WHY BLACK CHILDREN CAN’T GROW UP
THE CONSTRUCTION OF RACIAL CHILDHOOD IN AMERICAN LIFE, 1880-1954

by

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A dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School-New Brunswick

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in History

Written under the direction of

Dr. Virginia S. Yans

And approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

MAY 2011
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Why Black Children Can’t Grow Up

The Construction of Racial Childhood In American Life, 1880-1954

By STACEY PAMELA PATTON

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Dr. Virginia S. Yans

This dissertation explores how black childhood was constructed as a racial ideology during the Jim Crow era. I discuss how the extension of white childhood and the construction of the white child’s innocence depended upon the curtailment and demonization of the black child. Using oral narratives, medical studies, visual imagery, literature, sociological data, intelligence tests, court records and news articles, the individual chapters reveal how the racialization of the black child unfolded at each developmental milestone of life – birth, adolescence, and puberty. The insidious consequences, past and present, was foundational to the formation of a post-Emancipation racial hierarchy and to various regimes of social control in American society.

Unlike their parents and grandparents, the Jim Crow era’s black children grew up as free citizens and free laborers with no memory of slavery. And so a new ideology of repression emerged to contain them, to cast doubt upon their capabilities for citizenship and intellect, to exempt them from the powerful category of innocence, and to demean the value of their labor.

Without the racialization of black children, without controlling their minds and their bodies, they would have grown to be full and equal citizens. My agenda expands beyond victimization to hope, telling how African-American parents, both leaders and ordinary folk along with their white allies, created a rich counter narrative to defend and protect black children. In hopes of inspiring institutional reform and positive change in the age of Obama, this historical investigation seeks to help contemporary Americans understand how racism shaped cultural stereotypes and social welfare policies so damaging to black children.
Dedication

I dedicate this labor of love to the memory of my biological parents Robin Hope Harris and Steve Nelson Jones. It is true, as the great poet Khalil Gibran poignantly said about children, I came through you but not from you. Though I was never with you and never belonged to either of you, you were the archers and the bows from which this living arrow was sent forth, swift and far, upon the path of the infinite. Thank you for giving me life, for etching fortitude into the fibers of my soul, and for visiting me in my dreams.
Acknowledgements

KC 177668 and KC 114343. Those alphanumeric combinations followed me for my entire childhood as I navigated the New Jersey foster care system. For some, I was just another number, a statistic with precarious prospects, and yet another black child seemingly doomed to “fall through the cracks” or get “lost in the system.” But the worst did not happen because there were good people who saw my potential and gave me a chance at critical stages of my tumultuous black girlhood. The same held true in my early adulthood as I embarked on this intellectual journey to become an interpreter of American life.

Without Virginia Yans, David Levering-Lewis, Jackson Lears, Clement A. Price, Rudy Bell and Leslie Wilson, this dissertation would not have been written and I would have never become a historian. You took me under your wings, guided and nurtured my personal and intellectual development. Because you gave me a chance and recognized my potential I was able to complete this very important developmental milestone. If only more guardians of the future – people just like you – could have the courage, integrity, patience and sensitivity to embrace the foster kids, the wards, the so-called delinquents, and the legions of others pushed to the margins of society . . . I hope to one day experience the pleasure and satisfaction of guiding my own students and teaching them as well as I have been taught by each of you.

Several other scholars have offered valuable insights on some or all of my chapters at different stages of the writing: James Reed, Jennifer Morgan, Wilma King, Judy Leavitt, Laura Dawkins, Martha Hodes, Gayle Tate, Pamela Scully, Paula Fass, Lisa Sigel, Kenneth Goings, Kendra Taira Field and Khalil Gibran Muhammad. I appreciate the support of my graduate peers: Leigh-Anne Francis, Shanita Tartt, Melissa Stein, John Adams, and Christopher Mitchell. A special thanks to Dawn Ruskai, Mary DeMeo, Susan Schrepfer, and Candace Walcott Shepherd at Rutgers.

I am grateful to the following institutions for providing the research materials, which made writing this dissertation possible: The Curt Teich Archives, New York Medical Library,
NYU Bobst Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Oklahoma State Archives, Muskogee Library, Muskogee County District Court, Oklahoma Corporation Commission, Oklahoma Historical Society, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Ft. Worth National Archives, and the Library of Congress. I must also thank the relatives and descendants of Sarah Rector and Edith and Edna Durant for sharing memories and family documents.

I would also like to give appreciation to a few members of my literary family for all their support through some dark moments along this journey. Thank you for inspiring me with your brilliance, allowing me to rant, and for teaching me how to handle adversity with grace and patience: Faith Hampton Childs, Jill Nelson, Ishmael Reed, Michel Wallace, Deborah Rudacille, and Kathleen Krause. Many thanks to my colleagues at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund for your support and push to get this project done – Mae Bush, Monique Brizz-Walker, Lois Henry, Kathryn Bowser, TaRessa Stovall and Lee Daniels.

I would like to thank the members of my extended family for all their support and love throughout this process: Pamela Newkirk, Janice Walker, Bonzal Hamilton, Maureen Craddock and Joseph Pallato, Damon and Edna Williams, Lillian Rhyme, David and Marina Ottaway, Scott Albert and Donna Garcia, Bob and Pat Curvin, Reggie Hazzard, Lindy Lord, Mary Patton, Cerlisteen Vice, Gloria Harris, Ona Osirio, and my pets Zora and Brigitte. Last, but not at all least, I want to express my gratitude to the scores of children in the foster care system that I’ve met over the past five years. You are my brothers and sisters and you inspire me to continue to advocate and be a voice of change for you, even when some proclaim that you are just another number or deeply flawed and problematic.
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INTRODUCTION

“There is no place for black children in this world,” intellectual giant and civil rights doyen W.E.B. Du Bois lamented in 1920. His hyperbolic use of “this world” conveys the meanness of mainstream life to the first generations of free black children growing up in what he called the “sneering, cruel world” of Jim Crow racism. Given the dangers and limitations of life along the color line, Du Bois wondered if bringing black children into the world was an ethical or a responsible act in a period when African Americans’ control over their own labor, ownership of their bodies and reproductive choices, and title to their children was still a relatively new concept despite slavery’s end. He asked: “Is it worth while? Ought children be born to us? Have we a right to make human souls face what we face today?”

One might be inclined to think that Du Bois, a famous public intellectual and financially stable member of the black elite, would be immune from the stifling realities, racial dangers and dilemmas facing ordinary black parents who had less education and fewer resources. But let us not forget that even as he was a prolific writer, roving investigative journalist, college professor, sociologist, and race leader, Du Bois was also a parent. In 1899, his infant son Burghardt died of diphtheria after a frantic and unsuccessful search for a black doctor. No white doctors in Atlanta would treat a sick colored child. Death denied baby Burghardt a chance to grow up.

In his grieving, Du Bois expressed “awful gladness” that his son escaped the color line. “No bitter meanness shall sicken his baby heart. No taunt shall madden his happy boyhood,” he wrote in his 1903 manifesto *The Souls of Black Folk*. While Du Bois’s mourning over his firstborn son’s death has been well documented, less recognition has been given to his angst about raising his surviving daughter in a racist society or his thoughts about her full passage through childhood.

When the second-born Yolande was six years old Du Bois found himself sitting on the front steps of his Atlanta University campus home armed with a double-barreled shotgun and
two-dozen rounds of shells filled with buckshot as thousands of angry whites took to the streets for four days, burning black homes, businesses and schools. Venting their frustrations over black people stepping “out of their place,” the mobs assaulted hundreds and massacred scores of victims, badly beat a crippled boy, and even used a baby for target practice. To protect his wife and child, Du Bois later wrote – “If a white mob had stepped on the campus where I lived I would have without hesitation have sprayed their guts over the grass.” A father’s willingness to kill in order to protect his child from bloodthirsty racists gave his daughter a chance to survive childhood.

The girl grows up. A few months after Yolande’s lavish wedding to Harlem poet prodigy Countee Cullen in the spring of 1928, Du Bois penned a florid fatherly tribute titled “So The Girl Marries.” As he limned about the spectacularly engineered wedding, he nostalgically recalled his daughter’s coming of age. Papa Du Bois unapologetically admitted that Yolande was “spoiled and immeasurably loved.” Her privileged childhood was one of “excursions,” “dawdle and play and cut up,” and “wild tears at going to bed.” In infancy, she was “a round little bunch of Joy: plump and jolly, full of smiles and fun.” Her early adolescence brought “a flash of twinkling legs and bubbling mischief.” And then came “the days of gawky growth” and pubescence.

As Yolande grew, “so grew her problems,” and a father’s worries. They were not race-driven problems at first, but rather the usual pangs of childhood – “School; Multiplication Tables; Playmates; Latin; Clothes – Boys!” Though death had saved Burghardt from growing “choked and deformed by the strictures of Jim Crow,” in raising his daughter Du Bois would have to confront the realities of a racist society in which opportunities for black children were attitudinally and institutionally foreclosed. “Far, far in the offing, the shadow of the Fear of the Color Line” loomed and threatened his daughter’s innocence. The protective father tried to ward off the inevitable by shipping Yolande across the Atlantic to Bedales, an English boarding school where he expected her to “come back armed with manners and knowledge, a cap-a-pie, to fight American race hate and insult.”
Ordinary black parents also worried for, grieved over, celebrated, nurtured, and tried as best they could to protect their children, waverering as Du Bois did between despair and hope. As was Du Bois, African Americans across the United States were cognizant of the historical significance of the post-Emancipation period and the new possibilities it created. Watching the first generations of free black children grow up without any memory of slavery, its physical and psychic brutality, and its confining discipline, African Americans also understood the symbolic and transformative power of black childhood for the future potential of the race.

This dissertation tells the story of how African-American families and communities took power in their own hands and so balanced the racist narratives and cruelties of Jim Crow with hope. Each chapter reveals how blacks and their white allies created a rich counter narrative of possibilities, dignity, and competence for black children. While white supremacy overtly denied black youth the right to experience the full life stages of childhood and the benefits of protection, nurture, and social investment needed to achieve their optimal potential as responsible adult citizens, African Americans sought as best they could to prolong childhood and carve out a space for their children within American notions of childhood innocence.

For white Americans and people of color, black and white childhood was constitutive of each other. Keeping this in mind, this dissertation explores not the history of black childhood as the great historian Herbert Gutman did in 1977, a year before this writer was born a black child in America. Instead, my study examines discusses black childhood as a cultural construct and racial ideology and its impact on the lives of real black children growing up during Jim Crow. Coming of age as free citizens and free laborers, the Jim Crow era’s children were no longer “property” of white slave owners, nor was their potential hinged to the peculiar institution. As such, a new notion of black childhood emerged to control them, cast doubt on their intellectual capabilities, criminalize their behavior and sexuality, exempt them from the powerful category of innocence, and deny them the privileges and protections of citizenship reserved for “worthy” and “normal” white children.
My narrative braids together depictions of black children in medical texts, visual imagery, consumer goods, popular films, novels, newspapers, political commentary, court documents and social science literature while highlighting the ways in which emerging ideas about black childhood shaped attitudes, social policy, their treatment by teachers, reformers, courts and local authorities, medical doctors, psychologists, sociologists, rabid racists and other ordinary people. Alongside the usual and widely acknowledged black race fighters, prominent literary figures, professionals and civil rights attorneys, we encounter black midwives struggling to save children’s lives and preserving traditional African birthing practices to give the young the best start on life.

We also read the professional writings of a cadre of trained black psychologists and social scientists as they confront leading authorities of race psychology to defend black children from assaults on their intelligence. Meanwhile black newspaper editors from The Chicago Defender, Baltimore Afro-American, Pittsburg Courier and other media outlets make space to showcase the talents of high-achieving black pupils. We witness black parents using the courts to win simple justice for defrauded and murdered youth.

Black businesses produce material goods such as black dolls and books to instill race pride and self-respect while Du Bois uses the Crisis Magazine as a vehicle to document racial indignities suffered by youth. The magazine’s images of happy, cute, healthy babies countered the circulation of racially degrading and sexually explicit images produced by white America. Meanwhile, black parents did their best to keep their children, especially their daughters, visibly innocent. Clubwomen and black male reformers erected institutions and safe social spaces to nurture and harness children’s talents and to promote proper nutrition, and healthy childrearing practices. They also lobbied state legislatures and philanthropic organizations to build institutions for delinquent boys and girls in hopes that those children could be reformed and released back into society to lead moral and productive lives. Excluded from national Better Baby Contests, clergy and churchwomen create their own versions of these events in their homes.
and church sanctuaries. And we also hear black children themselves speaking their own counter narrative and protests to the degradation of race.

Once millions of former slave children and others were born into a free society, cultural conceptions of childhood as "unrealized potential" or "dependent victim," could no longer support the dominant society's agenda. White and black children now had to be defined against each other in order to preserve racial hierarchy. Using sociologist Vivianna Zelizer’s terms, it was no accident that the ideology of the “economically worthless” and “emotionally priceless child,” coincided with the rise of scientific racism and post-bellum racial hysteria. The black child was not simply excluded from the sentimental ideal of the “priceless child” whose innocence required prolonging and protection from the influences and dangers of the adult world, and whose futurity deserved investment. Rather, whites' investment in preserving racial hierarchy gave rise to this ideology. The image of the "black beast" created the "priceless” white child, and vice versa.

In my pursuit to uncover the historical roots of how racism shaped American attitudes and social policies so damaging to black children, I realized that I had to ask a series of questions: what is a black child? Is the black child born or made? If the black child is not born, then how is it made? How are conceptions of black childhood recalibrated over time? What practical social, political, economic, cultural and psychological functions do they serve? What hopes, anxieties, and fantasies do images of black childhood speak to? How are ideologies of black childhood used to draw lines of inclusion and exclusion? How is black childhood used to create systems of racial classification and social control? How is black childhood used to measure individual and racial progress? And finally, what does the treatment of black children reveal about America’s vision of itself as a democratic society?

Ultimately I came to understand that black children, like all children, are made, not born. Black childhood is a product of social and historical processes; it is a biological phenomenon and a lived experience. What black childhood is and how it has been understood has changed over time. The same is true for the idea of childhood itself, but the history of black childhood enables
another kind of exploration. It is a story about ideologies, about real children, and about race and power.

For white Americans and people of color, black childhood has always been, and continues to be, constitutive of race and racial identity. While the period of focus here is 1896 to 1954, the roots of black childhood stretch back into the colonial period where American conceptions about race and childhood first took shape for calculated labor and economic purposes. The profit-driven colonists and slave masters themselves understood the social and economic significance of black childhood to the preservation of racial hierarchy.

On August 20, 1619 a Dutch ship arrived in Jamestown, Virginia carrying twenty “negars.” Among those Africans was a young couple known as Antoney and Isabella who were immediately contracted as indentured servants that would work tobacco fields and cypress groves. Four years later, on January 3, 1624, the couple gave birth to a son, William Tucker. Tucker’s was the first recorded birth and baptism of a Negro child in colonial America. According to historians, William Tucker’s birth marked the beginning of African-American family life. But this is inaccurate. True, Tucker had the same skin color as his African parents, but the law did not distinguish his legal status as a Negro child. In 1662, the year after Virginia recognized slavery by statute, the House of Burgess took an initial step in the formation of black childhood by reversing the traditional English common law that children inherited the status of their fathers. Written in response to the growing problem of interracial mixing which produced mixed-race offspring, the new legislation stated:

Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishmen upon a Negro shall be slave or Free, Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present Grand assembly, that all Children born in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother.8

The passage of this law marked a critical shift from indentured servitude to lifelong slavery as an inherited condition. This kind of process, a process in which children were deeply implicated, was also an important moment in the construction of race. Children born to black
slave women and white men would inherit the legal status and racial identity of their mothers. The law gave white men *carte blanche* to continue their sexual indiscretions and the children born of such interracial liaisons were exempted from the privileges and protections of paternal inheritances.

It is at this moment in 1662, not 39 years earlier in 1632 with Tucker’s birth, that black childhood was first created on the basis of status and heredity to ensure the future of slavery and to maintain racial hierarchy. For the next two centuries, the future of blackness would be hinged to the peculiar institution. At birth, black children born to slave women would acquire fixed identities as slaves with limited and controlled aspirations. As inheritable property, slave children carried both economic and symbolic value. The status of black children was therefore essential for the reproduction and continuation of slavery and later for the maintenance of a Jim Crow racial hierarchy.

During slavery black parents struggled to attach value and emotional meaning to their children’s lives. As historian Wilma King argues in *Stolen Childhood*, slave parents struggled to ensure the survival of their children within a horrible institution where white owners viewed their offspring as “chattel with profit making potential.”9 Likewise, Marie Jenkins Schwartz notes in *Born in Bondage* that slave parents and white owners struggled to establish control over black children. While white owners were in a hurry for slave children to grow up so they could assume the burdens and responsibilities of labor, “parents countered by attempting to prolong childhood while looking for ways to ensure children’s physical and psychological survival.”10

Emancipation rendered the old constructions of childhood under slavery no longer viable. Black parents thus continued their attempts to prolong childhood and nurture the full development of their young despite their exclusion from the category of innocence and vulnerability, the defining components of childhood itself.

A few scholars have produced exciting historical studies centering black children’s lives under slavery and some have also examined childhood under Jim Crow. In 1972, John
Blassingame’s *The Slave Community* drew on autobiographies and testimonies of ex-slaves to unveil the collective mentality, culture and social networks blacks constructed under slavery. Blassingame gave significant attention to childrearing, black family structure, discipline practices and parental attitudes about sex. Five years later, Herbert Gutman’s *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* provided further insight into the lives of children growing up under slavery and during the post-Emancipation period from within the context of the family and community life.\(^{11}\)

Aroused by the controversial *Moynihan Report* thesis that the black family resulted in a modern-day “tangle of pathology” as a consequence of slavery, Gutman uncovered its adaptive features so essential to black survival under slavery and Jim Crow.\(^{12}\) Leon Litwack’s two chapters – “Baptisms” and “Lessons” – in *Trouble in Mind* draws heavily on black narratives and autobiographies to underscore how black children and their parents struggled to negotiate the racial boundaries and etiquette of Jim Crow. Litwack’s was the first to give attention to the varied responses black children had to white supremacy.\(^{13}\)

The translation and U.S. release of Philippe Ariès’s landmark *Centuries of Childhood* in 1965 produced an outpouring of essay collections, monographs, and encyclopedias exploring childhood from various methodological frameworks.\(^{14}\) On the heels of Ariès’s study, scholars began to uncover how important historical events shaped the lives of children and they have considered age, class, ethnicity, and regional differences. In the last decade, there has been renewed interest in the history of childhood as children have taken center stage in national debates over education, new technology, healthcare, poverty, and violence. But as Wilma King notes in her 2005 selection of essays on black childhood, “a void remains in the general literature about African-American children in a historical perspective.”\(^{15}\)

Aside from the studies cited earlier in this discussion, a few recent and notable efforts to explore black children’s lives include Mary Niall Mitchell’s *Raising Freedom’s Child*, which analyzes photographs, newspapers, novels and court cases to demonstrate how competing visions of black childhood were central to pro and anti-slavery arguments and its abolition. Jennifer
Ritterhouse’s *Growing Up Jim Crow* tells of black and white children came to understand themselves as black and white and learned their roles in a segregated society. Susan Cahn’s *Sexual Reckonings* explains how black teenage girls negotiated new freedom through the use of commercial products, leisure space, fashion and entertainment during a period of racial upheaval and moral panic over adolescent sexuality.¹⁶

*Unnatural Selections* by Daylanne English uncovers how literary debates and eugenic ideologies embraced by African Americans were implicated in visions of black childhood during the Harlem Renaissance. English uses photographs alongside the writings of Du Bois and other prominent black literary figures to uncover how a biologized narrative of race progress emerged. Rebecca de Schweinitz’s *If We Could Change the World* connects changing ideologies about children and youth to the modern black freedom struggle and how white and black ideas about childhood influenced the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁷

Slavery studies of black childhood are well formed but the experiences of black children during the post-Emancipation and Jim Crow period are still being understood. While the scholars mentioned have done an excellent job in initiating the history of black childhood, I am interested in directly engaging how black childhood was built into racialist discourses and practices. My study expands the geography of race and childhood beyond the South and interprets black childhood as a national problem, as Du Bois and well understood it to be. In this study, we see childhood and blackness through his efforts. His presence appears in every chapter as either a storyteller or historical source.

While previous historians have demonstrated the impact of race on the lives of real children, I am interested in acknowledging the impact and the centrality of childhood in the construction of racial ideology in American history. To do this, I had to build upon the Jim Crow South and turn to other regions of the country, to diverse cultural sites – the birthing room, medical laboratories in the north and south, psychology laboratories and think factories, the publishing industry of lower Manhattan, courtrooms in the Wild West, juvenile courts in urban
centers of the North and South, and offices of state and federal bureaucracies that realized race on paper through birth registration campaigns. Ultimately this project aims to bring together high and low culture practices and discourses within state and federal bureaucratic practices to demonstrate the web of cultural connections in which black childhood was imbricated.

My investigation led me to examine mainstream historical narratives – the professionalization of pediatrics in the 1880s, the shift from midwifery to obstetrics and gynecology, the rise of the psychology of adolescence, Progressive Era reform movements and purity crusades, the emergence and circulation of visual pornography in the United States and the Atlantic World, the Eugenics Movement, and the settlement of the West. Together these multiple strands of historical developments nationalize the problem of black childhood and underscore its connection to the modernization of American society in the late 19th and early 20th century and the mainstream American historical narrative.

The chapters of this dissertation are presented through different cultural sites, each of them connected to the other, all of them creating a web of cultural practice and racial understanding. The organization of the chapters does not simply aim to present taxonomy of constructs, but rather they are meant to reinforce each other. It is in the totality of the project that one will be able to understand just as much about the construction of white childhood as the construction of black childhood and how they relate to historical change and larger themes in American life. Here we will see how the prolonging of white childhood depended on the curtailment of black childhood. Each chapter reveals how this process unfolded through the lens of pediatrics, the invention of adolescence and rise of developmental psychology, the construction of sexual deviancy, Progressive-era anti-smut campaigns and pornographic pictures, the establishment of new guardianship systems and the defrauding of America’s wealthiest black children.

Chapter One: “If Dat Child Doan Soon Change Colour There’ll Be Trouble in Dis Family!!” – Skin Color, Negro Babies and Hidden Harms of the Jim Crow Science of White
Supremacy explores the immediate imposition of racial identification upon babies at their first moment of consciousness. Though birth is supposed to be a joyous moment in the life of a child, it was also a cruel moment when racial assignment initially occurred. Birth was also the primal moment in the reconstruction of white supremacy and the discourse on blackness after slavery.

The American medical establishment’s efforts to racially classify newborns occurred during an era when black infant and child mortality rates remained consistently double that of white children. While historians have argued that early pediatric pioneers diligently battled to stay the grim reaper’s hand and sought to improve the healthcare and wellbeing of the nation’s children so they could achieve their optimal potential as citizens, this story is not completely accurate. African-American children too were central to pediatric concerns but not for the most benevolent or ethical reasons. Even as black children were largely excluded from late 19th and early 20th-century child saving campaigns and reform efforts, they became experimentation objects in pediatricians’ obsessive drive to explain the ontogenetic development of skin color in black newborns. Early pediatric studies of the black child’s skin color became a template for how white professionals would discuss degeneracy, disease, abnormal growth, inferior cognitive development, and criminal and deviant sexual behavior of children.

This chapter also explores a series of coincidental occurrences surrounding the primal moment of birth: the formation and professionalization of the pediatrics specialty beginning in the 1880s in addition to the Supreme Court’s 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision which narrowed definitions of whiteness and legitimized racial segregation. That resolution gave a new impetus for the American medical community’s interest in skin pigmentation and the establishment of stringent birth registration systems in the United States. State and federal birth registration campaigns along with the South’s racial purity laws, which appeared at the height of the Eugenics Movement, required the race of parents and newborns to be documented on birth certificates. These occurrences led to a collusion of pediatricians and general practitioners, and reluctant black midwives with state and federal authorities to fix and record skin color on paper at the moment of
birth so that individuals could not slip across the color line and subvert the Jim Crow system.
This chapter connects African-American history to broader American narratives by revealing how
the history of childbirth, midwifery, pediatrics, and the growth of Jim Crow era state and federal
bureaucracies acted together as instruments of racial hierarchy.

Chapter Two: “Adolescents of Adult Size:” Developmental Psychology, Mental Testing
and the Invention of Racialized Adolescence carries the discussion from birth and infancy
through the next life cycle of childhood wherein skin color and racial identity was fixed but had
to be re-crafted to assure that black children remained under the strictures of social control. Here,
during the period of adolescence the black child transitioned from the cute pickaninny into a
young person with possibility and whose sexual potential became externalized, obvious and
threatening to others. This chapter tracks the theories of G. Stanley Hall – “the father of
adolescence” – and his acolytes who imported biogenetic theories about race into their studies of
childhood development and construction of adolescence as an important new life stage. This
chapter draws primarily on the writings of anthropologists, ethnologists, craniometrists, child
psychologists and the history of intelligence testing, all which aimed to demonstrate the
inferiority of black children. Child specialists used their expertise and scientific procedures to
reinvent race. Hall’s use of anatomist Ernst Haeckel’s “recapitulation theory,” for example,
posed that blacks’ ancestors never advanced to a higher intelligence level and so the modern
black child remained psychologically different from the white child, unable to evolve beyond
sexual impulse and the race’s inferior developmental state.

The fact that Hall's theories were so widely accepted suggests a curious paradox about
the era’s conceptions of childhood. Embracing the nineteenth-century notion of the “innocent"
child, white society was still reluctant to part with the Calvinist conception of "original sin." The
paradox was resolved by making the black child the sole model and repository of the filth,
indecency, and evil once used to describe all humankind's original state. Hall’s acolytes and
other developmental psychologists argued that when the frontal lobes of the black child’s brain
prematurely closed in adolescence, the black child became a sexual defiant that no amount of moral or educational training could redeem. The widely influential recapitulation theory impacted the amount and type of schooling black children received.

By the 1920s, biological theories of race shifted to a focus on more cultural and social differences as mental testing emerged as a new system of classification and social control in a rapidly changing and diverse industrial society. Thanks to the efforts of psychologists Henry H. Goddard and Lewis M. Terman, intelligence testing gained widespread legitimacy and became a multi-million dollar industry that helped shaped the country’s educational structure, one that used test scores to sort, track and channeling children of color into academically water-down classrooms. When tested alongside white children during the early period of adolescence, the black child was said to be as smart or smarter than the white child. But between ages 10 to 15 the black child’s brain stopped growing intellectually, retaining only superior athletic skills, quick reflexes, musical rhythm, defective motor control, and oversized genitals, which caused them to become sexually active early on and act out their savage instincts in dangerous ways. It is no accident that these studies served as a backdrop to lynchings and unpunished rapes of black children. It was here that I.Q. testing and modern ideas about black children’s educability, criminality, and precocious sexuality originate.

While the number of white southerners who knew about Hall’s theories cannot be established, certainly President Theodore Roosevelt was familiar with Hall’s works. Hall’s ideas were then disseminated through the general population via Roosevelt and through the works of his influential students at Clark University who went on to become leading authorities in their disciplines. Given Roosevelt’s notions about “race suicide,” white southerners might have regarded lynching not only as an obligatory masculine right of passing, but also as a way to keep “fecund” black Americans from gaining any ground in the “warfare of the cradle.” Hall’s ideas about savagery in early childhood together with larger anxieties of being outbred by inferior
blacks were connected to southern white parents’ willingness – even eagerness – to allow their children to witness or participate in lynchings.

Chapter Three: “Go ‘Long, White Man! I Ain’t No September Morn’.” Pornographic Postcards, Popular Perversion and the Racialization of Childhood Innocence moves the racialist themes from the psychology and medical lab to entertainment culture to show how the high discourse of science became popularized through the circulation of hundreds of cheap picture postcards produced from the late 1890s on to the early 1950s. This chapter explains how visual culture served as a kind of fantasy assassination and eroticization of the black child in a period when reformers argued that sexuality had to be the most important line of demarcation between adults and children. In postcard images drawn by famous and lesser-known white male and female artists, black children are portrayed as incompetent, gamblers and thieves, lazy and sexually precocious. As these objects of material cultural trafficked through the mails and other public markets, this joking arm of white supremacy attempted to mask their hateful, violent and pornographic themes.

This third chapter extends beyond the usual content analysis of visual culture presented by previous studies by connecting these visual artifacts to the history of Progressive era crusades against vice which sought to protect white children from being exposed to sex, gambling, alcohol, and other kinds of “filth.” Here, for the first time, reformer, anti-vice crusader and United States postal inspector Anthony J. Comstock “meets” African-American childhood. This chapter highlights Comstock’s founding of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, his censorship campaigns and activities to stamp out “smut” to save white youth from moral degradation while simultaneously neglecting the massive circulation of postcards of maligned and sexualized black children.

While some scholars have analyzed late 19th and early 20th century images of romanticized white children and argued that these images of fully-clothed, angelic-looking images are in some ways erotic, this chapter explodes that argument by placing examples of such
postcards next to images of naked black children engaged in sex acts such as fellatio, scat, anal sex, and dendrophilia – sex with trees. Postcards provided an outlet for whites to artistically express negative views about black children’s sexuality, as various kinds of animals do the work of castrating the genitalia of black boys, and black boys act as stand-ins engaged in the physical assaults and sex acts against black girls.

When placed next to images of white children produced during this period, the stark juxtaposition of the two demonstrates once again that black and white childhood are historically and tragically linked as imagined opposites, constitutive and dependent upon each other. The African-American counter narrative to this visual degradation was evident in black parents’ participation in Du Bois’s publication of the Brownies Books, the first-ever magazine for black children. The magazine grew out of the Crisis Magazine’s annual Children’s Number, in which parents sent hundreds of photographs of children to be displayed and celebrated. The Children’s Number and the Brownies Books were designed to develop self-respect, race pride, refinement, and education among black youth. Later, this chapter also examines the research findings of Kenneth and Mamie Clark on black children’s attitudes toward skin color. Their legendary doll study was critical to the Supreme Court’s landmark decision to strike down “separate but equal” schooling in Brown v. Board of Education.

The fourth chapter: “A Game of High Stakes:” White Guardians, Wealthy Black Children, Race Robbery and Murder in Muskogee County, Oklahoma, 1899-1934 takes a journey to the rough and tumble Wild West. The specific region of focus is Oklahoma Territory after the Civil War. As we encounter western land grabbers, oil barons, and shady opportunists hoping to profit from free market development of oil fields, the chapter centralizes the lives of Creek Freedman minors negotiating topsy-turvy race relations between black, red, and white people prior to statehood in 1908 and the adoption of Jim Crow laws. The story of black childhood in Oklahoma foregrounds the contingency and fluidity of race in the American West. Here, oil and money creates a different kind of black childhood that existed nowhere else in the world.
When Creek Freedman minors, black children who were the descendants of slaves owned by Native Americans of the Five Civilized Tribes, inherited oil rich lands by sheer luck, they became targets of greedy Oklahoma white men who developed schemes to rob thousands of black and Native American children of their estates. Under the 1887 Dawes General Allotment Act and subsequent land acts, thousands of black children who were citizens of the Five Civilized Tribes were assigned millions of acres of seemingly worthless lands. This chapter explores the mayhem created by the federal government’s policy governing Indian resettlement that turned Native American and black Freedmen minors into millionaires over night. The chapter opens with the 1911 dynamiting of two landowning children living in Taft, Oklahoma by politically well-connected white men and their hired black and Indian accomplices. The children’s mother uses funds from her children’s estate to hire a team of lawyers to prosecute the men.

The chapter then uncovers the devious plot to kill the two Taft children and then the subsequent trial, which led to a black and white man being sentenced to life in prison for the murders. A year after the murders, the grieving black mother gains full control over her children’s estates and uses money to memorialize them with a lavish headstone. The sentencing of a white man for the murders of two black children was the first of record in the United States but the jury’s decision can also be seen as a political dodge to keep the federal government from interfering in the state’s fraudulent guardianship system. Additionally, this chapter also reveals how feckless Progressive-era child-savers were who investigated crimes against these freedman minors. White men would continue defrauding children well into the 1930s until the federal government finally stepped in, too little too late.

Moving beyond the murders of the two children, the chapter then gives attention to the six wealthiest black children in the world whose incomes from oil revenues ranged from a few thousand dollars up to $50,000 a month. It uncovers how the NAACP’s Children’s Department, Du Bois’s investigative reports in the Crisis, and campaigns by the black press exposed the robbery and murders of wealthy black children while forcing the state’s governor to implement
measures to protect the estate of the world richest black girl – Sarah Rector, who unlike her black and Indian peers, was fortunate enough to gain control of her estate once she turned 18. Despite one black child’s successful ability to gain control over her property and optimize her wealth as she passes into womanhood, the full scope of the Oklahoma story is about the physical act of destroying black childhood. It is unfortunately a foreshadowing of the continuation of that destruction in a post-modern American society and African American’s continued struggle against it.

The conclusion to this project moves forward to this new century, one in which the election of the nation’s first black president inspired media pundits, bloggers, and ordinary Americans to debate whether the nation has entered a “post-racial” period, one in which the problems of race are supposedly no longer as potent. But an on-the-ground look at the racial disparities in education, criminal justice, healthcare, housing, and wealth reveals that presidency of Barack Obama has by no means resolved the complexities raised by Du Bois’s challenge nearly a century ago. According to the 2010 Census, black children are three times as likely to be poor as white children. Forty percent of black children are born to poor families, compared with eight percent of white children. And a black boy born in the past decade has a one-in-three chance of going to prison in his lifetimes.\(^{19}\)

In February 2011, The Children’s Defense Fund released a report titled “Black Children and Families are Facing the Worst Crisis Since Slavery.” The report found that at the top of serious concerns the black communities include child poverty caused by rampant black unemployment and the criminal justice system’s unequal treatment of black Americans, especially the cradle and school-to-prison pipelines. The report stated: “Most black adults believe the criminal justice system is doing more to hurt than to help black children. Half of the young people surveyed say that ending up in jail or prison is a very serious problem for the black young they know.”\(^{20}\)
In her nationally syndicated Child Watch column, Children’s Defense Fund president Marian Wright Edelman asserted – “Today, the toxic cocktail of poverty, illiteracy, racial disparities, violence and mass incarceration is sentencing millions of children to end, powerless, and hopeless lives and threatens to undermine the past half century of racial and social progress.”

Edelman called on community networks and institutions and an intergenerational movement to protect and invest in black children and correct America’s addiction to punishment and incarceration. My work is part of Edelman’s effort and the long tradition of African-American advocacy on behalf of black youth. But I argue that civil rights leaders and other child advocates must first take a moment to understand the centrality of black childhood to the historical logic of race and racial discrimination in hopes that it will better equip them in their civil rights agenda.

In viewing the long span of American history, from the colonial period to the present, what we can see are the ways in which racial formation and ideology has adapted itself to new circumstances and continues to preserve racial hierarchy. Racial ideas about children have taken a life of their own, one that is not often interrogated. Today the purposes are often veiled in a design of medical and social science discourses, standardized testing, and tracking in public schools. Racially coded messages about black childhood reappear in media analysis of street kids, statistics on high school dropouts, high out-of-wedlock births, pediatric studies of early puberty in disproportionate numbers of black girls, the pathology of ghetto girls, the early onset of menstruation and the dangerous young black male thug. The reification of racialized childhood now seemingly acts as a natural and autonomous force. We fail to understand the historical specificity of where these ideas came from and what their original functions were even as they persist as a powerful hegemonic force shaping attitudes and polices toward black children, now expanding to even embrace Hispanic youngsters.

My hope is that this dissertation invites a moment of reflection upon how ideas about black childhood have shaped our understandings and assumptions of what is possible and what is
made. Since racial ideologies about childhood are constructs that are made, they can be undone if this nation wants to achieve such a goal and become the true democracy it ought to be. Du Bois saw the corrective possibility through children when he wrote: “In the treatment of the child, the world foreshadows its own future and faith. All words and all thinking lead to the child – to the vast immortality and wide sweep of infinite possibility which the child represents.”

As the ardent champion of black children prophesized almost a century ago, America could not and will not become the democracy it ought to be until it stops privileging racial ideology over the infinite possibilities for all children.

10 Marie Jenkins Schwartz, Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 155, 208-209; See also Marie Jenkins Schwartz, Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). Focusing exclusively on the reproductive health care of enslaved women, Jenkins Schwartz argues that birthing black babies played a critical role in maintaining the slave system of Antebellum America.
20 Ibid.
22 Du Bois, Darkwater, 220.
Chapter 1

“If Dat Child Doan Soon Change Colour There’ll Be Trouble in Dis Family!!”
Skin Color, Negro Babies and Hidden Harms of the Jim Crow Science of White Supremacy

On October 2, 1897, a telegram arrived at the Seventh Ward settlement house where race man and public intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois had immersed himself among poor black residents while researching and writing his seminal sociological study *The Philadelphia Negro*. The bit of yellow paper carried happy news with biblical resonance – “Unto you a child is born.” As the fear and joy of new fatherhood mingled together, Du Bois did not conceal his anxious concern about his son’s physical features – “I wondered how it looked and how it felt, – what were its eyes, and how its hair curled and crumpled itself.”¹

With his swarthy light complexion, frizzy black hair, a long narrow-bridged nose, Du Bois was at times uneasy about his own racial identity and yet in the subtext of his writings it is clear that he was also proud of his hybrid European and African features. His olive-complexioned, golden-haired son’s arrival came a year after the triumph of legalized segregation, amid genocidal racial violence, and as legions of visibly white Negroes continued to cross the color line each year to escape second-class citizenship.² The Supreme Court’s 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision legitimizing the “separate-but-equal” doctrine had defined race as something visible and biologically based even though the plaintiff in that case, a one-eighth black Homer Plessy, was visibly white.

While the *Plessy* decision exploited the slippage between skin color and race to sanction various structures of black subordination, it left unresolved questions about the ontological certainty of racial identity and about who possessed the authority and competency to make on-the-spot decisions about who was black or white without proper scientific procedures.³ Much of the racial anxiety of the period was linked to this crucial Supreme Court decision, along with the subsequent rise of “passers,” and the hysteria over interracial sex. The *Plessy* decision served as
the basis for white supremacists’ increased obsession with minute racial distinctions and was an impetus behind the medical community’s preoccupation with skin pigmentation.

By the end of the 1890s, medical scientists became increasingly attentive to black infants and even stillborn fetuses, using them as clinical “material” to understand childhood illnesses, address high infant and child mortality rates, and to solve urgent question about racial classification. No part of the black children’s body escaped scrutiny. In addition to skin color, special attention was given to the skull, face, teeth, cranium, pelvis, genitals, spine, toes, jaws, lips, nose, and hair. As David Hooglan Noon has explained in his powerful essay “The Evolution Of Beasts and Babies,” scientists in the emerging fields of child development study gazed into the past and poached from evolutionary theories to explain the embryonic and postnatal development of children’s bodies. Drawing on the evolutionary principle – *ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny* – scientists rationalized that children’s development “expressed the body’s ancestral memory, condensing and telescoping the historical process of the entire species.” Evolutionary biology, as it related to children’s development was also used to anchor theories about racial difference and racial hierarchy.4

Noon has also maintained that the late 19th and early 20th century was a time when children were considered closer to nature than civilization and bound to a deep evolutionary and racial past. Building upon Noon’s argument, the black child, as child, occupied the unfortunate position of being by virtue of his or her youth, closer to the “natural” birth state of the black race. As such, the surveillance of the black child’s body, especially the development of skin color in the first days of life, proved essential to the demonstration of racialist theory and racialist medical practice, especially the pediatrics specialty. New babies were especially anxiety provoking because their racial indeterminacy in the first days of life suggested the fearful possibility that racial boundaries could not be maintained no matter how much government bureaucracies and science attempted to fix racial identity or prohibit interracial sex.
The bodies of black children became raw material in the post-bellum science of white supremacy, one that was quite legitimate to northerners and southerners. Understanding the important episode of birth as a defining moment in racial identification is essential to our ability to fully conceptualize the significance of black childhood in the reconstruction of racial hierarchy and birth as a primal moment in the production of racial identity after slavery. With the modernization of American society under way at the turn of the twentieth century, a different kind of national racial ideology was constructed. The removal of the legal apparatus of slavery led to the concomitant necessity for a new ideology of control over newly freed blacks. But this also meant that blacks, like European immigrants and other immigrants of color, were moveable migrating bodies responding to a free labor wage market required by the North and South. Paradoxically or ironically, racial ideology in the guise of science became national as the North joined the discourse and participated in various forms of social control. In fact, with the assistance of the *Plessy* decision the South may have worked out measures to control blacks in a quotidian practical way better than the quickly urbanizing North where anonymity was a problematic issue.

In this precarious environment of Jim Crow hysteria and racial violence, Du Bois was astutely aware that a catalogue of phenotypic features carried certain privileges that could determine a child’s ability to navigate a segregated society as well as intra-racial social hierarchies. Also cognizant that the presence of mixed-race individuals frustrated the flawed logic of racial difference, it is not surprising that Du Bois worried about how his hybrid ancestral traits had physically imprinted themselves on the body of his newborn son.

Disturbed, he asked: “Why was his hair tinted with gold? An evil omen was Golden haired in my life. Why had not the brown of his Eyes crushed out and killed the blue? – for brown were His father’s eyes, and his father’s father’s.”

This was a poignant optical moment when young Burghardt’s body became a problematic symbol of the instability of racial identity, a reminder of the violence, shame and guilt attached to
slavery and miscegenation, and a sign of a black father’s angst over his own paternity and genetic potency. Despite his uneasiness, Du Bois and his wife’s love for their son deepened over the first days and months of his life. But if a man of Du Bois’s intelligence and social status worried about the somatic traits of a white oppressor manifesting in his offspring’s features, then the larger white society was even more anxious about the specter of blackness threatening the purity of white bodies in an era when southern states narrowed legal definitions of whiteness down to persons with less than one drop of black blood.6

The anxieties surrounding the birth of a well-known black figure’s baby can tell us a great deal about the construction of race in American life. While historians have said much about the racialist social history of medicine and other forms of race science and eugenics, they have glanced over the meaning of birth in understanding white supremacy and the discourse on blackness. While the science of racism is well covered, pediatric literature provides an untapped source of evidence of how crucial black birth was to creating the fixed identity of blackness and shaping the development of a national and global pediatrics specialty.

Burghardt was just the kind of new baby whose physiognomy was especially anxiety provoking because his racial indeterminacy suggested the alarming possibility that racial boundaries could not be maintained no matter how much science, the courts, or government bureaucracies attempted to fix racial identity or prohibit interracial sex. Racially ambiguous individuals heightened distrust in a post-Emancipation society with unstable racial categories and fears of hidden blackness lurking in blood. Having a single strain of black blood or the nightmarish possibility of giving birth to a black baby terrified white Americans and provoked an entire culture’s obsessive demand for new ideologies and scientific technologies on how to detect and quantify blackness in order to present race as something uncomplicated, permanent and easy to determine. Like gender assignment, Americans at all levels of society insisted on certainty rather than ambiguity in racial designation.7
This chapter explores the glaring complexities of race expressed at the moment of birth, the invention of the pediatrics specialty, and ultimately an international cast of pediatricians’ and other self-styled medical experts’ obsessive drive to explain why black infants were born with white or pink skin. Throughout this transitional era, skin color, not the shocking high black infant mortality rates, commanded the medical profession’s attention. And in response to the societal verdict of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, it became necessary for a resolution of skin color debates leading to the collusion of pediatricians, other medical science professionals, and reluctant black midwives with state and federal birth registration campaigns that would fix skin color on paper. This discussion demonstrates how the history of childbirth, midwifery, pediatrics and the growth of state and federal bureaucracies contributed to the social engineering of race and acted together as instruments of racial hierarchy in the post-Emancipation period.

While Burghart DuBois was the visual acknowledgement of the threat of black children, there were several other important developments that signaled changing societal practices. Emancipation figuratively turned millions of black slaves white as they laid claim to the political rights of American citizenship reserved for white males. The Jim Crow era was filled with numerous challenges to racial equality. However, the introduction of the 1890 Mississippi Plan, the pioneering strategy for black disenfranchisement, coupled with the *Plessy* decision brought a new understanding of race into a wider context. The senior Du Bois, along with other black leaders, confronted a generation of political change that was often expressed in their written words on racial identity and their understanding that black childhood would be central to the future and progress of a new kind of free black citizenry.

The adoption of the “Grandfather Clause,” which stipulated that only sons or male descendant of anyone who had the right to vote prior to 1867 could inherit his ancestral voting rights, proved useful to those wanting to bar black males from the ballot. Meanwhile, the *Plessy* case addressed the aspirational group of light-skinned blacks from securing rights and prospering in white society. And yet there were still other blacks that slipped through the borders of race.
Therefore, childhood, not adulthood, had to emerge as a new battlefront if whites were to maintain supremacy. If it was coincidental that scientific research in pediatrics began to expand after 1890, it was not surprising that this new science became the tool of a racist society.

**Seizing the Moment of Birth**

Before the birthing process began its dramatic evolution into a scientific medical practice in the late 19th century, Americans regarded the affair as unclean, painful, and potentially deadly for all women and children regardless of race. Bleeding chords, postpartum hemorrhage, heart failure, fever, infection and shock dragged many unfortunate victims into the grave. For expectant mothers, physicians, and midwives, and other the perils of childbirth, from conception to delivery, inspired multiple anxieties, hysteria, superstitious beliefs and practices.9

The womb itself was considered a specter, a locus of mystery and chaos where a fetus could succumb to the tyranny of the uterus, the will of God, and most important for our story, the influence of remote ancestors and the “savage” stages of humankind’s racial evolution. Drunken sex, wild animals, barren women, jealous neighbors, angry spirits, frightening Negroes, black incubus demons, and a pregnant mother’s own wayward imagination and emotions were also believed to “mark” the physical and mental development of a child in utero.10 For white Americans, such anxieties were heightened by fears of baby switching and the possibility of giving birth to a black baby that was either the result of unlawful interracial sex, a spouse duped by a visibly white Negro who crossed the color line, or from a strain of black blood suddenly manifesting itself through an offspring after lying dormant in a family for generations.

Perhaps the most notable examples of baby switching and racial hysteria first appeared in works of fiction. Mark Twain’s 1894 *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is illustrative of racial passing. It is the tale of a one-sixteenth black slave who illicitly switched her white-skinned black son with her master’s white son. Born on the same day with blue eyes and blonde hair, the infants were indistinguishable. Twain’s story followed these white-skinned boys as slavery, freedom and the
illusions of racial ideology shaped their growth and social development. Once the deception was finally discovered, the two were switched back. The black man was re-enslaved and the white man gained freedom. However, the white man now carried the scars of blackness in his dialect and manner. The story shed light on the fact that Twain, Author’s of numerous stories on passing – *Huck Finn* and *The Prince and the Pauper* – believed that environment could make a difference in behavior. The white-black man as well as the black-white man were equally threatening to the white world.\(^{11}\)

Hence, guarding the port of entry to white status in an effort to preserve racial hierarchy made the racial classification of newborn babies a pressing issue after slavery, especially in the wake of the *Plessy* decision. As Gertrude Jacinta Fraser has argued in *African American Midwifery in the South*, the privacy of the birthing room provided opportunities for individuals to slip across the color line.\(^{12}\) Thus, failing to seize the moment of birth to properly assign individuals to a race jeopardized the delicate social order of the racial caste system. Within a generation of the Mississippi Plan, it was necessary for American society either by science or law or both to provide safeguards for the white race. Each child needed to have documented proof of his or her race in order to be properly positioned in a segregated society.

In the ensuing chaos and panic, the world of fact and fiction collided into a frenzy of mixed emotions. Novels continually appeared highlighting the dangers of racial passing and intermarriage. And at the same time, newspapers produced stories that matched the hysteria found in works of literature. A call for racial reform blurred the lines between science and the law. The delivery of children, the determination of race and the recording of that information emerged and expanded from 1900 to 1950. Black babies born with very light or white skin, whether their parents were mixed-race or not, complicated this process, confounded doctors and scientists, and upset ordinary Americans’ previously assumed notions about skin coloration and racial identification.
By 1900, science had not yet firmly established that as a general rule, black and white
babies are often indistinguishable by skin color at birth. Newborns not properly assigned to a
designated racial category by a midwife or physician posed problems. Abandoned newborns
sometimes added to these problems. A genre of sensational news stories of abandoned
“changeling” babies raised the alarming possibility that blacks could change into whites and vice
versa. Consider one such story that set in motion a train of humorous and tragic events.

On the morning of July 4, 1905, a newborn was found abandoned on the side of a
highway in the small rural village of Pleasantville, New York. The New York Times reported that
its finders took the “smiling, bouncing girl,” soon to be named Martha Washington, to the
Westchester County Almshouse where a childless white woman, saw the infant and “liked its
looks.”

Mrs. Quick, after consulting with her husband, successfully persuaded the almshouse
authorities to transfer the newborn to the couple’s care and that same day the family “went off
home smiling happy.” Other than bouts of fussiness and symptoms of baby colic, everything
went smoothly in the Quick household those first days. The adoptive parents said they were
“happy to care for her through all of its infant ailments.” But a week later, the baby developed a
new ailment that baffled the carpenter and his “good wife.”

The Times noted that by day seven the infant “was growing an inch a day and that Mr.
and Mrs. Quick grew more fond of her. The baby was healthy and cooed away, but her skin had
begun to be several shades darker.” Mrs. Quick tried to remedy the problem by giving the baby
additional doses of medicine, “but the infant’s hair began to kink and her skin grew decidedly
darker.” Convinced that their little girl had “some horrible disease,” the adoptive parents
hurriedly called the family physician.

Upon his examination, the knowing doctor smiled and stated that: “the baby is not ill.”
He found the baby girl to be medically normal, and delivered a shocking diagnosis that the child’s
parents “were evidently colored so it could not be expected that the baby should be white.”
Instantly, the Quicks were faced with a dilemma. Mrs. Quick asked her husband: “We can’t raise a Negro baby, Peter, can we?” As a white couple living in the North without Jim Crow laws, but with no obvious social or legal precedent for interracial adoption, they could decide to keep the baby or take her back to the Almshouse.

While Mrs. Quick was apprehensive and considered keeping the baby, her husband’s answer came swiftly. “We’ll take it to the almshouse and tell them we don’t want it. They’ll have to take it back,” he said.

The Quicks returned little Martha Washington to the Westchester County Almshouse. Exactly one month later, a *New York Times* reporter visited the child there and found her “reposing peacefully.” The Times reporter noted that the colored baby was “not getting the petting she received during her short stay with her parents by adoption.”

Exploiting racial fears, newspapers from Maine to California printed stories about Martha Washington’s shocking metamorphosis. They told of a baby that came into the world with white skin and had suddenly changed her color. Like the nightmarish symbol of the monstrous, soulless changeling baby that disguised itself as a healthy infant and wreaked havoc on families in classical folklore, Washington’s seemingly innate ability to alter her own skin color dramatized the cultural fears surrounding birth and uncertainties about fixed racial identity. Changeling narratives typically involved fairies or trolls abducting healthy babies in exchange for their own deformed offspring. The changeling disrupted a peaceful home until its true nature was revealed and then returned to its real parents or killed. Real life stories of changeling babies provoked a serious question – Could people really change their skin color and hence their race?

As Elizabeth Reis has powerfully demonstrated in *Bodies in Doubt*, this question first emerged during the antebellum period amid larger worries about the threat of dishonesty, illicit sexual relations, and startling reports of people suddenly and involuntarily changing their race or sex. In this context, Southern manumission, emancipation in the North, and the growth of the free black population created opportunities for racial mixing and inspired intense white efforts to
stiffen control over African Americans while spurring scientists to contemplate whether blacks were a different species and how they arrived at their skin color. As these same concerns and questions migrated to the next century, the idea of a Negro child entering the world with white skin and then suddenly breaking out of a fixed racial identity by changing its color challenged the idea that race was a permanently fixed biological characteristic.

For some readers, news stories of a black baby from Pleasantville, New York changing her color may have evoked similar references to Thomas Dixon’s popular 1902 Klan novel *The Leopard’s Spots: A Romance of the White Man’s Burden*. Dixon promoted the idea that a new kind of dangerous black child had replaced the old loyal Negro of the slave south after Emancipation left the region war-torn and psychically disillusioned. In his mind, black children were degenerates born into criminality and prone to violence. Young black males were animalistic deviants fueled by an uncontrollable urge to rape white females.

Dixon argued that this new Negro was a “plague” that if left unchecked would “throw the blight of its shadow over future generations, a veritable Black Death for the land and its peoples.” He urged whites to protect the race and its future offspring against the dangers of race mixing. A mere drop of Negro blood, he theorized, visibly revealed itself in offspring at birth – “The big nostrils, flat nose, massive jaw, protruding lip and kinky hair will register their animal marks over the proudest intellect and the rarest beauty of any other race.” This depiction of the black child as a monstrous figure, an object of fear, race hatred, revulsion, and contamination was characteristic of the literary representations of the black child during the period.

It is unknown if the Quicks read *The Leopard’s Spots* before visibly witnessing their child’s skin darken and hair kink before their eyes. It is also not known whether the couple had read popular “black baby tales” such as Gertrude Atherton’s *Senator North* (1900), Lee Durham’s *The Call of the South* (1908) and others which told of white women and passing mulattoes sinking into stupor or dropping dead after giving birth to black babies. All of these stories were all part of the cultural universe at the time of Martha Washington’s birth and death. Circulating
alongside black baby tales were narratives about passing, which told tragedies of racial mixing. Some plots centered on a visibly white man or woman with a slight or questionable strain of Negro blood from some remote ancestor who married a white person only to have their secret and shadowy misfortune revealed by the birth of a black child. Others detailed similar catastrophes of whites whose ancestors on both sides passed for several generations only to be suddenly confronted by a family skeleton in the shape of a black baby. In some passing narratives, ambiguous looking children devoid of bodily markers of race, symbolize the complexities of the process of determining racial identity.

While black baby tales played on white anxieties, some scientists confirmed fears about miscegenation, racial degeneracy and “race suicide.” Race scientists, in proselytizing theories about white superiority and black inferiority, supported a philosophy of social segregation, advocated sterilization of blacks, immigrants and other undesirables as the declining birthrate of white Anglo-Saxons stoked national fears of white extinction. Theodore Roosevelt blamed white middle-class women, calling them “race criminals” for not embracing marriage and procreation while popular media outlets drove home the message that white women were conservators of the race and guardians of its blood. The survival of the white race thus depended on white women’s reproductive choices.

Eugenicists interviewed for articles such as Cosmopolitan’s 1913 – “Do You Choose Your Children?” – emphasized that mankind’s genetic future could be shaped by judiciously breeding out abnormal traits through the careful selection of marriage partners. The piece told women: “You stand at a meeting point between galaxies of ancestors and galaxies of prospective progeny. In your system lies the bit of germ-plasm that – miracles of miracles! – conveys the potentialities of good and evil of the past – the epitome of the racial history of all your myriad of ancestors.” This kind of fable that exploited fears about the frightening possibilities of events that could go wrong in the womb mirrors biologist’s arguments that children inherited from animal and ancient humans. As Noon argues, scientists curious about human origins speculated
that children, in their fetal development, “replayed an evolutionary trek [which] extended a familiar greeting to an entire zoo of disgruntled beasts.”

Importing from 19th-century evolutionary biology, eugenicists argued that individuals not only inherited traits exclusively from their parents and remote ancestors, but also mingled together in an individual’s germ-plasm are desirable and defective traits of thousands of ancestral ghosts, traits which are irrevocably fixed at birth. Eugenicists warned that without foresight and knowledge of one’s genetic ancestry, injudicious breeding invited potential disaster – moral depravation, congenital diseases, in addition to crippled, scrofulous, “backward,” criminal, sexually perverted and other degenerate types of offspring. While these traits, including skin color, sometimes skipped two or three generations, they could still reappear with full force in a descendant of a remote ancestor.

