

Tracing Terror, Imagining Otherwise: A Critical Content Analysis of Antiracist Violence in Middle Grade Novels

Desiree W. Cueto

University of Arizona

Wanda M. Brooks

Temple University

This research offers a critical content analysis of three middle grade novels that is substantiated by key concepts within Afro-pessimism, Black critical theory, and Black futurity. Through this framing, we examine significant historic and sociopolitical moments reflected in the novels when Black preteen protagonists are forced to confront racialized violence. Across the set of novels, we outline a distinct pattern of antiracism—one that chronicles the incomplete nature of emancipation that continuously haunts Black lives in the United States (Hartman & Wilderson, 2003). Yet, at the same time, we consider how the novels connect the past, present, and future by reflecting how Black girls across time and location have imagined alternative ways forward.

I couldn't think why I was so broken up about a man I had met just the day before, a man who sang a little and chatted with us a little and was gone inside half an hour. Ivory was just a traveling worker with a sweet voice. But he was dead, and he wasn't coming back. I kept sobbing, and Zora kept saying, "I know, I know."

—Bond and Simon, 2011, p. 61

A gradual accumulation of middle grade novels that chronicle the experiences of Black girls who live through racially motivated violence directed toward members of their communities has emerged over the past decade. Carrie (the narrator in the excerpt above) expresses her visceral reaction to this violence in our opening quote. Carrie, Delphine, and Shayla are three preteen protagonists portrayed in the following middle grade books: *Zora and Me* (Bond & Simon, 2011), *One Crazy Summer* (Williams-Garcia, 2010), and *A Good Kind of Trouble* (Ramée, 2019). Although their stories take place across varied geographical regions and within distinct time periods—Reconstruction / Jim Crow, the civil rights movement / the Black power movement, and the present day / #BlackLivesMatter—a key turning point in each novel involves the protagonist struggling to come to terms with the unprovoked murder of a Black community member at the hands of either a white civilian or a white police officer. While in reality, Black men, women, and children

have been victims of racialized killings (consider #SayHerName), the books in this text collection focus on incidents involving violent acts against Black men and boys. To date, no middle grade novels have centered on the murder of Black girls. The girls and most women depicted in the books are portrayed as less likely to be targeted than their male counterparts; nonetheless, these spectacles of violence mark a metaphorical location that represents the ways in which race and gender merge to create life circumstances that are far different from those experienced by girls of other races (Crenshaw, 1991).

Carrie's introductory words provide a powerful example of the lived experiences that contextualize Black girls' social milieu. Yet, as a 2010 *Kirkus* review of *Zora and Me* reported, "The brilliance of this novel is its rendering of Black childhood during the Jim Crow era as a time of wonder and imagination, while also attending to its harsh realities" (2010, para. 1). This statement underscores the role African American children's literature plays in forecasting a future that is vastly different from the past or present. In what follows, we describe a critical content analysis that answers the following research question: How do the three middle grade focal novels reflect and actualize the experiences of Black girls affected by antiblack violence?

Conceptual Framework

We conceptualized this research through the groundbreaking perspectives and epistemologies of Black scholars, writers, and artists. Since our methodology is critical content analysis, which is based in the use of critical theory to think about the data, we highlight critical scholarship on antiblackness (Dumas & ross, 2016; Hartman, 2008, 2010; Wilderson, 2010) and Black futurity (Campt, 2017; Marable, 2006). At the same time, our analysis derives from narrative forms and stories that foreground Black lived experiences and ways of knowing (Bishop, 2007; McNair, 2018; Thomas, 2020).

Antiblackness (Situated within Afro-pessimism and Black Critical Theory)

Critical literature within Afro-pessimism and Black critical theory (BlackCrit) situates historical and ongoing antiblackness on the forward trajectory from slavery. Starting with forced migration through the Middle Passage, the Black body was constructed as nonhuman and therefore rendered to 250 years of legalized chattel slavery (Wilderson, 2010). Core tenets of Afro-pessimism center on the "position of the unthought" that Black people continue to occupy in slavery's "after life," (Hartman, 2008; Hartman & Wilderson, 2003). Afro-pessimism thus speaks to how the structure of antiblackness is constitutive and irresolvable, offering insights into how acts of gratuitous violence meted out on Black bodies are supported and even fueled by our current racialized social system.

Advancing BlackCrit as a lens within education, Dumas and ross (2016) point to the significance of examining the depth and scope of antiblackness in the United States, including how "Black bodies become marginalized, disregarded

and disdained” (p. 417). Taking up this call, this study not only examines the period-specific iterations of racial violence depicted in the novels, but also seeks to explicate the endurance of antiblackness across time and geographic location.

Black Futurity (Situated within Living Black History)

Regardless of the subject matter, a critical function of children’s literature, and Black children’s literature specifically, is to offer hope that something better is possible (Bishop, 2007). In identifying hope and imagination in middle grade novels, this research relies on Camp’s (2017) vision of Black futurity. Using photographic archives of Black subjects in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries as the basis of her research, Camp focuses on how the images convey diasporic practices of refusal and futurity. Concisely, she seeks to understand the subjects’ aspirations and how they might have imagined the future they wanted to see. Veering from notions that center on technological advancement, the supernatural, or utopianism, Camp considers Black futurity in grammatical terms related to the future real conditional tense, or that which has not yet occurred but must happen. Based on this conception, refusal is intimately tied to futurity. According to Camp, it is the practice of refusal that allows Black people to face dire circumstances and yet continue to expect a better tomorrow. She emphasizes that refusal and expectation do not come from a place of naivety, but rather out of the strength developed from survival, and from the ability “to see possibility in the tiny, often minuscule chinks and crevices of what appears to be the inescapable web of capture” (Camp, 2017, p. 33).

