



Reading Black Childhoods in *Chains* and *Crongton Knights*

Nicole King

To cite this article: Nicole King (2022) Reading Black Childhoods in *Chains* and *Crongton Knights*, *Wasafiri*, 37:3, 57-67, DOI: [10.1080/02690055.2022.2067212](https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2022.2067212)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2022.2067212>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 16 Aug 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1145



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

READING BLACK CHILDHOODS IN *CHAINS* AND *CRONGTON KNIGHTS*

NICOLE KING

REPRESENTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS of young black lives are fraught with complexity, given centuries of exclusion of blackness from Western conceptions of childhood and personhood more generally. In today's dominant cultural discourse, black children are either seen as marginal or presented as so mature and resilient as to be outside or beyond the parameters of childhood or innocence — what is known as 'adultification'. In this context, I examine two young adult (YA) novels, *Chains* by Laurie Halse Anderson (2008) and *Crongton Knights* by Alex Wheatle (2016), as texts that subvert this exclusion in provocative ways, making black childhood legible. They continue a long tradition of YA literature in the United States and the UK that have sought to recuperate the humanity of black children whilst offering formal innovations and foregrounding vernacular language as resistance; examples include *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush* (1982) by Virginia Hamilton; *Monster* (1999) by Walter Dean Myers; and *Noughts and Crosses* (2001) by Malorie Blackman. As a literary analyst alert to the varied 'realms of interpretation' of YA texts and to their pedagogical implications, I am concerned with teasing out the counter-hegemonic and decolonial 'practices of reading' advanced by both *Chains* and *Crongton Knights* (Wolf et al).

Anderson's novel *Chains* is set in colonial New York during the Revolutionary War and is narrated by thirteen-year-old enslaved Isabel, who is determined to protect herself and her younger sister, Ruth, from their abusive mistress and achieve the freedom she was once promised. Wheatle's *Crongton Knights* chronicles the adventures of fourteen-year-old narrator McKay and his friends as they negotiate friendship, bullying, love, and loneliness whilst trying to avoid the violence that only partially defines their

neighbourhood in twenty-first-century 'South Crongton' — a fictional setting that loosely resembles south London. By pairing the use of first-person narrative with paratexts and invented vernaculars, both Anderson and Wheatle destabilise the authority of a singular authorial perspective and simultaneously make visible the constructed nature of their texts and their young black subjects. These formal choices encourage readers' conscious engagement with how narratives are delivered from a particular standpoint and how stories of black childhood might expose and intervene in culturally embedded narratives of adultification, whereby black youth are perceived to be older and more mature than their white counterparts. In their deft handling of first-person perspectives, both authors — Anderson is white American and Wheatle is Black British — also avoid ventriloquism, and consequently, neither text masquerades as 'the' voice of black youth. Instead, each novel demonstrates the importance of focalising narratives through the perspective of black youth in a non-appropriative manner.

Building on analysis of the authors' formal choices regarding narrative voice, I use theories of representation to examine the interpretative implications of writing blackness and childhood. Both Anderson and Wheatle refute stereotypes of resilience and criminality attached to representations of black youth, and in doing so they offer complex, counter-hegemonic commentaries on race- and age-based subjectivities not only through form but also in content. Following Robin Bernstein's theorisations in *Racial Innocence* and Stuart Hall's approach in *Representation*, my close readings attend to how the signs and codes of racial difference and childhood are mapped and then deconstructed in *Chains* and



Crongton Knights. In different contexts but with similar aims, Wheatle and Anderson highlight language and signifying practices as central to how their protagonists resist adultification and claim childhood for themselves. Positioned within the genres of YA fiction, their texts can also be interpreted as serving a pedagogical if not socialising function for readers, as they demonstrate ways of reading black youth (McCallum; Hollindale).¹ By analysing the two novels in conversation, I hope to signal their shared polyphony in support of a critical practice of reading black childhood.²

I have also chosen these two texts because they have thus far been overlooked in scholarly treatments, despite being written by celebrated authors. In the United States, *Chains* was a National Book Award finalist in 2008 and received a number of awards, including the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction in 2009. Despite this recognition and Anderson's established literary profile, there is little scholarship on *Chains*. Similarly, Wheatle is an established UK author of fiction for both adults and young people, and *Crongton Knights* has received laudatory reviews and awards, such as the *Guardian* Children's Fiction Prize in 2016, but no scholarly attention. By placing these fictional narratives of Black British and African American young people side by side, my aim is to generate further conversations about the representation of black childhoods.