Scientists writing on the ancestral laws of heredity also posited that children could inherit from the savage stages of mankind’s racial evolution. Some argued that white “idiots” were throwbacks to some dark ancestral taint – to more primitive black, brown and yellow races. “Mongoloids,” “morons,” “imbeciles,” or “feeble-minded” white children were commonly racialized as Asian. What is today more appropriately labeled as Down Syndrome, was first introduced in science as mongolism in 1866 by English physician John Langdon Down. According to Down, mongoloid babies born to whites inherited ethnic traits such as yellowish skin, slanty eyes, round cheeks, thick lips and sparse brown hair. The presence of Asian features in white children was proof of the degeneration of the superior white type to the lower Mongolian type. “The being able to refer the child to an ethnic type other than Caucasian settles beyond question that the cause of the malady, whatever it may be was antecedent to birth.”

Down’s racial theory of mental defectiveness gained currency in Europe and the United States and had remarkable staying power in the scientific community well into the 20th century. Subsequent researchers offered multiple theories about the causes of mental defectiveness, from drunken sex and tuberculosis, to stress and “fright” during pregnancy. By 1925, eugenicist
Charles B. Davenport used Down’s threat by comparing feeble-mindedness to Negro features. In contrast to the white-skinned Plessy babies, at least short life expectancy spared mongoloid children from maturing into a threat. Because mongoloid babies generally died before age ten, the full import of scientific racists’ concerns were masked until later medical advances improved their mortality rates beyond adolescence.

Keeping in mind the larger universe of cultural and scientific ideas about changeling babies, racial degeneracy, and genetic throwbacks, what transpired in the Quick household that summer of 1905 was a sensational story for journalists of the time. The *Washington Post* dispatch on Martha Washington’s death noted – “if the colored baby had been found and adopted by a colored family there would have been nothing said about the occurrence, but the fact that she had been taken by a white family and afterward changed her color, was unusual.” The story had mystery, drama and fear, all coalescing around the particularly dramatic and important moment of birth. The national media attention resulted in a flood of letters to the almshouse penned by childless black couples seeking to adopt Martha Washington. White women too inquired about the baby girl, expressing that “it would be a novelty to bring up a pickaninny.”

However, just weeks later, on August 20, the front-page headline of *The Washington Post* blazed – “WHITE PICKANINNY IS DEAD.” It is unclear what caused the one-month-old infant’s death. Records from the West Chester County Almshouse during that time period indicate that large numbers of “inmates” at the crowded, squalid facility succumbed to outbreaks of smallpox and other infectious diseases. It is plausible that Martha Washington fell victim to some fatal illness. Had she not been abandoned and left in the care of an unsanitary almshouse, the infant’s chances of survival may or may not have been any better. A sad fact of life at the beginning of the 20th century was that all babies had a tenuous hold on life. That year, Martha Washington was just one of 25,827 infants that died in New York State, which had a 19 percent mortality rate for children under age one and a 28 percent mortality rate for children under age five.
Similar stories of changeling babies captured headlines during the opening decades of the twentieth century. In the fall of 1912, a one-day-old white-skinned baby boy was abandoned in some weeds in the northwest section of Washington, D.C. Police officers took the infant to the 15th Street Foundling Home where he was treated for exposure. In the meantime, Captain Doyle and some of the “boys” at the all-white Eighth Precinct made plans to adopt the infant as its mascot. When word came days later that the baby’s skin turned black and the child was in fact a Negro, plans to adopt the child were cancelled.27

In June 1907, Annie Laymon, a 30 year-old white servant appeared before Magistrate Whitman in the Yorkville Police Court holding a “coffee-colored” baby. The news dispatch does not tell us why she appeared in court. Laymon, whose husband George was a German Jew, had given birth two weeks earlier. When asked, she gave a remarkable explanation for her baby’s brown tinge. She did not admit to engaging in voluntary sexual relations with a black man, but said she had undergone a spiritualistic marriage, which darkened her child’s skin. “Julius Caesar performed the marriage,” she told the judge. “The spirits must work through a material body in this world.” According to Laymon, several other spirits showed up at the ceremony. Those “spirit guests” promised to act as guardians to her future offspring. It was likely, Laymon explained, that the spirits “had designed the color of the baby for some good purpose known only to themselves.”

Doctors at Bellevue Hospital where the child was born, scoffed at Laymon’s spiritualistic explanation, but offered a remarkable medical rationale for the strange occurrence. “Fright” during gestation, the medical staff explained, transformed Laymon’s baby’s skin color. Laymon told the doctors and the judge that while pregnant, she witnessed two Negro women fighting with knives.28 During this era, some medical minds asserted that “maternal impressions” such as nightmares, being frightened by dogs or crossing paths with black people, particularly black men, could turn a white woman’s child black or cause other types of faulty physical or mental development in utero.29 The story of Annie Laymon’s “spiritually” marked baby is an example of
the ways in which ideas about skin color, in a world without DNA and paternity tests, could be used as a defense against charges of adultery and voluntary interracial sex resulting in the birth of a black baby.  

Aside from the stories of the Pleasantville, D.C. and New York City infants, in most cases, when the issue of skin color and racial passing was discussed in the media or popular fiction, it involved a white person being duped by a passing spouse. But in the case of Martha Washington in particular, two well-meaning white parents had been fooled, without malice by a black newborn. Underlying the public’s fascination with this infant and the others that captured media attention was fear of the biological uncertainties of race in an American society still grappling with questions about the place of the Negro four decades after slavery’s demise. News stories, plays, fictive tales and medical anecdotes reveal that it was popular for Americans to feel and believe that race was fixed. But the story of an abandoned black baby’s brief integration into the home of a white adoptive family prior to her re-abandonment and subsequent death proved that in reality, physical marks of race were uncertain.

The stories of Martha Washington, Burghardt Du Bois and the other abandoned babies are laden with meaning. They reveal the complexity of reactions and choices that blacks and whites made in response to racially indistinguishable newborns. On the one hand, Du Bois and his wife resemble the angst and openness that black parents displayed when bonding to infants with mixed racial features. On the other hand, despite a short bonding period, Mrs. Quick’s decision, grounded in medical confirmation that the infant was colored, unknowingly condemned her adopted child to death. A racially segregated society required the creation of ideologies and technologies to prevent this very frightening prospect of whites embracing and nurturing black children. And for African-Americans the story was just as complicated. Their decisions ranged from fully embracing babies, to abandonment and even infanticide, as evidenced from scores of news and police dispatches published during the era. As black children grew, the complexities of
skin color within black communities affected childrearing practices and socialization, as well as black children’s conceptions of themselves as we will see in a later chapter.

There are good reasons why ordinary people did not know that black and white children are often indistinguishable at birth and why medical doctors engaged in a fierce debate for two decades about the ontogenetic development of skin color in black newborns. For one, by 1900 there were fewer than 50 pediatricians in the United States, none practicing in the specialty on a full-time basis, and most were based in northeastern cities where the black population was small. By 1914, 138 physicians in the country devoted their practices exclusively to the care of children.\(^3\)

It's impossible to know precisely how many white doctors came into contact with black newborns during this era, but it is clear from compiled journal articles that white doctors had little or no experience delivering black babies before the 1920s, when the decline of midwifery rendered childbirth a medical event that took place in hospitals, shifting birth from a female-centered home event. Still, since the majority of black babies in the United States were delivered by southern black midwives until the 1930s and 1940s white doctors had little or no opportunity to observe the development of skin color in black babies.\(^3\)\(^2\) The establishment of Progressive-era charity hospitals, dispensaries and clinics, and the professionalization of birth eventually settled questions about black infant skin. Additionally, the Great Migration of blacks to northern cities where black women moved away from traditional birthing practices and took advantage of professional institutions also gave white doctors greater exposure to black births.

There are other issues that help explain why white doctors had little or no experience delivering black babies. Marie Jenkins Schwartz explains that in the aftermath of slavery, with little money and lack of access to doctors and healthcare facilities, blacks were left to fend for themselves in medical matters.\(^3\)\(^3\) Prior to the Civil War, white physicians withdrew from the countryside in large numbers and this trend continued after the war. The end of slavery diminished the monetary rewards for birthing black babies and the closures of medical schools
after the war led to fewer practicing physicians. Racial animosity towards former slaves and intimidation of doctors by the Ku Klux Klan and other vigilantes further reduced the number of white doctors willing to see black patients. In addition, blacks found themselves “displeased with the way white men had tried to manage black women’s reproductive role in slavery,” and so in freedom, “they turned to more familiar and trustworthy healers and practices.”

The Jim Crow legal apparatus and racial science design to control adults is well known, but the story of how the deployment of medical science was immediately imposed on children at the moment of birth is less familiar. Now legally free and no longer property to be owned by white men, a new legal apparatus along with new scientific modalities were required to identify, monitor and control black children. Previously, the laws that governed slavery assured that children, including those not yet born, would inherit the slave mother’s legal status, and by implication, her racial identity, whether the father was black, white, slave or free.

The first miscegenation statutes passed in the colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries violated accepted conventional legal practice and understanding of patriarchy in the interest of protecting slave property because children born to slave women whose fathers were white represented a significant property loss if they were recognized as free. In freedom, a child’s racial status could no longer be assumed fixed and inherited from the mother’s status. To prevent visibly white black children from subverting the Jim Crow system and disappearing into white America, beginning in the 1880s and 1890s with the pediatrics specialty under formation, a mixed group of medical experts, through much debate, brought to light key issues concerning racial differences in infancy.

“As Black As the Ace of Spades”

Eugenicists and those physicians who wanted to enhance their status and the legitimacy of their professions did so by conducting experiments on infants and children, black and white. Historians who have studied human vivisection practices have told of how doctors subjected
defenseless orphans and poor children to experiments involving pain, mutilation, and disease and death. Experiments on children ranged from injecting infants and children with syphilis, gonorrhea, yellow fever, tuberculosis, and herpes. Upon post-natal delivery in the birthing room, black and white children of unknowing mothers were also subjected to spinal taps and other procedures. In some cases children were permanently harmed or even died. It is important to note that white children, especially foundlings, orphans, and the destitute, were also used in non-therapeutic experimentation and sacrificed in the name of science during this period. Given what historians have written about racialized medical experimentation, black children were very likely numerous objects of scientific study as well. In this unregulated environment for medical experimentation, in addition to the 1910 publication of the *Flexner Report*, which resulted in the closure of five of seven black medical schools in the South, as well as campaigns to eliminate midwifery, gave white doctors greater access to black babies.37

But as reformers, anti-vivisection societies and investigative journalists brought attention to dangerous and “vile” studies conducted on white children, medical journals continued to publish the research findings of doctors that performed risky experiments on black infants and children.38 For example, in 1914 the *American Journal of Disease in Children* published the findings of New York pediatricians Alfred F. Hess, Mildred Fish and Lester Unger who intentionally induced scurvy by withholding orange juice from infants until they developed hemorrhages. Hess conducted similar dietary experiments, inducing rickets in black children living in Upper Harlem. In 1925 the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published M. Hines Roberts’ “The Spinal Fluid in the New-Born.” Without parental consent, Hines performed dangerous spinal taps on 423 sick and normal black infants at an Atlanta hospital.39

The *Plessy* decision not only set the fundamental legal structure of racial hierarchy and limited the rights, privileges and protections of childhood to white children; it also interacted with the professionalization of science and medicine and legitimized the racial framework for understanding the life cycles of black childhood. Though sorely neglected by scholars of
childbirth, race, and medicine, the racing of the body at birth was of great importance to medical scientists, the state, and the broader society during the post-Emancipation period. *Plessy* gave a new impetus for the establishment of stringent birth registration systems in the United States. State and federal birth registration campaigns along with the South’s racial purity laws which appeared at the height of the eugenics movement, required the race of parents and newborns to be documented on birth certificates. State bureaucracies enjoined birth attendants to guard the color line by requiring them to record race on birth certificates. When it came to sexing a child, doctors had little trouble establishing maleness or femaleness as the primary identity of a newborn. Determining racial identity, on the other hand, involved more elaborate scientific discussions and experiments among doctors.

Race intruded in the research findings and conversations among baby experts in ways that demonstrate the American medical establishment’s characteristic callousness toward people of color and desire to maintain Jim Crow. As black communities became hunting grounds and laboratories for white researchers to document theories about racial superiority and inferiority, like never before, black babies became demonstration projects in courtrooms, medical schools, and laboratories of medical scientists seeking to consolidate their positions as authorities in their respective fields and as experts on race. In post-*Plessy* America, medical scientists increasingly turned their attention to black infants and even stillborn fetuses, using them as clinical “material” to solve urgent questions about racial identity, infant illnesses and mortality, and to devise racialized notions of normal and abnormal growth and development. The black child, as child, occupied the unfortunate position of being by virtue of his or her youth, closer to the “natural” birth state of the race. As such, the surveillance of the black child’s body, especially the development of skin color in the first days of life, proved essential to the demonstration of racist theory and racist medical practice.

The pediatrics specialty, historians have told us, originated out of positive ambition to solve high infant mortality, but it is also implicated in the racialization of infancy. Pediatrics
bolstered and benefited from the broader society’s changing perceptions about the needs and social value of children. The medical community thus reconceptualized children as a new kind of patient and childhood as a unique biological event. Pediatricians were pivotal to the incorporation of child saving into the courts, schools and civic and neighborhood organizations as well as to the establishment of orphan asylums, foundling homes, charities, dispensaries and children’s hospitals. But despite such enlightened efforts, baby experts also devoted service to a white supremacist agenda that sought to ensure that from the moment of birth, black babies did not escape their position at the lowest wrung of society. Pediatrics as a science thus incorporated the science of pigment obsession, a complimentary ingredient to other Jim Crow racialist paradigms. Efforts to illuminate the vulnerability of white children while fixing the racial identity of black babies at birth, as evidenced by scores of articles gathered from medical journals, were clearly prejudicial to the overall development of black children.

While Progressive Era pediatricians, baby-savers, public health officials and other experts concerned themselves with battling infant mortality and devising proper feeding and hygiene practices that would enable babies to grow up to fulfill their optimal potential as citizens, black children continued to suffer excessively high death rates. Richard Meckel has shown that southern states did not give attention to reducing infant mortality until the passage of the 1921 Sheppard-Towner Act, a federal measure that led to the hiring and training of black visiting nurses and the establishment of maternal welfare programs in cities with large black populations. Federal money or corporate philanthropy was frequently essential to the mounting of any kind of public health initiative. Black infant deaths were largely due to crowded unsanitary living conditions, the inadequacy or lack of maternal care, and poor diet habits of mothers who had neither knowledge nor money to change their food habits.

Black infants remained invisible to reform campaigns due in part to southern doctor’s racist medical narrative on black bodies and health. Emancipation, their discourse explained, had resulted in the physical, mental and moral decay of freed slaves. No longer under the confining
discipline and “civilizing” restraints of slavery, the freed slaves and their offspring were now doomed to extinction. In discussing the rates and causes of black infant mortality, most white physicians opined that the inherited physiological traits, undeveloped brains, and licentious sexual behavior of the race, not environment, discrimination or poverty, were the main causes.\textsuperscript{44} With the exception of a few, white professionals displayed a kind of racist preferential treatment of children even in matters of life and death, as Du Bois came to experience when his infant son Burghardt died from diphtheria in 1899 because no white doctor would treat a colored baby. The resultant inattention to black infant deaths had the same effect that lynching and other forms of lethal violence had on black children.\textsuperscript{45} It ended life.

At the dawn of a new century, Europeans initiated a child-saving fervor that swept across America. Sadly, this movement ignored the welfare of black babies in urban and rural areas. Hence, a persistent question facing doctors on both sides of the Atlantic was: What color is the Negro child at birth? To solve it, high-status doctors spanning from Johns Hopkins Hospital to the Carnegie Institution of Washington, D.C. to Oxford University in England used ocular techniques as well as microscopes to look between the layers of the skin. In their pursuit of ontological certainty about skin color, some doctors dissected the genitals of stillborn fetuses and deceased infants. Two northeastern doctors proposed using new X-ray technology and light therapy to prevent infants from turning black.

Debates and research findings on black infant skin appeared in notable national and international medical journals as well as the nation’s first journals dedicated to the study of children’s health – \textit{The American Journal of Obstetrics and Diseases of Women and Children} (1869), \textit{Archives of Pediatrics} (1884), \textit{Transactions of the American Pediatric Society} (1889), and \textit{Pediatrics} (1896). The crude observational strategies and documentation of the ontogenetic development of skin color in black newborns bolstered the idea that race was a fixed and unalterable biological inherited trait. The professional writings explored here served as the original imprint for whites on how to think about the development of black children’s bodies,
intellectual capacity, sexuality, and socialization. Of no medical value or social benefit to the lives of millions of suffering and marginalized black children, racialist ideas about black children became embedded in pediatric science and other burgeoning disciplines with tragic consequences for generations of black children.

In a period when there was no elaborate imaging technology allowing doctors to see into the womb and no DNA testing to determine paternity, physicians relied on ocular techniques to answer the following questions – Why is the Negro black? Are Negro babies born the same color as white children? Why are Negro babies lighter at birth than later in life? How long does it take for a Negro newborn’s skin to deepen in color? Are there certain parts of the body that appear darker in mixed-race babies? Do Negro babies develop skin color prior to birth? The French also asked “Pourquoi les Negres sont-ils noirs?” and published notes “sur la formation du pigment chez de Negre and studies of “les causes de la coloration de la peau.” In 1891, Dr. Léo Testut, president of the Anthropological Society of Lyon, dissected three black newborns and published his findings in a prestigious journal.46

Eighteenth-century European anthropologists, physicians and philosophers set the tone for skin research and generally concluded that black children were typically light in color at birth but their fingernails and genitals carried signs of racial identity. French surgeon Claude Nicolas Le Cat wrote in his 1765 treatise on skin traits: “The children of Negroes, as soon as they come into the world, have black genitals, and a black spot at the roots of their nails.” Light and air “expanded this colour; but it is certain that the rudiments of blackness are communicated by their parents; that in whatever part of the world that a Negro is brought forth, he will be equally black as if he had been born in his own country.”47

During the 19th century, theorists continued to remark upon black complexion.48 From the early 1800s to the early 1860s, Le Cat along with Theodor Waitz, Sir William Lawrence, John Charles Hall, Thomas Masterman Winterbottom, Petrus Camper, and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach published lectures and accounts of their observations of black newborns born in
European countries and colonized parts of Africa. These authorities came to a consensus that Negro babies were lighter in color at birth than they were a week later. Though black babies could readily be distinguished by their dusky hue when placed side by side with children of white parents this distinction proved “a difficulty when half-breeds were examined.”

By the last two decades of the nineteenth century, European biologists, anatomists, ethnologists and dermatologists began to ask whether Negro babies developed pigmentation prior to birth or after. Albert von Kolliker, a distinguished professor of anatomy and physiology in Wurzburg explained that microscopically there was no pigment in fetal skin prior to birth. “The pigment of the mucous membrane in the colored races, as in the Europeans, is developed after birth; but in the former – the negro – the margins of the nails, the areola of the nipple, and the genital organs become colored about the third day, and by the fifth or sixth day the color is diffused over the whole body.” German-born dermatologist Paul Gerson Unna agreed and insisted that, “it is very desirable that the origin of the physiological pigment of the skin should be thoroughly investigated.”

Although a few remarks about black infant skin appeared in medical journals in the United States in the early 1860s, American medical scientists joined the debate with a sense of urgency two decades after slavery ended. In his 1871 Descent of Man, Charles Darwin also grappled with skin color difference. Darwin speculated there that variations in skin color were the result of a slow and gradual consequence of sexual selection over the long span of human evolution. Humans acquired and passed on certain external physical characteristics that were useful to the survival of the species. In spite of external differences, Darwin believed that humans shared many similar traits. Cognizant that skin color was being used as a basis for describing blacks as physically and culturally inferior in order to justify slavery, Darwin did not support the idea of separating and ranking groups of people. He wrote that human groups “graduate into each other, and that it is hardly possible to discover clear distinctive character between them.”
The commentary on the origins of skin pigmentation reached a fever pitch during the 1890s when the Jim Crow agenda made it imperative for obstetricians and pediatricians to study and teach the nuances of skin pigmentation in an effort to monitor the color line. Obstetricians and pediatricians were involved in the birthing process, as both these fields competed for authority over the care of children and at the same time viewed pediatrics as a logical extension of childbirth and reproduction.\textsuperscript{52} Color prejudice continued to loom large in the racist ideology of Jim Crow as well as in European anthropological, medical and scientific circles whose dark-skinned subjects’ oppression in societies governed by colonialism shared uncanny similarities to African Americans. In the American landscape, the discourse on black skin color was operationally different during the Jim Crow period. As Harriet Washington so eloquently argues, American scientists had a long history of speculating uncomfortably about Negroes born with white skin, as they feared these individuals would “gain the capability to pass ad infinitum by bestowing their acquired white skins of their progeny.”

Washington also asserts that “Americans felt they could ill afford to be characterized as a nation of mongrels and mere pretenders of white status” in the eyes of European counterparts. Thus black skin “could no longer consistently and reliably designate a Negro, so it was critically important to find other means of detection.” The death of slavery and the emergence of “white negroes” made scientists eager “to delve more deeply under the skin of African Americans” in a conscious effort “to discover clues to race that were more than skin deep.” By doing so, scientific experts felt they could “understand the nature of race, and regain control over the black bodies that were slipping from their intellectual and literal grasp.”\textsuperscript{53}

An example of the Jim Crow era’s urgent concern that the medical community solve questions about racially indeterminate babies can be demonstrated in an advertisement that appeared on cigarette packages in the late 1890s. During this era, it was not uncommon for racist illustrations of blacks to appear on a variety of merchandise packaging even when the pictorial scenarios had nothing to do with actual product. In this particular advertisement, a dark-skinned
couple with large red lips and googly eyes stands at the bedside of their strikingly lighter-skinned newborn.

With his chest poked out, hands shoved into his pockets, and a dubious expression on his face, the father appears to doubt his paternity of the child. His guilty-faced wife looks on as he threatens, “If dat chile doan soon change colour dere’ll be trouble in dis family!!” This advertisement, which later circulated as a postcard, alleges that an immorality has taken place within a black family. Upon first read, it appears that an unfaithful black wife has engaged in an extramarital sexual liaison with a white man, consequently giving birth to a mixed-race child. The father’s warning: “If dat chile doan soon change colour,” perhaps inadvertently indicates his awareness that black newborn typically have lighter skin at birth and darken over time, lighten or stay the same color. Both he and his wife, for different reasons, have vested interests in this racially indeterminate child turning color.

In 1898, the Georgia Journal of Medicine and Surgery and the Cincinnati Lancet-Clinic referenced the cigarette advertisement. Both journals situated the cigarette advertisement within
“a discussion [that] has been going on in the Continental press as to the color of newly-born negro children.” The Cincinnati Lancet-Clinic asserted: “not one medical man in a thousand would answer the question correctly. There are obvious social reasons which render it desirable to have definite knowledge on this point.” That same year, the editor of Medical Brief agreed that scarcely one out of a million white laymen and a large majority of the medical profession, if asked this question, would not be able to answer it correctly. “Not that it is a matter of great moment,” wrote the editor, “but in these days when one’s knowledge is expected to be absolutely accurate, it is satisfactory to have even the most minute details made clear.”54 These comments are an example of how physicians connected social issues about race to their professional scientific authority.

A decade earlier, in August 1889, Robert B. Morrison, a surgeon to the Outdoor Skin Clinic of Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, delivered a paper before the International Congress of Dermatology and Syphilis held in Paris. Morrison told the audience that in the United States many doctors had “never thought of noticing the color of [negro children] when born, knowing the mother to be black.” Citing earlier European studies on the topic, he also noted that some American medical practitioners “ridiculed the idea of white negro babies, saying that they had plenty of color the first moment of birth.” Morrison referenced a southern physician who said, “the babies of true negroes are born ‘as black as the ace of spades.’” For Morrison, microscopic examination was the only true way of settling the niggling question. When his assistant at Johns Hopkins Hospital delivered an eight-month stillborn fetus whose father “was very black” and the mother “moderately so,” Morrison decided to look beneath the surface of the dead fetus’s skin for evidence of pigment by slicing a section from the arm where he found “an unmistakable line of pigment granules lying in the lowest layer of the epidermis which could be seen microscopically as well.”55
In another case, Dr. L.E. Neale, an obstetrician and Chief of the Maryland University Lying-in Hospital, took sections of “prepuce” (foreskin) from the penis of a mulatto baby, which had died in-utero 36 hours before birth. After examining the foreskin under a microscope, Neale found evidence of pigmentation. While to the contemporary reader the dissection of a dead child’s genitals may seem bizarre and unseemingly, it was not uncommon for doctors of this era to use living patients from public wards for research without their knowledge or to extract tissue and organs from cadavers of blacks and the poor without consent. The pathologist’s clinical research methods were not unusual in the context of medical research, and in the context of skin color research in general. Medical practitioners felt justified in doing so in exchange for the free services provided.

The collection and study of black fetuses must be considered within the historical context of the biological use of white fetuses. In her essay, “Materializing the Fetal Body,” Lynn Morgan reveals that from 1880 to 1940, the period of “classical experimental embryology,” human embryos and fetuses were considered depersonalized and unremarkable laboratory specimens. Retrieved from miscarriages or autopsies, human specimens shared shelves with jars containing snake, fetal dogs, and pig embryos. By 1913, Johns Hopkins University collected 1,000 embryos and fetuses “to be measured and tabulated,” and by 1944 the Carnegie Institute was the main repository of nearly 9,000 specimens. Morgan explains that donors were medical professionals working in social and scientific environments that regarded the acquisition of medical experiments on the unborn or stillborn as normal.
In a time when “fetal personhood was an unthought concept,” fetuses were bottled and shown to students learning about sex, the step-by-step biological process of fetal development from fertilization through birth, cell theory, and the problems of heredity. By discovering the origins of life and dispelling myths about the biological story of birth, Morgan argues that the documentation and description of human embryological development enabled “a subsequent generation to visualize and imagine – indeed, to ‘know’ – the embryo-and-fetus- as a coherent, continuous biological “thing,” progressing steadily from genesis (fertilization) to exodus (birth).” Social and spiritual elements, Morgan maintains, were secondary to the story medical scientists told about birth.56

The collection of black fetuses by doctors at Johns Hopkins, the Carnegie Institute and elsewhere reveals that professionals were primarily motivated by social concerns about race. Indeed, like the collection of white unborn specimens, the social and scientific context of the times made it appropriate for medical scientists to collect black fetuses and dissect them to solve the mysteries of black skin. Indeed, scientists used white fetuses primarily to chart biological development and to look for signs of recapitulation in the embryonic phases of life, in none of the medical journals explored in this chapter, or in Morgan’s study, were white embryos and fetuses used in pursuit of solving racialist questions about the ontogenetic development of white skin to support a racist agenda. Morrison and Neale concluded from their skin investigations on fetuses that babies of “true negroes” and mulattoes were born with pigment however they might appear to the naked eye. “Negro babies are, therefore, not born white nor do they suddenly grow black. They have pigment in the skin at least one month before birth.”57 Here, both physicians enhanced their authority on the development of skin color in black babies because they were able to scientifically establish that they could “see” race when others could not.
Six years before the *Plessy* decision, Arthur Thomson, anatomist at the University of Oxford, received portions of sliced skin and scalp taken from Negro fetuses ranging from five to eight months developed. “I must express my indebtedness to Professor Moseley for his kindness in furnishing me with the material from which the sections have been cut,” Thomson wrote. Though he successfully found distinct evidence of pigment in the deeper cells and layers of the skin samples, he complained that his investigation was “hampered by scarcity of material.” Thomson hoped to pursue future studies on black fetuses. “I would esteem it a favor if any members of the [Anthropological] Society who have portions of skin or scalps of coloured races of men in their possession, would favor me with the use of such specimens.” In the 1907 publication of *The Principles and Practice of Dermatology*, William Allen Pusey also noted his own findings of pigmentation in the foreskin of ten negro babies and thanked Professor Charles B. Reed of Northwestern for furnishing him with “the material” and for “the opportunity of examining these negro babies.”

Medical and Surgical Journal, Pediatrics and other journals published dozens of articles and correspondences on the issue of black babies and skin color. The debate reached its highest pitch after an eminent French physician identified only as Dr. Farabery, published a controversial article in the July 1898 issue of Pediatrics titled “The Color of Negro Infants.” After attending a Sudanese Exhibition held in the Champs de Mars in Paris, where he witnessed a birth, Farabery reported the he had ocular proof that Negro and white babies were born the same color. “The Negro baby comes into the world a tender pink color; the second day it is lilac; ten days afterward it is the color of tanned leather, and after fifteen days it is chocolate.”

Though Farabery had taken up the task of answering an old question that had seemingly been resolved in the eighteenth century and then microscopically confirmed during the nineteenth century, his findings and assertions provoked a firestorm of rebuttals in the Jim Crow context, especially from southern doctors who believed they knew the Negro more intimately and had more proprietary knowledge than a French physician. The editor of The Medical News asked: “Will not someone with a newly-born piccaninny or two on hand tell us the exact color of the precious treasures and so settle an important medico-anthropologic question?”

“NEGRO CHILDREN NOT BORN WHITE,” the Phrenological Journal and Science of Health responded in 1900. The journal noted in a tiny brief that medical men without experience commonly believed that Negro babies were born white. This popular belief was acquired by “hear-say evidence.” Though not all black babies were born the same tint, “they are usually of a pinkish hue” but soon became “a beautiful black – we say beautiful, and in this few will dispute, for it is true, and, were it not for our prejudices, we would say almost or quite as beautiful as if it were white.”

In a correspondence written to the editor of Pediatrics, Dr. Thaddeus Lindley Robertson, an obstetrician from Birmingham, Alabama and former president of the Alabama State Medical Society, gave a scathing rebuttal and suggested that Farabery was delusional.
A knowledge of just where Dr. Farabery got the information upon which to base the statement that “the negro baby at the time of its birth is exactly the same color as its white brother” would prove revelation to be much appreciated by many members of the medical profession who have spent a life of active service among the negro race in the Southern States without even a suspicion that they would be confronted with a white baby at birth by negro parents. That a colony of Soudanese negroes which afforded that eminent French physician an opportunity to settle the vexed question must have been a particular lot; or the doctor was laboring under some mental or optical delusions to arrive at his deductions, since our ample experiences with the new-born negro baby justify no such deductions. . . I must confess that it was a matter of great astonishment to me to find so many statements so far at variance with the facts in so short an article when facilities for correct knowledge on the subject are at your door. You can learn very near home that it takes neither sunlight nor climate to make the negro baby black. He comes into the world black and remains so unless by disease the pigment is destroyed, which sometimes happens.63

Geographic jurisdiction was a main point of contention. “We don’t question Dr. Farabery’s veracity,” the editor of the Georgia Journal of Medicine and Surgery stated. “But [we] would like to know in what part of the continent he made the observation; he certainly did not make it in the [American] south. For a genuine negro baby is black before it is born, after it is born, so long as it lives, and dies black.” Participating in the Plessy obsession of parental heritage and fractional ancestry, the writer added, “We will admit that in offspring from a hybrid mixture of white and black, producing quadroon, seven-eighths white, or a quinteroon, fifteen-sixteenths white, in such cases there might be marked similarity with a white baby, but it would not take seven days to tell whether it was of white or mixed parentage.”64

Petersburg, Virginia physician Herbert Claiborne, a former surgeon for the Confederate Army, also differed with Farabery. “I have practiced medicine for forty-eight years in what is known as the Black Belt of Virginia, where there are more negroes in some places than whites.” Of the thousands of Negro babies Claiborne claimed to have examined, he said he had never seen a white one. “Even the cross of the white man upon the negro woman does not produce a white baby. There must be several degrees of dilution with white blood before the Pickaninny is borne [sic] as white as his white brother. Suppose you call for further testimony.”65 A New Haven, Missouri physician also challenged Farabery’s “tender pink” description of black newborn’s complexion.
The color of the newly-born scion of African parentage, whether or immediate or remote
descent, is not the same as that of the Caucasian[sic] or American. It is a sallow or
creamy white without the pink glow or tinge that marks the scions of Caucasian[sic]
origin. The ‘tanned leather,’ familiarly known as ‘saddle color,’ belongs exclusively to a
mixture of the white and black races. The pink, rosy hue of the cheek of the
Caucasian[sic] never has been seen in the cheek of one having even one-eighth of negro
blood in their veins. The pigment is, no doubt, the cause, but it is so strong in the negro
that an enormous dilution is required to make it unrecognizable, especially in the organs
of generation.

“I have delivered a score or more of the little problems this year and speak from ocular
demonstration,” wrote Dr. C.J. March, a general practitioner from Fordyce, Arkansas. “A new-
born full-blooded negro baby is neither white nor yet is it black but of a dusky color. In some,
though not all, the scrotal integument and that about the flexures of the principal joint is black at
birth, but the general surface is of a dusky red.” Dr. D.M. Provence from Barnwell, South
Carolina reported that he had “never seen a newly born negro child black; though a few are dark
they are always lighter than their parents.” Provence described black baby’s skin as “a light
ginger-cake” color. Whether a child was of white or Negro origins unless the parents were
known, “would be a difficult matter to decide,” Provence wrote. “On examination, generally,
small areas of darker or almost black skin will be found, especially about the genital organs, if
male, and round the anus. The prepuce is generally very dark or black.”

Dr. H.C. Riley of Newville, Alabama also agreed that Negro babies had a ginger-cake
color for several days, however, “I think the doctor is off a little when he says ‘a child from a
white mother and a black father after a month’s time is almost as black as the full-blooded negro;
whereas, a child from a black mother and a white father is a very light mulatto in color.” Riley
insisted that white blood presented itself in newborns regardless of the source. “I have seen
children from a white father and a black mother who are mulattoes. The same color in both cases.
You cross a scrub cow with a Jersey male, and you get a calf half Jersey. You cross a Jersey cow
with a scrub male, and what do you get? A calf half Jersey. Blood will tell.”

A British observer weighed in on the “controverted question” with amusing conciseness
in a response printed in The Medical Press and Circular: “Pure negroes are born pink like young
rats, and the end of the third or fourth months they gradually become black.” As long as these children were not able to pass themselves off as white, “we have no right to complain.”

Abraham L. Wolbarst, a medical student at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York who later became a genito-urinary surgeon at the New York School of Clinical Medicine, recalled a discussion of the subject during an obstetrics lecture. James W. McLane, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology, brought a one or two-day-old black baby into the lecture hall to demonstrate how to accurately determine skin color at birth. The newborn was neither visibly white nor black, but it appeared “salmon color,” Wolbarst noted. “The professor held the piccaninny at arm’s length and in his peculiarly delightful manner asked the class what the baby’s color was.” Some students said white, while others said black. The “witty professor” shook his head at both responses and in “true Irish fashion,” responded, “It’s nather, it’s red.” Wolbart said that Dr. McLane told the students, “as a rule piccaninnies were red at birth while white children were gray.”

While medical practitioners agreed that black and white babies did not share the same complexion at birth, there was no real consensus on the exact coloration of black babies born to black or mixed parentage. Nor was there agreement on how long it took skin tone to deepen. Perhaps it was better to take Farabery’s lead and examine African babies. The editor of The Medical News suggested that practitioners in the English colonies of South Africa should be asked to decide the question. Another physician who witnessed the births of black babies in the Gold Coast Hinterland, Zanzibar, the Central Indian Deccan and other parts of East and West Africa confirmed that black babies were born with very light skin. “Negroes born in America are not, I take it, in quite normal climate, and live artificial lives, aping their white brethren and so I consider it better and fairer to draw conclusions from African source,” wrote Dr. Andrew W(illegible).

The presence of so-called sacral or Mongolian pigment spots in black newborns also captured the attention of physicians. In the early 1870s, German doctor, Erwin Baelz of Tokyo
Imperial University, first described these spots and taught that they were a racial characteristic. For much of the 19th century, European medical scientists studied pigment spots in infants of darker races including: Malay Indians, Eskimos, Koreans, Filipinos, and Africans and confirmed Baelz’s thesis. By the opening years of the 20th century, some doubts were raised as to whether Mongolian spots were distinct only to children of darker races.\(^57\)

In 1907, Chicago pediatrician Dr. Joseph Brenneman published an article on the subject in *Archives of Pediatrics*. After “carefully” examining 40 colored children and conducting a microscopic examination of the sacrum skin of a stillborn child that died after strangulation by the umbilical cord, he concluded that children of darker races, particularly Asians and Negroes, were born with bluish pigmentation spots found mostly extended over the buttocks into the lumbar region and sometimes the back, shoulders and extremities. Brenneman wrote that these spots varied in size from a dime to a dollar, were bluish gray, slate color, deep blue, violet or plum colored and were not “influenced by pressure.”

The blue color of these fleshy tattoos, Brenneman noted, were present during the later months of intrauterine life, at birth, and could appear weeks and even months after birth. The color of these spots deepened and eventually faded away, leaving no trace. One year later, Canadian pediatrician Albert E. Vipond furthered Brenneman’s studies, publishing his observations of pigment spots found on 217 Jamaican “Sambo” children in the *Archives of Pediatrics*.\(^58\) Unlike Vipond, Brenneman, in citing studies of white children conducted by other scientists, concluded that since Mongolian spots had been discovered in pure white children, they could no longer be considered as an exclusive race characteristic, instead they now became a “human characteristic.”

Both Vipond and Brenneman questioned black mothers about the blue pigment spots on their infants. “The observant mothers have noticed them and some think they are birth marks,” Vipond noted. Others, he wrote, thought their presence was due to food cravings during pregnancy, usually “the liver of some animal.”\(^58\) While Brenneman noted that in some Asian
Mothers held superstitious beliefs about Mongolian spots, he found no evidence among Negro mothers in his Chicago study. Instead, “a considerable proportion had never noticed it – had never heard of it – even many whose children were well marked.” Some mothers knew their babies had the bluish mark and told Brenneman that it was the rule for colored children. “They looked on it as they would on other negro characteristics.” Brenneman reported that many of the mothers were amused at his interest in the spots. One mother put it simply, “They say it shows that a person is a real negro.” This comment suggests that blacks too looked for certain markers on babies to affirm racial identity.

“Don’t You Know a Negro Child’s Scrotum is Always Black?”

As midwifery began to give way to the medicalization of childbirth and the legal definitions of whiteness narrowed, pediatricians shared their expert knowledge on how to deploy scientific tests to determine the race of newborn babies. By doing so, they further enhanced their authority on racial classification in children. As a result, black babies became demonstration projects not only in classrooms of medical schools, but also courtrooms in cases involving violation of southern miscegenation laws, rape, divorce, paternity suits, and inheritance claims.

In Dangerous Liaisons, Charles Frank Robinson examines the use of babies in 19th-century legal cases, before and after Emancipation. Robinson discusses how white and African-American property heirs challenged the legitimacy of biracial offspring, who could not secure estates from white parents because of the illegality of interracial relationships. While there were exceptional cases prior to Emancipation where black women and their biracial offspring successfully inherited property from white men in spite of legal challenges, southern legislatures tightened laws to make it more difficult for such inheritances. In some instances, white men raised the issue of biracial children to deny claims that they had fathered children with white women. Children were also used for display in cases involving access to public school. For example, in Hare v. Board of Education (1893), the children of James Hare were kept out of a
public school in Gates Country, North Carolina on the grounds that they were Negroes. In that case the court held that children of a white woman and a man whose mother was white, but whose father was a Negro, were not entitled to attend the white schools.

Pediatricians sometimes inquired about how to determine the race of children for the purpose of displaying their authority in legal matters. In the September 1895 issue of the New York Medical Times Dr. Anneta Katz, an obstetrician stated: “the scrotum of the new born male infants of African descent is always black; otherwise they are just like white babies.” Katz wanted to know how to distinguish between Negro and white female newborns. Not unusual for this time period, Louisiana Dr. Ben Brodnax answered in graphic detail when describing the sex organs of black babies.

Examination of the perineum of the female infant whether the parents are both black, one mulatto, or with white father and black or mulatto mother, a distinct line of lighter or darker shade is found to extend from the posterior part of the vulva along the raphé to anus, thence up the spine to the junction of the cervical and dorsal vertebrae. Not only does this exist at birth, but through life in bright mulatto women . . . I have notice[sic] this dark line in several cases in babies where both parents were very bright mulattoes. Another sign which is noticeable in the minimum mixture of negro blood, the baby is not of the clear semi-translucent pink color of purely white children, but of a tallowy white or waxy white.

Brodnax’s claim that “a distinct line” exists in bright female mulattoes at birth and throughout life brings to mind the famous Rhinelander case of 1925. Leonard Kip Rhinelander, a scion of a wealthy New York family, sued his wife Alice Beatrice for fraud, allegedly that she had misrepresented herself as white when she in fact had Negro blood.

During the trial, Beatrice was forced to strip naked in front of an all-white all-male jury to inspect her skin color. The court ruled in favor of Beatrice, finding that Rhinelander could not have mistaken his wife’s clearly perceptible Negro features. The NAACP’s Crisis responded to the verdict: “. . . [I]f Rhinelander had used this girl as a concubine or prostitute, white America would have raised no word of protest; white periodicals would have printed no headlines; white ministers would have said no single word. It is when he legally and decently marries the girl that Hell breaks loose and literally tears the pair apart. Magnificent Nordic mentality!” Once again,
this kind of deception illustrates the potential outcomes resulting from improper racial classification.

In an 1860 issue of *Medical World*, Dr. D.S. Ellis of Ashland, Virginia shared “a good joke” about an incident that took place in a North Virginia courtroom. In a case of disputed paternity, questions arose as to whether the infant was white or Negro. Growing impatient over the argument, the judge, a “rough and ready kind,” said “Don’t you know that a negro child’s scrotum is always black? Hand me the child.” Without inquiring about the sex of the child the judge then proceeded to “investigate the matter himself” by exposing the child’s genitals. To his chagrin and amusement of the lawyers, “he found it was a female child, and that his test was not applicable in this case.”

By the early twentieth century doctors had examined the scrotum, vagina, buttocks, anus, and extremities of Negro infants in addition to comparing the bone structure and nasal cartilages of black and white newborns, weight and head circumference. Physicians had sliced skin from the scalps, buttocks, and penises of stillborn babies to look under the skin. As debates about black infant skin continued in the United States as well as Italy, France, Germany, and Britain a few doctors began developing proposals to stop Negro babies’ skin from turning black altogether.

In April 1903, *The Detroit Medical Journal* reported than an unnamed Indiana physician discovered a technique that would allow black babies to retain their original color from birth.

It is known that negro children are born white, or nearly so, and the reason assigned by the Indiana man for their growing dark later in life is that the skin of the negro is extremely sensitive, throwing out large quantities of pigment as a means of protection. His plan for testing his theory is to have the room in which the experiment is to be carried out draped and furnished in red, with red lights and all attendants dressed in red garments. The infant undergoing the experiment is also to toe-clad in red. Under these conditions he believes that the child will retain its original white color. The experiment promises to be interesting. We trust that no convalescent from the tremens ward will ever get into the experiment room by mistake. A relapse would be practically assured.

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* printed a similar item on January 2, 1904, in which a Philadelphia professor and a New Jersey physician proposed the use of X-rays
or light treatment to keep Negro babies from turning dark. Could this be the solution America’s race problem?

A Philadelphia professor, it is reported, recently called attention to the fact that in his experience the skin of the negro becomes white under the influence of x-rays. We have not mastered the question of the origin of pigmentation in the human or other species, and are, therefore, not surprised at any such development. It would be interesting to know how further experiments in this line will result. An ambitious New Jersey physician, it is said, is taking negro babies at birth, and by the use of the light treatment hopes to be able to affect their future color. We anxiously await the outcome of the attempt on the part of science to solve the race problem.  

Ironically, these physicians’ comments are an example of how a few white professionals were so eager to establish a reputation even at the risk of eliminating a very potent racial marker.

Whether whitening experiments actually took place or not is debatable. Nevertheless, these stories gripped the imagination of white Americans but garnered no attention in the black press. In her examination of technology and race in the early twentieth century, Carolyn Thomas de la Pena argues in her essay “Bleaching the Ethiopian” that white readers of sensational articles feared that X-rays “could destroy visual divisions between races that were previously ‘proven’ by science, and that technology would allow blacks not only to visibly ‘pass’ as white, but even perhaps to ‘surpass’ them.” Because racial identity required “maintenance and display,” it was an unsettling idea that X-rays could penetrate the surface and prove that visual differences between human bodies simply “masked the reality of human universality.” Discussions about whitening black babies quickly disappeared after the series of sensational news headlines appeared on the subject between 1903 and 1904 while physicians continued to refine their arguments over the nature of black children’s skin until about 1920.

Though Jim Crow era ideas about black children’s skin color and alleged inferiority became rigidly institutionalized in the 20th century, the African-American counterattack on racialist medicine relieves some of the horrendous weight of these studies. Black physicians’ remained conspicuously silent on the issue of racial indeterminacy at birth, as evidenced by an
examination of issues of the *Journal of the National Medical Association*, one of the few medical journals in which black doctors could publish dissenting views about race.

This silence might seem odd, even as blacks held their own problematic and divisive ideas about skin color that were sometimes detrimental to the healthy development of children. But to medicalize the lore, in ways that white professionals medicalized racialist theories, would have been further divisive to black communities already troubled by hierarchies of skin color and self-hate. Still, an examination of black folklore and the narratives of African-American midwives, physicians, media pundits, and activists reveal that blacks participated in the racialization of newborns for different reasons. Just as white supremacists expressed fears about racial passing and the racial indeterminacy of skin color at birth, African Americans both celebrated the births of black children and diversity of black features while also voicing concerns about the future impact that racially ambiguous babies would have on the health, vitality, strength and political destiny of the race.

Despite enormous odds, the professionalization of African-American physicians began in the early 1890s but gained strides in the opening decades of the 20th century with the establishment of separate medical journals and societies. Launching in 1909, *The Journal of the National Medical Association* (JNMA), which was the brainchild of Dr. John A. Kenny, Booker T. Washington’s personal physician, provided a space for black doctors to publish writings on the health concerns of the race and to attack racist medical discourse about black bodies. The JNMA was also the communications arm of the National Medical Association, which was “born of the exigencies of peculiar racial needs, made necessary by the distinctiveness of our existence as a social group, apart from the organic life of this Republic.”73 A close reading of articles published from 1909 to 1920 reveals that black physicians did not participate in debates about the skin color or racial indeterminacy of babies because there was nothing to be gained by legitimizing the discourse. Instead, they dedicated their energy to the “conservation of Negro babies” and trying to save the race from the stifling medical impact of segregation and poverty.
Although many black midwives were illiterate, they were highly respected members of black communities. As traditional healers, they did “God’s work,” and ensured that poor mothers and their infants received better access to care. Linda Janet Holmes, Debra Susie, Molly Ladd-Taylor, Susan L. Smith, Gertrude Jacinta Frasier, Valeri Lee and others have traced the history of black midwifery, explaining how black women dominated the American medical scene in the 1800s and were eventually ousted by white middle-class men before the mid-twentieth century.

More than just birth attendants, black midwives cooked, cleaned, and comforted mothers in labor. They used plants and herbs, oils, balms, and salves to relieve pain and practiced certain cultural rituals to integrate the newborn into society. In the days and weeks after birth, midwives continued their services to ensure that mothers and newborns remained spiritually and physiologically protected. 74

In general, several days or weeks passed before a newborn was named. This practice allowed parents to observe the child’s looks, behavior, and temperament and to allow the ancestors to give signs about the child’s appropriate name. But early 20th century birth registration campaigns required mothers to name children right away. Midwives were also expected to document the race of the child and parents on birth certificates. The recording of race on birth certificates was part of a network of bureaucratic racial gate keeping which aimed to preserve the integrity of white blood by preventing interracial breeding.

As Molly Ladd-Taylor notes, “by following seemingly innocuous rules for birth registration . . . the midwife could forgo the traditional rituals surrounding childbirth.” 75 Cognizant of the dangers of interracial sex and the south’s racial purity laws, black midwives sometimes faced a significant moral dilemma when filling out birth certificates, as they had the power to assign ambiguous infants to the black race or allow them to slip across the color line. But the willful falsification of a newborn’s race on a birth certificate in southern states was a felony punishable by a year in the state penitentiary. 76 The criminalization of falsifying birth certificates is a sign of the significance of racial classification.
A review of the secondary literature on black midwifery and the oral testimonies of the midwives themselves, reveals that racial designation was not a primary concern until the interference of public health officials and “scientific” authority. As scholars have pointed out, folk rituals surrounding birth, from naming, the integration of spiritual healing, to the use of herbs were disavowed by public health officials as superstitious and unprofessional. As Gertrude Jacinta Frasier has argued, new rules, the birth certificate and state registration interfered with valued traditions, and black midwives were transformed from spiritually sanctioned care providers to symbols of professionalism and state authority.

Black physician’s writings on newborns ranged from the causes of infant mortality, nephritis in children, infant hygiene, intestinal indigestion in infancy and childhood, infantile gastro-enteritis, the care of the eyes during adolescence, prevention of hookworms, jaundice, rickets, fetal syphilis, and tuberculosis. There were editorials examining nutrition, and the duties of physicians to children. Issues of the journal also included light news such as a 1910 report of “A Case of Triplets: All Healthy and Thriving.” The journal’s black contributors and editors, as evidenced by their powerful critiques of the racialist writings about Negroes appearing in mainstream white journals, understood the racist utility that discussions and investigations of black infant skin served for a white supremacist agenda.77

Though the cadre of black physicians and doctors remained silent about skin gradations among black babies, mixed-race offspring were of grave concern to post-Emancipation era black communities. As Michelle Mitchell has shown, African-Americans contemplated skin color and voiced opinions on the emotionally charged issue of interracial marriage and anti-miscegenation statutes as they devised plans for racial advancement. Some blacks expressed that interracial sex resulted in “weaklings” and “mongrels,” and a dilution of the race. Black ministers, journalists, and activists including W.E.B. Du Bois, Nannie H. Burroughs, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, Mary Church Terrell expressed concerns about the welfare of black women and the
children born to interracial unions, as anti-miscegenation laws allowed white men to desert black women and escape the responsibility of caring for biracial children.\textsuperscript{78}

Just as whites expressed a collective hysteria over white-skinned Negro infants disappearing into white America, blacks too held fears about the impact these babies might have on the health and vitality of future offspring. As a result, Mitchell argues, the black collective’s future “depended upon concerted efforts to police intra-racial activity.” Black women bore the burden of blame for engaging in interracial sex that resulted in whitening of the race. As black women bore the blame for compromising collective advancement, some of the most radical men of the race who chastised and policed women’s moral behavior, displayed a tendency to fetishize the light skin, fine features and glossy hair of mixed-race offspring.\textsuperscript{79}

The intra-racial color consciousness among blacks was pervasive. Mitchell’s study also reveals that African-American’s discussions on skin complexion were varied. Race leaders advocated a range of strategies from self-control, protection of black women by men to prevent rape and sexual coercion by white men, to ostracism for those who crossed the color line. While blacks explored the physical impact of miscegenation and worked through their fears of fading to white, by the 1920s, these discussions gave way to a celebration of the range of complexions within the racial family through beauty and “better-baby” contests, in addition to the sale of black dolls designed to teach pride in complexion and heritage.\textsuperscript{80} Not surprisingly, race man W.E.B. Du Bois was at the forefront of this conversation as he showcased the diversity of skin color, hair textures, and facial features of black Americans in his 1906 \textit{The Health and Physique of the Negro American}, a study of 1,000 Hampton students, and from 1920-1921 the publication of \textit{The Brownies’ Books} which showcased a stunning array of black babies of all hues. Both publications were an effort to prove that neither pure blood Negroes nor mulattoes were degenerates or doomed to extinction.

\textit{The Health and Physique of the Negro American} features a catalogue of black-and-white plates of young students described by Du Bois as “typical Negroes” of various skin gradations
posed for headshots. These photographs resemble the portraits of the well-dressed children featured in the *Crisis* children’s number, which turned into the short-lived publication of *The Brownies’ Books*. Du Bois used certain adjectives to describe the skin color, physique and character of teen students and babies – “well-built,” “well-bred,” “slim and graceful,” “honest and reliable,” “good ability,” “light brown,” “very dark brown,” “creamy color,” “white,” “sandy,” and “chestnut.”

From this study, Du Bois concluded: “There is no anatomical evidence available that would sustain the view that the bulk of the Negro race could not become as useful citizens as the members of any other race. That there may be slightly different hereditary traits seems plausible, but it is entirely arbitrary to assume that those of the Negro, because perhaps slightly different, must be of an inferior type.” Likewise, Garvey admonished blacks to “respect all shades of their own race and never to have any prejudice against anyone whether he is black, brown, yellow, or any shade that the white claims is not white.”

As the 1920s witnessed the birth of the New Negro, for African Americans the image of the black baby took on new meaning for black mobilization for the struggle for civil rights. The studies of Laura Dawkins and Katherine Capshaw-Smith tell us that the black child represented a new kind of racial consciousness, was a symbol of endurance and redemption. Black writers of the Harlem Renaissance provided a positive counter to the “tragic or sardonic ‘dark child’ tales. Images of “hybrid” children too held the vision of “potentially redemptive miscegenation.” Unfortunately, Dawkins maintains, the sensationalist “black baby tales” told by white racists at the turn of the century, and then later adopted by Harlem Renaissance writers “as a means of parodying or indicting post-Reconstruction racial hysteria, still haunts the contemporary American landscape.”

By the 1920s, white medical practitioners halted their discussions on the skin color of black babies due to the issues highlighted in this chapter – the passage of racial purity laws, establishment of stringent birth registration campaigns, the closure of black medical schools on
the advice of the *Flexner Report*, campaigns to wrest control of the delivery of black babies from midwives, and the increasing use of black infants as demonstration projects by white physicians for white self-interest. As the “great era of passing” ended and segregation laws became so firmly entrenched that they cut the possibilities for black mobility in American life, medical practitioner’s obsession with the black child’s skin declined into a secondary obsession and new measurements and observation of blackness to be discussed in subsequent chapters – sexuality and brain power emerged.

“*The Gift Child*” and the “*Sweet Privilege*” of Being White

Earlier, this chapter told of the tragic story of a white couple that unknowingly adopted a white-skinned black infant into their home in Westchester County, New York. When that infant, Martha Washington, was found to be colored the parents decided that they were not equipped to raise a Negro child. That story ended with tragedy. Here is a similar story of Mam Bob, a black granny-midwife, and her husband who lived in rural Georgia and adopted a black child whom they affectionately referred to as “Pet” and described as “a white child without a taint of color that showed in any way at all.”

When Pet, “a child so pretty it made your eyes hurt,” was born some time in the 1920s to a mulatto mother and father. “All the white blood in her and her man got together and made a white child, and that’s all there was to it,” Mam Bob explained. While still an infant, Pet’s mother died from illness and her father was killed in a train accident. Since there were no relatives to care for the baby, Mam Bob and her husband, who was also a mulatto, decided to raise Pet as their “gift child.”

Unlike Peter Quick and his wife who quickly abandoned their adopted daughter, for the first few years Mam Bob and her husband lived “happy and untroubled about their gift child [and] loved that baby so much [they] got plumb foolish about it.” But things began to change when Pet started school and eventually discovered that she was “a white child that had to be black.” Mam
Bob recalled, “it was like somebody hung a sign on her that said COLORED, stooping her heart to shame.”

