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of The College of William & Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Lyon Gardiner Tyler Department of History

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Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Thousands of children throughout the United States participated in debates over race-based civil rights that occurred from the late 1940s through the early 1990s. One of the ways in which young Americans contributed to racial conflicts was by offering their opinions in letters and other writings. Children defended particular positions in the midst of national battles over integration, racial violence, desegregation, busing, urban uprisings, racial representation, poverty, and drugs. By communicating their interpretations of race and rights over the course of fifty years, children contributed to the development of American racial discourses. Children composed arguments both for and against racial equality by incorporating evidence in circulation around them. They reproduced contemporary interpretations of race and civil rights and introduced their lived experiences as “testimony.” Many children repeated historically rooted, racist arguments. Children also used their status as children to amplify their demands for political action on racial matters.

This dissertation draws on a source base of children’s letters and writings to presidents and other public figures, including first ladies, members of Congress, children’s authors, activists, and athletes. By deconstructing these written defenses of racial equality or inequality, I trace Americans’ justifications for their positions in several postwar civil rights disputes. These sources give historians access to children’s thoughts while also offering clues as to the origin of children’s information—whether parents, educators, or the media. This multi-layered material provides the opportunity to interrogate the results of children’s socialization and excavate children’s influence on racial discourses.
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Of all the pages in this dissertation, I am most happy to be writing this one. I am profoundly grateful to have the chance to thank all those – and there are many – who made this project possible. First and foremost, Professor Leisa Meyer encouraged the genesis of this project from day one, when I made the quite scary and rather dramatic decision to shift my major field of focus from the colonial era to the twentieth century. From that moment to this, she has listened to hours upon hours of my (not always coherent) thoughts, supported me in moments of crisis, and cheered me on when I needed it most. Apart from Leisa, I was lucky enough to be supported by a whole host of professors at William & Mary. Professor Fred Corney supplied a willing eye and a keen sense of humor, both of which came through in times of need. I originally conceived this project through conversations and writing conducted for Professor Hannah Rosen’s graduate seminar, “Race: History and Theory.” Her support both in the beginning stages and as a member of my committee helped my unformed ideas become a reality. Also as a member of the committee, Professor Charlie McGovern consistently communicated his enthusiasm for the history of childhood along with my sources and my take on them, renewing my own investment in the work. Professor Marcia Chatelain kindly lent her time and energy as an outside reader. I admire her scholarship and activism, and I am thankful she agreed to contribute her knowledge. Finally, I would like to thank Professors Christopher Grasso and Karin Wulf, who, in advising my Master’s Thesis, fostered an abiding appreciation for family history, good writing, and, of course, letters.

This dissertation demanded an incredible amount of work from archivists at each of the libraries and institutions I visited. The sources that feature as the stars of my work were not always easy to find. I relied primarily on the presidential library network administrated by the National Archives to compile the body of letters that drove my arguments. Searching for children’s letters to eight successive presidents about race and civil rights required patience and not a little bit of stubbornness. My first archival trip took me to Abilene, Kansas. There, Chelsea Millner, Archives Technician at the Eisenhower Presidential Library, pointed me in the direction of the “Bulk Mail Files,” which contain countless letters from children. Armed with this knowledge and help from archivist Mary Burtzloff, also at the Eisenhower Library, I was able to begin building a collection of letters from children about key events in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. I continued to be aided by archivists at each of the other presidential libraries. When I asked, they painstakingly processed piles of letters that often remained paper-clipped and rubber-banded. When letters were not in Bulk Mail Files, that presented its own challenge. Archivists assisted in helping me find “backdoors” that led to key sources, especially for the later chapters. Those working at the Carter Library presented me with several green books listing all the Oversize Attachments received by the White House Office of Presidential Correspondence during the Carter Administration. In those un-digitized books, I found entries for letters from various groups of students that proved crucial to my understanding of the late
1970s. At the Reagan Library, Ray Wilson provided the means for my discovery of four boxes of letters from Brooklyn schoolchildren to Reagan regarding Martin Luther King Day. Rachael Medders at the Bush Library urged me to take a peek at recently opened files on a fascinating letter exchange between Soviet and American high school students. Collections at the Center for Southwest Research at the University of New Mexico, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the Library of Congress also house extraordinary source material. I list these examples to demonstrate that my dissertation was the definition of a collaborative process. I would also like to thank archivists Jennifer Brathovde, Dana Bronson, Pamla Eisenberg, Mark Fischer, Allen Fisher, Steven Fullwood, Rachel Johnston, Brittany Parris, Sam Rushay, Jeremy Schmidt, Samuel Sisneros, and Randy Sowell.

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William & Mary has been a source of much more than scholarly and monetary support. Over the past several years there, I have met some of favorite people in the world. I look forward to taking my friendships along with me as I move beyond the halls of Blair. To the members of my indomitable cohort, Hannah Bailey, Casey Schmitt, Katie Snyder, Spencer Wells, and Beth Wood, I love you all. Thank you for all the ways you’ve been there over the past half-decade – big, small, and in between. Luckily, they let you make friends outside of the tiny group of people with whom you start the program. To Laura Ansley, Kristen Beales, August Butler, Alex Finley, Michaela Kleber, Kristina Poznan, and Holly Stevens White: thank you for sharing your eyes and ears along with your kindness and support. To my “writing buddy” of the past year, Sarah Stanford, thank you for setting deadlines with me – and, miraculously, sticking to them! The solidarity among graduate students at William & Mary creates an ever-growing network of friends and colleagues, and I thank everyone in my department and beyond for contributing to that sense of community.

I would also like to say thank you to my family. Gramps, you have been a constant source of inspiration and guidance, and your phone calls to ask me how
the writing was going reminded me that there was at least one other person keeping track of my deadlines! I also need to extend special thanks to my sister, Caitlyn, who lived with me during the final year of this project. You listened to me hash out many an argument, and you were there when I was ready to quit, pushing me onward. My ability to do this work extends beyond the most recent past. I felt both of my parents’ belief in the importance of my education from a very young age, and I thank them for that and much more. To the family I gained more recently, thank you for being as excited about this as I am. To those I see on more of a daily basis, turn the page.
This dissertation is dedicated to Louie and Nora, who kept my lap warm and my heart full, and to the person who read over my shoulder along the way.
INTRODUCTION

American children acted as key participants in debates over the meanings of race and civil rights that occurred between the end of World War II and the conclusion of the Cold War. During the decades bookended by these two global conflicts, the United States experienced extreme upheaval. Multiple social justice movements led by historically oppressed populations of Americans entered new and arguably more visible phases after World War II. Children contributed to these unfolding events in part by writing letters to prominent public figures. They wrote to presidents and first ladies, politicians, children’s authors, athletes, activists, and educators. While children contributed to protest movements both for and against equality in other venues as well, letter writing, especially to presidents, provided an opportunity for children to put their opinions regarding race and civil rights “on the record.” Letters operated as a medium for expression of argument and emotion on racial equality in America, and they offered a place for children to provide testimony on their experiences with racial conflict. In 1949, one young Black girl named Harvetta wrote a letter to President Harry S. Truman to “command the right to go places.”¹

“P.S. Don’t Tell My Mother” is a history of American children’s written contributions to twentieth-century conversations about race and civil rights. This dissertation interrogates the positions children adopted in debates over racial conflict from 1946 to 1991, analyzing the arguments that successive

¹ Harvetta to Harry S. Truman (Truman), [Undated by author but marked as March 1949 by White House staff], Harry S. Truman Papers as President (HST-PP), White House Central Files (WHCF), Official File (OF), Box 1667, OF 596-A Presidential Program Pro (PPP) F, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, Independence, Missouri (hereafter referred to as HST).
generations of children used to defend those positions. I survey the entirety of the argumentative spectrum, capturing the complexity of the ways in which children supported or resisted racial equality. Integration loomed large in children’s dialogues about race relations, especially through the mid-1960s. At the same time, integration did not represent the only or even the primary goal of children struggling for equality, especially among Black, Latina/o, Native American, and Asian American children. Many children of color chose to fight for a broad set of rights that transcended integration, advocating for racial representation in all sectors of American society.

I begin my narrative after the end of World War II, which was quickly followed by the onset of the Cold War. As multiple scholars of this era have demonstrated, the global dimensions of both of these wars forced changes in Americans’ perceptions of racism, racial violence, and racial “divisions.”

Opening with this period of heightened racial awareness, I describe children’s initial positions in postwar civil rights debates. I conclude my study in the early 1990s, suggesting that by this decade, many Americans – children included – argued that race was no longer relevant in a society that they pronounced racially equal. This interpretation persists among many living in America today.

Throughout the dissertation, I rely on a variety of terms to describe my analysis of children’s writings about race and civil rights. I define positions (used interchangeably with viewpoints) as children’s responses to debates over race-based civil rights: would they support integration or segregation, busing and

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desegregation or “neighborhood schools”? Once they made their choices, children justified their positions by making arguments in their letters and other writings. Within these arguments, children presented different forms of evidence. They used what I refer to as rhetorical strategies; purposefully incorporating subject matter that they believed would be persuasive to their reader. They also utilized what I call frameworks, or conceptual platforms for narrating complex categories of identity such as race. Finally, children chose to write about certain themes or subjects that were important to them and, they hoped, would be to their reader as well. In many cases, children’s arguments helped to develop and circulate racial discourses, or language communicating a set of meanings that maintains – or interrupts – a society’s established power relations. Children’s arguments often also drew on and reinforced ideologies of race (such as White supremacy or colorblindness), which I define as systems of ideas that help bolster social, economic, and political structures in the United States. By containing these elements, children’s written reactions to twentieth-century racial

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5 I purposefully employ the concepts of “discourse” and “ideology” in my analysis. I distinguish between the two by viewing discourse as both more all-encompassing and less structural than ideology. Following Foucault, I interpret discourse as the entirety of a society’s language and forms of knowledge production, all of which implicates the power relations of said society. Ideology, rather, I consider as a set of ideas that society codifies in law and/or social, economic, or political practices in order to maintain an established power structure.
conflicts provide the means for recounting fifty years of American youths’ argumentation about race and civil rights.

In chapter one, I explore the arguments children used to support three positions during the years immediately following World War II. Children repeated aspects of these arguments in civil rights clashes throughout the remainder of the century. First, I show that interactions between White teachers and students who expressed a belief in racial equality in the late 1940s and early 1950s, especially through discussions of “brotherhood” during Brotherhood Week celebrations, became key sites for circulating a discourse of racial “sameness.” In these situations, White children made arguments promoting racial equality by minimizing and trivializing race, often by relying on a color-based framework defining race, or “color,” as a dismissible difference located only on skin.⁶ Second, I discuss Black children’s arguments, which contained rights-based

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⁶ This discourse, with its emphasis on “sameness,” acted as a way for White Americans to oppose prejudice without addressing structural racial inequality in the United States. In combination with the color-based framework I discuss, it should be understood as a necessary antecedent to the ideology of “colorblindness,” which has become increasingly important to discussions about race in scholarly and public circles over the past few decades. Sociologists and cultural critics have been particularly active in deconstructing this ideology, among them Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, in *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America. 4th* ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2014); and Tim Wise, in *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2010). Peggy Pascoe, in the conclusion to *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), and even more directly in the 1996 article-version of one of the book chapters, remains one of the few who has interrogated the historical development of this ideology. See: Peggy Pascoe, “Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of ‘Race’ in Twentieth-Century America,” *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 1 (June 1996): 44-69. While chapter one focuses on the postwar development of a color-based framework that de-emphasized race, this should not be taken to imply that this type of argument was entirely new. In just one example, many abolitionists during the nineteenth century also engaged in minimizing racial difference as a means to reach racial equality. See: Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). I argue that in the latter half of the twentieth century, arguments promoting racial sameness became increasingly pervasive among White Americans. This dissertation seeks to trace this historical moment, acknowledging that it is part of a longer history of racial ideas and arguments in America.
appeals to their reader alongside descriptions of the lived reality of racial difference. Finally, I present common arguments offered by White children in letters sent to support White supremacy and/or White sociopolitical power. I reveal these children’s reliance on historically rooted claims about the danger of Black people (especially Black men) and their “lack of control” over their bodies and minds. This strain of racist arguments, which provided the key justification in White-led campaigns of terror targeting Black citizens after Reconstruction, continued to act as the foundation for many of the arguments White children made against expanded civil rights for Black Americans through the closing decades of the twentieth century.

Chapters two and three visit well-trodden ground in the history of the Civil Rights Movement, adding new dimensions to our understanding of the 1950s and 1960s. In chapter two, I outline the arguments of White and Black children in letters sent to Dwight D. Eisenhower in response to two school-oriented events (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954; and the Little Rock School Crisis, 1957) that seemed to indicate that integration was coming to public schools in the immediate future. I list several rhetorical strategies that children flexibly employed to write about race and civil rights on both sides of the integration debate. During this decade in particular, children wanted to participate in this conversation in order to influence the implementation of integration at their schools. Chapter three covers children’s divergent responses to two sets of events that were both widely reported in the American media. First, I show that children’s written protests against the publicized racial atrocities that occurred in the South from
1963 to 1965 generally reproduced arguments and rhetorical strategies from previous decades. After a series of urban uprisings that most White Americans interpreted as “riots,” children’s positions radically shifted. While many Black children viewed the incidents as rational responses to racist economic exploitation and police brutality, most White children did not accept this justification. By together condemning “rioters,” groups of White children that were previously divided over integration merged their viewpoints about race, civil rights, and Black Americans. I argue that, by the end of the decade, many White children embedded racist arguments in complaints about “rioting” and the danger of American cities.

In the context of this shift, chapter four explores the changes that White children and children of color made to definitions of civil rights during the 1970s. I assert that both groups engaged in the process of expanding the definitional boundaries of what “civil rights” encompassed and who should receive them. While White children and writers who did not specify their racial identities decoupled race from understandings of civil rights during these years, Black, Latina/o, and Native American children used their letters and writings to underscore the persistent relevance of race to equality. In the midst of racial consciousness and “rights-based” anti-busing movements, this decade witnessed many Black, Latina/o, and Native American children’s written embrace of their racial identities, even as many other children expressed a desire to ignore race.

The final chapter shows that amidst a conservative political culture in the public sphere, differences in the written arguments of those who chose not to
identify their race versus many Black, Latina/o, Native American, and Asian American children continued to sharpen. Children who did not specify their racial identities engaged in an erasure of ongoing racial inequality by arguing that racism and racial conflict existed only in the past. These interpretations of a present in which race did not matter aided children in sharing non-racial messages of support with their presidents for anti-welfare, anti-busing, and anti-drug policies carried out during the Reagan and Bush I administrations, all of which deepened racial inequality in the nation. In contrast, children of color continued to demonstrate the importance of race in their lives. They argued that race implicated inequality, sharing stories of hardship and frustration. They also constructed documents of racial pride and celebration. By the beginning of the 1990s, American children held vastly different understandings of the relationship between race and their rights.

I have written this dissertation on the foundation set down by scholars who call for interrogations of how racial inequalities in America have been created, maintained, and defended. The field of Critical Race Theory (CRT), an academic discipline initiated and contributed to mainly by legal scholars and historians, provides a theoretical framework for this line of inquiry. Critical race theorist Cheryl I. Harris articulates the main tenets of CRT in her essay, “Whiteness as Property” (1993). She argues that there has been a “valorization of whiteness as treasured property in [the United States] structured on racial caste. In ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent, the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable
asset—one that whites [have] sought to protect.” She asserts: “whites have come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by law . . . American law has [thus] recognized a property interest in whiteness.” Harris demonstrates that in the United States, Whiteness is a condition that has been invested with value by law – financially, socially, and politically – such that the social and racial structure of the United States has been, and continues to be, legally unequal. Harris defines Whiteness as “an aspect of racial identity surely, but it is much more; it remains a concept based on relations of power, a social construct predicated on white dominance and black subordination.” Harris’s work underscores the importance of delineating the ways in which Americans have instituted and perpetuated a system of racial hierarchy that has benefitted White people and exploited people of color for centuries. While Harris approaches this problem from a legal perspective, White Americans have long mobilized every societal tool available to them to preserve racialized power relations, including cultural forms, political and economic practices, social interactions, religious theology, and scholarly knowledge.

Many scholars have explored the wide variety of tactics Americans used to defend – and resist – their racially unequal society. For the purposes of this dissertation, with its focus on children’s arguments about race and civil rights, I

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am especially indebted to those who have narrated the history of racial ideas and ideologies. This body of scholarship deconstructs the concepts and argumentative strategies Americans employed to institute racist policies while also identifying racial group “deficiencies” in people of color themselves as the sources of racial inequality. In his study of five centuries of racist ideas, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2016), Ibram X. Kendi argues: “[t]ime and again, powerful and brilliant men and women have produced racist ideas in order to justify the racist policies of their era, in order to redirect the blame for their era’s racial disparities away from those policies and onto Black people.” By identifying “racist ideas” as the undergirding support system of racial inequality, Kendi forcefully articulates the need for scholarship that describes racial arguments. Although Kendi traces the development of ideas that primarily targeted Black Americans, he also demonstrates that racist thinkers frequently invoked the United States’ multiracial

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populace and correlated racial hierarchy in order to both degrade Black people and “prove” White superiority.\(^\text{11}\)

Race and racism in America have always been more complicated than a Black/White binary. Peggy Pascoe’s landmark study, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (2009), proves the importance of moving beyond the racial binary in our historical inquiry by recounting the ways in which White Americans engaged in illogical and asymmetrical decision-making in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to define racial separation as “natural” only when it protected White supremacy. The progression of miscegenation law regarding White men and Native American women, for example, followed a telling historical trajectory in comparison to the immediate post-Civil War challenge to the legitimacy of marriages between Black and White men and women. Before the 1890s, White men protested miscegenation law when it prevented them from marrying Native women, given that those marriages were an important strategy for securing White male property rights. In the new century, when White control of the land was effectively assured, interracial relationships between White men and Native women began to be delegitimized – also for the purpose of enshrining White male ownership of Native land.\(^\text{12}\) Pascoe’s work exemplifies the need to account for the calculations Americans made in order to reckon with the nation’s multiracial character.\(^\text{13}\)

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11 Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 110.
Because national discourses surrounding twentieth-century integration debates often framed integration as a Black-and-White issue, much of this dissertation, especially chapters one through three, also focuses on this racial division. However, by arguing that children relied on their knowledge of the multiracial nature of their country as evidence in their letters about integration, I add my own voice to scholarly demands for non-binary studies of race in America.14

Like Kendi and Pascoe’s books, my dissertation fits within the vast literature that seeks to expose Americans’ strategies for justifying and contesting racial inequality. Joining with historians of childhood and youth, I argue that children were uniquely important to those processes. There have been a few relatively recent studies of the racial socialization of children during the Jim Crow era that demonstrate the historical necessity of targeted child-rearing in maintaining or challenging racist societies. Jennifer Ritterhouse’s *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (2006) and Kristina DuRocher’s *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South* (2011) assert that the survival of segregation and White supremacy in the Jim Crow South depended on the participation of Whites of all ages, especially children. In order to ensure the continuance of the South’s racial order, White adults had to socialize their children into observing and practicing racial etiquette and racial violence.15 “Race,” Ritterhouse argues, is a “man-made

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distinction” that “every child born into a society has to learn . . . anew.”\textsuperscript{16} In a
critical analytic point that further underscores the importance of including children
in the history of race, she contends: “focusing on the socialization of children
reveals how much effort it took for White southerners to maintain and perpetuate
their racist culture.”\textsuperscript{17} White adults taught their children about their place in the
South’s gendered and racial hierarchy through various “sites of socialization,”
including public school curricula, parental teachings, advertisements, and public
and private – often violent – displays of “properly” deferential racial relationships
between Whites and Blacks.\textsuperscript{18} By focusing on racial lessons aimed at children
and children’s absorption or rejection of their instruction, Ritterhouse and
DuRocher’s work underscores the significance of children to the tenacity (or
downfall) of racial orders.

After World War II, American adults throughout the nation spent an
inordinate amount of time focused on how children should be properly raised.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} Ritterhouse, Growing Up Jim Crow, 9.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{18} DuRocher, Raising Racists, 11.
\textsuperscript{19} See: Julia L. Mickenberg, Learning from the Left: Children’s Literature, the Cold War, and
notes: “in a time of rapid social and technological change, atomic insecurity, and great uncertainty
about the future, the child became a focal point for national anxiety: anxiety about violence, social
control, changing sexual norms, and ‘alien’ – both extranational and extraterrestrial – influences”
(Mickenberg 132). Because of this attention, textbooks and other educational materials were
highly regulated and scrutinized for any “pink-tinged” content. See also: Andrew Hartman,
Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School (New York: Palgrave Macmillan,
2008), which focuses on the dominant narrative presented through public education during the
1950s. Hartman argues that education became more conservative during the 1950s with the rise
of the “life adjustment movement.” This new educational philosophy theorized that the child could
be adjusted to fit his or her suitable role in society, rather than society transforming to adapt to the
child’s needs. The approach emphasized patriotism, maturity, and the search, using standardized
tests, for the “proper” people to fill their “proper” places in the country. Finally, see: Marilyn Irvin
Holt, Cold War Kids: Politics and Childhood in Postwar America, 1945-1960 (Lawrence:
University Press of Kanas, 2014). Holt convincingly shows that the child held a place of increased
importance during the postwar era, leading to the expanding role of public society and
government in the lives of American children in the years after World War II. This occurred
As in the Jim Crow South, this socialization included lessons on how children should view and interact with different races, and how they should think about racial equality and civil rights. Children were therefore integral to twentieth-century racial discourse in part because many adult-driven conversations about race concentrated on children and their purported safety. In her study of Cold War-era politics, *Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War* (2014), Margaret Peacock argues that Soviet and American “[p]oliticians, leaders, propagandists, and publicists all deployed the vision of the child in order to organize the world around them.” Peacock shows that adult-participants in the Cold War mobilized images of children and childhood to portray innocence and happiness, as well as risk and danger, in order to augment their countries’ political clout. Postwar debates about race-based civil rights also included the “politics of childhood,” as American adults frequently relied on childhood innocence – and the need to protect it – in their arguments for and against integration and expanded civil rights for people of color.

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21 Ibid., 10.
Adults were not the only ones involved in the “politics of childhood.” Throughout the years I cover, many children emphasized their youth in their writings in order to accomplish two seemingly contradictory goals. First, they sought to use their unique subject positions as children to play on social assumptions about the need to protect children, amplifying the “politics of childhood” by invoking their status as young Americans. They presented themselves as the “inheritors” of the world’s problems and asserted that adults needed to listen to them and heed their opinions or suffer the consequences of children’s potential future injuries. Second, children acknowledged but de-emphasized their age, self-deprecatingly remarking that while their readers might assume they wrote just as “nutty teen-agers,” they had a right to communicate their thoughts and arguments as American citizens, regardless of their age. In such cases, children represented themselves as part of the broad American populace, sharing opinions that they argued should be considered equally alongside any other American’s. While these self-identifications signified oppositional strategies, children used both approaches – sometimes in the same letter – to contend that their positions should be a fundamental part of any decisions adults made regarding racial equality.


24 Scott’s Younger Than That Now helps inform my understanding of children’s use of their own ages in their letters. In her study of youth student movements and the politics of age during the 1960s, Scott usefully demonstrates that during the second half of the decade, White radical participants in youth movements used a “youth frame” to create a method of “organizing around their own oppression.” She also finds that youth of color did not generally rely on a youth frame, choosing instead to emphasize racial unity or to create a “citizen frame.” Scott focuses primarily on college-aged students in organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Students for a Democratic Society. I find parallels among the children
perspectives through their own words in the letters they wrote regarding race in America is not then a quaint exercise in recovering the innocent words that come out of the mouths of babes, but rather an absolutely necessary component of a complete history of race and civil rights in the United States.

Several scholars have demonstrated the centrality of children as activists in twentieth-century civil rights movements. Rebecca de Schweinitz’s *If We Could Change the World: Young People and America’s Long Struggle for Racial Equality* (2009) and Gael Graham’s *Young Activists: American High School Students in the Age of Protest* (2006) both show that high-school-aged activists acted as radical catalysts to their adult counterparts in civil rights protests during the late 1950s and 1960s. de Schweinitz argues that the particularities of growing up during the 1950s, including witnessing the 1955 murder of Emmett Till and the actions of the Little Rock Nine in 1957, along with being surrounded by the freedom-oriented rhetoric of the Cold War, prepared Black children to act as the vanguard of protests against segregation and racial inequality. I echo de Schweinitz and Graham in arguing that children played a key role in postwar battles over race and civil rights. I also contend that most recent scholarship of

whose letters I analyze in this dissertation, although I argue that many children of color between the 1940s and the early 1990s did indeed employ youth-driven language. In fact, many children juxtaposed their ages with their lack of rights and opportunities to underscore the racial oppression they experienced. Moreover, I do not find a “youth frame” to be isolated to the 1960s, or to the older high school and college students generally identified as the main participants in the student movements of that era.

children’s activism has focused on visible, “out-loud” methods of protest, such as student walkouts, pickets, and speeches, leaving written, print-based protests mostly unexamined. In revealing exceptions, several scholars have recently written essays and articles pointing to the rich analytical potential of print sources produced by children themselves. Each study illustrates how such sources add to historians’ understanding of children’s postwar activism and political engagement. Lori Rotskoff studies letters from “little women’s libbers” to Ms. magazine, arguing that the letters acted as a method of “cultural activism” for young feminists to “promote gender equality.”

Carol L. Tilley analyzes children’s letters of protest to Fredric Wertham in the 1950s, demonstrating that children made “political statements” in their written challenges to Wertham and other adults’ criticism of comic books. William Sturkey suggests that during the Freedom Summer in Mississippi, student-produced newspapers helped black children “understand, interpret, and react to the racialized nature of social and

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26 de Schweinitz briefly mentions the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth and other youth groups’ use of letter writing and petitions in the early phase of the movement in the 1920s and 1930s, but she does not analyze the content of these printed protests. de Schweinitz, *Change the World*, 166, 168. Graham uses underground newspapers as one of her key sourcebases, but, in her chapters on racially motivated protests, the bulk of analysis is on activism that was public in nature. See: Graham, *Young Activists*, chapters two and three: “Maintaining the Color Line in Desegregated Schools,” 30-50, and “It’s Not Personal, It’s Just That You’re White—Black and Brown Power in the High Schools,” 51-81.


economic structures” in the South. Each study highlights the intertwined histories of activism and print. In this dissertation, I argue that children and letters are essential pieces of the history of American race relations. While letters may not have been the primary place where children debated race-based civil rights, they preserved children’s arguments in material still accessible to historians. Conversations children had in the past are lost to us, and oral histories or autobiographies recalling those conversations have a limited ability to expose the details of children’s arguments about race-based civil rights. Oral histories of adults recalling childhood memories may not be as revealing as an historian would like, especially when dealing with an uncomfortable subject like race. Nostalgia and a desire to smooth over difficulties in the past combined with the long distance of years between adulthood and childhood render oral histories less than ideal in this case. Instead, letters act like amber, capturing the writer’s words and holding them hostage for as long as the paper survives. Letters do have their own methodological considerations that need to be taken into account. In his analysis of pre-telecommunications epistolarity, literary scholar William Merrill Decker notes that the enduring function of letter writing has always been simply to remain in contact in the face of geographic separation. As such, letters contain “certain rhetorical features [that] typify all

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30 While Ritterhouse, DuRocher, and several other scholars have made excellent use of these autobiographies and oral histories in their work, my dissertation adds a new component to this literature by analyzing source material produced by children while they were immediately invested in the outcomes of civil rights debates, rather than retroactively reflecting on their participation.
letter writing.” Beyond this, Decker notes: “social conditions and aesthetic expectations . . . vary widely from period to period as well as within given historical times.”31 While letters held a more important place in American society before the advent of telephones and computers, they nonetheless remained a key method of communication in the postwar era. Most children followed established letter forms by producing appropriate openings and closings, headings and addresses. Children sometimes penned their missives in looping calligraphy, taking great care to create an aesthetically pleasing material object to contain their message. The materiality of letters can aid in recovering children’s emotions at the time they wrote. Studied and patient children writing in cursive likely spent significant time reflecting on their chosen subject before they set out to write their letter. Other children’s letters appear to have been dashed off quickly and angrily, with messy writing, torn paper, cross-outs, and underlines juxtaposed with unforgiving prose communicating strong and perhaps rash emotions on the subject of racial equality. This trend often appeared in letters that children sent in racist outrage. Whether written in haste or not, children used letter writing as a mode of communication crucial to their overall engagement with questions about racial equality over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, making these letters invaluable artifacts for historians of race and of children.

Children used the letters they sent to their presidents in particular as a mode of political participation. In his study of nineteenth-century North American

immigrant letters, David A. Gerber argues that letters act as a method of self-identification involving both the writer and the reader because of the author’s constant awareness of the “other,” the audience on the opposite side of the correspondence.\(^3\) When letter-writers write within a centuries-old format known as “letter of petition,” or letters of political persuasion, they use this awareness of their reader to accomplish the predominant goal of these types of letters: to demand action from people in positions of power.\(^3\) Since the creation of the office, Americans have written such letters to their presidents, transcribing their concerns, suggestions, and requests for their presidential readers.\(^3\) Children’s communication with the White House also has a long history; children used letters to residents such as Abraham Lincoln and Eleanor Roosevelt to mix personal and political statements about themselves, the nation, and the changes they wanted the government to enact.\(^3\)

Children’s letters also acted as a way to convince the government to act on their behalf when they wrote to presidents about race-based civil rights during the second half of the twentieth century. Because they had limited means of

participating in political debates, children’s letters to presidents provided a method for children to enact their citizenship. In the useful introduction to her book, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (2009), legal and political historian Margot Canaday writes that most scholars have interpreted citizenship through two frames: citizenship as *practice*, or activity, versus citizenship as *status*, whereby people are incorporated or excluded from the citizenry based on certain elements of their identities. These two frames relate to one another – practices are implicated by status. When we consider children as American citizens, we need to account for constraints on their practices derived from their status as youths. Children cannot serve in the military, nor vote, nor can they take sole possession of unemployment or many other welfare benefits. Children do take almost daily advantage of one key public service: education, which was a key battleground for twentieth-century integration debates. Despite being barred from participating in many civic activities, children used their letters to presidents to explicitly self-identity as citizens and to protect their current and future rights. They claimed the status and demanded the practices. Moreover, because children are and were non-voting citizens, letters to presidents acted as a crucial tool of political participation that allowed children to voice their sanction or disapproval of presidential policies.

In order to construct a national and multiracial source base of children’s letters, I have relied primarily on the dusty, mostly unprocessed and under-utilized collections of Public Opinion, “Bulk,” or “General” Mail Files at

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presidential libraries located around the United States (see Figure 1). Historically, hundreds of thousands of Americans wrote letters to their presidents, and, beginning in 1939 after President Franklin D. Roosevelt donated all of his papers to the federal government for the purpose of public research, the government began to save them. In 1950, President Harry S. Truman followed suit. In 1955, the Presidential Libraries Act put the presidential library system firmly in place, ensuring that the accessibility of presidential papers would continue going forward.\textsuperscript{37} While historians of twentieth-century America have long used presidential libraries to write legal, political, diplomatic, and economic histories, as well as histories of racial conflict and civil rights, most historians have not taken advantage of the letters written to presidents by the American public, including children. Public Opinion or Bulk Mail Files are often some of the largest collections in presidential libraries, spanning thousands of boxes. While it is difficult to make comprehensive quantitative statements about these collections either individually or comparatively because of the variegated nature of how individual White House administrations and libraries saved and compiled the material, the qualitative information that can be gleaned is extraordinary. Although letters sent by children writing from all around the nation to presidents constitute the core of my evidentiary base, I have also uncovered children’s letters contained in the personal paper collections of several activists, educators, athletes, and other figures well known to the American public, including Jackie Robinson, Hawaii Congressional Representative Patsy Mink, Maya Angelou, and

\textsuperscript{37} National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), “A Brief History, Presidential Libraries and Museums,” accessed 16 November 2015, \url{http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/about/history.html}. 
others. In choosing which non-presidential public figures to research, I focused on those Americans whose actions connected them to conflicts over racial equality.

Figure 1: Richard M. Nixon Office of Presidential Correspondence, "E.O.B. Mail Room," April 27, 1970, White House Press Office Contact Sheets, Binder 31, Sheet 3425, Frame 7-7A, 4-27-70, Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, California (hereafter referred to as RMN).

In order to analyze these sources, most of which have never received scholarly attention, I draw on multiple bodies of scholarship. By bringing together the histories of racial ideas and arguments; children, childhood, and children’s activism; as well as print and letter writing, my dissertation provides a unique narrative in the history of race and civil rights in twentieth-century America. Children made arguments about race-based civil rights throughout the decades I cover. In order to articulate the validity and essentiality of their opinions, these arguments included their emphases of their youth and attempts to dismiss it. Because many children manipulated their status as young Americans when discussing racial conflicts, their writings added a singular thread to arguments
about race in America. In writing down what they thought about race and rights, children also acted as participatory circulators of racial discourse, just like adults. No survey of American racial argumentation can be complete without accounting for children’s perspectives and argumentative strategies. By engaging in close readings of children’s letters and other writings, I offer that account. While scholars like de Schweinitz and Graham have excavated the nature and motivations of Black and White children’s participation in the mass movements of the 1950s and 1960s, scholarship of children’s activism to date has not sufficiently explored the parallels and thematic overlaps in protests leveled by different racial groups after the 1960s. Because many historians of youth protest end their books in the late 1960s or early 1970s, they do not write about activism among Latina/o and Native American children. They also do not consider how children of color continued to fight for racial equality beyond the 1960s, nor do they contend with children’s participation in the erasure of race from national discourse during the 1980s and 1990s. By excavating children’s letters and writings across five decades, my dissertation offers a more comprehensive history of children’s participation in conversations about race and civil rights that occurred throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

The dissertation is not without analytical challenges. Children did not form positions about race and civil rights that they decided to share in their letters on their own. Children lie in the fault lines between generations, hearing

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38 Scott mentions student activists belonging to several different racial groups in her study, but because of her focus on “youth framing,” she primarily analyzes the relevancy of age versus race to these youths, rather than deeply interrogating the thematic content of their protests. Scott, *Younger Than That Now*, 127-131.
thoughts communicated to them not only by their peers, but also by their parents, teachers, religious leaders, grandparents, and a motley assortment of the other adults in their lives. Children then engage in their own processing of the information passed to them from other sources. Because of the complex and layered texture of children’s opinions about the world around them, children are unique historical actors. This makes children’s letters to public figures about race remarkable sources. Given that children often cited their parents, teachers, or examples from the media as their source of information about race and civil rights, children’s letters can reflect specific instances of parental, educational, and cultural socialization. In addition, moments of transformation in children’s letters suggest generational shifts, just as moments of stasis point to the entrenchment of racial thought across decades. But precisely because children’s letters and other writings reflect what children have heard and learned from their fellow youths and the adults around them, along with how they chose to interpret shared knowledge, parsing the material involves extra care.

Children’s writings, like primary sources produced by adults, were “mediated.” Children might have been told, for example, by either their parents or teachers to write a letter to the president. Those adults may have even gone

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39 The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs wrote extensively about the role of the family in determining a child’s memories and conceptions of the world. Writing in the early twentieth century, Halbwachs astutely noted: “[o]ur kin communicate to us our first notions about people and things” (Halbwachs 61). He recognized that family memories, shared with children, are implicated by the society in which a family resides (74). Finally, he argued that upon leaving the home for the school, children’s “thoughts are associated according to two directions” (Halbwachs 81). I challenge Halbwachs here, as he acknowledged only adult-driven “directions:” family and school. Based on the letters I analyze in this dissertation, I argue that children engage in a multidirectional construction of thought and memory that is heavily influenced by their parents and teachers, but is also affected by their individual responses to received information. Maurice Halbwachs, “The Collective Memory of the Family,” in On Collective Memory, trans. and ed., Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 54-83.
so far as to tell those children what to write. Such actions were particularly evident in school assignments in which several children repeated the same phrases. The media, their peers, and an endless variety of other vehicles for socialization also may have influenced children. When historians discount or discredit children’s sources for these reasons, they do themselves and the material a disservice. The same forces that shape the views of children affect adults as well, and historians should be careful to apply the same critical eye to adult-produced sources as that used by historians of childhood and youth when analyzing material emanating from children. In addition, sometimes the mediation of children’s sources can add historical value derived from the multi-layered nature of the material.

School assignments represented some of the most mediated children’s letters, with students repeating one or more sentences that may have even been written out on chalkboards for them to copy down in their letters. At first glance, such a repetitive litany of letters does not reveal children’s individual positions, and may only communicate the lessons teachers wanted schoolchildren to learn. And yet, because of the formulaic nature of these batches of letters, deviations from the norm are especially revealing. After Black professor and activist John Henrik Clarke visited his son’s New York City classroom to give a lecture on West African mythology in the spring of 1982, the students all wrote to thank Clarke for introducing them to this important topic. The letters generally stated some variation on the same theme: “Your talk was very interesting. I’ve never heard of the Yoruba, the Ashanti, or the story of the Golden Stool. Although I’ve
never heard of them, I felt that they were very fascinating.”⁴⁰ One student, Jason, chose to add a question for Professor Clarke: “how come the government lets the K.K.K. roam around but not the Black [Panthers?]”⁴¹ By taking the opportunity to include this pointed query in what could have been a benign and simple thank-you note, Jason demonstrated the capacity for children to transform even dictated form letters into personal and political means of expression.

Perhaps because children knew that adults saw and continue to see them as somehow less “credible,” many children included specific references to their ownership of their words when writing their letters. In the spring of 1948, ten-year-old David clarified as much in his letter to President Truman: “Nobody told me to write this letter – my father is a New York minister, and feels (alike my mother) the same way I do, but I wrote this myself.”⁴² David’s actions along with those of countless other children who also specified that they and only they were responsible for writing their letters, not their parents, teachers, or another adult, indicates that children understood that some readers would assume that they had not produced their letters alone. Anticipating this presumption, some children sought to differentiate themselves and their words, occasionally going so far as to express a desire that their letter be kept secret from the adults in their lives. This does not mean that the children who chose not to include such

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⁴¹ Jason to Clarke, March 9, 1982, John Henrik Clarke Papers, SCM 94-50, Box 5, Folder 18: Correspondence, Children’s Appreciation, 1982, SCH.
⁴² David to Truman, [February-April, 1948; Undated by author, date approximated based on location of letter in the archive], HST-PP, WHCF, President’s Personal File (PPF), Box 353, PPF 200 Pro R Civil Rights 2.2.48, HST.
specifications were writing under pressure, but rather that a great deal of children sought to circumvent those adults who might not view them as individuals capable of self-directed action.

While some of the limitations of studying the history of children through the use of children’s sources can occasionally be turned into analytical boons, this does not mean that the approach is not without its obstacles. One such difficulty arises when considering how the age of a particular child affected their opinions and the relationship of their own thoughts to those of the adults around them. Developmentally, both physically and mentally, a six-year-old child is different than an eighteen-year-old teetering on the brink of adulthood. In addition, the relationship a six-year-old has with their parents, teachers, and other mentors is certainly not the same as that of an older youth; the younger child’s opinions will likely be much more affected by the adults in their life than would be those of a teenager. The differences between young and older children may even seem great enough to preclude their inclusion alongside one another in a single narrative about “children.” However, both six- and eighteen-year-olds presented themselves as “children” and as “youths” in their letters, and they both wanted their arguments to be considered representative of the perspective of a younger generation. Because this subset of Americans saw itself as fundamentally different from those who did not belong to the group – adults – I have chosen to honor that assessment in my analysis. The youngest children whose letters to public figures I include in my analysis were approximately six and seven, and I generally cut off the group at eighteen, the most common legal age constituting a
minor in the United States during this time period. It is important to note that while I did not include more than one or two letters from writers over the age of eighteen in my study, college-aged Americans also often presented themselves as belonging to a younger generation. This was especially true before the voting age was lowered from twenty-one to eighteen in 1971. This underscores the contention that many historians of childhood have made that “age” is a historically contingent and socially constructed category of analysis similar to gender and race and should be considered as such. Because age, like other markers of identity, is complex and situational, I follow the lead of my sources in grouping young children and teenagers together under the umbrella of American children.

While children spanning a wide age-range positioned themselves as “youths” in their letters and writings, they also usually provided indications of their specific ages. By the second half of the twentieth century, the United States had become a nation that strictly organized and separated children through “age-segregated” school environments and youth markets. In the introduction to their recent essay collection, *Age in America: The Colonial Era to the Present* (2015), editors Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett argue: “Over the course of the twentieth century, marketers promoted ever more fine-grained age segmentation

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of the youth market, popularizing new age-defined terms such as ‘toddler’ in the 1930s, ‘teens’ in the 1940s, and ‘tweens’ in the 1980s.” Children recognized that sharing their ages (or grade-levels in school) with Americans during the middle and later decades of the twentieth century invited societal assumptions about their educations, leisure activities, and tastes and habits. Capitalizing on this common set of knowledge, children used the numerical value assigned to their life-stage to summon their readers’ sympathy for the position they took on race and civil rights. Among the children whose letters feature in this dissertation, the best-represented group of writers were eleven to thirteen years old (see Chart A in the appendix). As they approached their eighteenth year, children’s writing tapered off in a downward trend. As they entered high school, children often invoked their status as “future voters,” thereby using their letters to look forward to a prospective tool of political influence and participation. This

44 Field and Syrett, *Age in America*, 11.
45 See, for example: Geri to John F. Kennedy (Kennedy), May 15, 1963, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers (JFK-PP), White House Overflow (WHO), May-November 1963 pressure mail re civil rights (Pressure), Box 175, Unfolded, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Massachusetts (hereafter referred to as JFK); Jeri to Johnson, March 30, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Box 233, General, Unfolded, LBJ; Jack C. to Kennedy, [Undated by author but postage stamped June 12, 1963], JFK-PP, WHO, 1963 letters and telegrams re Birmingham, Alabama civil rights troubles (Birmingham Troubles), Box 167, Unfolded, JFK; Ruth to Truman, February 29, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 351, PPF 200 Pro H Civil Rights 2.2.48 (1 of 2), HST; Rosemary to Dwight D. Eisenhower (Eisenhower), September 24, 1957, Dwight D. Eisenhower: Records as President, 1953-1961 (DDE-RP), WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 9, Unfolded, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas (hereafter referred to as DDE); Richard to Richard M. Nixon (Nixon), [Undated by author; forwarded by Rep. James Buchanan on June 22, 1970], Richard M. Nixon Presidential Materials (RMN-PM), WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 14, Folder GEN HU 2-1/ST 1 Education Schooling Alabama Begin-12.31.70, RMN. While not all writers who discussed their ability to vote in upcoming years were in high school and therefore mostly above fourteen years old, the majority belonged to an older age cohort. Jon Grinspan’s recent work on youth politics in the nineteenth century suggests that youth investment in – and anticipation of – the experience of voting has a long history. While voting levels in the twentieth century do not approach those of the nineteenth, it appears that youth nonetheless continued to express interest in their ability to vote long after voter participation declined from its historic numbers in the late nineteenth century. See: Jon Grinspan, *The Virgin Vote: How Young Americans Made*
differentiated them from middle schoolers who were also invested in the outcomes of race-based civil rights debates, but whose longer wait for the vote may have inspired them to turn to their pencils and lined paper in greater numbers.

Along with middle schoolers, girls wrote more frequently than boys in this sampling (see Charts B, D, and E in the appendix). It is possible that girls’ disproportionate reliance on letter writing as a mechanism of political persuasion built on a long tradition of American women’s use of “letters of petition.” During the first half of the nineteenth century, abolitionist women so flooded the mailboxes of their Congressmen with protests against slavery that lawmakers passed legislation to attempt to limit the efficacy of their writings.46 Girls also may have written in reaction to adults’ tendency to associate girls in particular with the dangers of integration.47 Many girls manipulated and strengthened discourses that painted them as in need of protection by demanding that the state shield them – as girls – from either integration or segregation, depending on their position. The flip side of this coin is that girls may have felt more vulnerable than boys during nationally publicized racial conflicts. White girls belonging to multiple generations shared their written expressions of fear that Black men and boys represented a threat to the sanctity of their “pure” White bodies, (future) marriages, and school or recreational environments. Aside from this symbolic

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vulnerability, Black girls – who appear to have outwritten Black boys more than White girls outwrote White boys (see Chart D) – insisted on governmental redress for a list of perils they knew existed. Black girls discussed lynching (one Black girl implied that her letter to Eisenhower put her at risk for local punishment), police beatings, dog attacks, and death. Black boys wrote about these realities as well. But perhaps more Black girls wrote in an effort to make America live up to its professed desire to fill little girls’ lives with nothing but “sugar and spice and everything nice.”  

Beyond questions of gender and age, I have another complex analytical conundrum to address in the slippery nature of race itself. The histories of civil rights, racism, and racial inequality are predicated on the existence of race in the minds of those who wrote about it, spoke it, and acted upon it, over and over again through the centuries. While children’s letters from 1946 to 1991 speak to the changeability of the meanings of race in terms of how people interpret, describe, and react to it; at the same time, especially for many Black, Latina/o, Native American, and Asian American children, race was one of the most important parts of their identities. These children fought hard not only for equality, but also against any denial of the racial aspect of their humanity. In addition, for White children who expressed belief in White supremacy in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, their Whiteness acted as the foundation of their pro-

48 See: Nazera Sadiq Wright, Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016). Wright argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a variety of Black authors used tropes of Black girlhood to attempt to advance racial progress. I find it interesting that Wright associates Black girlhood with a particular discourse used by both Black men and women (in differing manners) to fight for racial equality, even as I recovered more letters from Black girls than boys. I can offer no definitive association between these two patterns, but I suggest that they are interconnected.
segregation, anti-equality arguments. Throughout my analysis, when I sort children by their racial identities, I can only do so because they took ownership of this element of their personhood. This dissertation also shows that when children helped to remove race from racial discourse, they contributed to the silencing of conversations about racial inequality and assisted in hiding the racist arguments behind inequitable policy-making. While I acknowledge the socially constructed nature of race, I also find it difficult to deny its claim to reality when reading the words of those children who demanded recognition – and celebration – of every part of themselves. By interrogating how different American children dealt with the existence of race in their lives, "P.S. Don’t Tell My Mother" tells the history of how children’s authorship of arguments about race and civil rights contributed to the development of racial discourses that had lasting effects in and beyond twentieth-century America. I argue that this history demonstrates that asking questions about how and why Americans constructed arguments about race is a necessary part of coming to terms with the racial inequalities that remain inherent to American society today.

49 I relied on three strategies for determining children’s racial identities. Many children explicitly self-identified, writing “I am White,” or “I am Black,” etc. They often presented this knowledge alongside some indicator of their youth, whether by stating their age or their status as a student at a particular grade-level. These statements generally factored into their overall arguments by allowing children to cast themselves as individuals with a clear subject position that they argued was already or would be in the future affected by civil rights policy. Other children clarified their race by differentiating themselves from other racial groups through the use of non-possessive pronouns such as “they” and “them.” Children also occasionally revealed their race by describing their circumstances and experiences with racial conflict and/or integration.
A NOTE ON SOURCES AND LANGUAGE

I choose to capitalize the racial descriptors Black and White. I recognize that readers may find this jarring, but I ask that they reflect on this disorientation to examine the simultaneously arbitrary and deeply meaningful nature of the decisions humans make when writing about race. The children whose letters form the backbone of this dissertation ultimately made my decision to capitalize for me. While not all children capitalized racial designations, many children chose this strategy to emphasize the racial aspect of their identities. One child also explicitly acknowledged capitalization’s capacity to communicate messages about power and racial hierarchies. Dorthy, a twelve-year-old White girl from Cordele, Georgia, concluded her October 12, 1957 letter to President Eisenhower by telling him: “I guess you wonder why I wrote negros with a little letter, well it is that when God put them on a low standard he wanted it to stay that way.”50 In this dissertation, I argue that language – grammar, punctuation, words – matters. My choice reflects this argument.

I have also decided to excise mention of children’s last names, partly to adhere to individual archives’ standards and to protect the privacy of people that may still be living today. This decision should not be taken to imply that I believe that children were unable to make their own choices when they wrote their letters and therefore need my intervention. Rather, I recognize and, indeed, hope for humans’ ability to change their worldviews over the course of a lifetime.

50 Dorthy to Eisenhower, October 12, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus Action, Box 13, Folder 3, DDE.
Finally, as much as possible, I maintain all original spelling and punctuation and do not use [sic]. I clarify language only when necessary.

On July 4, 1948, fifteen-year-old Margaret, a Black girl from Bagdad, Kentucky, celebrated perhaps the most American of holidays in a fitting manner. She wrote a letter to her president. “My dear Mr. Truman,” she began, “On this Declaration Day of our government, . . . the white and colored people of this Nation celebrate together, and in so doing offer our heart-felt gratitude for the independence that is so gloriously ours.” Margaret then added a complaint to her celebratory message: “Mr. President, the colored citizens of our country, have never had a religious or Civic holiday.”51 Invoking the dangerous implications of a fractured American citizenry during the early years of the Cold War, Margaret explained: “in my humble opinion a day so set aside for the colored people of this Nation would cause them to bless you throughout their lives. My race is sorely in need of a patriotic stimulant, that will bind us together with our white friends and leaders, and would prevent outside Nations from gaining a foothold toward the separation of such loyal friendship as we now have.”52 To rectify the lack of representation for Black Americans on the yearly calendar, Margaret asked Truman to set aside Abraham Lincoln’s birthday “as a legal holiday for colored citizens to commemorate the freedom from slavers and give us the right to think for ourselves and to advance according to our meret.”53

51 Margaret to Truman, July 4, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 549, OF 93-D “Emancipation Proclamation,” [One Folder], HST.
52 Ibid.
53 Margaret to Truman, July 4, 1948, HST. For a discussion of the symbolism and meaning attached to national holidays, especially during this time period, see: Richard M. Fried, The Russians are Coming! The Russians Are Coming!: Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold-War America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
Margaret wrote her letter at an auspicious time. A group of Black Americans had been trying to achieve recognition of the Emancipation Proclamation with a national holiday since 1942. On June 30, 1948, Congress responded by designating February 1 of each year “National Freedom Day.” This made it easy for William D. Hassett, Secretary to the President, to inform Margaret on July 17, 1948 that her proposal had been fulfilled: “With respect to your suggestion I am glad to inform you that on June thirtieth last the President approved Senate Joint Resolution No. 37, which provides for the issuance of a proclamation designating February first of each year as National Freedom Day. The purpose of this day is to commemorate the signing by President Lincoln, on February 1, 1865, of the Joint Resolution adopted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States, proposing the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution.”

Over a year later, Margaret wrote a second letter to Truman to communicate her disappointment that the White House had failed to promote National Freedom Day. She referenced Hassett’s July 17, 1948 letter and asked:

“Is it not now possible to make the Proclamation so that my people may be aided

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54 William D. Hassett to Margaret, July 17, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 549, OF 93-D
“Emancipation Proclamation,” [One Folder], HST. Note that Philadelphian Richard R. Wright, Sr. had originally promoted National Freedom Day beginning in 1942. Wright, who was born into slavery in 1855, responded to President Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” Speech by arguing that no American would be truly free until all Americans enjoyed equal freedoms. Wright then proposed commemoration of the Emancipation Proclamation on February 1 of each year. While Congress nationalized the holiday in 1948 (although Truman did not officially proclaim the holiday until January 25, 1949), one year after Wright’s death, in subsequent years, the holiday returned to its local roots. Observance in Philadelphia generally included a wreath-laying ceremony at the Liberty Bell, a banquet, scholarship awards, local school celebrations, and speeches. Ultimately, the holiday garnered less attention than Black History Month or Martin Luther King Day. In recent years, however, it experienced some resurgence. In 2010, President Barak Obama named January National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, culminating in National Freedom Day on February 1. Charlene Mires, “National Freedom Day,” The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia (2012), http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/national-freedom-day/.
in maintaining the loyalty we should have for our Country[?]” After repeating her rhetorical strategy of connecting racial unity with national security concerns, Margaret closed her letter by asking: “Is it not a most opportune time for this proclamation and a wide publicity following it[?]”\(^{55}\) Throughout her communication with the White House, Margaret emphasized the international and domestic significance of stimulating American unity, patriotism, and loyalty through the amelioration of racial conflict. Above all, she demanded representation for Black Americans in the form of a publicized national holiday that encouraged the “advancement” of Black people in the nation.

