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"But This Story of Mine Is Not Unique":
A Review of Research on African American Children’s Literature

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This article provides a review of research on African American children's literature by synthesizing the growing body of textual and reader response research conducted across the past several decades. The literature presented in this article cuts across the disciplines of education as well as English and library science. Using the selective tradition as a theoretical underpinning, the authors review extant literature through a three-pronged thematic heuristic developed as a result of their analysis. These themes present research findings related to African American children’s literature as (1) contested terrain, (2) cultural artifact, and (3) literary art. The three themes generated to delineate the findings derived from a four-stage iterative process of analysis. By considering collective findings, a more careful and continued institutionalization of this literature can take place in schools, libraries, bookstores, popular media, and within families. The authors also address future implications for educational practice and research related to African American children’s literature.

KEYWORDS: literature, multiculturalism, reading, Black education.

Speaking about her corpus of picture books rooted in African American history, and one particularly well known narrative titled Aunt Flossie’s Hats (and Crab Cakes Later), Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard1 (1991a) explains the following, “But this story of mine is not unique. Being African American means having stories. We all have our Aunt Flossies and our Cousin Chitas and our Great Aunt Lulus, who have given so much and who have made us what we are” (Howard, 1991b, p. 98). In deemphasizing the uniqueness of her story, Howard draws attention to the scarcity of published children’s literature written by and about African Americans. Perhaps Howard’s book would not stand out if there were countless others to read. The quote likewise suggests that within any collection of African American narratives, readily identifiable and recurring cultural and literary characteristics exist, given that “We all have our Aunt Flossies and our Cousin Chitas and our Great

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Aunt Lulus” (p. 98). Our article opens in this way because Howard’s quotation embodies much of the impetus behind the past thirty years of an increased attention to research about (1) the creation, authentification, production, and literary merit of African American children’s literature; (2) the purposes and interpretations of such texts; and (3) their pedagogical uses and potential.

Despite a growing number of studies about African American children’s literature, no synthesis of scholarship has been produced to delineate how this research might influence educational practice and advance future research. Without such a synthesis, the field relies on findings from individual studies to establish the legitimacy of an African American children’s literary tradition and to advance rationale for researching and including such narratives within curricula. We argue that by considering collective findings, a more careful and continued institutionalization of this literature can take place in schools, libraries, bookstores, popular media, and within families.

To avoid a broad discussion filtered through the lenses of multicultural education or culturally responsive pedagogy, this article provides a specific yet in-depth understanding of African American children’s literature. We offer a heuristic way of coming to terms with a growing number of disparate studies that minimally inform or effectively build on one another. Throughout this review, we rely on research to answer the following questions:

- What research served as the foundational and contextual impetus for the increase of studies about African American children’s literature that began after 1980?
- Since the 1980s, what theoretical lenses and textual analysis tools do researchers utilize to examine African American children’s literature?
- What common themes emerge from this strand of research?
- What is known about how readers in kindergarten through Grade 12 respond to and interpret African American children’s literature?
- What areas of understanding regarding African American children’s literature need to be further explored through practice and future research?

In posing these inquiries, we principally argue as do Fox and Short (2003) that Stories Matter: They matter because in the advancement of a literary tradition, African Americans gain a vehicle through which they can participate more fully in their textual and, thus, public representation. Likewise, these books matter for students in the same way any type of reading material does. Each text embodies the potential to address areas of literacy development considered important within the sphere of reading achievement. Broader than reading achievement, African American children’s literature can also assist readers with establishing beliefs, racial and literate identities, as well as sets of literacy, social, and cultural practices.

To sufficiently address our four main questions, we review extant literature through a three-pronged thematic heuristic developed as a result of our analysis. The literature presented in this article cuts across the disciplines of education as well as English and library science. Following a methodological section and description of the studies reviewed, the findings are presented in terms of three
themes that constitute the major sections in this article. These themes present research findings related to African American children’s literature as (1) contested terrain, (2) cultural artifact, and (3) literary art. After restating and summarizing our findings, the final portion of the article addresses future implications for educational practice and research related to African American children’s literature.

Method

To gather materials for this review, we relied on several databases including Wilson’s Omni File, ERIC, Academic Search Premier, and the Modern Language Association. Terms used to search included: African American children’s literature, multicultural literature, culturally relevant literature, ethnically diverse literature, reader response, cultural diversity, literary interpretation, children’s literature, and textual analysis. Peer reviewed journal articles were identified; excluded from the analysis were unpublished dissertations, theses, center reports, or conference papers found in any of the above mentioned databases. To locate book chapters we searched the bibliographies of three seminal texts in the field that provide comprehensive reviews of scholarship: Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children’s Literature (Bishop, 2007); Using Multiethnic Literature in the K-8 Classroom, (Harris, 1997); and African-American Voices in Young Adult Literature: Tradition, Transition, Transformation (K. P. Smith, 2001). In addition, we included some conceptual articles related to African American adult and children’s literature written by authors, illustrators, and scholars to contextualize the findings. We also reviewed the book databases at both of our universities for full-length published works.

The review is bound by the following parameters:

Did the researcher explicitly define the term African American children’s literature or could we determine the author’s definitional intent?

Did the research include stories largely written by and about African Americans? Although our discussion is not solely limited to books defined as by and about African Americans, we purposefully reviewed a larger quantity of scholarship about these texts (e.g., books by and about rather than just about).

When studies included an array of multicultural books, were at least a third about African Americans or did the major focus of the research consist of highlighting a particular book designated as African American?

Were the books appropriate for children through age 17? Although the term children’s literature is used throughout the review, a number of the studies incorporated books otherwise defined as young adult or juvenile (between ages 13 and 17). Additionally some studies included literature marketed for adults but read by high school youth, such as The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison (1970).

Did the studies focus on full-length books as opposed to truncated stories from texts such as literary anthologies or basal readers?

Did the reader response research take place in routine literacy settings, such as classrooms, afterschool programs, homes, and so forth?
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Did the reader response studies occur after the 1980s? This date coincides with the time period noted by Sims (1982) in which a larger percentage of books made available to readers included culturally conscious representations of African American families.

Did the reader response studies provide specific data regarding the perceptions of African American readers? Studies of primarily non-African American students’ responses to multicultural literature in general or African American texts in particular were beyond the scope of this review.

Were the studies conducted by scholars largely affiliated with the fields of education, English, or library science? Because a body of literature exists conducted by researchers in fields such as social studies education and historical studies, we limited our focus to education, English, and library science, although we recognize a future need to look at this topic across broader disciplines.

The three themes generated to delineate our findings derived from a four-stage iterative process of analysis. First, our aim was to survey the literature to provide a historical and contextual starting point and backstory for the research that emerged in the early 1980s. As such, the analysis consisted of identifying the seminal publications in the field that evoked and contributed to the emergence of research focused squarely on children’s literature written by and about African Americans. To determine the seminal nature of these publications, we considered the degree to which contemporary authors reference these pieces and mention them as decisive works undergirding or inciting their own research. The next phase of analysis included categorizing the body of textual analysis research along dimensions of theoretical, methodological, or thematic foci. In the process of carrying out this portion of the analysis, we sought to determine whether the findings collectively established the existence of an African American children’s literary tradition as some scholars have previously suggested. We then sought to identify the purpose of each reader response investigation along with the facets of reading explored. At this point, a heuristic was constructed that included the themes we felt best represented this accumulated body of findings.

Theoretical Perspective

The overarching theoretical perspective that informs this review of research is the selective tradition. Williams (1977) defined the selective tradition “as an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a preshaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification” (p. 115). Williams contended, “Most versions of ‘tradition’ can be shown to be radically selective,” and “certain meanings and practices are selected for emphasis and certain other meanings and practices are neglected or excluded” (p. 115). Harris (1990) states that “when a tradition is selective or, worse, when it sets up inaccurate and damaging stereotypes, the meanings and knowledge shaped by it become significant because they shape individuals’ perceptions of the world and their roles in it” (p. 541). For instance, in the 1920s, a forum was conducted by The
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Crisis, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in which African American writers discussed the difficulties of getting their work published if it did not reflect stereotyped views of African American life (Du Bois, 1926). Publishers tended to reject culturally authentic views of African American life. Through the rejection and selection of certain manuscripts, publishers had the power to affirm and perpetuate the selective tradition that stereotyped African Americans. Du Bois (1927) wrote:

[T]he themes on which Negro writers naturally write best, with deepest knowledge and clearest understanding, are precisely the themes most editors do not want treated. These are themes which White readers are tired of or do not wish to hear. . . . White Americans are willing to read about Negroes, but they prefer to read about Negroes who are fools, clowns, prostitutes, or at any rate, in despair, and contemplating suicide. Other sorts of Negroes do not interest them because, as they say, they are “just like White folks.” But their interest in White folks, we notice, continues. This is a real and tremendous handicap. It is analogous to the handicap of all writers on unpopular themes, but it bears hardest on young Negroes because its bar is broader and more inclusive. It puts a premium on one kind of sadistic subject. (p. 276)

Du Bois was fully cognizant of the fact that in literature certain images of African Americans—even if they were inaccurate—were more likely to be given enhanced standing as opposed to others.

