The Literate Meaning-Making Practices, Sociopolitical Knowledge, And Racial Awareness Of First-Grade African American Children In An Urban Community School

Wintre Foxworth Johnson
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The Literate Meaning-Making Practices, Sociopolitical Knowledge, And Racial Awareness Of First-Grade African American Children In An Urban Community School

Abstract
Issues concerning race and racism have long been considered too difficult for young children to comprehend. Underlying this perspective is an assumption that there is a common lived experience for all young children. While there are some universal aspects of coming of age that connect children of all backgrounds, young children of color experience childhood in distinctive ways. Few empirical studies on early racial awareness have exclusively examined African American children's perspectives, a group in the U.S. whose contemporary social location and historical experiences of marginalization enable them to develop convictions and offer insights about societal conditions. Numerous studies over the past 20 years on early literacy and learning have pointed to the significance of sociocultural contexts in supporting young children's literate capabilities and capacity to articulate the conditions of their worlds (e.g., Comber, 1999; Ghiso, 2011; Souto-Manning, 2009; Strickland et al., 2004; Zapata, Fugit, & Moss, 2017). Despite the richness of this work, there is relatively limited research about how young African American children make meaning of society and racialization through multiple literacy practices.

Drawing upon three sources of qualitative data—participant observations, literature circles, and interviews—I studied what five African American first-graders at an urban, community school understood about historical and contemporary racialized circumstances, how they represented their sociopolitical knowledge, and the socialization sources and messages upon which they drew. Grounded in a sociocultural approach to literacy (Street, 1995), critical literacy (Freire, 1970), Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1992), and developmental science on young children's emerging knowledge and identities (McKown, 2004), three primary findings emerged. First, all of the children, during their participation in the series of literature circles, expressed understandings and critiques of five issues: incarceration, policing, politics, enslavement, and personal moments of unjust treatment and exclusion, and described how racism operated to exacerbate them. Second, their literacy meaning-making practices—dialogue, drawing, and dictation—were characterized by imaginative thinking, intertextuality, and nonlinear temporality. Third, their understandings of racialized social issues were influenced profoundly by everyday experiences with their parents, active engagement with media, and the race conscious critical pedagogy of their school.

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THE LITERATE MEANING-MAKING PRACTICES, SOCIO POLITICAL
KNOWLEDGE, AND RACIAL AWARENESS OF FIRST GRADE AFRICAN
AMERICAN CHILDREN IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Wintre Foxworth Johnson
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Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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DEDICATION

This project and my degree are dedicated to my grandmother, Doretha Snowden Boyd, who passed away on May 30, 2020. Below is the tribute I wrote and read at her homegoing service.

In the novel Beloved, Toni Morrison wrote the following: She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind.

Not many can say that their grandmother was a friend of their mind. But my grandma was so many things to me: a friend, a confidante (she knew a lot of my secrets), my botanist always ready to advise me about how to keep my plants alive, the person who taught me how to cook, who modeled how to take care of home, who taught me how to read. She was my TV guide always recommending new shows to me, my go-to person to call to shoot the breeze about absolutely nothing during my car rides to and from campus or the grocery store. We shared countless small moments that I do not have the time to recount here.

She was my person, my safe place. Her voice (because I have spent all of my adult life living away from home), which I heard every day, was like a warm embrace. I exhaled in her presence, all worries faded away when I walked through the door of the place I’ve called home for 20 years and saw her face. What she was to me cannot fully be captured in this tribute; she was the fabric that weaved our family together and she was the center of my world in a lot of ways.

The following is an adaption of the poem entitled The Black Mother by Marcus Garvey:

Where can I find love that never changes
Smiles that are true and always just the same,
Caring not how the fierce tempest rages,
Willing ever to shield my honored name?

This I find at home, only with Grandmother,
Who cares for me with patient tenderness;
She from every human pain would rather
Save me, and drink the dregs of bitterness.

If on life’s way I happen to flounder,
My true thoughts should be of Grandmother dear,
She is the rock that ne’er rifts asunder,
The cry of her child, be it far or near.
This is love wonderful beyond compare;
It is God’s choicest gift to mortal man;
You, who know Grandmother, in this thought must share,
For, she, of all, is Angel of your Clan.

My Grandmother is Black, loveliest of all;
Yes, she is as pure as the new made morn;
Her song of glee is a clear rhythmic call
To these arms of love to which I was born.

I shall never forget you, sweet grandmother,
Where’er in life I may happen to roam;
Thou shalt always be the Fairy Charmer
To turn my dearest thoughts to things at home.

Grandma, my girl, you always said you lived vicariously through me when I went away for school, when I pursued my passions and established my family on my own terms. I hope to have made you proud and I hope you knew that you were a queen in my eyes. What you gave me these past 30 years is better than anything money can buy. No matter my financial standing, I am rich because I had you.

You will live on in my heart, in my memories, through my children, and I will do my best to reflect the unconditional love and gentle spirit that was the essence of who you were to everyone, especially our family. I will miss you more than I could ever articulate. I love you SO much and I always will. You were my angel on earth and now you are my angel above. Rest peacefully.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I could write acknowledgements as long as this dissertation. This project was a community effort, in that I could not have made it to this point by myself. I am empowered by the ancestors to do the work that ignites my passions and honors their legacy of Black excellence, resilience, and resistance. Thank you God, for charting my path and seeing me through, picking me up in the low moments, giving me the stamina to see this thing through until the end and for ordering my steps with so much purpose and alignment.

To my husband, Terah, thank you for creating space for me to develop myself outside of the roles of wife and mother. Thank you for your “we” mentality and supporting me to and through the journey. To my children, Valen and Ila, you are my greatest accomplishments but I hope this work makes you all proud. I often joke that you both have honorary degrees but I could not recount this journey without you all at the center of the narrative. Thank you for making my life full.

To my mother, Uvonka, you have been such a driving force for the inquiries that undergird this project. You set the stage for my interests in African American children, literacy, and critical education. You are so wonderful. I can only repay you in grandchildren 😊 To my stepdad and grandparents, you all filled a void that you did not have to. I am abundantly blessed for that.

I had a dissertation committee comprised of brilliant humans, scholars who are critical and compassionate. Dr. Gadsden, you have been so much more than an advisor and chair. You have supported me through the many life changes that I have experienced over the past six years. You have been so intensely and meticulously committed to my development, always going above and beyond the call of duty for me. You have challenged me to be a better researcher, teacher, and thinker. You have enveloped my family with your love and kindness. You are a model for how to advise and mentor in a humanizing way and I will do my best to carry that forward in my career. Thank you.

Dr. Campano, thank you for the countless times that you have listened to me brainstorm in your office, offering me loving but constructively critical feedback. You have been so encouraging and affirming at every point of this journey.

Dr. Stevenson, thank you for being available to me, to express my ideas, to explain my evolving analysis, and for expanding my paradigmatic perspectives as I engaged in this inquiry.

To my PennGSE and R/W/L family of professors (Dr. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Dr. Amy Stornaiuolo, and Dr. Diane Waff), colleagues (Dr. Grace Player, Dr. Emily Schwab, Dr. Sherea Mosley, Dr. Dana Cypress, Dr. Elizabeth Simmons, and many others who were integral to my time at Penn), and othermothers (Mrs. Penny Creedon, Ms. Lorraine
Hightower, Ms. Tamika Easley, Ms. Christine Lee, and Ms. Teya Campbell), thank you for making Penn a home for me. I felt nurtured academically but also spiritually and psychologically because of each of you.

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To all of my mentors along the way, Dr. Claudrena Harold, who envisioned this for me even before I believed I had the capacity to complete a Ph.D. and who has supported me and cheered me on every step of my professional journey. Dr. Roquinaldo Ferreira, who planted the seed for my scholarly interests during my first year of undergraduate studies. To Dr. Kimberley Bassett, who has over the years become a wonderful friend and who has always been an encouraging presence through my many life transitions. Dr. Sonja Lanehart and my NCTE CNV family (Dr. Valerie Kinloch, Dr. Saba Vlach, Dr. Maria Leija, Dr. Tiffany Nyachae, Dr. Teairra McMurtry, Dr. Davena Jackson to name a few), thank you for supporting me in the final leg of my doctoral studies. You all are soul feeding.

To Ujamaa, thank you for welcoming me with open arms into your school community. Thank you for being so kind and warm to me, a stranger who sought to represent such a small piece of who you all are. Thank you each of my participants, their parents, the teachers, and Ujamaa’s principal for all of the ways you showed up for me. I am forever grateful for the opportunity.

To my dearest best friend, Brittany Flippen, I admire the educator that you are. I admire the dedication that you demonstrate to your students and the school communities of which you have been a part. Thank you for being a consistent listening ear, a true support system.

There are so many people I could name here, so many I hold in my heart. I am who I am because of those who have believed in and poured into me.
ABSTRACT

THE LITERATE MEANING-MAKING PRACTICES, SOCIOPOLITICAL KNOWLEDGE, AND RACIAL AWARENESS OF FIRST-GRADE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Wintre Foxworth Johnson

Vivian L. Gadsden

Issues concerning race and racism have long been considered too difficult for young children to comprehend. Underlying this perspective is an assumption that there is a common lived experience for all young children. While there are some universal aspects of coming of age that connect children of all backgrounds, young children of color experience childhood in distinctive ways. Few empirical studies on early racial awareness have exclusively examined African American children’s perspectives, a group in the U.S. whose contemporary social location and historical experiences of marginalization enable them to develop convictions and offer insights about societal conditions. Numerous studies over the past 20 years on early literacy and learning have pointed to the significance of sociocultural contexts in supporting young children's literate capabilities and capacity to articulate the conditions of their worlds (e.g., Comber, 1999; Ghiso, 2011; Souto-Manning, 2009; Strickland et al., 2004; Zapata, Fugit, & Moss, 2017). Despite the richness of this work, there is relatively limited research about how young African American children make meaning of society and racialization through multiple literacy practices.
Drawing upon three sources of qualitative data—participant observations, literature circles, and interviews—I studied what five African American first-graders at an urban, community school understood about historical and contemporary racialized circumstances, how they represented their sociopolitical knowledge, and the socialization sources and messages upon which they drew. Grounded in a sociocultural approach to literacy (Street, 1995), critical literacy (Freire, 1970), Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1992), and developmental science on young children’s emerging knowledge and identities (McKown, 2004), three primary findings emerged. First, all of the children, during their participation in the series of literature circles, expressed understandings and critiques of five issues: incarceration, policing, politics, enslavement, and personal moments of unjust treatment and exclusion, and described how racism operated to exacerbate them. Second, their literacy meaning-making practices—dialogue, drawing, and dictation—were characterized by imaginative thinking, intertextuality, and nonlinear temporality. Third, their understandings of racialized social issues were influenced profoundly by everyday experiences with their parents, active engagement with media, and the race conscious critical pedagogy of their school.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Children, not yet aware that it is dangerous to look too deeply at anything, look at everything, look at each other, and draw their own conclusions. They don't have the vocabulary to express what they see...But a black child, looking at the world around him, though he cannot know quite what to make of it, is aware that there is a reason why his mother works so hard, why his father is always on edge...And it isn't long - in fact it begins when he is in school - before he discovers the shape of his oppression. (Baldwin, 1963, p. 124)

This dissertation examines five African American first-graders’ sociopolitical knowledge and how they used literacy practices to express and represent their awareness and understandings of racism. Moreover, I sought to explore whether and how these children understood the ways racism functioned systemically and from where they gathered their knowledge. Over the course of several months in an urban, community school in a Northeastern city in the U.S., I facilitated a series of fourteen after-school literature circles wherein I invited young children to offer their perspectives. They shared across experiences, which were drawn from and beyond the print literature that was introduced, and made meaning in multiple forms. Through their participation, I gathered data on their nascent racialized understandings of the world, their emergent literate identities, and their burgeoning justice-oriented mindsets. With an intention to build upon early literacy research in which researchers learn about children as opposed to from them (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2016), positioning them “as social actors who are subjects rather than objects of enquiry” (Christensen & James, 2008, p. 1), my project sought to center African American children’s narratives, voices, and perspectives. I write this dissertation as an African American woman, mother, and educator who believes deeply in the power and ingenuity of Black children and their literacies.
Story of the Questions

Autobiographical Connections

The origins of this dissertation study can undoubtedly be traced to my own upbringing and family. Growing up with grandparents as my primary joint caregivers, I spent much of my time with two people who had intimate, first-hand experiences with racism and discrimination. Born and raised in North Carolina in the 1940’s and 1950’s, they knew how racism could discreetly marginalize and block access to resources and often bare necessities. They walked or rode their bikes to school because there was no bus for Black children, as they watched white children ride by and sometimes even taunt or spit on them. My great-grandmother could transport white children as a local school bus driver but not her own children back and forth to school. They were refused service at restaurants because they only served white people. My grandmother recalls sticking her hand in a hole in the wall of a restaurant to retrieve a meal and not being able to sit down to enjoy her meal. My grandfather recollects not having textbooks and other necessary educational materials in the schoolhouse he attended. They have memories of the sit-ins and marches for desegregation of public businesses.

Their racialized experiences echo into the present and were often a topic of discussion in the home I shared with them from fourth grade through high school. Their sharing and storying politicized me in meaningful ways. They never shied away from explaining what their world was like growing up and what remained the same so that I always knew race mattered and matters for the person I was to become and what place dominant communities thought I should or should not assume. This pushed me to
interrogate the nature of my schooling. I understood that most of the literature I was exposed to in school did not reflect my identity until I was in high school and was assigned *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. I knew that there was a rich history of creating, working, living, thriving, and surviving within and across African American communities that was not included in almost all of the Honors and Advanced Placement curriculum from which I was taught. Assigned in my 12th grade Advanced Placement English class, this text allowed me to see the significance of Black Studies and demonstrated to me that Blackness and Black lived experiences could be the focal point of critical, intellectual discussion.

Alongside the lived experiences of my grandparents, I was raised by a mother who always was intellectually intrigued by African American history. In her own pedagogical practices as an elementary school teacher, she made sure to invite the narratives of famous and noteworthy Black people into her classroom. Having always taught predominantly African American children in both rural and urban contexts, she recognizes the importance of making known the foundational contributions of Black people in and to the U.S. As I matriculated into my postsecondary studies, my mother told me that if she could attend college again, she would major in African American studies. This further sparked my passion to intellectually engage with the issues and conditions of the African diaspora. My family created space outside of school for me to explore and expand my understanding of the resilience and ingenuity of Black people, while also attuning me to the oppressive conditions that warranted that resilience.
Her race consciousness permeates not only her teaching practice but was apparent in her approach to rearing me, with an emphasis on developing my identity as Black and woman and the experiences that lie at the intersection. My interests in my own identity and history and that of the African diaspora became salient to me long before I entered the University of Virginia. However, diving into texts such as *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois and hearing the words of Audre Lorde reverberate throughout the college classroom created a new kind of intellectually stimulating environment, one that was centered the collective experiences of people of the African diaspora.

My own racial awareness was cultivated at an early stage in my life. I was certain about who I was, the legacy of my ancestors that I was working to fulfill, and how we as Black people had come to be. My intellectual acuity was harnessed and refined as an undergraduate. Declaring my African American and African studies major early in my undergraduate studies, I was determined to fill the gaps of my primary and secondary educational experiences. It was in those courses and through those assignments, I felt as if I was getting all of the missing pieces of the historical puzzle I had not formally received in my K-12 education. The pinnacle of these experiences took place during my time abroad in Salvador Bahia, Brazil. I saw the connections of the transatlantic slave trade across space and time. I came to understand that the conditions of Black people in the Americas was something that I should engage more deeply and that the experiential knowledge that people should be centered and honored as rich and revelatory.

Furthermore, the sociopolitical nature of race and racism, that is how the racial, political and social context in which a society is developed and maintained, also became
significant. Salvador is where I became a researcher, where I began to ask empirical questions and desired to seek answers. These informal, familial and formal, educational moments paired with my later professional experiences are what led me to the inquiry explored in this dissertation.

**Professional Connections**

Alongside my intellectual engagements in my African American and African Studies major, I developed a love for young children’s learning and development through my volunteering efforts at a local early childhood development center in Charlottesville, Virginia. I worked alongside the teachers, facilitating craft and learning activities, supporting indoor and outdoor play, reading stories, and assisting the staff in other day-to-day duties. This center, which served mostly children of color, was where I began to see myself as an educator. I realized that I had a love for teaching young children and that I enjoyed seeing them grow and learn at this stage in their development. I knew that I needed to interrogate and cultivate this passion.

As a Prekindergarten and Kindergarten teacher in East Point, Georgia, I deepened this passion and honed in on my love for literacy, as a tool for collaboration, for engagement, and for transformation. Although not the most revolutionary early educator (as I was young, inexperienced, and only spent a brief time in the classroom as a practicing teacher), I knew that my students, all of color, possessed knowledge of the world and of themselves that should and could be used in their processes of learning. I knew that as they came to read and write in the traditionally academic sense, that they brought funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and cultural ways of being and knowing
that should be validated. They have rich histories, similar and distinct from my own, histories that should be included in the curricular and pedagogical practices of the classrooms they inhabited. I sought out literature that mirrored their lives. I encouraged their parents to visit and to communicate with me. I created space, as my mother does, to celebrate the Black heroes and heroines in our society. We discussed such historical moments as the Civil Rights era and I unearthed their emergent notions of fairness and racial justice.

My time in the classroom taught me as much as I taught my students. I learned how powerful literacy could be, if rooted in culturally relevant approach, and what is possible when you engage your students to cultivate a love for reading. I created a classroom context that was filled with opportunities to read, to improve my skills, and to dive into texts that interested me, what my grandmother had done for me as she taught me to read. I witnessed the immense growth and changes that my students underwent in the formative years of their K-12 schooling. I saw the emergence and development of their literate identities and what role educators play in supporting that trajectory. I reflected upon the limitations of my pedagogy and examined the possibilities of early literacy instruction in expanding our view of academic proficiency. Most consequential of all, I was exposed to the beauty of their lived experiences as young children of color in a low-income, urban community and how their identities were intimately connected to their approaches to learning.

**Framing of the Problem**

Think about these stereotypes, these omissions, these distortions as a kind of environment that surrounds us, like smog in the air. We don’t breathe it because
we like it. We don’t breathe it because we think it’s good for us. We breathe it because it’s the only air that’s available (Beverly Tatum in Adelman, 2003)

African American children and other young children of color are growing and learning in a persistently racialized environment; assuming colorblindness amongst young children ignores the contemporary context and historical legacy of race in the United States (Boutte, 2008; Boutte et al., 2011). The political and social context of the United States in which my participants live(d) is comprised of such issues as Black Lives Matter, intense protests, interrogations of the institution of policing and recurrent viral moments of police brutality, white supremacist demonstrations, issues of immigration, xenophobic discourses, human rights violations at the border and abroad, and the election and the rise of a president who has exacerbated prejudice along many lines, hatefulness, wealth inequality, and racism. We have been thrust out of the overwhelmingly colorblind or “post-racial” era of the Obama administration and have been forced to confront how society has always treated and continues to treat people of color and other marginalized communities. Issues of equity and justice involving communities of color are ever salient in the news.

Moreover, society is becoming more and more connected locally and globally every day. Social media, viral videos, news media are more accessible to people of all ages than they have ever been (Roberts, 2000). Although data discrimination and the “social divide” persists, African American children and families are digitally accessing and engaging with the world and societal issues (Ellison & Solomon, 2019). Given these conditions, it is not surprising that young children are aware of sociopolitical inequities; they are ubiquitous. In this current climate, there is a need to probe what young children
understand about the structural inequities or “unfair differences that exist in societal institutions such as schools, businesses, government, media, and the like...that systematically reflect and produce racial inequities in the US and privilege some groups while disadvantaging others” (Boutte, 2016) that shape their lived experiences and that of their families and those who identify with them phenotypically, racially, and otherwise.

Although research and scholars have examined the many ways that children of all backgrounds are thinking about difference and injustice, there is a dearth of empirical research that examines how young African American children are developing sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2014) and how literacy supports and assists them in espousing their developing viewpoints. Furthermore, little scholarship explores young children’s understandings of racism; the extant literature most often positions racism as something to be prevented or undone in young children (namely, white children), as opposed to something with which young children should grapple. Bell (1992) declares,

> Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary “peaks of progress,” short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance. (p. 32).

Racism is a permanent, indelible feature of U.S. society. The extant literature about how young children come to know about racism, what they are internalizing about it, and how they are making sense about the way racism operates around them has gone underexamined in empirical literacy studies. To view African American children not simply as victims of racism, or the objects of racism (as much of the work in anti-bias
early education does) but as critical and racial theorists and thinkers makes it possible to expand our understandings of their intellectual capacities, their literacy meaning-making practices, their resilience, and it privileges their experiences, words, and creations as worthy of documenting, representing, and disseminating.

**Theoretical Framing**

Three theories informed the design and analysis of this dissertation: sociocultural perspectives on literacy; critical literacy; and Critical Race Theory (CRT). These three theoretical orientations coalesce in a manner that acknowledges the racial realities of the young children in my study, inviting their experiential knowledge and conceptualizing literacy as a meaning-making vehicle for the expression of that knowledge.

**Sociocultural Perspectives on Literacy**

Moving beyond the definition of literacy as a simple set of technical and autonomous reading and writing skills (Street, 1984), sociocultural conceptualizations of literacy emphasize the varied contexts and histories of those engaging in literacy events (Heath, 1983; Barton and Hamilton, 2000). Sociocultural orientations to literacy practice (Luke, 2012; Gee, 2000; The New London Group, 1996) attend to the contextual and localized nature of children’s racial knowledge and sense and meaning making while also attending to the larger, historical influences on their literate embodiments and thinking. Literacy is more than pencil and paper; it is more than phonological awareness and vocabulary development. It is also very much about the ways that people express their beliefs, how their worlds are brought to bear in their experience and representation of the
world, and how who they are and understand themselves to be influences the way they think, speak, write, and read.

Gutiérrez (2008) distills sociocritical literacy, a specific iteration of this theoretical orientation, as “a historical literacy that privileges and is contingent upon students’ sociohistorical lives, both proximally and distally” (p. 149). In theorizing expansively about how literacy is expressed and enacted, I position literacy not simply as a means to represent standardized academic knowledge or proficiency but as a meaning-making practice (Wright, 2007). Invited to utilize a range of modalities to engage their ideas, the children used dialogue most often to articulate their racial awareness, the mode most commonly ignored in schools as an official demonstration of knowledge. Viewing literacy as a social practice served as a theoretical and analytical framing that made space in the circle sessions for the expression and representation of race, power, and manifestations of inequity that abound in the U.S. and inequities.

**Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1999), whose intellectual lineage can be traced in critical pedagogy (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993) and critical theory (Giroux, 2001) theorizes power, praxis, and politicization as central to literacy education and practice. It has been adapted and implemented in early childhood classroom settings, enabled educators to explore a range of issues related to justice and fairness (see Chapter 2 for pedagogical examples in the “Review of Scholarly Literature”). Utilizing critical literacy as a theoretical framing allows for a view of the text (in many of the previous studies and in my dissertation, multicultural children’s literature) as a grounding, a
centering place to begin exploring issues of difference with children. Children’s literature is the guiding means and platform to name and unpack the world and engage intellectual and aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1982) responses to it. Campano, Sanchez, & Ghiso (2013) declare,

There are also socially situated critical literacy practices that may arise organically in local contexts, especially if students, even elementary-age children, are afforded the curricular space to mobilize cultural and epistemic resources in their transactions with texts and with their worlds (p. 121).

Undergirded by the notion that young African American students have substantive life experiences and knowledge even as young as six and seven of which they are aware and are making sense of, my project attends to the “organic critical literacies” (Campano, Sanchez, & Ghiso, 2013) that they put forward. These critical literacies were activated by the children’s literature introduced to them, as well as their “witnessing” (Dutro, 2009) of other’s experiences and stories; these critical literacies were rooted in their emergent racialized identities as Black children, which enabled them to put forth assessments of society’s inequities in a number of forms. They read the word and then offered a reading of the world (Freire, 1985; Freire & Macedo, 1987).

This study utilizes critical literacy in its focus on power as a place to begin the discussion and for its possibilities of interrogation, deconstruction, and making and remaking their social worlds. As I approached this study with a critical literacy lens, I aimed to engage power in a manner that allowed my participants to connect their lived experiences to that of others, to the text, but also serve as a platform for problematizing, reflecting, and reimagining.
Critical Race Theory

Early education scholars and practitioners have taken critical literacy up and engaged in complex discussions with young children. However, race has not been central to those discussions. Yet, race and power are interrelated entities at work in people’s lives, even young children. With this premise in mind, three tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) shaped my methodological approach and informed the data analysis: 1. racism as constitutive and endemic to American society, 2. counter-storytelling/narrative, and 3. racial realism.

...African Americans must confront and conquer the otherwise deadening reality of our permanent subordinate status. Only in this way can we prevent ourselves from being dragged down by society’s racial hostility. Beyond survival lies the potential to perceive more clearly both a reason and the means for further struggle (Bell, 1992, p. 32)

As Bell (1992) argues, racism is constitutive and endemic to American society, it is embedded in how the U.S. was founded and continues to resonate with how power is maintained at all levels. Children are therefore not living in a bubble of racelessness, rather they are born into a stratified society and for children of color, a world that very early on instructs them about their societal status. Everyone is interpellated in the U.S. racist, hegemonic system and therefore, even young children can and do become aware of how pernicious ways in which race and racism operate. In this way, CRT undergirds the impetus for the study and provides a lens through which we can make sense of the racialized moments that occur every day. CRT enabled me to facilitate the circle sessions from a place that counters dominant discourses with and about young children of color. Instead of focusing on the limitations of their capacity to understand or articulate, my
study operated from an affirming place that viewed these children as intellectual knowledge-holders with limited (given their age) yet abundant (given their societal vantage point rooted in historical and contemporary marginalization) experiences to understanding the racial realities in the U.S. During the circles, the children demonstrated the “community cultural wealth” (Yosso. 2005) they possess.

(Counter)storytelling and the salience of narrative (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) in explicating the lived experiences of people of color are salient dimensions of CRT that influenced how I developed the study and also served as a lens in reading and interpreting the study’s data. The children made connections to a variety of multicultural children’s literature by drawing from their personal, social, and academic experiences and repertoires, thereby creating a space where storytelling occurred (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) and in which issues that the children found consequential were documented. The circles provided a space that invited the children to tell their stories, share their lives, opinions, beliefs, and most importantly, be heard.

Delgado & Stefancic (2017) define racial realism as the “view that racial progress is sporadic and that people of color are doomed to experience only infrequent peaks followed by regressions” (p. 171). Acknowledging developmental limitations of six- and seven-year-olds, this tenet of CRT allows me to analytically illuminate how these children expressed a sense of historical continuity. Adults are not solely capable of connecting the contemporary conditions of African Americans and people of color to historical events and legacies. The weekly conversations in the circles permitted connective conversations and utilizing racial realism as a fundamental analytical framing
enabled me to highlight the threads across the children’s dialogues and responses as they made links, conscious or not, across time, space, and instances.

In all, employing this conceptual framework enabled the circles to be a context wherein the children could articulate their understandings about the world, outside of the white gaze or an environment that limited their opportunities to make sense of their realities in a way that felt accessible and engaging to them. It is my belief that young children of color need a place to come together, think through injustice, racism, and society’s inequitable organization, share across experiences and make sense of what they see, hear, experience and know.

**Research Questions and Summary of Chapters**

My dissertation project focuses on three questions:

- What do young African American children know and understand about sociopolitical issues to which they have been exposed, observed, or experienced?
- How do they represent their knowledge and understanding of these issues in their oral, pictorial, and print literacies?
- What are the sources of their knowledge and understandings?

This dissertation study investigates these questions through an examination of data that primarily arose during the circles; the analysis chapter that follows will outline the ways I conducted this project and the nature of the circles that engaged the children’s sociopolitical sensibilities.

Chapter 2 details the research and scholarly literature upon which this dissertation builds. It outlines the following: the nature of African American literacy acquisition and
education in the United States across time (i.e., Anderson, 1988), what researchers have found regarding what young children can and do know about race (i.e., McKown, 2004), and how scholars and practitioners have engaged young children of all backgrounds in critical discussions about and around literature (i.e., Sipe, 2000; Franquiz & DeNicolo, 2006). I will discuss why literature circles should center race and racism for and about, between and amongst young African American children.

Chapter 3 will discuss the methodology and methods used in the conduct of the study and the analysis of the data. Within this chapter, I will also discuss my positionality in conducting this study and the implications for how I designed the literature circles. This chapter describes the site of the study, how and why I chose the books I read, and why culturally specific ways of knowing are important in engaging young children in literacy contexts.

Chapter 4 will discuss the first finding that answers the first research question (“What do young African American children know and understand about sociopolitical issues to which they have been exposed, observed, or experienced?”). I will outline the five salient themes that emerged during my circle time and how the children engaged explicating and critiquing several structural and institutional issues. This chapter will demonstrate the children’s capacity for naming and analyzing a range of sociopolitical issues, with an explicit attention on racism and its connections to the inequity about which they are aware.

Chapter 5 will elucidate the second finding that addresses the second research question (“How do they utilize oral, pictorial, and print literacies to make meaning of
sociopolitical issues?”) I will explicate how my participants represented their racial and sociopolitical knowledge and the importance of drawing upon young children’s literacies as tools and methods to understand their viewpoints and world-building perspectives. This chapter will also illustrate how the children’s literacy practices and expressions point to their historical knowledge and acuity about the persistence of inequity in the U.S. The findings in this chapter push us to consider the children’s sociopolitical thinking as intellectual endeavors, not simply as recitations or reflections of their racial identities or self-esteem.

Chapter 6 will discuss the third and final finding that addresses the third research question (“What are the sources of their knowledge and understandings?”), which bolster the first two chapters and their findings. Taking on the perspective that racial socialization is and should not be reserved for the home, this chapter will illustrate the ways my participants are drawing on informal racial socialization from multiple sources, in particular, everyday interactions with their parents, schooling, and engagement with popular culture and television. This chapter invites questions about the relationship between children’s in- and out-of-school lives and how they are coming to know about the issues discussed in Chapter 4 and why in the contemporary moment, we need to attend to the ways children are consuming large amounts (and different kinds) of information via the internet and television, unlike they once were when the world was less connected.

Chapter 7, the conclusion, will provide a discussion of the implications of the findings, as well as address areas for future research. In addition, implications for literacy
research, practice, and policy will be discussed. Finally, I will close with my own reflections on the work that is to be done with and alongside young children of color, acknowledge the responsibility that we all have in doing work such as this for the advancement of literacy, education, and society.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

This dissertation examines African American first grade students’ knowledge and interpretations of racial, social, and political conditions in and around their lives and the literacy practices they use to represent their understandings. It documents the nature of young children’s racial and sociopolitical knowledge, the meaning they make through literacy, and the socialization sources—parents, media, and schooling—upon which they draw that enable them to reach these understandings. The study builds upon five major areas of scholarship: (1) African American literacy education, (2) literature circles and discussions, (3) critical literacy pedagogy, (4) early racial awareness, and (5) racial socialization.

African American Education & Literacies

Over the course of history in the United States, from the time of enslavement to the present, access to literacy and equitable education for African Americans has been fraught with struggle and contestation (Anderson, 1988; Williams, 2005). Despite the difficulties in attaining access, African American have used literacy as a powerful and fortifying vehicle (Gadsden, 1992) through which to proclaim their humanity, achieve liberation, maintain familial ties, and engage in profound critique about society and reflect upon and name their lived experiences. Fugitive literacy practices have comprised the history of African American literacy acquisition and education and persist today as Black children and families seek out equitable conditions in which to learn.

