

# Rhetoric of American Identities

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### Media Representations of Black Boys and the Response of Contemporary African American Children's Authors and Illustrators

#### Medialne wizerunki czarnoskórych chłopców a reakcje współczesnych twórców literatury dziecięcej

#### Abstract

The concept of black boyhood has always been marked with negative associations. American media usually portray black boys as a potential threat. Rather than focusing on their future, they treat black boyhood as an experience “in the now,” failing to consider the historical context of African American communities. Thus, they create a monolithic picture of young black men, which highlights only their faults.

This way of imagining black boyhood has inspired African American authors and illustrators to talk back and join the national debate. Their picture books reject the public rhetoric of crisis and replace it with a new black narrative, which reconstructs the black male identity. The aim of this article is to analyze selected images of black boyhood included in the books, as well as to compare them with the message of today's media.

Koncepcja czarnego chłopięctwa zawsze naznaczona była negatywnymi skojarzeniami. Współczesne media amerykańskie zwykle przedstawiają czarnoskórych chłopców jako potencjalne zagrożenie. Nie zajmują się ich przyszłością, a wyjaśniając bieżące sprawy, pomijają szerszy kontekst historyczny społeczności afroamerykańskich. W ten sposób tworzą monolityczny obraz czarnoskórego młodego mężczyzny, który eksponuje wyłącznie wady. W ostatnich latach afroamerykańscy twórcy literatury dziecięcej zakwestionowali medialny wizerunek czarnego chłopięctwa. Ich książki odrzucają publiczny dyskurs kryzysu oraz proponują nową czarną narrację, która zmienia tożsamość czarnoskórych chłopców. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza wybranych wizerunków czarnoskórych chłopców zawartych w publikacjach oraz ich konfrontacja z przekazem medialnym.

#### Key words

race, identity, rhetoric of black boyhood, black narrative, African American children's literature  
rasa, tożsamość, retoryka czarnego chłopięctwa, czarna narracja, afroamerykańska literatura dziecięca

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## **Media Representations of Black Boys and the Response of Contemporary African American Children's Authors and Illustrators**

### **Introduction**

In many social and political contexts, the concept of black boyhood has been marked with negative associations. The public discourse on young black males usually describes them as dangerous suspects living in poverty and addicted to illegal substances. The metaphor of “the idle black male on the street corner” causing anxiety and fear prevails in American print media, TV and the internet (Donaldson 2015).<sup>1</sup> Although they may be true to some extent, such essentialized images shape the general perception of black youngsters in the U.S. society as well as affect the self-esteem of the boys who, according to Donaldson, “internalize biases and stereotypes and, through their behavior, reinforce and even perpetuate the misrepresentations” (2015).

If black boys are mentioned in American media, they are usually the characters of crime-related stories. Characteristically, rather than being perceived as underage and immature human beings, they are assessed with adult standards, with a special focus on their “suspect movements, threatening physicality, and malevolent intentions” (Dumas and Nelson 2016: 28). It was Emmet Till, murdered in 1955, who was first described in this mode. This case has brought into the public discourse a number of negative terms pertaining to black boyhood, which are still used in popular media. The death of Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old shot in 2012, seems to have been examined in a similar way. Trayvon was referred to as a menacing adult, while Zimmerman, a white watchman who killed him, was simply infantilized. Similarly, Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old African American killed in 2014, was described as a much “older” person, “weighing 170 pounds,

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1. Other tropes used in the media to describe African American boys include: “the violent, drug-involved gangster,” “the angry, withdrawn teen,” “the crude, disrespectful provocateur,” or “the unsmiling, unfeeling, untouchable thug” (Knight 2015).

standing 5 feet 7 inches tall and wearing size 36 pants and a man's extra-large jacket” (Henning and Davis 2017). Today the media still portray black boys as stock characters, overestimating their age, focusing on the number of killings they are involved in, as well highlighting their faults. Occasionally, one can find counter examples as well, like the reports about the situation of middle- and upper- class black men experts who have reached the upper ranks of the income ladder (Wilcox 2018). However, the stories of black men pursuing their careers in music or sports are definitely more popular.