Part of what makes Camp’s work on futurity useful is that it involves grappling with the horrific past and present, while also taking into account how Black people have imagined and even lived out a future beyond the restricted horizon. Relatedly, Marable (2006) advances the idea that for Black people, “the past is not simply a prologue; it is indelibly part of the fabric of our collective destiny” (p. 14). He presents the concept of *living Black history* as a way to challenge and disrupt antiblackness, and also to shape the future. Yet Marable contends that the Black past, including both the atrocities suffered by Black people and stories of perseverance, has been obliterated in an effort to preserve white hegemony. Therefore, unearthing, reclaiming, and reconstructing historical narratives becomes the work that makes Black futures (and all futures) possible.

Review of Related Literature

The examples of young Black protagonists discussed throughout this study are products of writers who have a critical understanding of how race and gender have been written upon the bodies of Black women and girls. Literary criticism that centers on the representations and perspectives of Black girls in middle grade novels remains scant in the field, however (Hinton & Branyon, 2017). Gaping holes also exist in current research that documents, interrogates, and disrupts issues related to contemporary antiblackness and antiblack violence (Gardner, 2020). We are not aware of any textual analysis studies about middle grades novels featuring

Black girls and their experiences and perceptions of antiblackness such as the one described herein. Consequently, our research builds upon and complements the extant literature described below.

Hinton-Johnson's (2005) research stands out as one of the earliest to explore Black teenage girls in young adult novels written by Black women. Her content analysis uncovers beauty aesthetics and standards in four contemporary texts. This study illustrates the benefits of relying on critical theories like Black feminism (Collins, 2000) to support the textual analysis. Likewise, Boston and Baxley (2007) and Rountree (2008) carried out similar inquiries of middle grade and young adult novels written by Black women and about Black teenage girl protagonists to consider what ideas, depictions, and messages reoccur in these stories. In Boston and Baxley's (2007) research, the following themes emerged: "identity, significance of race, ideas of feminism and womanism, and academic achievement" (p. 571).

Building on this research, Brooks et al. (2010) explored the heterogeneity of Black girl representations found in middle grades and young adult novels. Like prior studies, the authors included feminism as a theoretical frame, but their research also relied on an identity development lens to explain the protagonists' identity formations across the narratives. Brooks and Cueto (2018) completed a critical content analysis of depictions of Black adolescent girls in four young adult novels. In this study, (informed by postcolonial and youth theoretical lenses), the geographic settings encompassed the United States as well as England, Ghana, and the Dominican Republic. More recently, Henderson's (2019) research explored author Rita Williams Garcia's *One Crazy Summer* trilogy to consider the ways racism and sexism were taken up and likely understood by her youth readership. Henderson also pulled from Black feminism to illustrate how the Black adolescent female protagonists are affected by the "exploitation of labor, denial of political rights, and perpetuation of stereotypical imagery" (2019, p. 435).

While many of the studies described above address realistic narratives, Thomas's (2019) and Toliver's (2019, 2021) inquiries into Black girlhood and its literary representation occur in genres that are not as well studied. Thomas (2019) puts forward a significant literary critique of Black girl depictions through the construct of the "dark fantastic" (p. 12) and the critical race storytelling method, examining children's and young adult speculative fiction written by white authors. In Toliver's (2019) research, consisting of Afro-futuristic adolescent books written by Nnedi Okorafor, she argues that representations of Black girls can avoid preconceived binaries (such as respectability versus ratchetness) that limit rather than expand the ways in which youth exist and imagine themselves in the world. Finally, in a related study, Toliver (2021) depends on an Afro-futuristic theoretical lens to carry out an investigation of three speculative fiction novels. Her findings emphasize that

through these texts, the authors construct a physical and symbolic space where they can explore Black girl identities, digging behind societal ideas about what it means to be Black and female and creating room for Black women and girls to define their own existence in numerous and nuanced ways. (p. 2)

Methodology

The following research question guided our study: How do the three middle grade focal novels reflect and actualize the experiences of Black girls affected by antiblack violence? We employed critical content analysis (CCA) as a methodological approach. CCA is rooted in qualitative content analysis, which involves a close reading of a small amount of textual matter. However, researchers engaged in CCA adopt a critical stance to focus on locating power in social practices to understand, uncover, and transform conditions of inequity embedded in society. Hence, the critical lens is prioritized as the frame for the study, not just to interpret the findings, but to think with theory throughout the entire research process. The researcher engages deeply with that theory so that it becomes a lens for thinking about every aspect of the research (Johnson et al., 2017). Our study is grounded in the sociohistorical context and Black lived experiences as well as critical scholarship from Afro-pessimism and Black critical theory.

Relying on processes outlined within CCA, we selected frameworks, developed our research question, and analyzed three novels that reflected the lived experiences of Black girls during different historical times in the United States. This approach enabled us to carry out a critical reading that is evidenced through the rhetorical and narrative elements identified in the novels. Collectively, these novels constituted our study sample.

Data Sources

Antiblack violence is an expansive topic that cannot be fully explored within the scope of a single project. Confronted with the necessity of downsizing the scope of this research to engage in a comprehensive critical content analysis, we chose to focus this study specifically on middle grade novels that depict the experiences of Black girls affected by antiblack violence. As a result, noteworthy contributions to middle grade literature that involve police brutality and feature a male protagonist, such as *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes (2018) and *I Am Alfonso Jones* by Tony Medina (2017), were not included. Likewise, young adult literature that centers on older protagonists—such as *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017), *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone (2017), and *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely (2015)—was eliminated from consideration.

Our analysis centers on significant historic and sociopolitical moments reflected in middle grade novels when Black preteen protagonists are forced to confront racialized violence. To examine this, we selected first-person narrative texts that span from the twentieth century to the twenty-first century. Our intention was to engage with the books as a set of three, paying close attention to how the books might collectively reveal patterns that can be linked to the historic trauma of slavery. At the same time, we sought to understand how the novels connect the past, present, and future through portrayals of Black girls across time and location who imagine alternative ways forward.