The results of the U.S.’s history of denial, segregation, and inequitable resources and educational opportunities of African Americans are disparate outcomes and a
narrative of the “achievement gap” (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Nieto, 2010). Practitioners and researchers alike have attempted to identify and address the issues and problems that exist in urban schools (or more often, within the children themselves) which are viewed as impervious barriers to African American children and youth achieving in comparison to their white and affluent counterparts (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Literacy development has been examined in particular, emphasizing the development of reading and writing skills as essential to achievement and educational success (Matthews et. al., 2010). This intense focus on the ways African American children are “behind the curve” (Jorgensen, 1995), “not achieving on grade level” or suffering from a word gap (Hart & Risley, 1995), however, has obscured the richness of their literate and cultural practices (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009), along with their approaches to learning (Hale, 1986, 1994) and the instructional practices that best support their development (Boutte, 2016; Murrell, 2012) in the dominant educational discourse. As Ladson-Billings (2000) declares,

> With very few exceptions, the literature does not expressly address the preparation of teachers to teach African American learners effectively. Instead, references to the educational needs of African American students are folded into a discourse of deprivation. Searches of the literature base indicate that when one uses the descriptor, “Black education,” one is directed to see, “culturally deprived” and “culturally disadvantaged.” Thus, the educational research literature, when it considers African American learners at all, has constructed all African American children, regardless of economic or social circumstance, within the deficit paradigm (p. 206).

A number of scholars have discussed African American children’s “ways of knowing” (Goodwin, 2000; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016) and the importance of acknowledging the cultural resources that, if honored and acknowledged, can provide an expansive educational context. The research produced about the multiple and varied
African American children’s literacy practices challenge us to reframe the discussion about how African American children learn, what counts as education, and why race, culture, and social positions are consequential for literacy learning, expression, and practices (Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2015).

Literacy, which has been a central aspect of African American lives from the moment they arrived via the transatlantic slave trade, is a powerful tool by which to see, hear, feel, and come to know the critical social knowledge awareness African American children possess. This project furthers the research done about and with African American children and their literacy practices by positioning them as knowers concerning their social location and the historical and contemporary conditions that influence their everyday lives. Shifting the narrative of cultural deficits (Delpit, 2012; Milner, 2008) to one that centers itself on legitimizing African American literacies, which are rooted in long, complex histories and traditions (Fisher, 2008; Muhammad, 2019) as powerful and brilliant (Richardson, 2003), this dissertation utilizes the interdisciplinary literature on African American education in the U.S. to understand the unique, marginalizing conditions and contexts to which they have been subjected across time, the dominant representations of their literacy practices in research, and the potentiality of counter-examples to shift the narrative of African American children’s knowledge and literacy expressions.

**Literature Circles & Response to Literature with Young Children**

Literature circles and read alouds are popular pedagogical tools used to instruct children about print texts and to hear their responses to a variety of children’s literature in
early and elementary classrooms. Moreover, numerous literacy scholars have engaged young children in discussions about critical, social issues primarily through the literature circle and read aloud approach. Research on elementary-aged children’s responses to children’s literature and participation in literature circles and book clubs have “found that, given supportive environments, children respond to literature in a great variety of ways, through talk, art, spontaneous drama, and writing” (Sipe, 2000, p. 257).

Several scholars have offered profiles for conceptualizing and categorizing children’s literary understandings. The most notable of them is Sipe (2000). Sipe (2000) developed, as a result of his descriptive study of first and second grade children, five facets of literary understanding through stance (how children situate themselves in relation to the text), function (various ways in which texts may be used) and action (to what children do with texts): analytical, intertextual, personal, transparent, and performative. These categorizations enable researchers and practitioners to understand the complexities of literature circle discussions and the multiple ways that children can engage. This dissertation focuses primarily on Sipe’s (2000) conception of stance and the ways the children used the texts presented as platforms for understanding themselves, the world, and the relationship between the two. Short et al. (1999) examined student and teacher talk during literature circles in four multi-age (9-11) classroom settings, describing the four roles that teachers played: facilitators, participants, mediators, and active listeners. In this study, I vacillated between these four roles to elicit the children’s thinking, invite them to connect to their personal experiences, affirm their thinking,
ensure a consistent and balanced flow of conversation, and (rarely) raise issues that built from their ideas.

Although reader response and literature circle research abound, little has focused on African American children’s responses (Brooks, 2006; Brooks & Browne, 2012; Möller & Allen, 2006). In addition, many of the studies engage third through fifth graders (e.g., Eeds & Wells, 1989; Kong & Fitch, 2002; McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996), with a dearth of studies examining young children’s meaning making. Furthermore, race and racism are essentially absent from literature circles and early childhood education contexts more generally (with the exception of recent work like Fontanella-Nothom, 2019). Boutte, Lopez-Robinson, & Powers-Costello (2011) however, took up topics such as racism, illiteracy, and poverty, and immigration with a racially diverse group of second graders and found:

The second graders....demonstrated an awareness and understandings of race and racism that were based on their lived experiences. By engaging children in dialogue, JLR provided much needed opportunities for them to make sense of their everyday experiences with racism...children are not colorblind, but are race-conscious. (p. 337).

Young African American children are making important and critical life-text or text-to-self connections (Beauchat et al., 2009), employing the undervalued cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973) that they are adapting and solidifying as they develop, which should be documented and understood as reflective of their understandings and intuitiveness about the world. McGee’s (1992) study of first graders “grand conversations” about texts during read-alouds, for example, concluded that along with summary and retelling, students “constructed simple meaning, shared personal stories and
experience evoked by reading...and evaluated and critiqued the literary work” (p. 184), demonstrating young children’s capacity for analysis and interpretation.

By extending the body of literature that examines children’s responses to a variety of literature, multicultural or otherwise, this study allows for a better understanding of how young children are engaging texts to both individually and collectively make meaning about race and racism. Galda (1988) echoes the importance of the collective in stating “...response to literature is both personal and social...[T]he context in which the response occurs can is of vital importance” (Galda, 1988, p. 99). Instead of using the “repetitive pattern of teacher question, student response, teacher evaluation” (Galda & Beach, 2001, p. 69), this dissertation employed a “teacher-guided aesthetic approach” (Many and Wiseman, 1992) to the children’s responses in a manner that spotlighted the interpretive frameworks that they bring to multicultural children’s literature. This dissertation extends this scholarship by challenging the dominant framing that young children’s primary role in a literature circle or book club (most often in the context of school) is to listen and be taught how to read and attend to a text and instead repositions them as aware, possessing experiential knowledge. Influenced by research and work in critical literacy, the methodological approach of this dissertation sought to create a space wherein the children engaged in racialized issues about and beyond that of the literature they were read.

**Critical Literacy Pedagogy**

“Critical literacy views text meaning-making as a process of social construction with a particularly critical eye toward elements of the various historical, social, and
political contexts involved” (Norris, Lucas and Prudhoe 2012, p. 59). Scholars considering young children’s responses to literature complement the work of those who employ critical literacy practices with young children. The role of critical literacy in the classroom has been to provide children with the opportunity to think more acutely and analytically about the texts they consume, what those texts might say about the social world in which they are a part, and how they might reimagine that world (Shor, 1999; Luke, 2012). It often relates to interrogating issues about bookreading and deconstructing the decisions of the author; pondering the positionality and perspectives of main, supporting, or missing characters; and promoting social justice and equity mindsets (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). This dissertation is informed by Luke’s (2012) definition of critical literacy as “the use of technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms...governing the social fields of everyday life” (p. 2). These perspectives of interrogation and reflection in critical literacy are undergirded by sociocultural theories of learning, which emphasize the contextual nature of literacy acquisition and text meaning making (Souto-Manning & Felderman, 2013).

There are numerous conceptual developments in the field that have guided the ways teachers engage in this work with young children. Quintero (2004) employs the term problem posing (originally developed by Freire for adult learners). Her framework asks that teachers engage, guide, extend students’ thinking and prompt them to reflect. Luke and Freebody (1999) developed “The Four Resources Model”, which is comprised of breaking the code of texts, participating in the meanings of texts, and using the texts
functionally, and critically analyzing and transforming texts. Jones (2013) challenges the
texts that are used most often in early childhood critical literacy classrooms and discusses
the limitations of engaging in critical literacy practices when the literature excludes
representations of low-income (white) children; she interrogates the limitations of Luke
and Freebody’s (1999) Four Resources Model of reading (specifically the critical analysis
aspect of the model). She declares,

A reading pedagogy that incorporates the Four Resources and specific attention to
the identities of readers must be informed by the particular knowledge…about
students, families, and communities in which they work. Only then will…readers
feel entitled (or even a desire) to challenge the ideologies they encounter in texts
(Jones, 2013, p. 220).

Jones (2013) highlights the gap that exists in much of the critical literacy scholarship in
early and elementary settings: an examination of power as it relates to race, identity, and
rooted in the experiences of the children themselves. My dissertation seeks to address
Jones’ criticism of critical literacy research and practice.

Souto-Manning (2013) offers culture circles as a tool for thinking about the ways
in which early childhood educators might facilitate critical conversations with children
using multicultural children’s literature (p. 56-57). Although culture circles are primarily
used to address issues of fairness (like that of anti-bias curriculum; see, Derman-Sparks
& Edwards 2010), the five phase model uses children’s experiences as a basis of
conversation and the circles function as a space to discuss “shared issues of inequity
the concept of an audit trail in her book Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young
Children. Vasquez (2004) and her students utilized the audit trail, or learning wall, to
highlight their critical literacy engagements, make connections throughout the year to salient social differences relevant in the texts they engaged such as gender, and to build “a shared curricular history” (p. 58).

Several scholars have examined how expansive conceptualizations of critical literacy pedagogy has been implemented in early childhood classroom settings. For example, Silver et al. (2010), while exploring first graders’ personal inquiries about Hurricane Katrina, the children used technology, drew pictures, wrote notes, utilized drama and acted, painted, and listened to music (p. 382). They conclude “Through a multiliteracies curriculum, there is a greater potential for helping young children become critical readers, to be aware of the need to care about the world, to envision possibilities of freedom…” (Silver et al., 2010, p. 406). Similarly, Comber et al. (2001) examine how critical literacy and social action can be enacted and encouraged in a multiliteracies writing curriculum in a 2nd and 3rd grade classroom so that children might engage pertinent issues in their local communities and neighborhoods.

Beach and Cleovoulou (2014) explore the implementation of critical literacy through an inquiry pedagogical framework in a second-grade classroom. Through the use of inquiry pedagogy, “children feel safe to share and evaluate their ideas and the ideas of others” (2014, p. 162). This furthers the concept of critical literacy employed by many researchers because learning is experiential and exploratory in an inquiry classroom (Beach and Cleovoulou, 2014). One of the important findings from their case study is that the teacher’s intentional pausing and taking a stance as a “reflective facilitator,” thereby empowering students’ voices to be honored more prominently in discussion (Beach and
Cleovoulou, 2014, p. 172). Souto-Manning (2013) similarly declares that inquiry pedagogy must center students’ questions (p. 41). Critical literacy and inquiry pedagogy are two sides of the same coin in that they both seek to create culturally relevant classroom practices that are rooted in who the children are and recognizes that gaining knowledge is a constructivist process, which ultimately pushes the boundaries of standardized curriculum and implementation.

Paulo Freire (1970), the intellectual pioneer of contemporary critical literacy practices, pedagogy, and studies laid the foundation for a more expansive undertaking of critical literacy. Freire (1987) connects literacy and language in declaring “Language is also culture. Language is the mediating force of knowledge; but it is also knowledge itself…” (p. 53). Here, he illustrates the importance of looking beyond print for critical learning opportunities. Janks (2013) also emphasizes the importance of language in doing critical literacy work. “A critical approach recognizes that language produces us as particular kinds of human subjects...Likewise, it recognizes that our world-geographically, environmentally, politically, and socially- is not neutral or natural” (Janks, 2013, p. 227). Expressing a critically literate identity means more than just engaging with print but also other literate activities like those that include attentiveness to language. Few authors have taken critical literacy beyond a deconstruction of specific print literature; critical literacy has predominately been about challenging the ways in which children or young people read and reimagine books. This dissertation takes up Freire (1987) & Janks (2013) conceptualizations by illustrating the centrality of oral
language and dialogue in how my participants express their sociopolitical knowledge and racial awareness.

Although these pedagogical interventions have sought to create classrooms that will engage complex, politicized issues of fairness, justice, and equality, these studies have predominantly focused on axes of inequality like gender and social class (Jones, 2008; Silvers et al., 2010) with diverse groups of students in and out of classrooms as opposed to race and racism explicitly. As a result, there is a gap in examining and analyzing the full capacity of young children to make sense of how the world is organized and designed to stratify people by racial categories and the realities of intersectional discrimination. This dissertation utilizes relevant children’s books as an opening for discussion and engagement of sociopolitical issues and is therefore informed by the work of critical literacy scholars who consider early childhood an appropriate time to examine complex societal issues. Extending how critical literacy is enacted with young children, my dissertation presents new insights for this body of literature by inviting young African American children to move beyond the presentation of the texts and engage in sustained, open-ended inquiry about race, racism, and inequity in society.

Children can develop unique and complex reading and writing repertoires. These repertoires are often closely related to children's personal histories, and express their personal, social, and moral orientations within family, peer, school, and community life (McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996, p. 105).

A number of scholars, complementary to critical literacy researchers, have examined how children are using various literacy practices as a vehicle to making sense of their social worlds. For example, McGinley & Kamberelis (1996) found in their study of mostly African American third and fourth graders that reading and writing supported
children’s thinking of their possible selves, allowed them to reflect upon personal experiences, and how they developed an awareness of important social problems. In all, these authors demonstrate literacy’s expansive potential, for young children in particular, to function as a tool to think critically, pose questions, explore systems, articulate their own life experiences, and engage in a community discourse around these issues.

This dissertation furthers sociocultural and critical literacy scholarship in its documentation of children’s use of multiple literacy practices to grapple with their social realities and their historical antecedents. In drawing upon works that implore young children to “move beyond the personal to explore issues of power and relations among local, common, and natural ways of understanding the world and larger social system” (Van Sluys, Lewison, & Flint, 2006, p. 220) and responding to the call that “critical literacy work needs to focus on social issues, including inequities of race, class, gender, or disability and the ways in which we use language and other semiotic resources to shape our understanding of these issues” (Vasquez, Janks, & Comber, 2019), this study upends the assumption that young children are unaware of persistent stratification and racism and the implications for their and others’ present and future experiences in the world.

**Early Racial Awareness**

In examining young children and racial awareness, research discussions are increasingly focused on variations of the questions: How do young children demonstrate their awareness and knowledge of race, and what are the capacities of young children to make sense of racial grouping and hierarchies, either in relation to themselves or others
with whom they interact? The earliest of studies that explored very young African American children’s racial awareness began with Clark and Clark’s well-known “doll study” in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s, building upon the work of Horowitz (1939). Clark and Clark’s (1940) study found that young children, ages two to seven, have the capacity to differentiate racial groups and assign themselves a racial identity. Much of what came out of Clark and Clark’s (1939, 1940) foundational scholarship, despite the methodological shortcomings (Brand, Ruiz, & Padillo, 1974; Burnett & Sisson, 1995; McMillan, 1988), were copious amounts of subsequent studies (for examples, see Byrd et al., 2017; Powell-Hopson & Hopson, 1988; Hraba & Grant, 1970; Ward & Braun, 1972) that both supported and challenged their initial, influential findings.

More recently, Jordan and Hernandez-Reif (2009) modernized and extended the methodology of the doll study by allowing 40 Black and White Alabama preschool children, ages three to five, to choose from cartoons, instead of dolls, with a wider range of skin tones and concluded, among other things, that “children showed no skin tone preference when shown a variety of skin tone cartoons and asked who they would pick as their ‘best friend’” (p. 400). They also assessed the children’s preferences after they listened to a story of a Black character saving a baby duck and found that fewer Black children chose the Black cartoon as the one that looks bad, while White children continued to select the Black cartoon as bad looking (Jordan and Hernandez-Reif, 2009, p. 401).
In addition to replications and variations of Clark and Clark’s (1940) study, scholars have extended their inquiry by exploring Black children’s identity development and formation, whether racial differentiations affected with whom young children played, whether internalized racism had a deleterious effect on young children of color (particularly their self-esteem), and when and how children develop and deploy prejudice attitudes and stereotypical beliefs (Aboud, 1988; Bogan and Slaughter-Defoe, 2012; Cross et al., 1999; Pauker et al., 2010). Bogan & Slaughter (2012) concluded that “Black children are disproportionately negatively impacted by the development of racial stereotypes, particularly because of their advanced awareness of broadly held stereotypes” (p. 1).

Spencer (1982) argues that researchers who have followed in Clark and Clark’s scholarly footsteps have ignored the cognitive developmental processes that undergird race awareness. Utilizing Piaget’s stages of development, she refutes Clark and Clark’s (1940) finding that Black preschool children have negative self-concept or self-esteem, as this is something that must happen after children enter the concrete operational stage of development (beginning around age seven) and are able to deal with complex associations such as this (Spencer, 1982, pg. 276). Spencer’s (1982) intervention in the racial awareness literature is that she found that “Black preschool children…were able to maintain positive self-concept while showing the traditional findings of Eurocentric cultural stereotyping” (p. 277). Although Black children are aware of the racial stereotypes that exist in society, they may not necessarily internalize or apply them to their own identity (Spencer, 1982, p 285).
Numerous scholars have explored the ways in which racial awareness functions cognitively in young children and progresses developmentally. For example, Katz (1982) reviews the previous literature in the 1950s and 60s that supported the notion that young children are aware of race as early as three. As a result, Katz (1982) focuses on the underlying cognitive developmental tasks that children must be able to perform before the age of three; she is curious about the “perceptual prerequisites” to racial awareness and differentiation that involve categorizing (p. 4). Katz (1982) challenges the idea that at age three, children just automatically begin differentiating between racial groups but rather sees it as a cognitive progression.

Alejandro-Wright (1985) uses socio-cognitive developmental perspective to add complexity to ways prior research conceptualized children’s race awareness: incorporating skin color as the only or primary perceptual cue (p. 186). Alejandro-Wright (1985) proposes four stages of racial classification abilities: (0) Idiosyncratic, (I) Subliminal, (II) Preconceptual, (III) Conceptual (p. 199). This study is important as it highlights that racial knowledge is developmentally progressive, similarly to Katz (1982), and that “the child’s concept of race (is) qualitatively different from that of the adult; the child ha(s) his/her own unique way of thinking about color and racial categories” (Alejandro-Wright, 1985, p. 199).

Hirschfeld (1995) also pushes the earlier contextualization of young children as passively receptive to racial thinking and begins to shift the paradigm to thinking of children as possessing their own propensity to synthesize and deploy racial categories. He challenges Katz (1982) conclusions by interrogating whether children’s race thinking is
theory-like, biologically grounded, and involves domain-specific reasoning. Using a series of five experiments where children were shown a variety of pictures or told a story, he argues that children rely more on conceptual knowledge rather than perceptual information because “children recalled considerably more racial information after listening to a verbal narrative than after viewing a visual text” (Hirschfeld, 1995, p. 243). Additionally, he challenges the view that children simply gather their racial knowledge from phenotype or superficial differences in appearance.

Spears Brown and Bigler (2005) propose a developmental framework for making sense of how children perceive discrimination as they progress through childhood following a review of the previous literature on children’s perception of discrimination. Utilizing similar cognitions (cultural and social) as authors like Spencer (1985) and Hirschfield (1995), along with classification skills and moral reasoning, Spears Brown and Bigler (2005) suggest that children, by the age of six, have the basic cognitive skills to perceive discrimination (p. 544). This study is particularly important because understanding race and perceiving discrimination are interconnected and interrelated in important ways, as the former likely precedes the latter (Spears Brown & Bigler, 2005, p. 539).

Several researchers have taken sociological and observational approaches to examining young children’s racial awareness. Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) and Park (2011) employ ethnographic methods to examine young children’s racial awareness and attitudes. They found that young children possess a sophisticated language of race and ethnicity and use those concepts of race and ethnicity to exclude, include, control, and
define themselves and others. McKown (2004) concluded in his interview content analysis that African American children have more “elaborated, differentiated, and power-focused ideas about racism than their non-African American peers” (p. 614). However, not many of these studies take a qualitative, dialogic approach that engages children as a group, nor have they drawn upon exchanges with young children’s teachers and parents.

Van Ausdale and Feagin (1996) shift the way most research concerning children’s racial attitudes has been conducted. Instead of replicating various experimental designs, they performed unstructured participant observations of three-, four-, and five-year-old children’s everyday behaviors in a preschool over an extended period of time. They found that these young children, aged three, four, and five, had a sophisticated language of race and ethnicity and used those racial and ethnic concepts to exclude, include, control, and define themselves and others. Van Ausdale and Feagin (1996) emphasize the need for researchers not to underestimate young children’s cognitive capacity to understand race, as laboratory cognitive tasks often do. Rather, they urge that we focus on their daily, contextual interactions over time to truly understand the nature of race thinking in young children (Van Ausdale and Feagin, 1996, p. 791).

Characterizing racism as stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination, McKown (2004) employs a content analysis of his interviews with a diverse group of 202 children aged six to ten in which he explored how they defined racism. Differentiating his work from studies that have explored “children’s conception of race, children’s racial identity, and children’s own racial attitudes,” McKown (2004) positions his analysis as exploring
children’s understanding of other’s racism and the ways in which those understandings change with age and across ethnicity (p. 598). Among other findings, McKown (2004) concluded that African American children had more “elaborated, differentiated, and power-focused ideas about racism than their non-African American peers” (p. 614). Although McKown (2004) does not provide the reasoning for such salience amongst this group, this finding does have particular resonance for differentiating the racial awareness developmental trajectory of different racial and ethnic groups.

In addition to this empirical research, a number of conceptual studies have explored children’s developing racial awareness and examined findings across studies. In his literature review of children’s developmental understanding of ethnicity and race, Quintana (1998) found that studies have concluded that not only are racial attitudes present in young children, but that “White and African American’s children ability to racially classify and label themselves and others in a reliable fashion gradually increases to the age of 7 or 8 years of age” (p. 30). He also found that children’s racial attitudes are most influenced by the larger society as opposed to their parent’s socialization (Quintana, 1998, p. 31). Critsol and Gimbert (2008) reviewed literature published after Bigler’s 1999 article about using multicultural curriculum to combat prejudice. Their literature survey found that young children do understand race, at least incompletely and superficially, before the age of five (Cristol and Gimbert, 2008). In their discussion of Aboud and Amato’s 2011 study, they declare “children develop ethnic attitudes by age three and develop systematic racial prejudices between five and seven years of age” (Cristol and Gimbert, 2008, p. 202). Although the primary purpose of their literature review was to
emphasize the need for teachers and schools to positively socialize children around race to decrease racism, their article also further concretizes that young children can and do formulate ideas about their own race and the race of others. Hirschfeld (2012) seeks to debunk seven myths about racial awareness in young children. Loosely engaging the literature surrounding these myths, Hirschfeld (2012) complicates them in an effort to make apparent the ways young children develop and enact sophisticated understandings of race. Hirschfeld (2012) challenges popular assumptions surrounding the notion that children can and do discriminate concerning race, despite downplaying the role.

Children are developing ideas about race, as early as age three and even begin to discriminate phenotypical aspects of others even earlier than that. The above works provide a context for making sense of the ways in which children come to understand and employ racial categories. My study builds upon racial awareness literature, which has been comprised primarily of studies that employ experimental research designs and that have overwhelmingly examined children’s understandings of skin color, racial preferences, or racial attitudes (Byrd, 2012; Jordan & Hernandez-Reif, 2009) by highlighting the capacity of African American children to articulate and analyze racial events, situations, and issues around them that extend beyond interpersonal conceptualizations of racial awareness.

As Park (2011) declares, “Insufficient attention [is] given to the meanings that children learn to attach to racial and ethnic differences and the processes through which they engage in such meaning-making work...” (p. 392). Rather than continue conversations across race that result in recentering whiteness and white children in our
discussions at the intersections of early childhood and racial awareness, this study intended to center African American children in their racialized knowing and meaning-making practices, beyond the examination of their individualized experiences of prejudice and discrimination. Furthermore, this dissertation shifts our focus on the racialized nature of sociopolitical issues and conditions and how young children perceive those intersections and imagine the eradication of inequality.

**Racial Socialization**

Young children do not learn about race and society in isolation. Rather, they are taught by those around them, especially their parents, who are constantly communicating messages infused with racial meanings. Research on racial and ethnic socialization has focused on the role of parents, predominantly African American, in transmitting attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs about race and ethnicity. This research has highlighted parents’ use of direct and indirect processes, that is, educating children about their histories and culture, building ethnic pride, relaying messages regarding structural and interactional racism, and attempting to buffer racial discrimination (Gadsden, 1998; Hughes, 2003; Howard, Rose, & Barbarin, 2013; Lesane-Brown, 2006). Parental racial and ethnic socialization practices (Brown & Krishnakumar, 2007) have been found to increase psychological well-being (McHale et al., 2006), support positive identity development (Stevenson, 1995), lower child anxiety (Bannon et al., 2009), serve as compensatory factor in achievement (Neblett et al., 2006), and contribute to cognitive development among African American children (Caughy et al., 2002).
Several researchers whose work focus primarily on adolescence have discussed the nature of racial socialization in African American families by detailing what parents were doing and telling their children about race and identity and how we might categorize those behaviors (Caughy et al., 2011; Cooper et al., 2015; White-Johnson et al., 2010). Hughes et al. (2006) synthesize the racial socialization literature and detail the four most salient themes: cultural socialization, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust, and egalitarianism. Lesane-Brown (2006) also places racial socialization messages into three major categories: culture messages, minority experience, and mainstream experience (p. 409). Suizzo, Robinson & Pahlke (2008), in their investigation of middle class African American mothers’ racial socialization practices, that in addition to African American history and overcoming racism, promoting independence while maintaining close family relations was also a theme of their practices.

The role of gender, of both the children and parents, on the nature of racial socialization in African American families has also been investigated (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Cooper et al., 2015). Caughy et al. (2011) also found that “parents of girls were more likely to emphasize cultural socialization, whereas parents of boys were more likely to strongly emphasize a combination of cultural socialization, coping skills for discrimination, and promotion of mistrust” (p. 499). Hughes, Rose, & Barbarin (2013) discovered conflicting racial and gender socialization messages for African American boys, wherein racial socialization emphasized communalism and cooperation and gender socialization focused on individuality and competition. These studies together support the idea that girls may be racially socialized more often than boys but when parents do
engage boys in these practices, they are more complex and inclusive to prepare boys for the negative racialized and gendered stereotypes with which they might be confronted (Stevenson et al., 2005). Some authors have concluded that mothers and fathers do not differ in their racial socialization practices (Hughes and Chen 1999; Caughy et al., 2002; Cooper et al., 2015) while others document a distinction (McHale et al., 2006).

Ethnic/racial socialization has been widely studied for its influence, both positive and negative, on the academic development of African American children. A number of authors have found that racial and ethnic socialization can enhance academic performance and achievement for both young African American children and adolescents (Caughy et al., 2002; Bowman and Howard, 1985). Brown et al. (2009) on the other hand, found a curvilinear relationship between ethnic/racial socialization and academic achievement of kindergarteners and concluded that too much ethnic/racial socialization might be detrimental to achievement, citing that students might internalize an inflexible racial schema or adopt a fatalistic self-deterministic attitude (p. 400). Marshall (1995) found ethnic socialization to be negatively associated with the reading scores of African American children. Furthermore, Dotterer et al. (2009) concluded that racial socialization, specifically cultural socialization and preparation for bias, was related to school engagement, not as a buffer to the effects of discrimination but rather as an additive factor (p. 70). Hughes et al. (2009) found that cultural socialization messages had a significant effect on the academic efficacy of White and African American children because it increased their self-esteem and ethnic affirmation but preparation for bias had negative effects, more significantly for White than African American youth.
A number of scholars examining the racial socialization of Black children and youth have explored the effects and influence of transracial adoption on the nature and extent of racial socialization they receive. Goar et. al. (2017) interviewed 56 white transracial adoptive parents who attended culture camps and found that the majority of these parents used both colorblindness and race consciousness. Smith et al. (2011) detail the three race lessons that adoptive white parents imparted upon their African American adult children when they were young. They found that these parents engaged in “passive cultural socialization practices” which emphasized an individualized as opposed to a collective African American racial identity (Smith et al., 2011, p. 21), advocated for a caretaking and educative stance toward white people who discriminated against them while suppressing their own feelings of harm, and they encouraged their children to work toward racial harmony with white people. Killian & Khanna (2019) in their examination of adoptive parents of Black, Asian, and Latinx children, found six orientations of racial socialization amongst these families and that “color-conscious” transracial adoptive parents of Black children were more likely to emphasize preparation for bias. These studies discuss the inherent limitations of white parents adopting and raising African American children but also highlights the possibilities of conscious racial socialization amongst these families.

In addition, a number of studies have discussed the influence of demographic and other factors on parent’s racial socialization practices. Parents living in predominately Black neighborhoods were found to be less likely to racially socialize their children, while Black parents in predominately white neighborhoods “may take a more active role
in buffering their children from negative messages their children may receive about being Black” (Lesane-Brown, 2006, p. 406; Tatum, 2000). Caughey et al. (2002) found that higher SES African American parents reported sending more racial messages to their children. There have also been studies that have found a relationship between parents’ perceived and experienced workplace discrimination and greater ethnic/racial socialization (Priest et al., 2014). White-Johnson et al. (2010) found that African American mothers who fell under the multifaceted profile, as opposed to the low race salience or unengaged, reported higher levels of education. The multifaceted profile also included mothers who conveyed both “a positive view of African American culture and history while at the same time identifying obstacles their children would face as a result of their racial status” (White-Johnson et al., 2010, p. 243).

Hughes and Chen (1999) also concluded that parents who themselves were racially socialized as kids were more likely to transmit racial messages to their children. Thomas and Speight (1999) used Cross’s theory of racial identity development and found that parents’ racial socialization attitudes were influenced by their sense of racial identity, with parents with internalization attitudes having stronger and more positive attitudes toward racial socialization. Scottham and Smalls (2009) concluded that there are a number of interrelated factors that influence how much African American female caregivers racially socialize their children, including the caregiver’s sense of ethnic-racial identity and their feelings toward African Americans overall, and their perceptions of how African Americans are viewed by others.
Across these wide breadth of racial socialization studies, it is apparent that many parents of African American children employ a balanced and complex approach to racial socialization and that African American children benefit from some racial socialization as opposed to none (Dotterer et al., 2009). Moreover, racial and ethnic socialization for elementary-aged children is understudied. This dissertation study builds upon the limited racial socialization literature that focuses on young children (Blanchard et al., 2019; Doucet et al, 2018; Nash et al, 2018; Peters, 1988, 2002) and seeks to add complexity to this area of scholarship by examining the complex web of socialization actors in young African American children’s lives, including their unique composition of some of their families (LGBTQ and adoptive), their school, and the media.

A Need for an Examination of Young African American Children’s Sociopolitical Literacies

The work discussed in this literature review, when considered together, highlights the need for an examination of young African American children’s sociopolitical knowledge and the centrality of literacy practices in their expressions. The work above demonstrates that African American children, in their rendering and representations of society and salient issues therein, are drawing from a long legacy of literacy practices, histories of intergenerational learning and racialized knowing. Extending the view of African American literacies as experiential, communal, and liberatory in nature, this dissertation builds upon the research in this area in acknowledging that young African American children are knowledge-filled and epistemically privileged and empowered (Mohanty, 2000).
In addition, this dissertation challenges the colorblind tendencies in critical literacy pedagogy and literature circle practices in early and elementary school settings. Although critical literacy pedagogy is situated in a power-conscious theoretical framing, often, racism has been ignored or addressed in euphemisms. This project sought to challenge those orientations to examining difference with young children. This dissertation furthers our understanding of young children’s critical consciousness—examining what they know, how they come to know it, and how they represent their knowing. By foregrounding and illustrating the ways these children had an eye toward systemic inequality and various harmful functions and consequences of race in society, this dissertation seeks to move early childhood literacy literature forward by shattering the persistent myth that young children do not know how racism manifests beyond the interpersonal. By situating racism as central to social and political analyses through a CRT lens, this study advances knowledge about how young children are making sense of their worlds and what axes of inequality are penetrating their lives and thinking.

