Alice Childress's "Harlemese": Discovering Black Young Adult Literature in *A Hero Ain't Nothin but a Sandwich*

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On June 25th 1982, the United States Supreme Court issued its decision in a court case that, while it failed to capture the attention of the national media, would nevertheless lay some crucial groundwork for the ways in which young adult literature by and about Black people would arrive on the American scene. The case, *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico*, concerned a decision by a local school board in upstate New York to ban a series of books they deemed "anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy" (*Pico*) from circulating in the High School library.[1] The books in question were not actually part of any required curriculum, merely available for students to checkout from the library. Still as the parents subpoenaed to testify on behalf of the Board's decision insisted, their mere presence was cause for alarm. "[I]t is our duty," one parent insisted, "our moral obligation, to protect the children in our schools from this moral danger as surely as from physical and medical dangers" (*Pico*).

Asked to provide an example of a way in which the texts themselves evinced these moral dangers, another parent offered a specific critique of a 1973 novel, one of the few pieces of fiction included on the list, which had captured the imaginations and attention of the literary world. Written towards the beginning of what would become the War on Drugs in the US,[2] the novel centered on the story of a twelve-year-old inner-city Black youth who becomes addicted to heroin. Asked to elaborate on what about the novel struck the parent as problematic, the answer proved more revealing still. The offending scene focused not on the depictions of inner-city poverty or drug use, but rather on a moment in which one of the characters acknowledged that George Washington owned slaves. As the parent explained: "I believe it is anti-American to present one of the nation's heroes, the First President…in such a negative and obviously one-sided light. That is one example of what I would consider anti-American" (*Pico*). Ultimately the First Amendment rights of the students were upheld over the concerns about moral degradation. Still, given that the ruling hinged on a far narrower question about the school board's authority to control which texts are available in the library for students to potentially select, the question about the extent to which Black expressions of adolescence could be legally considered "anti-American" remained unaddressed.

Alice Childress was surely no stranger to controversy. Nor was she shy about the political import of her work. Reflecting on her own writing process, Childress described how she "concentrate(s) on portraying have-nots in a *have* society, those seldom singled-out by mass media, except as source material for derogatory humor and/or condescending clinical, social analysis." ("A Candle in a Gale Wind" 113). She would later say of her work: "I attempt to write about characters without condescension, without making them into an

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image which some may deem useful, inspirational, profitable, or suitable." ("Knowing the Human Condition" 10).

Still, her 1973 novel *A Hero Ain't Nothin but A Sandwich* struck a different kind of chord. Early reviews praised the book for being "unusually honest and forceful" (Kirkus) and "surprisingly exciting" while readers flocked by the thousands to devour the story of young Benjie and his struggle against, in the words of the *New York Times* review, "today's worst urban plague, heroin addiction" (Bullins). Yet for parents, librarians, and educators, the text was something of a harder sell. Written for an audience that was only just beginning to cohere, Childress's novel was at the forefront of the conversations about propriety and content. As such, it serves as an opening salvo in a battle over the meaning of Black young adult literature and the quest to find its proper audience and object. By balancing an insistence that younger readers need not be shielded from the grim realities of living with a desire to teach her readers valuable lessons about navigating the world, Childress's novel helps to initiate a new model for the writer/reader relationship. And alongside Childress's innovations, there remain undeniable echoes of the kinds of preoccupations that have long dominated discussions within and about Black literature more broadly.

This article argues for understanding Alice Childress' *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* as a vital contribution to early tradition of Black young adult literature as it begins to emerge in the 1970s. That contribution, far from existing in a vacuum, develops in tandem with a long tradition of Black writers debating over the best ways to address and engage the new generations. While much has been made of Childress's work for the stage as well as her complex depictions of racialized domestic labor, her work for younger readers has rarely warranted more than a passing mention. Still, as Trudier Harris notes in her introduction to Childress's short story collection *Like One of the Family*,

> In most of her adolescent and adult writings, Childress presents material judged to be controversial, so much so that reactionaries have banned them from the reading public…Such negative public reaction to Childress's works reflects a refusal to see blacks as human, a stance that Childress undercuts in the voice of [her domestic characters]. (xxxii-xxxiii)