Each of the novels selected for this research are of high literary quality, as indicated by the numerous accolades and awards bestowed on their authors. While

acknowledging the different aims of Black children's literature (intentionally defined herein as books by and about Black people), Bishop (2007) argues that a thread of commonality exists because "the creators of Black children's literature all share the experience of being members of a society in which race matters a great deal more than it should" (p. xii). As a result, the writers in our study rely on fiction as a form of activism—to frame and challenge the persistence of racial injustice for young readers in a country that has constructed these identities as nonhuman. Below, we have provided a brief plot description of the novels in the text set.

- *In Zora and Me* (Bond & Simon, 2011), a work of historical fiction set in the 1900s Jim Crow era, Carrie and her best friend, the young Zora Neal Hurston, work to uncover a murder mystery in their beloved Eatonville community. During the process, they encounter racialized truths, including the fact that the color of a person's skin could make them "fit to die." Once they discover who was murdered and why, they are forced to confront what they must do with this knowledge.
- *One Crazy Summer* (Williams-Garcia, 2010) is a historical fiction novel that depicts the types of communal resistance to 1960s racism that were enacted by members of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Three sisters, Delphine (11), Vonetta (9), and Fern (7), are sent by their father to Oakland, California, to spend the summer with their mother, a Black Panther and poet. It is the summer after Black Panthers founder Huey Newton was jailed and 17-year-old member Bobby Hutton was killed by the police.
- *A Good Kind of Trouble* (Ramée, 2019) revolves around the story of a young Black, unarmed man shot and killed by a police officer in contemporary times. The incident brings the 12-year-old protagonist, Shayla, to some hard truths about racism. Over a series of days, as details emerge on television and social media, Shayla begins to question what it means to be Black and female.

Data Analysis and Credibility

The approach to critical content analysis we adopted required that we read from the bottom up, looking at the lived experiences and reactions of the protagonists in each book (Bradford, 2009). At the same time, we situated each novel within the distinct time period it represented and therefore utilized this perspective for one level of analysis (roughly the 1900s, 1960s, and present day). We also repeatedly read each narrative alongside scholarship on antiblackness as explicated by Hartman (2008, 2010), Wilderson (2010), and Dumas and Ross (2016). Concurrently, we considered the concept of Black futurity put forth by Camp (2017), interwoven with Marable's (2006) concept of living Black history, and documented emerging themes. We supported our interpretations with evidence from each of these theoretical frameworks.

Taking into account the protagonists' experiences and their understandings of antiblackness, we coded passages that conveyed the protagonists' thoughts, words,

feelings, and actions as they related to incidents of racial violence. We also identified and coded instances in which hope, refusal, resistance, activism, and change were reflected within each of the novels. As we moved to collapse our codes into broader themes, we wrote analytic notes and carried out an iterative process to cement credibility, where we collectively discussed (and revised as needed) the meaning and parameters of each possible theme across several rounds of analysis. Last, we each read the novels multiple times to ensure a prolonged engagement with the data and included many illustrative examples in our findings to convey a thick description of the novels (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Positionality

We are Black women, mothers, sisters, professors, and scholars. For us, racial violence is not at a distance, but rather an ever-present, imminent threat to our lives and the lives of those we love and seek to protect. Undoubtedly, our collective lived experiences and stories contribute to the lenses through which we conceptualize this research and corroborate the narratives under investigation in this study.

Findings

The following themes represent our findings: (1) *recovering histories and rewriting narratives*, (2) *reckoning with slavery's hauntings*, and (3) *practices of healing and seeking justice*. Below, we provide an analysis and discussion that includes illustrative examples from our novels.

Recovering Histories and Rewriting Narratives

Pointing to the ways Black experiences have been obliterated from the broader context of American history—heavily redacted documents, unrecorded slaughter and lynching, and suppression of evidence—Marable (2006) asks, “How can the authentic history of black people be brought to life?” (p. 21). In our first theme, we describe the work each novel does to recover unacknowledged and excluded stories, particularly those that reflect agency, refusal, and resistance in the face of antiblack violence.

Novel 1: *Zora and Me* (1900s—Separate and Self-Sufficient)

During the Reconstruction era, systems of legalized segregation were established and then solidified through the Supreme Court’s 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson ruling on the fairness of “separate but equal.” Segregation produced and maintained racial disparities in every aspect of life, from employment to access to healthcare and education (Higginbotham, 1993). Yet there still existed self-sustaining Black communities with their own schools, churches, businesses, and medical facilities (Wormser, 2004). *Zora and Me* is set in the first all-Black township of Eatonville, Florida. Inspired by the actual hometown of the author Zora Neale Hurston, the novel serves as an example of a story that has largely been rubbed out of most history texts. Carrie’s observations, foregrounded throughout, catalog a vibrant Black community whose thriving way of life is set against complex racial laws

and government-sanctioned violence. Two telling scenes offer a glimpse into how this community not only imagined but remained a commitment to “inhabiting a future against all odds” (Camp, 2017, p. 136).

The first is a scene in which Carrie hears Zora’s mother lie to a white storekeeper about expensive dish towels she is buying for her home. To avoid drawing attention to the community’s successes, Mrs. Hurston tells Mrs. Walcott that she is shopping for her (implied white) employer. Outside of the store, Carrie comments,

Eatonville’s motto might as well have been: no need for white folks to know our business; best to let them think they got the upper hand. Since folks always called these kinds of answers “white lies,” Zora and I reckoned it was because white folks required lies from us. (Bond & Simon, 2011, p. 80)

Read within the context of the Reconstruction era, Carrie’s reflection speaks to her community’s agency and resilience and also brings starkly into view the precarious predicament success created for Black communities of that time. From 1882 to 1927, nearly 4,000 Black people were lynched in the United States. Entire communities—such as the Greenwood district of Tulsa, Oklahoma, or Rosewood, Florida—were burned to the ground by angry white mobs (Marable, 2006). The adults of Eatonville are aware of such dangers, but do not accept their subjugation. To the contrary, the town’s mayor, Joe Clarke, later confirms, “We Eatonville folks ain’t got the fear of whites in us, and I won’t allow anyone to bring that fear here. Eatonville is our home” (Bond & Simon, 2011, p. 132). To ensure their own survival and live out the alternative existence they have created for themselves, the community chooses to avoid the outside gaze.

