
This study used qualitative content analysis to determine if there is a difference in the way that black girls were depicted in children’s picture books in the 1990s compared to their portrayal in the genre now. This study sought to identify the consistent, overarching themes appearing in each book and to determine whether these themes promote a positive representation of this demographic. Seventeen children’s picture books featuring black girls as protagonists were selected and analyzed in depth using studies examining the diversity of children’s literature as a guide. This study found that the depiction of black girls in this medium has not evolved much over the past twenty years, though not for the worse; many of the most positive themes, promoting ideals such as empowerment, culture and heritage, and relying on one’s family for love and support, were found more or less consistently throughout each book, regardless of publication date.

Headings:

Children’s Literature

Content Analysis (Communication)
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF BLACK GIRLS IN
CHILDREN’S PICTURE BOOKS

by
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Introduction

In Noah Cho’s article for *The Toast* “Why I Teach Diverse Lit” (2015), he recounts how, in his journey from literature student to high school English teacher, he struggled to find diverse literature that was representative of his demographic— as a person of color, a child of immigrants to America, and a visual outlier to the demographic that “classic” Western literature so often represents (that is to say, white). Cho describes how he struggled to connect with Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, how he felt a sense of increasing alienation from being asked by his instructor to connect with and analyze a world inhabited by a white Puritan society, one where the Asian American diaspora experience did not exist. Cho notes the feelings of elation, belonging, and emotional catharsis he experienced later in his educational career, when he read and identified with the works of multicultural writers of color such as Marquez and Rae-Lee, in whose pages he saw himself reflected. Cho notes that, when he began to teach such diverse literature to his own high school students, defying the school board’s curriculum by inserting texts by authors who did not belong to the frequently white, Western, male canon that dominated the syllabus, the students responded as positively as he himself had. “For the first time,” he notes, “they were all genuinely engaged and interested in what we were reading... They are passionate about the stories we read, always looking for connections to their own lives and experiences” (Cho, 2015).
Cho’s experiences, both personal and shared among his students, are emblematic of the power of literature on developing minds, as is his conclusion that “[a student] shouldn’t have to struggle to find literature they identify with.” Such a manifesto is at the heart of the publishing industry’s obligation to provide diverse books at all reading levels; more than simply offering up serviceable representation, however, is the obligation of the publishing industry to provide equitable and respectful representation of its writers and characters of color, content that is just as relatable and well-rounded as the much-praised content produced by white authors for a white audience. Among the many American demographics that find themselves pushed to the wayside in terms of equitable literary representation, black women are one of the most marginalized demographics, and have been for decades. (Pescosolido et al., 1997, p. 445).

By extension, young, black, school-age girls are, by dint of both their race and gender, some of the least written about demographics in children’s literature, as well as some of the least frequently and positively portrayed (Macbeth, 2005, p. 32). Until the advent of the We Need Diverse Books campaign (Flood, 2014), which called upon publishers to increase the diversity of their literary output, the national conversation about representation had long since devolved into a quiet hum (Smith-D’Arezzo et al., 2011, p. 189). Similarly, when these books were written and did include black girls as characters, they were depicted either marginally, as secondary characters in someone else’s story, or as de-facto representations of plights that affected the African American community as a whole, such as children’s books that explored the issue of Civil Rights through the eyes of a black, school-age girl (Owens et al., 2001, p. 36-38). Such an example would be Robert Coles’ *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, published in 2010, which
recounted the well-known history of discrimination Bridges faced as a young girl attending a recently integrated school in New Orleans in 1960 (Bishop, 2012, p. 5).

Though such representation is important— as educating young children on African American history and the black American experience is as important as is educating them on the “traditional” historical narrative of America— having such a narrative as the only opportunity for black girls to find themselves in the pages of a children’s book may in fact be both superficial and lacking (Owens et al, 2001, p. 40). As Cho’s article demonstrates, the ability of students of all ages to connect with the literature they are reading, to identify with the plight of the character by seeing themselves represented by some facet of their identity and existence, is crucial to engendering interest and lifelong passion for literature, as well as a sense of esteem and valuation by society. As such, it is possible to argue that literature written for and about black girls should, in order to truly be effective and demonstrative of the We Need Diverse Books campaign, be as diverse, nuanced, and prevalent as its white literary counterpart.

Many previous SILS (School of Information and Library Science) research papers (Pierce, 2012, Young, 2016) as well as several research papers conducted outside of UNC’s program (Sims, 1983, Taxel, 1986, Smith-D’Arezzo et al., 2011) have explored the question of content in children’s picture books. More still have explored the topic of the representation of children of color in picture books, examining everything from the role children of color are given in such books, to the themes that person of color (POC)-specific children’s books explore, to the actual visual representation of children of color in these illustrated pages (Roethler, 1998, Parker, 2015, French, 2013, Lindsey, 2013). Examinations of the representation of children of color in children’s picture books is
crucial to the efforts of the publishing industry to improve the diversity of their content, as well as the quality of said content; such examinations also serve to hold publishers and authors accountable for the content they produce and help to ensure that writers, publishers, and educators alike are increasing the diversification of their content. However, an even more specific examination concerning the representation of children of color in picture books is needed to efficiently explore and examine the role of representation in children’s literature. My research question is: Has the depiction of black girls in children’s picture books changed over the past twenty years, and has that evolution, if it has occurred, resulted in a more nuanced, diverse, and non-stereotypical representation of this demographic?

In determining whether the evolution of the depiction of black girls has improved in terms of content, I am looking to determine whether their depiction within this fictional medium has changed at all over the past twenty years, and whether the roles that young black girls play in these books is more diverse than it was, meaning that they occupy roles other than “slave” or “civil rights-era figure.” I am looking for these particular elements in children’s picture books because this genre has been developed almost exclusively for a young audience that is just beginning to read (or to be read to) and represents, for many children, their first foray into the world of literary fiction; because these picture books contain illustrations and visual representations of characters and the image of a character is just as important (sometimes more important) to a child than the text of the story itself; and because viewing positive representations of oneself within a fictional medium is crucial for the healthy self-actualization and social development of young children (Macbeth, 2005, p. 27). As previously mentioned, black
girls are one of the least positively (and least frequently) represented demographics in American fiction (Macbeth, 2005, p. 32). Therefore, a study analyzing their fictional depiction in books meant for children is essential to determining whether that depiction is moving in a positive direction, and if there are overarching themes that warrant closer examination and critical analysis.

**Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of my study, a few terms require clarification, as they have many variable and interpretive meanings. “Depiction” here refers to the literary and visual representation of black girls as fictional or fictive-historical characters in picture books meant for children. For the purposes of this study, a “depiction” can be a black girl who serves as the protagonist of her own story, as well as a secondary or tertiary character in someone else’s story. Within this context, “diverse” refers to the role that the black girl (as a fictional character) is given in a children’s picture book—what it is that the character does. In order to count as diverse, the character must be portrayed as performing activities and occupying roles that popular children’s book characters (such as white children, inanimate objects, and animals) are often depicted as performing and occupying—such as being a dancer, going on a fictional adventure, interacting positively with their parents, playing with their friends, or solving a mystery. “Diverse,” within this context, also means that the personality of the black girl, as well as the context in which she is presented, must be removed in some way (though of course not entirely) from her race, meaning that she cannot simply be depicted as a slave, a figure of the Civil Rights movement, or used as a device through which to explore black history in a children’s
medium. Books that explore issues specific to the lived experience of black girls, however, (such as a picture book that discusses natural hair) will of course be accepted, as such an issue does not limit the role that the character plays in the book—the character could conceivably be a tomboy, an aspiring scientist or teacher, or any number of roles within the context of the book, even though the crux of the book discusses something that relates specifically to black girls and women.

“Children’s picture books” here refers to books that contain illustrations and are written specifically for the demographic of young children, ages 3-8. These books don’t necessarily have to be published exclusively by children’s book publishers or written by authors who only write children’s books, but they must be written intentionally (and not incidentally) for an audience of young children. Similarly, though the topic of my study centers on books primarily about black girls, it is not necessary for these books to have been written by people of color, though certainly many that are will be included in the study. Similarly, the books included in this study do not have to be distributed by publishing houses that cater specifically to diverse books, such as Lee & Low; books will be chosen from a mixture of mainstream publishing houses (such as Scholastic), as well as smaller, boutique, or promotional houses.

“Nuanced” here refers to the depiction of a black girl as a fictional character within this medium. Similar to the stipulations defined under “diverse,” such a depiction, the black girl’s mere presence in the book, must be equally as incidental and non-essential to the plot as the depiction of a white character, an animal, or an inanimate object. For example, other characters cannot spend a significant amount of the book’s plot discussing or pointing out the black girl’s race, or how that differentiates her from or
makes her similar to other characters in the book’s narrative. Finally, “non-stereotypical” here means that the depiction of a black girl as a fictional character within this medium is not reminiscent of racist stereotypes, either in the text written or the illustrations drawn for the story. The depiction must be removed from racial stereotypes found in American society and pop culture, such as the “magical negro,” “black best friend,” “black criminal,” “brash women,” or “domestics” tropes; furthermore, the depiction must be, overall, positive in the way it presents the character’s actions and personality (Nittle, 2017).

The question of diversity and equitable representation is a pressing concern in all forms of media these days, from TV, to film, to advertising to, of course, literature. My study aims to examine the evolution of one marginalized demographic’s representation within literary fiction in the hopes that it will clarify to writers, publishers, teachers, parents, and readers alike where the representation of black girls in children’s literature is headed, where it has been, and why that evolution, or perhaps lack of evolution, is important.