The themes contained in Margaret’s letters to Truman reflected developments in American racial politics dating back to the 1930s. As Black Americans observed the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy during this decade, they protested against the global dimensions of racism and White supremacy by connecting their own second-class citizenship to Adolf Hitler’s pursuit of Aryan racial purity and Benito Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia. From the mid-1930s onward, Black newspapers gave particularly extensive coverage to Hitler’s rise to power and racist policy-making.\(^{56}\) When the United States entered World War II in 1941, anti-fascist sentiment among Black Americans found new direction and purpose. Many Black activists and reporters accused segregationist and discriminatory members of the American government and public of being

\(^{55}\) Margaret to Truman, September 17, 1949, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 549, OF 93-D “Emancipation Proclamation,” [One Folder], HST.

“homegrown fascists.” They underscored the hypocrisy of fighting a war for democracy with segregated troops who experienced the bulk of their training at bases located in the violent Jim Crow South. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) activist and lawyer Thurgood Marshall termed the Detroit police force the “‘Gestapo’” to highlight policemen’s violent aggression against Black residents during the Detroit riot of 1943. Throughout the war, Black soldiers and citizens fought for a “Double Victory” against racial prejudice both at home and abroad.

The federal government made a few concessions to the cause of racial equality in response to these protests over the course of the war. In June 1941, for example, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 banning racial discrimination in war and defense industries and establishing the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to enforce the order. In addition, the Office of War Information sponsored a small amount of wartime messaging to celebrate the contribution of Black soldiers to the overall war effort.

Despite these improvements, the federal government did not make an appreciable shift in its approach to the existence of racism and segregation in the nation until after the war had ended. Black activists fostered this transition by applying direct pressure to President Truman in light of a series of violent

57 Ibid., 91.
60 Takaki, Double Victory.
62 Stephen Tuck, “‘You can sign and punch . . . but you can’t be a soldier or a man’: African American Struggles for a New Place in Popular Culture,” in Fog of War, 103-125, 110.
incidents – all targeting Black veterans – that transpired in Southern states in 1946. In Batesburg, South Carolina, a White policeman severely beat and blinded Isaac Woodward just hours after the twenty-six-year-old had been honorably discharged from the army. An all-White jury later acquitted the policeman. In Columbia, Tennessee, following a dispute over a broken radio involving a Black veteran and a White storeowner, White residents destroyed the entire Black business district of the city and policemen killed two Black men. In Monroe, Georgia, a large mob of White men lynched George Dorsey, who had only recently returned home after several years of service in the South Pacific, along with his wife, sister, and brother-in-law. Those responsible for the lynching were not identified or apprehended. In response to the violence, civil rights activists organized the National Emergency Committee Against Mob Violence. A delegation from the group met with President Truman at the White House in September 1946 to demand investigations of the crimes and legislative action to prevent future lynchings, using the upcoming midterm elections and the 1948 presidential race as leverage.

Three months after the meeting, Truman initiated the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, charging it to investigate the status of racial conflict in the nation and to conclude how federal, state, and local governments might participate in improving such conflict. The committee released its report, titled To

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63 Sullivan, “Movement Building,” in Fog of War, 79.
64 Laura Wexler, Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in America (New York: Scribner, 2003), 77-78.
65 See: Wexler, Fire in a Canebrake.
Secure These Rights, on October 29, 1947.\textsuperscript{67} The authors of the report recommended the adoption of anti-lynching legislation, the abolition of the poll tax, a “reconsideration of segregation,” the integration of the nation’s armed forces, and the institution of a variety of other anti-discrimination practices.\textsuperscript{68} The report suggested these policy changes by condemning barriers to racial equality for moral, economic, and national security reasons. The authors cited evidence demonstrating the “costs” and “waste” of racial discrimination in relationship to the American economy. The report also claimed that the existence of racism made the United States vulnerable to propaganda attacks by totalitarian and anti-democratic states. In March 1947, just a few months before the release of the civil rights report, Truman had shared his vision of the world as a battleground between “‘alternative ways of life’” in an address delivered to a joint session of Congress. Outlining what came to be known as the Truman Doctrine, Truman established his administration’s commitment to guarding the freedom of people around the globe – with financial aid and military intervention, if necessary – from what he defined as the totalitarian and communistic influence of the Soviet Union. In this context, the authors of the civil rights report viewed the proliferation\textsuperscript{67} Truman picked individuals with wide-ranging backgrounds and interests to serve on the committee. He chose several businessmen, including CEO of General Electric, Charles E. Wilson, who acted as chairman, and President of Pepsodent toothpaste company, Charles Luckman. Truman also picked union leader James B. Carney, as well as religious leaders Reverend Francis J. Haas, Rabbi Roland B. Gittelman, Francis P. Matthews, and Henry Knox Sherrill. Several college presidents along with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s son also joined. A number of activists were also called upon, including American Civil Liberties lawyer and co-founder, Morris L. Ernst, and member of the CIC, Dorothy Rogers Tilly. The committee also featured two prominent Black citizens, lawyer and the first Black woman to be admitted to the Pennsylvania bar, Sadie T. Alexander, and philanthropist Channing H. Tobias. See: “Agency History” for the Records of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, https://www.trumanlibrary.org/hstpaper/pccr.htm.\textsuperscript{68} Samuel Walker, Presidents and Civil Liberties from Wilson to Obama: A Story of Poor Custodians (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 144; Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights, 79-80.
of international news publicizing the American government’s ongoing sanction of segregation and its inability to protect Black Americans against racial violence as a particularly dire problem.\textsuperscript{69}

From a moral standpoint, the authors of the report added that racial discrimination violated egalitarian principles that they identified as inherent to the American system of democracy. In making this claim, the authors cited Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal’s bestselling study of American race relations, \textit{An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy}, published in 1944 with the support of the Carnegie Corporation. After Myrdal and his team of social scientists spent several years researching what they called the “Negro problem” in America and especially in the South, Myrdal asserted that racism represented a moral dilemma unique to America (hence his title). He interpreted racism as a contradiction of the “American creed,” which he described as the United States’ ideological commitment to the dignity of the individual, the equality of all persons, and the rights of freedom, justice, and opportunity.\textsuperscript{70} By defining racism as a moral dilemma, Myrdal contended that the “Negro problem” could be solved by a moral solution. Myrdal argued that if more White Americans knew about Black Americans’ capacity to succeed and contribute to society, then reformed White citizens would abandon their racial prejudice in order to align their beliefs with their nation’s fundamental principles.\textsuperscript{71} The most influential midcentury text on American race relations therefore suggested that in order to

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\textsuperscript{69} Dudziak, \textit{Cold War Civil Rights}, 27, 79-82.
\textsuperscript{71} Kendi, \textit{Stamped from the Beginning}, 350; Melamed, \textit{Represent and Destroy}, 20-21.
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achieve racial equality, Americans needed to transform individual attitudes rather than change economic or politic structures.\(^2\)

Truman promoted his Committee’s civil rights report in his 1948 State of the Union Address and again in a special message he sent to Congress on February 2, 1948. Truman’s message echoed Myrdal’s *American Dilemma* by supporting legislative action on civil rights so as to make the United States live up to its founding principles: equality, freedom, and opportunity. Truman stated: “if we wish to fulfill the promise that is ours, we must correct the remaining imperfections in our practice of democracy.”\(^3\) In order to perfect American democracy, Truman proposed a ten-point legislative program: establishment of two permanent governmental institutions, the Committee on Civil Rights and the FEPC; federal protection against lynching; desegregation of interstate travel; elimination of barriers against voting, including the poll tax; recognition of claims from evacuated Japanese-Americans; loosening of immigration and naturalization restrictions; confirmation of statehood for Hawaii and Alaska; and extension of self-governmental rights to residents of Washington D.C.\(^4\) Although Truman, like Myrdal, interpreted civil rights reform as a “moral” necessity, he also appeared to recognize the requirement for adaptations to American legal, economic, and political systems.\(^5\) Truman’s public support for these changes precipitated the exodus of the “Dixiecrats” from the Democratic Party, who walked out on the July 1948 national convention and ran South Carolina.

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\(^2\) Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 20.
\(^3\) Message, Truman, February 2, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 349, PPF 200, Civil Rights [Message] 2.2.48, HST.
\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Ibid.
Governor Strom Thurmond on a segregationist platform in the 1948 presidential election. By securing the votes of Black citizens in critical Northern urban districts, however, Truman won re-election, revealing the political calculations that underwrote his civil rights program.\(^7^6\)

While few of the legislative points Truman listed in his message passed during his presidency, his administration also witnessed some progress in civil rights reform. Truman signed an Executive Order that began the process of desegregating the armed forces in July 1948, and his Justice Department filed amicus briefs in Supreme Court cases that determined the illegality of housing and school segregation in the late 1940s and early 1950s, including *Shelley v. Kramer* (1948) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).\(^7^7\) Regardless of the uneven results of his proposed civil rights policies, Truman's focus on discrimination during the 1948 election cycle contributed to the increase of national discourse about race-based civil rights by legitimizing racial inequality as a critical political issue.\(^7^8\)

The president’s focus on civil rights in 1948 also brought him to the attention of American children concerned with postwar debates over racial inequality in the United States. Especially after Truman sent his message to Congress in February 1948, many children around the nation directed their

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\(^7^7\) Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 356; Walker, *Presidents and Civil Liberties*, 147-148. Note that despite Truman’s Executive Order, the desegregation of the military did not occur until the Korean War. At that point, combat shortages rather than a commitment to racial equality forced the acceleration of integration of troops. Moreover, once integration was more fully underway, Black soldiers experienced the effects of discrimination through disproportionate assignments to dangerous missions and a lack of rotation *out* of combat. See: Kimberly L. Phillips, “Did the Battlefield Kill Jim Crow: The Cold War Military, Civil Rights, and Black Freedom Struggles,” in *Fog of War*, 208-229, 209, 212.

written questions and opinions about civil rights to the White House. By analyzing letters sent to Truman by children like Margaret, this chapter delineates the arguments American children used to support their positions on race-based civil rights during the early postwar era. Perhaps because the majority of politicians in the late 1940s and early 1950s – including the president – interpreted civil rights and integration as issues primarily affecting White and Black citizens, most of the children who wrote to Truman self-identified as either White or Black. They also followed the president in defining civil rights and integration as problems that implicated White and Black Americans, even as they occasionally referred to the United States’ multiracial population to make their cases to Truman. I describe the arguments of three generalized groups of young letter writers: pro-equality White children, Black children, and anti-equality White children. While not all children’s positions fit neatly into these categories, the majority belonged in these groupings. White children who expressed support for racial equality and integration during these years emphasized the “sameness” of all humans. Black children lobbied for integration by relying on rights-based arguments and recounting the daily consequences of living with racial difference. Finally, White children who conveyed a desire for the continuance of segregation often contributed to the circulation of gendered and sexualized racist discourse. Other

79 In her study of postwar politics, the Cold War, and civil rights battles, Mary L. Dudziak states: “The full story of civil rights reform in U.S. history cuts across racial groups. The U.S. policymakers in this study, however, saw American race relations through the lens of a black/white paradigm. To them, race in America was quintessentially about ‘the Negro problem.’ Foreign observers as well remarked that the status of ‘the Negro’ was the paradigm for exploring race in America.” Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights, 14. Similarly, for much of the second half of the twentieth century, many American children viewed race relations in their country as a Black/White conflict. This often depended on their particular regional position, but especially in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, children remained tightly focused on racial discrimination as it applied to Black and White citizens.
White children endorsed the maintenance of White social and political power, even if they accepted integration. The arguments that children made to support all three positions underpinned children’s racial argumentation throughout the balance of the twentieth century.

**Mid-Century Education in America**

In each group, children’s arguments rested on midcentury trends in public education around the United States. Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, the number of students attending public schools experienced exponential growth. Between 1890 and 1930, nationwide attendance rose from approximately 14 million to 28 million pupils. By 1960, 99.5 percent of seven- to thirteen-year-old children and 90.3 percent of fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds were enrolled in school.\(^\text{80}\) This expansion developed at a slower pace in the South, especially for schools serving Black children.\(^\text{81}\) Even so, by the 1940s, public-school education reached an increasing number of American children around the country.

Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, many educators across the United States reacted to the nativism and racism characteristic of the late 1910s and 1920s by participating in the creation of anti-prejudice curricula for their students.

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\(^\text{81}\) Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow*, 183. Ritterhouse notes that in many Southern states during the 1930s, only about 20 percent of Black students attended high school. In some states, the rate was as low as 10 percent. For comparison, the rate for Southern White students in the 1930s was approximately 50 percent. See also: Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings*, 214-215. Cahn argues that by the late 1930s, the student population at Southern schools had transformed. Whereas in the 1920s, most secondary-education institutions served only White, elite children, by the next decade, the region’s student body was increasingly diverse in race and class. Of course, students continued to be strictly segregated by race, and White-only schools garnered the “lion’s share of public resources” (Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings*, 214). Although the South followed a unique trajectory, the trend in this region still echoed the national pattern of growth.
Concerned teachers in the Northeast and Midwest sought to counter anti-immigrant biases that found full expression in the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, which severely limited the immigration of Southern and Eastern Europeans and fully barred Asian immigrants from entering the country. Diana Selig traces the rise of twentieth-century anti-prejudice education to this historical moment. Selig argues that in order to curtail the abuse of immigrant children who already lived in the United States by the mid-1920s, teachers developed “intercultural education” programs that celebrated various immigrant groups’ contributions of their “cultural gifts” – especially food, songs, artistic expressions, and holidays – to American society. Educators hoped to replace children’s negative perceptions and stereotypes about immigrants with positive experiences that would help children appreciate the differences among their peers.

In developing materials for the promotion of tolerance among children, educators in the 1920s and 1930s benefitted from the parallel work of a diverse group of progressive thinkers, including children’s authors, parent education magazine editors, social scientists, organizers of the scouting movement, and religious leaders. Because of the targeting of Catholic and Jewish immigrants

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84 Selig, *Americans All*, 26-30, 66, 110. Because they were less regulated by local, state, and federal governmental agencies than public-school texts, books in the field of children’s literature acted as platforms for leftist writers to express their political worldviews and to encourage the eradication of racial and religious biases. Children’s literature therefore acted as a key refuge for leftist writers during the Red Scare of the 1920s and, later, McCarthyism. See: Mickenberg, *Learning from the Left*, 26-27. For an example of a scouting organization involved in the promotion of intercultural education and friendship, see Jennifer Helgren’s discussion of leaders in Camp Fire encouraging girl-participants to eschew prejudice in the first years of the organization’s existence. Helgren adds that by failing to directly challenge segregation or
and native-born citizens by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, the stimulation of religious tolerance among American youths represented a critical early priority for intercultural educators. In 1930, the leader of the intercultural education movement, Rachel Davis DuBois, received funding to institute intercultural programming at schools in several Eastern urban centers from the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ), then known as the National Conference of Jews and Christians.\textsuperscript{85} Beginning with its founding by representatives from Protestant, Catholic and Jewish philanthropic groups in 1927, the NCCJ acted as the chief organization focused on spreading interfaith “goodwill” throughout the United States.\textsuperscript{86} Leaders in the NCCJ consistently sought to develop programs that fostered religious cooperation. In 1929, one member, Father Hugh McMenamin, presented the idea of “Brotherhood Week” as a way for sermons and faith activities to promote religious unity during a given week. By 1934, the NCCJ as a whole agreed with the plan, and the organization observed the first National Brotherhood Week during that year. In 1935, the organization moved the date to February to commemorate George Washington’s birthday and highlight the celebration’s inherent Americanism.\textsuperscript{87} By instituting educational and anti-prejudice “holidays” like Brotherhood Week, the NCCJ’s work thus dovetailed with that of intercultural educators.

\textsuperscript{85} Selig, \textit{Americans All}, 99.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 113-114.
Tolerance education was not isolated to the Northern half of the country. Selig demonstrates that during the 1920s and 1930s, Southern schools also participated in the development of programs meant to inspire cooperation among different groups of children living in the South. Southern teachers responded to a separate set of circumstances than educators in the North. Reacting to racial conflict and out-migration of Black Southerners to the North during World War I, a group of reformers organized the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC) in Atlanta, Georgia in 1919.  

The CIC sought to promote peaceful and respectful interactions between Black and White Southerners by echoing the cultural gifts approach and celebrating the “cultural achievements” of Black Americans. The organization created educational materials, sponsored essay contests, and conducted surveys for Southern children and youths attending high schools and colleges in the South. While the CIC pushed for gradual interracial reform through the improvement of the social conditions of Black Southerners and the prevention of racial violence, members of the group did not support ending segregation. The CIC’s focus on the cultural success of Black Southerners allowed Southern White children to support segregation even as they also recognized the contributions of Black citizens to their nation and region. CIC essay contests and surveys revealed that White children could reconcile

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88 Selig, Americans All, 161.
89 Selig, Americans All, 151-152; Ritterhouse, Growing Up Jim Crow, 213-215.
90 In 1929, the CIC awarded its essay prize to a Black student, sixteen-year-old Ernestine Banks, for the first time. However, leaders in the CIC explicitly admitted that they primarily wanted to change the attitudes of White students. Black schools did not take primacy in the organization’s activities. Selig, Americans All, 168-169.
“brotherhood” with racial discrimination; in 1928, one college student wrote:

“Brotherhood does not mean intermarriage or social equality.”

During these decades, many Black educators and activists in both the South and the North adopted alternative teaching methods for their students. While educational materials aimed at Black children also focused on the contributions and achievements of successful Black Americans, educators used such texts to encourage the development of positive self-images among their students. In addition, intellectual and member of the NAACP W.E.B. DuBois and writer Jessie Redmon Fauset together produced a children’s magazine called *The Brownie’s Book* from January 1920 to December 1921, consistently publishing pieces that sought to instill racial pride in Black children. Much of this material, including *Brownie’s*, had classist undertones, with middle- and upper-class Black reformers seeking to improve the lives of all Black Americans by adhering to respectable, middle-class norms that would allow some Black citizens to “lift as we climb.” Black educators also taught Black children about the political and economic barriers that prevented unconditional racial equality in the United States, and some teachers encouraged their students to protest.

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91 Selig, *Americans All*, 171. While many Southern White children appear to have been taught to believe in the “brotherhood of man” as part of their religious upbringing, such lessons did not generally subvert the racial hierarchy of the region. See: Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow*, 131-132.

92 Selig, *Americans All*, 208-209; Burkholder, *Color in the Classroom*, 38, 109. See also: Katharine Capshaw, *Civil Rights Childhood: Picturing Liberation in African American Photobooks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). Capshaw argues that the Black authors of photobooks in the 1940s and 1950s used the medium of photography combined with the capacity to tell a “story” in a book to speak through the racial discourse of the era (“friendship and sameness”), while also subtly challenging the status quo and advocating for integration and social change. Capshaw, *Civil Rights Childhood*, 6-7, 68.


against discriminatory practices. In so doing, Black teachers and activists revealed the limits of intercultural education and of many progressive thinkers in the 1920s and 1930s. By focusing predominantly on culture, much of the anti-prejudice material produced by White authors for children during the 1920s and 1930s elided the economic and political practices preventing some immigrants and – even more so – racial minorities from experiencing full equality in America. The cultural gifts method also produced static representations of the people it celebrated, replacing negative stereotypes and assumptions about undifferentiated groups of people with “positive” ones. Moreover, throughout the 1930s, most educators outside of the South remained focused on immigrant children and gave limited attention to Americans of color in their classroom lessons and activities. Finally, most progressive schools teaching intercultural lessons were segregated in the 1930s, and anti-prejudice educators rarely challenged segregation head-on during this decade.

When Americans became increasingly concerned with the rise of fascism during World War II, efforts to promote “unity,” “goodwill,” global citizenship, and intercultural understanding among American children gained urgency. Even more so than during the previous two decades, educators and a growing number of anti-prejudice Americans looked to children as the best weapon for combatting

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discrimination in the present and the future. Social scientists like Gunnar Myrdal viewed education as the primary tool for shaping children’s worldviews, such that tolerance education became part of the nation’s war effort. Internal racial conflict and wartime protests mounted by Americans of color forced educators to teach their students about racial minorities by adapting the cultural gifts approach. Lesson plans highlighting the contributions of Black and Native Americans in particular became more common by the end of the war. At the same time, war exigencies and governmental pressure made teachers de-emphasize the distinctive characteristics of American immigrants, especially those from Germany and Italy. Such activities were viewed as detrimental to the war effort. An overall minimization of difference became the foundation of a new pedagogical approach termed “intergroup education.” As the war progressed, while teachers increasingly included Black and Native American history in their lesson plans, they also generally restricted their discussion of discrepancies between various groups of Americans’ cultural experiences. Educators instead taught about the “sameness” of individual humans who, by virtue of their similarity, all deserved full citizenship rights.

By the end of the war, anti-prejudice education – now called intergroup education – became associated primarily with the promotion of “friendship” and

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99 de Schweinitz, Change the World, 80-85; Mickenberg, Learning from the Left, 113; Burkholder, Color in the Classroom, 4, 110.
100 Burkholder, Color in the Classroom, 118, 128.
101 Selig, Americans All, 235-236; Burkholder, Color in the Classroom, 98-99, 118; Tuttle, Daddy’s Gone to War, 186-188.
102 Selig, Americans All, 256-257.
“brotherhood” between children belonging to different racial (rather than immigrant) groups. Following the lead of social scientists, many anti-prejudice teachers viewed racial discrimination as a moral problem contrary to the American creed that could be solved by reforming the worldview of the individual. Lessons in intergroup relations often focused on changing individual children’s attitudes about Americans of color, especially Black people, and teaching children to adopt “good manners” toward all people.

Despite these messages, most classrooms nationwide continued to be either segregated or mostly White after the war. Between the 1930s and the 1960s, school segregation rates in several Northern cities increased; in Gary, Indiana, Chicago, Illinois, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for example, these rates climbed as high as ninety percent by the early 1960s. Although segregation – whether in housing or in schools – separated children by race across the country, the unity of the citizenry endured as a priority for the United States as it entered the Cold War. As a result, a wide swath of political, religious, and educational leaders considered the implementation of strategies for cultivating positive interactions among Americans to be a priority. By the late 1940s, the NCCJ’s Brotherhood Week was a national celebration recognized by

103 This adoption of intergroup education was observed and encouraged by one of the largest teachers’ unions in the United States, the National Education Association, in 1946. The body explicitly addressed the disturbing example of Hitler’s influence over German youth as a reason why United States schools and teachers should institute “inter-group” educational programs. The NEA published their review of several different schools’ inter-group programs in a postwar report, National Education Association of the United States, More than Tolerance: Suggestions to teachers on inter-group education (Washington, D.C., 1946).
104 Selig, Americans All, 270-271.
105 Burkholder, Color in the Classroom, 146-147.
most Americans and sanctioned by the president.\textsuperscript{107} Many American schools observed the holiday, and Truman included the word “brotherhood” in his February 2, 1948 message to Congress.\textsuperscript{108}

Meanwhile, many anti-equality Americans connected civil rights activism with Communist influence, and they deemed postwar civil rights reform as capitulation to Soviet propaganda.\textsuperscript{109} In this climate, rhetoric about “brotherhood” and Brotherhood Week celebrations began to be tainted in some quarters; a Birmingham, Alabama school banned the children’s magazine \textit{Senior Scholastic} in the late 1940s for publishing a Brotherhood Week issue.\textsuperscript{110} Although the majority of anti-prejudice White educators in the late 1940s and early 1950s continued to avoid discussing the economic and political aspects of racial inequality in lieu of moral lessons for their students, even such transformations

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\textsuperscript{107} President Franklin D. Roosevelt served as the event’s honorary chairman in 1943. After the war, beginning in 1946 and lasting until 1952, the Advertising Council of America in partnership with NCCJ initiated a free advertising campaign through radio, broadsides, newspapers, comic books, school materials, and other platforms to promote brotherhood and unity. Both the NCCJ and the Ad Council consistently attempted to limit the extent to which their messages could be applied to \textit{racial} brotherhood. The groups wanted the focus to be more heavily on American unity and, for the NCCJ, interfaith relations. Ultimately, however, their control could only extend so far. Audiences – adult and child alike – connected the rhetoric of brotherhood with the state of race relations in America throughout the late 1940s. Schultz, \textit{Tri-Faith America}, 65, 69. See also: Wendy L. Wall, \textit{Inventing the “American Way:” The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 183-184, especially for statistics on the scale of the advertising campaign. Wall also acknowledges the lack of control corporations such as the Ad Council had over the language they introduced to the public sphere, arguing that Civil Rights activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. made deft use of this “cultural lever” in the 1960s (Wall 285).
\textsuperscript{108} Message, Truman, February 2, 1948, HST. The National Education Association’s 1946 report on intergroup education observed that in South Bend, Indiana and Providence, Rhode Island, several teachers and administrators made specific mention of the possibility of using Brotherhood Week observances to initiate conversations about racial tolerance. The Atlanta, Georgia public school system appeared to use Brotherhood Week only to promote religious tolerance, inviting a Jewish rabbi, a Catholic priest, and Protestant minister to the school for assemblies and forums. See: National Education Association, \textit{More than Tolerance}, 4-5, 22-24.
\textsuperscript{109} Dudziak, \textit{Cold War Civil Rights}, 26; Mickenberg, \textit{Learning from the Left}, 135.
\textsuperscript{110} Mickenberg, \textit{Learning from the Left}, 135.
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appeared too radical for those resistant to racial equality.\textsuperscript{111} As these oppositional standpoints hardened among many American adults in the early postwar era, children joined the fray as well.

**Northern White Students’ Pro-Equality Arguments**

For the White schoolchildren of an eighth-grade social studies class from the small town of Burley, Idaho, integration appeared to be a fair deal, while segregation seemed like a national embarrassment. During their celebration of National Brotherhood Week in March 1949, several students wrote individual letters to Truman, likely for a class assignment, in which they assembled a variety of arguments to defend their anti-segregation position.\textsuperscript{112} One member of the class, Lynne, wrote, “The Negroes fought for freedom in the war right beside any White person. They were there on the battlefield for the same reason everyone else was.”\textsuperscript{113} Lynne used Black Americans’ recent military service in World War II as a demonstration that Black people had contributed to the protection of Americans’ freedom and were therefore “deserving” of full citizenship rights. Her peer, Joe, turned instead to religion to emphasize the primacy of God’s judgment over that of humans: “I think all people should be treated equall, and the Lord would treat them equall, no matter what the race color or religion . . . if you do as ‘God’ would do you would not pass the

\textsuperscript{111} For a discussion of the dissolution of alliances between Black reformers and White Southern moderates during the war years, see: Jane Dailey, “The Sexual Politics of Race in World War II America,” in *Fog of War*, 145-170. Note also that the CIC, which no longer represented a relevant or vital organization by the mid-1940s due to increasing resistance to segregation, disbanded in 1943. Selig, *Americans All*, 180.

\textsuperscript{112} Only one student in the class wrote to oppose integration; I discuss her argument later in the chapter.

\textsuperscript{113} Lynn R. to Truman, [March 3, 1949; misdated by student as February 3, 1949], HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1667, OF 596-A PPP B, HST. See also: Birdine to Harry S. Truman, March 3, 1949, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1667, OF 596-A PPP B, HST.
Segregation law.” Several students noted that if the United States wanted to safeguard democracy abroad in its fight against communism, the government needed to be true to democracy at home as well. To that end, a few students drew attention to the special embarrassment caused by the existence of segregation in the nation’s capital. Many children also tried to dismiss racial difference, explaining why they believed that race should not matter to them, the president, or anyone else.

In their Brotherhood Week letters, the Burley children’s articulations of the meaning of racial difference varied, with little common point of reference except for a stated belief in equality. This expressed belief led several students to write their letters as reactions against what some Americans might have offered as reasons not to support racial equality. One student, Ann, wrote: “I feel the Negro’s are just as good as you and I . . . Some of the Negroe’s are better and can be more trusted than some of the White.” Ann recognized that White Americans often accused Black people of being dishonest or criminal; in midcentury America, trustworthiness was a signifier of good character usually

\[\text{Ann to Truman, March 3, 1949, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1667, OF 596-A PPP B, HST.}\]

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114 Joe to Truman, March 3, 1949, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1667, OF 596-A PPP B, HST. Many Americans turned to religious arguments to both defend and resist segregation. Historian Jane Dailey tracks segregationist reliance on such arguments after the release of the Brown decision in 1954, but children turned to God in civil rights debates in the late 1940s as well. See: Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after Brown.”
117 Ann to Truman, March 3, 1949, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1667, OF 596-A PPP B, HST.
reserved for Whites. Khalil Gibran Muhammad demonstrates that beginning in the Jim Crow era, statisticians and social scientists used census crime data to argue for the existence of something inherent to Black Americans’ biology or culture that rendered them disproportionately “criminal” relative to the rest of the American population. The researchers did not account for variables such as poverty or discrimination affecting rates of arrest and incarceration, which skewed their interpretations. This misunderstood data became a critical underlying justification for racial discrimination and housing segregation in Northern urban centers resistant to the migration of Black Americans after Reconstruction and during both World Wars.\(^\text{118}\) Ann’s letter reflected the process by which social scientific studies about the relationship between criminal data and race could be translated into mainstream American racial discourse. By resisting racist arguments branding Black people as “bad” and “untrustworthy,” Ann – an eighth-grade girl – contributed to the contestation of such discourse.

Another student, Kathryn, used her letter to Truman to register her frustration with discrimination: “I think it is all very stupid to have separate schools, hotel[s] and etc. for the Negroes,” she noted, “and they aren’t going to poyson [poison] the school.” The use of “poison” here was probably not coincidental, even though Kathryn was likely unaware of the centuries-old roots of this word. During the early modern period, colonists in what would become the United States and the Caribbean had deep and widespread fears of being poisoned by their enslaved populations. While it is impossible to know the extent

and scale at which poisoning actually occurred in the early modern Atlantic, scholars argue that the psychological reaction to its possibility was real and palpable.\(^\text{119}\) As such, by the mid-twentieth century, poison was a word with historical meaning and a longstanding connection to Black Americans and the perceived potential danger they posed to the White populace, making its inclusion in this letter especially stark. Kathryn’s word choice thereby underscored some White Americans’ longstanding fear that the simple presence of Black people in a given space could somehow make that environment unsafe or even harmful.

While Kathryn’s letter referred explicitly to the integration of public buildings, concern over the integration of “private” spaces was implicitly present in her argument. Kathryn wrote her letter to resist racist assumptions about Black people, and she continued her letter with the line: “They aren’t going to get the beds and furniture in the hotel all broken up.”\(^\text{120}\) Kathryn’s rebuttal drew upon historical characterizations of Black people, and Black men in particular, as “bestial” beings who could not control their bodies or sexual appetites and could not be trusted in White-only environments, especially an intimate and private


\(^{120}\) Kathryn to Truman, March 3, 1949, HST, my emphasis.
space such as a hotel room.\textsuperscript{121} Kathryn’s letter thus highlighted the issue – interracial relationships – that caused many Southern moderates to abandon their support of social reform during World War II. When Black Americans began arguing during these years for full “social equality,” including the abolition of miscegenation laws like those passed by Nazi Germany preventing marriages between Jews and Gentiles, Southern White moderates chose to defend the legal institution upholding the racial order of the South: segregation.\textsuperscript{122} Kathryn’s letter illustrated that this concern with interracial interactions went beyond Southern states. While Kathryn did not specify a subject beyond Black people in her letter, the image conjured by her description of a scene of (non)destruction was male. By scoffing at these expectations of Black men, Kathryn’s letter \textit{incorporated} some of the most prominent racist arguments about Black people that existed at this time throughout the United States.\textsuperscript{123} Conscious or subconscious, the undertones in Kathryn’s letter demonstrated how thoroughly interwoven gendered and sexualized discourse was in the fabric of American racism.

While Kathryn and Ann both focused on challenging racist arguments, many of the other Burley schoolchildren tried to define – and then dismiss – racial difference. These students’ letters indicated that they recognized racial difference.

\textsuperscript{121} For examples of White Americans propagating this argument, see: Ritterhouse, \textit{Growing Up Jim Crow}, 23-24; Cahn, \textit{Sexual Reckonings}, 242, 270, 280. Arguments about the danger of Black male bestiality came to the forefront of racist arguments at the end of Reconstruction, when White communities used rumors of Black men raping White women and girls as justification to lynch Black men, women, and children. Kendi, \textit{Stamped from the Beginning}, 274; DuRocher, \textit{Raising Racists}, 5.


\textsuperscript{123} This letter echoes Pascoe’s \textit{What Comes Naturally}, which convincingly argues that miscegenation law – and the fear of interracial relationships – was the most important structure supporting White supremacy and misogyny in America after the Civil War.
differences among Americans, whether through skin color, social and familial
relationships, or other markers, and they were trying to reconcile those
distinctions with the overall purpose of their letters: to argue for equal rights for all
Americans.\textsuperscript{124} While the children did not specify whether or not their own school
was segregated, based on Idaho’s midcentury demographics, it was unlikely that
they had a Black student in their class. Their only familiarity with Black people
may have been through media representations of Black entertainers or
athletes.\textsuperscript{125} Nonetheless, the Burley children relayed what they knew about Black
people to indicate their similarity to White people and thereby argue against
segregation. Lyle asserted that the athletic prowess of Black men “proved” their
equal status, stating: “Every man is created equally. The negroes are some of
the best athelics [athletes] in the world.”\textsuperscript{126} Several other students incorporated
animalistic descriptions historically applied to Black Americans and attempted to
refute those characterizations.\textsuperscript{127} One student wrote: “[with segregation,] we
would be treating them as animals. Just because they are dark that is no sign

\textsuperscript{124} I find Allyson Hobbs’s discussion of the simultaneously “socially constructed and performative”
yet also “quite real” nature of race, especially for those who lived it, instructive here. Whether race
could be literally seen (or un-seen) was not necessarily the point in mid-twentieth-century
America; rather, it structured all manner of relationships and opportunities, such that, in the late
1940s, even White children had trouble ignoring it. Hobbs, \textit{A Chosen Exile}, 17-18.
\textsuperscript{125} In Burley itself, the Black population was likely infinitesimal, if not non-existent. As a region,
the American West had the smallest population of Black Americans, with only 3.8% of the total
population living there by 1950. See: Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, U.S. Census Bureau,
\textit{Census 2000 Special Reports, Series CENSR-4, Demographic Trends in the 20th Century}
in \textit{Fog of War}, 116-118.
\textsuperscript{126} Stephen Tuck argues that throughout World War II, White Americans were “bombarded” with
imagery celebrating the patriotism of White men and women and demonstrating the ongoing
subservience of Black Americans. Moreover, he adds that White reporters often associated
successful Black musicians and athletes with the “primitivism” of the African jungle. Tuck, “‘You
can sing,’” in \textit{Fog of War}, 118. Note also that portrayals of “bestial” Black men had a long history
in American media, with \textit{Birth of a Nation} in 1915 and \textit{King Kong} in 1933 both inviting their
viewers to fear the “powerful Black man,” cast in \textit{King Kong} as a “physically powerful ape.” Kendi,
\textit{Stamped from the Beginning}, 305-307, 333.
they are not human.”¹²⁸ Lynne D. told Truman: “If the Negroes are treated like
dogs, why shouldn’t all white people [be also]. All men are born equal, and just
because they are of a different color skin that don’t mean they are any worse
than us.”¹²⁹ Each child called attention to what they identified as a signifier of
racial difference, whether athleticism or skin color. The students then argued that
in spite of such disparities, Black people were essentially the same as White
people. Based on the content of their letters, the Burley students appear to have
been exposed to lessons on racial sameness common in many American
classrooms in the late 1940s. Several children responded to this educational
message by following a circuitous route, acknowledging and describing racial
difference in order to argue for its insignificance.

Two other students defined race by connecting national and religious
differences to racial difference. Jane equated race and nationality, excluding
Black people from her classification of American: “The Negroes are a different
nationality but most of them are just as good as any American. Sometimes
better.”¹³⁰ Evalyn compared both religious minorities and recent immigrants to
Black people, writing: “If you are going to have race segregation in Washington,
why not say that this state and that state over there are [for] Jews only. And then
a few states over here [are] for Negro’s or people who have just come from
another country and haven’t had time to become an American citizen.”¹³¹ Both
girls’ letters displayed a lack of clarity on the status of Black people born in the

¹²⁸ [Unsigned – letter fragment among Burley letters] to Truman, March 3, 1949, HST-PP, WHCF,
OF, Box 1667, OF 596-A PPP B, HST.
¹²⁹ Lynn D. to Truman, March 3, 1949, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1667, OF 596-A PPP B, HST.
¹³⁰ Jane F. to Truman, March 3, 1949, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1667, OF 596-A PPP B, HST.
¹³¹ Evalyn to Truman, March 3, 1949, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1667, OF 596-A PPP B, HST.
United States as both Americans and citizens. Regardless of this confusion, Jane and Evalyn pointed to the injustice of racial inequality and prejudice. Evalyn charged the president to link religious and racial intolerance, using a sarcastic proposal for separate Jewish states to do so – likely a particularly powerful argument in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust. More broadly, these letters bear out historians such as Matthew Frye Jacobson and Peggy Pascoe’s arguments that a transformation in Americans’ definitions of race occurred in the United States between the 1920s and the 1960s.

Jacobson and Pascoe both demonstrate that beginning in the late 1920s, cultural anthropologists such as Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict attempted to revise what they viewed as antiquated and prejudicial understandings of race. Cultural anthropologists sought to replace biology with culture as the explanatory factor that determined differences among humans in order to argue against hierarchical classifications that defined national and religious identities as races. These scholarly debates were affected by the nativist political climate of the United States in the 1920s and the global rise of fascism in the 1930s and 1940s. Writing against the backdrop of World War II in 1943, Ruth Benedict’s *The Races of Mankind* proclaimed: “Aryans, Jews, Italians are not races.”

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132 Understanding of the Holocaust in the immediate postwar years was complex. While there was awareness of Germany’s engagement in the mass murder of Europe’s Jewish people (popular publications such as *Life* had included photographs of liberated concentration camps by the end of World War II), most Americans did not reflect on the experience of the Jews as particularly horrific. Rather, horror over the deaths of all victims during World War II – including American soldiers – and warnings about the dangers of “totalitarianism” more broadly characterized immediate postwar memory of the conflict. Still, I suggest that Evalyn drew on some degree of increased postwar concern with anti-Semitism in her letter. See: Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).


Pascoe argues that cultural anthropologists simultaneously advanced two contradictory arguments about the relationship between race and biology. They contended that biological race made no sense and did not exist, while also suggesting that race was merely biological, with all major human difference rooted in culture and environment. These academic shifts reflected political realities in the United States during World War II. The federal government encouraged minimization of differences among European immigrants and religious groups to present a united front against its wartime enemies. At the same time, both the federal government and White American citizens discriminated – often violently – against different groups of Americans of color, including Japanese, Mexican, and Black Americans during the war years. As midcentury prejudice increasingly appeared to uniquely and disproportionately affect those who could not lay claim to “Whiteness,” Americans seized on the second definition of race proposed by cultural anthropologists: race was merely biological. Americans thereby defined race as something visibly recognizable and reducible to biological determinants such as skin color. Those Americans who supported integration then used this narrow definition of racial difference to argue that race was insignificant and should not affect a person’s equal access to citizenship rights.

The Burley students’ letters reflected these transitions. Several students referred to the key difference between White and Black Americans as the color of

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their skin, and they used that minimal variance to argue for universal racial
equality. Jane and Evalyn, however, still included older definitions of race-as-
nation and religion-as-race in their missives, with Jane referring to “Negroes” as
a “different nationality,” and Evalyn comparing the hypothetical segregation of
Jews to the racial segregation of Black people. The Burley letters to Truman
demonstrated that anti-prejudice lessons on racial sameness were indeed
present in at least some White teachers’ curricula by the late 1940s and that
those lessons incorporated newer definitions of race. In the context of these
lessons and what was almost certainly a teacher-directed class assignment on
writing a letter to the president, many White students defended their positions on
integration by gathering evidence from what was circulating around them about
racial difference and Black people: racist arguments, media representations of
Black athletes, and incipient and evolving definitions of race. The students
therefore both mirrored national racial discourse and participated in its
development.

The Burley schoolchildren wrote their letters as part of their celebration of
National Brotherhood Week and their in-class discussion of “brotherhood” as it
related to racial prejudice. Multiple children and several whole classes wrote
Truman about racial equality and integration in relationship to their study of
brotherhood. Zoë Burkholder, using teaching journals to study how public
schools described the meaning of race to students between 1900 and 1954,
argues that in the increasingly paranoid and close-minded context of the early
Cold War, teachers essentially stopped talking about race after 1948: “Beginning
in 1948, there was a noticeable decline in the numbers of articles on teaching racial tolerance . . . Fewer authors wrote about teaching tolerance and began speaking in vague terms of ‘brotherhood’ and ‘neighborliness,’ concepts that did not necessarily refer to racial discrimination.”138 While Burkholder is correct that the Cold War fostered a more strictly regulated public school environment than in previous decades, and that discussions of brotherhood framed racial inequality as a problem that could be solved with moral rather than structural solutions, the nature of her sources makes it difficult for her to accurately evaluate how educators’ employment of brotherhood as a teaching tool played out among their students.139 Even if the word “brotherhood” and the celebration of Brotherhood Week acted as euphemistic ways for White teachers to smooth over racial conflicts without addressing root causes, the lessons also required that White children engage with the subjects of equality and civil rights amongst themselves and with their teachers. Although brotherhood did not explicitly refer to racial difference, based on their letters to Truman, many White children still tended to see it as such.

For some students, like those from Burley, a discussion of brotherhood led them to record their opposition to segregation and share their reflections on the meanings of racial difference. The third and fourth grade classes of Saint Paul, Minnesota’s Smith School used Brotherhood Week, which fell on February 22-29 in 1948, to support Truman’s civil rights demands as presented in the president’s February 2, 1948 message to Congress. Students particularly supported the anti-

138 Burkholder, Color in the Classroom, 154.
139 For scholarship on the constrained nature of education during the early Cold War, see: Mickenberg, Learning from the Left.
poll tax bill and the abolition of school segregation. One student even told Truman that, were she old enough, she would give him her vote. The children’s letters indicated that they talked about and may have even read Truman’s February 2, 1948 message. For these students, the themes of Brotherhood Week directly connected to Truman’s proposed legislative actions. This meant that White nine- and ten-year-olds, along with the White teacher who initiated this conversation, discussed poll taxes, segregation, and possibly lynching (a topic mentioned in Truman’s message), three virulent manifestations of American racism that demanded legislative action rather than adaptations to individual Americans’ attitudes. Multiple students also mentioned the pledge of allegiance, indicating that their discussion had encompassed the implications of the phrase “freedom and justice for all.” While an adult was almost certainly the instigator behind this discussion of race and brotherhood, it is nonetheless important to recognize the significance of White children’s responsive and participatory role in classroom interactions such as these, and, subsequently, their written defense of their positions. For these quite young White children, their teacher’s choice to bring Brotherhood Week into their classroom made them think about and react to specific legislative policies aimed at breaking down legal and social barriers to racial equality along with the connection between actions steeped in patriotic symbolism, such as the pledge, and racial equality.

140 Raymond, Terrance, Nancy, Jane B., Valerie, Quentin, Gary, John H., Robert S., Beverleen, Joseph, Joan, and Jerome [Members of the Third and Fourth Grade Classes, Smith School], to Truman, February 25, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 354, PPF 200 Pro S Civil Rights 2.2.48 (Folder 2 of 2), HST.
141 Joan to Truman, February 25, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 354, PPF 200 Pro S Civil Rights 2.2.48 (Folder 2 of 2), HST.
142 Quentin, Gary, and John H. to Truman, February 25, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 354, PPF 200 Pro S Civil Rights 2.2.48 (Folder 2 of 2), HST.
Some White students from Northern states used their discussions of brotherhood to vilify the South as the primary perpetrator of racial discrimination. The White students of Ludlow Elementary and Middle School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania wrote Truman in March 1948 to tell him what they thought about segregation, which most of the students characterized as a Southern problem. Paul posed several questions: “I realize that you are caught between the North and South, and on a matter that was settled over fifty years ago by our forefathers who fought the Civil War. Is it that the people of the South are too ignorant to understand the meaning of Brotherhood? Are they sick in mind?”

While Paul’s letter contained the most vitriolic description of White Southerners, of the twelve students who wrote, almost all used segregation, Jim Crow, and the poll tax to represent the totality of racial conflict in the United States, thus erroneously painting racism and discrimination as problems isolated to the South. The students’ characterization of their country reflected mainstream interpretations of American racism in vogue in the 1940s. The bulk of the research conducted for Gunnar Myrdal’s 1944 study of the “Negro problem,” for example, covered discrimination in Southern states.

Such portrayals misrepresented reality in the Northern half of the nation. While there were a greater number of lynching cases in the South than in the North during the 1940s, Northern states were not free of racial discrimination or violence. In the

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143 Paul L. to Harry S. Truman, March 19, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 352, PPF 200 Pro L Civil Rights 2.2.48, HST.
144 Shirley M., Milton, Marlene, Helen, Cullman, Carl, Arlene, and Paul P. to Truman, March 19, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 352, PPF 200 Pro L Civil Rights 2.2.48, HST.
children’s own city of Philadelphia a scant four years before the students wrote these letters, there had been a nationally newsworthy wartime strike by 6,000 White workers protesting the hiring of eight Black men as trolley car drivers for the Philadelphia Transportation Company. The 1944 strike lasted a week and so crippled war efforts in the city that President Roosevelt eventually called on federal troops to protect the strikebreakers and convince the remaining White strikers to return to work. While no deaths occurred over the course of the protests, there were several violent incidents during the conflict, including the non-fatal drive-by shooting of a thirteen-year-old Black boy named Franklin Howard by several White motorists.146

One student, Doris, acknowledged the existence of “Jim Crowism” – presumably segregation – in the North and the South. “Down the south negroes are being lynched without a trial and many of them I believe are not guilty,” she wrote, “There are many cases of Jim Crowism in the south, there are some cases up north, but not as many.” After this acknowledgement of Northern racial discrimination, Doris shared her vision of brotherhood. She argued: “The negroes should not be separated from the white race just because they are negroes. I do wish that brotherhood would mean more to all people. We should live like one

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world. No matter what race, religion, or creed.” Doris sought to promote racial and religious sameness, described here as “one world.” This phrase reflected the influence of calls for the stimulation of “world friendship” among children around the globe that had been present in teaching and parent education publications since the 1930s. Diana Selig asserts: “In fact, ‘world-thinking’ could obscure the perplexing problems of American race relations. It was easier in some ways to advance international cooperation than to tackle racial tensions closer to home.” In Doris’s case, applying “world-thinking” to the United States allowed her to view lynching and segregation as unfair. From there, instead of challenging the legal system and racist arguments that supported those practices, Doris replicated the postwar tendency to advocate for a moral solution to the problem of racial inequality. She wanted to live in “one world” where humans could coexist in spite of their racial, religious, or philosophical differences, and she argued that if “all people” embraced brotherhood, then they would create that world.

**Developing the Color-Based Framework**

Many White children, Doris among them, supported racial togetherness by attempting to illustrate racial sameness. While Doris used brotherhood as the foundation for her argument, several other children focused on “color” as an unimportant, meaningless, and solely bodily issue that should not stand in the way of racial friendship and American unity. Two students in Doris’s class

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147 Doris to Truman, [March 19, 1948; author misdated as March 16, 1948], HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 352, PPF 200 Pro L Civil Rights 2.2.48, HST.
149 Selig, *Americans All*, 56-57.
mentioned color as the primary division between various racial groups of Americans. Bertram wrote: “To the persons who hate the negroes the color of the skin makes a big difference. The negro should have the same privileges. The negro was first know to have come from Africa. Their skin is brown because of the hot sun.” Another student, Carl, relied on the diverse nature of the United States’ populace to produce a rainbow-like list of descriptors for Black, Native, Asian, and White Americans: “The future of this nation depends a great deal on the good will of the people who live here whether black or white, red or yellow or any other color of the skin.”

Outside of the Philadelphia group, several other children from around the United States also identified skin color as the driver of racial inequality. On February 5, 1949, Sharon, a White high school senior from Chicago, Illinois, told Truman: “I have a friend who is a Negro. Sometimes it is alarming to hear some of the experiences she has had in school and the things that have happened to her because of her color.”

David, a White ten-year-old boy from New York City, wrote a letter decrying the poll tax, unequal educational opportunities, unfair trials, and the fact that Black people could not pass White people on the sidewalk. He did not understand why “they can’t do [things] because of their color.”

Fred, a sixteen-year-old White boy from Brooklyn, New York, recorded his position on December 6, 1951: “A man is what he is, not, from the color of his skin, but from his soul and from his heart. I am White myself, but I

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150 Bertram and Carl to Truman, [March 19, 1948; Bertram misdated as March 29, 1948], HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 352, PPF 200 Pro L Civil Rights 2.2.48, HST. See also: Bill to Truman, February 11, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 352, PPF 200 Pro J Civil Rights 2.2.48, HST. Bill, a twelve-year-old from Hibbing, Minnesota, told Truman that Southern Senators wanted to “keep all the people down, White, Red, or Black.”

151 Sharon to Truman, February 5, 1949, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1669, OF 596-A Presidential Program Pro S, HST.

152 David to Truman, [February-April, 1948], HST.
regard my friends and neighbors not as Negroes or Indians, or what have you, but as fellow Americans.”

Fred, whose letter attempted to erase racial differences and make “American” the identity all people in the United States shared, addressed the “disgraceful conditions” and lack of constitutional rights people of color experienced in the United States, imploring Truman to “see to it that something is done that these people are treated as Americans and not as dogs to be kicked around.”

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, children’s understandings of race were varied, as seen, for example, in a survey of the Burley schoolchildren’s letters. At the same time, White children during these years began to focus increasingly on color and skin as representations of race, which they then dismissed as a significant marker of difference among humans. Children such as Fred and David, along with others, used their disavowals of color-based difference to support policies that addressed racial inequality in the United States. But what I refer to as a color-based framework reinforced the fiction that race (and racism) was primarily about bodily and visible differences rather than social, economic, familial, and cultural experiences, or discrimination and power. If race could be easily seen and ignored, then the corollary proposition would be that racism could be simply dismantled.

Children did not write letters including this color-based framework in a vacuum. In 1938, the state of New York released a revised Bill of Rights with a new amendment: “No person shall, because of race, color, creed or religion, be

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153 Fred to Truman, December 6, 1951, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 545, OF 93, Misc. 1951 (2 of 2), HST.
154 Ibid.
subjected to any discrimination in his civil rights.”\textsuperscript{155} Over the course of the
1940s, many White and Black Americans included variations of the “race, color,
or creed” phrasing in their discussions of racial equality and civil rights, such that
by the mid-1940s and early 1950s, this was a well-established stock phrase.\textsuperscript{156}
An article in the September 1951 issue of the popular parenting magazine
\textit{Parents' Magazine} recounted a mother and father’s practice of encouraging their
children to imagine how “others see us” (the parents recommended each family
member take a turn as “Mother,” “Father,” and so on) to foster “a feeling of
brotherhood for persons of different races, colors or religions.”\textsuperscript{157} White and
Black children from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Tampa, Florida, Winchester,
Virginia, Rochester, Minnesota, Miami, Florida, and Burley, Idaho incorporated
the “race, color, or creed” litany to protest against Americans’ unequal access to
rights in their letters to Truman.\textsuperscript{158} Americans often used this list to advocate for

\textsuperscript{155} New York State Constitution of 1938, Article 11, quoted in Schultz, \textit{Tri-Faith America}, 51.
\textsuperscript{156} Children’s club organizations were also involved in the promotion of this kind of rhetoric,
indicating one source of children’s exposure to the framework. Consider, for example, Camp Fire
officials’ statement at a national council meeting in 1943: “We believe that in our program of
training girls for responsible citizenship, the problems of minority groups, whether of race, creed,
or economic status, must be recognized.” While the officials did not use the word “color,” their
reproduction of a list of targeted identities and their purported focus on the “problems” of people
of color (rather than the racism of White Americans) underscores their participation in the
circulation of this type of discourse. Camp Fire officials quoted in Helgren, “Inventing American
Girlhood,” 284.
\textsuperscript{157} Thelma S. Douglas, “As Others See Us,” \textit{Parents’ Magazine} 26, no. 9 (September 1951): 46-47, 144-146, quote on 145, Women’s Magazine Archive,
\textsuperscript{158} For several examples, see: Seventh Grade Class at Scotlandville Elementary School to
Truman, November 8, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1669, OF 596-A PPP S, HST; Corrigan
Family to Truman, February 21, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 350, PPF 200 Pro C Civil
Rights 2.2.48 (1 of 2), HST; Beulah writing for Douglas School to Truman, March 31, 1948, HST-
PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 351, PPF 200 Pro D Civil Rights 2.2.48, HST; Katherine to Truman,
February 20, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 350, PPF 200 Pro A Civil Rights 2.2.48, HST;
Robert J. to Truman, March 19, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 352, PPF 200 Pro J Civil
Rights 2.2.48, HST; Joe to Truman, March 3, 1949, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1667, OF 596-A
PPP B, HST.
expanded rights for people of color. For many Americans, including White children, the phrase could reduce racial discrimination and complex inequalities to a three-word list that omitted the daily consequences and violence of racism. As the attachment of the word “color” to race increased in American discourse in the late 1940s and beyond, the color-based framework became one of the primary ways for many Americans, including children, to make arguments about race.