Through my investigation of these young African American children’s awareness and literate meaning making, I intend to contribute important insights that add complexity to our understandings of young children’s capacities for understanding race, racism, difference, and justice. I expect to add depth to resist the dominant narrative in early literacy that imagines these children are inherently lacking, less intelligent, or having limited literate capacities because of their minoritized identities. Moreover, I hope this dissertation provides empirical evidence that expands researchers’ and practitioners’
views of African American children, thereby opening up space to do future work from a place of knowing with young children of color.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY & METHODS

This dissertation utilized qualitative and ethnographic research methods. This chapter outlines the study’s research design, including school context, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. I describe my role as the researcher and discuss the study’s limitations.

Context

Figure 3.1
Figure 3.2

[Image of a hand-made protest sign with various messages such as "BLM", "NO DAPL", "#NoWar", "#NoWall", "BLACKLivesMatter"].
The Voices of the Children
A Poem by Ujamaa’s kindergarten, first and second grade students

Children’s voices
    beautiful
Powerful voices
    Pure like water
Amazing, strong
The most loved voices ever

The beat of life
Elegant like cranes
    Joyful, delicate
With loving flow

The voices have
Their own special light
The voices are rare
As different as every bird’s song

High pitched
Like the song of a sparrow
    Like the beautiful rain
Brave as the Earth and the Sun

Small packages
With big hearts
    Their roar
Makes the whole world shake

Participants & Setting

This dissertation’s primary participants were five first-grade African American students enrolled in a small Pre-Kindergarten through sixth grade community school in an urban, Northeastern city. The school, Ujamaa (a pseudonym which in Kiswahili means “extended family” and is the fourth Kwanzaa principle during which it also means “cooperative economics”, one that I felt captured the essence of the place in my time there) Elementary, functions as an alternative to the local school district and public
neighborhood schools and invites children from different neighborhoods across the city to enroll. The school was founded in 1977 as an after-school reading program, then became a preschool, and since then has expanded and concretized its place as a pillar and longstanding institution of the neighborhood community. Although private, Ujamaa is accessible for families of all socioeconomic statuses. There is a modest tuition rate and Ms. Holly, the founder and principal, does her best to keep costs low. For example, Ms. Holly not only operates as the principal but also teaches history to the upper grades; her commitment to the place is palpable. Despite the limited financial resources, she seeks to foster a schooling climate of joy and inquiry.

My thing is...it’s history, well it’s American history, it’s world history. We don’t celebrate Black History Month because I feel like why should we segregate Black history. It’s part of history. If you don’t know the context of it, then you don’t really understand it anyway (Interview with Ms. Holly, 2018).

Ujamaa Elementary’s mission places an emphasis on raising students’ awareness of societal inequities while also honoring their legacies and histories and centers the arts as a means of resistance, representation, and cultural production. Students take violin lessons, dance, yoga, capoeira, and often collectively create poems, like the one seen above. These opportunities are available to students, not because of Ujamaa’s large budget, but through community relationships and are a reflection of Ms. Holly’s commitment to the arts. She declared in the interview, “As broke as we are, we have never cut down on the arts.” The principal and teachers take up a critical social justice approach (Sensoy, & DiAngelo, 2017) to education with a celebratory emphasis but also a focus on the realities of race to prepare students to be change-makers and activists through voice and action locally and globally. For example, Ujamaa’s students have
participated in public marches and protests, visited important, cultural monuments and urban spaces (e.g., the home of Langston Hughes), and integrate real-world discussions into the curriculum (e.g., one of the school-wide units was entitled “The World We Want to Build”) that enables them to consider societal realities and offer critiques and solutions.

The school predominantly consists of African American children and teachers. It currently enrolls approximately eighty students, with no more than 12 students per class, one class per grade level. The school’s curriculum, which is fluid and responsive to the needs of students, is composed collectively by the principal and teachers. Students do not use textbooks and engage very little with technology. Ujamaa’s pedagogy is centered on providing children with a space to learn to love reading, writing, and research. Ms. Holly has cultivated a space that is of and about the local community but also strives to be a community in and of themselves. She sees her school as a family of parents, teachers, students, who are united by Ujamaa’s vision of social and racial justice.

During my data collection cycle, I worked primarily with the veteran first-grade teacher, Ms. Brandy. She is an African American woman who has been at Ujamaa since 1997 and taught several grades across the school. I also interacted on occasion with the Kindergarten teacher, Ms. Bea. I chose this site because of its alignment with the purposes of my study. The principal, Ms. Holly, understood the impetus for my study and welcomed me into the space with open arms. She was intrigued by the idea of engaging the lower grades in sustained discussions around these issues, as they have focused more of their race conscious efforts on the children in grades 3-5. She believed her students
were knowledgeable and aware but felt they just needed the space to reveal and display this knowledge.

I chose to focus on children ages 6 and 7 as focal participants because they are an understudied age group throughout the literature that engages children’s social and racial worlds and literacy meaning making (Dyson, 1997; Souto-Manning, 2009; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). The bulk of the extant literature that examines young children’s understanding does so with preschoolers or upper elementary students (McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996; Park, 2011; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Moreover, developmental research has substantiated that children are race salient (using race as a categorizing factor for friendship choices) as early as preschool (Ramsey & Myers, 1990), understand and deploy stereotypes around age 6 (Bigler et al., 2003; Pauker et al., 2011), and that some demonstrate an emergent racial constancy between ages 3-5 (Rutland et al., 2005).

At the time of recruitment, the first-grade classroom had eleven students, of which nine were African American. I sent recruitment documents, an informational letter to all eleven parents along with consent forms to the eligible nine families. Of those nine eligible children, the five children whose parents responded are the resulting participants represented in this dissertation. The other four students/families who declined did not do so because of the nature of the study but because of time commitments and whether they were enrolled in the after school program.

Two of the participants identified as boys and three identified as girls. Four of the five children identified as “Black” or “African American” and one boy identified as “brown” because his mother is white and father is African American. All but one female
student (who had recently turned seven prior to beginning) began the study at age six and three of them turned seven over the course of the study, and one remained six at the end of the study. All the children are being raised by two parents; two children have co-parents living in separate homes. Two children were adopted, one boy by two white lesbian women and one girl by an interracial white and Jamaican-American gay couple.

**Figure 3.3 Participant Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age at Start of Study</th>
<th>Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>African American biological mother and father, married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miles</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>African American father, white mother, unmarried</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camille</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Adopted, Jamaican American father and white father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Adopted, white mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>African American biological mother and father, unmarried</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Methodological Framing of Literature Circles**

Because social and moral realities are social constructed, they are indeterminate and subject to multiple interpretations...Thus, chronicles, storytelling, and counter-narratives are used to make visible the racial biases that are deeply embedded in the unstated norms of American law and culture (Brown and Jackson, 2013, p. 19).

**Cultural Ways of Knowing**

At the core of my research stance and methodological approach was an attendance to and honoring of my participants’ subjectivities and epistemic privileges (Mohanty, 2000; Moya, 2000). My methodological approach was undergirded by an understanding
that my participants, as people of color in the United States, are uniquely positioned to speak about issues of race and racism in society because they have historically and presently been the subjects of intense discrimination and inequality. People of color, and particularly children of color, have a distinct insight about the way the world operates and is organized; this knowledge demonstrates their individual and collective vantage point and articulates their burdens and oppressions in a manner only an “insider,” those with proximal experiences of racism and discrimination, could. Experience is borne out of one’s social location and that location should serve as a starting point for exploration and inquiry (Harding, 1992).

The widespread use of the call and response discourse mode among African-Americans exemplifies the importance placed on dialogue. Composed of spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker’s statements or ‘calls’ are punctuated by expressions or “responses” from the listener, this Black discourse mode pervades African American culture” (Collins, 1989, p. 763).

African American oral traditions (Grace et al., 2004) and culturally specific approaches (Tillman, 2002) were central to how I conceptualized the circle space. In discussing Chicana and Black feminist ways of knowing, Delgado Bernal (2002) and Collins (1989) acknowledge how people of color use personal and collective experiences to make sense of their lives and society. The circles were designed as an open-ended space for dialogue, thinking aloud, and hearing the stories of the other participants. Instead of engaging African American children individually, listening to children engage one another outside of the classroom context yielded richer data, reinforcing relevant discourse modes, specifically honoring “call and response” prevalent in African American music and culture (Collins, 1989, p. 763). This open-ended, culturally specific
approach to facilitation supported the epistemological orientation of the children to knowledge sharing and allowed them to draw upon the full range of their cultural resources. As Gardner-Neblett et al. (2012) declare:

...African American children have a repertoire of different narrative styles, which suggests that they are capable of flexibility in their narratives depending on contextual factors...[O]ral narrative skills are an area of strength for African American children, a strength that may stem from cultural practices that emphasize using stories to enrich interpersonal interactions (p. 221).

Figure 3.4 Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Data Collection Methods</th>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| What do young African American children know and understand about sociopolitical issues to which they have been exposed, observed, or experienced? | • Classroom participant observations  
• Literature circles  
• Student artwork/drawings | • Open coding using ATLAS.ti  
• Drawings and dictations  
• Analytic & reflective memos |
| How do they represent their knowledge and understanding of these issues in their oral, pictorial, and print literacies? | • Literature circles  
• Student artwork/drawings | • Open coding using ATLAS.ti  
• Drawings and dictations  
• Analytic & reflective memos |
| What are the sources of their knowledge and understandings?            | • Literature circles  
• Teacher interview  
• Principal interview  
• Parent Interviews  
• Field Trip Attendance | • Open coding using ATLAS.ti  
• Analytic & reflective memos |
The overarching purpose of the study was to understand whether young African American children in an urban context understood race and racism and the various ways they used literacy to make meaning. The study employed three methods of data collection and draws upon four sources of data: literature circles, drawings and dictations that were created during the circles, informal participant observations of the school day and field trips, semi-structured interviews. The data collection cycle began in January and ended in May 2018, although I informally entered the site in the Fall of 2017.

**Literature Circles**

The design of this dissertation is informed by Fredricks’ (2012) conceptualization of “critical literature circles” (CLCs). Fredricks (2012) states,

> Although literature circles are a highly interactive way of reading and sharing texts, there is not an inherently critical or culturally relevant component. Based on my students’ preferences, I offered the CLCs as a format for relating texts to members’ own historical, cultural, and social issues and sharing opinions on these topics in an educational setting…With CLCs, the facilitator invites members to analyze depictions of events, communities, characters, and themes and to relate them to pertinent issues in their lives (p. 495).

I extend Fredricks (2012) critical literature circles in that I created and facilitated a space that sought to interrogate racism and its multiple manifestations consciously and directly. The literature circles that I facilitated served as a dialogic context for understanding children’s racial understanding, as well as a space for these young children to explore their thoughts, experiences, and observations, and hear and engage the stories of others who identify similarly along racial lines.

After spending several weeks in the first-grade classroom during various times throughout the day in the fall of 2017, I began meeting weekly with the students after-
school for the literature circles fourteen times over the course of the data collection cycle. These circles, which lasted from thirty to forty-five minutes and were audio-recorded, were designed similarly as focus groups (Marshall & Rossman, 2014), wherein each week was to focus on one central topic, from which the inquiry and discussion would begin. Prior to beginning the circle sessions, I developed a longer a priori list of topics and complementary books. However, during the data collection cycle, the particular multicultural children’s book read at the start of each literacy circle (and relevant focal topics) was guided by what the children discussed or introduced in previous sessions and what book felt most resonant with who I came to know the children to be (See Appendix A for full session list).

Almost all the books met the following qualifications: they were written by authors of color (with the exception of Going Home by Eve Bunting, Grace for President by Kelly DiPucchio, and If I Ran for President by Catherine Stier); they featured people of color as the main characters; and they were categorized and/or leveled as accessible for early elementary-aged students. Numerous scholars have discussed the benefits of providing all children the opportunity to see characters of color in a range of settings and how children’s literature can function as a place to grapple with societal issues and make meaning about racial and other forms of difference (Brown & Ku, 2018; Husband, 2019; Souto Manning, 2009). Utilizing the work DeNicolo & Franquiz’s (2006), Bishop (1997), and others as criteria, these literature circles were informed by the research in multicultural children’s literature in that I sought to offer the children “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” (Bishop, 1990) around which to make meaning, build upon the
stories presented in the texts, and construct knowledge alongside one another. As Zapata, Fugit, & Moss (2017) argue, “Sharing diverse literature is a moral and political act that positions students to negotiate multiple points of view, ideologies, and feelings. From this perspective, this literature demands opportunities for aesthetic responses (Rosenblatt, 1986) and explorations of affect” (p. 63). This dissertation utilized multicultural children’s literature as a methodological tool, a way into the children’s worlds and their existing racialized knowledge. As Cullinan (1989) declares,

> Literature mirrors our perception of life; we see in stories reflection of our own… values, disappointments, and dreams. We view both our inner and outer world…Literature’s windows on the world look upon the full range of human experience, including our joys and sorrows, our virtues and vices (p. 424).

**Figure 3.5: Kelly’s Self-Portrait**  
**Figure 3.6: Isaac’s Self-Portrait**
During the introductory session, as a lead-in to the sessions that were more sociopolitical in nature, the children discussed their emergent racial identities and drew a self-portrait (see Figures 3.5 and 3.6 for examples). Across all of the sessions, they were provided the opportunity to pause my reading to consider the illustrations or story and make comments and connections. Several questions (e.g., “What do you think this book is about?”, “Does this book remind you of something you have seen in your life?”, “How is the story in the book different than your own life?”) were posed after the texts were read in their entirety.

My study takes up Rosenblatt’s (1982) aesthetic reading stance of Reader Response Theory by offering the texts as a means for my participants to engage and share what experiences, memories, feelings, associations, and knowledge the various texts evoke. Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt’s 1978, 1982) posits that reading is an active, constructivist, and subjective endeavor wherein the reader and text interact in a negotiation of meaning at a particular moment in time. With an orientation to connect the emotional with the intellectual, I sought to create a literary experience for my participants that would elicit “a synthesis of what the reader already knows and feels and desires with what the literary text offers” (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 272) and move beyond the text and center their lives as “texts”. This was of particular importance because my participants identified as African American children, a group who focus on text engagement in schools is often functional (e.g., whether they perform traditionally academic tasks as they are read texts like define vocabulary, make predictions, identify sight words, etc.)
rather than as an entry point to their lived experiences, knowledge, and connections to the books.

The discussions were open-ended and my role as facilitator was to affirm and follow-up so I often responded with “Tell me more”, “What do you mean?”, and “How do you know that?” At each session, the children expressed their concluding thoughts through drawing, scrap art creations, and dictations; they were prompted to write or draw something that represented the day’s session for them.

During twelve of the fourteen sessions, the selected children’s literature read to the children functioned as a direct platform for their theorizing, serving as thematic cues that encouraged them to storytell and share, and a “hook” to engage them in participating. I invited them to employ various literacy practices (e.g., reading, dictating, listening, speaking, drawing) to represent their thinking and knowledge. I designed the circles as a “community of inquiry” (Campano, Ghiso, Yee, & Rusoja, 2013), wherein the children could ask me questions, pose questions to one another, share stories, affirm and bolster the stories of others, and express themselves in whatever literate mode felt most comfortable for them. This also meant that the children had the opportunity to simply listen and sit in without offering anything orally or through drawing. I took all the drawings created during the circles and coded them along with the audio-recordings.

Participant Observations

To understand how my participants’ schooling context - the curriculum, instructional practices, class norms, discussions and activities - may have influenced their sociopolitical understandings and racial awareness, I relied upon structured participant
observations twice weekly in the first-grade classrooms and accompanied them on a field trip to a local performing arts center where they learned more about the Harlem Renaissance. These observations were informal therefore I did not take fieldnotes. I learned from being in the space that although not standardized in the traditional sense, the bulk of Ujamaa’s first-grade reading and math instruction utilized worksheets and paper assignments. Instead of structured participant observations (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Maxwell, 2013), I simply sought to immerse myself in the place to get a feel for the school’s overall approach. During these observations, I took pictures of the displays of art and bulletin boards and asked the teachers for poems the children had created, like the one featured at the beginning of this chapter. I was present primarily during reading.

**Semi-structured Interviews**

I conducted one semi-structured interview (Marshall and Rossman, 2014) with a parent from each child’s family to gain further perspective on the schooling context, their understandings of the school’s influence on their children’s racialized knowledge and finally, to ascertain their racial socialization practices and any critical, racialized incidents involving their children at home, within their families, or in their neighborhoods. I conducted a semi-structured interview with Ms. Holly, the principal, to contextualize the school’s history, its past and current social justice initiatives, and its overall philosophies and approaches to learning. Finally, I conducted a semi-structured interview with Ms. Brandy, the first-grade classroom teacher, to substantiate my participant observations, along with documenting her teaching philosophy and approaches to addressing issues of race and racism in her classroom.
Exiting Ethically and Gradually

To ensure some form of continuity in the space, I did not end my relationship with Ujamaa immediately after data collection. I returned monthly during the 2018-2019 academic year and performed read alouds for the Kindergarten through second grade classes as a whole group. I chose books that mirrored the literature that was a part of the circles and posed comprehension and open-ended questions to the students to engage them about sociopolitical themes that were salient in the news and media at the time (i.e., *We Came to America* by Faith Ringgold). All five of my participants were present and enrolled in the second grade class during the read alouds and they often led the discussions and volunteered to speak. These return visits provided me an opportunity to reconnect with the teachers and students and demonstrate my commitment to them beyond the window of time that served my research needs alone.

Data Analysis

I used an inductive (Patton, 1980) interpretive (Erickson, 1986), iterative, and reflexive (Ravitch & Carl, 2019) process that sought to make meaning of my data by closely analyzing the data collected, blending the words of participants, a grounded theoretical orientation, with my theoretical and methodological frameworks as lenses. I had my data transcribed using the website Rev.com and used Atlas.ti software to assist me in conducting multiple rounds of coding (Saldana, 2016).

I employed Creswell’s (2013) data analysis spiral as a guide for my analytical process: managing, reading/memoing, describing/classifying, and representing/visualizing (p. 151). I began analyzing by doing a first read of my
transcribed data, without taking notes. I then listened to all of the audio-recordings alongside a second reading of the transcripts. To clean up the transcripts, I excluded inaudible moments and words such as “uh” or “um”, so as to focus less on the syntax and more on the overall message my participants sought to convey. I then performed a third read of my circle and interview transcripts and the children’s drawings and noted initial, provisional codes and tentative ideas about themes, categories, and relationships (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Maxwell, 2013). These first cycle codes were a combination of direct, In Vivo codes from the participant’s words and descriptive codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Saldaña, 2016). Some of the transcript excerpts resonated with more than one code and are therefore double coded and represent in multiple domains. Thereafter, I wrote analytic memos to address coding, emergent patterns, possible links and connections, reflect on the collection or procedural issues I encountered over the course of the study (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014). Memos will allowed me to capture my thinking and also facilitated and stimulated analytic ideas (Maxwell, 2013).

I used several methods in the second round of coding. To answer the first research question, I employed focused coding, highlighting the most frequent codes and their thematic similarity (Saldaña, 2016). To answer the second research question, I engaged in axial coding (Saldaña, 2016). Axial coding allowed me to code and analyze the drawings alongside the audio-recordings. When axial coding, “[p]roperties (i.e., characteristics or attributes) and dimensions (the location of a property along a continuum or range) of a category refer to such components as the contexts, conditions, interactions, and
consequences of a process” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 218). Cox (2005) describes how we should view children’s drawings when we position them as knowledge holders and producers:

[A]s part of children’s broader, intentional, meaning-making activity. As an aspect of the interactive, communicative practices through which children’s thinking develops, representation is a constructive, self-directed, intentional process of thinking in action, through which children bring shape and order to their experience, rather than a developing ability to make visual reference to objects in the world (p. 115).

The drawings reflected the children’s thinking and were situated as a layered meaning making tool, rather than a simple reflection of what had been stated in the circles. To answer the third and final research question, I engaged in focused coding that allowed me to identify the salient categories (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Saldaña, 2016). The stages of category coding, category refinement, exploring the relationships across categories, and evaluating the integrated data (Creswell, 2013; Morehouse & Maykut, 2002) helped me identify the meanings across the circle meetings and interview data and weave the codes into thematic narratives that addressed the questions.
### Figure 3.7. Coding Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Initial Codes and Frequency</th>
<th>Secondary Categories and Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>What do young African American children know and understand about sociopolitical issues to which they have been exposed, observed, or experienced?</em></td>
<td>African American or Black (46)</td>
<td>Conceptualizations of Racism/Personal Experiences of Racial Exclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Barack Obama (5)</td>
<td>Politics &amp; Current Presidential Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biracial (6)</td>
<td>Policing &amp; Police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different (9)</td>
<td>Imprisonment &amp; Incarceration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Donald Trump (34)</td>
<td>Slavery &amp; Enslaved Peoples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hilary Clinton (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jamaica (9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gun(s) (14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jail or Prison (33)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Language (7)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Litter (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lynching (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Martin Luther King (9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Steal (13)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Racism (20)</td>
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<td>White (41)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Police (27)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protest/march (5)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Skin (9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slavery/Slaves (21)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harriet Tubman (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>War (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>How do they represent their knowledge and understanding of these issues in their oral, pictorial, and print literacies?</em></td>
<td>Long time ago/past (9)</td>
<td>Imaginative Thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I wish (9)</td>
<td>Intertextuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>News (12)</td>
<td>Temporality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Movie (11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TV/Show (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Superhero (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are the sources of their knowledge and understandings?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movie</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV/Show</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom or Dad or Parents</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babysitter</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Media
Parents & Home
Schooling

**Researcher Identity & Positionality**

Echoing the position of feminist scholars (Lather, 1992; Harding, 1992, 2004), I did not seek objectivity, neutrality, or in my work. Rather, I centered my positionality and viewed my identity as a place of strength from which to operate. My researcher identity is foremost informed by my identification as an African American woman, particularly one who is committed to issues related to Black children’s early education. As a Black woman, I know that I will carry with me a specific set of beliefs and understandings about being a person of color in the U.S. As Dillard (2000) declares, “Thus if one claims that one is *of* the group…there must be a simultaneous assessment of a person’s character, values, motives, and ethics in relation to that group” (p. 673). Therefore, I sought to be reflective and reflexive about the ways my identity influenced the data collection and analysis processes.

My research’s basic tenet is to highlight that young children in the United States are influenced by institutional and structural societal forces and examine the particular ways in which African American children make sense of those forces. My experience as a former early elementary school teacher of predominantly African American children also influenced how I understood the capacities of my participants (as rich, expansive,
intellectual) and negotiated my role as facilitator during the circles. I sought to decenter myself as an expert and authority to provide space for the children to share.

Because the central inquiry and design of my study focused on the children and their perspectives, I sought to be ethical in conducting research with young children. During the first circle session, I explained the purposes of the study and our weekly meetings and asked them for their verbal assent. For each subsequent circle session, I informed them that they could exit the study at any time and not participate during any session or the weeks following. There were, for example, some weeks where one or two students asked to leave early to participate in the school’s afterschool programming and so they did. During the circles and the subsequent analysis, I took a listening stance to privilege the meaningfulness of the children’s social worlds (Paley, 2007; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). Although I could never fully suspend my adult thinking and schemas, I attempted to actively engage and affirm the children with whatever thoughts and feelings they brought to the circles. I also sought to suspend the “traditional developmental models of childhood” and begin from a place where the children were viewed as “socially competent and agentic” (Connolly, 2008). In all, my research worked to acknowledge the power asymmetries (Christensen & Prout, 2002) between adult and child. I, at times, had to redirect their behavior and reiterate my expectations) while also working to privilege how they lead the discussions and their ways of knowing and being.

Despite my attempts to decenter myself in the circles and honor the children’s knowledge sharing and generation, I recognized that my presence was meaningful and influential. For one, I functioned as an “insider-outsider” (Fine, 1994) in the school,
someone who despite being racially similar to most of the students and teachers in the school, was there for the primary purpose of conducting research. Thus, the practice of reflexivity (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016) was central to my dissertation project. I remained aware of the social distance between my participants and I, given my role as an outside researcher. As such, I would seek clarity from the classroom teacher and principal when I wondered or was curious about a topic, to vet my interpretations and to pose clarifying questions. This is also why the parents were integral to my data collection cycle.

Furthermore, I was cognizant of reactivity as I collected my data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 102). I plainly explained my role as a researcher to the children. However, because of their age, my presence and the presence of an audio recorder did influence how comfortable they were speaking to me about personal and other sensitive issues, particularly at the beginning of the study. The children did, at moments, act in the way of “performing,” viewing me as an audience (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 102). However, eliminating my researcher influence and presence in the study was impossible and as Maxwell (2013) described, not necessarily a meaningful goal. Instead, I worked to make my purposes transparent to all participants and lean into the moments where my presence was salient to further dialogue between the children. I constantly reflected upon the ways in which my identity affected how I interacted with my student participants, recognizing the diversity of their experiences in and out of school despite their shared racial identity.

To grapple with my subjectivities during my data collection and analysis cycles, I wrote reflective memos as a space to reflect on my identities (e.g., race, socioeconomic
status, gender, education, teaching experience). I reflected upon the ways in which my identity affects how I interact with my participants, how it influenced the ways I interpreted and represented the data.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations of this dissertation. First, this study did not have the power of generalizability, given the small sample size. I had five children participants at one specific school site. These children are not by any means representative of all African American first-graders living in an urban area in the United States. Yet, the knowledge these children brought to bear illustrates the types of knowledge young children may possess. Despite the small sample size, the data and design provided in this study has generated knowledge about whether and how issues like incarceration, immigration restrictions, policing, and slavery are too weighty of topics in which to engage children. These children are not representative but they do illustrate possibility. They dispel the myth of colorblindness and bolster the work being done in antiracist pedagogies, with children of color at the center instead of the margins. Thus, this study needs to be replicated with larger numbers of young African American children.

Second, I did not observe these children outside of school. I interviewed their parents to support my analysis of their words, drawings, and dictations in the circles but I did not shift my purview for an extended period to directly observe their racial socialization practices or racialized experiences outside of school. Therefore, I only learned about events in the past from their and their parents offerings. Future studies might examine these practices in real time, gain more perspective on the families who are
raising young African American children to be racially aware and conscious of difference and inequity in the world.

Finally, this study does not look across age. Rather, it focuses on a very specific window of time in these children’s lives. I do not know how this knowledge changed over time, whether they have moved toward a more radical or colorblind stance on race and racism. In addition, this study does not allow for a comparative analysis of, for example, preschool-aged children versus my first grade participants. My study does not evaluate the progressive and cumulative nature of racial awareness, however, it does provide an example of how African American children age 6 and 7 think about race, racism, and racialization.

Through my research methodology and methods, I sought to design a study that would center the voices and perspectives of African American children. I collected data that focused on what they know, how they came to know, and what forms of representing their knowledge were most resonant for them. This chapter outlined the context for this study, the participants, the methodologies used in the design and implementation of the work, and offers details into how the data was analyzed and represented. Through the next chapters, I will explore the answers to each of my research questions and the salient dimensions of the children’s experiences, thinking, schooling, and out-of-school lives that became apparent, explicating the nature of their sociopolitical knowledge and racial awareness.
CHAPTER FOUR: CONTEMPORARY & HISTORICAL
SOCIOPOLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

Introduction

For too long, the experiential knowledge of students of color has been viewed as a
deficit in formal learning environments. Critical raced-gendered epistemologies
allow this experiential knowledge to be viewed as a strength and acknowledge
that the life experiences of students of color are “uniquely individual while at the
same time both collective and connected” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 109).

Sociopolitical knowledge is most often understood as out of the scope of the
concerns for young children’s early literacy development and academic achievement.
Gallo & Link (2015) argue that young children can and do bring in “politicized funds of
knowledge” into early elementary classroom contexts when they are invited to do so.

This chapter details the five salient themes--perceived racial injustice of themselves and
others, political inequities and the presidency, police and policing, imprisonment, and
enslavement--that emerged over the course of my participation’s fourteen-week
engagement in the literature circles. The dialogue that transpired consisted of the children
making race-conscious (in direct opposition to colorblind) assertions across the themes,
asserting counternarratives of empowerment, and offering critical opinions and
denouncements. This chapter provides n view into the nature of the experiential
knowledge in which my participants grounded their emergent racial and sociopolitical
ideologies and the kinds of offerings they made in the literature circle space. Moreover, it
reveals the expansive capacity that these children had in understanding and making
meaning about the historical and contemporary consequences of racism.

These children in this study are thinking about race and racism and its myriad
manifestations in a manner that demonstrates their sophisticated negotiations about and
handle on the topics. They formed arguments and supported those arguments with examples they gathered from various sources in their world, evidenced primarily through their dialogue but also through drawing and dictations. What is to be learned from what they said and drew is that African American children are consuming the world and recognize that their nascent views about the world take inequality, racism, and discrimination into account and this awareness is intellectual in nature, as it is foundational to their meaning-making about the world.

**Conceptualizations of Racism**

The literature circle sessions began with an inquiry into the children’s understandings about their own racial identities, skin color, and their definitions of racism. After I read *Skin Again* by bell hooks to them, they told me what they liked about the story and its illustration. Each child identified themselves as “African American”, “Black”, and/or “brown” (with the exception of Miles who is biracial and called himself “brown and white”). They then engaged with me about how being Black was a source of difference and the ways that race manifests itself through skin color difference. Renee declared, “Well, we are all Black and some people are white, so you can tell, if they're different than you, or if they talk different, because when I first came to Pre-K.” Kelly followed by stating, “I went to the pool then I went to the store to buy ice cream and water ice and these people, they looked like they came from a different place, because they looked different. They were really, really white and their face was different from my face.” After asking them whether they heard of Black or white as a race, Ryan questioned “Racism?” and Renee declared, “Well, we talk about this in school”. As a follow-up, I
then asked, “What does racism mean to you?” Kelly replied, “Racism means you don't like somebody because of their color.”

In the following week, after reading of Let’s Talk about Race by Julius Lester, Kelly reiterated her perspective:

WFJ: Everybody can tell me what you guys said to me that racism was?...What'd you think? Yeah.

Kelly: That somebody doesn't like you because of your color.

WFJ: Anybody else?

Isaac: Like some people don't really like you because they never met a brown person at school and they didn't really like your color.

Both Kelly and Isaac operationalized racism as an embodiment of feelings toward a person who perceives difference in another, namely their skin color. It can be inferred that Isaac views racism as an action carried out by white people and directed at brown people. His definition of racism recognizes points to the ways that racism is borne out of ignorance about others, in stating “because they never met a brown person at school.”

Kelly’s definition, however, is distinct from Isaac’s; she describes racism, during the Skin Again session shortly after she introduced the word racism into the dialogue, through what she imagines is how Donald Trump treats Black visitors to the White House:

If somebody comes up to his office that's Black, he'll use his bodyguards and kick them out. That's why I don't like a racist president, because some Black people, they think they're stronger and some white people, they think they're better than Black people. I don't like racism.

She identified the subjects of racism to be both white and Black people, but in different ways- which Blacks thinking they are stronger, while whites think they are better. While this could be viewed as a subscription to the concept of “reverse racism” (Black people
having the power to be racist toward others), Kelly may have been exposed to and internalized the long-standing, historical tropes of Black people possessing super strength and imminent threats. With media as a growing and more prominent aspect of young children’s lives (Lemish, 2015), racist ideologies and messages are constantly being disseminated via television, movies, and news. Kelly implicitly acknowledges that Donald Trump is a white man who acts in a racist manner, as Isaac did here:

WFJ: Is Donald Trump the only person that doesn't like people of other colors?
Isaac: There's other white people.
WFJ: Okay.
Isaac: They act like that because they never saw, or they never heard Black people before.