Contemporary African American writers for children continue to experience issues such as those described by the authors who participated in the abovementioned forum. Eleanora E. Tate (2001) writes, “Over the years, I have had to tangle with editors to retain some of the simplest words and phrases about African American culture in my stories and books for children” (p. 12). Tate noted that many other well-established African American children’s book authors have dealt with editors who have tried to edit their work in ways that are racially insensitive and inaccurate. For example, Tate writes that one African American author had to reclaim her manuscript from an editor who wanted to remove the father from the author’s fictional Black family to make it more realistic. In her analysis of the images of African Americans in realistic fiction, Sims (1982) noted that the most frequently occurring stereotype in one particular group of books was that of the absent Black father.

Stereotypes are integral components of the selective tradition (Perkins, 1979). Stereotypes, which can be negative and positive, reflect the social status groups. For example, Asian Americans are people of color, yet they are considered “model minorities,” and so many of the racial stereotypes associated with people of Asiatic descent, such as extreme intelligence, are positive. African Americans, on the other hand, are not considered “model minorities,” and so the majority of racial stereotypes associated with Blacks are negative. Harris (1990) argues that the “selective tradition in children’s literature regarding African Americans has been replete with stereotypes” (p. 541). Several scholars have applied the theory of the selective tradition within the sociopolitical context of children’s literature (McNair, 2008c; Power, 2003; Taxel, 1984) and found that it is useful for examining various phenomena such as book offerings available in Scholastic Book Club order forms, the representation of girls in historical fiction, the portrayal of the American Revolution in books, and
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so forth. Like these scholars, we contend throughout that children’s books written by and about African Americans emerged, in large part, as an oppositional and creative endeavor that challenged the selective tradition in children’s literature.

Findings

African American Children’s Literature as Contested Terrain

Our first heuristic theme, African American children’s literature as contested terrain, examines research on how African American children’s narratives are defined as well as whether representations in the literature are indeed culturally authentic. Issues of cultural authenticity, in this review of literature, speak to whether or not the speech patterns, values, cultural practices, and perspectives of African Americans are accurately portrayed in children’s literature. Bishop (2003) defines the term “cultural authenticity” in regard to two dimensions: the first having to do “with aspects of the cultural, physical, or social environment” (p. 27) authors choose to emphasize and the second dimension referring to “authenticating details” (p. 28) such as “grammatical and lexical accuracy of the characters’ dialect, and taken-for-granted information possessed by members of a cultural group” (p. 28). Fourteen studies were reviewed to address this theme (see Table 1).

The selective tradition provides insights into concerns about how the literature is defined and whether genuine representations of African American life are conveyed. By advancing the notion of a contested terrain, we assert that African American children’s literature does more than represent a culture. Rather, books can dispute negative racial depictions. These depictions can be conveyed through writers, promoted by broader institutions such as publishing companies and distributors, and recognized by literary consumers. Defining the literature on particular terms and contesting culturally unauthentic depictions serves to counter hegemony by provoking discussion about systemic forms of injustice and oppression.

Textual analysis. A number of children’s literature scholars such as Broderick (1973), MacCann (2001), MacCann and Woodard (1985), and Sims (1982) have examined the ways in which African Americans have been depicted that are not culturally authentic historically and up through the present in literature for young people. For example, MacCann analyzed a sample of books published from 1830 to 1900, and Broderick analyzed books that were published from 1827 until 1967. These theorists maintain that children’s books are cultural products created within particular sociopolitical contexts and, for this reason, they reflect and perhaps even perpetuate societal phenomena such as racism and White supremacy. MacCann writes, “Cultural and social historians have a useful tool in the record created by children’s books. The simple, transparent images contrived for the young are often an unsconscious distillation of a national consensus or a national debate” (p. xiii).

Across these studies of children’s books featuring African Americans, particularly those written by Whites, the representations of African American protagonists were consistently found to reflect White supremacist thought. Harris (1990) writes, “African Americans have been depicted in general literature since the seventeenth century. Essentially, the depictions are stereotyped, pejorative, and unauthentic” (p. 540). In addition to finding numerous depictions of loyal slaves, in their textual analysis of the images of African Americans in children’s books, most if not all of
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<td>Apol, L. (1998). &quot;‘But what does this have to do with kids?’ Literary theory and children’s literature in the teacher education classroom.”</td>
<td>To explore the relationship between literary theory and children’s literature.</td>
<td>Textual analysis (literary)</td>
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<td>Bishop, R. S. (2007). Free within ourselves: The development of African American children’s literature.</td>
<td>To trace the development of African American children’s literature from its early roots to the present.</td>
<td>Textual analysis (literary)</td>
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<td>Desai, L. (1997). “Reflections on cultural diversity in literature and in the classroom.”</td>
<td>To examine student responses to diverse literature and whether a teacher’s pedagogical understandings about multicultural literature shifted throughout the year.</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis of reader interpretations as well as changes in teacher pedagogy. Sample included an ethnically varied group of urban fourth graders.</td>
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<td>Harris, V. J. (1990). “African American children’s literature: The first one hundred years.”</td>
<td>To examine the historical development of literature written for African American children from the late nineteenth century to the present.</td>
<td>Textual analysis (literary)</td>
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which were written by Whites, both MacCann (2001) and Broderick (1973) found the following common representations: African Americans as unattractive, African Americans as lazy, African Americans as unintelligent, and the mocking of African American speech patterns. Literature can serve to affirm and provide ideological support for the misconception that African Americans are inferior and contented with their treatment as second-class citizens.

In her groundbreaking book, Shadow and Substance, Sims (1982) conducted an analysis of the images of African Americans in contemporary fiction published from 1965 to 1979. Sims developed three typologies in which to group the books, one of which was “social conscience” books. Sims labeled the books in this way because “they seem clearly intended to create a social conscience—mainly in non-Afro-American readers, to encourage them to develop empathy, sympathy, and tolerance for Afro-American children and their problems” (p. 17). Sims noted that many of the social conscience books, like those examined by MacCann and Broderick, perpetuated undesirable attitudes and stereotypes about African Americans and were therefore culturally unauthentic. For example, African American children were described as speaking in nonstandard dialect in comparison to White children. Many of the African American children also had enormous appetites. In addition, Sims also noted the “defeated, hopeless woman” and the depiction of African American physical features (e.g., dark skin) as less desirable in comparison to those of Whites. Sims writes that “even in the late sixties child readers were being presented images of Afro-Americans as, at best, uncomfortably different from other Americans, and, at worst, objects of ridicule” (p. 24). A textual analysis of 12 children’s books published between 1998 and 2002 conducted by McNair (2003a) found that a number of books that could be labeled as “socially conscious” were still being published. These books contained similar problems such as active Whites/passive African Americans, the misrepresentation of African American speech patterns, and other negative stereotypes. In an article that examined books written by Whites that featured African American protagonists, McNair (2003b) observed a number of disturbing “little things” such as the notion of “colorblindness,” descriptions of obese Black women, and “the tendency to associate things that are negative with the word Black” (p. 135).

It is because of these kinds of culturally unauthentic representations that there are frequent debates in regard to how African American children’s literature should be
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defined. In academic circles, there have been numerous articles (Aronson, 1995; Lasky, 1995; Mikkelsen, 1998; Seto, 1995) and even a book (Fox & Short, 2003) devoted to this topic often described as “the right to write” or the “insider/outsider debate.” African Americans are indeed Americans and so there are shared experiences among them and Whites, for example. However, because African Americans are also members of an oppressed group, their lives as American citizens are, at times, fundamentally different. Sims (1984) writes, “It is the difference that critics find often distorted, inaccurate, or, at best, missing in many of their books” (p. 147). Sims notes that it is this difference that many African Americans believe “should be transmitted to the children who read literature about Black experience” (p. 147).