I begin with an exploration of the cultural meaning of Harlem within the Black literary tradition. Anchoring her novel in one of the most iconic Black neighborhoods in the nation, I explore what I am calling Childress's "Harlemese" as a unique approach to writing to and about Black youths that remains in conversation with the ideas and debates that predate the advent of literary young adulthood. With this foundation, I explore how Childress's novel attempts to model this mode of writing that engages youths in complex topics without condescension while humanizing oft-maligned members of their own communities. From there, I move to situate Childress's novel as a part of the burgeoning tradition of writing for Black young adults that grows out of youths as it emerges as the Black Arts/Black Power movement of the 1970s. Finally, I end with some thoughts on Childress's position in the 1970s and beyond.

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Ultimately, my goal is to show that Alice Childress's "Harlemese" is more than an attempt to speak "slang" to youth. It is a celebration of the history and tradition of Black self-expression that represents a meaningful effort to explore the world through different perspectives and to grant each of those perspectives (and indeed, voices) equal standing and value. Against the backdrop of Harlem, Childress links together the overlapping goals of both Black and young adult literature to tell a story of self-discovery that remains profoundly indebted to a deep understanding of the palimpsestic nature of self-identity.

Alice Childress's 'Harlemese'

A lifelong New Yorker, it is perhaps unsurprising that Alice Childress chose her own childhood stomping ground as the setting for her first novel for younger readers. But there is another obvious advantage: in choosing Harlem, Childress also places her novel into conversation with a rich and complicated history that touches on many of the issues of race, class, and the shifting meaning and value of Black identity throughout US history that prove central to the novel. Put another way, to understand the value of the kind of "Harlemese" on offer in *A Hero Ain't Nothin but a Sandwich* it is essential to first grapple with the meaning of Harlem in Black culture.

One of the chief beneficiaries of the late nineteenth-early twentieth century migration that would see huge numbers of formerly enslaved peoples migrating to the urban centers of the American North, the New York City neighborhood of Harlem looms large in the Black cultural imaginary. During the early twentieth century in particular, between its robust community of professionals and artists alongside a thriving music scene that quickly established itself as the envy of even the wealthy white neighborhoods nearby, Harlem came to represent a new frontier of potentiality in the landscape of Black identity. As historian Clare Corbould explains, "Even if they never traveled to Harlem, black Americans nationwide, and worldwide for that matter, turned their attention toward it and derived pleasure from the simple fact that it was there." (10) Sociologist Monique Taylor further elaborates on the role of Harlem as a driving force in Black cultural production: "As the most famous of the Negro ghettos of the [early twentieth century], Harlem exerted a profound influence in the creation of America's newest cultural voice. Here, a group of Black Americans, striving to create cultural consciousness, attempted to forge a new identity for blacks" (9).

Harlem proved especially potent as a metaphor in literature, with early twentieth-century Black luminaries turning to the neighborhood as a vital space to work through questions about the meaning and fixity of identity and the value and limits of segregated spaces. The famous opening lines of Langston Hughes poem "Dream Deffered (Harlem)", intimately intertwines the neighborhood with the mythos of Black aspiration while injecting a healthy dose of skepticism, asking: "What happens to a dream deferred/Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?" (75).

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Hughes wasn't alone in capturing a profound sense of ambivalence about the mixture of promise and harsh realities of the persistence of inequity captured in the figure of Harlem. Between the cultural and artistic New Negro movement and the growth of a viable Black middle class more broadly, Harlem from the turn of the century through to the 1930s represented for Black people across the diaspora a kind of cultural touchstone, or what Taylor calls a "sacred center" (11).

Yet by the 1970s, Harlem had come to signify somewhat differently in the American imaginary. Writing about the popularity of stories highlighting the urban decline and increasing moral degradation of New York City seen in texts like Michael Harrington's late 1960s sociological treatise, *The Other America*, historian Brian Tochterman details how the narratives of decay and the pathologization of the working class operated in tandem. As he explains:

> As postwar popular culture established an image of national prosperity, *The Other America* prompted a narrative that saw New York in perpetual economic decline and increasingly segregated by race and class. Urban elites sequestered themselves in exclusive enclaves rising on the sites of old slums, as the white middle and working classes gravitated to single-family homes in homogenous suburbs, ensuring minimal contact with minorities and the poor. (Tochterman 123)

While all of New York suffered in the public's image throughout the decade, Harlem was particularly hard hit. No longer was it seen as an epicenter of American culture, it was instead relegated to nightly news segments highlighting urban decay and increases in crime. Long gone were the glitzy art deco palaces and cutting-edge infrastructural developments like the subway extension which had made the neighborhood possible, the Second World War having started a "pause" in investment that would continue for decades (Schaffer and Smith 351).