ADULTIFICATION, REPRESENTATION, AND THE NEGATION OF BLACK HUMANITY

Adultification is a process that leads to the perception of black children 'as less innocent and more adult than their white peers' by casting them as more criminally intent, sexually mature, or potentially violent than their white counterparts (Epstein et al). Adultification is a real-world phenomenon with serious and damaging real-world effects, as horrifically evidenced in the recent 'Child Q' case in the UK in which a fifteen-year-old black girl was strip searched by police officers called to her school in 2020.³ In addition to legal and social reform within the criminal justice system, educational and pedagogical solutions have been advocated, including school literacy

programmes and transformations within the publishing industry, specifically in children's and YA literature (Tripp; Pearson et al). As much as the scholarship on adultification's effects on black youth is gathering pace, it is evident that the representational aspect of this phenomenon is also significant in contributing to its longevity and appearance in various national, cultural, and historical contexts. In other words, it matters how black children are written by adults, not least in texts that shape the opinions and worldviews of soon-to-be adults. By presenting literary counter-narratives to adultification, *Chains* and *Crongton Knights* help to historicise the concept and demonstrate its representational effects in creating restrictive, if not perverse, images of black childhood. Both novels thus help us to apprehend age as a political, culturally situated, and often exclusionary category, as established in the work of Habiba Ibrahim and Karen Sánchez-Eppler, among others.

The temporal overlap of eighteenth-century liberal humanist philosophy, colonial expansion, and the transatlantic slave trade are key ingredients of adultification, as clearly demonstrated by the two following examples from the Enlightenment era. First, philosopher, statesman, and co-author of the US Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson opines in 1787 that 'the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind' (102). Jefferson's statement echoes Scottish philosopher David Hume, who writes in his 1754 essay 'Of National Characters' that he is

apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures among them, no arts, no sciences. (30)

These statements and the longer texts from which they are drawn converge in their dual purpose to define liberty and nationhood whilst rendering whiteness synonymous with intellect and whole personhood. Such ideas cast 'the negro' and other non-white people not just as lacking human attributes deserving of self-determination but also as incapable of acquiring them. As Lisa Lowe writes:

the safekeeping and preservation of liberal political society, and the placement of peoples at various distances from liberal humanity – ‘Indian’, ‘Black’, ‘negro’, ‘Chinese’, ‘coolie’, and so forth – are thus integral parts of the genealogy of modern liberalism. (8)

These racialised ‘others’ help define ‘the human’ by what it is not; similarly, the rights to freedom and ‘the pursuit of happiness’ are reserved for those who *are* human and, by extension, their children. Toni Morrison identifies how these overlapping philosophies inevitably shaped literary imaginations, too:

The need to establish difference stemmed not only from the Old World but from a difference in the New. What was distinctive in the New was, first of all, its claim to freedom and, second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment — the critical absence of democracy, its echo, shadow, and silent force in the political and intellectual activity of some not-Americans. The distinguishing features of the not-Americans were their slave status, their social status — and their color. (48)

Crucially, that slave status was used to overwrite all distinctions of humanity, including childhood. As literary scholar Hortense Spillers writes, ‘[e]very feature of social and human differentiation disappears in public discourses regarding the African-American person’ (80–81). This is no less true for the enslaved child subject, who is excluded from childhood and thus adultified. These definitions of adultification are instructive for reading *Chains* and *Crongton Knights*, because both Anderson and Wheatle use their protagonists – albeit in very different historical and national contexts – to respond to the idea that black children are routinely perceived as un-childlike and mature beyond their years.

Robin Bernstein’s research on the American figurations of childhood, race, and innocence explicitly connects this history of liberal humanism, adultification, and literary representations. Bernstein locates Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) – using the characters of (white) Eva and (black) Topsy – as pivotal for understanding how black youth are conceptualised as beyond both childhood and innocence in an American imaginary. Whilst Stowe writes little Eva and little Topsy as equally innocent – and

identifies the evils of slavery as the key influence on Topsy that degrades her innocence – Bernstein finds that performances of the novel and particularly popular minstrel shows corrupted this equivalency to construct the black child as beyond the human in opposition to the white child. ‘In many cases,’ Bernstein writes, ‘angelic white children were contrasted with pickaninnies so grotesque as to suggest that only white children *were* children’, undergirding the concepts which inform ‘adultification’ today, namely, ‘the exclusion of black youth from the category of childhood’ (16).

This legacy is relevant to my discussion of twenty-first-century literary representations of race and childhood. *Chains* not only restores the ‘natural’ innocence of the black child, but it does so without reintroducing a binary between whiteness and blackness in the text. Isabel’s innocence, as I will show, is recuperated not through ‘the loving touch of a white child’, as figured in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Bernstein 16), but through a more radical constitution of black familyhood, using Isabel’s memories of her parents, her parents’ teachings, and her relationship to her younger sister, Ruth, to assert both her innocence and her humanity. As the London Child Q case makes evident, the cultural phenomenon of racially differential childhood innocence that Bernstein outlines is not uniquely American; rather, it is integral to the philosophes of humanism that supported colonialism and slavery. As Lowe observes,

Elaborations of racial difference were not universal or transhistorical; they did not occur all at once but were local, regional, and differential, articulated in dynamic, interlocking ways with other attributions of social difference within various spaces in an emerging world system. (7)

In *Chains* and *Crongton Knights*, childhood is re-inscribed and asserted in the representation of black children, thereby simultaneously challenging narratives of adultification and liberal humanism. When we take care to see black girls and boys as the children or adolescents they are, rather than as more mature than their ages would warrant, we accord them the differentiated subjectivity of childhood, as opposed to adulthood, that their white counterparts access more regularly (Goff et al).

