

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Volume 3
Issue 1 *Minstrelsy and Racist Appropriation*
(3.1) and General Issue (3.2)

Article 10

April 2021

The Legacy of the Black Arts Movement in the Children's Literature of Toni Morrison and Sherley Anne Williams

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Recommended Citation

Sampson-Choma, Tosha (2021) "The Legacy of the Black Arts Movement in the Children's Literature of Toni Morrison and Sherley Anne Williams," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol3/iss1/10>

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The year 2019 marked the 50th anniversary of the creation of the first Black Studies program at San Francisco State University, a landmark which signals the indelible and long-lasting impact of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. These achievements are significant, and the recognition of such feats speaks to the ongoing legacy of Black Power, particularly in the areas of academics and the arts. Children's literature is one aspect of the Black Arts Movement that has been overlooked and understated. Writers such as Langston Hughes, Nikki Grimes, Rose Blue, Tom Feelings, and Virginia Hamilton are among authors noted when discussing children's literature of this time period. At the same time, two Black women writers whose works were garnering significant recognition during the Black Arts Movement (BAM) would later crossover into children's literature in the 1990s and in doing so, continue the spirit of the Black Arts Movement within their works. This 50th year celebration is an opportune moment to celebrate Toni Morrison and Sherley Anne Williams, whose adult literature is award-winning and widely recognized but whose children's literature is lesser known, in spite of its function to extend the values of the Black Arts Movement to an audience of children.

In her book, *Brown Gold: Milestones of African-American Children's Picture Books, 1845-2002*, Michelle H. Martin explains that the Black Arts Movement was an important time in terms of the evolution of Black children's literature, given the paucity of texts directed towards an audience of Black children. She explains, "From the 1920s through the wave of publishing that came out of the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements, many Black authors wrote 'FUBU' picture books: 'for us, by us,' even though targeting a Black audience sometimes meant being unable to place those texts with mainstream publishers" (71). As Martin points out, prior to this time, children's literature—a genre focused on an audience of children, specifically—was written by White writers for White children and Black children were given little, if any, thought.

With the rise of the Black Arts Movement, leaders would call for a new Black aesthetic that was not dictated by the White hegemonic establishment, but instead was created out of Black values by Black artists for Black people. In affirmation of the shared view of many diverse scholars of the Black Arts Movement, this essay defines the BAM as an innovative cultural movement whose focus is the production of art that is intentionally and unapologetically Black. Particularly well-suited for children's literature, the BAM's didactic approach and commitment to community building have been essential and its focus on empowering Black children central.

The use of a Black aesthetic for a Black audience is crucial in the context of Morrison and Williams because it speaks to the lack of recognition these writers received in the world of children's literature. Operating within a Black aesthetic has perhaps contributed to the disapproval and, or muted reception of these authors as legitimate crossover writers. While Williams' first children's book, *Working Cotton* (1992), has generally received a positive reception, particularly in tandem with the award-winning impressionist illustrations produced by Carole Byard, and her second book, *Girls Together* (1999), features paintings by Synthia Saint James, both books remain less known and rarely featured in children's literature outlets. Morrison, conversely, is a well-known adult writer; however, her children's literature, namely her first two books, *The Big Box* illustrated by Giselle Potter (1999) and *Book of Mean People* illustrated by Pascal Lemaître (2002), have received extensive criticism for their inefficiency and inappropriateness in targeting an audience of children. While the details of these authors' deflated success in children's literature can be traced to different specific causes, this essay argues that the root of their lack of success as crossover writers is the consequence of a failure to see their work as an extension of the Black Arts Movement—that is, their work endeavors to operate within a Black aesthetic, which may make them less popular within mainstream venues.

The essay additionally argues that when read within the lens of the Black Arts Movement, Morrison and Williams make important and valuable contributions to the genre of children's literature and create opportunities to expand discussions of a Black aesthetic, children's agency, self-love, cultural affirmation, and critical analysis of the adult power structure.

As writers publishing children's literature in the 1990s and 2000s, Morrison and Williams may not be perceived as agents of the Black Arts Movement, given the time-frame of the two periods. To support my analysis, I draw upon the work of Margo Natalie Crawford who theorizes that the indelible influence of the BAM should not be seen as a finite historical time frame but a nonlinear, shared aesthetic that she terms "black-post-blackness" or "a new way of thinking about radical black aesthetics as a constant push to what is imaginable and a constant holding on to the radicalness of black life in an antiblack world" (ix). Crawford points out the ways in which such movement participants imagine what is possible beyond the realities of their immediate time and space. Highlighting the counter literacy of Black mixed media, Crawford discusses the ways that the use of diverse media forms serves to counter the privileged function of formal, traditional texts, offering greater accessibility to greater audiences of Black people. Likewise, this concept has been argued about the *Brownies' Book* published by W.E.B. DuBois and used to target Black children during the Harlem Renaissance. The use of mixed media along with their didactic approach and emphases on empowering Black children undergird my position that Toni Morrison and Sherley Anne Williams extend the legacy of the BAM in their children's literature.