Growing up in a separate and thriving Black community, Carrie and her best friend Zora have largely been sheltered from faulty notions of racial inferiority. Upon further consideration of the incident in the store, Carrie reports, “It picked at my spirit that the surest way for Negroes to get along was to pretend they were only ever running errands for white folks. Didn’t people like Mrs. Walcott think anything belonged to us?” (Bond & Simon, 2011, p. 80). Essentially, Carrie questions why it is that white people cannot see that Black lives matter. This questioning continues throughout the novel as she is faced with an unthinkable act of racial violence. Carrie, much like her community elders, refuses to exist within the limits of what has been deemed permissible.

Novel 2: *One Crazy Summer* (1960s—Pride and Self-Defense)

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense provided a template for resistance movements such as the American Indian Movement, the Puerto Rican Young Lords Party, and #BlackLivesMatter, among others (Elder, 2016; Marable, 2006). Founded in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, the group organized armed patrols to protect against police brutality, and sought to increase Black political power, jobs, housing, quality education, and social programs for the poor (Elder, 2016). Yet the revolutionary acts of the Black Panther Party have often been left untold in school curriculum that sanitizes American history (McNair, 2018).

Told through the voice of its 11-year-old protagonist, Delphine, *One Crazy Summer* disrupts any narrative that dismisses the Black Panther's impact on social change. The novel draws specific attention to the group's promotion of Black pride, consciousness, and self-reliance. In one revealing scene, a member of the Black Panther Party questions why Delphine's younger sister is carrying a white baby doll. Referring to the doll as "self-hatred," he asks, "Are your eyes like hers? Is your hair blond like hers? Is your skin white like hers?" (Williams-Garcia, 2010, p. 66). These questions are not meant to embarrass the girls, but rather, they are reflective of Camp's (2017) notion of refusal related to racial subordination. Refusal is thus an antidote to the outside gaze, meant to counteract messages of inferiority that lead little Black girls to choose white dolls over Black ones.

For its part, the Black Panther Party outwardly disavowed white supremacy. Adopting the slogan "power to the people," the group embraced Black cultural forms and natural hairstyles, promoted Black history and literature, and rejected any notions of Black inferiority. While Delphine is initially dismissive of any reeducation efforts made by the Black Panther members, she quickly notices differences between the Eurocentric ideologies circulated in her school and the conflicting curricula presented at the Black Panther summer camp:

The classroom was unlike any I had ever been in. Instead of pictures of George Washington . . . there was a picture of Huey Newton sitting in a big wicker chair with a rifle at his side. I expected to find Dr. Martin Luther King's photo hanging on the wall, but I was disappointed. Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali were the only faces I could name. I didn't know any of the women, although one looked just like Big Ma. Next to her picture were the words, I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired. (Williams-Garcia, 2010, p. 69)

Clearly, the woman in the final photo is Fannie Lou Hamer, who testified about police brutality before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention. However, Delphine's inability to recognize her reflects the fact that Hamer's story is yet another that has been excluded from her school's curriculum.

As the story progresses, so does Delphine's attentiveness to divergent political and historical perspectives. New truths and narratives emerge, which prompt her to evaluate the circumstances that arise over the course of the novel in deeper, more personal ways. Thus, in this novel, futurity finds expression through Delphine's process of unlearning ideas she previously relied on to make sense of life, and then reformulating these ideas with her evolving consciousness.

Novel 3: *A Good Kind of Trouble* (Present Day—Woke and Weary)

Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors founded #BlackLivesMatter following the acquittal of the murderer of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Shortly thereafter, the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) and Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies (CISPS) established #SayHerName to ensure that racialized violence against Black women and girls would not go unrecognized (African American Policy Forum, n.d.). The visibility of these movements attracted allies from marginalized groups with parallel and intersecting concerns (Black Lives Matter,

n.d.). Collectively, human rights groups created an awareness about injustice so critical that 2016 was declared the year of being “woke” (Stoval, as cited in Hess, 2016). Yet, at the same time, Black life has continued to be fraught with peril.

It is against the tumultuous backdrop of the present day that Shayla pieces together snippets of history in order to reckon with senseless acts of racism and violence. Like the previously discussed protagonists, Shayla’s home and community serve as important sites that increase her understanding of history that is not codified in textbooks. At home, Shayla’s parents educate her about the works of Black writers and scholars such as James Baldwin and Maya Angelou. But at school, she interacts primarily within white spaces and absorbs a decidedly Eurocentric curriculum. In one scene, Shayla’s father tells her, “A lot of the things you’ll be taught at school are from . . . a certain perspective” (Ramée, 2019, p. 50). Based on previous conversations, Shayla intuits that her father is referring to white male perspectives. Even as her mother attempts to interject, her father reminds Shayla that “there are a whole lot of great thinkers who are people of color” (Ramée, 2019, p. 51). Much like Delphine, Shayla struggles to embrace the knowledge and racial uplift she receives at home, while being reduced by the dominant narratives she absorbs about Blackness at school.

Later in the novel, Shayla’s high-school-age sister, Hana, explains to her that “most people hear Black Panther and think of the movie, but the activists came first” (Ramée, 2019, p. 124). The two girls decide to emulate the Black Panther Party, with Hana donning an Afro like Angela Davis and Shayla dressing up in a black leather jacket and beret for Halloween. However, when Shayla arrives at school, the principal confronts her: “Young lady, do you really think it’s appropriate to wear that to school?” (Ramée, 2019, p. 139). While Shayla is clear that she has done nothing to warrant being accosted by her principal, the connection between the confrontation and racism does not become apparent to her until Principal Trask continues, “Glorifying such a violent time in history . . . such a violent movement. Just doesn’t seem like a good idea, does it?” (Ramée, 2019, p. 140). The principal’s impulse to suppress this part of Black history speaks to the revolutionary scope and significance of the Black Panther Party and, at the same time, illuminates the obstacles many Black children face within an education system that actively maintains white racial power.