It is not just that the media is saturated with depictions of black boys and men as violent criminals whose only hope for success lies in their ability to transform themselves into successful basketball players and rap musicians. Black boys growing up in impoverished urban neighborhoods often focus their dreams of success on athletes and musicians, actors and comedians because these professions require talent and hard work but do not require a college degree. Even in the most impoverished communities, residents can point to a successful athlete or entertainer who “grew up here.” For the boys who live in neighborhoods rife with crime, unemployment, police brutality and mass incarceration, the superstar status of professional basketball players and rap musicians seems within reach, and the men who succeed in these professions have generally faced the same hardships and dangers when they were boys. Their dreams of making lots of money has as much to do with lifting up their families as it does with any personal desires for riches and recognition.

The misrepresentation of black boys in the American media has recently become a popular subject of social research studies. In 2011 the Opportunity Agenda conducted a project named Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys. The authors of the initiative note that the media portrayals of black men have not changed much since the 1970s but they are still filled with “blatant bias, misrepresentations of facts and poorly substantiated claims” (Donaldson 2015). The scholars of UCLA came to similar conclusions in their study “The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children,” published in 2014. They told *The Atlantic*: “Our research found that black boys can be seen as responsible for their actions at an age when white boys still benefit from the assumption that children are essentially innocent” (Bump 2014). In 2016, American educators Michael J. Dumas and Joseph D. Nelson published their seminal article “(Re)Imagining Black Boyhood,” in which they claim that there is a lack of positive images of black boys in educational research as well as in the media. They believe “Black boyhood itself has been rendered both unimagined and unimaginable” (Dumas and Nelson 2016: 28). Black boyhood is not treated as a childhood phase. Unlike white children, who are usually perceived as innocent

and worthy of protection, black boys are deprived of these categories due to a number of social, cultural and political factors. These may include a variety of stereotypes of blackness and manhood, the place of origin of the child in question, as well as the economic and legal status of his family. Added to that, there is the systemic racism within government, including public safety departments. For instance, the police force tend to believe that young black boys are potential criminals rather than children involved in childish activities. Due to such false beliefs, lots of African American male teenagers keep suffering. They do not feel safe in their own neighborhoods. They sometimes associate their racial identity with failure and lose hope of the possibility of ever being successful like their white peers. As Wilcox notes in his discussion of the report *Black Men Making It In America*, “with so much talk of ‘black failure’ today, black boys may start to feel ‘why even bother when the odds are stacked against you?’” (Wilcox 2018).

This way of treating black boys in America has led to a number of tragedies. In 2012, Trayvon Martin lost his life for walking down the street, dressed in a hoodie, wrongly perceived by a white watchman as an indicator of crime-related behavior. Two years later, Tamir Rice was shot while playing with a toy gun. One of the obvious reasons for such situations incessantly taking place in the U.S. is the public rhetoric and its focus on the crisis of black males. People incessantly draw from negative stereotyping in the U.S. media and describe black boys far too narrowly. According to Dumas and Nelson, such attitudes do not only lead to discrimination against black boys in social policy and institutional practices but also to the process of dehumanization (Dumas and Nelson 2016: 29). Black boys are simply treated as not deserving emotional recognition as given to every human being, especially a child. Instead, they are perceived as problems themselves. It all starts with their black body, which is recognized by many Americans as a signifier of misbehavior, and their hoodie sweatshirts, the symbols of criminality. As Knight (2015) observes, “Americans' perspective on this young man then becomes the control and policing of his body—rather than the acknowledgement and affirmation of his mind and soul.”