Pro-Equality White Children Writing from the South

While the groups of White children who sent letters to Truman about their lessons on race and brotherhood came from Northern, Midwestern, or Western classrooms, this did not mean that White Southern children universally supported racial inequality and segregation in these years (see Chart F in the appendix). Letters from Southern children seem to have been relatively individualized, in contrast to several groups of Northern children who wrote as whole classes. Given the lack of letters from classes of White children in the South, and the relative preponderance instead of letters from individual children – none of whom explicitly mentioned the word brotherhood – lessons of brotherhood (especially when connected to race) may have been discouraged in Southern schools.159 But given the more daily visibility of discrimination and segregation in the South versus the North, those Southern children who supported racial equality could have been even more equipped than their Northern counterparts to understand

159 Consider the case of a Birmingham, Alabama school’s banning of Senior Scholastic magazine’s Brotherhood Week issue, as well as the example of a strictly religious Brotherhood Week celebration at the Atlanta, Georgia school surveyed by the National Education Association in 1946. Mickenberg, Learning from the Left, 135; National Education Association, More than Tolerance, 4-5, 22-24.
and resist racial inequality. Describing Southern childhood during the Jim Crow era, Jennifer Ritterhouse argues that White parents assembled a variety of lessons to ensure that their children supported the racial order of the region. This included violent displays of White domination such as lynchings and daily performances of difference in signs denoting facilities for “Whites Only” versus “Colored.”

Writing as a “rebel” from Bristol, Tennessee on April 6, 1948, Louisa, a sixteen-year-old White girl, expressed her appreciation for the South along with the president’s civil rights program: “I have lived in the South all my life, especially around Chattanooga, Tennessee, and am truly a rebel at heart. But when it comes to deliberately keeping down a race (and that’s what the so-called Southern Democrats want to do), my stomach, at the thought, just turns around in knots in horror and disgust at such a thing.” Louisa told Truman that she had discussed civil rights with her friends in school and that the “rebel youth” unanimously supported Truman’s program. She noted the existence of a generational gap in the South: “I think that if the minor races don’t have equal rights in business and education this generation, we will have it surely in the next, for every young person I have talked to is in favor of this equality – both in the north and south.” Louisa was not the only Southern child to present the themes of generational change and Southern youth support for a civil rights

161 Louisa to Truman, April 6, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 350, PPF 200 Pro B Civil Rights 2.2.48 (2 of 2), HST.
162 Ibid.
program. These Southern letter writers, who ranged in age from nine to sixteen years old, defied mainstream American assumptions that all White Southerners opposed integration. Letters from Southern children demonstrated that classroom lessons on brotherhood did not act as the only motivating factors behind White children’s written support of racial equality during the postwar era.

At the same time, like most White children writing from the North, Louisa presented an individual rather than structural vision of change for the nation. As her enlightened generation grew up, she argued, equality would follow.

**Black Children Compose Alternative Pro-Equality Arguments**

Black American children recognized that achieving equality in America required significant changes to its social, economic, and political structures. For some of these children, the promotion of brotherhood did not seem sufficient for eradicating racial inequality and discrimination in their country. On March 1, 1948, Robert, a sixteen-year-old Black boy from Braddock, Pennsylvania, sent Truman his own reflections on Brotherhood Week. “The last past week was known as ‘National Brotherhood Week,’ but is there really any ‘brotherhood’ in this world?,” he asked, “Is it really possible that one can live, regardless of race, religious doctrines, or texture of skin, in one so called ‘yard’ together[?]” By posing this question, Robert took the ideal of racial togetherness and flipped it on its head. His was an opinion born of experience.

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163 See: Dolores to Truman, February 11, 1948 [author misdated as February 11, 1947], written from Greenville, South Carolina, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 353, PPF 200 Pro R Civil Rights 2.2.48, HST; Darwin to Truman, April 26, 1948, written from Calvert, Texas, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 353, PPF 200 Pro M Civil Rights 2.2.48 (2 of 2), HST; Jean and Elizabeth to Truman, October 20, 1951, written from Silver Spring, Maryland, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 545, OF 93, Misc. 1951 (2 of 2), HST.

164 Robert B. to Truman, March 1, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 350, PPF 200 Pro B Civil Rights 2.2.48 (2 of 2), HST.
Robert wrote to his president to witness the reality of racial inequality by explaining what the lack of civil rights meant in the daily lives of Black Americans. Robert’s letter was carefully crafted, composed of flowing cursive written in black ink. The four lined pages contained a testimonial: “As you know Pres Truman, life is a hard thing to put up with, for there are so many ups and downs, and the Negro, seems to share more ‘downs’ than ‘ups.’”165 Robert continued: “I live and pray, that I someday although my face is dark, can and will enjoy all the privileges that this country offers. ‘Opportunity,’ is grand, to look at it as it means in Webster. But, to sit and think that the youthful, American Negro, must plan their future carefully, before he or she has the assurance that the gates of opportunity, is even cracked to them.”166 Unlike pro-equality White children who wrote letters to Truman, Robert did not attempt to puzzle out the meaning of race or present a reasoned argument for why humans should be treated equally in the United States. Rather, Robert’s letter asked – but did not answer – whether humans from different racial and religious backgrounds could live harmoniously together. Robert did not attempt to justify his own suitability for citizenship rights by deconstructing and denouncing racist arguments, as had several of the Burley schoolchildren. Robert did not seek to ignore or de-emphasize his racial identity. At a crucial moment in his letter, he re-affirmed it by referencing his “dark” face. For Robert, the choice not to see race was not an option, and he did not seem to want it to be. When Robert wrote Truman to thank him for sending the ten-point civil rights program to Congress, he made his letter more than just an argument.

165 Ibid.
166 Ibid.
It was a vessel for emotion, relaying the anguish of a Black American youth who saw little before him but closed doors.

Robert concluded his letter by delineating the challenges that confronted Black children as they grew. Robert told Truman: “A false step in planning our future casts a great indemnity, which we have to pay mostly with tears and sometimes blood.”167 This one sentence encapsulated significant injustices faced by young Black Americans in the late 1940s and beyond. Robert spoke to the racial double standard of judgment for American children. White children might have been told that everyone makes mistakes, but Black teenagers like Robert were aware that one “false step” was enough to lead to “indemnity.” Robert’s choice to include the word “indemnity” in this line underscored his knowledge that his nation was already waiting to exact payment from Black children’s future actions. Robert knew what such payment looked like. It denoted bodily consequences; “tears” and “blood” come from human bodies experiencing pain. By writing this letter, Robert sought to demonstrate to Truman what it felt like to be constantly at risk – physically, mentally, emotionally, politically. As a Black youth, Robert was uniquely equipped to reflect on this loss. Racial inequalities in American political, social, and economic structures limited sixteen-year-old Robert’s opportunities and endangered him, and he had done nothing to cause this oppression.

Other Black teenagers joined Robert in using their letters to Truman to reflect on threats to Black lives. Danene, a fifteen-year-old Black girl from Washington, D.C., wrote Truman a letter in late February 1948. She wanted to

167 Ibid.
press Truman on the anti-lynching bill he had presented as part of his message to Congress earlier that month, especially in light of Southern Democrats’ plans to filibuster against such legislation. “I know you understand that everyone has a right to live,” she wrote, “A better world this would be if everyone knew that.” Americans were well versed in rights-based language. It was present in the nation’s two founding documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Danene drew on this tradition and chose the most fundamental of the rights listed in the Declaration: the right to life. But Danene altered the original phrasing. She chose the right to live, a verb rather than a noun, an active process rather than a passive state. Lynching exemplified one of the most egregious affronts to that right – an action that flew in the very face of the right to live.

Lynching represented only one aspect of an enduring campaign of terror and violence targeting Black Americans. Following the Civil War and especially after the end of Reconstruction, White men, women, and children in both the South and the North participated in individual and group actions of sexual violation, destruction of homes, businesses, schools, and churches, and practices of daily intimidation that existed in tandem with legal and political constraints. These exercises served to exploit Black Americans’ labor, limit their political, economic, and social power, and abridge any employment of their rights. In light of this careful maintenance of White supremacy and a centuries-

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168 Danene to Truman, February 24, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 350, PPF 200 Pro C Civil Rights 2.2.48 (1 of 2), HST.
169 For scholarship on the various forms of violence White Americans used to support White supremacy, see: Danielle L. McGuire, At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and
long history of enslavement and oppression, Danene protested against White Americans’ ongoing defense of their right to lynch. “Tell me what has the Negro race done to the white man? What could they do? They can’t do anything, they haven’t had the chance. Ever since they have been in America the white man has mistreated them. Therefore they couldn’t possibly have done anything all that I can see is that they were born with a Black skin instead of a white one.”

To try and make Truman understand what it felt like to have the threat of being lynched hanging over one’s head, Danene wrote, “Any white man on the face of Gods earth, any white man, will tell you they do not wish to be treated as the Negroes are. They don’t want to be ‘lynched.’ Do you?”

Danene demanded that Truman, the president of the United States of America, imagine himself as a victim of lynching. She underlined the violent word and abruptly followed it with her two-word question, her staccato rhythm eliciting the horror of her subject. Danene’s letter focused on one of the most gruesome displays of American racism, attempting to force her reader to acknowledge that “Black skin” should not be a legitimate reason to deny anyone’s humanity. As such, like many White children, Danene described racial difference as grounded on the body in the color of one’s skin. Unlike most White child-writers, Danene linked race with skin at the end of a letter detailing the deadly consequences of racism.

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170 Danene to Truman, February 24, 1948, HST.
171 Ibid.
Rather than the large-scale issues Robert and Danene addressed, some Black children wrote about the ways in which racism affected their lives at the quotidian level. In June 1952, one eleven-year-old Black girl complained to Truman about having been refused service at a restaurant in Chattanooga, Tennessee; she asked him to look into the matter and ensure equal treatment to White and Black Americans.\(^{172}\) A few years earlier, in March 1949, another Black girl sent the president a similar demand. Harvetta, a teenager from Louisville, Kentucky, sent Truman a typewritten letter that stated: “I am a Negro of [America], and command the right to go places.”\(^{173}\) Harvetta informed Truman that in Louisville, “the gateway to [the] south,” there was “much segregation.”\(^{174}\) Harvetta sought to move freely where she wished, and the words she used to communicate that desire were unequivocal. She was most concerned that she and other Black children and teenagers could not visit places where they would be able to have fun, such as amusement parks, ice cream parlors, and zoos. Segregation not only prevented Harvetta from going where she wanted to go, it denied her the enjoyment of her childhood.

Harvetta’s experience is an exemplar of the work of Robin Bernstein, who argues that through a variety of cultural artifacts such as advertisements, plays, stories, and even alphabet-books, Americans racialized childhood innocence. Bernstein also explores the racial dynamics of Black and Blackface dolls, including the topsy-turvy and Raggedy Ann dolls. She shows that the way in

\(^{172}\) Cross-Reference Sheet, Description of Letter (including age of writer) from Alberta to Truman, June 13, 1952, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 546, OF 93 Misc. January-June 1952 (2 of 2), HST.

\(^{173}\) Harvetta to Truman, [March 1949], HST.

\(^{174}\) Ibid.
which Black dolls were constructed (in cloth and rubber materials) combined with accompanying “doll literature” invited children to abuse, hang, throw, and “wear them out.” Through these types of cultural practices, Americans saw and presented White children as innocent and deserving of protection and cast Black children as unbreakable, naughty, and un-childlike. Harvetta felt the effects of such a worldview, but she fought back by positioning herself as a deserving youth, demanding the rights she felt she was due – the freedom of movement and the privilege of innocence. She even went so far as to remind Truman of his responsibility to his constituents, the “parents” of Black children who had contributed significantly to Truman’s victory in the 1948 election.

Harvetta’s argument relied primarily on the logic of American citizenship and her own advocacy for herself as a child, but she also sought to convince the president that Black Americans merited the rights of citizens. Harvetta characterized most Black people as worthy of such rights, even as she criticized some unworthy Black Americans who might offend Truman with their inappropriate, perhaps overly challenging protests: “I know there are some Negros that are all ways going to show off no matter what privilege you give

175 Bernstein, Racial Innocence. Bernstein uses this history to contextualize psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s “doll tests,” arguing that the tests set up a drama that exploited this construction of Black dolls as “bad” dolls. The tests generally resulted in Black children crying when interrogated about Black dolls. Bernstein argues that Black children were “agentive” in crying because their tears interrupted a century of objects and performances that communicated Black childhood as painless. Rather, these children’s tears acted as the best possible evidence that Black children could and did feel real and visible pain.

176 Harvetta was not the only Black child to write a letter on limitations to childhood play. Andrew, an eleven-year-old Black boy from Washington, D.C., wrote Truman on June 20, 1949 to ask if he could be allowed to play on the White playground that was around the corner from his house, rather than the one reserved for Black children located five blocks away. Andrew wrote that his parents were worried he was going to be hit by a car making the long walk to the segregated playground. See: Andrew to Truman, June 20, 1949, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 548, OF 93-B July 1948-June 1949 (2 of 2), HST.

177 Harvetta to Truman, [March 1949], HST.
them, but that is no reason for the people of other races to blame the whole race of people.”178 Another Black teenager, seventeen-year-old Wesley from New York, New York, also apologized for those members of his race who did not meet White American standards: “think of Booker T. Washington, an[d] George Washington Carver . . . please don’t look at the bad things look at the good one’s and for my sakes please look over the ignorant one’s. Because there is no perfect race, and there is no race noticed so closely as the negro’s . . . the majority will prove worthy of being a true American citizen.”179 In writing these letters, Wesley and Harvetta both engaged in what historians, notably Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, have termed the “politics of respectability.”180 Both children wanted to demonstrate to Truman that the “majority” of Black Americans acted respectably and followed in the footsteps of safe and productive Black luminaries such as George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington. Although they disparaged members of their race for being “show-offs” and “ignorant,” Harvetta and Wesley sought to improve the lives of all Black Americans with their letters. Wesley also added that Black Americans were subjected to a higher degree of scrutiny than any other race. By presenting these arguments, Harvetta and Wesley replicated the post-Reconstruction political tactics of middle-class Black Americans who attempted to reform White

178 Ibid.
179 Wesley to Truman, [Undated by author but marked as received August 1948 by White House staff], HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1667, OF 596-A PPP K, HST.
180 See: Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), especially 14-15 and chapter seven. Higginbotham argues that middle-class Black Baptist women during the Jim Crow era believed that “‘respectable’ behavior in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America” (Higginbotham 14).
Americans’ perceptions of Black people as a whole by proving their race’s worthiness with careful attention to their private and public actions.  

Black children assembled arguments to convince the president that all Americans, regardless of race, deserved expanded rights and opportunities. Several Black children combined emotional pleas with rights-driven demands to elicit a sympathetic response from their reader. Others chose to mobilize their subject positions as children and youths to show that restrictions on their freedom were unfair. Some denounced the “bad element” in their race while concomitantly holding up positive examples demonstrating the “good” that characterized the deserving majority. A few Black children sent short letters by themselves or through their schools to share lines such as: “We do want Civil rights.” As a group, Black children did not accept a gradual timeline for reaching racial equality. For them, reflections on civil rights, equality, and justice could not be confined to lessons studied during Brotherhood Week.

**Anti-Equality White Children Defend Their Position**

Among those White children who chose not to support racial equality, most justified their position by expressing their fear of interracial sexual interactions and violence. White Southern girls’ letters in particular conveyed this

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182 Bessie Jean and George Ethel to Truman, April 22, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 354, PPF 200 Pro T Civil Rights 2.2.48, HST. See also a letter written by representatives from the “six high class” at Richard A. Tucker School in Norfolk, Virginia, in which the young Black students say they have been studying “about the Negroes and Their Achievements” using careful inclusion of the word “achievements” juxtaposed next to the line “We are very happy to know that you are trying to give the Negroes the opportunities entitled to them by the Constitution of the United States.” All told, the letter was only four sentences long. Richard A. Tucker School Students to Truman, April 8, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 353, PPF 200 Pro R Civil Rights 2.2.48, HST.
trepidation. Billie Jean, a White girl from Selma, Alabama, wrote to tell Truman how she felt about his civil rights program in August 1948: “You Mr. Truman are causing the most violent destruction on the South. There has been more rape, attempted rape and murder since you suggested Civil Rights program. Yes, Mr. Truman since you went into Cahoots with the devil and tried to bring more evil upon the people of the South.”

She then provided a detailed description of the events for which she held Truman responsible:

A young girl just isn’t safe these days, we’re scared to look out of our door after dark. Sunday morning at 3:30 my Mother was sleeping peacefully in her own bed, when a negro man came into her room and tried to attack her, she screamed and he jumped out of the window. Also four or five other women were attacked by this same negro that night. The police can’t seem to find him. The next night 3 more women were attacked by what is believed to be the same man. The negros are getting very bold and we are getting scared!

While it is problematic and dangerous to question the veracity of statements made by those affected by sexual violence, this letter reproduced racist arguments dating back to the years immediately following the Civil War and particularly emblematic of the Jim Crow era. Historians now use the term the “rape-lynch complex” to describe the process by which whole communities lynched Black men and boys without pausing to question the guilt of the accused. White women and girls, by offering up their accusations, participated as key and complicit players in this grisly spectacle. In her letter, Billie Jean presented herself, her mother, and the other White women in Selma as severely threatened, using the words “scared,” “screamed,” and “attacked” to describe

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183 Billie Jean to Truman, [Undated by author but marked as received August 19, 1948 by White House staff], HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1669, OF 596-A Presidential Program Con G-M, HST.

184 Ibid.

185 See: DuRocher, *Raising Racists*, 5-6, 133, for a discussion of the role of White girls in the “rape-lynch complex.”
their beleaguered position. She added to this impression by describing herself and her mother as innocents. Billie Jean was “a young girl” and her mother “was sleeping peacefully.” Finally, she chose a recognizable word applied to Black people who were not adhering to White social standards in Southern communities: “bold.”

Billie Jean presented multiple arguments in this letter, all of which served to reinforce a racist hierarchy. By casting herself as the innocent under attack, Billie Jean drew upon the same construction of racialized innocence that Harvetta, the Black girl who wanted to be granted the right to childhood through admission to zoos and amusement parks, had to work against.\textsuperscript{186} Billie Jean implicitly argued that it was her White life – her White \textit{body} – that deserved social protection and value. In contrast, she presented Black people, specifically a Black man, as an inhuman, even bestial aggressor. He attacked by night and eluded police; he was “bold.” Such a character, her letter argued, should not be seen as deserving of the rights enumerated by Truman’s civil rights message. Finally, Billie Jean’s outrage relied on the fiction that the White race was “pure” and should remain so. This falsehood represented one of the crucial underlying justifications for the ideology of White supremacy.\textsuperscript{187} Within this context, Billie Jean’s narration of the sexual violation of White women’s bodies recounted a direct attack on such purity and, by extension, on the fiction itself.

\textsuperscript{186} Bernstein, \textit{Racial Innocence}.
\textsuperscript{187} According to Pascoe, this “scientific fiction” was one of the three major precepts that miscegenation law rested upon, along with a constitutional fiction and the fiction that race “actually existed.” Pascoe, \textit{What Comes Naturally}, 7-8.
In a related strategy also meant to police racial and sexual boundaries, other White children used their letters to present themselves as the protectors of White racial purity by protesting against interracial relationships. John, who called himself “a young person of the south,” wrote Truman from Hattiesburg, Mississippi in February 1948 to express his profound disappointment in the president’s civil rights program. He argued that Northerners did not understand the Southern way of life. John contended that because White Northerners’ had “interbred” with Black people, it was up to the South to act as the last refuge of Whiteness: “In the south . . . segregation maintains white people white and black persons black. Down here every white person is white because we don’t interbreed with the Negro, as do you northerners. I have been to all the largest Northern cities, and for some reason almost everyone has a different complexion due to interbreeding.”

Multiple children referenced the dangers of interracial marriage, including twelve-year-old Nellie Ann, who wrote Truman from Saint Louis, Missouri on March 5, 1948 to say: “you keep saying colored people should have equal rights. Would you like it if a colored person married your daughter or became pres. of U.S.? I don’t think you would.”

As Peggy Pascoe argues, marriage has been one of the most “fruitful” ways to demarcate racial boundaries and preserve racial hierarchies because it provides a direct and intimate link between the family and the state. Legitimate

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188 John L. to Truman, February 12, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 355, PPF 200 Civil Rights 2.2.48 Con (2 of 5), HST.
189 Nellie Ann to Truman, [Undated by author but marked as received March 5, 1948 by White House staff], HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 355, PPF 200 Civil Rights 2.2.48 Con (4 of 5), HST.
marriages thus act as crucial markers of citizenship. As such, children’s fears about supposed threats to the sanctity of the institution of marriage appeared in many of the letters children wrote in support of White supremacy. On August 27, 1946, Benjamin, a White boy from Wausau, Wisconsin, sent Truman a remonstrance against the increasing numbers and power of American Jews. Benjamin specifically mentioned the exclusionary marriage practices of Jews to prove his overall point that they were a threat to the United States: “[I]f a Jew marries a gentile he is cast out.” The double standard here is telling. White children engaged in logical gymnastics to support racist hierarchies: White Christians should never intermarry, but the actions of a different racial or religious group also seeking to maintain purity indicated a conspiracy in which “these Jews have a network all over the United States and are classing themselves higher than the gentiles.”

While many White children who opposed integration and racial equality relied on explicit defenses of White supremacy to make their cases, some White children assumed a more moderate position. They advocated for a slight expansion in Black Americans’ “freedom,” or even gradual integration. One of the Burley schoolchildren, Shirley, stood apart from her peers as the only member of her class who viewed segregation as a “good act.” She added: “I think we should treat the Negroes a little more freely. I think the Negro children should have a

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191 Benjamin to Truman, August 27, 1946, HST-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Box 11, “Immigration” [One Folder], HST.
192 Ibid.
education as white children.” Shirley’s position indicated that even in a White classroom that appeared to be fully supportive of integration, resistance lingered. Given that this group of letters came from Idaho, a state far from the Deep South, Shirley’s letter demonstrated that opposition to integration was a national phenomenon. Finally, Shirley presented some of the most typical phrases used by moderate anti-integrationists during this time period. She included the word “freely” and applied it to the treatment of Black people, echoing reformist organizations like the CIC when they spoke of improving Black Southerners’ “social conditions.” Shirley also noted that Black and White children should receive equal educational opportunities, repeating the segregationist argument and “separate-but-equal” principle enshrined in constitutional law by the United States Supreme Court in its 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. Like other segregationists, she left out reference as to how equality and segregation could walk hand-in-hand. Shirley did not include any information about why she supported segregation, and she did not share her opinion on racial difference.

Dora, a thirteen-year-old White girl from West Memphis, Arkansas, recommended a more progressive stance than Shirley by sending an alternative civil rights program to the president on May 8, 1948. “Of course I don’t see a thing wrong with your ‘Civil Rights Program’ but the rest of the South does,” she wrote, “If you would only change the immediate changes it would cause, I’m sure

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193 Shirley D. to Truman, March 3, 1949, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1667, OF 596-A PPP B, HST.
194 Chart G in the appendix displays the origin, by state, of segregationist letter writers. Likely because of the way in which the Truman White House and/or Library saved these letters, I have a very small sample of letters from segregationist children. Most of this sample came from Southern states, although this should not be taken to imply that support for segregation was isolated to the South. Shirley’s letter underscored this fact.
the South would accept it.”\textsuperscript{196} Dora wanted Truman to institute a trial period of several years for schools and public transportation and only make lynching a federal offense when states exceeded a set amount of time in letting the crime go unpunished. Dora’s advocacy for a gradualist approach to civil rights assumed the continuance of White political and social control and prioritized protecting the South from “immediate changes.” In a similar argument, another White youth joined Dora in advocating for integration, but only so long as it “worked.” Albert, an eighteen-year-old from Dallas, Texas, told Truman on February 10, 1948 that civil rights was “a very ticklish problem” because “[e]ver since the slave days, the people in the South have been brought up to believe that Negroes were meant to be slaves and that the whites are better than any ‘nigger’ . . . The people must be re-educated.”\textsuperscript{197} As one method of re-education, Albert told Truman that he should implement a trial integration program at just one school, operating under “[the] agreement that if friction were caused between the two classes, the school would be closed then and there and segregation would be continued thereafter.”\textsuperscript{198} While Albert and Dora both wrote to support integration, they still maintained their commitment to a world in which White Americans controlled society and made the important decisions, likely including those about whether integration caused “friction.” In a clear indication of the importance she assigned to maintaining White political power in the South, Dora suggested that Truman

\textsuperscript{196} Dora to Truman, May 8, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 354, PPF 200 Pro S Civil Rights 2.2.48 (2 of 2), HST.
\textsuperscript{197} Albert to Truman, February 10, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, PPF, Box 352, PPF 200 Pro M Civil Rights 2.2.48 (1 of 2), HST.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
pick a “Southern Democrat” to win re-election in November.\textsuperscript{199} Despite the inherent limits of their plans, Dora and Albert each acknowledged that they wrote their letters within a society resistant to their positions. Both letters underscored the fact that children’s postwar positions on race-based civil rights existed on a spectrum rather than fitting into a strict dichotomy of pro versus con.

\begin{itemize}
\item The sweeping legislative program about which so many children wrote to President Harry S. Truman between 1948 and the end of his presidency in 1952 came mostly to naught. The only major change that occurred after the February 2, 1948 message to Congress was Truman’s Executive Order for the integration of the armed forces in July 1948, a recommendation proposed by the President’s Committee on Civil Rights. But the lack of teeth in the Truman administration on the issue of civil rights, especially after Truman won re-election in November 1948, did not stop many American children from seeing him as a person to whom they could and should confess their feelings about civil rights.\textsuperscript{200} Many children wrote the president independent letters that did not appear to be part of classroom initiatives. For those children whose letters about race were clearly school-sponsored activities, Truman represented a public figure who had spoken out on the necessity of “practical, workable arrangements for achieving greater tolerance and brotherhood,” and whose message therefore fit the educational programs many anti-prejudice teachers developed during these years.\textsuperscript{201}
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Whether motivated by their own desires to communicate with a person in power

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\textsuperscript{199} Dora to Truman, May 8, 1948, HST.
\textsuperscript{200} Sitkoff, “The Election of 1948,” 614; Walker, Presidents and Civil Liberties, 148.
\textsuperscript{201} Message, Truman, February 2, 1948, HST.
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or by the necessity of completing a school assignment, both before and after Truman’s program was announced, White and Black children sent the president hundreds of letters about civil rights. In doing so, they defended several positions on race-based civil rights with written arguments that children from following generations continued to draw on throughout the balance of the twentieth century.

White children who sent their written support of integration and racial equality in the late 1940s and early 1950s did so in arguments that accentuated the similarities between White and Black Americans. These children, especially those who lived outside the South, appear to have studied civil rights in their classrooms, participating in conversations that connected the concept of brotherhood with racial equality. For the most part, their teachers’ lesson plans seem to have incorporated the postwar discourse interpreting the “Negro problem” as a moral issue primarily confined to the South that could be ameliorated by encouraging children to promote racial friendship and togetherness. Many White children fulfilled this interpretation and reproduced this racial discourse, acting as anti-prejudicial children who protested against discrimination by offering solutions such as the increase of brotherhood between humans. Some classrooms and some children broadened their discussions of race-based civil rights, and these children’s letters resisted racist arguments and listed various structural changes that needed to occur for the nation to achieve racial equality. Many White children also participated in developing a color-based framework that minimized racial difference to a bodily marker located on skin,
using this framework as another strategy for emphasizing racial sameness. Like many of the White adults around them, most pro-equality White children during the late 1940s and in the years beyond relied on arguments stressing the inherent commonality of all humans to make their cases for integration as a moral resolution of a moral dilemma.

Black children lived the reality of racial inequality every day, and their letters communicated their intimate familiarity with their lack of civil rights. As a result, Black children sought to demonstrate that Americans of color deserved, without question, equality now. Within the pages they sent to the president, Black children presented rights-based arguments that detailed the various forms of racial violence and discrimination that affected Black Americans nationwide. While Black children joined White children in advocating for Americans not to discriminate on the basis of skin color, they also rejected limited strategies such as the celebration of National Brotherhood Week or the embrace of brotherhood as viable ways to eradicate racism. For many of these children, letter writing appeared to represent one of their main methods of protest. In the decades that followed, Black children continued to employ letter writing as a critical method for communicating arguments that promoted racial equality and demanded that the government grant them their rights as full-fledged American citizens.

On the other side of the debate, White children’s support for segregation existed on a sliding scale. Most of the children who wrote letters supporting the maintenance of segregation were from the South, although not exclusively – just as not all supporters of equality were from the North. Some White Southern
children directly involved themselves in the reproduction of racist arguments about White female vulnerability, Black male bestiality, White purity, and the corresponding importance of segregation laws. Others from the North and the South held a more moderate position on Black civil rights and integration, but their letters indicated their presumption that White political and social control of American society would continue unabated.

Debates over race-based civil rights and integration would center even more on children after the United States Supreme Court decided in 1954 with *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* that “separate-but-equal” was unequal. In this case, the Court outlawed the segregation of public institutions by ruling in favor of five groups of Black plaintiffs protesting against several segregated school districts.\textsuperscript{202} Because of its focus on schools, many American children viewed *Brown* as the opening of a fight that they, as students, had a unique right to influence. As children around the nation geared up to participate in this battle through their letters, many included arguments developed by both children and adults in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

CHAPTER TWO – “Who is responsible for this mess??”: Children React to Brown and Little Rock, 1954-1959

For much of the twentieth century, American schoolchildren gave little thought to school during the month of June. As the inaugural month of summer vacation, June was not the time to worry about either the past or the upcoming school years. In 1954, however, June was not simply the beginning of summer. On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court handed down the Brown decision, declaring unconstitutional the “separate-but-equal” principle for public school education. As a result, the summer of 1954 represented the moment when many children around the United States involved themselves in a battle they believed was uniquely about them. Writing to President Dwight D. Eisenhower on June 28, 1954 from Muskogee, Oklahoma, thirteen-year-old Paula complained, “I had just as soon give up my dream of being a lawyer if I had to go to school with negros to do it. My mom told me I would go to school and do whatever the supreme court said. I don’t think that it would do much good because I don’t see how I could learn anything with someone that stunk sitting beside of me.”

Chief Justice Earl Warren’s eleven-page opinion for the Brown decision included social scientific research on American race relations dating back to World War II. In order to justify the Court’s finding that segregation represented an unequal system, Warren cited psychological and sociological studies from the

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203 For a history of summer vacation, see: Kenneth Gold, School's In: The History of Summer Education and American Public Schools (New York: P. Lang, 2002).
205 Paula A. to Eisenhower, June 28, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 2, DDE.
1940s and 1950s that identified racism and its manifestation in segregated schools as either a psychological disease or a moral and mental deficiency affecting both the object of discrimination and the prejudicial racist. Perhaps in an effort to stress the “damage” segregated schools caused to the Black child-plaintiffs in *Brown*, the text of Warren’s decision repeated only those aspects of the psychological studies that “proved” the existence of “a feeling of inferiority” in the “psyche” of Black children living in a segregated society. Warren concluded the footnote dedicated to social science by citing Gunnar Myrdal’s *An America Dilemma*, highlighting the Court’s view of racial discrimination as a practice rooted in individual attitudes. With *Brown*, the Supreme Court offered the integration of schools as a prescription to solve these mental shortcomings in the youngest generation of Americans.

*Brown* also rested on the Court’s interpretation of public education as a right of citizenship belonging to all American children. In order to contextualize the outcome of *Brown*, Rebecca de Schweinitz notes that since the 1930s, child welfare advocates and educational experts in the United States had increasingly discussed children’s education as a fundamental right. Education, these activists argued, should extend to each American child the opportunity to develop into a mentally healthy individual prepared to act as a tolerant and mindful American citizen. de Schweinitz adds that the definition of education as a universal right...
received increased global credibility when the United Nations declared in its 1948 
*Universal Declaration of Human Rights* that everyone, regardless of racial or religious identity, had a right to education. As Wilma King demonstrates in *African American Childhoods*, Black parents who viewed education as one of the most important post-Civil War exercises of their freedom had been demanding that the American government and justice system grant their children equal access to quality education since Reconstruction. In their longstanding legal battle against segregation, the NAACP and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the organizations responsible for litigating the *Brown* case, often attempted to use the law to break down barriers to Black students’ educational opportunities. In the 1954 decision, Chief Justice Warren noted that the Court needed to view public education in relationship to its “present place in American life” in order to rightly judge the case. In so doing, Warren’s decision incorporated a definition of education advanced by Black and White educational activists for decades: “education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments . . . It is the very foundation of good citizenship . . . In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal

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213 In the 1930s and 1940s, many of these cases dealt with graduate education, and the NAACP usually attempted to ensure the “equal” aspect of “separate but equal” in their arguments. In his study of *Brown*, James T. Patterson argues that the NAACP shifted tactics in October 1950, deciding to move full tilt against segregation by challenging the constitutionality of separate educations for Black and White children. Patterson, *Brown v. Board*, 14-19, 38.
Brown legitimized American children’s right to equal education by protecting it with constitutional law.\textsuperscript{215}

After the Court decided Brown, the justices asked for follow-up arguments from the litigants and from Federal and State Attorney Generals nationwide on implementing the decision.\textsuperscript{216} Warren released this secondary ruling (known as Brown II) a year later, in May 1955. The vague opinion asked public schools to integrate “with all deliberate speed” rather than demanding immediate relief for students experiencing racial discrimination.\textsuperscript{217} By bowing to the demands of moderates who asked for “gradual” integration and reform, Brown II initiated a tortured process of application, opening the door to widespread legal and extra-legal resistance to Brown.\textsuperscript{218}

At every stage of the legal battle and the post-Brown conflict over putting the decision into practice, children played a key role. In each of the five individual cases that became bundled into Brown when it first went to the Supreme Court in 1952, children represented the object of concern for all of the legal actors.


\textsuperscript{218} Patterson, Brown v. Board, 83-84; Brian J. Daugherity, Keep on Keeping On: The NAACP and the Implementation of Brown v. Board of Education in Virginia (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 27, 34.
involved in the courtroom drama. In one of the cases, *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*, Black high schoolers from Robert Mussa Moton High School led by sixteen-year-old Barbara Johns catalyzed adults' activism in their community, pushing their slow-moving elders to support their protests for integrated schools. Once this kind of resistance made it to the Supreme Court in 1952, the NAACP’s chief counsel, Thurgood Marshall, drew on Black psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s doll experiments – in which Black children consistently chose to play with (and assign positive attributes to) white rather than brown dolls – as evidence that segregation induced an “inferiority complex” in Black children. Finally, once the decision was released, children stood at the frontline of clashes over integration that occurred in and around their schools.

In the fall of 1957, Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas became the most world-renowned example of the implementation of – and resistance to – *Brown*. When the Little Rock School Board adopted Superintendent Virgil T. Blossom’s plan for gradual integration in May 1955, the body set September

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219 Patterson, *Brown v. Board*, 27-35. The five cases were: *Brown* itself, filed in Topeka, Kansas; *Briggs v. Elliott*, filed in Clarendon County, South Carolina; *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*, filed in Prince Edward County, Virginia; *Gebhart v. Belton*, filed in the Delaware Court of Chancery; and *Bolling v. Sharpe*, filed in Washington, D.C.


223 The Little Rock School Crisis developed into an international affair with global press coverage in September 1957, causing grave concern among American diplomats around the world. Dudziak, “Holding the Line in Little Rock,” in *Cold War Civil Rights*, 115-151.
1957 as the start date and Central High as the location for the launch of school integration in the city. In late August and early September 1957, the segregationist Mother’s League of Central High and Governor of Arkansas Orval Faubus initiated their resistance to the Blossom Plan. On September 3, 1957, Faubus ordered the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the admitted Black students known as the Little Rock Nine – Melba Pattillo Beals, Minniejean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Gloria Ray Karlmark, Carlotta Walls LaNier, Thelma Mothershed, Terrence Roberts, and Jefferson Thomas – from entering the school. After a federal judge revoked Faubus’s authority to deploy the Guardsmen in this manner, the Little Rock police force replaced them and continued to prevent the Black students from attending school. Finally, after a mob of over a thousand White residents protested against the students’ entry on September 23, President Eisenhower reluctantly responded to the mayor’s call for federal troops to restore order to the city. On September 24, Eisenhower deployed 1,200 members of the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock, allowing the Little Rock Nine to begin their tumultuous school year. Troop presence declined in November 1957, and White students’ harassment of the Black teenagers escalated over the course of the year. Eight of the nine remained enrolled, and Ernest Green graduated in May 1958. After the 1957-1958 school year, the conflict persisted. Governor Faubus succeeded in using the power of his office to close schools during the 1958-1959 session. Once schools

226 Ibid., 137.
re-opened in the fall of 1959 with a so-called compliant plan for integration, the Little Rock School Board used a pupil placement law to limit Black students’ entrance into previously all-White schools, accepting only six Black applicants to attend two high schools.²²⁷

Throughout the Little Rock Crisis, Black and White children acted as principal players. White girls such as segregationist Sammie Dean Parker held themselves up as the iconic victims of integration, decrying the threat of “race mixing” that Black boys’ presence at Central High raised.²²⁸ White boys openly defied school rules and acted as violent aggressors toward Black students; one White boy attempted to stab Minniejean Brown in front of federal troops.²²⁹ The nine Black students were asked by their parents, Black activists around the nation, and members of their community to stand as examples for their race and silently endure racist abuse.²³⁰ Finally, with media outlets around the United States giving extensive coverage to the Crisis in the fall of 1957, children from all corners of the nation observed and weighed in by writing letters to President Eisenhower.

Beginning with Brown in 1954 and continuing throughout the rest of the decade, hundreds of children communicated with Eisenhower on the subject of school integration, often describing themselves as concerned parties who should be consulted on the matter. Some children even wanted direct control. Letter

²²⁷ Ibid., 192.
²²⁸ Ibid., 121, 123-124.
²²⁹ Ibid., 110, 124.
²³⁰ Anderson, Little Rock, 96-101. For an extensive narrative of the Little Rock School Crisis, with particular focus on the traumatic effects of integration for Black students such as Elizabeth Eckford, see: David Margolick, Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).
writers on both sides of the integration debate suggested that the president hold a vote for all American children to decide the issue. On February 26, 1956, Lucille, a White junior in high school from Greenville, South Carolina, pointed to the problem of Congress, the Supreme Court, and politicians making decisions about her schooling: “We know that we whites do not want to go to school with the Negroes and we content that the Negroes do not want to go to school with us. Therefore, why shouldn’t the Negroes and whites vote in their own schools concerning the matter? After all, we are the ones who will study and learn together, not the men of Congress, the Supreme Court, or the politicians.”

Lucille and other children who mentioned voting asserted that children understood their own schools better than adults. They added that they had to live with the consequences of public school integration on a day-to-day basis. While opposition to integration led Lucille to attempt to wrest control of the process from adults with political power, other students reasoned that putting children in the driver’s seat would allow positive integration experiences to expand across the United States. Milton, a White eighth-grade boy from South Charleston, West Virginia, noted in his February 7, 1956 letter to Eisenhower that his school had accepted “colored students” for the first time that year. The rest of the student body had not complained. “The only people that have been yelling,” he continued, “are the parents and the men running for office this year. They aren’t

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231 For some examples, see: Daisy to Eisenhower, February 14, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 2, DDE; Elmer to Eisenhower, September 17, 1958, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Other Schools; Segregation, Box 4, Folder 2, DDE. Neither Daisy nor Elmer specified their position on integration, but both children believed in the merit of a vote among schoolchildren.

232 Lucille to Eisenhower, February 26, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 4, DDE. See also: Ann C. to Eisenhower, [January 25, 1956], DDE.
the ones going to school with them . . . The reason the parents have been yelling
is they think their child is better than some negro. Mr Eisenhower I think the
school children all over the United States should vote on whether or not they
want to go to school with them.” On September 27, 1957, Melba, a Black high
school girl from Chattanooga, Tennessee, joined Milton in targeting parents: “If
the parents would just stay out of this and let the school children alone we (both
white and colored) would get [along] just fine . . . Why can’t the grown-ups leave
us school children alone and let us fight our own war, If we don’t want to go to
school together I think we can settle this matter all by ourself’s.” Although they
argued for opposing positions, Lucille, Milton, and Melba all characterized adults
with authority, notably politicians and parents, as meddling in business that was
not, nor should be, theirs.

Between 1954 and 1959, children used their letters to Eisenhower to
exercise what they presented as their right to participate in the decision-making
process regarding school integration. During these years, many American adults,
including the justices of the Supreme Court, interpreted children’s education as a
right of citizenship. By writing letters to the president, children entered their vision

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233 Milton to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received February 7, 1956 by White
House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2,
Folder 2, DDE.

234 Melba to Eisenhower, September 27, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re
Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 13, Folder 5a, DDE. See also: Goldie to Eisenhower,
[Undated by author but marked as received February 10, 1956 by White House staff], DDE-RP,
WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 2, DDE; Lisle to
Eisenhower, June 7, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration,
Box 6, Unfoldered, DDE; Cyril to Eisenhower, October 3, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF,
Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 9, Unfoldered, DDE; Virginia Bo. to Eisenhower,
September 27, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. Re Little Rock School, Box 3,
Unfoldered, DDE; Sue P. to Eisenhower, September 26, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail,
Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 13, Folder 5a, DDE; Doris to
Eisenhower, [Undated by author but postage stamped September 25, 1957], DDE-RP, WHCF,
Bulk Mail File, Correspondence re Little Rock School and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 1, DDE.
for that right into the sphere of deliberation. In these letters, children included a range of arguments to defend their particular positions on school integration. Children who advocated for segregation, integration, and even a middle road between the two used similar evidence in their arguments. This chapter delineates children’s reliance on what I call rhetorical strategies, or children’s incorporation of information they assumed would be especially persuasive to their reader. I identify four major rhetorical strategies employed by children on all sides of the debate in their letters to Eisenhower. Children warned about the threat of the Cold War; interpreted God’s will with the aid of religious teachings; recounted historical precedents and contemporary stories about Americans of color; and described both symbolic actions of American citizenship and the United States’ founding documents.235

While some children had also called upon these four rhetorical strategies in their letters to Truman, children added urgency to the strategies in the 1950s. Many children in this decade wrote about integration as an eventuality about to affect their schools. Perhaps because of these newly personal implications of the integration debate, few children repeated arguments about brotherhood typical

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235 This should not be taken to imply that children writing either in the 1940s or the 1960s did not also use these strategies. However, in each decade, historical particularities affected the content of children’s arguments. For example, those children writing about international issues during the 1940s often looked back to World War II along with the Cold War. Contrastingly, while many children in the 1960s also wrote about the Cold War, they often focused on the particular problems posed by visiting officials coming from newly independent states in Africa and Asia confronting Jim Crow segregation. See: Lynn R. to Truman, [March 3, 1949], HST; Robert M. to Truman, October 25, 1949, HST-RP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail File, Box 10, Civil Rights III, HST; Allen to Truman, [July 8, 1949], HST-RP, WHCF, OF, Box 545, OF 93, Misc. April to Dec 1949 (1 of 2), HST; Werner to Kennedy, May 10, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 174, Unfolded, JFK; Janice to Kennedy, May 11, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 174, Unfolded, JFK.
among child-writers during the late 1940s and early 1950s. In addition, more letters than in the pre-\textit{Brown} years appear to have been sent by individual children rather than by students completing school assignments.

At the same time, key characteristics of children’s earlier arguments persisted. Most pro-integration White children continued to stress racial sameness in arguments that focused on the moral implications of racism rather than the structural political and economic barriers to racial equality. Although many Black children also called attention to how they were the “same” as White people, Black children usually added specific references to the ways in which they and other Black Americans were being prevented from enjoying their full rights as citizens. Many segregationist children repeated gendered and sexualized racist arguments in order to oppose all forms of integration then and forever, while other children sustained a more moderate view on integration. Regional patterns also mirrored those of the previous decade. While the majority of children who wrote in support of segregation hailed from the South, White Southern children did not represent the only demographic who wrote to Eisenhower to protest integration. On the flip side, though most pro-integration White children came from Northern states, some Southern White children supported integration (see Charts I-K in the appendix). The letters children wrote

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[236]{In my collection of children’s letters to Eisenhower, I found only four children who used the word “brotherhood.” See: William F. to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received October 10, 1957 by White House staff] DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 9, Unfoldered, DDE; High School Methodist Youth Fellowship to Eisenhower, October 5, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 9, Unfoldered, DDE; Don to Eisenhower, May 19, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 2, DDE; Carolyn L. to Eisenhower, February 25, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 1, Folder 3, DDE.}
\end{footnotes}
in the 1950s remained focused on integration and the relationship between Black and White Americans. Black and White children represented the majority of letter-writers during this decade, though children on both sides of the debate cited the United States’ multiracial population as one element of their arguments.

In many of their letters, children denoted racial difference by using the same color-based framework present in children’s letters from the 1940s. As during the previous decade, the application of this framework involved children’s centering of bodily racial differences, especially skin, in their understandings of race. Children’s written arguments associated racialized skin with specific colors, signifying Black, White, Asian, Latina/o, and Native Americans in their letters with lists of colors: “black,” “white,” “yellow,” “brown,” and “red.” Both Black and White children reproduced this framework in their 1950s letters. Pro-equality writers attempted to use the framework to highlight the absurdity of something as trivial as skin color affecting access to equality, while segregationist children called attention to color in order to protest against “mixing” that which was visibly separate. Some pro-equality White children mentioned colors not associated with any racial group to ridicule racial discrimination. Edward, a White tenth-grade boy from Cleveland, Ohio, included such a listing in his September 21, 1957 letter to Eisenhower: “God doesn’t care whether our skin is white, brown, or green.”

Mentioning green people made racism seem ridiculous, so that racial discrimination against any person, real or unreal, appeared contrary to all sense. At the same time, this surrealist rendering of race endeavored to persuade racists to abandon their racism by focusing on the illogic and ignorance of

\[237\] Edward to Eisenhower, September 21, 1957, DDE.
prejudice – not the power and inequality inherent to discrimination.

Children writing on behalf of different positions used the color-based framework either to accentuate racial sameness in order to support integration or to highlight visible racial differences that should remain “separate” under segregation. No matter their position, children writing in the 1950s flexibly fit their evidence to the particular case they wanted to make. This chapter describes in turn each of the four primary rhetorical strategies that children included in their arguments for Eisenhower, showing how children with varying opinions about school integration mobilized every strategy to back divergent sides of the debate.

**Children Warn the President About the Dangers of the Cold War**

Many American children discussed race-based civil rights in global terms. They pressured Eisenhower to consider the international implications of domestic racial conflict in light of the Cold War. Cold War rhetoric pervaded American politics, popular culture, media, and educational materials during the 1950s. In the newly unveiled amusement park Disneyland, along with its promotional television show, space-themed “Tomorrowland” envisioned America’s present and future technological supremacy.\(^{238}\) Manichaean Westerns on film, television, and the radio celebrated rugged cowboys protecting beleaguered frontier towns from “savage” enemies, providing cultural justification for ideological and military battles with the Soviet Union and other “Communist” foes.\(^{239}\) Threats of communism and Russian invasion entered American classrooms as federal,

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state, and local government officials eliminated “red” teaching materials, forced teachers to take loyalty oaths, and made students perform duck-and-cover drills under their desks.\textsuperscript{240}

Many politicians and members of the public in both the United States and the Soviet Union connected the Cold War to the debate over American civil rights. Soviet and Communist Party propagandists from the 1930s onward underscored the hypocrisy of American rhetoric about democracy and freedom existing in tandem with Jim Crow segregation, disenfranchisement, and violence, particularly in the South.\textsuperscript{241} American political leaders and civil rights activists both recognized the potential damage that could be wrought by the continued embarrassment of legal segregation. As Mary L. Dudziak argues, many mainstream civil rights activists saw the conflict as useful leverage, even as the United States government took action against more radical activists – especially those who propagated class-based critiques of the government – in the name of Cold War protectionism.\textsuperscript{242} Segregationists used the Cold War context to slander civil rights leaders and movement participants as Communist agitators and to frame civil rights reform as submission to Soviet propaganda.\textsuperscript{243} Finally, American children from around the nation wrote about the possibility that public racial conflict and either the continuation or cessation of segregation could lead to Russian invasion; the inability of the United States to set a positive, democratic

\textsuperscript{242} Dudziak, \textit{Cold War Civil Rights}, 13, 252.
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 26-28.
example for the rest of the world; and Soviet propaganda highlighting American rhetoric versus policy.244

American and Soviet children also acted as part of Cold War military strategy. Leaders from both nations touted the Cold War as an ideological battle between communism and capitalist-democracy. On this symbolic battleground, the two governments each focused on educating the next generation to promote and protect their respective ideologies.245 In the United States, this emphasis on ideological education manifested in an expansion of civics, citizenship, and government classes in American public schools beginning in the late 1940s and early 1950s.246 Imagery that spoke to the necessity of protecting America’s children from Communist influence or takeover abounded across various media sources, including periodicals, advertisements, television, and films (see Figure

244 For Russian invasion, see: Barbara S. to Eisenhower, September 21, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock School and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 1, Unfoldered, DDE; Ann T. to Eisenhower [Undated by author but marked as received October 14, 1957 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 14, Folder 3, DDE; Theodore to Eisenhower, May 23, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 2, DDE; Jay to Eisenhower, October 17, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. Re Little Rock School, Box 1, Folder 1, DDE; Eileen K. to Eisenhower, September 14, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 15, Unfoldered, DDE; Mary B. to Eisenhower, March 1, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 1, Folder 4, DDE; Marilyn P. to Eisenhower, September 12, 1958, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Little Rock and Other Schools: Segregation, Box 1, Folder 5, DDE. For American embarrassment and international example, see: Harry to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received September 27, 1957 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 9, Unfoldered, DDE; Gavin to Eisenhower, February 22, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 2, DDE; Janet K. to Eisenhower, February 10, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 2; John H. and Denny to Eisenhower, February 22, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 1, Folder 1, DDE; Paula A. to Eisenhower, June 28, 1954, DDE. For Soviet propaganda, see: Ray F. to Eisenhower, May 15, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 6, Unfoldered, DDE.

245 See: Peacock, Innocent Weapons.

2). Americans racialized visual depictions of the kind of childhood innocence that needed to be vigilantly protected. In the 1950s, the children demanding American watchfulness invariably had White skin. At least some White children recognized how the United States defined them in terms of the Cold War and America’s competition with the Soviet Union. This was especially true in the latter half of the decade, after the Soviet Union successfully launched the satellite Sputnik in October 1957. The launch unleashed fears of a Soviet-American knowledge gap, especially in the sciences and mathematics, helping lawmakers garner the support they needed to pass the National Defense Education Act in 1958. In this same year, on September 26, 1958, Barry, a White tenth-grader from Norfolk, Virginia, wrote to Eisenhower to complain about the closure of his all-White school, Granby High. Granby was one of six schools in Norfolk that padlocked its doors in September 1958 as part of a “massive resistance” strategy to prevent the integration of its student body. Barry concerned himself less with the implications of integration than with how continued school closures could affect what he saw as the United States’ current primacy in the race with the Soviet Union: “At first we considered the present segregation problem as an

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247 Peacock, Innocent Weapons, especially chapter three.
248 As just one example: in Highlights, a popular children’s periodical that began publication in 1946, the layout of the magazine and its sole depiction of White children on its page-to-page content and in border drawings did not noticeably shift until the mid- to late-1960s. See: Highlights for Children Collection, boxes “E,” “B,” and “C,” Highlights for Children Archive, Special Collections at The Ohio State University Library, Columbus, Ohio (hereafter referred to as OSU). See also: Bernstein, Racial Innocence; Eric Avila, “Popular Culture in an Age of White Flight: Film Noir, Disneyland, and the Cold War (Sub)Urban Imaginary,” Journal of Urban History 31, no. 1 (Sept. 2004): 15.
249 Peacock, Innocent Weapons, 60-63; Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights, 145.
extension of our summer vacation, but the way it looks now we will never get a proper education. America is letting its greatest natural resource go to waste!!! . . . America is now the greatest country in this world; I believe, if we do not use our natural resources, we will fall behind Russia, and when we fall that far behind, we will never again be the land of the free.”

