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Suffer, Little Children: Childhood as Seen Through the Eyes of Black Writers

Kavon Franklin

Abstract:

The works of Richard Wright, in particular his autobiographical writings including *Black Boy* (1945), illustrate how bleak life could be for African American boys trying to get by in the deep South during Jim Crow. Mary Mebane shows that life was no easier for adolescent black girls in her memoir, Mary (1981). In Notes of a Native Son (1955), James Baldwin writes about the deleterious effect that systematic racism has on his homelife while growing up—how the cruelty his stepfather inflicts upon the Baldwin children is the cruelty the world has inflicted upon him. Poets such as Langston Hughes in "Junior Addict" (1964) and Gwendolyn Brooks in Annie Allen (1949) and other works tell tales of hopeless, hapless black youths who come from homes like Baldwin's (or even worse). These children are fated to become victims and victimizers. They are very much like the bullies in Norman Podhoretz's "My Negro Problem—and Ours" published in Commentary in 1963. In Podhoretz's telling, it is the black boys from his Brooklyn neighborhood who terrorize whites—not the other way around. In any case, being confronted with the weighty issues of race, difference, fear, and loathing force Podhoretz to give serious consideration to issues well beyond the usual childish pursuits. Likewise, Lillian Smith, a white Southerner, is prematurely aged after an incident in which her respectable middle-class parents' allegiance to whiteness and their humanity come into conflict and whiteness wins. My paper examines the ways in which these writers and others demonstrate how the harsh realities of racism and childhood naivete cannot coexist for long. These authors show how formative and life-changing bigotry and hate can be for those who experience it and live to tell their stories.

Keywords: Race, African Americans, Childhood, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes.

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The children constitute the most important component of any civilized society, as they hold the seed to the future. Hence, it is a common experience to find that politicians or social activists across the globe clamouring for reforms for the children, or vowing to protect them from any harm. Even in case of the countries ruled by a Communist government (or "red state"), the rights and interests of the children have been claimed to be of paramount importance. However, in the contemporaneous times, the vow to protect the children has taken an unusual turn, as public administrators have begun to make good on the promise to initiate several measures which would limit or eliminate pre-adolescent exposure to any knowledge of sexualities or gender expressions that would fall under the banner of "queer". Likewise, laws have been enacted which prohibit the advancement of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) in secondary school curriculum, ass it has been alleged that CRT and DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) are the two banes of the contemporary society which have come to symbolize the supposed "wokening" of the American youth. While DEI is often presented as the bogeyman of the professional workforce, CRT is blamed for warping the minds of impressionable children by requiring them to read literature or watch films in which racial minorities are presented as oppressed and the powers-that-be (almost always white) are the oppressors.[1]

In 2021, Matt Hawn, a tenured Blountville, Tennessee, teacher lost his job, in part, for teaching Ta-Nehisi Coates' "The First White President", which claims Donald Trump's 2016 presidential victory blamed to be based on white grievance[2]. Although Hawn may still continue his struggle to revive his previous job designation[3]; but it is fortunate for Mary Wood, an AP English teacher in Chapin, South Carolina, that she was able to keep her job. However, during her tenure Mary Wood was presumably chastened after being forced to abandon her unit, owing to accusations of white privilege, when a few students complained about having to watch films about segregation; and read Coates' *Between the World and Me* (2015) — a work of nonfiction framed as the author's letter to his son in which some hard truths about being black in America are shared.[4]

This social milieu necessitates that there will be more and more banned books, protests and counter-protests. However, except for the eight days *Roots* aired in 1977[5], and a very brief period of protests following the dastardly murder of George Floyd[6], there has never been a strong desire from the general public to discover the extent to which black people have been terrorized in their own country. Likewise, there has not been conducted any sustained scrutiny, either by a government or a non-governmental agency, to unravel the most helpless condition of the coloured Americans, especially the children of colour. This information seems all the more shocking when examined in the light of the fact, that in a nation whose leaders supposedly care so much about its young population, the children of colour are the most helplessly marginalised. Therefore, it becomes quintessential to undertake an examination of the condition of the coloured people of America during the four distinct eras, namely: pre-Emancipation America; the Jim Crow years; the modern Civil Rights movement era from the 1950s to the 60s; and the Post-Civil Rights period; so as to bring out how important it is to combine the study of history, fiction, and, critical theory, in order to fully acknowledge how the events of the past have affected the present, thereby enabling us to speak to the future.