The essentialized rhetoric of black boyhood is an obstacle for many ambitious black boys who are not involved in crime but suffer due to their low socioeconomic status. Due to the existing racial prejudice, they find it hard to imagine their future and find the right place in the U.S. society. Although some of them try hard to shape their lives themselves, the public discourse may limit their agency. The right support from public institutions is for some blacks the only way to stop feeling devalued and invisible. Many accomplished adults who grew up with the disadvantages experienced by children in low-income communities found early opportunities for success in libraries, athletic leagues, arts programs, educational institutions and religious organizations. For instance, the Boys and Girls Club

alone can claim many of Black America's most celebrated figures in its Alumni Hall of Fame. Thus, there is a great need for positive images of black boys which will serve as a resource to those young men rather than an impediment to their future lives. The public discourse preoccupied with black boys' lives as sources of violence and threat should be replaced with a new rhetoric which widens the public spectrum and offers black boys hope for creativity and play.

### **Black boyhood in African American children's literature**

In recent years, African American children's authors and illustrators have become important voices in the public debate on black boyhood. They frequently express their views on the situation of black children, responding to a variety of public events and publications. After the court's verdict on the death of Trayvon Martin, in which the white man who killed the boy was found not guilty, Christopher Myers, one of the most popular contemporary African American children's authors, published his seminal article "Young dreamers" in *The Horn Book*. He admitted he had decided to write the text due to the sense of responsibility he wanted to share with his readers. He believes that, in addition to mirroring the lives of racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S., children's books should create a more perfect vision of the communities in which children of color are to live. Myers (2013) defines his intentions as follows:

I want the kids who read my books to have a framework with which to understand the people they might meet, or even the people that they are becoming. I want the children who see my books to see an encounter with the other as an opportunity, not a threat.

The author makes references to the metaphorical hoodie. Drawing on his own experience, he claims that even if he is not wearing a hoodie, there are lots of other things associated with his race, such as his speech or bearing, that shape people's expectations of him. If such images of black boys are perceived as threatening, they will contribute to more young blacks suffering from racial prejudice and discrimination. That is why, Myers, both as an author and illustrator, believes that his next responsibility is to create positive portrayals. He speculates: "But if people can see us as young dreamers, boys with hopes and doubts and playfulness, instead of potential threats or icons of societal ills, perhaps they will feel less inclined to kill us" (Myers 2013). In his acceptance speech of the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award (2015), he directly addresses the American media and its role in building the identity of black boys. He stresses the fact that journalists only sensationalize the problems of young African Americans but do not provide any suggestions on how the boys can respond to unjust situations in their lives and how they can claim agency. Therefore, he believes there is a need "to rewrite the

fear and news reports, to rewrite the riots, [or] to rewrite the boys running from bullets” (Myers 2015).

Myers’ responsibilities seem to have been taken up by several other African American children’s authors and illustrators. Black boyhood has become a popular theme of picture books published within the last two years. Sanya Whittaker Gragg’s *Momma, Did you Hear the News?* (2017) focuses on the public discourse about shootings and shows how young African Americans respond to the news they hear on TV. In the illustrated collection of poems *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Boy* (2018), Tony Medina celebrates black boys by recognizing what really matters in their lives. The next two books include a variety of solutions to the everyday problems of young black men. Ebony Lewis reflects on their mental health and emotional suffocation in her story *Dear Black Boy: It’s OK to Cry* (2019), while Martellus Bennett, in his picture book *Dear Black Boy* (2019), informs black boys that there are more career opportunities for them other than athletics. Most of the books were written as a response of the authors to crime-related incidents in which their friends and relatives lost their lives. Unlike many journalists, African American children’s authors are not preoccupied with the violence and threats but they take more interest in the boys’ suffering and search for their true identity. With their verbal as well as visual narratives, they produce alternative pictures of black boyhood, offering what is missing in the public discourse. They reveal the inner feelings and fears of young black men, which are not known to the non-black public due to the negative attention given to the problems of poor African American communities.