After responding to the group that Donald Trump is an example of someone who is racist, Isaac importantly demonstrates that racism thrives off of an ignorance of and lack of interaction with others. He recognizes that to be racist, you have to not know others at all. Isaac also identifies that racism extends beyond him as an individual. His conceptualization connects the actions of this one man to a group identity or politics. “Other white people” act in ways similar to Trump whom Isaac would consider racist, which signals that to him, this is not an individual phenomenon. Moreover, the children pointed to the ways that racism is historical, not simply a present issue. Renee highlights how, for her, racism is not a contemporary condition:

WFJ: Why do people mistreat others…what do you think?
Renee: I think slavery came first and then they start having a war…A war, I guess to say? And then the Black people kind of got like something good. They really actually got, so that the white people got pay back for it.
Renee identifies the historical legacy of racism. She understands it as having begun during enslavement in the U.S. Both Renee and Isaac identify that racism is not simply a characteristic that is housed within one individual. Rather, it persists over time and is a way of being for many. After discussing their own racial identities and their definitions of racism, the children were asked to share instances when they have personally experienced racism. Camille shared two instances at summer camp:

Camille: When I was at Summer Camp, it's not really appropriate, but the kid that was saying to me, he said, "You look the skin color of poop." I didn't really like that.

... Camille: One time, I was at Summer Camp and this older boy said and he was a teenager and he said, "You don't look like a person that's white." I said, "But I don't care, because I can stand up for myself."

Camille identified two types of racist experiences to which she was subjected, one wherein someone expressed disdain for her skin color and one instance where she was told she could not do or be somewhere because she was not white. Camille also demonstrated that she is not a passive recipient of racist acts nor does she allow it to negatively influence her self-image or esteem. Rather, she saw a responsibility to speak back to discrimination and not be intimidated by how others feel about her. In addition, Kelly detailed a time when both she and Camille experienced discrimination on the playground:

Kelly: One time, me and [Camille] was at the park and we was going on the monkey bars and this boy and this girl ... these kids was trying to tease us, because we couldn't go on the monkey bars good enough. They were saying that you can't do that if you're Black. I told them, "Yes you can."

Camille: We didn't care, then we just did it a lot. Then, we said to them, "But that's not fair, because Black people can go on it, because I saw a lot of black
people go on it 1,000 times, like one person and five persons doing the monkey bars at the same time and we don't have to stop if we don't want to.

Camille, again, took an activist stance and speaking back to those who mistreat her because of her race. In her world, she may experience racism and prejudice but she knows that she has the right to be included and treated fairly. “We didn’t care, then we just did it a lot,” illustrates that she resists internalizing others’ feelings about her that are rooted in a racist or discriminatory perspective; rather, she uses that as fuel to make them see that she is unscathed. She challenged the justification for their attempted exclusion of her and Kelly.

The conversation about race, skin color, and their personal experiences with interpersonal racism illuminated several things about how the children were thinking. They primarily defined racism as a Black and white issue, born out of their own experiences and knowledge about how people view Black people. They considered several instances that illustrated the extent to which Black people experienced racism in both contemporary and historical contexts, and they declared an agency over how they reacted to being mistreated for being Black. This acts of defiance and narratives of empowerment serve as a buffer to the racism they experience. Their critical stances are not solely intellectual but rather function in the moment, as spontaneous direct opposition to the racial stress (Stevenson, 2014) they have experienced in their brief lives.

During the discussion of defining racism, Isaac mentioned that Black people were “traded” a long time ago because people did not like them. Isaac not only considered racism as an event of slavery, however. When asked “Are people still racism today?”,
Isaac responded, “Mm-hmm. Trump is.” The children viewed whiteness and racism embodied in Trump and his presidency in significant ways.

**The Current Presidential Administration and Political Inequities**

Renee: And I don't like Donald Trump because he doesn't like kids. And second, because he lied...And he's a racist.

The most common topic of discussion, most frequently during the first circle session after reading *Skin Again* by bell hooks and the second circle after reading *Let’s Talk about Race* by Julius Lester, was the presidency. In particular, the children discussed Donald Trump and the following: 1. his racial attitudes, 2. his immigration policies, and 3. his morality and socioeconomic privilege. The students introduced him into the discussion after they engaged their ideas and conceptualizations of racism. Declaring that no one likes Donald Trump, Kelly responds to *How do you know nobody likes him?* by further stating: “Because he's the worst and he lied and he said he's going to be nice to people then he brings people somewhere then he makes the police do something to them.” Kelly understood that he is in a position of authority to influence how people treat others (in this case, the police) and that his performance as a president is in some ways tied to being honest and kind.

After listening to the other children discuss Trump’s views on Brown and Black people on the first week, Miles declared, “Donald Trump doesn’t like anyone that are different than him.” Renee also asserted:

I would think that Donald Trump should let everybody come to make it fair. I think that I would prefer Black people and white people, because it wouldn't be fair, that's why we like to have the same people to be together and stuff, because if you don't have people together, they might turn out bad. So you wanna have people together and have the right way to do it.
Renee and Miles were acutely aware that his beliefs were not just ideas or thoughts, that they had material consequences; there was more to him than just being unkind or mean. They assessed his behavior as unacceptable, racist, unfair, and saw the consequences as far reaching (evidenced by Mile’s declaration that “I don’t want other people to want to start killing other people” and Renee’s statement that “they might turn out bad”). Most of them discussed Donald Trump’s stance on Mexican immigration and his desire to build a wall along the southern U.S. border as one of the consequences they condemned and of which they were aware.

Miles: And Donald Trump doesn't like homeless people. I mean, he just doesn't care about them and he doesn't want them to do anything and he wants to take over Mexico and my aunt told me a long time ago, Mexican people used to live here.

Here, Miles displayed historical knowledge about the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico and that Trump’s policies on immigration are not just a present issue. If Mexican people used to live here, for Miles, that makes it that much more awful for Trump to try and keep them out. Miles uses this knowledge to justify why Trump does not care about people who are different than him. In addition, after reading Grace for President, Kelly and Camille detailed what they believe a president’s job is:

WFJ: Can you tell me what do you think the President does?

Kelly: Do work and talk about people.

WFJ: Okay.

Camille: And decide who can go to a other country.

WFJ: Oh and decide. Donald Trump makes decisions about who can go to other people's countries? What does he say about that?
Camille: And who can go to Mexico...

Their views on the President’s duties and job expectations are informed by their perception of current events and what discourses have been salient over the course of Trump’s tenure as president, along with what they believe Trump himself identifies as an important aspect of his job. Trump’s presidency is defined, for them, by his attempts to discriminate against some people, limit their autonomy and right to move, migrate, and/or seek asylum. Mexico and immigration was the most salient topic of discussion related to Trump’s policies or political positions, likely because it was constantly in the news at the time. There was a understanding that Mexico is inhabited by “brown” people and that is a primary reason why Trump is against people moving; Camille’s details her conceptualization of the travel ban during the first literature circle:

I think Martin Luther King might like help people, so Donald Trump don't hurt people...Like make the servants chase the Black people and some of the people that are white was Donald Trump and they're mean. Some white people think that Brown people are mean, but they don't think of their self and they react to the Black people and they say, "You cannot come to this country. You cannot come this country." That's what the government says sometimes, when you're brown and you have to get a ticket to go to the other country and some people saw movies about Donald Trump making the police and servants getting the brown people and putting the people in jail and they're taking lessons to how to be mean.

Camille connects Trump’s travel ban to a broader view of white people who act in a prejudice or racist manner (as Isaac did in the earlier section); it is not simply about one person being mean to another, there is a group identity- whether it be “some white people” or “the government”- that Camille associates with Trump’s racism and his desire to prevent people from entering the U.S. She also sees him as a role model for those who want to be mean or treat brown and Black people unfairly, as Kelly did earlier; Donald
Trump is not acting in isolation, nor is he alone in his feelings about non-white people; others are “taking lessons” and adjusting their behavior to be mean.

In addition, Camille began her statement by evaluating Trump’s moral character and actions by juxtaposing him with Martin Luther King. Using this prominent, Black historical figure as a counterexample, Camille demonstrates her understanding of history and also underscores the far-reaching power and influence that Trump has on the nation, in a similar way that King had when he was alive. Camille’s description of the travel ban demonstrates a sociopolitical awareness of individuals versus collective, for both those who are the subjects and objects of marginalization. Other expressed similar sentiments:

Isaac: Donald Trump wants to build a wall and for Mexican people and Mexican people... Martin Luther King, if he was still alive, he would say, Mexican people could go into the United States.

After being asked if people think one skin color is better than another during the first circle session, Renee declared:

Martin Luther King talked about this. I think if Martin Luther King was still alive, I think that Donald Trump would be a little bit nicer, because he made Black people and white people come and because whenever I see ... whenever he's talking to something, I see him, his servants are all white, I think he should let, even if Martin Luther King was still alive, I think Martin Luther King would try to make people all come. That's what he'd always do. He'd always let people be Black and white people come to anything. It doesn't matter.

From both Renee and Isaac, there is a postulation about what Martin Luther King, Jr. would do and say if he were alive. They are posting him as a kind of moral barometer to measure Trump’s capacity to do good in the world. All three children are positioning Trump’s whiteness in opposition to King’s Blackness and desire to unite various groups of people- Black, white, and Mexican. There is an awareness of Martin Luther King Jr.’s
role as a multiracial coalition builder, which is viewed by the children as absent from
Trump’s presidency. Dr. King was not the only Black political figure to whom the
children compared Trump:

WFJ: ...you guys say you don't like Donald Trump, but did you all like when
Barack Obama was President?

Miles: Yes.

WFJ: Why? Tell me a bit...why?

Miles: He was better than Donald Trump because he let people come from
Mexico, and he doesn't hate anybody, and he treats everybody fairly; but Donald
Trump doesn't because he doesn't like Black people, and he doesn't like kids. And
he doesn't like people who are not rich like him.

Kelly shared similar sentiments:

Kelly: Well, I think Donald Trump, he doesn't really like Black people because
he just wants to be racist. I don't know why but he just wants to. And I like
Barack Obama better because he wasn't racist. And also because he liked kids,
Trump doesn't like kids...He doesn't like Black kids or white kids.

WFJ: Oh, he doesn't like any kids you're saying.

Barack Obama received positive praise from all of the children. They did not forward any
criticism about him or his presidency. Unlike Donald Trump, Former President Obama
was nice to kids, did not lie, and was not a racist, according to Renee. Their comparisons
implied their understanding of morality, particularly that of a white man they described as
racist and mean. Analyzing Donald Trump through a moral comparative lens to Martin
Luther King, Jr. and Barack Obama, the children elucidated the ways he was prejudiced,
amoral, and unkind. They also emphasized that his immoral behavior was something that
began before he took office. Renee began a discussion about Donald Trump’s alleged
election rigging:
I think I saw this thing on the news and it was talking about who should be the real president and it was thinking it would be Hillary Clinton, or Donald Trump, but Donald Trump cheated, so Hillary Clinton didn't be the president, but I don't think Hillary Clinton should have been the president, anyways.

Miles followed by declaring, “There's a show about what kids think about Donald Trump and I think he cheated, because he said, "If you vote for me, I'll give you a lot of dollars.” Not only was he seen as the antithesis to two famous, Black historical and contemporary figures through his behavior, beliefs, and morals, Miles also tied his character to his whiteness and socioeconomic privilege:

Miles: When I am bigger, I want to go to the president and fire Donald Trump and make him go to jail.

WFJ: Why should he go to jail?

Miles: And give everybody his money, because he has too much money and he's mean and then if he makes the wall, I'll tell the bodyguards to break the wall and I'll tell them on the news to clean up your own mess and put it in the trash and to keep the world healthy and make everyone be respectful to other people.

WFJ: Okay, and you said something about Donald Trump going to jail. Why do you feel like this? Why do you think he should go to jail?

Miles: Because, he's mean to Black people and that's not fair and he doesn't like a lot of people and he kills Black people and that's not good for people and I don't like people killing other people because it's violent and I don't want other people to want to start killing other people.

To Miles, Trump’s actions such as building the wall are life-threatening for people, akin to littering and waste that Miles sees on the streets of his urban neighborhood. There is a sense of the material consequences that are much more complex than a moral abstraction. He feels that he should be fired and jailed as the only reasonable atonement for his wrongdoings. Furthermore, Miles also asserts his agency in declaring that he would
demand that the wall be torn down; as Camille did when discussing the racism on the playground. The week prior, he also stated:

WFJ: So why do you think that [Donald Trump] doesn't like Black people, and kids, and people who aren't rich?

Miles: He likes people who are rich like him.

WFJ: ...So he doesn't like people who aren't rich. So tell me why. How do you know that he doesn't like those people?

Miles: And he doesn't care about homeless people. And he doesn't care about a town that just got a hurricane, just went in the country, and now it's wrecked, and no one's helping to make it.

Not only does Miles view his wealth as problematic but he also sees it as a method for him to discriminate against others, a condition of inequality that someone should address, as Miles imagined himself doing when he becomes an adult. He identifies that Trump does not care about the most vulnerable people in society, namely Black people, children, homeless people, and those who have been victims of natural disasters. All the children viewed Donald Trump as a racist, white man who has the power to deny people rights to move freely, to go unharmed by the government and police, or receive help in times of need. There was an explicit connection between his race and his belief system; they underscored that we cannot understand Trump outside of his identity as a rich, white man. Care and concern, or the lack thereof, are tied to the policies and politics that he instituted (e.g., travel ban) and or the issues he avoided addressing (in the case of the hurricane). Their critical and racialized awareness of Trump and the nature of his election and presidency stemmed from the fact that they viewed violence against brown
and Black people and intentional acts of exclusion and separation as dishonorable. Their standpoints on police officers and instances of police violence were parallel in nature.

**Police and Policing**

Police and policing were major foci for the children’s discussion. Much of the talk that emerged about the police during the circles concerned whether police officers were good or bad and specific instances that the children interacted with or saw others interact with police. The nature of the dialogue represented their keen understanding of the following: 1. the negative relationships that police have with communities of color, 2. the violent and suppressive role police have played in social movements like the Civil Rights Movement, and 3. police brutality and use of force toward Black people. During the *Going Home* literature circle, in which the post-reading dialogue began with a discussion about how jails look and imprisoned people (the book’s focal topic of immigration did not elicit any related knowledge but it did open the door for a rich discussion). Renee shifted the conversation some offered when she declared, “But, I think we should have good polices that care.” I then asked, “Do you think that there are some police that are not good? Why do you think that?”

Camille: They're a lot.

WFJ: What do you mean?

Camille: They're a lot of polices that are mean, because their job is being mean and not listening to a person that's actually...One time there was a kid and she knewed a lot about prison and she told me of all the things, and she told me of a tiny girl she was fighting for good polices. Then she got arrested and her mom could not find her, because the polices took her to a prison and the polices were smiling at her. And the polices said, “You might go to your mom, but you might not…” And she’s a good girl and she have a lot of stuff that she can break out of
prison and she was trying to get out of prison. Then she find a dirty toilet and she had to sleep in a bed that had a lot of bugs in it.

Camille described her knowledge of the consequences of protesting and her understanding of how police operate. She recounted a story that someone told her about a person who was arrested as a result of participating in a march against corrupt policing. She remembered that she was told the “police were smiling” in response to the girl being away from her family and locked up. She also described their jobs are “being mean and not listening.” Camille’s view of the police is undergirded by her own personal, first-hand experiences with them. During the interview with Camille’s father, I learned the details of those recurrent interactions with the police. I asked him whether he felt she understood race as operating at a systemic or institutional level, or simply an interpersonal one. He responded with this story that illuminated Camille’s conceptions of police:

So she, um, he got pulled over in New York and there's some drama with his brother. His brothers stole his driver's license for the number of years and racked up all these violations...So when he got pulled over in New York, he was almost arrested one time, well one time he was arrested...and then it happened again...Um, but she, so she, she was aware, she was old enough. She was five when it happened again and he didn't get arrested, but she was aware that he almost got arrested and now he doesn't drive in New York anymore. So she's trying to think out this meaning of like “Why does he not drive in New York, why does my papa not drive in New York but my dad does drive in New York?” She'll ask that question. It's very clear that she's slightly more aware than we necessarily know because just this weekend, we were on a trip in New York and we were coming back and we switched drivers...We hadn't said anything about it, but she was like, “Tell me again why he can’t drive in New York?” She was like, “Oh, I thought you were talking about the police in New York or something.”

Camille (during the We March literature circle): You know what? One time my papa got pulled over by the police and I just rolled my eyes at the police.
Camille gathered from the repeat stops in the State of New York that the police she had heard about were reflected in her lived experiences. Her “papa,” her adoptive Jamaican-American father, had experienced racial profiling and Camille was cognizant that the interactions that her family had with police were not necessarily positive. As a result of witnessing these exchanges and traffic stops, she felt the police should be met with resentment. Camille did not subscribe to the dominant early childhood framing of policing as an example of a helping profession. Rather, she viewed the police as antagonizers.

In Camille’s story of the girl being arrested, she labeled her as “good”. Renee, during the Going Home literature circle, similarly engaging the good/bad dichotomy in sharing her observations of policing on television:

Well...I know why polices like bad people, because I saw it on TV before. And sometimes, they let them get air, but they have gates so they get separated because they’re bad, so they have separated chains. Sometimes I feel bad...I watched this show with my mom and he was a good prison guy, but then he went to the judge, but then the judge he had to stay there longer. So, he sneaked outta jail.

As the discussion unfolded, it became clear that Renee was specifically referencing the highly public case of Meek Mill, a Philadelphia-born rap artist who was thrust into the spotlight after his court case and parole violation shed light on the prison-industrial complex and its abuses of people of color through extensive parole sentences, corrupt law enforcement officers and judges, and harsh sentencing. Although the story she retold did not include all the relevant facts of the case, her recounting represents a rather intimate engagement with this high profile case. Her understanding that people in jail are separated for being “bad” but that Meek Mill was a “good prison guy,” alludes to
the fact that he was unfairly treated by the judge and judicial system. Renee not only understands policing in the contemporary sense, she also understood that police operated similarly in the past. Following the reading of *A is for Activist* by Innosanto Nagara:

Renee: Because, he was Black and the police was white, so the white man didn't like the Black person. So then, he didn't move because a white person wanted to sit there.

WFJ: Oh, move from his seat, okay.

Renee: It's not fair.

Kelly: Wasn't that Rosa Parks?

Here, Renee is referencing Rosa Parks and her arrest, the impetus for the Montgomery Bus Boycott. She sees the issue as one of racism and whiteness as connected to policing. White people and police officers are linked (“the police was white”), whose wishes are at odds with the lives of Black people, in this instance Rosa Parks. After reading *We March*, Isaac distinguishes good police from bad and also points to images he has seen of Black people having water hoses turned on them:

Isaac: Some police are mean and some aren't.

WFJ: Yeah.

Isaac: The mean ones, they shoot people. And there's the fire people, they turn the water on very high and then it hurts the people because it’s so hard and then it kills them sometimes.

Renee explicitly implicates race as an element of policing in her understanding of why Rosa Parks was asked to move; while Isaac does not name race but sees police misconduct as connected to their use of guns and other forms of violence. Both see police
as having the potential to misuse their power and force to hurt people or force them to do something against their will.

The lengthiest conversation during the literature circles concerning police occurred after Renee began talking about Philando Castile, a Minnesota man who was shot and killed by a police officer in his car while his girlfriend sat next to him and her young child sat in the backseat in 2016. Renee opened up the discussion of this instance of police brutality by stating:

Renee: One time a long time ago, and my mom said I was not born, but we was watching it on Iyanla: Fix My Life –

WFJ: Okay, what about it?

Renee: And she was talking about this man and this woman and she had a kid and then they got pulled over by the police and then - you know when they have guns but it's not to shoot somebody?...And then, no. And then the police said, you know when you give up your credit card to the police.

WFJ: Yeah, driver's license, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Renee: He thought that he was taking out a gun because it was in his pocket so they just shot him. Just because of his color.

She remembers the details of Castile being pulled over. She recollects that Castile had a gun in his possession and that his being Black was the reason that the gun was interpreted as suspicious or endangering the officer. Renee does not mention race or skin color to describe anyone; rather, she posits this as the reason why Castile was shot and killed. Renee possesses an awareness of Black people as disproportionate targets of police brutality and implies that she senses a disregard that police have for Black people’s lives.

The dialogue continues:

WFJ: So did you see the video of the person?
Renee: Yeah.

WFJ: And how did that make you feel?

Renee: I thought it felt sad.

WFJ: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Renee: Because he really wasn't getting a gun and the police just killed him for no reason.

WFJ: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. So I know what you're talking about. His name was Philando Castile. That's his name, yeah. He did die because the police shot him in his car. Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes.

Renee: And she was crying.

WFJ: Who was crying?

Renee: The girl.

Although one might assume that Renee would be traumatized by seeing the extremely graphic video of Castile’s murder, she approaches her analysis of the situation from a seemingly removed stance. Stating “I thought it felt sad” as opposed to “I felt sad” indicates that she herself did not have a memorable emotional response or detached from the event. She seemingly recognized the emotions of Castile, his girlfriend Diamond Reynolds, and her four-year-old daughter and empathized with the trauma they experienced. Renee’s disposition throughout this entire exchange was very matter-of-fact, which point to both the pervasiveness of police killings in the media and Renee’s level of knowledge and exposure to such issues.. Renee continues discussing the role of Castile’s gun in the officer’s motivation for shooting:

Renee: He was really kind of scared because I think he had the gun in the back with him, so he was kind of like terrified, kind of, so he was just reaching for it
and then the gun wasn't back with him ‘cause I saw he was like this, unless it was in the pocket. Unless it was in his pocket. And then he just started shooting like five I guess. I don't - she didn't know what to say.

WFJ: You mean the police officer started shooting –

Renee: No his wife didn't know how much shots the police did so she just knowed that he died so…

WFJ: Okay.

Renee: Mm-hmm (affirmative). it was sad. The kid and the mom was in the car too so yeah I don't know if she saw how much shots.

WFJ: How do you think they felt?

Renee: Sad. She was crying and stuff. The police had to take the kid out, so she was crying...so yeah.

Renee considers the circumstances around Castile’s gun, inferring about his state of mind during the interaction with the police. Not only was Renee cognizant of the disproportionality of police violence and police bias when interacting with people of color, she also seemed attuned to the fear that police instill in people of color who are suspected of wrongdoing. Renee is aware of the feelings of terror and sadness that were present before, during and after the shooting. Renee’s retelling of the events surrounding Philando Castile’s death demonstrates her awareness of the way police often treat Black people they deem a threat or suspicious and the deadly outcomes that can occur when police judge someone “just because of his color”. Her recounting illustrates her capacity to comprehend power arrangements and systemic iterations of racism. Directly after Renee spoke in depth about Philando Castile, Camille alludes to her knowledge of another instance of police misconduct:
Camille: Sometimes polices shoot somebody because somebody just have an inhaler. Because sometimes people can't breathe. And they have inhalers. But they take the sprayer out and put them in their pockets. Some people have to press a button to get the air out....Then the boy was saying, "This is my inhaler," and the police was saying, "I don't believe you."

WFJ: Why do you think the police didn't believe him?

Camille: Because they actually really looked like a gun and then the police saw the air. Then, the person coughed...the police thought he was killing hisself.

Camille does not directly reference race in the same way that Renee did but she does further reinforce an understanding that police violence occurs. Also, in opposition to Renee, she justifies the police’s actions in saying that the inhaler did not look like a gun. She gives credence to the narrative that victims of police brutality to some degree deserve the treatment or violence to which they are subjected, a belief held by many and a pervasive line of thinking represented in the media. However, in the dialogue she posits between a boy and a police officer, she alludes to the idea that police are selective about who gets the benefit of the doubt.

Although Camille does not mention a name or specify who she is talking about, Eric Garner, a New York City Black man, is a likely inference. Garner’s attempted arrest and eventual murder was caught on camera and became one of the more high profile cases of police murders of Black people in the U.S. in the last decade. Garner’s last words before being choked to death by a police officer were “I can’t breathe”, which became famous and are utilized as protest mantra by activist organizations like Black Lives Matter. Renee and Camille represent an interesting juxtaposition. Renee recounts a race-conscious understanding of police brutality through a very specific case, while Camille does not name race but seems to allude to an awareness of disparate treatment by
police. Overall, the children relayed feelings about police that were mostly negative, rooted in both firsthand and indirect experiences with police officers. The discussions we engaged in around police and policing highlights how they view police treatment as starkly different depending on who you are. Their views reflect the larger structural dynamic that has existed over time between police and communities and people of color. This historical linkage to the contemporary was evident also in the ways they thought about enslavement.

**Enslavement and Enslaved Peoples**

Slavery was a topic that emerged early on during the literature circles. The children began discussing their knowledge of slavery as they considered their own thinking about their conceptualization of racism and continued throughout the weeks, with many of their thoughts being sparked during the reading of *The Youngest Marcher* by Cynthia Levinson. They understood that enslavement of African peoples happened long ago and that Black people were enslaved persons while white people were owners. Their understandings of slavery addressed three aspects of the institution: 1. Being overworked and mistreated and the consequences therein, 2. The restrictive and deadly nature of being enslaved, and 3. Harriet Tubman and her role as an abolitionist.

Isaac: Like, in olden days, people didn't like brown people so they used them as slaves so when...So that meant, so when the white people didn't want to do the work on a really sunny day and sweating that Black people had to do it and like if they didn't want to mow or not and the brown people had to do it and then if they didn't want to go in a thunderstorm when it's raining and water the plants then the Black people have to do that, cause they use them as slaves.

Isaac recognized that enslaved people were forced to work, no matter how exhausted they felt or how harsh the weather, risking their well-being and bodies. He also recognized
that enslavement was a condition to which “brown” people were subjected, in which white people to assign undesirable work to them because they did not like them. There is an awareness here of slavery as intentional, in which compulsory labor was essential. Isaac and Renee acknowledge the consequences of enslaved people being overworked. After the reading of Freedom in Congo Square by Carole Boston Weatherford, we engaged in a discussion about the hardships of slave labor:

Isaac: I think it's hard when you're pregnant and then it's hard to work if you're cutting a branch, and you accidentally might hit you and then the baby would get hurt.

WFJ: That's possible. I think so. I think it is hard, but they didn't give them a break no matter what. Yes?

Renee: The baby might get lost.

WFJ: What do you mean by lost?

Renee: You know when the baby, when you hold the baby too long and it might get lost in their belly.

Here, Isaac and Renee seem to be articulating someone having a miscarriage, which is likely to have happened in contexts where enslaved pregnant women worked in extreme weather for long hours. She acknowledges the effects of the condition of slavery on the enslaved people’s children and families. Renee recognizes that the consequences of being enslaved could be deadly as well:

Well slaves, well white people sometimes don't like...Black people sometimes are sometimes a little smart. White people I think, I was watching this movie with my mom, it was this little...He was a boy and he was going to his house to get stuff and then he saw white people and then he was talking smart to the white people and then they got mad and they started to start being mean to him and at the end he was, they used this thing to choke him with the thing. It was the neck thing and they choked him and he was dead and he was hanging.
Renee discussed her understanding of lynching, describing it in detail, which she learned about after watching the 2016 movie about Nat Turner entitled “Birth of a Nation”. She sees that one way that white people rationalized lynching was that they got mad when Black people talked “smart”. Renee recognized the power imbalance that was inherent in how enslavement was carried out; Black people were hung and killed because white people perceived them as a threat, which is similar to how she described Castile and the role of his gun in his murder by a police officer. In all, we can see how the children were thinking about the how enslavement caused people hurt, danger, and death to Black people and that white people were the authority and rule makers, the arbiters of consequence.

Slavery was recurrent topic during the circles but not simply in acknowledging how hard it was for Black people. The children also discussed narratives of perseverance, particularly through their knowledge of Harriet Tubman and her work to liberate herself and others from bondage. After Kelly inserted Harriet Tubman into the conversation about presidents, mentioning the talk about her becoming the new face on the twenty dollar bill, I asked, “Does everyone know who Harriet Tubman is?”:

Kelly: Yeah

Camille: Oh yes! Very strong.

... 

Kelly: She was somebody and she had the people from the South's slaves escape and go to the North.

WFJ: She stopped or she helped them?

Kelly: Helped them.
Both Kelly and Camille had immediate and enthusiastic responses, and understood that her most notable contribution to history was tied to her ability to escape being enslaved and helping others to do the same. Weeks later, Isaac recounts the plot of a book about Harriet Tubman that he often read with his parents:

Isaac: Because this was a real person that actually happened when there were slaves and at night she opened her door and packed everything and her parents told her how to walk quietly on the leaves and her brothers got captured too and then she said "I'm going to escape," and then her brothers said "No, I'm gonna tell your boss." And then she escaped and then when she came to...she actually walked all the way to Puerto Rico or something...And then a nice lady had a boat and the lady sailed her far and then another man had a horse and then she got in the carriage.

WFJ: Oh, you're probably talking about Harriet Tubman, right? Is that the person? Isaac: Yeah, when she came to Philadelphia she had a pistol, it's a type of gun...I forgot in the middle of the part of my book they put chains on the kids' legs and then the people ride on horses and they have guns and if you fall asleep on the trip there, they will shoot you and there's one person that's on the horse that has a gun that is looking over you and there's another person that's not on a horse that is looking right at you.

WFJ: Okay, so what you're saying is a part of the book, you know the reason why they had the chains?

Isaac: Yes.

WFJ: Why?

Isaac: So they can't escape.

Isaac recognized that Tubman was resolved to escape from enslavement, even if it meant leaving her brothers behind. Despite his limited knowledge of geography, he knew the gravity that escaping was at the time. He also pointed to the ways Tubman success was tied into the humanity of others. Although he did not specify the race of the individuals who assisted Tubman, he remembered that those people were essential in getting her far
away from her plantation and out of the range of being captured. What is most striking about his retelling is that Isaac began the story by emphasizing Tubman was “a real person”. Although a historical figure, she is someone who existed, who endured the realities that she did. This emphasis on reality is reflected in Renee’s discussion of a movie she saw concerning slavery:

Renee: I was watching this movie and he got caught by the white people and he was trying to sneak out at night but white people in the trees and they had those horses things and they had guns and then they was telling him to leave before they shot him so he went back to that house and then he had to leave because that's what Isaac said, you're not allowed to leave so he had to go at night and sneak out at night.

WFJ: So what was this a movie or a book?

Renee: A movie but I'm pretty sure it was real life.

Connected to what Isaac had just shared with us about his book about Harriet Tubman, Renee remembered seeing a movie wherein an enslaved person was trying to escape despite the heavy surveillance of the white people. She demonstrates a knowledge of slavery as a state where people did not autonomy and the need for them to sneak out at night. As previously mentioned, after a reading of Freedom on the Menu: The Greensboro Sit-Ins by Carole Boston Weatherford, Renee cites slavery’s legacy as one reason for contemporary racism, but continues this thinking by grappling with the backlash of abolition and the Civil War:

Renee: ...I think slavery came first and then they start having a war. What is it called again? A war, I guess to say? And then the Black people kind of got like something good. They really actually got, so that the white people pay back for it.

WFJ: Oh, so what's payback? You're saying people being mistreated?
Renee: Yes.

WFJ: Payback for what?

Renee: For letting Black people, for, I don't know how to say it.

WFJ: Okay, because you were talking about slavery, saying that afterwards white people were trying to get payback for Black people not being slaves? Renee: For having a war for white people.

WFJ: Oh, for having a war that set Black people free from being slaves?

Renee: Yeah...Because some people went up to the thing, when I was talking about Roots, they went up to some white people, some Black people left, so then the white people turned it around and they saw Black people coming there...

WFJ: So you're saying revenge. Kind of like revenge, like they were getting back at them. So that's why things like that were unequal and stuff.