Some scholars of children’s literature consider any book that features African American protagonists to be African American children’s literature. For example, in her book Brown Gold (2004), Martin identifies books such as Little Black Sambo (Bannerman, 1899) as examples of African American children’s literature, even though these books are replete with negative stereotypes. Many argue that to include books such as these in the canon of African American children’s literature ignores the differences that African Americans believe should be transmitted to children about the African American experience. Noted children’s author Virginia Hamilton (1981) explains:

I am convinced that it is important to reveal that the life of the people is and always has been different in a significant respect from the life of the majority. It has been made eccentric by slavery, escape, fear of capture; by discrimination and constant despair. But it has held within it happiness and subtle humor, a fierce pride in leadership and progress, love of life and family, and a longing for peace and freedom. Nevertheless, there is an uneasy ideological difference with the American majority basic to Black thought. (p. 57)

Hamilton contends here that it is difficult for European Americans to write from the perspective of African Americans because their experiences and worldviews, which are largely shaped by racism, are so different. For example, a White author recently published a children’s book titled Phillis’s Big Test (Clinton, 2008) that offers a fictionalized account of “America’s first Black poet” Phillis Wheatley’s meeting with White men to prove that she had actually written her poems. At one point, the text describes her adjustment to life as a girl enslaved in Boston. It reads, “Her first winter was so very cold and awful. She survived only by the kindness of her masters, especially the Wheatleys’ [her owners] twins, Nathaniel and Mary, who eagerly shared their lessons with the young slave girl” (unpaged). Where definitions of African American children’s literature are concerned, one might doubt whether African American writers would have made a similar literary move: one in which an enslaved girl is described as surviving “only by the kindness of her masters.” In her analysis of a book titled A Girl Called Boy (Hurmenence, 1982), a book with similar language choices, Sims (1984) noted that there was a “cumulative focus on the ‘better’ aspects of the slave system” such as “slaves’ ambivalence, or positive feelings about their masters and their bondage, both aspects which are likely to be absent altogether, or certainly downplayed, in the writing of most Black authors” (p. 148). For this reason, a number of scholars would not identify Phillis’s Big Test as African American children’s literature.

In an article that contrasted two children’s books about slavery, Apol (1998) found that the authors wrote in remarkably different ways about slavery. One text
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was *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* (J. Lester, 1998) and the other was *Daily Life on a Southern Plantation* (Erickson, 1998). Julius Lester is an African American, and although we were not able to determine the racial identity of Paul Erickson, we suspect he is not an African American based on his literary choices. Apol noted the differences in the two texts in regard to the description of a slave auction with the following passages. Lester’s book reads, “Step right up! New shipment of niggers just in. These niggers are as Black as Satan’s thoughts, which means it don’t matter how hot the sun gets, they will work like it’s the cool of the day” (unpaged). Erickson’s text reads, “Slaves were usually sold at auctions, which were advertised on posters and flyers and in newspaper advertisements. A prime hand (a grown man in good health) cost as much as $2,000 (about $30,000 today)” (unpaged). Although Erickson’s description of the auction appears factually accurate, it also seems “neutral” and the passive tense is used in that the people who are selling the slaves are not identified. Apol contends that it is important for readers to challenge the underlying assumptions in both texts and grapple with how they affect readers and the manner in which they understand the world. Apol notes that “by casting slavery as a ‘normal’ part of plantation life, perhaps Erickson hoped readers would raise their own questions about an uncritical acceptance of such power relations” (p. 43). Another interpretation, based on Sims’s (1984) research, is that Erickson may have chosen to make different literary choices as a result of his acculturation and worldview.

Children’s book author Jacqueline Woodson (2001) states:

* I do not believe someone who is not a person of color can know the roads I and my people have traveled, the depths and heights we reach in our trek from children to young adults. I do not believe anyone who is not of color can step inside our worlds, our skins, our childhoods—and write from there. No, to write Black children’s literature, the major criterion is that at some point in your life—you had to have been a Black child. (p. 49)

Like Woodson above as well as D. Johnson (1990b) and Bishop (2007), throughout this review we define African American children’s literature as books that are written by and about African Americans. D. Johnson argues that “part of the legacy of the African American experience is a justified sensitivity of African American writers, illustrators, critics, educators, and reading audiences toward past misrepresentations of themselves” (p. 9). Despite the convictions of leading scholars, the definitional and cultural authenticity debates continue among researchers as well as readers, particularly when the interpretive community of a classroom is taken into account.

**Reader response research.** Although less focused on how to define African American children’s literature, studies of reader response reveal that, at times, participants question the cultural authenticity of African American textual representations. In several studies, disputes arose as study participants interpreted the literature in unexpected ways. In other words, researchers did not intentionally set out to study whether the books depicted accurate portrayals of African American life. However, respondents found this issue noteworthy and contestable.

Two studies in high school and upper elementary classrooms (Bleich, 1992; Desai, 1997) illustrate how readers from African American backgrounds interpreted textual representations presumed (by adults) to be valid depictions of
African American life as quite problematic. Participants reportedly enjoyed and identified with large portions of the stories, but at the same time, they felt uncomfortable, embarrassed, and offended by stylistic elements such as the usage of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and the historical use of the word “nigger” (Desai, 1997, p. 173). Although scholars such as Baugh (2000) and Ball (2005) who investigate AAVE in both spoken and written modes have long since verified its sophistication, rule system, and pragmatic uses, some participants felt uncomfortable with AAVE’s inclusion in the narratives they read.

For instance, in a study of largely low-income African American fourth and fifth graders who read a unit of books written by Mildred Taylor that included Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (1976), Song of the Trees (1975), and The Well (1995), a participant explained, “I really don’t like the word nigger because when the Simms be calling the Logan family niggers and stuff it makes me feel awful and it makes me feel like I’m a nigger when the White people be calling the Black people niggers” (Desai, 1997, p. 175). To address this student’s feelings, the teacher explained that sometimes writers use words that appear offensive, but the words actually represent the time period as well as the character’s voice rather than the author’s. In this research, readers were actually coming to terms with the genre of historical fiction and stylistic choices of authors, but the psychological impact of what they read stood out to them in deeply personal ways.

High school African American youth have gone beyond language to interpret unsettling and “low class” (Bleich, 1992, p. 7) images of African Americans in stories, such as “Sweat” and “Story in Harlem Slang,” both of which were published in Spunk (Hurston, 1985). These short stories were authored by Zora Neale Hurston who is a well-regarded writer of African American fiction. After reading Hurston’s stories, one student, Ms. G., commented in an essay:

> Reading these stories I found them to be irrelevant to my learning ability for an English class. The stories themselves not only offended me but it offended my entire race. I don’t appreciate reading or writing about the low class of my people. . . . The majority of the vocabulary words that has been used are offensive and stereotypical of the Black English. I’ve asked three generations of my family and none have heard of those words. (Bleich, 1992, p. 7)

Reflecting on the above student’s critical responses to the language in Hurston’s text, Bleich (1992) writes:

> This essay addresses the fact that White teachers brought Hurston to class. Ms. G correctly reads our initiative at least in part “wanting to discuss [her] race.” . . . We teachers did not consider that Ms. G’s feelings might take this form. . . . We did not consider that these students knew very little, if anything, about the heated discussion of the canon and that they were definitely not interested in how politically forthcoming we tried to be. They justifiably advocated that if race was to be an overt topic, or even if pimps and drug dealers were overt topics, all races be part of the picture (p. 8).

In Bleich’s (1992) research, the interpreted victimization of the African American characters provoked resistance as well as harsh scrutiny by some participants. They questioned their teachers’ motives for incorporating these stories into the curriculum. Subsequently, a range of classroom climate issues emerged, which included the teachers’ capacities to deal with tension, apathy, resistance, and
intergroup conflict among the participants and toward the teachers. Despite reading Zora Neale Hurston’s literature (arguably texts written in opposition to the selective tradition), respondents articulated concerns about whether or not protagonists and their culture were accurately portrayed. This issue of representation surfaced as extremely important perhaps because students read only a few short stories rather than a wide range of texts that offered multiple renderings of African Americans. Students reacted strongly to a single, albeit historical representation because it contradicted the contemporary views they held.

In a study conducted by Brooks (2006), a group of middle school African American readers did not become resistant but rather lost interest in what seemed to be a culturally authentic story line about the historical legacy of the Underground Railroad in *The House of Dies Drear* (Hamilton, 1968). Unlike the studies just mentioned, the participants’ teacher also shared their ethnicity. Some of the young readers attributed their disinterest in the story to the author’s depictions of the middle-class African American family named the Smalls. One of the overriding concerns held by study participants focused on the behaviors of the African American family who chose to live in a haunted house. Believing that African American families would not live with ghosts, participants questioned the veracity of the cultural portrayal created by Hamilton. Because the plot of *The House of Dies Drear* (Hamilton, 1968) largely rests on whether readers’ actively engage with solving the mystery of the ghosts, students became critical of the book and its request of them as readers. Hamilton has established one of the strongest legacies of writing genuine stories about a range of African American life. Yet, for these readers, Hamilton’s perspective was not collectively shared. This problem of cultural representation led to a decreased level of story involvement.