Picture books are a perfect genre to rewrite the narratives of black boyhood. As Myers (2015) contends, “With pens and word processors, with painted ink and collage, we can...create possibilities where there weren’t any before.” According to some scholars, picture books, if viewed as aesthetic objects, are strong communicators of meaning (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001). They speak to readers with colors, artistic style, or the poetics of the language. But above all, as Jessica Whitelaw (2017: 15) observes, the genre is characterized by a sense of hopefulness, especially “when social issues are represented and explored through visual art and words.”

Picture books about black boyhood come out of the tradition of African American literature established to counteract false images of blackness and offer black readers an alternative vision of their lives. As Bishop contends, “Picture books, with their combination of verbal and visual art, would seem to be an obvious choice of weapon for Black writers and artists engaged in a battle over what kind of images of Black people are presented to children” (Bishop 2007: 115). Tolson describes African American children’s literature using the concept of the blues aesthetic which allows blacks to survive in the harsh reality defined by racism:

“This literature is written by Black writers that assist in creating another set of tracks that link to the crossroads of the blues by shared stories of survival, new myths, and rejuvenated folktales” (Tolson 2008: 7). In addition, Tolson stresses the fact that black children’s picture books are a form of therapy for all kids who experience racism in their everyday lives. Similarly, African American children’s author Jacqueline Woodson states, “As people who exist on the margins, we do have a different view of the world, and it is our responsibility to refocus. In the course of refocusing, we may help a child who is coming out or struggling with abuse or with family or with health to acquire a clearer vision of the world and thereby grow up stronger” (Woodson 1995: 713).

### **Resisting the public rhetoric of black boyhood**

While most of the books to be discussed in the following sections of the article celebrate the lives of black boys, Sanya Whittaker Gragg’s picture book *Did you Hear the News?* makes her readers aware of what is actually going on in the minds of young black men as they hear the stories of gun shooting, unfair court trials and severe punishments, and suggests how they can resist the public rhetoric of black boyhood. The main characters of the story, two young black boys, ask their parents why such things happen:

I really just don’t understand.  
I thought cops were good guys.  
But every day I watch tv,  
They’re taking someone’s life.

One boy was eating skittles.  
Dad, I like to eat them too.  
Another played his music loud!  
Just like I sometimes do! (...)

One boy was holding his toy gun.  
He was playing in the park!  
I’m mad and scared to walk our dog.  
Especially when it’s dark. (Whittaker 2017)

One of the boys gets emotional, which is emphasized with a portrait of the boy crying. The following words are placed at the top of the page: “Don’t like these people dyin! / Can’t stand these mommas crying” (Whittaker Gragg 2017). Finally, they have a talk with their father who tells them how to cope with unexpected encounters with the police. He asks the boys to remember the acronym “ALIVE,” in which each letter stands for an important lesson to be remembered: “Always use you manners,” “Listen and comply,” “In control,” “Visible hands always,” “Explain any movement” (Whittaker Gragg 2017).

Police brutality is another important issue raised by the author. Making the characters admit they are afraid of the police seems to be an important rhetorical strategy in discussing such a sensitive matter. Unlike in the popular media, black boys are finally given the opportunity to voice their opinion on the ways the officers stop black males. One of the book's characters says:

What about the policemen, Mom?  
Thought they were all good guys.  
If they don't like us "cause we're black,"  
What matters? Not our lives! (Whittaker Gragg 2017)

The words are accompanied with the illustration of the officer trying to control black people protesting with the banners "Black Lives Matter. Am I next?" The book ends on a positive note. The boys' parents tell their sons that not all policemen are bad, which is a reversal of the popular belief that all white policemen mistreat blacks. But then, once again, the boys are instructed that only their proper behavior will protect them from violence and police brutality, which does not mean that the children are always responsible for what happens to them. As the media report, there have been cases in which black people who have not done anything wrong were attacked by police officers (Dow 2016). The final illustration is a drawing of a heart with the hashtag #nomore, which reminds the readers that the issue of black boyhood is a significant theme of contemporary media.

