
THE IDENTITY OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHILD IN 20TH CENTURY PICTURE BOOKS – (AN ILLUSTRATED PRESENTATION)

Within the United States – The Great American Melting Pot – there are many identities. People subdivide themselves and claim their motherland, or their ancestral home as part of their identity, such as the Irish-Americans, the Italian-Americans, or the African-Americans. While most European immigrants “have been comfortably assimilated into the cultural mainstream”¹, African-Americans have not easily assimilated as they are immediately recognised and separated by their skin colour. They have long been “split between racial pride . . . and a desire to assimilate black identity” in to the Caucasian ideal². What stands out most in American history is the institution of African-American slavery and its consequences; “it is . . . at the heart of our cultural experience”³.

African-Americans have made an epic journey from being sold as slaves to being a vital part of the fabric of American society and in children’s books today, there is a growing and healthier emphasis on depicting a multiracial society.

There is no better time for developing a positive self image than during childhood because “a minority child's self esteem is dependent on [a] positive racial identity”⁴. Every image a child sees “contribute[s] to the youngster's value system”⁵; every image influences a child's sense of who they are and where they are in the world. Children growing up in a multiracial environment begin to question their racial identity at about the age of three or four, and picture books free of stereotypes contribute greatly to a child’s understanding of, and sympathy towards, a multiracial world.



For far too long, “either by oversight or intent, the publishing industry has contributed towards making the literary canon for children a predominately Caucasian dominated enclave”⁶ because unfortunately, the illustrations that are found of African-Americans in children’s books have not always been positive.

In very early examples of children's books such as **Little Black Sambo**, Black people were often shown as minstrels or ‘golliwogs’ (fig. 1) and names given to the characters in the story tended to be derogatory towards people of colour.

Figure 1: Helen Bannerman, Little Black Sambo, 1899.

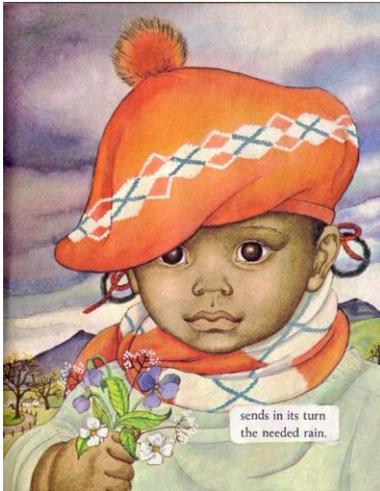


Figure 2: Eloise Wilkin, 1956
My Little Golden Book About God



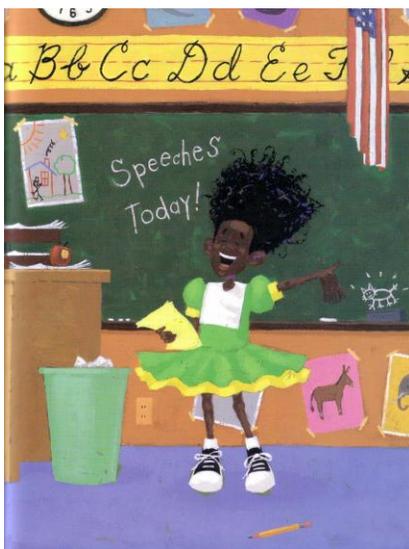
Figure 3: Ezra Jack Keats, *The Snowy Day*, 1962.

By the late 1950s, books including minority characters begin to appear in shops and libraries, but they were often still written, illustrated, edited, and published by white people (fig. 2) and language was carefully chosen to avoid any offense to minorities. It was truly the examples from the 1960s, as a direct result of the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964⁷, that began to show multiracial societies authentically represented (fig. 3) through illustration.

Finally, by the 1990s, Black people began to appear in children's book illustration as self-appreciating, proud people using colloquial dialects in the writing of the texts (fig. 4).

Slaves and Pickaninnies

Although slave trade and ownership was made illegal in 1863, the distorted images of half-naked, watermelon eating children, fat, bug-eyed mammies⁸, and submissive elderly uncles⁹ continued. For nearly one hundred years, the only images of Black children were “plucky pickaninnies”¹⁰.



Take, for example, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899), which was written and illustrated by Helen Bannerman, a Scottish woman living in India.

Figure 4: Joe Cepeda, *Nappy Hair*, 1997.