To illuminate the argument that the work of Morrison and Williams is founded on a black aesthetic requires an understanding of the standards and guidelines established by leading voices of the Black Arts Movement. BAM leaders believed Black Americans should form the basis of

art produced by and for Black audiences. Amiri Baraka is credited with galvanizing the Black Arts Movement through the theater program, Black Arts Repertory Theater School (BARTS) in 1965. Baraka encouraged Black voices and the production of Black art. As he explains in his revised introduction to the 1968 anthology, *Black Fire*, “What we said we wanted to do at BARTS was create an art that was 1) Black in form & content, as Black as Billie Holiday or Duke Ellington. 2) an art that was Mass oriented that could move easily in and be claimed by the Black Community as part of a Cultural Revolution. 3) We wanted an art that was Revolutionary. As revolutionary as Malcolm X or the new African revolutionaries” (xix). While BARTS would come to an end, Baraka and Larry Neal used their platforms as artists and leaders to create the anthology to recruit and inspire revolutionary voices in the BAM struggle. Their essays, poetry, and dramas were provocative and jarring in order to shift the paradigm away from European standards to those that were befitting of Black people. Neal, for instance, says the primary duty of the Black artist is to “speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people” (29). According to Baraka, Neal, and other like-minded activists-artists, a Black artist should always endeavor to uplift his or her community and advance the community’s spiritual and cultural needs.

Among those advocating for cultural centering and Black self definition was Maulana Karenga, creator of the Black cultural nationalist organization US, which sought to promote and provide an African-centered education—including the acquisition of African languages, creation of Black student groups, Black independent schools, and the establishment of formal African and African American Studies programs. Additionally, Karenga created the concept of Kawaïda theory, an African philosophical paradigm used to engage in self-conscious reflection, resist various forms of racial oppression (such as seeing oneself through the lens of White people) and

to encourage the pursuit of personal liberation, as shaped by an understanding of African values. Most known for establishing the pan-African holiday Kwanzaa, Maulana Karenga has long held that Africa and its descendants should be the foundation for African diaspora people. In 1968, Karenga, argues, "It becomes very important then, that art plays the role it should play in survival ... Black artists and those who wish to be artists must accept the fact that what is needed is an aesthetic, a Black aesthetic, that is a criteria for judging the validity and/or the beauty of a work of art" (2086). Rather than subscribe to Western or Eurocentric standards, Karenga and others believe there must be a Black aesthetic produced, "by us and for us," as Martin points out. Karenga asserts that art is integral to survival and that art must function within a larger scope. He contends that "It must be functional, that is useful, as we cannot accept the false doctrine of 'art for art's sake.' For in fact, there is no such thing as 'art for art's sake.' All art reflects the value system from which it comes" (2087). Using a key phrase of the Harlem Renaissance period and signaling readers to the philosophy of an artist's right to produce art merely for the joy of producing art without attaching any political strings or racial agenda, he declares what he sees as the falsehood of this idea. While some scholars support the idea that an artist has the freedom to produce a work of art for the value and beauty of the art, others, such as Karenga, believe that the very standards and notion of what determines the value and worth of a piece of art are the ideologies that inform the society in which an artist lives; art is therefore political. Consequently, even to produce art one must identify the criteria and standards to which one is subscribing. James Stewart, another pioneer of the Black Arts Movement, likewise points out the need for standards that reflect the values and sensibilities of Black communities. Stewart writes, "existing white paradigms or models do not correspond to the realities of black existence. It is imperative that we construct models with different basic assumptions. Our models must be consistent with a

black style, our natural aesthetic styles, and our moral and spiritual styles” (3). Once establishing the lens of a Black aesthetic, it becomes easier to evaluate the art produced using this criterion.

Sherley Anne Williams is yet another significant contributor to the Black Arts Movement whose work embodies the values of the movement and who utilizes those values within her children’s literature. In 1992, the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award Nominee published her first children’s book, *Working Cotton*. Williams received much recognition for her poetry and frequently anthologized short fiction. She earned an Emmy Award for a televised production of her poems. Her 1986 neo-slave narrative, *Dessa Rose*, which preceded Morrison’s *Beloved* by one year, became a 2005 off-Broadway musical as well. While she was widely recognized for her adult-based literary accomplishments, Williams’ children’s books remain less known and critically analyzed, in spite of expanding the principles of the BAM; this fact may make her less popular with mainstream publishers, as pointed out by Michelle Martin. Williams is among authors who recognize the writers who came before them, including those writing within the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance movements; however, she points out her departure from such paradigms as a transition into Black Arts, which she also refers to as Neo-Black writing.

Twenty years before Williams released her first children’s book, she published *Give Birth to Brightness: A Thematic Study in Neo-Black Literature* (1972). Through this text she makes apparent her participation in the Black rhetorical tradition as she engages age-old questions, including what is Black art and what is its function? She argues that “Renaissance writers were beginning to question whether being different, in some ways, from Whites was an automatic sign of inferiority. They attempted to confront what has become a traditional problem for the Black artist: How to depict and express the culture of Black people, the ritualized patterns and traditions which have enabled Black people to survive the terrifying experience of being made

American” (*Give Birth to Brightness* 42). Williams, like those who came before her, seeks to elevate the Black experience and to impose value and coherence on that experience, not through the usage of White, hegemonic standards but by paradigms created by Black people. She explains, a major issue of the past is that “The Black writers of the Renaissance and most of the writers who came after them tended to verbalize their experiences by seeking to refute or confirm the racial stereotypes which governed their lives, drawing upon their backgrounds to do this but seldom bringing to their writing fresh or original modes of expression from their roots” (43). Consequently, her goal is to outline a newly envisioned set of criteria that does not mimic or react to the White readers’ gaze but instead defines itself by its own value-system and articulated self-definition. Ultimately, in her subsequent work she engages in the continuity of the ideals of the Black Arts Movement, which reinforces the idea articulated by Karenga that all art reflects a specific value system.