### **Celebrating black boyhood**

In 2018, Tony Medina published his collection of poems in the form of a picture book *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Boy*, illustrated by thirteen artists of color. Medina was inspired to write the book by photographs of young boys living in Anacostia, a historically black neighborhood in the southeast section of Washington, D.C., recently strongly affected by gentrification. With the title of the book he also refers to Wallace Steven's 1952 poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and Raymond Patterson's 1969 "Twenty-Six Ways of Looking at a Black Man," which was a popular text during the period of the Black Arts Movement. Having experienced the drawbacks of being a black boy himself, Medina tries to empower young African American readers, as well as make them believe that they are important members of the U.S. society. The book is often referred to as a Black Lives Matter book making the readers understand that the lives of young black boys must be celebrated for their beauty and diverse experience. It starts with a dedication that reads: "For Black and Brown children / Whose every breath is affirmation / Against erasure / Whose very being is confirmation / For generations" (Medina 2018). The author further explains his motives for writing the

book in the introductory poem “Thirteen Ways,” in which he enumerates a variety of activities black boys are involved in doing on a daily basis. These are, among others, playing games, reading comic books, watching movies, as well as hugging their mums and emulating their dads. By describing black boys with the typical childlike behavior, the author stresses the fact that they are just ordinary kids who deserve attention and respect like others. He adds that “[b]lack boys are three dimensions of beauty.” They do their duties, such as going to school or church, they have feelings, and they “have minds that thrive with ideas.” Besides, each of them is unique, and thus cannot be reduced to stereotypes, such as those promoted in the media. In this way Medina rejects the monolithic concept of black boyhood, which places all African American youth under one umbrella. Instead, he proposes that “Black boys be bouquets of tanka / Bunched up like flowers / They be paint blotched into a myriad of colors / Across the canvases of our hearts” (Medina 2018).

The following poems, accompanied by diverse illustrations, focus on such universal themes as emotionality, physical beauty, intellect, power and a sense of belonging. They show young black boys going to school, spending time with their families, or planning their future careers. The poems can be described as subversive as they do not correspond to the popular images of black boys in the media, where they are targeted as the most troubled social group in the U.S. They are usually presented in the context of the school to prison pipeline, a criminalizing process that results in many black youths dropping out of school and ending up in prison at a very early age.

Tony Medina offers a fresh perspective on the lives of black boys by focusing on diversity and uniqueness of their experience. His poems as well as the accompanying illustrations show boys of different ages. The first poem “Anacostia Angel” features a toddler enjoying his early childhood together with both of his parents, which is a reversal image of a typical dysfunctional black family, usually living in poverty with one parent. The second poem portrays a young boy dressed up for the church in the company of his grandmother. The positive mood of the book is also created by the poem entitled “The Charmer,” which celebrates the life of a teenage black boy. The meaning of the poem is expanded with the graffiti-like illustration by Tiffany McKnight. The portrait of a smiling black boy is decorated with a variety of colorful patterns and optimistic signs such as “You can do anything!” “You are enough,” or “Black is beautiful.” Some of the pictures and poems remind black boys where they come from. The poem “Images of Kin” tries to make the readers aware of their African ancestry: “South East Bebib mask / Face like a road map of kin / Brought back from the past / Resurrected dignity / Flesh of onyx majesty” (Medina 2018). The accompanying drawing shows two different realities. One is an ancient city somewhere in Africa, while the other is

a modern street with the figure of a teenage boy. He is wearing plenty of ancient jewelry, a baseball cap which looks like a crown, and a T-shirt with the caption Southside Kings. The picture indicates that the boys' lives are in their hands, they rule the world around themselves and decide about the future, which is a highly utopian message.

### **Fostering the future of black boys**

Whereas the contemporary authors of children's books are strongly concerned with the future of black boys living in America, the media portray black boyhood as "a social experience *in the now*" (Dumas 2016: 28). What we hear in the news is usually the accounts of the current problems of black boys, and if anyone talks about their future it is only because they are perceived as a potential danger. As Dumas (2016: 28) concludes, "the lives of black boys as children only matter because of who others want them to be (or fear they may become) in adulthood."