As Pet entered the later years of adolescence, the couple came “to feel the heavy duty” of trying to raise a white child to be black. Mam Bob said that her husband was an educated man and a good father to their five children, but raising Pet “was beyond his wisdom.” In addition to raising her own children, Mam Bob had helped “our white folks some ways to raise theirs. But I raised my black children to be black and the white children to be white. That was the pattern to follow. But the knowledge of color didn’t come so soon nor so ugly to my own children as to Pet. We didn’t know how to ring the bells of freedom for a white child whose spirit was in bondage to the colored blood folks she knew she had in her.” Pet loved her adoptive parents, “but she was not among us,” said Mam Bob. “She was all alone by herself in that wide space that lays between white and colored.”

For years the couple struggled to raise their white-skinned black child in spite of the obvious difficulties. Within their home, they could not “name the thing or talk about it.” At some point the couple sought out ways for Pet to be raised as a white child, first sending her to an orphan’s home in the North. “But they said no, they wouldn’t fool people about her color.” The couple brought her back home. Later Pet changed her first name from Anginora “because it sounded too much like a Negro name.” During trips to church or to town, she covered her face with a parasol to cover up from passersby. “It was like being colored put all joy beyond her reach on earth. And being white, she couldn’t bend her spirit to white people. And it stabbed our love for her to our hearts.”

Mam Bob and her husband sent Pet to live with one of their daughters so she could attend school with white children. It was a “smothered hope.” For a while, their daughter was happy “but then it broke up around her” when Pet “let on she was a white child and nobody knew better till what they call a visiting teacher came to my daughter’s house and found out the family was colored.” Pet’s teachers and classmates did not take kindly to having been fooled. “In the shame
of it Pet couldn’t get up spirit to go back no more” and so she returned to her adoptive parent’s home where she lived until age 14 and was eventually sent up North to live with another daughter where she could attend a school for mixed children. At this point, Mam Bob felt it was her duty to prepare her daughter to cross the color line.

“Before she went away I talked to her as a woman among women and told her she couldn’t pass for a white person till she was old enough and knowledgeable enough to get along by herself without us forever. Till then she needed to stay with us and get educated and learn the ways of white folks every chance she had so she wouldn’t give herself away when she left us.” Mam Bob never used the words “cross the color line” in her discussions, but the mother and daughter knew “that was a compelling thing in her heart and mind.”

During the summers, Pet made rounds with her mother as she cleaned white homes. “She worked with me and watched how things were fixed and how things were done nice in a white lady’s home.” During the school months in the North, Pet took extra classes. Then the time eventually came – “when nor where nor how ain’t mine to tell nor yours to know.” In a far away city Pet found her place “among her own people.” Mam Bob and her family “never could any more lay the least claim to her.” Their daughter “had to lose herself to us in our family and to us in our race. For the sweet privilege of being a white woman she had to be alone in her knowledge of herself.” Facing the possibility that her life could be torn apart, likewise she had to be “alone in her fears that some day in her life’s span that somebody would find out she had a taint of color in her blood.” Mam Bob reasoned that it must be “a hard thing for a woman’s mind and spirit to be all times afraid and all times alone in fear – fear of her own color, fear her children will show color, fear unnamed for what it is – and nobody on earth she so much dare tell her fears to.” It was indeed a high price to pay for the privilege of white skin.

The burden of her child’s flesh, Mam Bob said, “makes black patterns of pain for her on my heart and mind.” Still she found comfort in her child’s ability to cross the color line, “knowing that the color she fears in herself will help her to bear it through life. For her colored
blood can give her the deep patience to endure of colored people — a patience as old and as deep as our sorrow.”

This tragically poetic story of racialized childhood will now move forward from birth to coming of age wherein skin color and racial identity was fixed but had to be recalibrated to assure that black children would remain under the strictures of social control and so deprived them from growing up to become competent citizens.

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6 On the narrowing of legal definitions of whiteness after slavery, see Karen Woods Weierman, “For The Better Government of Servants and Slaves”: The Law of Slavery and Segregation,” 24 Legal Studies Forum 133 (2000):133-155, 140-141. For example, Weierman explains that in Virginia in 1910 the legal definition of mulatto as a person with one-fourth or more black blood, in effect since 1785, was expanded to include people with one-sixteenth or more black blood. Under this change, many people classified as white became “colored” in the eyes of the law. In a 1924 statute, “Preservation of Racial Integrity,” the Virginia legislature defined “white” as someone with no trace of any blood but Caucasian or no more than one-fifteenth African blood. A 1930 statute upheld the “one-drop” rule as the standard for whiteness.

7 Elizabeth Reis, Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009) pp. xii.

8 Ibid., pp. 40


10 The incubus is an ancient mythological figure, a bird of prey that had intercourse with women as they slept. This metaphor was the centerpiece of white supremacist campaigns to represent black men as sexually threatening to defenseless white women. The black criminal entered homes and raped white women as their husbands slept beside them. For more on the incubus metaphor, see Glenda Gilmore, “Murder, Memory and the Flight of the Incubus,” in Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy, ed. David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 79; Martha Hodes, White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 206; and Jacqueline Denise Goldsby, A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 28.


14 Reis, Bodies in Doubt, 36-39.


16 Gertrude Atherton, Senator North (New York: John Lane, 1900), and Robert Lee Durham, The Call of the South (Boston: LC Page, 1908).

17 For an excellent study on “black baby tales” see, Laura Dawkins, “Black Babies, White Hysteria: The Dark Child in African-American Literature of the Harlem Renaissance,” in The American Child – A Cultural Studies Reader, eds. Caroline F. Levander and Carol J. Singley (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 167-168. Dawkins reveals how racist fables about black children that emerged during the late 19th and early 20th century such as Gertrude Atherton’s Senator North (1900), Thomas Dixon’s The Leopard’s Spots (1902), Robert Lee Durnham’s The Call of the South (1908) and others, typically recounted the destruction of women found guilty of miscegenation or passing for white when they gave birth to babies with black skin. In those stories, the black child was cast as an “emblem or horror, disruption, or simply imperfection – the antithesis of ‘perfect’ milk-white babies.”

18 The Crisis, June 1916, 53.


26 Thirty-Eighth Annual Report of the New York Department of Health of New York for the Year Ending December 31, 1914, Volume 1 (Albany: J.B. Lyon Company, 1918), 409-410. See tables 9 and 10 showing annual number of registered births, deaths at all ages, deaths of infants under age one and five, infant mortality rate, and percentage of all child deaths occurring in New York State for years 1885-1917.


29 The Prince and the Pauper (1881; New York: Macmillan, 1907), 1.


32 See Susan L. Smith, Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women’s Health Activism in America, 1890-1950 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 119. Smith notes that lay midwives delivered half of all babies in the United States as late as 1910, with much of the practice being conducted by European immigrants and southern black women. By 1930, only 15 percent of all births were delivered by lay midwives due to immigration restrictions and the preference of urban women for childbirth attendance by physicians. At that time, 80 percent of all remaining midwives practiced in the South, largely due to racial discrimination and lack of access to health care facilities. Smith also notes that even as midwifery declined in significance in northeastern and midwestern urban areas, the number of practicing midwives did not drop significantly in the South until after 1950. See also, Kennedy, Born Southern, 218. Kennedy demonstrates that as late as 1940, black midwives attended three-fourths of black children in Mississippi, South Carolina, Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, and Louisiana. For a graph illustrating trends in U.S. birthing practices from 1750-1950, see Leavitt, Brought to Bed, 12.

33 This too was the case for poor pregnant women in general, regardless of race.

34 Schwartz, Birthing a Slave, 294-296.

35 Virginia’s Act XII (Hening, Laws of Virginia 2 (New York, 1823), enacted December 23, 1662, provided that “if any christian shall commit fornication with a negro man or woman, hee or shee so offending shall pay double fines [regularly imposed].” Another section of this act provided: “Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman should be slave or free, Be it therefore enacted and declared . . . that all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free according to the condition of the mother.” On children born to white men recognized as property loss, see Mary Ann Mason: From Father’s Property to Children’s Rights: The History of Child Custody In the United States (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 43-46. See also William H. Williams, Slavery and Freedom in Delaware, 1639-1865 (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996), 18-19. In Massachusetts, for example, white men who bore children with free black women were whipped, fined, and held responsible for any children resulting from the relationship. White women were whipped and bound into a period of indenture. For more discussion on this point, see Hodes, White Women, Black Men; and Lorenzo Greene, The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1766 (1942: reprint, NY: Atheneum Press, 1968); and Debra L. Newman, “Black Women in the Era of the American Revolution in Pennsylvania,” Journal of Negro History 61, No. 3 (July 1976): 276-289. It is not the scope of this chapter to pursue a detailed history of the legal treatment of interracial offspring prior to Emancipation. Rather, I simply want to establish that there was long trail of fear about interracial sex leading to mixed-race offspring and there were laws that support this position. For an excellent discussion on the law of interracial sex and the status of mixed-race offspring, see A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., and Barbara K. Kopytoff, “Racial Purity and Interracial Sex in the Law of Colonial and Antebellum Virginia,” Georgetown Law Journal, 77 (1989): 1967-2029; Kathleen M. Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process: The Colonial Period (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); James Hugo Johnston, Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South, 1776-1860 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970); On trends in southern and northern and Mid-Atlantic states, see Weierman, “For the Better Government of Servants and Slaves,”155, 140-141; For laws regarding biracial children in Massachusetts, see James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), supra note 46, at 10, 21; for Rhode Island, The Public
Laws of the States of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations (Providence: Carter and Wilkinson, 1798), pp. 483. On the treatment of mulatto children born to white women being bound out to servitude until age 31, see Act XVI, 3 Laws of Virginia 86, 87 (Hening 1823) (enacted 1671). The age was changed in 1705 to 31, Ch. XLIX, 3 Laws of Virginia 447, 453 (Hening 1823) (enacted 1705). In 1765, it was reduced to age 21 for males and age 18 for females. Legislators decided it was “an unreasonable severity toward such children.” Ch. XXIV, 8 Laws of Virginia 133, 134-35 (Hening 1821) (enacted 1765). There was no similar law for legitimate or illegitimate mulatto offspring of free black women because the legislators were concerned about preserving the purity of the white race only. On this point see Marie-Amelie George, “The Modern Mulatto: A Comparative Analysis of the Social and Legal Positions of Mutilatoes in the Antebellum South and the Intersex in Contemporary America, 15,” Columbia Journal of Gender & Law 665 (2006): 675, and Ira Berlin, Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 7. See also Gregory Stephens, On Racial Frontiers: the new culture of Frederick Douglas, Ralph Ellison, and Bob Marley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 37-38; and Werner Sollors, Interracialism: black-white intermarriage in American history, literature, and law (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 119.

Much of the historical scholarship on historical categories of race and functions of skin color has centered on the issue of adult conflicts over racial passing and interracial marriage, with the usual emphasis on the Plessy v. Ferguson decision. Historians have given some attention to conflicts over the enrollment of racially ambiguous children in public schools, the establishment of paternity in the courts, and the settling of property inheritance cases involving black women and children heirs.


Fraser, African American Midwifery in the South, 72.


47 Claude Nicolas Le Cat “Traite de la couleur de la peau humaine” and “Le Cat and the Physiology of Negros” as cited in Werner Sollors Neither Black nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 155-156.


50 Arthur Thomas “Note on the Skin and Scalp of the Negro Foetus” Journal of Anatomy and Physiology XXV (1890), 282.

51 Ibid.


57 Ibid, pp. 395.

58 Ibid., 283-284.


65 Ibid.


73 For a full history of this discussion among physicians and anthropologists during the late 19th and early 20th century, see Joseph Brenneman, “The Sacral or Socalled ‘Mongolian’ Pigment Spots of Earliest Infancy and Childhood, With Especial Reference to Their Occurrence in the African American Negro,” Archives of Pediatrics 24 (January-December 1907): 426-444.


75 Ibid., 512.

76 Brenneman, pp. 440.


78 Examples of antebellum cases involving white men who petitioned for divorce when their wives gave birth to black babies, Borden v. Borden, 14 N.C., 436, Scroggins v. Scroggins, 14 N.C., 430, and Whittington v. Whittington, 19 N.C.,
63. Ibid., 150.
69. For example, Adolf H. Shultz, “Relation of the External Nose to the Bony Nose and Nasal Cartilages in Whites and Negroes,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 1, No. 3 (1918): 329-338. In this study funded by the Carnegie Institution of Washington, Shultz examined 20 Negro fetuses and children ages 2-5 to explain the growth and greater breadth of the Negro nose. The nose, like skin, was considered of anthropological importance in proving racial difference. See Bird Thomas Baldwin, *The Physical Growth of Children From Birth to Maturity, Volume 1, Issue 1* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1921); and “The Color of the Iris During Infancy,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 73 (Nov. 1919): 1444-1445.
78. See Charles Frank Robinson’s discussion of African Americans, anti-miscegenation law and intermarriage in *Dangerous Liaisons*, 114-128.
80. Ibid., chapter 6.
82. As quoted in Charles Frank Robinson, *Dangerous Liaisons*, pp. 125.
84. This story comes from a collection of oral narratives of granny-midwives from rural Georgia. See Marie Campbell, *Folks Do Get Born* (New York Rinehart & Co., 1946), 223-231.
Chapter 2

“Adolescents of Adult Size:”
Developmental Psychology, Mental Testing and the Invention of Racialized Adolescence

About two and a half months after Du Bois and his wife welcomed baby Burghardt into the world, two black adolescents in Savannah, Georgia were allegedly “caught” by white doctors, taken inside the St. James Dispensary on the corner of Harris and West Broad Street and killed in the name of science. On December 13, 1897, a group of child witnesses said they climbed a tree near the dispensary window and saw the bodies on a table and “white men standing around them cutting them up.”

News that white doctors had engaged in a eugenic atrocity against two of their own flashed through Savannah’s black community of 24,000 residents. Despite having no physical evidence that a crime had actually occurred, for the next two days over 2,000 angry blacks surrounded the dispensary “gesticulating and talking wildly.” Police officers averted a full-scale riot by clubbing protestors and arresting five ringleaders.

A December 14th headline of The Savannah Press blazed – “NEGROES WERE RIOUTOUS.” The paper said “the ignorant darkies” had gotten “a foolish idea” in their heads that children were “cut to pieces” by dispensary doctors. The Washington Post called the allegations “a silly story” and the North Carolina Medical Journal fingered “a mischievous liar.” Based on the content and tone of the press accounts, local authorities launched no formal investigation into the allegations. Protestors were not asked for names or descriptions of any missing children, nor did parents of the alleged murder victims appear at the forefront of the community’s concerns. Instead, black teachers and pastors were asked to “use their influence to disabuse the minds of the Negroes of their beliefs in the vivisection practices of the dispensary doctors.”

As the previous chapter explained, vivisection was the practice of subjecting humans to experiments involving pain, mutilation, disease or death for scientific purposes and was a common and covert practice in the late 19th and early 20th century. Stories and fears about it circulated throughout society and was part of a vigorous intergenerational tradition of black rumor and folklore. Real or imagined, angst about such atrocities were powerfully etched into black’s collective paranoia about the evilness of white science. Black distrust was further fueled by the murderous raids of the Ku Klux Klan, “night doctors,” “night riders,” and body snatchers known for spiriting black cadavers from their graves to support a clandestine traffic in bodies for medical dissection.

It is possible that the Savannah children, who were living in congested hotbeds of crime, misery, and death, could have cooked up the story as a prank or out of very real fears related to rampant sickness and death, among which many took place in charity hospitals and dispensaries like St. James. It is also very likely that the children heard frightening stories from elders about how black people were treated at white-run medical institutions set in their midst. Perhaps the dispensary doctors were engaged in an autopsy on bodies that may have been supplied rather than a vivisection on kidnapped children. Frightened by what they saw, the young children would not have known the difference between an autopsy and a vivisection.

While we may never know the reality of what those adolescents saw at the dispensary, this story highlights the possibilities of why white doctors would or could have in fact seized black children and why a black community believed that a grotesque crime had occurred. It is plausible that St. James doctors might have believed that the capture of two black children to satisfy a scientific agenda did not constitute a crime, or that the children’s disappearance from the larger society was of little significance. We can only speculate that given the disproportionately high rates of tuberculosis, typhoid, malaria and other infectious diseases, in addition to the disproportionately high infant and child mortality rates in Savannah, there may have been urgent interest in discovering why certain diseases permeated the black community. At this time in
American medical history there was a larger conversation among the white medical establishment about the need to contain black diseases so they would not become harmful to whites.\textsuperscript{4}

Two days after the initial siege at St. James, The Savannah Press reported – “NEGROES ARE QUIET.” The protestors “realized the absurdity of the report which was circulated and have once more settled down.” In its spring 1898 issue, the North Carolina Medical Journal ran a joking editorial about the December uprising – “It will probably be a long time before a pickaninny ventures to pass the door of St. James Dispensary after nightfall.”\textsuperscript{5} Even in the obscene racism of the Jim Crow South, the white media and local authorities rationalized that such a horrible crime against black children was unimaginable. Despite white efforts to denounce the story, African Americans saw otherwise. The Savannah incident is merely one illustration of how blacks feared that their children could be subjected to atrocious abuse and used as objects of scientific study with impunity, whether for general medical knowledge or to answer racialist questions. In addition to the dangerous climate of Jim Crow terrorism, this fear must also be understood within the context of an era in American history when the very idea of studying children’s bodies scientifically was a novel, unstructured, and highly controversial enterprise.

The quest for knowledge about children’s bodies must also be seen as a holistic endeavor, one in which scientists sought to understand the individual as a whole person. For our study, this means that Jim Crow era scientists were not only concerned with the biological components of the black child’s body through examination and even racial dissection. They were also interested in testing the black child’s mind and charting how racial differences in cognitive development impacted physiological growth, behavior and intelligence. By the early 20th century stinging media attention and shocking investigations by anti-vivisection societies accused physicians of using helpless orphans and other poor children as guinea pigs in medical experiments. These investigations along with official inquiries into the ethical limits vivisection won the battle to make experimentation on children subject to legislative control.\textsuperscript{6} But this reform did not outlaw
other sinister forms of experimentation on black children that took place under the veil of scientific respectability and in service to white supremacy.

Chapter one explained how the racialization of childhood began at the precious moment of birth as doctors routinely subjected black children to skin color testing. Pediatric unease about the indeterminacy of skin color prompted scientific investigations of newborn and fetal flesh during a Jim Crow period that demanded the certainty of individual’s racial identity. Determining blackness at birth was crucial to creating the fixed identity of African Americans, to reconstructing white supremacy, maintaining racial boundaries, and circumventing the citizenship rights and protections of individuals as set forth by the post-Civil War era civil rights amendments to the Constitution.

Birth was where it all began, but the struggle and search for hard scientific evidence to justify racial discrimination and inequalities did not end with the flesh. The process continued to unfold at each developmental milestone of black children’s lives. Medical doctors explorations into the mysteries of black infant skin declined as the evolutionary and biological concepts of race that reigned in the late 19th-century shifted from a central focus on physiognomic differences and ranking races into more modern and increasingly complex socio-cultural and national differences. The rise of the psychology of adolescence then emerged as a new obsession and just one elaborate system of classification and social control.

This chapter will examine two concrete examples of how science was used as an ally in the invention and racialization of the category of adolescence in the late 19th and early 20th century. The first will be the speculative racialist theories of a select group of child psychologists who used modern science and scientific procedures to reinvent race. By tracking how their racialist theories about black children drew from the fields of anthropology, ethnology, and craniometry we can see how scientists not only strengthened their own ideas, but also brought a new aura of respectability to old stereotypes upon which white Americans built centuries of caste and discrimination. Limiting the black child’s intellectual potential, like the fixing of skin color,
contributed to the development of modern scientific racism. The second will be a scrutiny of a body of mental tests that were used as instruments of social science and racial hierarchy. Understanding the historical context in which the tests were created and the motives of the testers will demonstrate how race was made into a national educational policy.

Together, we will see how race was imbricated within Progressive-era reform agendas involving the expansion and reorganization of an “efficient” national compulsory educational system, which fused biogenetic theories about racial difference with mental testing to sort and “track” students according to ability. More significantly, by the 1920s, such tests became widely used devices to cast doubt on black children’s intellectual capacity and fitness for citizenship by comparing them to whites. Likewise, mental tests were also used on immigrant children to disqualify them as assimilable and competent citizens. Though the language of race psychology and the policies it supported also victimized white ethnic children, they were eventually socialized and blended into whiteness while blacks and other children of color never escaped the racialist logic and paradigm. Architects of child psychology working to legitimize their discipline and advance their own respective agendas through childhood policy, used their expertise and scientific tools to reinvent new strategies to cope with the possibilities created by the emancipation of millions of black slaves now declared legally equal.

My story of the invention of racialized adolescence takes place in the Progressive Era, from 1890 to 1920, and beyond. America’s dramatic shift from a rural agricultural into an urban industrial society led to the formation of polyglot cities, class conflict, labor unrest, fear of decay and ‘primitive’ immigrants, and women’s aggressive campaigns for suffrage which exacerbated the breakdown in Victorian gender role. During this period, historical change could be seen everywhere, pervaded the air, and stoked fears of a social apocalypse and exceptionalist hopes as Americans of diverse stripes and creeds asserted their voice in democracy. In 1899, the perceptive education reformer and philosopher John Dewey marveled, “One can hardly believe there has been a revolution in all history so rapid, so extensive, so complete.”8 In this time of
transformative change, social reformers and scientists took on the role of easing the historical transition from the old preindustrial society into a new and relatively harmonious modern one where the struggle for economic survival among diverse groups of people was to be expected.

Previous historians have demonstrated that the protection and nurture of children was a favored and high priority of Progressive Era reformers. From Jane Addams and Lillian Wald, Julia Lathrop and Mary White Ovington, Florence Kelly and Anthony Comstock, to John Dewey and Eleanor Roosevelt, reformers turned their energies towards child labor, healthcare, schooling, playground movements, purity campaigns and anti-vice, child abuse, and juvenile justice to name a few. African American activists and clubwomen also joined a diverse group from across the spectrum of society and gained a voice in improving democracy. Historians have described the period as a watershed moment when Americans believed the country was falling apart and tried to control change and still anxieties by placing their faith in science for guidance and hope.

Indeed, the recognition and study of adolescence can be understood as an artifact of the Progressive Era. There is no doubt that many progressives were true champions of children and driven by genuine humanitarian concern and a faith in progress and the future. There was even some cross-racial collaboration between reformers who sought to improve society for the benefit of all children. But there is a troubling silence about how racial attitudes, contested meanings of childhood and adolescence, and reform practices produced a heritage of disparities for African-American children. Because much of the historical literature on the Progressive Era focuses on social reform, attention has been diverted away from how larger national and racial policies redefined citizenship qualifications and excluded certain groups while making others America. Childhood was deeply implicated in this process and the development of post-Civil War ideas and practices surrounding race and citizenship and how Americans drew color lines of inclusion and exclusion.

This discussion shifts attention from the more familiar on-the-ground reform activities to the high institutions that participated in the construction of racialized adolescence and creation of
mental tests. This chapter discusses the social and cultural changes that led to the modern ‘discovery’ of adolescence and its role in the development of a new functional psychology in the 1890s, one that considered the child’s mind a dimension of biological evolution. The story moves beyond the South into high and low discourse productions to examine the intellectual traditions within developmental psychology that influenced modern conceptions of black childhood and how those conceptions shaped debates over black education. The previous chapter stepped inside the birthing room, medical science laboratories, and birth registration bureaucracies. Now we will turn our attention to think factories that built a lucrative industry by producing theories, which supported and contested racialized notions of childhood. While pediatricians and obstetricians marked black children in the birthing room, child psychologists conducted their practices in schools, juvenile detention centers, girls and boys homes, clinics and orphan asylums.

The role of three sets of familiar chief actors that participated in the contests over the meaning of black childhood will be explored here. G. Stanley Hall, psychology’s doyen and famed “father of adolescence,” who in 1904 published Adolescence, the standard text on the subject, was among many social scientists of the era that addressed the national crisis by turning toward the future. His two-volume opus along with his other writings and activities helped bring the child study movement to the forefront of educational reform and gave progressives a platform for understanding the nature of childhood and how children should be educated, controlled, socialized, and nurtured into adulthood. Scholarly treatments of Hall have suggested that his model of child development universalized and democratized adolescence, but a look at his anti-black rhetoric will prove otherwise.

While it is true that Hall and his acolytes worked in an era where there was little knowledge of the psychology of adolescence in other ethnic cultures and social settings and yet still these pioneers naturally inferred that the adolescent period was an inevitable and universally experienced phenomenon in every social environment. However, Hall’s brand of adolescence
excluded, marginalized and harmed the black child whom he and others argued did not progress through the ‘normal’ stages of childhood, nor did they ever leave childhood and its ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’ stages to mature into responsible, civilized adult citizens.

The second set of actors are early psychologists including Alfred Binet, Lewis Terman, Henry Goddard, Howard Odum and some lesser-known scientists who created and administered various kinds of mental tests to children. These professionals carved out their expertise and methodologies and used academic journals to disseminate their ideas. Their works had enormous currency because of their contribution to the creation of adolescence and their ability to measure intelligence. It is essential to note that all race psychologists were not from the South. While the *Plessy* decision was a legal maneuver that limited black access and the intricate scheme of the Mississippi Plan required that a certain degree of intelligence be demonstrated in order for blacks to vote in southern states, the Great Migration changed the racial map and created new opportunities to assert themselves as participants in the political process and education reform.

The mass numbers of blacks migrating northward together with millions of immigrants pouring into the country made the problem of race a broader national issue. As blacks competed with ethnic whites for jobs and other resources, northern whites felt compelled to harden existing lines of segregation in housing and education. The saga of the South’s racialist discourse intensified in the north as millions of black children moved into public schools in the north. During this time major testing centers were established in Chicago, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New York, Los Angeles, Cambridge and other cities. As we track the evolution of theories and testing we will be able to see how race was foundational to the development of race psychology as experts jockeyed for top recognition in their field and gave service to the Jim Crow agenda.

Finally, we cannot overlook a diverse group of actors who resisted and sometimes accommodated to racialist professional authority. Scientists including W.E.B. Du Bois, Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, Horace Mann Bond, Kelly Miller, along with black news commentators,
and a cadre of other black intellectuals who published articles on intelligence testing in the path breaking *Journal of Negro Education* contested racialist theories. Meanwhile Booker T. Washington and Thomas Jesse Jones, for example, took an accommodationist stance in their philosophy of black education. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute and Samuel Chapman Armstrong’s Hampton University served as institutional models, which emphasized teaching blacks industrial labor and moral behavior that would socialize them according to their social position. Nevertheless, just as the racist biological determinists believed their disciplines were essential to improving society and ensuring American progress, so too did those reformers who invested themselves in overturning the racialist paradigm.

It may be tempting to argue that a focus on race and racist social policies can lead one to read back into historical contexts certain contemporary sensitivities that had not yet found their place in the fabric of American society. However, the oft hidden critique and protests by African Americans and their white allies who challenged the corpus of literature on race psychology reveals that such sensitivities did in fact exist. Therefore, we must not simply accept the notion that racist social reformers and psychologists were simply “products of their time” as an excuse for espousing harmful ideas that led to devastating consequences for real children’s lives.\(^{11}\)

Like those 2,000 black people in Savannah who went to extremes to defend two black children from a horrific crime, based on truth or outright fabrication, African Americans and their supporters shared a zeal for racial justice and democracy and steadily defended black children by directly confronting white racialist science and questioning the validity of mental tests that were standardized on and written for white children. This interracial coalition of critics also linked the harmful impact of high science discourse to the harmful restriction on black children’s access to mainstream education. In doing so, these trained intellectuals helped set the framework for the NAACP’s legal strategy for the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which overturned “separate-but-equal” schooling. I must note that this discussion is limited by the lack of historical sources on the viewpoints of black children and parents on intelligence testing. Leon
Litwack’s *Trouble in Mind* provides an excellent discussion about black children and parent’s attitudes towards education in the South. Like the moment of birth, the developmental stages of early childhood and adolescence along with the measure of children’s minds were highly politicized and racialized subject matters among professionals and ordinary Americans trying to determine how best to bring up the modern child in an historical period rocked by transformative economic and technological change, massive demographic shifts, social upheaval, racial turmoil and fierce competition for limited resources and opportunities. The purposeful extension of childhood via the invention of racialized adolescence and use of mental tests was not only a response to larger societal shifts and the need to restore social order, but also a necessary step in protecting the privileges of whiteness. It is no accident of history that the prolonging of white childhood resulted in the curtailment and denigration of black childhood.

**“Storm and Stress”**

In the last twenty plus years a growing interest in childhood studies has led to an explosion of scholarly works on child-saving campaigns of the Progressive Era. Important contributions to the history of American childhood have devoted attention to class, gender, and ethnic differences. Scholars have described how economic change, religion, consumerism and westward expansion impacted growing up in America. The Progressive Era was also marked by widespread discussions of evolution, advances in medicine and concern about mentally challenged individuals. Since the development of Jim Crow laws coincided with the Progressive Era’s audacious vision for the young, historians have also studied how race shaped the socialization of children and limited black children’s access and mobility. Much of the scholarship on the Progressive Era has given a kindly assessment of WASP reformers, pediatric pioneers, institution builders, and developmental psychologists, characterizing them as ardent spokespersons and champions acting in the best interests of vulnerable children.
If one believes the rhetoric of the time and much of the scholarly echoes of that rhetoric, America was supposedly building herself to become the ideal democratic model of a child-centered society that genuinely cared for its youth, protected them from harm, and invested in their future prospects. While the central focus of this discussion is on the shortcomings of Progressive reform as it relates to black childhood, I do not discount the era’s important accomplishments in the dramatic improvement of the most basic aspects of human welfare. But the treatment of disabled, poor, immigrant, and black children tell a disturbingly different story about the aims of child welfare reform, national health and speak to how America imagined itself. After all, reformers’ conception of progressive development ran congruent with evolutionary principle of “survival of the fittest.”

Charles Darwin’s (1809-1882) principle applied not only to animal species but also human society. Since society evolved as animal species did, this meant that success was an indicator of fitness and inherited superiority. The misery and failures of the poor, the working classes, and the benighted children of black people could be attributed to their deficient traits—laziness, lack of thrift, honesty, moral prudence and sexual restraint. Their marginal position in society was merely a manifestation of “natural selection.” Social meddling or the extension of charity to the children of inferior groups was an interference that could doom society and the race, and possibly lead to the extinction of the entire species. Hence, the only justifiable role of the welfare state was to let nature take its course while protecting the property and privileges of the fittest and their offspring.15

A few historians have given some attention to how racism played a role in America’s failure to achieve the ambitious goals of child welfare reform. In her chapter essay in Dirk Schumann’s Raising Citizens in the “Century of the Child” Katharine Bullard has described the Progressive Era as a time of growing national consensus in interests in childhood of all Americans. Social reformers were driven by the conviction that the future of children was as citizens and that citizenship required particular nurturing and training in addition to certain
material and educational assistance. From the White House to the U.S. Children’s Bureau to local institutions, programs promoting the welfare of children touted universalist language that regarded children as members of the national community. Bullard notes that behind the rhetoric of improving the quality of life categories of childhood, the focus was really on white children’s social citizenship and right to have their wellbeing a matter of national interest. Bullard explains that since discrimination was at the core of reform policies, “the children of African-American sharecroppers, Puerto Ricans or Mexicans were not brought into citizenship because they did not share the European heritage of the nation.”

Judith Sealanders’s *The Failed Century of the Child* characterizes child welfare reform as an unfinished revolution. Although children’s welfare was central to 20th-century definitions of progress, the nation failed to achieve the ambitious goals symbolized by the phrase “century of the child.” Sealanders writes that an “odor of deception clung to child advocacy” as childhood policies often cloaked other aims. She contends that instituting care for children was based on the model white child as the valuable future citizen and activist state policies that emphasized a democratic vision actually deepened racial divides. Kriste Lindenmeyer and Bengt Sandin also found that despite the enthusiasm for protecting childhood and providing children with access to education and health care, actual policies failed to deliver the promise of “the century of the child.” My discussion builds on these important works by examining how racialist conceptions of black childhood were built into practices and policies that led to the disparate outcomes and failures.

Reform campaigns and institutional polices largely reflected societal attitudes and interest in preserving class status and racial privilege. Scientific studies of infants and adolescents articulated a biologically conceived vision of an American future with certain types of children deemed unfit for citizenship participation. As white children took center stage in reform efforts because they were considered desirable future citizens, the feeble-minded, the idiot, the moron, the masturbator, the crippled, the sick, the effeminate boy, and the black child were among the
types of children that could not be located in the Progressive Era’s picture of a healthy nation. Charts, graphs, manipulated empirical data, and standardized tests of intellectual ability, personality and behavior sought to demonstrate that those children were out of step in the march of progress because they failed to measure up when calibrated against the white Anglo-Saxon standard of physical, mental or moral development.²⁰

While recent scholarship has also acknowledged anti-immigrant biases in child labor and education reform, as well as how race bias determined who received basic protections and benefits such as mother’s pensions and access to institutional services, there is still more to be said about how certain leading figures committed themselves to defining black inferiority while simultaneously acting as hardcore advocates of white children. White reformers often saw no contradiction between their commitment to and obsession over their own children’s wellbeing and the deliberate denigration, neglect, withholding of resources, and denial of protections to other people’s children. With this in mind, the construction of adolescence as a unique period of child development had functional and ideological utility in a time of Progressivism, imperialism, massive immigration, and broadening racial conflict. In the backdrop of this dramatic shift in conceptions of childhood loomed serious questions: Who will rule in the 20th century? Who will determine the fate of the nation? Whose children should be worthy of future citizenship? Thus adolescence was invented to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society and to address these anxious questions.

The term ‘adolescent’ derives from the Latin adolescens, which means to grow up. Contemporary historians have come to a consensus that the first recorded explicit philosophical discussions of adolescence as a sequential demarcation in the human life span took place in ancient Greece with Plato (c427-c347 BC), Aristotle (c384-c322 BC), and Socrates (c469-c399 BC) who all characterized youth during this stage as obnoxious, impulsive, and rebellious. Much later, in the 17th century, Englishman John Locke (1632-1704) and the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) pondered whether adolescents were inherently good or evil and
how best to educate them. Scholars have also given attention to how colonial Americans defined and fixed ideas to this period. Before the 1900s, among Americans there was no widely acknowledged yawning period between childhood and adulthood, nor was there a preoccupation with its behavioral characteristics. “One generation passed quietly into the next,” according to historian Joseph Kett. It was in the early 20th century that the term adolescence was popularized in America and became a subject of scientific study framed by Darwinian conceptions of evolution and nature.

Historians agree that the modern conception of adolescence was a socio-historical creation spawned by the impact of the Industrial Revolution on childhood and changes in labor and family patterns. Much emphasis has been placed on the functional utility of that idea for a rapidly changing industrial society that had to grapple with how to best educate a diverse labor force and protect children from the temptations and dangers that considered harmful to their growth. Adolescence fundamentally prolonged childhood due largely to the declining need for child labor, increasing life span, and changes in children’s function in family life. The rhetoric, reform efforts, legislative measures and institutional responses of the era also helped encourage and justify the extension of childhood. In addition to its functional utility in society, the need for adolescence also had symbolic purposes. As some Americans acted out their status frustrations, nativist fears, and racial hysteria, they looked to children to work out their tensions, to manage the chaos, and search for order. The Progressive-era conception of childhood articulated that Americans knew how to use science to maintain order, manage its diversity, create a healthy citizenry, and measure progress and ensure that the nation retained its vanguard position as an exceptional society.

Despite everything historians have said about adolescence, its origins and functions over time, there has been a failure to acknowledge that youth between age 10 and 20 sprang from various racial groups and did not experience this period uniformly, nor did those authorities that contributed to its creation welcome the inclusion of all children into this protected category.
Enter G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924) with the publication of his 1904 two-volume *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*. The first holder of a Ph.D. granted in psychology in America, Hall helped psychology gain a foothold in the sciences and was a central figure that defined and popularized conceptions of adolescence. He offered parents, educators, doctors and reformers insights into the growth and maturity of children.

Leader of “the child-study movement” and founder of developmental psychology, Hall was the founder and first president of the American Psychological Association. He taught at Harvard, Johns Hopkins and Clark University and even joined the “great accommodationist” Negro leader Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) in 1904 for a summer of teaching at Howard University. Some of Hall’s best-known students included John Dewey (1859-1952), Arnold Gesell (1880-1961), Frederick Kuhlman (1876-1941), Edmund Huey (1870-1913), Henry L. Goddard (1866-1957), Lewis M. Terman (1877-1956) and Guy Montrose Whipple (1876-1941). All were prominent psychologists, influential education reformers, and authors of published comparative studies on Negro and white intelligence.

As David Hooglin Noon has argued in “The Evolution of Beasts and Babies,” progressive social scientists thirsty for professional distinction and cultural authority, were also motivated by their anxieties over the social order of industrial capitalism. Writes Noon, “Teachers, scientists, physicians, and other child-centered professionals contributed to a broad movement that identified children simultaneously as ‘natural’ and ‘social’ beings, regarding knowledge of each as necessary for the cultivation of social order.” Their discourses about the nature of children and child welfare depended upon an acceptance that children were different and problematic but would develop “under the guidance of experts, into orderly and productive adulthood.”

Scientists thus marked the differences between adults and children by parsing out developmental stages “through which children gradually traversed and which corresponded to progressive acquisition of intelligence, manual skill, codes of morality, and so forth.” Noon
describes the Progressive era has a period when the “childhood gaze” was enacted by a variety of researchers from a variety of settings ranging from universities, clinical environments, classrooms, in the home, on the playground and in the machine shop. “Within the realm of child science,” Noon explains, “children appeared as vessels of information to be scanned, interpreted, converted into charts and tables, and introduced as objects around which a more compassionate circuit of authority would be distributed.”

Hall is best known for describing adolescence as a transformative period of “storm and stress” beginning with puberty and ending with the termination of physical growth in the twenties. For Hall, children were born twice, once as an individual and again, in adolescence, as a member of the human race. This new birth, he theorized, was “suggestive of some ancient period of storm and stress when old moorings were broken and a higher level attained.” Based on evolutionary theory, Hall’s Adolescence and other writings argued that the period of adolescence contained vestiges of animal ancestry and savagery, which repeated in a child’s developmental stages. Hall borrowed from embryologist Ernst Haeckel’s biogenetic law of recapitulation that ontogeny repeats phylogeny. While Haeckel’s version applied to infancy, Hall extended it to the growing child. With this framework in mind, the child retraced the historical record of its species or race (phylogeny) in its own growth (ontogeny).

According to Hall, “The child comes from and harks back to a remote past; the adolescent is neo-atavistic, and in him the later acquisitions of the race slowly become prepotent.” During this time of crisis, adolescents experienced heightened emotionality and “oscillation and oppositions between inertness and excitement, pleasure and pain, self-confidence and humility, selfishness and altruism, society and solitude.” Hall reasoned that the inevitable physiological and cognitive changes that occur during adolescence was predetermined, inherited biological fact, not a culturally constructed stage of life. Adolescence was not only the bud of the individual and the race, unlike birth and post-puberty, it was most important in revealing information about the past and forecasting the future.
“Mental development after puberty is much more uncertain than before,” Hall wrote in 1903. “The first 12 years of life represent larger and more fundamental qualities. Adolescence adds a new story.” During this profound transition from childhood to adulthood, children experienced rapid physical, mental and growth, sexual maturation, fluctuating emotions, and irrational behaviors while struggling to shed the primitive and savage ways of remote ancestors in order to attain a higher level of civilization.

Historian of childhood Steven Mintz has argued in *Huck’s Raft*, that Hall’s concept of adolescence “provided a handle that urban middle-class parents used to understand the special difficulties they faced in raising teenage daughters and sons.” John and Virginia Demos, Kett, Mintz and others have maintained that the concept of adolescence was not a biological or universally experienced fact, but it was “conditioned by social forces” related to industrialism. Kett dates the birth of the concept in the 1890s when adults shifted their views of youth as “troublesome, rash, and heedless” and came to regard them as “vulnerable, passive and awkward.” Thus, the invention of adolescence reveals how the “storm and stress” of societal and familial changes that shaped children’s lived realities came to be interpreted as a natural biological process rather than as a culturally constructed byproduct of society’s attempt to create stability.

Hall convinced Americans that children needed nurseries, playgrounds, light and fresh air, obedience training, and suppression of sexuality. He also motivated a generation of educators, reformers, doctors, and psychologists that they should study and assemble data documenting children’s physical and mental growth during adolescence in order to improve the future prospects of the race and nation. He wrote: “The influence of the environment in producing acquired characters transmissible by heredity is greatest in the soma of adolescence . . . For those prophetic souls interested in the future of our race and desirous of advancing it, the field of adolescence is the quarry in which they must seek to find both goals and means.” Looking to the future, he added, “If such a higher stage is ever added to our race, it will not be by increments
at any later plateau of adult life, but it will come by increased development at the adolescent stage, which is the bud of promise for the race.”

In *Rites of Passage* Kett has explained that Hall’s conception of adolescence as a unique time of inner turmoil was enthusiastically embraced by youth workers because it “universalized” and “democratized” the concept of adolescence. Youth workers used Hall’s concept to justify the establishment of adult-sponsored institutions that allowed them to impose on young people “norms of behavior that were freighted with middle-class values.” But since Kett’s study and other scholarly examinations of the creation of adolescence focus heavily on white childhood, one cannot argue that adolescence was democratized or universally applied to all children, and certainly not for African-American children who were considered miniature adults and whose parents were treated like adult children and pushed to the margins of society.

The depiction of adolescence as pathological led to an industry of medical and psychiatric intervention and counseling that capitalized on adult anxieties about children’s behaviors. Writing about similar trends in Europe, John Gillis has explained that though the troubles of children were deeply imbedded in the economic and demographic structure of society, their issues were treated as psychological rather than byproducts of political and economic stress. But while the psychological problems of white children were characterized as symptomatic of psychological turmoi and attributed to the pangs of normal adolescence, black children’s storm and stress was understood as deviant and volatile because of their alleged inferiority and animalistic traits.

Hall was not without critics. Cultural anthropologists Margaret Mead (1901-1978) and Franz Boas (1858-1942) provided a powerful counterweight to racialized notions of adolescence and Western assumptions about ‘primitive’ peoples. As the speculative Hall and others, who were primarily influenced by Darwinian concepts, argued that black children did not participate in this important life stage, Mead concerned herself with testing Hall’s widely held theory that maturation was biologically based and not culturally determined. Likewise, Boas staunchly...
refuted evolutionist racism and argued that racial superiority and inferiority had no scientific basis. In his 1911 *The Mind of Primitive Man*, Boas maintained, “the traits of the American Negro are adequately explained on the basis of his history and social status . . . without falling back upon the theory of hereditary inferiority . . . There is no unbridgable gulf between the mind of primitives and that of civilized persons.”

Mead’s 1928 *Coming of Age in Samoa*, a research project undertaken at Boas’ discretion, was the first cross-cultural look at adolescence. She argued against Hall’s highly gendered thesis that adolescence was inevitably a time of “storm and stress” and that physical development was biologically determined. Mead’s important study of one oceanic culture led her to conclude that adolescence was not stressful in every culture. The demands, neurosis, and traumas faced by youth in Western society were cultural byproducts of modernization. And further, Mead believed, as did Boas, that culture patterned children’s biological development and physical growth. Boas’ and Mead’s line of thinking also suggested obvious contradictions about conceptions of adolescence within the American framework of race. As we shall see later, African-American critics echoed Boas and Mead as they challenged racist depictions of the intellectually inferior black child.

Hall also defined adolescence as period of promise in which children’s minds and bodies grew in leaps and bounds. It was also a “plastic” and vulnerable stage in which “the growth forces that push youth toward maturity are so liable to show signs of exhaustion before their work is finished.” To ensure children achieved the full developmental benefits, he stressed that youth needed careful nurture, guidance and shielding from the harmful effects of the adult world. Hall’s thoughts on children’s vulnerability

Young children grow despite great hardships, but later adolescence is more dependent upon favoring conditions in the environment, disturbances of which more readily cause arrest and prevent maturity. Not only is the range of variation in growth now increased, but there is far greater liability to reversion. As we advance to the later stages of adolescence, all these liabilities are greatly increased, as is the predisposition of sickness. The young pubescent, achieving his growth in the realm of fundamental qualities, dimensions, and functions, comes up to adult size at eighteen relatively limp and inept,
like an insect that has just accomplished its last molt, and is therefore far more in the need of protection, physical care, moral and intellectual guidance; . . . this last great wave of growth throws the child up onto the shores of manhood or womanhood relatively helpless as from a second birth.  

This second birth not only required proper nurture, but that a definitive line to be drawn between adults and children, between conceptions of what a child or adult was and was not. Hall believed that environmental pressures, sexual perversion, abuse, exposure to vice or any other attempt to cut short the adolescent stage could lead to moral and psychological arrest, resulting in children that never outgrew their primitive instincts and were ill-prepared for responsible adult citizenship. The role of adults then was too inspire children’s healthy development, harness blossoming intellect, foster healthy emotions, check sexual precocity, and guide youth pass “the dangers of arrested development” into “safe maturity.”

While historians have acknowledged that Hall’s concept of adolescence was distinctly gendered, especially among reformers concerned that young males channel their masculine energy and activities into a socially acceptable direction, little attention has been given to how race was also constitutive of the construction of adolescence. A look at Hall’s racialist writings on black children does not reveal a vision of “safe maturity.” Nor did he and his like-minded ilk conceive of a boundary between black childhood and adulthood. For the black child there was no period of vulnerability, no intellectual blossoming that needed nurture, and no morality that required protection. Even as Hall called for the removal of all harmful things that could lead to arrested development in white children, and warned that their period of adolescence should not be cut short, his influence racial views promoted the opposite for black youth.

Hall believed that Black Americans, Africans and other ‘primitive’ people belonged to “adolescent races” that were in a stage of incomplete development. And thus, at every stage of development, from conception to physical maturity, the children of adolescent races recapitulated their ancestral record. Since non-Anglo Saxons were in a stage of incomplete growth, according to Hall, they needed to be ruled and cared for by more developed peoples. This ideology
supported racial hierarchy in America and European imperialism. The white Western child, especially the male, was a powerful symbol and standard of the fully developed body and self that not only left racialized children behind, at the bottom of social structures, and outside of normalcy and into pathology. Hall did not provide any real science to support his assertions and conclusions about racialized adolescence, but his writings supported widely held beliefs in white superiority.

Hall’s views on race can best be gauged by the following words he published in a 1905 essay titled “The Negro in Africa and America.” In that essay, he asserts beneath black’s outward physical traits there were much deeper racial differences.

No two races is history, taken as a whole, differ so much in their traits, both physical and psychic, as to the Caucasian and the African. The color of the skin and the crookedness of the hair are only outward signs of man far deeper differences, including cranial and thoracic capacity, proportions of body, nervous system, glands and secretions, vita sexualis, food, temperament, disposition, character, longevity, instincts, customs, emotional traits and diseases. All these differences, as they are coming to be better understood, are seen to be so great as to qualify if not imperil every inference from one race to another, whether theoretical or practical, so that what is true and good for one is often false and bad for the other.

In the final chapter of Adolescence, which he titled “Ethnic Psychology and Pedagogy, Or Adolescent Races and Their Treatment,” Hall supported the idea that Negroes were “cheerful, contented, fond of music, very emotional . . . shiftless and irresponsible, lack[ing] stamina and trustworthiness, injured by the mere top-dressing of culture as well as by being the pawn of politics.” Given their condition, blacks “should not be treated like superior races” and the black child’s education should be “practical, domestic, agricultural.” Since “savage” adults of other race were essentially like adolescents whose “faults and virtues are those of childhood and youth,” Hall believed they should be treated in the same manner as actual white adolescents – “with the same careful and painstaking study, lavish care, and adjustment to their nature and needs.” Just as “the inexorable laws of forcing, precocity, severity, and overwork” led to arrest in white children, the same would be true for primitive adults who if they were not protected and allowed to “linger in the paradise of childhood.”
In addition to encouraging shielding and protection, Hall assured child professionals and parents that it was normal and even good for white adolescents to undergo torrid mood swings, unmanageable passions, rebellious fits, and antagonistic relationships with their parents and elders as part of the necessary steps of growing up. But this script did not apply to black children. As Joel Williamson and Winthrop Jordan have shown, the slave and his offspring, released from bondage, were no longer represented as a child in need of protection or as a fledgling future citizen. The former slave was instead an animal whose savagery was a constant and innate trait rather than a childish state of development that was subject to change. Not only was the black child’s psychosis volatile and defective due to mental arrest and earlier onset of puberty, Hall also theorized that they also followed a different intellectual trajectory than the white child.

Up to about age 12 “the negro child is quite as bright as the white child” and in some cases even more advanced. But somewhere between ages 10 and 15 black children’s intellectual development came to a halt due to premature brain closure and rapid development of their sexual instincts. The onset of puberty in black children “was more sudden and far more likely to permanently retard mental and moral growth than in the white child who shoots ahead.” Hall added, “the virtues and defects of the negro through life remain largely those of puberty.” For Hall and many of his contemporaries, black children, like their white counterparts, moved through the primitive stages of infancy and early childhood but only to become “adolescents of adult size” with atrophied brains, oversized genitals, behavioral disorders, and bad impulse control.

It is important to note, the theory that black children matured much faster than white children and exhibited brain atrophy because of uncontrolled sexual passion or “furor sexualis” as it was popularly called, did not originate with Hall. This idea had long been a staple in the lore of white racism, as it appeared in the writings of anthropologists and ethnologists, and others who wrote racist polemics on the Negro. When it came to theorizing about ‘adolescent races’ or
actual children of the so-called ‘lower races,’ the father of adolescence simply repackaged old ideas into modern science. As Claudia Castañeda has shown in *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds*, the notion that the racial, the sexual, and the reproductive were all linked to inferior mental development was characteristic of late nineteenth-century discourse on racial difference.\(^{44}\) The discourse on the inner workings of the black child’s mind has even older roots.

**“The Kindergarten of Racial Development”**

One of the oldest documented references to the black child’s mental capacities can be found in the private writings of Benjamin Franklin in 1763. Franklin, who was a far more progressive than his contemporaries, recognized that the lack of support for black education was due “partly from a Prejudice that Reading and Knowledge in a Slave are both useless and dangerous.” Despite popular sentiment and a legal policy that criminalized teaching slaves to read and write, Franklin embarked on a grand experiment by financing a black school in Philadelphia. After one visit to that school, Franklin wrote that black children were “as quick, their Memory as strong, and their Docility in every Respect equal to that of white Children.” Though the children he observed were early adolescents, unlike his nineteenth and twentieth-century intellectual descendants, Franklin did not reason that those students’ intellectual development would suddenly come to a halt, instead he believed their education should be nurtured. After subsequent tours of black schools organized throughout the colonies by Anglican minister Thomas Bray, Franklin resolved that blacks were not innately intellectually inferior to whites, “but they have not the Advantage of Education.”\(^{45}\)

In the first half of the next century, anthropologists conducted cranial studies to ‘prove’ whites had the larger brain size and were therefore superior to blacks that were naturally born and fitted for a life of servitude. In *The Mismeasure of Man*, Steven J. Gould described a marked shift from medical approaches to craniometry, such as the use of brain size and weight as measures of intelligence, to more sophisticated psychological approaches.\(^{46}\) Even prior to the
Civil War, anthropologists published plantation reports regarding the intelligence of slave children at puberty. For example, in 1861, eminent anthropologist Franz Pruner (1808-1882), a.k.a Pruner-Bey, published a monograph on the Negro. He wrote: “The young Negro possesses a pleasant physiognomy up to puberty, which commences in girls between the tenth and thirteenth year, and in boys between the thirteenth and fifteenth year.” Pruner-Bey then explained that the brain literally closed in on the black child. “The central frontal suture closes in the Negro in early youth, as well as the parietal part of the coronal suture. With advancing age the central portion of the coronal suture, the sagittal suture, and the parietal sutures close, nearly simultaneously.”

In 1863, Dr. James Hunt, President of the Anthropological Society of London whose work was frequently cited in American journals, read a paper to that society, in which he stated: “With the Negro, as with some other races in man, it has been found that children are precocious; but that no advance in education can be made after they arrive at the age of maturity; they still continue, mentally, children.”

Professor Filippo Manetta, an Italian adventurer and self-described expert scientist of human intelligence and “Negroid behavior” observed slave children from various plantations in the South. In 1864 he reported that during adolescence, “the Negro children were sharp, intelligent, and full of vivacity, but on approaching the adult period a gradual change set in. The intellect seemed to become clouded, animation giving place to a sort of lethargy, briskness yielding to indolence. We must necessarily suppose that the development of the Negro and White proceeds on different lines.” Manetta asserted that the white child’s brain volume “grows with the expansion of the brain-pan,” whereas the black child’s “growth of the brain is on the contrary arrested by the premature closing of the cranial sutures and latter pressure on the frontal bone.”

The same year that Manetta published his plantation report, Dr. Carl Vogt, a professor of Natural History at the University of Geneva, echoed the expert of “Negroid behavior” and other scientists’ by equating the brains of adult blacks to white infants and children. It is important to
note that the outpouring of these writings came amid debates about the passage of the 1864 Constitutional Amendment to completely abolish slavery and questions about whether or not blacks were suited for freedom and civilization. On free black children in the North and mental arrest, Vogt wrote:

It is undeniable that the sudden metamorphosis, which at the time of puberty takes place in the Negro, is intimately connected with physical development. The Negro child is not, as regards the intellectual capabilities, behind the white child. All observers agree that they are as droll in their games, as docile, and as intelligent as white children, where their education is attended to, and where they are not, as in the American Slave States, intentionally brought up like cattle, it is found that the Negro children in schools, not only equal but even surpass the white children in docility and apprehension. But no sooner do they reach the fatal period of puberty than with the closure of the sutures and the projection of the jaws, the same process takes place as in the ape. The intellectual functions remain stationary, and the individual, as well as the race is incapable of further progress . . . The grown-up Negro partakes, as regards his intellectual faculties, of the nature of the female child, and the senile white. He manifests a propensity for pleasure, music, dancing, physical enjoyments, and conversation, while his inconsistence of impressions and all the feelings are those of a child.”

Pruner-Bey, Manetta and Vogt were not able to see into the black child’s developing brain to witness the premature closure of certain bones and sutures as the process unfolded. A close reading of their writings does not indicate that any of these men actually came into contact with the remains of a black child’s brain or skull, nor did either conduct or witness any form of brain surgery on a living black child. It appears that they simply quoted each other and based their findings on no real science, but rather speculative anthropological and ethnological understandings of the relationship between certain brain parts and arrested development.

Modern studies of the brain indicate that at birth the coronal suture – a dense fibrous connective tissue – prevents the frontal and parietal bones of a child’s skull from meeting. Premature closure of the parietal, sagittal, or coronal suture can result in deformities. Three of those deformities include: “oxycephaly – a high cone-shaped head, “plagiocephaly” – a twisted and asymmetrical head, and “scaphocephaly” – a long, narrow, and wedged-shaped head. If we take the logic of these influential scientists literally, it is quite amusing to picture millions of post-pubescent black children walking around with such oddly shaped heads. This picture of the black
child’s inferior anatomy, as confirmed by science, could no longer be described as just a metaphor of white bigotry. As Gould has explained, the notions that blacks were stuck in a continuous limbo of childhood “gave this old chestnut the respectability of main-line scientific theory.”

After the Civil War, the nation grappled with the question of the place of four million ex-slaves who were uneducated and found freedom to be a bitter fruit. Blacks’ new freedom came as American educational systems were being developed in their modern form. As debates abounded about the social purposes of education for the Negro, white scientists continued their line of reasoning that the black child could not advance to the level of the superior white child. For a brief period beginning in the late 1860s and ending in the late 1870s, blacks temporarily joined the ranks of the nation’s free citizens, becoming laborers, voters, students, and political activists that campaigned for first-class citizenship and developed an educational system to defend and extend their new, hard-won freedom. The ex-slaves campaigns were undermined by what Rayford Logan called “the betrayal of the Negro” by federal and state governments and extralegal tactics and terrorist groups.