Barry assigned himself and his fellow classmates the title of “natural resource,” asking Eisenhower to protect their “right of getting an education.” Barry did not specify whether or not he supported integration, and it is possible that his request for Eisenhower’s intervention implicitly accepted the end of segregation at Granby. Regardless, by positioning himself as a “resource” in need of conservation, Barry called upon Cold War-era assumptions that American children, especially White children, needed to be shielded from harm. Barry may not have requested the continuance of segregation, but, as a White boy, he relied on his culturally rooted expectations that Eisenhower would act to fulfill his needs and protect his rights.

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251 Barry to Eisenhower, September 26, 1958, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Other Schools; Segregation, Box 4, Folder 2, DDE.

252 Ibid.
Above all, children’s use of the Cold War as a rhetorical strategy focused on the racial divisions in the nation and the potential danger such infighting posed. To guard against this threat, some children argued that the president should maintain segregation, while others wanted integration to go forward. On September 21, 1957, several weeks after Governor Faubus had deployed the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the Little Rock Nine from entering Central High and three days before Eisenhower sent federal troops to the city, Barbara, a fourteen-year-old White girl from Fallston, Maryland, aimed her anger at the president: “The way things look now, because of the deal you just put through
about us having to go to school together, Russia could walk right in and overrun us and we wouldn't know what happened. We would be too busy fighting among ourselves.”  

Barbara did not extensively explain why she opposed integration, except to say: “They (the negroes) don’t want to go to school with us and we don’t want to go to school with them.”  

Barbara’s argument, including her Cold War-inspired warning, rested on the premise that White and Black students both so opposed integration that their resistance to it would be violent. Barbara offered no evidence for her bald statement that neither race wanted to go to school with the other. Unlike many other White children who wrote letters to Eisenhower during this decade, Barbara did not lay out any arguments about Black Americans’ racial inferiority. At the same time, Barbara’s predictions of doom, which included her cautionary statement that “half the population of the United States” could be killed if integration went forward, sought to preserve the status quo.  

Barbara argued that preventing change ensured the stability of the nation’s future. In 1957 in the United States, especially in the South where Barbara lived, this meant leaving legal segregation in place, along with the educational, economic, and political advantages such a system granted White Americans.  

Children who supported integration focused on the racial divisions that segregation legally enshrined, which they argued threatened the United States’ national security. Eileen, a sixteen-year-old girl from Superior, Wisconsin who did not specify her race in her letter, told Eisenhower on September 14, 1957: “We

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253 Barbara S. to Eisenhower, September 21, 1957, DDE.  
254 Ibid.  
255 Ibid.
all know that a country never falls from the pressure from the outside; it always falls from the pressure within. Russia is just waiting for us to fall apart and fight amongst our selves.\textsuperscript{256} Eileen feared that one night she would go to sleep, and when she woke, “[her] freedoms [wouldn’t] be there.” She asked the president to stave off her apocalyptic nightmare by “[thinking] of us kids (both black and white).” She informed him: “[i]f we were all blind we wouldn’t know the difference in color of skin.”\textsuperscript{257} Engaging the color-based framework, Eileen reduced racial differences to the visual and suggested that Americans un-see them to ensure national unity and safety.

Racial identity was not always so simple, even among those who also argued that racial divisions undermined American interests. John, a fourteen-year-old Black boy from Columbus, Ohio, wrote on March 21, 1956: “my race go to war and die for their countrie. But comes home to be treated like dog or killed. You must do something about this, because I think this is what the Communist Party wants, the two race to fight so they can step in and help one of us. Myself I love my countrie, but my race too.”\textsuperscript{258} John wanted Eisenhower to reckon with the inconsistency between Black Americans’ military service and their lack of rights or, even worse, violent abuse by Whites. John connected these issues to his fear that the Communist Party would seduce disaffected or disgruntled Black or White Americans, thus gaining a foothold in the United States. He indicated that he would be disappointed with such a fate. But John refused to subsume his

\textsuperscript{256} Eileen K. to Eisenhower, September 14, 1957, DDE.
\textsuperscript{257} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{258} John S. to Eisenhower, March 21, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 5, Folder 7, DDE.
racial identity and his protest on behalf of Black Americans to that love, specifying that he loved his race in the same sentence as his profession of love of country. John made no mention of being “blind” to racial differences. For him, Eisenhower could protect the United States against communism only by addressing and eradicating racial inequality; actions that did not necessarily include ignoring race.

Like John, many American children appeared to view the Cold War as the most pressing danger the United States faced in the 1950s, and this undergirded their communications about race and integration. Children’s reliance on the Cold War as a rhetorical strategy in their letters demanded that the president think about integration and civil rights in terms of ensuring the global dominance of democracy. By writing these letters as “future citizens,” children also drew on the president’s Cold War understanding of young Americans’ role in society. When writing about civil rights and the Cold War, children categorized racial conflict as something that would adversely affect their abstract future as American citizens. By defining Eisenhower’s choice regarding school integration as an action to protect children in the midst of an international struggle for primacy, these children participated in rhetorically racializing the concept of childhood.

**Children Contemplate God’s Will for Public Schools**

Many children mobilized their religion as a rhetorical strategy in their arguments about integration. Religion (defined by the children who wrote Eisenhower in a Judeo-Christian framework) likely contributed to a significant
number of American children’s worldviews in this time period.\textsuperscript{259} For these children, answering complicated questions about race and civil rights involved thinking about God’s and, for literalist Christians, the Bible’s guidance. Some children indicated that conversations about race and integration occurred in their Sunday School classes.\textsuperscript{260} Not all children included signals of the educational roots of their religious interpretations, but, for my purposes, the importance of children’s letters and arguments lies in their own application of religious teachings rather than its origins.\textsuperscript{261} When children included religious arguments about racial difference in their letters to the president, most relied either on Scriptural references or considered the role of “God as creator.”

Some children reflected that if God had created the world and everything in it, surely somewhere in that creation laid the answer about God’s intentions for how the races should interact with one another. As such, these arguments rested on a single noun-verb clause: “God made.” Children who supported integration,


\textsuperscript{260} See: Bobby to Eisenhower, September 24, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. Re Little Rock School, Box 3, DDE; Robert K. to Eisenhower, September 16, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 15, DDE.

\textsuperscript{261} There is certainly evidence that adults’ religious worldviews and arguments mirrored those presented by children during these years. For a study of the role of religious arguments in pro-segregationist thought during this time period, see: Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after Brown.” In addition, historians have extensively covered the role of religion in the Civil Rights Movement, especially among its leaders. See: David L. Chappell, \textit{A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Davis W. Hocuk and David E. Dixon, “Introduction,” in eds., Davis W. Hocuk and David E. Dixon, \textit{Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1956-1965} (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 1-15. While I acknowledge the importance of religion to adults’ views of race during this era and the influence of adults on children and children’s arguments, I seek to explore aspects of children’s religious thoughts that may have been overlooked or discounted in past studies because children were not taken seriously as independent actors. Interrogating the nature of children’s religious understanding of race aids in contextualizing the development of various racial arguments into the later decades of the twentieth century.
segregation, and, occasionally, something in between, incorporated their differing interpretations of God’s will and used almost identical phraseology to make divergent arguments. Several children also included the color-based framework to describe visible racial differences that they argued God must have made for a reason.

Segregationists contended that God had purposefully made the races “separate” and that the federal government should not make laws threatening such separation. As shown in chapter one, children also protested against interracial “mixing” during the late 1940s, and they would continue to do so in the 1960s. Both White girls and White boys included this kind of argumentation in their letters to the presidents during these decades. White girls in the 1950s seemed to be particularly threatened by the possibility that the integration of their schools would lead to the eventual integration of private spaces. As previously discussed, the ideology of White supremacy rested on the belief that White women and girls needed to be protected from Black men and boys so as to maintain the purity of the White race. Many White girls who wrote letters to Eisenhower supporting segregation sanctioned this ideology. Paula and Janette, two thirteen-year-old White girls, the former from Muskogee, Oklahoma, the latter from Hamilton, Mississippi, wrote to Eisenhower in June 1954 shortly after the Supreme Court ruled for integration in the *Brown* decision. Paula wrote: “If God had wanted us to marry and mix with people of other ancestry, he would have made us alike and with all one color.”

Janette connected her gender to her religion and finally to her convictions about segregation. She described herself as

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262 Paula A. to Eisenhower, June 28, 1954, DDE.
“only a small southern girl who does not want to go to school with the negroes,” referencing her size and girlhood to present herself as helpless and in need of the president’s care (see Figure 3). She then asked the president: “Mr. Eisenhower, I think it is fair enough for them to have equal schools as we white children, but I don’t think God meant for us to mix up and marry, now do you President Eisenhower?”

Doris, a White teenage girl from Lexington, Kentucky, presented a more complex argument to Eisenhower in September 1957 during the Little Rock School Crisis. Doris began by stating: “We do not know what color Jesus was. He may have been brown, yellow, . . . red, or white!” She then argued that that children would be just fine in integrated schools, but that interracial relationships crossed a line in the sand: “I think we should be able to go to school with each other, but never date or marry each other, because were all God’s children, but we marry our own race.”

Doris advanced a vision of religious-racial tolerance to support integrated public schools, while also interpreting God’s intent for His creation to argue that “race mixing” defied God’s will.

During an era when schools acted as the locus of heterosexual socialization and interaction in the lives of American children, these anti-“mixing” arguments represented particularly salient points of contention for segregationists. As Susan K. Freeman argues, educators across the nation expanded sex education programs during the 1940s and 1950s, enrolling students in public middle and high schools in what were known as “family life” and “human relations” classes. These courses – some of which were coed,

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263 Janette to Eisenhower, June 2, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, File 3, DDE.
264 Doris to Eisenhower, [September 25, 1957], DDE.
though not all – encouraged young boys and girls to constitute heterosexual identities predicated upon positive socializing with the opposite gender that would culminate in “healthy” and “normal” marriages with suitable mates.\textsuperscript{265} Taking these lessons out of the classroom, many American children enthusiastically participated in heterosexual “dating cultures” that were enacted predominately through activities located at their schools, such as the prom or yearbook superlative awards.\textsuperscript{266} Given the tight association (made by both children and adults) between schools and heterosexual interaction during these years, when White girls wrote letters of protest against integration to Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, they almost certainly hit a sensitive cultural nerve. A few months prior to the \textit{Brown} decision, Eisenhower pulled Chief Justice Earl Warren aside to insist to the judge that Southerners simply did not want “‘their sweet little girls’” sitting next to “‘some big overgrown Negroes’” in integrated schools.\textsuperscript{267}

![Letter](image.png)

Figure 3: Janette to Eisenhower, June 2, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 3, DDE. The blue pencil markings are from White House staff members.

By writing letters that included religious anti-miscegenation arguments,

White children perpetuated the fiction of White purity and asserted that God

\textsuperscript{265} Susan K. Freeman, \textit{Sex Goes to School: Girls and Sex Education before the 1960s} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), especially chapter five.

\textsuperscript{266} Cahn, \textit{Sexual Reckonings}, 212, 215, 280, 302.

\textsuperscript{267} Dwight D. Eisenhower quoted in Margolick, \textit{Elizabeth and Hazel}, 93.
valued that purity. Paula, the thirteen-year-old White girl from Muskogee, went so far as to argue that intermarriage would make the United States an embarrassment on the world stage: “many other people don’t want the future generations to grow up and marry people of another race. The other people of the world will look down on us, the people of America!”\textsuperscript{268} The preeminent evidence children presented to Eisenhower on the danger of “race mixing” related to God’s desires about how species – both human and otherwise – should interact with one another on earth. Joyce, a White high school senior from Covington, Georgia, told Eisenhower on February 24, 1956 that humans should take their cues from other animals in nature: “As God says in the Bible that we are all equal, but He still separated the colors. The white in one place, the black in another, the yellow in another, etc. Even the birds all stay with their mates and their kind.”\textsuperscript{269} In order to successfully petition Eisenhower to maintain segregation or, at least, to ensure the sexual separation of the races, Joyce, Paula, and Doris all employed the color-based framework.\textsuperscript{270} They used this framework to argue that God chose to create humans with differences they defined as immediately and visually discernable because God wanted those “colors” to remain separate – individual spots on an omniscient artist’s palette.

\textsuperscript{268} Paula A. to Eisenhower, June 28, 1954, DDE. See also: Ray F. to Eisenhower, May 15, 1956, DDE. 
\textsuperscript{269} Joyce to Eisenhower, February 24, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 2, DDE. See also: Joan H. to Eisenhower, July 2, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 2, DDE. 
\textsuperscript{270} For other examples of letters from White children that replicate these arguments, including opposition to interracial relationships and inclusion of the color-based framework, see: Fairy to Eisenhower, May 26, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 5, DDE; Ann C. to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received January 25, 1956 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 2, DDE.
Children who supported integration without any specific qualifications also began their arguments by considering the implications of the words “God made.” They argued that God would not have created someone only to have them be excluded from either salvation or equal treatment under the law, adding that God chose to make some people Black, some White, and so on. Like segregationist children, many of these writers relied on the color-based framework. These children contended that God’s role in the creation of humankind proved that racial differences were not arbitrary. Contrary to segregationists, who would have agreed with this aspect of their argument, they did not connect visible racial differences with the existence of a celestial message demanding the sexual separation of different races. In September 1957 in reaction to the events in Little Rock, many young Americans asked Eisenhower why schools around the United States had not been integrated. In these letters, several children included references to God’s role in the creation of all humankind. Melba, the Black girl from Chattanooga, Tennessee who wanted parents to stay out of children’s business when it came to integration, also blamed parents for not properly teaching their children about God’s opinion regarding equality. “Mr. President,” she wrote, “I think that we school children would enjoy going to [school] together if the parents would teach their children that people are people no matter what

271 See: Mike to Eisenhower, September 27, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 15, Unfolded, DDE; Daniel A. to Eisenhower, September 26, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ackd Ltrs. Re Little Rock School, Box 1, Folder 3, DDE; Susan K. to Eisenhower, September 24, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 15, Unfolded, DDE; Marion to Eisenhower, September 25, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 2, Folder 7, DDE. For similar examples from earlier years, see also: Janet K. to Eisenhower, February 10, 1956, DDE; Goldie to Eisenhower, [February 10, 1956], DDE; Barbara O. to Eisenhower, February 29, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 1, Folder 3, DDE.
color we are because God made us all and I don’t think God likes the way his people are living today.”

Melba’s letter demonstrated that Black children also incorporated the color-based framework to minimize difference. The phrase “no matter what color we are” used color as a metonym for race as a whole while also discounting color as a factor that should determine equal and integrated access to education.

Although Melba’s letter should be seen as part of the postwar trend toward the color-based framework, her overall argument differed crucially from some White children’s reliance on the color-based framework during these years. Melba did not connect the minimization of racial difference to the assumption that White was better than Black. Gaynet, a sixteen-year-old White girl from Portland, Oregon, included a poetical postscript in her September 26, 1957 letter of support for integration that communicated a divergent interpretation of racial difference:

God made the negro,  
He made him in the night.  
He [made] him in a hurry  
And forgot to make him white.

Gaynet’s poem revealed the limits of religious, color-based explanations of racial difference in the minds of White children. Gaynet appeared to believe in racial equality and integration, and, like many children during the 1950s, she supported this belief with her religious worldview. But in Gaynet’s poem, the racial default remained White. Gaynet described Blackness as a mistake that should be

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272 Melba to Eisenhower, September 27, 1957, DDE.  
273 Gaynet to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received September 26, 1957 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ackd Ltrs. Re Little Rock School, Box 3, Unfoldered, DDE.
embraced because it was part of God’s creation, not because it equaled Whiteness.

The range of opinions on integration that children supported with the words “God made” illustrated the flexibility of evidence when marshaled for inclusion in racial arguments. Children agreed that God made all humans, and that humans did not look alike and could be sorted into simplistic and easily identifiable groups described by colors. Given this much common ground, clear categorizations of “pro-segregation” or “anti-White supremacy” did not always apply to these children’s arguments. Doris expressed her acceptance of school integration alongside her desire that Americans continue to prevent intermarriage. Gaynet advocated for integration, but she also wrote a rhyme that marked Black people as a creation mishap derived from God’s working in the night – sightlessness or sleeplessness, or perhaps both. Taken as a whole, these letters indicated the extent to which similar or even the exact same premises occasionally undergirded opposing racial arguments extant in twentieth-century America.

Apart from reflecting on the origins of humankind, many Christian children who made religious arguments about race-based civil rights also referenced the Bible in their letters to Eisenhower. As with creation tales, children who supported either segregation or integration both incorporated Scriptural references. Betty Sue, a sixteen-year-old White girl from Carthage, Texas, wrote to Eisenhower on May 19, 1954 to tell the president the story of Noah’s son Ham from the Old Testament Book of Genesis: “The segregation law is against the
word of God to try to put them in the equality with the whites . . . [because God] put a curse upon Noah’s son Ham and turned him black. He said from then on the negro would be subject to slavery to the white race. Do you read your Bible? Betty replicated an argument common among American pro-slavery apologists in the mid-nineteenth century, claiming that slavery had been a justified “curse” – God’s punishment for Ham’s descendants because Ham had seen his father Noah’s naked body. Betty Sue interpreted this Biblical story in the same way as other writers had for several centuries before her, using it as justification, even encouragement, to enslave Black people. While Betty did not argue for a return to legal slavery, her words made clear that segregation ensured the continuance of the same essential power dynamic between Black and White Americans from one century to the next: servitude on the one hand and dominance on the other.

Children who called for integration also included Biblical text in their letters, often presenting simpler but no less culturally rooted arguments than Betty’s. Many of these children included well-known New Testament directives – either the “Golden Rule,” found in Matthew 7:12, or “Love thy Neighbor,” from Mark 12:31. The Golden Rule and its message of reciprocity seemed to encapsulate the inherent wrongness of segregation for many American children. Ray, a White schoolchild from Burbank, California, focused on unequal access to housing in his city, asking Eisenhower on June 2, 1954: “why the Negroes cant

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274 Betty R., et al. to Eisenhower, May 19, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 2, DDE.
275 Paul Finkelman, Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South, A Brief History with Documents (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 31-32; 123-124; 162.
[sic] live in Burbank the Golden [Rule] says Do You To Others As You Would have Them Do UnTo You."\textsuperscript{276} It is crucial to consider the possibility that children like Ray made arguments based on these phrases not so much from a religious perspective as an American one, as these Biblical statements were deeply enmeshed in American popular culture by the mid-twentieth century.\textsuperscript{277} When children used them to communicate their understanding of racial equality, this does not necessarily mean they did so because of an explicitly religious worldview. Even so, some children included other markers of their faith alongside the references. Bobby, for example, a White thirteen-year-old boy from Uniondale, Indiana, strongly condemned White protestors in Little Rock in September 1957 by describing his Sunday School class’s discussion of “love thy neighbor:” “I seen that awfull on T.V. Last nite at Little Rock. What is the matter with people. I go to Sunday School and they teach us to love you neighbor. ‘God’ loves us all.”\textsuperscript{278}

Loving one’s neighbor did not always imply going to school with them. Several children quoted this particular text to back either only qualified integration

\textsuperscript{276} Ray L. to Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 2, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 6, DDE. See also: Cyril to Eisenhower, October 3, 1957, DDE; Lee to Eisenhower, February 24, 1956, DDE; Janet C. to Eisenhower, March 21, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 5, Folder 7, DDE.


\textsuperscript{278} Bobby to Eisenhower, September 24, 1957, DDE, emphasis in original. See also: Sue P. to Eisenhower, September 26, 1957, DDE.
or total segregation. James, a White high schooler from Birmingham, Alabama, implied in his October 7, 1956 letter that supporting integration would render him disrespectful and unloving toward his own race: “Sir, If I love not my self how can I love my Neighbors? If I protect not my body and mind, how can I love and protect my community, country, State and nation? If I respect not and love not my race how can I love and respect other races and peoples?”  

Susan, a nine-year-old White girl from St. Petersburg, Florida, told Eisenhower on May 22, 1956 that recent actions in the South indicated that White people were not loving their neighbors as the Bible told them to, but she also clarified: “I do not beleive in the negro and white to marry.”  

Betty, a White teenager from Plant City, Florida, agreed with Susan about the dangers of interracial socializing even as she expressed her like and even love of her Black neighbors: “I like the negroes. But not the mixing idea. As the Bible says: ‘Love thy neighbor as thy self. I do.’”  

For these children, “loving thy neighbor” did not mean eliminating segregation. James, in fact, argued that he could not love his neighbor if he did not first love himself, which necessitated promoting segregation. For Susan and Betty, “love thy neighbor” could be unironically included in letters wherein interracial “mixing” represented the primary concern in the integration debate. In matters of Biblical interpretation as in contemplations of God’s creation, when children reached for religion as a rhetorical strategy to argue with President

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279 James W. to Eisenhower, October 7, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 10, Folder 1B, DDE.  
280 Susan A. to Eisenhower, May 22, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 6, Unfolded, DDE.  
281 Betty S. to Eisenhower, November 13, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 9, Folder 4, DDE.
Eisenhower about race-based civil rights, they molded their evidence to fit the processes of integration they desired.

**Children Tell Stories and Offer Precedents About Americans of Color**

Some children’s main rhetorical strategy in their arguments for or against integration involved recounting historical precedents and contemporary stories about people of color and interracial interactions. These children named individuals and identified groups that they characterized as “good” or “bad” to demonstrate those groups’ capacity for equal or unequal access to rights and American citizenship. They also relied on historical narrative, discussing events in the American past, especially slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, and connecting that past with the country’s present. Finally, many children detailed the experiences of other racial groups in the United States, portraying the reality lived by such people as they understood it (though rarely as it actually was) to defend their positions in their letters to the president.

Many children argued that the contributions of past and present famous Black Americans should demonstrate to White Americans that all Black people deserved equal rights and integration. Children who wrote these types of letters, most of whom were White, gathered what they knew about Black people from popular culture and American history to make their cases, often referring to individuals by name. A slew of White children listed the names of Black people they would have heard singing and playing on radios across the United States in the 1950s, including Louis Armstrong, Fats Domino, and Nat King Cole, juxtaposing the performers’ abilities with examples of discrimination against
Black people, or against the individuals themselves in some letters, to protest against segregation generally. Some children also turned to their American history books, using the limited coverage of Black Americans in those sources to justify their positions on integration and racial equality. In May 1954, James, an eleven-year-old White boy from Pelham, New York, noted: “George Washington Carver, a famous negro scientist or something made over 300 uses for the peanut and 118 for the sweet potatoe . . . He was probably one of the greatest men in the U.S. and he was a negro.” Phyllis, a sixteen-year-old White girl

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282 See: Gaynet to Eisenhower, [September 26, 1957], DDE; Jerri to Eisenhower, September 25, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ackd Ltrs. Re Little Rock School, Box 1, Folder 4, DDE; R. H., to Eisenhower, October 3, 1957, York, England, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 10, Folder 3, DDE; Patricia C. to Eisenhower, April 14, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 9, Folder 1, DDE; Simone to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received April 14, 1956 by White House staff] DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 5, Folder 2, DDE; Carol S. to Eisenhower, March 8, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 5, Folder 7, DDE; Phyllis F. to Eisenhower, April 12, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 4, Folder 7, DDE. Children were especially incensed when White men attacked Nat King Cole during his performance in Birmingham, Alabama on April 10, 1956. See: Phyllis F. to Eisenhower, April 12, 1956, DDE; Carlos to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but postage stamped May 1956], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 9, Folder 1, DDE.

283 James E. to Eisenhower, April 11-May 23, 1954 [Ellis included this date range on his letter], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 3, DDE. A few children also mentioned Booker T. Washington in their letters of support for integration. See: Joan C. to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received February 28, 1956 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 4, DDE; Patricia A. to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received May 7, 1956 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 8, Folder 2, DDE; Carolyn to Eisenhower, March 27, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 4, Folder 6, DDE. In his study of textbook content from the Civil War through the 1980s, Joseph Moreau notes that textbook authors in the 1950s most frequently chose George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington as safe examples of upward mobility and limited integration to represent Black Americans’ experiences in the United States. Joseph Moreau, Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 277. For an example of a typical 1950s American History textbook, see Edna McGuire, They Made America Great: A First Book in American History, Teacher’s Annotated Edition (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1950, reprinted 1964 ed.). McGuire included a brief chapter on Carver, describing Carver’s scientific and agricultural aptitude in a few sentences that infantilized the inventor: “George liked pretty things. And he liked the outdoors. He had his own little garden. It was bright with flowers. He gathered colored stones and pretty leaves. George knew how to
from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, combined examples from past and present to ask Eisenhower to consider what the United States might look like without the accomplishments of Black people: “What would have happened if we didn’t have the great Negro inventors, men in history, the entertainers, the men who gave their lives so that their families and everyone elses could be free?”284 These children reasoned that the talents and accomplishments of publically renowned Black men (they did not mention Black women) showed that Black people were not only good Americans, but that their actions had improved the country as a whole. In this formulation, citizenship and rights could be earned by proving oneself worthy, and many Black people had already “performed” in this manner. This argument set up a problematic dichotomy between “deserving” and “undeserving” Black people; only if one reached the threshold of having demonstrated their “value” could they enjoy rights supposedly conferred upon Americans by birth on United States soil.

Beyond this logical stepping-block, this argument depended on the availability of examples in media sources of Black people acting in ways that demonstrated that they “deserved” equal rights, and White children’s letters to the president confirmed that there was a dearth of such information in the 1950s.285 At least some Black children recognized the problems caused by

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284 Phyllis F. to Eisenhower, April 12, 1956, DDE.
American media’s representation of Black people during the 1950s. Two Black boys, Nathan and Edgar, wrote Eisenhower on April 24, 1956 from Romulus, Michigan to complain about what they saw – and did not see – on television:

“why are there no nigros on television exceptes as slaves, or as servants., or jungel natives. We fellow nigros would like very much to see some plays mysteries or Detective story with the hero beeining a negro. after all we are America Citizen.”

Nathan and Edgar explicitly tied their American citizenship to the portrayal of Black people then flashing across television sets in living rooms throughout America. They recognized that the roles available to Black actors (the boys also left Black women unacknowledged) made for shows that narrated stories of subservient and sub-civilized Black people in society that translated and contributed to White treatment of Black Americans as second-class citizens in everyday life. Nathan and Edgar argued that it was high time for a story about a Black “hero.”

If children could not find a Black hero on television, they saw one on the baseball diamond. Jackie Robinson integrated the major leagues in 1947 and won the World Series with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1955, proving to pro-integration children both that the integration process was successfully underway

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286 Nathan and Edgar to Eisenhower, April 24, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 9, Folder 1, DDE.
in America and that acting against prejudice sometimes made a difference. Some children chose to write directly to Robinson instead of using his life-story as evidence in letters to their president. A child wrote a letter to Robinson with a different goal in mind than when writing to their president; rather than making a case to a person in power about changing the direction of the nation, these children expressed gratitude to someone they believed had already effected change. While these children’s letters would not influence national policy, they still acted as crucial mechanisms for children to communicate their thoughts about racial equality. Benn, a sixteen-year-old Chinese American boy from San Francisco, California, wrote to Robinson on December 26, 1956 shortly after an airing of the 1950 film “The Jackie Robinson Story” on television to express his appreciation for Robinson’s actions promoting racial tolerance and integration: “[m]y family and I came to this country during this time of crisis because we knew that this is a country of true democracy. I think that this element has never been as well demonstrated as in the story of your life. I would further like you to know that I consider you an outstanding leader in the intergradation of your race in this country, and sincerely hope with you that one day there may be no racial prejudice in this world.” Benn’s letter to Robinson connected his family’s experience of coming to the United States for increased democratic opportunities to the triumphal epic presented as Jackie Robinson’s “story” in the 1950 film.

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287 While no child in the body of letters from children writing to Eisenhower about civil rights surveyed for this dissertation mentioned Jackie Robinson by name, one did reference integrated baseball teams as one aspect of her “proof” of racial equality. See: Sue P. to Eisenhower, September 26, 1957, DDE.

While Benn did not mention any discrepancy between what his family came to America looking for and what they found, his choice of Jackie Robinson as a representation of the best of America indicated that Benn saw American greatness in those who recognized the limitations of American democracy and fought to make America more equal. Benn, a Chinese American boy who also described himself as a “typical American teenager,” used his letter to “join” Jackie Robinson in hoping for a future in which racial prejudice would not exist.289

Support for Robinson and what he represented stood out as the overarching theme in letters from children to the baseball player. White children applauded him personally and used their accolades to convey their belief in integration, while Black children thanked Jackie for his actions on behalf of their race and for being “a credit” to Black Americans.290 Both children of color and White children in the 1950s looked to Jackie Robinson as living evidence of what many children fought for in writing their letters to Eisenhower – democracy, freedom, and racial equality. Jackie Robinson’s singular experience with integration did not matter to the children who wrote him.291 Robinson meant most

289 Ibid.
290 For White children, see: Nancy to Robinson, January 7, 1957, Jackie Robinson Papers, Box 3, Folder 2, Retirement, Correspondence, Fan Response, 1957, 2 of 2, LOC; Martin to Robinson, December 15, 1956, Jackie Robinson Papers, Box 2, Folder 16, New York Giants, Proposed Trade, Fan Response, 1956-1957, LOC. For Black children, see: Harry, David, Johnny, Frank, Donald, Marvin, “Gas House Boys,” to Robinson, January 1957 [no day included], Jackie Robinson Papers, Box 3, Folder 2, Retirement, Correspondence, Fan Response, 1957, 2 of 2, LOC. There were also earlier and later examples of letters from Black children, who wrote to Robinson in both the 1940s and in the 1960s. See: Charles to Robinson, July 17, 1947, Jackie Robinson Papers, Box 1, Folder 29, Copies from Arthur Mann Papers, Fanmail, 1947, LOC; Quentin to Jackie, [Undated but likely written in 1964 based on location in the archive], Jackie Robinson Papers, Box 1, Folder 27 – Fanmail, 1949-1968, nd., LOC. I did not find any children’s letters to Robinson protesting his role in integrating baseball, but this does not mean that none sent such letters.
291 In a study of Black athletes in American sports, Gerald L. Early describes Jackie Robinson thusly: “Jackie Robinson, alas, was our constrained hero in the age of the cold war, the
as a symbol for these children, signifying what could be if Americans eradicated racial intolerance. Still, Robinson represented the exception, not the rule. Most Americans did not interact with the likes of Jackie Robinson on a day-to-day basis. When children wrote the president to participate in the debate over racial equality and American democracy, they worked to address the exceptional and the everyday.

As a result, the Black heroes and heroines of the stories children recounted for Eisenhower were not always famous. Many pro-integration White children wrote letters noting that they knew Black people or had Black friends who they described as “nice,” “good,” or “clean.” In these letters, White children implied that by being polite and sanitary, Black Americans adhered to charismatic prince of an old-style liberalism that believed in the individual more than it believed in the viability of group identities, that believed in merit more than in reparations, and that believed more in the legitimacy of American institutions and their fundamental fairness than in a racial nihilism that thought the plague of white supremacy could not be cured except by political amputation” (Early 69). Gerald L. Early, “When Worlds Collide: Jackie Robinson, Paul Robeson, Harry Truman, and the Korean War,” in A Level Playing Field: African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 23-69.

292 For “nice,” see: Cheryl F. to Eisenhower, October 8, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 9, Unfolded, DDE; Sydney to Eisenhower, September 30, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 8, Unfolded, DDE; Susan C. to Eisenhower, April 23, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 8, Folder 2, DDE; Jerri to Eisenhower, September 25, 1957, DDE; Carolyn H. to Eisenhower, May 8, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 6, DDE; Joan C. to Eisenhower, [February 28, 1956], DDE; Linda F., [Member of Sixth Graders from Hanford, California Lakeside School], to Little Rock School and Eisenhower, October 4, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 9, Unfolded, DDE. For “good,” see: James E. to Eisenhower, 11, April 11 – May 23, 1954, DDE; Carlos to Eisenhower, [May 1956], DDE; For “clean,” see: Janet C. to Eisenhower, March 21, 1956, DDE; Mary Ellen, [Member of Sixth Graders from Hanford, California Lakeside School], to Little Rock School and Eisenhower, October 4, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 9, Unfolded, DDE. For letters about Black “friends,” see: Marilyn A. to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received October 14, 1957 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ackd Ltrs. Re Little Rock School, Box 1, Folder 2, DDE; Aprille to Eisenhower, August 26, 1958, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Other Schools; Segregation, Box 1, Folder 5, DDE; Carol S. to Eisenhower, March 8, 1956, DDE.
appropriate, White, middle-class social norms that merited citizenship.\textsuperscript{293} Susan K. Cahn argues that poor and working-class White girls in the Progressive-era South were encouraged to act like “good” and “nice girls” by taking great care with their appearance, hygiene, and sexual behavior. Cahn also traces the existence of phrases such as “nice boy” and “cute gal” in White students’ midcentury high school yearbook messages to one another. Cahn states that receiving these stock descriptors indicated that students had met the standards of their peers.\textsuperscript{294} Pro-equality White children applied this popular, class-driven discourse to race relations by maintaining that the personal experiences they described should prove that all racial groups contained good and bad people, and that most Black people, having demonstrated their positive qualities to their fellow Americans, should be integrated into (White) society.

Some children’s stories about Black people came directly from their experiences with integrated school systems. Arlene, a White teenager from Glen Ellyn, Illinois, wrote Eisenhower to protest the actions of White people in Little Rock on October 1, 1957. “I admit there are bad negroes,” she wrote, “but look how many bad whites there are!” Based on her experiences at her own school, she stressed that integration worked: “I am 15 ½ years of age and attend

\textsuperscript{293} As I discuss in chapter one, some Black children in the 1940s wrote about members of their own race in this way as well, engaging in the “politics of respectability” to attempt to convince the president to grant them and the rest of Black America equal rights. I did not find examples of letters from Black children to Eisenhower that replicated this argument. This does not mean that Black children did not write them, especially given that the White House Chief of Files disposed of much of the body of letters written to Eisenhower about civil rights during the 1950s. See: Memorandum, William J. Hopkins, December 17, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Alpha File, Box 3113, T, Till, Emmett, only, DDE. The memo shows that White House staffers disposed of “3 drawers & 1 scroll” of “Material re the Emmet [sic] Till case” and an unspecified amount of “Material on the subject of segregation” in December 1957.

\textsuperscript{294} Cahn, Sexual Reckonings, 142, 225-227.
Glenbard High as a junior. There are about four negroes and about 2100 whites. The colored are readily accepted, have a lot of friends, and participate in sports and clubs.\textsuperscript{295} While White children who focused on the goodness of Black people in this manner sought to contribute to the case for integration, they missed the glaring realities of the integration process of the 1950s. To begin with, as Arlene’s letter indicates, integration during these years did not mean having a student body in which Black and White children were equally represented. Black children who attended integrated schools or social activities during this time period were both severely in the minority (for example, the four Black children in Arlene’s school population of 2,100 would have represented about 0.002 percent of the total) and put in the position of having to act as representatives for their whole race. Arlene mentioned that the Black students at her school were “readily accepted” by their White peers and were apparently successful both socially and on sports teams. Such a narrative elides the pressure placed on these Black children to be “nice,” “good,” and “clean” so as to pave the way for more Black Americans to enjoy expanded rights and privileges.\textsuperscript{296} Most pro-equality White

\textsuperscript{295} Arlene to Eisenhower, October 1, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 15, Unfolded, DDE.

\textsuperscript{296} Marcia Chatelain’s discussion of Black girls’ experiences (and the burden they felt for having to act as representatives of their race) in interracial camps in the 1940s influenced my understanding and reading of these letters. See: Marcia Chatelain, \textit{South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 146-7. See also: Allison Berg, “Trauma and Testimony in Black Women’s Civil Rights Memoirs,” \textit{Journal of Women’s History} 21, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 84-107, especially 93-96 on Melba Pattillo Beals’s memoir. Finally, the February 6, 1958 final suspension notice of Minniejean Brown, the only one of the “Little Rock Nine” who did not finish out the 1957-1958 school year, offers a poignant reminder of the physical and emotional pain of integration experiences for many Black children: “[Minniejean was] [r]einstated on probation January 13, 1958, with the agreement that she would not retaliate verbally or physically, to any harassment but would leave the matter to school authorities to handle. After provocation of girl student, she [Minniejean] called the girl “white trash”, after which the girl threw her purse at Minniejean.” Suspension Notice, Little Rock Public Schools, February 6, 1958, in
children who wrote letters to Eisenhower about “nice” Black people likely expected that the majority of Black Americans did not and would not challenge White ways of living; integration seemed unthreatening to them because they had no reason to believe that integration would fundamentally change White America.\textsuperscript{297} In the 1950s, the burden of change and proof did not rest on White children’s shoulders; it lay heavy on those of Black children.

White children who supported segregation countered stories about “nice” Black Americans with tales of their own, presenting narratives either of Black people who proved their niceness by supporting segregation, or of “bad” Black people who demonstrated the necessity of segregation laws. Many of these children professed their appreciation for Black children followed by their skepticism that “nice” Black kids \textit{wanted} to go to integrated schools. Writing on September 16, 1957 from Cleveland, Ohio, Jeanette, a fourteen-year-old White girl, wanted Eisenhower to know that “I don’t dislike the Negro race, for I know some nice Negro girls,” but, she asked, “Weren’t they happy in their own schools and sections? Who is responsible for this mess??”\textsuperscript{298} White children like Jeanette repeated the “separate-but-equal” premise over and over again in their letters,

\textsuperscript{297} In \textit{Change the World}, Rebecca de Schweinitz argues that the \textit{Brown} decision and subsequent civil rights protests in the 1960s often exploited the “sentimentality” of childhood. She notes that such a framework came with limits: “If linking the movement to ideas about childhood challenged America, if it garnered sympathy and support for the black freedom struggle, it also shaped and limited that support. Many white Americans were willing to come to the aid of black children or at least to protect the ideal of childhood. But they were only willing to do so if it did not affect white children too much, as the controversies surrounding busing and affirmative action revealed. When integration struggles moved north and west and it became clear that achieving racial equality would require more than an abstract belief in democratic principles and the rights of childhood, even some white liberals began sounding very much like southern segregationists” (de Schweinitz 145).

\textsuperscript{298} Jeanette to Eisenhower, September 16, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 9, Unfolded, DDE.
continually asserting that segregation did not mean inequality of opportunity. They often even argued that Black children went to schools that were better and “more modern” than White children’s schools.\textsuperscript{299} This was a false claim; Black schools throughout the nation historically suffered from astronomically lower levels of funding than White schools. After \textit{Brown}, a few Southern school districts increased funding for Black schools so as to avoid integration, providing fodder for lies that education had always been equal in the South.\textsuperscript{300} Communicating these falsehoods in their letters, segregationist children argued that there had been no reason to overturn \textit{Plessy} in the first place. The years after 1954 represented a struggle to prove that fact and return to the pre-\textit{Brown} status quo.

Other White children did not appear to believe that segregation needed the justification that could be found in calling Black people “nice” or praising Black schools. They instead used their letters to tell Eisenhower about the “bad” Black people in their communities and in the United States as a whole. Unlike children who wrote to support integration, these stories did not depend on naming Black people. The accounts they provided focused on the nameless, what these children portrayed as the waiting threat posed by the anonymous group of all Black people living in America that would be unleashed if the

\textsuperscript{299} See: Sandra Br. to Eisenhower, May 17, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 2, DDE; Harriett to Eisenhowe, September 25, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 9, Unfoldered, DDE; Paula A. to Eisenhowe, June 28, 1954, DDE; Troy to Eisenhowe, September 28, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock School and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 1, Unfoldered, DDE; Janet R. to Eisenhowe, October 1, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 14, Folder 3, DDE; Lou Ellen to Eisenhowe, [Undated by author but marked as received May 27, 1957 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 2, Folder 1, DDE; George B. to Eisenhowe, February 3, 1959, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Other Schools; Segregation, Box 4, Folder 4, DDE.

\textsuperscript{300} Patterson, \textit{Brown v. Board}, xvii, 104; Daugherity, \textit{Keep on Keeping}, 7; Cahn, \textit{Sexual Reckonings}, 222.
government enforced integration. As they wrote these letters and sent them off to be read by staff members in the White House, White segregationist children drew on racist arguments from across the centuries and reproduced them in their own present, acting as complicit makers of racism in its 1950s iteration.

Several White girls argued that integration would lead to the increased spread of disease. On October 2, 1957, Beverly, a ten-year-old White girl from Mesquite, Texas, asked Eisenhower: “Would you want your grandchildren going to school with people who have head lice, body lice, itch, and practically every disease known to this country?” Fairly, a fourteen-year-old White girl from Rocky Mount, North Carolina, wrote to Eisenhower on May 26, 1954 to share her mother’s views about Black people: “My mother is a registered nurse and she says that two-thirds of the Negros that go into the hospital have a certain kind of very bad diseases. They are catching you know.” Black people, especially those living in poor communities, had long been viewed by Whites as sources of disease because of their “unsanitary” living conditions. In her work on the relationship between Black and White middle-class Southern women during the Progressive Era, Glenda Gilmore argues that Black and White women reformers in North Carolina in the 1910s and 1920s together drummed up fears of disease to secure funding for “clean-up days” of their poor Black neighbors’ communities. As Gilmore notes, poverty and racially driven structural inequalities limited the access poor Black people had to healthy living

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301 Beverly to Eisenhower, October 2, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 4, Folder 1, DDE.
302 Fairy to Eisenhower, May 26, 1954, DDE.
303 Gilmore, Gender and Jim Crow, 169-170.
environments and good healthcare, making disease more prevalent in those communities. Gilmore adds: “[i]n reality,” “[s]ince flies know nothing about the color line, they flew back and forth across it with no regard for class standing or race.” Still, by the 1950s, ideas about the connection between Black people and diseases were well established.

This was particularly the case with sexually transmitted infections or, as Americans then termed them, “venereal diseases.” On October 12, 1957, Dorthy, a twelve-year-old White girl from Cordele, Georgia, demanded of Eisenhower: “Do you have any idea about the low standards of the negro race here in Georgia? ¾ of the negros have veneral diseases.” As Pippa Holloway argues in her study of sexual politics in Virginia from 1920 to the mid-1940s, White Southern political leaders used fears of Black people spreading venereal diseases as one method of creating the cultural notion of “sexually dangerous” populations. This helped them implement strict policies, including sterilization programs, anti-miscegenation laws, and mandatory testing for venereal diseases, to regulate the sexual behavior of both Black and lower-class White Virginians. These laws helped preserve White upper- and middle-class social and political power by reinforcing Virginia’s historical racial and social hierarchy.

304 Ibid.

305 Dorthy to Eisenhower, October 12, 1957, DDE. Note that White girls were not the only ones who wrote these types of letters, although they were certainly the majority during this era. A “white teenager” wrote to Kennedy on June 12, 1963 from Atlanta, Georgia, echoing fears of venereal diseases as part of his opposition to integration: “Why do you want to let niggers into public swimming pools to contaminate whites with their [diseases]? In my city, Atlanta, the Syphillis rate is white, 06%, Black, 94% of the cities percent.” Phillip to Kennedy, [Undated by author but postage stamped June 12, 1963], JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Troubles, Box 167, Unfoldered, JFK.

explains that White Southerners claimed that Black Southerners were both "licentious" and "lazy," and so were more inclined than White people to contract venereal diseases and ignore treatment. White doctors used this racist argument to increase their own medical influence and interventionist policies. As Dorthy’s letter shows, more than just White doctors in 1930s Virginia perpetuated this argument as a method for limiting Black people’s civil rights.

Each of these White girls constructed a hypothetical about the danger the girls faced if the government forced them to be brought into closer contact with Black people through integration. They all mentioned threats beyond disease. Beverly and Dorthy maintained that most Black people, both male and female, resorted to violence and carried concealed weapons "such as razors, ice picks, and knives." The girls’ letters transmitted the inescapable impression that the presence of Black people in a particular environment signaled unremitting injury to White people. Like those White girls who wrote to Truman and Eisenhower protesting integration because of the possibility of wanted and unwanted interracial interactions, Beverly, Fairy, and Dorthy, writing as White girls, helped circulate the racist argument that White women and girls needed protection from Black people. Each girl carefully noted her age in her letter, using childhood in combination with the racialized dangers the girls listed to convince Eisenhower that supporting integration denoted a direct attack on White girlhood innocence –

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307 Ibid., 92-95.
308 Dorthy to Eisenhower, October 12, 1957, DDE. See also: Beverly to Eisenhower, October 2, 1957, DDE, who wrote: “I'll bet you didn’t know that negro girls are taught from the age of 5 years to carry sharp razors concealed on their person.” The racist argument of Black people carrying razor blades was especially well established, circulating in newspapers dating back to the immediate post-Civil War era. Muhammad, Condemnation of Blackness, 26. See also: Cahn, Sexual Reckonings, 284.
and on the future White citizenry of the United States embodied in their potential reproductive capabilities.

By writing about disease and criminality, the girls implied that Black people observed a different set of “standards” than White people in terms of their cleanliness, personal hygiene, and moral and physical fitness. Richard, a fifteen-year-old White boy from Montgomery, Alabama, also relied on this argument to oppose integration in his December 27, 1956 letter recounting his family’s recent experiences with Black people:

If the Negroes were decent, meaning moral and physical, the White people (meaning the better race) would not feel so badly about this new way of life Integration! In the summer time when a group of Negroes are on the bus it is most unbearable. The odor is so strong a gas mask would do little good. Their hair looks buggy most of the time and their clothes are filthy. As for moral fitness, my Father saw a Negro girl about eleven years old pregnant. Surely you or any one else would [not] want his children associating with such trash.309

As had Dorthy, Fairy, and Beverly, Richard described Black Americans (who he grouped together without differentiation) as indecent. He pointed to the lack of hygiene of Black people along with the paucity of morality and sexual promiscuity indicated by a young girl’s pregnancy. Since the colonial era, White Americans had used cleanliness as a method of demarcating boundaries of both race and class, arguing that a clean body signified a civilized person.310 When White children called Black people dirty or smelly, they built upon several centuries worth of racist arguments about the direct connection between civilization, cleanliness, and Whiteness. As such, these children’s letters contributed to the

309 Richard to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received December 27, 1956 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 10, Folder 2, DDE.
310 See: Kathleen M. Brown, Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
symbolic exclusion of Black people from definitions of “clean,” “moral,” or “civilized.”

Richard signed off from his letter to Eisenhower by including his self-identification as “a Robert E. Lee fan,” indicating the connection that many segregationist White children felt to the history of the South and the Confederacy. Richard informed Eisenhower that he hoped for a “second ‘Confederacy’ to replace the ‘Nigger lovers’ in Washington.” Children like Richard used their letters to present a pro-Southern interpretation of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction to cast segregation as a logical system of racial order necessary to the survival of the South. They argued that this history should act as a precedent for Eisenhower to prove the fallacy of integration as a viable social policy. To make this argument, children relied on a body of historical work that remained popular in the United States in the 1950s and that could be found in American history textbooks still in circulation until the 1960s. Initially propagated by historian William S. Dunning and his students in the early 1900s,

311 At least one Black child responded to these types of letters with a narrative-in-kind, writing about “bad” White people. Madelena, a ten-year-old from Vivian, West Virginia, noted: “Mr President all negroes are not bad, we have some good and some bad just like the whites. I often reads in paper how the whites are killing their own mothers father and childrens and also raping their on [own] kids I haven’t seen many cases where negroes are doing that.” Madele

312 Richard to Eisenhower, [December 27, 1956], DDE. See also: Alf to Eisenhower, October 11, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 13, Folder 5[b], DDE; Anne Marie to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received October 8, 1957 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 4, Folder 2, DDE. Anne Marie, a thirteen-year-old, wrote: “Since I am merely an illiterate little southerner who wishes the Confederacy could have won, I’m sure my letter won’t phase you one bit. It is just another letter from the people of the nation who are against your move.” Anne Marie to Eisenhower, [October 8, 1957], DDE.

313 Grace Elizabeth Hale characterizes these types of reinterpretations of history and celebrations of the Confederacy as the “first clearly white space within the culture of segregation.” Hale, Making Whiteness, 79-82.

315 Moreau, Schoolbook Nation, 274-276, 324.
these histories portrayed Reconstruction as a time of Black rule, Northern corruption, and, as a result, financial and political chaos in the South.\footnote{316}{Eric Foner, \textit{Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877} (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), xvii-xix.}

Immediately after \textit{Brown}, William, a fourteen-year-old White boy from Birmingham, Alabama, wrote a letter to Eisenhower that replicated the Dunning narrative: “Mr. President, as you know, during the Reconstruction Period, after the Civil War the negroes, carpetbaggers, and scalawags had almost complete control over the South. If negroes are given the same privileges as we whites we will go back and repeat history.”\footnote{317}{William J. to Eisenhower, May 17, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 2, DDE.}

Other children went back further in time than Reconstruction to demonstrate to Eisenhower that integration represented a natural element in the historical trajectory of the South. Dorothy, a White high schooler who wrote to Eisenhower from Minden, Louisiana on May 23, 1954, contextualized the colonial history of the American South and provided a reason for why the Civil War had occurred: “Because the need was greater, far more slaves were brought into the agricultural South than into the industrial North by our forefathers. This brought on a problem which created the Civil War which cost the South a great loss in lives and property.”\footnote{318}{Dorothy C. to Eisenhower, May 23, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 1, DDE.}

Dorothy relied on passive-voice sentence construction and a lack of specific nouns to establish the historical non-culpability of the South for slavery and the Civil War, and, more than this, Southern victimhood for having lost lives and property during that conflict. “Slaves were brought” to the South,
resulting in “a problem;” this unidentified “problem” “created the Civil War.” Dorothy then argued that segregation and voting disenfranchisement had been Black people’s choice since Reconstruction. White Southerners, she claimed, abided by this decision in order to keep distance between the races because of what Dorothy referred to as Black peoples’ “insanity.” Dorothy demanded to know why segregation should end: “If the negro and the white man are both happy, why not let them alone? Why disturb a practice that has been operating successfully for three hundred years?” Dorothy’s choice of the number “three hundred” is particularly instructive, given that Jim Crow segregation laws had only been legally in place in the South beginning in the 1880s and 1890s – a duration of, in 1954, approximately sixty or seventy years. By instead choosing the number three hundred, Dorothy explicitly connected Jim Crow segregation to slavery as one continuous system of racial order and hierarchy that, from her perspective, allowed for the “successful” functioning of the South.

Pro-integration children referenced nineteenth-century American history in their arguments as well. Instead of stating that the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction demonstrated the danger of Black political power, pro-integration children focused on the precedent of Abraham Lincoln’s intentions in emancipating enslaved men, women, and children in those states that had seceded from the Union in 1863. They argued that Lincoln had initiated the process of “freeing” Black people, and that by supporting segregation, often violently, Southerners violated the freedom that had legally belonged to Black
Americans since that time. They added that all those presidents who came after Lincoln had an obligation to ensure that Black people remained free. By not enforcing integration, the children claimed, presidents shirked their duty.

Children arguing both for and against integration also told stories about how the United States treated other racial groups in both the past and the present. Many children maintained that “positive” interracial interactions between White people and other non-Black racial groups should help Eisenhower make decisions in the integration debate. Pro-segregation children used these examples to highlight the exceptionality of Black Americans, asserting that while other racial groups could be integrated into White society, Black people, for a variety of reasons, could not. Edwin, a fourteen-year-old White boy from St. Petersburg, Florida, advanced this argument in his May 4, 1956 letter: “The Chinese are polite. The people from most foreign lands are polite. Not the Negro.