One of the ways that Anderson and Wheatle both reveal and resist adultification is through their presentation of the challenge of parenting oneself and others when but a child oneself. Both novels remind readers of the position of their respective protagonists, Isabel and McKay, as young people and show how their experiences of childhood are ‘interrupted’ by the presumption and expectation of the adults around them that they age up, without regard for the potential consequences. In *Chains*, not only is Isabel enslaved and subject to the whims of her owners, but her parents are also both dead, and whilst she feels desperately responsible for her very young sister, Ruth, she does not know how to protect her. For instance, in need of guidance as to how to secure their promised freedom, and not receiving any from her mother’s spirit, she frets that she might have made an irrevocable mistake in not burying her mother according to ancestral traditions, which she had never actually been taught:

Maybe she was angry because I’d buried her wrong. Maybe Momma’s ghost was lost and wandering because I’d buried her the wrong way ... my eyes closed tight to keep the tears inside my head where they belonged. (Anderson 6)

To show her true feelings – those of vulnerability and an intense fear of being sold – would be to place herself and her sister at further risk, and so Isabel cannot let her tears flow at her mother’s graveside. By presenting this dilemma, Anderson insists that the reader perceive Isabel as fully possessed of emotions and sensibilities that not only make her human but specifically differentiate her as a child.

In *Crongton Knights*, whilst only McKay’s mother is deceased, his father works night shifts, and his older brother, Nesta, is frequently not at home. Therefore, McKay is usually responsible for himself in terms of cooking, schoolwork, and keeping himself safe.

I didn’t like to admit it to anyone but being left alone in our castle at night freaked the living kidneys out of me, especially with all the slayings going on in our ends. (Wheatle, *Crongton Knights* 12)

The first-person narrative voice in both texts conveys the resistance, resentment, and fear that such expectations of maturity generate in Isabel and McKay. Thus, not only by showing the adverse effects of adultification, but also by depicting the social, political,

and economic structures that facilitate it, *Chains* and *Crongton Knights* offer an indictment of the adultification of young black people.

As in Stuart Hall’s explanation of the constructionist, discursive approach to representation, linguistic signs and codes ‘are a crucial part of our culture – our shared “maps of meaning” – which we learn and unconsciously internalize as we become members of our culture’ (29). This framework is helpful to my analysis of the signifying practices within *Crongton Knights* and *Chains* – the ways in which the texts make meaning and reveal how that meaning is made. I therefore examine closely those parts of the novels where adultifying signs and codes are revealed and where Isabel and McKay chart new ‘maps of meanings’ regarding their identities and subject positioning as black youth. More specifically, I argue that by showing how their protagonists advance their understanding of how they are shaped by and through language, the texts simultaneously offer the reader information about the unfixed, malleable meanings of race and childhood – meanings that Enlightenment philosophies of liberal humanism identify as *unmalleable*. Similarly, whilst the novels present their characters’ rejection of definitions of themselves by others, neither concludes with a set of fixed meanings. The notion of meaning as unfixed and the openness over who gets to make meaning are reflected in the narratives and by the identities of each author, both as adults defining adolescents and as, respectively, white and black adults creating meaning for black adolescents. The YA genre is particularly suited to such a discussion of making meaning through the process of construction because it mirrors adolescence itself as a transitional phase of human development. As Karen Coats writes, ‘YA fiction is organized around the same sorts of tensions that preoccupy the physical bodies and emotional lives of its intended audience’ (316).

Following this approach, my discussion of *Chains* and *Crongton Knights* centres on how each text’s signifying practices offer representations of black childhood that oppose predominant narratives of adultification. I turn first to *Chains* to highlight the ways that Isabel engages in resistant practices of reading as she negotiates different forms of violence aimed at negating her personhood and girlhood in eighteenth-century America.

CHAINS AND THE 'INSOLENCE' OF BLACK GIRLHOOD

Chains, as its title announces, is fundamentally concerned with metaphors of bondage and liberty. Spanning eight months, from May 1776 to January 1777, the novel tells a tale of unfreedom at the very moment in history when liberal humanist ideals of the individual, agency, and self-determination are consolidated in Europe and the nascent American nation state. Providing a counter-narrative to the intersecting colonial and humanist discourses used to enslave Isabel and which decreed that the right to self-determination be inapplicable to 'property' such as slaves, Anderson imbues Isabel with alternate knowledge, acquired from her parents and their memories, of black life as unstructured by slavery and racial capitalism. Armed with this knowledge, instead of embodying the role of an abject slave, Isabel resists both objectification and the presumption that it is a natural or inevitable mode of being because she is black.⁴