The defeated South lacked taxable resources for adequate biracial schools even if they wanted them. As more whites moved from the country to cities, they left behind huge pockets of isolated black communities that had to depend on their own limited resources to build schools and other institutions. Rural politicians drew on science to justify diverting tax funds to white schools, leaving black communities with low-paid, semi-literate teachers operating in crowded broken-down shacks with little equipment. Du Bois observed such conditions when he was an undergraduate at Fisk and taught for two summers at a one-room school with a leaky roof in the backcountry of Tennessee. He also noted that poverty and the need for black children to support their families caused many of his students to frequently miss school. Though illiteracy rates dropped from 90 to 40 percent by 1900, black’s struggle to read and write left them unable to qualify for jobs in the complex world of factories.
Racists continued to argue that blacks were made of inferior stuff, but their stifling Jim Crow environment, social ostracism, and lack of access to equal education were given no credence. At the same time, white children in mill towns who were not much smarter than the freedman’s children, were still assured jobs thanks to racial privilege. Meanwhile, as racist medical doctors argued that Emancipation had caused the Negro’s health and morality to degenerate, others like Charles Dudley Warner (1829-1900), who co-authored *The Gilded Age* with his friend Mark Twain, maintained that dreams of education and civic participation ruined blacks’ work ethic and mental stability. Warner argued against vocational education for blacks: “In Slavery the negro did not worry; was not fired by ambitions about his future, but led a humble if somewhat animal life in his little cabin . . . When he became free and invested with the duties and responsibilities of citizenship, new and heavy demands were made upon his intellect.” The former slaves lost their “mental equilibrium” due to the “stress and strain” of new freedom.55

As blacks in the South were deprived of political and economic power, they also lost substantial control over the shape and character of their educational institutions in the public sector. Efforts to improve black education were assisted by liberal white reformers and philanthropic foundations including Peabody, Slater, Rockefeller, Jeanes and Rosenwald. However, violent southern resistance hampered those efforts.56 The South’s white supremacist structure devised a social ideology of education that conformed to political and economic subordination leading blacks to lose of control over the shape, character and aims of their education.57 In the post-slavery period whites argued that since blacks emerged from their condition illiterate, they were incapable of learning or absorbing the standards of civilization around them.

Rabid white supremacists used scientific ‘evidence’ of the black child’s alleged inferiority to prevent a new generation of free blacks from achieving equal rights and from maturing into competent adults equipped with the tools to compete alongside whites. As Leon Litwack has powerfully shown, southern whites understood that a good education not only
equipped blacks for citizenship, but also implanted dangerous aspiration and ambitions. Fearing that a new generation of blacks would treat the dominant race with less deference and respect or out achieve whites, the ideology among politicians and educators was “to make black education compatible with the prevailing racial hierarchy.” The late 19th century saw voluminous anthropological and ethnological studies together with growing interest in race psychology. Investigators grappled with a series of questions: Is the Negro equal to the white? Is the Negro’s psychological makeup different from whites? Should schools educate black and white children the same or should there be differentiation of schoolwork to meet the needs of two mentally different races? The 1890s saw the first stirrings of misuse of experimental psychological research as a flurry of scientific investigations on children’s cognitive development filled the pages of books and professional journals.

Grafting onto the rootstock of evolutionary theories scientist grew increasingly interested in the early development of the human species. The growing child was likened to a “natural museum of human history” and carefully observed in order to see the evolution of human species and the corresponding traits of different races. Folding evolutionary theory into early theories about children’s cognitive development, psychologists devised systemized observations and concocted scales for quantitative measurement. Out of this research, tests were then conducted on children in the post-natal period of life, beginning as early as 10 days old up to age three, and then again during adolescence.

The late 19th and early 20th-century use of the German-devised “baby tests” and a host of other scales, together with the influential cognitive development theory of pioneering Swiss child psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980), provided standards by which observable behaviors of normal childhood growth could be detected and tested before children could crawl, utter their first words, or recognize skin color difference. Piaget’s scheme of cognitive development, like Hall’s theory of adolescence, posited that from infancy a child passed through a series of preprogrammed and biologically fixed stages in intellect and ability on the way to adult maturity.
Piaget and his contemporaries believed that hereditary and environment explained differences in the rate of children’s developmental stages.60

Child professionals and parents considered baby tests valuable instruments in evaluating a child’s physical abilities, intelligence, personality, and how well he or she learned to interact with the world around them. Baby tests scored weight measurement, posture, motor development, reactions to sound, taste, odors and visual stimuli, posture, reaching, grasping, behaviors toward pictures and mirrors, manipulation of objects, language comprehension and mental age.61 Psychometric tests also provided quantitative markers considered valid in predicting a child’s later potentialities, particularly I.Q. scores and success in school.62

The Eugenics Movement’s propaganda slogan that children had “a right to be “well-born,” led to the establishment of weekly consultation clinics where parents from across the country took advantage of free baby tests and listened to lectures on “the problems of children.”63 By abstracting a child’s mental age with a single score, scientists believed they could forecast a child’s future, and “curb the undue hopefulness” of parents with mentally and physically disabled infants by labeling a child as unable to achieve because of a biological proclamation.64 Tests applied to thousands of black and white babies in the first ten days up to year three of life also had racial utility. Baby tests not only shaped culturally constructed conceptions of normality, but also codified and appealed to popular stereotypes about the black child’s mental inferiority.

Scores of comparative baby tests administered in the first decades of the twentieth century reveal glaring racial differences in infant weight and height, coordination, control over the body, reception and reflexes, “participation of limbs,” “defense to stimuli,” “manipulation of objects,” “memory and imitation,” “visual pursuit,” “fanning of toes,” “grasping,” and “senses and will” to name a few.65 Not only did observers find black babies to be below standard height and weight measurements, due largely to poor prenatal care and nutrition, so too were they distinct in their behavior and behind white infants in their intellectual development. For example, a study by Myrtle McGraw (1899-1988), a noted psychologist and close friend of philosopher and
educational reformer John Dewey (1859-1952), compared the I.Q. scores of a group of Southern infants and found “a slight but consistent superiority” of white subjects over the colored babies. McGraw reported that the mean I.Q. for white infants was 105 compared to 92 for Negroes. Alongside published reports of inferior I.Q., systematic anthropometric tests revealed black babies had smaller cranial girth and thicker skulls than white children.66

Nothing about infant bodies and behavior escaped scientific scrutiny and racial comparison. Listening to “speech sound equipment,” investigators discovered racial differences in the way babies cried and whined. Black infants displayed both “accelerated motor development” – a sign of their innate physical prowess and athletic ability. At the same time, black babies made fewer movements than white babies. For example, Elizabeth Hurlock (1898-1988), a well-known psychologist and author of numerous texts on child development, observed that, “negro males made 1.85 movements per minute contrasted with 2.08 of the white males; negro females, 2.17 as contrasted with 2.09 of white females.”67

Hurlock’s findings were in keeping with the stereotype of the lazy black child. Columbia University psychology professor Frank Bruner published an essay in the American Psychological Association’s bulletin in which he described black children as “shiftless,” “indolent,” “lazy,” and “lacking in persistence and initiative and unwilling to work continuously at details.” Because of their “primitive brains” black schoolchildren were not contemplative or capable of focusing on complex tasks in the classroom. Bruner found that it was “impossible to get the child to do anything with continued accuracy, and similarly in industrial pursuits, and the Negro shows a woeful lack of power of sustained activity and constructive conduct.”68 Lauretta Bender (1899-1987), a psychiatrist from New York City’s Bellevue Hospital who was best known for her research on childhood schizophrenia, explained that black adolescents grew up they retained “a special pattern in behavior disorders [and] brain impulse tendencies,” particularly “the capacity for laziness” and “the special ability to dance.”69
Since black children’s developmental deficiencies, laziness, behavioral disorders, and “special ability to dance,” had already been foreordained by nature, there was no use investing in their education and no need to extend to them the privileges of a prolonged and protected childhood. Thus, the unique and turbulent period of adolescence became a privilege of the white child, who according to the results of scientific investigations, slowly but steadily progressed through all the stages of a childhood. Empirical data alongside speculative theories confirmed that the normal white child shed the savage animal traits of early childhood as they matured past adolescent stage into civilized adulthood and thereby responsible citizenship.

In an 1895 paper titled “Reaction Time According to Race,” psychologist R. Meade Bache took the laboratory to prove there was a correlation between children’s sensory responses of the eyes, ears, nose and brains and intelligence. She theorized: “That the Negro is, in the truest sense, a race inferior to that of the white can be proved by many facts, among these by the quickness of his automatic movements as compared with those of the white.” Bache’s experiment on 12 white, 11 Negro and 11 Indian children revealed that whites were slower, and Indians were faster than Negro children. She explained that Indians’ faster speed could be attributed to their “mode of life [which] compelled them to rely on quick movement.” Blacks on the other hand were not quicker than Indians because the confining discipline of slavery had slowed them down.

Whites, though the slowest, were the smartest. The higher intellectual capabilities of civilized whites had thus been gained at the sacrifice of quickness to stimuli. Mead’s study appeared the same year that Booker T. Washington pleased apprehensive southern whites by offering his famous Atlanta Compromise speech, which urged blacks to give up agitation for equal rights and access to equal education in return for jobs. While some scholars have described Washington as a man made and maintained by white people, recent historians have interpreted his aims and development of the Tuskegee model of industrial education as a survivalist strategy to
minimize lynchings and further disenfranchisement by whites irked by the site of educated, thriving, upwardly mobile or “uppity” Negroes.

Not only was reaction time a reflection of higher or lower mental functioning, so too was automatic power and a child’s ability to understand abstract ideas. Anna Tolman Smith, a specialist for the U.S. Bureau of Education, extended Bache’s findings by attempting to prove that while black children learned the elements of reading with ease, they “failed to master the developed language, the expressive medium of subtle relations and of complex experiences.”

The subject for her 1896 experiment was a 16-year-old “typical Negro” boy named Isaiah. Smith gave Isaiah a word association test, which revealed deficiency in associating to abstract terms. From examining this one boy, Smith made the generalized conclusion that “the negro child is psychologically different from the white child. In automatic power he is superior, but in the power of abstraction of judgment and analysis he is decidedly inferior.” Recognizing the social and political utility of her study, Smith added, “this fact must be recognized in the school training.” She also noted that Isaiah became a drummer, which “afforded an outlet for his automatism.”

What Smith and Bache’s tests and conclusions reflect is a larger idea that after puberty a child’s mental life was supposed to broaden and take on the ability to penetrate into the meanings of things and to appreciate logical, aesthetic and moral situations. Smith, like Hall and others, explained that before adolescence a child’s activities were mainly the so-called lower mental processes, such as perception, memory and motor responses. Because black children were a ‘lower type,’ they failed to attain those post-pubertal traits to the same degree as white children. Remaining permanently on a lower level, the black child could never reach the finer elements of intellectuality, even though they were equal or superior to whites in sense capacity, rote memory, objective attentiveness, and motor control.

Another method scientists used to support the dominant social view that black children possessed less developed brains was through auditory and visual memory tests. In 1897,
psychologist George R. Stetson administered a simple memory test to 1,000 fourth and fifth grade students in the Washington, D.C. area and found black children deficient in reasoning. The children were asked to memorize passages and then required to recite them in private to the examiner. After documenting the rate at which students accurately recalled what had been told to them, he found that “in both races, of course, the memory is in decadence from primitive conditions, but as the blacks are much nearer those conditions I naturally expected to find a much greater auditory mnemonic ability than is possessed by whites. It is there the slightness of their superiority that becomes surprising! The black students’ slightly better performance was due in part to their “acknowledged deficiency in reasoning power.”

It is clear that Bache, Smith, and Stetson clearly sought data to confirm racial stereotypes. While their studies appeared more empirically based than the speculative and more abstract evolutionary theories of Hall, still there were others who revived mid-century craniometric studies to prove the black child’s inferiority. In his 1898 treatise *Degeneracy; It’s Causes, Signs and Results*, Dr. Eugene S. Talbot claimed that the pure black and the mulatto child’s brain and reproductive organs were at war during the onset of puberty. “The conflict for existence between brain growth and reproductive organ growth at puberty, results in the mulatto, as in the negro and anthropoids, is the triumph of the reproductive.”

The following year Arthur MacDonald, published an exhaustive study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* titled “Colored Children – A Psychosocial Study.” MacDonald documented the results of a series of mental tests he administered to 91 colored high school students in New York City. The student’s poor results were attributed to changes in their physiognomy, especially their skulls, at puberty. “Among the boys and girls the percent of long head is much greater after puberty than before,” he wrote. MacDonald concluded that the “dullness of colored children sets in between age 13 and 16.”

Likewise, Philip A. Bruce, a white historian from Virginia who assessed the condition of newly-freed slaves in his 1899 *The Plantation Negro As Freeman*, noted that the “precocity of the
child is remarkable” early on, but at puberty the black child’s mind becomes “sluggish, narrow, and obtuse.” Bruce further explained that the “development of the physical frame absorbed what should go to support an enlargement of the brain.” More explicitly, the black child’s brain atrophied because the rest of its body, particularly the genitals, required so much energy to complete their excessive growth.

Dr. Aleš Hrdlička of the Pathological Institute of the State Hospitals in New York confirmed MacDonald and Bruce’s findings. Hrdlička, who was largely responsible for making physical anthropology a well-defined discipline, collected black children’s skulls and skeletons for the U.S. National Museum (USNM) while he was a curator there. An accessions list dated June 30, 1905 reveals a “skeleton and brain of negro child,” numbered 43790 and 43942 respectively. Years before becoming curator for the USNM, Hrdlicka published a careful study of the Physical Differences Between White and Colored Children of the Same Sexes and the Same Ages. He presented “more stable differences of a physical nature” which he observed in his examinations of 1,400 children placed in the New York City juvenile asylums. The children ranged from three years old to just beyond puberty and 300 of Hrdlička’s subjects were black. “The white children show more diversity, the negro children more uniformity in their normal physical characters. This fact becomes gradually more marked as we advance with the age of the children.”

On the size of black and white children’s bodies, Hrdlička wrote: “The form of the head is much less variable in the colored children than it is in the American-born white children. A pure colored child shows mostly a long and narrow head, whilst the normal white American child will show us everything from a pronounced short-head to high dolichocephaly.” Moving his way down the body, Hrdlička found that the black child had a narrower forehead, prognathism in the face, a lower and broader nose, “spacious” lips, smaller ears, and stronger teeth than the white child. The black child was more musculearly developed with a deeper chest, longer arms, and had a pelvis that inclined forward, giving rise “to a greater prominence of the buttocks.” The thighs
“appear not unlike the thighs of a frog.” Hrdlička briefly noted sexual difference between the races. Of black boys, “the penis is longer than that of a corresponding white boy” and “the colored girl, before the age of puberty, and sometimes beyond this period, is a great deal more the shape of a boy” while white girls showed “decided feminine characters.”

Hrdlička essentially provided a geographical atlas of the black child’s body and thus offered a picture of what normal children looked like. His description of the black child’s limited cranial capacity was cited in numerous studies of mental testing and in discussions on how best to educate black children. The line of thought was that since the black child’s brain ossified early, which could be seen by the peculiar shape of its head, meant that the black child’s education had to begin much earlier, pushed more rapidly, and planned in a different curriculum than the white.

At the dawn of the 20th century established psychological ideas about the limits of the black child’s mind continued to bleed into political discourse on black education. In his Presidential Address before the American Social Science Association in May 1900, Charles Dudley Warner complained that millions had been invested in the higher education of Negroes and pleaded for a reversion of this policy. “We must confess a mistake,” he told the audience. “The negro must no longer be the pawn of politics; lower and especially industrial education is the end and no more top dressing of culture on fields without depth of soil . . . This race has gifts of music, temperamental gaiety and emotional religion, but lacks responsibility and thrift. We cannot apply the same treatment as to higher races. No negro tribe ever invented a language and Africa shows no progress. Contact with higher races had produced no permanent effect.”

Warner’s proposal – “Drop philosophy, modern and ancient languages, higher science and mathematics then, and attend to rudiments.”

In its revised 1900 edition, Encyclopedia Britannica advanced the notion of mental arrest among blacks during childhood. An entry on the Negro stated: “The premature closing of cranial sutures and lateral pressures of the frontal bone [sic] close much earlier in the Negro than in other races.” This closure was due to “premature ossification of the skull, preventing all further
development of the brain…. Nearly all observers admit that the Negro child is on the whole quite as intelligent as those of other human varieties, but that on arriving at puberty all further progress seems to be arrested.” Racist doctrine was injected into arguments made by those contending that educating the Negro was financially imprudent and futile. Writing in 1901, Tulane University president Edward A. Alderman maintained that money spent on Negro higher education ought to be spent on industrial training only because blacks were “in the very kindergarten of racial development.”

Kelly Miller (1863-1939), the first black to attend Johns Hopkins University and Dean of Howard University, responded by noting the backwardness of southern schools, the unequal distribution of funding to black and white schools, and arguing that racial prejudice doomed the black child’s scholastic achievement. Miller also rejected the notion that blacks should only receive industrial education. In a 1902 report to the U.S. Commissioner of Education he wrote: “The Negro is a man and is entitled to all the privileges of mankind . . . Why should the larger elements of his nature be left unnurtured while the mechanical side only is developed?”

Once Hall’s Adolescence lent further scientific credence to the idea that children of lower races stopped mentally developing after puberty, more scientists echoed racialist prescriptions for education. The English-born cultural evolutionist Sir Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917) in his 1904 Anthropology, posited that “in measuring the minds of the lower races, a good test is how far their children are able to take a civilized education . . . The history of civilization teaches, that up to a certain point savages and barbarians are like what our ancestors were.” That same year, the Governor of Mississippi vetoed a $10,000 bill supporting a Negro normal school at Holly Springs, the town that gave birth to the fearless anti-lynching crusader and journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett. The governor justified his decision by arguing, “literary education – the knowledge of books – does not seem to produce any good substantial results with the negro, but serves rather to sharpen his cunning, breeds hopes that cannot be gratified, creates an inclination to avoid honest labor, promotes indolence, and in turn leads to crime.”
In 1907, Dr. Henry Wattell published “The Black and White Problem; A Study in Educational Methods,” in which he wrote: “The brain and skull of the negro differ markedly, after puberty, from an anatomical standpoint, from those of the Caucasian of the same age, and that the brain of the black child requires moulding in a different manner from that of the white in order to make the most of those, alas, too limited years of active receptivity.”

On December 30, 1908, a debate held at the last meeting of the Educational Association which took place at the First Methodist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, Dr. J. H. Phillips of Birmingham, Alabama engaged in a fierce dialogue with political leaders “regarding just how the negro should be taught in the way he should go.” Phillips argued that black children should be taught by hand picked black teachers. He injected science into his comments. “The negro child possesses greater physical and possibly greater mental maturity than a white child of the same age. The period of infancy in the white race is more prolonged. Thousands of negro children receive no benefit from the school because they begin too late; the premature closing of the brain suture causes the early arrest of brain growth and they remain through life mentally in a state of comparative childhood.”

Phillips maintained that black children should begin school much earlier than whites. “Kindergarten or nursery schools should be provided, and early training should be given in moral and industrial habits which shall become automatic before the period of arrest is reached.” Indeed, both Tuskegee and Hampton were often cited as noteworthy examples for erecting industrial normal schools for children on their campuses. Attempting to education the black child after mental arrest set in was a useless endeavor, according to Phillips. “The education received by the negro youth after the age of 12 or 14, generally has little effect upon his moral character acquired after the higher faculties become inactive.”

Howard Odum, a prominent sociologist who founded the School of Public Welfare at the University of North Carolina described black children as “easily interested, attentive, eager and alert in their learning.” He too believed black children were brighter than whites in early
childhood. Black children had the ability to learn easily from memory and imitation and they could “retain little things for some length of time.” However, Odum, wrote, “there are many negro children who have an almost total lack of mental perception, whose minds are so dense that they can scarcely learn anything. The percentage of such cases increases with age.” Up to age 13 black children were able to “grasp and hold that which confronts the mind” but then development ceases due to the predominance of their” physical impulses and pleasure-pain feelings. . . that the more primal emotions, fear, anger, jealousy, self-exaltation, self-deprecation, sorrow, etc., are especially active in the negro; that dynamically the negro is volatile, easily responsive to stimuli, guided by present impulses, unrestrained – in short, that his life is one of temporary emotion rather than of permanent sentiment.”

A 1917 study of first to fourth grade Negro children in Lexington, Kentucky by W.E.D. Stokes found that the mind of the Negro child reached maturity at the end of the second or third grade. “The negro child appears very precocious during early life. I believe the natural instincts of the negro babe are more acute than those of the white child. His musical talent is pronounced in early childhood, but when he reaches a certain stage, we find an impenetrable wall, beyond which there can be no future accomplishment. No teaching can correct it. It is due to the inherent fiber of the brain that can only be changed by a process of evolution which may take some thousands of years to accomplish.”

American scientists also drew on widely circulated anecdotes from European anthropologists and educators on teaching African and Australian children. The French physiologist Charles Richet, who published papers on abnormal psychology noted: “The account generally given by European teachers who have had the children of lower races in their schools is that, though these often learn as well as the white child up to about twelve years old, they then fall off, and are left behind by the ruling race. This fits with what anatomy teaches about the less [sic] development of the brain in the Australian and African than in the European.”
The “mulatto hypothesis,” was also a recurrent theme of mental tests. Based on comparisons between full-blooded blacks, mixed race, and white children, this hypothesis held that mulattoes had greater ability than pure Negroes and that skin color was an accurate index of the amount of white blood in an individual. That mulattoes were intellectually superior to pure blacks had been articulated in the culture much earlier. In his 1855 antislavery book *Inside Slavery, or a Tour Among the Planters,* noted abolitionists C.G. Parsons remarked that mulattoes were “the best specimens of manhood to be found in the South. The African mothers have given them a good physical system and the Anglo-Saxon fathers a good mental constitution.”

When black children scored as high or higher than whites on intelligence tests, psychologists credited their high performance to the amount of white blood flowing in their veins, as indicated by their skin complexion. The same was said to be true for American Indians with white blood. Unlike the black full-blooded black child, for a mulatto child, white blood carried increased opportunities for intellectual development. Josiah Morse (1879-1946), a psychologist at the University of South Carolina who gave the Stanford-Binet tests to black and white children in 1914, found that “colored children are mentally younger than the white” and that lighter-complexioned black children obtained higher mental scores.

Morse also asserted that although black children excelled in rote memory, they were “inferior in esthetic judgment, observation, reasoning, motor control, logical memory, use of words, resistance to suggestion, and orientation or adjustment to the institutions and complexities of civilized society.” Likewise, Marion Jacob Mayo who compared the grades and test scores of 150 colored high school students in New York reported, “the presence of mulattoes considerably raises the standard of the negro attainment.” Testers also concluded that their results indicated that more upwardly mobile blacks were likely to migrate to northern cities.
Measuring Minds

Steven J. Gould, John Haller, George Frederickson and others have well described the history of the creation and use of the I.Q. tests in the early 20th century. In 1904 Alfred Binet (1857-1911), director of the Sorbonne’s psychology laboratory, was commissioned France’s Ministry of Education to devise a test which could help identify poorly performing schoolchildren so that special instruction could be provided for them. Gould has shown that Binet’s test was based on a hodgepodge of diverse tasks related to every day problems of life—“counting coins, or assessing which face is prettier . . . basic processes of reasoning as direction (ordering), comprehension, invention and censure (correction).” Explaining Binet’s motives, Gould revealed that the aim of his scales “was to identify in order to help and improve [children’s performance], not to label and limit.”

Binet believed that his test ought to be used only to determine whether a child was normal or retarded, but not to use scores as predictors of a child’s future. “We should therefore study his condition at the time and that only. We have nothing to do either with his past history or with his future . . . We do not attempt to establish or prepare a prognosis, and we leave unanswered the question of whether this retardation is curable, or even improvable.” While Binet believed that some children were innately incapable of normal achievement, he still contended that all could improve with help. Binet rightly feared that his test could be perverted and misused by hereditarians who interpreted scores of intelligence as proof of inferiority and thus channeled low scoring students into their socially sanctioned rung at the bottom of the hierarchical order. Binet warned that educators might use I.Q. scores as a convenient way to prove eugenic principles or as an “opportunity for getting rid of all the children who trouble us.”

After Alfred Binet’s death in 1911, Stanford University psychologist Lewis M. Terman (1877-1956) began devising a new version of the Binet test. Psychologist and eugenicist Henry H. Goddard (1866-1957) is credited with having introduced the Binet scales to America when he used results to categorize feebleminded students at the Vineland Training School in New Jersey.
as either “idiots” or “morons”, but Terman was the architect of its popularity. When Goddard took the Binet test to Ellis Island he found 40 to 50 percent of immigrants tested to be mentally deficient. Armed with results hastily gathered from small samples, Goddard lobbied for stricter immigration to maintain the ethnic status quo.91

It is clear that Goddard, Terman and other psychologists disregarded Binet’s caveats, overturned his intentions, translated and misused his test to establish, as Gould argued, “supposedly objective data that vindicated hereditarian claims” which legitimized Jim Crowism in the South, de facto segregation in the North and West, and stringent immigration policies.92 Between 1911 and 1916 when Terman’s Binet tests began to be widely used, psychologists debated whether racial and nationality differences constituted a problem when using the tests to diagnose feebleminded or delinquent children. While some scientists condemned the test to be unfair when used on children of European immigrants because of clear language differences and other factors, they continued to embrace the validity of the testing criteria when applied to black children.

In 1914 when Byron A. Phillips applied the Binet test 137 white and 86 Negro children he concluded: “the colored children are retarded to a much greater extent both pedagogically and psychologically then the white children . . . and the white children are accelerated to a much greater extent than the colored children.” Howard Odum applied the test to black children in the Philadelphia public schools and determined that black students were so “retarded” mentally that the school’s curriculum was not appropriate for them. Phillips added, “If the Binet tests are at all a gauge of mentality, it must follow that there is a difference in mentality between the colored and the white children, and this raises the question: Should the two groups be instructed under the same curriculum?”93

Historians have noted that U.S. mobilization for World War I – a war to save democracy – gave national legitimacy to I.Q. tests, as they were used as part of the military recruitment process for weeding out the unfit and determining qualifications for would-be officers. What had
previously been used to identify the feebleminded and delinquent, now gained national legitimacy as a method of ranking racial groups and weeding out the unfit as part of the military recruitment process. Terman, who was the first to use the Binet tests on normal children in 1916, contended that the same tests given to army recruits should have “universal use in the schoolroom.”

Goddard and Terman, along with Robert Yerkes (1876-1956), a Harvard professor who was most famous for his comparative psychology studies of apes and chimpanzees, and the controversial English psychologist Cyril Burt (1883-1971) all regarded intelligence test scores as an accurate way to identify a child’s innate level of intelligence which they believed stayed constant for life. Additionally, these men believed tests were a good way to systematically organize educational systems and vocational opportunities using psychometric principles.

Prior to its mass use, Terman had predicted that I.Q. tests would prove the inferiority of blacks and other peoples of color. “When this test is done there will be discovered enormously significant racial difference in general intelligence, differences which cannot be wiped out by any scheme of mental culture.” When the results came in, Terman wrote: “These tests have told the truth. These boys are uneducable beyond the merest rudiments of training. No amount of school instruction will ever make them intelligent voters or capable citizens.”

By the mid-1920s intelligence testing became a multi-million dollar business in the United States as psychologists convinced school administrators that test scores were valid indicators of a child’s learning ability and that tests could also be used as an effective way to ensure school “efficiency.” Terman wrote of the test: “By its use it is possible for the psychologist to submit, after a forty-minute diagnostication, a more reliable and more enlightened estimate of the child’s intelligence than most teachers can after a year of daily contact in the schoolroom.” Terman also maintained that a child’s educability and course of study could be accurately predicted in the first year. And to be certain, “for all practical purposes by the end of the child’s fifth or sixth year.”
Terman recommended that poorly performing children be “segregated in special classes and given instruction which is concrete and practical. They cannot master abstractions, but they can often be made efficient workers, able to look out for themselves.” One of the resulting reform implications of Terman’s I.Q. testing was the reorganization of schools into a “multiple track plan.” His pedagogical prescription was to sort students according to ability and assigned to tracks – “gifted,” “bright,” “average,” “slow,” and “special.” The belief was that students would then compete with others of their own mental caliber. Given the virulent anti-black rhetoric teeming throughout the studies of Terman and others, it is no accident that this systematic reordering led to blacks and other nonwhite students being channeled into classes and programs with little opportunity for intellectual development that could lead to better vocational prospects and therefore improve their chances of living more fruitful lives.

As Paula Fass has explained, I.Q. tests were a useful sorting instrument at a time in American history when democracy seemed threatened by heterogeneity. Counting, sifting and ranking individuals provided a form of order and containment and helped draw lines of inclusion and exclusion. Given the cultural concerns of the time, it is logical that intelligence tests led predictably to racial comparisons and socially sanctioned disparities. As the 20th century progressed, psychologists gained immense credibility with intelligence tests. Terman’s Binet tests sold about 1.5 million annually in the mid-1920s. Between 1927 and 1948, there over 60 measures of intelligence were devised and nearly 1,300 achievement tests were put to use. By the 1950s the number of scholastic aptitude tests grew to 2,400 and the number of intelligence tests climbed to 800 and reached well into the thousands by the late 20th century.

Over the decades psychologists continued to descend upon schools, boys and girls homes, orphanages and juvenile asylums. New tests of “non-intellectual traits” found racial differences in black and white children’s “emotionality,” “color preference,” “social perception,” “speed,” “ascendance-submission,” and “musical ability.” Amid all the high discourse about allegedly inferior black children, the backdrop of lives pinned with poverty, degradation and violence,
some scientists also embarked on new psychological research on black children to answer a single unnerving question – “Is the Negro happy?”

“Strange and Foolish Tests”

The abstract discourse of white racialist science was never too far over the heads of African Americans, even as they to endure the stifling realities of segregation and focus on keeping their children alive. African Americans have long defended themselves against racist attacks on their capabilities. Black people saw the pretentiousness of white researcher’s claims that a little mental test could judge and classify their fitness for life. In the early 1900s, led by W.E.B. Du Bois, Thomas Jesse Jones, Kelly Miller and an interracial coalition of reformers and social scientists including Jane Adams, Mary White Ovington and others, African Americans steadily contested white depictions of the intellectually inferior black child. Black critics pointed out that racial prejudice, isolation, and the wages of poverty, not innate racial or cultural differences, harmed black children’s intellectual growth and impeded their integration into the academic mainstream.

Leading black social scientists and educators used their professional training to attack the central premise of intelligence tests: that there were racial differences between black and white children that could be measured and quantified without scientific error or racial bias. Black critics frequently called out white scientists for abusing scientific methods and manipulating data to create myths about white superiority while imposing inferiority onto blacks and other people of color. Du Bois, a witness to the high tide of biological racism and misuse of mental testing, best summed up this critique:

Every device of science was used: evolution was made to prove that Negroes and Asiatics were less developed human beings than whites; history was so written as to make all civilization the development of white people; economics was so taught as to make all wealth due mainly to the technological accomplishment of white folks supplemented only by the brute toil of colored peoples; brain weight and intelligence were used and distorted to prove the superiority of white folks.
As his Pulitzer-prize winning biographer David Levering-Lewis has shown, Du Bois was not only an educator, but also a social scientist who fervently argued that the plight of the Negro was mainly rooted in white prejudice. Like Boas and Mead, Du Bois stressed the importance of acknowledging the impact of culture and environmental factors when assessing black educational achievement. Throughout his life Du Bois lamented that the Negro’s lack of education, access to decent jobs and housing, poor health and other disparities stemmed from a social system created out of constructed cultural categories of race, often based on scientific rationale.\textsuperscript{101}

Just as Boas took to Ellis Island to study the physical condition and intelligence of new immigrant arrivals, and Mead traveled to Samoa to study adolescent girls, Du Bois studied 40,000 Negro “types” and published his findings in his 1906 \textit{Health and Physique of the Negro American}. Using scientific procedures, data, and photographs, Du Bois sought to undermine racist claims that blacks were physically and intellectually inferior. The health and educational disparities they faced were a result of race prejudice and restriction.\textsuperscript{102} More importantly, Du Bois believe that the black condition could be solved by a change in attitudes and by equipping black children with the educational tools needed to fight American injustice.

Along with Du Bois, a cadre of capable black educators, psychologists, social scientists, and writers participated in debates over the black child’s intellectual ability, racist school curriculum and pedagogical practices. The story of how Du Bois found himself in opposition Booker T. Washington who espoused different a philosophy on black education has been well told by other historians. While Washington promoted the model of industrial education that sought Negro accommodation to the status quo, Du Bois rejected the accommodationist approach and a curriculum that he thought guaranteed that young blacks would “dream of cornbread and molasses” and find themselves sentenced to lives of mindless servitude.\textsuperscript{103}

V.P. Franklin’s brilliant article “The Tests Were Written for the Dogs” provides the best complete historical analysis of the discriminatory use of I.Q. tests and African American’s responses to them. There was the most vocal detractor, president of Lincoln University Horace
Mann Bond (1904-1972), who published “Intelligence Tests and Propaganda” in the June 1924 issue of The Crisis Magazine and “What Army Intelligence Tests Measured,” in the July 1924 edition of Opportunity Magazine. Bond wrote numerous other articles and books criticizing I.Q. tests because they put forth no clear definition of intelligence. Like Du Bois, Bond emphasized environmental factors that accounted for differences in intelligence tests and pointed out that the tests themselves encouraged racial prejudice.104

Following Bond’s heels, other noted scientists including Howard H. Long, Albert Sidney Beckham, Charles S. Johnson, J. St. Clair Price and the Jewish anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits, who studied under Boas, also used Opportunity throughout the 1920s and 1930s to publish their criticisms of I.Q. tests, emphasizing that methodological flaws, cultural biases, and noting the findings of black scientists who conducted their own original research and generated vastly different data.105 These writers’ critiques and scientific findings on intelligence did not make it into mainstream journals because they were often edited by leading racialist thinkers in the discipline who controlled the content.

V.P. Franklin looks at how educator Charles H. Thomas’s Journal of Negro Education (JNE) provided a viable forum for black scientists such as E. Franklin Frasier, Charles S. Johnson, and other voices including James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Ralph Bunche, Charles Hamilton Houston and others who sought to clarify what intelligence tests were actually measuring. Establish in 1932, the JNE’s mission was to document the impact of racism and segregation on black access to equal education. The JNE also provided critical surveys of racial tests conducted by whites on black children. Contributors powerfully demonstrated that mental tests were culturally biased in favor of white middle-class children on whom the tests were standardized and written for. Not only did JNE contributors offer culturally specific alternatives to scholastic aptitude and other intelligence tests, they also called for a moratorium on the use of tests in making educational decisions affecting blacks and other children of color.
In tracing the history of African American challenges to mental tests, Franklin points to Horace Mann Bond, who is 1924 argued that test scores were not valid measures of innate intelligence, but rather, they reflected social and educational training. In 1927, Bond published a study on “Some Exceptional Negro Children,” which blasted the “mulatto hypothesis” that black children who performed well on I.Q. tests did so because of their white blood. Others followed suit and published the results of high-performing full-blooded black children in the Baltimore Afro-American, The Chicago Defender and other black newspapers.

Du Bois also made a point of highlighting these exceptional children in the pages of The Crisis Magazine. Using various cultural mediums of study and communication, blacks vociferously attacked I.Q. tests through a steady flow of articles, which pointed out that the prejudice of examiners, significant differences in cultural background, and educational opportunities available to black and white children had to be considered when assessing achievement. One scientist observed that blacks could never be winners under a white microscope and measuring stick. “The Negro is not seen in an advantageous light when thus bludgeoned with a measuring rod constructed for other races . . . Investigations of the Negro’s specific abilities always seem to imply final comparison against Caucasian standards.”

The Negro was not a homogenous race, critics constantly explained. But rather, the Negro was a socially distinct group consigned to a set of social circumstances as a result of racial attitudes. Given their marginalized condition, and the racialist aims of the test creators, it was only logical that black children’s responses and attitudes on tests administered by white people were especially pronounced. As psychologist Robert P. Daniel articulated in a contribution to the JNE, “race consciousness engrained daily by social isolation and taboo is not summarily dismissed by a smiling, pleasant-voiced, courteous, but unknown white examiner who comes to administer a strange and foolish test.”

Daniel and others complained that white examiners failed to realize that black children fit them into “certain emotional patterns and mental sets and responses as directed by social tradition
and experience.” Several factors almost always came into play during testing sessions, even when whites tried to establish a good rapport with their black subjects – fear, hesitation, and misunderstanding. The research of Albert Loyal Crane drove home this point. Crane noted the contrast between attitudes of black and white children upon entering the testing laboratory.

The Negro entered the room cautiously with eyes wide open and fluctuating in expression between fear and curiosity, not untouched with negative self-feeling – all of which however, soon gave way to more placid, somewhat stolid attitude as the subject became adapted to the environment and busy with the routine of the tests. The white group, however, entered the room with an attitude of general curiosity, the fear reaction in the majority cases well held in check by an obvious self-confidence, and in all cases quite effectively under control.

Crane also complained about the tactics white examiners used to induce black children to participate in tests. He reported that testers used “threats, cajolery, flattery, bribery and every conceivable ruse within the bounds of reason and the law.” Some children were paid fifty cents and provided transportation in “a rickety old Ford.” Given these conditions, black children followed “old habits of unquestioned obedience and amendability which the pressure of racial social forces.” Thus their responses on tests reflected “a social mandate” of racial deference, one that did not operate in the mindset of white children.

While black scientists launched their concerted attack, black editorial writers had their say. From The Amsterdam News in 1928: “It is very significant that in all their studies, researches and excavations they never discover anything credible to the Negro.” White scientists’ “laborious investigations proves exactly nothing.” The Chicago Defender in 1932 proclaimed, “tests disclose no racial difference in intelligence but they do show the advantages of education and environment on the intelligence of children.”

One cannot discount the psychological function that mental tests held for reassuring ordinary white Americans of their superior rank on the scale of humanity. As one black editorial writer for The Pittsburg Courier expressed in 1928: “We need not be surprised [sic] when some scientists arises to point out that there are inherent differences between whites and blacks, and that the former are inferior to the latter.” The writer added, “There are thousands of exploiters of
Negroes who gain moral strength from such statements, and there are scores of millions of ordinary whites who are much lifted in spirit when they are told, after all, the Negro who is their superior physically, mentally and financially, is in reality their inferior by fiat of Dame Nature.”

Intelligence tests were “merely old wine in new bottles,” The Pittsburg Courier writer stated: “We have heard it so often ever since we have been in America that we have to expect it at least once a year from some white ‘intellectuals.’ For a long time many of us have been feeling a little sorry for those whites who spend so much of their time and the money of others trying to prove what down in their hearts they know is not true. Yes, it is very amusing, and then again, it is a little pathetic.” The writer pointed to a hopeful trend – “the percentage of Negroes in this country who in this day and time believe that whites are superior to the blacks is very small, and growing smaller. It is not so much what others may think of us that is spiritually important but rather what we think of ourselves. Let us be confident of our power and potentialities and it does not matter what nonsense the other group is led to believe by their ‘scientists.’”

Indeed, these words provided an uplifting prescription for a group whose children were under constant assault, physically, mentally and morally. As Du Bois and his contemporaries understood, a more egalitarian common curriculum for all American students was needed – one that was not infused with virulent evolutionary and biologically based racial assumptions about student’s abilities or one that employed psychometric tests which led to negative racially disparate outcomes. Scholars have noted that G. Stanley Hall’s theories about adolescence collapsed under the weight of its own illogic and because of Mead and other’s emphasis on how culture and social context impacted the way children grow up. Educator’s notions of scholastic aptitude and intelligence have slowly given way to culturally sensitive pedagogical teaching practices and understandings about children’s cognitive development. But despite steady criticism and pressure from civil rights groups to correct the harmful vestiges of race psychology, Hall, Goddard, Terman and their contemporaries’ influence still undergird the organization our
current educational system today, as well as popular conceptions of black children grow and think.

The landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision may have solved the problem of legally sanctioned school segregation, but that problem metastasized into others – passions over school busing, financing for special education and bilingual education, affirmative action backlash in higher education, high-stakes testing, and school closures to name a few. In the midst of these debates the issue of the validity of testing continues to emerge. By the 1970s the Association of Black Psychologists, NAACP and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund called for a complete moratorium on I.Q. tests because they placed a negative label on black children, channeled them into inferior class tracks, and destroyed positive intellectual growth.

Black civil rights leaders, social scientists, educators and psychologists have argued that I.Q. tests were the great tragedy of the 20th century and still remain at the heart of poor education and lack of motivation of black children who are still measured by culturally biased standards. Part of the problems of the failures of urban schools is the notion that black children are uneducable. The recent work of Columbia University psychologist Claude M. Steele has shown how black achievement gaps continue to be racialized and that the explanation for underperformance often has less to do with preparation or ability than with the threat of stereotypes about their capacity to succeed. In 1999 a group of educators at Stanford University tested this hypothesis and confirmed these findings.111

Even as African-American journalists, intellectuals, and their civil rights organizations continue the long tradition of grappling with how to prevent sophisticated new badges of inferiority from being affixed to black children, the double tragedy is that some black teachers, parents and the students themselves have either consciously or subconsciously swallowed the propaganda that black students are congenitally intellectually deficient. Indeed, as Leon Litwack revealed in his study of black attitudes towards education, this was also true during Jim Crow. And yet still, we have yet to fully understand the origins and complex functions of old
expressions. Nor have we drawn upon the lessons of Mead, Boas, Du Bois, Binet, Bond, Herskovits and others who recognized how essential childhood was to the making of race and new schemes of social control.

The next chapter will continue the conversation on how representations of the black child as an intellectually deficient, animalistic, and morally devoid lower species denied Jim Crow’s children a right to childhood. We will leave the psychology lab and revisit the medical sphere and listen to the street-level discourse of white society to examine how jokes and published studies on the black children’s sexuality enacted violence toward their personhood, not just through professional studies and humor, but also through the actual violence of lynching and rape.

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4 Records from the Chatham County Health Department’s Vital Statistics Archives reveal that for the year 1897 St. James opened its doors, 736 blacks and 577 whites died in Savannah. Of those totals, 270 black and 210 white deaths were children under age 12. As the city continued to improve sanitary conditions and provide better medical access to whites, mortality rates for white children steadily declined as they worsened for black youth. A 1903 Atlanta University investigation of black mortality in large cities found that blacks comprised 31 percent of Savannah’s mortality rate and 60 percent of that total were children under age 10. By 1914, in Savannah there were 123 deaths among white children and 330 deaths among black children under age 10. See, Conference for the Study of Negro Problems, 1st (Atlanta, 1896). Mortality among Negroes in Cities; Proceedings of the Conference for Investigation of City Problems. Held at Atlanta University May 26-27, 1896 (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1903), 21-23. For a discussion of infant and child mortality rates and the living conditions of black children see, W.F. Brunner, “The Negro Health Problem In Southern Cities.” Journal of the Outdoor Life, 12 (1914): 124; for overall health and sanitary conditions in Savannah see, Werner Troesken, Water, Race, and Disease (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), esp. chapter 4.

5 “Negroes Are Quiet,” The Savannah Press, December 15, 1897, 7; and “Besieging A Dispensary,” 34.


7 I draw this point from a similar argument made by Mae Ngai whose book explore how racial ideology must be understand as central to the shaping of immigrant policies in the early 20th century. See, Mae Ngai, Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), esp. introduction.

I make this statement in response to a December 2003 review of Kriste Lindenmeyer’s “A Right to Childhood”: *The U.S. Children’s Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-1946.* The reviewer, Larry DeWitt complained that scholars who have focused “excessively” on gender and race have developed an “overly-critical, unbalanced, view of the shortcomings” of Progressive reform. He suggests that scholars who have written about gender and race have offered a less faithful re-creation of the world of early 20th-century social reformers. And further, he writes, “a focus on policy and policy issues rather than race, gender and social roles, helps us avoid the temptation of reading back into historical contexts contemporary sensibilities which in reality had not yet found their place in the fabric of the American story.”

A later chapter on the 1940s studies on black adolescence by the American Youth Commission will attempt to remedy this void by showcasing the voices and attitudes of black youngsters and their parents as they struggled to navigate racial and class structures during Jim Crow. On black attitudes towards schooling in the South see, Glenda Gilmore, *In Search of Progressivism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); for a look at how material culture reflected their parents as they struggled to.


29 G. Stanley Hall, "Psychic Arrest in Adolescence," *Journal of Proceedings and Addresses of the 42nd Annual Meeting of the National Education Association Held at Boston, Massachusetts* (July 6-10, 1903), 811.


39 George Everette Parker, *Genetic Philosophy of Education: An Epitome of the Published Educational Writings of President G. Stanley Hall of Clark University* (New York: Sturgis & Walton, 1912), 181.

40 For more on this point about the symbol of the fully developed white child in contrast to non-white children see, Julia L. Mickenberg and Lynne Vallone, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.

Knoblock and Benjamin Pasamanic, "Further Observations on the Behaviora
No. 1 (Feb. 1936): 3

Psyche Cattell, "The Development of Intelligence and Motor Control in Infancy,
Sex Differences in Newborn Infants,"

Beasley, "Visual Pursuit in 109 White and 142 Negro Newborn Infants,"

tests to babies between six months to age three “every Wednesday from 1:00 to 3:00.”


Gould, Mismeasure of Man, 148-149.


Gould, Mismeasure of Man, 116.


Ibid.


Litwack, Trouble in Mind, 78, 81.


In his examination of the “mental testing movement” in the United States in the pre-World War I era, V.P. Franklin also notes that when the Stanford-Binet tests were translating and introduced in the U.S. in 1910 by Henry Goddard who used the tests on “feeble-minded” children at the Vineland Training School in New Jersey, Goddard became the first to suggest that new intelligence tests measured how much a child was capable of learning at a given chronological age. See, V.P. Franklin, “The Tests are Written for the Dogs: “The Journal of Negro Education”, African American Children, and the Intelligence Testing Movement in Historical Perspective.” The Journal of Negro Education 76, No. 3 (Summer, 2007): 217.

See for example, "The Parents’ Educational Bureau of Portland Oregon,” Child Welfare Magazine 8 (Sep. 1913-Aug. 1914): 408. Portland’s Educational Bureau offered eugenic lectures “on all children’s problems” and administered free tests to babies between six months to age three “every Wednesday from 1:00 to 3:00.”

Herring, pp. 147.

Immigration Problem

the validity of testing criteria and use on immigrant children see, Jere

as shown by a substitution test.

Black children were decidedly inferior to whites.

Political and Social Science

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see, Gregory Walcott, “The Intelligence of Chinese Students,”

Applied Psychology

American Indians see, Thomas R. Garth, “The Results of Some Tests on Full and Mixed Blood Indian,”


Obrien, 1917),

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See annual report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institute, showing the operations, expenditures, and condition of the Institution for the year ending June 30, 1905 Report of the U.S. National Museum.

Ales Hrdlicka, “Physical Differences Between White and Colored Children of the Same Sexes and the Same Ages.” Proceedings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science 57 (Dec., 1898): 475-476.

Granville Stanley Hall, The Pedagogical Seminary 7 (1900): 301.


Tylor, Anthropology, 75.


Gould, 149, 151, 152.

Shipman, Evolution of Race, 128.

Gould, Mismeasure of Man, 175.


95 As quoted in The proceedings of the National Conference of Juvenile Agencies, Vol. 12 (1915), 55.


98 Steven Ward, Modernizing the Mind: Psychological Knowledge and the Remaking of Society (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, Praeger, 2002), pp. 73. Estimates on the number of tests developed vary among scholars.


109 Daniel, pp. 420, 421.


Chapter 3

“Go ‘long, white man, I ain’t no ‘SEPTEMBER MORN’”: Pornographic Postcards, Popular Perversion and the Racialization of Childhood Innocence

“God only knows how many children born under conditions which promised lives of usefulness and honor, have been killed morally, physically, and mentally, through the dissemination of unclean matter. There is no pernicious influence upon the mind of a child than a filthy picture.”

Anthony J. Comstock

On May 9, 1913, Anthony J. Comstock (1844-1915), special agent for the United Post Office Department and head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, stormed out of his tiny office on the second floor of 150 Nassau Street in New York City after being told that a local art dealer was corrupting the morals of the city’s youth. The anonymous tip came from Harry L. Reichenbach (1882-1931), a press agent notorious for staging wild publicity stunts to promote films. Days earlier when the owner of the Braun & Company Art Gallery at 13 West 46th Street found himself stuck with 2,000 prints of French artist Paul E. Chabas’s now iconographic September Morn painting, he enlisted Reichenbach’s services to help sell them. Though the romantic painting of the nude girl had won high acclaim when it was presented to the upper echelons of the French art world in 1912, it failed to capture the attention of American buyers when Chabas shipped prints to various cities the following year.
By 1913, the entry of the term pornography in the *Webster’s Dictionary* expanded the definition of obscenity and referred to written and visual images of sexual behavior that violated moral and social taboos. The *September Morn* painting fit this definition. To sell the prints, Reinchenbach devised a prankish scheme that would offend the moral sensitivities of the pot-bellied, mutton-chopped whiskered, cranky, prudish old vice suppressor, generate national controversy, turn the bathing blonde into a cause célèbre, and make money to pay his rent in the process. In his anonymous phone tip, Reichenbach promised Comstock that he would find an “obscene” painting of a nude girl hanging in the Midtown gallery’s storefront window. With his badge and revolver hidden underneath the flap of his black frock coat, Comstock set out to protect innocent souls from being tempted by what he called “devil traps,” “cursed pictures,” and “evil reading.”

Comstock was no stranger to seeing nasty pictures or witnessing “unnatural acts” that took place inside some of New York City’s seedy establishments. His Nassau Street office was set in the midst of brothels, saloons, dingy news depots, and other venues for publishing and selling erotica. This proximity enabled him to make certain observations about the impact of unregulated circulation of sexual ideas. In his lurid writings, he often invoked images of innocent and vulnerable children to make his point. He lamented: “the youth of this country today are being cursed by the dissemination of pictures where woman is exposed to vulgar gaze, through the medium of photography and art.” Thus, it was his duty and the duty of every chivalrous man to defend and protect the chastity of modest women and innocent children from being defiled in obscene pictures. “The nude in art,” he complained, “is a menace upon this chastity.”

According to Reinchenbach, the old man nearly choked when he arrived at the gallery and saw a group of boys and girls “uttering words of unholy glee” and “making faces too sophisticated for their years” as they ogled at the slender nude skinny-dipping in an icy lake surrounded by morning haze. Little did Comstock know that Reichenbach had paid the youngsters fifty cents a piece to make a spectacle over the painting as part of his publicity stunt.
Nor was he aware that the Chabas painting was embroiled in controversy in a Chicago trial and had made headlines in other cities before reaching Manhattan.

The nude girl caused traffic jams, prompted arrests of art dealers, triggered a storm of protests by police officers, vice suppressors, clubwomen and art communities, and stimulated heated debates over art and decency in newspaper editorials. Chicago’s superintendent of public schools testified in court that the painting had “an immoral effect on children.” A local priest claimed that “it stimulat[ed] lust” and was “an improper exhibition of human nakedness.” The controversy ended in mid-March, when a jury in that city ruled that the painting was not improper and could be displayed publicly. In New York, Comstock would be hailed as Miss September Morn’s sworn enemy and his damnation of the painting ignited further “enraged cries of lewd and indecent” across the country.

“Take her out at once!” Comstock roared after marching past the small group of children and barging inside the gallery. “The picture of the girl without any clothes on,” he barked.

“But that is the famous ‘September Morning,’ ” the salesman on duty defended the painting.

“There’s too little morning and too much maid! Take it out!” Comstock ordered. “It is not a proper picture to be shown to boys and girls.” His verbal tirade continued. “There is nothing more sacred than the form of a woman, but it must not be denuded. I think everyone will agree with me that such pictures should not be displayed where school children passing through the streets can see them.”

Initially, the shop salesman defied the head of vice by refusing to remove the painting from the window. His insubordination provoked Comstock to throw back the flap of his frock coat and display his badge. The salesman then reached for a picture hook and removed the painting from the window. Before leaving, Comstock ordered him not to display Chabas’ naked girl, warning, “If you ever put that picture in the window I’ll confiscate your whole stock!”
When the gallery manager Philippe Ortiz was informed that the hoax was a success, he put the painting back in the display window despite Comstock’s threats of arrest and seizure of his stock. With Reinchenbach’s assistance, the controversy made headlines of the daily newspapers causing throngs of curious New Yorkers and tourists to flock to the gallery to catch a glimpse of the nude girl. The New York incident made Ms. September Morn into a succès de scandale and the subsequent media coverage helped the Braun & Company Art Gallery quickly sell out of prints. Reinchenbach earned his rent money. Ortiz was never arrested nor was any of his stock confiscated. Comstock continued to argue that the painting was obscene as hundreds of thousands of lithographic reproductions of September Morn continued to sell in stores in every part of the country.

During that summer and early autumn of 1913, reaction to the September Morn debacle oscillated between outraged agreement with Comstock’s supporters and mockery of the man. The painting inspired poems, songs, vaudeville performances, cartoons, and comedies across the country. Some cities allowed the painting to be publicly displayed but behind screens or with bathrobes and drapes over the girl’s breasts and waist. Other communities barred the painting from galleries, streetcars and cabs. Postmasters in Fort Worth, New Orleans, Montgomery, Birmingham, San Jose, Miami, Dallas, Omaha, and Kansas City banned postcard reproductions from being sent through the local mail. Students at Wooster College in Ohio gave September Morn a “flame bath,” by tossing prints into a bonfire as part of a campus-wide religious revival.12

Three men in different cities were denied admission to the United States Navy for having the nude girl tattooed onto their bodies. Recruiting officers and surgeons decided that their entrance with that “obscene tattoo mark” would be “demoralizing to the Navy.” Determined to serve their country, the recruits responded by scraping the mark off their skin and draping the nude in a tattooed wrap.13 In some towns, men, women and teenage girls were arrested or fined for posing as the nude in parades and for acting out the bathing scene in rivers, on lawns and front porches. That October a woman in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania was fined fifty dollars for “indecent
exposure” when she offered her own public exhibition of the September Morn. The Philadelphia Inquirer reported that the woman waded out into the Susquehanna River wearing only a pair of white tights and posed in front of a thousand or more along the banks while being photographed.¹⁴

Before the hullabaloo over the naked blonde quieted, in 1913 a black burlesque version of Chabas’ sweet little girl emerged. Of this nude portrayal of a black child, there were no public outrages of lewdness or indecency, no arrests or trials, no newspaper commentary, and no censorship by Comstock. We can presume that this image was designed to either poke fun at the controversy over the Chabas painting or to mock the possibility of using a naked black child to earn the ire of a purity crusader. The idea that a young black girl could be chaste, beautiful, innocent, worthy of a famous reformer’s lament against obscenity, or that a provocative image of her could stir up the same kind of controversy as a risqué image of a white girl, seemed laughable. In this illustration, the black child herself seems to recognize that she is an object of ridicule and not worthy of reproach, as the caption beneath her reads: “Go ’long, white man. I ain’t no ’SEPTEMBER MORN’.”