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Just Property

One of the most recurrent arguments put forth by the opposers of Critical Race theory is this, that not every enslaved person of colour, residing in America existed in unceasing misery. To illustrate their argument further, they put forth the examples of such slave narratives like that of Henry "Box" Brown. To state in a nutshell, Henry "Box" Brown writes about living a fairly contented life (all things considered) with his own home and family[7]. Likewise, another important example is that of Harriet Jacobs, who writing as "Linda Brent," in *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, speaks of her "happy childhood"[8], as she is growing up with her parents and brother on or near a plantation in Edenton, North Carolina, in the 1810s. But the narratives also show something else: even the most "pampered"[9] slaves eventually have to face the same unavoidable fact, that they are the property of the slave owners. Some of the slave owners were found to be a considerate master — although the employment of the word "considerate" is very relative, and significantly differs from narrative to narrative — would not sell the slaves to other slave owners; although he very well *could*…to anyone for any reason, anywhere. Thus, Henry Brown's illusions are shattered when his wife is sold and shipped away[10], while Harriet Jacobs' revelation occurs during childhood when her beloved mistress dies, and she learns that the woman had bequeathed her to a five-year-old instead of freeing her. Jacobs, then nearly twelve, is especially hurt since she has been fed so much religious doctrine from the mistress about looking out for the meek and loving thy neighbour,[11] without realizing those "neighbours" were white. Hence, Jacobs learns for herself, that she is mere chattel. This is a scene that plays out again and again before the abolition of slavery. Eventually most enslaved people are struck by how one-sided the relationships were, between them and the slave masters or the white playmates.

Richard Mentor Johnson, who as a colonel in the War of 1812 is said to have killed Tecumseh[12], and had also made a name for himself in politics. He eventually ascended all the way to the vice presidency in the Martin Van Buren administration, but he was most well-known for his personal life. Johnson, had two children with Julia Chinn, an enslaved black woman, commonly referred to by historians as his common-law wife[13]. Additionally, while Richard Mentor Johnson is often commended for taking care of his twin daughters this does not mean he was particularly sympathetic to black women. In fact, after Chinn's death, he took up another enslaved woman named Cornelia as his partner, whom he is thought to have sold off, when he grew tired of her[14]. How does this square with the image of a kindly father? And what of the fact that Julia Chinn had been belonged to Johnson's father?[15] In many cases, "mulatta" women were raped by their fathers, brothers, and other male relatives. There is no evidence that Chinn was related to Johnson, but, then again, those types of things were normally not discussed in public. While Johnson is praised for forcing polite society to accept his children, who knows what damage was done to their psyche by living in a world with one enslaved parent and one free. They had to have known their good fortune was contingent upon their status as honorary whites and with one wrong word or glance that designation could be stripped from them.

Therefore, to say that their lives all had "happy endings", is atypically an understatement. More often than not, enslaved young women faced fates similar to those of Harriet Jacobs, who

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despite her light skin and good looks, would never experience a debutante ball. Jacobs is not physically abused while enslaved; instead, she is nearly driven insane by the unceasing sexual pleas from her master, Dr. James Norcom ("Dr. Flint" in the book)[16]. The man tries all manner of tricks to get Harriet into his bed. Given all the different instances of enslaved women being raped — some of these accounts being veritably horrific, and extremely violent —it is somewhat surprising to learn that Dr. Norcom doesn't use force to have his way with Jacobs. Then again, it could also be argued that perhaps Dr. Norcom believed himself to be above such heinous acts, as he was capable enough of "seducing" Jacobs. Nevertheless, Dr. Norcom fails at this, but more than him, his failure infuriates his wife, Mary Matilda Horniblow Norcom, who blames Jacobs more than her husband.

It's important to remember, that, Harriet Jacobs is still a teenager at this point, a child, and that too a helpless one, as she is an enslaved girl with no real protection. The few relatives she turns to for comfort can only help her so much[17]. Thus, as an enslaved individual, she cannot openly accuse Norcom of wrongdoing. The only option is to try to outmaneuver this powerful older man, while not offending him, or raising the suspicions of his jealous wife.

The rampant sexual abuse of black women has remained a consistent factor in American life. African women were raped as they sailed from their homeland in Africa to the Americas during the Middle Passage. Moreover, they were often raped in the low country of Georgia and South Carolina; the Upper South plantations in Virginia; and the sugar plantations of the Caribbean, which is how the legions of "black" women as light-skinned as Harriet Jacobs came to exist. This creation of an entirely new group of people led to a "pigmentocracy" whereby, people with lighter-skins ascended the ladder to the top. This complexion hierarchy still negatively affects the self-esteem of girls who feel that the further they are from European beauty standards, the less worth they possess.