As part of her value system, Williams’ semi-autobiographical children’s book, *Working Cotton*, presents illustrations detailing a day in the life of a child who is a migrant worker, a subject underrepresented in children’s fiction and therefore a new image of blackness, which is used to reclaim Black childhood innocence. *Working Cotton* utilizes the first-person plural female voice of Shelan, a child who works in the fields alongside her family but speaks through the prism of her own optimistic truth. Field labor is a physically demanding work, and every family member is required to share in the responsibilities. Narrating her day, Shelan explains, “We gets to the fields early, before it’s even light. Sometime I still be sleep” (*Working Cotton*). Using a child’s persona and Black vernacular, Williams indicates that neither fatigue nor the darkness of the early morning provides an excuse for the mandatory work. In spite of the cold, her father assures her “sun be out soon...burn off this fog and dew” (*Working Cotton*).

Throughout their time together, her parents are singing and humming, choosing to focus on the good, rather than on their predicament. At the same time, the darkness of the images emphasizes the gloom and harshness of the work being done despite the humming. The exhausting labor of fieldwork becomes evident through Shelan's narrative, even though she sees the positive aspects of her situation and takes pride in her father's swift work, noting how much he is able to pick. Discussing the lunch that her mother has packed, Shelan reveals the family's ritual of a mid-day meal. She goes on to identify the consistent presence of children migrant workers—a reality that has been common in Williams' own experience and which she addresses in the author's note. There is no time for playing, as there is much work to do between sun up and sun down. The story concludes with Shelan's dad's observation that all growing things blossom, and because the cotton has continued to grow at this late juncture in the season, it is bound to bring the family luck. Finally, when it is near dark the bus returns to pick up the workers, and Shelan declares, "us all be tired" (*Working Cotton*). Using Black dialect, Williams does not caricature or "denote uneducated, often unintelligent characters whose primary function in the plot is comic relief. Rather, black speech becomes in [our] works—as it had in the works of Hughes and Brown before [us]—a serious literary language whose cadences and rhythms evoke a frame of reference and value which is different from that which can be portrayed through the use of the standard dialect...[it is] a distinctive Black frame of reference" (*Give Birth to Brightness* 52). The narrative point of view reflects the innocence of childhood and at the same time establishes the ritual of family meals, group work, and a hopeful spirit in the midst of adversity. These are "traditions which have enabled Black people to survive the terrifying experience of being made American" that Williams addresses in *Give Birth to Brightness* twenty years earlier. She provides an original mode of expression that stems from her personal roots. Her children's text allows

Black children to see themselves reflected in the work and interpret the work from a black frame of reference. In this way, she creates and reinforces a Black aesthetic.

The inclusive language demonstrates a strong sense of community, in spite of a reality based in poverty and the indiscriminate exploitation of Black bodies. All of Shelan's family members are present and gathered together in one place, which contrasts the antebellum narrative of disparate Black families sold away from one another. Her father's optimistic voice steadies her with declarations such as "cotton flower this late in the year bound to bring us luck" (*Working Cotton*). There is a hopeful cohesiveness that frames Shelan's experience even when she ponders the fact that "it's a long time to night" (*Working Cotton*). And although Williams describes her own migrant-labor-life as "the most deprived, provincial kind of existence you can think of," her literary work functions as a catalyst to edify Black people ("Sherley Anne Williams"). Simply writing about this aspect of her own personal experience allows Williams to challenge Americans to think about the kinds of labor Black people continued to engage in during the 1950s, a time when the combine machine was well-developed and widely utilized to harvest cotton. And yet, Shelan's family, as was Williams' family, is forced to rely upon physical labor and fieldwork because of limited employment options. As Jasmine Marshall Armstrong argues, Williams uses "her poetry, children's literature and theoretical writings in order to transform both her own personal and her community's painful experiences of poverty, racism and de facto segregation...into transformative, empowering art...[thereby] resisting the hegemony of the dominant white culture" (56). Ultimately, Sherley Anne Williams operates in the spirit of the Black Arts Movement. She sees the value of family unity, optimism, and love. These are values which reconstitute a Black aesthetic built upon Black culture and which uplift Black communities.