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319 Patricia L. to Eisenhower, February 28, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 1, Folder 2, DDE; Gail to Eisenhower, February 11, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 1, Folder 5, DDE; Maureen to Eisenhower, February 24, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 2, DDE; Ronnie to Eisenhower, February 7, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 5, DDE; Barbara O. to Eisenhower, February 29, 1956, DDE; Judy to Eisenhower, February 13, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 2, DDE; Marcia to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received March 19, 1956 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 1, Folder 4, DDE; Marjorie to Eisenhower, October 3, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 15, Unfolded, DDE; Carolyn to Eisenhower, March 27, 1956, DDE.

320 Paula W. to Eisenhower, February 17, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 4, DDE; Bobby to Eisenhower, September 24, 1957, DDE; Mama to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received February 28, 1956 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 5, DDE; Eileen B. to Eisenhower, February 28, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 1, Folder 3, DDE; James E. to Eisenhower, April 11 – May 23, 1954, DDE; Vega to Eisenhower, April 27, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 8, Folder 2, DDE.
He would rather spit on you as to look at you.”

In contrast, pro-integration children contended that since other racial groups lived in America without facing prejudice, Black Americans should be able to do so as well. Whether the pictures the children painted in their letters were based in reality is less important here than that they viewed segregation and discrimination as uniquely applying to Black people. This Black/White representation persisted even when the child-writers lived in states with diverse racial populations. Sara, for example, a White ten-year-old from Burbank, California, asked Eisenhower to explain racial difference to her, as experiential discrepancies among different races confused her: “I would like to know if there is any difference between the ‘White Race’ and the ‘Negro Race’ and why some perants disagree with having White and Negro children go to school together. I would like to know this because several Spanish, Polish, Japanese and Chinese go to my school.”

Sara placed quotation marks around “White” and “Negro” the first time she used the words to question how these racial groups differed from the Spanish, Polish, Japanese, or Chinese students attending her school. If no difference existed, Sara asked, then what barred Black students’ entrance? Sara’s letter underscored the complexity of “race” and the project of legal segregation in the United States, which at various

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321 Edwin to Eisenhower, May 4, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 9, Folder 1, DDE.
322 Marjorie to Eisenhower, October 3, 1957, DDE; Janice to Eisenhower, September 14, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 14, Folder 4, DDE; Edward to Eisenhower, September 27, 1957, DDE; Janet C. to Eisenhower, September 26, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 14, Folder 4, DDE; Edward to Eisenhower, September 26, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 14, Folder 4, DDE; Edward to Eisenhower, September 26, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 14, Folder 4, DDE; Edward to Eisenhower, September 21, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 8, Unfoldered, DDE. For a later example, see: Steve A. to Kennedy, May 9, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 176, Unfoldered, JFK.
323 Sara to Eisenhower, June 2, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, File 6, DDE.
times had also targeted many of the groups Sara mentioned.\(^{324}\) Both pro-integration and pro-segregation children who referenced the experiences of Asian Americans and Latina/os wanted to force the president to define what qualified a person for legal exclusion from public spaces, a status they defined as reserved for Black people.

Children also related the debate over integration to the historical and contemporary relationship between the federal government and Native Americans. Some children argued that the systems of legal segregation and Native American reservations were comparable. A group of high school students from Arlington Heights, Illinois asked Eisenhower a series of information-gathering questions in their October 8, 1956 letter to help them form their still-undecided opinions about integration. They wondered: “According to the constitution of the United States of America, all men are created equal, and we are trying to integrate the Negroes, if so why did we segregate the Indians?”\(^{325}\) When the students engaged in analogizing the marginalized experiences of Black people and Native Americans in the United States, they revealed a lack of understanding common among many White Americans in the 1950s of the historical and contemporary power struggles embedded in debates over Native American reservations. Since the late nineteenth century, the federal government had implemented a series of legislative polices that, by attempting to dismantle the reservation system and break down the land held therein to individualized

\(^{324}\) See: Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, especially chapters three and four.

\(^{325}\) Ed, Riggie, Bonnie, and Kent, Committee on segregation, to Eisenhower, October 8, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 10, Folder 1B, DDE.
plots, ultimately decreased Native autonomy.\textsuperscript{326} Only during the 1930s as part of the Indian Reorganization Act, also known as the “Indian New Deal,” did the government reverse these policies and begin to reaffirm Native political autonomy.\textsuperscript{327} The reversal was short-lived. By the early 1950s, the government had entered what historians call the “termination era” and again began restricting the limited power that came from Native Americans’ maintenance of their reservations by “terminating” federal oversight and recognition of tribes – tantamount to terminating the reservations and tribes themselves. The House of Representatives initiated this policy in 1953, arguing that it would “grant [Indians] all of the rights and prerogatives pertaining to American citizenship.”\textsuperscript{328}

While members of Congress did not explicitly connect the reservation system to segregation, as the students had, they similarly grounded their policy in contemporary debates over civil rights and equality. As for the students, their support of the integration of Black Americans appeared to be only lukewarm. They also asked Eisenhower: “Do you think [integration] should go as far as intermarriage?”\textsuperscript{329} The students seemed to support both integrating Native Americans into mainstream (White) society while also limiting the integration of Black Americans. These parallel and overlapping arguments – reflective of

\textsuperscript{326} For an overview of nineteen-century Indian policy, see Elliott West, \textit{The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).


\textsuperscript{329} Committee on segregation to Eisenhower, October 8, 1956, DDE.
specific legislative developments that occurred in the 1950s – highlighted the basis of many White children’s opinions about governmental policy on the premise of a racial hierarchy in which White remained ascendant.

Not all White children represented Native American reservations as discriminatory in their arguments. On February 8, 1954, about a year after the Supreme Court began hearing arguments in the Brown case although still a few months before the decision came down, Virginia, a White schoolchild from Dorchester, Massachusetts, complained to Eisenhower about “the awful way the negroes are treated in the South.” She suggested that Black Americans receive their own “special” spaces, similar to those of Native Americans: “I think their should be a special city for [Black people] so they could show everyone as the Indians on their own reservation do that they have great talents and that even some of them are way more religious than some other white people are.”

Virginia did not connect segregation with racial discrimination, or, in her words, the “awful” treatment of Black Americans in the South. She advocated further separation between White and Black people in America through the creation of a place where Black people could “show” the rest of the country their “talents” and religiosity, as she argued Native Americans did on their reservations. Virginia’s goals for Black Americans’ future and her celebration of Native Americans’ accomplishments echoed assertions dating back to the seventeenth century that Native Americans and other non-Europeans could only show that they were capable members of society by adhering to Christian principles and European

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330 Virginia Ba. to Eisenhower, February 8, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 1, Folder 6, DDE.
work standards. Similarly, Virginia argued that Black Americans were not ready for integration, but that with time, improvement, and a place of their own, they, like Native Americans, could be eventually. Virginia’s letter depicted civilization as a staircase, with “talented” Black and Native Americans working their way up to join White Americans at the top. In the meantime, Virginia envisioned them as fully separated from White people like her.

For other children, the United States’ historical relationship with Native Americans provided an embarrassing precedent that could be used to critique current “mistakes.” Carolyn, a White schoolchild from Hickman, Kentucky, told Eisenhower on October 14, 1957 that: “just because our forefathers made the mistake of bringing [colored people] here doesn’t mean that we have to live with them just like one of us, if so you had better return something that our forefathers took away from the Indians, and that is their Nation.” Carolyn bent colonial history to her will in her letter, asserting that the “forefathers” had erred in importing African slaves, ignoring the fact that slavery had allowed for the political and economic founding of the United States. Carolyn defined integration as payment for that error, and she argued that to make such reparation was equally as ridiculous as relinquishing Native Americans' stolen land. Although Carolyn condemned European colonists for their actions, she did not want

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332 Carolyn K. to Eisenhower, October 14, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 15, Unfoldered, DDE.
current White Americans to be held responsible for those long-ago choices. In particular, she complained that her generation should not have to endure what she saw as the punishment of integration.

Marion, an eleven-year-old Black girl from Marshall, Texas, invoked colonial history to represent the other side of the debate. On September 25, 1957, she informed Eisenhower: “I saw in the paper where some white people were raising money to send us back to Africa, but if that’s the case they ought to raise enough money to send themselves to France, Spain, and other countries, and give America back to the Indians.” Marion targeted a racist hypothetical, “go back to Africa,” that White Americans used to curtail the expansion of civil rights for Black Americans. The four words referenced historical portrayals of Africa as “uncivilized” to depict Black people in that manner as well, implying the lack of intelligence and assumptions of sub-humanity that went hand-in-hand with such a characterization. This succinct racist argument simultaneously sought to oust Black Americans from the body politic and the physical space of the nation while also denying Black people’s fitness for citizenship. Marion ridiculed

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333 Marion to Eisenhower, September 25, 1957, DDE.
334 Several White children wrote letters to Eisenhower that included versions of “go back to Africa,” either in protest of the racism the command implied, or in support of it. For protest, see: Judith to Eisenhower, September 24, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 15, Unfolded, DDE. For support: Lou Ellen to Eisenhower, [May 27, 1957], DDE; Richard to Eisenhower, [December 27, 1956], DDE; Heidi to Eisenhower, August 28, 1958, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Other Schools; Segregation, Box 3, Folder 5, DDE. Heidi even proposed a detailed plan for the president: “Well this is what I think. I think that the government should have a special ship to take back any negroes to Africa if they want to go. And those that want to stay should be provided with a school of their own. I also think that you as leader of our country should talk with the leader of at least one of the countries there about civilizing the country for the newcomers. I hope you don’t thing [think] I’m intruding or telling you what to do because I’m not. I just hate to see people suffer either of my race (white) or another race of people.” Heidi to Eisenhower, August 28, 1958, DDE.
335 For the colonial roots of this argument, see: Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning, 85-86, 109-111.
the argument by underscoring the fact that White Americans, too, were transplants from across the Atlantic. Marion, pencil-in-cheek, wrote that if national ancestry was to be the rule of thumb, White people should prepare for a massive transfer of land ownership that would not end in their favor.

Children presented Eisenhower with historical precedents and contemporary stories to convince him that such examples provided the answer for how the president should act in the debate over integration. Children relied on this rhetorical strategy to portray Black people as either worthy or unworthy of the rights associated with American citizenship. These children may well have first heard the arguments they included in their letters from parents, teachers, friends, or various media sources. But many children carefully differentiated themselves from these potential sources and claimed the action of letter writing as their own. Fairy, for example, the fourteen-year-old White girl who wrote to warn Eisenhower about Black people’s propensity to spread disease, concluded her letter with the line: “Now don’t get the idea that some one has told me what to write for they haven’t. I have a mind of my own.”

American children did not represent the original authors of many of the arguments they drew on to support their positions on racial equality. Some of the stories and precedents children recounted had long roots buried in the United States’ past. Children gave new life to these old arguments by repeating and amplifying them, writing as children in need of protection from the dangers they listed.

**Children Define American Principles**

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336 Fairy to Eisenhower, May 26, 1954, DDE.
While some children told stories to demonstrate that Black people either did or did not deserve the rights of full-fledged American citizens, others focused more directly on the concepts of rights and citizenship. Children reflected on the connections among duties, citizenship, and rights, demanding that Eisenhower honor such connections in the context of the integration debate. Children’s rights-based arguments also drew on America’s founding documents, including the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address. Many children included the phrase “all men are created equal,” often misattributing the Declaration’s line to the Constitution or even God and Jesus. Other children correctly referenced the Constitution, interpreting various articles and amendments to argue that if Eisenhower supported either integration or segregation, he would be in equal danger of violating Americans’ constitutional rights.

Several children asserted that the reciprocal connection between the duties and rights of citizenship signified one of the most important relationships in American democracy. In order to illustrate the imbalance of that relationship for Black people in the 1950s, some children called attention to Black men’s recent military service. Pro-integration children frequently made this argument in letters to both Truman and Eisenhower.337 Carlos, a fifteen-year-old boy living in New

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337 See: Carol S. to Eisenhower, March 8, 1956, DDE; Edward, September 21, 1957, DDE; Fourth Street School Sixth Graders to Eisenhower, September 25, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 9, Unfolded, DDE; Patrick H. to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received February 7, 1956 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 5, DDE. For letters to Truman, see: Bertha to HST, February 20, 1951, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 549, OF 93-B 1951-1953, HST; Rosemary to Truman, December 10, 1948, HST-PP, WHCF, OF, Box 1669, OF 596-A Presidential Program Pro “W,” HST; Fred to Truman, December 6, 1951, HST; Lynn R. to Truman, [March 3, 1949], HST.
York City who described himself as both Puerto Rican and White, joined them by writing to Eisenhower in May 1956: “Even though I am only a very young child I understand the meaning of democracy. I know what democracy stands for here in the U.S.” He asked several rhetorical questions to articulate what democracy meant to him: “Aren’t negroes any good? Aren’t they needed? Yes negroes are needed. Negroes have contributed to society. Negroes have helped our country become great. How? Well, Negroes have fought against the enemy for their country – the U.S.”

Carlos and other children who included this argument in their letters of support for integration sought to strengthen Black Americans’ claims to the rights of citizenship by conjuring a metaphorical scale on which to weigh the contributions Black people had made to the nation through their actions as citizens and soldiers. Carlos argued that a balanced scale demanded the rights as well.

At least one pro-segregation child, Mary, a fourteen-year-old from Onion Hill, Maryland, relied on this scale as well, arguing that Black men’s military sacrifices did not stack up when compared to those of White men. “If the negroes are worthy enough (as certain people seem to think) to share the white schools & everything else,” she wrote, “maybe you can answer the question why aren’t they worthy enough to help the U.S. in her wars. Look at the colored in uniform compared to the whites, pretty drastic isn’t it? I realize that negroes have fought & died in helping us fight our wars, but over ¾ of the men that fought and died were whites.”

Mary’s claim reflected popular White assumptions about Black

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338 Carlos to Eisenhower, [May 1956], DDE.
339 Mary B. to Eisenhower, May 25, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re
Americans’ military service. Polls conducted by the Office of War Information during World War II revealed that less than half of White Americans believed that Black Americans “were doing enough to support the war.”\footnote{Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 6, DDE.} Wartime propaganda and news that limited coverage of Black soldiers – or depicted negative actions – fed this perception, which, based on Mary’s letter, persisted for decades after the war had ended.\footnote{Tuck, “‘You can sing,’” in Fog of War, 113.}

Black children and youths made their own claims to the rights of citizenship by writing letters about family members’ or even their own military service. Writing from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on June 22, 1956, Patricia, a Black twelve-year-old girl whose father served in the Army “overseas,” demanded that Eisenhower address the contradiction between segregation and depictions of the United States as a land of freedom: “Our country is called ‘the land of the free and the home of the brave.’ Why do we have race segregation?”\footnote{Ibid., 112-114.} On October 5, 1957, Charles, an eighteen-year-old Black serviceman in the Navy, also addressed hypocrisies in American democracy, writing about his own service in the military juxtaposed with the discrimination and racial “insults” he had endured. Despite Charles’s age and participation in the military – societal markers indicating that he had reached adulthood – Charles emphasized his youth in his letter. He stated his age to show the brevity

\footnote{Patricia D. to Eisenhower, June 22, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 6, Unfoldered, DDE. See also: Madelena to Eisenhower, October 22, 1956, DDE. Madeleena did not specify whether or not she had a relative in the military, but she wrote: “We have gifts Many gifts. Our fathers died in Wars besides many white men and yet we are Jim Crowed from many places. We fight for free Americanism, but we the negroes just want to get alone with all nations.”}
of his life alongside his willingness to die for a country that honored neither him nor his race: “I am but eighteen years of age, and yet I am willing to lay down my life in the defense of a country where my people are not even wanted.”

Charles used his service to proclaim his own maturity, something not generally attributed to eighteen-year-olds, and to dispute the maturity of a nation unwilling to embrace Black Americans. While Charles’s experiences differentiated him from the other children discussed in this chapter, Charles also chose to specify his status as a young American in order to strengthen his argument. He joined hundreds of other children who included their ages in their letters to bolster their arguments in support or denial of race-based civil rights.

Children also made rights-based arguments by referencing the nation’s founding documents. In midcentury America, most Americans viewed the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address as responsible for fomenting the American Revolution, solidifying political order, and pushing the nation to live up to its ideals. By the middle of the twentieth century, Americans regarded these three documents as the literary embodiments of the United States’ most important egalitarian principles. Celebrations of the founding documents abounded during the Cold War as part of the battle to promote American democracy. Civic education, which also expanded during the early years of the Cold War, emphasized the founding documents and especially the story of Abraham Lincoln in order to encourage children to

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343 Charles to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received October 5, 1957 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ackd Ltrs. Re Little Rock School, Box 1, Folder 1, DDE.

344 Fried, Russians Are Coming, 97-100, 106, 121.
associate the history of democratic freedom with the United States.\footnote{Mickenberg, \textit{Learning from the Left}, 223-245. Mickenberg argues that Leftist children’s authors were able to write books for civic education programs that included progressive and sometimes complex, critical portrayals of Lincoln’s accomplishments and failures.} Based on the many children’s letters that referenced the founding documents, a significant number of children absorbed this information. Scores of children simply wrote: “all men are created equal,” arguing that the phrase should be enough to show the president what he needed to do.\footnote{The overwhelming majority of children who used the phrase did so to support pro-integration arguments. See: Linda A. to Eisenhower, September 24, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ackd Ltrs. Re Little Rock School, Box 1, Folder 3, DDE; Suzanne to Eisenhower, April 1, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 5, Folder 8, DDE; Ruth to Eisenhower, May 14, 1956, DDE, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 8, Folder 3, DDE; Committee on segregation to Eisenhower, October 8, 1956, DDE; James E. to Eisenhower, April 11 – May 23, 1954, DDE; Diane to Eisenhower, November 8, 1958, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Other Schools; Segregation, Box 3, Folder 3, DDE; Harold to Eisenhower, September 27, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 14, Folder 4, DDE; Linda H. to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received February 8, 1955 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 5, DDE; Betsy to Eisenhower, February 24, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 1, Folder 1, DDE; Jay to Eisenhower, October 17, 1957, DDE; Elizabeth to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received March 2, 1956 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 1, Folder 3, DDE; Bob to Eisenhower, March 21, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 5, Folder 7, DDE; Robert W. to Eisenhower, March 2, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 1, Folder 4, DDE; Susan M. to Eisenhower, February 25, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 1, Folder 3, DDE; Jerry to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received February 11, 1956 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 5, DDE; Lisle to Eisenhower, June 7, 1956, DDE; Rachel to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received October 15, 1957 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ack’d Ltrs. re Little Rock School, Box 9, Unfolded, DDE; Aprille to Eisenhower, August 26, 1958, DDE; Marcia to Eisenhower, [March 19, 1956], DDE; Jerri to Eisenhower, September 25, 1957, DDE; Linda B. to Eisenhower, September 29, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ackd Ltrs. Re Little Rock School, Box 3, Unfolded, DDE; Berta to Eisenhower, February 7, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 5, DDE; Judy to Eisenhower, February 13, 1956, DDE; Bruce and Christie to Eisenhower, April 4, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 5, Folder 6, DDE; Mary K. to Eisenhower, February 20, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 6, DDE; Bruce to Eisenhower, September 29, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 4, DDE; Cleopatra to Eisenhower, March 16, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 4, Folder 5, DDE; Carolyn L. to Eisenhower, February 25, 1956, DDE; Carol W. to Eisenhower, October 18, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ackd Ltrs. Re Little Rock School, Box}
this line much more frequently than pro-segregation children, this did not mean that pro-integration children could monopolize the words. Margaret, a White teenager from Downingtown, Pennsylvania, sent Eisenhower a letter in June 1954 to protest against Brown, an act she mistakenly believed had come from Congress: “My opinion of this act is if they (Congress) would have left it stay as it was, there would not have been any trouble, especially in the south. I believe that all men are created equal, but I also believe that most of the American Negroes were content. I do not think that the Negro should be forced to go to a public school.” Like many other pro-segregation children, Margaret perpetuated the falsehoods that Black Americans were “content” and that segregated facilities were equal. Because these untruths formed the cornerstone of her argument, she included her stated belief that “all men are created equal” without facing any logical difficulty. For the most part, however, pro-segregation children who wrote about the founding documents did not focus on the concept of equality as articulated by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration. Instead, most chose to debate constitutional rights.

Children may not have fully comprehended the intricacies of constitutional precedent, but at least some understood that the Constitution structured and

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30, Folder W(3), DDE; Janet K. to Eisenhower, February 10, 1956, DDE; Alice to Eisenhower, January 11, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 2, DDE; Janet C. to Eisenhower, March 21, 1956, DDE; John S. to Eisenhower, April 5, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 5, Folder 5, DDE; William F. to Eisenhower, [October 10, 1957], DDE; Sue P. to Eisenhower, September 26, 1957, DDE; Sandra K. to Eisenhower, September 25, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 13, Folder 5a, DDE; Clairellen to Eisenhower, February 23, 1956, DDE; Sally, Camille, George W., and Richard, to Eisenhower, January 23, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 1, Folder 5, DDE.

347 Margaret to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received June 29, 1954 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 2, DDE.
regulated laws throughout the nation. These children argued that constitutionally based arguments should resonate with their presidential audience. As with other types of letters, children used similar evidence to justify differing positions, contending that both integration and segregation were unconstitutional. Children on both sides of the debate quoted the Fourteenth Amendment. Pro-segregation children asserted that integration would violate the “equal protection” and “due process” of White Southerners. Pro-integration children stated that segregation infringed on the same principles in actions committed against Black Americans across the country. Even more frequently, pro-segregation children invoked the Tenth Amendment to take up the nineteenth-century battle cry of “states’ rights.” Segregationist children used this amendment to identify policy-making regarding integration as a “power” reserved for the states, and they accused Eisenhower and the Supreme Court of unconstitutional federal intervention. Several White children called Eisenhower a “dictator” and characterized integration as an armed “invasion” of the South. Eisenhower’s deployment of federal troops to Little Rock especially incensed many segregationist children.

348 For pro-segregation, see: William J. to Eisenhower, May 17, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation, Box 1, Folder 2, DDE; Karl to Eisenhower, November 10, 1958, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock and Other Schools; Segregation, Box 3, Folder 3, DDE. For pro-integration, see: Whitney to Eisenhower, August 10, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 5, Folder 1, DDE.

349 Sandra Ba. to Eisenhower, Eisenhower, February 15, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 2, Folder 4, DDE; Hazel to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received October 2, 1957 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Ackd Ltrs. Re Little Rock School, Box 30, Folder W(3), DDE; Karl to Eisenhower, November 10, 1958, DDE; Martha to Eisenhower, December 15, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Segregation and Integration, Box 9, Folder 4, DDE. Many segregationist politicians also used the Tenth Amendment as justification for their anti-integration policies during massive resistance. Daugherity, Keep on Keeping, 41.

350 Harriet to Eisenhower, September 25, 1957, DDE; Janis to Eisenhower, September 26, 1957, DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock School and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 1, Unfolded, DDE.
Wanda, a young White girl from Fairmount, Georgia, wrote to Eisenhower in September 1957 and relayed her and her mothers’ joint despair over the crisis: “My mother cried when she heard your hateful voice speaking about your decision. She cried and said to think my poor children will have their lives ruined by Dictors. I cried too.” Children like Wanda demanded that Eisenhower, as president and upholder of the Constitution, act quickly to defend their opposing interpretations of the document.

Although both White and Black children defending integration and segregation wrote letters about the rights of citizenship, Black children’s letters to Eisenhower conveyed the pain and fear that racial inequality, discrimination, and lack of rights caused for them in the 1950s. White segregationist children also filled their letters with communications of their anger and apprehension when they wrote about Black children entering their schools, but abstract realities spurred those written expressions of emotion. In contrast, Black children’s letters often described concrete exigencies of living without opportunities or protection. Marion, the eleven-year-old Black girl from Marshall, Texas who satirized racist calls to send her and other Black Americans “back to Africa,” used her letter to describe how racism affected her and others in the United States in the 1950s. She wrote that she did not understand White protests against integrated schools. She argued that public school integration seemed a small concession to make in light of the absolute lack of opportunities for Black Americans, especially those living in the South: “I my self would like to go to school with the White race, and I

351 Wanda to Eisenhower, [Undated by author but marked as received September 27, 1957 by White House staff], DDE-RP, WHCF, Bulk Mail, Correspondence re Little Rock School and Gov. Faubus’ Action, Box 1, Unfolded, DDE.
believe that all of us could get along just [fine], you know that we as Negroes have little or no advantages, because you [hardly] ever see a Negro from the south in a contest that include the white race in the south.” With this statement, Marion explicitly addressed racial inequality of opportunity in the South. But the most poignant evidence Marion offered against American racism came from the plea she included a few lines later: “If I get killed about writing you, at my funeral please [know] that I died with a clean heart . . . Please don’t [print] my name, because I don’t want nothing to happen to my family, me I don’t care about myself.”

Marion lived in a country and a region where Black people, including children, who even hinted at challenging the political, social, or economic power of White people often faced murderous punishment at the hands of White Americans. Living under the shadow of lynching, Marion’s fears of violent retaliation against herself and her family in response to her action of writing a letter of complaint to the president were far from unfounded. Eleven-year-old Marion confronted this specter head on, sending her protest to the president “with a clean heart.”

When the Supreme Court ruled in favor of integrating American public schools in *Brown*, children around the United States shifted the way they debated integration. While Americans had engaged in conversations about race-based civil rights for many decades, earnestly so since World War II, these deliberations

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352 Marion to Eisenhower, September 25, 1957, DDE.
353 Writing in 1957, Marion would have almost certainly known about the tragic and horrific murder of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy, two years earlier. Till was lynched by two White men after being falsely accused of flirting with a White woman in Money, Mississippi in September 1955. The murderers were acquitted.
were suddenly focused on child-oriented spaces. As a result, hundreds of children from around the nation wrote to Eisenhower not simply to reflect on racial equality but to directly respond to the question of whether or not they wanted their schools to be integrated. When writing these letters, children made arguments they hoped would convince the president to agree with them. As such, most children defended their positions on public school integration by relying on four rhetorical strategies that incorporated evidence these children presented as persuasive and relevant. They cautioned the president about the Cold War threat; emphasized God’s will and Biblical teachings; told stories and invoked precedents; and detailed the meanings of citizenship, rights, and the founding documents. Different children mobilized these strategies in arguments to defend integration or segregation by fitting evidence to their particular position.

Children who supported opposite sides of the conflict over integration may not have written to one another (or, if they did, such letters may be difficult to recover), but they put the arguments they composed in direct debate. If segregation threatened Russian invasion, integration posed an equal and opposite danger. God may have created all humans, and religiously motivated children agreed on that point, but they could not reach consensus on His intentions for what He had made. Children disputed stories of “good” and “nice” Black people with stories of their own. Some created conflicting portrayals of “nice” Black people, and others described the ominous threat of “bad” Black people. Different children offered Native American reservations as precedents for integration or segregation. Children interpreted citizenship, rights, and the
founding documents to demand that Eisenhower protect and serve them – White children in segregated schools, or Black children asking for the equality the Declaration promised. Children wrote arguments that flexibly responded to one another by sourcing the same material. Children’s letters acted as palimpsests, layering 1950s cultural, political, and social references, such as Russian takeover, on top of historical arguments dating back as far as the United States’ colonial past, in ways that would have made sense to those children regardless of their position on integration.

Children likely received such information from a variety of locations, including their parents, teachers, friends, ministers and Sunday School classes, television sets, textbooks, advertisements, and so on, but they also processed and reconstituted this material in letters they chose to present as their own. While some of their communications were the result of school assignments, many children also clarified that they alone had decided to write their letters. Acknowledgement of the self-directed nature of their letters sometimes revealed intergenerational tensions between children and adults. Doris, the White teenage girl from Lexington, Kentucky who claimed that God supported public school integration but did not want people of different colors to intermarry, opened her letter by stating: “I am just a child and my mother says a child should speak only when spoken to, but I think a child should have the right [to] speak.”

Doris’s letter represented her resistance to her mother’s desire for her silence. She continued: “This [affair] about the colored children is bad for America. I believe that the colored children [would rather] go to their own school, but they also need

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354 Doris to Eisenhower, [September 25, 1957], DDE.
more education, so they go to our school.” While Doris repeated a common segregationist assertion that Black students would rather attend segregated schools, she also accepted integration and joined with other children of her generation in protesting against parents’ actions. She wrote two separate versions of the same argument to stress this point: “it is mostly the grownups would object. All children should get along with each other,” and, “Children can get along with each other its just the adults.”

Doris argued for the viability of public school integration alongside her contention that neither she nor God desired interracial relationships. Her letter did not challenge all forms of segregation or racial discrimination. But she also noted that the act of letter writing represented defiance of her mother’s authority. It is possible that, as a child from Kentucky, the opinions her letter contained would have upset her mother even more than the audacity of a child speaking before being spoken to. Doris ended her letter by cramping a postscript in the left-hand corner of her pink stationary: “P.S. keep this from my mother because she would be disappointed Please.” Children wrote about race and civil rights in relationship to their parents’ opinions; for the most part, children likely echoed their parents’ arguments. Nonetheless, Doris and other young letter writers who advocated that parents should leave it to children to control – and speak about – the process of integrating public schools demonstrated that some children believed they had a distinctive ability to solve racial conflict in America.

Children also used their status as children to racialize childhood

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355 Ibid.
356 Ibid.
innocence in their arguments, asking Eisenhower to place the children of
America first as he acted on integration. Children imagined a variety of threats in
their letters, including Russia, interracial marriages, violent, dirty, and diseased
Black people, and meddling politicians and parents. In each case, children
demanded that Eisenhower protect them and the nation’s future. They defined a
wrong step in the integration crisis as an assault on childhood itself.

Children’s arguments as communicated in letters to Eisenhower between
1954 and the end of the decade did not significantly depart from those present in
children’s letters to Truman. The only key differences were children’s
abandonment of the concept of brotherhood as a way to promote racial equality,
and children’s post- Brown expressions of personal investment in the debate over
public school integration. White children who supported integration continued to
focus on the moral implications of discrimination, rather than on the political and
economic dimensions of racial inequality. Pro-integration White children also
persisted in their emphases of racial sameness and dismissals of racial
difference, especially when using the color-based framework. During these
years, many Black children also based their pro-integration arguments on the
sameness of all people. They did so while continuing to use letter writing to
protest against various examples of racial discrimination and inequality. One
child even pointed out the danger of writing to Eisenhower. Many White
segregationist children, most of whom lived in the South, repeated racist
arguments to justify the continuance of White Americans’ political and social
control of society and the maintenance of segregation. As the decade turned,
child and adult activists brought this kind of racism into streets filled with cameras so that the world could see its ugliness. Many children saw and responded – in writing.
CHAPTER THREE: “These people want to be free”: Argumentative Shifts in the 1960s

In the spring and fall of 1963, hundreds of children scrawled the word “Birmingham” in letters to President John F. Kennedy. A difficult word to spell, children often transposed the “i” and “r” in the first syllable of the Alabama city. Their misspellings did not detract from the messages of outrage they wrote in response to the events that took place in Birmingham between May and September of that year. Two years later, in August 1965, the name of a different American city that was much shorter and simpler to write, “Watts,” also became synonymous with children’s anger over the state of American race relations in their correspondence to President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Over the course of the 1960s, beginning especially in 1963 and carrying on through 1968, a series of flashpoints in racial conflict occurred that attracted a great deal of media attention and an outpouring of response from the American public. The mainstream media trajectory went from South to North and followed a declensionist arc: activists and politicians’ heroic actions, which “fixed” Southern racial issues in the first half of the decade, were undermined by Black “rioters’” irresponsibility and irrationality in Northern urban “riots” that occurred in 1964 and 1965 through 1968. During these years, American children repeated or contested what they heard, saw, and read on their televisions and in their newspapers, precipitating important transformations in the way children debated race and civil rights by the end of the decade. This chapter analyzes children’s letters written in response to a series of highly public racial conflicts from 1963 to 1968, using the
letters to show key shifts in the racial arguments of the nation’s youth during these pivotal years.

Since the 1950s, civil rights leaders, including Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), had recognized the importance of the media to the Civil Rights Movement. They believed that coverage of Southern racist violence (especially in photographs and on television) would enrage White Northerners, create leverage with political leaders, and encourage the introduction of civil rights legislation. As historians have demonstrated, some of the most important and long-lasting work of civil rights activists in the South did not occur in the places on which the media focused most of their attention, such as Birmingham or Selma, Alabama. At the same time, in the early 1960s, photographic and television coverage of the violence – much of it involving Black children – that occurred both at protests themselves and in White Southerners’ acts of retribution against Black activism garnered the lion’s share of national public outcry.

Three events in particular consumed the media and produced a massive response from the attentive public. First, from May 2-5, 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama, thousands of Black elementary, middle, and high school students participated in the “Children's Crusade” to protest for expanded economic opportunities, integrated institutions, and voting rights for the Black citizens of Birmingham. The police arrested hundreds of children and released their dogs

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357 See: Charles M. Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition ad the Mississippi Freedom Struggle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Payne argues that local grassroots activism by Southern Black residents in the years after World War II, built on by SNCC workers and initiatives in Mississippi, acted as some of the most effective protests in the South.
and hoses on them. Second, on September 15, 1963, four members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) bombed Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and killed four Black girls, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair. Third, over the course of several weeks in March 1965 in Selma, Alabama, police officers and White civilians brutally attacked and killed Black and White marchers and civil rights activists fighting for voting rights in the city.\(^{358}\) Given the intense reaction from Americans around the United States, especially White Northerners, visual evidence of the violent manifestation of racism in the South apparently communicated the urgency of the struggle for civil rights in a way that words could not.\(^{359}\) In the end, the SCLC’s strategy worked, at least in terms of legislation. President Johnson and Congress passed a series of Civil Rights Bills over the course of the decade, including the 1964 Civil Rights Act, outlawing discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion, or national origin; the 1965 Voting Rights Act, providing a series of protections and enforcement mechanisms to extend voting rights to Southern Black Americans; and, finally, the 1968 Fair Housing Act, passed on April 11, 1968 shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Each of these bills succeeded in the context of publicized violence targeting Black people.

The sight of Southern White violence aimed at Black citizens also generated a reaction among children. Many children chose to participate in this

\(^{358}\) See: Maurice Berger, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Martin A. Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Note that the voting rights campaign in Selma culminated in in a five-day pilgrimage from Selma to the capital by hundreds of activists from around the nation, many of them White religious leaders and representatives. They reached Montgomery on March 25, 1965.

\(^{359}\) Berger, *For All the World to See*, 8.
phase of the Civil Rights Movement through their letters to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. Historians such as Rebecca de Schweinitz have argued that in the 1950s and 1960s, children played a crucial role as activists who encouraged more radical action from their adult counterparts. Children’s engagement with less public and in-the-streets methods of activism has only recently been addressed in the literature. A few scholars have begun to add to our understanding of children’s protest methodologies by demonstrating the capacity of print to act as a mode of political participation and activism both in national, rights-based movements and in less large-scale political debates. I add to this scholarship by arguing that, during the early 1960s, especially from 1963 to 1965, children used letters to Kennedy and, later, Johnson, to call for action in the matter of civil rights, often explicitly acknowledging that they saw their letters as protests. In these letters, writers identified themselves as children and youths by specifying their age or status as students. Young Americans attempted to motivate their presidential readers to protect their futures, as children had also done in the 1940s and 1950s.

For White Northern children, “seeing” events in Alabama inspired written expressions of anger and frustration. Even so, these children’s vision of change as presented in their arguments remained focused on the South and limited to integration. The rhetorical strategies they used to argue for the eradication of racism replicated many of those drawn on by children during the previous

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360 For public youth activism in Civil Rights Movement, see: de Schweinitz, Change the World; Graham, Young Activists, especially chapters two and three: “Maintaining the Color Line in Desegregated Schools,” 30-50, and “It's Not Personal, It’s Just That You’re White—Black and Brown Power in the High Schools,” 51-81. For print activism, see: Rotskoff, “Little Women’s Libbers”; Tilley, “Children and the Comics”; Sturkey, “I Want To Become Part of History.”
decade, and children continued to employ the color-based framework to define racism as irrational. The solutions White Northern children offered to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson also echoed those from the 1940s and 1950s. Children proposed vague, morally driven prescriptions to give Black people in the South their “freedom” by ensuring that integration moved forward. Despite these patterns, some White children in the North articulated their awareness of specific political and economic barriers preventing racial equality in the North and the South.

Black children, too, repeated rhetorical strategies from the 1950s in their letters to Kennedy and Johnson. They also invested their letters with written communications of urgency usually absent from letters written by White children. When responding to the violence that occurred in Birmingham and Selma, Black children wrote about the pain of seeing “their people,” particularly those that were “their age,” attacked, injured, or killed, directly connecting themselves and their Blackness with the violence committed against Black people in the South. Mainstream interpretations of racial conflict remained primarily focused on divisions between White and Black Americans in this decade, and, as during the 1940s and 1950s, the vast majority of letter-writers self-identified as either Black or White.

Some White children, most of whom lived in the South, cast doubt and aspersion on the images coming out of Birmingham and Selma. These children wrote protest letters seeking to change the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement, roll back any previous gains in integration, and prevent further civil
rights legislation. They argued that the racial inferiority of Black people meant that the presidents should want to prevent further “mixing” and social interaction between White and Black Americans and any expansion of Black social, political, or economic power. Repeating arguments from previous decades, many of these children reproduced racist “stories” from the past and the present in order to lobby for segregation.

Later in the decade, the mainstream media and its audience witnessed a series of urban uprisings in cities such as the Watts section of Los Angeles, California, Newark, New Jersey, Detroit, Michigan, and Chicago, Illinois. Most observers interpreted these events through the frame of already-passed civil rights legislation and increased anti-poverty funding. As such, the majority of mainstream media outlets – even if they recognized the social and economic inequalities that motivated urban unrest – refused to grant either agency or rationality to Black participants in what newspaper and television coverage termed “riots.”

While several urban uprisings occurred during the summer of 1964 in cities including Harlem and Rochester, New York, Chicago, Illinois, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the unrest that rocked Watts from August 11-18, 1965 gripped the nation in a way that the previous year’s incidents had not.

The events that unfolded in Watts began with California Highway Patrol officers’ arrest of Marquette Frye, a twenty-one-year-old Black man, under suspicion of drunk driving. Both Marquette and his mother, Rena, argued that the

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officers assaulted them during the arrest, while officers denied this account.\textsuperscript{363} The arrest became public as hundreds of residents gathered at the site of incident, and tension over the assaults erupted into a week of violence. At least thirty-four people, mostly Black residents of Watts, died, approximately 1,000 were injured, 4,000 were arrested, and over $200 million of damage occurred.\textsuperscript{364} Two years later, in June and July 1967, uprisings occurred in Cleveland and Cincinnati, Ohio, Newark, New Jersey, and Detroit, Michigan. Finally, in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968, uprisings occurred in over one hundred cities, including Chicago, Illinois and Washington, D.C. Thomas J. Sugrue characterizes this period of what came to be known as the “long hot summers” by noting that, “[f]or all their differences, 1960s riots had crucial commonalities. Rioters chose their targets carefully, and had just two: the police and shopkeepers.”\textsuperscript{365} The urban “uprisings” – “spontaneous upsurge[s] of protest or violent expression[s] of discontent” – that occurred between 1964 and 1968 represented the response of Black Northern residents of inner-cities, especially young Black men, to economic exploitation in the form of price-gouging by White owners of stores in Black neighborhoods and decades of unchecked police brutality committed against Black people.\textsuperscript{366} Deindustrialization and the suburbanization of cities beginning in the 1940s and 1950s compounded these issues by leaving Black people stranded and jobless in economically

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364 Horne, \textit{Fire this Time}, 3.
366 Ibid., 334.
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destitute urban centers, with no means of transportation out to where jobs could be found.  

Most White children throughout the United States did not interpret the events in Watts or other Northern cities as driven by economic inequality or police brutality. Instead, the majority of White children repeated common narratives presented by mainstream media outlets that cast “riots” and “rioters” as irresponsible and irrational through voiceovers played on top of images of burning, looted buildings. Children denigrated the “rioters,” “they,” and “these people” as unthinking, entitled, and undeserving of civil rights. In this manner, White children acted as participatory agents of circulation in a shifting national conversation about race involving the media and the American public. Like White adults, children also absorbed, reflected upon, and then transcribed their views about the “riots” and race more generally in their letters to Johnson. A survey of what I term “but letters” – “I believe in civil rights, but…” – demonstrated that many Southern children who felt vindicated by events in Northern localities and many Northern children who felt threatened by them came closer together in the way they wrote about race and civil rights after 1965. Both groups of children often embedded racist arguments in their expressions of nominal support for equal rights alongside their condemnations of the “riots.” These children asserted that enough had been done to extend civil rights to Black Americans. If anything, they added, the government had engaged in too much action to increase Black people’s opportunities. While the majority of White children wrote “but letters” in

response to the uprisings, a small number of White children resisted media narratives and circulated their own interpretations in letters to the president, defending participants by detailing historical and contemporary racial inequalities.

Black children responded quite differently to events in Watts, Newark, Detroit, Chicago, and other Northern cities. Many Black children also condemned the “rioters,” echoing “respectability” arguments characteristic of letters written by some Black children in 1940s. These children’s letters still lobbied for expanded civil rights, arguing that a few bills did not mean the work was over. Black child-writers from Los Angeles bore witness to police brutality, contextualizing the events in Watts and complicating portrayals of irrational “rioters.” Several children included strong expressions of racial pride in their letters, underscoring developments in Black Power and Black Consciousness Movements that gained momentum in the United States from 1966 to 1968.368 By the end of the decade, Black children’s arguments about Northern unrest along with their own relationship to their Blackness contrasted sharply with the general consensus then developing among White children nationwide.

White Children “See” and Protest Against Southern Racial Discrimination

When declaredly pro-equality children wrote in response to events that occurred in Alabama between 1963 and 1965, the sight of the violence in Birmingham and Selma appeared to affect them deeply. Many writers referenced visual images from newspapers and television in their letters.369 In response to

369 For examples of letters from children to Kennedy and Johnson that included reference to
the brutality committed against Black protesters in Birmingham in the spring of 1963, most children focused on White Southerners' use of hoses and dogs on Black protestors, especially children.\textsuperscript{370} In September 1963, after White supremacist terrorists bombed the Sixteenth Street Church and killed four Black girls, three of whom were fourteen and one eleven, children identified with the victims' youth, describing their horror after reading the story of the girls' death.\textsuperscript{371}

In March 1965, children wrote about the cruelty they witnessed through media coverage of events in Selma, condemning police officers' beating of women, use of teargas and whips, and trampling of marchers with their horses.\textsuperscript{372} Several children enclosed clippings in their letters to the president, with arrows and underlines in the captions pointing to what they argued represented egregious examples of racist violence.\textsuperscript{373} By reacting specifically to visual media evidence of these events, White child-writers from the around the country, particularly the Northeast (especially New York City and its environs), the Midwest, and the

\textsuperscript{370} See: Regina to Kennedy, [Undated by author but postage stamped May 6, 1963], JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Troubles, Box 166, Unfolded, JFK; Allen to Kennedy, May 10, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 190, Unfolded, JFK.

\textsuperscript{371} See: Gail G. to Kennedy, [Undated by author but postage stamped September 30, 1963], JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Bombing, Box 222, Unfolded, JFK.

\textsuperscript{372} See: Andy to Johnson, March 9, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Selma, Box 185, Unfolded, LBJ.

\textsuperscript{373} See: Laura to Kennedy, May 6, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 172, Unfolded, JFK; Mary D. and Chris P. to Kennedy, [Undated by author but postage stamped May 20, 1963], JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 175, Unfolded, JFK.
Pacific Coast regions, joined a contingent of adults in the nation who used media coverage to protest against the undeniable problem of racism and racial violence in the South. Maurice Berger has documented the importance of photographic and televised coverage of this violence as a “powerful force” that could present a “vivid, ongoing morality play that pitted segregationists against their benevolent victims.”

Many politicians and American citizens of all ages reacted collectively and intensely to the narrative the images told by calling for immediate federal action to stop the violence.

Pro-equality White children’s letters to Kennedy and Johnson closely resembled letters written by White children supportive of integration in the 1940s and 1950s, but writers also invested their arguments with 1960s particularities. In addition to repeating the 1950s-era rhetorical strategy of warning about the danger of Soviet propaganda focused on racial divisions, several children argued that the events in Birmingham and Selma damaged the United States’ relationship to newly independent countries in Asia and especially Africa.

Beyond this shift, even more so than during the mid- and late 1950s, when many children believed that integration would affect schools in the North and the South, children in the early 1960s singled out the South as the sole source of racial

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374 Berger, *For All the World to See*, 125, 130.
376 For examples of letters using the 1950s-era rhetorical strategies, see: See: Karyl to Kennedy, June 8, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 175, Unfoldered, JFK; Darilynn to Kennedy, May 17, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 176, Unfoldered, JFK; Brenda W. to Johnson, [Undated by author but marked as received April 6, 1965 by White House staff], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, General, Box 235, Unfoldered, LBJ; Everett to Johnson, March 15, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Selma, Box 4, Unfoldered, LBJ.
377 See: Samuel to Kennedy, May 9, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 190, Unfoldered, JFK; Connie to Johnson, [Undated by author but postage stamped April 1, 1965], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, General, Box 235, Unfoldered, LBJ.
conflict in the United States. These characterizations mirrored those of many White children in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

On September 15, 1963, Jean, a White ninth-grader from Farmington, New Mexico, wrote a letter that typified those sent by fellow pro-equality youths from 1963 to 1965:

Really what is happening in Birmingham and other southern cities is a disgrace to our country and is rather foolish. I feel that the Negros should be given the same rights as the ‘White’, and should be punished equally also. For God created all men to be equal and I’m sure He didn’t intend for us to be mixed up in what we are now. Down here in Farmington, New Mexico, we ‘the Whites’ live with Negros, Mexicans, Indians, Japanese, and many other races, and we never have had any racial troubles. I think there ought to be some way that we could all get together and live happily and equally. What has happen to our ‘Declaration of Independence’? ‘ . . . all men are created equal, . . . ’

Letters like Jean’s used several rhetorical strategies to underscore the South’s “foolishness,” while also differentiating the South as a “disgraceful” aberration. Jean contrasted the South with other parts of the country in which multiracial populations lived in harmony, such as her hometown. Jean had a rather exceptional vantage point in the Southwest, where multiple racial groups did live together, although not so harmoniously as Jean described. While Jean’s letter reflected her unique regional location in the nation, it did so by incorporating the established rhetorical strategy of telling positive “stories” about the United States’ contemporary multiracial population to argue for expanded civil rights for Black Americans. By offering up God’s will and the Declaration of Independence as

378 Jean to Kennedy, September 15, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 180, Unfoldered, JFK. Farmington is located adjacent to one of the largest Navajo reservations in New Mexico, so Jean likely did have some understanding of multiracial populations characteristic of her area.

379 While the Chicano and Red Power movements would draw more attention to issues of racial, ethnic and cultural discrimination against Latina/os and Native Americans in New Mexico during the late 1960s and 1970s, activism was already underway in the Southwest by the 1950s and the mid-1960s. See, for example: Reies López Tijerina, They Called Me “King Tiger”: My Struggle for the Land and Our Rights, trans. José Angel Gutiérrez (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2000); Bradley G. Shreve, Red Power Rising: The National Indian Youth Council and the Origins of Native Activism (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011).
additional proof of the fallacy of Southern segregation, Jean’s letter included three of the four major rhetorical strategies used by children during the 1950s and again in the 1960s.

Pro-equality children also remained reliant on the color-based framework to accentuate the “sameness” of all people. John, a White student who did not specify his location in his letter, wrote to Kennedy on May 9, 1963 to call for the withholding of federal aid to Alabama in response to events in Birmingham: “We are white but just because the Negroes have darker skin than us does not mean they are different. They have the same red blood we do.”380 Scott, a ten-year-old White boy from Passaic, New Jersey, informed Johnson on April 26, 1965 that: “[human beings] can be green, purple, orange, black, brown and blue with pink polka dots, but they should have the equal rights a white man has. In Mississippi, Alabama or wherever there’s segregation the white people are mistreating the negroes.”381 Letter-writers like John and Scott listed the colors of the rainbow and referenced polka dots and red blood in order to trivialize variance in skin color while also drawing attention to bodily aspects that were the same among humans, such as blood. They thus employed the color-based framework to contribute to pro-equality White children’s overarching purpose in their pre-Watts letters: to ridicule Southern racism.

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380 John M. to Kennedy, May 9, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 176, Unfolded, JFK.
381 Scott to Johnson, [Undated by author but marked as received April 26, 1965 by White House staff], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, General, Box 232, Unfolded, LBJ. See also: Sandy to Johnson, April 17, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, General, Box 232, Unfolded, LBJ; as well as a letter from an eleven-year-old White girl writing in response to the integration of the University of Mississippi by James Meredith in 1962: Linda Z. to Kennedy, September 27, 1962, JFK-PP, WHO, Box 104, Folder 6, Pro James Meredith, JFK.
White children sent hundreds of letters to Kennedy and Johnson between 1963 and 1965 demanding that the presidents take strong and immediate action in the South. Most of these writers came from New York and other mid-Atlantic states, although children from the Midwest, Pacific Coast, and the rest of the Northeast wrote in large numbers as well, in addition to children from other states across the country (see Chart L in the appendix). Several White children from Southern states wrote to protest against segregationists’ actions in Alabama, just as some children from Northern states wrote to decry federal violation of “states’ rights” and portray civil rights activists as in the wrong (see Charts L and M in the appendix). As during previous decades, children described the action of letter writing as their way of inspiring change. This methodology appeared to be particularly relevant to children during a decade when protests for civil rights became more public and popular. Irene, a Jewish high school student from San Diego, California, closed her September 20, 1963 letter to Kennedy by stating: “I can only hope that this letter will help you to fight against racism and segregation.”382 Writing in October 1963, Linda, a twelve-year-old White girl from Waterloo, Nebraska, demanded that Kennedy “[r]ead this letter several times and concentrate on it. Now, is there anything you can do about the negroes? Just remember God could have made YOU just as black as night if he would have wanted to. Keep this in deep thought.”383 Elizabeth, a White teenager from Kansas City, Missouri, wrote to Johnson on March 15, 1965 that: “We

382 Irene to Kennedy, September 20, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Bombing, Box 221, Unfolded, JFK.
383 Linda W. to Kennedy, [Undated by author but postage stamped October 7, 1963], JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Bombing, Box 222, Unfolded, JFK.
[teenagers] know that, though we cannot yet vote, we can be committed, and, though we are not yet ready to give speeches, we can write letters.”

Even when children recognized that the president himself might not read their letters personally, this did not stop them from hoping that their words would find their way to the Oval Office and make a difference. John, a White ninth-grader from Baltimore, Maryland, wrote Johnson in November 1965 to say: “Two years ago my seventh grade class wrote to you about the situation in Vietnam. You didn’t receive the letter and I doubt if you will receive this one. If you do I would [feel] much better about what I have to say.”

As non-voting citizens, White children recognized their letters as political tools that could allow them to influence the presidents on the matter of race-based civil rights.

Even as they advocated for presidential action, the solutions and commentary White children provided in their letters underscored the limitations of the societal changes White Americans envisioned in the early 1960s. Steve, a White seventh-grader from Lakewood, Ohio, wrote Kennedy on May 9, 1963 to express his class’s opinion that “[the] colored should have equal right and opportunity with the white race.” Steve elaborated: “The colored must be educated and ready to accept the [challenges] as well as the white must give them their due in rights and [privileges]. All this begins apparently with social acceptance, and all of us do feel the bias of color and creed at times, but if we

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384 Elizabeth D. to Johnson, March 15, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Selma, Box 5, Unfolded, LBJ.
385 John B. to Johnson, [Undated by author, marked November 30, 1965 on White House departmental referral sheet], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 31, Folder HU 2 ST 19-21, General, LBJ.
are intelligent people we must see beyond these things.”  

Jeff, a twelve-year-old White boy from Reynoldsburg, Ohio, told Johnson on February 16, 1965: “I’m scared because the negroes might turn communist because they are not getting, their freedom or proper care, and the right to vote in the south. Why are negroes being treated this way. I hope you can do something about this tragedy. ‘please help’!”