As Tochterman goes on to explain: "By the end of the 1960s, consumers of a diverse media understood that New York City was in a full-blown economic, social, and cultural crisis, riddled with a pathological underclass, and, from the perspective of cultural elites, 'ungovernable'" (141). A combination of shifting demographics, spurned in part by the growth of the suburbs as well as a series of targeted divestments and controversial redevelopment plans had turned the once bustling Black community into a flashpoint in national conversations about inner-city violence and urban blight.

Nevertheless, for Black writers, Harlem remained a productive site for thinking through questions of identity. As Monique Taylor argues, "Harlem provided a symbolic space upon which the writer could reflect and present the conditions of Black Americans to the rest of the world" (12). Certainly, that was so for Alice Childress, who takes up the image and idea of Harlem in a way that both continues this tradition and while also productively rehearsing so many of the debates that had been central to its formation for future generations.

Alice Childress was not one for strictly didactic writing. Her work for the stage, which had already earned her an Obie award and seen her become the first Black woman to

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have a play professionally produced on Broadway, tended toward the profoundly ambivalent. So when one of the central characters of her first novel for younger readers observes: "Most of the kids don't talk anything but *Harlemese*, but have minds as sharp as a double-edged razor. They laugh at textbooks because most invite laughter. 'Our' school is full of white-face books written by white writers," (Childress 41-42) there is a poetic irony in this moment being both the one that lands *A Hero Ain't Nothin but a Sandwich* in the crosshairs of school administrators and later the Supreme Court as well as the closest the text comes to articulating a lesson.

Yet this moment, offered by middle-school teacher Nigeria Greene, comes closest to offering if not a proper lesson, then perhaps a theory of Alice Childress's approach to Black writing for young adults. In this moment of reflecting on the incredibly complex subject position of the black adolescent, Nigeria Greene, and Childress through him, articulates both the challenges of teaching against white supremacist ideology; "…George [Washington] was a slaveholder, and it is impossible to hang him over my front blackboard and not discuss him" alongside the virtues of learning to code switch, "[i]f a book said a lie was the truth, that lie was the answer I put down on my test paper " (42).

Nigeria approaches his classroom as an opportunity to teach transgressively, insisting on a racial materialist approach to American History and foregrounding lessons about important Black figures. He represents one of the many types of people who populate the corner of 1970s Harlem where readers are introduced to the story of Benjie. A young man navigating the minefield of Black adolescence at the start of what would become the decades-long War on Drugs, Benjie's story is an unflinching and at times deeply uncomfortable exploration of the search for meaning and identity in a world that refuses to see you as more than disposable. Through the chorus of voices around him—parents, friends, teachers, administrators, pushers and more—Childress maps out a vision of Black writing for young adults that insists them into the kinds of conversations typically kept behind closed doors.

Important as that chorus is, it is young Benjie who speaks first in the novel: "Now I am thirteen, but when I was a chile it was hard to be a chile because my block is a tough block and my school is a tough school. I'm not trying to cop out on what I do or don't do cause man is man and chile is chile, but I ain't a chile no more" (9). Straight away readers are introduced to a young man struggling to fully understand, let alone articulate, his place in the world. And yet, he is not without his own critical insights. For Benjie, childhood was rarely a space of innocence and frivolity.

Literary theorist Robin Bernstein has written extensively on this phenomenon of "racial innocence," arguing that during a crucial moment in the development of ideas about racial identity as well as childhood, print culture and social practices throughout the US aligned such that: "[w]hite children became constructed as tender angels while black children were labeled as unfeeling noninnocent nonchildren" (33). This duality of white innocence and black "unfeeling noninnocence" serves in many ways as the foundation of the social world that Benjie is unwittingly inheriting.