Aiding in the process of affirming Black life and establishing the humanity of African-descended people (particularly children) is the award-winning illustrative work of Carole Byard. Byard illustrated over a dozen children's books and won the Coretta Scott King for several of them, including the Caldecott and King Honor Awards for *Working Cotton*. An African American woman, Byard like many writers and illustrators of color, chose to illustrate books featuring Black children in order to represent the children she wished she had seen in the books she read when she was a child. In *Working Cotton*, she uses an impressionist style to center the experience of protagonist Shelan. While this 19th century French artistic approach was used to shift the focus away from images of grandeur to the common people and everyday life, it was not typically used to represent Black subjects. Byard, however, makes a bold statement by demonstrating the beauty and elegance of Black life in spite of the hardship of the work being featured in the text. The cover of the book shows Shelan facing forward, making direct eye contact with the viewer and holding an armful of cotton. The significance of this image lies in the humanizing stare of a Black child who is clearly a fieldworker. Whereas Black people were expected to cast a downward gaze when interacting with White people, here Shelan is pictured front and center, her eyes directed forward in an exacting glare. Viewers can feel the reality of her work experience, even as they take in the beauty of the landscape in contrast to the harsh work being done. The joy exhibited by the family reveals the resilience of the individuals who establish community in the midst of labor-intensive work. On the first page, Shelan is asleep as her family and other migrant workers travel to the field on a bus in the blue-black early morning. Observers witness and identify with being exhausted at this early juncture of the cold morning. The soft hues used in the paintings make it easy to sympathize with and care for the characters

within the story. Byard creates an art form that centers blackness even as it uplifts the Black community.

Byard is participating in the conversation on race and subjectivity reflected in discussions of the absence of Black pain and the lack of innocence when portraying Black children. Public sentiment towards people is often shaped by the portrayal of those people within media outlets. In choosing the Impressionist style of illustration, Byard is making a statement about Black suffering, innocence, and the ability to feel fatigue and disappointment, but also love, joy, and family unity. She then translates those sentiments to her viewers who, through the artistic style, are inclined to relate to the Impressionist images and thereby reconsider their perception of Black people. Robin Bernstein provides an important historical and chronological overview of the representation of Black humanity within literature and American society. In her book, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, Bernstein explains, “Unrestrained violence against representations of black juveniles was, by the turn of the twentieth century, normalized in American popular culture. In advertisements, stage plays, film, material culture, and children’s books such as E.W. Kemble’s *A Coon Alphabet*, pickaninnies were beaten, scalded, attacked by animals, neglected, and dismembered—all without significant suffering” (52). Perpetuating messages of Black inhumanity and a callousness towards the suffering of Black people and particularly children, these media outlets maintained an American narrative that justified Black oppression. Bernstein goes on to point out the diverging perceptions of Black and White childhood:

Different trajectories of white and black childhood during the second half of the nineteenth century resulted, by the turn of the twentieth, in sharply bifurcated visions of American childhood, and especially white girlhood, became laminated

to the idea of innocence; to invoke white childhood was to invoke innocence itself. In contrast, images of nonsuffering black pickaninnies emptied black childhood innocence...The bifurcation of childhood innocence, through pain and its alleged absence, imbued racial innocence—that is, the pivotal use of childhood innocence in racial politics—with an uncanny flexibility and therefore the power to support opposing agendas. (63, 65)

The work of illustrators is essential, as it contributes to the shaping of public perception of racial identity. As shown through the acceptance of White innocence and Black guilt and inhumanity, material culture reinforces values and creates systems that are used to maintain hierarchies. To reference Maulana Karenga, “art reflects the value system from which it comes” (2087). Byard, like Williams and Morrison, is influenced by the liberational aesthetic of the Black Arts Movement. She, therefore, engages in political action as she is deliberately shaping the perception of Black identity for both her Black and non-Black viewers. Together, Byard and Williams contribute to the message of self-love while they affirm the strength of the Black community.

Williams continues the themes of uplift and affirmation in her 1999 book, *Girls Together*. In it she celebrates Black girlhood and culture. As Rudine Sims Bishop explains, in the 1990s there is a “desire to use literature to affirm black children, to authenticate their lives, and to encourage them to see themselves in a positive light” (138). Participating in this goal, Williams provides insight into joyful moments within the lives of Black girls. She utilizes her text to reveal the everyday lives of the characters. In contrast to the field setting of *Working Cotton*, Williams’ second children’s book, *Girls Together* is set in the city. A lighter, more casual read, the book intentionally depicts the happy bonds and carefree days of Black girls. The narrator and

her sister are partners in a stealth operation to avoid chores by seeking outdoor recreation and the company of their friends. By experiencing a day in the life of the narrator, readers come to see a strong community in which children run errands for adults but also spend time enjoying being children without the expectation of working. The five characters live in the same community, but their experiences are unique and specific to their households and parental rules. Each person is described using details of hair, skin tone, and body-type as a way to emphasize the beauty and diversity of the girls. The narrator and her sister quietly depart from home while their friend Lois is not permitted to leave the house until one of her parents returns from work; nor can friends enter Lois' house until an adult is home. Consequently, Lois is included in the group but does not participate in the day's events because of these rules. From the onset of the story, readers are made aware of the obedience and respect the girls have in that they support one another and comply with their parents' standards. Another friend has her own room, which contrasts a view of multiple people being crammed into one space. ViLee has a younger brother whom she avoids, lest her mother require her to take him with her. The girls discuss a number of possible activities from making paper dolls to bike riding, recycling, dancing, and attending a movie—all of which are normal everyday childhood activities. Ultimately, they go to another neighborhood where they climb trees and pick flowers.