During Jacobs' time, there were some who expected special treatment due to their fair skin; others viewed it as a mark of disgrace. Jacobs directly addresses her readers when she mentions the in-your-face-but-secret practice of owner-slave sexual relations and the children born out of those interactions. To do this, she tells a story of two young girls who are playmates, one white, the other (partially) black. They do not know it, but they share the same father and as they age, the white girl steps into her rightful inheritance while the other "[drinks] the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink."[18] To all those good Christian whites, she asks, "Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right?"[19]

The answer: maintaining the "purity" of black women is not something that's of concern to whites and not something that black men have the power to control. In a letter to his former master in Tennessee, freedman Jourdon Anderson writes that he is hesitant to return to the old plantation, despite the white man's promises of good pay and kind treatment. Anderson has a host of concerns, but the main one is what will become of his pretty daughters. He cryptically refers to two other black women who fell prey to the advances of lecherous white men; in his view, such a fate is worse than death.[20]

Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute (later University), alludes to the sexual violation of black women in his memoir, *Up from Slavery*, but the allusions are made as obliquely as possible[21]. Diarist Frances Anne "Fanny" Kemble is more voluble in this aspect. The British-born actress improbably ended up as a mistress on a Georgia plantation and made a number of observations including how unsafe and wretched the life was for children, especially girls, during slavery. Their bodies did not belong to them; nor could their fathers defend them; whereas even the lowliest, most miserable white man would be viewed as justified in warding off predators trying to set upon his daughter[22]. In this milieu, the vast majority of black men were neutered. They could not protect their wives or even their children. The wives knew it; the children knew it. Long before the days of the Reconstructed Man, it paid to have a strong, protective father—a man other men feared. As any display of independent thinking and virility were death sentences, the father-child bond was weakened. Furthermore, it also suffered extensively with every bowed head and meek response to injustice. Thus, the men of colour being prohibited from the traditional protector/provider role, had significant repercussions on the familial relations of people of colour, whose ripples can be felt to this day.

However, during the period of slavery, it was not just their fathers, upon whom enslaved children learned they couldn't depend upon. They realised painfully that their mothers were also incapable of protecting them, since, the Afro-American women working as slaves, in the various plantation farms, although have been historically prized above rubies, were as helpless and hapless as a piece of furniture, or good cattle, who could be sold off at the whim of the slave owner, making them no match for real power wielded by the slave owners only. Thus, in Charles Ball's narrative, Ball recalls a pretty contented life with his mother, siblings, and his father who regularly visits them, from another planation. This ends when Charles is sold. His mother, naturally, melts down on the day of the separation, and chases after him. For her tears and intransigence, the woman is flogged, which traumatizes the four-year-old boy. Furthermore, as if to explicate vividly the dehumanization of the enslaved, Ball claims that the day of his sale is the first time he has *ever* worn clothes. His father, who is previously portrayed as a jovial man, becomes morose upon the dismantling of his family and — once alerted that he will be sold further south, which might as well as be in hell from the perspective of the slaves — runs away and is never seen by his family again.

The story of black existence during American slavery is one of loss and fear—the loss of loved ones sold away and the fear of that loss. Everything is designed to keep the enslaved population on their collective toes and grateful for whatever scraps, their owners see fit to throw their way.

Like Charles Ball, Frederick Douglass grows up on a Maryland plantation. He also feels relatively well-treated by his owners during the first years of life. Fairly quickly, he learns that kindness has a limit. Douglass' mistress, Sophia Auld, is the person who teaches him to read, but once informed by her husband that enslavement and literacy are not compatible, ceases her instruction, and does everything in her power to prevent Douglass from furthering his education.

Douglass continues his education, despite the staunch resistance from the Aulds. One way Douglass improves his skills is by learning from impoverished white boys who provide him with reading lessons in exchange for bread. While commiserating with these poor white boys, Douglass says, "You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, *but I am a slave for life*!"[23]

This sentence serves as a reply to all those who lament the Americans of colour are not being able to "move on" from the discrimination and violence they, or their ancestors suffered in an earlier age. The frequent claim is that other ethnic groups were also either enslaved, or employed as indentured labourers, and yet managed to get over it. What is often left unsaid is that many nonblacks serving in this capacity were not necessarily dehumanized because of it, nor were they enslaved for life.