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And in a further vote of confidence for the wisdom of youth and the value of lived experience, even without consulting the literature, Benjie seems to know a lot of this already. As he tells readers, to him being a "chile" means being helpless, "[s]omebody gonna cop your money and might knock you down cause you walkin with short bread and didn't even make it worth their while to stop and frisk you over" and alone, "[y]ou best get over being seven or eight, right soon, cause seven or eight is too big for relatives to be holding your hand like when you was three, four, and five" (Childress 9). Benjie's words speak to the 'adultification' of young Black children, and boys in particular. Psychologist Phillip Goff and colleagues describe this adultification as a process of dehumanization resulting in "reduction of social considerations afforded to humans for those who are dehumanized." (Goff 527). This reduction "violates one of the defining characteristics of children – being innocence and thus needing protection – rendering the category 'children' less essential and distinct from 'adults'" (527). Through Benjie, Childress gives voice to this experience of being robbed of the presumption of youthful innocence.

Still, for all his insights into the racial dimensions of childhood, Benjie's understanding of adulthood is naïve at best. As much as he may want to imagine himself a jaded realist, he still sees the world in stark moral terms. This comes through most clearly in his own refusal to understand his drug usage as a problem:

> "Why folks gotta lie and say I'm on skag, say I'm a junkie? My grandmother say 'You a dope fiend.' I don't call her a coffee fiend or a church fiend. No I don't do that. They lyin! If you 'on' something that mean you *hooked* and can't give it up. I ain't hooked. What's draggin them is I ain't gettin off it yet." (Childress 10)

This moment perfectly speaks to Benjie's sense of adulthood as a space of freedom even as it highlights how little understanding of responsibility or accountability his vision entails. It is a child's impression of adulthood, all pizza parties and no cleaning. And, in a characteristically sympathetic moment, Childress allows Benjie to articulate this disconnect between freedom and responsibility without judgement.

Living through the aftermath of a Civil Rights movement that failed to meaningfully manifest change for inner-city youths, Benjie represents a generation newly disaffected and searching for a sense of personal and political identity to call their own. He rejects the committed optimism of the generation whose own Great Migration from the South to the urban cores of the North brought with it promises of a better life, a dynamic perfectly encapsulated in an early interaction between him and his would-be stepfather Butler. Benjie recalls one of their recent interactions: "'Listen and learn, Benjie, time is changing, there's gonna be more opportunity.' But he gets to my soul nerve when he keep saying that, cause I don't see him doin nothin but being a janitor in one of whitey's downtown buildins" (13). For Butler, the 1970s present the promise of continuing the project of racial equality that found such national support in earlier decades. Benjie, meanwhile, gives voice to a particularly racialized mode of disaffection borne out of a growing sense of the unfinished work of justice and equality.

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Here again Benjie expresses a nascent understanding of the complex ways in which the Civil Rights movement was beginning to give way to a decidedly more conservative cultural ethos. Yet for all his insights, he could only gesture toward the far more nefarious project at play nationally. Legal historian Michael K. Brown provides a helpful overview of the link between the upheaval of the Civil Rights era and the targeted anti-Black forms of divestment that would come to dominate the following decades:

> In the post civil rights political order white racial resentment buttressed an ideology of individual choice and personal responsibility, which was sustained by widening class and racial inequality. Conservative political elites created this racial order by exploiting the 1960s political upheaval to forge an electoral coalition that united white southerners, religious conservatives, and fiscal conservatives and was dedicated to rolling back regulation of the economy, repealing progressive taxation, and ultimately undoing as much of the Great Society and New Deal as possible. Racial hostility and polarization were instrumental in bringing this political coalition to power and race has been foundational to its stability (Brown 649-50).

At some level, Benjie knows at least some of this. However, unequipped with either the language to fully articulate these critiques or the social capital to effect meaningful change (who, after all, is interested in the complaints of poor Black boys from the inner city?) Benjie turns his frustrations inward. Childress is among the first Black writers to see in the growing epidemic of drug use a deeper critique of the failure of both the state and the Black community to provide for its youth.