Reader response research that incorporates stories written by esteemed writers such as Hurston and Hamilton does not reflect the types of depictions described earlier by literary scholars such as Broderick (1973) and MacCann (2001) where obvious stereotypes and demeaning representations of African Americans permeated the selective tradition in children’s literature. Instead, these reader response findings serve to further complicate scholarly debates of definition and cultural authenticity from a reader and distinctive youth point of view.

**African American Children’s Literature as Cultural Artifact**

The foci of the next set of studies reviewed bears directly on the construction of children’s literature about African Americans as stand-alone and legitimate cultural artifacts. Thirty-six studies were reviewed to address this theme (see Table 2). By cultural artifact, we mean narratives representing a range of fluid depictions of African American life and the cultural practices engaged in by its members. These stories function as cultural artifacts because they communicate certain values, knowledge, and social practices. It is through challenging the selective tradition in children’s literature that oppositional children’s literature created by and about African Americans contains unique cultural characteristics that reflect aspects of African American life, history, and culture. According to Bishop (2003):

> Across ethnic, racial, cultural, and national boundaries, and across time, children’s literature has long been considered a vehicle for transmitting moral and cultural values as well as entertaining. When a group has been marginalized and oppressed, the cultural functions of story can take on even
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<td>Athanases, S. Z. (1998). “Diverse learners, diverse texts: Exploring identity and difference through literacy encounters.”</td>
<td>To determine the value and meaningfulness of ethnically diverse literature to a group of high school students.</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis of reader responses to multicultural literature. Sample was comprised of students enrolled in two 10th-grade English classes in an urban locale.</td>
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<td>Bishop, R. S. (2007). Free within ourselves: The development of African American children’s literature.</td>
<td>To trace the development of African American children’s literature from its early roots to the present.</td>
<td>Textual analysis (literary)</td>
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<td>Connor, J. J. (2003). “‘The textbooks never said anything about . . . :’ Adolescents respond to The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo.”</td>
<td>To assess adolescent students’ engagement with The Middle Passage.</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis of responses to one text about the middle passage. Sample was a racially diverse group of 25 high school students.</td>
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<td>Fairbanks, C. M. (1995). “Reading students: Texts in context.”</td>
<td>To determine the validity of a student “decontextualizing” literature.</td>
<td>Qualitative response analysis of the texts assigned in a 10th-grade English class. Sample was comprised of one African American student enrolled in the class.</td>
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<td>Franzak, J. (2003). “Hopelessness and healing: Racial identity in young adult literature.”</td>
<td>To explore the politics of racial privilege and oppression through the lens of critical race theory in two novels by Sharon Draper.</td>
<td>Textual analysis (literary)</td>
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<th>Article reference</th>
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<td>Harris, V. J. (1990). “African American children’s literature: The first one hundred years.”</td>
<td>To examine the historical development of literature written for African American children from the late nineteenth century to the present.</td>
<td>Textual analysis (literary)</td>
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<td>Harris, V. J. (1993). “Contemporary griots: African American writers of children’s literature.”</td>
<td>To examine the history of African American children’s literature and the works of some authors.</td>
<td>Textual analysis (literary)</td>
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<td>Hinton-Johnson, K. (2005). “Subverting beauty aesthetics in African American young adult literature.”</td>
<td>To examine young adult novels by three African American female authors that contain female protagonists for whom physical appearance is a great concern.</td>
<td>Textual analysis (literary)</td>
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<td>Lester, N. (1999). “Roots that go beyond big hair and a bad hair day: Nappy hair pieces.”</td>
<td>To conduct an analysis of the book, Nappy Hair and explore the sociopolitical dimensions of Black hair.</td>
<td>Literary analysis (literary)</td>
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<td>McGinley, W., &amp; Kamberelis, G. (1996). “Maniac Magee and Ragtime Tumpie: Children negotiating self and world through reading and writing.”</td>
<td>To examine how children’s literature linked to socially relevant topics influenced the literacy practices of its readership.</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis conducted during the course of a year. Sample included 35 (mostly African American) children enrolled in third and fourth grades.</td>
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<td>Rogers, R. (2002). “That’s what you’re here for, you’re suppose to tell us’: Teaching and learning critical literacy.”</td>
<td>To assess small group discussions about culturally diverse texts through the framework of metanarratives and critical literacy.</td>
<td>Qualitative critical discourse analysis conducted during a two-year period with a reading club comprised of urban, African American youth.</td>
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<td>Sutherland, L. (2005). “Black adolescent girls’ use of literacy practices to negotiate boundaries of ascribed identity.”</td>
<td>To demonstrate the influence of identity on the literary practices of African American adolescents.</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis of responses to Toni Morrison’s <em>The Bluest Eye</em>. Sample was comprised of six African American 16-year-old females.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tolson, N. (2008). “Black children’s literature got de blues: The creativity of Black writers and illustrators.”</td>
<td>To examine the work of various Black authors and illustrators through the lens of the blues aesthetic.</td>
<td>Textual analysis (literary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyson, C. A. (2002). “‘Get up offa that thing’: African American middle school students respond to literature to develop a framework for understanding social action.”</td>
<td>To illustrate the ways in which literature can be utilized as a tool to increase student comprehension of social activism.</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis of responses to texts used in language arts and social studies lessons for urban middle school students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walker-Dalhouse, D. (1992). “‘Using African American literature to increase ethnic understanding.”</td>
<td>To demonstrate the ways in which literature can be used to expand cultural knowledge and influence students’ receptivity to individuals from parallel cultures.</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis of responses to a unit adapted from the Houghton Mifflin Reading Program and augmented by African American children’s and trade books. The sample included 26 multiethnic students in a fifth-grade classroom.</td>
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greater significance because storytelling can be seen as a means to counter the effects of that marginalization and oppression on children. (p. 25)

Because fewer than 5% of books published prior to the 1980s (Cooperative Children’s Book Center, 2008) depicted African Americans as leading characters, just having a sizeable number of representations to offer to a readership constituted the initial impetus behind the textual analysis and reader response studies conducted. As Bishop (1990a) explains in her repeatedly cited metaphor of mirrors and windows, during the late seventies and early eighties, African American children were strongly in need of textual artifacts that mirrored their life stories and, likewise, other racial groups began relying on books as their windows into the African American experience. Bishop writes:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (p. ix)

Textual analysis. Arguing that it is just as important to study misrepresentations of African Americans as it is to examine the ways in which African Americans represent themselves, D. Johnson (1990b), in the introduction to her book wrote,
Research on African American Children's Literature

I join other scholars of Black children's literature in discussion of how African Americans have portrayed and continue to portray themselves, and what information, ideologies, and messages we transmit to our youth through this literature whose power is not always fully acknowledged. (p. 13)

Because literature reflects the struggles, experiences, and aspirations of its creators, it is not surprising that African American children's literature has developed distinct characteristics and has focused to a large extent on affirming African American life, culture, and history. Tolson (2008) notes that “Black children’s literature cannot just be classified as an aesthetic literary work but has to be looked on as a literary vehicle in understanding the historical, political, spiritual, and sociological experiences of being Black in the United States for children” (p. 7). Although African American children's literature is not monolithic, we argue as does Bishop (2007) that its creators “all share the experience of being members of a society in which race matters more than it should” (p. xii). Themes such as the effects of racism, information about the institution of slavery, struggles for equality and racial uplift, effects of dominant beauty standards, questions of identity, and the contributions of African Americans are common across African American children’s literature (Harris, 1993; Henderson, 2007; D. Johnson, 1990b; Vaughn-Roberson & Hill, 1989).