The 1999 publication of *Girls Together* represents a bold statement about the presence of beautiful Black girls from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds; the book evidences the fact that Black girls belong in and deserve to be the focus of children's books. It is a natural extension of the mission of BAM to promote Black survival through art. Returning to Crawford's assertion that contemporary uses of BAM concepts represent "a new way of thinking about radical black aesthetics as a constant push to what is imaginable and a constant holding on to the radicalness

of black life in an antiblack world” (ix). *Girls Together* falls into a category of realistic books that reflect accurate portrayals of the people therein. Bishop praises writers of such stories as their work “is [a] testament to African American writers’ understandings of one of the important challenges faced by black children living in a society in which they are undervalued and their beauty unappreciated” (244). For this reason, Williams intentionally underscores the smiles, beauty, and strengths of the individual characters in *Girls Together*. It is a story of youthfulness and sisterly bonds within the context of a Black community in which the kids embrace and enjoy their neighborhood and spend time together but simultaneously respect the rules of the parents and grownups in their community.

The use of a Black vernacular reflects one aspect of the characters’ cultural identity. It provides what Williams previously described as a “distinctive black frame of reference” (*Give Birth to Brightness* 52). She uses the juxtaposition of the language and the normalcy of a child’s typical pastime to illustrate the ways in which language does not detract from the ubiquitous childhood experience but instead identifies it within a specific context that privileges the Black experience. Much like Paul Laurence Dunbar’s use of Black dialect within the conventional structure of sonnets, Williams combines rhetorical strategy and subject matter to create new modes of analysis that stem from Black cultural roots. She is once again reclaiming Black innocence, to echo the ideas of Bernstein. While texts by White authors did not allow for the innocence, or at times the humanity of Black children, Williams uses the Black frame of reference to establish a new aesthetic that centers blackness. Her approach is in the service of promoting and uplifting Black children. As Martin reminds readers, it is among the kinds of texts that are for us, by us, in order to affirm a Black urban cultural tradition exemplified in the use of language.

Coupled with the language of *Girls Together* is the style of illustrations created by the award-winning artist, Synthia Saint James. James was the creator of the US Postal Service's first Kwanzaa stamp as well as the creator of the cover of the book *Waiting to Exhale*, among sixty bookcovers and thirteen children's books. James is known for her colorful African American silhouettes, which lack detailed facial features, but when depicted in groups reflect a beautiful, colorful, vibrant black community. When viewing James' work, Rudine Sims Bishop points out the ways in which "the reader/viewer is left to infer expressions from the characters' movements, their stances, and their placement in relation to each other" (183). Allowing for the use of imagination and subjective interpretation, James reveals a huddle of young girls who thrive on one another's company and who provide affirmation of Black girlhood. The variances in clothing color and hair styles—short hair, long hair, braids, afros—reveal the diversity among the girls in spite of them being from the same community. Her pictures reinforce the uniqueness of each girl's personality and home life. The close proximity of the girls to one another suggests the intimate emotional and psychological connection they maintain, which thereby reflects the spirit of community as articulated in the Black Arts Movement. The purposeful nature of the illustrations serves as what Crawford says is "a push away from the narrowness of the category of 'black art'" and a "push *back* to the mixed media, abstraction, satire, and experimentation in the BAM" (4). Williams' children's literature becomes a mechanism to cut through the heart of systems seeking to render them invisible and undermine their success. This assertion comes through her connection to the BAM and the value she places on the Black aesthetic.

Continuing the spirit of the Black Arts Movement is fellow crossover writer Toni Morrison—author of twelve adult novels, numerous essays and speeches, as well as several children's books. Winner of the American Book Award, Pulitzer Prize, and Nobel Prize for

Literature, she is hailed as one of the greatest American writers of all time. Although she began her career writing for an adult audience, the subjects of her novels—from the first to the last—acknowledge and examine the trauma of children. Furthermore, the fame she has achieved has come through writing about the human experience from a “distinctive black frame of reference” (Williams, *Give Birth to Brightness* 52).

While Morrison has garnered the ultimate level of success for a writer, she has faithfully maintained her commitment to the Black aesthetic—even within her children’s literature—a commonality she shares with Sherley Anne Williams. This consistent approach to the human experience by way of the Black experience has been well received in adult contexts—novels, essays, and speeches. Within the world of children’s literature, however, the reception has not been the same. Though published in book form in 1999, *The Big Box* is co-authored with her son, Slade Morrison, who originated the idea at approximately nine years old, when a teacher told him he “couldn’t handle his freedom” (“Toni Morrison Makes You Think”). Roughly six years later, his mother would add poetic verse to the story, crafting a wonderful cadence with repeated lines, which she published in both of their names in *Ms. Magazine* in 1980. In many interviews and essays about her work, Morrison has explained her particular interest in centering Black life and culture:

If my work is faithfully to reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture, it must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance, the critical voice which upholds traditional and communal values and which also provides occasion for an individual to transcend and/or defy group restrictions. (“Memory” 389)

By her own declaration, Morrison articulates her unwavering commitment to the Black aesthetic, which clearly positions her within the Black Arts Movement. This position is essential in examining Morrison's children's literature, as it is the framework through which her work should be read. To return to Karenga, to understand the art is to understand the value system from which it comes. He argues for using the correct paradigm stating "that what is needed is an aesthetic, a black aesthetic, that is a criteria for judging the validity and/or the beauty of a work of art" (2086). If read in this way, Morrison's children's literature can be appreciated in the context of the Black Arts Movement. Her books allow for and encourage people to challenge the power structure and hegemonic forces at work. This approach of challenging existing structures, critically evaluating, and at times rejecting such systems is reflected in much of her work, including *The Big Box* and subsequent children's literature.