The Story of Little Black Sambo (fig. 5) tells of a little boy who loses his fancy clothes in the jungle to tigers, and then recovers the clothes while the tigers are arguing over which of them is the most handsome. 'Sambo' is the hero of the tale, and this name is now considered a racial slur. Sambo's parents, 'Black Mumbo' and 'Black Jumbo' also appear in the story.

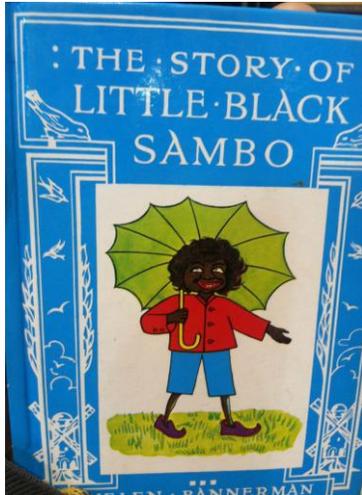


Figure 5, 6.: Helen Bannerman, *Little Black Sambo*, 1899.

Mumbo is depicted as a heavy-set 'mammy', who carries her saucepan (representing her domestic duties) and covers her unattractive hair with a headscarf. Both Mumbo and Jumbo are barefooted and wear loud, mismatched clothing (fig. 6). The representation of people without shoes and in ill-fitting, tacky clothing "reinforces a limited range of social and political possibilities for blacks"¹¹. Although their appearance leads the audience to believe that Mumbo and Jumbo are parents of limited means, they show their pride in their child by dressing him in finery. Sambo receives an umbrella (more likely a 'parasol') and a pair of shoes from his father. Both a parasol and shoes would have been considered signs of wealth in the 19th century. Sambo also proves to be quick thinking and wily by offering to trade his finery for his life.



While this book's origins are from India, it must be understood that once published in America, the characters were interpreted as Black and the illustrations that accompany this text are less than complimentary to people of the Black race. Sambo, Mumbo and Jumbo are all shown in a mocking 'golliwog' or minstrel style, with very black skin, large whites to their eyes, and huge red, smiling mouths. Bannerman originally wrote the story for her daughters, and she was not a trained illustrator as proven by her weak representations of the human figure and her awkwardly rendered tigers (fig. 7). However, it would have been common in the 19th century for a lady to be educated to a certain degree in drawing as a genteel pursuit.

Figure 7: Helen Bannerman, *Little Black Sambo*, 1899.

The illustrations here, intentional or not, reinforce negative stereotypes in the depiction of Black people, and the poor colour printing makes unattractive art even more so.

A God for Black Children

In 1954 in America, racial segregation in public schools was finally banned. The following year, Rosa Parks, a Black woman, was arrested for refusing to give her seat on a public bus to a White male passenger, and the bus boycott of Montgomery, Alabama began. These events fueled the fire of the Civil Rights Movement which was a brutal and frightening time in history. People working for African-American rights were considered nothing short of revolutionaries.