The text opens in rural Rhode Island, as Isabel and her five-year-old sister, Ruth, find themselves sold upon their mistress's death rather than freed as she had promised. Their new owners, the Locktons, bring the two girls to colonial New York and rename Isabel 'Sal Lockton'. Undeterred, Isabel focuses on how to protect Ruth, who is vulnerable to epileptic seizures, and on finding a means to claim freedom, with the help of her friend Curzon, the only other young person in the text, who is also enslaved. The moment of crisis, which cements Isabel's determination to run, comes when Madam Lockton sells Ruth to new owners who take her far from New York. The text closes with Isabel and Curzon attempting to free themselves and search for Ruth.⁵

I examine the novel's moment of crisis from two angles: first, the practices of reading that *Chains* engages in form and content, particularly through its use of epigraphs; and second, Isabel's rejection of how the Locktons and others choose to read her as something and someone that she is not. Habiba Ibrahim writes that '[b]lack age is the prism through which the abuses of liberal humanist dispossession, as well as black cultural, political, and historical reclamation, are visible' (3). Indeed, not only does the novel exhibit and critique the exclusion of Isabel, Ruth, and Curzon, as young black people, from normative

human subjectivity, but it also highlights how Isabel accrues and creates alternative images of black girlhood to effect and make visible such a reclamation.

The shock of learning that her beloved sister has been sold away unleashes such fury and despair in Isabel that she rashly attempts to flee at that very instant. However, she is quickly caught, arrested, brutally beaten, and jailed. While the judge notes that her 'crimes of insolence, property destruction, and running away from her rightful owner are not devious enough to warrant a sentence of death', he grants Madam Lockton's request for a 'permanent reminder' of the crimes committed (Anderson 145). Isabel receives a horrific iron branding on her right cheek: the letter 'I' to signify her insolence. In the wider context of the novel, it is easy to read that branding and the notion of insolence in various ways: 'I' for attempted independence, 'I' for identity, 'I' for self, and 'I' for invisibility. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of this violent, abusive punishment, Isabel feels the accentuation of her invisibility as a child to those around her:

As commanded, I purchased two packets of straight pins, a piece of lace, and a basket of turnip greens. The shopkeepers and other folks looked at my face and saw only the angry red scar, just starting to fade at the edges. They did not see the girl hidden behind it. (Anderson 159)

The mundanity of the list that begins this passage highlights the profundity of its concluding statement — one of self-understanding in which Isabel recognises and asserts her own girlhood. Thus, perhaps unexpectedly, Ruth's absence creates the circumstances where Isabel most fully expresses a sense of selfhood beyond being her sister's guardian and someone else's property. Whilst black childhood as a habitable subject position, accorded rights of protection and innocence, is always under threat of erasure in the novel, it is also true that Isabel often perceives childhood as a liability. Perhaps it is therefore inevitable that Ruth must exit the narrative before Isabel herself can more forthrightly claim and 'see' — instead of hide — aspects of her girlhood in herself.

In echoes of Ralph Ellison's eponymous protagonist in *Invisible Man*, Curzon recognises the ironic advantages of blackness as invisibility; for one thing, it allows children like him to gather information that can then be exchanged as needed:

'You are a small black girl, Country,' he said bitterly. 'You are a slave not a person. They'll say things in front of you they won't say in front of the white servants. 'Cause you don't count to them. It happens all the time to me.'
(Anderson 41)

This reminder of the invisibility of black childhood does not obscure a simultaneous understanding of Isabel's position within adultifying discourses, which first construct her as un-childlike and then read her presumed maturity as evidence of criminality. As we have seen, such narratives of adultification, which continue to command power in the twenty-first century, supported and intertwined with practices of enslavement. Isabel is seen not as a young girl in despair or fear but rather as an insolent, rule-breaking slave. Anderson contrasts this misreading with clear depictions of Isabel's vulnerability and weakness: 'I open my mouth to roar, but not a sound escaped. I could not even mewl like a kitten' (12). Such metaphoric representations of Isabel's smallness and impotence undermine adultifying discourses while also opening a space for Isabel to fully understand herself — as a girl with great responsibilities but without the strength and resilience of an adult.

Isabel's sadistic branding coupled with the loss of her sister traumatises her to the extent that she emotionally disconnects for a period, mechanically doing her work and losing track of Curzon. The structure of *Chains* mirrors her feelings of disjuncture, as well as her subsequent slow recovery through her own subversive acts of reading. Isabel's first-person narration is supplemented by epigraphs relevant to each of the novel's forty-five chapters, providing snippets of voices of the era such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin alongside ephemera including slave sale advertisements and letters written by ordinary citizens commenting on their experience of the Revolutionary War. The juxtaposition of Isabel's narration with this range of epigraphs from the elite as well as the non-elite presents a definitive endorsement of democratic practices of reading that are inclusive of voices not accorded authority in the eighteenth century. The delineation of each epigraph from Isabel's narrative also emphasises the novel's status as a constructed text and consistently undercuts the potential seduction of her first-person perspective as definitive. This

exposure of the project of the book further demonstrates capacious practices of reading and interpretation.