The Big Box begins with three children who are living in a life-size brown box with lots of fun toys and wonderful possessions. The poetic refrain explains how the children used to live prior to their existence in this space. For instance, Patty lived in a house but had "too much fun in school all day and made the grown-ups nervous" as she ran through the halls and refused to play with dolls, in addition to singing in class (*The Big Box*). The teachers had a meeting and with her parents decided that she "just can't handle [her] freedom" (*The Big Box*). They hugged Patty and then placed her in a box with three big locks on the door. The same happened with two other children, Mickey and Liza Sue, who used to live in the city and the rural countryside respectively. While their parents visit weekly and bring new forms of entertainment, the children are told, "we all agree, your parents and we, that you just can't handle your freedom" (*The Big Box*). Patty, Mickey, and Liza Sue learn that society governs behavioral expression be it at home, in school, or within the community. These ideas seem extreme but certainly open a

conversation about freedom and compliance, a logic, which reviewers believe will elude children. Morrison herself sees this conclusion as “a strong dismissal of children’s intelligence” (“Toni Morrison Makes You Think”).

When *The Big Box* was published, the negative criticism from reviewers reflected a failure to understand the authors’ paradigmatic framework. In a February 2000 *New York Times* review of *The Big Box*, Denis Woychuk underscores the idea that “*The Big Box* resonates as a work of art, but it is not a book for children.” The *School Library Journal* published a review that likewise denounced the book.

This is a book that will have a hard time finding an audience: it looks like a picture book for younger children, yet the theme and images require some sophistication and a desire to explore life’s boundaries. What children of any age will make of parents who decided to lock up their own children for relatively minor infractions remains to be seen. (Fader 227)

What makes this picture book, which has been designated as a children’s book, unfit for its classification? While it features vivid illustrations by Giselle Potter and has a wonderful rhythmic pace, the philosophical questions it impugns take a non-traditional approach to reaching its audience of both children and adults. Ultimately, the story becomes an indictment against adults who suppress the actions and expressions of childhood, presupposing that children are far more capable of critical thought than what adults perceive—the book therefore garners negative reviews.

While Morrison and Morrison’s message is based in a Black aesthetic which privileges freedom of self-expression and the right to challenge the oppressive power structure, the accompanying illustrations are innocuous and reflect three children who are simply carrying on

like children: a boy, and two girls; one who appears White, Black, and LatinX respectively. The book's artist, Giselle Potter, has illustrated more than thirty books. In the book she employs pastels and light colors—beige, variations of green and blue—to reflect the freedom found within nature and the children's tendency to play happily and be carefree. At the same time, restrictions imposed by adults within school, the apartment building community, and the rural farm setting show adults with serious faces, crossed-arms, wrinkled brows, hands on hips. At times the parents, teachers, and grownups from the community form a group that stands or sits in opposition to the child in question. By contrast, kids are aligned with nature and animals in moments when the poetic refrain is repeated.

Oh, the seagulls scream

And rabbits hop

And beavers chew trees when they need 'em

But Patty and Mickey and Liza Sue –

Those kids can't handle their freedom (Morrison and Morrison, *The Big Box*)

In complementing the words, the pictures reveal kids who dance, laugh, and spin while holding hands in a circle. With trees surrounding them and animals leaping, the illustrations tell the story that in nature, living things are free to do what they need, be it scream, hop, or chew. Children, conversely, are restricted and in fact punished when they do what seems natural to them.

When directly asked about the meaning of the box in *The Big Box*, Morrison explains “it is a soft, familiar, comfortable, everyday ‘prison’ into which children are metaphorically placed when their imagination is suppressed or programmed” (“Toni Morrison Makes You Think”). For Morrison, the value of imaginative freedom outweighs the conventions of the authoritative parent-child relationship. She goes on to say that society does not understand the difference

between punishment and protection, as evidenced through the repression of imagination. From her perspective, “children [are] living in a wholly commercialized environment that equates ‘entertainment’ with happiness, products with status, ‘things’ with love [and society] is terrified of the free (meaning un-commodified, un-purchaseable) imagination of the young” (“Toni Morrison Makes You Think”). Ultimately, she says parents should conclude *The Big Box* with “thoughts about how much weight we give to ‘things’ in order to show love and caring. Thoughts about what our children really want and need from us.” In her own words, Morrison clarifies for uncertain readers the purpose of her book. Merely giving children things in place of the relationships they long to share does not make up for adult and community absence. In speaking to the spiritual and cultural needs of the community, Morrison and Morrison remind the community of its responsibility towards its children. *The Big Box* becomes a conduit of critical thought and serves to emancipate the uncritical, naively compliant mind by drawing attention to the laws or rules of society, describing various scenarios and then challenging the outcomes. Morrison and Morrison’s book likewise serves to evoke the possibilities brought about by childhood agency. At the end of the story protagonists Patty, Mickey, and Liza Sue break down the walls of the box, as the narrator raises the question, “Who says they can’t handle their freedom?” (*The Big Box*). The story itself encourages an interrogation of the oppressive system through which adults exact a toll on the thoughts, will, and behavioral freedom of children. The overtly stated question leads to further implied questions that if asked will no doubt lead to a reconsideration of authority and notions of censure and power. This rhetorical strategy is an extension of the spirit of the Black Arts Movement.