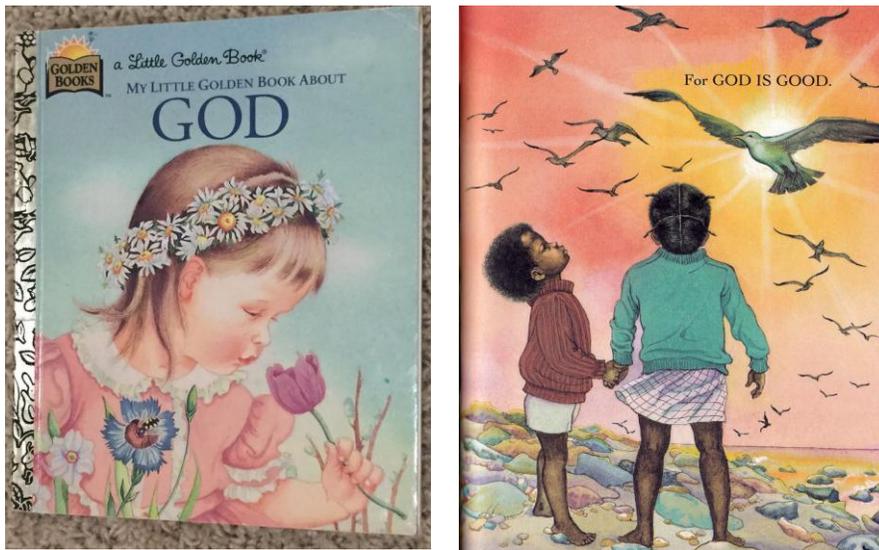


Figure 8, 9: Eloise Wilkin, *My Little Golden Book About God*, 1956

Published originally in 1956 and updated a few years later, *My Little Golden Book About God* is surprisingly multiracial (fig. 8). The subject of the book is very conservative; it merely shows children experiencing God through nature and love of family. The illustrator of this work is Eloise Wilkin. Wilkin's career in children's books spanned almost 50 years, and she was twice the winner of the Children's Book of the Year as awarded by the Child Study Association of America. Her work tends to contain idyllic depictions of sweet, chubby-faced toddlers. Interestingly, Wilkin was also known to have joined Martin Luther King Jr. in a Civil Rights march.

By the forth spread in *My Little Golden Book About God*, there are Black children shown (fig. 9). A brother and sister appear together on the beach, looking up at seagulls while the text states, "For God is GOOD." The children are barefooted, and although this often interpreted as a sign of poverty, these children are on the beach where it would be acceptable to be without shoes. The children are neatly dressed and they hold hands which shows a familial love. The little girl maintains a strong stance and the little boy looks up in curious wonder. The only negative stereotype here, singled out by critics, is the little girl's hairstyle which shows small braids in a 'pickaninny' style. The term 'pickaninny' originated in the American south when migrant workers would wait to see if a plantation owner would be able to offer seasonal work. Instead of waiting

in the queue to be chosen, workers would ask those at the front of the line “Are you picking any?” meaning, “Is there any cotton to be picked?”. A slurring, or lazy pronunciation lead to the bastardised phrase, “pickaninny”.

A few pages later there is another little Black girl shown from the shoulders up on a spread about how God sends the rain to make plants grow (fig. 2). Her skin tone and features are those of the Black race, but they are not over-emphasised, mocked or unattractive. The child simply gazes gently at the viewer.

The Black children by Wilkin are, for the most part, depicted sensitively, honestly and with dignity. Typical of Wilkin, all the children are idealistic with serious expressions and large, sad eyes. They are executed predominately in watercolour and incorporate gouache and coloured pencil for stronger, more detailed areas. Although there are only three Black children shown, they are shown as being children of a loving God, and as an integral part of society.

A Black Child in the Snow

The 1960s were a radical time in American history. Civil Rights legislation was being passed, schools and universities were being integrated, and outdated ideas on race were being challenged. Multiracial characters for children's books were still rare, but Ezra Jack Keats decided to “turn his life around” and work “on a book with a black kid as a hero”¹². Keats gave America its first picture book of the century to have a Black child as the central character, and in doing so crossed social boundaries at a volatile time.

Keats, originally Jacob Ezra Katz, son of Polish immigrants who grew up in the tenements of New York during the Great Depression, changed his name just after World War II to avoid discrimination and prejudice. *The Snowy Day*, written and illustrated by Keats, was published in 1962 and won the Caldecott Medal the following year (fig. 10). It is certainly the most famous and most highly praised book in America featuring a Black boy as a hero. The story is simple, and follows Peter, who wakes up to find that “snow had fallen during the night”, through his day. Through the story, Keats conveys “the joy of being a little boy alive on a certain kind of day”¹³. Peter is shown as a curious, precocious and warmly dressed little boy.

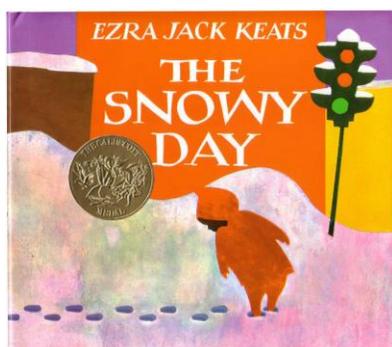


Figure 10: Ezra Jack Keats, *The Snowy Day*, 1962.

Keats made a departure from his usual media and executed the illustrations for *The Snowy Day* using a combination of collage, painting techniques and coloured pencils, with collage elements taking precedence. Because the illustrations are quite simplified, it is impossible to identify the features of the Black race in some illustrations. Peter is shown authentically, however, with dark brown skin, an upturned nose and shortly cropped black hair.