With her too red lips, protruding eyes and plaits run askew, the image of a naked black girl bathing in a wooden bucket caused no public controversy and no repudiation from New York’s most famous spokesman for children. Obviously meant to draw laughter from certain viewers, the black child appears just as defenseless as her white counterpart. At first glance, she seems to display a sense of modesty but unlike the September Morn with her idealized flesh and refined colors, there are no hints of sentimentality or beauty in this image. No scenic lake or soft hazy morning backdrop surrounds the black girl and her coarse facial features make her appear physically unattractive.

While Chabas sought to capture the innocent nude’s “delicate charm,” the artist of this postcard had different intentions.¹⁵ It is clear that artist Bernhardt Wall extracted from and/or pandered to popular ideas about white children’s innocence and racist ideas about black
children’s sexuality to draw laughter and, in the process, generate a profit. Popularly known as America’s “Postcard King,” Wall was a native New Yorker and Spanish American War veteran who made his living by drawing book covers and over 5,000 picture postcards for the Ullman Manufacturing Company located at 342 East 59th Street in Manhattan, 16 blocks from where the *September Morn* controversy erupted.

These two images images, one of a nude white girl posing ankle deep in a frigid European lake, the other, a younger nude black girl bathing in a wooden bucket with a bar of soap at its base – are connected by the context of their shared history. It is not an obviously simple story about the parody of one child at the expense of the other. Side by side, and together, these old pictures demonstrate a complex narrative about the ways in which late 19th and early 20th-century new media, censorship laws, purity campaigns, and ideas about sex coalesced to create a racialized notion of childhood innocence. The juxtaposition of these two girls reveals how notions of child sexuality, consumerism, popular entertainment, and the rise of pornography in the Atlantic World were all implicated in a racialized construction of childhood innocence during the Progressive Era. These objects of consumer culture are also artifacts of the Jim Crow universe and they visually express how innocent black children became targets of amusement and degradation in an era when children were supposed to be protected. The creators of the images shown this chapter and the sustainers of notions of innocence, consciously or not, had some understanding that black and white children were constitutive of each other’s racial identity.

There were impresarios and purity crusaders overseeing and controlling new national media. Recognized as protectors of children, they have never been written into the history of race. Here, for the first time, African American children and one of America’s most famous purity crusaders will meet each other. Comstock was one of the foremost icons of America’s turn-of-the-century sex wars and most passionate spokesman for children. His conscientious reform efforts along with his ability to prick the social anxieties of New York City’s elite and middle-class whites made him a villain and a buffoon to some and a hero to others as he perhaps
single-handedly defined pornography even as he sought to suppress its production and circulation nationwide. 16 Comstock’s struggle with his own sexuality may explains his lifelong efforts to control other people’s ideas about sex and to prevent white children from being exposed to pornography and other forms of vice. However, it is how this famous crusader’s purity campaign and rhetoric of childhood innocence omitted black youth that is of concern here, not his personal anxieties.

Though scholars have described Comstock as a flawed but diligent champion for youth, this sultan of smut has not been accorded his due for his negligence of the filth that white America produced and circulated about black children. The elderly vice suppressor was not an actual perpetrator of racial discrimination against black children. Although he did nothing to directly harm them, Comstock was silent about the impact of vice on black youth, including racist and sexually suggestive postcards that circulated through the mail, one of his domains of control. In an era when Progressive reformers fervently argued that children were absolutely innocent and needed to be protected from various forms of vice and exploitation, black youth escaped Comstock’s concern and were considered unworthy reform material in the mainstream American mindset. Comstock thus operated as a silent actor in the drama of the construction of racial childhood. The exclusion of black children from his purity campaign and the period’s constructed category of innocence, illustrates how a generation of white Americans turned their consciousness away from the widespread cruelty and neglect of black youth. Comstock’s silences as well as his outspoken crusades is an untold story of how American childhood, black and white, was drawn into the web of social relations and the construction of racial hierarchy at the turn of the twentieth century.

My random collecting of hundreds of old turn-of-the-century postcards suggested to me that black and white children were imagined opposites. Their images operated as either a positive or negative counterpoint to the other, helping to legitimize myriad racist laws and social practices, lending credence to cooked-up pseudo-scientific theories about racial difference, and
making the sexual degradation of certain groups of children appear benign and natural. Charged with racialist ideas about childhood and sex, the circulation of pornographic postcards produced between 1890 to the late 1950s, which were created by and for white audiences, allowed whites to openly and legally participate in pedophilic activity without actually acting on their sexual desires, distinguishing themselves from those who engaged in real violence against black children.

It is a provocative assertion, but I argue that pornographic postcards of black children were more than they appeared to be. At worst, some white artists and viewers used them to displace their repressed desires for their own “innocent” and “untouchable” children onto black youth. Historians have made similar observations concerning erotic images of white children. Even if such images did not provide viewers with titillation, they offered certain assurances about white normalcy, morality, and superiority. During the Progressive Era, reformers such as Comstock maintained that the boundary line that separated adults from children was sexuality. Adults possessed sexuality while children were supposedly free from it. But as the previous chapter demonstrated through the writings of G. Stanley Hall and others, black children allegedly displayed signs and behaviors of sexuality in early adolescence while the white child’s sexual instincts remained dormant. The visual imagery presented here is illustrative of how high science discourse became popularized.

This chapter brings together three historiographies, namely those concerning American consumption, the construction of childhood innocence, and the production of race. While numerous scholars have studied the production of racial imagery and consumer items popularly known today as “Black Memorabilia” or “Black Americana”, those scholarly works focus almost exclusively on adults. In these adult centered considerations, the significance of childhood in the construction of race is marginalized or overlooked. Black children, if they appear at all in these studies, are understood as proxies or stand-ins for black men and women who are viewed as the main targets of white control and degradation. To look at both groups of children separately
tends to repeat silences and exclusions. My goal is to bring these silences and exclusions under scrutiny by examining the production and circulation of juxtaposing images of black and white children. The picture postcards displayed throughout this chapter are not a scientific sample; they are selections from my personal collection of nearly 200 images assembled from antique stores, flea markets, and online dealers. History has left us these remnants of what once circulated in all directions of our society and they represent merely one physical manifestation of how black and white children were separated even in the American imagination.

Picturing Innocence

Some scholars have suggested that the culture of the Progressive Era may have masked its pedophilic sexual fascination through denial and abhorrence of erotic images of white children that circulated in an underground market those that were seen in popular texts such as Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Tess, Peter Pan, Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland and his erotic photographs of little girls. Historians have also located eroticism of children in other historical sources such as child-rearing manuals, psychological literature, and advertisements. James Kincaid’s Child Loving and Anne Higonnet Pictures of Innocence have traced the historical romanticism of the innocent child and how mass-produced images acquired the ability to define cultural assumptions of what childhood looked like. Additionally, other scholars have explored the ways that reformers, politicians, advertisers and purveyors of children’s culture used images of childhood to define innocence and to advance certain political, social, and economic interests.

Kincaid and Higonnet have argued that even as Progressive-era reformers and institutions helped construct conceptions of childhood by emphasizing children’s sexual innocence and purity, their efforts inadvertently eroticized children. Children’s presumed innocence only reinforced desire for them as sexual objects. But this fixation on the eroticization of the white child has diverted concern away from the more overt and sinister types of abuse of black children. Sexual images of African-American children have gone unnoticed in scholarly discussions of
innocence, and they have been given passing mention by scholars of race and consumer culture, even though it was the black child that became the sole model and repository of filth and indecency in the era’s high culture discussions of child sexuality and innocence.

It is tempting to simply dismiss Kincaid’s and Higonnet’s assertion that the construction of white children as innocent somehow eroticized them. After all, their focus is mainly on romantic images of fully clothed vapid and angelic looking children not engaged in illicit sexual activity. However, since white children were culturally constructed as forbidden and untouchable innocents, then one can understand how they became objects of desire. Thus, I would argue that there is a difference in the “ography” of written and printed images of children. There are erotic images, as Kincaid and Higonnet have argued, and there were also filthy pornographic pictures as this chapter will demonstrate.

The erotic images of white children did not carry the negative illicit notions that very public and filthy pornographic pictures of black children did as they trafficked through the mail. As Lisa Sigel has noted in her scholarship on the rise of pornography in Britain and the Atlantic World, prior to Comstock’s era, words instead of pictures had been recognized as the main source of pornography. But during the 1880s and 1890s cheap postcards helped transform pornography from words to pictures. This transformation, Sigel notes, dramatically broadened audiences’ exposure to women as objects of desire, scatological humor, bestiality, and to the sexuality of people of color and children.18 These images, not always shocking today in a culture in which pornography is more visually graphic, were shocking in the past because certain acts were made visual.

Let us reason for a moment that white children were inadvertently eroticized by the cultural construction of innocence. If this is true, then Progressive reformers, purity campaigners, and anti-smut crusaders most likely did not believe that in highlighting children’s purity they were unwittingly inviting perverts to show up and get a sexual release off romanticized images that reinforced notions of innocence. Still, aside from the connection between progressives and
their alleged eroticization of childhood, modernization along with the rise in forms of print media and the segregated entertainment culture play a more significant role here.

The appeal of the forbidden in modernizing cultures and the availability of the forbidden in various media, like those that placed bare-breasted colonized women and naked children of color on readily available cheap postcards, excluded those groups not viewed as part of the ideal. Because black children were not considered innocent, they forfeited claims to protection, in image and reality. Therefore, smut artists and viewers did not see themselves as guilty of child abuse because unlike white children, blacks were not really innocent or pure. Black children thus became fair game for abuse in a circulating medium that allowed white ethnics, working-class people, as well as middle-class men and women to “enjoy” black children’s bodies, either sexually or in a crude joking way, with total impunity. Because American society still does not regard black children as innocent, these very same old postcards continue to circulate today now under the guise of “Black Memorabilia” or “Black Americana,” with joking descriptions that attempt to obfuscate the potent sexual and racial themes.\textsuperscript{19}

During the second half of the 19th century, the United States enjoyed a major wave of consumerism, along with the promotion of new forms of communication that preceded the use of picture postcards. Initially, innovations such as the camera, telegraph, telephone and mail delivery system had their deficiencies. They were oftentimes too slow, too expensive, unreliable or inaccessible to most Americans before burgeoning technological developments of the 1880s and 1890s added new dimensions and availability to the nation’s streams of communication. Advancements in print technology and photography, the expansion of the railways throughout various regional centers, and the passage of the \textit{Private Mailing Card Act} in May of 1898 helped stimulate the massive production and distribution of postcards throughout the country. Prior to this new law, the United States Postal Service had been the only establishment allowed to print postcards.
The easing of regulations allowed private printers to produce postcards and paved the way for consumers to send cards through the mail for a penny instead of the regular letter rate of two cents. As a result, the demand for postcards soared and quickly spurred a collecting craze, especially among predominantly white middle-class buyers, particularly women, with disposable incomes and a taste for sentimental objects. In 1908, the United States Postal Service reported that over 677 million postcards were mailed that previous year. The following year, Americans sent over one billion postcards through the mail. By 1920, postcards became what historian Lisa Sigel has called “a trans-Atlantic phenomenon” with roughly 140 billion sent worldwide. All of these developments created a new universe of images, stimulated the commercialization, massive consumption and circulation of visual imagery, and transformed the possibility of exploiting images of children, women, blacks, and various ethnic groups at home and abroad.

The sexualization of black children in popular imagery grew from the same ideologies and practices that prompted the sexual and racial degradation of black men and women. But there is a different kind of historical specificity to the objectification of black boys and girls that warrants a separate study. Black children, like black women, were in some measure, understood to be the "property" of black men, and therefore subject to exploitation by white men, who as a means towards enforcing racial and economic hierarchy wished to violate the property of black men. But a sexual image of a black child drawn by a white male or female artist raises a different set of issues not solely about the conviction to strip black patriarchs of the power of protection and control over black women and children. Such pictures express specific ideas, anxieties and even fantasies that white racists held about black children’s physical and intellectual development, sexuality, reproductive capacity, citizenship worthiness and perhaps their own ambivalence about the embroidered notion of white children's sexual innocence. This kind of imagery constituted one critical dimension of a collective racial discourse about an emerging generation of black children aimed at subjecting them to various processes of devaluation. White supremacists used various devices, including newly emergent forms of popular media and print
technologies, as part of a calculated and insidious effort to undermine the future potential of a new kind of free black citizenry.

Early in their lives black children were deprived of innocence. It was essential to deny the notion of possibility early on, to stamp them with a badge of inferiority, to keep them from growing up, and certainly to inhibit their progression towards full adult citizenship. Postcards and other popular media emerged at this point and were used as new national technologies and strategies of control that were suited to maintaining racial hierarchy. It is important to note that the postcards’ meanings have changed over time; they served different purposes in 1890 than they did in 1920 or 1950. In the period from 1890 to 1920 was obsessed with the purification of the self, manliness, the nation and the white race, as Gail Bederman’s *Manliness and Civilization*, Elliot Gorn’s *The Manly Art*, Clyde Griffen’s *Meanings for Manhood*, John Kasson’s *Houdini, Tarzan and the Perfect Man* and Jackson Lears’ recent *Rebirth of a Nation* have shown. The reform activities of Anthony Comstock must be understood within this cultural climate.

Comstock was a purity crusader, but so were the Southern “redeemers,” crusaders who sought to purify politics by disenfranchising African Americans.

The period from the 1920s through the 1950s was less concerned with purification. White Anglo-Saxon supremacy had been secured by *de facto* and *de jure* schemes that cut the possibilities of black progress in the North and South as well as for immigrants from abroad. In this time frame popular amusements such as freak attractions, world’s fairs, amusement parks, minstrel shows, and the production of “darkie music” and racist children’s books like Helen Bannerman’s *Little Black Sambo* helped to assimilate European immigrants and to promote their whiteness by excluding, marginalizing and parodying blacks. David Nasaw’s *Going Out* argues that the rise of new commercialized amusements were marked by racism that allowed for the unification of diverse groups of whites to purposely exclude blacks and deride them as a means to visibly remind themselves of their privileged status.
As the work of Kenneth Goings and Patricia Turner have shown, during this latter period, cultural icons like Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and the Negro porter on the Cream of Wheat box embody a more complex significance than pure racist contempt. Aunt Jemima was a nurturing pre-industrial figure and Uncle Ben represented the smiling grandfatherly black man; both were pre-industrial race figures that embodied the values that whites still yearned for even as they left them behind. As Jackson Lears has argued in several of his works, there was a covert element of white envy in representations of black people’s supposed ease and freedom. Such representations, which had an erotic component to them, expressed white desires to liberate themselves from the novel bondage of citizenship responsibility.

“Insidious Traffic”

“Postcard King” Bernhardt C. Wall was one of many artists that extracted from and/or pandered to popular ideas about white children’s innocence and racist ideas about black children’s sexuality to draw laughter and, in the course, make money. Wall was a native New Yorker and Spanish American War veteran who made his living by drawing book covers and
over 5,000 picture postcards for the Ullman Manufacturing Company located at 342 East 59th Street in Manhattan, 16 blocks from where the *September Morn* controversy erupted. Most of Wall’s illustrations feature children set in patriotic scenarios and landscapes of the American West. He produced soft colorful vignettes of chubby, charming, and innocent-looking white children. Wall’s little girls appear in clean long dresses and bright white bonnets as they garden, cook, milk cows, play in pumpkin patches, frolic amongst flowers, offer up rosy cheeked seasonal greetings, and occasionally engage in childish courting scenes.

Wall’s black burlesque postcard version of Chabas’ *September Morn* painting differs drastically from his sentimental portrayals of cute and patriotic white children. In 1913, the same year that he sketched his naked black girl he published two similar cards featuring nude black girls with the caption lines: “I Don’t Like Dark September Morn,” and “Fade Away September Morn.” Wall was one among a few well-known turn-of-the-century child portraitists that made money from sketching racist and even sexually explicit portrayals of black children that were in turn marketed by various publishing houses throughout the country. Other well-known artists who drew black children include: Bertha Blodgett, Frances Brundage, Ellen Clapsaddle, Grace Wiederseim Drayton, Maud Humphrey, Richard F. Outcault, Margaret Evens Price, and many other lesser-known artists. Like Wall, their images of black and white children differ in both style and theme.

There are many vivid examples of the stark contrasts between how white artists depicted black and white children. In a 1905 postcard drawn by Bernhardt Wall, a tidy-looking white boy dressed in blue overalls appears as a towering figure along a shoreline. Standing upright with a serious expression, he holds a shovel in one hand, a pile of sand dotted with a sand pail, miniature soldiers, military artillery and an American flag lying rising from a sandy mountain at his feet. The vision is clear: the white boy will grow up to be a true American patriot vested with responsibility and power, and control while his black counterpart, shown in the postcard next to him, will not. The black boy, “A True American,” as the caption reads, grins while clutching a
large American flag. With his adult like head and plump belly, he wears a cloth diaper as watermelon rinds lay at his feet. He tells his viewer: “I’m an American, same as you. And my favorite flag is red, white and blue. But when I’m hungry, ‘tis plain to be seen . . . My favorite color is red, white and green.” The humor in this card attempts to obfuscate the real message that unlike white youth, black children will never fully grow up to achieve the competence required to handle the adult privileges and responsibilities of American citizenship.

It is not certain whether Comstock ever saw Bernhardt Wall’s black burlesque version of the *September Morn* or similar cards produced by other artists. Unlike Chabas’ rendition of a nude white girl which Comstock banned from the mails, pornographic postcards of black children circulated openly in the mail without objection from Comstock who, as a postal inspector was authorized to forbid them, or from purity leagues, postmasters, and mail clerks who stamped each postcard. Despite Comstock’s regulatory powers, this genre of racialized child pornography failed to merit his attention and provided white artists, publishers, and consumers with a means to evade censorship laws and satisfy certain racial fantasies and erotic desires, which trafficked in humor at the expense of black children.

One of the consequences of the rise in obscenity prosecutions, thanks to Comstock’s efforts, was that they inspired publishers to develop new genres of pornographic materials by
manipulating legal taboos in an effort to not only evade the law, but to also attract buyers. Sexual images of black children, masked in humor, represent one of those clever forms of manipulation used by artists. Censorship laws prohibited white children from being sexually objectified in art, but artists were allowed to produce obscene images of black children and such images circulated in public markets and through the postal system.

While Comstock diligently sought to protect white children from being indecently objectified in or exposed to obscene pictures and reading, he may or may not have noticed lewd images of black children that trafficked through the mail. An examination of his writings, arrest ledgers of the N.Y.S.S.V., and secondary literature on his life and career reveals no evidence that he did, despite their ubiquity. While Comstock’s outrage over the September Morn painting reflects popular struggles of the elite and middle classes trying to save the young from contamination, and for some, at least, to save the white race from racial pollution, it did not occur to him that African Americans had the same protective instincts and visions for their children. Yet the historical record reveals, as chapter two shows, blacks understood that their children were of economic value to whites engaged in the business of exploiting the youth of the race for cheap labor and entertainment. Black children also had symbolic value for white supremacists seeking to use them as evidence to prove black inferiority and immorality.

III.3.7 A nude black child by F.A. Moss, 1910 (Author’s Collection)

III.3.8 A nude black child breaking into as he falls to the ground by F.A. Moss, 1910 (Author’s Collection)
Comstock never used the term pornography, but applied the law named in his honor quite broadly to new forms of obscenity that captured his attention in the decades following his appointment as the guardian of public morals. Though Comstock diligently took up the charge of fighting vice to protect and safeguard the future of the young, he was not a moral guardian to all children. Just as he argued that the aim of dirty pictures was to “pervert the taste of the young,” “enslave the young imagination,” and that the messages in such evil things caused social, moral, physical, and spiritual death, he did not seem to recognize that obscene pictures also surrounded black children growing up in the decades after slavery with the same kinds of dangers along with new powerful networks of racial oppression.

In the symbolic realm of American popular culture, this new form of mass media that Comstock fought against also sexualized black children, one of many insidious strategies of racial construction. Postcards, as a visual medium, reinforced white fears about black overpopulation, social and biological contamination and expressed the urgency of maintaining dominance over the first generation of free black citizens through an intense focus on its youth. By purchasing, sending and receiving obscene images of black children, large masses of white consumers consciously or unconsciously engaged in the reproduction of race as well as the sexual degradation of black youth as a means to create a new, symbolic control over their lives and as a calculated and informed strategy to eliminate black children as future competitors and to affirm their own superiority.

Scholars have noted that Comstock sought to control the upsurge of new visual media because he feared the ways in which print technologies could be used to encourage the wide distribution and accessibility of obscene material, which he believed would lead to further social and moral decay. Forty years before Comstock encountered the naked girl in the lake, he had gained enough support from ministers, clubwomen and preventative societies along with financial backing from the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and wealthy New Yorkers to successfully lobby Congress in 1873 to pass stricter anti-smut legislation and the means to
enforce it. He traveled to Washington, D.C. with a bag full of naughty books, condoms, abortion literature, postcards, pills, and dildos to demonstrate before Congress that the uncontrolled production and circulation of obscene material had become a pressing national problem. During that meeting he also displayed 15,000 intercepted orders for pornographic literature written and mailed by school children.²⁹

Based on this evidence, Comstock successfully convinced Congress that public health and morality had taken a dramatic decline since the Civil War, and that the future of the Republic was in danger because the corrupting forces of Satan persistently baited and lured the innocent souls of the nation’s white youth. His reaction to and subsequent suppression of the September Morn painting decades later should not be understood solely as one man’s crusade to stamp out smut, but as a political act which reflects societal fears about social disorder, anxieties about the possibilities of taboo sexual liaisons across class, racial boundaries and age barriers, and the need for social control in a rapidly changing society. By policing the mails, Comstock sought to limit children’s exposure to all things dirty.

Before Comstock’s intervention, the mail was often immune to local regulation and there was little restriction on the public circulation of sexual literature or the exploitation of children in vaudeville shows, circuses, and brothels in New York City and other urban centers across the county. During his plea before Congress, Comstock specifically targeted the postal system as the main source of the “insidious traffic.” He would later write: “the mails are the great arteries of communication – mighty thoroughfares leading up to all our homes and institutions of learning. The sanctity of the seal is the cloak of security to the villain.” For Comstock, the mail posed a grave threat because it was “the most powerful agent to assist this nefarious business, because it goes everywhere and is secret,” making pornography exciting. But the mail made it accessible. Left unrestrained, the mails had the potential to cause chaos by spreading ideas about sex to certain groups, especially children who needed to be kept ignorant of sex so they could pursue “proper” pursuits. Comstock would claim that filthy things trafficking through the mail ruined
the youth by inducing masturbation and other bad behaviors that tarnished their character and social standing, and undermined their future prospects. Comstock often blamed Jews and the Irish for flooding urban centers with smut and political corruption. His writings reveal his nativist sentiments, echoing middle-class and elite anxieties about the deterioration of their social and political hold on power and the erosion of their cultural values due to the incursion of immigrants. Comstock complained that the sale of smut by political and cultural outsiders had “succeeded in injecting a virus more destructive to the innocency and purity of youth . . . than can be the most deadly disease to the body.” Exposure to vice, he maintained, “poison[ed] and corrupt[ed] the streams of life, leaving a moral wreck, a physical deformity, [and] enervated system” of innocent youth. Without protection, “this cursed business of obscene literature works beneath the surface, and like a canker worm, secretly eats out the moral life and purity of our youth, and they droop and fade before their parent’s eyes.”

As Nicola Beisel has shown in *Imperiled Innocents*, Comstock also linked vice and social decay to middle and elite class fears that their children would fall prey to immorality and they would not be able to socially distance themselves from *inferior* groups of children. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century moral campaigns were not just a critical component of class formation and the consolidation of class privilege and identity as Beisel and other scholars have maintained, they were also essential to the reproduction of racial identity and the preservation of white supremacy. Just as it was critical to safeguard the future of the Republic by protecting the social and moral purity of white children, it was also essential to keep the future of the black race in check by excluding its youth from certain reform efforts if whites were to dominate, regardless of class status or degree of whiteness.

To preserve social standing and encourage future mobility in a competitive multiracial society, it was essential to raise healthy, happy, protected, and morally pure children by shielding them from harmful pictures, words and ideas. Beisel asserts that reform efforts aimed at children “are properly seen as struggles over class reproduction” and a means for the middle class to
It is important to note that Beisel uses the *September Morn* painting as the front cover of her book to illustrate the connection between the rhetoric of childhood innocence, class reproduction and identity politics. Had Beisel seen Bernhardt Wall’s black burlesque depiction of the *September Morn*, perhaps her rich argument could have been further nuanced by an analysis of race, a dimension sorely missing from her scholarship and other scholarly studies on childhood, reform movements, and Anthony Comstock’s career.

Though Comstock never explicitly said that his protective measures were for “White Children Only,” his silence on the exploitation of black children reveals that his primary concern was to protect only white youth from contamination and social decline. In his polemic, *Traps for the Young*, he likened exposure to lewd images and vice to grotesque scenarios of children being victimized by strangers, stricken with venereal diseases, tortured, maimed, and attacked by wild beasts, adders and centipedes. While he complained that white native-born children were being victimized by real or imaginary outside forces -- immigrants, strangers, or creatures from the wild -- he remained conspicuously silent about white exploitation of black children who lived under constant siege during the time of Jim Crow segregation. At the time, of course, he would have been more concerned about immigrants than blacks because there were more immigrants than blacks in New York City and the north. Playing on fear and invoking images of vulnerable and defenseless white children ultimately won Comstock the support he needed from Congress to legitimize and fund his purity crusade. Meanwhile, not until the mid-twentieth century did Congress begin to pass legislation that would protect black boys and girls from lynching, rape and other forms of violence, legal discrimination and denial of a right to a future.

On March 3, 1873, Congress granted Comstock’s wish for tougher legislation by passing the *Act of the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use*. This federal law, more popularly known as *The Comstock Act*, made it illegal to sell or distribute contraceptives and abortion literature, and to publish, sell or send “obscene, lewd, or lascivious” books, pictures, pamphlets, and advertisements through the mail. First-time
offenders of the new law faced a $5,000 fine and five years in prison and a repeat offender could be fined up to $10,000 and ten years imprisonment. That same year, Comstock became a “special agent” for the United States Post Office Department and founded the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. The Society’s mission was to suppress “obscene literature and articles of indecent and immoral use.” For Comstock, obscenities lurked in pamphlets, leaflets, songs, paintings, salacious dime novels, medical literature, and picture postcards – all which he argued, were “designed and cunningly calculated to excite the imagination and inflame the passions of the youth.”

“Greetings From Down In Sunny Dixie

The first picture postcards portraying African Americans were released almost three decades after the Civil War at the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition held in Atlanta, the same event where Booker T. Washington delivered his famous Atlanta Compromise speech in which he assuaged white fears about so-called uppity blacks and their quest to pursue equal rights. Washington’s speech pledged accommodation to white supremacy, a tactical maneuver that ultimately failed at protecting black people’s property, civil rights, and humanity from white backlash. While visitors attending the Exposition were able to see new technological
innovations, they also witnessed ethnological exhibits featuring blacks and other exotic people as inferior savages. Such spectacles, along with newly emergent racist consumer markets in a variety of artifacts, helped buttress white ideas about black inferiority. Atlanta, the same event where Booker T. Washington delivered his famous Atlanta Compromise speech in which he assuaged white fears about so-called uppity blacks and their quest to pursue equal rights. Washington’s speech pledged accommodation to white supremacy, a tactical maneuver that ultimately failed at protecting black people’s property, civil rights, and humanity from white backlash. While visitors attending the Exposition were able to see new technological innovations, they also witnessed ethnological exhibits featuring blacks and other exotic people as inferior savages. Such spectacles, along with newly emergent racist consumer markets in a variety of artifacts, helped buttress white ideas about black inferiority.

As historian Grace Elizabeth Hale writes in *Making Whiteness*, emancipation “made anything possible and nothing certain.” With freedom came soaring black literacy rates, increased black mobility, the growth of the black middle class, the chance to own property, and the opportunity to construct a new kind of identity as free and competent citizens. The fulfillment of such possibilities destroyed white myths about black inferiority just as fears about race mixing threatened racial hierarchy. As Hale asserts, a “culture of segregation” along with the consumption of racist consumer goods helped to create blackness as a commodity.\(^{38}\) Postcards represent merely one dimension of a persistent strategy to reproduce race through consumption.

Emancipation had destroyed a black childhood known to Americans for centuries, and it unleashed new possibilities for black youth born or coming of age after slavery. Mary Niall Mitchell reveals in *Raising Freedom’s Child*, that in the years preceding the Civil War, Americans used conflicting images of the black child to foreshadow the social, political and economic consequences of emancipation. The images Mitchell explores reveal how northern and southern feelings about the black child’s future rested between hope and disorder. There were fierce debates over what kind of education black children should receive, as well continuing
disagreements concerning their labor, racial classification, and citizenship status. Mitchell shows how white northerners saw education as the means to transform former slave children into “models of discipline and propriety” with education providing the potential to “eradicate slavery’s effects, producing instead industrious young people with the desires of free market consumers.” On the other hand, the idea of black children enjoying the same privileges as whites led to anxieties about the destruction of racial identity, the disappearance of a black agricultural labor force, the collapse of the plantation economy in the South, and fears about sexual mixing between blacks and whites.39 Essentially, if given a fair chance, the first generation of free black children had the potential to upset the nation’s racial hierarchy.

By the late 1890s, there was a dominant and clear consensus among whites, in all regions of the country, that the black child’s futurity was problematic. Racist and pornographic images of black children began to heavily traffic through the mail and other public spaces spreading a collective artistic vision of a society where black youth had little, if any, intrinsic value to American society. Consumer goods that degraded black children were one of several categories of material culture that helped create what Hale calls “a common whiteness” to help solve post-Civil War tensions and justify new forms of discrimination and terror against blacks. Such goods were popular, she writes, because of their “wide capacity to embody the black as entertainment, labor, and product.”40

Though not all white consumers were rabid racists, the majority purchased commodity representations of blackness not just for a good laugh, but also to search for individual and collective meaning during the era’s social upheavals. While Hale and other historians have shown how consumer culture became implicated in the reconstruction of race during the Jim Crow period, they have not fully considered the use of children in this process and, furthermore, their work has a southern regional focus that neglects the national circulation of new popular media and the national importance of racial reconstruction. White artists, publishers, and consumers exploited the marketplace to dehumanize black children as one of many strategies to
thwart the progress of a newly freed black citizenry and to deny black youth the notion of future possibility.

Over 114 major publishers as well as smaller distributors in the United States, including six German publishers, five publishers in Paris and London, and three Italian and Swiss companies produced massive quantities of over 1000 different types of visual scenarios depicting black children in a racist or sexual manner. American publishing companies ranged in location from Boston, Cincinnati, New York, Detroit, New Orleans, Asheville, to Houston, Florida and elsewhere. Prominent publishers like Raphael Tuck & Sons, Curt Teich, Detroit Publishing, and the Asheville Postcard Company produced numerous comical series on black children. Some companies, particularly Curt Teich Publishing, often hired photographers to travel throughout the South to capture images of black life. Photographers often staged scenes with black children posed in outdoor settings gorging themselves with watermelon, sitting on piles of cotton, being chased by or engaging sexually with animals. These children, sans parental supervision, steal, fight, gamble and engage in precisely those behaviors that Anthony Comstock argued children should be shielded against.

Some real life photographs were later turned into postcards with the original unedited pictures printed on the face of the cards. Those postcards were then hand drawn with children’s skin darkened, lips reddened, eyes bulged, limbs elongated, and colorful props and disparaging caption lines added later. For example, a 1902 photograph taken by Ignatius (Nace) Brock (1866-1950) of Asheville, North Carolina, shows an elderly African American man and a well-dressed young girl reading from a small blackboard. That same photograph was later turned into a postcard mocking black educational aspirations and rendering black adults incapable of properly rearing the youth of the race. The card on the bottom right actually reverses the story of the one on the left where grandpa appears to be teaching the young girl. It is not certain whether Brock sold rights to his photograph or gave permission to the Asheville Postcard Company to copy and alter his work to produce a derogatory postcard image. Brock, who was also a painter and poet,
was known for his staged portraits, mountain landscapes, and photographs depicting black and whites engaged in normal daily activities.

Color, facial expressions and body language are altered details in the postcard depiction of Brock’s photograph. As the grandfather scratches his snow white hair, the young girl coldly glares at him, perhaps disappointed by his inability to help her solve the problem on the small blackboard. The caption line above her head reads, “GRAND-PAP EMBARRASSED.” The child’s dress and her eagerness to learn suggests that there was some understanding on behalf of whites that black children had the capacity to learn quickly and to become competent citizens. Unfortunately, as the postcard depiction of Brock’s photograph reveals, the older generation of African Americans seemed unprepared to nurture the intellectual development of black youth. In most turn-of-the-twentieth-century postcards black parents are absent, but when present they are rendered incompetent and hopeless. Such depictions of the elder generation fit nicely into progressive era agendas and legal institutions that sought to intrude on the lives and decisions of black parents.

While certain mainstream postcard images brought concern and attention to white children affected by issues such as economic hardship and environmental catastrophes, artists
altered pictures of black children faced with the same issues in order to construct ideas about their blackness. For example, in January of 1939, noted photographer Marion Post Wolcott published a series of photographs documenting the conditions surrounding children of poor white packinghouse laborers living in Bell Glade, Florida. Her photos showed children with their families living in crowded, dirty shacks and cabins with poor sanitary conditions and unclean water. Many of the children were left alone, sometimes until two or three in the morning, while parents labored in the fields picking and packaging vegetables. Wolcott had worked on similar projects for the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression and sometimes her published work sparked efforts to improve working and living conditions for white migratory laborers.

Though the images shown above, one a photograph captured by Wolcott, and the other a postcard by an unknown artist, are similar, their messages and functions differ. The photograph shows a white woman washing “black muck” off her daughter’s scalp. The black muck, which came from a nearby filthy canal, frequently caused itchy rashes, scabs and sores on the skin. A black mother and child shown in the undated postcard next to the photograph could have very
well lived in the same vicinity under similar conditions. But the caption underneath reads:
“AUNT VENUS HUNTING IN DIXIELAND.” Both of these images are, of course, about poverty. Perhaps they both offer a sense of superiority to the voyeuristic white middle class observer. But the problems of dirt and contamination in these two images have different origins: filth from the environment and filth from being a dirty racial type. Despite their similarities, a simple caption line obscures an important environmental problem that affected poor children of both races and alters the entire message and function of the images.

Ill. 3.14 Hagenbeck Wallace Circus request for a Postcard illustration of African pinheads, 1920s (Courtesy of the Curt Teich Archives)

Ill. 3.15 Postcard of Boela Tribe of pinheads produced by the Curt Teich Publishing Company, 1920s (Courtesy of the Curt Teich Archives)
A Curt Teich Publishing Company archivist reported that in some cases customers provided direction to the publisher to help guide artists in the creation of postcards. For example, a 1920’s postcard featuring the “Boela Tribe of Pin Heads” accompanied by a written request from the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus illustrates this point. During the early twentieth century the Indiana-based traveling circus was second to Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey and was a popular source of entertainment in small towns across the country. The company, like many other circuses, employed black adults and children to dress and act as wild Africans. Those blacks danced and scared whites that could not tell the difference between an African and a Negro from Mississippi. One of Hagenbeck-Wallace’s main features was the Boela Tribe Pinheads.

The circus company provided the Curt Teich Publishing Company with detailed instructions to help create a postcard, advertising the tribesman as a main attraction. The artists were asked to make the men “chocolate covered” and to “be sure to bring top of natives heads to a pin point.” The use of bright colors is emphasized throughout the request. Certain props like drums, spears, feathers, claws, beads, straw huts, palms, and wild animals were to surround the natives.

This evidence suggests that artists may have been given directions to publishers on how to draw black children in similar settings and other stereotypical manners. The majority of the postcards featured in this chapter were produced in house by the Curt Teich Publishing Company and were not ordered from outside sources. There were no directions or notes written by the artists who produced the cards. After a thorough examination of its archives, the publishing house could not provide any materials that would help provide the motivation behind the images, or produce accurate sales statistics. The archivist did indicate that the primary goal of the publishing company was to make money by producing postcards that appealed to consumer tastes, not to pass judgment about their racial or sexual themes. Clearly, the intent of publishers and artists was to exploit a perceived market for racial degradation and black children earned no reprieve from their profit-making ambitions.
Picture postcards not only expanded communication and new forms of advertising, they also became the most widely circulated visual medium for popularizing ideas about black bodies within the United States and some European countries, particularly England, France, Germany and Italy. While postcard culture in Europe had flourished in Europe since the late 1860s, the craze did not begin in the United States until the later part of the 19th century. The images shown throughout this chapter contain distinctly Southern and Northern American themes about blacks. They also represent the nation’s participation in a global discourse that rendered black bodies as savage, primitive, infantile, contagious, sexual, unfit, ugly, and dirty. Americans and Europeans projected these labels onto blacks, Native Americans, Africans, and other colonized and exoticized groups in central and South America, the Caribbean, India and Asia. As Sigel has noted, Europeans (both senders and receivers) viewed racist, imperialistic, and pornographic postcards of peoples they conquered as part of the right of conquest and justification for domination.41 Perhaps artists and publishing companies were aware of the profitability of colonial degradation and adapted this approach to include African American children and other marginalized groups, particularly Native Americans who had been subjected to massacres and relegated to reservations before being memorialized in popular imagery.

Some 200 noted and anonymous artists, including the well-known artists mentioned earlier that sketched romantic images of white children, also drew black children as: “nigger kids,” “kute coons,” “curly coons,” “piccaninnies,” “Coontown kids,” “happy little coons,” “little minstrels,” “little darkies,” “watermelon trios,” “chocolate drops,” “little wooers,” and “alligator bait.”42 An overwhelming majority of these cards are pornographic, certainly according to Anthony Comstock’s standards. This joking arm of white racism manifested through postcards extended its harm to black children’s lives through various forms of discrimination, mob violence, rape, and lynching. Sold for just a penny, these postcards zipped in all directions through the nation’s postal system and abroad until the late 1950s when the NAACP, parents and some concerned whites pressured publishers and sellers to stop their circulation. The harmfulness
of these postcards was apparent to civil rights activists of the 1950s as it surely would have been to Anthony Comstock in his day had he been open to seeing black children as equal to whites.

Postcard images of black children must be situated into three time periods to provide a socio-political and economic backdrop for their production. Once placed within their historical context, close readings will unveil the various practical functions these cards served and then they will ultimately be returned to their senders – in an ideological sense. The first period of production is the “nadir,” an era many historians have described as worse than slavery. From the early 1880s extending to the 1930s, whites lynched thousands of black adults and children, destroyed schools, churches and entire communities, and used rape as a form of political violence to keep blacks in their place even as Progressive reformers across the country championed various programs to improve society. During this same period, as postcards became more commonplace within the culture as their demand increased, competition to make images of blacks funnier and more degrading intensified competition among rival publishers. Caricatures of black children were at their worst during the nadir, reflecting the volatile state of race relations. During this period that white nostalgia for the old social order based upon chattel slavery is apparent in the postcards.
During this period black children, like the girl and boy shown on the previous page appear in baskets or atop piles of cotton as “staple products.” In this case, the product is cotton, a southern crop. Not only was cotton a major source of the South’s economy, so too were black children. The cotton surrounding the children’s bodies not only makes a comment about black children’s relationship with certain crops, but is also intended to highlight their blackness. Though no longer part of a future cheap slave labor force, black children still had some economic value to white southerners as exploitable laborers. Black children are not only juxtaposed with southern crops, but they often appeared giggly and plump to promote the myth that they were well-fed and content with their status and conditions growing up along the color line, just as white slave owners claimed during slavery. While the set of images above show plump and happy children, in the cards below, they are cast as endangered species being eradicated.

In evolutionary terms, children would be separated from the kind of natural predatory scenarios shown above. A mother or father’s intervention would be a sign of civilization. But this is not the case of black youth. Instead of being separated from the natural, they are returned to nature as “gator bait.” Some of the cards portray black boys climbing trees or running to escape hungry wide mouths of alligators. Groups of unsuspecting naked black children can be seen riding away from shorelines on the backs of grinning gators. In her study *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies*, Patricia J. Turner analyzes this alligator bait motif through an exploration of white folklore, literary tradition and Freudian analysis. Turner probes the connection between these images and the stereotype that black parents allow their “savage” or “animal-like” children to run wild, and she writes, that these images “implicitly advocate a form of aggression in eradicating an unwanted people.”

Turner further expands her symbolic interpretation of the alligator bait motif by describing the animal’s mouth as a “toothed vagina” and its long bodily appearance as “phallic.” Read this way, according to Turner, the large gator’s confrontation with a small black child
reveals hints of “male-to-male penis envy” between white and black men. She also asserts, “the alligator represents the white man’s desire to overpower the ostensibly super phallic black man with a white, more potent phallus.” While it is true that adult black men appear in postcards being chased, bitten and eaten by large gators, it is adolescent boys and teens that are the predominant prey in these cards. Black boys are not simply stand-ins for adult men in these images. They too were targets of white aggression and violence just as grown black men were. While white artists used gators and large birds to dismember black boys’ genitalia, lynch mobs, writers, and medical doctors of the era expressed a
morbid fascination with black children’s genitalia and promoted the castration of black boys to control their unchecked sexuality and to keep them from reproducing.

Other wild animals such as pelicans, bears, tigers and geese also pose varying degrees of threat to black children’s lives. These cards told viewers that black children were unwanted and a species doomed for extinction, confirming medical doctor’s and other racial thinker’s claims that blacks race after slavery because blacks, no longer under the supervision of whites and the “civilizing” restraints of slavery, were doomed for extinction. The animal motif also tells viewers that black children were savages that they needed to be controlled. The stork, unlike other wild animals, serves a different function in playing on white fears about increased black birth rates. Black and white children are delivered from some natural realm by nature’s creature – the stork, but only black children are sent back to the natural realm through extinction, alligators, and other means. In one image, storks “compare notes” as they hold black and white babies side by side before delivery while another brings “a baby periodical,” in the form of a complete white child, but also unwanted “colored supplements” that can be thrown out. The message to viewers is that white identity and the future of whiteness should be subscribed to through procreation and investment in white children.
The second period of racist postcard production existed roughly from the 1930s to the end of World War II, which historian Ken Goings contends, “the psychological and economic dislocations caused by the Great Depression, helped keep the mythical past of the Old South alive for a bit longer.” During the Great Depression, blacks suffered through desperate economic times. As fifty percent of blacks remained jobless, many whites argued that blacks should remain so as long as whites were unemployed. With de facto and de jure segregation still intact, lynching and other forms of racial violence surged after a short decline.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, who did not back anti-lynching legislation for political reasons, proclaimed that the nation’s priorities should not be focused on divisive racial issues. He argued that blacks and working class whites faced the same problems of hunger, inadequate housing, unemployment, disability and old age. But in the popular imagery produced during that time, black children often served as the comedic icon of poverty, masking the stark realities of economic degradation not only for blacks but also for poor whites. By the end of World War II, images of black children appear softer and more comical, showing less attention to race, though segregation and violence persisted after the war. As the nation recovered economically and elevated itself as a world power, blacks enjoyed new opportunities created by the mobilization for war.

The third period extends from the late 1940s to the late 1950s as civil rights struggles came to the fore. Though the mobilization for war along with Roosevelt’s New Deal initiatives slightly altered racial attitudes, approaches toward desegregation and social equality were met with a persistent backlash, especially from southern conservatives. Cognizant of the nation’s
identity and image abroad as a democratic model, New Dealers and liberals began to question the contradictions and harm of discriminatory practices. As national discussions about the integration of schools and other public facilities intensified, postcard sketches portray black children with light skin tones and clothing colors. They are still presented as stupid buffoons lacking the capacity to be educated or assimilated into American society even by their own parents, especially black mothers.

Black mothers were often cast as nurturing mammies of white children, but when they appeared in images with black children they yell, hit and try in vain to wash their youngsters “white as snow.” Soap, as a gleaming white civilizing agent and purifier, together with black children, was used as a marketing tool. Sometimes black children stepped into a bath and their blackness suddenly disappeared. So if a particular brand was strong enough to whiten black skin, then it was most certainly sufficient for white skin. In some cards, black children soak in bathtubs overflowing with gleaming white suds as the captions underneath read, “How ink is made.” Black mothers often appear in bathing scenes, failing to wash away the stain of their
children’s blackness and deviance, as do white playmates, who stand appear frustrated or confused because the black child “won’t come clean.” Essentially, black mothers are blamed for being ineffective agents with their children and for giving birth to a dysfunctional race of people. This imagery suggests that early on black children displayed signs of monstrosity and deviance as an indication of their future menace to society and their inability to be properly governed or washed clean of their taint of inferiority.

Images of African Americans, especially children, are more sexualized during this period than earlier, playing on white fears about integration and the dilution of the white race. As an example of white anxieties about integration, an early 1950’s postcard shows a half-naked black boy standing next to a fully clothed white girl. The boy’s skin is much lighter and his physiognomy is not as rough as black children drawn in cards produced during the nadir period. With his hands at his chest, the boy appears to be offering something to the brightly dressed white girl. With her gleaming blonde hair, blushed skin, and worried expression, she turns away from him saying in French, “No! ... chocolate makes me sick!” The caption line tells the viewer that the black boy has tried to offer himself to the white girl, perhaps for innocent play or the possibility of a sexual encounter. Clearly she has already been warned about the dangers of mixing with his kind. Though the caption is written in French, it was drawn by a New York artist and circulated throughout the United States.

Though historical sources do not allow exact calculation, these kinds of postcards widely and freely trafficked through the United States postal system, and were readily available for

III. 3.27 French postcard of a white girl rejecting a black boy’s advances, undated (Author’s Collection)
purchase at bookshops, five and dime stores, tourist stops, and train depots across the country. The massive consumption of these postcards, along with other kinds of racially degrading consumer products, allowed consumers to take pleasure in the domination and dehumanization of black children. Purchasing, sending and viewing these degrading images allowed senders, recipients, and collectors to feel a sense of superiority and to participate in the moral degradation of black youth. These cards also encouraged viewers to see black children as commodities and to see them as the white child’s imagined opposite. A popular culture form, they assisted in naturalizing the black child’s inferiority.

“A Little Local Color”

Most of the postcards shown here were obtained through the Internet and from private dealers who marketed them as “funny,” “cute,” “hilarious,” and “comical.” Such humor attempts to make the racial and sexual exhibition of black children appear benign as it did at the height of their production during the Jim Crow period and era of Comstockery. Furthermore, this tasteless humor reveals how American consumerism itself became implicated in the construction of racial ideology at the expense of black children. When we strip these cards of their humor, as well as their contemporary marketing labels, “Black Memorabilia” and “Black Americana,” and we return them to their original senders and creators, what we see is how a new media and consumer culture assisted in surrounding the first generation of free African American children with a new powerful network of oppression that replaced legal bondage. Simultaneously, Comstock and other vice suppressors, social reformers, commercial artists, and consumers developed strategies to protect white children from similar forms of devaluation. Historically, postcards emerged at a moment when various forms of popular entertainment increasingly became more accessible to the masses. The consumption of thousands, perhaps millions, of postcards affirmed ideas about race and maintaining the subordination of the African Americans, especially their children. Widely
circulated visual entertainment created for senders and receivers a private space to enjoy degrading, even pornographic images of black children.

Racist and pornographic postcards of black children were used in an everyday manner to communicate with friends, relatives and associates as well as by advertisers to market goods and business. In addition to postcards, tens of thousands of racist consumer items that emerged during the 1890s including: salt and pepper shakers, “jolly nigger banks,” cookie jars, storybooks, dolls, toilet paper holders, letter openers, playing cards, household decorations, sheet music, dart boards, puzzles, cleaning agents, hygienic products and more. Comical postcards trafficked through the mail alongside postcards of hangings, burnings, torture and castration of black adults and children. Thousands of ordinary whites that attended and participated in these “voyeuristic spectacles” sometimes sent photographic postcard images of mutilated or “barbequed” black
bodies through the mail to friends and family members sometimes with strands of the victim’s
hair enclosed. It was not unheard of for “festival” participants to collect bone fragments, fingers,
ears, and even the genitals of a lynched black person. The caption lines on these postcards ranged
from, “LYNCHED,” to “Vengeance,” to “Coon Cooking.” The most chilling, are the faces of
grinning white boys and girls glaring up at the bodies of lynch victims.

In one postcard image taken on May 25, 1911 in Okemah, Oklahoma, a white boy stands
on a bridge next to a toddler and three other children smiling as he holds a noose attached to a
black boy who had been castrated and lynched alongside his mother. This visual imagery
produced and collected in the aftermath of a lynching denied black victims “sanctuary” even in
death. On May 27, 1908, a new amendment to U.S. Postal regulations made it illegal to send
lynching postcards openly through the mail because they, along with other forms of obscene
material were considered “matter of a character tending to incite arson, murder or
assassination.” The federal law disrupted only part of lynchings circuitry and the legal measure
certainly did nothing to outlaw the practice of lynching itself. Senders of these cards were forced
to place and send their grotesque souvenirs in envelopes, and in some cases, lynching cards still
trafficked openly through the mail. Comical postcards expressing violence toward black children,
including castration of boys, substituted the more graphic depiction of white violence towards
blacks. While the mass reproduction and circulation of lynchings had the potential to stir
widespread backlash at home and abroad, comical postcards could be written off as a joke. Both
lynching photographers and postcard artists rendered a service to white supremacy through the
reproduction and sale of the degradation of African Americans.

Comical postcards featuring black children share similar themes with other popular
culture references and forms of entertainment. Their images harmonized with themes from over
600 popular coon songs, a genre of popular music that fascinated Americans from the early 1880s
until the 1920s, and included black baby tales, nursery rhymes and minstrel themes. These
degrading images were found in best-selling books, films, pseudo-scientific theories, comparative
medical and sociological studies, and all shared pre-existing antebellum ideas about black inferiority. Children’s books such as Thomas Nelson Page’s *Jack and Jake* (1891), Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus and His Friends* (1892), and Helen Bannerman’s *Little Black Sambo* (1899) to name a few, specifically extended old and new ideas about racial inferiority to black youth. These texts not only perpetuated ideas about their stupidity and inferiority, they also played upon white fears about uncontrolled sexuality and the dangers of integration.

A 1920’s Valentine’s postcard by Mabel Lucille Atwell shows a barefoot grinning boy clad in checkered blue overalls and a stripped white and red shirt speaking bad English. He says, “YOU DO MAKE I LARF.” Ironically, the French translation of the English caption line is actually grammatically correct – “You make me laugh.” Paule, the sender, apologized to Georges, the card’s recipient, by writing on the back, “Excusez la carte ’c’était le seul que je purrais trouver.” The English translation: “Please excuse the card it was the only one I could find.” This message indicates that the French sender recognized the card as derogatory.

Historian Wilma King has noted in an essay on black children in the print media, such stereotypical images that cast black children in this way “relegated them to a marginal place and eliminated any hints of competition or agency that might threaten whites.” Essentially, the humor justified the ideology of black inferiority and the ideology of white superiority and domination.
A few cards in my collection show senders commenting about the smell of watermelon and other features of the South’s landscape but rarely about the black children shown on the cards. There are a few exceptions. For instance, on March 14, 1944, a grandmother mailed a postcard from St. Petersburg, Florida to her grandson in Pompton Plains, New Jersey. The front of the card shows an adolescent black boy being chased up a tree by a large alligator. The boy looks down frightened as the wide-mouthed, sharp-toothed gator waits at the base of the tree. The recipient, Richard Cronenwall, is asked: “How would you like to be the boy up in the tree?” The card is signed “Nanny.” Just as comments like these shown on the postcards are rare, the graphic scenes depicting black children often had little or no connection to cards used for marketing certain goods.53

Filmmakers of the day also attached the same kinds of cloying themes to African American children as they did to black adults. The humor and racist themes are rooted in the minstrel tradition though black children were not central figures in those popular antebellum spectacles where whites caulked up there faces and pretended to act out their own myths and fantasies about blacks. Donald Bogle, the foremost authority on the history of African American film, argues that Hollywood conformed the escapades, physical features, and lifestyles of black children into dominant racial themes of the era. Films and shorts such as Thomas Alva Edison’s Ten Pickaninnies (1904), D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of A Nation (1915), Hal Roache’s 1922 series Our Gang, later adapted as The Little Rascals, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Topsy and Eva both filmed in 1927, all carry the same stereotypes and messages portrayed in picture postcards. The children in the cards resemble the scripted portrayals of famous child actors like Ernest Morrison (Sunshine Sammy), Allen Clayton Hoskins (Farina), Matthew Beard (Stymie), William Thomas Jr. (Buckwheat), and Butterfly McQueen who starred as Prissy in Gone With The Wind. The black child, Bogle writes, “was a harmless, little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were
pleasant and diverting.”⁵⁴ Again, the humor allowed viewers to engage in a collective laugh at the expense of black children while obfuscating the painful realities of their lives.

As Bogle asserts, like black adults, black children became the national joke in popular entertainment when the race was treated the worst. Blacks often appeared as happy, comical figures in Southern tourist postcards to perpetuate the false illusion for visitors that their Negroes were happy and content. For example, a 1940’s postcard features a masculine looking girl with bugged eyes, beet red lips, muscular arms and legs, clad in a bright red dress, matching socks, and colorful ribbons in her hair, and carries a message of happiness. The child, “local color,” holds bright daisies and promises to cheer up the card’s recipient. This image also operates on dominant themes about black femininity and masculinity, depicting females as aggressive and domineering, like men, while black males appear weak and effeminate.

Ill. 3.31 A sexually ambiguous black child, published by Tuck & Sons Company, 1908 (Author’s Collection)
These kinds of comedic distortions of black children’s bodies also helped reinforce dominant medical theories of the day. For example, Aleš Hrdlička, a Czech-born doctor who immigrated to New York with his Bohemian family in 1881, published a study on savagery in children and another comparing the bodies of “colored” and white children that were housed in the city’s juvenile asylums in the late 1890s. One of his findings was that “before the age of puberty, and sometimes beyond this period, [the colored girl] is a great deal more the shape of a boy than is the case of the white girl.” White girls showed more “decidedly feminine characters, that is, feminine thorax, waist distinctly narrowed, and large hips seen as early as the eighth year of life.”

Hrdlička’s medical depiction implies that black females were less evolved. Like black women, black girls were also perceived as the antithesis of white beauty, femininity and soft physicality. The contrasts between white and black children’s bodies were rooted in medical and scientific assumptions but widely circulated visual imagery helped the average less educated American observe such physical differences. While such imagery offered aesthetic validations to white adults about the development of their own children, medical doctors, scientists and artists presented the black child’s body as a mass of peculiarities. High culture (medical studies) and low culture (in this case postcards) reveals the same racial ideologies about black children.
In an early 1900s postcard two “quarrelsome coons” are juxtaposed against the beauty and femininity of the white girl. Published in 1908 by Raphael Tuck & Sons, this card was part of the “Happy Little Coons Series.” The pitch black skinned girls, barefoot and clad in ragged dresses, fight over a white doll wearing a bright clean flowing white dress. The “coons” prefer white dolls and beauty rather than their own physical traits. Dr. Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s pivotal 1940s dolls tests which examined children’s attitudes about race, revealed the negative psychological impact on black children growing up during segregation. Their studies were crucial to the historic Supreme Court’s Brown v. Board of Education decision that dismantled “separate-but-equal” education on the basis that segregation harmed black children’s self-esteem and development. This card indicates that whites were well aware that black children favored whiteness over their own blackness and so too were black reformers cognizant of this issue well before the Clarkes’ doll studies. As chapter two will show, W.E.B. Du Bois and other African American reformers created and promoted the consumption of black dolls and other items of material culture within black communities to help combat white depictions and to help black youth consume positive ideas about black beauty, intelligence, pride, and racial uplift.
Shown on the previous page is the classic 1880 painting, “The Yachting Girl,” by Winslow Homer juxtaposed against a postcard sketch of a black version of the painting. This kind of humor, an ugly masculinized black girl child with distorted features became a device used to soothe northern consciousness about the nation’s race problems and to assure whites that the rising generation of newly freed blacks were not a threat. Historian Ken Goings explains that these comical images created “the illusion that race relations were progressing in the South, and the North need not worry about its colored brethren in Dixie. Goings adds, “if African Americans could be depicted as happy clowns or ‘Sambos,’ then their conditions could not be that bad.”56 In the same vein, if black children could be depicted as happy, despite their physical distortions and the poverty and violence surrounding their lives then there would be no indication that the realities of growing up in a segregated society had a negative impact on their development and outlook on life. In essence, black children were depicted as happy despite coexisting convictions that they were not worthy of a protected childhood.