The most fascinating aspects of the epigraphs, however, arise when Anderson specifically links them to Isabel's clandestine reading activities and her claim to black girlhood. Several epigraphs feature quotations from Thomas Paine's anti-monarchy pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776); Isabel gets her hands on a copy of this text in the final quarter of the novel and is inspired by what she reads. Likewise, she sees and recognises *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) by Phillis Wheatley, which also features among Anderson's epigraphs, though she does not get a chance to read it. Even so, Isabel's discovery of the book is similarly inspiring:

Momma told me about Miss Wheatley. She was kidnapped in Africa, sold in Boston, and wrote fancy poetry that smart people liked. She had visited London in England. She had been an enslaved girl but was a free woman. I took the slim book off the shelf and opened the cover. I had never read a poem. What if I lacked the skill? What if I were caught? (Anderson 228)

Although Isabel accords Wheatley an exalted position as a writer of 'fancy poetry' for 'smart people', Wheatley nevertheless enables a radical act of self-recognition for Isabel as a black girl. This pivotal act is compounded by Isabel's invocation of the alternate knowledge that she gained from her parents. In short, Isabel asserts an intricate web of origin for herself, in parallel to Wheatley's, and in doing so situates herself in space and time. Her reading of Wheatley thus opens up a place for herself in history, as a black girl who is much more than a commodity to be itemised and traded — a narrative ultimately more significant than a history recorded in bills of sale, and one in which she figures for herself what Ibrahim terms 'a radical alterity ... and modes of mediation between the past and present' (38). Thus, this scene refutes discourses of adultification in two directions: first, by positioning Isabel as a child in receipt of parental guidance and knowledge; and second, through the example of Wheatley, whose movement from girlhood to womanhood is staged as a developmental process inclusive of and accessible to black girls — 'she had been an enslaved girl but was a free woman'.

Recalling my earlier discussion of Hall and representation, this moment of self-recognition for Isabel and her ability to reject both thingification and adultification culminate in an act commonly depicted in antebellum slave narratives — that of naming oneself, in which her otherness, her difference from her owners, is something to be proud of and lay claim to. Practices of reading, as well as the exposure of narratives as constructed, fuel Isabel's rejection of how others choose to 'read' her as something she is not (older than her years, a piece of property) and someone she is not (Sal Lockton). She reclaims her own identity back from the brand on her cheek and refuses the name as well as the ideology imposed upon her. Wheatley, her mother, and her own self-recognition as a girl enable these self-assertions. 'I' stands for Isabel, while her new surname, which she creates as a symbol of her own hopeful activities with seeds, is 'Gardener'. Isabel names herself in defiance of how others would 'read' and define her (as a thing, as insolent). With these examples, it is possible to see how practices of reading are linked to ideas of representation. Isabel declares, 'I had set myself free' (Anderson 300).

The brief Phillis Wheatley passages extend the metatextual significations of *Chains*: the text enacts practices of reading through the representation of a black girl who practises her own reading whilst actively resisting being read reductively and harmfully by others. Isabel's readings counter-hegemonically mirror Anderson's authorial choices to use Wheatley and Paine as parallel voices within the frame of the nation's self-conception. The novel's re-conceptualisation of the birth of the United States through the lens of black girlhood makes legible the cultural desire to deny black girlhood altogether. By linking the paratexts with the development of Isabel's character — a rediscovery of herself by reading the words of a formerly enslaved black girl — Anderson further signals possibilities for subversive practices of reading and rejection of the liberal humanist mode of subjectivity.

Isabel revises the meaning of her brand and thereby shows her awareness and defiance of the 'regimes' of power and knowledge, as Foucault might say, that conspire against her and all similarly situated black children. In refusing the dominant interpretation of the 'I' on her cheek, Isabel also rejects the discursive practices assumed by Madam Lockton and validated by the wider society that position Isabel as property, as object, as evil, and as un-

childlike. This rejection conveys to the reader that meaning is not fixed but rather depends on who is 'reading' and what kinds of power accrues to them. By periodically and strategically portraying Isabel as remembering and internalising wisdom from her parents, the narrative contains a system of representation for Isabel to draw on as an alternative to the world of enslavement, objectification, and dehumanisation. Furthermore, the periodic mention of her parents gives the reader multiple opportunities to read Isabel as someone's child — as cast within rather than cast out from ideas of childhood — and not just as someone's piece of property. The text centres a type of age-based subjectivity that could be seen as radical, because it actively counters (and suggests a counter-narrative to) the violent forces of adultification — a component part of the engine of enslavement — pressing down on Isabel. It does so by focusing on Isabel's agency, self-liberation, and refusal to be defined by others.