The picture of Peter's mother has been cited as having negatively stereotyped physical (mammy) characteristics (fig. 11). Her face is not shown, but she is a broad woman, wearing a bright yellow checkered house dress created from collaged oil cloth. Instead of searching for uncomely characteristics, Peter's mother might be viewed as a typical mother of any colour, who suffers from middle-age spread, but who lovingly removes her son's wet socks, listens attentively to his recollections of the day, and then supervises his pre-bedtime bath (fig. 3). Critics have also pointed to Peter's lack of understanding of the properties of snow as negative stereotyping (fig. 12), but it could be argued that Peter is just a typical young and innocent child.



Keats was inspired to create the character of Peter after seeing a small Black boy from rural Georgia featured in a 1940 issue of [Life magazine](#) (fig.13), and Peter went on to feature in six more, though lesser known, books. *The Snowy Day*, which was published the year before President John F. Kennedy sent troops to Alabama to assure the peaceful desegregation of schools, and just two years prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was a pivotal and monumental book in the world of multiracial books for children.

From the Motherland to the 'Hood

It was 28 August, 1963 that Martin Luther King Junior delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington D.C., and soon after that the term "Negro" began to fade from usage because "Black" was considered more assertive. The Civil Rights Act and its subsequent legislation meant that African-Americans entered the 1970s "social, political, and economic arenas with new-found confidence"¹⁴. At this time, sensitivity to the impact of stereotyped depictions of African-Americans reached a peak,¹⁵ and authors and illustrators were concerned with images and themes of the 'homestead', 'the motherland' and the coming of age of the Black American People. By the late 1980s and 1990s, however, authors and illustrators were finished waxing nostalgic and began to focus on a modern and lighter-hearted view of "the 'hood"¹⁶ and Black solidarity.

Few subjects generate more anger, passion and solidarity among women than the state of their hair, and African-American women especially have been plagued by this deeply troubling issue¹⁷. While many Blacks would scoff at the idea that a hairstyle "could advance people in the same way that political revolts had liberated oppressed peoples in the past, others believed that revolution began with these metamorphoses of the self"¹⁸. In the last century, 'mammies' have been liberated from their headscarves and 'pickaninnies' have released their pigtailed. The afro

hairstyle of the 1960s and the braid fad of the 1990s are touted as examples of Black women collectively rejecting white beauty standards. It is this refusal to adapt to the Caucasian ideal of attractiveness that has allowed Black women to embrace their own unique characteristics.

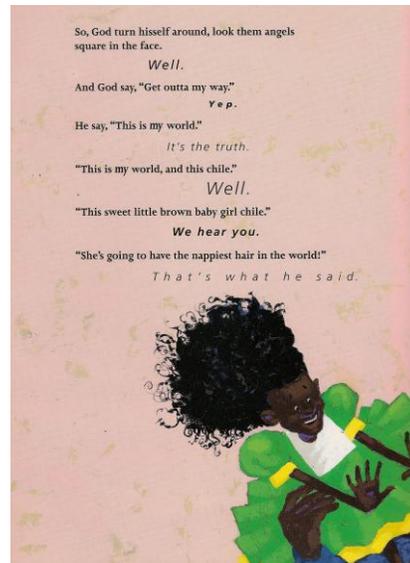
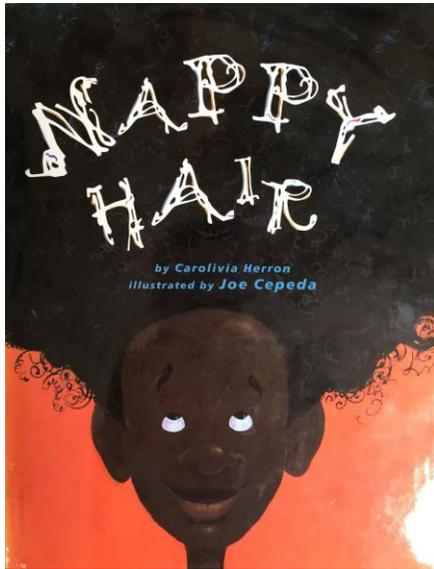


Figure 14, 15: Joe Cepeda, *Nappy Hair*, 1997.

It was the title, *Nappy Hair* – once considered a racial slur – that caused this book to be banned from public school classrooms and libraries (fig. 14). The term 'nappy haired' originated when slaves were still picking cotton in the deep south and the fluff off the cotton bolls settled into the 'nap' - meaning pile, weave or texture – of the hair.