**Literature Review**

*Examinations on the State of Diversity in Children’s Literature*

The study, argument in favor of, and examination of diversity (in all media, but especially in literature, and in particular, children’s literature) has a long-running history in both academic, education-centered, and media studies research. Research conducted on the topic of diversity and representation specifically of black girls in children’s picture books is, however, surprisingly scarce, indicating that the general vein of research on
diversity in literature runs deep instead of broad. Still, many researchers of the last
century have presented thorough, influential, and valuable, if general, overviews of the
portrayal of black children in children’s literature. Pescosolido et al. (1997) noted,
significantly, that the portrayal of black characters in children’s books over the past forty
years is nonlinear, and that it can be broken up into four distinct eras— from dramatically
decreasing representation from the 1930s to the 1950s, to almost zero representation in the
1960s, to a resurgence in the 1970s, and ultimately a tapering off at the end of that
decade. Bishop (2012), almost fifteen years after Pescosolido et al., picks up almost
exactly where the previous study left off, examining the changing tide of cultural, racial,
and ethical politics throughout the latter half of the previous century and into the next
millennium, from the 1980s to the early 2000s. Bishop’s own study notes that not only
has representation climbed (though marginally) throughout the past twenty years, but that
it has evolved along with the black American experience, importantly reflecting the
particular struggles and challenges faced by this demographic in the latter half of the 20th
century.

Macbeth (2005) by contrast takes a less hopeful view of the situation, noting that
the search for multicultural children’s literature in the new century is still just that—a
search, and one that often yields unsatisfying results in terms of scope, availability, and
complexity or variety of subject matter. This particular study also delves into the
complexities of the publication process, discussing the role of publishing houses in the
availability (or lack thereof) of diverse literature for children, how the politics of award-
winning books and marketing conflate with the obligation to publish and promote
equitably, and how this has often both aided and hindered the quest for diversity in
children’s literature. Owens et al. (2001) examine the psychological and socio-cultural implications of this lack of both availability and complexity in literature that aims to be diverse. This examination notes that diverse literature broadens a young reader’s social consciousness, working at once to affirm the existence and identities of children of color while also promoting greater empathy and acceptance of different cultures and races among white children. Roethler (1998) expands upon this idea by examining how the visual component of picture books literally model to children how to deal with problems in their lives by presenting them with a mirror through which to view themselves; by extension, he asserts that while this sensory experience is equally important to all children, regardless of race, black children in particular are being underserved on this front and as a result, lack the crucial identity formation that such reflective demonstrations could afford them, and which white American children, he argues, have always been afforded. Such research serves to examine the state of diverse children’s literature over the course of the past century, noting where marginal progress has been made, where the most notable gaps appear, as well as what the broader social, cultural, and psychological implications of that significant lack mean for children of color.

*Socio-Cultural Analyses on the Representation of Black Girls in Literary Fiction*

Socio-cultural analyses on the state of diversity and representation of black children, and particularly black girls, in children’s books are of particular interest and relevance to my own study, grounded as I intend my research to be in this particular genre and demographic. Lindsey (2013) describes in her research how themes of subjugation and empowerment have infused literature written specifically for young
black girls and adolescents, as well as how the frequent presentation of such themes has affected the demographic of black girls and adolescents who read these books. French (2012) in turn, examines a more pressing and thematically negative element that permeates much of the literature written for a young, black, female demographic. She notes how there has long been a strong “sexual script” prescribed to black women and that this carries over to the portrayal of black girls in children’s books, as well as how black girls navigate this portrayal while growing up and developing their own identity. French defines this “sexual script” as “enacted ways of engaging in relationships and sexual behavior, and the gendered and developmental norms associated with them [...] girls learn to look at themselves through the eyes of men, lose touch with their own bodily desires, place greater importance on romantic relationships, and learn to be sexually passive” (p. 36). French argues that black women are, by way of this sexual script, “often characterized as oversexed vixens, teen mothers, and carriers of sexually transmitted infections (STI), [while] mainstream standards of beauty disregard Black girls” (p. 35). Sims (1983), however, predates both French and Lindsey, yet he instead chooses to explore the prominent themes of empowerment linked with girlhood that pervaded much of the contemporary literature of his time; he notes in particular how a group of ten-year-old black girls responded to stories aimed at their demographic and discusses the implications of their reactions on the literature being produced.

Taxel (1986) notes the essentialism that is inherent in portraying black girls as strong and empowered within a fictional medium in his own research; this study critically examines three works of young adult literature written for and about an African American audience and interprets them for not only their fictional literary merit, but also
for the socio-cultural and historical perspective they represent for and about an African American population. Taxel’s content analysis is particularly valuable, as it is a study on which I can model my own research. Similarly, Smith-D’Arezzo et al. (2011) present a study in which professors of different races were asked to examine twenty-three children’s picture books containing black characters, a study which ultimately gets at the heart of perception, reception, and the implications of diverse literature amongst difference races. My own study will fit smoothly into this body of literature, occupying, as it does, the space between a general study on diverse literature (with my focus on children’s picture books) and the study of a general population of people of color (with my demographic focus on black girls specifically).

Additionally, my study ultimately seeks to fill the gap between each of the “examination” and “analysis” studies discussed above by focusing, not on the big picture ideal of the state of diversity in children’s and young adult publishing, nor the general question of how these depictions affect the portrayal, identity formation, and cultural acceptance of the African American population as a whole, but rather how a very specific type of book (the picture book made for children) portrays a very specific part of the population (black girls). My content analysis will bridge the gap between theoretical and practical and help to facilitate a discussion, touched on in many of these sources, about the actual state of the portrayal of black girls in children’s picture books, whether that portrayal has evolved, and where it could (or should) advance from this point onward.

**Methods**
My research question addresses the past and present fictional representation of black girls in children’s picture books and seeks to determine if that portrayal has evolved over the past twenty years. My research method for this study will be a content analysis, wherein I examine a selection of children’s picture books featuring black girls as protagonists to determine what meanings, themes, or patterns are common in this genre of literature, as well as the fictional representation of this demographic. A qualitative content analysis is an appropriate research tool to use for my purposes because I seek to investigate the meaning that the text of these books hopes to convey through their employment of various themes. As Barbara Wildemuth (2009) explains, a qualitative content analysis is “a systematic approach to learning about particular aspects of a body of text [which] focuses on the features of recorded information... [q]ualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to examine meanings, themes, and patterns” (p. 305, 297, 308). Because this study seeks to determine what meanings, themes, and patterns are common in children’s picture books written about black girls, a qualitative content analysis is a fitting method for my research because it will allow me to critically and closely examine selected texts, and to subsequently select and record themes from these books as they appear to me.

I am interested in conducting a study that analyzes and addresses the state of the representation of black girls in children’s picture books in part because I myself never struggled to find complex, nuanced, and plentiful representations of my own demographic in books while growing up. As an upper middle class white woman of Jewish descent, and a highly educated one at that, I never lacked for either resources or material that reflected my own particular demographic. A bookish kid from the start, I
gained a lot of self-actualization, confidence, and knowledge from reading while growing up, and in particular from reading books that featured protagonists who looked like me, came from similarly educated backgrounds, and whose families reflected my own home dynamic, complete with two college-educated parents, two siblings, and two dogs. My undergraduate education at UNC Asheville strove to inform me about many diverse perspectives through the Humanities classes all students were required to take, and in particular through our school-wide reading and discussion of texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharata, and sections of the Quran, as well as through required lectures on such topics as race and poverty in the United States and the impact of colonialism on the modern world. Despite this, the majority of my education was still firmly rooted in the white Western literary tradition. For example, a class on the fundamentals of Western literature was required by UNCA’s Literature department in the pursuit of my degree, but no classes on Eastern, African, or South American literatures were required and were instead offered only as “special topics” classes. As such, though I have had exposure to diverse literatures and strive to be aware of issues of representation in all forms of Western media, I have never had to face the personal impact of this lack of representation myself and am approaching this study from the perspective of an outsider whose demographic is widely represented by all media in the United States.

For the purpose of this study, I analyzed seventeen children’s picture books which were published between the years of 1996 and 2016. As a qualitative content analysis “requires small, purposively selected samples” for the results to be transferable, I deliberately kept my sample size to a number that would be more manageable to analyze in-depth (Wildemuth, 2009, p. 298). These books were written and illustrated by authors
and artists of varying races, genders, and ethnicities, as no restrictions were taken into account concerning the demographic of the creator or the audience (including age level, or even medium) that they usually write for. The only firm requirement in my selection of these seventeen books was that they had to be a children’s picture book intended for readers between the ages of three and eight. The books chosen for analysis also had to contain illustrations on at least 80% of the book’s pages, in addition to text. Picture books that contained only illustrations without text were not considered for review. As a qualitative content analysis is an inductive form of study, I did not begin my content analysis with a list of themes in mind to watch out for as I read (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 37). Rather, as I analyzed each book and absorbed its content, recurring themes, categories, and concepts emerged from the text, themes which I then recorded into an Excel spreadsheet, organized according to book, author, and date. I did not begin this content analysis with formed questions in mind to guide me during my examination, other than the overarching question of my study: Whether children’s picture books featuring black girls as protagonists had changed over the past twenty years and if so, how. In this way, I relied upon emergent coding to reveal themes as I analyzed and re-analyzed each book chosen for my study.