Where Benjie is the voice of an increasingly alienated Black youth culture, each of the adults around him serves as a stand-in for a kind of response to the problems of adolescence. There is Butler, a transplant from the South who notes the heightened cycles of targeted poverty and urban blight increasingly taking over the inner city: "I've seen a lot in my lifetime, but I've never seen nothing like this" (Childress 16). In addition to his optimism about the new world of possibilities opened up by the previous decades' struggles, Butler also brings a searing class-consciousness to the narrative. He manages to strike a balance of allowing Benjie to be responsible for his own poor choices, "[t]he kid got to hanging round those that's in a junk bag and then got in one himself", while also understanding the limited life choices available to people in his circumstance. Butler is tasked with figuring out how to model both parental support and meaningful discipline all while navigating the complexities of being a non-biological parent to a difficult teenager. In so doing, he stands in for the scores of men who embrace the difficult work of fatherhood in circumstances that would cow even the most well-intentioned of social workers.

Rose Craig, Benjie's mother, is a woman overwhelmed by the responsibilities of parenthood and elder care alongside working full-time. Forced into a position of caretaker for both her son and increasingly her aging mother, "lately my mother has been turning on the gas and forgetting to light it with the matches, another time she left the water running and flooded the downstairs apartment," (51) Rose is neither intentionally neglectful nor uninvolved. Instead, she is a proxy for legions of single Black mothers working to survive

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and provide for their families even as society insists on only understanding them as failures and drains on the system.

Rose works as a direct response to the image of the Black mother as deficient or deviant, a trend with long roots in American cultural and political life but one which found particular voice in the 1960s and '70s. Scholars have long pointed to the 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, or the so-called Moynihan Report as a key moment in the modern pathologizing of Black parenthood and the Black family by extension. That report, written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then Assistant Secretary of Labor, argued that "the gap between the Negro and most other groups in American society is widening," and that "the fundamental problem, in which this is most clearly the case, is that of family structure. The evidence – not final but powerfully persuasive – is that the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling." (*The Negro Family*) Moynihan's work would go on to locate a number of societal causes for the struggling urban landscape of the decade, but the vast majority of that responsibility fell on the single mothers raising children without the necessary support, for as Moynihan succinctly opines: "White children without fathers at least perceive all about them the pattern of men working. Negro children without father flounder – and fail" (*The Negro Family*, Chapter IV).

In Rose, Childress reimagines this figure of the lazy, sexually lascivious single Black mother who exists to be an inadvertent and unapologetic drain on resources as a struggling and overburdened caretaker doing everything in her deeply limited power to make do. Through her story, readers come to understand how Black women are forced to defer their own humanity in the service of others all while bearing the burden of their resentment. And Childress returns that sense of humanity by reminding us that Rose Craig isn't merely a hardworking caretaker, she is also an adult woman with dreams and desires of her own, a point she doesn't shy away from making when Rose tells readers: "A child thinks his mother should be a mother and nothin else. Trouble is they been taught, all of us been taught, that love is for squares. Guess me and Butler don't look very special in [Benjie's] eyes…just a plump lady and a hardworking man goin along doin their best" (Childress 53). Through the figure of Rose, Childress reminds younger readers of the humanity adults can so often feel compelled to hide.

Taken together, Butler and Rose speak directly back to the prevailing myths about the Black household. Even in a moment of incredible crisis, Benjie's house is never a place of deviance or neglect. Rather, Childress depicts their home as a site of indelible strength where people with everything working against them struggle to create some sense of family and community despite the fact that, as Butler astutely observes, "poor folks ain't got many ways to solve problems" (21).

Benjie's grandmother, Mrs. Ransom Bell, stands in for an older generation that believed in a religious passivity that would see justice deferred into the next life and that feels increasingly estranged from culture. Readers are first introduced to Mrs. Bell in the aftermath of a mugging that took place outside of her church: "Yes, they hit me and knocked me down, my own kind did it to me, but I'm still alive. Don'tcha see how good God

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has been? Who would I have if I didden have Jesus?" (30). Hers is a world overrun with unwelcome changes as the new generation shifts its cultural values in ways that feel increasingly unfamiliar. In her story, readers get a glimpse of the kind of uplift and respectability politics that would be called into question by subsequent generations. Particularly in the aftermath of the nominal advent of Civil Rights, pleas to meet the continued violence wrought by racial inequity with Christian patience felt increasingly old-fashioned and out-of-touch.