Jennifer, a thirteen-year-old White girl from Woodstock, New York, indicated the intensity of her reaction to the news from Birmingham by telling Kennedy in May 1963 that she wanted to gather her fellow students and go “down there and march” to ensure that Black people, especially those “[her] age,” “have as much freedom as we have.”

White children left no doubt about the depth of their feelings on the events that occurred in Alabama from 1963 to 1965; many writers accentuated their words with underlines and exclamation marks. Even so, as this collection of injunctions to Kennedy and Johnson indicates, White Northern children in the early 1960s viewed racial conflict as something primarily (if not exclusively) located in the South that could be solved if White people gave Black people “freedom” and learned “social acceptance.” As Steve’s letter demonstrated, many White children still believed that Black people needed to prove themselves worthy and educated before White people could “give” them civil rights. By stating these views, White children gave voice to the position of the majority of

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386 Steve H. to Kennedy, May 7, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 190, Unfoldered, JFK.
387 Jeff to Johnson, February 16, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Selma, Box 64, Unfoldered, LBJ.
388 Jennifer E. to Kennedy, [Undated by author but postage stamped May 10, 1963], JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 190, Unfoldered, JFK.
389 See also one child’s reference to the “tears” that news from Alabama “brought to my eyes”: Pat to Kennedy, September 15, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 180, Unfoldered, JFK.
pro-equality White Americans at this time. Martin A. Berger argues that the pictorial narrative of Southern violence that motivated so much public outrage in the North in the early 1960s also limited White Northerners’ understandings of necessary change and appropriate protest by casting Black people as tragic victims and Southern segregationists as villains. In this manner, White Northerners both distanced themselves from the problem of racism and characterized non-passive activism as unpatriotic. While White children around the nation expressed strong belief in equality and civil rights in the early 1960s, most of them did so in repetitions of the Southern-focused, mainstream narrative circulating around them in the news and among most White adults at this time.

**An Alternative Position: White Northern Children Identify Local Discrimination**

A few White children wrote letters indicating that awareness of Northern racism and structural inequality also existed among some White Northerners during the early 1960s. Several children described the hatred, slurs, racist arguments, and racial discrimination present in their Northern communities. In her June 12, 1963 letter, Shirley, a White teenage girl from Ann Arbor, Michigan, targeted White Americans’ deep-set opposition to interracial relationships by demanding to know whether or not Kennedy would allow his daughter to date a Black boy:

I would also like to comment on what Senator [Philip] Hart of Michigan said the other day, about the below-the-surface prejudice of people in the north. He was absolutely right, because if I were seen going out with, or just going somewhere with a Negro fellow, I

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390 Berger, *Seeing Through Race*.
391 Ibid., 59-63; 72-73, 75; 152-154.
392 See: Lois to Johnson, March 15, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Selma, Box 5, Unfolded, LBJ; Elizabeth D. to Johnson, March 15, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Selma, Box 5, Unfolded, LBJ.
would be ostracized by my white friends. Mr. President I would like to know how you feel about what I have just commented upon. If your daughter were 16 or 17 years old, would you let her go out with a Negro? – if she wanted to?  

Shirley asked that Kennedy and other White liberals like him contend with the prejudice that allowed for the integration of public spaces, but prevented support for full racial equality. Shirley demanded that Kennedy address the notions of racial inferiority and sexual bestiality that undergirded arguments against interracial relationships between Black men and White women and girls. With her question, she communicated her hope that the president would abandon such a worldview.

Other White children also addressed “below-the-surface prejudice,” explaining how racism affected housing opportunities for Black Northerners.

Mary, a White junior in high school from Dearborn, Michigan, explained to Kennedy on May 18, 1963 that Black people’s limited housing access meant that gradual action on civil rights would not work in the North:

This hatred and dissatisfaction has been building up for a long time, and it’s too late to be gradual about things now. The North will be just as bad in a few years. There is the same hatred, although it’s more under cover here. In this city in which I live, negroes are forbidden to live. Until just a few years ago, there was a clause on the deed to each house which stated something to the effect that one could not sell his house to a negro or a Jew. Fortunately, this came to the attention of the state and was changed. However, public sentiment hasn’t changed. I understand that two or three negro families have bought houses in Dearborn, and haven’t been able to move in because the neighbors won’t let them.

Mary’s letter described the practice of racially restrictive covenants, a method whereby neighborhood associations, homeowners, or real estate groups enforced housing segregation by prohibiting the lease or sale of homes to Black

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393 Shirley H. to Kennedy, June 12, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Troubles, Box 167, Unfolded, JFK. See also: John L. to Kennedy, June 12, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Mail on reaction to the President’s radio-TV address on Civil Rights, June 11, 1963 (TV Address), Box 1225, Unfolded, JFK.

394 Mary A. to Kennedy, May 18, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 176, Unfolded, JFK.
people and occasionally to other racial and religious minorities through clauses on deeds and in neighborhood agreements.\footnote{Sugrue, \textit{Sweet Land of Liberty}, 202.} While the Supreme Court declared such covenants unconstitutional in \textit{Shelley v. Kramer} in 1948, this decision did little to ensure Black access to White neighborhoods in Northern communities, as Mary’s letter indicated. In the years after World War II, White Northerners moved farther and farther away from metropolitan centers, keeping Black residents out of these neighborhoods through violent intimidation, continued reliance on informal and formal neighborhood agreements not to sell to Black buyers, and successive waves of White flight into prohibitively expensive suburbs. In these suburbs, White Americans could build economic and social capital for themselves and their children through access to good healthcare, education, and jobs.\footnote{Ibid., 208, 248-249.}

Ira, a fourteen-year-old White boy from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, informed Kennedy on May 21, 1963 how many White people justified barring Black people from White-majority neighborhoods:

When I was six years old my family moved to a neighborhood with Catholics, Protestants, a few colored families and mostly Jews. Within six years about [ninety] per cent of the white families moved out and colored families moved in. What was the reason for this? These were upper income bracket families looking for a better neighborhood to bring up their families. It was in Philadelphia, ‘The City of Brotherly Love’. Are people afraid to live with their brothers? Some people use the excuse that it is the colored people who are connected with all the murders and rapes in Philadelphia. This is a far from true generalization.\footnote{Ira to Kennedy, May 21, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 176, Unfolded, JFK.}

In recounting the story of White flight in his neighborhood, Ira both identified and dismissed the primary explanation his White neighbors gave for moving. Ira’s letter demonstrated that by attributing criminal activity and sexual violence solely
and disproportionately to Black people, especially Black men, White Northerners adapted racist arguments about Black people’s uncontrollable sexual appetites and bestiality to cast Black men as the stereotypical criminal threatening Northern cities – and the reason behind their moves to the suburbs.\(^{398}\)

Other White children’s letters demonstrated that when integration or interracial socialization did occur in the North, racial prejudice and physical violence often hampered smooth relations between White and Black people. Claudia, a White seventh-grade girl from Dobbs Ferry, New York, told Kennedy on May 7, 1963 that when her housekeeper’s son “entered an integrated school, even the teachers were cruel to him. Rocks were thrown at the house, just because of his race.”\(^{399}\) Steven, a White high school student from Mt. Pulaski, Illinois, also described the abuse that Black children endured in Northern localities in his March 15, 1965 letter to Johnson:

I am one of a few students out of some 300 kids in my school who happen to like negro people . . . I have gotten beaten and beat up a few kids for calling my colored buddies ‘black bas----’ and a few other choice words . . . About 1 month ago my high school (Mt. Pulaski) played McArthur Springfield and there were colored students at the game. About 7 boys from Pulaski had two colored boys down and were giving them a ’[Brooklyn] Stomping.’ My friend and I got the principal and we stopped the fight. We haven't played McArthur since.\(^{400}\)

Steven’s descriptions of both verbal and extreme physical violence (a “Brooklyn stomping” referred to a person’s use of a sidewalk curb to exacerbate the effect of beating and kicking a victim’s head and neck) aimed at Black children underscored that prejudice in the North could also be expressed in ways that did not at all qualify as “below-the-surface.” While Steven and the other White

\(^{398}\) Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*, 221.
\(^{399}\) Claudia to Kennedy, May 7, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 172, Unfolded, JFK.
\(^{400}\) Steven to Johnson, March 15, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, General, Box 235, Unfolded, LBJ.
children from the Northeast and the Midwest who wrote about overt and covert examples of Northern racial discrimination represented a small minority in the early and mid-1960s, these children’s letters nonetheless demonstrated that the mainstream interpretation of American racial conflict as a moral problem isolated to the South was not all encompassing.

**Black Children Write About the Communal Pain of Racial Violence**

When Black children around the United States reacted to the events in Birmingham and Selma, they related to the victims of the violence in ways that also departed from the mainstream. Martin A. Berger argues that liberal Whites “failed to feel the violence [in Alabama] as *their* pain.” In contrast, Black Americans’ communal pain and identification with Southern Blacks “sprang . . . from a shared sense of identity, history, and destiny, then alien to even liberal whites.” 401 In their consistent demands that Kennedy and Johnson protect “[their] people,” Black children used possessive pronouns to directly connect with Black Southerners injured or killed in the violence. 402 Many Black children echoed the sentiment that Shirley, a fourteen-year-old Black girl from Monroe, Louisiana, confessed to Johnson in her March 1965 letter: “It hurts me when one, of my own

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402 In addition to the examples quoted in the text, see: Fletcher, John Ericsson Junior High School Student, Brooklyn, to Kennedy, May 8, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 174, Unfolded, JFK; Roslyn to Kennedy, May 10, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 174, Unfolded, JFK; Clarissa to Kennedy, June 8, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 174, Unfolded, JFK; P.S. 119, New York City Sixth Graders to Kennedy, [September 1963], JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Bombing, Box 220, Unfolded, JFK; Michael W., J.H.S. 43 Manhattan Student, to Kennedy, [Undated by author but marked as received September 24, 1963 by White House staff], JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Bombing, Box 221, Unfolded, JFK; Jack Yates Senior High School Students to Johnson, March 11, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Selma, Box 169, Unfolded, LBJ; Mary B. to Johnson, March 10, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Selma, Box 185, Unfolded, LBJ.
race is violently treated or killed.” Veronica, an eleven-year-old Black girl from Far Rockaway in Queens, New York, transcribed her and her brother’s grief in her May 3, 1963 letter to Kennedy: “I cry when I see the horrible things that happen in America against my people. My brother, who is 10 years old, cries also.” Regina, a “Negro girl” from Hempstead on Long Island, New York, pled with Kennedy to defend Black children in her May 9, 1963 letter: “please Mr. President help my people so the dogs won’t bite little children.” Linda, a young girl from Santa Monica, California, expressed to Kennedy on May 8, 1963 how she felt about the relative importance of her Blackness to her overall identity when explaining her relationship to Black people in Alabama: “I’m twelve years old. Most of all I’am a Negro. Being I’am a Negro I care about my people.” Sandra, a Black elementary schooler from New York City, exposed the injustice of White violence by juxtaposing it with Black women’s historical and contemporary labor in White homes in her March 11, 1965 letter to Johnson: “I feel bad to see pictures how my people get beat by chains and sticks. I feel bad to see my old people get beat and have to walk miles and miles I hope some day it would not be like these days are now. Because it is so bad how white people hate the negro. But yet they let these black hands cook and handle their children with love and kindness.” Pamela, who wrote with her fellow classmates from P.S. 119 in Harlem, New York, referenced Martin Luther King Jr.’s description of

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403 Shirley L. to Johnson, [Undated by author but postage stamped March 16, 1965], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Box 5, Selma, Unfolded, LBJ.
404 Veronica to Kennedy, May 3, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Troubles, Box 166, Unfolded, JFK.
405 Regina to Kennedy, [May 6, 1963], JFK.
406 Linda W. to Kennedy, May 8, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 190, Unfolded, JFK.
407 Sandra C. to Johnson, March 11, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Selma, Box 185, Unfolded, LBJ.
Black people’s centuries-long suffering in her September 17, 1963 letter to Kennedy: “Why aren’t you doing more to protect our people? We’re human too. Rev. Martin Luther King said, ‘Even after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed 100 years later the Negro is still not free, 100 years later the life of the Negro is still badly crippled’. Why aren’t we free now?” Black children’s articulations that they “hurt” when they saw Black people’s pain spoke to the collective manner in which many Black Americans, children included, experienced the violence in Birmingham, Selma, and the rest of the South. The “shared” foundation of “history, identity, and destiny” that Berger identified as characterizing Black adults’ reactions to events in Alabama applied to Black children as well.

Black children also communicated that their personal safety felt undermined by events in Alabama. After KKK terrorists bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Kevin, a nine-year-old Black boy from Reading, Pennsylvania, asked Kennedy: “Mr. President if it isn’t [safe] in church where can we the negro [people] of these [United] States Be [safe] we know no other home then America.” When writing to Kennedy in September 1963 from Louisville, Kentucky, Peggy, a Black girl, reflected: “me being a colored girl, I keep thinking it could have been me . . . I am a girl 12 years of age, and I was in Sunday School at the time of the bombing, even though I didn’t know about it.”

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408 Pamela, Sixth-Grade Student at P.S. 119, Manhattan, to Kennedy, September 17, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Bombing, Box 220, Unfolded, JFK.
409 Kevin to Kennedy, [Undated by author but marked as received September 30, 1963 by White House staff], JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Bombing, Box 221, Unfolded, JFK.
410 Peggy C. to Kennedy, [Undated by author but postage stamped September 17, 1963], JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 180, Unfolded, JFK.
White children also communicated their mourning of the violence, they did not express fear for their lives after news of the event broke. Black children’s direct experiences with racial prejudice and violence in America contextualized their more personal articulations of the implications of events in Alabama. Black children were not totally alone in writing about the individual consequences of the events in Alabama. Carmen, a Latina sixth grader from New York City, wrote about her fear that racial violence could affect her as well in her May 9, 1963 letter to Kennedy: “I am a Spanish girl and maybe someday this will happen to me. I don’t want dogs and fire hoses on me, if I walk in the street saying I want freedom.” Carmen, who also could not lay claim to the safety of White skin, demonstrated that at least some children of color who did not identity as Black also interpreted the events in Birmingham and Selma as personally dangerous and painful for them as well.

**Mobilizing Letters as Protests**

While certain aspects of Black and White children’s letters in the early 1960s differed in content and tone, Black children’s descriptions of the Alabama events mirrored those of their White peers. Both groups reached for the same rhetorical strategies that children had used in their 1950s letters to craft their arguments. Unlike White children who feared that the Alabama crisis undermined the United States’ position in the world, Black children shifted this narrative by discussing the Cold War as a distraction from the more significant problem of racial discrimination. Betty, a fifteen-year-old Black girl from Highland Park,

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411 Carmen, Student at P.S. 51, Bronx, to Kennedy, May 9, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 190, Unfolded, JFK.
Michigan, ridiculed Americans’ concern with the space race in her September 17, 1963 letter to Kennedy: “People say that this is the atomic age and they are so worried about how to get to the moon and what’s going on in space, that they don’t ever stop to realize that they have enough trouble right here on earth.” Betty concluded her letter by warning the president: “All I can say is that if someone isn’t real quick about the Alabama situation I don’t think they will have to worry about going to war with Russia. They will have a big race war right here in the United States of America.” By the mid-1960s, amid escalation of American military involvement in the Vietnam War, several White and Black children also highlighted the mistake of focusing on Vietnam while racism still plagued the nation. Black children added that sending resources to Vietnam to the detriment of Black Southerners especially troubled them, given Black taxpayers and soldiers’ contributions to the war. George, a Black high schooler from Houston, Texas, demanded on March 10, 1965 to know why Johnson sent troops to Vietnam and not to Selma: “You will not send troops to Selma to help the negro tax payers, but will send troops over seas to fight for and protect the people in Vietnam! What are you doing to protect our American Heritage our faith in freedom and [equality] are these to be forgotten?” As had Betty, George communicated his frustration that the president would dedicate economic and military resources to foreign issues while Black people suffered in America.

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412 Betty H. to Kennedy, September 17, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Bombing, Box 220, Unfoldered, JFK.
413 Ibid.
414 See, for example: Gail S. to Johnson, April 1, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, General, Box 235, Unfoldered, LBJ.
415 George, Jack Yates Senior High School Student, to Johnson, March 10, 1965, LBJ, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Selma, Box 185, Unfoldered, LBJ.
George underscored his point by referencing “our American Heritage,”
challenging the president to honor the nation’s stated core principles of “freedom”
and “equality” by protecting Black people in Selma before worrying about
Vietnam.

By writing about America’s “faith” in “freedom” and “equality,” George
made what he called “American Heritage” one of the key rhetorical strategies
present in his letter. Several other Black children joined George in citing words
and phrases from America’s founding documents to castigate White Southerners’
actions in Alabama. Like the early 1960s letters from pro-equality White
children, many of these children’s arguments also relied on the color-based
framework. Beverly, a fourteen-year-old Black girl from Newark, New Jersey,
wrote to Kennedy on October 4, 1963: “I believe that God put us on this earth to
do well to each help one another to love one another. As it is said All Men Are
Created equal. And regardless [of] [color] we should be able to help one
another.” Echoing several strategies present in the 1950s letters, Beverly
connected words from the Declaration to God’s vision for how humans should
interact with one another on earth, “regardless of color.”

Some Black children cited supposed American principles in combination
with the color-based framework to challenge the rationality of White Americans’
belief in racial hierarchy. In her May 22, 1963 letter to Kennedy, Gertelle, a Black

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416 See, for examples: Earline, Student at J.H.S. 40, Queens, Samuel Huntington, to Kennedy, May 20, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 176, Unfolded, JFK; Rita, Jack Yates Senior High School Student, to Johnson, March 11, 1965, LBJ, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Selma, Box 169, Unfolded, LBJ.
417 Beverly M. to Kennedy, October 4, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Bombing, Box 222, Unfolded, JFK.
high schooler from New York City, began by promoting the founding documents’ words on the one hand and questioning the significance of color on the other: “In Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, he said, “all men are created equal.” Still there are people who won’t let this stand . . . Why do [White people] think they are so much better than the Negro? Is it because their skins are lighter? No it couldn’t be that, otherwise there wouldn’t be so many trips made to Florida for their Sun-Tans or so much Coppertone, QT Sun-Tan Lotion and other browning substances.”

Gertelle subverted America’s racial hierarchy by identifying what she saw as the contradictory desires of White Americans who discriminated against Black people but also went the beach to darken their own skin, a practice that had been in vogue among White Americans since after World War I. After demanding that Kennedy confront this paradox, Gertelle recounted how children at her high school no longer wanted to pledge allegiance to the American flag because “Liberty and Justice for all certainly isn’t true when some of our people now are fighting for freedom.”

By citing the pledge, Gertelle addressed the duplicity of a self-styled free and democratic United States that refused to protect its Black citizens. Similarly, Philip, a fifteen-year-old Black boy from Flint, Michigan, asked Kennedy how the president could expect him to serve in the United States

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418 Gertelle to Kennedy, May 22, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 176, Unfolded, JFK. For other examples of letters from Black children focused on the racial body, see also: Cynthia T. to Kennedy, May 9, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 190, Unfolded, JFK; Kathy R. to Kennedy, May 12, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 174, Unfolded, JFK.
419 Anthony J. Stanonis, *Faith in Bikinis: Politics and Leisure in the Coastal South Since World War II* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 119-120. Stanonis notes that White Americans acknowledged the racial ambiguity that tanning introduced and carefully policed this ambiguity. He argues that American beauty culture’s celebration of blond hair acted as a way to ensure that White audiences understood that Whiteness – healthful and leisurely, but unquestionably White – still represented the pinnacle of American beauty.
420 Gertelle to Kennedy, May 22, 1963, JFK.
military while “this wicked country” discriminated against him because of his race: “I am wondering why I should; or any of my brother fight for a country that refuses to own us worth while citizens because my skin is black or brown or yellow because negroes are of many colors because the white man has always had a desire for [our] women.”

Philip’s letter questioned the concept of race by describing the mixed-race (often White in appearance) children of White men and Black women. In alluding to the long history of White men raping and engaging in coerced and consensual sexual relationships with enslaved and free Black women, Philip joined a large contingent of Black men who had expressed outrage both against White men’s violation of “our women” and Black men’s powerlessness to prevent it.

Both Philip and Gertelle used their letters to express refusals to perform actions associated with American citizenship – pledging allegiance to the flag and serving in the nation’s armed forces – contextualizing these actions with their subversions of the United States’ color-based racial hierarchy. They also presented examples from White people’s long history of appropriating and

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421 Philip to Kennedy, September 18, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO. Birmingham Bombing, Box 220, Unfolded, JFK. See also: Robert, Student at John Ericsson Junior High School, Brooklyn, to Kennedy, [May 1963], JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 174, Unfolded, JFK. Robert ridiculed the color-concept by stating that White people did not look like milk and would look funny if they did.

422 See: Hobbs, A Chosen Exile.

incorporating aspects of Black life and culture into their own lives so as to “master” their racial anxieties. By referencing this history, Gertelle and Philip’s letters challenged the rationality of racism, exposing the illogic of the visual and bodily differences on which many White Americans claimed racism rested. Gertelle and Philip did not acknowledge color-based difference so as to trivialize it, as did White children who wrote about polka-dotted Americans. Instead, Gertelle and Philip directly attacked the racial hierarchy itself by arguing that White Americans’ notions of Whiteness, White purity, and race-as-color were all paradoxical in light of White people’s historical and contemporary pursuits of dark skin and Black women.

Gertelle, Philip, and all of these Black child-writers took advantage of letter writing as a channel for protest. To some degree, every child who wrote a letter the presidents to attempt to influence their stance on civil rights reached for writing as a method of political participation. As I discussed earlier, pro-equality White children repeatedly expressed that this was how they viewed their letters. Because the United States prevented Black Americans, including children, from enjoying all of the rights of citizenship, Black children’s letters to presidents represented a rebuff of the American practice of sociopolitical racial exclusion. Several Black children used their letters to claim citizenship by introducing themselves in ways similar to Brenda, a thirteen-year-old from Portsmouth, Virginia, who opened her May 9, 1963 letter to Kennedy by stating: “I feel, as being a Negro and a citizen of the United States, I think I have the right to voice

my opinion.”  Many Black children recognized that letter writing allowed them to reach people in positions of power who had the potential to protect their fellow Black Americans. Anna, a Black middle schooler from the Bronx, explained to Kennedy in her May 9, 1963 letter why she believed her missive to be important: “This is the only way I can communicate with you about the racial problems in Birmingham, Alabama . . . I know you may not think this letter means too much to you but it means all the world to me [and] to any other negro who [feels] he or she has not been treated fairly in this so-called democratic country.”  By writing her letter, Anna communicated with Kennedy in the “only way” she believed was available to her. As she acknowledged, the letter might not have meant much to the president, but for Anna it represented a demand for immediate solutions in the racial crisis – sent to the mailbox of the White House. By advocating for change and addressing the man known as the “leader of the free world,” the document meant “all the world.”

Black children also described their participation in other civil rights activities in their letters, demonstrating that they used letters as one methodology among several for participating in the Civil Rights Movement during the early and mid-1960s. Letters allowed Black children who marched against segregation and racial discrimination in the streets in Alabama and other Southern states to

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425 Brenda C. to Kennedy, May 9, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 190, Unfolded, JFK. See also: William to Kennedy, September 17, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 180, Unfolded, JFK; Fannie to Johnson, March 17, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Selma, Box 4, Unfolded, LBJ.
426 Anna, Student at J.H.S. 38, Bronx, to Kennedy, May 10, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 174, Unfolded, JFK.
more fully and explicitly state their cases to the political leader of the country.

Juanita, an eighteen-year-old Black participant in the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, wrote a letter to Johnson on April 25, 1965, a month after the marchers had reached the capital. Juanita used her letter to continue the activism in which she had engaged in March by both describing the reasons for the protest and appealing to Johnson to fulfill his duties as president: “We have come not only five days and fifty miles, we have come from three centuries of suffering and hardship. We have been to Governor Wallace and found him wanting; now we seek your support, your authority, and your leadership. We must have our freedom and we must have it NOW.”

Juanita went on to detail all the ways in which White political leaders in the South prevented Black people from attaining equality in education, jobs, or day-to-day living. Each of the last three paragraphs of her letter opened with the phrase “We call upon you,” followed by demands for Johnson to “establish democracy,” “put an end to police brutality,” and stop “the climate of violence and hatred” in Alabama. Public marches and other forms of “out-loud” activism (and Southern racist violence) undeniably forced politicians and the American public to carry out some social and legislative changes by the middle of the decade. At the same time, letters gave people like Juanita the opportunity to augment their public activism by providing a space for detail-oriented, written communication with political leaders.

Black child-participants in the Civil Rights Movement also used their letters to express more personal reflections about racism and discrimination in the

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428 Juanita to Johnson, April 25, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, General, Box 234, Unfolded, LBJ.
United States. In late August 1963 (during the same week as the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom), Helen, a Black high school sophomore from Plaquemine, Louisiana, joined many of her fellow students as “foot-soldiers” in her city’s campaign to register voters, combat segregation, and fight for equal job opportunities. Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) representatives including James Farmer came to Plaquemine in August 1963 to foster activism in the city.\textsuperscript{429} White residents and police officers responded violently to Farmer’s presence and to the campaign itself, arresting student marchers and using teargas and hoses on them. On September 1, 1963, after the release of Farmer, the students, and other participants in the late August protests, White residents and officers attacked the site where many activists gathered, the Plymouth Rock Baptist Church, in an unsuccessful attempt to apprehend and lynch Farmer.\textsuperscript{430} On September 20, 1963, Helen wrote a letter to Kennedy to respond to the church bombing that had occurred in Birmingham five days earlier and to recount her own experiences with racist violence in the Plaquemine Demonstrations: “Mr. Kennedy, you probably don’t know how I feel because when you were fourteen no one burned your legs with teargas, no one ran you down the street with electric cattleprods and I know no one has ever asked you to vacate the premises because you’re dark in color. But I know and it hurts terribly.”\textsuperscript{431} In this written testimony, Helen described not only the physical manifestations of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{430} “1963 Plaquemine Civil Rights Demonstrations,” Video Newscast.
\item \textsuperscript{431} Helen to Kennedy, September 20, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Bombing, Box 221, Unfolded, JFK.
\end{itemize}
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American racism in the violence that White Plaquemine residents had committed against her in the previous weeks, but also the psychological implications of being discriminated against “because you’re dark in color.” For Helen, all of it “hurt terribly” in a way the president could never understand. While Helen valued her work in Plaquemine, which she identified as “further[ing] the cause of freedom,” her letter to Kennedy acted as the medium through which she could communicate how she felt about discrimination.

Beyond allowing Helen to record her emotional reaction to racist violence, Helen also used her communication with Kennedy to address and disrupt some of the racist arguments she heard circulating among White residents in Plaquemine. Helen followed her description of being attacked with cattle prods and teargas with a paragraph-long response to White racists’ call for Black Americans to “go back to Africa.” She specifically associated this type of language with lower-class White people: “I feel when my poor white neighbors tell each other over their fence that ‘Those ‘niggers’ should go back to Africa where they came from’ that they are really the ones that should be sent to an uncivilized area of the world. Because nobody can ever send me back to Africa because I’ve never been there. Yes, my ancestors were imported from there so I guess they can go dig their graves and send them back to Africa.”

Helen demanded inclusion in the American citizenry, writing that she had never been to Africa and would not be sent there. Helen also accused her “poor” White neighbors of being “uncivilized.” As seen in chapter two, White racists had long described Black Americans as “dirty” and “uncivilized” in order to defend

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432 Ibid.
segregation in the South. For centuries, the ability of poor White Americans nationwide to lay claim to civility through Whiteness gave them a sense of superiority over Black people in the nation’s social and economic hierarchy. These “wages of Whiteness” constituted a pact between lower-class Whites and the rest of White America in opposition to Black Americans.\textsuperscript{433} Helen argued that White people undermined this racialized claim to civility by their racism itself. Helen’s quip that poor Whites who uttered the phrase “go back to Africa” could dig up the bones of her imported African ancestors narrated a long history of White Americans’ “uncivilized” actions: not only had White people stolen Africans to work them to death and bury them across the ocean from their homes, but now, centuries later, they wanted to send back their descendants. Helen suggested that these “uncivilized people” should be sent to Africa – an “uncivilized part of the world” – thereby herself incorporating racist arguments about Africa propagated by White Europeans and Americans for centuries in order to make her point.\textsuperscript{434} Nonetheless, by responding to and negating a racist phrase spoken over White fences in Plaquemine, Helen used her letter to challenge the racialized “civility” of poor Whites in her city and White America more broadly. Her letter thus enabled her to add another layer to the protest she


\textsuperscript{434} Helen was not the only Black American who expressed ambivalent feelings about Africa. Russell Rickford argues that it was not until Pan-Africanism became a part of the Black Power Movement in the late 1960s and 1970s that a large number of Black Americans began to experience shifts in their understandings of Africa as a place that had a long history of powerful and successful civilizations. He also adds, however, that such interpretations were often ahistorical and nostalgic. Russell Rickford, \textit{We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 119, 251.
had already mounted against segregation and racial discrimination in Plaquemine.

Helen’s letter spoke to the lives of Black children in the segregated South in the 1960s. Like pro-equality White children, many Black child-writers in the early and mid-1960s focused on the kind of violence Helen described as the only representation of American racial conflict. As discussed earlier, Black children’s direct experiences with racism and discrimination in their own cities and towns around the United States contextualized their communal responses to the Alabama crises. At least during the first half of the 1960s, however, many Black Northerners and Westerners expressed their belief that they had “good lives” in comparison to Black Americans living in the South. Leila, a nine-year-old Black girl from Menlo Park, California, asked Kennedy in May 1963 why Black Southerners could not enjoy the same privileges she did in California: “I am a negro child. I have a house, go to a good school and have a happy life. Why not them?”435 Beverly, a Black sixth-grader from Harlem, explained to Kennedy on October 1, 1963 that Black people in New York City moved about freely: “In New York if the colored people in Brimingham were up here they could do what they wanted to do when they want to go to a movie. They could go to anyplace they want.”436 While segregation laws more fully restricted the rights, opportunities, and even leisure of Black people in the South than those living in the North in the 1960s, racial inequalities still existed in the North and affected the lives of Black

435 Leila to Kennedy, [Undated by author but postage stamped May 10, 1963], JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 190, Unfolded, JFK.
436 Beverly T., Sixth-Grade Student at P.S. 68, Manhattan, to Kennedy, October 1, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Bombing, Box 222, Unfolded, JFK.
Northern children. Even so, especially to younger Black children living in the North in the early 1960s, the violence of the events in Birmingham and Selma likely contrasted sharply with their own lives up to that point. During these years, then, the majority of Black Northern children joined with most pro-equality White children in focusing on the South and in offering the president the simplistic solution of extending “freedom” to Southern Blacks. At the same time, a few Black children responded to Birmingham and Selma in letters that characterized racism as an issue that affected all of America. Beverly, a thirteen-year-old Black girl from Harlem, wrote Kennedy on May 10, 1963 to protest the fact that “the people in Birmingham Alabama have No freedom at all.” She added: “I am a Negro of 13 years of age. And I have had that experience. When white people have talked about you when you walk by them sometimes.”

Events in Birmingham, Selma, and the rest of the South stood at the center of the vast majority of children’s letters written before the summer of 1965. Even Beverly, who recognized that racism existed in words uttered on the streets on New York City and in the bites of police dogs in Alabama, wrote her letter to advocate for “freedom” for Black people in Birmingham.

**Defending Segregation With All Their Might**

For many White children living in the South, those police dogs represented protection against what they portrayed as “outside” Black agitators whose protests spelled the end of White civilization in America. These White Southern children also incorporated rhetorical strategies from the previous decade in their

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437 Beverly W. to Kennedy, May 10, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 174, Unfolded, JFK. See also: Linda D. to Kennedy, May 10, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 190, Unfolded, JFK.
letters. Many invoked the threat of communism to discredit participants in the Civil Rights Movement by questioning their motives and their tactics. On May 12, 1963, Harriet, a fifteen-year-old White girl from McAdams, Mississippi, argued that those Black people who supported integration and the Movement must have been influenced by Communists, given that most Black Southerners knew that “[t]hey have opportunities and aren’t unfairly mistreated.”\textsuperscript{438} Tawonna, a seventeen-year-old White girl from Birmingham, Alabama, echoed this defense of the separate-but-equal principle two years later in her March 27, 1965 letter to Johnson: “why can’t they have just as good restaurants as we have but eat in their own ones[?] . . . Why is Alabama so bad it isn’t any worse than in any other state, just because outsiders are here and not there. If you didn’t but know it Communists are thriving on this plan of [upsetting] the whole US system for their own good.”\textsuperscript{439} Tawonna contended that the events in Selma demonstrated that the Soviet Union had scored a victory against the United States by successfully manipulating Civil Rights activists: “The communists are slowing down America. They are taring and feathering it slowly but surely.”\textsuperscript{440} On May 16, 1963, David, a White high school student from Houston, Texas, communicated his concerns about the propaganda value of the events in Birmingham for “the Communists in Moscow.” Unlike pro-equality children who expressed similar fears, David blamed Black demonstrators: “The Negros commenced demonstrating (unlawfully) and

\textsuperscript{438} Harriet M. to Kennedy, May 12, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 175, Unfolded, JFK.
\textsuperscript{439} Tawonna to Johnson, March 27, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, General, Box 235, Unfolded, LBJ.
\textsuperscript{440} Tawonna to Johnson, March 27, 1965, LBJ. See also: Berger, \textit{Seeing Through Race}, 118. Some Southern publications, including the popular \textit{The True Selma Story: Sex and Civil Rights}, by journalist Albert “Buck” Persons, also associated Civil Rights leaders (especially King) with communism.
difenately incited a riot by their action . . . When the Negroes were told to disperse by the police officers, they (the policemen) were answered by bricks and stones . . . The Negros were suppose to be demonstrating in a quote: ‘peaceful’ manner. The bloody heads and wounds that were sustained by the lawmen of Birmingham were proof enough to establish the fact that the Negros were indeed, wrong and braking the law of the city by their demonstrations and [violence].

David’s letter challenged the narrative of the passivity and helplessness of Black protestors versus the brutality of White Southern residents and police officers that most Americans received through the mainstream media. David presented an alternative story that exonerated and, more than this, commended White police officers in Birmingham for their ability to “keep order.”

Many White children from the South expressed frustration with the national media and “the North” more generally. They argued that Civil Rights leaders, beyond being Communists, primarily came from Northern states. This claim strengthened their profile of participants in the Movement as “outsiders” and supported their assertions that Black people were content with the status quo in the South. Joanna, a fourteen-year-old White girl from Sylacauga, Alabama, targeted civil rights activists’ campaigns for equal job opportunities in her June 12, 1963 letter to Kennedy: “The majority of the negroes in the South do not want to work, nor do they want our help. Neither do they want the trouble that has been brought to all of us. The agitators are not from the South, but are from

\[441\] David to Kennedy, May 16, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 175, Unfolded, JFK.

\[442\] Ibid.
the North and are supported by the N.A.A.C.P." In advancing this argument, White Southern children responded to White Northerners' myopic focus on the South as the primary or sole location of American racial conflict. Many of them disputed this depiction by casting the South as the region of the country in which Black Americans flourished. Frankie, an eleven-year-old White girl from Olive Branch, Mississippi who had moved to the North, compared her regional experiences in her June 11, 1963 letter to Kennedy: “I live in the North and I have seen the way the Negroes are treated. They are treated mean, hateful, and every other bad way! They are treated well in Miss[issippi]!” Frankie’s letter, like the small minority of White Northern children who testified to the existence of both “below-the-surface” and overt racism in the North, challenged the mainstream portrayal of American race relations as a Southern problem. Unlike those children, Frankie also included the statement that Black people in the South “were treated well.”

Several other White children from Southern states joined Frankie in presenting this interpretation of the South. Daniel, an eleven-year-old White boy from Creola, Alabama, complained to Johnson on March 31, 1965 about the press coverage of events in Selma: “T.V., radio and newspapers are not fair to us . . . I have never seen a Klu Klux Klansman nor a street riot or riot of any kind, none of my friends have either. We have negro friends and neighbors and we

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443 Joanna to Kennedy, June 12, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Troubles, Box 167, Unfolded, JFK. See also: Gordon to Johnson, [Undated by author but postage stamped April 24, 1965], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, General, Box 232, Unfolded, LBJ. Gordon especially targeted Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Farmer.
444 Frankie to Kennedy, June 11, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 171, Unfolded, JFK.
445 Ibid.
have never had a disagreement or anything with them. We live close to Mobile and the negro schools there are as good as the white ones. Their housing projects are better." In her April 1, 1965 letter to Johnson, Marilyn, a White eighth grader from Ronda, North Carolina, allowed for the possibility that the South had "civil rights problems." She also termed the media narrative about the South "unfair," and she added that reporters should investigate Northern racial conflict before throwing stones: "We feel that the South has been given unfair publicity. On the other hand the North (having as many civil rights problems as the South) blame us for the problems of the nation. If some of the many reporters would go to the North they might find that we are correct in our thinking." By re-focusing attention on the North and presenting stories about Black Southerners’ positive treatment and "good" educational and housing facilities, these children’s letters acted as part of the effort to preserve White sociopolitical power in the South. While their parents and the other adults in their lives may have influenced their arguments, they claimed ownership of their writings. Frankie clarified at the end of her letter: “No one put me up to this. It’s my own idea!”

Several White children defended their position on segregation by explaining to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson that Black people were not qualified to be socially or politically included in American society. By presenting a series of racist arguments, these children depicted Black people as unfit for

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446 Daniel to Johnson, March 31, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, General, Box 235, Unfolded, LBJ.
447 Marilyn C. to Johnson, April 1, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, General, Box 235, Unfolded, LBJ.
448 Frankie to Kennedy, June 11, 1963, JFK.
equality. Each of their letters argued that Black people represented a threat to the safety of White people and especially White children. On June 12, 1963, Sue, a White student from Greenville, South Carolina, informed Kennedy that the integration of her school “wouldn’t be so bad if they kept themselves clean.” She underlined the word “clean” three times. In an unusual example of a letter from a White Northern child defending segregation in the mid-1960s, Debra, an eleven-year-old White girl from Palmyra, Pennsylvania, told Johnson on March 26, 1965 that the president should give Black people their own separate state because “[i]f you let them have their rights they’ll be swarming around like flies. Then it will not be safe to even walk the streets.” On June 11, 1963, Cynthia, a nine-year-old White girl from Chickasaw, Alabama, attempted to prevent Kennedy from integrating schools by arguing that Black people were dirty, violent, and animalistic:

If you let those Negeroes go to school with us you will never know when a Negroes is going to pull a switch blade knife and kill somebody. And if you let those Negeroes go to school with the white people We will have to let the Negeroes school teachers teach and we will not ever learn anything because they are dum. We will have them eating with us and studying with us. And they have an awful odor they smell like an old dead dog. They have just as much [sense] as [a] dog. If you know what is good for you you better keep those awful stinkin Negeroes out of the white peoples schools. So now you better listen to me and remember this if you let those awful stinkin Negeroes go to our white peoples schools.

Cynthia ended her letter by stating: “I am only 9 years old. Now you better listen

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449 Sue to Kennedy, [Undated by author but postage stamped June 12, 1963], JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Troubles, Box 167, Unfoldered, JFK.

450 Debra to Johnson, March 26, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, General, Box 235, Unfoldered, LBJ. See also: Sandra F. to Kennedy, [Undated by author but postage stamped June 13, 1963], JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Troubles, Box 167, Unfoldered, JFK. Sandra mentioned that the streets would not be safe if Black people succeeded in what they were “trying to do.”

451 Cynthia D. to Kennedy, June 11, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Troubles, Box 167, Unfoldered, JFK.
to me it is for your own good. I mean it now I am not joking I really mean it."

Cynthia, Debra, and Sue’s letters described Black people as unclean, uncivilized, and dangerous. As during the 1950s, White girl-writers played a key role in intensifying these arguments by calling on their racialized, gendered, and age-specific identities to present themselves as in need of protection from the president. Cynthia and Debra’s letters compared Black people to dogs and flies to communicate that they viewed Black people, who would “pull switchblades” and roam “the streets,” as threats to their personal safety. Cynthia cast a wider net, asserting that the smell and lack of intelligence she associated with Black teachers and students would undermine her education. The connecting thread in racist arguments that depicted Black people as physically dangerous, dirty, and unintelligent was the contention that Black people could control neither their bodies nor their minds. This supposed lack of control acted as proof in the White girls’ defense of segregation as a system that shielded White Americans from Black people.

Cynthia’s letter to Kennedy also included the line: “Just in case you do not know it our freedom is [gradually] being taken away.” Several White children repeated this warning in letters to Kennedy and Johnson. As had pro-equality White and Black children, several segregationist children framed their communications as protests. They asserted that recent legislation or even

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452 Ibid.
453 As discussed in chapter two, White Americans’ exclusions of Black people from definitions of “civilized” and “clean” dated back to the colonial era. These exclusions sought to preserve multi-class, racial unity in opposition to enslaved and free Black laborers. Brown, Foul Bodies. See also: Edmund S. Morgan, American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975).
454 Cynthia D. to Kennedy, June 11, 1963, JFK.
rhetoric in support of civil rights pointed to the expansion of Black people’s political power in the United States. They argued that the granting of rights to Black Americans directly correlated to a loss of White Americans’ “freedom.” Lynn, a fourteen-year-old White girl from Franklin, Louisiana, enclosed her April 26, 1965 letter in an envelope dotted with the words “Personal,” “Private,” and “Important.” Lynn’s “Important” letter asked Johnson whether “white people” still had rights in America: “I am writing to know what rights the white people have now a days.”\textsuperscript{455} In June 1963, Patricia, a twelve-year-old White girl from Thibodaux, Louisiana, explained to Kennedy: “It’s not that I hate Negros, some are very nice, but its just the idea of them trying to root us out of our freedom. I’m beginning to wonder if we even have freedom. The Negros will soon be presidents, governors, etc.”\textsuperscript{456} Also in June 1963, Jack, a fourteen-year-old White boy from Little Rock, Arkansas, used his letter to tell Kennedy that he was being a “dictator.” Jack included a postscript to further underscore his ire with the president: “P.S. it is so disopointing that in my generation that one race has more rights than the White.”\textsuperscript{457} For these children, the event of a Black person holding a position of political power, especially the presidency, could only mean that White Americans’ freedom had been abrogated to the point where Black people’s rights exceeded those of White people. Segregationist White children employed letter writing as a means to prevent this from occurring.

As had Cynthia, many White children sought to avoid this eventuality by

\textsuperscript{455} Lynn to Johnson, April 26, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, General, Box 232, Unfolded, LBJ.  
\textsuperscript{456} Patricia F. to Kennedy, [Undated by author but postage stamped June 14, 1963], JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Troubles, Box 167, Unfolded, JFK.  
\textsuperscript{457} Jack C. to Kennedy, [June 12, 1963], JFK.
portraying Black people as unworthy of social or political inclusion. Patricia narrated a story of a Black man shooting two people and then asked how her father was supposed to send her and her brother to college “when Negros might take over.”

Ricky, an eleven-year-old White boy from Sylacauga, Alabama, cautioned the president in his June 14, 1963 letter: “Our beautiful country will soon be ruled by Negroes unless you do something about it. Haiti is an example of this.” With this line, Ricky included a racist argument portraying Haiti as a failed state ruled by ineffectual and “barbaric” Black people. This analysis of the Haitian Revolution and early Haitian statehood dated back to the beginning of the nineteenth century; Thomas Jefferson, for example, described free Black and formerly enslaved Haitian leaders as “Cannibals of the terrible republic.” Ricky’s letter contributed to the body of argumentation authored by White children who protested against Black “rule” of what Ricky claimed as “our beautiful country.” These children maintained that Kennedy and Johnson needed to leave the United States’ racial hierarchy intact because the Black people that they argued were uncivilized, unclean, unsafe, and unintelligent had no place in the political sphere as they envisioned it.

When segregationist children wrote about the dangers of upsetting the nation’s racial order, interracial “mixing” continued to represent one of the most

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458 Patricia F. to Kennedy, [June 14, 1963], JFK.
459 Ricky to Kennedy, June 14, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Troubles, Box 167, Unfolded, JFK.
major among them. As shown in chapters one and two, the possibility of
interracial interaction and sexual relationships between White and Black people
had long signified a threatening occurrence for White adults and children
supportive of segregation. Relationships between Black men and White women
especially undermined the ideology of White supremacy given its basis in the
sanctity of White female purity. Several White children repeated such fears in
letters written to Kennedy and Johnson in the early 1960s. In her June 1963
letter to Kennedy, Delta, a White ninth-grade girl from Birmingham, Alabama,
argued that God had separated the races for a reason. Alongside this religious
argument that had also been common among White girls in the 1950s, Delta
cited her science textbook as proof that animals also did not “mix” with one
another either. 461 Trish, a twelve-year-old White girl from La Marque, Texas,
expressed her concern for mixed-race babies in her June 5, 1963 letter, asking
the president to consider “the hurt of the children brought forth by [mixed
marriages].” 462 Other children asked the presidents if they would want their
daughters to date Black men. Lynn, the fourteen-year-old from Franklin,
Louisiana, demanded: “How would you like it if a big black nigger came and
asked one of your daughters for a date or happened to sit by her?” 463 One
twelve-year-old Catholic boy from Jacksonville, Florida marshaled his and the
president’s common faith against what he set up as the menace of a Black
Baptist suitor for Kennedy’s daughter, writing: “I hope Caroline will grow up and

461 Delta to Kennedy, [Undated by author but postage stamped June 12, 1963], JFK-PP, WHO,
Birmingham Troubles, Box 167, Unfoldered, JFK. See also: Brenda B. to Kennedy, June 12,
1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Troubles, Box 167, Unfoldered, JFK.
462 Trish to Kennedy, June 5, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Pressure, Box 175, Unfoldered, JFK.
463 Lynn to Johnson, April 26, 1965, LBJ.
marry a big, fat, black, baptist nigger!464 By targeting the presidents’ White
daughters, these letter-writers added to claims about Black people and especially
Black men’s inability to control themselves. Using allusions to “big” and bestial
Black men, the children placed sexual appetites on the list of things over which
they argued Black people had no control.

**Urban Uprisings Precipitate a Shift in White Children’s Arguments About
Civil Rights**

Beginning in mid-August 1965, a few segregationist Southern children
seized on the example of Northern urban unrest as further proof in support of
their defense of segregation. These children referenced the “riots” to vindicate
the South and to ask Johnson whether he now sympathized with a Southern
system that limited Black people’s rights and opportunities. James, a sixteen-
year-old White boy from Mobile, Alabama, asked Johnson on August 15, 1965
what the president planned to do about the violence then occurring in Watts. He
remarked: “I am interested very much as to why this riot is taking place since
mistreatment of negroes is supposed to only happen in the South.”465 James
expressed his frustration with the way in which many Americans had
categorized the South during the first half of the decade and argued that
Southerners had warned the nation about the danger civil rights activists posed:

> The nation is indeed in a sad state of affairs when police officers are not permitted to
> enforce laws without fear of mob violence and riot. Is it possible that the negro is immune

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464 Jack E. to Kennedy, June 12, 1963, JFK-PP, WHO, Birmingham Troubles, Box 167,
Unfolded, JFK. See also: Tawonna to Johnson, March 27, 1965, LBJ; Lynn to Johnson, April
26, 1965, LBJ.

465 James to Johnson, August 15, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights,
Correspondence re: the riots in Watts, Los Angeles, August 1965 (Watts), Box 223, Unfolded,
LBJ. For other examples of pro-segregation Southern children’s letters, see: Phillip to Johnson,
July 26, 1967, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 33, Folder HU 2 ST 22, 7.26.67 (2 of 3),
General, LBJ.
James did not communicate support for any measure of civil rights, instead arguing that the increase in Black people’s opportunities had itself been the cause of the uprising. He concluded with his hope that Californians and the rest of the North would learn from Watts: “Maybe they too will discover that the negro cannot be appeased now that his appetite has been enticed and fed by concessions far beyond any reasonable demand for ‘civil rights.’” James’s continuing support for segregation differentiated him from the growing majority of White children nationwide who generally presented themselves as “for” civil rights by 1965. But James raised an issue that appeared in many of the nominally pro-rights letters written by White children responding to events in Watts, Newark, Detroit, Chicago, and other Northern cities between 1965 and 1968. James argued that Black people both in Watts and in the South were “immune to arrest and not expected to pay for [their] crimes.” James thereby claimed the existence of an uneven standard of crime and punishment through which the justice system entitled Black people to leniency not extended to White Americans.

This argument built on the assertions of segregationist children who associated Black people’s achievement of civil rights with White people’s loss of

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466 James to Johnson, August 15, 1965, LBJ.
467 Ibid.
them. In his July 26, 1967 letter to Johnson, Phillip, a fifteen-year-old White boy from Memphis, Tennessee, called the urban uprisings a violation of “our Heritage”: “What kind of Americans are we if we sit back and let a few NAACP leaders go all over the country inciting riots and taking away the freedom we fought for and shed our blood for. IS THIS AMERICA?” Phillip argued that if the government allowed the “rioters” to go unpunished, then such a double standard indicated that “our fellow Americans” – Black people – were taking away other (White) Americans’ freedom. After 1965, White children like Philip portrayed the “riots” as proof for the statement that Black people’s recently expanded civil rights now surpassed the rights of White Americans.

Writing “But Letters”

In contrast to James and Phillip, several White children from Southern states expressed support for civil rights in their post-1965 letters. They also used their letters to file complaints with President Johnson about what they described as “out-of-control” and entitled Black people. While they wrote to respond specifically to urban uprisings, many children did not distinguish between participants in these uprisings and Black Americans more generally. Ralph, a twelve-year-old White boy from Edenton, North Carolina, told Johnson in July 1967: “I know the Negroes are in need of many things, but they don’t have to show it in these ways. The negroes have millions more than they had in 1961 but as the saying goes, ‘give them an inch and they’ll take a mile.’” By structuring

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468 Phillip to Johnson, July 26, 1967, LBJ.
469 Ralph to Johnson, [Undated by author but marked as received July 27, 1967 by White House staff], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 34, Folder HU 2 ST 22, 7.27.67 (4 of 4), General, LBJ.
his letter in this manner, Ralph composed what I call a “but letter.” The use of the conjunction “but” allowed White children from both the North and the South to use the first clause of their sentences to recognize racial discrimination and to record their approval of civil rights. In the second clause, White children qualified these statements. Ralph did so by arguing that Black people did not need to riot to gain rights, so clearly they rioted only to take advantage of the rights they had already been granted.

Members of a youth club in Huffman, Texas represented by a writer who signed with the initials M.A. echoed these sentiments in their August 1965 letter to Johnson. M.A. clarified: “I have never been prejudiced against Negros. I been taught different but this letter I want you to know this letter is not just from me but there’s a whole bunch of us here who want these questions answered.”

M.A. and his friends demanded answers about the supposed lack of punishment accorded to the participants in the Watts uprisings. The youth club characterized the arrest and release of participants as equivalent to a night of warm beds and hot meals. Contrary to the youth club’s account, Black participants in the uprisings were not released easily or without access to funds to pay the exorbitantly high bail rates. In addition, rather than releasing the high number of juveniles arrested in August 1965, the police in Watts held the girls and boys pending a “pre-detention hearing.” When adult and juvenile defendants reached trial, they were given harsh sentences through trials in which Black jurors had

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470 The Youth Club, c/o M.A. to Johnson, [Undated by authors but postage stamped August 18, 1965], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 223, Unfolded, LBJ. See also: Elizabeth G. to Johnson, August 14, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 222, Unfolded, LBJ.
been systematically removed from the juries.\textsuperscript{471} No matter the truth, M.A. and his peers used what they depicted as a racial double standard to mock belief in racial sameness: “Will you please inform me as to the reasons those rioters are not being punished more severely than they are? . . . Must be neat to have dark skin then you are able to get away with stuff white people never could. I guess they aren’t like whites after all, are they? I’ll tell you something Me and my friends out here used to be for the Negro trying to be better.”\textsuperscript{472} M.A. and his friends in the youth club twice wrote that they were not “prejudiced” and were supportive of Black people being “better.” They juxtaposed those earlier feelings with their current frustration and apparent dwindling of support for the “betterment” of Black Americans derived from what they described as Black people’s preferential treatment in the uprisings. By sarcastically stating that Black people “aren’t like whites after all,” M.A. and his club reiterated subscription to a racial hierarchy in which White came over Black.