A variety of different search platforms, databases, and resources were used to identify the children’s picture books that I analyzed in my study. Selection began with different keyword searches in NoveList Plus. An initial search was performed with the chosen keywords “children’s picture books” AND “black girls.” Next, a search was performed for “picture books” AND “African Americans” AND “girls.” In NoveList Plus, it is possible to limit the results of a search to “fiction” or “nonfiction” and to search
by a targeted age range; the results for each of these searches were limited to “fiction” and “ages 0-8.” NoveList Plus’ Advanced Search options also allow users to specify the year of publication for books in their search terms, a feature I used to my advantage when searching for older titles within my twenty-year time period. Title read-alike lists that NoveList provides were also perused as a resource to find other possible books to include in my study. Next, Goodreads was searched for user-created lists that compiled children’s books written for children of color, and specifically for black girls; one list in particular, “African American Picture Books,” consisting of 332 titles, was particularly helpful. I scanned each book in the list in search of my stated criteria that the book be a picture book for readers between the ages of three and eight, and that it feature a black girl as the protagonist. This particular user-generated list was helpful in finding both recent and older publications, as there was a steady mix of the two featured in the list. Additionally, I searched the website catalogues of the diversity-driven publishing house, Lee & Low Books, for more recent publications that center on black girls. Finally, I searched through the catalogues of my local libraries, including the Durham County Library System, the Chapel Hill Public Library, and the SILS Library, to see what I could find in terms of diverse children’s picture books that feature black girls as protagonists. I spoke to Margaret Anderson, the Children Services Librarian at the Durham County Library’s Southwest Branch, for recommendations and received several helpful titles from her, including the more recently published books *Thunder Rose* and *Dancing in the Wings.*

As previously stated, I implemented a qualititative content analysis to examine and identify the themes present in each of the seventeen books I examined for my study. To support this endeavor, and to avoid bias in my process of identifying themes, as well as to
avoid building off of pre-conceived ideas I may already have formed prior to compiling my research, I entered my data into an Excel spreadsheet, which I used as a coding system that would allow me to simply note down the theme as it appears in the text, instead of building off of a set of themes from book to book. I created separate entries for each book selected for my analysis and organized them by date, starting with the oldest selected book (*Boundless Grace*, published in 1996) first. I then added data about the author and illustrator of each book; I chose to note the respective races and ethnicities of each creator as a precaution, in case I later identified the reoccurrence of a theme that would make taking the creators’ race into account in my study. I noted each book’s intended age group in a third column and recorded each book’s themes in a fourth; the themes were written down in simple language and organized under the subheading of whatever term I thought best represented what the book was trying to communicate to the reader, such as “family,” “self-love,” or “ambition.” I did not use a third party to help me conduct my research, as I believed that my analysis would be easier and more consistent if I, as the sole researcher, identified and analyzed the themes in my selection of children’s picture books, instead of collaborating with another person’s observations. In this way, I gained a complete overview of each book that I chose to analyze, which I believe lent a more cohesive element to my research.

The question of diversity and equitable representation is a pressing concern in all forms of media these days, from TV to film to advertising to, of course, literature. My study aims to examine the evolution of one marginalized demographic’s representation within literature specifically, in the hopes that it will clarify to both writers, publishers, teachers, parents, and readers alike where the representation of black girls in children’s
literature is headed, where it has been, and why that evolution, or lack of evolution, is significant. My study also aims to fill a gap in the literature concerning diversity and children’s literature and may potentially bring focus to the specific plight of black girls in the world of children’s picture books, their portrayal, whether that portrayal has evolved, and where it might advance from this point onward.

**Findings**

Though I took precautions to guard against bias and analyzed each children’s book in an impartial way, to the best of my abilities, I still had preconceived notions of what I would find as I read these books. Namely, I believed that I would find a positive progression toward nuanced themes, more complex narratives, and more fully-realized protagonists as the books I read became more recent in publication date, and that the books I reviewed from the mid-to-late nineties would seem outdated in their presentation of themes and narratives. Furthermore, I expected to encounter several one-note protagonists in many of the older books—characters who were representative of tired stereotypes for black girls, or who lacked depth because their role in the book was to impart a history lesson and assume a caricatured persona, such as “slave” or “civil rights activist.” Instead, to my surprise and delight, I found that many of these books, both from twenty years ago and more recently, demonstrated something wonderful: They emphasized that black girls could be anything, could occupy any role in society, and could tackle complicated, diverse, and nuanced narratives while doing so. In the seventeen books I selected, I read stories about black girls training to be ballerinas, track and field athletes, and Tae Kwon Do masters, black girls who raise dragons, grow up to
become mythical figures of the American Wild West, and who love fashion and sports and pursue these topics for their own pleasure and self-actualization.

There was a pervasive theme of empowerment in many of these books, an emphasis on taking pride in the various manifestations of black and African culture; many books tackled the subject of African beauty in the form of young girls learning to appreciate the unique texture and stylings of their hair, while many others displayed a determination to speak proudly about African American and black cultural roots by exploring both the history of black oppression in America, as well as the legacy of culture and history that came before this. Family, and in particular the bond between mothers and daughters, was a prominent theme in many of these books as well. Overall, these findings reveal that the depiction of black girls in children’s picture books has been, at least for the past twenty years, a largely positive, stable one, populated by characters with distinct personalities and goals and depicted in a variety of settings, from rural Tanzania to 1960s Tennessee to modern-day New York City. Furthermore, the themes found in each of these books were largely positive in that they promoted a celebration of the great capabilities of black girls, the diversity and importance of African, African American, and black culture, and the strength of family and community. To discuss these findings in detail, they are sorted below into four larger, general themes:

• Empowerment
• Motherhood and the mother-daughter bond
• Family
• Culture, heritage, and divinity
Empowerment

The theme of empowerment manifested in several different ways in many of the books that I analyzed. One of the most common ways in which empowerment for black girls was discussed was through an examination of black beauty, and in particular the depiction and discussion of black (natural), textured hair. At the start of my study, I expected to find many children’s picture books featuring female protagonists that dealt with the concept of natural hair and taught black girls to be empowered by and proud of their hair. I did not expect, however, to find that some of the most effective narratives in this vein would be from some of the oldest books that I selected. *Nappy Hair* (1998) and *I Love My Hair!* (2001) each addressed the concept of self-love and empowerment through natural hair and hairstyles in terms of the greater narrative of being black, framing it in terms of taking pride in one’s race, origins, and community. *I Love My Hair!* takes an especially innovative approach in that it demonstrates to the protagonist (and, in turn, the young black girls reading the book) how her hair can be styled in a multitude of different ways, from cornrows that mimic planting columns in a garden, to afros that surround the head “like a globe,” to beaded braids that make music for her as she walks (p. 12-18). The emphasis on the natural world reflected in the different hair styles the protagonist wears underscores the specialness of her hair, as does the lesson her schoolteacher imparts to her— that being able to wear her hair in an afro is a blessing and was once a subversive act by the black community, “a way for them to stand up for what they believed, to let the world know that they were proud of who they were and where they came from” (p. 20).
This conflation of the natural beauty of the world, embodied in the shape of the globe, the structure of planting rows, and the music of clacking beads, and the history of protest and empowerment in the black community serves to strengthen the book’s lesson: That being black and having traditionally black hair is a beautiful thing that people should derive empowerment and pride from. By contrast, Big Hair, Don’t Care (2011) carries the same objective as I Love My Hair! but imparts the lesson in a somewhat tamer, less dramatic way. While it demonstrates the different styles that natural hair can take and encourages black girls to take pride in their hair, it doesn’t connect the lesson to anything broader. The text instead uses fanciful language and a simple, rhyming narrative to describe the ways in which the protagonist’s natural hair is her unique identifier, likening it to a cloud, a hat, and a cotton ball (p. 19-23). In this way, the book is more simplistic and less impactful in its delivery of the theme of empowerment (p. 9-14). It was surprising to note this regression of tying simple, baseline themes, such as empowerment, with larger, more complex themes, such as the history of African American struggle and the ties between black beauty and the natural world, in the books that I analyzed. I had expected for themes to become more nuanced as the dates of the books became more recent, but instead found that the opposite was often true and that the more complex, meaningful narratives appeared in books written in the late nineties and early 2000s.

Empowerment as a more general theme, and in particular the empowerment, creativity, and individuality of the young black girls who served as the protagonists of these works, was present in some form in each book I analyzed, regardless of the decade in which it was written. For the most part, that empowerment was also derived from
much the same sources in each book—namely, the support and love of the protagonist’s surrounding family. In Dancing in the Wings (2003), Sassy laments her big feet and long legs, which she worries are holding her back from being a ballerina; she can't partner with anyone due to her height and stands above the other girls, so she also can't dance in the corps de ballet (p. 5). However, she comes to embrace her differences as her strengths after talking to her Uncle Redd, who encourages her to look inside of herself to find the confidence she needs, instead of focusing on external factors (p. 9-10). She embraces her differences and uses them to land a coveted spot in a summer dance program in Washington, D.C. (p. 23). Similarly, in JoJo’s Flying Side Kick (1998), JoJo learns to overcome her nerves at being asked to perform a flying side kick in her Tae Kwon Do class with the help of her Grandaddy, her mother, and her friend P.J., who respectively encourage her to keep calm, to have confidence in her movements, and to visualize her actions before she performs them (p. 8, 12, 16). JoJo succeeds in executing a perfect flying side kick and, more importantly, overcomes her fear of the tree outside of her house, which had plagued her over the course of the book (p. 26). Her character arc is one of growth and liberation from fear by gaining confidence in her own actions and capabilities. Similarly, These Hands (1999) is a book built around the concept of capability and features a narrative that lists all the things a young girl is capable of doing, just with her hands. The book lists the unnamed protagonist’s ability to touch, build, teach, hug, write, help, read, and share; the narrative’s emphasis on active verbs underscores its message of empowerment, as do Bryan Collier’s accompanying illustrations, which depict a young black girl interacting with her world—playing piano, touching her mother’s pregnant belly, and shaking maracas (p. 10). Although the
protagonist of *These Hands* does not undergo the same kind of character transformation as Sassy and JoJo, each book shares the common theme of attempting to empower black girls by depicting characters who look like them accomplishing their goals with the strength they find within themselves.