Outside of the home, the other place Benjie, and by extension the novel, explores in depth is the school. It is here that we are introduced to Nigeria Greene and his Black Nationalist pedagogy. This is also where readers meet Bernard Cohen. Together the two men share responsibility for teaching the seventh graders, as Mr. Cohen explains: "He teaches the bottom of the seventh grade, and I have the top," (34) a task constantly challenged by the two men's vastly different approaches to teaching. Cohen and Nigeria serve as foils, with Cohen giving voice to the disillusioned white liberals who want to help the "urban poor" but make little effort to truly understand their situations.

On the use of language, Mr. Cohen offers this critique:

> Nigeria likes to say 'ain't' even though he knows better. That's *their* way of trying to invent a language because they don't have one. He's also trying to impress the kids, make them believe he's a swinger, one of the crowd. At the moment, he's in a big hassle to get a Swahili class started. What in the hell do they need with Swahili? Well, maybe they can use it to ask for a welfare check in two languages." (36-37)

Though Cohen is quick to correct himself, "I don't mean that. I'm just tired of catching hell from Monday to Friday," (37) his outburst points to the difficulties of working inside a system predicated on the assumption of Black inferiority. This brief exchange speaks to a longer history of black self-authorship through language. It also calls out the ways in which white authority rejects or disempowers those expressions.

To the question of whether the students should be exposed to more teachers and historical figures of color, he muses: "What will this country be if the all-Black schools get all-Black teachers? If we give up our seniority by default, they will move on to the assistant and principal jobs – like Grant through Richmond. Is it healthy for kids to learn nothing but Black history, Black supremacy, and Black power?" (35). In this moment Childress, through Cohen, gives voice to the real limits on the tolerance of Black identity in white liberal society. Cohen is perfectly content to participate in a system designed to reproduce racial inferiority as the status quo. Once again, the hard limit comes at the moment of Black self-authorship.

Nevertheless, even Nigeria is forced to begrudgingly acknowledge Cohen's success in the classroom: "Give him his due, he teaches hard, when kids leave his room, they take something with them, even if it's a lie" (44). As the school's principal describes in his brief interlude: "Bernard Cohen and Nigeria Greene do not get along very well, but the kids fare a bit better because they're both here" (55). Through Nigeria Greene the students gain a kind of optimistic, if ultimately unattainable vision of Black self-authorship where Bernard

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Cohen gives them the practical tools and knowledge required to survive in the racist capitalist world of adults. And as if to drive the point home, ultimately, it takes the two men working in tandem to set the wheels in motion on getting Benjie help.

Unsurprisingly, that help does not come easy. Interspersed with the scenes from the Harlem chorus are newspaper clippings detailing an inner-city increasingly overrun with gangs and drugs. It is immediately following one of these interludes, here announcing: "Drugs Available in Local Schools", that readers are introduced to one of the novel's most complex characters: Walter, known also as "the Pusher". Walter's nihilism is matched only by his drive for self-preservation. Despite his insistence that his being a non-user makes him different from the "junkies" he sells to, he also appreciates how they are both trapped inside a system of abuse and targeted neglect. As he explains: "I don't feel sorry for a livin! If I was to get bumped or go to jail for life, these crackers who own the world and all what's in it would go right on doin like they been doin, just as if my ass had never been born" (61). And later, "I hate the nigga (junkie) most much as I'm hatin myself; the both of us ain't have no more sense than to be born Black in the middle of some big white action" (63).

When Walter declares: "I'm pushing for cops when you get right down to it," (60) he unmasks the interrelationship between the criminalization of Blackness and the reproduction of a racial caste system newly emerging at the dawn of the War on Drugs. As he explains, for many "junkies" drug use is not indicative of a lack of intelligence: "Some junkies supersmart. They talkin baaaaaaad, they rap out the history of the world, and tell what it's gonna take to get whitey's foot offa your neck, and what a revolution is, and what mistakes was made by Garvey, King, and Malcolm…but they can't keep their veins closed, dig?" (62). He illuminates how young men like Benjie become trapped in a system that needs them to fail to prove that their mistreatment was justified.