As the exchange between Principal Trask and Shayla culminates, we see the beginnings of what Campt (2017) describes as “creative acts of refusal” that will not succumb to white domination (p. 42). Shayla rejects out of hand any notion that Black history is dangerous or off limits. Moreover, her deliberation on the encounter with her principal demonstrates that she is well aware of the truth of this history: “I want to say how the Black Panthers weren’t about violence, but my mouth won’t cooperate” (Ramée, 2019, p. 140). Although Shayla feels disempowered to speak back, her inner dialogue confirms the absurdity reflected in Principal Trask’s rendering of Black self-defense as violence. In line with the previous protagonists, Shayla’s historical understanding expands outside the limits of white hegemony.

Reckoning with Slavery's Hauntings

While the novels maintain the perspectives of the protagonists, it is each girl's understanding of the nonhuman status occupied by Black men and boys that allows her to recognize and respond to her own marginalization (Crenshaw, 1991). Across the text set, we categorized scenes and dialogue surrounding acts of racial violence under the second theme: *reckoning with slavery's hauntings*. We examine the circumstances each protagonist faces within the context of the particular historical moment in which she lives, and in light of America's history of slavery and its aftermath.

Novel 1: *Zora and Me* (1900s—Ivory's Murder)

"There's a body by the tracks!" Chester sputtered. "It don't have no head. The body don't have no head."

—Bond and Simon, 2011, p. 58

The defining act of terror in *Zora and Me* is the brutal murder (described above) of Ivory, a Black turpentine worker traveling through Eatonville. Ivory's murder, at the hands of a white civilian, is linked to his interactions with a presumed white woman, who is actually his sister, Gold. As 10-year-old Carrie processes Chester's reporting of the crime, her entire world begins to unravel. She describes the anguish felt by members of her Eatonville community, and her own emotional attachment and grief over a man she had only met a handful of times:

The whole porch gasped, then fell quiet. Goose pimples sprung up all over my body like I had been dipped in ice-cold water. Zora was almost twitching. She turned to me to make a silent *Shh!* sign, her eyes hot with interest. . . . "We knew him," Zora said. "The man without a head. We knew him." (Bond & Simon, 2011, pp. 58–60)

During the 1900s, not only were Black people denied access to public space, but their freedom was restricted by force and terror, much like what they experienced under slavery (Hartman, 2010). While the existence of Eatonville makes it possible to imagine a Black community moving beyond the horrors of slavery, Ivory's murder serves as a visceral reminder of the underlying antiblack structural conditions that continue to make Black people vulnerable to extreme acts of violence.

The ongoing threat to Black life as an outgrowth of slavery is made evident in one pivotal scene. Mr. Ambrose, the white man who helped bring Zora into the world, speaks plainly to Carrie and Zora about the state of things for Black people of their day, explaining, "When white folks are jumpy, they can reach awfully high—so high a few niggers will surely end up swinging from trees" (Bond & Simon, 2011, p. 97). Through this explicit reference to lynching, Mr. Ambrose makes the girls understand the dehumanization of Black bodies. Carrie's realization that Blackness is seen by whiteness as something less than human is reflected through her inner dialogue, "While the old man spoke, I thought about everything

I ever saw hanging from a tree that didn't naturally belong there. I had seen dresses and slacks dangling off branches. I had seen hats and underclothes swinging in the wind" (Bond & Simon, 2011, p. 98). It is unclear whether those garments belonged to actual people who had been lynched and perhaps burned, or whether Carrie was struggling to imagine how human beings could *end up swinging from trees*.

The recent past of slavery also echoes in the circumstances surrounding Ivory's murder, which reflect the well-documented occurrence of white men using the protection of white women's purity as an excuse for antiblack violence. Though these claims were rarely, if ever, founded, such framing of Black as dangerous or a threat rendered the Black body as deserving of death. For Carrie, this truth is deeply personal as she reports:

Only years later did I understand why the death of Ivory, a man I barely knew, had rocked me like an earthquake. . . . That was the day that in my gut, I finally realized that my father was gone for good. He wasn't coming back, and we weren't going to save him any more than we could have saved Ivory. (Bond & Simon, 2011, p. 135)

In the above scene and one that comes later in the novel, we see that Carrie's understanding of Ivory's murder is interpreted not only as a racial act but also as an act that signals her vulnerable status as a Black girl. She later shares, "I knew that death was death. I knew that outside the boundaries of Eatonville, it could be dangerous not to be white, and that inside those boundaries was no guarantee of safety" (Bond & Simon, 2011, pp. 164–165).

Novel 2: *One Crazy Summer* (1960s—Little Bobby's Murder)

Delphine's process of making sense of the murder of 17-year-old Bobby Hutton, the youngest member of the Black Panther Party, dovetails with Carrie's process of coming to terms with Ivory's murder. This realization becomes apparent in *One Crazy Summer* as Delphine begins to uncover details about the day Bobby Hutton was shot and killed by the police:

The police fired at the Panthers and the Panthers fired at the police. That's when Little Bobby came outside to surrender, and took off all his clothes except for his underwear to show he had no gun, they shot him anyway. Over and over and over. (Williams-Garcia, 2010, p. 127)

Here, the use of excessive force by the police serves as an example of how antiblack violence stems from the nonhuman status assigned to Black bodies. Delphine internalizes this message, and it manifests in two significant ways. First, it causes her to feel a sense of her own vulnerability, as she reflects,

Reading that article had made me both angry and afraid. Angry someone as young as Bobby had been killed and afraid that if he could get shot for being with the Panthers, maybe it was too dangerous for us to be at the Black Panthers' summer camp. (Williams-Garcia, 2010, p. 127)

Particularly troubling is the fact that the Black Panther Party represented a level of protection against the white racial terror prevailing in many parts of the nation during the 1960s. This also made them targets, because Black people, being regarded as nonhumans, were never expected to protect themselves. In 1968, J. Edgar Hoover proclaimed, “The Black Panther Party is the single greatest threat to the internal security of the United States,” and he unleashed the full force of the FBI to bring the party down (Brown, 2009, p. 156).