Perhaps the most effective narrative of empowerment in all the books I analyzed belongs to 2002’s *Something Beautiful*. Inspired by author Sharon Dennis Wyeth’s own childhood, the unnamed protagonist scours her intimidating, often violent neighborhood in search of “something beautiful”— something that empowers her, that she can appreciate and take pride in (p. 1-3). She encounters various members of her community, who all share with her the simple things in their lives that they consider to be beautiful, such as the vegetable arrangement in a grocery stand, a jump rope, or a perfectly made fish sandwich (p. 11, 12, 15). At the novel’s conclusion, the protagonist returns home, where someone has written the word “die” on her door and strewn trash on her front yard. She decides to make a change: “I pick up the trash. I sweep up the glass. I scrub the door very hard. When *Die* disappears, I feel very powerful” (p. 25). The protagonist learns, in this moment, that she has the power to change the things in her life that upset her, or which she cannot accept. This is a crucial lesson to impart to any child but especially to a demographic of young black girls, who are so often, by dint of society’s treatment of both their race and gender, disarmed of all authority and confidence (Patton, 2006, p. 34).

Empowerment as a theme was consistently included in all of the books that I read for my analysis, regardless of when they were written, beginning with 1998’s *Nappy Hair* and carrying on almost uninterrupted until 2016’s *The Quickest Kid in Clarksville*. It took many forms across these books, from narratives in which a young girl outsmarts a
supernatural entity trying to get into her house (*Precious and the Boo Hag*, 2005), to a story in which a farm-raised rabble-rouser learns to appreciate the natural world around her, instead of disrupting it (*The Chicken-Chasing Queen of Lamar County*, 2007), to another story in which yet another young girl learns that it is best to adapt to change and learn from it, rather than fall to pieces (*I Had a Favorite Dress*, 2011). It is notable, then, that the theme of empowerment has been present in children’s picture books with black girls as protagonists for the last twenty years but has perhaps shrunk in terms of impact. Although books such as *Dancing in the Wings, JoJo’s Flying Side Kick*, and *Big Hair, Don’t Care* ruminated on the same theme of empowerment, older books such as *I Love My Hair!* and *Something Beautiful* linked this theme to something greater—growth and capability, the power that young black girls possess through their agency as individuals, and how this power can help them accomplish significant feats—such as loving themselves and improving their world.

*Motherhood and the Mother-Daughter Bond*

Many of the books in my content analysis presented a surprisingly centralized theme of motherhood, as well as the accompanying theme of the mother-daughter relationship, or as I will refer to it, bond. Five books in particular built their plots around the theme of motherhood and the mother-daughter bond, using it as the central point of action, drama, and character development; these books were *Elizabeti’s Doll* (1998), *Come On, Rain!* (1999), *Raising Dragons* (2002), *Pecan Pie Baby* (2010), and *I Had a Favorite Dress* (2011). That this selection of books shared this common theme of motherhood and the mother-daughter bond was particularly notable to me because they
spanned the selected time period of twenty years that this study covers almost perfectly. As such, the theme of motherhood and the mother-daughter bond was demonstrated to be one of the most consistent themes present in children’s picture books featuring black girls as protagonists, as well as one of the most complex. Furthermore, the books containing this theme emphasized the relationship between mothers and daughters sometimes to the total exclusion of the father; in fact, many books, whether they communicated the central theme of motherhood and the mother-daughter bond or not, failed to mention or represent a father or father-figure at all. By contrast, no book that I reviewed for my content analysis had an absent mother figure. Furthermore, motherhood and the mother-daughter bond were not mutually exclusive in their presence in a book, but instead often intermingled, resulting in narratives in which young girls both aspired to be mothers and explored their relationship with their own mother, occasionally, as in the case of *Elizabeti’s Doll*, intermingling the two into one narrative.

*Elizabeti’s Doll* (1998), one of the oldest books that I analyzed, features some of the most prominent themes of motherhood out of any of the books that I selected for this study. The plot centers on a young girl, Elizabeti, whose mother has just had a baby; Elizabeti, curious about and drawn to her mother’s daily routine of caring for the infant, pretends that a rock, which she names “Eva,” is her child and treats it as such throughout the book (p. 3-4). Much of the book’s plot is derived from Elizabeti watching her mother feed, change, and care for her child, actions which Elizabeti imitates, in all seriousness, with her own “baby”, Eva (p. 5-12). The message of motherhood is communicated within the book itself, as when Elizabeti takes “Eva” with her on a visit to her friend Rahaili. Rahaili initially laughs at the idea of Elizabeti mothering a rock and treating it as a child
substitute, but by the end of Elizabeti’s visit, Rahaili herself has decided to adopt a “baby” of her own and name it “Malucey” (p. 13-14). At the story’s conclusion, Elizabeti’s mother tucks both her daughter and “Eva” into bed and ruminates to herself that Elizabeti will “make a fine mother” one day (p. 29). It was interesting to encounter such firmly cemented themes of motherhood and traditional gender roles in one of the first books that I read for my content analysis, and even more interesting to find them in a book set, not in then-contemporary 1998 America, but in Tanzania, and to find elements of Tanzanian culture displayed throughout the book.

Though Elizabeti demonstrates undeniable creativity, imagination, and sensitivity in her adoption of “Eva” as her baby, she displays more single-minded interest in motherhood than in any other topic throughout the book. The book is peppered with domestic tasks that Elizabeti and her mother accomplish while simultaneously performing their respective duties as mothers: They wash and hang clothing up to dry, fetch water, and tend to the cooking (p. 12, 16-17, 22). No male characters are present in the book, save for Elizabeti’s infant brother, Obedi. Elizabeti’s mother and sister, Pendo, are the only family members that Elizabeti encounters and both are shown to belong exclusively to the domestic sphere, demonstrated by Pendo’s responsibility in cooking the family meals, and especially by her mother’s caregiver role, which is emphasized (and imitated) throughout the book (p. 17).

The prominent themes of motherhood, girlhood, and the bond between mother and daughter demonstrated throughout these books are certainly not detrimental themes to explore in children’s literature, and certainly not in picture books aimed at black girls. More often than not, the theme of the bond between mothers and daughters was the most
prominent one present in each of these books, and the one on which a lot of action and 
exploration was built. I would argue that this consistent theme is a positive trait in 
children’s picture books written with black girls as protagonists, as it demonstrates the 
power of familial love, and in particular the strength and prominence of mothers and 
mother-figures in many young girls lives; these are women whose lives the protagonists 
are encouraged to model their own lives on, who the protagonists make every effort to 
bond with, learn from, and keep close to, so prominently are they centered in the 
existences of these characters.

Not a single book that I reviewed in my small sampling had a mother that was 
absent from the narrative, though there were more than a few missing fathers. Such a 
central focus on motherhood, however, does have the added downside of tending to 
encourage traditional gender roles, a theme that was also present in many of the books 
that I analyzed, regardless of when they were written. *Elizabeti’s Doll* is, in this sense, 
the worst offender, as the plot celebrates and encourages a young girl’s desire to be a 
mother when she herself is barely out of infancy; the repetitive display of domestic tasks 
performed by women throughout the book, the communicated message of motherhood, 
the desire for a baby to care for, and Elizabeti’s mother’s rumination at the end of the 
book— that Elizabeti, a child herself, would make a good mother someday— all cement the 
book’s commitment to the narrative that little girls the world over aspire to be mothers, 
and that they are naturally suited to the task.

This is a troubling theme to encounter, in part because no other book reviewed in 
my content analysis refuted it. *Raising Dragons*, for example, centers on an unnamed 
young girl’s belief that her destiny is to raise and nurture dragons, a task that she posits
she was born to do. Although much more fanciful in nature than *Elizabeti’s Doll*, the book’s protagonist (nicknamed only “Cupcake”) is shown performing many of the same tasks that Elizabeti and her mother perform throughout the book—feeding her “baby,” a dragon named Hank, caring for and teaching him, and, when Hank reaches adulthood, beginning the cycle all over again with a new set of dragon eggs (p. 2, 13-18, 25).