CRONGTON KNIGHTS: BLACK BOYHOOD AND SIGNIFYING VERNACULARS

In comparison to Anderson, Wheatle includes relatively few paratexts in *Crongton Knights*. The book contains a map of South Crongton and its environs as well as a list of British organisations for young people affected by the issues presented in the story, including bereavement and gang culture, and, as protagonist McKay likes to cook, three recipes mentioned in the text are also produced in full. Whilst the map most obviously emphasises the invented nature of the novel, collectively the paratextual elements of *Crongton Knights*, like *Chains*, foreground the author and the materiality of the text and present a counterbalance to McKay's first-person narration. More than its paratexts, the novel's invented vernacular, initially signalled through the title and peppered throughout the dialogue and narration, is by far the most notable aspect of its complex representation of young black people resisting adultification.

As an aspiring writer, Wheatle recalls that he was 'mesmerised by Tolkien's inventiveness of language' and explains the source materials he uses in *Crongton Knights*:

I didn't reject the South London vernacular completely but what I did do was to add aspects of it to elements of US Hip-Hop, Jamaican dancehall, old school reggae and every other sub-culture I thought could supplement my concoction. With my own stirred-up brew of words and phrases I hoped to offer something unique, fresh and entertaining to the reader. ('I was Mesmerised')

Wheatle's 'stirred up brew' also has antecedents in the work of a wide range of Caribbean diaspora writers, including Samuel Selvon and Nalo Hopkinson. Indeed, Deirdre Osborne's assessment of Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* holds true for Wheatle's text:

What Evaristo reaffirms is that Black British writers are just as much inheritors of Britain's aesthetic cultural legacies as their white peers, while also frequently offering the unique perspective of African diasporic influences, shaped within and by a British context. (251)

The use of an invented vernacular in *Crongton Knights* cleverly positions McKay and his friends – 'Liccle Bit' aka Lemar, 'Rapid' aka Jonah, Colin aka 'Boy From the Hills', Saira, and Venetia – as 'knights' on a quest. The group's central heroic mission materialises as a consequence of an attempt by Venetia to extract herself from an uncomfortable context of adultification. The friends come together to help her retrieve a mobile phone containing naked photos taken by her older, coercive boyfriend, who lives several neighbourhoods and kilometres away. This poorly planned mission to avert a sexting scandal is accomplished, but the group is then mugged for their own phones and money, presenting a new, far more dangerous challenge — how to get home in the middle of the night, without hope of parental assistance, traversing areas not only unfamiliar to them but which are locked in notorious gang disputes. *Crongton Knights*, like *Chains*, includes scenes of arresting violence, and the worst comes when the friends are held hostage, as gang leader Festus uses them to lure McKay's older brother, Nesta, into settling a score. Saira, quite unexpectedly, attacks and wounds Festus, creating the opportunity for their escape. In my analysis, I focus on the narrative attention given to McKay's experience of these deeply fearful situations and link this to Wheatle's invented vernacular. I suggest that Wheatle presents a strong indictment of adultifying discourses of resilience and strength that, as Goff et al assert,

preclude black boys from being viewed as vulnerable or innocent and in need of protection.

The linguistic inventiveness of the narration is central to the expression of the group's – and especially McKay's – contradictory adolescent feelings of bravery and apprehension, as when Liccle Bit snaps at McKay,

'And can't you press the freaking doorbell? Use the damn ting! When you slap our gates like that it makes us all think you're the feds, or worse, that it's Manjaro coming back to Voldemort us! My fam is giving me nuff grief about it.'
(Wheatle, *Crongton Knights* 17)

The teenagers' referral to each other as 'knights', their homes as 'castles', their front doors as 'drawbridges', and their letterboxes as 'gates' signifies a form of bravado and bluster that is voiced alongside terms from popular culture such as 'the feds' and 'Voldemort' that reveal their genuine anxiety. Wheatle's wordplay envelops his teenage characters in quite varied cultural referents – from the Harry Potter books and films, as well as other adventure stories, to Afro-Caribbean vernaculars, including terms like 'ting' and 'nuff grief' – all of which purposefully differentiate them as young people, boys in this instance, who happen to be black.

Wheatle's invented vernacular is joyous and energetic, like the characters themselves, and this energy is expressed through the group's banter and appreciation for jokes. Their artful linguistic complexity also mirrors their individual complexity. When aggressive debt collectors threaten at McKay's 'drawbridge' before school, McKay is terrified and 'rages' at his dad for leaving him at home on his own, while also complaining that he just wants to eat his freshly made eggs and toast in peace. Expressing himself without the machismo or resiliency expected of black boys and instead with humour and pathos, he laments, 'if I was going to be deleted I wanted my full breakfast first!' (Wheatle, *Crongton Knights* 84). Wheatle's subversive orality amplifies the depth of the characters' feelings of fear and vulnerability, in part because the unfamiliar argot invites and even requires a careful practice of reading so that its meanings can be fully absorbed.