In addition to grappling with her own sense of security, Delphine recalls a separate incident involving a police officer and her father, which crystallizes the role of race in each situation:

Papa had rolled down his window and shown the state policeman his license and said he was driving his girls down to see their grandma in Alabama. That state policeman hadn't offered directions. He hadn't called Papa “Mr. Gaither, sir,” or “citizen” like the helpful police officer in the civic pride film. I heard what that state policeman called Papa. I heard it alright. I held onto Fern tight, afraid for Papa. (Williams-Garcia, 2010, p. 125)

With a growing sense of sorrow and maturity, Delphine realizes that her father's racial identity was linked to the treatment he received and the choices he made when responding to the mistreatment. Similarly, Hartman (2010) writes that everyday forms of antiblackness—harassment, discrimination—are often overlooked, making it so that only spectacular or extremely heinous forms of violence attract any attention. Delphine's observations demonstrate how both everyday and spectacular acts of violence affect Black girls in particular ways, creating stress and trauma, and making them highly aware of their own vulnerability as they move through the world.

Novel 3: *A Good Kind of Trouble* (Present Day—Murder of an Unarmed Black Man)

In *A Good Kind of Trouble*, it is the now all-too-familiar story of a young, Black, unarmed man shot and killed by a police officer that brings Shayla to some hard truths about racism. Referencing the present day, Wilderson (2021) speaks to the ease with which antiblack violence can be ignored by white society, even when such violence is increasingly portrayed in the media, linking this apathy to the criminalization of Blackness itself. Over a series of days, as details emerge on television and social media, Shayla questions her mother about why the young man was murdered: “Do the police hate us? Hate Black people?” (Ramée, 2019, p. 41). Her mother's answer does little to console Shayla, but it does explain how belief in the nonhuman status of Blacks continues to endure:

Well, for a long time people have been fed a diet about Black folks. About folks with brown skin. Making them think we're scary. And, that's how the police have been trained to act. It's going to take a long time to change people's minds. (Ramée, 2019, p. 41)

Still naive about systemic racism and its remarkable staying power, Shayla's re-

sponse appears hopeful: “Maybe after the trial people will know we’re not scary. They’ll know we matter” (Ramée, 2019, p. 41). Although guardedly optimistic, Shayla notices that her parents and sister seem anxious about what might happen during the trial. Several days later, the limits of Shayla’s hope are revealed as her mother shares the *not guilty* verdict:

“How could that happen?” I ask. “She shot that man.” “The jury must’ve believed she thought her life was in jeopardy.” “But he was walking away.” As much as I hated seeing that video, I’ve watched it a bunch of times. All I saw was a man walking slowly to his truck. And then a police officer started shooting. (Ramée, 2019, p. 260)

Shayla’s words reflect the raw emotions of Black children, struggling to come to terms with the fact that Black people can be killed in the United States without consequence. Verdicts such as this one confuse and demoralize youth, like Shayla, who rightfully expect a legal system to uphold fairness and justice.

While it is this incident that leads Shayla to become more racially conscious, experiences within school allow her to witness, in an up-close way, the precarity of Black lives. Shayla critically reflects on her own and others’ perceptions of a classmate named Bernard. Because he is a tall, Black boy (viewed as “mean” since elementary school), Bernard faces recurring racial incidents that make his life difficult. He is racially profiled within the context of his school, as his Blackness is treated as threatening and dangerous.

When he’s unfairly accused of starting a fight, Shayla thinks about how often Bernard experiences excessive surveillance from his teachers and unfair discipline from the principal because of the color of his skin. Moreover, after vouching for Bernard to the principal and arguing that the role he played in the fight was preventative, Shayla feels disheartened by her friend’s reluctance to see Bernard differently:

When I tell the story at lunch, Julia doesn’t believe me. “Are you sure he was protecting Alex?” “Yes,” I say, tired of explaining. “But he’s so mean,” Julia says. Isabella says, “Maybe not.” Julia gives me an accusing look. . . . I don’t understand why Julia can’t see Bernard in the new light I’m shining right on him. (Ramée, 2019, p. 293)

Julia’s dismissive response appears to mirror the inner thoughts of so many others across the novels (and in real life) who, despite evidence to the contrary, hold on to beliefs about the nonhuman status of Black people.

Practices of Healing and Seeking Justice

As described in the previous section, each of our protagonists undergoes a racial awakening in the novels (resulting from the racist killing of a Black male). Our final theme, *practices of healing and seeking justice*, outlines how they eventually develop enough maturity to navigate the perils of antiblackness through individual and collective efforts. We argue that because of their own efforts, and in response to senseless acts of violence and racism, the protagonists continuously imagine and

move toward futurity. As Black youth, they “could never afford to stand still” given the ongoing threats to their well-being and very existence (Marable, 2006, p. 14).

Novel 1: *Zora and Me* (1900s—Grieving and Community Renewal)

Because of the heinous and mysterious nature of Ivory’s murder, Carrie’s initial feelings of shock soon give way to deep despair. As the days pass, she and Zora experience a process of grieving fueled by their refusal to accept, as final, the death of Ivory. Following guidance read about in a book of myths, the girls decide to set Ivory’s spirit free by singing him a lullaby. Recalling the wisdom Ivory shared with Carrie about her own missing father—“Nothing ever ends. Even the spirits of folks never end. They just get lent away” (Bond & Simon, 2011, p. 33)—her choice of lullaby represents a belief in eternal life and justice. After realizing the potential within a simple yet reverent act, she reflects on the healing inherent in what she and Zora are planning:

I felt the weight of sadness lift slightly in me for the first time since Ivory died. We would be the looking and finding folks like in his song. We would look for his spirit and find it, and we would set it free. (Bond & Simon, 2011, p. 111)

One evening, Carrie and Zora travel to Ivory’s place of death to release his spirit through song. Living with the irrationality that is antiblack violence, the girls carry out this practice of renewal to heal themselves from the pain while seeking justice for Ivory. Indeed, in their inability to accept Ivory’s death as something normal or routine, they demonstrate “a refusal of the very premises that have reduced the lived experience of blackness to pathology and irreconcilability in the logic of white supremacy” (Campt, 2017, p. 50). Still, setting Ivory’s spirit free represents only their first step; it does not solve the mystery of his death for those who knew and loved him.