“Cupcake” is, like Elizabeti, herself a very young girl, and though the book clearly grounds the plot in fantasy rather than reality (at one point, “Cupcake” and Hank travel by themselves to the Island of Dragons, where they meet other mythical creatures), it still emphasizes the themes of caretaking, motherhood, and domesticity that *Elizabeti’s Doll* underscored (p. 23). While the books themselves are only four years apart in publication, they reach to opposite ends of the spectrum of storytelling; *Elizabeti’s Doll* establishes itself very firmly in the lives of women in Tanzania and demonstrates this establishment by depicting everyday cultural activities, such as women balancing jugs atop their heads to transport water, using a traditional kanga wrap to carry children around, and depicting the characters as living in Maasai Huts (p. 16, 20). By contrast, *Raising Dragons* takes place on a modern-day farm, presumably in the American South, and interjects elements of high fantasy and magical realism into the narrative, with “Cupcake” working with Hank to complete her family’s farming tasks in half the time and for double the profit (p. 18, 20). This difference in narrative style compounds the curious intersections of these books, in particular their respective devotions and displays of the concept of motherhood as something that all young girls aspire to and are inherently born with the skills to succeed in.
A notable exception to this pursuit of motherhood, and implicit complicity with traditional gender roles, is *Pecan Pie Baby* (2010), written by Jacqueline Woodson. In this book, Gia, the protagonist, worries that once her mother’s baby arrives, her whole life will change. As it is, the baby is all anyone can seem to talk about, and it bothers Gia because she feels as though she is being pushed to the wayside—by her friends, her aunts, her cousins, and her grandmother, all of whom care only about the arrival of the baby (p. 7-20). In her mother’s preparation for the arrival of the baby, Gia is surrounded by people eager to participate in that experience and eager for Gia herself to automatically assume the role of “big sister”. Gia, however, is resistant to the role forced upon her and takes every opportunity to express it; when her mother remarks to her that the baby’s imminent arrival is “Cool, huh?”, Gia responds with a laconic, “Not very” (p. 4). She expresses exasperation when her classmates ask her if she’s excited to become a big sister, embarrassedly endures friends and family members wheedling that soon she will have a younger sibling to care for, and even refuses to hold her cousin’s baby when it is passed to her (p. 7, 11, 17).

Much of the book is about Gia’s fear that she will slip beneath her mother’s priorities once her sibling arrives and that the comfortable life she and her mother have led—just the two of them—will never be the same after the baby is born (p. 22). The narrative is a tender examination of the bond between a mother and her only child and how the insularity of their relationship is a precious thing to both of them, something they will both miss when the baby is born and permanently introduced to their family dynamic. Gia’s disgust and rejection of the caretaker role that is forced upon her by friends and family, however, is an interesting theme to note, as it marked the first book in
my content analysis that showed a young girl refusing to conform to the traditional gender role of “caretaker” as it is passed on to her. Instead of centering her narrative around the delight Gia might have expressed at the opportunity to become a caretaker for another human being, Woodson instead explores a more realistic, less imposing narrative about the bond between a mother and her child – and how that child delights in, of all things, being cared for, instead of caring for someone else. In this way, the book doesn’t adhere to the enthusiasm and longing for motherhood that *Elizabeti’s Doll* and *Raising Dragons* does, and it interjects an important caesura into the dominating narrative of motherhood and aspiring caretakers that these other books contain.

Motherhood was a dominating theme in many of the other books included in my content analysis, though it was a kind of motherhood markedly different from that espoused by *Raising Dragons* and *Elizabeti’s Doll* in that, instead of straying into the concept of aspirational motherhood, they instead focused on the relationships between mothers and daughters – the aforementioned mother-daughter bond. Two books in particular stood out to me as being important variations on the familiar theme of mother and daughter: *Come On, Rain!* (1999) by Karen Hesse and *I Had a Favorite Dress* (2011) by Boni Ashburn. In *Come On, Rain!*, Tess, the protagonist, spends the day strategically gathering her friends together in anticipation of a large rainstorm. When the storm finally arrives, the four young girls play in the shower together and are eventually joined by their mothers, culminating in a joyful rain-dance between the eight characters (p. 7, 13, 18). Women are the only characters present in the book, and in particular only mothers and daughters are featured; the climax of the book is a bonding moment between three sets of
mothers and daughters, showcasing them as carefree, loving people appreciating the simple gift of rain together (p. 25-26).

*I Had A Favorite Dress*, written twelve years after Karen Hesse’s book, explores a similarly exclusive bond between mother and daughter, similar to the bond explored in *Pecan Pie Baby*. The unnamed protagonist grows out of her favorite article of clothing, a dress, over the course of a year. Initially upset that her dress no longer fits, her mother repurposes the article of clothing into first a shirt, then a tank top, then a scarf, then a pair of socks, and then a hair bow, until finally there is nothing left of the dress to wear (p. 5, 10, 18, 20). The protagonist then, learning from her mother’s lesson to innovate and create instead of becoming upset, uses the leftover scraps of her once-dress to decorate a tote bag, which she can then carry with her wherever she goes (p. 26). The book explores the patience and kindness of the protagonists’ mother, who teaches her daughter that it is best to lean into change and go with the flow instead of melting down about it, and who never once shames her daughter for valuing fashion or caring about what she looks like.

This book is notable, as are *Come On, Rain!* and *Pecan Pie Baby*, for featuring a total absence of a father figure in the protagonists’ life and instead only showing her relationship with, and indeed the very existence of, her mother. Such a structure raises the question of why so many of the children’s books I analyzed, picture books specifically featuring black girls as protagonists, have negated the existence of fathers, but it also highlights a clear value that the authors of these books are trying to impart: That the bond between mothers and daughters is important and that it deserves to be showcased uniquely, without the influence of a male figure of any sort infringing upon the narrative.
Family

Family as a general theme, beyond the realm of motherhood and the exclusive mother-daughter bond, was also frequently explored in many of the books I chose for my content analysis. It was interesting to note that the oldest book I analyzed, 1996’s *Boundless Grace*, was also the book with the most unique, in-depth, and thoughtful analysis of family dynamics among the set. Grace, the protagonist, grapples with her parent’s separation and her father’s absence in her life; when she is invited to visit him in The Gambia, she meets his new family, including a wife and two step-siblings, and struggles to find her place in this new dynamic and culture. In particular, Grace struggles with the traditional structure of a family as presented to her in the books she likes to read—“families had a mother and a father, a boy and a girl, and a dog and a cat”—and must work to identify her own life in this narrative (p. 3). By spending time with her step-family and reconnecting with her father through a shared love of Gambian culture, Grace learns that she must construct her own “narrative” for what a family is, instead of relying on the one taught to her by fairy tales. (p. 18). She grows to accept her two families and the physical distance between herself and her father, while recognizing that there is no one “standard” model for a family dynamic (p. 24). *Boundless Grace* is especially significant because it addresses, head-on, concepts such as divorce, separation, and the “missing father,” a theme that is present in many of the other children’s picture books I analyzed but is rarely discussed or recognized in-text.

Just as Grace derives strength from accepting and recognizing the new narrative that her non-traditional family creates, the protagonists of many other stories I analyzed used their families as a means to gather the love and support they need to surmount their
own obstacles and obtain their own goals. In Dancing in the Wings, it is Sassy’s Uncle Redd who encourages her to take pride in the features that make her different (her height and her large feet), and inspires her to use her differences to stand out during an audition and land a coveted spot in a summer dance program in D.C. It is JoJo’s grandfather who works with her to overcome her nerves about being tested into the next level of her Tae Kwon Do class, as well as her mother and her friend P.J. who give her advice on how to succeed in executing the perfect flying side kick. The unnamed protagonist of Sharon Dennis Wyeth’s Something Beautiful derives inspiration and wisdom from the community around her, including her Aunt Carolyn, her mother, and family friends such as Miss Delphie at the diner, Mr. Lee the grocer, and her neighbor, Mr. Sims, in her search of “something beautiful” in her life. Their various accounts for what that “something beautiful” is— a smooth stone, music, new shoes, a baby, and even the protagonist herself— inspires her to create beauty in her own life, instead of hoping to chance upon it. Carolivia Herron’s Nappy Hair uses the chorus of an entire family, led by the rhythmic narrative of the grandfather, to celebrate and exult in the beauty of Brenda, the protagonists’, exceptionally curly hair. Through the call-and-response format of the narrative, the family composes an ode to Brenda’s “nappy” hair, treating it as an extension of her uniqueness, intelligence, and specialness and endowing her with pride in her appearance. Nappy Hair is also unique in that it briefly discusses the legacy of slavery that impacts many African American families, noting that although “they sold your momma for a nickel... and your daddy for a dime,” the legacy of African American pride and family has been retained through many years and trials, indicating that the
bonds of family are too strong to break, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable struggles.

With the exception of *Raising Dragons* (2002), in which Cupcake’s father plays a large role in the narrative, each of these books has the curious, unifying motif of featuring the total absence of a father figure in the protagonist’s life and instead only showing her relationship with, and indeed the very existence of, her mother and extended family members, such as cousins, aunts, and grandparents. This curious omission of father figures and paternal influences is echoed in eleven of the seventeen books I chose to survey for my content analysis and transcends the previously mentioned theme of mothers and daughters exploring their relationship together; these books include *Elizabeti’s Doll* (1998), *JoJo’s Flying Sidekick* (1998), *Come On, Rain!* (1999), *I Love My Hair!* (2001), *Something Beautiful* (2002), *Dancing in the Wings* (2003), *Precious and the Boo Hag* (2005), *The Chicken-Chasing Queen of Lamar County* (2007), *Pecan Pie Baby* (2010), *I Had a Favorite Dress* (2011), and *The Quickest Kid in Clarksville* (2016). It is important to note that fathers and father figures are absent across the spectrum of years that the books chosen for analysis were written in, from 1998’s *Elizabeti’s Doll* to 2016’s *The Quickest Kid in Clarksville*. Thus, this curious omission, the erasure of fathers from the majority of family-centered narratives, is not relegated to a certain time period, nor is it a theme that has grown or shrunk in stature but has instead remained steady in children’s picture books with black female protagonists throughout the past twenty years. Little explanation for this is given and in fact, it is only in the aforementioned *Boundless Grace*, the oldest book in the selection, that a reason for a
father’s absence in the young girl’s life is given and the impact of that absence explored. Otherwise, the absence of fathers is an egregious blight on many of these books.