Having anchored their subjectivity to adolescence linguistically and experientially, Wheatle then works towards ensuring these characters are seen as young

people who have not yet grown up and still need and desire protection and guidance. He accomplishes this by presenting both their swagger and their fear, as per Little Bit's admonition of McKay above. In language as well as theme, then, *Crongton Knights* refutes the adultifying narratives of contemporary British culture, whether these derive from peers, family, or the community. The idea that adultifying discourses might emanate from *within* the families of young black people is significant, as it suggests the pervasiveness of the ideology even as it highlights the intersection of economic and social factors that de-link black subjects from normative interpretations of age.

Throughout *Crongton Knights*, Wheatle gives attention to this fault line of adultification within the family. As much as McKay is devoted to his friends, he, like Isabel, derives his sense of self from his membership in the family unit. Thus, he resents being excluded by his older brother and father from discussions about the family's precarious finances: 'Why are we in such deep debt? ... I was getting pissed with their stupid pact not to tell me what the freak was going on' (Wheatle, *Crongton Knights* 5–7). Equally, McKay resents their expectation that he act more maturely than his fourteen years might suggest. He feels both overprotected in terms of information sharing and under-served in terms of caregiving. For instance, when his father leaves for work and asks McKay if he will 'be all right on his own', McKay feels dread, although he does not feel able to say so:

I had just watched my big brother being arrested and if that wasn't bad enough, Festus Livingstone and the other North Crong hood-rats were intent on savaging his ass. It might be safer in prison than on the streets. So no, actually, I didn't want to be on my lonesome. In fact, it would've been nice if Dad kept his miserable self in the castle and told me that things were gonna be OK, whether he believed it or not. (Wheatle, *Crongton Knights* 73)

McKay's particular adolescent vernacular helps to build an image of his relative innocence and foreshadows his eventual insistence that his father and brother recognise his stage of development. McKay's ambivalence about adulthood is also captured in the irony of his emulation of the Knights of the Round Table to describe his friends and their 'quest'. Whilst the language of knights and quests conjures an innocent, imaginary world, McKay's actual words reveal

his understanding that they are rushing towards adult experiences that they are not yet ready for:

At least knights had body armour, swords and maces, and horses that could gallop forever. Our crew? We were trekking up to Notre Dame on the number 159 bus, with just our fists and our afros for protection. (Wheatle, *Crongton Knights* 38–39)

As I have discussed, representations of black children typically cast them outside of childhood and burden them with expectations of high and even adult levels of maturity and resilience. By contrast, McKay, at heart, is shown to be a boy who misses his dead mother, likes to cook, reads manga comics and King Arthur stories, plays video games, and has his own copies of the *Lord of the Rings* DVDs (Wheatle, *Crongton Knights* 77). By taking care to show his protagonist's age-appropriate activities and feelings of vulnerability, Wheatle, like Anderson, writes against cultural norms that uphold the adultification of black children.

Jacqueline Rose's suggestion that literary representations of children say as much if not more about the adults in their orbit than about the children themselves holds true for *Crongton Knights* and *Chains*. McKay seeks a more nuanced relationship with his father and brother according to which he is neither adultified nor infantilised; his full inhabitation of adolescence therefore requires his father's full inhabitation of adulthood. Similarly, Isabel's recognition of herself as a girl necessitates, at least temporarily, that she be released from parenting her younger sister. In very different modes and contexts, then, both Wheatle and Anderson contemplate the fluidity of notions of adult and child even as they highlight their young protagonists' desire for the protection and care of a liberated and liberating parent figure.

CONCLUSION

Young adult literature is an important context for challenging the regimes of power that invisibilise the innocence and vulnerability of black children and young people. In both form and theme, *Chains* and *Crongton Knights* encourage subversive reading practices and the reclamation of black childhood; Isabel's reading of Thomas Paine and self-recognition in her

encounter with Phillis Wheatley's text and McKay's readings of Arthurian legends and manga comics intertwine with paratexts and invented vernaculars to disrupt both the illusion of literary naturalism and the representational frames that seek to erase black childhood and degrade black humanity. In their deft exposure of these dehumanising discourses, Anderson and Wheatle reveal the ideological entanglement of adultification with notions of racial difference and white supremacy that can be traced back to liberal humanist ideas about who is human and who is granted access to age-based subjectivity. Rendering visible the insidious effects of these narratives, *Chains* and *Crongton Knights* engage in urgent alternate ways of seeing, reading, and re-asserting black childhood.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to editor Dr Malachi McIntosh for his persistence and patience regarding this piece. I am also indebted to Dr Ana Nenadović for her thoughtful comments and suggestions on the early drafts. My thanks to you both, and to Farhaana Arefin and the peer reviewers, who provided welcome editorial suggestions on the later drafts.

NOTES

[1] *Chains* is pitched towards the younger end of the range of YA fiction and *Crongton Knights* towards the older end; however, such distinctions blur depending upon individual readers and assessors. Whilst *Chains* might include more instances of – and more extreme – violence, *Crongton Knights* perhaps includes more sexual references.