Of course, not all Black youths will recognize themselves in Benjie's story. Readers also spend time with young Jimmie Lee Powell, the son of a former Civil Rights activist who tries to straddle the line between supporting his friend and avoiding trouble of his own. As Jimmie's story attests, in a society that can only understand Black youths as a problem, the more subtle needs of adolescence often go unmet:

> Fact is, if I was on skag or just out of jail, they would maybe buy me a set-a drums just to help me straighten up. Sure, if I was in a drug bag they'd pay me money to go to school and give me a head shrinker too. Some cats come outta detention and soon have folks advisin and workin to help them make it big. I'd like to get a little help myself, but I don't wanta get into trouble to get it, not really. I wish there was someplace to go without bein in trouble. (84)

While Benjie represents the kind of "problem" around which the community can rally, Jimmie Lee stands in for the scores of Black youths who feel ignored or neglected because they fail to inspire the same charitable impulse so often associated with helping the "less fortunate". Despite his age, Jimmie Lee is already growing hip (to borrow the parlance of the period) to the links between sympathy and charity and how profoundly

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politicized those bonds can become. He is coming to see how the spectacle of Black suffering is a prerequisite to institutional support.

A Hero Ain't Nothin but a Sandwich lives in these small vignettes. It strives to tell the story of how communities are formed and what it takes to repair the kinds of damage society can do. While Benjie certainly does not speak for every youth, in his rejection of the optimism of his parents he gives voice to a new generation's refusal to accept the conditions of possibility that constrained the past. Yet, as Childress makes clear, Benjie still has much to learn, about the world and his place within it. The closing scene of the novel finds the family unit reconstituted in a fragile stability as Butler patiently waits for Benjie to return checking in with a local rehab facility. In Butler's patient waiting, there are echoes of the message of Childress's call to young Black readers and the writers who would find them: "Come on Benjie, I believe in you…Benjie, don't hold back, come one, I'm waitin for you…hurry up, I'm waitin, boy…I'm waitin right here…It's nation time…I'm waitin for you…" (126).

Alice Childress's Harlemese filters the difficult conversations about the meaning of blackness through the prism of adolescent experience to produce a multiplicity of answers and options. In the end, Childress makes the case for a version of literature that understands the often-challenging racial realities of adolescence while leaving space and grace for growth and change.

"It's Nation Time": Writing for Black Young Adults in the 1970s

By 1973, a tradition of writing for young Black readers had been long established. Katherine Capshaw and Anna Mae Duane have uncovered a long tradition of work specifically targeting young Black readers extending back to the heyday of periodical print culture in the 1880s and '90s (Kapshaw and Duane 2017). Unfortunately, while records for titles such as *Our Women Our Children,* published in the 1880s by a Kentucky-based Baptist organization, or *The Joy*, a magazine targeting young readers from the late 1880s, point to the existence of both writers and presumably readers working in the space, as is so often the case with ephemera of the period, neither have yet been located for further exploration.

Still, their mere existence points to an ongoing conversation among Black writers about the best way to introduce younger readers to complex and challenging ideas. Writing in *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*, Capshaw (at the time Capshaw Smith) highlights the tension between the desire to produce texts that would be appropriate for younger audiences and the imperative to share more challenging racial truths as one of the central debates in the early development of Black writing for younger reader.

> With the general assumption of child maturity and modernity, writers debated the role of prejudice in raising activist children. For some, knowledge of racial bias was a function of child sophistication, and home reading became a means to model responses to the prejudice inevitably encountered outside the home. For others, worldliness of black children called for a retreat through literature to domestic and

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> natural landscapes unsullied by political contact. (*Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* 2-3)

Throughout the period, writers like Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Effie Lee Newsome, and Jessie Fauset worked to model writing for younger readers that could imagine space for a Black childhood even within the confines of a society that often did not.

Yet by the 1970s, the newly emerging Black Arts/Black Power movement was beginning to push back against the idea that Black representation needed to be limited by the politics of respectability or the absolute goal of inclusivity. Frustrated by the limited material gains produced in the wake of the advent of nominal civil rights for Black people, the Black Arts/Black Power movement sought to imagine different modes of sociality and political organization that could meaningfully address the needs of the community.