_Pecan Pie Baby_, for example, suffers from this lack of fatherhood more than most of the other books. Gia’s mother is pregnant, due to give birth very soon, and amidst a parade of grandmothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins who all enter into the book at various stages (building a crib for the new baby, coming over for tea, going out to dinner, present at Thanksgiving), a father for Gia or the new baby is never mentioned or shown (p. 11-14, 17-20). Similarly, _Something Beautiful_ is a book built on the concept of community and familial support and love; the unnamed protagonist finds strength, perspective, and encouragement from everyone in her neighborhood, from extended family to neighbors to school friends. The book culminates in the protagonist’s mother expressing love for her, and imparting the message that the protagonist, her daughter, is the most precious thing in her life (p. 27). Nowhere in this book about community and familial support is the protagonist’s father or father-figure mentioned or shown. This omission in both _Pecan Pie Baby_ and _Something Beautiful_ is especially egregious compared with _These Hands_, a book in which family is rarely talked about but in which the protagonist’s father is still depicted in one of the illustrations by Bryan Collier, thereby establishing the existence of a paternal figure in the protagonist’s life (p. 9).

In the case of both _Pecan Pie Baby_ and _Something Beautiful_, as in the case with many of the other books lacking in father figures, this lack does not necessarily work to the books’ detriment. Although a father is not mentioned, each protagonist is shown to be supported, loved, and encouraged by her mother all the same, and grows from her care. But it can be argued that the lack of fathers in these books, and the lack of questioning
their absence, might point toward an unfortunate, inadvertent lesson for young readers of these books: That it is normal for a father not to be present, that black girls do not lack for that absence, and that mothers alone are the ultimate caregivers for young children. In fact, whole families, mothers and fathers alike, are only shown in five of the seventeen books chosen for analysis (*Boundless Grace, Nappy Hair, These Hands, Raising Dragons, Thunder Rose*). Though the sample size is small and cannot give a comprehensive overview of the genre of children’s books as a whole, the statistic, even in this small pool, is egregious.

This is not to say that the statistic is entirely inaccurate, however; Thomas, Krampe, and Newton found, in their 2005 study, that 39% of African American children do not live with their biological father, and that a further 25% do not live with any father representative, whether biological or not (p. 536). This same study, however, also found that 76% of non-resident African American fathers visited their children on a weekly, biweekly, or daily basis, and that African American fathers were substantially more likely to be involved in visiting relationships than fathers of other racial and ethnic backgrounds (p. 532). The children’s books examined in this study might be attempting to reflect the reality that many young readers, and especially readers of color, face by depicting a family that is different from the typical “nuclear” family unit displayed in much of Western media, including TV shows, movies, and other children’s picture books. The complete and total absence of father figures in these books however, and especially the lack of in-text discussion regarding this absence, continues to raise questions about the representation of the African American family dynamic in fiction, and whether it is troubling that so many children’s picture books featuring black girls as protagonists omit
the presence of a father figure with seemingly so much ease. Regardless of the role, or lack thereof, of the father in these books, it is important to note that family, in all its iterations, is never once in any of these books shown to be a destructive thing; rather, it is always depicted as a source of support and comfort. This, on the whole, promotes concepts of unity and empowerment to black girls, themes which are themselves depicted frequently and significantly in many of the books chosen for review, independent of the themes of family itself.

*Culture, Heritage, and Divinity*

The culture and heritage of African Americans was another surprisingly prominent theme in many of the books I chose to review for my content analysis. These stories did not shy away from exploring African Americans’ place in contemporary society, nor did they disassociate themselves from the painful history that many African Americans share, and which makes up a significant part of their cultural narrative. For example, many of the books analyzed address the often painful history of African Americans in the U.S. Several, such as *Thunder Rose* and *Nappy Hair*, make explicit references to slavery and the enslaved state of the generations preceding the book’s protagonist. Several other books (*Boundless Grace, Nappy Hair, Elizabeti’s Doll*) discuss various African nations and the protagonists’ deep ties to such places; *Elizabeti’s Doll* takes place entirely in Tanzania, for example, while *Boundless Grace* explores Grace’s culture shock and eventual acclimation to The Gambia as the country where her father now lives, and which she herself comes to identify as a second home.
Explorations of race, nationality, and origin are not made lightly or conventionally in these books. Instead of using the history of slavery in a heroine’s family as a means to pigeonhole the protagonist into a familiar, one-dimensional role, as “former slave” or “discriminated African American,” these books instead use these themes as a means to explore the concept of culture and heritage and how they work to empower the protagonist, instead of victimizing them or stripping them of agency. Just as often, there is a curious theme of divinity, and in particular the idea of African Americans as a divinely blessed race of people, that coincides with the themes of heritage and culture in several of these books. This divinity manifests in interesting ways and lends a weight to each narrative that works in unison with the themes of empowerment previously discussed.

*Nappy Hair* (1998) displays this theme most explicitly by way of the narrative styling used to tell the story. Structured as a call-and-response vocal narrative (itself a cultural tradition in African American music), *Nappy Hair* tells the story of a young girl attending a family picnic, wherein her uncle voices his amazement and admiration for her tightly curled, “nappy” head of hair, with the voices of the rest of her family acting as a lyrical chorus to his commentary (Boone, 2003, p. 212-214). The uncle exclaims over Brenda, the protagonist’s, “willful” head of hair, comparing brushing it to “crunching through snow” and exclaiming that each strand on her head contains “eight complete circles per inch” (p. 9, 14). His aim in proclaiming this narrative isn’t to shame Brenda, but to empower her; he argues that her hair was “an act of God that came straight through Africa,” a gift bestowed upon her because a Divine creator wanted the presence of nappy hair on His earth (p. 21). The uncle then goes on to state that Brenda’s hair, willful as it
is, originated way back with the family’s ancestors in Africa and endured the cruelty of the slave trade, all to manifest on Brenda’s head, now a free child born to a free black family in contemporary America (p. 22).

The story is inextricably tied up with the concept of black excellence and empowerment, as while Brenda’s uncle is proclaiming over the God-given beauty of her hair, he also notes that she is smart and well-spoken, “the only one in her school [who] knows how to talk right” (p. 10). While her family, acting as a unified chorus in their response to her uncle’s narrative, initially argues that Brenda has been subjected to a curse, an “innocent child” forced to bear nappy hair by God’s inexplicable will, her uncle maintains that Brenda’s hair is a gift from God, that He “wanted hisself some nappy hair on the face of the earth” (p. 12, 14). With this divinely-inspired narrative, Nappy Hair draws on both themes of family and African American culture to assert that the natural hair many black girls possess (and which is frequently denigrated by the media as being “unattractive” or “unprofessional”) is a gift from a Divine Creator, a conscious choice that God made, specific to black culture and heritage, that has endured hardship and struggle and should be viewed as a miracle (Patton, 2006, p. 26).

Similarly, Precious and the Boo Hag (2005) pays direct homage to the Gullah culture by incorporating the concept of the Boo Hag, a mythical creature similar to a vampire, into the story (Zepke, 2009, p. 152-153). Precious, left home alone sick for the day, must keep her wits and courage about her as she attempts to outsmart a Boo Hag named Pruella, which is attempting to get into her house. Pruella takes various shapes in its attempt to gain entry, including that of a neighbor woman, her friend Addie Louise, and even a penny, but is always foiled by some obvious mistake it makes in its disguise—
featuring George Washington on the front of the penny instead of Lincoln, for example (p. 15, 19, 26). Precious takes note of each of these mistakes and exploits the Boo Hag’s weaknesses, such as its dislike of clean water and its inability to enter Precious’ house unless invited inside, to outsmart Pruella and keep her at bay; each time she wins an encounter with the Boo Hag, she repeats the mantra: “Pruella is a Boo Hag—she’s right outside my window. She’s tricky and she’s scary, but I didn’t let her in!” (p. 17-18).

That Patricia McKissack and Onawumi Jean Moss incorporate Gullah culture into a children’s picture book is significant, not least of all because the Gullah are one of the least recognized geographic groups in the United States; many are direct descendents of Central and West African people brought to the U.S. as slaves, as Gullah culture originated on isolated plantations in the Lowcountry regions of the American South (Jarrett et al., 2002, p. 23). The book makes no overt reference to the Gullah culture or people other than the use of the Boo Hag mythology, and, in keeping with the fairy tale structure of the narrative, the setting and time period of the story are kept intentionally vague. Precious’ mother and siblings work on a farm and Precious must be left home alone because it is the height of planting season and all hands are needed on the field. It is unclear whether Precious and her family are free farm workers or slaves on a plantation, as no overt references to slavery are made in the book. Furthermore, Precious and her family speak in an African American vernacular, evidenced by the use of phrases such as “aine,” “less’n”, and “young’un” (p. 3, 6, 17). The book, then, pays implicit homage to both Gullah culture and the more broadly defined African American culture of the Southeastern United States, as no references to Sea Island Creole, the traditionally spoken Gullah language, is made in the book (Jarrett et al., 2002, p. 20). Nevertheless, this
representation is important and, in a way, revolutionary; few other books reviewed in my content analysis paid such overt homage to African American culture, much less explored niche and potentially frightening components of sub-cultures unfamiliar to large swaths of the public. By being willing to show a protagonist as steadfast and clever as Precious in an explicitly African American cultural light, in a story hugely influenced by Gullah culture, the book breaks ground in a way that the other books explored in this content analysis do not.