In considering the tradition for children, we acknowledge the role played by writers of African American literature for adults. Bishop (2007) notes that African American children's literature has its beginnings in nineteenth century newspapers and periodicals developed by organizations and individuals such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and Frederick Douglass. These publications, like African American children's literature, “function[ed] as voices of racial uplift, as shapers of a national Black community, as instruments for educating a Black citizenry, and as a vehicles for self-definition, self-determination, and self-expression” (Bishop, 2007, p. 10). Several of these magazines did devote attention to children. For example, The Christian Recorder contained a section titled “The Child's Cabinet.” In regard to this particular section, Haywood (2002) writes that it “consistently held material ranging from reports on activities of children to didactic and entertaining poems and stories, illustrations, letters and articles and briefs about children” (p. 419). Likewise, Foster (1995) writes, “During the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, literature for African-American children was a special concern for numerous constituencies. Abolitionist newspapers, for example, often included children's columns that featured poems, stories, and essays” (p. 34). In the twentieth century, Du Bois along with members of the Crisis staff created The Brownies' Book, a magazine aimed primarily at African American children. In regard to The Brownies' Book, Du Bois (1919) articulated seven objectives that he hoped to accomplish with the publication of this magazine:

1. To make colored children realize that being colored is a normal, beautiful thing;
2. To make them familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race;
3. To make them know that other colored children have grown into useful, famous persons;
4. To teach them delicately, a code of honor and actions in their relations with White children;
5. To turn their little hurts and resentments into emulation, ambition and love of their own homes and companions;
6. To point out the best amusements and joys and worthwhile things of life; and
7. To inspire them for definite occupations and duties with a broad spirit of sacrifice. (p. 286)


Several authors who wrote for adults, such as Nella Larsen and Langston Hughes, contributed to *The Brownies’ Book*. This phenomenon of African American authors writing for both adults and children is not unusual. In an essay titled, “Books and the Negro Child,” Hughes (1932) wrote, “America’s children are in pressing need of books that will give them back their souls” (p. 110). In fact, Hughes’s poem, “April Rain Song” was first published in *The Brownies’ Book*. In her textual analysis of *The Brownies’ Book*, D. Johnson (1990b) writes:

The ultimate importance of *The Brownies’ Book* rests in its articulation of the rationale and objectives at the foundations of the very creation of Black children’s literature. . . . It is not an overstatement to say that the very existence of *The Brownies’ Book* precipitated the development of the body of work now called African American children’s literature, in all of its subsequent manifestations and meanings. (p. 37)

As evident in the above discussion of adult- and child-centered periodicals, African American authors of children’s books commonly borrow from long-standing African American adult literary traditions (Baker & Redmond, 1992; Brawley, 1970; Gates, 1988, Napier, 2000). These theorists document and discuss the historical traditions of specific features and themes found in African American literature for adults. Both bodies of work, though aimed at different audiences, have much in common historically and up through the present. AAVE is one example of a stylistic feature found in both African American adult and children’s literature. Bishop (1990b) writes:

The most readily recognizable element of African American culture to appear in books is the accurate representation of many of the various stylistic, phonetic, and grammatical elements and structures that identify a speaker as a member of the African American community. (p. 560)

Themes frequently embedded in African American adult literature such as social protest against racism, challenging Eurocentric beauty standards, questions of identity, the effects of racism, and preserving African American culture and history (Gloster, 1968), are pervasive in African American children’s literature as well (Harris, 1993). For example, in an analysis of the beauty aesthetic in several African American young adult novels featuring female protagonists, Hinton-Johnson (2005) noted that there was attention to issues such as colorism and hair as in the works of adult novelists including Morrison and Hurston.
A number of scholars have conducted textual analyses of African American children's literature related to certain topics (e.g., hair and racial identity development in Black adolescents) as well as books by particular authors such as Arna Bontemps, Hamilton, and Walter Dean Myers (Brooks, 2002; Franzak, 2003; Lane, 1998; N. Lester, 1999). For example, Lane examined one of Myers's books for the ways in which African American masculinity was conceptualized. Other scholars such as Vaughan-Roberson and Hill (1989), Henderson (2007), and McNair (2008a) have examined key works that include African American children's periodicals such as The Brownies' Book and Ebony Jr.!, as well as children's literature written by select authors like Patricia C. McKissack. For example, in a study that entailed a comparative analysis of The Brownies' Book and contemporary African American children's literature written by McKissack, McNair (2008a) utilized critical race theory as a theoretical framework and found several common themes across both bodies of work. For example, both bodies of work challenged dominant perspectives via storytelling, demonstrated the significance of social protest against racism, and depicted literacy as important. Utilizing the blues aesthetic as a theoretical framework, Tolson (2008) argues that themes such as "acceptance of the contradictory nature of life" (p. 47), an "optimistic faith in the ultimate triumph of justice" (p. 52), "the deliberate use of exaggeration" (p. 41), and "brutal honesty clothed in metaphorical grace" (p. 45) are present in African American children's literature written by authors including Donald Crews and Sherley Anne Williams. Furthermore, studies of recurring themes have been considered in texts such as K. P. Smith's book, African-American Voices in Young Adult Literature (2001). Smith's edited volume consists of several chapters that explore themes in young adult literature, such as male bonding, family survival, and color and class.

In the book Shadow and Substance, Sims (1982) identified one group of books with the label "culturally conscious." According to Sims, "the label culturally conscious books suggest that elements in the text, not just the pictures, make it clear that the book consciously seeks to depict a fictional Afro-American life experience" (p. 49). Common themes in these books included linguistic styles associated with African American speech patterns, positive descriptions of skin color, names common among African Americans, and references to African American historical events and cultural traditions. Although not all of these books were written by African Americans, Sims found that the African American authors were the most successful at embedding authentic cultural details.

Similar to Sims, Harris's (1990) research explores trends across several decades; her work establishes that African American children's literature has undergone a long history of publication. The historical time periods explored by Harris include: (1) Beginnings of a New Tradition, 1890-1900; (2) An Emergent Tradition, 1900-1920; (3) Strengthening of the Tradition, 1930-1940; (4) The Shift to Assimilation, 1940-1970; and (5) Culturally Conscious Literature: The 1970s and Beyond. With her review of African American children's literature, Harris concludes like Sims by advancing the notion of culturally conscious African American children's literature. In sum, textual analysis scholars have verified that a bona fide literary tradition exists that includes common goals across many authors for the purpose of their stories as well as particular embedded features such as recurring themes, linguistic patterns, and topics.
Reader response research. Since the early 1980s, studies of reader response have increasingly incorporated books falling within the category of culturally conscious African American fiction. Through the selection of culturally conscious stories, it appears that either explicitly or implicitly many scholars were counting on the literary tradition just described to affect readers. Because, for the most part, genuine depictions of African Americans had been missing in traditional children’s literature prior to the early eighties (partially because of the selective tradition), the benefits of allowing African American readers to see themselves reflected in books they read was noted as not only educational but socially just.

Groundbreaking research conducted with children relied heavily on the veracity of these culturally influenced textual and pictorial representations, in large part because of a book’s embedded (and often presumed) ability to strike a chord with readers. Assumptions stemmed from beliefs that readers from African American backgrounds would self-select or respond favorably to particular narratives because expressions of their own ethnicity and culture permeated the story lines. Thus a linkage could be drawn between textual depictions and students’ lived realities. In addition to the story line as conveyed through the text, illustrations embodied a great deal of importance because they depicted African American characters. Scholars of some response studies hypothesized that readers would identify and become more engaged with stories because as cultural artifacts, the narratives served as mirrors for African American youth at the mercy of a largely Eurocentric curriculum. Indeed, research demonstrated that participants enjoyed, identified with, and became more deeply engaged while interpreting stories about African American life (Altieri, 1993; Hefflin, 2003; Parker, 2008; Sims, 1983, E. Smith, 1995; Spears-Bunton, 1990).

Sims (1983) published an article describing one of the first investigations of a reader’s responses to contemporary African American children’s literature. She examined a ten-year-old girl’s views of 30 books. At that time, although children’s stories about African Americans were being published a bit more frequently, researchers still remained unaware of the impact of this literature on its readership. In the more recent research of Parker (2008), E. Smith (1995), and Spears-Bunton (1990), which occurred with both elementary and high school students who were mainly African Americans, evidence suggested that reluctant readers of traditional canonical texts did gain more enthusiasm for reading when presented with texts about African American experiences. One African American high school student in Spears-Bunton’s (1990) study remarked, “You know, maybe Black literature should be set aside, special like, so I can see it better for myself” (p. 572). Parker’s (2008) research of African American high school readers’ responses to Myers’s novels not only revealed the importance of engaging boys in stories representing their own cultural group but also highlighted the significance of young males’ reading contemporary narratives about urban youth. Similarly, Hefflin (2003) conducted a study to ascertain what African American third graders recognized as “powerful” about African American children’s literature. The children recognized this body of literature as powerful for several reasons, which included being able to identify with characters and events, passing stories on, and connecting to cultural heritage. Even with one-to-one reader–text matches based on ethnicity and a broad notion of culture, findings of some research also suggest that identifying with a story might occur beyond a reader’s immediate life. Scholars point out that
biographies and historical fiction books are commonly self-selected and favored by students (McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996; Tyson, 2002).