An indenture contract composed in 1742 shows how onerous the agreements could be. In it, John Reid, Jr. (whose age is not specified) is bound to Robert Livingston, a merchant living in New York, to be his apprentice—during which time Reid agrees to faithfully serve his master, "his Secret keep, his lawful Commands gladly every where obey."[24] In addition, the contract prohibits Reid from marrying, fornicating, playing cards, or wandering off without approval. Reid's term of service is five years, during which Livingston promises to teach him the "Art and Mystery" of life as a merchant while also providing him with "sufficient Drink and Lodging."[25] So while, Livingston runs a tight ship, there is something to be gained for the young apprentice. Most important, there is a beginning and an end.

World Without Pity

The historian John Hope Franklin made a name for himself with several extensively researched works of nonfiction about the Afro-American experience, but one of his most frequently taught texts is just over a page long, and provide details about a single event only. In "The Train from Hate," Franklin describes an incident that occurs circa 1922. He and his mother board a train headed for Checotah, Oklahoma, but because they have taken their seat in the "whites only" section, they are soon asked to move away. His mother says they'll do so when the train comes to a stop, but instead, she and her children are forcefully thrown off. Along the way, Franklin, who's about seven years old, begins to cry and his mother chooses that time to impart wisdom that any Jim Crow-era black boy needs to know: while segregation is the law of the land, she says, it does not define their worth as people[26].

That's nice, but can children really understand that? Just as Harriet Jacobs writes about living in blissful ignorance as a child before discovering her inferior status in the eyes of the laws and in the eyes of everyone who has a position of authority over her. Franklin is duly changed by his exposure to racial bigotry. Telling a child that he is equal when society consistently says he is not is a losing campaign. The relentless social messaging thus trumps parental platitudes.

Another major event took place in 1922, when Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son," was published. This work is a major favourite among the readers, and it involves a prototypical hardworking (presumably single) black mother telling her child to keep his head up despite the challenges of life[27]. The black literary canon is filled with such tales, and is in perfectly keeping

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with the fact that mother-worship is an integral aspect of the Afro-American culture. However, the flip side of the coin is equally explored in Calvin C. Hernton's *Sex and Race in* America. Born in 1932, Hernton recounts playing innocently with a white friend when he is suddenly set upon by his irate and terrified grandmother who tells him that, he and the girl being seen together could get the entire family killed[28]. Hernton, who's also seven years old at the time, is psychosexually altered from that point on.[29] He develops an intense hatred *and* sexual desire for white women and a disgust for black women, as he comes to view them influenced by the prejudices of his grandmother, and accordingly, deems Afro-American women to be unattractive and unappealing.

Jim Crow was not simply about imposing segregation. The laws were intended to make Afro-Americans untouchables, which was bizarre since so many white infants had been raised and breastfed by black nurses. During slavery and the early years of the sharecropping system, blacks and whites were in frequent physical contact and, of course, lived in close quarters, but with the hardening of Jim Crow, black children learned they were not to touch, speak to, or walk alongside respectable whites which had a disastrous impact upon their psyche. Thus, for the Afro-American teenagers, it resulted in issues regarding how they viewed their female counterparts, specifically, how they viewed them as inferior to the white girls whom the entire media landscape presented in glamorous terms.

It's no wonder that so many young black boys grew up believing white women were the pinnacle of beauty. The forbidden fruit aspect, and the media promotion added to a genuine interest for a number of black men, which in turn, created a prurient, perhaps homoerotic fascination/repulsion within the minds of many white men as they came to fantasize about the black man-white woman couplings. Black men, at least as far back as the time of the Lincoln administration, were publicly accused of having designs on white woman. The implication was that this desire was the real reason they kept harping on about "freedom"— they wanted the "freedom" to have white women and not die because of it.

In *The Red Record*, Ida B. Wells shows that a high percentage of black men lynched in the late 1800s and early 1900s had been accused of rape or attempted rape of white women,[30] so the fears of Hernton's grandmother are not misplaced. It was only that her reaction to that fear created a muddle of emotions within him that nourished self-hatred and a generalized anti-blackness. For instance, when the teenaged Calvin gets a light-skinned girlfriend, he's pleased with himself, but the thrill wears off quickly. She still isn't white. When he dates a white girl, the experience is described as sexual dalliance and not a romantic relationship. He's proud to have her, and yet contemptuous of her.[31] His feelings are similar to those that have been discussed in a few other autobiographical works where black men describe how their sexual preferences were shaped by the taboo element of interracial sex, and confess that their desire for the white woman's body started when they were boys, and first learned that the white women were off limits.