For the members of this group, art, and particularly art aimed at young people, was an essential medium for communicating the movement's message. This somewhat practical interest in targeted awareness-raising dovetailed rather neatly with a thematic fascination with the figure of the black child and representations of black childhood prevalent throughout the genre. As Caplan explains,

> Childhood suddenly offered the opportunity for Black writers both to discover and to develop a black ideal: on the one hand, childhood became the epitome of the decolonized mind, a space for the black nation to express its 'authentic' voice; on the other, childhood became the terrain for counterliteracy training, for undoing cultural degradation begun in white schooling, and for setting new foundations of black identity through authoritative histories of African and black experience. (161)

Throughout the 1970s, Black writers turned to the space of childhood, and increasingly adolescence, to produce texts that elucidated the complexity of the black lived experience beyond the upwardly mobile middle class. Texts such as Virginia Hamilton's *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush*, James Baldwin's *Little Man, Little Man,* and June Jordan's *His Own Where* eloquently address complex themes of poverty, educational inequity, and inner-city violence. And more importantly, they did so in a way that was unafraid to be unflattering. As Capshaw notes: **"**During the Black Arts Movement, black children embodied both a nationalist idea and its incomplete fruition" (*Civil Rights Childhood* 157).

A vital part of that tradition, it is more appropriate to describe Childress's novel as helping to "discover" Black young adult literature rather than "inventing" it. This shift locates Childress's novel as a part of a burgeoning tradition that was beginning to insist the Black young adult into the cultural lexicon. The publication history of the text itself is a testament to how young adult literature as a category insisted itself into being.

With the novel's release, critical successes, and subsequent banning, the ensuing controversy fueled the public demand for a television movie adaption the following year, for which Childress wrote the screenplay. The novel itself would continue to sell well throughout the 1970s before slowly disappearing from bookshelves throughout the late '80s and '90s.

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A Hero returned to print in the early 2000s, first in 2000 under the Penguin Putnam Books for Younger Readers imprint, then just two years later in 2002 as a part of the newly created *Speak* imprint of publisher Puffin Books. As the publisher's website described:

> "Bringing classic and cutting edge fiction to the forefront of the paperback list, Speak provides a dedicated home for older readers. With a range of the quality fiction and non-fiction Puffin is known for, *Speak* combines contemporary novels featuring characters with whom readers can identify, historical fiction that transports the reader to new worlds, smart, original series fiction, and a mix of award-winning authors and bright new talent." ("Speak – Penguin Books")

With this imprint, Childress's work was cemented as one of the early "classics" of young adult (or, more accurately, teen) literature, archived alongside such texts as John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, Laurie Halse Anderson's *catalyst*, and S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. But the quickness of the move away from Books for Younger Readers speaks volumes about the kinds of expectations that parents and librarians had begun to imbue the text with. Ironically, one could argue that the impossibility of understanding Childress's work as a work for "younger readers" only further underscores the importance of her role in insisting Black identity into the space of young adulthood. Fortunately, where Childress and others began to go, many more writers would soon follow, weaving their own tales about the pain and possibility of growing up while Black in America. And in all of their narratives, echoes of Alice Childress's deeply idiosyncratic Harlemese prevail.

Notes

1. According to the court records, the nine offending books in the High School library were *Slaughter House Five*, by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.; *The Naked Ape*, by Desmond Morris; *Down These Mean Streets*, by Piri Thomas; *Best Short Stories of Negro Writers*, edited by Langston Hughes; *Go Ask Alice*, of anonymous authorship; *Laughing Boy*, by Oliver LaFarge*; Black Boy*, by Richard Wright; *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But A Sandwich*, by Alice Childress; and *Soul On Ice*, by Eldridge Cleaver. The book in the Junior High School library was *A Reader for Writers*, edited by Jerome Archer.
2. Historians typically point to the passage of Controlled Substance Act in 1971 as the informal start of the War on Drugs. The bill was originally intended to expand federal authority over the regulation of narcotics and would lead to the creation of the Drug Enforcement Agency. As many legal and critical race theory scholars have noted, this expanded regulatory authority would be disproportionately used to surveil and police inner-city and predominantly minority areas, leading to high levels of arrests of non-violent offenses and creating a steady supply of human capital for the rapidly expanding private prison industry. For more on the disproportionate impact of the War on Drugs in the Black community, see Doris Marie Provine *Unequal Under Law: Race in the War on Drugs* (U of Chicago, 2007) and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (Ohio State U Press, 2010).

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