Medina's perspective on the issues is totally different. He believes black boys are aware of the fact that they can shape their future. They also have a sense of responsibility towards their local communities. In the last poem "Givin' Back to the Community," a young black man talks about his choice of career: "I went to this school / When I was a shawty rock / Breakin' in the yard / Wanted to be a rap star - / But a teacher's not too far!" (Medina 2018). Instead of becoming a musician, he opted for the teaching profession in order to assist young boys like he used to be a couple of years ago. The accompanying illustration is even more telling than the verbal text. In the science classroom the young teacher is explaining things with rap-style gestures to a group of students. We cannot see their faces, but a bunch of raised hands indicates their eager participation in the lesson. The poem "Brothers Gonna Work It Out" is filled with a similar mood: "We righteous Black men / Patrol the soul of this 'hood / Raise young bloods proper / To be the kings that they are / Crowned glory of our future" (Medina 2018). Protecting other black boys and preparing them to be the future leaders of their communities is a dream of many young African Americans. Being referred to as kings gives them more agency and a feeling that they can decide about their lives. There is a powerful collage illustration accompanying the poem. A figure of a black boy with a crown on his head is placed in the middle of the picture featuring different parts of the city and the sign of Humboldt Avenue in the black neighborhood of Anacostia. This picture as well as many others in the book symbolizes the boys' sense of belonging to their local community as well as their willingness to protect the younger ones. The poem "Street Corner Prophet," together with the illustration of a black-skinned Jesus figure wearing dreadlocks, points to a similar issue: "Dreadlock halo crown / Jesus

show up everywhere / In a black parka / Here in Anacostia / Winter corner's sacred sons" (Medina 2018). Like the previous images, it is empowering to the young readers who never see their true selves in the media.

### The "no excuses discourse"

Except for criminality, the American media hardly ever mention other important problems black boys face in their lives. These are among others economic obstacles, racial discrimination in public institutions, or psychological distress. One of the reasons for silencing those issues is the so called "no excuses discourse" (Dumas and Nelson 2016: 34). There is not enough compassion for black children due to the general belief that racism no longer exists and there are no barriers to their success. According to Dumas and Nelson (2016: 34),

this way of thinking suggests that Black people have had little reason to complain all along, or at least not since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and then dismisses the genuine suffering and malaise experienced by Black children in schools, as if children just need to bear the burden of it all without complaint, without faltering.

Subsequently, many policy makers and educators blame the children for any misfortune in their lives rather than acknowledge the larger social and historical contexts. They also fail to notice young black children's urge for survival in the places they were born.. From their early childhood black boys are aware of gendered racism they are exposed to. Thus, as Dow explains, they need to learn "individual strategies of survival under racist and gendered norms" (Dow 2016). These include controlling their emotions as well as monitoring the way they dress. The outsiders to black neighborhoods, on the other hand, do not realize the dangers hidden on the street corners nor do they understand "the rules of this urban game" (Kniaż 2017: 120).

African American children's authors try to legitimize the pain black boys feel in their everyday lives and accept their right to express the feelings of anger or fear. In *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Boy*, Medina does not fail to mention the fact that it is hard for black boys to be happy, especially when they grow up and face such problems as poverty or unemployment. One of the illustrations in his picture book depicts a black teenager carrying groceries. He seems to be depressed by the difficulties of everyday life. The poem "One-Way Ticket" mentions just one of the problems: "Payday don't pay much / Every breath I take is taxed / The kind of life where / I'll have to take out a loan / To pay back them other loans" (Medina 2018). Another image refers to the black boys standing on the corner of the street. The poet compares those boys to a "cat at the curb," who contemplates life and tries to get out of the trap of his life. Finally, Medina reminds the readers that the

image of black boyhood is identified with the place of living, which is usually a neglected black neighborhood. One of his poems defines this place as the “Do Not Enter” zone: “Ashes pepper sky / Over deserted landscape/ Of broke-down buildings / And cars propped on cinderblocks / Where hope hurtled through the wind” (Medina 2018). Growing up in such poor conditions is, in the author’s opinion, an excuse for black men’s anger and confusion. Although many black boys are not directly involved in criminality, they are identified as thugs while they participate in the street life of the neighborhood. As Kniaż (2017: 125) rightly observes,