In his 1965 autobiography, Malcolm X recounts his life before the suspicious death (likely murder) of his father, Rev. Earl Little. Although Rev. Little is a proud Garveyite, Malcolm, who is just five years old, has no sense of race pride and, therefore, does not object to his white

classmates referring to him, and his siblings using racial slurs. At that age, he doesn't feel they are uttered with malice.[32]

This happy-enough existence is upended with the death of Malcolm's father. The insurers on one of his dad's policies cheat the family out the money; ultimately forcing them into dire poverty. Malcolm's mother has a full mental breakdown; and the children are sent to live in various locations.

Malcolm and his siblings are failed at every level, but he gets a second chance. A prominent white couple in Macon, Michigan, whom he calls the Swerlins, take a liking to him and keep him on, in the detention home they run, instead of transferring him elsewhere. Malcolm flourishes while living with this couple, although their behaviour certainly runs afoul of modern sensibilities. Even a young Malcolm has a vague sense that their language and behaviour are inappropriate. The Swerlins, their staff, and their visitors frequently use anti-black epithets around Malcolm. They even probe him with a series of race-based questions, but he takes it in his stride.[33]

This amiable, docile version of Malcolm doesn't exist for long. In a conversation with his English teacher, Mr. Ostrowski, Malcolm answers the standard "What do you want to be when you grow up?" question by saying he wants to be an attorney. This isn't even true, but Mr. Ostrowski's honest reaction stays with Malcolm forever.

"A lawyer," the man says, is not a "realistic goal for a n-gger."[34]

Two things that make this incident particularly galling are: Mr. Ostrowski is not a cruel person; he doesn't make callous racial jokes like one of Malcom's other teachers. He appears to like Malcolm and that affection is returned, so when Mr. Ostrowski tells him a "n-gger" can't dream big, it is as if he's not just speaking for himself, but for America.

Not having a sense of who this boy will grow up to be, Mr. Ostrowski tells the future minister, Malcolm X that his best bet is to be a carpenter.

"It was then that I began to change—inside," Malcolm says."[35]

Richard Wright is another person whose accounts of life as a black child in Jim Crow America are invaluable—particularly his novel *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945), a fictionalized autobiography.

In his work, Wright presents incident after incident in which he going along with his life, not bothering anyone, but being met with contempt, mockery, and anger from white people whose paths he dares to cross. While trying to secure a job as an errand boy for a white woman, when he is in his seventh grade, the woman asks Malcolm if he steals. He is stunned by the question, but upon reflection he remembers "hearing that white people looked upon Negroes as a different variety of children, and it was only in the light of that, that her question made any sense."[36]

Moreover, the white women Wright encounters treat him as an imbecile; while the men treat him as an easy mark, and hence susceptible to harassments. He is chased from every job he has in the South. Quietness can't save him; neither can humility, or a feigned slow-wittedness. The people who come in contact with him can sense he's different. It offends their sensibilities and

violates the order of polite Southern society, where a black boy could express his intelligence without any fear.

Malcolm X does not have an easier time in the Midwest either. The Swerlins become uncomfortable with him once he can no longer be looked upon as a pet. They send him away. It is his half-sister Ella Collins, a no-nonsense, much-married businesswoman, who takes the charge of Malcolm into her hand, and opens up a world of possibilities for him. Likewise, Malcolm's first trip to visit Ella in Boston also has a significant impact on his life. Although he will come to have a number of complaints about the city and its inhabitants later, he credits his move from Macon to Boston with saving him from a humdrum, so-called middle-class existence in Michigan, which would involve marrying a local girl and getting a poorly paid job as shoeshine boy, waiter, or even a carpenter, as Mr. Ostrowski suggested.

Though not his mother, Ella becomes a source of protection and guidance for a boy whose mother no longer recognizes him. For most black children in literature from the Jim Crow Era, mothers and other maternal figures are usually the only saving grace for wayward youth, since the fathers who aren't killed, often take off or are emotionally distant and the white society is largely unsympathetic.