Renee: Yea.

Renee demonstrated her understanding (rooted in her viewing of both the Birth of a Nation and the movie Roots) of why white people mistreated Black people and were prejudice toward them. For her, white people felt threatened and were seeking revenge for the war that ensued which ended slavery. Renee implied that Black people being free came with a price and that price came in how they would be treated after being freed. The opinions that the children shared about slavery revealed that they knew race was central in how slavery was carried out, who fulfilled which roles in the structure of slavery, and the resilience that Black people, in particular Harriet Tubman, displayed despite the intense subjugation they experienced. The institution of slavery and the conditions of enslaved peoples were often connected to the children’s understandings of contemporary incarceration.

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Imprisonment and Incarceration

Although incarceration was the least recurrent topic of the five, it was still something the children talked about across a number of weeks. The discussions about jail and prisons were primarily centered on 1. defining and describing the juvenile detention centers, 2. their understanding of the role of police in operating them, 3. their own families’ experiences with being imprisoned, and 4. the role of jailing activists during the Civil Rights era. During the second literature circle, after reading Let’s Talk About Race, Isaac shared that the book made him think of a time he had visited an old jail turned museum. Renee posited “Was it juvie?” after hearing him say he saw children there. In response, Miles shared his understandings of juvenile detention facilities:

Miles: I heard in juvie most people they have stuff that juvie persons can hide.

WFJ: What is juvie?

Miles: Juvie is a jail but it’s for kids but sometimes you have to be a little older.

WFJ: But do all kids go there?

Miles: Not little kids like us but like teenagers and stuff.

WFJ: Well, why do they go there?

Miles: Because they do something bad.

WFJ: Okay do you know someone who is in one of those places?

Miles: One time my cousin doing something bad. He was with Mom and he stealed money and drugs and stuff and he got in big trouble and the police checked their house and he had to go to juvie.

Miles’ knowledge of the juvenile detention centers came from his personal experiences with having a family member who was sent to one. His understanding of why children
are sent there came from his own cousin being jailed; he saw jail as a place where people are sent when they something wrong; interestingly, he identified their actions as bad, but did not see label them as inherently bad people. Renee described how she believed the inside of a jail looks, along with her understanding of police’s role in operating them:

And, they have these toilets and they're dirty. But they have books and they have these seats, but they're dirty. But at least they get food, but some polices let people get outta jail and fight, but they shouldn't. They should get in trouble but some polices don't care. But, I think we should have good polices that care.

WFJ: We should have ... Say the last thing?

Renee: Good polices that can care about if they come out.

Renee’s understanding of police as bad or not doing their job is evidenced in her thoughts about what they do in prisons. Jail is a dirty, undesirable place. She felt that police allow incarcerated people to fight and escape jail because they “don’t care.” Her description of jail did not include a judgment of those being imprisoned; the fault or misconduct lies in how the police behave those spaces. Renee’s knowledge of how police function in jails and how jails and prisons look was also rooted in her family’s experiences of being incarcerated. She recounted an instance about her grandmother:

Renee: When my mom was taking me to school and my first day of school, she went this way and it was called Cops Week and I saw polices and some people and my grandma went to jail and I saw the prisoners and it looked real. I saw their food and I said it looked nasty. And when I saw my grandma she said it was not good in there and it had a bad influence.

WFJ: Because you visited the place where she was?

Renee: Then, I talked to her on the phone and I think that it was white people and they didn't let her stay there for a long time. And some polices let the prisoners fight but they're not supposed to because the polices can get in trouble. That's why my mom watches videos so she can know what happens that's why people watch the news and stuff.
Renee inserts race into the conversation about incarceration (that is, outside of a discussion about Donald Trump), for the first time. Renee mentioned that white people were at the jail, not because they were incarcerated also, but because they were in charge of her grandmother and the other imprisoned peoples. Again, Renee described jail as repulsive (“I saw their food and I said it looked nasty”). Camille mentioned race in a similar fashion by stating, “And I want the soldiers to go in jail and I will take their guns and I will take the batteries out of them. Then, I will let them out. Then all of the bad white people don't know how to put the batteries in.” In this instance, Camille discussed her ideas about who should be imprisoned and how to quell violence and keep bad people from operating guns; having mentioned Donald Trump a little earlier, she specifically racialized “all of the bad people” as white. There was a connection between an understanding of prisons as a place intended to keep people from doing harm to others. In those same dialogic moments, Camille hinted at a nascent, abolitionist stance: “I wish I had a special key that I can let people out.”

Aside from putting forth their conceptualizations of jail and its conditions, how police conduct themselves inside, and their first-hand interactions with the criminal justice, there was also much talk about how the children were thinking about the role of being imprisoned during the civil rights era. Kelly demonstrated her knowledge of the historical moment with a series of questions:

Kelly: Oh, Martin Luther King was in jail?

WFJ: He was. Yeah, he went to jail a few times...

Kelly: Oh, I thought that was Malcolm X. I thought he was in jail.
WFJ: Malcolm X also went to jail but he read a lot of books and he became an activist there...

Kelly: If they're in history and people like them, and say they changed the world, why were they in jail?

After reading *A is for Activist*, Kelly signaled that she knew these Civil Rights activists are revered today and are a part of our collective identity as a nation. She did not seem to have been taught very much about the opposition that Malcolm X and Dr. King faced during their time. She was, therefore, curious about why people who were working toward freedom and liberation/equal rights would be jailed. After explaining that Malcolm X and Dr. King had people who disagreed with them, Kelly declared “So, they that were disagreeing with them should be in jail.”

During the same circle session, Renee mentions Dr. King:

Renee: I remember Martin King was saying power or justice or something ... I forgot...

WFJ: Mm-hmm.

Renee: But, I remember he was in jail, but he didn't stay long, but he wanted to stand up for himself because you can't just make somebody move out the way. So, he start to stand up for hisself.

Renee believes that jail for Dr. King was not as a place where he became disillusioned or broken, rather it made him more resolved to be who he was, to speak out and stand up. He did not just allow others to dictate his agenda; he was strong and fearless in her mind. She also recalls a visitor at her school, who became an activist at a young age during the Civil Rights movement; she declared, “Ooh! This girl she came to our school and she got locked up because she was Black.” Isaac recalls the guest speakers’ experiences in more detail:
Isaac: Then he said "Can I have a hot dog?" And then his dad said "No." Then he said "Why?" “Because your skin.” Then "If you're on the highway and you want a hotdog, give them a hot dog cause that is stupid”...And the man that was married to the woman, she was protesting and she got locked up for real.

WFJ: Okay so then there was a woman with this man who came to visit who was talking about going to jail for protesting.

Kelly: Yeah she actually did get arrested.

Isaac remembers that a time that the man was denied the right to purchase food because of being Black. He also remembers that the woman was jailed for protesting against unequal treatment like that to which her husband had been subjected. He also remembers that the speaker called the situation “stupid” because he thought he should be able to purchase a hot dog if he was hungry. Like Renee, he understood that this experience and the jailing of his now wife was because of their Blackness.

The mentions of prisons, jails, and incarceration were salient because they revealed the children’s understanding of imprisonment as something designated for people who do bad things but also a place where harm is done to people, guilty or not. Their conversations about prison were woven throughout discussions of Donald Trump and why his imprisonment would be justified as well as rapper Meek Mill being over sentenced or unduly punished by the criminal justice system. Although jail was portrayed as a horrible place they would never want to be, outside of the conversation about Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights activists that visited their school, incarceration was not seen as a racialized entity in society. They did not name race as the primary factor for disparate treatment with the prison system. Incarceration primarily functioned as an issue that bolstered their beliefs and views about the other topics. These intersections revealed
that although the children did not explicitly name it as racially motivated system, they knew it to be an undesirable place to be, one that separates people.

**Conclusion**

This chapter addressed the research question: “What do young African American children know and understand about sociopolitical issues to which they have been exposed, observed, experienced? The young African American children who participated in my study knew much about race, Blackness and whiteness, and contemporary instantiations of injustice and racism, along with historical conditions that perpetuated unfair treatment of African Americans like enslavement, incarceration, and segregation. Throughout many of the responses and dialogues, dichotomous categories were recurrent, namely “fair/unfair”, “good/bad”, “nice/mean”. These seemingly simple categories were applied to make sense of bigger ideas and issues in society, like that of immigration regulation and policing. “Donald Trump is mean because he won’t let Mexican people into the country”; “some police are mean because they kill Black people”; “slavery was bad because Black people died working too hard and they had to hid to escape”. These binary attributes assigned to individual people were directly connected to a larger, critical sociopolitical knowledge and awareness.

In this chapter, I have shown that these young African American children see society and its conditions through the lens of race. They understand society as a place where people like them as mistreated, and also a place where the kindness or meanness of others has effects on how people are allowed to live, move, survive, and thrive (or not). They made connections between their immediate worlds and the world they see on tv-
movies, news, tv shows, and those that reside in print texts. They made sense of the world not as a colorless or colorblind place where equality abounds but as one that is being shaped or having been shaped by the people in power, namely the president and freedom fighters like Martin Luther King.

Researchers and early literacy practitioners should glean the following from the data presented above: young African American children, as early as the age of six, should be provided a space to express and work through their thinking about the stratification that exists in society because they are capable of thinking deeply and critically about a range of issues. They utilized the literature I read as a starting point, but did not always make connections that were related to the books’ central topics; Rather, the text activated their prior knowledge and recent lived experiences, what they heard and saw. They lead the discussions, which were not linear or neatly discrete. The discussions were fluid and permeable, which supported the child-centered nature of the context.

Moreover, their opinions, ways of thinking, and expressions should be honored and valued. In this intraracial dialogic space, where all participants identified as “Black”, “brown”, and/or “African American”, they expressed their understandings about racism which lessened the fear of backlash or marginalization; they thought alongside one another, engaged each other’s ideas, responding to one another and utilizing each other’s ideas to spark thoughts of their own. As Copenhaver (2001) states,

All children need opportunities to see characters like themselves in books, dealing with issues like the ones children face in their own lives. We can use the dialogue constructed during read-alouds as the place where understandings are constructed during discussions with others… (p. 356).
The richness of the conversations during the literature circles is not likely to have occurred without an establishment of the space as a place where I as the facilitator invited the children to share, storytell, and recount communally and dialogically. The data presented in this chapter challenges educators to consider how literacy spaces can account for the racial, social, and cultural contexts that are influencing African American children’s development, particularly considering that they are growing and learning in a world that is racialized from the start. The chapter that follows will address three meaning-making elements of the children’s responses: imaginative thinking, intertextuality, and temporality. How the children chose to represent their thinking is as important what they thought. Their varied literacy practices, which included being read to and listening to the text, functioned as a developmentally and culturally responsive platform for them to articulate their sociopolitical knowledge, an awareness of the persistence of historical forms of racism, and engage in imagined resistance to the status quo.
CHAPTER FIVE: IMAGINING, ENACTING, & REPRESENTING RESISTANCE THROUGH LITERACY

In analyzing the topics about which my participants discussed during the literature circles, the ways that they discussed those topics emerged as an important finding also. These children were not only using their intellectual capacities to think about salient conditions and events in their worlds; they are also thinking and representing that thinking in particular ways. The multiple literacies (drawing, dictating, and most consequentially, speaking) that they used to represent their thinking had three elements that were represented across our time together. Their understandings were imaginative (Thomas, 2016), intertextual (New London Group, 1996; Sipe, 1999; Wright, 2007), and temporally vacillated between past and present (Compton-Lilly, 2014; Csak, 2002). These elements reflect their unique approaches to representing their understandings of the range of sociopolitical topics that emerged.

Imagination

There were several illustrative moments when the children expressed an understanding of or belief about an issue and did so in a way that demonstrated how their imagination comprised an aspect of their meaning making practices. Imagination functioned as a way for the children to mesh the harsh realities of enslavement, imprisonment, and racism with figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998) of expansive alternatives to the status quo, agentic possibilities, and revolutionary solutions to inequities.
**Harriet Tubman is a Superhero**

During the discussion of enslavement, specifically Harriet Tubman’s significant role in freeing people, Isaac declared: “[Harriet Tubman] is a superhero because she risked her own life and some superheroes do that too, so she can be [one] too.” At the close of the circle, Kelly handed me her drawing, which she described as “The Harriet Tubman superhero.”

**Figure 5.1**

Kelly’s drawing demonstrates not only the importance of the dialogic and interactional space that occurred during the CLCs (Isaac was the one who declared Tubman as a superhero and Kelly producing this version of her after hearing him offer his interpretation of her historical significance), but also how imaginative thinking supported her understanding of Tubman. She represented Tubman’s fearless mentality and heroic efforts to help others escape bondage by illustrating her as a superhero, someone who defies normal human capacity and takes down “bad guys” in order to save those in need. Interestingly, the only colors Kelly used in the illustration, which were likely to emphasize Tubman’s powers are located on her cape and shoes. She also used the literary device onomatopoeia (“Boom”, “Crash”, “Pow”), one we more often see.
included in stories, for dramatic effect. Tubman’s hair is likely a reflection of Kelly’s past encounters with images of female superheros, as opposed to a more accurate representation of how Tubman hair was (braids, often pictured under a scarf, as was illustrated in the book Moses and which can be seen in portraits of her) This pushes the genre of the drawing from a simple illustration and makes it almost comic-like (Ghiso & Low, 2013), demonstrating how Tubman embodied superhero qualities through her daring, repeated ventures to free the enslaved.

Kelly’s application of superhero as represented through this drawing illustrates her view of Tubman as exceptional, unlike many others in her time, willing to go above and beyond to free people from bondage. Instead of viewing Tubman as a victim of enslavement, this imaginative framing of her as a superhero allowed Isaac and Kelly to reposition her freedom narrative as supernatural and otherworldly. It positioned fugitivity as heroic, instead of rebellious. Here, both Kelly and Isaac reconfigure the emphasis of teaching and learning about enslavement with young children, balancing the inhumane lived realities with the bold narratives of resistance and resilience. Kelly’s imagination functioned to illuminate how she considers Harriet Tubman not a distance historical figure but a modern, cool superhero who should be revered for the sacrifices she made for others.

I Wish I Had a Special Key That I Can Let People Out

The ways the children thought imaginatively resurfaced in our discussion of instantiations of contemporary bondage. Within the discussion of prisons and jails, Camille offered a unique envisioning of how she would free people:
Camille: One time my babysitter saw Donald Trump building a wall. And the soldiers were on the side and it was nighttime. And they bring out candles, then they made a spell on the window. And you know what? The windows was too tiny for the glass windows, and they had to take it all apart and build it all back-

WFJ: You saw this on TV?

Camille: No, my babysitter tell me that and her name is [Sharon]. And she's really magic because she's a witch but not a real one. But whenever I'm going to the park, she makes the swings go this way (waves arms to the right) not straight.

WFJ: Okay. So, what about the windows? What are you saying about windows?

Camille: So, they said, "Please can you make the windows tiny?" And the windows shrank and it was this tiny and this big (gestures with fingers). But the windows was this big, and this tall-

WFJ: And what were the windows for?

Camille: For jail. They was building a jail but I forget where it was, but ... I said to her, "If they did that, I will make a spell on it. But they can never build it back again and just leave it like that"...And if they put people in it, the people can just walk out and I will give the people a ladder to go out. I wish I had a special key that I can let people out and I wish I could put Donald Trump in jail because he's so mean. And I want the soldiers to go in jail and I will take their guns and I will take the batteries out of them. Then, I will let them out. Then all of the bad white people don't know how to put the batteries in because [Sharon] made a spell on it.

WFJ: Okay. What batteries?

Camille: The batteries of the gun, because guns need batteries so they can shoot people.

WFJ: Oh, you're saying you would take the batteries out of the guns?

Camille: Yeah…

Camille began her discussion of jail by invoking Donald Trump and his desire to build a wall; her thinking about imprisonment stems from her beliefs about Trump’s treatment of Latinx immigrants. She envisioned the wall as a place where people are heavily surveilled but also a place that has windows, meaning people are kept inside. The wall is
a form of prison or jail. It is unclear whether the wall is the jail that she goes on to describe, but what we learn is that Camille saw parallels in the forms of suppression and oppression associated with Trump’s border wall and mass incarceration.

Another aspect of Camille’s imaginative thinking concerns her babysitter, Sharon. According to Camille, she is a witch who performs spells and can shift the direction of the swings at the park. In order to stop the building of a jail that she saw, she wants to assume her babysitter’s powers, likely intrigued from the fanciful storytelling about the windows of the wall, to make sure that the jail could not be rebuilt. Her idea about the key also demonstrates her understanding that jail is a place where people are not allowed to come and go freely but with her magic and powers, she would use a ladder and key to help deserving people escape, jailing others like Donald Trump.

As illustrated in the previous chapter, all the children saw Trump as mean, racist, and privileged. Camille desired to trade prisoners, whom she feels are being wrongly imprisoned, for others like Trump and soldiers (who in her recounting function like prison guards). Camille also discusses guns. Camille recognizes that some of the soldiers’ power lies in their possession of guns. To diffuse this power, Camille would remove the guns’ batteries and make them not only unavailable to the soldiers who once possessed them but also to any “bad white people”.

Camille story of the wall, jail, and guns illustrate a complex form of imaginative thinking. She blends her sociopolitical perspectives on Trump, incarceration and guns with her fantastic thoughts and plans to remedying the inequities of mass incarceration. Camille’s imagination functioned as a way to communicate to the other circle participants
how she sees the world and what solutions exist to remedy unequal conditions that are caused by racism, politics, and profit.

**Rudolph the Red-Nose Reindeer - Everybody Teased Him**

As they discussed their conceptualizations of racism, the children offered their understandings of interpersonal interactions that they had that they felt were negative. They told stories of being on the playground and white children telling them they were not allowed to play and other moments where they were told their skin looked like “poop.” During that discussion, Renee shifted the discussion the purview of the discussion from one about their personal experiences of racism and racial prejudice to one about how discrimination looks for those other than herself, through the lens of a movie she watched:

Renee: One time, I was watching this movie called Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer and when Rudolf was a little kid, everybody teased him, because he had a red nose, so he pretended not to have a red nose.

Renee inserts Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer into the discussion as a demonstration of her understanding of that discrimination works to exclude people based on (often arbitrary) phenotypic features which mark people as different or inferior (Brown & Bigler, 2005). Although not a human, this fictional example illuminates how Renee’s imaginative thinking allowed for a relevant connection that helped demonstrate that she in fact understood what discrimination and prejudice looks and feels like.

The end of her statement is particularly salient, in that it presents a tension with what Kelly and Camille experienced and the ways that they chose to fight back and speak up for themselves. Instead of covering up their “red nose” or in this case their brown skin,
Kelly and Camille decided to disregard the mean words and actions of the white children on the playground (“We didn't care, then we just [got on the monkey bars] a lot.”).

Renee’s recounting of the story of Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer placed in conversation with Kelly and Camille’s first-hand experiences with interpersonal racism highlight the necessity of imagination in the dialogic literacy space, especially in one where children are grappling with heavy and complicated topics that relate to their lived experiences and racialized identities. Renee might have been assumed to not understand racism in the same way as Camille or Kelly if her thinking was simply disregarded as silly or unrelated. However, Renee can be understood to have had as much an understanding of the issue as Camille or Kelly do. Her understanding is tied to her consumption of media and not to her own experiences, rather she transposed the concept of racism onto a fictional character.

Imaginative thinking plays an important function for the children’s expression of their beliefs, understandings, and meaning making process. Spencer (2003) declares,

[Imagination] cannot be fully accounted for in words. Instead it creates and renews all experiences, hopes, wishes, feelings and thoughts...[F]or children learning to read and in their continuance as readers and writers, imagination is not something separate or extra... Making texts mean is the way by which readers, at each stage of growth, 'orchestrate' different kinds of knowledge of life and language text. Imagination is at the heart of this process” [emphasis added] (p. 107).

For these children, imaginative worlds, spaces, and framing characterized their conceptual space to illustrate that they in fact make sense of the world in complex ways; these conceptualizations were justice-oriented in historical memory and enabled them to enact agency over their lives and that of others experiencing injustice.
Intertextuality

“Intertextuality is most commonly defined as the process of making connections between current and past text. This view focuses on the ‘ways in which the production and reception of a given text depends upon the participants’ knowledge of other texts’ [emphasis added] (Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981, p. 182) and defines texts as meaningful configurations of language intended to communicate” (Short, 1992, p. 315).

Across the discussions of the salient sociopolitical issues, conditions, and events, the children invoked and made connections to many different types of “texts”, including television shows, movies, music, books they read at home, and the stories they were told by their parents, friends, and babysitters. They also incorporated the people and content that they learned in schools. The children connected various types of literacy experiences in a way that enabled them to explicate the connections and overlaps they saw in different areas of their lives. They used these references as ways to bolster their thinking and representations, thereby illustrating the embeddedness of experiential knowledge that undergird their sociopolitical positionalities. Their thinking is an intricate network of cultural resources and products (Sipe, 2000) that have been introduced from multiple places, namely home, school, and media. The children’s intertextual invocations (New London Group, 1996) represent their keen awareness and abilities to distinguish between reality and fiction.

I’m Going to Escape

Isaac introduced Harriet Tubman as a topic of discussion; he first mentioned her during our reading of Freedom on the Menu: The Greensboro Sit-Ins by Carole Boston Weatherford. He emphasized how “real” Tubman was and how enslavement had truly taken place (as Camille does later). He discusses how she escaped:
Isaac: Because this was a real person that actually happened when there were
slaves and at night she opened her door and packed everything and her parents
told her how to walk quietly on the leaves and her brothers got captured too and
then she said "I'm going to escape," and then her brothers said "No, I'm gonna tell
your boss." And then she escaped and then...she walked all the way to Puerto
Rico or something.

He opens by remembering that she was fearless because despite even her own family
attempting to dissuade her, she chose to continue with her plan of escape. She did not
allow others to deter her. Isaac’s intertextual recounting is so detailed, that he narrates the
nature of the dialogue between Tubman and her brothers. Although geographically
inaccurate, Isaac mention of Puerto Rico demonstrates his understanding of the great
distance that Tubman traveled to be free. He continues:

Isaac: And then a nice lady had a boat and the lady sailed her far and then a other
man had a horse and then she got in the carriage.

WFJ: Oh, you're probably talking about Harriet Tubman, right? Is that the person?

Isaac: Yeah, then when she came to Philadelphia she had a pistol, its type of a
gun.

WFJ: So you're reading a story about her?

Isaac: Yeah, because I have this chapter book about her and I got it from, there's
this place where it's a hike but then you see cannons where they fought.

... Isaac: I forgot in the middle of the part of my book they put chains on the kids’
legs and then the people ride on horses and then they have guns and if you fall
asleep on the trip there, they’ll shoot you and there's one person that's on the horse
that has a gun that is looking over you and there's another person that's not on a
horse that is looking right at you.

After being prompted, Isaac details that his knowledge of Tubman came primarily from a
book that his parents read him before bedtime. Through this book, he had learned about
her bravery of traveling back and forth down South to free other slaves, along with
having taught herself how to read despite it being forbidden. Although the topic might
not readily be thought of as a comfortable or soothing bedtime story, for Isaac, to know this history was a source of pride. Isaac was not afraid or shy about retelling the story, quite the opposite. He retells the story with confidence Sipe (2000) states,

Thus, in reading literature, we may connect the story (or stories) of our lives to the story we are reading. There may, however, be equal value in understanding intertextuality in a more limited and specialized way, *separating out links to personal experiences from links to cultural products like books, advertisements, movies, television programs, paintings, or other discrete arrays of signs*’ [emphasis added] (p. 256).

Isaac connects the book he had read at home to story and illustrations in *Moses*, which we read in a literature circle session. As a result of his sharing, the space was opened for others to share their thinking about enslavement, escaping, and harm that came to those who dared to want to be free from perpetual bondage. As a young, Black boy, his parents chose stories that were representative of history because of his intersectional, marginalized identities (parental racial socialization is discussed in more depth in Chapter 6), understanding that it is important that he know from where he comes and the histories to which he is connected.

The story of Tubman is not one they feel should be hidden from a young boy like Isaac but rather one that should be read multiple times for him to know intimately, because she is such a strong Black cultural representative and historical figure. Isaac intertextual connection to Tubman’s story from home is striking in its detail, vivid in its recounting, declarative in its delivery, and drives home the point that the out-of-school literacies are important to consider when thinking about what children know about both the past and present. Although it is not clear the exact types of discussions that occurred around the text as it was read to Isaac, we do know that the type of images that persisted
in his mind about who Tubman was. The illustration that resulted from this discussion provides a summative statement:

**Figure 5.2**

Isaac drew Tubman as defiant, fierce, and fearless. He describes the picture as “Harriet Tubman shooting a gun.” We see Tubman is holding a gun and a purse, emphasizing that her gendered identity was not at odds with her outspokenness and defiance. As he mentioned, she was unafraid to stand up to those who opposed her or stood in her way. Overall, Isaac provides us with a beautiful example of how children are meshing the literacies and knowledge they acquire, synthesizing it, repacking it, and representing it in their own way.

**Hanging Up People on Trees & War of the White People**

Art was not a central aspect of what the children discussed; even in the reading of the texts, there were only a couple instances where students noticed the illustrations and commented on them. Rather, most of the discussions centered on what they experienced first-hand, witnessed, places they had visited, television programs they viewed, or books
they read. However, after reading *A is for Activism*, Camille provided us with a vivid description of lynching that she saw in artwork:

Camille: Because ... strong, white people, in the olden days, think white people are stronger than Black people, but that's not true because...white people used to say the rights are not that good for white people, but they are because they need to think what they're doing to people like hanging up people on trees when people say not do it.

WFJ: So, where did you see people hanging on trees?

Camille: I think it was...Or, in a mural.

WFJ: In a mural, okay.

Camille: And, my babysitter has a picture on her card, and there's a man hanging up because he feels stuck when he's gonna talk.

WFJ: The first thing you were saying, why were those people being hung on trees?

Camille: Because the people thought they were not that strong, and the white people wanted to be stronger than the Black people, so they made a discussion. And, nobody could find them when they were doing it because they sneak in they apartment.

WFJ: Nobody could find who?

Camille: The people that hanged people on the trees and never let them go...And we don't care if you're Black because you're just too weak.

WFJ: Okay, because the people who you were saying hung the Black people on the trees would go into their house, they wouldn't get caught.

Camille: Yeah.

Camille is adamant about the timing of which she speaks, “the olden days”. Camille’s rendering is beyond simply describing what she saw on the mural or picture card from her babysitter. She uses this textual connection to further her positionality. Like Isaac, she is race-conscious in her rendering. White people claimed dominance over Black people
and used their feelings of superiority to justify lynching Black people. She situates white people as strong, not because she believes them to be so but because it is a part of a larger power struggle. Camille is analyzing the images that stuck with her and offers her understanding of why Black people were victimized and lynched. Renee also discussed lynching in specific, racial terms when she mentions a movie she watched:

Renee: I think because, maybe, the white ... me and my mom was watching this movie ... and this man and these white people, they was kids, and then, they growed up. And then, his dad didn't like his friend because he was Black, and I thought that this not fair that we ... then, they start killing him, and then, they had a hang, and then, he had this ... her boyfriend, and she died.

WFJ: Do you remember-

Renee: I mean, she didn't die, but I was wondering why she was the only Black people that didn't die. She was the only Black people, and slaves, and…

WFJ: But all the other Black people, you said, died how? How did they die? Renee: They was having the war of the white people, so they have all these guns and stuff, and they was hiding in trees. And then, the white people was ... and then, they tried to defend the Black people, so they died. And then, he was hanged up on the tree.

Renee was grappling with a number of considerations here. She wondered why, when most all other Black people died in the movie, this one Black woman was spared. In making the connections, there was a moment of ambiguity. She spots a contradiction and offers it as something to be considered. There is sophistication in her thinking about this movie; she does not declarative definitive conclusions. Instead, she analyzed what was presented to her, wrestled with the perceived contradictions, and thought aloud about what felt unresolved for her.

When Renee watched this movie, she likely drew upon her prior knowledge of discrimination and segregation (“his dad didn't like his friend because he was Black”).
Both Renee and Camille extended Isaac’s comments by offering opinions and critiques (“...but that's not true because”/“I thought that this is not fair”). Their representations of those historical moments were not neutral. Rather, they wanted to make clear that they felt strongly about what they saw and watched. The intertextual connection does not stop at the meshing the two sources of information together. It is also, for them, about positioning themselves in between those texts and moments. As children of color, it is not enough for them to simply connect “texts”, the cultural milieu (Brooks & Browne, 2012) that is embedded is their interpretations and renderings are always at the surface. They are not reading, writing, watching, listening outside of their racial and ethnic identities. Quite the opposite occurred: their identities alongside their identities as children intersect and allowed for them to read historical (and contemporary) moments as socially and politically charged.

**A Movie but I'm Pretty Sure It Was Real Life**

Like each of the previous examples, Renee’s intertextual connection to a movie she saw connected her to a representation of the past. Renee demonstrates that at least part of her historical knowledge of slavery is rooted in her viewing a movie, she discusses the details of what she saw:

Renee: I was watching this movie and he got caught by the white people and he was trying to sneak out at night but white people in the trees and they had those horses things and they had guns and then they was telling him to leave before they shot him so he went back to that house and then he had to leave because of what [Isaac] said, you're not allowed to leave so he had to go at night and sneak out at night.

WFJ: So what was this a movie or a book?

Renee: A movie but I'm pretty sure it was real life.
What is compelling here is that Renee declares that what she saw was “real life”. She watched a historical fiction film that for her realistically demonstrated her what enslavement was like. In her recounting, race is a salient aspect of her remembering. These people are not raceless. Rather the white people function, as they did in history, as slave-catching antagonists (“white people in the trees”); while the enslaved Black people are remembered as cautious and afraid for their well-being and safety (“he had to go at night and sneak out at night”). Her portrayal of the characters is as important as her intertextual connection to the movie itself. The details that stuck with her about this scene reveal the ways in which race is entangled with her historical imagination; although understanding race as mostly a binary of Black and white, she sees that the story in this movie supports all of the ways in which she understood white people to behave during enslavement.

Not only does she recount these realistic details about an enslaved person attempting to escape, she mentions Isaac’s comment to further legitimize her interpretation of the movie as real life. His comment about Harriet Tubman and her bold attempts to escape represent for her in this recounting a connection that is rooted in validating the other children’s viewpoints. She took up what Isaac stated as veritable and applied her own illustration of that historical moment. This type of dialogic engagement occurred numerous times during the circles.

The dynamic of the group’s engagement, as evidenced above, illustrate the ways the group itself functioned as a type of “text”. For example, Kelly’s superhero drawing of Harriet Tubman was a representation she developed on her own but the idea of Tubman
as superhero came from Isaac declaration of such. Kelly agreed when Isaac made that statement and quietly decided to draw her as such. Intertextuality is developed and played out in the moment; it is not simply about the physical or tangible “texts” had been exposed prior to circle time but also the oral statements, stories, and declarations the children offered in the literature circle functioned as texts also (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993). They built upon each other’s ideas, they considered each other’s comments, and they responded to them both directly and indirectly.

By shifting the deficit narrative that positions African American children as lacking in resources and broaden our understanding of the types of resources with which they are drawing from, the ways they are approaching reading, writing, drawing and interpreting both literature and their proximal circumstances and experiences can be better understood and centered. In considering the forms from which they draw, popular culture (Dyson, 2003) and informal moments of learning and questioning in out-of-school spaces (i.e., with babysitters and on playgrounds) must be seen as valid sources of knowledge, especially for kids of color. The words and drawings of these children demonstrate, as several scholars have done before, that young African American children have a network of resources and background knowledge, all of which should be honored in school spaces and more specifically in literacy classrooms. They are theorizing in non-dominant ways, which support and advance their attunement to race moments, enabling them to connect contemporary conditions to historical moments, and highlight their knowing in a way that validates their intellectual capacities that begin outside the

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classroom walls. These connections and cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978) served as critical bridges that enabled the children to think between and across time.