Jerdine Nolen’s *Thunder Rose* (2007) works on the opposite end of the spectrum to McKissack and Moss’ *Precious and the Boo Hag*, in that instead of grounding its story in original African American cultural tropes, it chooses to introduce black characters into a traditionally white American narrative— and then proceeds to take ownership of that narrative. *Thunder Rose* follows the birth and later exploits of a young black girl cast in the mold of a mythic folk hero, born with the ability to speak— minutes after her birth, she tells her astonished parents that she’s “right partial to the name Rose”— and wrestle thunder and lightning into submission (p. 4). Rose grows in strength and capability as she ages, becoming an accomplished metalworker, cow wrangler, and vigilante dispensing frontier justice to small-time desperados on the open plains (p. 8-18). Rose’s significance as a character— her cool-headed self-assurance, her impossibly long list of accomplishments, and her young age— is tied up in both her status as a folk hero of the American Wild West and in her race as an African American. The narration explicitly states, in the book’s opening lines, that Rose is “the first child born free and easy” to her parents, implying that she is descended directly from formerly enslaved black Americans (p. 1).
The author’s note at the book’s beginning sheds further light on this, as Nolen clarifies that many Africans who had been treated as slaves had fled the Southeast after the Civil War and settled much of the land in the American Old West themselves, taking the opportunity to live free in these wide-open spaces. Thunder Rose herself is the extrapolation of the author’s desire to “construct a tale out of love and joy, one told from the perspective of that ‘fortunate feeling’” that, Nolen states, persist in so many black Americans, and which is not often present in black folktales (author’s note). In this way, Nolen, supported by the striking visuals of Kadir Nelson’s illustrations, adapts a form of storytelling most often used to tell the tale of pioneering white Americans to lift up and support black Americans instead. It becomes all the more significant, then, that a young black girl is the protagonist at the heart of this adaptive storytelling, as Thunder Rose represents the resiliency, innovation, and good fortune, similar almost to the divine endowment discussed in Nappy Hair, of black Americans, and of the “fortunate feeling” emblematic of their cultural narrative.

Conclusion

This study attempted to examine whether the depiction of black girls in children’s picture books had changed at all over the past twenty years, and whether that evolution, if it had occurred, had resulted in a more nuanced, diverse, and non-stereotypical representation of this demographic. Seventeen children’s picture books featuring black girls as the main protagonist, published in the twenty-year period between 1996 and 2016, were chosen, and a qualitative content analysis revealed that several unifying themes appeared in each one. Some of these themes spoke to the empowerment of the
black girls who served as protagonists of these books, whereas others placed great emphasis on motherhood and the relationships between mothers and daughters; other themes communicated in this selection of books included the concept of culture, heritage, and divinity, as well as the pride that African Americans and black Americans take in their racial identity and history. Overall, the themes depicted in these books, and the consistency with which they appeared across the twenty-year spectrum that this study covers, speak to both the positive representation of black girls in children’s picture books and the stability with which these books have maintained those positive representations.

Based on the findings described in this study, I can conclude that the depiction of black girls in children’s picture books has not changed very much in the past twenty years, and that this is not a detriment. It is encouraging to note that the genre has been relatively nuanced, diverse, and non-stereotypical more or less consistently over the past twenty years. In some cases, the themes which have been noted and discussed are presented in more complex and nuanced ways in the older books than they are in more recent reads, as evidenced by, as an example, *Boundless Grace’s* (1996) willingness to tackle issues of divorce, separation, and nontraditional families more readily than more recent books, such as *Pecan Pie Baby* (2010).

The sample size of books selected for my study was much too small to allow me to make a definitive statement about the state of representation of black girls in children’s picture books—whether it is climbing in numbers, plateauing, or subsiding. Similarly, I cannot speak to the accessibility of these books, or the “search” as described by Macbeth (2005), wherein he asserts that multicultural children’s literature is more difficult to find, and the results more unsatisfying when found, than children’s literature featuring white
protagonists. Though my own search was relatively comprehensive and included various methods, such as searching through databases, consulting a librarian for references, and a form of footnote-chasing performed through title read-alike services, I encountered occasional difficulties in finding titles that fit the subject, time period, and scope of my criteria. Book lists, search results, and suggestions needed to be carefully parsed through to find titles that fit the description of my study perfectly, a description composed of only a few requirements: That the book be a children’s picture book, that it had been published in the last twenty years, and that it featured a black girl as the protagonist. I found seventeen books that fit this description satisfactorily and discarded many other potential reads because they lacked in either one of two crucial departments— that they were outside the bounds of the time period, or, more often than not, that they didn’t feature a black girl as the main character.

The lack of availability of titles representing this specific demographic was discouraging and falls in line with much of what the research on this topic said. The themes my selected books presented, however, and the consistency with which those themes prevailed over the twenty-year time period that this study spanned, were not. These children’s picture books offered crucial definition to the identity of young black girls, giving them identities that varied from ballerinas to cowgirls, from reluctant big sisters to aspiring mothers, and from athletes to artists. Though the pervasiveness of some of these identities was slightly troubling at times (in particular, the aforementioned theme of caretaker roles being assumed only by women, and subsequently strived toward and mimicked by young girls), their overall variety and consistency was impressive. No one “script” was prescribed to the characters in these books; their interactions with their
families were almost unanimously loving yet complex, their exposure to black culture and heritage was always framed in a positive light, and their aspirations and goals were always supported by others, and eventually achieved. As such, these books contribute positively to the potential identity formation of young readers, and in particular black girls who bear similarities to the protagonists featured in these books. Furthermore, these books worked to meet Roethler’s (1998) expectations that valuable literature aimed at children of color is something that will model to children how to deal with problems in their lives, and in which they can find themselves, their families, and their culture reflected.

The literature I reviewed prior to beginning my study brought up several concerns regarding the depiction of young girls, and in particular black girls. French (2012) notes that there has long been a “sexual script” prescribed to black women, and that this script carries over to the portrayal of black girls in children’s books—a depiction wholly damaging because it is, in some ways, instructive and can affect how black girls formulate their own burgeoning identities. While there was no “sexual script” identified in the themes and storylines presented by the selected seventeen books I reviewed, there was a hint of conformity to traditional gender roles. Several books discussed and demonstrated the concept of motherhood, and in particular motherhood as it relates to young black girls; books where fathers were absent were numerous, and more than one book depicted the female protagonist as harboring aspirations and inclinations toward motherhood, despite being a child herself. While many other books sought to explore the close relationships between mothers and daughters, and thus bring greater representation to both female characters and female-centric relationships (both topics that are often
severely underrepresented in contemporary media), the theme of aspirational motherhood, caretaking, and the traditional gender structure that is often supported by these themes (with a mother always present as a caretaker and a father’s absence going unremarked) were undeniably present and linked.

One major way in which the themes identified in the selected books differed from the issues discussed in the literature concerns the concept of empowerment. Though Taxel notes that essentialism is inherent in portraying black girls as strong and empowered characters within a fictional medium, meaning that many authors tend to rely upon characteristics such as being outspoken and brash to represent a black girl as being empowered, this was rarely found to be the case within the actual books reviewed. Young girls sought and achieved empowerment through their actions and interactions with other people more often than through their words or attitudes: JoJo conquers her fears by channeling her anxieties into action, helped by the advice of her family and friends, in JoJo’s Flying Side Kick; Atla learns to work with her rival, Charmaine, to attain her goal of becoming the fastest runner in her town in The Quickest Kid in Clarksville; and the protagonists of Nappy Hair, I Love My Hair!, and Big Hair, Don’t Care each discover an appreciation for, and take confidence in, their natural hair with the help and encouragement of their families. Empowerment was also found to have a direct tie with the other prominent theme of culture, heritage, and divinity, as many of the protagonists in these books (including Nappy Hair, These Hands, Something Beautiful, and Thunder Rose) are taught to take pride in their heritage as black Americans and use that pride to accomplish their respective goals.
Dancing in the Wings, of all the books reviewed, comes precariously close to conforming to Taxel’s fears of essentialism in the depiction of a black girl as “empowered.” The protagonist, Sassy, is so named because she “always has something to say” (p. 2). She is often depicted by illustrator Kadir Nelson with her hands on her hips, a pose that evokes both an attitude of toughness, as well as the stereotype of the “sassy black woman,” an evocation only strengthened by Sassy’s name (Stevens, 2002, p. 6). However, Dancing in the Wings imparts to the reader that Sassy’s smart-aleck attitude and quick comments do her no favors, and that her ability to put in hard work to attain her dreams of being accepted into the summer dance program is what ultimately causes her to succeed. In this way, empowerment is explored as a nuanced, many-sided theme in these books, a trait that is derived from both confidence, action, thought, and support, instead of attitude alone. These books largely avoid the pitfalls of children’s literature described by Taxel and French by successfully depicting black girlhood as a diverse experience, full of differences in attitude, wants and needs, and circumstances, but always essentially positive. Young girls in these books are taught to dream, achieve, and explore and are largely defined, not by their adherence to familiar tropes or stereotypes, but by their individuality as characters.