While Malcolm X finds refuge in Boston, beginning with the Housing Act of 1949, many Afro-American minors were removed from their communities. The stated purpose of urban renewal was to repair blighted areas by tearing down shabby homes and other structures in "urban" areas. Naturally, many of these areas were populated by black people, who were often promised that they could return to their neighbourhoods once nice new homes had been built. Very often that was a pipe dream and people who had once been friends, neighbours, and lovers ended up scattered hither and yon. These homes may indeed might have been run-down, but the communities where they were located were often tight-knit. Once urban renewal made it way through mid-size towns and large cities, communities from all regions of the country disappeared and the sense that black young people had, of the ground constantly shifting under their feet, was made even more poignant as they said goodbye to the people who had babysat them, looked after them as they played, scolded them, loved them. With the dismantling of their neighbourhoods, they would lose touch with many of those people, making a hostile society even colder and more alienating.

A New Breed

In Spike Lee's *4 Little Girls* (1997), former U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young says young people frequently tell him they are disheartened that members of their generation aren't unified like people were in the 1960s. He responds by telling them, "Nobody was together in the 60s." In fact, only "a handful of people" show up to the first demonstrations Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. leads in Birmingham, Alabama. "It was a small group of dedicated people who got it started," Young says, "and then the kids took it over."[37]

In 1963, King calls James Bevel, a Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) director in Mississippi, to organize Civil Rights workers in Birmingham. The twenty-six-year-old

Bevel, along with Young, Dorothy Cotton, and a number of other activists began recruiting local college students, but it is Bevel who is instrumental in going to high schools to look for potential protesters.

At one institution, A.H. Parker High School, administrators close the gates. In spite of this, SCLC member Wyatt Tee Walker remembers kids leaving school anyway and joining the marches.[38]

Margaret Walker devotes a few poems to child crusaders. "We're hoping to be arrested/and hoping to go to jail," one states. "We'll sing and shout and pray/For Freedom and for Justice/And for Human Dignity." The epigraph of the poem is a line attributed to an eight-year-old, possibly in Birmingham, in 1963: "Hurry up Lucille or we won't get arrested with our group."[39]

The zeal with which these children fight for freedom puts a heartwarming spin on an ugly fact: in a country whose leaders claim to care so much about children, black children are faced with the reality that they are left out this equation. There is no liberty or justice for them. Not even their parents will demand equal rights due to the very real fear of violence, verbal harassment, and loss of employment. To echo a line from June Jordan's, these children take to the streets and show they are the ones they've been waiting for.[40]

Historian Taylor Branch says he is unaware of any other American movement that made use of young protesters in the way the Civil Rights Movement did.[41] It does not help that the person in charge of maintaining peace in Birmingham, Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene "Bull" Connor, is so tempestuous and dangerous. Connor and his men are in their element during the event that galvanizes the parts of America sympathetic to their cause. It's on a hot and humid day on May 3, 1963, in Kelly Ingram Park. For hours, nothing of note occurs until someone throws a brick, and the policemen and fireman respond with great force, turning their hoses on the children.

"It was absolute helter-skelter," says musician Rickey Powell, who is fifteen at the time. "The dogs were barking and biting," and young people could be seen in living rooms all across America rolling down the street due to the pressure of the hoses.[42]

This nightmarish scene accomplishes what months of negotiations and uneventful marches could not; it demonstrates how deeply entrenched race-based hatred can be—that grown men will react violently to young children who demand their country live up to the tenets espoused in the pledge they are asked to repeat day after day.

Later that year, on September 15, four young girls—Carole Robertson, Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, and Cynthia Wesley—die when a bomb explodes near the basement of 16th Street Baptist Church, just across from Kelly Ingram Park.

In Dudley Randall's "Ballad of Birmingham," a young girl asks her mother if she can attend a protest. The mother refuses to let her due to the possible danger. She has no fears about sending her to church, though: "The mother smiled to know her child/Was in the sacred place/But that smile was the last smile/To come upon her face."[43]

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Innocence in an environment of racial animus cannot last. The mother in Randall's poem might have been one of the mothers who lost her daughter in the 16th Street bombing, or she might have been any of the black mothers throughout history who have watched their sons and daughters attempt to function in a society which is frequently cruel and unforgiving to people who look like them. These mothers are unable to assure themselves or their children that "everything will be all right" because they have learned, and know their children *will* learn that too often that is simply not true.