Many White children from Northern and Western states wrote their own “but letters” (see Chart O in the appendix). They also claimed that the uprisings and the supposed lack of punishment for participants reflected a racial double standard.\textsuperscript{473} As did children from Southern states, these writers argued that Black people were taking advantage of the freedom and rights the government had

\textsuperscript{471} Horne, \textit{Fire This Time}, 204-205.
\textsuperscript{472} Youth Club, c/o M.A. to Johnson, [August 18, 1965], LBJ.
\textsuperscript{473} For several examples, see: Melissa to Johnson, August 14, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 222, Unfoldered, LBJ; Linda M. to Johnson, August 15, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 223, Unfoldered, LBJ; Betty Sha. to Johnson, [Undated by author but postage stamped August 17, 1965], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 222, Unfoldered, LBJ; Bruce to Johnson, August 18, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Box 225, Unfoldered, LBJ.
accorded them. In addition, they disparaged the Civil Rights Movement and the racial inequalities that many activists offered as explanations for the uprisings. Linda, a fourteen-year-old White girl from Norwalk, Connecticut, complained about events then occurring in Detroit in the letter she wrote on July 26, 1967: “if a white man commits a crime, he is punished if proven guilty. Now if a Negro was to commit the same crime, was proven guilty, and was punished the same way as the white man, the Negro leaders would swear up and down that it was an unfair trial, police brutality, prejudice jury, or what not. To me this seems absurd. If the Negroes would only look at themselves in a mirror, I’m sure they would see that they are making complete and utter fools of themselves and their ‘poor, mistreated’ race.” Linda maligned civil rights activists and defined the rights for which they fought as frivolous and unnecessary. She refused to countenance the existence of each of the items she listed: unfair trials, police brutality, prejudiced juries. With her addition of “or what not,” she ridiculed the series as a whole. She capped this argument by calling an undifferentiated mass of Black people “fools” who acted like “poor” and “mistreated” victims. By placing quotation marks around these words, Linda’s letter communicated her belief that Black people performed – rather than lived through – oppression. Linda concluded: “Now Mr. President, I have nothing against Negroes, in fact some of my best friends are Negroes, but it makes me angry to see them pulling this

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474 See, for example: Joseph to Johnson, August 11, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 226, Unfoldered, LBJ; Dianne to Johnson, [Undated by author but postage stamped August 25, 1965], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Unfoldered, Box 227, LBJ. See also: Deana to Johnson, August 14, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Unfoldered, Box 222, LBJ. Deana argued that Communists had incited the “racial riots.”

475 Linda P. to Johnson, July 26, 1967, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 33, Folder HU 2 ST 22, 7.26.67 (3 of 3), General, LBJ.
great nation down.”476 As had White children in the 1950s, Linda used evidence of a personal connection with Black people to strengthen her argument and, in this case, to balance her critique of Black Americans. Linda sought to demonstrate that racial prejudice did not form the foundation of her articulated lack of belief in either racial oppression or the need for continued civil rights activism, and so she offered up the fact that “some of my best friends are Negroes.” This reflected the key purpose of “but letters:” children could express and simultaneously exonerate a racist argument through the use of conjunctions and dependent clauses.

Several Northern White children responded to the events in Watts and other cities by arguing that Black Americans did not deserve civil rights. These children did not clarify whether they referred to participants in the uprisings or Black Americans throughout the nation. They argued that the “destruction” in Northern cities proved that Black people were not worthy or contributing members of society. These children adapted the rhetorical strategy of segregationist children who told stories about “bad” Black people during previous decades, employing the “but letter” format to provide a counterpoint to the racism their letters contained.

On August 16, 1965, Becky, a fourteen-year-old girl from York, Pennsylvania who did not specify her race in her letter to Johnson, used Native Americans as a prop to set up a dichotomy between “deserving” and “undeserving” groups of oppressed Americans:

They have all these riots, and going around burning homes and killing people. But they

476 Ibid.
say they are not being treated equal. How can they expect to be treated equal if they are doing all sorts of things that aren’t right, and sometimes getting away with it. I think the people who really don’t have any equal rights is the American Indian. I don’t recall any time since I was born that the Indian has caused any trouble. So I don’t really think the Negro has any [thing] to holler about because they have more rights than most American Indians.  

Becky argued that Native Americans set a standard of protest for minority groups that Black Americans did not meet. Native Americans, who Becky added had less rights than Black people, did not “cause trouble.” In comparison, Becky wrote that Black people not only caused trouble but “got away with it,” echoing the charge of racial entitlement that many children from the North and the South leveled at the president in their letters. She used this contrast to argue that Black people had not demonstrated that they deserved equality, nor should they expect it. By using Native Americans to validate her belief in rights for “deserving” non-White Americans, Becky trivialized the historical and contemporary oppression (and resistance) of Native peoples in the United States. Through this trivialization, she cloaked her prejudicial statements aimed at Black people.

Linda, a thirteen-year-old White girl from El Sobrante, a small locality near San Francisco, California, also argued that Black people had exhibited their “unworthiness” for equality, explaining to Johnson on August 14, 1965 what the “riots” told her: “[the colored people are] proving that they aren’t capable of handling Civil Rights. Because anyone black, white, brown, green, orange, or any color, acting the way these people are, don’t deserve Civil Rights and they are

477 Becky S. to Johnson, August 16, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 226, Unfolded, LBJ.
showing that they’re still mentally primitive.” Linda contended that “colored people” had shown that they were incapable of “handling” civil rights and were “mentally primitive.” Writing that “anyone,” “white,” “green,” or “orange,” who rioted did not deserve civil rights by virtue of their mental primitivism, Linda applied the color-based framework to suggest that race did not factor into her conclusions. The framework for emphasizing racial sameness that many children had included in their pro-equality, pro-integration letters in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s thus became Linda’s tool for masking the racist arguments she made about Black people’s mental capacity and ability to “handle” civil rights.

By associating the words “mentally primitive” with Black people, Linda sustained anti-equality White children’s decades-long reliance on arguments describing Black people as “uncivilized.” Several other White children, especially those living near the areas affected by urban uprisings between 1965 and 1968, referenced the events in letters that questioned Black people’s ability to think rationally or to control their actions. These statements mirrored the mainstream press coverage of the Watts uprisings by Los Angeles-based media outlets, which depicted the “riots” as examples of senseless, anti-order, irrational

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479 Linda C. to Johnson, August 14, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 222, Unfolded, LBJ.
480 See, for examples: Maureen to Johnson, August 27, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 222, Unfolded, LBJ; Betty She. to Johnson, [Undated by author but postage stamped August 24, 1965], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 228, Unfolded, LBJ; Linda M. to Johnson, July 24, 1967, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 31, Folder HU 2 ST 22, 7.24.67 (1 of 2), General, LBJ; Susan to Johnson, [Undated by author but postage stamped August 17, 1965], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 225, Unfolded, LBJ; Douglas to Johnson, August 16, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 222, Unfolded, LBJ; Judy to Johnson, August 18, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 229, Unfolded, LBJ.
terrorism. By repeating these media narratives in their letters to Johnson, children acted as what I call “agents of circulation” who participated in the written development of a shifting American racial discourse. Although child-writers applied their descriptions to the “rioters,” their portrayals often also implicated the entirety of lower-income, urban Black populations or even all Black Americans.

On August 15, 1965, Harriett, a fourteen-year-old White girl from Tarzana, a section of Los Angeles located about thirty miles from Watts near Encino, wrote a letter asking Johnson to help her understand the “riot.” She demanded: "What do the Negroes possibly hope to gain by this outburst[?]" She demonstrated that she had heard several answers to her question already; she used her letter to dismiss them: “Do they think jobs will be given out to them more willingly, with less questioning? . . . This is not the way to gain rights. But ‘Oh!’ they cry – ‘This is not a racial riot, but an economic one!’ Yet the riot has indeed turned to a racial one. ‘Rights!’ they shout. ‘Give us our rights.’ And rights they shall get. But no American has rights of demolishing property, killing persons, and theft, so the Negro too, shall be arrested for his crimes.” Harriett listed several of the motivations that activists (and, several decades later, historians) offered to explain the uprisings: they were reactions to a lack of job opportunity and to violations of human rights, exhibited most egregiously through acts of police brutality committed against Black residents of Watts. Harriett rejected these explanations in lieu of one of her own: “Perhaps there truly are no answers to questions concerning causes of the riots; perhaps it is simply an instinct in the

481 Jacobs, *Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society*, 56-59, 64, 80.
482 Harriett R. to Johnson, August 15, 1965, LBJ, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 229, Unfoldered, LBJ.
Negro’s mind which drives him to the point of revolt.” Harriett made no distinction between Black Americans and participants, encompassing all Black people in her derision of a particularity in “the Negro’s mind” which caused Black people to have a propensity to “revolt.” This statement undeniably replicated the lack-of-control argument that had appeared in many segregationist children’s letters in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s. Departing from that group, Harriett also declared: “and rights they shall get.” By including both of these sentences, Harriett’s racist letter could appear nominally pro-rights.

Many White children reproduced the characterization of Black people as “out-of-control” in letters they wrote to communicate their fear for themselves or their relatives because of the “riots.” Most of these children did not reference civil rights at all, neither confirming nor denying their support of racial equality. On August 16, 1965, Suzy and Chris, two White girls on vacation in New Jersey, told Johnson they were scared that Black people would bomb the train that they planned to take back home to California. They asked Johnson to guard the train and wanted to know why they could not “shoot back.” Carol, a seventeen-year-old White girl from Garden Grove, a city about thirty miles from Watts, told Johnson on August 14, 1965: “Never once have I shunned a Negro, nor considered him frightening, different, or even lower than I.” Even so, she had to decided to write a letter to Johnson “[b]ecause, sir, I am scared!” On July 26, 1967, Riva, a twelve-year-old girl from Brooklyn, New York who did not specify

483 Ibid.
484 Suzy and Chris O. to Johnson, August 16, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 223, Unfolded, LBJ.
485 Carol to Johnson, August 14, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 225, Unfolded, LBJ.
her race, asked Johnson to take action to prevent the “riots,” because “[m]y friends and I are afraid to come home from school, for fear of being attacked.”\(^{486}\)

In her July 24, 1967 letter to Johnson, Linda, a fifteen-year-old White girl from Forest Park, Illinois, lamented her inability to help the president re-establish “law and order” and protect her city: “I am a 15 year old girl (who will be a junior in high school this fall). Since I live in a suburb of Chicago, I just pray that nothing like what happened in Detroit will ever happen in Chicago. I feel so helpless because I can’t really do anything positive to keep law and order.”\(^{487}\) Steve, a fifteen-year-old White boy from Bellflower, California, wrote to Johnson on April 24, 1968 several weeks after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. to advise the president not to attend King’s funeral and instead focus on ending the “riots.” He explained: “The only reson I am writting this letter is I have two sisters they are very young and a mother In Chicago, and I’ame scared to death.”\(^{488}\)

White children did not make up these feelings. Especially for those living near urban areas affected by uprisings, children responded to media portrayals of fires and destruction by expressing that they were afraid and demanding that the Black people they portrayed as uncontrollable be controlled. They wanted “law and order” to be instituted in their communities. By sending these written fears of Black people in cities (which many children did not clearly identify as pertaining only to “rioters”), these children re-purposed arguments made by many

\(^{486}\) Riva to Johnson, July 26, 1967, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 33, Folder HU 2 ST 22, 7.26.67 (1 of 3), General, LBJ.

\(^{487}\) Linda M. to Johnson, July 24, 1967, LBJ.

\(^{488}\) Steve W. to Johnson, [Undated by author but marked as received April 24, 1968 by White House staff], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 31, Folder HU 2 ST 12-18, General, LBJ.
segregationist children in previous decades and during the first half of the 1960s. These letters, many of which came either from White girls or from White boys emphasizing the need to protect White girls and women, adapted racist arguments casting Black people and especially Black men as bestial and uncontrollable by applying them to generalized descriptions of Black people living in urban areas.

White children’s letters about the uprisings thus acted as vessels for the circulation of racist arguments. Robin, a twelve-year-old White girl from Westland, a suburb of Detroit, Michigan, isolated her anger to the participants in the uprisings. Her July 24, 1967 letter to Johnson repeated the segregationist demand that Black people “go back to Africa,” associating it with “rioters” in Detroit: “Please, don’t get me wrong. I do know some negros who are very nice. I know that the negros who are doing it is doing it because they think we are unfair, (and maybe some people are, but not all of us.) These people should go back to Africa.” Robin allowed for the possibility that “some” White people’s unfair treatment of Black residents in Detroit may have caused the uprising. She did not characterize that treatment as an acceptable reason for the event, condemning participants and proposing that they should “go back to Africa.” By including this phrase in her letter in the late 1960s, Robin distinguished herself from many of her White anti-riot peers. By the mid-1960s, most had moved away from this kind of “out-loud” racism.

489 Robin to Johnson, July 24, 1967, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 31, Folder HU 2 ST 22, 7.24.67 (2 of 2), General, LBJ. See also: Debbie to Johnson, July 24, 1967, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 31, Folder HU 2 ST 22, 11.23.63-7.23.67, General, LBJ; Betty She. to Johnson, [August 24, 1965], LBJ. Betty expressed some vague support for a gradual program of civil rights, so long as “social” acceptance did not lead to inter-marriage.
Robin’s letter represented a bridge between older racist expressions and newer, arguably subtler arguments based on similar opinions. In her August 18, 1965 letter to Johnson, Frieda, a thirteen-year-old White girl from Los Angeles, included several racist arguments about Black people and Black men in circulation in the mid-1960s. Frieda twice described herself as unprejudiced. She self-identified as Jewish and used her faith to explain her subscription to racial and religious tolerance: “It is terrible when brothers hate each other because of a color of skin. I am a Jewish girl, but I will not scorn a Catholic girl because she is Catholic.” She also noted: “don’t get me wrong. I am for [integration], all for it, in school I wrote an 800 word essay on it.” Frieda wrote her letter primarily to offer a description of the Black residents of Watts to help Johnson understand what had happened there: “all of them, no matter how kind they may seem, will loot at the opportunity. Thats the way they are raised, in that neighborhood . . . Most of those people don’t live with their wives, their children are dirty, and they don’t have jobs, they live by unemployment checks, they wouldn’t work if you gave them a job on a silver platter. They don’t give a heck about civil rights, they don’t want to vote, but they have an opportunity to loot, well why not, (according to them).” In her descriptions of poor Black men on welfare who did not work, maintain their marriages, or raise their children, Frieda reproduced characterizations of Black family structure and Black men articulated by

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490 Robin’s 1967 letter is the last example I have found of a letter from a White child to the president using this phrase as an aspect of their argument. This does not mean it disappeared from usage, but rather that it receded in popularity among most Americans, including White children. The archive reflects this evolution.

491 Frieda to Johnson, August 18, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 229, Unfoldered, LBJ.

492 Ibid.

493 Ibid.
Johnson’s Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in the 1965 government report, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” “The Moynihan Report” had been available within the Johnson Administration for several months, but the press did not see it until July 1965. By mid-August, reporters frequently drew on the report to explain the Watts uprising.494 Moynihan argued that the history of American slavery and Reconstruction had emasculated Black men and subverted Black family structure. As a result, Black women acted as heads-of-households and the main breadwinners, thus continuing to undermine Black men’s masculinity. Moynihan claimed that matrifocal households sat at the root of a “tangle of pathology” that caused a reproducing cycle of poverty, “social deviance,” and welfare dependency in urban Black communities.495 Both Moynihan and Frieda misidentified the preponderance of single women raising families in Black communities as the cause rather than one of the effects of poverty and racial discrimination.496

Frieda, like many White Americans who repeated Moynihan’s conclusions after 1965, used her disparagement of Black men as feckless and idle to characterize all residents of Watts – and poor, urban Black people like them – as opportunistic looters who did not care about voting or civil rights. This blanket

494 Carter, Music Has Gone Out, 69-70.
496 Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 69-96, 75, 77-80, 99, for a critique of Moynihan’s thesis. Collins not only argues that Moynihan misrecognized matrifocal households as a cause rather than an effect of poverty (and centuries of racial discrimination), but also demonstrates that Black women disproved Moynihan’s thesis by resisting the “controlling image” of “the matriarch” through the lives they lived (Collins 99).
characterization of poor Black Americans as criminals and welfare recipients rather than as victims of racial discrimination represented an important shift in the racial arguments written by White children after 1965. Exemplifying the “but letter” format, Frieda carefully included mention of her religious identity and school essay on integration to contextualize her statements and to identify herself as not racist and pro-rights, even as she contributed to the circulation of racist arguments about Black people.

**An Alternative Position: White Children Defend Participants**

Just as a small minority of White children departed from the mainstream media narrative surrounding Birmingham and Selma in the first half of the decade, some White children also presented alternative interpretations of urban uprisings in the letters they sent to Johnson after August 1965. Many of these children lived far away from cities that experienced unrest. To that end, some children repeated the analysis presented by media outlets outside of affected urban areas. The *New York Times*, for example, explained the events in Watts as the result of the federal government’s incomplete extension of rights to Black citizens. In his study of media responses to the Watts uprisings, Ronald N. Jacobs argues that by focusing on federal intervention and recounting only the most recent iteration of racial inequalities, the *Times* coverage ignored the centuries-long history of racial discrimination and avoided engagement with Black participants’ primary concern: police brutality. The “paternalism” of these editorials replicated the tone of stories about Birmingham and Selma by presenting Black people as victims rather than as active protestors.

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Several White children echoed the *Times* in explaining the “riots” by blaming either the federal government or White Americans more generally for not granting Black people “rights” or ameliorating conditions in urban areas. Michael, an eleven-year-old White boy from New York City, wrote about the Congressional defeat of the infamous “Rat Bill” in his July 26, 1967 letter to Johnson: “I think that the cause of all these riots is the conditions under which Negros live. To think that the U.S. Congress won’t even pass a bill to do a little thing like clean out rats in a slum is disgraceful and disgusting.”

On August 18, 1965, Christine, a twelve-year-old White girl from Florence, Oregon, expressed her anger at White people for treating Black Americans so badly: “Are we the people of the so called ‘free’ United States of America afraid of what will happen if we did give the negros their rights. I think maybe we are. I have said this before but I am going to say it again. The negros cant be blamed for roiting. I am a firm beliver in rights for all Americans.”

Annette, a ten-year-old White girl from Bloomfield Hills, a suburb of Detroit, recited her explanations for recent events in her July 1967 letter: “I know the reason they have riots, because the Negroes aren’t [getting] any education, any good jobs, and not enough money to support thier families.”

These letters differed significantly from “but letters” sent by

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499 Christine to Johnson, [Undated by author but postage stamped August 18, 1965], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 223, Unfoldered, LBJ. See also: Barbara to Johnson, August 14, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 225, Unfoldered, LBJ. Barbara blamed “mean” Americans.

500 Annette to Johnson, [Undated by author but marked as received July 27, 1967 by White House staff], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 34, Folder HU 2 ST 22, 7.27.67 (3 of 4), General, LBJ. Several children mentioned a lack of job opportunities in their letters about the uprisings. See: Gail F. to Johnson, [Undated by author but marked as received July 26, 1967 by White House staff], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 33, Folder HU 2 ST 22, 7.26.67 (3 of
Northern and Southern children. While they put the onus of action on either governmental officials or White Americans, these children attributed rational thought to “rioters” responding to a lack of opportunity and civil rights. They did not repeat racist arguments about “out-of-control” Black people in their letters. While, like the Times, they did not engage with the long history of racial discrimination in America, these children’s letters demonstrated that some White children viewed the “work” of civil rights as unfinished at the end of the decade.

A few other White children responded to urban crises by analyzing historical and contemporary American race relations. These children argued that centuries of oppression and White people’s actions as far back as slavery and as recent as the uprisings themselves motivated participants in the “riots.” On July 25, 1967, Cynthia, a fourteen-year-old White girl from Wilbraham, Massachusetts, contrasted the lives of White and Black Americans. Cynthia claimed: “[t]he trouble with us whites is that we’ve never had a bad day in our lives.” In comparison:

We have pushed the negroes too far and now we’re going to pay. We white folk started all this you know. We brought these people and treated them as slaves. We sold them like they were cloth or food. We seperated families. A child was born and we sold it away from its mother and father who too would sooner or later become seperated. We whipped them, starved them, and treated them as dirt. We still do. And you can’t see the reason why these people have finally had it? I really don’t see how they could have taken it so far. They must be strong people . . . This is what the negroes live everyday . . . They can’t go to good schools or school period to get an education for a job. When if they’re lucky they can get a job and a few dollars for some food. But where can they go to eat? And where can their children, and where can they live? As of now they live in the slums, without a job or schooling. Sure some of them can live a good life but thats a very small portion. All this just because the Dear Lord gave them a different colored skin. They can’t hide it. People just look at their color skin and call them dirt. So I urge you to do something for them.⁵⁰¹

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³) General, LBJ; Kathy P. to Johnson, [Undated by author but White House response sent August 9, 1967], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 16, Folder HU 2 8.9.67-8.14.67, General, LBJ; Teena, to Johnson, [Undated by author but postage stamped August 17, 1965], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 226, Unfolded, LBJ.

⁵⁰¹ Cynthia H. to Johnson, July 25, 1967, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 15, Folder HU 2
Cynthia narrated the oppressions of enslavement and, more recently, barred access to educational, economic, and housing opportunities to argue that White people had “pushed the negroes too far.” In Cynthia’s letter, the uprisings were just that – revolts against several centuries of abuse and constricted rights. Unlike White children who disparaged Black people’s claims of discrimination as performances, Cynthia detailed the lived, daily experiences of racial inequality in both the past and present, arguing that the survival of Black Americans showed that they “must be strong people.”

On July 26, 1967, Vicki, a twelve-year-old White girl from Silver Spring, Maryland, also reflected on the effects of racial oppression in her letter to Johnson. She disagreed with her parents, especially her father, regarding the causes of the “riots.” She had written to the president because she knew he would tell her “the absolute truth” about what was happening. While Vicki’s father argued: “it is all the colored peoples fault,” Vicki presented a variety of justifications that implicated both White and Black Americans. Vicki made an association between the “riots” and family structure reminiscent of the Moynihan Report: “I think part of the way they act is because of the slums they were brought up in, and their parents.” Vicki also posited that Black people “rioted” as a psychological reaction to the history of slavery: “Also they just could be taking revenge on the white people from the way their ancesters were treated as slaves.” Finally, Vicki asserted that the main issue seemed to be police

8.2.67-8.3.67, General, LBJ.  
502 Vicki to Johnson, July 26, 1967, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 33, Folder HU 2 ST 22, 7.26.67 (2 of 3), General, LBJ.  
503 Ibid.
mistreatment of Black people, a position that put her directly at odds with her father:

> And the way the policemen and guards treat them I have seen it on T.V., heard it on the radio, and read it in the newspaper. Am I wrong in thinking that? Is it really all the colored peoples fault? Dad says the reason the police treat them that way is because the colored person hits the policeman first, and tries to kill him, And so when the policeman finally gets him settled and going he has a right to hit and kick him. I said ‘two wrongs don’t make a right, but [Dad] said ‘what is [he] supposed to do, say come along buddy?’ Is he right? But then, I have often seen policemen hit a woman, because she is not moving as fast as he wants her to, I am not sure who is right. Could you please tell me?  

Vicki’s letter reflected the confusion of a child whose interpretations of what she saw, heard, and read about the relationship between police officers and Black people in cities contradicted her father’s opinion. Her argument both repeated and contested the racial discourses available to her at the time she wrote. She argued that poor Black people’s family structure caused the “riots,” thereby associating the culture of poor Black Americans with criminality. She perpetuated a claim that Black people had been psychologically damaged by enslavement. But Vicki also disputed her father’s views on police brutality and reached out to Johnson to corroborate her opinions. Vicki’s willingness to question her father’s characterization of the uprisings, even as she also circulated two popular racist arguments, made her part of a small minority of White children whose post-Watts letters to Johnson defended participants by listing social, economic, and historical causes for the events.

**Black Children React to the Uprisings**

When Black children responded to urban uprisings, they also presented complex interpretations of the “riots” and what they meant for Black Americans more generally. Many Black children wrote letters to differentiate between “bad”

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504 Ibid.
participants and themselves, their families, and other “good” Black people. As had some Black children in the late 1940s, these writers engaged in the “politics of respectability” in order to protect the reputation of “worthy” and “deserving” Black citizens by disparaging those whose radical actions threatened to undermine that reputation. Black children both in the 1940s and the 1960s who wrote these types of letters did so to preserve expansions in rights and opportunities for Black people and to ensure the presidents’ continuing dedication to civil rights reform. Frederic, a twelve-year-old Black boy from Oakland, California, referenced the Golden Rule to term the fighting in Watts “wrong” in his August 1965 letter to Johnson: “I’m a Negro and not too proud to say so at the moment because my race is not doing the right thing. All this fighting is wrong. We should try to get along with people, not fight with them. If we were and are freed we should act like it. In other words ‘Do unto others as you would like them [to] do unto you.” On April 7, 1968, a few days after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Duane, a twelve-year-old Black boy from Chicago, Illinois, apologized to Johnson on behalf of his race: “I am only twelve years old, but still I am embarassed of my people I am a negro boy and it gives us all a bad name for my people to act like that. If Martin Luther King was still alive he would not approve. It is a shame to have people that would make the rest of us look so bad, in a case like this we should show that we have intelligence. We have good qualities to. But there are people that destroy them

505 Frederic to Johnson, [Undated by author but postage stamped August 19, 1965], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 223, Unfolded, LBJ.
and make us all look bad!”

Several years earlier, Tony, an eleven-year-old boy of “Mexican [Descent]” from Tucson, Arizona, hoped that Martin Luther King, Jr. himself could quell the “riots.” Tony asked Johnson if King could be persuaded to read the message he enclosed in his August 16, 1965 letter: “Fellow negros you should be ashamed of yourselves. Any negro who acts like this should not have the right to be called a negro. We have pride. You are destroying yourselves. If you act like dogs with the rabies, you should be treated like dogs with the rabies.”

Frederic and Duane both expressed embarrassment and frustration with those members of “their race” whose actions they classified as “wrong.” Tony, who self-identified as a child with Mexican heritage, used his letter to accomplish the same purpose: to paint Black participants in the “riots” as people making poor choices who did not represent the whole of Black America.

Duane and Tony’s letters included arguments describing the “rioters” as “uncivilized” similar to those made by many White children between 1965 and 1968. Duane argued that the “rioters” undermined Black people’s claims to “intelligence” and “good qualities,” recognizing that White people’s reactions to the uprisings would incorporate such assertions. Like those White children whose letters relied on animalistic metaphors to depict Black people as out-of-control, Tony compared participants in the uprisings to rabid “dogs” whose actions negated their identities as “prideful” Black Americans. On July 24, 1967, Jackie, a fourteen-year-old Black girl from Detroit, Michigan, also vilified participants in the

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506 Duane to Johnson, April 7, 1968, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 18, Folder HU 2 4.22.86, General, LBJ.
507 Tony to Johnson, [Undated by author but postage stamped August 16, 1965], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 222, Unfoldered, LBJ.
uprisings: “some group wanted to be smart and has just started a big mess. They don’t know that they are hurting themselves as well as others. And yet they are raising sand about equal rights. They (the rioters) are doing nothing but putting themselves down lower, and showing that they aren’t ready for equal rights. They are going to want to fight wherever they go. All Negro’s aren’t bad, just certain groups and ones that want to be noticed and want to make trouble.”

Jackie argued that “smart” “rioters” who “want[ed] to make trouble” in Detroit neither deserved nor were “ready” for civil rights. Like Tony and Duane, Jackie’s depiction of the participants differed from many White children’s in its careful distinction between “rioters” and the broader population of Black Americans. She also associated a pathological need to “fight” with those who “rioted,” refusing to recognize the uprisings as rational responses to police brutality. Jackie thus applied a racist argument to “certain” Black people to show that “all Negro’s aren’t bad.”

Clarence, a sixteen-year-old Black girl from Los Angeles, California, also reacted to the situation in Watts by providing a series of distinctions between “deserving” Black Americans like herself and the “rioters.” But Clarence’s August 15, 1965 response to the events included her perspective as a Black girl who had witnessed racial discrimination in Los Angeles. Clarency, who identified herself
as “a negro young lady,” represented the actions of the “rioters” as “wrong” and without “cause or right.”\textsuperscript{510} She apologized for the “riots” and asked that Johnson “Please find forgiveness in [your] heart and help those who needed and deserved it among the Negros.”\textsuperscript{511} While Clarency condemned participants in the Watts uprising and begged Johnson not to blame all Black residents of Los Angeles, she also offered an explanation: “I will however say this. The police force do not or let me say have not in the past done their job right in the past. They (both white & colored) have treated and arrested us like animals. They forget we’re humans also. I don’t of course mean all policemen, some are understanding. But others [when] it comes to taking a minor, young adult in, well you can guess the rest.”\textsuperscript{512} Clarency’s letter testified to the existence of the police brutality that activists in the 1960s and historians since have identified as the primary unifying factor among all urban uprisings between 1965 and 1968. Clarency, who argued that “rioters” had no “cause or right,” used her letter to affirm that White and Black police officers treated Black residents of Watts “like animals” and forgot that Black people were “humans also.” After recounting instances of ongoing racial discrimination in her community, Clarency concluded her letter by expressing pride in her Blackness and refuting White supremacy: “I’m proud to be a Negro, as you are proud to be white. We the people as a whole are no different from anyone. As you are no better than anyone.”\textsuperscript{513} Clarency repeated censures of “rioters” found in letters written by Black and White children across

\textsuperscript{510} Clarency to Johnson, August 15, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 229, Unfoldered, LBJ.
\textsuperscript{511} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{512} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{513} Ibid.
the nation, but her vantage point in Los Angeles provided her with explanatory
context that she shared with the president. Clarency advocated for the ongoing
prevention of racial discrimination in the United States so that the equal status of
her racial identity could be a reality in law and practice.

Clarency lived just a few blocks below the northern boundary of the Watts
“curfew area.” On August 14, 1965, three days after the uprising began,
California’s Lieutenant Governor, Glenn Anderson, instituted a nightly curfew in a
46.5-square-mile area located in South Los Angeles. Adams and Washington
Boulevards, a few blocks below the Santa Monica Freeway, constituted the
northern line. Alameda Street and Rosecrans Avenue formed the eastern and
southern sides of the rectangle, while Van Ness Avenue sat to the west. The
choice of these streets placed lines between sections of Los Angeles with
significant populations of White residents and “‘any area in South Los Angeles
where African Americans lived.’” On August 16, 1965, Cheryl, a thirteen-year-
old Black girl who lived a few blocks away from the western edge of the zone on
West 85th Street, wrote to Johnson about her family’s experiences with the Los
Angeles police force: “Several years ago my mother was picked up off of the
streets while shopping for a baby buggy. The police men were in civilian clothes.
My mother was treated roughly by the policeman hand cuffed and shoved into
the police car. Nothing was done about the brutality of these policemen. My
mother is a school teacher. A negro school teacher in Los Angeles, California.
The station which handled my mother so rudely was 77th street police station.

514 Los Angeles Times, November 29, 1991, quoted in Horne, Fire This Time, 82. See also:
Horne, Fire This Time, 155-156; Jon Schleuss, “Inside the Watts Curfew Zone,” Los Angeles
Police Chief [William] Parker still dares to deny brutality.\textsuperscript{515} By writing her letter, Cheryl joined a large group of Black people in Watts who protested against the increasing number of discriminatory arrests and beatings of Black people by police officers during the 1960s. Black residents considered the 77\textsuperscript{th} Street Station as the worst manifestation of Los Angeles police abuse of Black people, including Black women such as Cheryl’s mother.\textsuperscript{516}

Given Cheryl’s intimate understanding of what discrimination and police brutality looked like in Los Angeles, she did not apologize for the uprising. Rather, she defined the “riot” as a fight for freedom in a city in which a racist White mayor and police chief locked poor Black people up in the “ghetto” and then abused them:

President Johnson you may still be wondering why Los Angeles had this riot. The negroes of Los Angeles were tired of John Birch sympathizers such as [Mayor] Sam Yorty and [Chief] William Parker. The people are tired of being caged up in a slum like it’s [officially] designated to them by the ‘Great White Father.’ These people are tired of being behind walls, whose bricks are composed of segregation, prejudice, and discrimination. They are tired of not being able to clothe and feed their families. In other words these people want to be free. Since Parker and Yorty would not negotiate, the people fought for their freedom.\textsuperscript{517}

Cheryl indicted several “bricks” in a system that “caged” Black people in a “slum” and took away their freedoms. She accused Democratic Mayor Sam Yorty and Police Chief William “Bill” Parker of having ties to the John Birch Society, an ultra-conservative, anti-communist, anti-civil rights organization. While Yorty denied such connections and Parker himself did not appear to belong to the society, some estimates placed as much as one-third of the city’s police

\textsuperscript{515} Cheryl to Johnson, August 16, 1965, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, Watts, Box 230, Unfolded, LBJ.
\textsuperscript{516} Horne, \textit{Fire This Time}, 136-137.
\textsuperscript{517} Cheryl to Johnson, August 16, 1965, LBJ.
department within the Birch Society’s ranks in 1965.\textsuperscript{518} The Birch Society’s radical conservatism marked it as an organization that virulently resisted societal changes, including expansions in civil rights for minority citizens. The high number of police officers who belonged to the group therefore partially contextualized the preponderance of discriminatory stops, arrests, and abuse that occurred in the mid-1960s.\textsuperscript{519} Cheryl also referenced the racial mapping that segregated Black people in Northern cities across the United States in poverty-ridden neighborhoods without access to jobs. She condemned this practice as the making of a cage for which White Americans expected Black people to thank them – the benevolent “‘Great White Father’” granting Black people a place in the city. As a resident of Los Angeles who lived just over ten blocks away from the most abusive police station in Watts, Cheryl rejected gratitude. Rather, she defended participants in the Watts uprising as “people [who] fought for their freedom.”

Cheryl presented a more specific definition of freedom than had most White and Black children during the early 1960s. For her, freedom meant that Johnson needed to do more to “[better] the condition of the American Negroe in the American ghetto.”\textsuperscript{520} She took the narrative out of the South and centered it on American cities, demanding presidential action to address the “segregation, prejudice, and discrimination” that happened there as well. Cheryl hoped to


\textsuperscript{519} Horne, \textit{Fire This Time}, 139.

\textsuperscript{520} Cheryl to Johnson, August 16, 1965, LBJ. Cheryl’s letter mirrored narratives of Watts in Black media outlets that focused on the rationality of the “rioters” and the depth of White racism. Jacobs, \textit{Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society}, 72-73.
convince Johnson to enact change that would provide a better future for her and Black youths around the nation: “I am 13 years old. I will be 14 on September 13, 1965. I am the future generation. I hope that when I become an adult that I will be truly free!”

**Black Children’s Letters Contribute to a Resistant Discourse of Racial Pride**

By the mid- to late-1960s, several Black children joined Cheryl in communicating their frustration with persistent racial discrimination alongside their pride in their racial identities. These statements echoed those made by a few Black children responding to events in Birmingham and Selma earlier in the decade. On July 20, 1967, Sheba, an eleven-year-old Black girl from St. Louis, Missouri, also referenced the practice of tanning to address the hypocrisy of discrimination based on skin color: “I am black and proud of it. Millions of people buy sun tan lotion and go to the beach and try to get dark, and then dog us because we are dark. God put us on the earth black, and we will stay black. I am eleven years old.”

Like many other Black and White children, Sheba found color-based discrimination foolish. She did not use her letter to promote racial sameness. Rather, like Clarency, she took proud ownership of her racial identity.

Sheba explained the “riots” through a framework of pride and power, arguing that the events demonstrated that humans could only be oppressed for so long. She explained: “The riots, I think, are a way of showing the power of black people . . . We are always downed. White people blame us for everything .

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521 Cheryl to Johnson, August 16, 1965, LBJ.
522 Sheba to Johnson, July 20, 1967, LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 31, Folder HU 2 ST 22, 11.23.63-7.23.67, General, LBJ.
“[downing]” Black people, Black children in the second half of the decade increasingly argued that the Vietnam War represented one of the most disturbing demonstrations of racial inequality in the nation. In June 1966, shortly after President Johnson ramped up operations and combat intervention in Vietnam, Ruth, a Black girl from Kinston, North Carolina who described herself as “not a teen-ager yet,” wrote to Johnson to explain the anguish of having her brother fight in Vietnam while the country relegated him and other Black soldiers to the “lowest and dirtiest places in America” upon their return. Between 1961 and 1965, ninety percent of Black soldiers in Vietnam were assigned to combat roles, and, as a result, they died in disproportionately higher numbers than White men. Ruth reflected: “Dying for your country isn't so bad but what does a Negro suppose to get out of Dying when he's treated as though he hasn't got a Country.” Alice, a Black junior in high school from New York City, asked Johnson how the president could expect Black men to fight and die for America in a war purportedly meant to ensure the freedom of the Vietnamese people: “I’m Negro and I don’t understand why you send Negroes to Vietnam to help you when you don’t help them. I can’t see Negroes fighting for someone else’s freedom when we don't have our own freedom.”

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523 Ibid.
524 Ruth to Johnson, [Undated by author but White House response sent July 9, 1966], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 14, Folder HU 2, 5.26.66-7.22.66, General, LBJ; Carter, Music Has Gone Out, 133-135.
526 Ruth to Johnson, [June-July 1966], LBJ.
527 Alice to Johnson, May 16, 1967, LBJ, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 15, Folder HU 2 5.6.67-6.20.67, General, LBJ.
Alice wanted to be included in the United States’ present and in narratives of its past: “why aren’t the children in school taught Negro History. I know more about Negro History than most of my teachers (present and past) and I’m only a junior in high school. We never hear about Negro doctors, scientists or anything. If it was [not] for my mother I would not have known anything about my BLACK Brothers and Sisters.”  

By the latter half of the 1960s, in the midst of urban uprisings and the Vietnam War, statements from Black girls like Cheryl, Alice, Ruth, and Sheba reflected a significant divergence among White and Black children. Just at the moment when White children from both the North and the South had begun to form a consensus around a rejection of continued civil rights activism and denunciation of radical protests, many Black children did the opposite. They emphasized large-scale racial inequalities, including unequal access to housing, police brutality, the absence of representational educational materials, and the death of Black soldiers in Vietnam. They included written defenses of Black power and Black pride in their arguments, embracing Blackness at a time when many White children condemned it.

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Between May 1963 and March 1965, children watched, read, and heard about racial violence in Birmingham and Selma, Alabama, and they responded. Pro-equality White children, primarily from Northern states, witnessed from afar Southern racist atrocities and asked how Kennedy and Johnson could not act. Their letters relied on many of the same rhetorical strategies that children had

528 Ibid.
drawn on during the 1950s to make their cases for presidential action on public school integration. They argued that “foolish” color-based segregation, which they characterized as a Southern problem, violated American principles and interests, along with God’s will. While these letters contained expressions of strong emotions and an activist bent, the majority of Northern White children remained myopically focused on the South. Letters from a small minority of this demographic underscored the danger of this limited purview, as the few White children who wrote about “below-the-surface” Northern prejudice, racially restrictive covenants, and acts of physical violence committed against Black children in integrated settings warned of future problems in the region. Black children who responded to Birmingham and Selma joined with the majority of pro-equality White children and presented arguments that mirrored those from the 1950s. At the same time, Black children’s unique experiences with racism in their own lives caused them to describe the events in Alabama in communal terms. They connected with the Black victims of Southern racist violence, feeling the pain of “their people” and linking Black Southerners’ threatened safety to fears for their own lives. Even so, most of the Northern Black children who wrote to Kennedy and Johnson between 1963 and 1965 concentrated on Southern racial conflict, with only a few children explicitly addressing the existence of racism in the places in which they lived. On the other side of the debate, an incensed contingent of White children living mostly in Southern states continued to resist the integration of public facilities, especially their schools. As had
segregationist children in earlier decades, they relied on historically rooted racist arguments that shored up the fiction of White supremacy.

After a series of urban uprisings between August 1965 and April 1968, many of these positions evolved. Most White children from the North and the South did not accept the premise that the “riots” occurred in response to either economic exploitation or police brutality. Rather, through the use of “but letters,” White children from around the United States condemned “rioters,” embedding racist descriptions of participants as entitled, out-of-control, dangerous, and undeserving of civil rights. In these same letters, they also presented themselves as supportive of all people’s rights, regardless of race. The use of this format enabled the majority of Southern and Northern children to write letters that reflected a single position for the first time in two decades. For them, the civil rights era had ended. A few White children stood apart as outliers. While they also often accepted arguments in circulation that, for example, maligned Black family structure, these children argued that the “rioters” had not been unjustified. Black children also disagreed with the new consensus among White children. They did not universally approve of the uprisings, and a few Black children also circulated arguments that presented poor, urban Black Americans as unfit for citizenship. But especially for those Black children who lived in neighborhoods affected by the racial discrimination that precipitated the uprisings, the events made sense. A human could only be abused for so long, they wrote. Black children around the nation used their letters to attempt to convince Johnson that far from being over, the work of civil rights had hardly begun. They paired such
statements with proud embraces of their identities as Black children, demanding inclusion and equality in a way that recognized Black Americans’ contemporary and past contributions to the nation.

Children responded to events in places like Birmingham, Selma, Watts, and Detroit by taking part in national conversations involving the mainstream media, politicians, and the adults in their lives. Several scholars have documented the critical role children played in the Civil Rights Movement. By writing letters to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson over the course of the 1960s, both White and Black children who wrote to support a variety of positions on race-based civil rights also participated as protestors in keys events of the Movement. More than this, children acted as “agents of circulation” by repeating and occasionally contesting mainstream media narratives that played a crucial role in shifting the manner in which Americans talked and wrote about race by 1968. Just as in previous decades, children did not act alone in these developments. At the same time, children contributed their own words and opinions to these shifts. Many children continued to rhetorically link presidential action on racial conflict to the protection of their futures. It is also important for historians to recognize that the transformation of children’s positions reflected national narratives precisely because children helped to create such trends. They reached for arguments in circulation around them and fit them to their purposes, thereby helping disperse such discourse. As the nation moved into the next decade, children continued to participate in increasingly deviating conversations about race and civil rights. With children’s focus moving decisively away from the
South for the first time in decades, the tragic narrative that easily cast Black
marchers as heroes and Southern racists as villains no longer appeared to many
children to fit. It was time for a new set of players and an entirely different story.
CHAPTER FOUR: “If you were in seventh grade and poor how would you feel?”: Children Expand the Conversation

On November 12, 1969, seven young residents of St. Paul, Minnesota who identified themselves as either “Black” or “Indian” wrote a letter of complaint to President Richard M. Nixon. The writers – five of whom were fourteen, one fifteen, and one twenty years old – listed a series of questions indicting the United States’ past and present relationship with Black and Native Americans. They asked: “Why did white people bring us black people over here, use us for hard labor, and now want to send us back?” and “Why do they give Indians land, then take it away as they, the white people, need it, after they’ve signed treaties saying the Indians could have that part of their own land?” They also wanted to know: “Why do white people think they discovered America when it was already inhabited and used by the Indians? Why do history books record all the discoveries of white people and not those of black people and Indians?” and “Why do white people tell us to obey their laws when we haven’t fully got our rights yet? And they expect us to be satisfied.”529 They concluded with a declarative statement calling out two phrases used to patronize and belittle their racial groups: “We don’t want to learn to be good little colored boys and crazy Indians.” Rather, they claimed: “To make a better world we need better people.”530 The children wrote together as a frustrated multiracial group addressing the persistent lack of racial representation and civil rights for Black and Native Americans. Both in terms of their identities and the content they

529 John, Matthew, Joan, Leroy, A.J., Darrd, and Mike to Nixon, November 12, 1969, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 6, Folder GEN HU 2 Equality 11.1.69-11.30.69, RMN.
530 Ibid.
presented, their letter reflected nationwide changes in debates over race and civil rights that occurred during the late 1960s and 1970s.

By the late 1960s, the national conversation regarding civil rights had expanded. In previous decades, most Americans defined the issue of violated civil rights as pertaining primarily to Black people living in the South. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, several different groups of protestors forced a shift in this perception. Many Native Americans, Latina/os, and Asian Americans had called attention to acts of racial oppression and violence, violations of civil rights, and segregation laws that targeted their racial groups throughout the twentieth century. During the 1960s and 1970s, many activists incorporated public protest methodologies of the Black American Civil Rights Movement. In addition, after 1966 when then-SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael introduced the phrase “Black Power” in the same year that Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) in Oakland, California, race-based social justice movements often included radical expressions of racial pride and power in their protests. Proponents of Red, Brown, and Yellow Power joined...
those of Black Power as the decade turned. Americans of color were not the only ones who declared that the United States government was violating their civil rights. Many White Americans framed local school districts’ mandated desegregation plans in the late 1960s and 1970s (known as “busing”) as subversions of their freedom and rights. In the context of these events, this chapter examines examples of the letters and written work that children presented to Presidents Richard M. Nixon, Gerald R. Ford, and Jimmy Carter along with other Americans involved in civil rights debates during the late 1960s and 1970s, excavating and analyzing children’s interpretations of race and civil rights.

Each of the presidents that governed in these years generally opposed further civil rights reform and decried political protests. Both Nixon and Ford publicly recorded their disapproval of desegregation plans that involved busing or attempts to address the racial “imbalance” of public schools. Nixon also capitalized on many Americans’ media-inflamed fears of urban uprisings (and Black Americans) in his 1968 campaign, spreading rhetoric about the need for “law-and-order” politics and a crackdown on crime and dissent. While Carter appeared to be more supportive of civil rights than his Republican predecessors, his administration made large cuts to social welfare, healthcare, and educational programs. These cuts disproportionately hurt Americans of color; by the end of the decade, a Black unemployment rate that hit a record low in 1973 had climbed

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533 Consider, for example, National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) member Clyde Warrior’s painting of the phrase “Red Power!” on the side of a car for a Fourth of July Parade in Oklahoma City, just one month after Carmichael’s June 1966 speech. Shreve, Red Power Rising, 159.
534 Walker, Presidents and Civil Liberties, 289-297, 341-343; Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning, 410.
to new and unprecedented heights.\textsuperscript{535} In May 1980, feelings of economic hopelessness and persistent abuse of Black citizens by the police exploded into another uprising, this time in Miami, Florida. When Carter visited the city, he demanded that the protests end before he approved federal assistance, further incensing the residents.\textsuperscript{536} Overall, civil rights activists saw little support from the White House throughout the late 1960s and 1970s.

Racial justice movements of this time period were complex and diffuse. Black, Red, Brown (also known as Chicana/o or Latina/o), and Yellow Power acted as broad labels that encompassed the actions of different groups of protestors throughout the nation. While the movements shared methodologies, expressed solidarity with one another, and even fought together in situations that involved multiracial populations, Black, Native, Latina/o, and Asian Americans often had concerns that specifically and solely related to their cultures and communities. No single group of protestors “led” these movements, just as the actions and goals of protestors did not reflect the desires of any entire racial group. At the same time, shared themes emerged that transcended the boundaries of the protest sphere, and Americans of color nationwide – adults and children alike – not associated with protest groups often voiced sentiments similar to those of movement participants.

After 1966, Black Power advocacy could be found in local Black Panther chapters around the country, teachers who founded Pan-African nationalist schools to give Black children access to self-affirming education, and Olympic

\begin{footnotesale}
\textsuperscript{535} Kendi, \textit{Stamped from the Beginning}, 424-425.
\textsuperscript{536} Marable, \textit{Race, Reform, and Rebellion}, 173-174.
\end{footnotesale}
athletes who raised their gloved fists at the 1968 Mexico City Games. A wide-ranging group of artists, athletes, politicians, intellectuals, writers, and educators embraced Black Power in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a way to center Black identity and move beyond integration as an “end in itself.” Proponents of Black Power argued that Black people and their history and culture demanded respect. Advocates contended that Black control of Black communities and institutions represented the best option for ensuring the cultivation of Black pride along with ending the United States’ economic, political, and cultural exploitation and abuse of Black Americans. Internal ideological rifts and misogyny, as well as extreme, often-violent suppression sponsored by the federal government undermined the potential success and longevity of the Black Power Movement. In addition, the BPP’s emphasis on armed self-defense fed a mainstream media narrative characterizing the Black Power Movement as dangerous, disorganized, and chaos inducing. By the mid-1970s, many Black Power coalitions of political and intellectual activists had broken down. Even so, Black Power advocates fostered the spread of a radical discourse of racial pride and power that outlasted the movement.

Native American protestors in the 1960s and 1970s focused on treaty rights, respect for Native culture, and Native sovereignty, arguing that the United States government needed to honor past and contemporary agreements with Native peoples. Red Power activists belonged to groups including but not limited to: the American Indian Movement (AIM, founded in 1968), the National Indian

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Youth Council (NIYC, 1961), and the Indians of All Tribes (1969). These groups led and participated in campaigns to protest past and continued efforts by both governmental bodies and individual American citizens to exploit and steal Native Americans’ territories by violating reservation or resource (especially fishing) agreements. The organizations also campaigned against racism and acts of racial violence targeting Native peoples. These protests included several highly publicized “occupations” of federal land, buildings, or landmarks that held special historical meaning for Native peoples. The occupations of Alcatraz Island (1969-1971), the Bureau of Indian Affairs building (1972), and Wounded Knee (1973), along with demonstrations on iconic landscapes such as Mount Rushmore and a replica of the *Mayflower* (1970), brought nationwide visibility to Native Americans and to issues such as historic treaty recognition, self-determination, and Native pride. But many Native Americans in the United States, especially those living on reservations or in rural areas, did not feel that the protestors spoke for them or their communities. Regardless, the movement radicalized and popularized discourse about Native identity and rights in communities across Native America.\(^{539}\)

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, Latina/o activists in places as far-flung as New York City and East Los Angeles struggled in parallel protests to gain expanded representation for Latina/o citizens, even as they used differing terminology to describe themselves and their movements. For example, while these years witnessed the rise of the identification “Chicana/o” among many

Latina/os, especially Mexican Americans living in California and other parts of the
Southwest, Latina/o advocates in New York City at this time generally referred to
themselves as Hispanics, Latina/os, or by their national ancestry (such as Puerto
Ricans). Some Mexican American residents of Texas called themselves Tejanos.
Such variance in named identities reflected the diversity among Latina/o
Americans, which led activists to participate both in national coalitions of
Spanish-speaking peoples and in local campaigns for Latina/o rights. Across the
nation, Latina/o activists lobbied local, state, and federal government
representatives, educators, and the American populace for inclusion in the body
politic, an end to exploitative labor practices, and respect for Latina/o culture.
They also fought for the implementation of bilingual-bicultural programs for
students at every level of education. Such goals sometimes overlapped with
Black Americans’ campaigns for educational equality, but also frequently led
activists to arrive at loggerheads. Ultimately, Latina/os in these years inspired
a groundswell of protests demanding that the United States give redress for past
and present wrongs that threatened their communities.

Radical activism among Asian Americans in the 1960s and 1970s
generally remained isolated to college students and youths living in the San
Francisco Bay Area. In 1968, a group of students of Asian descent founded the
Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) at the University of California at

Berkeley. Richard Aoki, a Japanese American member of the Oakland BPP, joined AAPA after transferring to Berkeley; he also connected the two organizations. The students rejected the term “Oriental” and the stereotype of a quiescent racial minority it promoted. They advocated for a pan-Asian identity, castigated American colonialism and racism, and demanded increased representation in Asian faculty and subject matter at the university level. While this activism came primarily from Californian youths, the increased attention they called to discrimination against Asian Americans contributed to national political and judicial changes. In 1974, for example, a Chinese American student named Kinney Kinmon Lau brought suit against the San Francisco School Board in *Lau v. Nichols*, and the Supreme Court ruled that discrimination for limited English-language proficiency constituted racial or national origin discrimination. English-language instruction for bilingual students (though not necessarily bilingual-bicultural education) was thereafter protected by law.542 In 1977, the federal Office of Management and Budget issued Directive No. 15, which added “Asian or Pacific Islander” to governmental agencies’ paperwork and records and thereby institutionalized a pan-Asian identity.543

While each of these movements had particular goals and motivations, they thematically overlapped in several aspects. Activists centered their racial groups’

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history and culture, underscored the United States’ colonial, racist past and present (including calling attention to violations of civil and treaty rights), and presented the country with unapologetic expressions of racial pride. By the late 1960s, people of color who did not identify as participants in the movements engaged in these practices as well, reflecting the increased circulation of this type of discourse. In letters, stories, essays, and poems presented to the presidents and other adults, Black, Native American, and Latina/o children also echoed activists. Their writings focused on the importance they assigned to their racial groups’ histories and cultures in their lives and communities; the concern they felt over the content and quality of their education; and the contested relationship they had with the United States as expressed through their pride in being Black, Native American, and Latina/o alongside their recognition of ongoing American racism.\(^{544}\) Particularly by articulating their vision for “good” education, children of color sought to ensure that their “right to equal education” as promised by \(\text{Brown}\) adhered to their definition of equality. Although children communicated these feelings during the radical phase of the Black, Red, and Brown Power Movements, which most historians identify as ending by the mid-1970s, they also continued to do so in the later years of the decade.\(^{545}\) As such, children of color participated in elongating and carrying on conversations about race and civil rights that occurred \textit{after} a nationwide shift away from broad-based racial justice movements.