Some scholars argue that comical racial stereotypes were so familiar within the culture that few people had any notion that they degraded black adults and children. The same may be
said for contemporary dealers who market these old postcards as cute and funny as during the
heyday of their production. But what engendered the individual or collective laugh? What about
the children’s hair, skin color, facial features, clothing, behavior, demeanor, and caption lines is
funny? If these material culture images were so amusing, then why did African Americans
vehemently protest their production and circulation? Furthermore, why did blacks view such
images as grotesque distortions of their humanity and take measures to shield youngsters from
them? To describe these objects as simply funny, then or now, is to deny their overt and covert
themes and functions or the masked messages between artists, advertisers, publishing houses and
the buying public. As historian Wilma King has argued in an essay on African American
children in turn-of-the-twentieth-century print media, black children were cast as buffoons,
servile laborers whose purpose was to serve and entertain white audiences. These comical
images “relegated them to a marginal place and eliminated any hints of competition or agency
that might threaten whites.”57

The humor attached to picture postcards not only allowed purveyors of this genre of
racialized child pornography to evade censorship laws, and this devaluation allowed black
children to serve as stand-ins for white children in objectionable art. To use white children in
postcards filled with scenes of sex, violence, crime, and other forms of degradation would have
certainly sparked the ire of Anthony Comstock, especially given his reaction to the September
Morn painting. While lewd images of white children circulated in limited illegal underground
markets restricted to the eyes of those socially defined as prurient, obscene images of black
children were disqualified from the realm of objectionable or pornographic visual production and
overlooked as abusive to children by white producers and consumers. Like black adults, black
children were made into objects of laughter as a means of stripping them of humanity and self-
possession. Humor thus became what Ken Goings calls “a device of oppression” used to render
blacks powerless.58
**Picturing the “Priceless Child”**

As Comstock and other Progressive era reformers kept childhood central to their moral campaigns, much of the imagery produced of children echoed and reinforced reformist sentiments. While reformers and purity crusaders used the notion of childhood innocence as a rallying point for their efforts, popular mass-produced images helped Americans picture what worthy, innocent, and priceless children looked like, as well as what kinds of children stood outside prevailing standards of beauty, innocence, and intrinsic value. Together, the ideologies of reformers and artistic images collaboratively used the black child as a negative counterpoint to create and define a new kind of innocent and priceless white childhood even as they defined racial difference.

In 1981, the sociologist Viviana Zelizer published her classic study, *Pricing the Priceless Child*, in which she argued that the American attitudes and toward the view of children underwent a transformative shift between the 1870s and 1930s. Zelizer maintained that the expulsion of children from the “cash nexus,” or labor force, was followed by what she called the “sacrilization” of their lives. Children’s changing economic value determined their new social value, she argued. The view that children were objects of utility and financial contributors to the family network shifted to the view that they were “economically worthless but emotionally priceless” members of the middle-class family to be invested in with sentimental value and moral meaning. In exchange for their lost economic value, the conventional wisdom of the day also posited that children needed to develop deep emotional bonds with their parents. Children required nurturing, patience, companionship, playtime, self-development, education, shelter from vice, and confinement of their sexuality to protect them from exploitation. To use children for profit, to sexualize them, and to deny them the sanctity and protection of family and home was taboo.

Economics alone did not shape changing perceptions about the place of the child in the home and society. Despite Zelizer’s thought-provoking and rich contribution to our
understanding of the historical evolution of cultural attitudes toward children, her thesis is limited by her failure to address how the ideological construction of the “priceless child” was shaped by slavery’s demise, anti-black thought and racial segregation. As the black feminist scholar Hazel Carby and others have maintained, during slavery “black females reproductive destiny was bound to capital accumulation.” Children born to black women were property, a type of capital in the form of slaves that served as a cheap labor force. 

During slavery black children had actual economic value and thereby social value to the hegemonic paternalistic system. But emancipation and subsequent laws of the late 1870s outlawing illegal indentures and apprenticeships largely helped expel black children from the labor force though not fully. But after black youth lost their economic worth to whites as business property and collateral, their lives were not “sacrilized,” nor were they viewed as emotionally priceless objects worthy of social investment and protection. In return for their lost economic value, black children were further devalued and that devaluation played a critical role in constructing oppositional ideas about the superior, morally pure, and deserving white child. Through postcards and other objects of material culture, black children were made readily available for new kinds of economic and sexual exploitation without guilt. White racists used these images to encourage Americans to concentrate the sins of society onto black children and to use black children as a target for blame.

The turn of the twentieth century saw the rise of romantic and sentimental genre paintings and postcards featuring pale looking, fragile and demure white children, especially girls. Those images of white children are filled with detail, stylistic exactitude, and calculated to appeal to viewer’s emotions. White children are featured as objects of parental pride and affection. Props like toys, books, and cute pets surrounding white children imply proper learning and development unlike black children who are surrounded by wild animals, dice, knives, and toilets. Black children are pictured stealing, fighting, smoking, gambling and engaging in taboo sexual acts, like
the children shown in the postcard below. The behavior of black children tells viewers that they are not highly evolved or qualified to be citizen subjects.

Central to the new view that children were priceless, were changing understandings about children’s sexuality. The dominant view at the time was that children were sexually innocent, lacked sexual desire, and were not mature enough to engage in sexual activity. These ideas lent credence to policies that shaped child labor laws, education reform, life insurance for youth, and the creation of a separate justice system for children and adults. Not only did it become increasingly taboo to make a profit off children through labor exploitation, it also became increasingly taboo to sexually objectify children in art, and new laws outlawed sexual intercourse with minors. By the late 1880s, ideas about childhood innocence provoked lawmakers to pass new legislation extending certain children protection from sexual degradation by raising the age of consent and revising rape laws. On the surface it seems that such laws were created to protect all children, but when applied, really only covered white youth.
In old postcard images, white girls especially served as emblems of childhood innocence. They appear in soft vignettes to highlight their innocence and vulnerability. Pictured as cloyingly sweet, pious, helpful, and self-effacing, white girls emulated the idealized standards of submissiveness, respectability, grace, meekness and charm as they appear shrouded in ornate costumes or wafting dresses. Their bodies are undeveloped and they exude innocence. The viewer is drawn into the girl’s face, cheeks, feet, and arms – the parts least associated with sexuality. Unlike their hoydenish, independent and feisty half-naked or completely nude black female counterparts, white girls appear more dependent, demure and modest. They are the paragons of usefulness and are inculcated with social values of wife and mother as they engage in domestic tasks like needlework and gardening. White girls are also shown taking care of pets, dolls, and siblings. Their mothers cuddle and nurture them and their worlds are safe and comfortable. These kinds of images emerged alongside reform literature and child-rearing manuals produced during the period.

Like adult white women, white girls served as paragons of earlier antebellum ideas about femininity. Their physical features along with their behavior constituted innocent childhood. Some scholars have audaciously argued that these kinds of images of pure, soft, untouchable, alluring white girls are themselves erotic and sexually exploitative because they somehow invite the gaze of predators. Perhaps, but when these questionably erotic images of white children are
placed next to hardcore sexual images of black girls and boys the discussion either changes dramatically or the dialogue becomes conspicuously silent. But it is not the focus of this project to parse out degrees of sexual exploitation and abuse of children, rather it is to highlight contradictions in the discourse as well as address the silences and the consequences for black children’s lives. Based upon archival evidence, as well as Comstock’s reaction to Paul Chabas’ naked white girl, it seems clear that artists and dealers understood that they could not sexually objectify white children in cartoons or photographs and publicly circulate them without prosecution. These images allowed white audiences to publicly view black children’s sexual development and to view them engaged in sexually taboo behaviors.

In *Picturing Innocence*, Anne Higonnet argues that through the realm of art the “romantic child” was born. The romantic child, she claims, was “socially, sexually and psychically innocent.” She further asserts that adults sought comfort in such images. Higonnet writes: "The image of the Romantic child replaces what we have lost, or what we fear to lose. Every sweetly sunny, innocently cute Romantic child image stows away a dark side: a threat of loss, of change, and, ultimately, of death. Romantic images of childhood gain power not only from their charms,
but also from their menace.” Despite this observation, like many other scholars, Higonnet fails to deal with the ways in which white anxieties, sexual and otherwise, intruded onto black childhood and allowed viewers to picture black children as devoid of innocence.

Since white girls were assumed to be absolutely sexually innocent, they deserved to be protected. Conversely, black girls portrayed as exuding sexuality through their dress, behavior and suggestive caption lines, thus forfeited their rights to certain protections reserved for innocent and worthy white girls. In a photographic postcard printed in 1900, a pre-pubescent girl wearing a tattered white dress perches one hand on her hip and fans herself with the other, like a grown woman. Appearing hot and loose, she says to her viewer, “SOME CLASS, EH?” A similar postcard produced 30 years later by an unknown artist shows a young girl wearing a bright red dress and propped up in high-heeled shoes. She fans herself and proclaims, “Dis tender chick’n done been possessed of a tender heart.” The Milwaukee based E.C. Kropp Company produced a different version of this motif. A very dark skinned black child juxtaposed against a backdrop of hazy red and yellow, fans her genital area as she smiles and tells the viewer, “Honey, I’se Waitin’ Fo’ You Down South.” These images conforming broader stereotypes about black women’s licentious sexuality, denied a period of sexual innocence to black female children.
Some white artists represented black girls as sexually mature at a young age, while others drew them with masculine bodies and mannish behaviors unlike the feminine prim white girl. Both distinctions are clearly derogatory. In the early 1900s artist Sarah E. Nash produced “The Sporting Girl Series” for the Curt Teich Company. Like her “Yatching Girl,” the “Baseball Girl,” and others show the same distorted looking black girl holding a bat while standing over home base. She says, “When at the bat I’m always right to knock ‘em out Yes out of sight.” A black girl named Sally punts a football and easily scores touchdowns in the cartoon sketch titled “Football Girl.”

Black girls not only look and behave much like boys, they, like adult black women, also do the job of emasculating boys by rejecting their advances, verbally cutting them down and hitting them over the head with various objects thus also demeaning young boys’ masculinity. Though several scholars have broadly assumed that throughout the turn of the twentieth century, as it became more taboo to denude children in pictures, clear distinctions were also made to create boundaries between adult sexuality and children’s innocence. But such actions and notions were not universal. In fact, African American children were subjected to pedophiliac voyeurism,
one that drew little distinction between the bodies, behavior, character and sexuality of black adults and children.

Many of the postcards in my collection reveal a morbid fascination with black children’s bare buttocks, which were often drawn in the shape of an inverted heart. Black children’s private parts are clearly displayed for white viewers, allowing them to gain familiarity with closed inaccessible black sexuality. The black child’s nudity became a highly visible form of communication during a period when children’s sexuality was supposed to be confined or non-existent. Black boy’s pants fall down or burst open in public and during bedtime prayers while black girls’ dresses fly up or droop open to reveal their pitch-black “hearts.” These images created the perception that the black child’s body was differently evaluated from the white child and could be displayed and read for signs of biological inferiority and moral degeneracy of the race. Those physical signs included their skin color, coarse facial features, jagged teeth, exaggerated limbs, oversized heads, but also, as these postcards made clear, their large buttocks and genitalia.

The images shown above are reminiscent of the famous “Hottentot Venus,” or Saarjie Baartman, a South African woman brought to Europe and placed on display in freak shows for five years in Paris and London until her death from smallpox in 1815. Her steatopygia (large
buttocks) and her oversized vulva, which was said to resemble “the skin that hangs from a
turkey’s throat,” captivated working-class and bourgeois whites.64 When Baartman died, her
brain and genitals were removed, pickled and preserved until they were later returned to South
Africa in 1975. Baartman became the icon of black female sexuality that dominated Western
fantasy well into the 20th century. Images of Baartman helped reinforce white stereotypes of
black sexuality and white artists extended and projected those ideas onto black children.65

For white viewers, pornographic postcards not only proved black children’s difference
and pathology, they also served as visual markers that reflected normal and abnormal child
development in the burgeoning new fields of pediatrics and sociology. These images told
viewers that black children were growing in the wrong ways, (developing not their minds)
lacking in self-control and displaying deviance, which could be linked to their oversexed bodies.
Wilma King asserts that such images reinforced the notion that black girls especially were
libidinous. She also contends that, “This sort of sexualized racism functioned as a rationalization
for the exploitation of black girls and women across time and region.”66

White children are rarely denuded in turn-of-the-twentieth-century postcards. When they
are, their nudity is used to highlight their purity and white children are oftentimes placed next to a
naked black child to make a statement about the impure and pure child. Unlike the black child,
the white child’s nudity does not signify degeneracy, immorality, or a social threat. Picture
postcards not only helped reinforce myths about black children’s oversexed bodies and
promiscuity, they also helped perpetuate racial devaluation of black childhood through their wide
circulation among popular audiences. Because black children were pictured as sexually deviant
instead of innocent and priceless, they were thus denied access to the category of innocence and
their degradation in virtually every realm of American life was accepted.
“It Must Be Sumthin’ I ET!”

In the early 1940s postcard shown above, a young girl stands in a watermelon patch wearing a red dress with one strap suggestively dropped below her shoulder. The viewer is first struck by her protruding belly, which is shaped like the watermelons at her feet. At first glance it seems that she has swallowed an entire melon. But her glowing expression and the caption above her head, “OH-I IS NOT! . . .” all hint that she is pregnant. This card operates off the stereotype that blacks have an insatiable lust for watermelon, but also perpetuates the notion that black girls are prematurely sexual.

As with black boys, girls are made into adults and used to parody the sexual behaviors of adults. As the children engage in sexual behaviors and other inappropriate social acts, they become responsible for forfeiting their rights, protections, and privileges reserved for innocent white youth. “Tender chick’ns” strike flirtatious poses and flippantly strut down streets tempting onlookers. These images of black girls mirror postcard and popular media images of black women as harlots. In those scenes, black women wear tight clothing that accentuates their exaggerated buttocks and erect nipples as they pass by whistling and googly-eyed black men. The
The girl shown in the postcard shown below is similar to the young child shown in the watermelon patch. She wears a white dress dotted with blue circles and a large red ribbon tied behind her. Her right strap is also suggestively dropped, revealing the soft curve of her shoulder. This little girl brings a Valentine’s Day message: “With My Love.” Her lips, bright and pink, are wrapped around the tip of a peeled white banana that curves into her mouth as she holds the long fruit at its base with one hand. The girl’s bulging eyes suggest that she is struggling with a phallus – with some male viewer’s fantasy – disguised as a fruit. I purchased this card for $125.00 from a white female dealer in Ohio who denied that there was anything racist or explicitly sexual in the card. “It’s a classic postcard of a cute little black girl having a snack,” she explained. The artist, Frances Brundage (1854-1937), was a highly respected and prolific portraitist who specialized in pristine Victorian images of white children in greeting cards, storybooks and calendars.

Unlike many of her mostly male contemporaries, Brundage often used the same level of artistic detail and similar techniques in her illustrations of non-white children as her white subjects, though her images of black children were almost always caricatures that conformed to
racist stereotypes of the day. Such provocative images of children consuming food has been shown to impact the way parents raised their children. As Stephanie J. Shaw has noted in her study of professional black women raising children after the Civil War, mothers often forbade their daughters from eating in public or wearing lipstick. Though oftentimes there was no explanation as to why, it is clear that parents were influenced by the proliferation of images that used food as a technique to sexualize their offspring.\textsuperscript{68}

A young black girl in the above postcard sits on a stool with her legs open and buttocks exposed as she tries unsuccessfully to sell lemonade. Frustrated, she tells the dog, “THERE’S ‘BARELY’ ANY BUSINESS AT ALL.” But the picture begs a deeper question. Is she selling lemonade or sex? No one seems to be buying either “product” despite dropping her price down from five cents to three. This image is not really about an actual black girl selling sex. It is an attempt to get white viewers to consume ideas about the black child’s alleged sexual deviance, but also their accessibility as sexual objects. Such sexual images told African American adults that they did not fully possess control over the lives of their young because they did not have control over censoring the use of racialized child pornography. The larger dominant white world
would continue to use black children’s identities as objects to be consumed for the use, pleasure, and domination of whites.

Images of black children were not only used to communicate sexual messages, but to also advertise sweet products, thus black children too became consumable products. A black boy sketched as “Po’ lil’ CHOCOLATE DROP” appeared in 1907 as part of the Curt Teich Publishing Company’s “Candy Kid Series.” That same year, the Hershey Company introduced its trademark foil-wrapped chocolate candies shaped like the boy’s head shown in the drawing. Other companies, including Nestle, also launched the sale of similar candies called chocolate drops. The boy featured in this postcard with his large bare feet, is wearing a torn shirt and patched high-water britches held up by one red suspender. As his scruffy brown dog gazes up at him, the perplexed looking boy presses one finger against his thick oversized lips. Though disguised as a chocolate drop, the boy seems to know that his head is shaped like a circumcised penis. The words “I hate me,” are hand written along the white border section at the bottom of the card. A reading of this card suggests that black boys themselves, in the white imagination, are phallic symbols.
Not only does the black boy become a penis viewed in terms of his sexuality in these distorted images, he also placed in situations where white artists, disguised as humor, reveal their anxieties and morbid fascination with black boy’s genitals. White male artists drew black boys sticking their genitals through holes in fences while ducks and other wild birds suck on or castrate them. The caption line on these cards often reads: “Done Got Caught.” The boy shown above sticks his penis in a tree as a mammy figure looks on and says, “LAWSY ME! WHAT A PECULIAR LITTLE BOY.” On the opposite side of the tree a cork dripping with either urine or semen holds up a wooden bucket. The popular Southern term of a male that engaged in dendrophilia (sex with trees) is called a sapsucker, a term for a small woodpecker known for puncturing the bark on trees to feed upon the sap. In addition to penetrating holes in trees and fences, black boys are also shown mounting donkeys, pigs and other wild animals. The two boys mounting the donkeys below not only become extensions of the animal’s erotogenic zone, there is also a suggestively bestial and homoerotic undertone to the images produced by these white artists.

Food is not only used as a trope to promote the depiction of black children as accessible sexual objects, it is also used to reinforce racial stereotypes associated with older minstrel themes. A majority of the postcards produced during the Jim Crow era recast comical themes
employed by popular coon songs and vaudeville shows. For example, one popular minstrel theme reinforced the idea that blacks had an insatiable appetite for and rampantly stole chicken and watermelon. Sam Lucas’ 1884 hit song, “Coon’s Salvation Army,” described blacks as chicken-and-watermelon thieves:

De melon patch am safe today,
No coons am dar in sight,
De chickens dey may roost in peace
Wid in der coops tonight. ⁶⁹

Elmer Bowman’s 1899 “I’ve Got Chick on the Brain” claimed that coons “would rather have a poke chop than have their right mind; but I likes my chicken, and I likes ‘em fried.” Comical postcards of black children drew from the lyrics of popular coon songs first published in the 1840s when slavery was a hotly debated political issue, and those songs published in the 1880s and 1890s when race relations were at their lowest. Postcards produced during this same period show black boys invading chicken coups, raiding watermelon patches, and swiping at chicken through fences by day and night to satisfy their insatiable lust. As skilled hunters and “executioners” of chicken, black children engage in a taboo act by stealing and eating expensive meat that was considered a treat served only on Sundays.

Perhaps the most popular stereotypical food associated with black children is the watermelon. Black boys often appear in scenes gorging themselves with watermelon right off the rind. In these happy scenes their mouths are stretched to extremes over large slices of
watermelon. Some of the captions read, “Dinner Time,” “A Feast,” “Having A Delightful Time,” and “Give Us De Rine.” These images convey dual messages – one implying that black children naturally prefer food that can be eaten with their hands, and that black children’s nutritional needs can be supplied by easily accessible crops that grow profusely. The humor of these cards attempt to mask the realities of black children’s hunger by suggesting that they were always hungry in an uncontrolled animalistic sense, not the kind of hunger that writer Richard Wright describes in his classic book *Black Boy*. Growing up in the Deep South, Wright recalls how hunger nudged at his ribs, and twisted his empty guts until they ached, making him dizzy and dimming his vision. This empty feeling caused him to beg for bread and made him angry and insistent. He writes, “hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played . . . standing at my beside, staring at me gauntly.”

Wright’s hunger pains are symbolic for his larger feelings of emptiness as a black child growing up on the color line. He did not lust for watermelon or chicken, nor did he chose to steal them, as the white stereotypes and images suggest. Wright hungered not only for food, but also for education and love – all which had been denied to him because of the stifling economic and social realities of racial segregation. Watermelon scenes along with other images of chubby black babies with plump bellies mask the economic reality of racism that often left black children and their families without adequate food.

According to popular white folklore, blacks were believed to be attracted to the fruit’s bright green and red colors. The sliced melon, shaped like a smile, is bright red to match the exaggerated red lips of the children. These images also provide a kind of subliminal pornography for white viewers. These scenes almost always involve boys on the brink of puberty. The brightened pink or reddened juicy melons resemble vaginas often positioned on top of the boy’s laps as they sink their mouths and faces into it before raising their dripping wet faces to smile at the camera.
In addition to chicken and watermelon, certain objects like razors and craps, are associated with black children to show that they are not just thieves and savages, but also hustlers, gamblers, and “razor wielding coons.” Boys and girls wield knives and hatchets at chickens and other children, and sometimes cut themselves in half. These cards suggest that early on black children displayed potential for violence. As James Dorman asserts in his study of coon songs, “the flashing steel straight razor – became in the songs the dominant symbol of black violence.” This theme can be found in the lyrics of Bert Williams and George Walker’s “The Coon’s Trademark”:

As certain and sure as Holy Writ,  
And not a coon’s exempt from it,  
Four things you’ll always find together,  
Regardless of condition of sun and moon –  
A watermelon, a razor, a chicken and a coon!  

These kinds of images helped viewers consume stereotypes about the personalities of black children. Not only were black children potentially dangerous, they were clowns devoid of intelligence, irresponsible, lazy and free from white conventions and social mores. Black boys, like black men, appear as docile little Sambos that lust not only for chicken and watermelon, but
also dancing, singing and fighting. Just as the use of the Sambo stereotype justified slavery by alleging that blacks were happy and content to be servants for their white masters, this motif was extended after Emancipation and projected onto the first generation of free black children in order to limit their prospects. In freedom, white artists depicted black children as having no pursuits other than to sleep, eat, steal, gamble, hustle, entertain and engage in sexual behaviors. While reformers like Anthony Comstock were busy trying to keep white children from being exposed to this kind of vice, black children were depicted as unashamedly engaging in it.

Surrounded by chicken, watermelon, razors, dice, cigarettes and other markers of vice, white artists portrayed black children as unschooled rural inhabitants with a distinctively uneducated dialogue and no ambition to read books or better themselves. The difference in the black child’s speech patterns separates them from white youth. White children appear as symbols of progress. White artists depicted white youth as articulate, bright, educable and full of promise. They display early signs of citizenship worthiness and responsibility unlike lazy and good-for-nothing black youth. These messages shaped and justified public policies that denied adequate schooling and resources to black children. The goal was to ensure that black children would
replenish a compliant labor force, while at the same time emphasizing investment in the middle-class white child’s future.

“The Same Old Crap

Another slew of comical postcards featuring black children and their diet exposes the pellagra epidemic, which was first reported in 1902. Spanning four decades, the epidemic affected over three million Americans and claimed 100,000 lives, mainly in the South where 90 percent of the African American population lived at the time. Pellagra, also referred to as the “lazy disease,” had always been a consistent problem in the South and was first attributed to African American’s inherited inferior health. One South Carolina physician “observed” that 75% of those stricken with pellagra were African American and mostly female. But by 1914 those ideas changed as crop failures and economic downturn caused the epidemic to soar, and statistics taken during that time indicated that the majority of pellagra victims were poor whites. The disease itself was attributed to nutritional deficiency caused by lack of niacin and protein as well as the consumption of spoiled corn. The diet of poor southerners, black and white, mainly consisted of cornbread, molasses, and pork fat. The symptoms of pellagra included: confusion,
depression, scars and rashes, red ulcerated lips, swollen tongue, elongated limbs, vomiting and diarrhea.  

As panic about the disease heightened in 1914, some accused the media of using the pellagra outbreak to inflame sectional tensions between the North and the South by misrepresenting conditions of the South to prospective immigrants. One writer complained, “The prospective [European] emigrant was told that he would come in competition with cheap Negro labor, that lynchings were a popular pastime, that life and property were not safe and he would have a poor chance of enjoying the fruits of his labor.” Adding insult to injury, “... the magazines print[ed] supposedly scientific and reliable articles proclaiming that two million southern poor whites have been made helpless by the hookworm that the disease originates with and is spread by the negroes.” In 1911, Dr. J.A. Kenney, a resident physician at the Tuskegee Institute submitted a study before the National Medical Association, finding that Negroes were no more susceptible to pellagra than any other race. He asserted, “No race of people is immune; that immunity is more of a sanitary and climatic consideration than any racial predisposition.”

As newspapers and white doctors racialized the pellagra epidemic, white artists used postcard images of black children to mask the realities of the crises through potty humor or pornographic scat scenes. Below, a black girl runs away from an angry goose wearing a cone shaped yellow hat. Similar cards show black children running from hogs, pigs, chicken, and roosters pecking at their buttocks. The girl has angered a goose by poking her nose into the animal’s “business,” that business being its corn feed. Since black children were considered unclean, by not wiping themselves after using the toilet, the animal was able to smell the corn that has passed through the child’s body.

Some postcards also show animals pecking at black children’s stools as they defecate openly in the woods. Black boys often appear in scenes where they relieve themselves on chamber pots and simultaneously shoot “craps.” The craps are both dice and feces. The winner, as one 1930s postcard shows, enjoys making “pot luck” as he defeats his less fortunate playmate.
A potluck also refers to a gathering where each person is expected to bring a dish to be shared among the entire group. Judging by the expressions on the losers’ faces, the winner may not be inclined to share his winnings with them. Instead, they may get a taste of more than just defeat. Perhaps they may share whatever is stirring in his pot. The sexual fetish term for eating feces is coprophagia, and refers to those who enjoy the sight, smell, taste, or feel of feces. In many of these “scat” cards black children defecate comfortably and even happily with each other. Since these cards were drawn by white artists, we must view them not for what they say about black children’s sexual inclinations, but for what they reveal about the fetishes of the creators and viewers.
Red-lipped black children not only appear defecating in the open woods, they also fall into their own “mess” inside toilets, relieve themselves while sitting on chamber pots as steam and flatulence fill the air. Boys and girls shamelessly relieve themselves and struggle to maintain control over their excretory functions while sending messages like, “I CAN’T HOLD BACK ANY LONGER . . . SURE DO MISS YOU,” “YOU’LL BE HEARIN’ FROM ME,” “THE BIG BLOW OUT,” and “YOU MIGHT GIVE A FELLA A WRING ONCE IN A WHILE.”

Wearing a bright dress to highlight her blackness and heart shaped buttocks, the girl above sits on a chamber pot while reading a newspaper with the headline: “I’m on the Go.” She tells her viewer, “I’se busy, ‘scuse the view. When I’se thru, I’ll write to you.” The boy next to her is also clad in a bright dress as he relieves himself in an outhouse while reading a newspaper with the headline: “The Sinking of the Maine.” This hidden message in these cards is that black children are able to enjoy the pleasures of bodily elimination and uninhibited sexual fetishism. More importantly, these visual displays offered white artists and viewers the opportunities to examine such fantasies.

I have only come across one postcard image of a white child falling into a toilet only to be rescued by a parent. Images of white children urinating, defecating, and flatulating, were not produced by the Curt Teich Company or other publishing houses that created similar images of black children. I have only come across one postcard of a white child falling into a toilet only to
be rescued by a sympathetic parent. These kinds of bodily functions were kept in the private
domestic space of white homes and away from the public’s gaze and surveillance. Written off as
harmless humor, these scatological scenes, as Sigel explains, were a major theme in late 19th
century pornography and became closely associated with other themes related to sexuality. For
black children, these cards made it clear that the sanctity of home, family, privacy and ownership
over their bodies were not allowable.

**Please Return To Sender**

I have often been asked if African American adults and children purchased these
postcards that were clearly a blatant distortion of their humanity. While I cringe at such inquiries,
I honestly cannot prove without equivocation that blacks did not purchase these items, as there is
no data to illustrate this point. However, there is a great deal of evidence to support that they did
not since these cards were created by and for whites and marketed and sold to whites, among
which middle-class white women were the main consumers. Wilma King writes that it is unlikely
that blacks purchased these postcards and other similar items. She also contends that they were
so widespread within the culture that it would have been difficult for blacks of any age to avoid
them. King writes:

> The negative characterization and parody of black children’s phenotypical features,
language, behavior, must have had a negative impact on their self-esteem. It was not
unusual for organizations founded by blacks to encourage the general black population to
avoid any behavior, including wearing colorful clothing, that would prompt unfavorable
comments from whites.74

African Americans who did purchase racist postcards often did so in a futile attempt to
keep their children from being exposed to such hateful imagery. By the close of the 20th century,
black consumers also collected these items as a reminder of the past. And some black collectors
seeking out historical memorabilia were limited to mainly negative material. In recent years a
few black intellectuals began collecting these items to examine their historical functions, their
disappearance after the Civil Rights Movement and their reemergence in today’s image market as
collectibles. At the same time, others (black and white) continue to profit from these items with little knowledge about the history of their production and their impact on the lives of African Americans, especially black children. I have collected these old postcards with the sole purpose of stripping them of their humor, devaluing them as consumer items, and returning them to their original senders – the racists artists who created them during an era of our history that many Americans would like to forget.

The picture that Anthony Comstock demanded be removed from a gallery window almost 100 years ago eventually found its place in a museum. Perhaps Comstock would be pleased to know that today Chabas’ *September Morn* is tucked away in Manhattan’s Metropolitan Museum of Art while the hundreds of filthy images of black children continue to circulate now through cyberspace. If Comstock’s rhetoric about innocence and his purity campaign had not excluded an entire race of children, then perhaps such obscene images might not continue to traffic as they do under the guise of “Black Memorabilia” and “Black Americana.” While these images gave aesthetic validation to whites about their own children, they also allowed viewers to sexually possess black children’s bodies through their eyes. White children came to be characterized by their dependence, vulnerability, purity, and absence of sexuality and future potential – all traits that constituted childhood innocence and a call for their protection by reformers such as Anthony Comstock.

In the popular mindset, the black child represented the kind of social decline that whites feared for their own children, families, and future. Given the historical context of their production, the racial backgrounds of the artists who created them, and the various practical functions they served, the images examined in this chapter cannot simply be dismissed as benign, funny, or harmless objects disconnected from the stifling realities of life along the color line. Nearly a half-century after many of these old pictures disappeared from various markets to be stowed away in attics and basements across the nation, they have reemerged and continue to circulate, fascinate and incite controversy.
Despite being sold for as little as $1.00 and for as much as $250.00 under the guise of “Black Americana” or “Black Memorabilia,” these images do not reveal any truth about how African Americans ever thought of or remembered their children. But for African Americans, the black child represented racial uplift, hope, redemption and the possibilities of freedom. Black leaders and black children themselves would present counter images that were in stark contrast to the images explored in this chapter. African Americans constructed their own version of childhood innocence to contest the white racism directed at their offspring, and they too used the visual marketplace to participate in the consumption of ideas about race pride and moral uplift through the children of their race. In spite of black’s efforts to create counter images of their children, the continued trafficking of racist and sexual images in cyberspace unfortunately reveals that the youth of the race have not escape the past.

1. “Anthony Comstock Has Fought 33 Years to Save Children from Vice,” Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 3 March 1905, 2.
4. See Walter Kendrick, The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Kendrick reports that shortly before Congress passed the “Comstock Act,” the Committee on Appropriations earmarked $3,425 for the use of a “special agent” with a promise from the Postmaster General that Comstock would receive the appointment and authority to enforce the law restricting the sale and circulation of “obscene” material through the mails. Though Comstock was given a badge to signal his official status, he was not on a payroll, had no superior, and was free to interpret and apply the law as he saw fit. Kendrick also reports that Comstock had no restrictions on the means by which he could catch criminals. Comstock’s appointment as special agent to the United States Post Office Department also allowed him to police obscenity at the national level.
6. Ibid., pp. 185.
7. Reichenbach, Phantom Fame, 33.
the Painting Sure is a Work of Art,” The Kansas City Star, April 27, 1913, 1; “Pictures as Evidence; Judge approves it,” The Duluth News Tribune, April 30, 1913, 2; “Police Put Ban on Art, ‘Miss September Morn’ and Other Paintings Are Barred,” Fort Worth Star-Telegram, May 4, 1913, 24.

9 In a chapter titled “The American Obscene” in The Secret Museum, Kendrick reports that in the last years of his life Comstock restrained himself when it came to filth in art. He reports that Comstock took no official action against Chabas’ “classic piece of kitsch September Morn, only demanding that a copy be removed from a Manhattan shop window” (it was soon put back, but Comstock let it stay), pg. 147. But Comstock did more than demand the painting’s removal. He threatened to confiscate the gallery’s stock and threatened to arrest the gallery owner. The publicity surrounding the incident sparked controversy not only in New York City but in many other cities that responded with official action against September Morn, many barring it from the mail. Because Comstock was the most famous suppressor of vice at the time, he was the most influential authority on obscenity and other purity minded thinkers, censors, teachers, ministers and the like followed suit.

10 The Manhattan gallery owner, Philippe Ortiz initially put the painting in the window to challenge Comstock, but he eventually removed the painting because it disrupted business.


12 Ibid.


15 “‘September Morn Her Pose, $50 Her Fine. Mayor of Harrisburg Punishes Woman Who Gives Exhibition,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, September 17, 1913, 3; “City Must Pay To Keep Man in County Jail – Frank Sulten Modern Adam Poses as ‘September Morn’”” Belleville News Democrat, August 14, 1913, 1.

16 “Twenty-five Years After.” Time, March 18, 1935.


19 Sigel, “Filth in the Wrong People’s Hands,” 861.

This chapter will build upon the previous works of several scholars including: Kenneth Goings’ study Mammy and Uncle Mose which explores the rise of racially degrading consumer materials and their function during the post-Reconstruction period on through much of the twentieth century. My study extends the work of Patricia J. Turner’s Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammys, which explores images of black children, particularly the “alligator bait” motif as an expression of sexual castration and other forms of violence and vengeance directed toward black children. This chapter also connects some of the racial themes posited by Donald Bogle’s Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammys, and Bucks. Bogle’s study of blacks in film unveils some of the stereotypes projected onto black children by movie producers during the early part of the twentieth century. This chapter also builds upon the very important work of Wilma King’s African American Childhoods and Mary Niall Mitchell’s Raising Freedom’s Child, both of which have examined the production of print images of black children at different moments in American history, as well as their changing functions. Last, Lisa Sigel’s scholarship on the rise of pornographic postcards in the Atlantic World as well as the direct guidance she has offered me in constructing the framework for this chapter has helped enrich my understanding of the social and political dynamics of sex, race, and children.

20 The Private Mailing Card Act, authorized by Congress on May 19, 1898 granted private publishers to print and sell cards to the general public that would be mailed at the same rate as the penny cards issued by the government.


28 There is much debate among scholars about the origins and definition of what constitutes pornography as well as its impact on sexual behavior. Walter Kendrick writes in *The Secret Museum,* that the term pornography comes from the Greek “pornographos, writing about prostitutes.” By the mid-19th century, the word “pornographer” meant someone who produced obscene representations. He also argues that the increased output of sexual literature in the second half of the 19th century reflects larger social, economic, demographic and technological developments. During Comstock’s era, pornography included medical texts, pseudo-scientific works, books, songs, poems, drawings, postcards, any written or visual representations that depicted sex. As Kendrick and other scholars have noted, Comstock freely interpreted what was obscene, lewd, lascivious, or indecent. Comstock and others in power constructed these definitions and were concerned with how sexual images and ideas shaped thoughts and behaviors of certain groups that needed to be controlled. He believed that the primary purpose of obscene literature and pictures was to cause arousal. It is important to note that the definition of pornography and its function is subjective and continues to change over time. It can also be masked by and traffic in humor as the cards in this chapter do. Though these sexual depictions of black children may not cause arousal in viewers does not disqualify them as pornographic, lewd, obscene, lascivious, and indecent, even by Comstock’s definitions.


30 Anthony Comstock, *New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, Sixth Annual Report (1880)*, 11-12; *Frauds exposed; or, How the people are deceived and robbed, and children corrupted* (New York: J.H. Brown, 1880), 391.


33 Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents*, 8, 104, 205. See also, Nicola Beisel, “Class, Culture and Campaigns Against Vice in Three American Cities, 1872-1892,” *American Sociological Review*, 55, No. 1 (Feb., 1990), 44-62. In this article Beisel writes that the literature on moral reform movements argues that such movements are instances of either cultural or class status defense unrelated to conflict, or that they defend strictly material class interests. She seeks to argue against this notion by emphasizing the importance of culture and reproduction of class position. Moral reform movements are a form of class politics and support for such movements can be viewed as a response to the political and social threat posed by the immigrant working class and mediated by cultural consensus within the upper class. The problem here is that immigrants were not the only groups migrating to urban centers like New York, Philadelphia, Boston and other areas. As the numbers of blacks increased in these areas, so too did reformer’s concerns about racial contamination. See also, Marjorie Heins, *Not in Front of the Children*. Heins notes that social fears led to calls for censorship and child protection emerged as a powerful argument for certain restrictions though actual harm to children was not proven by Comstock and others. Heins argues that the impulse to protect the young was a misguided response to social change and child protection campaigns were largely deployed to mask other goals. For Comstock, art and new forms of technology were legitimate sources of fear and thus targets for censorship. The need to regulate filth, contamination, vice, and crime while defining purity, childhood innocence and racial difference reveals how Americans reacted to social change, the movement of diverse bodies, and sexual possibilities.


35 As quoted in Anthony Comstock, *Traps*, xiii, The Comstock Law stated: “That no obscene, lewd, or lascivious book, pamphlet, picture, paper, print, or other publication of an indecent character, or any article or thing designed or
intended for the prevention of conception or procuring, nor any article or thing intended or adapted for any indecent or immoral use or nature, nor any written or printed card, circular, book, pamphlet, advertisement, or notice of any kind giving information, directly or indirectly, where, or how, or of whom, or by what means either of the things before mentioned may be obtained or made, nor any letter upon the envelope of which, or postal-card upon which indecent or scurrilous epithets may be written or printed, shall be carried in the mail."

36 See Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Kendrick reports that shortly before Congress passed the “Comstock Act,” the Committee on Appropriations earmarked $3,425 for the use of a “special agent” with a promise from the Postmaster General that Comstock would receive the appointment and authority to enforce the law restricting the sale and circulation of “obscene” material through the mails. Though Comstock was given a badge to signal his official status, he was not on a payroll, had no superior, and freely interpreted the law. Kendrick also reports that Comstock had no restrictions on the means by which he could catch criminals. Comstock’s appointment as special agent to the United States Post Office Department allowed him to police obscenity at the national level.


40 Ibid., 151-154.

41 Sigel, “Filib in the Wrong People’s Hands,” 861.


44 Ibid., 38.

45 White children also appear in postcards with “taxidermied” alligators. However, the children are not being eaten, stalked or harmed in any other way by the animal. Instead, they appear in playful scenes with gators, usually with a parent nearby. At certain tourist stops, particularly in Florida and the Panama Canal, white parents and children often appear happily posing on top of gators as they wave at the camera.


47 In his study on “Black Memorabilia” Ken Goings defines such collectible as universally derogatory items of African Americans produced by whites. He notes that they are objects from white history. The stereotypes were developed and produced by whites. White publishers, manufacturers, and advertisers were responsible for their dissemination to white audiences. Goings asserts that African Americans saw the collectibles as distortions of their humanity and identity.


48 See Leon Litwack’s introduction in *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Twin Palms Publishers, 2008), pp. 8-38, see image 38, the lynching of Laura Nelson and her son on May 25, 1911, Okemah, Oklahoma.


51 See also, Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *Tom Sawyer Abroad* (1876), Joel Chandler Harris’s *Aaron in the Wildwoods* (1897), William T. Adam’s *Brother Against Brother* (1894). These popular children’s texts emerged alongside national bestsellers such as Charles Caroll’s *The Negro A Beast* (1900), Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902), and Robert Shufeldt’s *The Negro: A Menace to Civilization* (1907).

Ibid., 124.


Aleš Hrdlička, “Physical Differences Between the White and Colored Children, of the Same Sexes and Same Ages,” *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, 47 (1898), 475.


King, *African American Childhoods*, 123.

Ibid., 124.


Aleš Hrdlička, “Physical Differences Between the White and Colored Children, of the Same Sexes and Same Ages,” *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, 47 (1898), 475.


King, *African American Childhoods*, 123.

Ibid., 124.


See King, *African American Childhoods*, 129.

Ibid.

Elaine Luck, 2003. Telephone conversation with author, Feb. 13. I purchased this card from Elaine Luck who lives in Akron, Ohio and is a leading dealer in vintage postcards.


Sam Lucas, “The Coon’s Salvation Army” (Boston, 1884).


King, *African American Childhoods*, 130.
Chapter 4

“A Game of High Stakes:”
White Guardians, Wealthy Black Children, Race Robbery and Murder in Muskogee County, Oklahoma, 1899-1934

Land and oil created a different kind of black childhood in Oklahoma that did not exist elsewhere in the country. Two decades after the Civil War, thousands of black children inherited millions of acres of land in what was formerly known as Indian Territory before Oklahoma’s statehood in November of 1907. Months after Oklahoma joined the Union, the new state legislature immediately enacted anti-black laws that assisted in the wholesale robbery and murders of young people in various oil-producing counties. Following patterns already set by southern states, Jim Crow’s arrival ushered in voter disenfranchisement, segregated facilities, miscegenation laws, and lynching in addition to further loosening of federal protections of lands owned by Indians of the Five Civilized Tribes and their freedmen. The construction of a new kind of racial hierarchy severely altered the status of freeborn blacks, former slaves of Indians, the first generation of slave descendants, people of mixed race, and “state Negroes” that migrated to the territory prior to 1907. Out of this crucible emerged a black childhood of blessings and curses, blended bloodlines, ancient agreements, broken promises, and topsy-turvy racial categories and relationships.
As historian Elliot West has noted, the Reconstruction era, which coincided with a period of territorial acquisitions, “forced a new dialogue between West and South, unsettled race relations and presumptions, and finally led to a new racial order encompassing western as well as southern people of color.” West also observed that in the years after the Civil War, “America was a kind of borderland where racial edges and meanings were shifty and blurred.” Oklahoma provides the perfect landscape to explore the strange terrain of racial reconstruction, one where familiar hierarchies of race were often inverted and complicated by the presence of red, black, and other ethnic groups in addition to thousands of landowning children of color that sometimes had oil gushing from their yards and hundreds of thousands, and in some cases, millions of dollars sitting in their bank accounts.

This chapter will revisit the 1911 murders of two wealthy children from the all-black town of Taft, the spectacular trial of the interracial group of men responsible for their deaths, and will briefly touch on six other guardianship cases involving white men and their wealthy black wards. These cases grabbed local and national newspaper headlines for decades and left behind a trail of thousands of pages of legal documents. This narrative takes civil rights doyen W.E.B. Du Bois’s initial Crisis investigations further by examining how greedy oil tycoons, real estate brokers, bankers, attorneys, judges, land speculators, utility corporations and federal agencies used various mechanisms – including broken treaties, various congressional acts, competency laws, guardianships, and other extralegal devices – to disable America’s eight wealthiest black children and thousands of other juvenile inheritors of land.

By the end of its first year, The Crisis’s circulation reached 9,000, tripled to 27,000 in 1912, and increased to over 100,000 readers by 1920. As his audience expanded, editor Du Bois, who was himself a roving investigative journalist, continued to provide readers with rich sociological evidence conveying the mean spiritedness of mainstream life to black children. Acting as a gatekeeper of the challenges and experiences of black youth, Du Bois exposed how opportunities for them were institutionally and attitudinally foreclosed. Assistance came from an
interracial coalition of reformers and newspaper stringers embedded in black communities across the country. Together, their reports and dispatches provide harrowing testimony of dramatic and mundane incidents, slights and hurts, and the more insidious attempts to deprive the promise of the future by removing hope and optimism early on from black childhood.

By 1914, the NAACP had received many requests from concerned blacks to establish a Children’s Department as an institutional response to the widespread racism and white violence. Those requests came in the midst of grim realities facing the race – stifling segregation and disenfranchisement, deadly race riots, labor conflicts, rampant sexual assaults, and 2,258 blacks lynched, which included a significant number of children. The announcement came in the October edition that a committee had been formed to organize a juvenile auxiliary to be headquartered in Washington, D.C. Du Bois wrote: “In its struggle for equality of opportunity for colored people the Association has interested itself in a number of cases affecting children and young people.”

Of the many cases taken up by the NAACP, perhaps the most disturbing were the murders and wholesale robbery of thousands of Oklahoma’s landowning black children who were descendants of slaves owned by Creek Indians before the Civil War. Born before statehood, these young Creek nationals lived in colored tribal towns of Muskogee County in the eastern portion of the state and came of age during Oklahoma’s first major oil boom which lasted from just after statehood through 1930. A decade prior to statehood, Oklahoma had become the largest oil-producing region in the world with 40 million gallons being pumped out of the state each year.

Between February 1914 and May 1920, The Crisis reported the cases of Dan Tucker, Sallie Hodge, Luther Manuel, Sarah Rector, the twins Edith and Edna Durant, and siblings Herbert and CaStella Sells whose lives were dramatically altered with the discovery of oil on their lands. These three boys and five girls had enormous incomes from oil revenues ranging from $500 to $50,000 a month at a time when 90 percent of blacks living in the United States
were confined to a life of poverty in the South and the average annual income of American families in 1914 was just under $750.00 and $1,340.00 in 1920.6

Ten-year-old Dan Tucker owned 160 acres of land producing 2,400 barrels of oil daily, bringing him a monthly income of $6,750 in royalties. Sallie Hodge held title to rich bottom farmland worth $600, in addition to $100,000 in cash and $50,000 in notes and mortgages. Luther Manuel, believed then to be the richest black boy in the world with an income of $50,000 a month, owned land on top of a gusher in the heart of an oil field in Glen Pool. Edith Durant, who turned 18 in July of 1918, owned an oil well in Tulsa County and was to receive $150,000 in cash and title to land worth a million dollars while her sister Edna owned $50,000 worth of oil producing land nearby.

By the time the twins reached their age of majority their estates significantly dwindled because their white guardian executed bad loans and other business deals with the authorization of the Muskogee County Probate Court. The wealthiest girl among the group of children was Sarah Rector, whose estimated income in 1914 from lands she owned in Glen Pool was $50,000 a month. Despite her wealth, Du Bois noted that 10-year-old was one of six children living in “a shack with only one bed for the entire family.”7 Yellowed news articles, court transcripts, and interviews with living descendants of these children reveal a weary record of racial exploitation and kleptocracy assisted by the State of Oklahoma and the United States federal government.

Numerous dispatches about these eight children poured in to The Crisis from Boley, Langston, Guthrie, Taft, Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Muskogee and a few news outlets from surrounding states. The Professional World, a colored newspaper of Columbia, Missouri, reported that the exploitation of Oklahoma’s wealthy blacks was a widespread problem. “In no State in the Union have Negroes been robbed, actually robbed with impunity and openly, as in this State. White men are worth millions who have built up their fortunes by thievery.”8 In numerous editorials, Du Bois complained that corrupt state officials and unscrupulous white guardians, not their own parents or some other relative, were appointed by the Muskogee County
District Court to handle black children’s monies and business affairs until they reached eighteen. This system of legalized graft, Du Bois charged, resulted in “hundreds of white men in [Oklahoma] who have become rich from the wealth of Negro children.”

The discovery of Dan Tucker, Sallie Hodge, Luther Manuel, Sarah Rector, the twins Edith and Edna Durant, and siblings Herbert and CaStella in *The Crisis*, subsequently led to further details of their tribulations in stacks of articles from local western newspapers, tribal land and genealogical records from the Federal Dawes Commission and Bureau of Indian Affairs, thousands of pages of court transcripts, guardianship records and criminal files from the Muskogee County District Court, and financial records from the Oklahoma Corporation Commission, custodian of the financial records of oil and gas companies that held drilling leases to the children’s lands. In some places, scant profiles of white guardians, attorneys, judges, banks, and other whites that benefited financially from the estates of these children are provided. Together, these documents demonstrate how local and state governments used the law and guardianships as a means to re-establish black children’s lives as disposable capital to be governed and exploited by whites. Last, this chapter also illuminates how the mainstream print media’s construction of these children, their biological parents, and other relatives as incompetent and racially inferior, justified the state’s legal appropriation of parental authority and control over the children’s lives and financial resources.

This analysis of Oklahoma’s exploitation of black children offers rich, unexplored territory in the history of early twentieth-century race relations and the settlement of the West. First, it permits an examination of how local government, courts, and administrative agencies used existing institutions, specifically guardianship and Jim Crow laws, to reconstruct racial hierarchies. The use of these legal devices not only disenfranchised black children, they were also part and parcel of a larger attempt on behalf of whites to carve out the frontier – an unstable place of contingent possibilities that whites hoped to exploit – and establish (in spite of federal protections) control over Indian and freedman lands for profit. Here the Age of Jim Crow
converges with the Age of Imperialism and reveals how American expansion limited the movement and citizenship rights of people of color (sometimes with cooperation of certain individuals of color) in this study of the devaluation of black childhood. The strategic control of black children was understood as a necessary strategy in a fluid situation threatening to allow their economic success and independence. The American frontier offers an unusual opportunity to examine black childhood’s central role in the construction of racial hierarchy.

Second, while the majority of Jim Crow era studies have emphasized voting rights as a site for analysis of restrictions upon full citizenship of blacks confined to the South, analysis of childhood and race encourages us to look elsewhere. White guardianship over wealthy black children turns our attention to another rarely explored, fundamental, and constitutionally protected right: the right to own property and enter into contracts. Scholars have yet to fully examine how childhood was seized in the process of inhibiting citizenship rights to freedmen and women after slavery was abolished.

The question of place and citizenship rights of blacks during the post-emancipation decades is a familiar story in the South where blacks were granted citizenship rights, which were gradually withdrawn. In addition to voting disenfranchisement, recent interest in apprenticeships and contract labor have been explored as efforts to inhibit full citizenship. But childhood has not appeared in the historiographical contestations over citizenship except in discussions of segregated schooling and the removal of Indian children to government-run boarding schools as part of a total assimilation program. Historians have covered the erosion of black property rights in the Jim Crow South and the elimination of black businesses through violence and terror. The association between property ownership, citizenship, white manhood and wealthy black children allows exploration of a complex set of racial relations surrounding efforts to inhibit full citizenship rights to black Americans. Once again, black childhood provides an excellent place to begin exploring these efforts because of its centrality to the economic development of the West.
and the drama of racial reconstruction in the decades after slavery. Their centrality was based on their luck of the draw and good fortune to inherit oil-rich lands.

Du Bois offered an excellent starting point to explore the murders and legalized robbery of America’s wealthiest black children, despite not having at his fingertips access to a much richer history of multiracial relationships in Indian and Oklahoma Territory prior to and after statehood. In a February 1914 issue of The Crisis, Du Bois printed a small paragraph with scant details on the trial of three white men and “a certain number of hired colored accomplices” who used dynamite “to get rid of two colored children who inherited $250,000 worth of property.” No further details, including the names of the children or the conspirators, were provided. But curiosity and a quick keyword search using the terms “negro children,” “dynamite,” and “Taft” entered into the Oklahoma Court Network System, an online legal research database, returned digitized transcripts of the biggest and most sensational murder trial to ever take place in Oklahoma at that time.

The trial transcripts provide horrific details about the murders while provoking even larger questions. How did these black children, at this time in U.S. history, inherit so much land and wealth? Why did three well-to-do white men devise a plot to kill two innocent children? How were those white men able to convince an Indian and a group of black men to participate in the murderous plot? Why did the State of Oklahoma pour so much time, legal power and financial resources into prosecuting the conspirators, especially when rampant kidnappings, robberies, rapes and murders of black and Indian children by whites, and some black and Indian men, largely went unpunished in Oklahoma and beyond?

It appears that the new state had critical interest in prosecuting the men involved, as the trial took place during a period when the federal government increased its power over the states. Whereas it may seem as if there was a genuine effort to achieve justice for two unfortunate black children, their case is really an example of how one state contested the authority of the federal government to regulate its powers over land, resources, and people of all ages living within its
borders. For land-hungry and optimistic whites, there was too much land and money at stake to allow the federal government to maintain protective policies that would enable thousands of black and Indian children to capitalize on resources and become full-fledged citizens once they reached their age of majority.

While the national and protracted media attention given to the murders of two wealthy black children was dramatic and unusual, these victims were among over 4,000 land-owning black youth living in the Creek Nation alone who were subjected to some form of exploitation. This significant number of propertied black children posed a peculiar and yet hopeful situation for citizens of the new state. Certainly for the freedpeople, who had been transformed from property into citizens, these children symbolized the openness of the West and possibilities of achieving full citizenship, of which controlling one’s own labor, owning property, and retaining parental authority over children were fundamental. These children were also statistically troublesome to white supremacists contesting the citizenship status and privileges of blacks. In eastern Oklahoma, thousands of propertied black children proved especially irksome for ambitious and land-hungry whites seeking control over virtually all of the state’s resources.

Access to land, mineral resources, and money equipped freedmen minors of Oklahoma with the power to become legal equivalents of whites at a time when the incorporation of people of color into the American body politic as full citizens was unimaginable, especially for white men whose claims to independence were built on access to and ownership of land in addition to the subordination of women and people of color.10 Oklahoma’s state officials recognized that the presence of thousands of land owning black and Indian children actually ran contrary to white supremacists ideas about the fundamentals of American citizenship and racial hierarchy. The problem was to be corrected through a new racial hierarchy and assisted by a guardianship system.

The incredible irony of the Oklahoma story offers a tangible instance of how the state and federal government altered its relationship to children of color and it reveals how white men
assured masculinity and control over wealth by using guardianships to systematically rob and kill young wards of the state before they had the chance to capitalize on their resources once they reached the age of majority. In addition, the state’s probate courts denied black adults the right to act as proxies for their children by appointing white men as guardians who controlled minor’s estates because they could not legally execute contracts. Examining the state government’s relationship to land owning black children provides an opportunity to see yet another dimension of racial reconstruction after slavery.

“We Want to Kill Them All If We Can.”

On the night of March 14, 1911, two black men and a full-blooded Creek Indian arranged another of their secret meetings to discuss the final details of their plot to blow up two wealthy black children living in the tiny all-black town of Taft. The men, John C. Norwood, D.R. “Doc” Allen and Sam Lowe met at Ford’s Gin, a local watering hole not far from where 14-year-old Herbert Sells and his 10-year-old sister CaStella lived with their mother and stepfather on a spit of land in a four-room, 20-square-foot prairie house. The siblings owned several hundred acres of oil producing land 39 miles away in Glenpool, a small town located about 20 minutes south of Tulsa – the self-proclaimed “oil capital of the world.” With production in Glenpool reaching over 43 million barrels in 1907 alone, Oklahoma became the nation’s leading oil producer by 1907 and held that distinction until the late 1920s.