The text of the story for *Nappy Hair* is written to reflect a traditional African-American spiritual 'call-and-response' (fig. 15). This characteristic sing-song storytelling is rooted in pre-American Civil War Negro religion, and remains, according to the distinguished art historian, Richard J. Powell, “the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on Amercian soil”¹⁹.

The author, Carolivia Herron, is a scholar of African-American Judaica and was, at the time of writing *Nappy Hair*, an assistant professor of English at California State University. *Nappy Hair* is a joyous celebration of the Black identity. The story begins with an Uncle at a family picnic teasing his young niece, Brenda, a “sweet little brown baby girl chile [sic]” who has “the nappiest hair in the world” because “God wanted hisself [sic] some nappy hair upon the face of the earth”.²⁰ Once teachers and librarians moved past the title page, the story of “a rose among a thousand thorns” was seen for the wonderfully positive affirmation of uniquely Black traits that it is, and the ban was lifted.

The illustrations by Joe Cepeda, an award winning illustrator of Latino heritage, are bright, lively, and full of jovial emotion. Cepeda's work sparkles not just with flecks of layered paint, but with

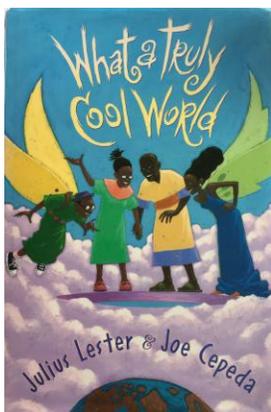
authentic sentiment. The narrator, Uncle Mordecai, is shown as an elderly, gray haired, cane-toting man. Also depicted at this cross-generational picnic are various aunts, male relatives, and cousins illustrated with a variety of types of dress and hairstyles including dreadlocks, cornrows, and afros (fig. 16). Unique at the time, and true to life, there are different shades to the characters' skin tones.



Figure 16, 17 : Joe Cepeda, *Nappy Hair*, 1997

Early in the book, when the Uncle accuses Brenda's hair of having “willful, intentional naps”, Brenda is shown having woken from sleep, but still drowsy, with an enormous fluff of hair sticking up from her head (fig. 17). She has the appearance of being less than pleased. Later, however, once the rest of the family join in the call-and-response, and the excitement and pride of having this type of hair builds, Brenda is shown at school, giving a speech to her class (fig. 4). In this illustration her hair has been only slightly tamed, but her expression is one of pride, confidence, and even joy. Her head is tilted back, she smiles as she speaks and she gestures broadly. An American flag hangs within view symbolising a reconciling of her “two-ness, an American, a Negro”²¹.

A Cooler, More Colourful World



Identity is not just 'who we are' or 'where we are from'; identity also encompasses 'who we are becoming', 'how we are represented' and 'how we see ourselves'²². *What a Truly Cool World!* by Julius Lester and illustrated again by Joe Cepeda, is an outstanding example of what the Black identity is becoming (fig. 18 - left). Published in 1999, this book stars Shaniqua, a name with African origins meaning 'God is gracious'. Shaniqua is “the angel in charge of everybody's business” who assists God in the decoration of the earth. The text is casually written in Black southern vernacular, which adds to its charm. The illustrations are again bright, bold, and cheerful. In one spread, all the angels of heaven gather with picnic baskets to watch as God creates music (fig. 19). The angels differ in ages, sizes, colours, and ethnic

backgrounds. When God finishes his creation, Shaniqua compliments him by saying, “Go on with your bad self, God!”- a Southern vernacular and youthful expression.



Figure 19,20: Joe Cepeda, *What a Truly Cool World!*, 1999

It is here, with this image (fig. 20) that the idea of Black identity comes full circle when in *What a Truly Cool World!*, God is revealed . . . to be a Black man. This Black man is represented authentically and with dignity, but a bit of humour as well. An audience of minority children can now see their own faces reflected in, yes, the face of God.

In children's books of the 20th century, the African-American people have come from being portrayed as the worshippers of a God (as in *My Little Golden Book About God*) to being representative of that God (as in *What a Truly Cool World!*). The emphasis has changed from a homogeneous, Caucasian dominated casts of characters, to an ethnically varied, multiracial cast of characters, with African-Americans taking centre stage. Children's books of recent years show a greater mix of races, more shades of skin colour, many hair textures, and the joining of Black and White families. The previously skewed “notions of what was beautiful, appropriate, uplifting, or authentically Negro” have changed and are now being reflected positively and imaginatively in the illustrations, themes, and language of children's books²³. This is only one step in the right direction for diversity in children's literature. Hopefully there are more to come.