[2] Throughout this essay, I use 'black childhood' as an umbrella term that encompasses the broad range of experiences of young black people before they consider themselves or are considered by others to be adult or grown-up. At the same time, I am concerned with the sub-genre of literature commonly referred to as young adult literature in publishing, schools, and libraries and which is aimed at audiences between the ages of twelve and eighteen.

[3] The evidence for the real-world consequences of adultification of black children is extensive. For US-based evidence, see Epstein et al and Goff et al. In the UK, the 'Child Q' case provides the most recent horrific evidence of adultification, whereby a fifteen-year-old black girl was strip searched in school in 2020 by police officers whilst on her period, without the consent or notification of her parents, and with no teachers present. *The Guardian* reports the

local police commander as admitting 'that the Met had a problem with officers viewing inner London children as "adults", adding that what had happened to Child Q would probably not have happened to a child living in the Cotswolds' (Thomas). The statement uses geography to stand in for race and class difference.

[4] The knotty questions of a slave's status as property, their right to liberty, and their inherent humanity were immediate and ongoing problems for the new United States, well before its Civil War. The Constitutional Compromise of 1787 settled for the time the issue of freedom and property by decreeing a slave would count as three-fifths of a free person for the purposes of congressional representation. This three-fifths clause, though struck down by the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1868, is nevertheless symbolic of the way that black people – and black children – continue to be regarded as less than human and as 'other' to their white counterparts (Kelley and Lewis 135).

[5] *Chains* is the first book in a trilogy followed by *Forge* (2010) and *Ashes* (2016).

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Chains*. Atheneum, 2008.
- Bernstein, Robin. *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. New York UP, 2011.
- Coats, Karen. 'Young Adult Literature: Growing Up, in Theory.' *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, edited by Shelby A Wolf, et al, Routledge, 2011.
- Epstein, Rebecca, et al. *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*. Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017.
- Goff, Phillip Atiba, et al. 'The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children.' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 106, no. 4, 2014, pp. 526–45, doi: [10.1037/a0035663](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035663).
- Hall, Stuart, editor. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Version 2, Sage, 1997.
- Hollindale, Peter. *The Hidden Teacher: Ideology & Children's Reading*. Thimble Press, 2011.
- Hume, David. 'Of National Characters.' *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, edited by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, Blackwell, 1997, pp. 29–33.
- Ibrahim, Habiba. *Black Age: Oceanic Lifespans and the Time of Black Life*. New York UP, 2021.
- Jefferson, Thomas. 'Notes on the State of Virginia.' *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, edited by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, Blackwell, 1997, pp. 95–103.
- Kelley, Robin D G, and Earl Lewis, editors. *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans*. Oxford UP, 2000.
- Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Duke UP, 2015.
- McCallum, Robyn. *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity*. Routledge, 1999.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Vintage, 1993.
- Osborne, Deirdre. "'Civis Romana Sum": Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* and the Emancipatory Poetics of (Multi-) Cultural Citizenship.' *Reading Contemporary Black British and African*

- American Women Writers: Race, Ethics, Narrative Form*, edited by Sheldon George and Jean Wyatt, Routledge, 2020, pp. 233–53.
- Pearson, Lucy, et al. 'Prize Culture and Diversity in British Children's Literature.' *International Research in Children's Literature*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2019, pp. 90–106, doi: [10.3366/ircl.2019.0293](https://doi.org/10.3366/ircl.2019.0293).
- Rose, Jacqueline. *The Case of Peter Pan: Or, the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. Rev. ed., Macmillan, 1994.
- Sánchez-Eppler, Karen. 'Raising Empires Like Children: Race, Nation, and Religious Education.' *American Literary History*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1996, pp. 399–425, doi: [10.1093/alh/8.3.399](https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/8.3.399).
- Spillers, Hortense J. 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book.' *The Black Feminist Reader*, edited by Joy James and T Denean Sharpley-Whiting. Blackwell, 2000, pp. 57–87.
- Thomas, Toby. 'Child Q Staff were not Aware Strip Search had Taken Place, School Says.' *The Guardian*, 25 Mar. 2022, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/mar/25/child-q-school-confirms-staff-were-not-aware-strip-search-had-taken-place. Accessed 29 Mar. 2022.
- Tripp, Rhiannon. "Insufficient Degrees of Representation": Examining Racial Diversity and Book Prizes in UK Children's Publishing.' *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 44, no. 2, Apr. 2020, pp. 136–52, doi: [10.1353/uni.2020.0014](https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2020.0014).
- Wheatle, Alex. 'Alex Wheatle: I was Mesmerised by Tolkien's Inventiveness of Language.' *The Guardian*, 15 Mar. 2016, www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2016/mar/15/alex-wheatle-tolkien-language-little-bit-crongton-knights. Accessed 22 Mar. 2022.
- _____. *Crongton Knights*. Atom, 2016.
- Wolf, Shelby Anne, et al, editors. *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*. Routledge, 2011.