Nineteen wells underneath the Sells children’s Glenpool allotments netted the pair nearly $2,000 a month in royalties (about $44,000 today) in addition to fees paid to them by the Gypsy Oil Company (then a subsidiary of the Gulf Oil Corporation) which held a lease to drill on their property. The net value of their lands was $200,000 (about $4.4 million today). For one prominent white land dealer, the Sells children were the only things standing in the way of his big payday. It would take two years of planning, multiple trips to Mexico, and thousands of dollars to pay an imposter and a group of accomplices to get rid of Herbert and CaStella with kerosene,
powder and seven sticks of dynamite. A bound copy of a 1911 Muskogee District Court trial transcript unearthed from the Oklahoma State Archives provides detailed testimony of that secret meeting and the plot to kill the Sells children in one of the John Norwood’s own words.11

“Let’s go somewhere where we can’t be seen.” Doc Allen said to Lowe and Norwood as they stood outside Ford’s Gin. Doc Allen, an arch conspirator, was a “state Negro” (an outsider who was not a citizen of one of the Five Civilized Tribes) who migrated from Texas before Oklahoma became a state.12 He worked as a Blacksmith, dabbled in local real estate, and lived in Muskogee with his one-quarter Cherokee wife and their five children.

Lowe and Norwood followed Doc Allen to the Midland Valley Rail Depot, which at the time stretched from Fort Smith, Arkansas through Muskogee and Tulsa to Wichita, Kansas. The rail line was used to carry bituminous coal and oil from the region to colder parts of the country. During Oklahoma’s oil boom in the early decades of the 20th century, the Midland Valley was the main rail line that provided transportation for workers, new migrants, land speculators, oil tycoons, wildcatters, roughnecks, gamblers, bootleggers, land hungry settlers, opportunists and swindlers.

The three men arrived at the rail depot and hid themselves behind a set of blinds in the men’s water closet. They spent the first few minutes passing a bottle of whiskey back and forth between them. “I want to explain what I came here for,” Doc Allen said, looking straight at Norwood.

“Go ahead,” said Norwood.

“Now Sam has told me that you are all right, and I know you are.”13

Little did Doc Allen know that letting Norwood in on the deal would turn out to be a decision that all of the men involved would later regret.

“Now, I have a job I want you to help us do,” Doc Allen continued. Lowe stood by, silent.

“What do you want me to help you do?” Norwood asked.
“I want you to help me watch. We have got everything arranged, and I don’t understand just how to do it very well, but this fellow here does,” he said, referring to Lowe. “And we want another man to help. Now there is money in it for all three of us if you go ahead and keep your mouth shut, say nothing about it. There is $5,000 in it.”

“Where’s the money coming from?” Norwood asked.

“Well, there is a man in Muskogee going to furnish the money, and he is all right,” Doc Allen assured him.

Norwood pressed him. “Who is the man in Muskogee going to furnish you the $5,000?”

“His name is Irvin.”

William M. Irvin, sometimes spelled Irwin in press accounts, was a 52-year-old short white man with gray hair, gray eyes and a bushy walrus mustache that drooped over and circled the sides of his lips. He was a well-known real estate broker who it was said once shot and killed “a Chink.” A copy of Irvin’s prison ledger reveals that he had no religious affiliation and did not drink or smoke. His only vice was chewing Old Gravely brand tobacco. Irvin left his native home in Alexandria City, Alabama some time in 1884 when he was 25. He never married, had no children, but he made frequent trips to visit “a sweetheart” living in a town not far from the Mexican border.

Financially backed by two politically connected land dealers, Irvin originally hatched his plan to steal the Sells children’s lands in February 1909 when he first met Doc Allen. During their first land deal together, Doc Allen told Irvin about the children’s father, a Creek Freedman named Hardy Sells who lived in the North Fork colored tribal town and owned valuable lands. Family and friends presumed Sells had drowned after trying to cross the Deep Fork River during a storm years earlier. Since his body was never recovered, there were also rumors that he fled to Mexico to avoid prosecution for allegedly killing another man.

“Go ahead,” Norwood pressed Doc Allen to say more about the plan.
“Now, we want to blow the house up and burn it up,” Doc Allen explained. “We want to kill them all if we can, but if we can get the children and the woman, we will be all right, but we want to kill them all, if we can.”16

“The woman,” a citizen of the Creek Nation listed as number 969 on the Freedman roll, was the children’s mother, 37-year-old Priscilla “Sila” Mackey. She was born during Reconstruction and her parents, John and Peggy Drew, were slaves owned by Captain John Yarger, a Creek Indian who led slaves out of Alabama along the Trail of Tears in 1834. Not long after her first husband Hardy Sells went missing in the summer of 1901 she married Zebidee “Zeb” Mackey, a noncitizen from Texas. Doc Allen and Irvin believed that the children’s mother had to be killed, perhaps to avoid potential legal disputes with the Creek Nation over the land.

The Creek Nation’s old laws of descent, inheritance and distribution of land stipulated that only a parent or blood relative who was a citizen of that nation could inherit or sell the property of a deceased child. In the absence of a parent or closest blood kin the tribe then required to sell the excess land back to the federal government, which in turn sold the surplus land to non-Indian, most likely a white homesteader. That old law was repealed in 1902, allowing for land and monies of dead allottees to be awarded to noncitizen heirs according to federal statutes governing Arkansas and Oklahoma Territory prior to statehood. By 1911, Oklahoma State law permitted a parent to sell land inherited from his or her living children and only with a court order. If Priscilla Mackey or Hardy Sells were living, they could make a deed to Herbert and CaStella’s allotments upon their children’s deaths and not before. By killing the children’s mother, (and since the father was presumed dead) this would leave a clear title to the land.

“You ought to know what you are doing?” Norwood asked Doc Allen.

“Well, we do,” Doc Allen answered. “We have enough dynamite.”

“Dynamite won’t blow the house up,” Norwood said.

“It’s dry wood. Powder and dynamite both will.”
“I don’t think it will,” Norwood insisted. “The dynamite will cause the powder to force the blaze out, anyway.”

Sam Lowe finally spoke up. “The way I’m going to fix it will blow it up and burn it up,” he said, pulling back a piece of cloth covering a galvanized bucket, powder, seven wrapped sticks of dynamite and a 50-foot long fuse he brought to the meeting. “I’m going to put coal oil on top of it, and that will set it afire, and the blaze from the powder will ignite the coal oil.”

“Now, what we want to do is stay together,” said Doc Allen.

All that was required of Norwood was to be a lookout and to whistle if he saw anyone coming while Doc Allen and Lowe planted the explosive under the house. Though Doc Allen had recruited Norwood for the job, it is uncertain how he knew that Norwood could be trusted. But it would later turn out to be a decision that he and all the other conspirators involved would regret.

“Now, you are coming with us, are you?” Doc Allen asked.

“Yes,” Norwood answered and walked away.

Doc Allen said his last words to Norwood – “I will not be back here, as I knows of but I will leave word for Sam, the time when you are to meet us.”

“A Horrible Death in the Flames.”

That time came nine days later on Thursday, March 23 at about two or three o’clock in the morning. As Doc Allen and Sam Lowe approached the home where the Sells children and their parents were sleeping, Norwood suddenly backed out without saying a word and ran off to his sister’s house about a half mile away. Undeterred, Doc Allen and Lowe continued as planned. First, they spread kerosene soaked rags around the base of the tiny house and then placed the bucket of powder, coal oil and dynamite directly underneath the children’s bedroom without waking the family’s dog.

Sam Lowe lit the fuse.
Moments later, the entire west side of the house blew to pieces, shaking the tiny town of less than 1,000 residents. The blast tore a large hole in the ground where the galvanized bucket was planted. A section of the house was hurled some fifty yards away into a local merchant’s yard and the dog’s burned carcass was buried under the southeast corner of the dining room. Immediately following the explosion, the roof fell in and what remained of the house quickly caught fire. The children’s mother and their stepfather escaped the flames unscathed. They had been sleeping in another section of the house separated from the children’s room by a thin partition.\textsuperscript{18} Herbert was instantly killed in the blast, but his sister was not so fortunate. A neighbor later testified that he saw the Mackeys dressed in their nightclothes hollering for help. As the couple tried digging through the burning shingles to save CaStella, neighbors rushed toward the flames.\textsuperscript{19}

CaStella’s legs were caught underneath the collapsed roof. Mackey tried to pull his stepdaughter from underneath the hot, heavy timbers while other men worked to lift the roof but the timbers were wedged so tightly together that the roof could not be moved. When the intense heat forced the men to give up, Priscilla Mackey tried to rush into the flames in a desperate attempt to rescue her last living child. Not only had she just lost Herbert in the explosion, her two older children, Birdie and Dewey, died years earlier in infancy probably from smallpox or tuberculosis.\textsuperscript{20} A bystander grabbed the distraught mother and held her back from the flames while “neighbors and friends were compelled to stand impotently by and see the unfortunate girl screaming with agony die a horrible death in the flames.”\textsuperscript{21}

By daybreak, a posse of townsmen formed and launched a search for the murderers even though local, state, and federal authorities dispatched to the scene of the crime had no leads about possible perpetrators or a motive for the crime. Meanwhile, William Irvin paid $3.26 for a first-class, one-way train ticket out of Taft. The ticket salesman, a porter and conductor would later testify that Irvin was the only white man seen boarding the Midland Valley train out of the all-
black town that day. Those witnesses also recalled that Irvin wore a black coat and vest, light shirt, dirty blue overalls, a black crusher hat and carried a distinct brown leather grip.

Months prior to the murders of the Sells children, a rash of similar dynamiting incidents rocked Taft. Robbers blew up the local bank and dynamiters left the Midland Valley train depot badly damaged. The local papers are full of incidents where bombs were used to intimidate and kill Indians and freedmen who owned valuable lands. Three years earlier, in 1908, black residents blew up the store of an Assyrian merchant who had insisted on doing business in the exclusive all-black town. That same year, black residents filed a petition with the Muskogee County Board of Commissioners asking for the removal of the only white man living in town. Before threatening to kill him if he didn’t leave, residents accused the white man of drunkenness and unscrupulous business practices.

Taft and other all-black towns established by Creek Freedman, like the other tribes of Indian Territory, did not take kindly to outsiders, black or white, whom they viewed as criminal elements bent on threatening their way of life after centuries of serial defeats and destructive encroachments by the United States government and its federal policies.

By Friday morning, March 24, investigators had two theories about the murders of the Sells children. The dynamiting was either a plot to murder the children’s stepfather or a conspiracy to kill the poor rich children to get possession of their property. The first news report on the incident from the Muskogee Times-Democrat focused on the children’s stepfather, “an intelligent negro,” with “plenty of bitter enemies.” Zeb Mackey had numerous shooting scrapes with other black locals and had threatened to expose certain corrupt town officials for mismanagement of funds. “It is possible that these plotted to blow up the entire family,” the report stated. There were also accusations that Mackey was involved in the crime and that he hatched a plot to dynamite the house to get rid of his wife Priscilla and her children.

Months before the explosion, Mackey’s wife sold her 40-acre homestead for $1,000. He took her money, sold her livestock and squandered all the funds before returning to her. During
his time away from his wife, Mackey had an affair with Lou Janey Perryman, another Creek Freedmen whom he had gotten pregnant. When Mackey’s wife discovered the affair, she assaulted Perryman with a large rock, knocking the pregnant girl to the ground. According to witness testimonies, Mackey returned to his wife because he knew of her children’s wealth. Mackey said that his wife “had no sense and he had only been living with her for what she had.” In a short time, he expected “to get a lot of money” and leave Priscilla for “a more intelligent and sensible wife.” The day before his stepchildren were blown up, Lou Janey Perryman gave birth to Mackey’s child. He promised her that he would “get some money, leave his wife, and get out of the country with [her].” Days before the bombing, Mackey had also been seen in the town’s grocery story asking to purchase dynamite powder and five cents worth of fuse.

The *Muskogee Times-Democrat* report also told readers that the Sells children owned valuable oil allotments each worth $100,000. Their guardian, former Muskogee mayor Thomas H. Martin, had $20,000 invested in the first mortgages of the children’s properties. Though the children earned nearly $2,000 per month in oil royalties, Martin, as required by law, regularly paid their mother a monthly allowance of $75 for their care – less than five percent of their royalty earnings.

There are no surviving records detailing the nature of Martin’s interactions with the Sells children or their business affairs nor could his annual guardianship reports submitted to the county court be located. But a 1924 investigative report published by the Office of the Indian Rights Association (IRA) provides a sketch of the unscrupulous and restrictive tactics that many wealthy guardians employed to keep their wards living in poverty. In most cases, the guardian decided when, where and how much of the ward’s money he would pay for their support, and at what stores the ward could purchase goods to be charged to the guardian. The costs of purchased goods at certain stores were then deducted from the ward’s allowance. The I.R.A. report noted: “If the ward purchases at any other store, the guardian will not pay the bill and the ward rarely is given enough money to purchase things for cash at any other store, so that the store favored by
the guardian has an absolute monopoly over the ward’s business.” Guardians usually lived some 20 or 30 miles away from their ward’s homes and provided up to $10 twice a week, barely enough to live on for two or three days at a time.26

In addition to providing those scant details about Thomas H. Martin’s connection to the Sells children, the *Muskogee Times-Democrat* also indicated that the children’s missing father, Hardy Sells, was said to have showed up in Mexico City, not long before the killings in Taft. There in Mexico City, Sells supposedly transferred the deed to his 160-acre allotment as well as the allotments belonging to all four of his deceased children to William Irvin. When his older children Birdie and Dewey died, Sells inherited their lands. While it is uncertain if he had any official capacity, somehow Doc Allen was able to sell those lands to Irvin when their father went missing. Doubt brewed in official circles about these deed transfers, adding yet another layer of mystery to this sensational crime. Had the deed transfers been made and signed by the real Hardy Sells, or an imposter?

*Dynamiters Play For High Stakes*

Not long after the public learned of the Sell’s children’s wealth, their mother made plans to travel to Mexico City to see if her first husband, who had gone missing a decade earlier, was in fact alive. Authorities quickly advised Priscilla Mackey not to do so because investigators discovered that the deeds that had been executed in Mexico, were placed on record in Okmulgee County, and William Irvin was their prime suspect. Nearly three weeks after Herbert and CaStella were buried side-by-side in the same plot at the colored Blackjack Cemetery in Taft, William Irvin left for Mexico, unaware that state and federal authorities were on his heels.

Federal authorities not only took extraordinary measures to travel to Mexico in pursuit of Irvin, on Monday April 3rd, they arrested him in Mexico City and charged him with the children’s murders. The *Muskogee Times-Democrat* reported that the arrest was done “so quietly that even the hotel officials did not know what was going on.” During the arrest, detectives discovered the
deed to Hardy Sells’ 160-acre allotment and deeds to all four of his dead children’s properties pinned to Irvin’s coat. The *Daily Oklahoman* reported that Doc Allen was also arrested in Taft that same day and charged with murder. Investigators promised more arrests and indictments that were “likely to cause a sensation in the most unexpected circles.”

Years prior to the murder of the Sells children, investigators and lawyers for the Creek and Cherokee nations discovered countless deeds made to lands belonging to persons long dead, or to the lands of children who had recently died from illnesses, accidents and under other mysterious circumstances. Most of the deeds were executed in Mexico. The *Daily Oklahoman* explained that deeds were acknowledged differently in Mexico than in Oklahoma. In Mexico, “when an American with his duly accredited passport appears before the American consul and identifies a man, and that person executes a deed to the American for property on the American side, the consul must acknowledge the deed, which makes it a legal transfer.” It was easy for a person to steal lands belonging to Indians and freedmen by going to Mexico and getting “a negro or Mexican to make and execute such a deed after being identified before the consul.” Though the U.S. government and Oklahoma state officials were aware of the practice, no prior effort had been made to prosecute defrauders until the Sells children’s murders gained widespread media attention. The fact that Herbert and CaStella were wards of the government because they had been appointed a white guardian, and their property was worth big fortunes, offered incentives for
Muskogee deputy sheriffs, detectives, a district Indian agent, and even federal secret servicemen to build a case and make “an example of this kind of work.”

Could it be that Irvin, a white man, and his accomplices, would be indicted, tried, convicted and maybe sentenced to life in prison or even hanged for killing two black children at a time in American history when racially motivated murders of black people almost always went unpunished?

“An Equal Interest in the Soil.”

To understand how the Sells children and the other Creek Freedmen minors acquired land and wealth, one must grasp the complicated history of post-slavery era race relations in Indian Territory and how black childhood figured into the settlement of the West. Attention to the meaning of black childhood to westward expansion allows an opportunity to understand the effects of the wilderness and open space on children, a group sorely missing from the historiography of the American West. Further, the story of these children helps conceptualize how race and childhood figure into the history of American citizenship.

Decades after slavery’s demise in Indian Territory, historian Frederick Jackson Turner described the western frontier as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization” and proclaimed that “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.” Turner’s monistic account of
the West has already been refuted by scholars who have noted his omission of women, blacks and other ethnic groups’ role in the development of the frontier. Turner and other early historians painted a mythic picture of the West, one in which whites advanced into free land, spread civilization by establishing superior institutions, and championed democracy and individual freedom. But the pre-existence of the Indian tribes and governments, all-black towns, cross cultural interactions and exchanges indicates that for people of color living in Indian Territory, the frontier offered autonomy and liberation because of the absence of American democratic ideals, institutions and civilization.

Various migrations along with multiethnic ancestries complicated and changed the political status of freed people living in Indian Territory after the Civil War. As slaves, blacks belonging to Native Americans lived under a more benign institution than those slaves of the American South. Slaves in Indian Territory cut timber, plowed fields, harvested crops, raised buildings, enjoyed more autonomy than slaves of the south and often could not be sold to southern buyers who considered them spoiled by leniency shown to them by their Indian masters.

Not all blacks that crossed the Trail of Tears ended up in slavery. A significant number of free persons shared both Indian and black ancestry and produced mixed-race offspring. While Indian masters owned slaves, they did not own the land. Land was a “collective property” that belonged to each nation. While slaves, particularly those of the Creek and Seminole tribes, were expected to meet certain work criteria, they were free to choose how, when, and where they worked. Like those slaves and free blacks of the south, slaves and free persons of Indian Territory created their own culture and communities. Before the Civil War, the Five Tribes were divided over the slavery issue and in the Creek Nation the anti-slavery factions allowed fugitive slaves to reside in their lands.

On July 10, 1861, seven months after 11 southern states succeeded from the Union and six months after the creation of the Confederate Constitution at Montgomery, Alabama where
Jefferson Davis was named the provisional president of the Confederacy, the Creek Nation entered into a treaty with the Confederate States. The Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole tribes also made treaties with the Confederacy to preserve slavery. In the Creek Nation, the Lower Towns joined the Confederacy and the Upper Creek Towns, joined by the slaves of the Lower Towns, remained loyal to the Union. The loyal Creeks, as they were called, extended citizenship rights to the former slaves after the Civil War while the Lower Towns faction sought to exclude blacks from the nation.  

By making treaties with the Confederacy, the Five Civilized Tribes ignored their allegiance and unsettled their existing relationship with the United States. As a result, the tribes forfeited all lands, annuities and protections granted to them by the U.S. government and their alliances with the Confederacy gave the federal government the opportunity to enforce new restrictions on Indian sovereignty after the war. The five nations were then forced to reconfigure their political relationship with the United States by signing peace treaties with other tribes in addition to relinquishing $12,000,000 worth of land in the western portion of present-day Oklahoma.

The federal government also demanded that the tribes abolish slavery and that ex-slaves and blacks with no Indian ancestry or affiliation with the tribes be incorporated into each nation as equals while allowing southern states to use measures to cleanse their freedmen from civic life because the North lost the political will to enforce amendments to the Constitution that protected black civil rights. The Treaty of 1866 between the Creek Nation and the U.S. government declared that Creeks of African descent, ex-slaves and persons who lawfully resided in the nation prior, “shall have and enjoy all the rights and privileges of native citizens, including an equal interest in the soil and national funds . . .” This provision of the treaty which placed freedmen on parity with blood citizens was bitterly opposed by prominent Indians, especially the Stidhams, McIntoshes, Marshalls, Barnwells, Graysons, Porters and other slave-holding families of the Creek Nation that lost landholdings after the Civil War who directed their hostilities towards
blacks. During the tumultuous Reconstruction period, freedmen living in Indian Territory enjoyed a vibrant era where they held political offices, exercised their votes, built schools, businesses, churches and newspapers. As one writer noted in 1905: “Rare indeed are the instances in American history where Negro bondsmen as a result of their freedom, became to all intents and purposes even the equal, socially, politically and financially, of their former masters.” The Creek Freedmen were “one notable and emphatic exception.”

Born in the opening decades of the 20th century, the Sells children along with the other five wealthy children in this chapter were allocated lands through the federally imposed 1887 Dawes Allotment Act, sponsored by Republican Senator Henry L. Dawes. This assimilative law first affected reservations outside of Indian Territory but was later imposed on the Five Civilized Tribes with the establishment of the Dawes Commission in 1893 and the passage of the Curtis Act in 1898. The Curtis Act, a legislation which bore the name of Senator Charles Curtis from Kansas, a dominant figure in federal legislation for the five tribes, provided that Creek Indians and their freedmen and their descendants should be given 160 acres of land valued at no more than $6.50 per acre with the average allotment valued at $1,040.00.

The fact that the freedmen and their children were to be considered for land allotments and that the Dawes Commission, not the tribal government, would determine their eligibility, angered tribal members. This new Indian policy was an effort designed to prepare Oklahoma for statehood by dissolving the political sovereignty of the tribes and dividing up communal lands into individual plots to be farmed. Lands allotted to the tribes were placed under federal restrictions and could not be sold or taxed until after a period of 21 years. The total assimilation policy attempted to force Indians to learn English and assimilate into capitalist markets with the ultimate goal of opening up their excess lands for white settlement and profit.

All members of the five tribes were required to submit applications to the Dawes Commission in order to receive allotments. The first enrollment of Creek citizens began in 1899 and closed on May 25, 1901. Each citizen was required to make an appearance at the Dawes
Commission office in Muskogee to apply for an allotment for themselves and their children. There, they were assigned numbers and placed either on the blood rolls (which included full-blood Indians and mixed bloods which were Indians and whites (but not blacks and Indians or blacks and whites) or the freedman roll. Though many freedmen could prove their Creek ancestry, many were not placed on the Creek by Blood roll.

White officials from the Dawes Commission often relied on visual markers to determine whether an applicant belonged on the Indian or freedman roll. When the first enrollment closed, the tribes believed there was a surplus of unallotted lands so they petitioned Congress to add children who were born since May 25, 1901. The Newborn Act of March 3, 1905, provided for the enrollment of children born after May 25, 1901 and prior to March 4, 1905. A later Act of Congress approved April 25, 1906 allowed the enrollment of additional children living before March 4, 1906 whose parents had been enrolled as members of the Creek Tribe. Under the March 3, 1905 agreement, 2,099 children, both by blood Indian and freedmen, were enrolled and 821 children were enrolled on April 26, 1906. Of the total 2,920 new enrollees, 1,135 were children of freedmen.37

The lives of Creek Freemen children growing up in Indian Territory contrasted sharply with the landless black children of the southern regions. As Gary Zellar reveals in his study of African Creeks, there were little racial hostilities between blacks and Indians in the Creek Nation. Though the Southern faction of the Creeks kept blacks at a social and residential distance, they did not “sponsor legislation to mandate racial segregation, regulate freed people’s behavior, restrict their mobility, or impede their access to land.” Unlike their black southern counterparts, the freedpeople of Indian Territory were able to control their own labor and use their land as they saw fit. In an interesting twist, landless white farmers from neighboring states became sharecroppers and tenant farmers in Indian Territory whereas blacks filled those roles in the South.38 Because Indians and freedmen were landlords over white tenants, their children were
not exploited as an agricultural labor force by whites, nor were they subjected to the same kinds of illegal apprenticeships and indentures suffered by black children of the South.

Unlike black children living in the Deep South whose ancestors’ and predecessors’ post-emancipation promises of full citizenship and 40 acres of land had gone unfulfilled, and despite robust political opposition and some violence, the parents and children of ex-slaves living in Indian Territory were extended political rights, access to education, equal share in lands and monies held in trust by the federal government.\textsuperscript{39} It seemed that in this region of the country, there was a moment when a significant number of black children were finally going to be given the chance to improve their lives, to optimize resources, and prepare themselves for future citizenship participation. But then came statehood in 1907 and new Jim Crow laws in January of 1908. The relatively stable life enjoyed by Creek Freedmen and other blacks came under assault.\textsuperscript{40}

Prior to statehood, Oklahoma Territory was not just an open space with boundless possibilities for Americans seeking a new start; it was also a place full of strange inversions when it came to race relations and power. Nearly two decades before statehood, some press accounts described Oklahoma Territory as a “paradise” for Negroes. For example, an editorial printed in the \textit{Chicago Herald} noted the Territory’s fine farming land and expressed ambivalence about the future state being set aside for black people. “It might be cruel, so far as the country is concerned, to fill Oklahoma with negroes, and yet it would be good riddance for the rest of the union if a hundred or two hundred thousand negroes could be placed there, where among themselves, they could develop their own peculiar nature, where they could practice social equality without hindrance.”

A small state settled, owned and governed by blacks could be “a capital thing,” an experiment on their capability for self-government. Having a small country or new state of their own could allow blacks “a chance to depend on themselves [and] determine their real value.” Such a grand experiment had its risks. Media pundits and political leaders of the day argued that
there had been no modern instance where Africans or African-descended people made “any considerable advance when not connected directly with the white element.” However, it was possible that “in a country like Oklahoma, colored men who have had the advantages of association with the white race, and who would be in close contact with the superior civilization of the pale-faces, might attain considerable development.”

First a place set aside by Congress in 1834 through the Intercourse Act as territory to be governed by Indians, then later envisioned as a separate refuge for former slaves of Indians and southern whites, Oklahoma – “the land of the red man” – later became a state for and ruled by whites whose power was assured by racial categories and restrictions. The newly installed white government dissolved Indian sovereignty, stole their land and oil while simultaneously arguing that Indians could be civilized through the federally imposed allotment process, as well as educational and missionary campaigns of the late 19th and early 20th century. Freedmen living in Indian Territory prior to statehood enjoyed more political rights than whites and those blacks that began migrating from the south during the Land of 1899 experienced a mix of economic hardship and success as they purchased farms and established thriving all-black towns to the chagrin of white settlers who had become accustomed to blacks being consigned to the lowest rung of society in the southern states.

Whites, unless adopted into a tribe, were not extended the privileges of holding political office, voting, owning lands, running businesses, or sharing tribal funds that were set aside by the federal government. It was also illegal for whites to live in Indian Territory although the federal government did not wholly enforce laws to keep intruders from encroaching on Indian lands. A writer for the San Francisco Bulletin asserted that whites needed to be kept out of Indian Territory altogether to protect Indians from land hungry settlers because “most of those who come rob the Indians, and they are, as a rule, shiftless, unscrupulous and bad citizens.” Unlike southern blacks that were subjected to legal and extralegal devises of white vigilantes and mobs, blacks in Indian Territory exerted authority over whites. From the early 1870s until 1889 when
the territory was officially opened to white settlers, black soldiers of the U.S. Army’s Ninth
Calvary patrolled the borders and prevented white intruders from settling there.\textsuperscript{44}

As more whites poured into the Indian Territory, their numbers increasing from 110,254
in 1890 to 302,680 in 1900, tensions bubbled and pressure to make Oklahoma a state mounted.
Zellar describes the 1870s as a tumultuous period in Creek County with whites calling to develop
Indian Territory with railroads and industries, reformers embarking on “civilizing” missions, and
pressures to dissolve relationships between blacks and Indian Creeks.\textsuperscript{45} Indians and blacks
feared the coming of statehood for obvious reasons. While Indians sought to retain their tribal
governments and communal land ownership, blacks challenged the Democratic Party’s plans to
organize the new state into a segregated society. In April 1891, a Georgia writer predicted the
coming of a race war in Oklahoma. The war “will not be fought with guns and knives. The
weapons will be the plow and the hoe, which will be wielded by each race upon its own land.”\textsuperscript{46}

Once Oklahoma became a state with the newly established legislature and county courts
controlled by whites, old land agreements between the Indians and the federal government were
violated and promises made in the new Constitution to not interfere with federal policies
protecting Indian lands were ignored. The Enabling Act of June 16, 1906, which provided for the
admission of Oklahoma and Indian Territory as a state, stipulated:

 That nothing contained in the said constitution shall be construed to limit or impair the
rights of persons or property pertaining to the Indians of said Territories (so long as such
rights shall remain unextinguished), or limit or affect the authority of the Government of
the United States to make any law or regulation respecting such Indians, their lands,
property or other rights by treaties, agreement, law or otherwise, which it would have
been competent to make if this Act had never been passed.\textsuperscript{47} The citizens of Oklahoma
adopted the new constitution in accordance with the Enabling Act, which explicitly
recognized the federal government’s complete jurisdiction over matters regarding
Indians. Soon after statehood, this promise was quickly brushed aside and the state’s
legislature launched campaigns to repeal laws enacted for the protection of the Indians
and freedmen. Also pooh-poohed was a line written in Article I Section 6 of the
Constitution, which stated that the new government “ ... shall never enact any law
restricting the right of suffrage on account of race, color, or previous condition of
servitude.”
Though they were classified as “colored” and were members of the first generation of freeborn blacks to grow up without the memory and confining discipline of slavery, the thousands of freedman minors living in Indian Territory (and later Oklahoma), were not black children in the conventional sense. As nationals of their individual tribes, freedman minors had no concept of what it meant to be an African American or an American citizen. Freedman children’s language, culture, schooling and way of life vastly differed from black children growing up in the South under Jim Crow restrictions, and in some respects, Creek freedman minors had better opportunities and prospects for their future. Despite these cultural differences, Oklahoma’s new racial hierarchy made little or no distinction between freedmen minors of the Five Civilized Tribes and Negroes youth from other states. When describing wealthy freedman minors, the local media used the terms Negro and colored as well as disparaging words like “little niggers,” “pickaninnies,” “ink spots,” and “aces of spades.”

When oil or other minerals were discovered on lands owned by children, state law required the appointment of white guardians to handle their finances and support for education and care. A 1924 report from the Philadelphia-based Indian Rights Commission estimated that there were about 4,000 professional guardians in Oklahoma who had minor’s estates entrusted to them ranging in value from a few thousand dollars up into the millions. When Oklahoma became a state, there were 101,506 members of the Five Civilized Tribes, including 23,405 freedmen, with just under 17 million acres of land yet to be stolen by land hungry settlers. Before Indians and Freedmen began receiving allotments from the federal government, they had no concept of land tenure or the white man’s financial systems. Not only was owning real estate a foreign concept, Indians and their freedmen did not experience theft of land or significant property other than corn, cattle or horses. Men like Doc Allen, Lowe, and Norwood, with the help of powerful well-heeled whites, used rape, kidnap, liquor, marriage schemes, and even resorted to murder to steal land and money from helpless children who oftentimes had no idea that they owned land or
had thousands, and even hundreds of thousands of dollars sitting in bank trusts that could have been used to enrich their lives.

The combination of greed and racism, in most cases, kept freedmen minors from optimizing their wealth and subjected them to many of the same kinds of indignities that undermined the prospects of landless, benighted black children living in the South. In the Creek Nation alone, a total of 6,834 freedmen were allotted individual 160-acre plots of land between 1899 and 1906. Of that total, 2,427 were adults and 4,407 were children under age 18.49 Since 64 percent of the lands allotted to the freedmen in the Creek Nation went to children, they were easy targets of fraud and “plums” for professional guardians appointed by the county courts.

When the allotment process began in 1899, the adult Indians and Freedmen secured their pick of the best farming land. The rough mountainous and seemingly useless lands went to the children who won out because the rugged lands contained practically all of the oil and gas wells that were later discovered in the eastern portion of the state. With the opening of these wells and the high prices of oil, “money flowed in to [minors] without the slightest effort.”50 Not only had the federal government confiscated the wrong half of the state and assigned Indians and their freedman many allotments that sat on top of oil and other valuable minerals, they had unknowingly made millionaires out of black children who were supposed to be pushed to the margins of the Jim Crow society.

In the spring of 1904 Congress passed what was known then as the Indian Appropriation Bill, which removed restrictions from the sell land allotments owned by 40,934 members having less than one-half Indian blood, in addition to the lands owned by over 20,000 freedmen. Prior to this bill, like all other citizens in Indian Territory, freedmen could not sell their lands without the supervision of the government. A later congressional Act of May 27, 1908, also repealed restrictions against the sale of homesteads owned by Creek freedmen and mixed-bloods. This act also removed all federal supervision of the sale of lands inherited by full-blood Indians and took jurisdiction over Indian probate matters in Eastern Oklahoma and transferred it to the local county
courts. These new measures opened the door for wholesale graft and exploitation of adults and thousands of defenseless land-owning children. The Indian Rights Association reported that by the early 1920s, 64,339 (an estimated 90 percent) members of the five tribes were robbed by local grafters. The I.R.A. called those congressional acts “the machinery of the government” and a “conspiracy to cheat, rob and defraud” the Indians of Oklahoma. It is important to note here that we usually think of the preservation of white supremacy during this period through the lens of the U.S. Supreme Court and failed anti-lynching legislation and state laws, but not Congressional maneuvers.

The oxymoron of children, both black and rich, unraveled a series of uncomfortable paradoxes for those accustomed to thinking of black Americans as property of whites or Native Americans. These Oklahoma children, the descendants of slaves, once the property of Native Americans, had themselves become owners of property – substantial property that was even better than lands owned by full-blooded Indians who had been forced by the United States government to free their slaves and then incorporate them into their nation with the same equal rights, privileges and protections they enjoyed. For Herbert and CaStella Sells, inheriting land was a curse. They not only lost their “equal interest,” they also shed their blood and lost their young innocent lives in the soil.

“Sensation Rumored.”

Eleven days after William Irvin’s arrest, a heavy rain flooded Taft, jarring loose 20 sticks of dynamite hidden under a small drainage culvert some 200 yards from the charred home of the dead Sells children. The explosives were marked – Independent Powder Company – and wrapped in a soaked copy of a Sunday Chicago Examiner newspaper dated March 4, 1911. A Negro boy found the explosives floating on top of a torrent of water and brought the cache to Muskogee and turned it over to the sheriff. That same day, a grand jury made an inquiry into the dynamiting case with several witnesses who knew something about the murders making
appearances. Days later, the grand jury returned a batch of five indictments charging murder and filed them with Judge R. P. Degraffenreid in the Muskogee Country District Court. Among the indicted were three black men – Doc Allen, Jim Manuel, an ex-con once convicted of defrauding a Creek Freedman girl of her land, and Stout Ham, who lived less than one mile from the Sells children. In addition to Irvin, the indictment also included two other well-to-do white men – John Coombs, and F.L. Martin. All five men were charged with “knowingly, willfully, unlawfully, purposely and feloniously, with malice aforethought, and without authority of the law, and with the premeditated design then and there to effect the deal of the said Herbert [and CaStella] Sells,” who suffered “mortal wounds” and “burns” which led to their deaths.52

John Coombs, a wealthy oil operator from Bartlesville, allegedly provided financial support for the plot. F. L. Martin, a one-time candidate for the state legislature, was the brother of Thomas H. Martin, the former Muskogee mayor and guardian of the Sells children. After their arrests, all three men spent two nights in the county jail in a big runway surrounded by Negro prisoners. It is unclear whether they were segregated from the black prisoners for their safety or if they were denied sleeping bunks by the other prisoners. Martin, however, made his stay a bit more comfortable by sending for a bed from his home. The bail, which was set at $15,000 a piece, was paid within two days for Coombs and Martin. Irvin, along with the accused blacks remained in jail until their trials.53
On September 11, 1911, the six accused men arrived in district court shackled together, their chains rattling and reverberating through the halls of the courtroom. Their trial dates were set for mid September, the men lock-stepped out of the courtroom just as they arrived.

“BIGGEST MURDER CASE COMING UP,” blazed the headline of The Muskogee Times-Democrat the next morning.

Wesley E. Disney, the lead county prosecutor for the state, was no stranger to litigating land fraud and guardianship cases. Disney was a prominent Muskogee attorney, and later a U.S. Congressman, who knew all the ins and outs of the games that high-profile men of the Oklahoma played when it came to stealing lands from defenseless Indians and minors. By the early 1920s, Disney along with other attorneys in the state had litigated over 14,000 probate cases involving land fraud, an average of 1,076 cases per year since statehood. Most of those cases involved lands owned by Indian and freedman of the Cherokee and Creek Nations. For the murders of the Sells children, Disney told The Muskogee Times-Democrat that he planned “to send every one of the defendants over the road if he could.”

Ill. 4.5 Photograph Judge R.P. Degraffenreid and court officials inside the Muskogee County District Court house, 1912 (Courtesy of Oklahoma Historical Society.)
Irvin was the first to be tried for murder with R.P. Degraffenreid was the presiding judge. When his trial began at 11:40 a.m. on December 13th, the big courtroom was “so still that a drop of a pin could be heard.” What the state expected to prove was “most startling,” state’s attorney S. M. Rutherford told the jury in his opening statement. He then shared details about the dynamiting of the Sells home and said that the state would show that Irvin’s plans to murder the Sells children actually began in February 1909, two years before the killings. A clerk for the Dawes Commission would testify that she sold certified copies of the Sells children’s land allotment records to Irvin two weeks prior to the murders.

J.C. Johnson, “a big ginger-colored Negro” who federal investigators extracted from Mexico and was the state’s star witness, would testify that Irvin and Doc Allen visited him at least three times, paying him hundreds of dollars to impersonate and forge the signature of the dead Hardy Sells on five deeds. Doc Allen and Irvin promised to pay Johnson $5,000 in gold once their big land deal succeeded. Rutherford said that John Norwood, who turned state’s witness, would testify about the secret meeting he attended with Doc Allen and Sam Lowe and about the night of the explosion when he backed out at the last minute. Other witnesses would testify that Irvin bragged about “a big job” he had going that was worth $200,000 and that he complained that the only thing keeping him from the money was the mother and two heirs. Rutherford ended his statement by saying that the state would prove that Coombs and Martin were part of the conspiracy to murder the Sells children because they furnished all of the funds for the plot.

Irvin’s attorney, George S. Ramsey, argued that the evidence against his client was circumstantial at best and that the state’s prosecutor was focused on the wrong man. In his opening statement, Ramsey said that his client was not in the vicinity of Taft before or after the explosion. He said that the land belonging to the Sells children was sold to the Gypsy Oil Company through the probate court, eliminating any motive in the killing of the children.
Ramsey also charged that the probate court required Priscilla Mackey to set aside $5,000 from her dead children’s estate to prosecute the six men and legitimize the state’s power.

At the close of his opening statement, Ramsey made yet another startling charge. “If anyone was to gain by their death, it would be Zeb Mackey, the stepfather, and Mrs. Mackey, their mother.” Rutherford told the jury that he would prove that it was Zeb Mackey, not Irvin, who hatched the murderous plot with Doc Allen and the other indicted Negroes. Rutherford also maintained that Irvin believed that the children’s father Hardy Sells was in fact alive and was only following the lead of Doc Allen who claimed that Sells was living in Mexico.

The state’s prosecutors spent the first two days of the sensational trial weaving together, link by link, a complicated web of circumstantial evidence against Irvin. Disney and Rutherford had already established that Irvin and others conspired to blow up the Sells children to get possession of their lands. Then on the evening of December 15, Doc Allen made a stunning confession to Disney, the local sheriff and Fred Cook, the Indian agent involved in the investigation. Doc Allen admitted that he and the children’s stepfather, first hatched the plot to kill the children but the deal got too big for them and they needed money and Irvin’s assistance to carry it out. Doc Allen’s confession also implicated John Coombs and F.L. Martin for furnishing the “blood money” which paid for expenses and trips to Mexico.

Would Doc Allen’s confession seal the fate of Irvin and the others? Or would the jury believe the testimonies of well-heeled men who swore that Irvin was an upright, trustworthy, and respectable man who was duped by Doc Allen, a “sharp nigger” and his accomplices?

“He Had Nerve.”

Hours before the jury prepared to deliver its verdict in the state’s biggest trial ever, Irvin sat in the sheriff’s office facing a possible death sentence. If he had any fear at all, “he did not betray it,” The Muskogee Times-Democrat reported. Irvin was “buoyant, full of life and ginger.”
“I am feeling foxy this morning,” Irvin told the sheriff and reporter. “I slept well last night, and feel that in a few short hours I am going to be a free man.” Irvin complained that he hadn’t had his usual cold morning bath for the first time in 25 years. “It makes me feel kind of musty,” he said.\(^57\)

After deliberating for 16 hours, the jury found Irvin guilty of murder and conspiracy and sentenced him to life and hard labor in the state penitentiary at McAlester. The next day, Irvin sat huddled up in one corner of his cell with “extreme nervousness and despair plainly written over [his] face.” He declined interviews with reporters, turned down magazines and the daily newspaper containing the account of the return of the jury’s verdict in his own case. Irvin’s only request was for a bit of Old Gravely chewing tobacco. Four days later, Doc Allen appeared in court “sullen and surly” as he pleaded guilty to save his neck from the gallows.\(^58\)

Attention and excitement over the Sells case waned after the convictions of Doc Allen and Irvin. F.L. Martin, the former Muskogee councilman and brother of the Sells children’s guardian, stood trial in January 1912. He denied knowing that his brother was the guardian of Herbert and CaStella, and had no knowledge of a plot to get rid of the children. Martin was found not guilty. Sam Lowe, the black man who was actually responsible for placing the dynamite under the sleeping children and lighting the fuse, was acquitted. There are no surviving case notes or opinion in the case to provide answers for the jury’s verdicts in those two cases.

Charges against the wealthy oilman John Coombs, Jim Manuel and Stout Ham, whose roles in the murders were unclear in the surviving press accounts and trial transcripts) were all dropped. Prosecutors cited insufficient evidence and the potential expense to tax payers if the state proceeded with three more trials that might be lost.\(^59\) Irvin appealed his conviction but the Oklahoma Criminal Court of Appeals upheld his sentence in March 1915. His prison ledger indicates that he died at McAlester on May 19, 1916 from an unknown cause. After serving eight years of his life sentence, Doc Allen was paroled in December 1918 and pardoned in October 1926. Zeb Mackey, the children’s stepfather, was arrested and charged with murder and
conspiracy but was never tried. Some years later he was arrested again for shooting at his wife, who became the primary beneficiary of her children’s estate.

It is important to recall that Priscilla Mackey had set aside $5,000 through the probate court to pay for the trials of Doc Allen, Irvin, Martin, and Lowe. It is possible that those funds ran out after the first round of trials. The point is that when these two wealthy black children were viciously murdered, funds from their own estate were used to pay to obtain some semblance of justice. Had there been no monies, it is safe to speculate that there might not have been such a political charade put on by local, state and federal authorities to hunt down Irvin in Mexico, arrest five other men, and proceed with prosecutions and convictions.

This case was not really about protecting the property and civil rights of two wealthy black children. The trial itself was a spectacle; its function being to legitimize the new state’s power and legal apparatus and to show that it protected the rights of its citizens even as thousands of other land-owning children across the state continued to be exploited with the help of the probate court and unscrupulous leaders and businessmen. While Herbert and CaStella Sells suffered the worst possible fate of children who were unlucky enough to inherit oil rich lands, Sarah Rector, Luther Manuel, Edith Durant, Dan Tucker and Sallie Hodge spent years caught in the middle of court battles between their parents and greedy men vying to be their guardians.

"Oil Made Pickaninny Rich!"

In May 1914, while Doc Allen and William Irvin were still serving life sentences in the state penitentiary, a series of newspaper reporters descended on a shanty perched on a rocky farm in Coweta, Oklahoma. They came to write about one of the state’s richest boys, a 10-year-old Negro named Daniel Tucker. One month before the reporters arrived at his home, $12,000 had been deposited into Tucker’s bank account. He had been earning $300.00 a day from oil royalties from land he owned in the Cushing oil fields some 65 miles away from his home oblivious to the
events of the world as an Eskimo.” The reporters found Tucker chasing chickens, feeding pigs, “running wild, free and irresponsible as a colt, oblivious to the events of the world as an Eskimo.

By their accounts, “Little Danny” was also unaware of his own wealth. Even if he was aware of his financial status, a Kansas City Star reporter asserted: “the fact would carry no significance in his brain.”

Born on September 14, 1903 in Redbird, Indian Territory, Tucker was the 49th child added to the New Born Freedman Roll of the Creek Nation approved by an Act of Congress on March 3, 1905. When the Secretary of the Indian Office of the Department of the Interior (later the Bureau of Indian Affairs) approved Tucker’s application for a 160-acre allotment on August 20, 1906, his land appraised at $320.00. Tucker’s father, a Creek Freedman, had previously applied for allotments for himself and his two older sons Frank and Ananias in April 1899. His wife Lizzie was not a citizen of Creek Nation and was therefore not entitled to an allotment. Despite Dan Tucker’s enormous income, he and his 49-year-old father and 44-year-old mother lived “plain and unobtrusive.” There were no shrubs or shade trees surrounding their typical frontier home – nothing to “relieve the impression one gets of what seems to be the pitiful

III. 4.6 Land allotment card belonging to Dan Tucker, certified by the United States Department of the Interior on August 20, 1906 (Courtesy of the Ft. Worth National Archives)
poverty of its occupants,” a *Dallas Morning News* reporter observed. An old well in the front yard and a smoke house in the back yard offered “some evidence of the thrift and industry of Dan’s father.”

After receiving their son’s Cushing allotment in 1906, Tucker’s parents immediately tried farming on the rocky and hilly land located near a stream. Two years later, after seeing no return, the Tuckers gave up, believing that the land was a worthless tax burden. It is important to note here that the Indian Appropriations Bill passed by Congress in 1904 lifted restrictions on 9,720,000 acres of lands owned by thousands of freedmen. Proponents of the bill argued that the freedmen were fully competent and should be entitled to dispose of their land and pay taxes the same as whites. Proponents also argued that the State could be trusted to protect its citizens against improvidence and that federal guardianship and supervision of Indians and freedmen should cease because both interfered with the rights of the new state.

Ironically, whenever oil or other valuable resources were discovered on a freedman’s property, the state government stepped in and declared both children and adults incompetent, deeming them wards in need of white guardianship. When restrictions were removed, lands held by the freedmen were no longer federally protected and much grafting ensued. Since the motivation behind lifting restrictions was to open up more land for whites and to disable blacks and Indians as property owners, the U.S. government showed lack of will in protecting the freedmen from the chicanery of schemers.

Long after the Tuckers gave up hope that their youngest son’s property would yield some kind of profit, the Prairie Oil and Gas Company struck oil on land adjacent to young Tucker’s allotment. By 1915, the Cushing fields produced more than 300,000 barrels of oil per day, 72,000,000 barrels annually with 3,600 wells drilled in the field. The Prairie Oil and Gas Company arranged a lease with Tucker’s father and when drilling began, oil rushed out of his land “like water from a lawn sprinkler.” Under the terms of the lease agreement, Dan Tucker received one-eighth of the gross proceeds from oil sales. By the end of February 1914, less than a
month after drilling began, Tucker’s father received a court order requiring him to pay a $7,000 bond fee to become his own son’s legal guardian. Press accounts reported that Jim Tucker knew how to plant and shuck corn, but being a guardian and overseeing his son’s growing fortunes “was way over his head, so to speak,” a reporter wrote.

Jim Tucker was “superseded by a more business-like accountant, a man who could give adequate bond to the court.”63 On March 8, 1914, Jess W. Watts, an attorney from Wagoner, Oklahoma, was appointed as Tucker’s guardian. Watts paid Jim Tucker $70 a month for Dan’s care and education despite the fact that the boy’s income climbed to $6,000 a month. Since there are no surviving guardianship records or further media reports on Dan Tucker, it is difficult to ascertain how much money he earned before Cushing’s oil wells dried up in the early 1940s or whether he was able to hold onto his money once he reached the age of majority or if his guardian squandered his estate. A search of Oklahoma civil and criminal court cases between 1913 and 1925 reveals that Watts, a partner at the Watts & Breedlove firm, was involved in 25 land fraud cases, half of which he defended unscrupulous men who were prosecuted for stealing properties from minors.

Tucker’s story illustrates how the media constructed wealthy black children and their parents as incompetent and incapable of controlling their own resources. A Kansas City Star reporter claimed that earning thousands of dollars a month in oil royalties was of no consequence to Dan Tucker. “To tell him that he made $12,000 last month means hardly as much to him as to tell him he has another pig to feed.” The writer further asserted – “In money matters Dan’s mind grasps the significance of amounts up to 25 cents, but beyond that the thought of money is unnecessary and uncalled for. The reader never hears young Tucker or his parent’s voices speak about their poverty and fortune, or how they felt about the State’s intervention in their lives. Still, a reporter claimed that young Tucker “resented” being assigned a guardian, his father being given $70 a month for his care, and being sent to school. “All the provision he needs is someone to ring the dinner bell.” And further, “five months of school a year are a good many more than Dan sees
use for and he is inclined to think that if education and culture are necessary for one to be rich, graciously he will be content to roam about in old ‘Jim’s’ pasture the rest of his days, and let someone else take the money who will be willing to prepare himself for it.”

This kind of media depiction of a wild, ignorant, mentally incompetent, uneducable, unsavvy, poor-but-happy freedman was not uncommon. These reports reveal how race shaped the public’s perception that blacks and Indians could not handle money, had no need for education, cultivation or financial independence, and that parents of wealthy freedman children could not properly handle the affairs of their children. Such media accounts not only announced the wealth of these children to potential grafters and guardians, they also helped legitimize the fact that such men were appointed by the State’s probate courts to control the children’s moneys. Ironically, while these stories claimed that handling thousands of dollars per month and conducting business transactions were over the heads of the children’s parents, reporters were conspicuously silent about how white guardians robbed and exploited thousands of youths across the state.

Sarah Rector, another 10-year-old listed as number 261 on the Creek Freedman newborn roll, owned a Cushing allotment and also captured national headlines. In September 1913, the Kansas City Star and Savannah Tribune reported that Rector’s income reached $112,000 and that she paid the largest income tax in the State of Oklahoma. “She has an income that makes President Wilson’s salary or the salary of a railroad or insurance president look like small change,” the Kansas City Star noted. Months later, in January 1914, a Kansas City Star reporter visited the Rector family and subsequently wrote a feature article with the headline – “Oil Made Pickaninny Rich.” Rector, described as “ignorant, with apparently little mental capacity,” crawled under her parent’s bed and refused to be interviewed. “Of course they could have grabbed her by the heels and dragged her out,” the reporter wrote. “But any person with $15,000 a month in real money falling into her lap has got to be handled with care, no matter if she is a pickaninny instead of a prima donna.” Despite her young age, Rector received “bushels of
proposals” from young German men asking to marry her. “From the character of the letters all of them are highly educated, and from the pictures, fine looking chaps.” The reporter noted that the letters indicated that blacks in Germany were afforded a vastly different social standing than in Oklahoma. Stacks of letters came from others who heard of Rector’s fortune, including requests from women interested in social uplift or civic improvement, from wildcat promoters, and grafters.66
Rector, was born March 3, 1902 in Taft to Joseph and Rose, both citizens of the Creek Nation. The “bewildered” young girl lived in a two-room prairie house with her parents and five siblings. “The house was not much to look at and nothing in particular grew upon the land around it, but for all of that Sarah and the rest of the family were quite content,” Mary Dillie wrote in the Women Who Lead the Way section of the Oregonian. On March 24, 1906, the
Department of the Interior assigned Rector seven separate lots of lands ranging from two to forty acres for a total of 160 acres appraised at $556.50.

Not only had the 10-year-old never seen the land, according to Dillard, Rector “did not want it.” In fact, it was Rector’s father who sought to dispose of the land and repeatedly petitioned the county court to sell it because it was worthless for farming. State law, however, forbade the sale of lands belonging to minors and because children were considered incompetents, Sarah could not enter into a business contract to sell her own land. Since Congress lifted restrictions on the sale of lands owned by freedmen two years earlier, the state required Rector’s family to pay taxes “that fell due with painful regularity.” Five years later, in February 1911, B.B. Jones drilled on Rector’s land and discovered a gusher. Jones was a small-town banker and business partner of the legendary oilman Tom Slick. Together they formed the Hi-Grade Oil Company, which they later sold to the Prairie Oil and Gas Company, which then entered a lease agreement with Joe Rector. Rector owned the biggest producing wells in the Cushing fields with 2,500 barrels of oil weekly, each barrel worth $1.00.

While Dan Tucker was supposedly chasing chickens, happily feeding pigs and running wild on his family’s Coweta farm clueless about his own wealth, as reporters claimed, Dillie reported that Sarah “continued to play about in her little ragged dresses and bare feet.” At night, the girl “continued to curl herself up in the only bed she had ever known, a big chair and rag quilt beside the kitchen stove. Dillie claimed that Rector’s enormous income “was no reason why she should change her habits.” As was the case with Dan Tucker, soon after Rector’s wealth made headlines, “a shrewd and kindly lawyer took an interest in the child and her family,” Dillie noted.67 The Salt Lake Telegram and Duluth News-Tribune reported that Rector was “under sympathetic guardianship” and receiving the best education. The Kansas City Star claimed that Judge Thomas Leahy of the county court approved petitions, filed by Rector’s guardian, to purchase a bed, decent clothing and a $2.50 pair of shoes that she allegedly didn’t want, and ordered a new home to be built for the entire family.68
It is important to note that these reports came months after Du Bois dispatched social worker Florence Kelley to Oklahoma in the winter of 1914 to conduct an investigation of Rector’s situation. In 1912, Kelley, a white abolitionist descendant, social worker, and early organizer of the NAACP, together with another white reformer Lillian Wald, formed the U.S. Children’s Bureau, a federal investigative commission, which focused on a wide range of issues including crimes against children. A close ally of Du Bois, Kelley was also one of a few ardent white Progressive reformers that advocated on behalf of black children. A review of her collected writings suggests that Kelley, and the interracial coalition of reformers associated with the NAACP, recognized the potential benefits of arguing on behalf of and exposing the plight of black children. If America was to achieve some semblance of racial harmony, then it had to remove barriers to equal education, curb labor exploitation, and punish violence against black youth.