The Promise, The Failure

Even with the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s and the integration of African Americans into the workforce, the post-Civil Rights era presented a number of problems for black people. For one, many of the civil rights leaders had been assassinated along with John and Robert Kennedy who were viewed as allies or potential allies. With massive youth resistance to the war in Vietnam and a large number of whites worked up over urban crime and lawlessness, Richard Nixon was able to use the "Southern Strategy" to win over former lifelong Democrats and further create the narrative that the cities were crumbling.

Indeed, many of them were. The potential of the Black Power movement, like so many black movements, flamed out due to jealousy, self-sabotage and infiltration. Further devastation was caused by the break-up of black families and the rise of (struggling) single-mother-led homes, which is often blamed on welfare and feminism, but, in reality, even though the lack of economic opportunities surely played a huge role.

Add accessibility of hard drugs to this toxic mix, along with a tough-on-crime approach and the birth of the "at-risk" black child was born. This child, unlike those during Richard Wright's youth, actually had a chance (or so the thought went). He was not hindered by overt bigotry or Jim Crow laws. Yet, he *and* she often squandered their chances. They made mockery out of the opportunities Martin Luther King and others had given their lives for. Why?

Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Boy Died in My Alley" (1975) speaks to these young people who are students of the streets. The young man who dies in the speaker's alley dies by violence, and he dies alone. His death is an effect. The cause is centuries of malignant neglect. It is the fault of systemic exclusion and of rudderless black leadership—in this case, the leaders being his either negligent or incompetent parents.

This boy is shot, but whether by gun, knife, drugs, or suicide, this speaker is so familiar with doomed black youth, that his or her "heart ears" are closed to them. The young man from "The Boy Died in My Alley" is like the minors James Baldwin describes in "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" In this 1979 *New York Times* article, James Baldwin writes about the lack of genuine love and concern for African American children. The cause of contempt, he argues, is not with the way black children dress or speak, but with who they are.[44]

One of the best examples of downtrodden black youth, is Sapphire's magnificent, but maligned *Push* which so offended the bourgeois sensibilities of "refined" black readers and critics in a way that was reminiscent of the story that June Jordan tells in "Nobody Mean More to Me

than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan." In that essay, Jordan recounts her students (all black) balking at having to read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. They don't like the dialect or the unseemliness of what occurs in the novel.[45] (*The Color Purple* is one of the books Precious Jones, *Push's* protagonist, resonates with as she learns to read.)

Precious' story of sexual, physical, psychological, and emotional abuse and neglect is ugly but ultimately triumphant. So many others are not so lucky. It is almost de rigueur in "urban" films that the most promising young black man or woman will die in the third act and in literature they either die or suffer horrific health consequences, such as Precious who contracts AIDS…from her father.[46] If not that, they suffer from drug abuse, like the young person in Langston Hughes' "Junior Addict." That child uses heroin as a means of escape from the chaos that surrounds him in his Harlem neighbourhood.[47]

Whether it is in a big city or a small town, set during slavery or in the current day, the story of black children who suffer the worst of America's abuse should continue to be studied. Thankfully, they are not all tales of woe; however, there are a number of African American artists who keep their spotlight on the plight of children who whether they are members of the "underclass" or come from "respectable" two-parent homes, due to the perceived taint of their racial identity, offer an insight into what it is like to navigate life in a society, which is too often hostile and unforgiving.

Notes

[1] *See* Lauren Cameron, "What Is Critical Race Theory and Why Are People So Upset About It?" *U.S. News & World Report - The Report*, June 4, 2021, 8–12. https://search-ebscohost-com.aufric.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=150718703&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[2] Emma Green, "He Taught a Ta-Nehisi Coates Essay. Then He Was Fired," *The Atlantic*, August 17, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/08/matt-hawn-tennessee-teacher-fired-white-privilege/619770/.

[3] Rick Wagner, "Updated with 38-page appeal; Watch now: Hawn appeals firing as Sullivan teacher to Chancery Court," *TimesNews*, January 27, 2022, https://www.timesnews.net/news/education/updated-with-38-page-appeal-watch-now-hawn-appeals-firing-as-sullivan-teacher-to-chancery/article_3e838f00-7eec-11ec-bb4f-93b68c695f54.html

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[4] Sarah Jones, "What the Censors Want," *New York*, June 15, 2023, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2023/06/what-the-right-wings-censors-really-want.html.

[5] Bethonie Butler, "Everyone was talking about 'Roots' in 1977—including Ronald Reagan," *Washington Post*, May 30, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/05/30/everyone-was-talking-about-roots-in-1977-including-ronald-reagan/.