When speaking of her collaborative relationship with her readers, Morrison has frequently mentioned that she is writing for her own Black people and not for the benefit of a

White audience. She makes clear that she “didn’t want to do the sort of writing that was very popular in the so-called Harlem Renaissance, back in the nineteen-twenties, which was sort of racial uplift. I didn’t want to do that. I don’t mean that it shouldn’t have uplifted the race. But those books implied a White reader, which implied a White gaze, so that there was always some White critic or eye looking over your shoulder...I could care less” (“Talking to Myself”).

Morrison’s purpose is to fill a void within literature, and her focus is her own people. Both she and Williams come out of the BAM and seek to prioritize cultural integrity and an aesthetic that rejects White surveillance.

An extension of the Black aesthetic is the “group nature of art” and the “relationship to audience performance” that Morrison often mentions when discussing her work. *The Big Box* is a story that utilizes repeated stanzas and invokes rhythmic modes of expression. Even though the story is told from a third-person perspective, the children’s rebuttals are included:

I know you are smart and I know that you think you’re doing what is best for me.

But if freedom is handled just *your* way then it’s not my freedom or free. (Morrison and Morrison, *The Big Box*)

This assertion of each child’s thoughts and feelings underscores the humanity of children and their ability to reason. Mickey even adds, “Why can’t I be a kid like me who doesn’t have to handle his freedom?” – as if to say, why should he be forced to be anything but a child at this stage in his life (*The Big Box*). His response suggests that children should be given the space and opportunity to enjoy youth and free play. Instead, the adults jointly determine the children’s sentence, and the children assert their own logic as a form of resistance. In the final scenario:

Liza sat still and avoided their eyes by lowering her little-girl head.

But she heard their words and she felt their eyes and this is what she said:

‘But I’ve worn my braces for three years now and gave up peanut brittle.

And I do my fractions and bottle-feed the lambs that are too little.

Will the crows not scream and the rabbits not hop?

Won’t the beavers chew trees when they need ‘em,

If you shut me up and put me away ‘cause I can’t handle my freedom? (*The Big Box*)

Individually and collectively, the children demonstrate their disapproval, yet by the end of the story, the reader is chanting the poetic rhythm; thereby, readers are engaged in the group nature of the art.

While the dissenting reviews of the book suggest that its challenge of authority makes the book inappropriate for children, Michelle Martin points out that “Americans still more or less ascribe to the Victorian notion of the child as innocent and needing to be protected from social conflicts and sheltered from adult issues,” which is why such readers are alarmed by the premise of the book (74). As Bernstein discusses, there is a view of White childhood as innocent and as something in need of protection and preservation, whereas that luxury is not afforded to Black children. In the spirit of the BAM, leaders of the movement and participants therein promote the idea of providing honest portrayals of the power structure that seeks to oppress Black people. Martin goes on to point out the ways that children’s literature with BAM themes do not overtly express their values but rather manifest their values in other ways.

Many of the ideas integral to the Black Arts Movement that manifest themselves in the black aesthetic are, indeed, inappropriate for texts for young children and therefore do not show up directly in picture books. For example, for the most part, African American children’s picture books do not convey ideas about separatism or nationalism, nor do they seek to radicalize or destroy the white aesthetic. But

some of them do express anger at the plight of black children in America—and this anger often comes not so much in what the child character expresses but in what the narrative evokes in the reader in response to the child's situation. (74)

In returning to activist-scholars such as Karenga, Baraka, Stewart, and others, it is essential that art is based in and evaluated by a Black aesthetic that reflects the values of Black communities. The frustration of many reviewers stems from an inability to see Morrison and Morrison's message within this context.

Operating within a Black aesthetic, the text engages in antiphony or call and response. *The Big Box* is a book to be read aloud in order to hear the cadence of the poetry. One of Morrison's goals is to invite readers into an "audience performance." In interviews she regularly states her perspective: "[I] really want this relationship between the text and/or the audio with the reader. I don't like the distance that sometimes exists. You know where you're simply absorbing the information? I want the reader to participate in it" ("Talking to Myself"). Her point once again reflects the group nature of art, which signifies a Black aesthetic. By the conclusion of the story, both reader and listener have heard the call and can't help but respond, which is what Morrison wants. She confides, "I want the reader to help me with the book. I want the relationship to be that intimate. So I have to leave out certain things that the reader can supply" ("Talking to Myself"). Morrison values the community and its contributions to the success of Black people. In this way, she reinforces what Baraka and the Black Arts Repertory Theater School aspire to do: "an art that was Mass oriented that could move easily in and be claimed by the Black Community as part of a Cultural Revolution" (Baraka, xix).

Through children's literature, Morrison signifies her message in the genre she selects to convey her message. As a children's book and specifically, a picture book, Morrison anticipates

a dual audience of both adults and children. Armed with the knowledge that adults invariably read to their children, she packages her message in the form of a children's story as a form of commentary on the ways in which children are inhibited and restricted from freedom of expression. In reading to children, adults help her with the reading of the book and consequently carry forth the message packaged for children but covertly directed at adults. She highlights the ways that possessions are substituted for relationship, which takes away opportunities for child-centered free play. The catchy nature of the refrain and lyrical lines cause the repeated message to resound in the ears of the reader and the listener. By the conclusion of the story, both reader and listener have heard the call and can't help but respond with the next logical thought; who then restricts children's freedom? If at first glance the message was not apparent, the genre itself amplifies the message highlighting the value of freedom. The unsuspecting adult must therefore grapple with his or her culpability in the suppression of childhood.