**Temporality**

The last element that was evident across the children’s discussions, statements, perspectives, and representations was temporality. The children vacillated between past and present tense in how they spoke about the issues. They bent time to make sense of the topic and used their contemporary understandings of concepts and issues like the president, incarceration, and the Civil Rights movement. Time was nonlinear in a way that clarified their meanings and provided them an opportunity to consider the consequences of serious sociopolitical moments.

**Donald Trump’s Servants**

As discussed in Chapter 4, Donald Trump was a salient topic of discussion across the weeks. He was constantly mentioned when the topics of racism, exclusion, or whiteness were introduced. The word choice in the two excerpts below demonstrate how temporality became important in illustrating their views about him:

Renee: Martin Luther King talked about this. I think if Martin Luther King was still alive, I think that Donald Trump would be a little bit nicer, because he made Black people and white people come and because whenever I see ... whenever he's talking to something, *I see him, his servants are all white* [emphasis added], I think he should let, even if Martin Luther King was still alive, I think Martin Luther King would try to make people all come. That's what he'd always do. He'd always let people be Black and white people come to anything. It doesn't matter.

Camille: *Like make the servants chase the Black people* [emphasis added] and some of the people that are white was Donald Trump and they're mean. Some white people think that Brown people are mean, but they don't think of their self and they react to the Black people and they say, "You cannot come to this country. You cannot come to this country." That's what the government says sometimes, when you're Brown and you have to get a ticket to go to the other
country and some people saw movies about Donald Trump making the police and servants getting the brown people and putting the people in jail and they're taking lessons to how to be mean.

Not speaking directly after the other, both Renee and Camille refer to Donald Trump’s cabinet members, entourage, and affiliates as servants. Servant, which Merriam-Webster defines as both “an individual who performs duties about the person or home of a master or personal employer” and “a person in the employ and subject to the direction or control of an individual or company” invokes a certain emotionality. In naming his associates as servants, it invokes associations of servitude and working against one’s will comes to mind. A dated term for housekeepers or hired domestic workers, their usage of servants emphasizes that the children are aware that many people in Donald Trump’s administration are subject to his power and will. They are not serving the will of the people who elected them, as originally intended and designed but are not free to make independent decisions, outside of the purview of Donald Trump. They understand that Donald Trump is the decision maker (“make the servants chase the Black people”). Using such a term as servant is reminiscent of enslavement and acknowledges the disjunction between his presidency and those who preceded him, like Obama, and even other powerful political figures like MLK, Jr. The vocabulary Camille and Renee chose to use signals a temporal shift, a reversion and backwardness, and reinforces the hierarchy that Trump’s makes attempts to solidify in the media, through his speeches, on Twitter, and in the continuous news cycles.
Incarceration and Enslavement

Prison, bondage, and enslavement were connected in the children’s representational repertoires. They looked across time and drew parallels between the ways that African peoples and their progeny were forced to work. They compressed time. This is best illustrated in examining their construction of Harriet Tubman as an overcomer, fighter, and rebel. We revisit Kelly’s illustration for its expression and commentary on time:

Figure

Tubman can be seen in the photograph kicking someone who can be assumed as the person overseeing the conditions of bondage for the enslaved person. The enslaved person is behind bars. Kelly views slavery as a form of incarceration or imprisonment. As is expected for a six-year-old, Kelly is not aware of the actual everyday physical limitations imposed on slaves (which did not always look like being caged) but from this picture, we can see that she is attuned to the fact that slavery entailed some form of physical and emotional confinement. Slaves were not free to move about as they chose
and they were not happy about it, as she indicates by the expressions on the person’s face who is behind bars and then her when she is freed.

Kelly playing with this contemporary invocation of incarceration through the use of prison bars blurs time and space in important ways. She is offering a conceptual link between African enslavement and the prison industrial complex of today. She meshes time and space on an imaginative level while also offering a sociopolitical critique. This has implications for how we understand how children are making sense of historical conditions and moments. Kelly’s frame of reference for understanding the weight of what Tubman did is informed by an understanding of how people are currently being jailed and housed. If we see Kelly’s illustration as a glimpse into the mind of a child who is making sense of life as both a slave and abolitionist, we can see that she is not misunderstood but rather offers an interesting analysis of the parallels systems of oppression of Black and Brown peoples that run across time (arguments made by scholars like Alexander (2010) and Davis (2003). This temporal meshing is an intellectual play that she also put forth in her making sense around jailing during the Civil Rights movement:

Kelly: She was getting arrested because she was Black.

WFJ: Did she say it happened a long time ago?

Kelly: Yeah, it was real, it was when it was like slavery.

Kelly is referring to the freedom fighter and Civil Rights activist who came to speak at Ujamaa. She along with her husband discussed how they became activists when they were young and how they were jailed for protesting and marching even as children. They also detailed for the children the type of segregation and discrimination they
experienced (which Isaac recalled in the Chapter 4). The associative link here lies in Kelly’s understanding that the time of slavery signals a time of being in bondage, one in which your body is not free to move and make choices without consequence, one in which race was a good enough excuse to detain someone, as Kelly plainly signals with her explanation of why the woman was jailed. So for Kelly, being arrested as a child for being Black was akin to slavery and makes sense to have occurred during the period of enslavement. The temporal associations were also relevant in the ways that children connected their understanding of Trump and his presidential politics as well.

In the Olden Days

The play with time was also present in the children’s understanding of what is occurring during the Trump administration and what happened during previous points in history when slavery and segregation were legal and normalized. During our first circle, the children explored their definitions of racism. Most responses began by discussing past examples of racism and allusions to a past in which white people mistreated Blacks (“A long time ago people do like Black people because they treated them the other way. But, I think that if they could done another chance, they would like them.”). Renee inserts Trump when asked for a contemporary example of racism/racists. The conversation about him continues:

Renee: I saw on the news last night that he's telling about what his plan was about Black people and white people.

WFJ: The State of the Union address, right?

Renee: Then he was talking about stuff that people should have different ways and have Black, white people in. When I saw all of his people, it was mostly all white people. But, some of the Black people was all the way in the back.
WFJ: So, you're saying that the people who were there at the talk mostly were white? Oh, okay and you did see some Black people? Yes.

Renee: Like, in the olden days, people didn't like Brown people so they use them as slaves...

Isaac: So when the white people didn't want to do the work on a really sunny day and sweating that Black people had to do it and like if they didn't want to mow or not they and the Brown people had to do it and then if they didn't want to go in a thunder storm when it's raining and water the plants then the Black people have to do that, cause they use them as slaves.

Renee begins by discussing the details of what she remembers of Trump’s 2017 State of the Union address; the detail that stuck with her the most was the race of the crowd. This reflects not only the very white Congress that was elected during Obama’s administration and persisted until the 2018 election cycle (although despite the diversity, it is still majority White) but also what Trump supporters look like. The temporal “bridge” that occurs in her discussion of what she saw begins in her noting that the Black people who were in attendance were mostly in the back.

Her thinking about slavery and inequitable, oppressive labor practices are triggered by where people were positioned during Trump’s speech. Her vacillation between this very present moment of what she perceives as televisied marginalization is similar to what she thought about the treatment of Blacks during slavery. Compulsory labor and being “all the way in the back” do not at first seem to be much related. However, for Renee, she sees a thread running through physical organization of that room and the physical and mental organization of enslavement. Although we do not know if the Black people Renee observed at Trump’s address were supporters or obligated to attend, her temporal link to enslavement makes it likely that she understood
their presence to be compulsory. In the same way that whites “used” Blacks as slaves, Renee might have considered those Black attendees as being “used” also.

Temporal associations enabled the children to mesh, bend, bridge, and compress time. They considered the ways that contemporary conditions and events resonated with past conditions that upon first look do not look or feel similar. Time does not function linearly for them, rather their expressions of racial and sociopolitical understandings transcend temporal constraints and boundaries. Through an examination of how temporality functioned in their meaning-making and expressions, it becomes evident that these children are making important statements about how racism, discrimination, and oppression persists (Bell, 1992).

**Conclusion**

Young children use various forms of literacy-speaking, drawing, dictating, listening, and reading- as meaning making tools. Literacy affords them the opportunity to make sense of the world around them, in a manner that is developmentally responsive, even if the topics that they engage are traditionally viewed as adult, complex, or beyond the scope of their capacities. By allowing for an open-ended space, I found that the children’s literate meaning-making was imaginative, intertextually connective, and manipulated time. We will better understand just what the children are saying and also how they are choosing to represent their knowledge in spaces such as these. These elements of their representation were lenses the children were utilizing to make sense of sociopolitical and racialized conditions. By validating them as knowledge producers,
educators and researchers are better able to analyze and draw from their words and pictures.

One resonant theme that was mentioned throughout is the amount of indirect dialogue that occurred across the weeks. The children did not often address one another; rather they actively listened to one another and responded. They consistently built upon, extended, and referenced each other’s ideas. The literature circle context allowed for insightful interthinking (Pantaleo, 2007), where the children were able to hear the comments of other, take them up, and extend them. This would not have been possible in a one-on-one interview setting or even in an environment that did not allow for a free flow of topics. As the researcher, I actively monitored my role as facilitator, affirmed when necessary, and posed open-ended follow questions that allowed for each child to react if they chose. The “dialogue” allowed the children to engage and borrow from each other’s representational répertoires.

Arguably, the most consequential implication of the data presented across Chapter 4 and 5 is that these children push against a white, hegemonic norm of childhood. They challenge the notion that children should live lives devoid of race and that if they do, they are better off. The result of this study should not be to think of these African American children as less-childlike or adultify them. (Dancy, 2014). Rather, we should understand the diversity that exists in the experiences of children from marginalized backgrounds. My participants were born into brown skin; the conditions into which they were born, in the United States, race them, not their schooling, parents, or exposure to television and movies. If they are not allowed to directly engage their experiences, observations, and
wonderings, they cannot be expected to successfully navigate the racist conditions that are salient or will become salient in their lives as they age. The children in this study were constantly grappling with racialized events, conditions, and ideologies.

Despite how much some (particularly, those that employ colorblind ideologies) may try to refute, the Black children in this study and all children of color are constantly exposed to racial events, conditions, and ideologies. Educators must not shy away from acknowledging that children are acquiring and making meaning of these narratives and histories. Their sociopolitical knowledge should instead be seen as a reason to engage them through imagination, through temporal plays, and through intertextual connections that move beyond print texts. These children of color are children—children that can articulate their understandings, views, and conclusions about the world and society in which they live, engaging in the political moment. Being politically, socially, and racially aware is a constituent feature of their coming to age, not diminishing but distinguishing their childhoods.
CHAPTER SIX: SPHERES OF INFLUENCE-EXPANDING THE RACIAL SOCIALIZATION PARADIGM

It is clear that this reality, racism and the response to racism, must be included in any interpretation of parental behavior in Black families. To understand the dynamics of child socialization in Black families, the racism factor must be considered (Peters, 2002, p. 58).

Thus far, this dissertation has primarily centered on the words and drawings of the child participants in my study. I have sought to intentionally highlight the ways that these young children are making meaning about their lives, the social and political organization of the world, and how varied literacy practices is a central aspect of their means to represent their thinking. However, to address the third research question, “What are the sources of their knowledge and understandings?” I drew upon the semi-structured interviews I conducted with their parents, principal and teacher, as well as the informal participant observations I conducted while spending time in Ujamaa over the course of the 2017-2018 school year. In pursuit of this question, I wanted to better understand from where these young children drew to offer the complex, race conscious assertions.

What I found was that the racial socialization practices (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019; Doucet et al., 2018; Gadsden, 1998; Lesane-Brown, 2006; Peters, 1985) they were exposed to were not simply composed of messages from their parents and in their homes, but also included a much more layered and interconnected web of racial teachings that occurred in their school, alongside their peers, and from various forms of media. These embedded practices in the children’s lives were composed of informal moments and instances, of which the children were actively engaged and not passively receptive. Their parents, teachers, and friends sought to inculcate them in a way that extended their racial
awareness, with a balanced perspective of prideful cultural socialization and preparation for bias (Hughes et al., 2006); this socialization supported the children’s thinking about their own lived experiences and with this attention on racial realities bolstered their critical orientation of interpreting the world.

**Everyday Experiences With Their Parents**

Because power and politics are at the center of all teaching and learning, the application of household knowledge to situations outside of the home becomes a creative process that challenges the transmission of “official knowledge” and dominant ideologies. (Bernal, 2002, p. 110)

The parents in my study engaged in complex forms of racial socialization. The parents indicated that they are not simply thinking about bolstering ethnic pride, but are also grappling with the complexities of their children’s futures in society and the quality of their lived experiences. What most interestingly emerged from the data was not the types or profiles of messages they chose to impart (which are consistent with previous literature, see Hughes et al., 2006 and Lesane-Brown, 2006 for comprehensive reviews of recent scholarship) but rather how and when they chose to do so. All of the parents discussed informal moments that had become a central aspect of how they taught their children about race and racism. These critical racial teaching moments and opportunities occurred during shopping trips, television watching, bedtime story reading, police traffic stops, and interactions with older siblings. In all, each parent and family felt they had a responsibility to make sure that my participants learned about being Black from them (although Kelly’s father differed on the intensity of that responsibility), that they should make racial teaching and learning is at the forefront of how they parent, that they should engage their children in the ordinary and embed these practices.
Where are All the Black Barbies?

Shopping, a seemingly mundane activity, for Camille and her parents was a lesson in racial representation. They utilized these moments to teach Camille to see the systems and motivations underlying marketing choices and store selections. He discusses one shopping trip:

She doesn't always agree with me. She doesn't always know and then...she'll have these moments. Like a few months ago, we were at a thrift store and there was this whole toy aisle and she was like, “Where are all the Black barbies?” And I'm like “See, this is what I've been saying!” She was like but all my friends with barbies have Black barbies. So she never knew but she didn't know what I'm saying like “oh, barbie has way more white barbies” and that fits into like lifting up white people. She doesn't believe me and she doesn’t see that in her world. But then when she saw it she was like, “Wait a minute.” And she was asking questions. So she's aware of that. These are things that she could look for.

Camille, at first skeptical of her dad’s teaching about cultural messaging that underlies media and representations in stores, questioned the lack of Black dolls at the thrift stores. Her parents had previously made her aware of this type of underrepresentation. The essence of this racial socialization moment in the ordinary event of shopping had to do with providing Camille first-hand experiences to be confronted with racial difference in society, the consequences of racism in the media, and an opportunity to make sense of it in conversation with her parents. Camille’s dad made a critical parenting choice here, by not simply allowing Camille to believe that all barbies are Black or that everyone has easy access to Black dolls as she does. Instead, he positioned her to take stock of her surroundings, to see the limited selection that existed to the masses, in hopes of providing her a better understanding of the connection between race, media, and representation.
Are There Any Black People in the Show?

Media was such a significant thread that ran through how Camille and Isaac’s parents discussed their socialization practices. Isaac’s parents, like the others, reported being explicit about what they teach him about being a Black boy in the U.S. and detailed how they seek frequent, informal opportunities to talk about and consider alongside their children how race is evident in their lives. One of those ways is through his television watching. They discuss the importance of television as a teachable space and an opportunity to cultivate his critical capacities. I asked, “‘Are there specific, significant moments of racial socialization that you remember, either by you or a family member?’”:

[W]hen he asks to watch a show, he w[ill now tell me, he'll say, “Can I watch this show? There is a Black character and there is a girl.” Because I'll say to him, “Are there any Black people in the show? Are there any girls in the show or is it realistic to you that there's five, there's fifteen characters and only one girl because there’s this one robot show that he really likes. Or is it realistic that there's only one Black person in the show”...I was like, “they have a blue person and a gray person but not a Black person”...So he'll be like, “Mommy, can I watch this? There is Black people. There is.” So he knows that we're going to critique him and like she said, curate, his media experience.

Isaac's parents, with a critical intentionality that is rooted in both their own dominant experiences as white women and marginalizing experiences as members of the LGBTQ+ community, were aware that television was a primary socializing influence in Isaac’s life. Therefore, they sought to cultivate his critical media literacy (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Baker-Bell et al., 2017). Through their prompting and questioning, Isaac became attuned to the racial and gendered dynamics and makeup of the shows and programs he enjoyed watching. He came to understand the importance of representation in media, a skill that is likely to grow in him over the years. Isaac understood, evidenced by his
propensity to check in and have the quality of the show validated by his parents, that television was not simply a medium for imagination but also a place that should reflect society and its diversity and multiplicity of identities. A common, informal moment of television watching was viewed as a political act for Isaac’s parents and should be approached with a critical lens. They knew that Isaac, even as a young boy, could grasp this skill and apply it. For them it was about this central purpose:

Honestly, I really wanted [Isaac] to know history and kind of how it's been whitewashed and how that is not what he sees in textbooks, if he ends up in some other school, is not representative of his ancestors and his people and all of the negative stereotypes that are everywhere today. I don't want that to weigh heavily on him, so I want him to be aware of it so that it cannot be so negative for him, I guess. Just like on a very basic level like understand that he is not what is he is made out to be on the 6 o’ clock news.

The critical media literacy they sought to cultivate in Isaac was not simply about a numerical diversity but also reflected their goal of ensuring that Isaac understood that lack of media representation reflected larger societal inequities and that in his attunement to this would help to challenge dominant representations of people of color and women.

Television is a primary source of perpetuating stereotypes and to counter this internalization, they were preparing him to “read” between the lines and scenes, to evaluate the narratives, and to on a fundamental note, examine who was missing or excluded.

**It Doesn't Have to be About Harriet Tubman for a Black Person to be in a Book**

Camille’s dad also discussed media representation and the ways he and his partner sought to nurture Camille’s critical capacities for naming underrepresentation. In response to my question, “Do you feel like she has an understanding of race and racism
and if so, is she understanding it interpersonally or do you see as understanding how systems of inequality?” he stated the following:

Uh, she understands to some extent that media fits into a pattern. We talk about like Barbies and Disney movies and stuff. When that comes up we talk about how that is sending messages and she's, she understands that that has to do with like, she'll ask questions like, oh, in our society, I mean she didn't use these words but she will say, “Are there more books about boys?” kind of thing. And I’ll say “Yes, in our society people emphasize stories about boys and so there's more boys”. So she's aware of that fitting into media messaging.

Camille, as a result of her parent’s explicit teachings, had an eye toward the patterned underrepresentation of narratives about girls. She seems books as ideological, as infused with political stances about whose lives and stories are important to be represented and accessible to purchase in stores and featured on shelves. Books as a political tool for racial socialization was a theme throughout my interview with Isaac’s parents.

Reading was a fundamental aspect of how Isaac. Isaac was the first offer Harriet Tubman’s history and significance into the circles. His parents discussed how their repeat bedtime readings of a historical fiction book provided a space for learning more about her life and historical significance. They also discuss books as a medium to grapple with the racial dynamics of their family, a Black son being raised by two white women:

There's a part of early childhood which is like coming together and everything is always “You're exactly like mommy.” And then there's differentiation, right? So like, but he has this thing where he went, he looked at us there is a difference between us, visually that he can see. So I feel like, well I think it was like three and a half or four and I feel like he had some trouble with that. We made sure that we got extra books about like Color of Me and My Skin is Beautiful and the Marvelous Me books. All these things that just say like a million different colors of people, a million different beautiful colors of people. Marvelous Me is or I Love My Hair like that one specifically for girls in the hair but still the same idea...It's just that like I Love My Hair specifically about hair, you know...But getting books like that and making sure that we put it in the rotation, put them in the rotation...Again just to normalize it.
Isaac’s mothers saw books as a platform for understanding, a developmentally appropriate way to enter into conversations about race and make meaning about racial difference in the world but most importantly, in their home. This was the result of research and careful consideration, not a hunch or whim. Isaac’s parents took time and care in thinking about their identities in relation to their own. They made conscious, informed decisions about what books to purchase and the multiplicity of messages they seek to provide him. They discuss the connections they make between the books and first-hand immersion:

One of our little ABC board books is *A is for Activist*...but also at a more advanced level, like he's been to Black Lives Matter marches and he's been to like the immigrants’ rights rallies and stuff like that. So he's definitely exposed to the conversations around race and racism and how it comes into play...

Books are viewed as the beginning of deeper, broader discussions and engagements with topics of race and racism. Isaac’s mothers support his reading and match them with lived experiences and exposures that enable Isaac to understand that books do not simply present imagined stories or fiction, but can be rooted in real life and important societal issues. They continued later in the interview detailing more of the kinds of books they buy for Isaac and their significance for his racial identity development:

We go out and buy books like *Swift Walker* is one, *Zoey and Sassafras* is another, *Jaden Toussaint*, you know, books and children's books for young kids that feature Black characters because I need him to not read a thousand books with never seeing a Black person. But also, I mean we also for both race and for gender and sexuality, we try to include a lot of books that have, or as many possible, that just happened to have two mom, but it's not the focus of the story. Or just happens to have Black characters, but it's not about Black history. It's just, it's just a Black kid who is experiencing this thing…Jaden Toussaint is just a Kindergartener trying to get more screen time. He’s just a Black boy...and it doesn't have to be about Harriet Tubman for a Black person to be in a book...If every book was
about Harriet Tubman and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, it would be a really boring world. That's three people in every book will be about that. They are emphasizing the diversity of representation that matters for Isaac. Narratives about Black people and children should not be singular, as Black people are not monolith and they are not only their histories of enslavement. Isaac’s mothers seek to provide him with a range of book types and stories, expanding his imaginative framing and “normalizing” Black characters are the center of children’s literature. Books are a powerful method for his parents to center the lives and histories of Black people and to develop Isaac’s racial consciousness. Miles’ mother, Ms. Holly’s daughter who also attended Ujamaa as a child, discusses the importance of cultural authenticity (Harris, 2003; Woodson, 2003) in considering what books she chose for him:

Miles’ mother: We read this book, it’s the Magic Tree House series, Jack and Annie, he loves his series. There was one book that was about the Civil War and it talked about slavery and I was kinda mad because it's a white author and I felt like I didn't want him to learn about, like I wouldn't, didn't want him to learn about slavery for the first time by a white author...I was kind of upset and I was reading it out loud to him. So I got to it, I just kept reading it and then I talked to him about it afterwards.

WFJ: Do you feel like the approach of the book was like off, like not accurate?

Miles’ mother: I wouldn’t say that it was not accurate. I wouldn’t say that it was inappropriate, I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with it, but I would have rather it come from, I don’t know, just like...come from a Black author, a Black perspective.

In her recounting of a moment of storytelling and book reading with Miles, his mother underscores the role of who has control of the narrative as just as important as the narrative being told. She sees Black history in children’s literature as most authentic when coming from a Black author and an aspect of how she teaches Miles through
historical texts is to ensure that the stories within them are being told by people who share that history and ancestral lineage. She furthers the argument that books are not neutral but are rather political, ideological instruments that can serve as veritable sources of knowledge.

**We Say That the Police Target Black People More**

Ideology did not simply reside in the texts but in the embodiments of these children. Another aspect of consciousness raising for Isaac was the way that his mothers thought about Isaac’s bodily autonomy and the limitations imposed upon him and their family because of his identity as a Black boy. They discuss the critical decision making and how the contemporary climate of police brutality influences them:

One of the other things that we do is, he doesn’t play with any guns at all and we’ve explained why that is. Because there have been instances in which Black boys are out in their neighborhood and they have a very obviously toy gun, but they are mistaken by police for having a real gun and it’s dangerous. And I mean, in addition to guns are dangerous and we don’t do violence in our family and so we don’t do guns in our family. But he understands that the reason he can’t have one, even when all his friends have one, because that we’re not going to send you out into, play in our yard and have a police officer drive by and mistake you for a kid, a Tamir Rice or something, you know. So that’s one way, another way that he’s kind of understanding racism in America.

Isaac’s mothers made the connection between the mundane and the sociopolitical and the thin line that Black people negotiate between innocence and guilt. Isaac does not have the luxury of simply playing in the yard with a toy gun like his friends who are white. Rather, as a Black boy, his parents have to be preoccupied with whether he could become a victim or hashtag. As parents who take a critical orientation to racial socialization, there is a constant negotiation of seeing your child not only as an individual but also a part of the larger, political and racial landscape of the U.S. society. These moments in time, that
should be comprised of carefree play, are instead negotiations of identity that are carefully planned and considered.

Miles’ mother also discusses the ways she broaches the topic of policing with him:

Miles’ mother: I shy away from diving deeper unless he asks and then if he asks, I'm honest about it. I'm like, I can't watch the news when they're showing clips of Black men being murdered. Like on the news, I can't, like I try to shield him from that. I think.

WFJ: Do you think he has any awareness about police brutality?

Miles’ mother: He definitely does. He, he knows, like he was very upset about the incident at Starbucks and even though there wasn't violence. I was watching the news, I let him watch it with me. But, you know, when there's protests about Black Lives Matter, I've explained that, you know...I'll tell him that, that people have been killed unjustly by police or you know, or that, people are arrested...people of color are much higher levels or rate...A lot of what I tell him is in response to what he already knows.

Miles’ mother, in similar ways to Kelly’s fathers follows his lead in introducing new, heavy topics to him. If he asks, if he brings some knowledge to bear, she does not mind discussing it with him. Although she teeters the line between exposing him to graphic situations and introducing new racial controversies to him, she does use television as a method of socialization. They watch the news together and they discuss what they watch and their reactions and feelings about injustices. Both Isaac and Miles’ mothers attempt to strike a balance between preparation and exposure to violence and trauma.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Camille sees the police from an oppositional stance because of her experiences with her parents, in particular, her Jamaican-American “papa” constantly being stopped and nearly arrested every time he drives through New York. This was a source from which Camille’s father chose to discuss police and policing.
Although her dad felt as if she did not completely grasp the particulars of the situation, he acknowledges that she does understand the gravity of their interactions with the police (“She knows there’s something...she’s very concerned about it.”). Her knowledge of the police was also grounded in her implicit teachings from her babysitter. Her dad details the messaging she receives from the babysitter’s work:

We say that the police target Black people more, we talk about Black people ending up in prison for longer, unfair ways. Her babysitter is very involved in decarcerate stuff and does like art exchanges with people in prison and where they will write to them about art that they wanted. The inmate will like a portrait made of themselves in this way. And then their babysitter will like do the art, commission the art and then send it back into the prison. There's this like correspondence with the art and there’s like an art show and stuff. So [Camille] has been able to watch it when that happens. She’s very aware of incarceration and police. She doesn't really get how it fits... She understands the connection much more related to like individual prejudice. Like she can get like, “oh, police officers might not like Black people as individuals”, but she does not get how it works as a system.

Camille receives racial socialization at home not only from her fathers but also from her babysitter. This implicitly political choice to hire a babysitter who is an abolitionist activist has influenced Camille’s awareness about incarceration (see Chapter 5 and her discussion of the “special key”) and policing. As he said, she witnessed the art and communication her babysitter had with incarcerated people and the community work she was doing. Although her dad does not think she made the connection from individual to system, the perspectives she offered in the circles conflict with his observations in some ways. These teachings and choices created fertile ground for Camille’s sociopolitical thinking and beliefs and she was expressing them in ways that demonstrated how she moved beyond the interpersonal. Camille was not the only person to be racially socialized
in her home by someone other than her parents; Kelly’s brother also played a role in raising her awareness.

**Sibling as Source of Knowledge**

While Kelly’s father stressed his commitment to being neutral in how he teaches her about race and racism and even seemed to advocate for a colorblind stance, the way he described his support of Ujamaa “activist” and “Afrocentric” curriculum, his ubiquitous presence in the school as a volunteer directly counter this stance. He was not colorblind, despite his representation of himself, yet he was implicit in his approach to racially socializing Kelly. This implicit approach, however, did not trickle down to Kelly’s older brother, who was also enrolled in the 4th grade at Ujamaa.

Kelly’s father: When they have group activities together, she sees older kids. She sees her older brother participate in these activities and he might talk about going to his classroom and his acceptance of certain people from different backgrounds. It kind of reinforces her...

WFJ: You feel like they have an even heightened kind of discussion and awareness about those racialized issues and political issues?

Kelly’s father: Definitely...He’ll just talk about the social aspect of it, what his classmates said...and different things like technology or Youtube so they may see something that's considered to be a racist or racially charged. They might talk about that.

WFJ: She engages with him?...Do you feel like he is one of her main influencers...or is he kind of one of many?

Kelly’s father:...A little bit of both.

WFJ: Does he draw a lot from school? Or is it about how you set up your household and how you are open to engaging those issues and having those kinds of conversations?
Kelly’s father: They draw a lot from the school and when they bring it home, that’s when we talk about it...we don’t want to contradict what they are learning here.

For Kelly’s father, her brother was the primary socializer in the home. He functioned as the age appropriate exposure that increased her critical consciousness and opened the discussions in their home about race and racism. Kelly’s father would explain race and racism to Kelly’s brother in more direct ways, he said in part because of his age but also because of his gender (Interview data, 2018). He is learning from the school in similar, but arguably more forward ways, about race and racism and that trickles down to Kelly. Her racial and political consciousness is about hearing her brother’s experiences and perspectives, the conversations he begins at home and the ways his parents negotiate teaching him about his identity are important for how Kelly comes to see the world and interact in it. Her father goes on later to discuss the ways that her brother has created moments of wrestling with meanings of race and experiences of racism:

WFJ: Are there particular instances that may be he's engaged with her about or that you guys have engaged as a family because of what he's knows or what he's aware of?

Kelly’s father: Yes. [Kelly] she never really gave any feedback about it. She just went with it.

WFJ: Give me an example.

Kelly’s father: One time, we were with a friend of mine. She was having a problem with a little boy in school. My son asked was he white or Black. And she said, she said it didn't matter. But [Kelly’s brother] wanted her to specify whether he was white or Black. She specified that he was white. He told her that she should, she should hit her back immediately. And he, he corrected himself. He said, I'm not saying that because he's white, I'm assuming because he's a boy ...

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Kelly’s father: She was there and she heard it. She didn't comment, but she was there. She absorbed it. Stuff like that, she’s exposed to.

Kelly’s father was adamant that he was neutral in his racial socialization practices with Kelly but more open and forward with his son. He said he wanted to expose his children to issues related to race but “balance it out” so that his children would be provided multiple perspectives on an issue. However, from the interaction above, we see that Kelly’s brother was race conscious in his thinking but may have his consciousness curtailed some by his parents, or at least his dad’s push for neutrality or what could even be deemed as colorblindness. However, her brother seems to be the one inserting race into the out-of-school conversations in ways that are substantive and influential. Kelly’s central socializing figure outside of the context of school seems to be her brother, which challenges the prevailing notion in the literature of parents as all-knowing about race and racism. Kelly and her brother likely engage even more about these issue outside of the earshot of their parents.

Across all of the interviews conducted with the parent(s) of my participants, I found that the racial socialization from home was the result of considerable thinking and intentionality on the part of the parents. Although their approaches and methodologies differed, they did not shy away from engaging the children in examining their race, their varied and layered experiences of racism, representations of people of color and women in the media, and the consequences of racism. Instead, they took race forward efforts to make plain to their children throughout their short lives, in many informal and immersive ways, that their Blackness matters. Although realist, their stances were not simply pessimistic. There were narratives of cultural and ethnic pride that were woven into the
choices they made and significant efforts to highlight the Black history. These practices were not solely focused on the individual; each of the practices analyzed above point to the significant ways that these families attend to the social, political, institutional, and systemic aspects of being Black in society and how those forces affect who their children are, who they are projected to become, and how the world around them is organized. These practices were mirrored in how the children talked and shared in the literature circles; the ease with which they offered their racial awareness and sociopolitical knowledge reflect the normalcy of these conversations within their families.