Along with exploring reader–text cultural matches, another line of studies revealed the shortcomings linked to the notion of identifying with texts as cultural artifacts. According to a transactive perspective of reading, individuals might all hold varying interpretations of a story because the meaning construction process is heavily influenced by the reader (Rosenblatt, 1986). Thus, African American youth do not always identify with and feel validated by African American literature. In some cases, if children possess limited knowledge of Africa or African American connections to Africa, their ability to find realistic or desire to identify with books about African heritage declines (Grice & Vaughan, 1992). Minimal scholarly attention has been given to how students respond differently to African versus African American stories, and we know little about the ways cognitive-based or listening comprehension issues might interfere with story identification.

There are a number of other caveats to consider. Even though youth may identify with a textual depiction of culture, they may concurrently display resistance to reading a narrative about their own racial group. Some, particularly younger readers, prefer happy stories (Grice & Vaughan, 1992), whereas others recoil at painful and horrid manifestations of historical realities, such as slavery. Moller and Allen (2000) coined the term “engaged resisting” (p. 171) to illustrate how in their study with several African American fifth graders, students read and then reacted negatively to historical depictions of violence against their own racial group despite being engaged in a novella written by Mildred Taylor.

Recent understandings about the fluid nature of identities and reader subjectivities have moved some scholars away from uncomplicated views of identifying with a story just because of who one is culturally. Instead, studies examining the degree to which reading a book as a cultural artifact might influence not only a participant’s identity development, membership affiliation, or positionality with respect to race, but also other varied aspects of his or her social identity have been explored. Scholars cite evidence of study participants obscuring the static racial identity construct while reading and, instead, enacting fluid readership identities (Brooks, Brown & Hampton, 2008; Fairbanks, 1995; Sutherland, 2005). Sutherland, for instance, recently applied a feminist framework to examine Black high school adolescents’ constructed identities within book discussions about The Bluest Eye (Morrison, 1970). The “multilayered, relational, and in flux” (Sutherland, 2005, p. 365) identities of the adolescents manifested as they grappled with Eurocentric beauty standards and how they were viewed by society. The adolescent girls identified with Morrison’s fiction from the overlapping identities they embody that are framed by both gender and race.

Larger arguments besides those of reader identification and engagement have also interested scholars. Several response studies examined the proposition that cultural values, attitudes, and racial pride could be transmitted by or constructed between reader–text transactions (Athanases, 1998; Grice & Vaughan, 1992; G. S. Taylor, 1997). Furthermore, a few researchers chose to explore readers’ development across moral and ethical dimensions when responding to African American stories. For instance, because a common theme of “overcoming racism” is found in many novels, sophisticated moral and ethical discussions of racism, oppression, and social justice have taken place among readers from kindergarten on up through.
Brooks & McNair

high school. Findings indicate that African American youth across grades are quite adept at discussing issues related to race and racism in critically complex ways. However, at times, study participants' lack of prior historical or cultural knowledge as well as a lack of awareness about contemporary forms of oppression influence textual interpretations (Brooks & Hampton, 2005; Connor, 2003; Rogers, 2002; Tyson, 2002; Walker-Dalhouse, 1992). In Connor’s (2003) research, she uncovered that high school students reading The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo (Feelings, 1995) refined and extended what they knew historically. Connor writes:

Students consistently commented on how The Middle Passage added both to their intellectual and emotional understanding of the human side of slavery’s transatlantic journey. . . . Their responses overwhelmingly indicate that reading The Middle Passage allowed them to think more critically about, discuss, and come to understand a crime committed against approximately 60 million Africans. (2003, p. 244)

Like the development of Connor’s participants, several studies reveal that students’ interpretations of the moral and ethical dilemmas found in African American children’s texts progress along a continuum of personal transformations, expanded political awareness, and enactments of social action (McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996).

African American Children’s Literature as Literary Art

The final prong of the thematic heuristic includes studies about the narrative construction of literature, reading pleasure, and literary understanding. Nineteen studies were reviewed to address this theme (see Table 3). By using the term literary art we aim to draw attention to aesthetic, creative, and literary elements of books that typically serve the storytelling function, such as considerations of genre, narrative conventions, literary devices, and codes. These literary elements constitute the artistic quality of a text, irrespective of its ability to convey or evoke from readers a culturally grounded interpretation, so to speak. African American authors have used these elements to forge an oppositional and creative tradition in children’s literature. Yet, because authors concurrently write from particular cultural points of reference, the displays, frequency, and choice of literary elements are most certainly culturally influenced. For example, in her essay, “The Known, the Remembered, and the Imagined: Celebrating Afro-American Folktales,” Hamilton (1987) writes that her books have “presented aspects of story, style, and language from the perspective of a parallel American culture” (p. 67). Likewise, Feelings (1985) states, “Storytelling is an ancient African tradition where the values and history of a people are passed on to the young verbally. To me, illustrated books are a natural extension of this oral tradition” (p. 73). We acknowledge the inherent difficulty in completely separating literature as an art form from writers, readers, and their own cultural practices. Doing so herein enables a foregrounded discussion of African American children’s stories from a decidedly literary rather than cultural point of view.

Textual analysis. Several scholars have begun to examine authors’ literary styles in particular genres (Collins, 2001; Hinton, 2008; Marshall; 2008). For example, Collins conducted a literary analysis of eight young adult biographies (e.g., James

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<td>Bell, Y., &amp; Clark, T. (1998). “Culturally relevant reading material as related to comprehension and recall in African-American children.”</td>
<td>To determine how a character’s race influences the comprehension and recall of readers.</td>
<td>Quantitative analysis utilizing a sample of 109 fourth-grade students who were assigned to listen and respond to stories with either Black or White protagonists.</td>
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<td>Boyd, F. B. (2002). “Conditions, concessions, and the many tender mercies of learning through multicultural literature.”</td>
<td>To explore the ways in which students constructed meanings about previously unread texts.</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis of responses to multicultural literature. Sample was comprised of 4 ninth-grade students.</td>
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<td>Boyd, F. B. (2006). “Teaching Warriors Don’t Cry with other text types to enhance comprehension.”</td>
<td>To demonstrate alternative pathways toward increasing student literary skills.</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis of responses to a book about desegregation used in a seventh-grade literacy class.</td>
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<td>Lee, C. D. (2006). “‘Every goodbye ain’t gone’: Analyzing the cultural underpinnings of classroom talk.”</td>
<td>To determine the effectiveness of the Cultural Modeling Framework on literary reasoning.</td>
<td>Qualitative analysis of responses to various forms of literature (e.g. texts, rap lyrics). Sample comprised of urban African American high school students.</td>
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<td>Marshall, E. (2008). “‘The random brushing of birds’: Representations of African American women in biographies.”</td>
<td>To conduct an analysis of biographies written by and about African American women that have been included on the Coretta Scott King Award list.</td>
<td>Textual analysis (literary)</td>
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<td>McNair, J. C. (2008b). “‘I may be crackin’, but ‘um fackin’: Racial humor in <em>The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963</em>.”</td>
<td>To examine the use of racial humor as a literary device in <em>The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963</em>.”</td>
<td>Textual analysis (content)</td>
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<td>Smith, V. (2000). “Are there seats at the round table? An examination of Black protagonists in four fantasy young adult novels.”</td>
<td>To examine the depiction of Black protagonists in four fantasy young adult novels.</td>
<td>Textual analysis (literary)</td>
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Van DerZee: The Picture-Takin’ Man by James Haskins, 1979). Collins theorized that “through Black biography, it is possible for Black young adults to tap into the accumulated wisdom of countless generations” and “understand the racism that assaults them everyday” (p. 7). Marshall utilized feminist thought as a theoretical framework and conducted a literary analysis of biographies by and about African American women that have won the Coretta Scott King author/honor award (e.g., Talkin’ About Bessie by Nikki Grimes, 2002; and Let It Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters by Andrea Davis Pinkney, 2000). Marshall contends that “biography can be read as a unique narrative mode through which raced and gendered experiences of Black girls and women are made visible” (p. 30). Marshall found that the “biographies by and about women included on the Coretta Scott King book list present historical accounts and cultural memories that rewrite traditional narratives to include the unique struggles, contributions, and triumphs of African American girls and women ” (p. 46). Hinton examined the ways in which contemporary writers are creating neo–slave narratives based on original slave narratives such as those produced by Frederick Douglass. Hinton writes

While original slave narratives are narratives written by people who actually lived during the antebellum period and were enslaved, neo-slave narratives are written by contemporary authors who retell or re-envision the slave experience in America. Often loosely basing their work on historical documents and court cases, the writers of neo-slave narratives create imaginative depictions of the lives of former slaves. (p. 51)

Both Hinton (2008) and Marshall (2008) found that writing in these particular genres allowed writers to reinvent or explore the lives of African Americans in innovative ways. For example, one of the neo-slave narratives analyzed by Hinton was titled Day of Tears: A Novel in Dialogue (J. Lester, 2005). Day of Tears’s pioneering literary style provided a varied depiction of slavery through the voices of several protagonists including an abolitionist, a devoted Mammy figure, a subversive slave, and a loyal slave.