While in Oklahoma, Kelley corresponded with NAACP officials in Washington and worked alongside Kate Barnard who was the most prominent and irksome reformer of the West. Early in her career, Barnard was described by the local press as “a sweet and dainty wildflower and as refreshing as an Oklahoma breeze.” Elected as the state’s first Commissioner of Charities and Corrections, she was responsible for convincing the legislature to establish a special court for children in need of legal supervision. For much of her career she fought on behalf of the state’s orphans and delinquents and she was most likely first responsible for bringing the plight of Sarah Rector and the other Creek Freedman minors to the attention of the NAACP. When she began her career, the Irish-Catholic champion of children knew little of the exploitation of Indian and Creek Freedman minors until she received a report of three “wild children” who had been sleeping in the hollow of a tree, drinking from a stream and stealing food from nearby farmhouses. Upon further investigation, she learned that the children’s parents were dead, that they owned valuable oil land and were under the protection of a guardian who had been collecting
royalties and charging the children exorbitant fees for their education and support. Worse yet, this same guardian had 48 other wards assigned to his care.\(^70\)

Kelley and Barnard spent months investigating Sarah Rector’s case, sending updates to *The Crisis* about her schooling and living conditions. Sarah Rector “wears the cheapest kind of clothes, and is given but a meager education by her white guardian, who doles out for her support but a few dollars a month,” Du Bois wrote. “If she were a white child her guardian would see that she lived in a manner befitting her income, and was receiving the best education. Her riches only serve to enrich whites – only serve to enable whites to live in luxury while she lives in poverty, or next door to poverty.”\(^71\)

T.J. Porter, a banker from Beland, served as her guardian until he was ousted for purchasing a building from a friend with funds from Rector’s estate. Bob Fite, who Du Bois described as “a white man who has openly manifested his prejudice against the race,” sold his building on South Second Street in Muskogee to Rector for an extortionate sum of $57,000. “A white elephant on his hands, he used his pull with the white guardian of this Negro girl to lad it off on her.”\(^72\)

In May 1919, Edward Curd, the attorney representing Rector’s new guardians, bankers M.G. Young and C.A. Looney, had his license revoked and the Oklahoma Supreme Court disbarred him for purchasing farmlands and various properties in Muskogee without informing Rector’s guardians. Petitions filed on behalf of Rector and her guardians by Curd, were approved by various judges in the county court. For his benefit, he received over $15,000 in fees and commissions for unauthorized real estate investments.\(^73\)

Lending out a ward’s money on promissory notes to personal friends of the guardian, oftentimes on inadequate security, was a common practice. This is how the estates belonging to Edith and Edna Durant nearly vanished before the twins reached 18 years of age in July 1918. Between August 1912 and September 1914, Edith’s guardian R. Lee Hayes filed 16 petitions with the county court to make real estate loans with funds from her estate. Each petition reported that
the ward had large sums of money on deposit in various banks and that it was “proper and to the
best interest of said minor that said money should be loaned at a reasonable rate of interest on
good Real Estate security[sic].”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Loan</th>
<th>Name of Applicant</th>
<th>Loan Amount</th>
<th>Interest Rate</th>
<th>Loan Term</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8/27/1912</td>
<td>Harry G. Davis</td>
<td>$2,000.00</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/27/1912</td>
<td>J.A. &amp; Callie Pitts</td>
<td>$3,000.00</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/29/1912</td>
<td>Fay Todd</td>
<td>$5,000.00</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5 Years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illegible</td>
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<td>$2,500.00</td>
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<td>5 Years</td>
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<td>J.A. Markham</td>
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<td>5 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/6/1912</td>
<td>Luke Longston</td>
<td>$3,850.00</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/6/1912</td>
<td>Ira Lawrence</td>
<td>$4,200.00</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>$1,800.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>9/11/1913</td>
<td>J.B. &amp; Schuyler A. Upton</td>
<td>$2,000.00</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/10/1913</td>
<td>Arthur C. Wright</td>
<td>$2,000.00</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<td>$1,200.00</td>
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<tr>
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<td>$3,500.00</td>
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<tr>
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<td>William Lawrence</td>
<td>$700.00</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<td>4/23/1914</td>
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<td>8%</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
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<tr>
<td>9/14/1914</td>
<td>R. D. Keys</td>
<td>$1,000.00</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ill. 4.10 Shown above, are loans executed by Edith Durant’s guardian, R. Lee Hays. Between August 1912 and September 1914, the Muskogee County Probate Court approved 16 loans to the individuals shown above with funds from Durant’s estate totaling $38,250.00.
Descendants of the Durant twins, nephew Bruce Reed and grandsons Quinton and Larry Harrison of Tulsa, knew of their immense wealth. “They had money and they had property all over Muskogee,” said Reed. “But no one could ever explain to us how they lost their money or how the land and property left their hands.”

The men were shocked to learn that loans were approved for white people that the girls, nor their father and co-guardian Monday Durant, had never and would never meet. According to the petitions, the Durant’s monies were used to build private homes, farms houses, hotels, and other business ventures throughout Muskogee, Sapulpa and Tulsa. In that two year period, as the chart below reveals, the court approved $38,250 worth of loans at an eight percent interest rate to be repaid to Edith’s estate over either a two, three, or five year period. A review of her semi-annual guardian reports submitted to the Muskogee County District Court reveals that neither the interest nor the principal amount of any of these loans were ever repaid.

Hays also filed a petition in November 1916 to request “an allowance of not to exceed $3,000.00 for the purpose of erecting a good, comfortable dwelling house” on Monday Durant’s allotment. The Court later ordered that R.L. Hays and Monday Durant hire an architect and builder to erect a house of no more than seven rooms.” Relatives of Edith and Edna indicate that despite this court order, no home was ever built for the family. It was not uncommon for guardians to file similar petitions for lavish gifts for their wards. On June 3, 1916, Hays received an order from the Court for authorizing $2,000.00 for the purchase of a car for a cross-country trip in addition to $400 per month for two or more months to cover all necessary expenses for a “health restoring trip to be made in the company of her father, mother, and sisters.” Later that summer, on August 29, 1916, the District Court authorized Hays to “purchase for said ward, Edith Durant, a piano not exceeding the sum of $500.00.” Such an order is questionable since press accounts and court documents indicate that both girls were mentally incompetent and illiterate. Reed indicated that his aunt never owned a piano or a car, and her father only traveled by horse and buggy throughout his lifetime.
In addition to executing loans and letting the risk fall on the wards with approval of the county courts, guardians and their attorneys often paid themselves exorbitant fees to handle the children’s estates. The Durant twins’ previous guardian, Bates B. Barnett was removed by the District Court in the summer of 1911 for appropriating funds for his own personal business.

Barnett was appointed as the girl’s guardian on August 2, 1906 when he executed the required $40,000 bond and handled thousands of dollars worth of leasing agreements with Galbreath Oil and Gas Company, Prairie Oil and Gas Company and the Laurel Oil and Gas Company but failed to file guardian reports or bank deposits of the girl’s monies. Barnett also failed to pay the required $75.00 monthly allowance for the children’s care. In June 1907, Monday Durant filed a petition in District Court against Barnett to recover $18,149.60 belonging to Edith and $2,087.30 for Edna. The father indicated that he was “a poor man” and needed those funds for “the care and management of his daughters.” Another petition filed by Monday Durant on July 18, 1910, requested the Barnett’s removal because Edna was “in great danger of losing all of said estate.” From the time of his appointment in 1906 to his removal in 1911, Barnett charged a total of $45,948.46 in fees that were paid to him through the Indian Agent’s Office at Muskogee.
R. Lee Hayes, the twin’s second guardian, kept copious reports of various fees, oil and gas, transactions, submitting them to the court in a timely fashion. However, in addition to making loans and letting the risk fall on his wards, he also made large purchases of buildings and tracks of worthless lands with their monies. The Indian Rights Association noted that many of the buildings erected in Oklahoma were built with monies belonging to wealthy children. Hayes and other unscrupulous guardians often cut back door deals with appraisers and banks to sell buildings and lands to their wards for double, sometimes triple the amount of their true worth. Ferdinand P. Synder, guardian of Luther Manuel, was removed for corruption and mismanagement of his estate, then worth $1,000,000.

Born February 1, 1903 in Lee, Indian Territory to Mulcie and Adam Manuel, young Luther owned an allotment in the heart the Cushing oil field. In September 1915, the Carter Oil Company and the Sapulpa Refining Company held a $3,000,000 lease to drill on the 11-year-old’s land. Du Bois reported in the November 1916 issue that Manuel’s income reached $50,000 a month. A 1916 investigation by the Bureau of Indian Affairs charged that Manuel’s guardian and John Alcorn, a local probate judge, conspired to defraud the minor. Synder purchased worthless land in Craig County from A.C. Clark, “a stool pigeon” for Elmer Coon, the Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners of Muskogee County. Coon helped secure the appointment of Judge Alcorn with the understanding that Alcorn would assure the sale of the worthless Craig County property to Manuel’s estate. Synder also spent $120,000 of Manuel’s money on the purchase of other worthless properties in Muskogee while paying himself $200,000 in fees that were never recovered. In November 1919, Manuel petitioned the court to remove his second guardian, banker Ed Sweeney, for mismanagement. The District Court denied his request.  

Sallie Hodge’s guardian was also removed from his duties in 1912 because of fraudulent activities. Charles L. Torr, the attorney representing her guardian, was indebted to her estate for $2,150.00. A report filed by Kate Barnard indicated that Hodge’s guardian paid Torr $500.00 per
year in fees. Torr, who was convicted of defrauding other minors, was convicted and sentenced to one year in the State Penitentiary. Of the nearly 4,000 professional guardians in Oklahoma, 600 were removed by 1912, mostly for embezzlement and misappropriating funds. In general, there was no real auditing of the ward’s accounts by probate judges, who needed the support of guardians to be re-elected. As their ward’s estates dwindled with such purchases, bankers, attorneys, appraisal and insurance companies, along with guardians gained large sums of money from these transactions.

Oklahoma’s guardianship system was what Tanis Thorne called a “veritable cottage industry, sanctioned by law, with profit sharing by numerous persons in local cliques.” Stealing from Indian and black wards enabled many of Oklahoma’s leading citizens to build powerful political machines. As the Indian Rights Commission noted in a 1924 investigative report, these men owned fine houses, high-speed automobiles, and lived in luxury as they enjoyed long careers as professional guardians. The reported added, “the professional guardian is catered to by banks, who desire his account, by merchants who want to secure the ward’s trade; and his friends want liberal loans on questionable security – and in this way the whole community is interested.”

“The Exception Only Proves the Rule.”

On May 26, 1916, less than two years before their 18th birthdays, Edith Durant and Sallie Hodge received cash bonuses of $90,000 each from the Prairie Gas and Oil Company for a lease extension to continue drilling on their allotments. With the prospects of lucrative returns on both teens’ properties looking positive, plans to keep Durant and Hodge as wards of the State were in the works. Grafters also kept a “birthday book” so they would know when the girls and other minors with estates were to become of age.

Du Bois also kept Durant, Hodge and the other wealthiest black children of Muskogee County on his radar. In the June 1918 edition of The Crisis, Du Bois announced: “Edith Durant, a colored girl of Oklahoma, will be of age July 2 [and] Mrs. Sallie Hodge Reid also comes of age
this year and will receive a large fortune. White guardians have done much to waste the money belonging to these minors.”

Hodge, who married W.C. Reid in 1913 when she was 14-years old, successfully acquired her entire estate and immediately placed it under the control of her husband to protect her from grafters. Durant, however, was not so fortunate.

One month before Durant’s birthday, R.C. Allen, National Attorney for the Creek Nation, petitioned the county court to have a guardian appointed for her estate. At the time, Durant’s allotment earned $1,200.00 per month and she owned real estate valued at $1,000,000.00. In his petition, Allen argued that Durant was “spirited out of the jurisdiction of [the] Court for the purpose of avoiding the jurisdiction of the Court to appoint a guardian.” Allen noted that Durant was recently removed from the care and protection of her guardians and that her whereabouts were unknowns “She is illiterate, ignorant and wholly incompetent and would squander and dissipate her property unless a guardian is appointed for her as an incompetent immediately upon reaching her age of majority.” A hearing was set for August 31, 1917 at 10:00 in the morning.

Neither Durant nor her guardians, R. Lee Hays and her father Monday, appeared before the Court. Allen claimed that Durant was given sufficient notice to appear in Court and he argued that she may have been kidnapped by grafters. “She has been aided and assisted by persons having designs upon her property and her said estate, and an unlawful intent fraudulently to deprive her thereof.” Allen requested that J.C. Scully, a banker from Haskell, be appointed as her guardian. On September 7, 1917, six days after Durant’s 18th birthday, Scully paid the $150,000 bond required by the Court, and an order to have her entire estate turned over to Scully was executed. Durant, along with her previous guardian and her father, fought the order. Four months later, on January 21, 1918, the order to appoint Scully as her guardian was vacated on the grounds that he was appointed without any notice to Durant or her guardians.

Sarah Rector faced a similar battle when she turned 18 and moved from Oklahoma to Kansas City, Missouri. John Collins of Muskogee submitted a petition claiming that neither Rector nor her parents were capable of managing her large estate. In 1922, at age 20, Rector was
still earning $40,000 a year from oil royalties, a large part which she invested in Liberty bonds. She also owned $100,000 worth of farmland in Oklahoma. Like Durant, petitioners, which included Collins and local probate attorneys, claimed that Rector was mentally defective even though she graduated from high school and later attended Tuskegee University. The petitioners also claimed that Rector “expended her wealth which resulted in “seeking of a guardian for her by her Oklahoma friends.”

When Rector moved to Kansas City in 1920, she purchased an automobile and a mansion at 2000 East 12th Street. Though she was 18 at the time, the Missouri legislature revised its age of majority law, extending the legal age from 18 to 21. This revision changed Rector’s status back to a minor and her “Oklahoma friends” were quick to take advantage of this technicality. Judge Jules Guinotte of the Muskogee County Probate Court disagreed with the petitioner’s claim of Rector’s incompetence. The 20-year-old “has handled the more than $750,000 worth of property she owns with such astuteness that application for guardians was denied,” The Savannah Tribune reported on March 20, 1922. Judge Guinotte ruled that Rector was competent to take care of her own money and “compliment her highly on her intelligence and thrift.” Du Bois wrote his own celebratory note in the June issue of The Crisis – “Pessimists on the Afro-American question may well consider the pure-blooded Negro girl, Sarah Rector of Kansas City, aged 20, who proves to a white court that she is managing astutely her fortune of $750,000 and needs no guardian. Possibly the exception proves the rule.”

Rector, Durant, and Hodge were indeed exceptions to the rule when it came to wealthy Indian and freedmen minors retaining their estates into adulthood. Records for the estates of Dan Tucker, Edna Durant were either lost or destroyed so it is unclear what happened to their large sums of money. Descendants of Rector and the Durant twins still question how millions of dollars worth of real estate left their hands. When Luther Manuel died of illness on December 11, 1936 at age 32, he was almost penniless. His widow, Thelma J. Manuel, was told by the probate court that her late husband’s estate was valued at less than $100.00. Three years later, on
December 8, 1939, Thelma Manuel filed a petition for a hearing to investigate Luther’s estate. She eventually hired Tulsa attorney Jay W. Whitney in December 1942. Whitney’s investigation revealed that Manuel paid “illegal and erroneous taxes upon the income of his allotted lands and the oil and gas removed from it.” Manuel’s total estate was subsequently valued at $84,001.84 once those taxes were refunded. The deceased Manuel’s 83-year-old mother Mulcie, was also a heir to his estate. Her guardian, a white woman named Hanna M. Davis, petitioned the Court and received $11,500.00 in fees, which were deducted. Whitney charged Mrs. Manuel $42,000 in fees for recovering the large tax refund. After Davis and Whitney’s deduction along with thousands of dollars in court costs, administrative fees and inheritance tax, Manuel’s widow and mother received $3,871.85 on August 14, 1953, over a decade after the initial petition was filed.

Various historians have noted that in the 1910s and 1920s, Progressive reformers and federal agencies launched investigations to expose the robbery of wealthy Indians and freedmen. However, the State of Oklahoma used various measures to undermine watchdog agencies and to thwart corrective legislation that would have protected remaining lands owned by Indians and freedmen from graft. The plight of these eight wealthy black children provides a snapshot into how thousands of blacks and Indians endured a feeding frenzy on tribal land that resulted in most freedmen and Indians becoming the poorest people in the United States during the 20th century. In one of the worst Jim Crow states in the Union, the first generation of black children, whether they born as descendants of the slaves of Indian Territory or white southerners, endured stifling racism, segregation, lynching, disease and poverty as they were disabled as landowners and denied their own wealth in most cases.

This story does not have a trumpet-blowing ending. Perhaps one redemptive aspect is that Mrs. Mackey won some semblance of justice for Herbert and CaStella. Aware of her rights as an inheritor, she was able to gain control over her children’s estates and escaped becoming a ward of a white guardian, unlike so many other black and Indian adults with significant property. Mrs. Mackey spent part of her funds on an elaborate gravestone to honor her children. That
marker symbolizes the pain, wealth, and feeding frenzy that accompanied the forced allotment of Indian and freedmen lands in Oklahoma and a Jim Crow system that assisted the robbery and murders of young children.

1 Prior to statehood, Jim Crow education statutes were enacted in the Territory. In 1890, a statute required an election every three years to vote for or against separate schools for white and colored children. An 1897 statute required a separate district to be established for colored children wherever there were at least eight black children attending a school. The statute also made it unlawful for any white child to attend a school for black children or vice versa. Between 1907 and 1957, Oklahoma passed 16 Jim Crow laws.


4 This number includes blacks lynched from 1889-1913, one year prior to Du Bois’ call for the establishment of a Children’s Department in the NAACP. The compiled data is from the NAACP report, Thirty Years of Lynching (New York: NAACP, 1919).

5 The Crisis 8, No. 6 (October 1914): 292.


7 The Crisis, 8, No. 5 (September, 1914): 229-230; 10, No. 5 (September, 1915): 279; 8, No. 6 (October, 1914): 292; 7, No. 4 (February, 1914): 175; 20, No. 1 (May, 1920), 53.

8 The Crisis, 7, No. 4 (February, 1914): 175.

9 The Crisis, 7, No. 4 (February, 1914): 175.


12 Ibid., 36-37.

13 Irvin v. State, 37.

14 Ibid.

15 William M. Irvin, prisoner number 3332, Oklahoma Department of Corrections prisoner ledger page recorded March 31, 1912.

16 Irvin v. State, 37.

17 Irvin v. State, 38.


20 “Plot To Murder Zeb Mackey or Conspiracy to Get Children Out of Way is Theory of Officers,” Muskogee Times-Democrat, March 24, 1911, 1, 6.


22 Ibid.

23 Original trial transcript, page 42.

24 “Plot...,” Muskogee Times-Democrat, 1,6; “Negro Children Owned Fortunes, The Victims of Dynamite at Taft Had Property in Glen Pool,” The Daily Oklahoman, March 24, 1911, 10.


26 “Two Held After Double Killing: White Man Accused of Dynamiting Home of Wealthy Black Children.” The Daily Oklahoman, April 4, 1911, 1; “Dynamiters Play For High Stakes, Sells Children Believed To Have Been Murdered For Their Property,” The Daily Oklahoman, April 9, 1911, 38.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.


Treaty between the United States of America and the Creek Nation of Indians; Concluded June 14, 1866; Ratification advised, with amendments, July 19, 1866; Amendments accepted July 23, 1866; Proclaimed August 11, 1866.


For an explanation of the issues surrounding the allotment policy and how the Dawes Commission records were created and used to determine who was eligible to receive a share of land in Indian Territory see Ken Carter’s The Dawes Commission and the Allotment of the Five Civilized Tribes. 1893-1914 (Orem: Ancestry.com Inc., 1999). For a discussion of the tensions between Indians and freedman resulting from the distribution of land allotments see also F.G. Speck’s “Observations in Oklahoma and Indian Territory,” The Southern Workman 36, no. 1 (1907): 23-27.


See Donald A. Grinde, Jr. and Quintard Taylor, “Red vs. Black: Conflict and Accommodation in the Post Civil War Indian Territory 1865-1907,” American Indian Quarterly, 8, No. 3 (Summer, 1984), 211-229. The authors argue that prior to the Civil War, blacks and Natives had lived in relative harmony. Emancipation severely altered the status of blacks in Indian Territory, liberating 7,000 slaves. The federal government subsequently allowed the five nations to decide how to integrate the former slaves as citizens with full civil and political rights. Grind and Taylor revealed that there were a range of tribal attitudes toward the adoption and treatment of freedmen, with Seminoles and Creeks being the most liberal, the Cherokees moderate, and Choctaws and Chickasaws the most conservative and violent. The authors explicitly state that during the post-war years, former slaves, regardless of their citizenship status, along with freedmen from neighboring southern states, were allowed to live in Indian Territory without being molested by Indian nations.

Various scholarly works have examined the post-Civil War and Reconstruction periods in Indian Territory, the results of the 1866 treaties signed by the Five Civilized Tribes with the United States government, the impact those treaties had on the tribes and ex-slaves and how some tribes accepted the integration of the freedman into their nations while others rejected them. See, Thomas Andrews, “Freedmen in Indian Territory: A Post-Civil War Dilemma,” Journal of the West 4 (1965), 367-376; For discussions on all-black towns and black migrations to Oklahoma see, Daniel F. Littifeld and Lonnie Underhill, “Black Dreams and “Free Homes”: The Oklahoma Territory, 1891-1894,” Phylon 34 (1973): 342-357; Norman Crockett, The Black Towns (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1979); Scott Ellsworth, Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Jimmie Lewis Franklin, Journey Toward Hope: A History of Blacks in Oklahoma (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982); Murray R. Wickett, Contested Territory: Native Americans and African Americans in Oklahoma, 1865-1907 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).


The following scholarly contributions describe Indian attitudes toward their freedmen and other blacks living in Indian Territory following Emancipation. Also discussed is the change in black’s legal status, ownership of land as well as the condition and activities of blacks from other states that migrated to the territory. See, Berline B. Chapman, “Freedmen and the Oklahoma Lands,” Southwestern Social Science Quarterly 29 (1948), 150-159; M. Thomas Bailey, Reconstruction in Indian Territory: A Story of Avarice, Discrimination and Opportunism (Port Washington, N.Y.: National University Publications, Kennikat Press, 1972); Leroy Fischer, ed. The Civil War Era in Indian Territory (Los Angeles, Lorrin L. Morrison, 1974.).


The Blacks in Oklahoma. Flocking to the Territory in Large Numbers,” *Macon Weekly Territory*, April 22, 1891, 3.

Constitution and Enabling Act of the State of Oklahoma, approved June 16, 1908, Section 503.


See John Bert Campbell, *Campbell’s Abstract of Creek Freedman Census Cards and Index* (Muskogee: Phoenix Job Printing Company, 1915). When the federal government allotted lands in severity to eligible citizens of the Five Civilized Tribes, former slaves of those nations along with their descendants were eligible to receive allotments. The Dawes Commission of the Five Civilized Tribes devised a separate roll of census cards and an index or abstract of names of eligible freedmen enrolled between 1898-1906. The Campbell’s Abstract contains the names of three categories of enrolled citizens: Creek Freedmen (5,694 names of adults and children), Creek Freedman Newborn (811 children under age 18), and Creek Freedman Minor (329 names of children under age 18). At first glance it may appear that the majority of lands were allotted to freedmen adults with 5,699 names. But upon further review and after extracting the names of 3,267 children from the Creek Freedman roll and adding them to the 811 names on the Freedman Newborn roll and 329 names on the Creek Freedman Minor, the total number of children is 4,407, comprising 64% of lands allotted to Freedmen of the Creek Nation. The Campbell’s Abstract, in essence, provides a snapshot of who the citizens of the Creek Nation were at the time. However, it also reported that half of those citizens were dead, victims of the Spanish influenza that claimed thousands of lives in the region.


Oklahoma’s Poor Rich Indians, pp. 9, 11.

Original indictment, Oklahoma State Archives.


“Startling Charges Made In Taft Case,” *Muskogee Times-Democrat*, December 14, 1911, 1, 12.


“Buoyant Bill Irvin Has Lost Nerve Since Friday,” *Muskogee Times-Democrat*, December 23, 1911, 1; D.R. Allen Guilty; Life Term,” *Muskogee Times-Democrat*, December 26, 1911, 1.


Ibid.


*The Crisis* (October 1914).

*State ex rel. Dale et al, State Bar Com’rs v. Curd*, Oklahoma Supreme Court, May 27, 1919.
Telephone interview with Bruce Reed, October, 30 2009.


The Crisis, 16, No. 2 (June 1918).


“Riches Fail to Dazzle Girl – Negro Girl to Manage Her Own Business.” The Savannah Tribune, March 30, 1922, 7; The Crisis 24, No. 2 (June 1922).
Conclusion

My dissertation demonstrates that after Emancipation childhood was foundational to the reconstruction of racial identity and white supremacy. Coming of age without the memory, confining discipline, and brutal effects of bondage, the children and grandchildren of former slaves were positioned to become free citizens and free laborers. To borrow from historian Mary Niall Mitchell, the black child’s freedom represented “a future in which black Americans might have access to the same privileges as whites: land ownership, equality, autonomy.”\(^1\) The possibility of accomplished citizenship for this new generation presented more hope and more fear than the Reconstruction era’s aborted efforts to assign citizenship to emancipated adult slaves because the black child’s citizenship was permanent and guaranteed by a hard won federal constitutional amendment. The story of emancipated black childhood adds a new dimension to the history of race as it invites us to understand how racial oppression was not just a southern phenomenon; it circulated throughout the culture, high and low, North and South, East and West.

Of course the ways in which black and white Americans contemplated and responded to black children’s possibilities were fundamentally different. Blacks looked to their children for racial redemption and to carve out a place of citizenship. Despite his sometimes woeful and bleak assessments about the impact of racism on black children’s lives, race leader W.E.B. Du Bois maintained that “if given a chance these children of the sun” would develop into "social units of worth and value." But almost a century ago, he also predicted that if skin color prejudice persisted as a barrier to the privileges and protections of American citizenship, "the world will be the loser [if] these babes of darker skin are denied the opportunities to reach the maximum in efficiency and service."\(^2\)

But the hope of one race was a threat to the other. For white Americans seeking to preserve social status, political dominance, and racial hierarchy, the black child as a fully functioning future citizen was frightening, disturbing, and unthinkable. I would like to suggest
that we need to understand how childhood was constitutive of race and how race was constitutive of childhood after slavery. The racialization of childhood was a complex process of strategic significance; the characters presented in my dissertation tell us this. The range of responses from medical doctors, midwives, psychologists, social scientists, educators, commercial artists, reformers, guardians, rabid anti-black politicians and ordinary Americans unveils a hegemonic story of repression. But there is also a redeeming story. It is a story of efforts to overcome racial oppression, a story that reveals courage, intelligence and fortitude of ordinary folk and race leaders and their understanding of the value of cooperation with white allies. This is the counter narrative that I have introduced into my discussion, necessary not only because it is a true account, but also because it relieves readers of good hope and intention, black and white, of the incredible burden of hopelessness, of the dark possibility that no change is achievable even for the children in which we, as decent and concerned Americans, place our hopes.

My introduction offers to my readers a summary of the contents of each chapter. Let me begin by pointing out now how these chapters, separately and together, affirm or hopefully enrich the existing historiographies of childhood, race, medicine, social science, psychology, popular culture and national expansion into borderlands of the American West. Taken as a totality, the four chapters, if we observe them in conversation with each other, offer a powerful understanding of how racialized childhood happened, how it was naturalized, and how it became a quotidian practice at all the sites of cultural production I explore. Additionally, I want to suggest new departures. I hope that my study has the potential to impact historical thinking on broader more inclusive narratives of American history, encouraging the opening of that narrative to acknowledge the significance of the racialization of American childhood. Some of my evidence, like mental testing, tracking in schools, disparities in health, and the sexualization and criminalization of black children make it difficult for anyone reading these chapters to escape the conclusion that the foundation for the modern problems and current assumptions and policies affecting black children are rooted in the period from 1880 to 1954.
I do not represent here a chronological history of black childhood. I do not write a history of childhood. Instead I write of the black child in history and the history of black childhood as part of our nation’s history. This story of children, I believe, is an American story. And American history cannot be fully understood without understanding the history of racialized childhood. In order to accomplish this project, I chose a methodological approach designed to uncover how the tragic story of race unfolded both through various sites of cultural production, not only regional sites but sites that can be comprehended as sites of national importance in the construction of race. I also explored materials, evidence and conceptualizations more commonly utilized by scholars interested in the history of childhood itself. Each chapter foregrounds how the black child moves through the key moments of childhood development, or situates each developmental stage within a particular cultural site to reveal how a web of discourses and ordinary practices became implicated in the construction of race and childhood. My objective is to demonstrate the power of this web of cultural discourses and practices, and how it was dramatically revealed at each turning point in the black child’s life – birth, adolescence, and puberty.

Exploring the moment of birth in chapter 1 introduced medical science professionals adding to the efficiency of health practice and judicial process. Yet their actions, intentionally sinister or not, resulted in harmful consequences for the black babies they marked at birth, forever branded for the continued process of racialization and exclusion. Medical expert’s expected and acted upon collusion with state bureaucracies and birth registration campaigns consigned black children to a marginal existence on the dark side of the color line. They did not proceed without notice or objection. In this process, black midwives and parents often objected the imposition of bureaucratic policies in the privacy of the birthing room, as well as the bureaucratic invention of using birth certificates to fix race on paper. Meanwhile, a new generation of black doctors interrogated this and other medical constructions of race. However, as my readings of the documents show, their disagreement with mainstream debates over the ontogenetic development
of skin color in black newborns concerned them less than more urgent matters including high
mortality rates of black adults and children, dietary issues, infectious diseases, access to adequate
healthcare, and improving the unsanitary and overcrowded living conditions in segregated
communities. Black medical professionals, who gave special attention to the problems of
children, understood that the future of the race hinged upon the holistic understanding of black
children’s health.

Ordinary people are also involved in this narrative of the racial construction of young
black folk. Peter Quick and his wife, the white adoptive parents from New York, and Mam Bob,
the granny midwife from rural Georgia, find their way into this story of racialized childhood. The
New York couple returned their adopted daughter to the Westchester County Almshouse one
week after her skin turned from white to black. The Quick’s benign intent and their ultimate
concessions to social conventions of race led them to make a decision that resulted in little
Martha Washington’s death. Mrs. Quick’s poignant hesitation to return her adopted daughter
reveals the depths of social mandates, but also the potential for tenderness. For the recognition of
the cruelty and superficiality of racial designation, how many Mrs. Quick’s were there? Did
other Americans question the sense of racial mandates? Could the outcome have been different
for Martha Washington, and for black childhood itself?

Mam Bob’s management of her beloved adopted child, nicknamed “Pet,” shows a
different kind of negotiation of race and racial identity, in this instance a refusal rather than
hesitation and rejection of the child and its interests. The course of events and painful
experiences surrounding Pet’s birth and early adolescence yielded few choices for her future
prospects and place in society. But Mam Bob’s devotion to Pet is evident in her unwillingness to
accept a life of racial restriction for her visibly white daughter. She trains her daughter in the
ways of white folks, guides and prepares her to disappear into white America, exposing her to a
life of constant fear and risk should her secret be discovered. We do not know what became of
Pet, but her heartbreaking story provides a glimpse into how black people negotiated the
possibilities of race through the socialization of their children. Rejecting racial restriction as the ultimate destiny of their children, black parents with sons and daughters devoid of the visible bodily markers of race sometimes made the choice to empower their children to choose their identity and decide how they would position themselves in society.

Just as we have no way of demonstrating that white medical experts used their studies of skin pigmentation to intentionally degrade black children, we cannot claim that mental testers like Lewis Terman and others who put their professional expertise into I.Q. testing as the measure of childhood development and progress had any intent to harm. By way of promoting their expertise and the legitimacy of their emerging discipline, Terman and his contemporaries promoted the racialization of childhood. Likewise before them, G. Stanley Hall, their mentor and “the father of adolescence,” deployed biogenetic and evolutionary theories, which had the result of shortening black childhood at the developmental stage of adolescence. Hall, proclaiming a distant objectivity, introduced theories about “adolescent races” to confirm the normalcy and superiority of the white child, a pattern also crudely articulated in popular circulating images of black children. Though unrecognized in scholarly analysis of Hall’s work and the work of his students, the juxtaposition of black and white children was constitutive of and dominant within reigning paradigms of subsequent psychological and policy analysis on the black child. Hall and his students, then, naturalized the idea of black inferiority within social scientific studies of children.

Ultimately, my discussion of the construction of racialized adolescence and psychology calls for scholars to situate both themes side by side within the life stages of childhood. Only then can we see how both movements together fixed the negative potential development of black children. Here is yet another layer of collusion of science in the process of the racialization of childhood done in the service of enhancing professional prestige and ensuring white supremacy. Although scholars have given significant attention to Hall’s 1904 opus Adolescence, they have not interrogated the structuring of his book, which ends with a chapter on children of adolescent races. His final chapter, “Ethnic Psychology and Pedagogy, Or Adolescent Races and Their
Treatment,” employs the black child in the service to ensuring the hope for white childhood and the impossibility of growth for black children. Hall defined white children as normative and the black child as a failure.

It is clear from my merging of Hall’s work and the early use of mental testing, that the counterpointing of the black and white child was indigenous to the turn-of-the-twentieth-century study and measure of children. As the tests quantified racialist theories, here is where we can see the origins of the use of white children as the standard measure of intelligence and “normal” development, and the black child as symbol of failure and pathology. Environment and cultural influences were not of concern to these researchers. The otherness and inferiority of black children became embedded as a historical fact and still remains a habitual and taken for granted feature of our educational and social policy despite the continuing efforts of Mead, Boas and their culturalist successors to discredit it.

The senders and recipients of postcards more than likely had no inclination to read or converse with the writings and test results of Hall and psychological testers. Nonetheless, postcards delivered hateful and pornographic messages about the black child’s character offering popularized versions of scientific theories about their inability to mature beyond the primitive stages of childhood. As this happened black children were excluded from mainstream Progressive-era child-saving campaigns because they were viewed as unworthy and incapable of reform and protection. The mutton-chopped New York vice suppressor Anthony Comstock, thoroughly invested in protecting the innocence of white children, was blind to the existence of the black child. He did not see them. He was not aware of them. They had no place in his anti-smut crusades.

Leaving the East Coast and Comstock’s national campaigns against smut, we stop in Oklahoma, where we met culprits like William Irvin, John Coombs, F.L. Martin and their hired black accomplices D.R. “Doc” Allen, Jim Manuel, Stout Ham, Sam Lowe, and John Norwood along with thousands of white male guardians in Oklahoma, who driven by greed, disregarded the
personhood of land-owning black wards. The Oklahoma story, with black children as central figures, shows how the contingency of race played out on the stage of this western American territory verging on statehood. Unique and specific to the childhood of freedman minors growing up as both American citizens and as citizens of the Five Civilized Tribes, the imposition of guardianship until the age of 18, in effect, inhibited their full citizenship rights, particularly their right to enter into contractual agreements and maintain control over their sometimes lucrative oil estates. Their parents were also excluded as incompetent guardians. While Hall, the mental testers, and purveyors of racist postcards shortened black childhood by denying innocence and protection to black youth, the Oklahoma courts upholding guardianship laws extended black childhood to age 18 because they recognized the economic benefits in maintaining control over black children and their valuable property and oil revenues.

The hard facts of what happened in Oklahoma indicate this: sometimes black children did not reach adulthood because they were killed and fleeced out of their estates. While Herbert and CaStella Sells were blown up by dynamite as they slept in their home, Sarah Rector grew up and left the State of Oklahoma to build a mansion and businesses for herself. Like those who crossed state borders and territories to confiscate fugitive slaves in the pre-Civil War period, Rector’s guardian and Muskogee County court officials crossed the border into Missouri in an attempt to reclaim their control over her and her property. Ultimately, Rector was one of the fortunate few that escaped the systematic murder and race robbery. Du Bois, who diligently monitored Rector’s growth from the time she was 10, celebrated her court victory when he received news that she stood before a judge, now as an adult, and demonstrated her competence in managing her estate.

And finally, as the evidence concerning Oklahoma and elsewhere shows, there were black heroes at each turning point in the black child’s development and at every cultural site of race production. African Americans defended their young as best they could despite few resources and options and in the face of daunting odds. Black Americans looked within and
outside their own communities for help in this protective project. As ordinary blacks tried to create a free black childhood, their leaders engaged in a cooperative dialogue with white allies such as Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, Julia Lathrop, Kate Barnard, Mary White Ovington, Florence Kelley, and W.E. Disney, the Oklahoma prosecutor who used his legal powers to successfully prosecute two of the murderers of the Sells children. The story of racial repression is balanced with hope as I see it embodied in this important black counter narrative, which was not as the evidence shows, always reactive. As reading of parenting literature and essays published in *The Crisis* and other media outlets produced during the period reveals, blacks too held and deployed their own ideas about childhood innocence and development and they drew strength from within their own culturally adaptive institutions and families to survive oppression.

The collaboration of black parents, race leaders, intellectuals, journalists, practicing doctors and social scientists underscores their perception of alternative possibilities and hence the contingency of race. Even as they saw other options, race leaders and parents, sometimes with their white allies, acted upon them. This collaboration and resistance, despite frequent failures to reverse the racialization of black childhood, demonstrates that racial construction of childhood was not an ineluctable or unquestioned outcome. Moreover, the construction of racialized childhood had many proponents, some who either failed to see the problem or unintentionally colluded in perpetuating it. The conscious Jim Crow efforts of the South to maintain racial hierarchy are familiar. But we must also consider the sometimes unintentional results of the actions of well meaning doctors, social scientists and Progressive reformers, actions unrecognized for their harmful consequences and therefore sharing some measure of the insidious. The racialization of childhood and the negative outcomes for the past and present generations of black children is a historical fact, but so long as alternatives were perceived and acted upon, it was not inevitable. The redemptive possibility of interracial collaboration in the interests of black children did not come to fruition until the 1954 landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* victory, but was residing and present in American race resister’s thinking a half century before.
I turn now to consideration of the various historiographies from which this dissertation draws and which, I hope, it furthers. The existing literature on the history of childbirth and pediatrics does not give significant attention, if any at all, to black babies. Additionally, birth is an overlooked moment in African-American histories and racial ideology. And yet this important passage into life is, I hope I have demonstrated, crucial to my story. The previously untapped sources in pediatric literature have allowed us to observe the cruel moment when racial identity was immediately imposed in birthing rooms and later affirmed in laboratories investigations by embryologists and other self-styled medical experts. My chapter on birth shows the involvement of state bureaucracies invested in the permanent fixing of racial identity and preservation of racial purity through the surveillance of birth and the creation of birth certificates. While studies of passing have used marriage laws and licenses, court battles over property inheritance of black women and their mixed-race offspring with white men, and local cases involving ambiguous children seeking to attend white-only schools, my study of the engagement of pediatricians and other birth attendants reveals that attempts to prevent legions of Homer Plessys from subverting the Jim Crow system occurred at the moment a black child came into this world.

Scholars have separately discussed the impact of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, the professionalization of medical practices focused on children, and the decline of midwifery. But their studies have not recognized how the synchronic evolution of these developments discussed in chapter 1 operated to racialize children. While some studies have inadvertently rendered the black child invisible in their discussions of the modernization of American society and the reconstruction of race, my dissertation shows that black childhood was seized upon to add power to the strategic aims of racial oppression. My discussion of black birth and the medical profession’s engagement with the bodies of black children invites scholars to expand future studies of medicine and race to push their analysis back to the childhood experience to more deliberately track the relationship of medicine to race. The discussion of childhood permits us to understand what a complex multi-layered practice racialization is. What we see is that newly
identified actors in this study who participated in the racialization of children, knowingly or not, intentionally or unintentionally, solidified the color line even as they created the logical imprint that we use to understand black children today.

The existing literature concerning birth and reproduction has focused heavily on Eugenics, sterilization and racially disparate birth control campaigns. Two generations of scholars have documented the dramatic and extreme proposals for race control that these projects promulgated. My discussion of black birth calls for a fresh look beyond such dramatic efforts to annihilate certain races and other undesirable groups of people. I ask that we turn our eyes to more ordinary and quotidian practices resulting in an unacknowledged bodily or spiritual holocaust of black children, at the unrelenting high rates of infant mortality, at lynching and rape of black youth, and at tolerated but insidious discriminatory practices such as denial of access to educational opportunities and demeaning ugly stereotypes that harmed the souls, if not the bodies, of black youth.

My second chapter builds upon the historiography of adolescence and revisits familiar sites – playgrounds, clinics, and the studies and lectures of G. Stanley Hall, and the classrooms wherein his minions conducted psychological tests. Much has been written about adolescence as a “second birth” and a socially constructed stage that was added to the life cycle of child development in the late 19th and early 20th century. And there is abundant literature on the history of mental testing and Hall’s construction of adolescence and cultivation of a generation of mental testers. But the histories of adolescence and mental testing have not been considered together, even though the concept of adolescence and the use of mental tests, as American social scientists created them, implied growth and progress – at least for white children.

Stunningly, no one, including Dorothy Ross, Hall’s distinguished biographer, discusses how Hall used his concept of adolescence and theories of black childhood to assure the hope that the white child would successfully escape the tumultuous and savage stages of adolescence and move toward full maturity. My interpretation of the evidence reminds of the significance of this
unfortunate connection to black children made at the moment of creation of American thought concerning normal adolescent development: from the start black children were not only excluded from normalcy but used to demonstrate its certainty; their alleged failure and inherent incompetence was used to confirm the white child’s progress towards maturity and responsibility. The black child as “other” was the proof for standards of normal psychological development and, ultimately, for standardized tests. The hegemony of these proofs, now taken for granted, remains with us still.

While the racialization of children was being carried out in the birthing room, Hall and his acolytes were hard at work developing a racialized psychology of adolescence and mental tests, both of which were intended to enhance the developing discipline of psychology. Consequently, the child who survived the perils of birth and infancy and moved toward the next life stage would be the subject of new social science projects. While some of the historical literature examines the black child as a subject in social science, medical experiments, and race psychology, these studies do not see their use as part of the larger construction of race. The new project of the psychology of adolescence involved Hall’s theorizing about black children, and the use of mental tests as instruments to affirm Hall’s theories that black children do not grow up.

Though some historians have recognized the construction of “otherness” as part of American imperialism, my study shows how the same kinds of racial construction deployed abroad became domesticated through black children who were used as home-grown subjects of surveillance for experts seeking to enhance their disciplinary prestige and identity. Once again, timing and synchronization of events together enhanced the grip upon the black child’s fate. As significant numbers of black children exited the South beginning in the 1920s, the problem of race became nationalized and resulted in more black children becoming available as actual laboratory subjects in medical studies and mental testing, or as imagined subjects for those seeking to make and prove claims about racial inferiority. Progressive reformers like Du Bois, Thomas Jesse Jones, Kelly Miller, Horace Mann Bond, Mead and Boaz, and a cadre of black
professionals and media commentators questioned the data and debunked biogenetic theories about racial differences in child development. Additionally, a perusal of *Opportunity Magazine*, *The Crisis* and black newspapers reveals that blacks were not only critical of “foolish tests,” they also appeared to accept the hegemonic standards of emerging social science even as they defied their certainty by showcasing talented and intellectually precocious black children who scored high on I.Q. tests or out performed white children.

My third chapter reveals how popular culture echoed and reinforced Hall’s message and the findings of the mental testers. There is an ample amount of historical literature on black imagery and stereotypes that circulated through the mails, film, books, advertising, and consumer goods. However, these studies tend to view images of black children as comical surrogate figures used to comment on black adults, instead of as actual commentaries on children and efforts to control them. My intervention in the existing literature suggests a different use and interpretation for these rich resources and poses another set of considerations that move beyond the usual content analysis. Here using new citizen subjects – black children – my discussion of popular artifacts is situated in the discourse of citizenship and ideas of citizenship worthiness now of great interest to historians and other scholars. It is not that Hall influenced the artists who drew postcards, but that within this arena of popular and consumer culture I have found that his ideas became naturalized, taken for granted, and ordinary.

Du Bois invited and received images of respectable black youth from black parents, images that would be published in *The Crisis* and his *Brownies’ Books Magazine*, a project intended to affirm the accomplishments of black parents and children. Though black children were not lynched in the North, their visual world and the world of white consumers who purchased postcards and cheap household items bearing black stereotypes were embedded with symbolic media messages that demeaned black youth. The postcards, and other consumer objects and items of pleasure, delivered messages about social control that put black children and their parents on notice that they would be dealt with if they stepped out of line. These items portrayed
black children as good-for-nothing, lazy, stupid, ugly, deviant, sexual, unwanted, dispensable and unworthy of citizenship participation.

When placed next to images of white children produced during the same era, they speak to how black and white children were constructed as imagined opposites and powerfully demonstrate how a newly developed social value of children as innocent, worthy and protected did not apply to blacks. As I catalogue the exclusion of black children from mainstream Progressive-era anti-vice campaigns, my study agrees with an emerging literature and growing recognition of the failures of child-saving. The degradation of black childhood operated on the level of the stereotype and moved blacks to engage with consumer culture to create a visual narrative of their own to counter the comic violence and sexually degrading imagery produced by white America. Additionally, clubwomen and other race leaders erected their own child-saving institutions to assure the health and moral development of children.

Turning my lens to the borderlands of the American West, I move beyond previous discussions that focus on the settlement of new territory, those that bow to racial diversity in the borderlands through discussions of Native Americans and the establishment of all-black towns framing their discussions as only an adult experience. The murders of Herbert and Castella Sells and the court battles of Sarah Rector, Edith and Edna Durant, Luther Manuel, Dan Tucker and Sallie Hodge is an unusual untold tale of racially motivated greed and political corruption. The significant number of propertied black children, potential owners of oil rich property posed a peculiar and yet hopeful situation for African Americans. Here I show how southern innovations related to the control of black children were imported to western territories not yet members of the Union.

The post-Emancipation South engineered new ways, including apprenticeship and sharecropping to control the freedpeople, few of whom owned any property. The post-Civil War political situation in Indian Territory and the subsequent Dawes Allotment Act posed a different problem at the dawn of Oklahoma’s statehood in 1907. An entire historiography has examined
the adoption of a repertoire of legal practices, from illegal indentures, apprenticeships, and sharecropping to prisons, in order to maintain slavery by another name. Politically powerful and well-healed white men of Oklahoma drew upon legal controls through guardianships to prevent black children or their parents from securing full citizenship rights including, of course, the right to contract and, for the parents, the right to act as their children’s legal surrogates, both of which would have enabled their children and their later descendants to become autonomous and prosperous.

Access to land and oil created a different kind of black childhood that did not exist elsewhere in the United States. Certainly for the freedpeople, who had been transformed from slave property of Native Americans into citizens, landowning black children symbolized the openness of the West and possibilities of achieving full citizenship. Upon statehood, Oklahoma’s newly elected officials quickly recognized that the presence of thousands of land-owning children of color ran contrary to the fundamentals of racial hierarchy. There was simply too much land and money at stake to allow the federal government to maintain protective policies that would allow so many black children to capitalize on resources and become full-fledged even prosperous citizens once they reached the age of majority. The strategic control of black children was understood as a necessary strategy in a fluid political situation threatening to allow their future economic success and autonomy.

I want to speculate now on how my findings can enrich the American national narrative. First, the history of race and the racialization of children is not only a southern story; it is a national phenomenon. The Oklahoma chapter reveals how racial pogroms and the development of strategies to deny emancipated blacks their rights as citizens and parents extended to other regions of the country and how racial hierarchy staked a claim in state building and the incorporation of new territories. Black children, like Native American children, are central to that story. Second, the history of pediatric medicine and psychology are deficient for not taking into account how the history of black childhood is implicated in the formations of these specialties.
While historians have long recognized the role of the courts in the maintenance of the color line, my research signals that state bureaucracies, and in the case of Oklahoma, the U.S. Congress and other federal agencies colluded in the use of children to promote racial policies and surveillance.

Third, the national circulation of stereotypes through popular visual media and consumer goods need to be connected to the problems of citizenship and race. Racialized images of children must be understood as a central theme in the discourse about how American citizenship is constructed and who gets excluded in the process. Clearly popular culture production including postcards, allow such an exploration.

This dissertation is not the full story of what I want to tell. To complete this study and bring it to book form I look forward to further explorations. First, I want to continue my examination of the developmental life stages of adolescence, particularly adolescent sexuality, a topic of substantial concern to social scientists, physicians and black parents. To further examine the actual physical destruction of black childhood, future chapters will look at lynching and sexual violation, the place of black children in the sexualization of post-Reconstruction era politics and discourses on sexually transmitted diseases and sterilization. It is during this period that the normalization of the black child as sexually precocious in early adolescence first took root. I need to engage in more primary source research to fully develop and strengthen the black counter narrative to the sexual degradation of black childhood, particularly how black women developed writing campaigns targeted at advertisers of racist and sexualized images of black children. Drawing from the American Youth Commission’s interviews with adolescent blacks, I also need to incorporate black children’s voices into the narrative to highlight their feelings about the visual world surrounding them and the impact that cultural ideas had on their view of themselves as well as their attitudes on sex and white people.

The construction of the sexually deviant black child is linked to the disturbing criminalization of black children that began early in the twentieth century. I plan to look at the development of juvenile courts at the turn of the twentieth century to argue that although
Progressive Era reform programs were envisioned as a means to save troubled youth, this rehabilitative ideology did not apply to black children. While works such as David Oshinsky’s *Worse Than Slavery*, David Blackmon’s *Slavery By Another Name* and others have uncovered the criminal justice system’s economic exploitation of blacks who were arrested and forced to work off fines by serving as unpaid labor to small-town businesses, provincial farmers, and large corporations, black children have not been extracted and given attention in this saga even though they were frequently admitted to reformatories because of their utility as laborers. A few scholars have noted that though the economic exploitation of black children in the North was less evident, but reformatory authorities still shared the southern view that black children were inferior to white children and had little reform potential. This future chapter will dig deep into the biological theories about black children’s deviancy to explicate the dynamics of racism in the juvenile justice system.

As I wrote this dissertation I was made aware that other groups of children – Japanese, Chinese, Native Americans, Chicanos, Filipinos, Puerto Ricans, and other Hispanics, as well as white ethnic immigrants were also racialized. Ethnic children of color became the subjects of litigation concerning public schools, segregation and confinement, and were subjected to standardized testing and tracking. My dissertation calls for future studies on the process and implications of the racialization of these diverse groups of children.

And so here we are in a new century with a black president and we are facing new sets of economic, social, political, demographic and technological changes, much like Americans at the turn of the 20th century. The Obama presidency by no means resolves the complexities raised by Du Bois’s challenges at the dawn of the twentieth century. Du Bois’s premonition about the problem of the color line still holds true. Now is the moment to step back as an historian and consider the problem that the children and grandchildren of slaves presented and the solutions Americans, North, South, East and West developed in a society structured by race to deal with these new citizens. These solutions remain with us still, as do the vestiges of inequalities in
citizenship and race that they carry. The dire statistics and the dour predictions about black children, too numerous to cite here, are such a staple of news reporting that they fail to shock anymore. The question is, do those constant references to “minority achievement gaps,” “growing incarceration rates,” “Black-on-Black violence,” “alarming health disparities,” “hip hop gangstas,” young black “video vixens,” poor health and diet, and much higher than average death rates among young black Americans help to hem in the dreams and aspirations of many black boys and girls? Do they convey the message that “It’s no use dreaming, because you aren’t going to make it,” which some youth take to heart?

Set against the backdrop of the crises facing black youth, many have asked what Obama’s achievement means for black children? Some observers have suggested that his rise to power symbolizes the resurrection of hope, a reconstruction of democracy and a psychic boost especially to young blacks. Could it mean that the American Dream is finally a bit more within reach for children of color coming of age today? Could it mean that there will be a dramatic shift in thinking of black children as something other than problematic, menacing and doomed? While it is too soon to know what the Obama presidency means in this context, perhaps it signals a turnaround in the public perception of the worth and promise of black children and other children of color and how they view themselves. But given the statistics, we cannot allow ourselves to be so mesmerized by the historic significance of Obama’s election that we believe America will make a radical about-face anytime soon. Change is a slow process.

While the streams of history flow to yet undecided waters, we must remain hopeful about the state of black childhood in America despite predictions to the contrary. While there are striking and disturbing parallels between the social realities facing black children growing up during Jim Crow and those coming of age in this new century, we must acknowledge that times have changed. This is not the world of the 1890s, 1900s, 1920s or the 1950s. America has indeed become a more tolerant society because of the Civil Rights Movement, in which, let us not forget, the interests, safety and equality of black children figured prominently.
The logic of contemporary capitalism and new global technologies has expanded the space of tolerance and recognizes blacks and other marginalized groups as viable consumer markets. Many white Americans have come to recognize that their fate is bound up with tolerance and racial equality. We must take note as well of the overwhelming reverse migration of blacks back to urban centers of the South as they traditionally have. But a recent report by The Brookings Institute shows something new: the Southern U.S. region — primarily metropolitan areas such as Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Miami and Charlotte, N.C. — accounted for roughly 75 percent of the population gains among blacks since 2000, up from 65 percent in the 1990s, according to the latest U.S. Census estimates. The gains came primarily at the expense of northern metro areas such as New York and Chicago, which posted their first declines in black population since at least 1980. This reverse migration has been primarily attributed to the South’s modernization, improved racial climate, employment opportunities, and historical ties. As blacks, no longer the major minority, reclaim the South, Hispanics now the largest American minority, are settling near them. It remains to be seen how these demographic shifts will redefine race and racialized childhood.

In this dissertation I have shown how an imprint of racialized childhood was developed after slavery, delivered through various cultural sites and connected, one to the other, and to a web of cultural understanding and practices. If we look at racialized childhood with the understanding that my scholarship has outlined, we can see why black children have not escaped the old racial logic that justified legal segregation and differential treatment. Additionally, we can see how this understanding and exploitation of children is now being applied to Hispanic children and deployed as an instrument of immigration control. As a new wave of potential citizens pose the same kind of problems as free citizens and free laborers, that black children did in the aftermath of slavery, immigration hardliners are seizing the old paradigm cultivated by racial theorists and even innovating new strategies such as rendering the 14th Amendment’s birth right to children of immigrants born in the United States, to racialize and demean minority and
immigrant children. This current epistemology of race and childhood echoes what was said about black children’s incompetence, deviancy and inability to grow up. While black children cannot be deported because they are clearly citizens, some Americans wish to deny citizenship to the children of illegal immigrants and simply deport them and their parents. Once again, the citizenship status of the child is at issue.

In December of 2010 the U.S. Senate rejected the DREAM Act, legislation which proposed to grant citizenship at the end of a ten-year period to children of undocumented immigrants who successfully earned post-secondary degrees or entered military service. It was clear then that the failure of so moderate a measure to gain approval – with some Democrats as well as Republicans voting against it – did not augur well for a bipartisan search for sensible solutions to the crisis of illegal immigration in the new Congress. It was in the aftermath of the deferral of the DREAM Act that illegal immigration foes sounded calls for a review and repeal of the 14th Amendment’s Citizenship Clause as it pertains to granting automatic citizenship to children born to illegal immigrants on American soil.

Hoping to obscure these proposals’ roots in the imbroglio that erupted in Arizona in the spring of 2010 over the state’s harsh, wrongheaded immigration act, the legislators pushing these “birthright citizenship” measures couch their opposition now in high-toned legalistic and constitutional terms. But in fact they are following an old and tawdry tradition in American life – one that should give anyone knowledgeable about the black freedom struggle of the twentieth century a strong sense of déjà vu. Then, too, those who opposed citizenship for black Americans displayed a special venom in trying to deprive black children and young people of the keys to opportunity. Then, too, black youth, were spoken of in demonic terms – as criminals, as threats to the public order. Then, too, a campaign of “massive resistance” to them stretched from the halls of Congress and state legislatures to municipal governments and street protests. So, perhaps, then, it should not have been unexpected that immigration hardliners would reject the ten-year, achievement-oriented path to citizenship the DREAM Act, now deferred, would have
required of Latino youth whose parents entered the U.S. illegally – and who are already Americans in everything but the actual rights of citizenship. America, once again, is disabling the young as a centerpiece of racial hierarchy and social policy.

In this rapidly changing climate of economic turmoil and growing political hysteria of right-wing conservatives, we can only hope that young blacks can recognize their own promise and potential reflected in the browning of America and in the nation’s first black president. Hopefully, they can see their rich possibilities reflected in his victorious journey. Du Bois offered a starting point for the achievement of justice and democracy through black children. He provided the best articulation about the importance and potential of all American children. He wrote: “All human problems . . . center in the Immortal Child and his education is the problem of problems . . . And that child is of all races and colors. All children are the children of all and not of individuals and families and races. The whole generation must be trained and guided out of it as out of a huge reservoir must be lifted all genius, talent, and intelligence to serve the world.”

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