Active Media Engagement

That's why my mom watches videos so she can know what happens that's why people watch the news and stuff. (Renee, 2018 Let’s Talk About Race LC)

Media is embedded and foregrounded in the racial practices of the participant’s parents. This was reflected in how they often explicitly drew upon various forms of media to represent their awareness. The most significant example of the children’s engagement with television and media came in the form of Renee’s discussion of Philando Castile and the discussions that transpired about police brutality (see Chapter 4 for an in-depth analysis of this exchange). Renee offered a critical analysis of the media’s representation of Castile’s guilt in his own death and offered a nuanced rendering of the events that transpired on his final day. The exchange about Castile underscores the ways media was so salient in informing the children’s awareness and the prominence of television and news shows had in informing and provided them tools to represent their emergent political ideologies. The bulk of moments where the children invoked the news or television as a source of knowledge. Media, for Renee most significantly, served as a
source to verify the truth as she understood it and was a medium for gathering knowledge about contemporary politics.

**But Yeah it's True: Media as Veritable Confirmation of History**

Renee during a discussion about enslavement, declared, “I think some people don't believe that, but I watched this movie and it was slaves and stuff” (*Skin Again LC*, 2018). Here we see that she is asserting that the movie (2016’s “The Birth of a Nation”) she watched was grounded in truth, in the lived experiences of actual people. She acknowledges that some people might see slavery as an unbelievable but from what she viewed, it was easily discernible for her as a real point in history. This small statement provides a window into the ways that Renee understood the media she consumed as a source to bolster her already existing historical knowledge. This could be attributed to the history she’s been taught in school and from her parents. In order for her to take a critical approach to synthesizing what she viewed on television, she had to possess some background knowledge about slavery. The movie was an addition not a foundation to her exposure to slavery. Media was an extension, not the sole source from which she drew.

During one of the discussions about Harriet Tubman, after Renee recounted a specific scene from a different movie (see Chapters 4 & 5 for the full data excerpt), I asked “So what was this a movie or a book?” and she replied “A movie but I'm pretty sure it was real life.” Renee understood that what she was watching may not be completely factual given that it was a film but that it was rooted in a *real* historical moment. Renee also named the movie *Roots* as one of the films she watched about slavery.
Renee: ...I think slavery came first and then they start having a war. What is it called again? A war, I guess to say? And then the Black people kind of got like something good. They really actually got, so that the white people pay back for it.

WFJ: Oh, so what's payback? You're saying people being mistreated?

Renee: Yes.

WFJ: Payback for what?

Renee: For letting Black people, for, I don't know how to say it.

WFJ: Okay, because you were talking about slavery, saying that afterwards white people were trying to get payback for Black people not being slaves?

Renee: For having a war for white people.

WFJ: Oh, for having a war that set Black people free from being slaves?

Renee: Yeah...Because some people went up to the thing, when I was talking about Roots, they went up to some white people, some Black people left, so then the white people turned it around and they saw Black people coming there...

WFJ: So you're saying revenge. Kind of like revenge, like they were getting back at them. So that's why things like that were unequal and stuff.

Renee: Yea.

Renee demonstrates her critical orientation to watching these historical movies in a number of ways but it is most clear in her reiterating the reality upon which these stories were based. She emphasizes this when saying “And then the Black people kind of got like something good. They really actually got…” The people in the movie represent actual people and the exchanges she witnessed in this film represented larger, racial tensions that helped to explain inequality that persisted even after slavery. A war ensued, Black people were freed, and white people retaliated by continuing conditions reminiscent of slavery. The movies that Renee viewed and offered during the literature
circles were truthful not necessarily for their complete historical accuracy but her rendering of them reflected her ability to select and “read” the narratives for the history of which she was already aware. The critical literacies that had been nurtured in her at home and school and prior exposure to the debasing conditions of slavery enabled her to see the movies and distinguish fact from fiction, historical from imagined past realities.

**I Heard When I was Watching the News One Time**

Popular culture was not only a way for Renee to assert truth but also a means by which the children could make sense of contemporary politics. At the time of the study in January 2018, Donald Trump has been in office for two years and had constantly been in the media since he formally announced his run for presidency on June 16, 2015. The children invoked the news as a source of knowledge whenever they discussed him. For instance, Miles responded to my question “But where did you learn that Donald Trump doesn't want people to go to Mexico?”, “On the news.” It was very evident early on in my data collection cycle that the children were not shielded from the contemporary realities. Rather, they were immersed in the latest news and political discourse. My exchange with Renee makes this clear:

Renee: Well, Donald Trump tried to...I don't think, but I think I saw this thing on the news and it was talking about who should be the real president and it was thinking it would be Hillary Clinton, or Donald Trump, but Donald Trump cheated, so Hillary Clinton didn't be the president, but I don't think Hillary Clinton should have been the president, anyways.

WFJ: Why do you not think that?

Renee: Because sometimes she doesn't like Black people.

WFJ: What do you mean?
Renee: I heard one time, she didn't like Black people.

Renee moved beyond simply recounting and moved toward a speculation. She likely heard about the critiques that were launched as a result of Secretary Clinton’s comments in the 1990’s about Black youth as superpredators or her husband’s support of the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, popularly known as “The 1994 Crime Bill”. Renee assessed an unfairness about how Donald Trump was elected but also knew from watching news reports that Clinton had been criticized for her comments and support of policies that criminalized Black people and youth. She deduced that because of this news coverage that Clinton did not deserve to be president either. Cheating is bad but disliking Black people is no better.

This assessment of racism from political figures to the citizenry was attributed to Donald Trump as well. What felt important about the news coverage they watched was the ways that Black people were the object of racism and that was something. The news served a separate function from the movies Renee watched. What was salient in the circles for the children was that the news was a place to learn about contemporary political actors and the still recent 2016 election, assess the results, and highlight narratives that resonated with them, specifically how these figures felt about Black people.

WFJ: Okay, you said that he kills Black people? Where did you hear that? What do you mean?

Renee: I heard it on the news that he doesn't like Black people.

The excerpts above are illustrative of all of the moments, which are woven throughout this dissertation, wherein the children activated the knowledge they had
gathered from the media. Various forms of media, including television, news, and movies, served as a platform for theorizing, inferring, and imagining, in similar ways as the children’s books and the dialogic space within the literature circles. The media did not shape their ideologies in the way one might assume it would young children, however. Particularly in the case of Donald Trump, the media’s stories confirmed what they already knew or thought. It provided them illustrative examples of how racism operated, rather than taught them. The children consumed the media actively; they pieced together what they had learned from their parents and the narratives embedded in their schooling to make meaning about the racialized nature of the media. They invoked media narratives that aligned with their beliefs and utilized their engagement with media as a means to drive home their thinking. As their parents laid the foundation for them to critically engage and analyze media, their schooling supported this in multiple ways. The sociopolitical knowledge that these children demonstrated is a reflection of the emancipatory pedagogical practices (Murrell, 1997) of Ujamaa.
An emancipatory pedagogy must therefore expose the inadequacies and racist foundations of contemporary educational theories and practices while at the same time articulate a pedagogy which supports a critical literacy for "reading the world" among African-American children. I do not mean to suggest here that the project of liberatory education for African-American children is merely political action. The essence of a liberatory education project is the cultivation of a consciousness and the development of children's identities, as well as academic proficiencies (Murrell, 1997, p. 28).

If you walk into Ujamaa Elementary, which is a 3850 square foot converted three-story twin row home built in 1900, you will see the walls are filled with art and student creations. The essence of the place feels child-centered. It is loud and booming with children’s voices and feet going up and down the stairs. Children are not expected to
walk quietly or conform to strict behavioral expectations that limit their autonomy. It is a schooling environment filled with respect and expectations nonetheless. On any given day, you will likely see parent volunteers serving in a range of capacities in support of the school. You may even have a chance to see Ms. Holly in action, teaching history to the 5th and 6th grade students. I learned a lot about Ujamaa’s approach to education through my observations but the most enlightening exchanges came in the form of my interviews with the primary adult actors in the children’s lives. What I learned from her about the school from the principal and parents can be placed into three categories: a) Ms. Holly’s conceptualization of Ujamaa Elementary’s mission b) the nature of her teaching philosophy, pedagogy and practice and c) the central role the children have played across the years in shaping Ujamaa’s vision, curricular focus, and energy.

Mission

Ms. Holly, a middle-aged white woman, is the founding principal of Ujamaa Elementary. She has been committed to the mission of the school even before it operated as such. She is the guiding force behind many of the school-wide initiatives, has worked tirelessly to sustain the school financially and academically over time, and is committed to ensuring the students and families enrolled at Ujamaa are honored, centered, and that it remains a community space of learning. When asked how she would describe Ujamaa’s mission and how it has changed over the years, she declared:

The mission is really to build on the love of learning that children have...It depended over the years who’s there and the issues that I see. Seeing children as whole people, that are creative, curious, interested in everything, interested in science and math but also have a rich cultural legacy that they aren’t usually taught about in schools. Not just a cultural but historical, you know, and so, it’s very much a part of the school that I want children to know who they are, in light
of who their ancestors were...The greatness in their history. I want them to know about the greatness in their history...cause I think that has kind of been left out...

Ms. Holly’s leadership has been characterized by an approach that is multilayered and responsive to the times but also to who the children are. The school is academically traditional in many ways (e.g., first-grade completed workbooks and worksheets to check for understanding in reading and math), but it is very much about African American history and culture. Although Ms. Holly does not personally share this racial or cultural history with her students and families, she has always been an ally (Spanierman, & Smith, 2017) to her students and families through her work and vision in the school. She is a disruptor of the norms of how schooling in this particular local context is overwhelmingly done. As a result, Ujamaa presents a counterexample of the kinds of education that can happen when one recognizes that for Black students especially “culturally sustaining literacies can have a powerful iterative relationship with academic literacies in the classroom” (Lyiscott, 2015, Abstract). The central impetus for Ujamaa’s curriculum and pedagogy is to ensure that students come to “know who they are”. Ms. Holly adds complexity to this when as she continues to speak about the mission:

Ms. Holly: [A]nd the power of resistance and also the power of the arts. Because I think that the arts are an essential part of healing but they've also always been used to express the deepest feelings and visions of people. The arts are often left out of public schools.

This is a crucial aspect of how Ujamaa operates. The students are not only viewed as those who need to be taught, but they are knowledge holders who can and should resist through both action and artistic representation and creation. Resistance, according to Ms. Holly, is key to the nature of community commitments that Ujamaa makes. They have
participated in marches and advocated on behalf of the local community to commemorate and monumentalize a very painful, historical moment. Moreover, I witnessed the students reciting Langston Hughes poems and creating poetry of their own, chanting and singing Freedom Songs they learned from the Civil Rights Movement. The arts were not complementary or additive, rather they were much a part of the fabric of the school. The arts threaded the mission across time, space, grade level, and focus. She went on to say, as she reflected specifically on what the Black Arts Movement has taught her students:

In the most...in the hardest of times, people have turned to the arts and really have expressed amazing ideas and new ways of looking at the world through the arts. I feel like this is a time in history where we need that.

Art was and is a sustaining aspect of life as a marginalized person. It was and is integral to the way people represent their pain, resilience, and persistence for a better more equitable existence (e.g., enslaved persons knitting quilts to signal the path to freedom, the myriad examples of Black artists and creators across time in the U.S. who have told their stories and the stories of others, the list is endless). Ms. Holly was acutely aware of the intricate connectivity that social justice education, literacy learning, and the arts can have for transforming educational experiences for African American children. As Amiri Baraka (2009) declared, “There is no depth to education without art” (p. 108).

**Philosophy, Pedagogy and Practice: Ms. Holly**

Directly connected to her establishment and maintenance of the mission is Ms. Holly’s conceptualization of her teaching philosophy. As the principal and upper elementary history teacher, she considers her role as a pedagogue as much as she does her role as a school leader. She discusses her teaching philosophy:
It is based on the idea that children are curious, creative, and interested and that you have to work...that has to be the foundation. But also as a history teacher, that history is...learning your own history is a way of building identity. And in an environment where people’s identities...people of color’s identities are being so maligned, you know, from the White House on down...police violence is just so out of control, and you know, people are not being prosecuted. So I think part of history is building strong identities but also knowing that you don’t have to accept things the way they are, and you don’t have to accept people’s view of you, you need to know who you really are.

Similarly to wanting the children to “know who they are” through their attendance at Ujamaa, Ms. Holly sees her teaching as a way for her students to learn their own history and build a strong sense of self. Ms. Holly’s explanation of her teaching philosophy reflects Ladson-Billings’ (2014) three major domains of culturally relevant pedagogy: 

- academic success
- cultural competence
- sociopolitical consciousness

She wants children to succeed in traditionally academic ways and possess a curiosity for learning. She desires for them to become knowledgeable about their cultural and racial identities. She also finds it essential for students to be moved to social action. Ladson-Billings (1992) defines culturally relevant teaching as

[T]he kind of teaching that is designed not merely to fit the school culture to the students' culture but also to use student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge. Thus, culturally relevant teaching requires the recognition of African-American culture as an important strength upon which to construct the schooling experience (p. 314).

In all ways, Ujamaa represents the essence of culturally relevant pedagogical practices and orientations for and about African American children. Ms. Holly did not once speak of her African American students, the majority of the student of body presently and across the years, as deficient, low-performing, or behind. Rather, she saw their culture as a rich resource, a complex web of histories, practices, and ways of knowing that should
be central to how they learn and grow within the school.

**Philosophy, Pedagogy and Practice: The Perspectives of Ujamaa’s Parents**

Their decisions to enroll their children in African American independent schools represent efforts to obtain schooling that is more closely attuned to the values and beliefs they are developing within their own families. The school, therefore, is used by parents to extend the educational foundation begun at home (Shujaa, 1992, p. 157).

Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1992) was illustrative of the ways that the parents of my participants understood Ujamaa, what attracted them to the school, and why they chose to enroll their children. Parents reported that they relied on the school to support and reinforce the racial messaging they provide at home. They indicated that they see meaningful racialized learning outside of the home, and in particular within the four walls of school, as central to their children’s development. Isaac’s parents provided a poignant example of this:

[Isaac] stood in front of the audience and read a poem, recited a poem that he had memorized and it was by Langston Hughes. So his first ever public performance of anything was like a living embodiment of Black history, you know what I mean? So I think that that's really important to us…like deciding about the school it was that it's a social justice curriculum, but I think that living it through experience has been really important to me, to both of us, that he's getting a really…You can be in a lot of Black spaces and not necessarily have a pro-, specifically pro-Black message that's really articulated in lots of different ways and here it’s a pro-Black message.

The connection to the arts, “a living embodiment of Black history”, as a means of culturally relevant pedagogy is vivid. Isaac’s parents saw this as a fundamental piece of his coming of age. He needed to learn through a social justice lens. They elevated their critique of schools and further express their support of Ujamaa by saying that many spaces that claim to be pro-Black can in fact still be anti-Black. Ujamaa, to them, is a
space that not only purports to be a Black-affirming educational context given the
population of students, but also demonstrates their commitments to Blackness, Black
history, and Black literacies (Coles, 2020). Camille’s father echoes this sentiment about
Blackness and identity as the reason why they chose Ujamaa:

It is a lot to do with identity. We chose [Ujamaa] because it, for her identity as a,
as a Black girl, the preschool where she was at we were happy generally with the
curriculum and their approach to play and free time and respect for people’s
voices and things. But, she started there when she was two and then in the two
years that we were there, they went from having maybe a third kids of color and
two-thirds white kids to her being the only kid of color. There's about fifteen kids
at the PreK. And around that time we also started to hear her say things like, “I
wish my hair was straight” and it came out a lot in her hair at that time. She was
also starting to notice matching skin tones, and she saying like, “oh, I match with
that kid” and stuff. And then specifically it started turning into kind of a negative
about herself and we were like, “Ooh, we gotta get her out of there.” So we were
looking for a school with more Black kids...And then, [Ujamaa] I wouldn't say as
closely aligned curricularly with what we would have chosen but for the identity
piece and then a lot of the other pieces like respect for people’s voices...

WFJ: Do you feel like that was more important than the curricular piece?

Camille’s father: At that point yea, we felt like that was really important.

Camille’s dad spoke to the decision making they had to grapple with when choosing a
school for Camille. Both him, a white man, and his partner, a Jamaican-American Black
man, recognized the significance of Camille being in an early childhood and elementary
setting that was identity-affirming. They wanted a space that was not so centrally focused
on academics that it ignored Camille’s intersectional experiences as a Black girl. This
was so important that meant they did not completely subscribe to all of the curricular
moves of the school. A school like Ujamaa was the right fit because, as parents who
strived to take a race conscious approach to parenting, they knew the messages Camille
would receive and the identities of her teachers and classmates mattered just as much, if

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not more, than whether or not the school was deemed traditionally and academically rigorous by dominant, external standards. When asked, “Do you feel happy about that choice (to enroll Camille at Ujamaa)?”, he declared:

Yes! Yea...I'm not necessarily looking for a school to be everything to me and the things that I think, you know, every school is gonna involve some kind of sacrifices and then the things that we do see here I find so inspiring for what I would want for her, that we are very pleased. Things from like the Human Rights Night that they did a few weeks ago to the poetry reciting and then the P.E. curriculum involving yoga and capoeira and everything. It's, yeah, it's all the, all of that is pretty much what we would want so.

Camille’s dad realized that school was a consequential contributor to Camille’s development but also knew that it was not “everything”. He and his partner felt a responsibility to teach her about who she is, about the realities of the world, and support her in making sense of their identities and subject positions. Nevertheless, school was central and Ujamaa was a good match for their goals for Camille at this age. He emphasizes, as Ms. Holly did, the ways the arts--poetry and capoeira, example, are central to how Ujamaa creates and learns and the ways the arts are connected to social justice and equity-minded education. For Camille’s parents, there was a shared responsibility between school and home to do the work of racially socializing and that Ujamaa was a place where critical orientation to seeing oneself and the world was possible, even for young children.

Kelly’s father, who also serves as a parent volunteer and is very well-known by the faculty, staff, and students, discusses the centrality of Ujamaa mission as, although not the foremost, one of the reasons why both his children attended. He stated:

The limited selection in the public school...The main thing for Ujamaa was the small class sizes. I figured we can take advantage of the small class size. Then
after that, is the closeness of the staff, the experience of the staff, the nurturing of the staff when it comes to the students and also the curriculum. The curriculum being activist-based, politics, Afrocentric a little bit, a little Afrocentric and then the social studies, the social studies curriculum is pretty good....The things that are in place every year...combined with the new, current events. They kind of intersect.

Ujamaa was an intimate learning environment, with one classroom per grade, with an average of ten students per class. Kelly’s father, as an embedded part of Ujamaa, understood first-hand the importance of the relationships that were cultivated between and among the students, teachers, and parents. It was not only about the learning that took place but also what kind of interpersonal connections that were made. The critical pedagogy was matched with an ethic of care and connection (Brown, 2004; Roberts, 2010). He knew that social justice matched with loving stance and approach to learning, growing, and coming to consciousness was what made Ujamaa a special place. Furthermore, his labelling of the curriculum as “Afrocentric a little bit” points to the ways that the mission of the place is palpable, public, and legible for all parties. The mix of history and contemporary perspectives reflects how Ms. Holly describes the school and its work and bolsters the point that Ujamaa was a place where emancipatory pedagogical moves were made. A central aspect of this pedagogy was to center children as knowledge-holders and curriculum builders; they serve as the foundation for how learning is facilitated and make space for an emergent yet coherent curricular design that privileges social justice, understudied Black histories, and praxis.

**Children as Curriculum Shapers**

A fundamental premise of Ujamaa’s curricular design is that it reflects and is guided by the children’s ideas and interests. They shaped the curriculum in important,
lasting ways. Ms. Holly discusses how one of their intellectual investments became a piece of their school identity year to year:

The children have so inspired me with what they have come up...Sometimes what children started years ago has now become part of, it’s ingrained in our school culture. Like a Civil Rights Day. The children organized a Civil Rights day years ago and it was their idea to honor veterans of the Civil Rights Movement. And so that has been, we've been doing that ever since...They are the ones who decide who we are going to honor...the first group that we honored we got really close to. They were the freedom fighters that helped desegregate (name of local college).

It is important to note that Ms. Holly described this signature Ujamaa celebration as one that the children were responsible for “organizing”. “Civil Rights Day”, which began as a small celebration years ago but is now observed each year. The children were central to the creation of this tradition. The students choose who to honor, they learn more about what it means to be an activist and change-makers and they historicize their understandings through their knowledge of past Civil Rights movement figures and moments. This day left an indelible mark on my participants, evidenced by their enthusiasm in recounting it. In the circle sessions, they would often invoke Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and situate him as a hero, as the moral high ground, and as a powerful leader. They had knowledge of his life, how he was murdered, and his goals for racial harmony.

Ms. Holly also discussed other school-wide initiatives, like a two-year study of the Harlem Renaissance, wherein the children wrote and played music and painted a mural that was once on the side of the building adjacent to the school (unfortunately it is now torn down). This long-term project has become embedded in the curricular scope and sequence; the children travel to New York City to visit the home of Langston Hughes.
and learn about many of the important figures from the movement. These projects are squarely situated in Black history and culture, allowing the children to dive into the work and stories of notable Black intellectuals and creators.

Ms. Holly continues by discussing another example of how the Ujamaa children functioned as curriculum shapers and informants:

I have been so inspired by their ideas that sometimes I’ve changed my whole history, teaching to something they came up with. For example, when they decided they wanted to do a campaign against police brutality. I had a whole plan for what I was going to do in history that year and I said if that is what you want to do, you have to...need to learn about youth movements around the world, what youth have done to organize and how it has worked out. So we did that and we talked about youth movements here...Their ideas are very much part of the directions that we go.

Ms. Holly discusses her own history classes here but what she signals is a larger view of how Ujamaa operates. I witnessed this same shift in Ms. Brandy and Ms. Bea’s classrooms; they continued a science unit because the children were intrigued about the solar system. The way that Ujamaa orients itself to the children’s interests and develops curriculum around what most intrigues them is reminiscent of what early childhood scholars call emergent curriculum. Emergent curriculum is “process of using the spontaneity generated in the daily life of the children and adults in the program, along with teacher planning, to develop the curriculum” (Jones & Nimmo, 1994, p. 1).

Furthermore, Stacey (2018) argues that emergent curriculum is “not linear-- it is organic, constantly growing and evolving” (E-book). Emergent curriculum is being implemented and applied at all grade levels at Ujamaa, from PreK to 6th grade. The children are heard and reflected in the curricular choices of the teachers. It is an aspect of the teaching and learning that occurs and undergirds the mission of honoring the histories
and legacies of the students (and even the multiple cultural and ethnic identities of the teachers). If the curriculum was prescribed and scripted, the spirit of the community-based educational model that Ms. Holly founded Ujamaa on would be compromised. The students at Ujamaa are curriculum shapers, as agentive thinkers in the school whose perspectives matter for what they learn and how.

In their agentive positionalities, the children knew that Ujamaa was a schooling context where they could grapple with the contemporary political moment. Ms. Holly recounts the aftermath and consequences of Donald Trump’s election:

I talk about racism really more than they want to talk about it. This class, it's really interesting to me, I don’t know if it’s a sign of our times. When “45” in the White House got elected, the children were devastated. I mean they were crying in class. And they were like “What’s going to happen to us?” I think they built protective shields around themselves. “It’s not so bad, It’s not gonna change my life… So I was feeling like, for me, a protective shield is learning about the Black Arts Movement and learning what you can do.

Ms. Holly describes the backlash of the current administration. The children became more hesitant to discuss race and racism. As she said, they built “a protective shield” in an attempt to block considering the effects of how Trump’s presidency and policies might negatively affect them, their families, their communities, and society at large. Because Ujamaa was a place that embraced these types of discussions, the children could use the school as a place to make meaning and sort through their feelings and reactions. Instead of allowing them to wallow or rest on feelings of hopelessness, Ms. Holly was resolved in her commitment to help them deal with these realities by emphasizing the way historical narratives can help the children see that they are not powerless but can use the
arts and creating as a way to overcome, challenge, and resist oppression and harmful politics.

Ujamaa Elementary, although founded by a white woman, is a part of a long history of Black independent, neighborhood schools (Foster, 1992; Ratteray, 1992). Although there is not an explicit Afri/ocentric orientation, this school is an illustrative example of a place that recognizes the importance of centralizing African American narratives, histories, stories, and experiences, reflective of the students and families that enroll. There was also a collective nature to the curriculum shaping that the students did, mirroring the cultural ways of being in schools throughout history among African American children and families. For example, when charting a historiography of African American in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Butchart (1992) states,

Ultimately, investigations of the effects of African American education must grapple with a more basic conceptual problem. Is there an irresolvable contradiction between the central value of African American culture and that of education as defined by bourgeois society? The point of education in liberal culture is individualistic and privatized. The aim is to allow the atomized individual the opportunity for self-fulfillment in a social setting conceived as a marketplace; this goal can be realized only (or most effectively) through a systematic process of severing communal obligations, and by privatizing as commodities the knowledge gained in the educational setting. African American culture, on the other hand, values a communal ethos. Community and mutuality, not atomization and privatization, define the good (p. 362).

These initiatives, celebrations, and learning moments were the result of the collective efforts of the children. Ujamaa has a community ethos by which it operates. There is a mindset from principal to teacher to parent to student that reflects this communal approach to learning, a fundamental premise upon which African American communities and schools have thrived over time.
Ujamaa has a strong leader who is clear about why the school is designed in this way. The teachers subscribe to these beliefs (a number of the teachers participated in a book club wherein they read *Black Reconstruction: Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* by W.E.B. DuBois) and cultural, historical, and action-oriented initiatives are often school-wide. My participants were/are being educated in an environment that works to privilege their identities, acknowledges the realities of the past and contemporary, and nurtures their sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2014) and civic attitudes through theory and praxis. Operating from a place of knowing with students, Ujamaa was therefore a source of critical, racial knowledge and a platform for the representation and meaning-making.

**Conclusion**

The data shared in this chapter demonstrate the multifaceted ways that young children are learning about race and are being socialized to take a critical approach to analyzing racism and varying forms of inequity in their lives and the lives of others. By expanding the purview of my analysis to forms of socialization other than that which occurred in their homes, I found that the children were actively being taught through schooling and media and that the teaching was more informal iterations of racial messages that complemented the parents’ intentions. This socialization although categorized for the purposes of analysis and representation, does not neatly fit into a pedagogical box. Rather the teaching and learning about race and racism was embedded in their everyday lives and comprised many interactions they had in- and out-of-school.
Furthermore, there is a dialectic relationship between the schooling space and home, in that the parents chose to enroll their children in Ujamaa because of its explicit focus on social justice education but they also understood that they had a responsibility to teach their children about their Blackness and its meanings in society. This rang true even for Camille and Isaac’s adoptive white parents and Miles’ white mother (arguably even more so because they acknowledged their lack of first-hand experiences of racial marginalization). Ms. Holly also recognized that parents were an essential component to furthering the mission and vision and that they were a central part of the “family” she sought to cultivate within the school. The school itself was a consequential site of sustained racial and cultural learning, grounded in the experiential knowledge and interests of the children.

Within the home and in out-of-school spaces, the children were being taught about meanings of race, racial difference, and societal inequities through more than just conversations and experiences with their parents. Media, in particular television, was of consequential importance in shaping their thinking, which supports the findings of prior studies like Stroman (1991). They watched the news and reiterated those messages. This reflects the growing connectivity of the global world and the ways technology is influencing how even young children are learning and coming to consciousness about the world. However, what is unique about this engagement with media is not that they are passively internalizing the messages but rather they are forwarding critiques, sifting through messaging, and demonstrating a criticality in their consumption of media (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). These children have the capacity to bring all of these
influences to bear as they are making sense of the world, its many forms of stratification, while also situating themselves and their families within these marginalizing realities.

The implications of these data are apparent: literacy practitioners must consider how families, of all compositions, and other out-of-school influences like the media might contribute to an understanding of their children’s lives, what is important about their worlds and identities, and the critical literacies that should be supported and nurtured in classrooms. This is especially true for early literacy educators who seek to take up sociocultural approaches in their practice. Moreover, this chapter attempts to present a shift in how we think about racial socialization, as more than simply contained to the work of the home. Critical racial socialization can happen in schools; early childhood and elementary contexts do not have to be colorblind, nor should they (Boutte et al., 2011; Doucet & Adair, 2013; Husband, 2012). Ujamaa provides an illustrative example that it is possible to nurture race conscious mindsets in young children, in a manner that balances hope with reality, skepticism with optimism. These children, parents, and school challenge educators to take an inward look and question whether the children are “not ready” or if they are simply uncomfortable broaching the topics with children. It is even more imperative to do this work with African American children, as their legacies of enslavement continue to linger as central aspects of how the world is comprised and maintained.

Chapter 7, the final chapter of this dissertation, will provide an overview of the findings, address the limitations of the study, and discuss future directions for research that can extend the critical race work in early literacy.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

By what sends
The white kids
I ain't sent:
I know I can't
Be President.
What don't bug
Them white kids
Sure bugs me:
We know everybody
Ain't free.

Lies written down
For white folks
Ain't for us a-tall:
Liberty And Justice;
Huh! For All!

Langston Hughes (1951), “Children’s Rhymes”

Introduction

This dissertation has sought to address an understudied area in early literacy: examining the race consciousness and sociopolitical thinking of young children through an engagement with their multiple literacy practices. Throughout our time together, my participants demonstrated a deep and nuanced awareness of the world in which they live and thrive. They are making sense of a society that is stratified along many lines, of which race was evidently most salient for them. Within the dialogic space of the literature circle, these young African American children demonstrated that they are capable of synthesizing the multiple and complex messaging from media, peers, and families, and forwarding a critique of systemic and institutional conditions with an attention toward
historical continuity of the issues. The circle became a space that invited them to offer their unique lens to the world and they experience and demonstrate cultural and social knowledge that is fundamental to how they see themselves as young African American children and others with whom they interact. Their racial knowledge is fundamentally sociopolitical and central in how they construct notions of justice and equity.

**Statement of Main Findings**

The knowledge generated as a result of this dissertation project makes plain the need to wholly reject the idea that young children are incapable of making meaning about race and various manifestations of racism. My participants represent the complexities of the knowledge that young children carry with them but also are able to express. The data represented throughout sought to answer the questions:

- What do young African American children know and understand about sociopolitical issues to which they have been exposed, observed, or experienced?
- How do they utilize oral, pictorial, and print literacies to make meaning of sociopolitical issues?
- What are the sources of their knowledge and understandings?

The central arguments in response to these questions are summarized in this section and will serve as the basis for a discussion of the implications for literacy research, practice, and policy.

**Sociopolitical Awareness as Systemic Critique**

A primary argument of this dissertation, which was detailed in the first data analysis chapter, is that young children of color are capable of understanding and
articulating multiple manifestations of racism, beyond a simplistic formulation of racism as interpersonal and individual but as sociopolitical conditions. I found that the children were not simply aware of and capable of naming racism but that they offered critiques of the status quo and offered counternarratives of empowerment. Through their participation in the literature circles, in which I functioned as facilitator not teacher, they were provided a space to make meaning about issues that were salient to them. The open-ended dialogic format engaged them in a way that made room for the nuanced thinking and perspectives and how they pushed back on what and whom they found to be unjust and racist.

The children pushed the boundaries of the dominant developmental expectations of their capacities, particularly by how they brought to bear prior knowledge to make meaning. They demonstrated that they are not docile in their internalization of white supremacist ideologies but that even as early as ages six and seven, they can resist and reimagine the world. The dialogue and conversations that took place were critical in nature, because the discussion of racism only began, not ended, at skin color. The literature circle was a place where the children listened, affirmed, witnessed, and built upon one another’s beliefs, advanced an analysis of racialized circumstances that illustrated their nuanced sociopolitical knowledge. In this way, the literature circle enabled them to consider, remake, and refine their own emerging theories about race, racism, society, and notions of themselves.
Meaning-Making as Imaginative, Intertextual, & Nontemporal

The second data analysis chapter illustrated the ways the children represented their sociopolitical knowledge and the elements of their literate expression. The children’s expressions were sometimes imaginative in nature, wherein they moved beyond critique to envisioning action, their own and that of others. In this way, they did not view the conditions as being impossible to change but imagined that if critical praxis took place, injustices could be remedied. Their imagination functioned as a method to offer solutions and radical moves toward eradicating the results of a racist government and system.