Still regarding genre, several scholars have argued for more books written by and about African Americans in science fiction (Hampton & Brooks, 2003) as well as fantasy. In an article titled, “Are there Seats at the Round Table? An Examination of Black Characters in Heroic Fantasy,” V. Smith (2000) ponders why there are so few fantasy books with African American protagonists. For example, Smith asks, “Is there something about the form of fantasy itself that is inimical to Black characters?” (p. 334). Smith conducted a textual analysis of four young adult fantasy novels, two of which were written by African Americans, to determine if there were cultural details embedded in the books that made them unique. What Smith did not discuss was the fact that there is also a shortage of picture books in the fantasy genre. Our search for studies revealed none that focused on African American fantasy books for children in the primary grades.

Several scholars have examined the use of literary elements in African American children’s literature. McNair (2008b) conducted a textual analysis of the award-winning novel, The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 (Curtis, 1995) to examine the unique approach by which the author utilized humor as a literary device to highlight the impact of racism on the Watson family. The findings revealed that the utilization of humor within this book is culturally specific and that a significant
portion of the humor has racial overtones. Textual analysis, undergirded by humor theory, revealed four categories of racial humor that included “lies” or exaggeration during storytelling, the use of sarcasm to emphasize the hypocrisy of American racism, poking fun at Whites, and the anticipation of racism. A close examination of humor as a literary device in this book reveals to readers of all races some of the social dilemmas that African Americans face.

Utilizing the Black aesthetic as a theoretical framework, Henderson (2005) analyzed several African American young adult novels that have received the Coretta Scott King Award to examine the literary elements and style. Henderson argues that the content of the young adult novels is consistent with the tenets of the Black aesthetic and African American adult literature, but that the literary elements and style in African American children’s literature are notably different. Henderson believes that young adult literature serve as a primer because “being introduced to traditional African American storytelling devices helps prepare the reader to decode those same devices when they are used in African American adult literature” (p. 300). Henderson argues that because the literary elements and style of African American young adult novels are inconsistent with those found in African American adult literature, readers are not being adequately prepared. Henderson’s claim that African American young adult literature should serve as a “primer” for African American adult literature is questionable at best. Unlike most of the scholars reviewed in this section, Henderson conducts literary analysis with an eye toward the adult African American literary tradition. However, as reviewed earlier, an African American tradition in children’s writing has been established, which solidifies these books as compelling within their own right and for their intended readership.

Reader response research. While reading African American children’s literature, literary pleasure, comprehension, and interpretation overlap and develop, as is typical with any quality literature. In particular, recognition of aesthetic complexity, artistic sophistication, literary elements, and devices such as characterization, metaphors, figurative language, style, plot, and theme have been addressed by scholars (Boyd, 2002, 2006; Copenhaver, 2001; Harris, 1995; Lee, 1993, 2006; Sipe & Daley, 2005). In one study, Copenhaver (2001) argues that when reading African American literature, “the children provided substantial evidence of literary understanding, and their responses suggested their cultural backgrounds provided significant resources for making meaning of story” (p. 347). Her take on literary understanding derived from conceptual categories advanced by Sipe (2000), which included intertextual, analytic (including plot, texts, and illustrations), personal, and transparent responses where students found themselves directly engaged in the story world. Harris (1995) examined a literacy program whose goal consisted of infusing African American literature into an afterschool curriculum. The 13 children participating were third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students. Harris utilized the response typology of Purves and Rippere (1968) to categorize responses within levels that included engagement, perception, interpretation, and evaluation. The students’ responses “centered primarily on their personal reactions, character, plot, and action” and did not include “extended responses or discussion” (pp. 249–251). A limitation of the study recognized by Harris was the types of questions asked by
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the teacher; these queries may have influenced the length and literal qualities of the participants’ responses.

As an example of reader responses to texts largely situated within a unit-based pedagogical intervention, Lee (1993) concentrated on identifying and extending the interpretive strategies employed by the high school students participating in her research. Lee investigated oral and written responses to African American literature from six classes of African American high school students. Specifically, her study examined how a cultural linguistic feature of the African American community, “signifying,” might be used as a pedagogical tool to scaffold reading and responding to African American literature. Lee implemented an instructional unit around the linguistic practice of signifying to scaffold the interpretive processes of the students. She continued this line of work to further reveal how embedded textual features such as signifying can be joined to students’ everyday linguistic repertoire and other cultural models to further enhance literary understanding (Lee, 2006). Lee (1991) argues that textually based linguistic features “can support a pedagogical scaffolding between reader and literary text capable of building the skills of literary analysis that most youth in American schools simply miss” (p. 291). Pedagogical scaffolding and a focus on learning transference contributed to a notable increase in students’ literary analysis capabilities.

Research on general comprehension, (e.g., inference, questioning, clarification) as well as on higher order and analytic thinking as expressed through reader responses to African American children’s books has been of interest to some scholars (Bell & Clarke, 1998; Lehr & Thompson, 2000; Rickford, 1999, 2001). In one of the few quantitative studies reviewed, Bell and Clarke (1998) investigated the impact of African American literature on reader recall and comprehension. Their study included 109 African American elementary school students who either read or listened to books with varying levels of African American imagery and sociocultural themes. According to their findings, improved comprehension occurred when the participants read books with the most African American imagery and sociocultural themes. However, reading recall was not significantly impacted. Rickford (1999) conducted another reader response study utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods. She focused on identifying the benefits of incorporating African and African American folklore and short stories into a fifth-grade class of racially and ethnically diverse students. Rickford administered structured questioning protocols to assess various levels of reading interpretation. Participants performed better on higher order thinking questions rather than lower order questions and they scored better when they responded to longer rather than shorter stories.

Summary and Implications

We have advanced a three-pronged thematic heuristic throughout this review of literature. This heuristic encapsulates research done on or with African American children’s literature as (1) contested terrain, (2), cultural artifact, and (3) literary art. These areas effectively synthesize the growing body of textual and reader response research conducted within the past several decades. Some studies certainly cut across several strands of the heuristic. We believe that for literature depicting other groups of color, such as Native Americans and Asian Americans, the same heuristic would enable researchers and practitioners to think through aims of their studies or use of this literature in increasingly systematic and targeted ways. Using the selective
Our review revealed how of the three heuristic prongs, African American literature as contested terrain received sustained textual analysis attention throughout the past thirty years. And, yet, fewer examinations of how readers’ interpretations of the literature have enabled them to grapple with issues of definition or cultural authenticity occurred. At times, contested issues such as how African American children’s literature gets defined and culturally authenticated exist largely within the sphere of academic scholarship that does not include actual readers. In schools, however, readers situate themselves in relationship to their classroom teacher as well as a larger community of their peers who may represent varied racial and economic backgrounds. As a result, from a reader’s point of view, ascribing cultural authenticity to a text may be something that fluctuates over time and across varied settings.

To engage youth in this debate allows an inroad into readers’ feeling some agency with respect to how particular groups are represented or misrepresented. These discussions might lead to further considerations of other debated topics, such as who defines how African American girls are depicted in stories or other popular culture media? Discussions such as these exemplify the types of engagement in critical literacy that noted scholars such as Freire and Macedo (1987) and hooks (1994) have consistently called for throughout the last several decades.

With regard to our second theme that addresses African American children’s books as cultural artifacts, textual analysis scholarship focused on biracial characters is warranted. To further muddy issues of a cultural artifact representation, African American authors have begun to address controversial issues such as mental illness, homosexuality, interracial romantic relationships, and incarceration. It is also worthwhile to theorize about these books. Some examples include Visiting Day (Woodson, 2002), in which a young girl visits her father who is serving a prison sentence, and Humming Whispers (A. Johnson, 1996), a story of two sisters, one of whom has schizophrenia and hears voices. Scholars should be encouraged to continually revisit texts as cultural artifacts in emerging or either repopularized genres, such as young adult “street” and “religious” fiction.