In a scene that describes their movement toward seeking justice for Ivory, Zora overhears a conversation that allows the girls to make a connection between Gold and the white man who likely murdered Ivory. While anxious and afraid of knowledge they now possess, Zora decides to confide in a white ally, Mr. Ambrose, to ensure the safety and longevity of their community. Carrie’s guard is not completely down, however. The stakes are high. Carrie wonders to herself as she listens to Zora convey everything they learned to Mr. Ambrose:

The agony of having to decide what to do cut her . . . but I wasn’t sure whether she was going to tell the old man what she heard between Gold and Joe Clarke or not. Mr. Ambrose was an ally, but he was also white. (Bond & Simon, 2011, p. 154)

Upon realizing that a white man from his town killed Ivory, Mr. Ambrose trusts Carrie and Zora with sharing this information (in secret) with their mayor, Joe Clarke. Ambrose says to the girls, “I know he will make sure justice is done in Eatonville. The same as I will make sure justice is done in Lake Maitland” (Bond &

Simon, 2011, pp. 156–157). Carrie then explains, “The following afternoon, we went to Joe Clarke’s store. We knew we had a mission, and we knew we couldn’t breathe a word about it” (Bond & Simon, 2011, p. 158). Indeed, this responsibility ends up being a turning point in their lives. They each begin to realize the importance of their voices and how courageously speaking out helps to sustain their beloved Eatonville community.

Novel 2: *One Crazy Summer* (1960s—Releasing Fear and Gaining Joy)

Echoing Carrie’s connection to her town, protagonist Delphine eventually learns the importance of the Black community and how to safeguard it. Against the backdrop of the Black Panther Party’s ongoing care for Black people during the tumultuous time of racial upheaval and terror in the sixties, Delphine witnesses the Panthers providing breakfast and general aid as a healing balm to those in need. At the same time, they strategically organize folks to resist injustice.

Notably, two women in the Black Panther Party greatly influence Delphine: her mother, Cecile, and Sister Mukumbu. It is well known that Black women played an important role in the Black Panther Party’s agenda: Angela Y. Davis and Elaine Brown, for example, are two well-known female leaders of the party who were imprisoned for their role in resisting white racial terror. Early in the novel, readers learn that Cecile deserted her family years earlier to become an artist and poetic voice for the Black Panther Party. While heartbroken about being abandoned, Delphine is intrigued by the courage to define oneself outside of typical boundaries. When visiting Cecile for the summer, Delphine slowly begins to understand the type of activism her mother is engaged in with the Black Panther Party. But it is only after her mother’s arrest that Delphine starts to realize the real threat of Cecile’s activism and questions the justice system:

Why had the police arrested Cecile? She wrote “Send us back to Africa” poems and “Movable Type” poems. She didn’t write “Off the Pig” poems and “Kill Whitey” poems, that is, if writing poems were a crime. (Williams-Garcia, 2010, p. 169)

When their mother is released from jail, the sisters inquisitively ask Cecile about “being arrested and being a political prisoner and a freedom fighter” (Williams-Garcia, 2010, p. 204). Her mother’s defiance of both racism and patriarchy serves as inspiration and a guide for how Delphine might eventually find the courage to seek justice for Bobby Hutton’s death.

Along with Cecile, Delphine feels close to Sister Mukumbu, a warm and more traditional maternal figure. For example, when Sister Mukumbu encourages her to distribute flyers for a rally against the police brutality that killed Bobby Hutton, Delphine shares her fears: “Sister Mukumbu, it’s all dangerous. Just being here at the center is dangerous” (Williams-Garcia, 2010, p. 133). Sister Mukumbu urges Delphine not to be afraid and stresses the importance of standing together with others in protest. Indeed, the rally being planned is more than a mere protest. It is a time for their community members to give creative performances, share vital health and voter registration information, and demonstrate against antiblack racism.

Afterwards, as she feels a sense of accomplishment for raising awareness about the rally, Delphine's fears give way to courage and a collective sense of joy:

Everywhere you turned there were college students in T-shirts signing people up for sickle cell anemia testing and voter registration. Black Panthers from around the country . . . stood tall, patrolling the park. Policemen also stood tall, holding on to their wooden clubs. And yet, I wasn't afraid. I was excited. (Williams-Garcia, 2010, p. 192)

While not unrealistically optimistic about the rally's ability to end police brutality, Delphine leaves feeling proud of herself, her mother, her sisters, and the community for envisioning a world in which police brutality does not occur. Marable (2006) explains this collective consciousness:

As racialized populations reflect upon the accumulated concrete experiences of their own lives . . . a process of discovery unfolds that begins to restructure how they understand the world and their place within it. That journey of discovery can produce a desire to join with others to build initiatives to create space, permitting the renewal or survival of a group, or a celebration of its continued existence despite the forces arrayed against it. (p. 36)

In fact, Delphine's participation in a nonviolent assembly stirs up a sensation within her of being above and beyond the everyday. She reflects, "Bringing people to this rally was magic that had you soaring above trees. It certainly was worth marching up to the no sayers" (Williams-Garcia, 2010, p. 193).

Novel 3: *A Good Kind of Trouble* (Present Day—Changes Within and Direct Action)

The video of him getting shot got played over and over online. I sure don't want to observe that anymore.