The notion of the street as a dangerous place seems to be attached to the identity of individuals ... . The street seems to be not only the environment in which young people sell drugs and use weapons but also the part of reality which prompts people to behave in a certain way. As the place and people cross-influence each other it can be said that they are inseparable.

Ebony Lewis tries to provide an explanation for the boys’ behavior in her picture book *Dear Black Boy: It’s OK to Cry*, which was created after the author’s teenage cousin was shot. She writes about the maturation of black boys being painful due to a number of issues about which they have no choice. Dangerous neighborhoods, dysfunctional families or institutionalized racism are just a few reasons why they are vulnerable. Lewis believes it is time to openly talk about the pain experienced by black boys. While the media usually present African American males as emotionally strong or even unresponsive while in agony, Lewis gives permission for the boys to cry: “Don’t pretend that nothing bothers you or that your pain doesn’t count” (Lewis 2019, unpagged). She also tries to justify the boys’ failures using a number of repetitive statements: “It’s OK to CRY. / It’s OK to fail. /It’s OK to hurt./ That’s how you / know you’re HUMAN. / That’s how you / know you’re REAL” (Lewis). Capitalizing the words “human” and “real” is a call for action aimed not only at the boys but also the U.S. society which, by means of the media, tends to dehumanize young black kids rather than rehabilitate them from improper—though understandable—behavior and the complementary misery. The book’s illustrations expand this narrative with more hopeful visions of black boyhood. While the opening pages show all boys in shades of grey, yellow and brown, which makes them all look the same, half- way through the story another boy character appears. The blue color of his body distinguishes him from the other figures. In fact, it is one of the boys who was dreaming at the beginning of the story. He was told to “DREAM OF SOMETHING MORE,” and, as the other pictures show, his emotional transformation opened up new opportunities in his life.

Although Medina and Lewis included a number of dismal images, they make black youth understand that their lives matter. They stress the fact that black boys

are part of the larger African American communities and cannot be judged outside of the context of their story.

### **The new black narrative**

*Dear Black Boy* (2018), written and illustrated by former NFL player Martellus Bennett, is one of the latest children's books that encourage black boys to pursue their dreams irrespective of the existing stereotypes and expectations. The book became the author's response to the shooting of two black men, Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, in 2016, which made national headlines. The text was first published as an open letter in *The Players' Tribune*. Two years later it was made into a picture book, and released by Bennett's multi-media creative house, the Imagination Agency, whose aim is to create a black escapism experience by means of storytelling, movies, apps and games, diverting young blacks' attention from negative concepts of blackness.

Bennett addresses black boys directly, telling them to do more than is expected of them. He makes them aware that there are more opportunities in this world than just sports. Throughout the book he uses sports metaphors to explain "the game of life," which requires them to run all the time. It means making an effort to enjoy freedom, just like many black people did in the past, for instance, during the period of the Civil Rights Movement. First, he makes his readers understand how they are perceived in the U.S. society and how to cope with the obstacles they face in everyday lives: "The game of life is the one game they don't think we can win, but this must be the greatest game ever played. Millions have marched, millions have fought, millions have died. Millions continue to run ... for freedom" (Bennett 2018). The book includes a myriad of commands directed to the boys such as "Set Goals, Black Boy, Set Goals!" "Think, Black Boy, Think!" or "Win, Black Boy, Win!" which are followed with explanations using typical sports language. There are also powerful illustrations that expand the message conveyed by the verbal text. One of the images portrays a black boy standing on the top of a mountain. The accompanying text says: "Dream *Bigger*, Black Boy, Dream Bigger! For your dreams are valuable. No one can take those from you" (Bennett 2018). On the following page the same boy character is flying in the sky, which is a popular African American symbol of freedom. Another powerful image shows a black boy trying to reach the shoes flung on power lines, which traditionally mark places of crime involving black men. Both pictures indicate that the boys are determined to change their lives from now on.