With respect to reader response research, we suggest future studies exploring whether there are times in the development of youth in which identifying with one’s race constitutes a stronger pull. Subsequently, reading books as mirrors becomes incredibly important. We would also be interested in research that takes into account students’ biracial or multiracial backgrounds with respect to identifying with a text culturally. Young adult literature, such as Jaime Adoff’s Jimi and Me (2005) increasingly recognizes this population and the multifaceted identities and subjectivities they assume. Second, when students are exposed to recurring themes in African American children’s literature such as overcoming oppression, it is still largely unclear whether and how social dynamics in a small group or class either aid or disrupt responses to books from this vantage point. And, we remain curious about whether teachers have gotten any closer to figuring out how to manage difficult discussions that are oftentimes avoided, such as dealing with both
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individual and societal racism as reflected in not only historical but contemporary realistic fiction.

Outside of the classroom context, we know that African American parents play important roles in their children’s literacy experiences and it is worthwhile to examine their knowledge about and use of African American children’s books as cultural artifacts. A recent study conducted by McNair (2007) examined what happened when 10 African American families—with children in kindergarten through Grade 2—were exposed to an abundance of children’s literature written by and about African Americans. Initial results indicated that parents increased the amount of time they spent reading aloud to their children, developed an appreciation for high-quality literature, and passed along the knowledge they gained about African American children’s books to friends, family members, and coworkers. It is worth noting if and how parents acquire African American children’s literature and how their racial identity affects the ways in which they read aloud and discuss books with their children. For example, how might an African American mother negotiate and explain to her daughter the complex sociopolitical messages about hair in books such as Nappy Hair (Herron, 1997) and I Love My Hair! (Tarpley, 1998)?

Counting on African American children’s literature to maintain its positioning as a sustainable cultural artifact will require additional scholarly interest. For instance, recent reports from the Cooperative Children’s Books Center (2008) boast startling statistics. On average, in the years between 2000 and 2007, roughly 2% of books by and about African Americans were published by small or large (rather than individual) publishers. This number has decreased slightly since the 1980s. In part because of the selective tradition, we assert that the institutionalization of African American literature (for children and adults) has undergone periods of ebbs and flow. For example, founded in the 1960s, the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) played a key role in the institutionalization of African American children’s literature. Bishop (2007) writes, “Although the CIBC did not limit its concerns to African American children’s literature, it began there and had an important impact on people who were creating, publishing, and reviewing children’s books about African Americans” (p. 85). Elinor Sinnette, an influential African American librarian, noted that the CIBC “was founded in response to the dearth of good children’s books about African Americans” (Bishop, 2007, p. 85). The CIBC sponsored a number of literary contests that helped to launch the careers of notable authors of African American children’s literature including Mildred Taylor and Sharon Bell Mathis. According to D. Johnson (1997), in the 1960s, “One of the most important stimulants to the publishing of African American children’s literature, largely as a response to political agitation, was the federal government’s commitment to provide funding to school districts to purchase books created by African Americans” (p. 137). The Coretta Scott King Book Award, which honors African American authors and illustrators of outstanding books for youth, was also established in the 1960s and in 2009 will celebrate its 40th anniversary.

Organizational backing and literary merit awards such as these do not always coincide with marketplace influences, however. We contend that studies based on the institutionalized ebbs and flows of African American children’s literature will help to solidify the field. Marketplace influences, for example, such as examining the trends of how major publishers versus smaller publishers (e.g., Just Us Books) commission and publish African American children’s books, receive minimal in-depth
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scholarly attention (Taxel, 2002). Furthermore, we were unable to find any studies that examined the types and percentages of African American children's books commonly recommended for school reading lists, library shelves, and book stores.

With respect to our final heuristic, literary art, we believe the research indicates gaps in our knowledge base. Assessments focusing primarily on literary quality are frequently missing from textual analysis studies done about African American children’s literature. Criteria to establish the literary sophistication of the stories are often surpassed by rather than equated with cultural features denoting the books as about African American life. Examining and upholding these texts as literary art remains essential for reasons beyond curricular inclusions of diversity. We certainly notice, for instance, a significant amount of advocacy on behalf of the advancement of African American children's literature from the largest professional literacy organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association. Both organizations support book awards such as the Coretta Scott King; the promotion of diverse literature in professional standards, authors and illustrators of color at national conferences, and scholars who study and write about these topics through research grants as well as through publishing. At the same time, few mainstream literary awards (e.g., Newbery and Caldecott) have been bestowed on African American authors who write for children. Likewise, when considerations of a literary “classic” are advanced by those in the publishing industry, literary organizations, or educational contexts, it is rare to see any children’s books by and about African Americans noted as “classic” texts for reasons having to do with the literary quality. Within the context of children’s literature, the term “classic” is usually reserved for titles such as *Charlotte’s Web* (White, 1952), *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969), and *Make Way for Ducklings* (McCloskey, 1941). Future research is warranted to identify “classic” African American children’s literature and what it is about these texts that make them pioneering literary works. We can likewise consider which literary and professional organizations as well as publishing companies contribute to the selective tradition by awarding few books from writers of color the classic status.

Textual illustrations constitute another aspect of our literary art heuristic, and there is scant scholarship in this area. In an article titled, “I See Me in the Book: Visual Literacy and African American Children’s Literature,” D. Johnson (1990a) writes, “In the study of illustration and African American children’s literature, illustration is equally important as text” (p. 10). In a study that examined the illustrations in three biographies of Harriet Tubman, all of which were illustrated by African Americans, Thompson (2001) noted that “the picture-book versions of Tubman’s story show more than they tell” (p. 87). Because during the last several decades, a number of prominent African American illustrators including Kadir Nelson, Brian Pinkney, Faith Ringgold, and James E. Ransome have begun creating the images in picture books, studies in which their artwork is analyzed are necessary. Just as authors can embed culturally influenced themes and literary devices within the text, illustrators also embed important messages in the images of picture books (Roethler, 1998). For example, in regard to her evolution as an artist of children’s books, Faith Ringgold (Ringgold, Freeman, & Rocher, 1996) states:

I learned a lot about African design . . . and then I incorporated these elements into my art, which became not African art, but African American art. And I used it to express not the African experience, which I didn’t have, but the
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African American experience—and that’s what my art really is. It’s the expression of the African American female experience. (p. 10)

How can children be helped to develop a sense of visual literacy and how might this affect their responses to and interpretation of African American picture books?

Not unlike the textual analysis, constructions of meaning and the insights these offer about students’ reading development and processes have been infrequently focused on by reader response scholars. Yet, in the limited number of studies conducted, a consistent finding suggests that literary understanding can be enhanced when readers identify and use cultural features embedded in texts. To rely on African American children’s narratives as potential tools for scaffolding literary analysis, close reads of the literature as both cultural artifacts as well as literary art will be required. One clear issue across studies of reader responses includes how little consensus has been built around what constitutes major concepts, such as the ways cultural practices are displayed while reading as well as how specific cultural depictions in texts evoke varied literary interpretations. Similarly, in the studies reviewed, notions of comprehension and literary understanding varied to some extent.

With some exceptions (e.g., Bell & Clarke, 1998; Lee, 1993; Rickford, 1999), because a number of the response studies relied on qualitative and often case study methods, the data remain thick yet less applicable to generalizability. An increase in quantitatively designed studies to explore the relationships between the selection of reading materials (e.g., African American children’s stories) and a reader’s evolving literary understanding or more broadly his or her reading achievement would be helpful.

In addition to the critiques emerging from our three-pronged heuristic, a broader research issue surfaced when we considered the disciplinary backgrounds of scholars addressing African American children’s literature. These backgrounds include English, literacy education, library science, as well as social studies education. In the reviewed studies, we rarely found the type of fertilization across disciplines that we attempted (although still with limits) throughout this article. These disciplinary divides have likely made it more difficult for researchers to be informed by and to build on a large body of findings. This review can move researchers a bit closer to appreciating and valuing the interdisciplinary strands of scholarship on African American children’s literature.

In conclusion, we return again to children’s book author Howard (1991b) who suggested in our introduction that “being African American means having stories” (p. 98). To uphold and bring to the forefront Howard’s compelling words, we encourage scholars in the field to examine the wide range of issues discussed throughout this review with increased rigor and sustained attention. In doing so, we can further develop and advance the remarkable tradition of children’s books written by and about African Americans.

Notes

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1. The complete names of authors of children’s and adult literature are used when they are referenced for the first time in the article. From that point on, only the last names of the authors are used. Scholars are referred to by their last names only throughout the article.

2. The conceptual articles are noted with an asterisk in the reference list.

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