—Ramée, 2019, p. 23

In the quote above, Shayla reacts to the all-too-frequent imagery that characterizes antiblack violence of contemporary times. In contrast to Carrie and Delphine and the time periods in which their stories are set, Shayla witnesses the murder firsthand via technology, although continually watching the murder is not something she wants to do. Refusing to continue to watch the incident but gaining the voice to speak out against it represents Shayla's first step toward self-healing and seeking justice. When she and her classmates discuss the nightly protests, one student questions the anger and threats of violence. Shayla quietly responds: "You'd be angry too if people who looked like you were getting shot for no reason" (Ramée, 2019, p. 63). Although these are the first words she's spoken about the protests, Shayla has been thinking about them intently because of her sister Hana's involvement.

At first, when noticing the black armband Hana wears to school and not desiring an armband for herself, Shayla rationalizes, "I don't think it would stop

anyone from dying” (Ramée, 2019, p. 87). But her sister stresses the need for action: “You can’t just want things. Sometimes you have to do something” (p. 88). Indeed, Hana’s character demonstrates the many ways in which contemporary teenagers can take a stand. In Hana we see the courage to protest via silent marches, sit-ins on the freeway, wearing armbands, and creating posters with messages against police brutality. Still, early in the novel, Shayla astutely observes her sister’s actions while contemplating whether she too must become engaged in some way.

After hearing news of the police officer’s acquittal and an anticipated night of protests that compels her mother to pray for Hana’s safety, Shayla decides to act. She plans to wear and distribute black armbands to her closest friends at school “to show their support for the Black people who’ve died when dealing with the police” (Ramée, 2019, p. 45). The proliferation of black armbands at her school provokes an unanticipated rupture. Knowing that her principal has forbidden the armbands, Shayla summons her own bravery:

I don’t think I have ever done anything I know one hundred percent is going to land me in a whole heap of trouble. . . . But the louder part of me is saying that people need to start paying attention. I tie another knot in my armband, making sure it’s good and tight. (Rameé, 2019, p. 317)

Despite Shayla’s reluctance about wearing the armband, her sister observes how she is likewise being transformed in a good way:

[Hana] “Hey, good job with the armbands.”
 [Shayla] I look at her. “But it’s not really going to change anything.”
 [Hana] “Change is hard.” She shrugs. “But that doesn’t mean we stop, right?”
 [Shayla] “Right.”
 [Hana] “Besides,” she says, “seems like it changed you. And that’s pretty important.”
 (Ramée, 2019, p. 367)

Referring to the book’s title and the words spoken by the esteemed John Lewis, “Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble,” Shayla’s journal reflection reveals that she understands her activism as worthwhile and righteous: “I may not have changed much, but I sure learned something important. I make a final entry. *Some things are worth the trouble. For real*” (Ramée, 2019, p. 358).

Discussion and Conclusion

The decision to begin by presenting findings related to correcting historical inaccuracies with our first theme, *recovering histories and rewriting narratives*, was made with intention. We found it significant that each novel brought forth contradictions, distortions, and exclusions in dominant historical narratives. Transformative in nature, the novels worked to challenge and destabilize the status quo by introducing untold and lesser-told stories of Black lives in America. Returning to

Marable's (2006) assertion that historical knowledge "is absolutely vital to the task of imagining new racial futures" (p. 64), we contend that the contextual framing of each novel shaped the protagonists' (as well as readers') encounters with the antiblack violence at the crux of each novel. Further, this framing served as a basis to imagine possibilities for present and future change.

Under the second theme, *reckoning with slavery's hauntings*, we documented the ways in which the protagonists' experiences were markedly different from girls of non-Black racial backgrounds because of the phenomenon of African slavery and antiblack racism. The incidents described under this theme illuminate how traces of the past continue to shape (while not fully determining) the present and possible future. Scenes and dialogue brought forth through this reading urge readers to acknowledge that the history of slavery and its long-term consequences have not been sufficiently dealt with and are the continued realities of Black youth like the protagonists in the novels.

Engaging in practices of healing for oneself or others, while also seeking justice on behalf of those wronged, sits at the heart of our final theme, *practices of healing and seeking justice*. While no single way characterizes the practices and activism, something within each protagonist compels her towards movement and envisioning a better future. Marable (2006) argues that "the state of being critically self-aware prefigures both a sense of power and a capacity for action" (p. 37). For Carrie, this self-awareness begins with acknowledging her grief for Ivory and concludes with protecting the Eatonville community from outsiders doing harm. Delphine learns to overcome her fears of activism and experiences a sense of collective joy in rallying alongside the Black Panther Party. Finally, Shayla's path helps to foster her own voice as well as discover ways to engage in resistance with friends from school (across diverse backgrounds) and the larger community.

The events of recent years serve as a reminder of the prevailing challenges and opportunities to be realized in our nation. They also point to work to be done in the field of education. This study aimed to show how Black middle grade novels can offer support in the development of that work. Across the set of novels, we outline a distinct pattern of antiblackness that is a direct outgrowth of slavery. Yet, at the same time, we consider how the novels work as futuristic texts, reflecting how Black girls across time and location have imagined alternative ways forward, both in terms of their race and gender. As novels likely to be selected by language arts, social studies, or history teachers for upper elementary or middle grade readers, these stories inform youth about our present historical moment and how it has been shaped by the struggles of people who came before. Given the plots, educators might develop interdisciplinary units undergirded by these novels to explore themes and/or central ideas such as: brutality, resistance, white supremacy, refusal, and resilience. These texts collectively frame a timely discussion about the horrific acts of racism that are occurring in real time. The stories share lessons that can be applied today by young people when encountering white normativity, violence, and oppression. Moreover, the stories serve as luminaries, inspiring today's youth to consider the possibility of a just and flourishing nation. Future research that

considers reader perceptions of and responses to these narratives would greatly complement this study.

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Desiree W. Cueto is an associate professor of literacy and children's literature in the Department of Teaching, Learning and Sociocultural Studies at the University of Arizona.

Wanda M. Brooks is a professor of literacy education in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Temple University.