[6] On 25th May, 2020 in Minneapolis, a police officer serving with the Minneapolis Police Department, named Derek Chauvin had murdered, a black American citizen, named George Floyd, by kneeling on his neck for almost ten minutes. This inhumane act had sparked off a series of protests across the USA, pointing out the differential treatment meted out to Americans of colour. The protests were soon reverberated across the nations of the world. For more information, one could access the following article: George Floyd is killed by a police officer, igniting historic protests (history.com)

[7] Henry Box Brown, N*arrative of the Life of Henry Box* Brown, *Written by Himself*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (1999): 39, https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brownbox/brownbox.html.

[8] Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. L. Maria Child (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973), 3.

[9] Ibid, 29.

[10] Brown, N*arrative of the Life of Henry Box* Brown, 33.
[11] Brent, *Incidents*, 6.

[12] Tanisha C. Ford and Carl R. Weinberg, "Slavery, Interracial Marriage, and the Election of 1836." *OAH Magazine of History* 23, no. 2 (April 2009): 57–59. doi:10.1093/maghis/23.2.57.

[13] *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2003, 128.

[14] Ford and Weinberg, "Slavery, Interracial Marriage, and the Election of 1836," 58.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Brent, *Incidents*, 30.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Brent, *Incidents*, 29.

[19] Ibid.

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[20] Libra R. Hilde, "My Children Is My Own: Fatherhood and Freedom," in *Slavery, Fatherhood, and Paternal Duty in African American Communities over the Long Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 2020), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469660691_hilde.11, 226.

[21] Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery: A Norton Critical Edition.* Ed. William L. Andrews. (New York: Norton, 1996), 6.

[22] Frances Anne Kemble. *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838*-1839, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1863), *Library of Congress*, https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcmassbookdig.journalofresiden00kemb/?sp=23&r=-0.623,0.605,2.246,0.911,0, 15

[23] Douglass, "Learning to Read and Write," 63.

[24] "Indenture agreement, 1742," Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed March 15, 2023, https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/indenture-agreement-1742.

[25] Ibid.

[26] John Hope Franklin, "The Train from Hate," In *Reading Literature and Writing Argument*. Ed. James, Missy, and Alan P. Merickel (Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 169.

[27] Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son." In *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes.* Ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel. (New York: First Vintage, 1994), 30.

[28] Calvin C. Hernton, "Sex and Racism in America," In *Brotherman: The Odyssey of Black Men in America—An Anthology*. Ed. Herb Boyd and Robert L. Allen. (New York: One World-Ballantine, 1995), 223.

[29] Hernton, *Sex and Racism,* 227-228.

[30] Ida B. Wells, *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States, 1892-1893-1894*, (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, 1894), Reprinted on Project Gutenberg, February 8, 2005, *https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14977/14977-h/14977-h.htm*.

[31] Hernton, *Sex and Racism,* 228.

[32] Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine, 2015), 21.

[33] X and Haley, 28.

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[34] X and Haley, 38.

[35] X and Haley, 38.

[36] Richard Wright, "The Price of Keeping One's Place," in *Sociology through Literature: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Lewis A. Coser (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 302.

[37] *4 Little Girls*, directed by Spike Lee (1997; New York: HBO Home Video, 2000).

[38] *4 Little Girls*, directed by Spike Lee (1997; New York: HBO Home Video, 2000).

[39] Margaret Walker, "Street Demonstration," in *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 55.

[40] June Jordan, "Poem for South African Women," Academy of American Poets, accessed April 2, 2023, https://poets.org/poem/poem-south-african-women.

[41] *4 Little Girls*, directed by Spike Lee (1997; New York: HBO Home Video, 2000).

[42] *4 Little Girls*.

[43] Dudley Randall, "Ballad of Birmingham," in *Reading Literature and Writing Argument*, ed. Missy James and Alan P. Merickel (Upper Saddle, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2002), 450.

[44] James Baldwin, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" in *Moves Writers Make*, 2nd ed., ed. by James C. Raymond (Needham Heights, MA: Simon & Schuster Custom Publishing, 1998), 192.

[45] Sapphire, *Push* (New York: Vintage, 1996).

[46] Langston Hughes, "Junior Addict," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes.* Ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: First Vintage, 1994), 539.

[47] Langston Hughes, "Junior Addict," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes.* Ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: First Vintage, 1994), 539.

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