In leaving some of the work to the audience, Morrison exhibits trust in her readers, even as she teaches them to think critically, a strategy she employs in her second children's text *The Book of Mean People*. At the start of the narrative she is forthright about the subject of the book: "This is a book about mean people" (*Mean People*). While atypical for a child's picture book, the message begins with matter-of-fact plausibility and then creates irony by identifying the characters' actions as mean but using illustrations that are logical and necessary, such as feeding a child vegetables. The juxtaposition of smiles, beneficial behavior, and unhappy children results in an implied questioning of how meanness is defined. Mimicking the movement of jazz, Morrison then shifts to a new instrument or perspective, pointing out that meanness can take the shape of a loud or soft volume, grandparents or parents, and the ambiguity of orders given by adults. While more often the consequences of meanness are not good, the reader can surmise that

behavior can sometimes be construed as mean when in actuality it is intended to be beneficial. And in the same way that smiles can be conflicting because the person receiving the smile does not feel happy with the accompanying actions, smiles are nonetheless a good thing. Rather than discard smiles altogether, the protagonist chooses to embrace smiling.

Illustrated by Pascal Lemaître, *The Book of Mean People* utilizes anthropomorphous imagery to convey the conflicting messages adults pass onto children. Based out of Europe, Lemaître creates rabbit characters who do not reflect a specific cultural identity. Instead, he focuses on the positioning and height differences between adults and children. The adult rabbits look down on the small rabbit, towering over the rabbit with long ears and frowning faces. His illustrations accent the text, as for example, a screaming parent with elongated ears and wide-stretched mouth screams to the point that the child flies backwards. The grandparents, in their spectacles, look on with frustration, even as they send conflicting messages. While Morrison and Morrison's message is universal, the story's outcome is nonetheless indicative of a child's agency and self-empowerment. Ultimately, the child rabbit realizes he cannot interpret the contradictory messages of the adults around him. Instead, he chooses to smile and to shape his own future, as he hops away from those who tried to control him, declaring "How about that!" (*Mean People*). Although it would be perceived as rude for a child to run off and leave his parents out of frustration, *The Book of Mean People* creates opportunity for dialogue about conflicting messages and the ways in which children can appropriately respond. Through dialogue, children can creatively and critically discuss the expectation to interpret idioms and confusing behavior.

The Book of Mean People was published in 2002, three years after the mixed reviews of *The Big Box*, yet Morrison continues to stand behind her belief in the ability of the reader to

think critically, participate in the interpretive process, and engage with the larger concepts of her work. In an interview she explains that she was initially told that her storylines were “unsaleable because: 1. Adults bought children’s books, not children, and 2. No children’s book that did not offer a reconciliation with the adult view was marketable” (“Toni Morrison Makes You Think”). Morrison, however, would not be dissuaded from her approach. In another interview, she challenges parents to “trust [children] a little bit more than you do. Don’t trust the world because it’s not trustworthy, but trust the children to figure it out” (Capriccioso). In contrast to her critics, Morrison demonstrates an unwavering belief in the abilities of children. While *The Big Box* concludes with a direct question about who perpetrates the implied injustice against children, *The Book of Mean People* conversely ends on a positive note in which the child chooses to be happy in the face of misunderstandings. Both of these texts can lead to fruitful discussions between adults and children. Morrison specifically raises these subjects to challenge the thought-processes of her readers. She points out that “this is the time when children are learning syntax and double entendre and what you really mean. That’s the point of the ‘meanness.’ [The child is] not around villains. He’s trying to wade his way through what for a six or seven year-old is a very complicated world” (Capriccioso). As an advocate for children who believes in their ability to think critically, Morrison uses her children’s literature to demonstrate a child’s capacity to reason on an emotional and intellectual level.

In jointly examining the children’s literature of Williams and Morrison, clear parallels can be made between their contemporary work and the mission of the Black Arts Movement. Regarding her work, each author comments on her desire to ground her work in a Black aesthetic as she targets Black children and their families. In centering children as the subjects of their picture books, they underscore the importance of the Black community and the essential aspect

of a Black aesthetic. These authors establish standards that stem from a “distinctive black frame of reference” and which assert the history and experiences of Black people. As importantly, they help readers engage in self-awareness and critical thought. Morrison and Williams empower their audiences by establishing a sense of agency within young readers and evoking conscientious thought that has the potential to galvanize them beyond passive observers. As María Lourdes López Roperero argues, “whereas the children in [Morrison’s] novels are usually portrayed as victims of social injustice, the characters in her children’s books have independent minds that enable them to challenge the adult world. What all her books share is a concern with an education for autonomy that enables the child to become a thoughtful adult” (54). The ultimate goal in rearing children is to guide them towards thoughtful adulthood, an imperative echoed in the works of Williams and Morrison. When read within the lens of the Black Arts Movement, Morrison and Williams make important and valuable contributions to the genre of children’s literature and create opportunities to expand discussions of a Black aesthetic.

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