The books examined in this study reveal an encouraging truth about the state of children’s literature written about black girls. The relative stability of both the depiction of this demographic within the realm of children’s picture books and the themes that such books espouse reveal that, far from wavering in the quality of their content over the past twenty years, this genre has held steady in purporting a nuanced, diverse, and non-stereotypical portrayal of this particular demographic. Overarching themes, such as
empowerment, the bonds of family, and in particular the influence of mothers, and the celebration of African and black American culture and heritage, were present in each narrative examined, indicating that while there has been no progressive leap in the depiction of black girls in the past twenty years, neither has there been a lapse. Nevertheless, if black girls as a demographic are to achieve equal representation with their white peers in literature, further narratives depicting them as protagonists must be written, published, and promoted. Furthermore, their depiction must remain as multifaceted, diverse, and nuanced as it has been for the past twenty years, staying clear of harmful stereotypes while also striving to capture the great complexity, and distinct perspectives, of black girlhood in all of its many forms. Finally, it is important that the depiction of black girls in children’s picture books continues to evolve; if it doesn’t, it runs the risk of stagnating and quickly becoming irrelevant, as the lived experiences of black girls comes to outpace the perspective that writers choose to represent in fiction. Children’s picture books with black female protagonists are, narratively speaking, in a good place right now. Their challenge now is to continue to achieve such nuance and complexity in the years to come.
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Appendix A: Book Summaries


Elizabeti’s mother has just had a baby and Elizabeti finds herself fascinated with her mother’s responsibilities in caring for her brother. She adopts a rock, which she names “Eva,” and cares for it just as her mother cares for her new sibling—washing it, feeding it, and carrying it with her as she completes her daily chores around her village in Tanzania. One day, Elizabeti sets “Eva” down for a nap and misplaces her; she and her mother search the village high and low for some sign of “Eva,” but are unable to find her. Fearing that she has been lost forever, Elizabeti mourns for “Eva.” While tending to the cooking later that night, she discovers that someone has placed “Eva” in the fire pit among the other rocks. Elizabeti and her mother rescue “Eva,” and the two are reunited. Later that night, her mother tucks Elizabeti and “Eva” in and muses that Elizabeti will make a good mother herself someday.


Brenda attends a picnic with her extended family, where her grandfather composes a lively ode celebrating her natural, “nappy” hair. He narrates, with the call-and-response input of the rest of her family, how Brenda’s hair makes her unique and how it is a signifier of both God’s wishes to see natural black hair on the face of the earth, as well as the resilience and natural beauty of the African American people.


JoJo, a Tae Kwon Do student, is given the opportunity by her instructor to move up from her white belt class into the yellow belt level. In order to pass her exam, however, she must break a plank of wood in two by executing a perfect flying side kick. Nervous about the examination, JoJo receives advice from her Grandaddy, a former boxer who tells her to move with intention, her friend P.J., who tells her to have confidence in her movements, and her mother, a tennis player, who encourages her to visualize her movements before she executes them. JoJo struggles to sleep the night before the exam, as she keeps catching sight of the scary tree outside of her house, which she imagines looks like a bandit. The next morning, during her examination, JoJo takes the advice given to her; she visualizes the plank of wood as the tree outside of her house and executes a perfect flying side kick that snaps the plank in two. She passes her exam and successfully moves up to the next level of Tae Kwon Do. JoJo then returns home and swings from the tree outside of her house, having now conquered her fears.

A poetic, rhyming narrative describes the many things a young girl can accomplish with her hands alone. The book describes the protagonist’s capability to perform actions, such as fly a kite, open a book, shake maracas, help, and create, and accompanies the text with tender, colorful illustrations of a young girl performing these activities and interacting with her family.


Tess spends the day strategically gathering her friends together in anticipation of a large rainstorm. When the deluge finally comes down, the four young girls dance and play outside in the shower together. They are soon joined by their mothers and the narrative culminates in a joyful rain-dance between the eight characters, four sets of mothers and daughters each.


This story addresses the concept of divorce, separation, and nontraditional family structures. Grace grapples with her parents’ separation and her father's absence in her life. When she goes to visit him in The Gambia, she meets his new family, including a wife and two step-siblings, and struggles to find her place in this new dynamic. Grace is greatly influenced by fairy tales and struggles to see her own family structure reflected in these narratives, where fathers always stay with their daughters. Grace's Nana encourages Grace to make her own narrative concerning her family, instead of relying on the ones supplied by the fairy tales she reads. Grace learns to accept her two families and her father’s physical distance in his new home in The Gambia; Grace also learns to accept that her family narrative will continue to change and grow in the coming years, but that this is not a bad thing.


Keyana, a young girl, narrates how she came to love her natural hair by discovering its versatility, history, and beauty, and becomes proud of it, despite the difficulty her mother sometimes faces in combing it and the occasional teasing she receives from her classmates. Keyana also learns to associate the care of her hair with her mother's attention and love, as well as the support of her teachers, and, eventually, the knowledge of African American cultural history and expression through the various styles in which her hair can be worn, such as braids, cornrows, and afros.

"Cupcake," a young girl growing up on her parent’s farm, knows that her true calling is to raise dragons; she pursues this career tenaciously, raising her first dragon, Hank, in secret from her parents, despite their disapproval. Hank's growth allows her to live beyond the boundaries of her ordinary world; she flies above her farm, helps to grow crops at two times the normal rate, and even flies across the ocean to return Hank home to Dragon Island. “Cupcake” eventually wins the approval of her parents and returns to their farm to find new dragon eggs waiting for her, ready to be raised by her capable hands.


A young girl living in a rough New York City neighborhood learns about the concept of “beauty” in class one day, and seeks to find “something beautiful” that she can admire and take pride in. She learns from various members of her community— from classmates, to diner waitresses, to grocery stand owners, to extended members of her family— what they each consider to be “something beautiful.” This list includes everything from a perfectly-made fish sandwich, to a jump rope, to a nicely arranged produce stand, to a newborn baby. The protagonist then returns home and reflects on the varied definitions of “beauty” that have been presented to her. She decides to clean the trash from her yard and scrub the graffiti from her front door, actions which help her to create her own definition of beautiful. When her mother returns home that evening, she tells the protagonist that she is her “something beautiful.”


Sassy laments her big feet and long legs, which she worries are holding her back from being a ballerina. She can't partner with anyone due to her height and stands head and shoulders above the other girls, so she also can't dance in the corps de ballet. However, after talking to her Uncle Redd, who encourages her to view her differences as her strengths, she comes to embrace her unique features and uses them to land a coveted spot in a summer dance program in Washington, D.C. However, Sassy also learns that she doesn't need to show off to be noticed; wearing a yellow leotard to her audition makes her stand out for the wrong reasons, and her smart comebacks cause her more problems than solutions.

Precious, a young girl left at home for the day with a stomachache, is given strict instructions by her mother not to let anything or anyone inside the house. However, Precious soon encounters a malevolent entity known as a “Boo Hag,” which attempts to gain entry into her house by using various disguises to trick Precious into letting her inside. Precious spends the book evading Pruella the Boo Hag’s attempts to fool her and emerges triumphant from their encounter, though Pruella still waits outside, attempting to find a way in.


A young girl delights in catching the chickens kept on her family’s farm, and she aims to catch one beautiful chicken (Miss Hen) in particular. She pursues this sport by being clever, stealthy, and quick-witted; she also does so against her mother (Big Mama’s) wishes. However, upon learning that Miss Hen is also a mother, she learns that observing the chickens, and eventually teaching them useful tricks, is more satisfying than catching them. Retiring from her chicken-chasing days, she decides to help watch over the newborn chicks instead and becomes the unofficial guardian of the chicken coup.


Thunder Rose is the epitome of a tall tale hero of the American West, built along the same mold as Paul Bunyan. She can talk from the moment of her birth, communes with thunder and lightning, can lift full grown cows over her head and wrestle with cattle, is an expert blacksmith, and even catches a band of outlaws. However, it is during her ultimate test against a tornado near the end of the book that she learns that strength and willpower are not what is going to save her, but compassion, creativity, and the culture of her own people; she sings the storm down from a tempest to a rain-shower with a traditional African American folk ballad once sung to her by her parents. As such, Thunder Rose demonstrates that, although she is an anomaly, she is also still the product of hundreds of years of African American culture, familial ties, and strength.


Gia worries that, once her mother's baby arrives, her whole life is going to change. As it is, the baby is all anyone can seem to talk about and it bothers Gia because
she feels like she is being pushed to the wayside—by her friends, her aunts, her cousins, and her grandmother, all of whom care only about the arrival of the baby. Her mother, however, takes care to tell her that she too will miss the exclusive life that she and Gia led before the arrival of the baby, and helps Gia to realize that a new phase of their life is beginning— and that this isn't necessarily a bad thing. In the end, Gia comes to accept the baby's arrival and helps her mother prepare for the new addition to their little family.


As the year passes, the narrator’s favorite dress goes through a series of creative changes, from dress to shirt to tank top to scarf and so on, until all that’s left of it is scraps for a bag that the protagonist can carry with her always. Assisted by her patient and crafty mama, the narrator finds that when disaster strikes her favorite things, it is best to find a creative solution to the problem, instead of melting down about it. Structured around the days of the week, the story is also illustrated to show the passing of the seasons, a perfect complement to the themes of growing older and keeping hold (and letting go) of special mementos.


Lola’s hair is very big, much bigger than the hair of the other kids at her school. Despite her hair blocking the view of anyone that dares sit behind her and causing her to lose at hide and seek, she sings its praises throughout this simple, rhyming narrative—including the many unique styles she can wear it in.


Alta aspires to be the fastest runner in Clarksville, Tennessee—the successor to Wilma Rudolph, three time gold medalist in the 1960 Olympics and Clarksville native. She practices ceaselessly, despite her lack of resources (including new running shoes) and endeavors to retain her record when Charmaine, a new girl with new shoes, challenges her to a race to find out who among them is the fastest. However, Alta and Charmaine soon overcome their differences and work together to get Atla’s home-made banner to the Wilma Rudolph parade on time. They realize that there's room enough for both of them to be the fastest runner in Clarksville and that in fact they are stronger together as a united front than as enemies. Alta derives inspiration from Wilma Rudolph—including using her name as a kind of motivational chant—and reminds herself that Rudolph also grew up in poverty in Clarksville and still managed to succeed.