Their imagination functioned alongside a synthesis of the various texts (Kress, 2009) to which they have been exposed; the intertextual elements of their knowledge demonstrated that these were not uncomplicated regurgitation of something they heard or saw once or a parroting of beliefs or views they did not understand. Rather, they were complexly repackaging the knowledge they gather from multiple sources, moving between and across print, television, and interactions with others. These intertextual representations served as a platform for making sense of how the world had been represented to them. They are reading words and the world (Freire, 1985) and their social and informal learning experiences, on the page and beyond, matter for a full understanding of the knowledge they bring to bear.

Finally, the nontemporal element of their representation was important in that it made evident the children’s ability to draw upon historical examples and precedents to make sense of contemporary sociopolitical realities. The children (re)mixed, meshed, and
compressed the actions of prominent figures, the details of inequitable conditions, and demonstrated their nascent awareness of the historical persistence and continuity of inequity. These three interpretive literate moves demonstrate the ingenuity with which these children grappled and the inherently intellectual nature of their sociopolitical awareness.

**Multiple, Layered Informal Socialization Factors**

Underlying the critical and complex nature of the children’s sociopolitical knowledge and understandings is an acknowledgement that they are drawing on multiple socialization sources to gather information and make meaning. In the third and final data analysis chapter, I argue that we must expand the literature about racial socialization of African American children and youth to include the role that school plays. Although my participants’ parents play a significant role in how they come to know about race and racism, the informal moments they incorporate in their child-rearing practices signal to the equal importance of other factors of socialization that are at work in their lives. The media, in particular, recurred as the place where the children were exposed to something and it demonstrates the centrality and ubiquity of television and the internet in children’s sociopolitical awareness. An attention to the ways that these children are consuming and engaging with various forms of media revealed that they are relying on the connectedness of the local and global social worlds and that that digital integration and influence are at the forefront of their meaning-making.

The children also drew upon their schooling experiences and learning to make meaning. During the circles, they inserted discussions of observations they make of their
schools, activities and events in which they were a part, and visitors who broadened their perspectives on issues. These in-school experiences were fundamental to how they understood the world and themselves; the function of the school enabled them to position themselves as actors and supported the development of their sociopolitical consciousness in concrete ways. Moreover and consequentially, the study was conducted in the school's art room; being housed in the physical space where their parents’ identified as a place for them to be nurtured and poured into as Black children allowed them to have a touchtone for the relevant experiences, conversations, and moments that took place inside school. The school was a connective place, one that engaged the range of their sensibilities and capacities, one where they were always invited, a safe place to share and dialogue alongside their peers with me as facilitator. These findings on the whole present a host of implications for research, practice, and policy.

Implications for Research

The five young children with whom I conducted my dissertation research represent just one very small group of African American children who are living today and making sense of a world that is persistently colored by racism, stratification, and inequality. They function as a case study of sorts and signal a need for more research that centers, documents, and analyzes their wealth of experiential knowledge. This dissertation presents several implications for literacy research and practice.

Positioning African American Children as Literate Knowledge Holders

Young children of color, in particular the African American first-graders with whom I worked, are richly literate people. This project illustrates the breadth and depth of
African American children’s literate expressions through an examination of their talk, dialogue, and listening, bolstering the significance of orality in children’s reading and storying. The children presented layered and complex literate expressions of the racialized experiences and observations in and of society. Through these views and criticisms, they pushed the boundaries of dominant developmental preconceptions of six- and seven-year-olds. Their literacy practices enabled them to embed their cultural, racial, and social knowledge, which is inherently intellectual and academic. Furthermore, African American children should not always be compared to children of other races in thinking about their development and literacy practices; in constant comparison, we miss the uniqueness and richness that lies within their approaches to literacy. They, instead, should be seen as knowledge holders, generators and producers of valid forms of reasoning and expression.

Given the dearth of research that positions young children as critical knowledge producers about issues of race and racism, early literacy research needs the voices of young children. We do not yet know the full range of African American children’s capacity to name their realities and evaluate their world and the world of other marginalized peoples, along with a deeper examination of from where and how they are acquiring the knowledge and forming understandings. With much of the research focused on how African American children can acquire the necessary skills to be “on grade level” and/or meet standard developmental milestones of language and literacy, there is a dearth of research that examines what is traditionally deemed unacademic - the knowledge that is
rooted in their lived experiences and the literate representations of those critical moments in their lives.

Conducting Racial Awareness Research using a Sociocultural Literacy Approach

Traditional approaches to racial awareness research have left many unanswered questions about the nature of young children’s racial knowledge. Experimental designs have not captured nuance and are too heavily focused on dichotomized notions (“good” versus “bad”, “mean” versus “nice”, “ugly” versus “beautiful”) of race, phenotypes, and skin color. While purely observational designs have placed more emphasis on the ways that young children across race make friends, express or are subjects of prejudice and discrimination. These data, although important to gather, do not allow researchers to attend to the sociopolitical issues that are more salient for young children. Overwhelmingly, this research has led us to believe that young children cannot make sense of structural and institutional racisms and are only able to see racism as an interpersonal phenomenon. Moreover, in these cross-cultural examinations, the focus continues to be shifted in a way that centers the white gaze and as such, white people. African American children’s perspectives therefore fade into the background and they are positioned primarily as victims whose self-esteem are negatively affected by whiteness and the acts of white people.

This dissertation sought to move racial awareness research forward by examining African American children as intellectual but also having the ability to speak truth to power and racial inequity. The literature circle model, composed only of African American children, that I employed allowed them to share and listen outside of solely
being viewed and interpreted as objects of racism but also as actors of resistance. Racial awareness research needs to build upon this framing and approach to dig deeper into young children’s sociopolitical awareness and attend to the culturally specific ways of knowing and being that African American children might offer.

**Implications for Practice**

**Rethinking Literature Circles**

This dissertation invites a rethinking of the traditional literature circle model, encouraging early and elementary educators, especially those in urban areas with predominately students of color, to use multicultural children’s literature and peer interactions to facilitate discussions about sociopolitical issues and racism. The multicultural literature utilized in this study served as a launching pad for the critical discussions that transpired, which opened the space for topics of race, racism, and difference. The children’s books were a platform, a sliding glass door (Bishop, 1991) for the children to explore sociopolitical issues that were grounded in the children’s experiential experiences, weaving together multiple narratives to represent their knowledge, related to and beyond the books. Diverse books matter; representation in print literature is central to children’s healthy (racial and otherwise) identity development (Bishop, 1990, 1997; Brooks, 2006; Thomas, 2016). However, how teachers present texts, and how they invite children to grapple with the texts and offer their full selves, all make the difference in culturally responsive education. The research design of the literature circle and subsequent findings of this study invite early literacy practitioners and elementary school educators to consider how they can rethink literature circle as a
place for children to demonstrate and exchange critical social, racial, and political knowledge.

Literature circles, in many early and elementary classrooms, are an important pedagogical tool for teaching young children print concepts, vocabulary, increase their motivation and interests in reading, and strengthening their reading comprehension (Snow et al., 1998; Mol et al., 2009; Gambrell & Codling, 1997; Penno et al., 2002). Read alouds, in particular an interactive engagement with multicultural children’s literature can also serve an important role in allowing children to share thoughts about their contexts and the world around them (Husband, 2019; Long, & Gove, 2003). I was able to use the literature circle in a way that engaged young children to reveal their thoughts, reactions, and analysis of conditions and circumstances that are not typically invited into the school day. My study demonstrated what happens when multicultural children’s literature, a circle context that is attendant to the identities of the participants, can be characterized by open-ended, child-directed discussions. The literature circle context provided them the opportunity to make connections between and across the texts’ storylines and illustrations, drawing upon children's literature, personal stories, common schooling experiences, teaching from parents and families, and other aspects of their out-of-school lives to critique structures and institutions and assert narratives of empowerment.

With researcher (or educator) as facilitator and not just teacher, the traditional literature circle model can be reinvented. With this reworking, literature circle time can be one in which the range of children’s in- and out-of-school knowledge, meaning
making, and literacy expression can be brought to bear. The literature model facilitates an alternative pedagogical pathway to engage children in discussions about texts but also about relevant issues in their worlds, which challenges teacher-student power dynamics and one-directional knowledge transference. Early educators can and should more often position themselves as facilitator, learner, listener, attendant to their positionality and ways they can resist colorblindness and the perpetuation of the status quo. The richness of the conversations during the circles would not likely have occurred without an establishment of the space as a place where I as the facilitator invited the children to share, storytell, and recount communally and dialogically. Early literacy practitioners can use this approach, which I intend to refine and further develop in future research, to ask “What can I learn from my students? What knowledge and perspectives above and beyond the page do they offer me and how can that inform my pedagogy?” This dissertation calls for a more robust literature circle framework, one that allows for an examination of the social and cultural dimensions of the ways in which children approach reading, writing, and thinking.

**Viewing Orality as a Legitimate Academic Skill**

African American children’s early literacy proficiency in the United States is so narrowly defined by learning standards, grade and reading levels, and standardized assessments, with an emphasis on school readiness (Halladay, 2012; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2001; Washington, 2001). Often, oral language is seen as reserved for babies and a pre-literate skill (Mason, 2017). In other words, talking and speaking is viewed as what children do before they learn “real” literacy, which is grounded in print and pen. This
does not make room for a meaningful consideration of what the children are saying, how they are saying it, and its relationship to their reading and writing habits. The critical dialogue that occurred during the circles demonstrate the significance of orality in these children’s sharing and storying—and raises questions about how orality might be used to complement and add complexity to our understanding of the development of children’s literacy practices.

For instance, had Isaac not exclaimed that Harriet Tubman was a superhero, Kelly would not likely have drawn the intricate illustration that affirmed Isaac but also demonstrated her awareness of the conditions of enslavement. How do we extend our priority on oral language beyond very young children and think about its importance, particularly for children of color like my participants? Furthermore, if oral language is reserved for the realm of play, how do we acknowledge it as a worthwhile practice that should be cultivated in an “academically-focused” classroom? Nurturing the oral language skills of young African American children is culturally responsive. Echoing the sentiments of scholars and educators who critically examine hip-hop (Lyiscott, 2019; Morrell & Duncan Andrade, 2002; Newman, 2005), listening, speaking, and responding are literacy. They are valuable ways of knowing and early educators should use orality as a means and method to build upon young children’s existing knowledge.

**Informing Early Childhood Teacher Education**

The findings from this dissertation suggest that teacher education programs, particularly those focused on training literacy educators, should not only be focused on reading and writing outcomes. The processes by which children acquire various types of
skills and the social practices they use in expressing and representing their literate selves should be an emphasis on how teachers are trained in reading education. My dissertation study asks teacher preparation programs to consider whether and how literacy practitioners and elementary educators are prepared to support children in grappling with racial issues. The findings demonstrate that these children are astute and rigorous in their recitation of their observations, experiences, and exposures. They challenge apprehension in early literacy about the capacity of young children to understand race and racism.

Moreover, my study has implications for thinking about educator positionality. I, as an African American woman, thought intently about who I was to do this work alongside these students, to engage them in critical discussions, and how I would go about facilitating discussions that centered the experiences of these students and their communities. I attempted to create a space that allowed my students the opportunity to feel comfortable and welcomed sharing who they were, lessening my role as the researcher/teacher and positioning myself as facilitator. Creating a space wherein students felt they were the knowledge holders asked that I held myself accountable. This intraracial circle space was not one that united us along the lines of race but did not erase the distinctions and differences that existed between us along other lines of identity. Teacher educators have a responsibility to not only teach future teachers how to engage their students in these critical moments (DeNicolo & Franquiz, 2006) but also how to delve deeper into their own personal identities and histories before doing this work. Who we are influences who children can be with us and literacy educators must challenge the stance that literacy is a neutral endeavor.
What is substantiated from this study is that if young children are provided a context in which they are invited to think through societal conditions and inequities by utilizing the literacy modes with which they are most comfortable, they offer us much in the way of making sense of the world and stratification. When ignoring the sociocultural influences that are present in students’ learning and expression, early educators neglect the wealth of knowledge that children bring to school. Sociopolitical awareness may not be seen as academic knowledge. However, in understanding young children’s early experiences, educators are better equipped to be culturally sensitive, critical, and responsive to whom they teach, considering both the identities of their students and themselves. They can honor how the world influences young children in complex ways, in the ways they approach literacy learning and to challenge systems that perpetuate inequities, even schooling itself. Early educators, while engaging in critical reflexive inquiry about themselves and their own histories, should be taught to harness these experiences, name inequality, engage in systemic critiques, enact resistance alongside their students to consider ways school and society might be more equitable.

**Underscoring Connective Critical Literacy Practices**

Finally, this study underscores the influences of the home, school, and media in young children’s racial awareness and the connective, critical literacy practices that can happen across contexts. With the increasing attention on culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2014) in individual classrooms and schools, schools should consistently be evaluated not only for their standardized academic performance but also for their responsiveness to the students.
whom they instruct. The teaching and learning about race and racism that my participants experienced was embedded in their everyday lives and comprised many interactions they had in and out-of-school. Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers (i.e., Are standards appropriately constructed to incorporate and honor children of color’s out-of-school lives are honored and privileged?) alike need to be attentive to the ecology of racial socialization that interacts and intersects (and sometimes contradicts) in the lives of young children and how those messages manifest in their thinking and approaches to learning.

**Future Directions and Lingering Questions**

The current study, while important, has limitations and suggests the need for future, related research. While many different studies exist that illustrate young children’s emergent literacy practices, few engage the intersections of literacy and racial meaning making, with a specific focus on sociopolitical issues. Even fewer studies focus specifically on African American children’s meaning making outside of the paradigms of academic achievement, literacy development, and the demonstration of reading and writing proficiency. Three areas of future research follow from this dissertation.

**Longitudinal Examination**

In addition to expanding the number of participants in a study such as this, there still remains a dearth of empirical knowledge concerning young African American children’s sociopolitical knowledge. A longitudinal examination would allow for a more in-depth understanding about how children such as these develop racialized attitudes, viewpoints, and perspectives over the course of their early childhood, what experiences
are central to that development, and how their literacy representations of this knowledge change and in what they become more complex. This line of research would examine the depth and breadth of the children’s knowledge and perspectives over the course of their early elementary experiences, noting what issues become salient at which points in their development and whether and how their standpoints about issues change. Moreover, we need to understand if the influences of media, schooling, and parents become more or less central in how these children formulate their perspectives.

**World-Building and PAR Research**

The children with whom I researched did not simply indict the *status quo*. Their awareness extended to offering solutions and views toward a future that would be more justice and equity-oriented (“I wish I had a special key that I can let people out”). The present study did not delve much in the imagined futures of these children. However, a future study would begin from the place of knowing and ask young African American living in urban settings to consider the sociopolitical issues they find most salient, along with how they imagine their communities and themselves to be engaged in change-making. Using participatory methods, researchers might investigate what nascent civic and political engagement looks like, as well examining what social responsibility young African American children envision for themselves. This line of research has the potential to offer new perspectives and critical approaches that center young African American children as experts about their own literacy learning and social experiences, as they inquire into their communities and the persistent inequities that are present in urban contexts.
Analysis of Contemporary Community Schooling

Although the Ujamaa did not self-identify as Africentric, the school’s orientation to learning was reminiscent of schools that identify as such. There has been much research about Afri/ocentric schooling, its efficacy in comparison to Eurocentric schooling contexts for African American children, and its role in nurturing and edifying them. (Asante, 1991; Davis, 2017; Perry et al., 2003; Lee, 2004; Shockley & Frederick, 2010). What is understudied, however, is the role of racial socialization in schools and the racial and sociopolitical messaging that are transmitted between and amongst young children. Shifting the focus from academic achievement or self-esteem building, an ethnography of place would investigate what makes places like Ujamaa unique in their educational approaches and what schools such as these can teach traditional, urban public school settings about how to embed culturally responsive education in the work they do. Is Ujamaa characteristic of contemporary Black community schooling models; how does it differ? Ujamaa made the types of discussions that my students had normal, not a one-time special event. Therefore, what do the curricular and pedagogical moves (unwritten/unofficial/unstandardized and official) of the school tells us about what it means to educate African American children so they are comfortable, willing, and confident in sharing their thoughts and beliefs about racial issues?

On the whole, this dissertation invites researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to take heed of young children of color’s capacity to both make sense of the racialized world in which they are living and growing along with their ability to recognize the marginalization and suffering in various forms, and value the importance of
dialogue and sociocultural literacy spaces for engaging social issues as well as the role of informal socialization factors in their living and learning. Future research will build upon these findings to expand our understanding of African American children’s racial, sociopolitical knowledge, how literacy is central to how children express knowledge, and the varied and layered influences on their development.

**Final Words**

**Figure 7.1**

As Camille writes, “Me and you love justice. I cannot stop justice.” Privileging and centering the voices of young children of color in our pursuit of justice should be one of the approaches that researchers, practitioners, and activists draw upon. Their thinking, words, and representations of society are where we should begin, along with how they
come to know. Young children of color provide us with a sobering perspective of reality but also imaginative possibilities that move us forward and keep us hopeful that the world can and will change for the most vulnerable of those among us. Their sociopolitical awareness serves as a mirror upon which to reflect about the way that the world is, the way it has been maintained over time, and how it can be changed. If we do love justice, we must actively work toward it.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Number</th>
<th>Multicultural Children’s Literature Book Read</th>
<th>Opening Topic(s)/Focus From the Text</th>
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<tr>
<td>Session 1</td>
<td><em>Skin Again</em> by bell hooks</td>
<td>skin color, racial identity, conceptions of racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 2</td>
<td><em>Let’s Talk About Race</em> by Julius Lester</td>
<td>skin color, racial identity, conceptions of racism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Session 3</td>
<td><em>Going Home</em> by Eve Bunting</td>
<td>immigration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Session 4</td>
<td><em>Mama’s Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation</em> by Edwidge Danticat</td>
<td>immigration, incarceration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 5</td>
<td><em>Last Stop on Market Street</em> by Matt de la Peña</td>
<td>poverty, urban city life</td>
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<td>Session 6</td>
<td><em>A is for Activist</em> by Innosanto Nagara</td>
<td>marching, protests</td>
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<tr>
<td>Session 7</td>
<td><em>Grace for President</em> by Kelly DiPucchio</td>
<td>presidency, elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 8</td>
<td><em>If I Ran for President</em> by Catherine Stier</td>
<td>presidency, elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 9</td>
<td><em>The Youngest Marcher: The Story of Audrey Faye Hendricks, a Young Civil Rights Activist</em> by Vanessa Brantley-Newton</td>
<td>marching, incarceration, police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 10</td>
<td><em>Harlem’s Little Blackbird: The Story of Florence Mills</em> by Renee Watson</td>
<td>segregation, the Civil Rights movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Session 11</td>
<td><em>Freedom on the Menu: The Greensboro Sit-Ins</em> by Carole Boston Weatherford</td>
<td>segregation, protests, the Civil Rights movement</td>
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<td>Session 12</td>
<td><em>We March</em> by Shane W. Evans</td>
<td>marching, protesting, demonstrations, the Civil Rights movement</td>
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<td>Session 13</td>
<td><em>Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom</em> by Carole Boston Weatherford</td>
<td>enslavement, fugitivity, abolition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 14</td>
<td><em>Freedom in Congo Square</em> by R. Gregory Christie</td>
<td>enslavement, fugitivity, abolition, freedom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B. PARENT INFORMATIONAL CONSENT LETTER

Dear Parents and Guardians:

My name is Wintre Foxworth Johnson and I am a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate of Education, with Dr. Vivian L. Gadsden as my advisor, dissertation chair, and the principal investigator of the study. Over the course of the spring semester, I will conduct my dissertation at ___________. My research interests lie in exploring the social and racial experiences of young children of color and examining the influences of those experiences on their literacy learning, development, and expression. The specific focus of my project is to examine African American children’s developmental understanding of political and social issues and injustices that are informed by racial differences. These issues include such topics as poverty, segregation, immigration, and even the recent political election and its effects. The study will include first and second graders of color who are enrolled at ___________. In these twice weekly literacy circle sessions, we will use a variety of children’s books to engage in discussions concerning the children’s thoughts about, observations of, and/or experiences with a particular societal issue.

The benefit of this study for the students who participate is that they will have access to interesting and critical texts and opportunities to share their knowledge with other children in this specially designed program. They will engage sensitive issues with other children who also identify as African American while engaging in important literacy practices (reading, writing, and dialogue). The students will also be provided an opportunity to make sense of these topics in a non-evaluative environment and draw upon their literacy strengths to express themselves. Each session will be audio and video-recorded and the children’s written responses and drawings will be collected. From January to May, there will be about 20 30-minute small group sessions over the course of the spring semester immediately after school. The resulting transcripts and written work composed by students will be used for the purposes of my dissertation and any subsequent presentations and publications. This study is important because it will provide data to examine the ways that young children of color are describing and explaining the social issues mentioned above that they have experienced, heard about, and about which they may be beginning to form an opinion. My hope is that this research will yield important knowledge and interventions to understand and engage young children’s awareness of race and racism.

I am writing to ask your permission to allow your child to participate in the series of literacy circles that are fundamental to my study and that I might audio-record your child in their classroom context as I conduct observations. Also as a part of this study, I would ask that you participate in one two-hour-long focus group concerning your choice for your child to attend _____________. Participation is completely voluntary, the study presents minimal risk to you and your child, and all your family’s information will be kept confidential. In the final report, all responses will be kept anonymous. You may
withdraw yourself or your child at any point in the study, and they may withdraw themselves. Lastly, there are no costs involved in the study nor will you be compensated.

If you would like more information about my dissertation project, I am more than happy to talk with you. I can be reached by phone at ____________ or via email ____________.

If you and your child are willing to participate in the study, please complete the attached consent form and return it to your child’s teacher.

Thank you in advance for considering my request to allow your child to participate in my research study.

Sincerely,
Wintre Foxworth Johnson
APPENDIX C. PARENT CONSENT FORMS

Parent/Guardian Consent Form

*By signing this consent form, I confirm that I have read and understand the information detailed above.*

After reading the introduction letter that details the study, I,

________________________ give permission for my child, ____________________, to
(Parent/Guardian’s Name) (Student’s Name)

participate in the study entitled “Exploring the Racial and Sociopolitical Epistemologies
of Young Children of Color”.

I, __________________________, also agree to participate in a two-hour focus group.
(Parent/Guardian’s Name)

___________________________________ ____________________
(Parent/Guardian’s Signature) (Date)

Parent/Guardian Contact Information:

Name(s): _____________________________________________________________

Preferred Method of contact (email or phone): ______________________________

Email address and/or phone number: _________________________________

*** Please return this signed consent form to your child’s teacher by ____________.

Thank you for your interest in this study!

A copy of this consent form is available for you to keep.
APPENDIX D. PARENT/GUARDIAN OBSERVATION CONSENT FORM

My name is Wintre Foxworth Johnson and I am a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate of Education. Over the course of the spring semester, I will conduct my dissertation at __________. The specific focus of my project is to examine children of color’s developmental understanding of political and social issues and injustices that are informed by racial differences. As a part of my project, I will conduct a series of observations in your child’s classroom. I would like to audio-record during my observations and may capture your child’s voice on tape. Your child will not be asked to do anything differently when I am observing and my presence will be as unobtrusive as possible.

By signing this consent form, I confirm that I have read and understand the information detailed above.

I, ______________________ give permission for Wintre Foxworth Johnson to audio record in my child’s, ______________, classroom. I understand that my (Student’s Name) child’s voice may be captured on tape but if their words are used, their identity will be protected by a pseudonym.

___________________________________ ____________________
(Parent/Guardian’s Signature) (Date)

A copy of this consent form is available for you to keep.
APPENDIX E. CHILD VERBAL ASSENT FORM

Oral description and assent request for participants:

“Hi, my name is Wintre and I am a student working on my research study. A research study is an interesting way to find an answer to a question you might have. I am interested in learning about what children like you think about children’s books and how those books relate to their real lives. I will be here at your schedule for the next 4 months and I would like you to participate in my literacy circles twice a week. We will look at numerous illustrations and I will ask you questions. At the end of each circle meeting, you will be able to write or draw in a journal. I will video record our circle meetings but when I write my report, I will keep your name and school private.

If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you do not want to participate or even if you change your mind later and want to stop.

Do you have any questions for me? If you have a question later that you did not think of now, you can ask me the next time you see me.

Would you like to participate in my study by coming to the literacy circles each week? Would it be alright for me to videotape and record our sessions?”

Child responses:

1. (Child’s Name) NO YES
2. (Child’s Name) NO YES
3. (Child’s Name) NO YES
4. (Child’s Name) NO YES
5. (Child’s Name) NO YES
6. (Child’s Name) NO YES
7. (Child’s Name) NO YES
8. (Child’s Name) NO YES
9. (Child’s Name) NO YES
10. (Child’s Name) NO YES

_______________________ _______________________
Researcher Signature Date
APPENDIX F. STUDENT FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOLS

Description of focus group/literacy circle to participants:

Thank you for participating in this literacy circle. Each week we will look at a different children’s book. You or may not have heard of or read these books before. Before we look at the books, I will ask you a few questions. After we explore the books, I will ask you a few more questions and we will discuss your thoughts and reactions. I am interested to understand what you know and what the books make you think of. At the end of each group meeting, you will have an opportunity to write or draw your thoughts and ideas.

Reminders:
1. You can decide to leave the group whenever you chose and there will be no consequences.
2. When we do meet, what we talk about in this group is confidential- that means we do not tell anyone who is not in this room what we discuss.
3. You will be video-recorded during our sessions. One person speaks at a time and everyone will have the opportunity to speak if they would like.

Introductory focus group/literacy circle questions (after reading a book from the race and racial difference list)-
1. Would you say you are Black or African American?
   a. What does it mean to be Black/African American?
2. Do you know people who are not Black or African American?
   a. How do you know they are the same or different than yourself? How can you tell?
   b. Is it only their skin color or something else that makes someone different?
   c. Do you think one skin color is better than another?
   d. Do other people think one skin color is better than another? How do you know?
3. Have you heard someone say something bad or unkind about people who look like you, who are Black or African American?
   a. About people who look differently than you?
4. Do you know what the words fairness and unfairness mean?
   a. Justice and injustice?
   b. Equality and inequality?
   c. Prejudice?
   d. Discrimination?
5. What does the word racism mean to you?
   a. Can you give me of an example of racism?
   b. Have you ever experienced racism yourself?
      I. Have your friends or family?
Questions for subsequent focus group/literacy circle meetings -

1. What does (topic of that session - poverty, immigration, segregation, activism, homelessness, presidency, religion, incarceration) mean?
2. What are your thoughts about (topic)?
3. Do you think (topic identified by students) has anything to do with race (being African American or Black) or racism (definition students give in first meeting)?
   a. Tell me why you think so or why not.

Now we will look at (name of chosen book).

4. Do this book make you think of anything you have seen or have had happened to you or someone you know? Tell us about it.
   a. Can you relate to any of the illustrations?
   b. If no response: What does (researcher will highlight a specific illustration or scene in the book) tell you? What does it mean to you?
5. How are these illustrations the same as things occurring in your life at your school, home, community, what you’ve seen on television, or in the world? How are they different?
   a. Do any of the images remind you of any real-world issues or events?

Now, you can take time to journal about today’s circle session. You can write or draw about any of the following:
1. something you shared today
2. what experiences you’ve had that are related to the book
3. what you feel is most important about the book or our discussion
4. how the book made you feel
5. what you want to know more about/what questions you have about the topic this week
APPENDIX G. SEMI-STRUCTURED PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I want to ask you a few questions about the history of the school, its current state, and its future trajectory.

1. Can you provide me a brief history of the school?
   a. What was your purpose in founding the school?

2. What is the mission of the school?
   a. In what ways have you actualized that mission?
   b. How has that mission changed over the years?

3. In what ways is the school different from a traditional elementary school (curriculum, teaching styles, schedule, overall organization of the school, etc.)?

4. What is your teaching philosophy?
   a. What informs your teaching philosophy?

5. What do you want children to learn at this school? Why?
   a. How do you think they learn best? What evidence do you see of those learning methods in your school?

6. How do your teachers intentionally explore and focus on issues of racial difference, inequality and/or discrimination and other social issues into your classroom through lessons and activities? What kinds of things are they learning about?
   a. What has been your role in encouraging/leading this kind of instruction?
   b. Can you describe an instance where you saw a teacher doing this with your younger students? Has this been evidenced in the first-grade classroom or lower grades more generally?

7. In this particular social and political moment, how are you and your teachers facilitating conversations around issues of racial difference and inequality?
   a. What does literacy learning look like this space (reading, writing, etc.) and is it connected in any way to race and social awareness and learning for your students?

8. Can you describe an instance where a younger student demonstrated their thinking or understanding around a racial and/or social issue? Tell me their age, grade, the context in which this thinking was shared, and what they said or did.
APPENDIX H. SEMI-STRUCTURED TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I want to ask you a few questions about the ways in which you incorporate race and issues of racial inequality into your pedagogy and what you feel your students understand about these issues.

1. Do your curriculum intentionally incorporate an exploration of and focus on issues of racial difference, inequality and/or discrimination into your classroom through lessons and activities?
   a. Can you give me an example of when you did this?
   b. What do activities look like? Can you provide me an example of something children would be doing in the classroom?
   c. How are you guiding and encouraging discussion around these issues?

2. What pedagogical tools/methods/materials do you feel are most useful in facilitating conversations about racial difference, racism, social justice, and inequality?

3. What messages about race and racism do you and your curricular practices intend to convey to your students?

4. What do you think your students know about social and racial issues?
   a. Can you tell me about a time or times when students have expressed their racial knowledge?
   b. Have they connected the curriculum or classroom practice to their real lives or experiences?
   c. Are their views critical? If so, in what ways?
   d. Do you feel they are limited in their understanding because of their age or development? Why or why? How?

5. When I visited on (specified date), I noticed ____________/I heard a student say ____________________. Can you tell me more about this?
APPENDIX I. PARENT SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Description of interview to participants:

Thank you for participating in this interview. I would like to learn more about your children’s schooling from your perspective, your own racial socialization practices with your children, and what you understand their knowledge about race and racism to be. You may choose to respond to all of the questions or only some.

1. How long has your child attended (school site)?

2. Why do you choose (school site) as the school that your child to attend?

3. What do you understand the school’s mission to be?
   a. Do you think (school site) is fulfilling its mission and commitment to social justice education? Why or why not?

4. What role do you think (school site) plays in your child(ren)’s racial socialization?
   a. How you see the school affecting your child(ren)’s understanding of race and racism and inequality?

5. Do you see any influences of the school on your child(ren)’s sense of race, justice, and equity?
   a. Can you think of any instances when your child(ren) have shared with you discussions, activities, or lessons in which racialized, politicized or social issues in the classroom were addressed and/or taught?

6. Do you feel they are limited in their understandings of these issues because of their age or development? Why or why? How/in what ways?

Now I am curious about your racial socialization practices in your family and home.

7. What role do you feel you play as a parent in socializing your child around racial, political, and social issues, current or historical?
   a. Are there specific, significant moments of racial socialization that you remember, either by you or a family member?
   b. Specific messages about society, what to expect, who she should be?
   c. What messages do you want to send to your child about their identity, racial, ethnic, gendered, or otherwise? About racial and societal inequities/inequalities?
d. Where do you feel your child picks up most of their conceptualizations about racial, political, and/or social issues (home, media, school, peers, books, internet, etc.)?

e. Have you shared your experiences with race and racism with your child?


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