Endnotes

1. FINKENSTAEDT, Rose L. H., *Face to Face – Blacks in America: White Perceptions and Black Realities*, NY: William Morrow and Company, 1994, p. 17.
2. POWELL, Richard J., *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1997, p. 89.
3. FINKENSTAEDT, Rose L. H., *Face to Face – Blacks in America: White Perceptions and Black Realities*, NY: William Morrow and Company, 1994, p. 18.

4. WARDLE, Francis, 'Raising Multiracial Kids Who are Proud of Their Identities', Colors, Issue 96, September/October 1999, p. 3.

5. TURNER, Patricia A., *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies – Black Images and Their Influence on Culture*, Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1994, p. 105.

6. PIROFKSI, Kira Isak, 'Multicultural Literature and the Children's Literary Canon', Student Thesis, San Jose State University. - from www.edchange.org/multicultural/papers/literature.html on 10 – 4 – 04.

7. **The Civil Rights Act of 1964** – enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in the 88th Congress, assembled and passed on 2 July 1964, it was an Act “To enforce the constitutional right to vote, to confer jurisdiction upon the district courts of the United States to provide injunctive relief against discrimination in public accommodations, to authorize the Attorney General to institute suits to protect constitutional rights in public facilities and public education, to extend the Commission on Civil Rights, to prevent discrimination in federally assisted programs, to establish a Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity, and for other purposes.

The resulting legislation assured that, without discrimination or segregation on the grounds of race, colour, religion, or national origin, American citizens would be entitled to the following:

Voting Rights

Injunctive Relief Against Discrimination In Places of Public Accommodation

Desegregation Of Public Facilities

Desegregation Of Public Education

Commission On Civil Rights

Nondiscrimination In Federally Assisted Programs

Equal Employment Opportunity

Registration And Voting Statistics

Intervention And Procedure After Removal In Civil Rights Cases

Establishment Of Community Relations Service

8. **Mammies or Mammy** – portrayed as an overweight, smiling middle-aged character whose duties include, but are not limited to, the kitchen and cooking. The best known is from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*.

9. **Uncles or Uncle** – In reference to the Uncle Remus stories by Joel Chandler Harris (a 19th century White journalist who collected and compiled slave folklore stories). An 'Uncle' was an elderly, stooping, self-hating Black character.

10. **Pickaninnies or Pickaninny** – refers to a young Black girl with wooly hair or little braids that stick up. She is usually in service to a White mistress. The characteristics relate to Harriet Beecher Stowe's 'Topsy' in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

11. TURNER, Patricia A., *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies – Black Images and Their Influence on Culture*, Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1994, p. 7.
12. WARDLE, Francis, 'Raising Multiracial Kids Who are Proud of Their Identities', *Colors*, Issue 96, September/October 1999, p. 2.
13. KEATS, Ezra Jack, *The Snowy Day*, NY: The Viking Press, 1962, p. 35.
14. BJELAJAC, David, *American Art – A Cultural History*, London: Laurence King Publishing, 2000, p. 164.
15. TURNER, Patricia A., *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies – Black Images and Their Influence on Culture*, Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1994, p. 60.
16. **The 'hood** – a shortened, slang term for 'the neighbourhood'. It refers, in this instance, not just to a locally housed group of people, but to the Black community as a whole.
17. HUTCHINSON, Earl Ofari, 'Why African-Americans Are Splitting Hairs Over Hair', *Jinn Magazine*, December 1998, p. 1.
18. POWELL, Richard J., *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1997, p. 144.
19. POWELL, Richard J., *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1997, p. 32.
20. The narrator, Uncle Mordecai, uses the vernacular pronunciation of some words. 'Hissself' is himself. 'Chile' is child.
21. DuBOIS, W.E.B., *The Souls of Black Folks*, Chicago, IL: A.C. McClurg and Company, 1903, p. 2.
22. COLEMAN, Robin R. M., *Say it LOUD! African-American Audiences, Media and Identity*, NY: Routledge, 2002, p. 8.
23. POWELL, Richard J., *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1997, p. 46.