With every single statement Bennett encourages young African Americans to take action. He rejects the media image of black boys as a monolith. He believes that

everyone is different and cannot be placed within the same categories: “Exercise *your* right to speak your mind ... to avoid conformity imposed by the small minds of society” (Bennett 2018). The final verses of the book are highly optimistic. The author insists that black boys take their lives in their own hands: “Move Forward, Black Boy, Move Forward! For we know where we’ve been, but where will you take us next? Win, Black Boy, Win! For the world needs more winners who look like you” (Bennett 2018). This kind of rhetoric may serve as a motivator for many young black boys to draw away from the stories of racial prejudice and crime, and to embrace the new black narrative.

## Conclusion

The rhetoric of crisis concerning black boyhood is present in all forms of today’s media. The stories of shooting deaths of African American young men appear in American press on a regular basis. Although the victims receive a lot of empathy nationwide, there is not enough talk of how to repair the situation nor is enough research being done on the causes of the trouble. Whenever black boys are involved in crime-related cases, journalists put the blame on the lack of support they get from their parents or they find the reason in the black neighborhood they come from. Moreover, they fail to distinguish black boys from black men. The adultification process deprives many of those youngsters from being perceived not only as children but also as individuals.

This way of imagining black boyhood has motivated African American authors and illustrators to talk back and join the national debate. Within the last two years the American publishing market has seen more books featuring black boys than ever before. Most of the books have received rave reviews and have been placed on bestseller lists. In their public interviews the authors make it clear that the main reason for writing the books was to respond to a specific case of shooting a black boy or a black man they knew personally. Another thing was the lack of diversity in the children’s book market, lacking books with positive black characters. As the marginalization of young African Americans pertains to both the verbal stories and the visual materials included in the books, many authors have decided to use the genre of picture books, in which the illustrations convey the meaning of the story as much as the text. The books’ primary aim is to make a difference in the lives of young black boys. They include practical advice on how to avoid police brutality as well as a myriad of suggestions as how to build their new self-esteem.

With their hopeful visions of black boyhood, the potential of picture books is unlimited. They inspire young black readers to claim agency and escape from the racialized frames of reality. They also motivate adult readers to change their

perspectives and see every black boy as an individual rather than one of those dangerous felons. Unlike the popular media, a good picture book fosters the readers' social imagination, which, according to Wissman (2019: 15), is "the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, in our schools." This is especially important for white readers who try to understand social problems that are beyond their experiences.

Sanya Whittaker Gragg, Tony Medina, Martellus Bennett and Ebony Lewis believe black boys are the "endangered species" that need special protection and care. First, they must be isolated from the discourse of crisis which implies trouble once you see a person of color. Then, as the authors imagine, they should be given a chance to use the available opportunities rather than limit themselves to the few career paths generally considered as being suitable for black people. Finally, they must be accepted by the white people of the U.S. society. As Bennett notes in his interview for *Ebony* magazine, "We [Black people] see dreamers. We see dancers. We see magnificent people, but a lot of people just see danger when they look at the Black boy" (Santi).

Another asset of the picture books is that they do not promote the success of individual black Americans, as it is a common practice in many African American magazines as well as mainstream media. Instead, they focus on the multitude of black boys' experiences. Illustrating everyday problems of average black boys, they reconstruct the black narrative. The books' authors teach the young readers that they do not need to be ashamed of their current situation but appreciate every stage of their lives. They also instruct them how to learn from the past as well as the current environment in order to create new positive narratives of black boyhood. As the books are widely discussed in the media, it is likely that they change the perspectives of readers from different social backgrounds or even transform the media images of people of color.

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