\(^{544}\) I have not found an example of an Asian American child who evinced such views during these years.

\(^{545}\) Joseph, \textit{Midnight Hour}; Rickford, \textit{African People}.  

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Contemporaneous to the rise of Black, Red, Brown, and Yellow Power Movements, many White Americans engaged in racially driven protests of their own in response to a renewed legal emphasis on desegregating local school systems. A series of Supreme Court cases decided between 1968 and 1974 caused school-integration battles that had been festering since Brown to enter a new phase. In 1968, the Supreme Court ruled that the “freedom of choice” plan in New Kent County, Virginia (wherein children could “choose” to go to a majority-White or majority-Black school, regardless of their race) did not constitute compliance with the Court’s order to desegregate schools with “all deliberate speed.” In 1971, the Court upheld a lower court’s affirmation of “busing” plans (in which students were re-assigned and transported to schools in various parts of localities to address longstanding and purposeful policymaking that segregated pupils) as acceptable methods for desegregation. The Court put a significant limit on this decision and on the efficacy of busing plans by ruling in the 1974 Detroit-based case Milliken v. Bradley that busing students across school district lines – essentially between suburban and urban areas – could not be justified unless it could be shown that an individual school district had purposefully engaged in legal or de jure segregation. The false dichotomy between de jure and de facto, or “natural,” segregation placed on impossible burden of proof on litigants who needed to prove the lawful intent rather than show the discriminatory impact of inequitable policies.\footnote{Matthew F. Delmont, Why Busing Failed: Race, Media, and the National Resistance to School Desegregation (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 6-8.} Milliken resulted in the integration of Black students with primarily lower-income White students during the 1970s, leading to the
increasing departure of White residents from cities over the next several decades.\(^{547}\) In the brief window during which school boards implemented busing plans in school systems around the country, many parents and children responded with vociferous resistance.

White children who wrote to the presidents to support anti-desegregation and busing positions incorporated arguments from children opposed to expanded civil rights for Black citizens during previous decades. In particular, children’s arguments echoed those of White children responding to urban uprisings from 1965 to 1968. Child-writers, some of whom did not include mention of their racial identities, continued to write “but letters.” They counterbalanced their hostility toward busing with their support of Black people and civil rights. Many children also argued that busing equaled a violation of their freedom and rights. In doing so, they used rights-based and racist arguments previously used by segregationist children who described the increase of Black Americans’ rights as equivalent to the loss of their own. Several of the causes children listed for their opposition to busing appeared to be non-racial. They reasoned that the increased traffic and reliance on gas would be expensive and time-consuming,
and they would need to leave their friends and neighborhoods. Other justifications embedded racist arguments about Black people’s lack of intelligence, proclivity for violence and crime, and out-of-control sexuality that children had used to oppose integration in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Overall, the debate surrounding busing allowed White children and children who did not identify their race to reinterpret racism and limited civil rights as issues that also affected them.

In this chapter, I trace shifts in children’s discussions of their racial identities and their interpretations of civil rights in the late 1960s and 1970s. I examine several sources written by children of color, arguing that their ongoing concern with race and civil rights manifested in their focus on three subjects, which often overlapped: the histories and cultures of “their people;” the value they placed on their education; and examples of American racism or discrimination juxtaposed against their own racial pride. Many of these children centered their racial identity in their writings, moving beyond integration to write instead about racial self-worth and representation. I also argue that White children’s opposition to busing reflected another dimension of this expanded national conversation regarding civil rights. As the narrative moved away from Birmingham and Selma, White children engaged in a process of claiming civil rights for themselves. Rather than centering their racial identities, they sought to disconnect civil rights from race, arguing that everyone – including White children – deserved to have race-blind “freedom.” By the end of the decade, children of
color and White children had participated in developing vastly different
discourses for discussing American race relations.

**Children of Color Represent Themselves in Print**

Black children during the late 1960s and 1970s no longer focused on integration or Southern racial discrimination. They instead used their letters and other writings to communicate about American racism more broadly and to demonstrate the importance of their racial identities to their overall personhood. While some Black children had engaged in this type of letter writing in previous decades as well, the late 1960s and 1970s witnessed a decisive thematic shift. Moreover, whereas in previous decades, few Native American or Latina/o children sent letters to the White House, a larger number of these children appear to have felt more empowered to present their arguments to the presidents and adults in their communities during years that saw increased publicity for Native and Latina/o protest movements.548 While most of the children of color whose writings I analyze did not explicitly identify with any racial justice movements, their arguments indicated that the discourse activists injected into the public sphere affected them and, to some extent, likely inspired their words.

Several Black, Native American, and Latina/o children sought to demonstrate the importance of “their people’s” histories and cultures in their own lives and in the overall fabric of the nation. In the process of identifying and attempting to rectify the rarity of the inclusion of these stories in mainstream

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548 I found minimal numbers of Native American or Latina/o children’s letters to the presidents between 1946 and 1968. Because of the complexity and size of the presidential archives, however, this should not be read as a decisive verdict on the nature of the source base for these years. I suggest that much more research is necessary to fully review the holdings at these archives.
media sources, they became authors of an alternative narrative of the United States’ past and present in which they could see themselves represented. They knew this representation mattered. On March 24, 1973, Helen, a twelve-year-old Black girl from Westfield, New Jersey, wrote to a young Black children’s author named John Lewis Steptoe whose books *Stevie* (1969) and *Uptown* (1970) drew on Lewis’s life growing up as a Black kid in Harlem. Lewis also painted the illustrations that accompanied his text. Helen described Lewis’s books as uniquely “black:” “It was a together, black and wonderful experience for me in reading. I dig your pictures. Most of all they get down and tell whats happening.” In lieu of the traditional “sincerely,” Helen signed off by writing: “Keep On Doing Your Thing, For the Sake of others.”549 Children of color recognized that seeing themselves in print was “wonderful,” and several children actively participated in creating print documents that depicted their lives.

In 1972 and 1977, two different groups of Native American children sent Presidents Nixon and Carter printed booklets that celebrated their communities. They did not intend these to be private publications, and in sending their work to the presidents and thereby entering their writings into the historic archive of the nation, they performed an act of open resistance against any silencing of their cultures. In May of 1972, Vernon, a Navajo sixth grader from Crownpoint Elementary School in Crownpoint, New Mexico, wrote a cover letter to introduce his and his peers’ “magazine” to Nixon: “We hope you like [our] Magazine [its]

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name is Diné ba’á kchín dóó dabik’is ba hane’ or The Writing of Navajo
[Children] [and] their Friends. I [hope] you will read all of it. I would like it to be in
the News.” Vernon and thirty-nine of his fellow sixth graders along with their
teacher had prepared the booklet to tell readers about their lives as Navajo
children. Several students wrote stories or essays about their families’ farms and
herds of sheep and goats, reflecting cultural patterns of pastoralism and sheep-
and goat-herding that had deep roots among the Navajo (or Diné, which is how
many Navajos both in the 1970s and currently describe themselves). Black-
and-white photographs of sheep and goats dotted the pages among the
children’s narratives (see Figures 4 and 5). One student, Marshall, described his
family’s consumption of the sheep’s entire body: “In our way, first we cut of the
sheep’s head. Then we build a fire that burns of the fur. We get a stick and
scrape off the burn part. Then we put in the oven we wait till it is done. My father
or mother breaks the jaw open. My sister and I take the jaw, we play with it like
guns. My mother eats the tounge and I eat the cover of the eyeball. We eat the
meat of the throat. Sometimes my dad breaks the skull, then I eat the brain.”

For centuries, the Diné had supported themselves through pastoral

550 Vernon to Nixon, [May 8, 1972], RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, Indian Affairs (IN), Box 6,
Folder GEN IN 6/1/72-7/31/72, RMN. The children who participated in the writing of this magazine
mostly self-identified as Navajo rather than “Diné.” Their magazine’s title uses the word “Diné.”
For the most part when speaking about the children themselves, I follow their lead in using
Navajo, although I use Diné when referring to the Navajo Nation as a whole.
ba’á kchín dóó dabik’is ba hane’ (The Writing of Navajo Children and their Friends),” ed.,
Barbara Hemley Rosenn [Teacher], 3, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject Files, IN, Box 6, Folder GEN IN
6/1/72-7/31/72, RMN; Veida, “Summer with the Navahos,” in “Diné,” 4, RMN; Lionel, “Sheep,” in
“Diné,” 8, RMN; Marshall, “Sheep’s Head to Eat,” in “Diné,” 9, RMN; Thomas, “Blood Sausage,” in
RMN; Elrena, “Grandmother,” in “Diné,” 17, RMN; Edgar, “Grandfather,” in “Diné,” 17, RMN. For
an overview of the history of Diné interaction with livestock and the land, see: Weisiger, Dreaming
of Sheep.
552 Marshall, “Sheep’s Head to Eat,” in “Diné,” 9, RMN.
practices. This economic independence ended only with the New Deal-era herd-reduction program instituted by John Collier and the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the 1930s in an ecological effort to curb land erosion on the Colorado steppes. The mass slaughtering of sheep, goats, and horses caused starvation among many Diné by the 1940s and widespread poverty that continues today. The horror of the slaughter and its aftermath indelibly imprinted itself onto the collective memory of the Diné, perhaps even increasing the cultural and spiritual importance of these herds. By communicating on page after page the importance of sheep, goats, and other livestock to the Navajo children and their families, the children’s 1972 publication can be read as an expression of existence, a denial that past American governmental policies had succeeded in destroying the economic, social, and cultural practices of the Diné.

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553 Weisiger, Dreaming of Sheep, 8-9, 78.
In 1977, Yup’ik middle and high schoolers from the towns of Hooper Bay, Mountain Village, and Emmonak in the Lower Yukon, Alaska School District created a booklet they called “Kwikpagmiut” (an old name for a variation in the
Yup’ik language), which echoed the Navajo students in presenting a story of survival. The students sent their work to President Carter and included former President Ford’s response to the previous year’s publication in a “Letters, Notes and Comments” section at the end of their 1977 document. The children had conducted interviews with elders in their communities, and they used their booklet to publish the content of these interviews and to present students’ stories and poems. Several interviews of Yup’ik elders narrated experiences of starvation, disease, and the loss of Yup’ik education and practices due to a long history of increasing White presence in the Lower Yukon region. These transcriptions addressed and reckoned with the hardship and horror in the Yup’ik past while also honoring the resolve of those community members who, for example, had eaten mice to live to tell their tales. Influenza and tuberculosis devastated Yup’ik populations at several points over the course of the twentieth century.

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554 The Lower Yukon School District was established as in 1976 in response to the Alaska Supreme Court’s decision in Molly Hootch v. Alaska State-Operated School System mandating the creation of local school systems so as to allow Alaska Native students to attend school without needing to leave home. It therefore appears that students immediately engaged in creating editions of “Kwikpagmiut.” Molly Hootch, the first name listed among 27 plaintiffs in the case, was from Emmonak, one of the participating villages in the production of “Kwikpagmiut.” See: Ann Fienup-Riordan, Mission of Change in Southwest Alaska: Conversations with Father René Astruc and Paul Dixon on Their Work with Yup’ik People, 1950-1988 (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2012), 151; Lower Yukon School District, “About Our School District,” http://www.loweryukon.org/menu/about/

555 Gerald R. Ford as quoted in Lower Yukon School District Students, “Kwikpagmiut,” [1977], Jimmy Carter Presidential Papers (JC-PP), WHCF, Name File, White House Oversize Attachments (WHOA), Oversize Attachment (OA) 973, 155, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, Georgia (hereafter referred to as JCL). Ford’s response was the first entry listed in a two-page spread of letters and responses to “Kwikpagmiut” [1976].


557 Emma, Donna, and Irene, “Starvation Will Come Someday,” in “Kwikpagmiut,” 71-75, JCL. The girls recounted Kirk’s advice that a mouse made a good meal when nothing else was available to eat.
century, causing trauma among survivors that the students took pains to
record. One student, David, interviewed an older resident, Jasper, to find out
how life had changed in Emmonak after influenza hit the village in 1918: “There
were lots of people before the sickness came; there were lots of men. The kids
used to play on the lakes behind the houses. They used to play every night, hide
and seek and everything. They used to make lots of noise. After the sickness it
just got quiet. I missed all those people that died. Just in maybe two weeks, all
those people died. So then after that, very slowly they increased . . . very slowly . . .” The painful pauses that David purposefully entered into his transcription
communicated the heart-wrenching nature of the “slow” recovery in Emmonak. At
once, the pauses reflected the memorialization of the process of reproducing
new generations after the “sickness” had passed. Similarly, alongside interviews
about the difficult history through which members of their communities had lived,
many Lower Yukon students included pieces about basket making, fishing,
cooking, the annual potlatch feast, hunting, and the “old ways” to represent and
contribute to the continuation of Yup’ik traditions in years to come.

While the Navajo and Yup’ik students and the adult teachers with whom
they worked chose to connect their local stories to the federal government by
sending their publications to the White House, some children of color remained
focused on gaining access to portrayals of their history and culture in their own
locales. Like the groups of Navajo and Yup’ik students, they often created printed

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558 Fienup-Riordan, Mission of Change, 13-14.
559 David, “After the Sickness, It Just Got Quiet…,” in “Kwikpagmiut,” 114-117, JCL, ellipses in
original.
560 Lower Yukon School District Students, “Kwikpagmiut,” JCL.
representations of this knowledge. During a time when civil rights activists still struggled for equal representation for people of color in American history textbooks, these self-produced histories acted as critical alternatives for children of color to celebrate “their people.”

In Hinds County, Mississippi during the summer of 1969, several Black children participated in a summer recreation program for creative writing and the arts. At the end of the program, the adult organizers helped the children put their writings together in a short, printed document. For the front cover of the magazine, the adult editor, De Gecha X, chose a drawing of Africa and Mississippi with the word “Home” resting diagonally between the two.

Inside the magazine itself, children from in and around the Jackson area, including rural towns such as Terry, Mount Olive, and Utica, presented several essays, stories, and poems about Black history. Regina, a nine-year-old from Jackson, relayed her appreciation for learning about Black people: “I like to study

561 While civil rights activists had begun lobbying school boards in the 1960s for the adoption of American history textbooks that presented the true, multiracial history of the United States, this remained a slow process. By the 1960s and 1970s, new textbooks had been released and were in use in school systems around the nation. However, resistance to these stories (termed “multicultural”) remained strong throughout the rest of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. See: Moreau, Schoolbook Nation.

562 This document is located in the records of the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) at The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library. CDGM ended its Headstart programming Mississippi in 1967. While this summer camp was not then directly sponsored or funded through them, it is likely that one of the adult organizers – Jack Sperling (drama), Malena Dow (drama and creative writing), Catherine Knight (painting), and De Gecha X (editor) – had some connection with the former initiative. Dow’s role as a professor in the Department of Speech and Dramatic Arts at Jackson State University from the 1960s through 1989 also indicates that the summer program may have been connected to the historically Black university, although I have been unable to confirm this suspicion. For Dow’s story, see: Eddie L. Brown, Jr., “Jackson Churches, Mt. Helm, College Hill, etched in JSU History, Jacksonian 6, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2008): 22-23.

563 “Poetry and Literary Expression by the Students of the Creative Writing Section of the Summer Recreation Program 1969 Jackson (Hinds County) Mississippi,” ed., De Gecha X, located in the Child Development Group of Mississippi Collection MG 265, Box 6(7), Folder 3, “Printed Material, 1966-1970,” SCH.
about Black History and it is very interesting . . . The Black man has as much history as the white man, and we have a lot of soul in all our songs. Many famous Black people sing soul.® Several children described the discussions the summer program had sponsored regarding slavery and post-emancipation Black labor. These writers recounted both the violence of enslavement and the degradation of Black workers in the Southern domestic economy.® Cornelius, a thirteen-year-old from Mt. Olive, pronounced these class discussions the most important part of the summer program overall: "I think the recreation program is a good program. We’ve learned about Africa and how the white people treated us in slavery . . . We talked about Frederick Douglas, who was born a slave on the Eastern shore of Maryland. We talked about slave making. The meaning of slavemaking is breeding fear into people . . . These are the reasons why I think the summer recreation program is a good program."® Pamela, a ten-year-old Black girl from Jackson, reflected: “Some Blacks work for the whites. I know you can make a living at it, but I don’t like it. The slaves did not like working for the whites. But one reason why they did was if they did not do the work, they would be punished. The punishment would be a beating with a whip. They did not like this, and sometimes they got them back real good."® For Pamela and the other children who narrated such stories, their writings acted as more than just a

® Regina, “To Be Black in America,” in “Poetry and Literary Expression, 18, SCH.
®®® Cornelius, “Thoughts on the Summer Recreation Program,” in “Poetry and Literary Expression, 20, SCH.
®®®® Pamela, “How It Feels To Be Black in America,” 19.
process of writing down the history they had recently learned. They were, instead, namings, exercises in recording the experiences of their past and present to acknowledge and celebrate the strength and survival of Black people in America.

The necessity of the Hinds County summer program underscored the fact that many children of color in the late 1960s and 1970s could not gain access to resources for learning about their racial groups’ past and present in American public schools. Raquel, a Latina fifteen-year-old from Albuquerque, New Mexico, attempted to change this when she led a student walkout from Washington Junior High School in the spring of 1968. She released a list of student grievances that began with a call to arms: “If the teachers can strike for DOLLARS -- we can do it for an EDUCATION.” On April 22, 1968, Raquel and about two dozen other middle schoolers spent the day picketing in front of their school, their signs charging the institution with discrimination against Mexican

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568 The Washington Junior High School student walkout was by no means without precedent among Latina/o students. In East Los Angeles in March 1968, a little over a month before the Washington walkout, over 10,000 students left five area high schools to protest the lack of representation for Mexican American students in the curricula and among the teaching faculty, as well as the overall racist culture of the schools. Raquel did not specify a connection to this walkout in her documents, although it is likely she was at least aware of, if not inspired by, the events in California. See: Carlos Tejeda, “Genealogies of the Student ‘Blowouts’ of 1968,” in *Marching Students: Chicana and Chicano Activism in Education, 1968 to the Present*, eds., Margarita Berta-Ávila, Anita Tijerina Revilla, and Julie López Figueroa (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2011), 9-42; See also: Petrzela, *Classroom Wars*.

569 Raquel Tijerina, "Washington Junior High School Grievances," [April 1968], Reies López Tijerina Papers, MSS 654, Box 55, Folder 8, "Personal: Family: Rachel Tijerina, 1968-1974," Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico Libraries, Albuquerque, New Mexico (hereafter referred to as CSR). Raquel's first and last name are mentioned in the footnotes of this piece because the coverage of Raquel's protest in the Albuquerque press and the public nature of her father's activism precluded any action I might have taken to protect her identity. Her father, Reies López Tijerina, a prominent land-grant activist, recounted his experiences and activism in the Chicano Movement in his autobiography: Reies López Tijerina, *They Called Me "King Tiger": My Struggle for the Land and Our Rights*, trans. José Angel Gutiérrez (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2000). Raquel's walkout may have been fostered by her father and siblings' history of activism in the 1950s and 1960s. See also: “Junior High Students Picket Their School," *The Albuquerque Tribune*, April 22, 1968, B7.
American students. Raquel, who spearheaded the walkout, also wrote a speech for the occasion and likely drafted the list of grievances. Raquel argued that Mexican American students should be able to see themselves in the textbooks and histories they read, hear themselves in the bilingual instruction taught by the Mexican American teachers she wanted the administration to hire, and taste their cultural inheritance in the food they ate. She accused the school of shaming Mexican American students: “This teachers make this kids believe that they should be ashamed of their language, of their culture, and even of their food. They never teach us our history and culture, they just want us to think that our only heroes in the United States were George Washington, Daniel Boone, David Crooked, and only this american anglos are heroes . . . they dont want us to learn about our heroes. Their afraid that we might have too much pride if we know about our people.”

Raquel’s written and public protests covered each of the three topics most evident in the writings that many children of color produced during this time.

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570 Not all Mexican American students during this time period would have joined Raquel in characterizing their schools as racist and discriminatory. On May 10, 1972 Felix, a Mexican American high school senior from El Paso, Texas, invited Nixon to his graduation from his “predominantly Anglo school.” Felix told the president that: “As a Mexican-American citizen, born and raised in El Paso, I would have been greatly handicapped just fifteen years ago. But now, thanks to the strength of America’s democratic beliefs, I have been able to excel in certain aspects of my life.” He added: “Sir, to think that such accomplishments would have been impossible within my lifetime for members of my race and heritage is difficult to do. But I know that it did happen, the Mexican-Americans were badly discriminated against, for my father experienced it. And I am grateful with all my heart that America is a great enough nation to humble itself and change for the better.” Felix wrote his letter to communicate a belief that, by 1972, the wheels of American democracy had turned in the favor of racial equality for Mexican American citizens. While his experiences at a school where he received good grades, was elected student class president, and was admitted to college helped to foster this perception, the ongoing activism among Latina/o citizens nationwide during the early 1970s for educational equality demonstrated that many Latina/o students could not share in Felix’s experiences. Felix to Nixon, May 10, 1972, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 7, Folder GEN HU 2 Equality 4.1.72-12.31.72, RMN.

period. She identified a connection between the quality of her education, the lack of coverage of “our history and culture,” and the racism of the “american anglos” at her school. She argued that White teachers and administrators did not want to teach her and other Mexican American students about “our people” because they wanted to suppress Mexican American pride. School administrators suspended Raquel and her fellow protestors, and the city charged them with obstructing pedestrian traffic on sidewalks. At a juvenile court hearing for these charges in June 1968, Raquel disqualified all district judges and demanded an out-of-town judge hear the case instead. Raquel’s narrative then drops from the archive, and it is unclear whether the students returned to Washington Junior High, or if their protests fomented change at the institution. While Raquel’s protest may or may not have led to changes at her school, her words reflected her participation in the development of a discourse of racial self-worth and advocacy based not only on integration but rather on the broader right to equal representation in education.

Other children of color joined Raquel in expressing concern over the content of their education. This included their efforts to highlight the importance of language. Given that multilingual students’ abilities to speak and write in multiple languages affected their day-to-day experiences both at home and in school, they often included and represented this multilingual knowledge in their writings. Multilingual children like the Navajo and Yup’ik students chose to include non-English words in the publications they sent to the White House,

subtly demonstrating their intention to use multiple languages in their school activities. The Navajo students titled their publication and each of its three major sections in Diné, only providing the English translations as subtitles. The Yup’ik students called their booklet “Kwikpagmiut,” a word denoting a variation of the Yup’ik language. While Raquel did not include Spanish-language text in her list of grievances or speech, she communicated the pain of Spanish-speaking students who did not have access to bilingual education in their schools: “It’s harder for us to have to know two languages. We are brought up speaking our language then when we go in school we don’t understand this new language and the teachers don’t understand us. We are not familiar with this language . . . if [a] Spanish student tries to speak our language which some teachers say it is foreign we practically get suspended.” During the 1960s and 1970s, activists in both the Red and Brown Power Movements focused much attention on multilingual children’s right to an education that valued rather than denigrated their linguistic backgrounds, reacting to American educators’ long history of suppressing and belittling Latina/o and Native children’s multilingualism. When multilingual students chose to represent their linguistic knowledge in print or record the discrimination of teachers who did not respect their abilities, they participated in these conversations and protests by adding their own evidence of the importance of multilingual capabilities in their schools and communities.

573 Crownpoint Sixth Graders, “Diné,” RMN.
574 Lower Yukon School District Students, “Kwikpagmiut,” JCL.
575 Raquel, “Speech,” CSR.
576 In 1966, Clyde Warrior, one of the key members of the National Indian Youth Council, reacted strongly to this history, criticizing even the newer Upward Bound programs as “trying to wash students in white paint.” Warrior quoted in Shreve, Red Power Rising, 153. See also: Petrzela, part one, “Language,” in Classroom Wars, 20-100; Lee, Building a Latino Movement.
While many multilingual children showed their appreciation of their linguistic abilities in their writings, these same documents also demonstrated that some older members of their communities doubted children’s dedication to maintaining such knowledge and to preserving their culture as a whole. The interview portion of “Kwikpagmiut” required extended periods of interaction between children as young as twelve or thirteen and their elders.\textsuperscript{577} Many of these interviews had been conducted in Yup’ik and then translated by the students into English for their readers. Older residents accused the students of laxity regarding their knowledge of Yup’ik language and culture in a few of these interviews, which led Lower Yukon students to defend their generation. They identified as younger Yup’iks who chose to participate in the continuance of their cultural traditions. Axel, a sixty-six-year-old man from Emmonak, told his student-interviewers: “Today, you find that not many look back on their own heritage. They don’t even know they’re Eskimo anymore . . . You young generation, if you did care for it you’d never lose the tongue.”\textsuperscript{578} Students Linda and Joanne recorded his words but ended the transcription with their own addendum: “It was fun listening to Axel but we’d like to say to him that we still think of our native ways. We still think about them and don’t think we’ll ever want to forget about

\textsuperscript{577} Contributors to “Kwikpagmiut” were in the seventh through twelfth grades.  
\textsuperscript{578} Axel quoted in Linda and Joanne, “Johnson’s Life and the Change of the Yukon Yupiks,” in “Kwikpagmiut,” 23, JCL. Note that while the word “Eskimo” is currently understood to be derogatory in most places in the United States, some Native Alaskans did and do still accept the term, as “Inuit” is not a Yup’ik word and refers only to the Inupiat of Northern Alaska, the Inuit of Canada, and the Kalaallit of Greenland. See Lawrence Kaplan, “Inuit or Eskimo, Which Name to Use?,” July 1, 2011, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, Alaska Native Center, https://www.uaf.edu/anlc/resources/inuit-eskimo/. I have used Yup’ik in my text while also maintaining original quotations and usages of “Eskimo.”
The interviews forced the students to reflect on their relationship with their communities and its older members and to define their own role in remembering “native ways.” By writing “Kwikpagmiut,” they believed they had created a key resource in that process. The student staff of another locality in the school district, Hooper Bay, wrote: “Some of the old people know about the ways of long ago. We think that KWIKPAGMIUT is something that we can use to learn about old ways. If we did not have KWIKPAGMIUT we would not have known about the old ways. These ways would have been forgotten.” In small, predominantly Native towns like Hooper Bay, which boasted a population of only 650 residents in 1977, the task of creating reference texts describing Yup’ik history and practices for their own generation and the children that followed them likely rung with urgency. The Lower Yukon School District, which served several villages in a 22,000 square-mile area surrounding the Yukon River near the coast of the Bering Sea, had been established just one year earlier in response to a court case protesting the lack of local school options for Alaska Native students. The students’ ability to produce a text meant to preserve Yup’ik culture — and the speed at which they did so — in their new local school system demonstrated the importance of Native education for both adults and children in their communities.

Apart from the material they studied, many children of color in the 1970s

579 Linda and Joanne, “Johnson’s Life and the Change of the Yukon Yupiks,” in “Kwikpagmiut,” 23, JCL.
580 Hooper Bay Staff, “Hooper Bay Joins Kwikpagmiut,” in “Kwikpagmiut,” 55, JCL.
581 For population statistic, see: Hooper Bay Staff, “Hooper Bay Joins Kwikpagmiut,” in “Kwikpagmiut,” 54, JCL. To further underscore the importance of this self-conscious definition of their publication as a sort of textbook, consider the dearth and racism of American textbooks in relationship to Native Americans during the 1970s, many of which barely mentioned or only wrote about Native populations as lost relics of the nineteenth-century American West or long-ago friends of the Pilgrims. Moreau, Schoolbook Nation, 326.
had to reckon with the lack of economic resources afforded to their schools. Minority children nationwide lived disproportionately in poverty in comparison to White children during this time period. In 1976 (the first year of a complete dataset for all three groups), 40.6 percent of Black children and 30.2 percent of Latina/o children under the age of eighteen lived in poverty compared to 9.8 percent of White children. Native American children (who the Census did not track in 1976) also experienced persistent poverty. The mostly Navajo residency of Crownpoint, New Mexico and the primarily Alaska Native population in the Lower Yukon region both recorded high levels of poverty in the 1970s. Few students from these groups focused on this subject in the publications they sent to Nixon and Carter, although one Navajo child, Thomas, indicated that wealthier Diné ensured that poorer members of the nation also had access to oats to feed their sheep.

In some cases, poverty sat at the heart of students’ writings. A group of fifth-graders who “all [belonged] to the Omaha Tribe” asked President Nixon on March 11, 1969 if he could improve the state of their school: “President Nixon, we as students would like very much for you to investigate the condition of our

584 Thomas, “Winter in Navajo Land,” in “Diné,” 3, RMN.
school Bldg. It is old and in very poor condition. We manage to get along but have three classrooms outside the main bldg., have the Library across the street and have no place to accommodate any sports at all let alone space for Audio Visual Aides. Our Gym is too small for any use to us." The children lived on the Omaha Reservation in Macy, Nebraska, a town in Thurston County. This county encompassed land belonging to two Native American reservations and boasted poverty levels above twenty percent from 1970 through 2000, in comparison with a national average hovering around thirteen percent. Although the children in Macy “managed to get along” with an old school building, temporary classrooms, and no accommodation for either recreation or audiovisual aids, they lobbied the president for help in making their educational experience better than that. Nixon, likely in response to the public activism of the Red Power Movement, spoke in support of Native self-determination and budgetary increases for Native communities in 1970, though concrete legislative action progressed slowly. While financial assistance in the context of the Nixon administration’s Native policy may or may not have ever reached the fifth-graders in Macy, their letter reflected their desire to advocate for the economic quality of education available to Native children like themselves.

The Macy students asked and perhaps realistically hoped for Nixon’s aid,

585 Doreen, Dena, Marcie, Theresa T., Walter, Vincent, Maggie, Regus, Elaine, Gregory, Rozella, William, Orlando, Everett, Larry, and Curtis, Macy Public School Fifth Graders, to Nixon, March 11, 1969, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, IN, Box 4, Folder GEN IN Indian Affairs 11.11.68-3.31.69, RMN.
587 Smith and Warrior, Like a Hurricane, 123.
but some children of color did not believe in the president’s ability to help their communities. By the mid-1970s, many American cities suffered from financial woes brought on by a multiplicity of factors, including rising gas prices related to geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East, larger municipal budgets, and increasingly smaller tax bases due to job loss and White flight. In particular, New York City experienced an acute financial crisis by mid-decade. When fiscally conservative Democrat Abraham Beame was elected mayor in 1974, he addressed the near-bankruptcy of New York City in 1975 by giving large financial institutions like Chase Manhattan and Merrill Lynch control of city finances, slashing budgets, and firing 25,000 of the city’s 300,000 employees. In addition, while a combination of domestic and foreign exigencies had led to New York City’s problems, Beame and other governmental officials around the country often simplistically blamed bloated bureaucracy and rising welfare budgets that they associated with minority recipients. Black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers made handy scapegoats. On October 29, 1975, President Ford made a speech denying New York City aid to prevent imminent bankruptcy, asserting that the federal government could not be held responsible for irresponsible municipal spending. The next day, New York’s Daily News headline read: “FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD.” While Ford never actually uttered this immortal phrase, the two words “encapsulated” the tone and message of his October 29

588 Lee, Building a Latino Movement, 238.
speech. Many of those who felt directly affected by the financial crisis, including poor children of color, responded to the president’s remarks in outrage.

On the same day the Daily News printed its provocative cover story, a group of seventh-grade students from Junior High School 21 in the Morrisania neighborhood on the edge of the South Bronx sent a packet of letters to President Ford that White House correspondence secretaries labeled in red pencil: “File – rude.” Black and Puerto Rican residents had moved into this area of the Bronx in increasing numbers since the 1960s, making it a minority-dominant neighborhood. Morrisania and nearby Hunts Point experienced extreme poverty in the mid-1970s, represented most poignantly in the rising number of abandoned and burned-out buildings that existed throughout the area. Fires devastated this section of the city in these years, tripling in frequency from 1960 to 1974. Landlords benefitted from arson by cashing in on insurance money paid toward already-vacant properties, and city officials promoted abandonment in “planned shrinkage” programs by withdrawing funding for subways, police and fire stations, hospitals, and schools in the “worst parts’ of the South Bronx.” Segregation had also increased in New York City’s public school

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591 Roberts, “Infamous ‘Drop Dead.’”
592 All but three of the letters (there were nineteen total) appeared in the archive separated from the rest of the documents in the folder by a folded piece of white paper. (Note that all letters reside in the same box and folder.) The packet was stapled together, likely by White House secretaries in 1975. See the top letter in the packet for the label. “The Serious Joint” to Gerald R. Ford (Ford), October 30, 1975, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Papers (GRF-PP), WHCF, Bulk Mail Sample File, Box A10, Children's Mail Acknowledged by Miscellaneous Enclosures (23), Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan (hereafter referred to as GRF). This selection of letters was by no means the only set from New York City schoolchildren. The Bulk Mail Sample File contains a subject category dedicated to “New York City,” and several children’s letters can be found in these folders. See, for example: Meilyn to Ford, November 18, 1975, GRF-PP, WHCF, Bulk Mail Sample File, Box A34, New York City (1), GRF; Mitra to Ford, November 20, 1975, GRF-PP, WHCF, Bulk Mail Sample File, Box A34, New York City (1), GRF.
593 Lee, Building a Latino Movement, 237.
systems by the end of the 1960s. The Morrisania seventh graders who lived through these circumstances termed themselves “The Serious Joint,” a slang phrase meaning “the real thing.”

Members of The Serious Joint reacted to Ford’s dismissal of the effects of financial hardship in New York City by demanding that he consider what it felt like to be a poor child. Valencia asked Ford: “if you were in seventh grade and poor how would you feel if your president was doing this to you.” Pamela described the conditions of schools, helping to communicate the seriousness of the students’ complaints: “Some schools are complaining about roaches rats in the school.” Several children threatened the president, seizing upon the news of two recent assassination attempts targeting Ford to do so. Todd warned the president: “I would not come to New York City, cause you might get shot at and they won’t miss.” Another student made the act of letter writing metaphorically equivalent to beating up the president: “On October 29, 1975 you stated that would veto any bill that would help New York City I think you are wrong because you care for you white self you are the most ugly President I have ever seen . . . you are a sucker! sucker. And if you don’t put some help in New York City I’m

594 Lee, Building a Latino Movement, 172.
596 Valencia to Ford, October 30, 1975, GRF-PP, WHCF, Bulk Mail Sample File, Box A10, Children’s Mail Acknowledged by Miscellaneous Enclosures (23), GRF. See also: Sherrita to Ford, October 30, 1975, GRF-PP, WHCF, Bulk Mail Sample File, Box A10, Children’s Mail Acknowledged by Miscellaneous Enclosures (23), GRF.
597 Pamela to Ford, October 30, 1975, GRF-PP, WHCF, Bulk Mail Sample File, Box A10, Children’s Mail Acknowledged by Miscellaneous Enclosures (23), GRF.
598 Todd to Ford, October 30, 1975, GRF-PP, WHCF, Bulk Mail Sample File, Box A10, Children’s Mail Acknowledged by Miscellaneous Enclosures (23), GRF. See also: Direen [spelling approximated, difficult to read] to Ford, October 30, 1975, GRF-PP, WHCF, Bulk Mail Sample File, Box A10, Children’s Mail Acknowledged by Miscellaneous Enclosures (23), GRF.
going to write and write until you turn black and blue.”

A few children connected their experiences of poverty to their racial identities, presenting expressions of racial pride alongside their critiques of the president. Joanne, a “New York Puerto Rican” girl, specifically referenced the *Daily News* headline to turn Ford’s purported message to New Yorkers back on the president: “I just wanted to inform you that I was reading the paper and I heard that you want New York City to drop dead. Now I’m going to tell you something from the mouth of a New York Puerto Rican and I’m telling you to drop dead. I wish you lived in New York and see how tough it gets . . . If it’s true that you veto every bill to help us you are prejudicing and selfish and unrespectable to NYC.”

She included a postscript to preempt any racist assumptions Ford might have about her and other Puerto Ricans: “P.S. If I have been disrespect and you think I’m a Puerto Rican slob I’m not a P.R. slob and I meant every word of my disrespect. I never disrespected anyone but I will make an exception.”

Joanne, perhaps reacting to characterizations of Puerto Rican and Black children as “culturally deprived,” unmotivated, and undisciplined then in circulation among health and governmental officials, clarified that she had never disrespected anyone. Ford’s actions had forced an exception in her rule. A Black student named Mark joined Joanne in protesting against the president’s planned lack of aid for the city, urging the president to follow an alternate course: “Yo be a good

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599 “Sincerely a Pal” to Ford, October 30, 1975, GRF-PP, WHCF, Bulk Mail Sample File, Box A10, Children’s Mail Acknowledged by Miscellaneous Enclosures (23), GRF.
600 Joanne D. to Ford, October 30, 1975, GRF-PP, WHCF, Bulk Mail Sample File, Box A10, Children’s Mail Acknowledged by Miscellaneous Enclosures (23), GRF.
601 Ibid.
President for New York you should do what we want and be kool.” After signing off, he also added a postscript: “P.S. And you should turn the White House into the black house.” He then drew three pillars, coloring one red, one black, and writing the word “green” in the last, referencing the Pan-African liberation flag (see Figure 6). Many Black New Yorkers and Black Power advocates nationwide embraced Pan-African nationalist ideology as a vehicle for Black Americans to develop an independent, counterhegemonic “cultural citizenship,” with the liberation flag providing one way for Black people during the late 1960s and 1970s to “fulfill the mandates of Black consciousness.” Mark joined this contingent of Black Americans by using the liberation flag in conjunction with his subversive desire to turn the White House “black” to frame his criticism of the president’s actions through the lens of his identity as a Black American boy.

603 Mark to Ford, October 30, 1975, GRF-PP, WHCF, Bulk Mail Sample File, Box A10, Children’s Mail Acknowledged by Miscellaneous Enclosures (23), GRF.
604 The liberation flag appeared in several iterations over the course of the twentieth century as a symbol of African diasporic pride, independence, and liberation. It is based on the Garveyite flag created by Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1920. “For Garveyites, the red represented ‘the color of the blood which men must shed for their redemption and liberty,’ the black stood for ‘the color of the noble and distinguished race to which we belong,’ and the green for ‘the luxuriant vegetation of our Motherland.’” Kersuze Simeon-Jones, Literary and sociopolitical writings of the Black Diaspora in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 20.
605 Rickford, African People, quotations on 6 and 47. For an example of a New York City protest incorporating the flag, see: Rickford, African People, 69.
Some student members of The Serious Joint suggested that Ford’s refusal to help New York City stemmed from racism. Joanne accused Ford of prejudice, and another student claimed that Ford only cared about his “white self.” By including these statements in their letters, the children asked the president to critically reexamine what they believed to be a racist policy decision and instead make the racially equitable choice to help poor people in New York City.

These children were not alone in using their communications with the White House to demand that presidents both eradicate racism and address the inequitable conditions under which many Americans of color lived during these years. At the beginning of the decade, on March 26, 1970, Margie, a Black tenth-grader at Jack Yates Senior High School in Houston, Texas, wrote a letter to Nixon to make him understand that people “start riots for their freedom and
Margie elaborated that she was disturbed by Nixon’s resistance to the advice of Senator Edward Brooke, the Republican from Massachusetts who was also the only Black Senator then in office. A few weeks earlier, Brooke had accused Nixon of courting the votes of White suburbanites in the 1972 election by “shunning” the needs of Black Americans. Brooke especially denounced the administration’s lack of support for school desegregation or anti-poverty programs. Margie told the president: “you are not bringing us together you are for one side not the other side. We both need help.” Three years later, on January 30, 1973, Marsovena, an eighteen-year-old Black girl from Freeport, Illinois, specifically addressed the lack of Black representatives at all levels of government that marked Senator Brooke’s career as exceptional. Given the 1971 ratification of the Twenty-sixth Amendment granting eighteen-year-olds the right to vote, Marsovena viewed this issue with new urgency:

For the first time in the history of the United States an 18 year old can vote and also become elected to some offices. Although this voting will benefit some, for others, will not. I feel that the others it will not benefit will be the Afro-Americans of this country. Now that we 18 year old Blacks have the right to vote we suddenly find ourselves with no one to vote for. I am not joking when I say that there is a terrible racial unbalance in representation in the legislature. Not only do we find this racial unbalance on a local level, but on a national level as well. We, as young Blacks, are the Blacks of the future. It is our job to clean up the ghettos, to educate the young, and to get better training for better jobs. This is why I write to you, Mr. President. I write to you because you sit at the very head of the legislature in this country. I am writing to you so that you can be instrumental in instituting new and better reforms to fund programs to save the Black community. It is the one way and the only way to survive.

Writing from a relatively small, rural city in Northwestern Illinois, Marsovena’s

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606 Margie to Nixon, March 26, 1970, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 7, Folder GEN HU 2 Equality 7.1.70-7.31.70, RMN.
608 Margie to Nixon, March 26, 1970, RMN.
609 Marsovena to Nixon, January 30, 1973, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 8, Folder GEN HU 2 Equality 1.1.73-3.31.73, RMN.
desire to “clean up the ghetto” and “save the Black community” replicated Black middle-class discourses of respectability and racial uplift from earlier in the century by characterizing poor, urban Black Americans as a “problem” that needed to be solved. At the same time, her letter broached some of the most relevant subjects of her time by not only contending with the ongoing dearth of Black political leadership in the United States, but also asking Nixon to do his job as president and institute “better reforms” to minimize racial inequality and poverty.

As a newly eligible voter, Marsovena had gained access to at least one (clearly changeable) social marker of adulthood. She also purposefully foregrounded her youth in her letter, repeatedly referencing her age and describing herself as part of a generation of “young Blacks” who represented “the Blacks of the future.” By including these indicators of her status as a young Black American whose future might be affected by the president’s actions, Marsovena used her youth to strengthen her argument about the racial inequality she wanted Nixon to address. Several children and “youths” of color who straddled the boundary of childhood and adulthood used this argumentative strategy in letters they wrote addressing discrimination during these years. In 1969, the fourth year of Mexican American and Mexican migrant workers’ five-year strike against the exploitative labor conditions of the California grape industry, twenty-four “sons and daughters of the migrants working in California” sent Nixon a letter asking: “Why is the Department of Defense making such a tremendous increase in its purchases of California table grapes for Viet Nam? In

610 Ibid.
view of the great Grape Boycott of crucial importance to all Mexican-Americans, why doesn’t the government purchase apples, peaches, pineapples, or oranges instead?”

They demanded to know why the government did not support the workers’ cause by participating in the nationally renowned boycott of the industry’s grapes, emphasizing: “As sons and daughters of migrant farm workers, we believe that we have the right to know.”

The author of this petition was a college student at Pitzer College in Claremont, California, and both she and her fellow signatories likely ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-two. At once, they used their position as members of a younger generation – the children of parents whose work conditions the strike and boycott sought to improve – to ask for “redress” from Nixon on this matter.

On March 22, 1978, Faith, a nineteen-year-old who identified herself as “a member of the Crow Tribe” living in Bozeman, Montana, also employed this strategy in her letter to President Carter. Faith wrote to detail the ways in which “my people” had suffered in the “19 years of my life that I have lived.” Faith’s letter was a reaction to an ongoing conflict over non-tribal members who had violated historic treaty agreements by openly fishing in segments of the Bighorn River that were located on her tribe’s reservation. In 1973, the Crow Tribe, in response to rising food prices coupled with decreased fish and game populations, instituted regulations on non-members’ ability to fish in those segments.

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612 Margarita and Signatories, June 13, 1969, RMN.

613 Faith to Jimmy Carter (Carter), March 22, 1978, JC-PP, WHCF, Subject File, IN, Box IN-3, Folder 5.1.78-9.30.78, General, JCL.
portions of the river that crossed their reservation. In May 1974, non-member James Junior Finch fished in defiance of the resolution. In 1975, a Montana district court judge ruled that the state of Montana owned the riverbed and that the Crow Tribe did not have exclusive rights either to fish or to regulate fishing in the river. The ruling was overturned in a court of appeals that determined that the United States government owned the land in trust for the Crow people. The dispute continued throughout the rest of the 1970s, until, in 1980, the case made it to the Supreme Court in *Montana v. United States*. In 1981, the Court decided in Montana’s favor, determining that Crow tribal authorities only had the right to regulate the activities of non-members on their reservation when “the political integrity, the economic security, or the health or welfare of the tribe” was endangered by non-members’ actions. Because the Court found that outdoor, “sportsman” activities did not “imperil the subsistence or welfare of the tribe,” the tribe could not impose regulations in this situation. The decision severely undermined tribal authority over non-members throughout Native America, threatening tribal governments’ abilities to protect Native peoples on reservations.\(^{614}\) In the midst of this legal wrangling, Faith transcribed her anguish over what the United States had taken and continued to take from her and her people:

> We did not ask for you and your people to come to America. We did not ask to be treated in this manner. Why? It is you who has done wrong. We just excepted it with hate in our hearts towards all white-men. Over the many years your people have tortured us in many ways. Let us live what lives we have left in peace. You have everything we ever owned. We have lost this battle long ago but it is you who keeps the fire burning. Our pride and

\(^{614}\) The United States Department of Justice, Indian Resources Section (IRS), “Cases Involving the Scope of Indian Lands and Jurisdiction,” (Updated May 14, 2015), [https://www.justice.gov/enrd/montana-v-us](https://www.justice.gov/enrd/montana-v-us).
dignity is all we own and have to live for.\footnote{Faith to Carter, March 22, 1978, JCL.}

When Faith identified herself as a nineteen-year-old, she made those years a measuring-stick for the abuses that members of her tribe had endured since her birth, such that they “owned” and “lived for” nothing but their “pride and dignity.” In this manner, Faith’s mention of her youth underscored the tragedy of a life already filled with oppression after less than two decades spent on earth.

Rather than focusing on their generational identity, some children of color reflected more directly on their relationship to the United States as American citizens affected by racism. Cassandra, a thirteen-year-old Black girl from Utica, Mississippi who participated in the Hinds County summer recreation program in 1969, wrote three short stanzas for the program’s booklet to communicate how she felt about her Blackness and her place in the United States’ past, present, and future:

\begin{quote}
I understand I am a Negro, 
My face is Black; that's true. 
From the dust God made us all; 
So I know he made me too.

Let me always be Black. 
I don't want to cross the color line, 
Social justice is not the question; 
You keep yours, and give me mine.

What I seek, today, Americans, 
Is equal justice for all mankind 
When you come to write a history, 
Don't leave my name behind.\footnote{Cassandra, “Negro,” in “Poetry and Literary Expression,” 7, SCH.}
\end{quote}

Cassandra’s first stanza spoke to the common humanity of all people. She cast God as the creator of all humans, with everyone made from the same “dust.” Sameness, however, did not undergird Cassandra’s argument. In both of the first
two stanzas and the title of her piece, “Negro,” Cassandra not only self-identified as both “Negro” and “Black,” but she also refused to minimize that Blackness. In Cassandra’s rendering, she was “Negro” and “Black,” and she appeared to accept the two labels equally. Black consciousness advocates associated with the expansion of the Black Power Movement encouraged rejection of the word “Negro” in favor of “Black” by the late 1960s to embrace and celebrate Blackness. In contrast, Cassandra’s poem seemed to indicate her desire to ascribe positivity to a word, “Negro,” that she likely still heard both Black and White people use to describe her. In the second stanza of her piece, she clarified that whatever label she used, she felt nothing but pride in being Black. She had no desire to “cross the color line,” to become White in any capacity, beseeching instead an unnamed omniscient presence – God, perhaps – to “Let me always be Black.” Also in the second stanza, she characterized social justice as not a question, but simply a fact. Cassandra wanted her due. Finally, in the last stanza, Cassandra directed her words to all “Americans.” The poem was a testament to her sense of simultaneous belonging and exclusion from that body. Cassandra saw herself as deserving of “equal justice,” of “social justice,” of those things supposedly accorded by law to all American citizens. At the same time, her poem set down “lines” she did not want to cross. She had no desire to become part of White America. And yet, in writing as her final line, “Don’t leave my name behind,” Cassandra ended her poem by powerfully inscribing herself in the

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narrative that would someday be written to tell America’s story. More than this, she demanded that her name not be left behind. Her poem acted as a deeply personal and individual plea that conveyed the lack of full inclusion Black children felt in accounts of the United States’ past and in its citizenry in 1969.

Native children also reacted against the United States’ historical and contemporary erasure of their cultures, asserting that their Native personhood represented an important, perhaps even more authentic or valuable aspect of American identity. Vernon, the same child from Crownpoint, New Mexico who had written a letter of introduction for the Navajo students’ magazine to President Nixon, also wrote a short story about a man named Bill and his Honda 350. For Vernon, the motorcycle, a classic symbol of American rebellion, might have been cool, but cooler still was Bill’s pride in his people: “He is proud to be an Indian, because Indians are the only real American[s]. The white say they are American, but they are not. The real Americans are Indian.” Vernon took ownership of an identity that had been denied to and imposed upon Native Americans at varying times in American history and made it uniquely and only Native. Vernon reclaimed “America” and “American,” both historically as a geographic space on which Native peoples existed before Europeans, and symbolically as a dual identity – “Indian” and “American” – that was better for its duality. A Yup’ik student-contributor to “Kwikpagmiut,” Theresa, repeated these themes in a poem she wrote to be the booklet’s epigraph. She recognized White people’s capacity to help Yup’iks interact with the wider world while also arguing that this qualified

619 See: Rosier, Serving Their Country for scholarship on this “duality” of Native American identities in twentieth-century politics and protests.
acceptance should not involve any loss of her community’s heritage: “Where is the spirit of the Eskimo culture now?/It must remain in the hearts of men./It must not be drowned by greed laziness, or lust./It must be kept and taught from generation to generation. . . . Yes, we could add the ways of the white to our ways./They can bring the Eskimo to know the world./But let us not forget the ways of our fathers before us.” Vernon and Theresa both argued that their Native cultures deserved recognition and preservation, sentiments that Native activists during the late 1960s and 1970s also strongly and repeatedly expressed. The students included no explicit reference to Red Power or any of the public protests undertaken by Native activists between 1969 and 1973, but their writings indicated that Red Power activism of this time period likely contributed to a symbolic shift in the way in which many Native Americans, including children, framed their relationships with the United States government and White Americans.621

By articulating that they should be more rather than less valued in American society by virtue of their racial identities, children of color indicated the degree to which the national conversation surrounding race and civil rights had shifted by the late 1960s and 1970s. Cassandra, Vernon, and Theresa did not write about integration. Rather, along with the majority of children of color who presented their writings to United States presidents and adults in their own localities during these years, they focused on racial pride and self-worth, arguing that they deserved to be equally represented in the United States. These writers

621 See: Smith and Warrior, Like a Hurricane.
demanded that governmental officials, educators, and other White adults respect their histories and cultures and include such content – along with their languages – in their educational curricula. They fought for their right to equal education, asserting that their access to good education should be ensured no matter how poor they might be. They wanted racism eradicated, particularly when it affected their ability to enjoy a positive and representational education. They communicated these arguments by consistently expressing their pride in who they were. In doing so, they eschewed any acceptance of being simply “integrated” into White America. By contributing to a discourse of racial pride during the debate over equality, children of color made the definition of “civil rights” encompass much more than it had in the 1950s and early 1960s.

**Anti-Desegregation Children Help Change the Meaning of (Race-Based) Civil Rights**

When White children reflected on the meanings of civil rights during the late 1960s and 1970s, they also argued that they had relevant purchase in assurances of equality. In 1968, after the Supreme Court mandated that school systems go further to implement integration than ineffective “freedom of choice” plans, a wave of children claimed that the federal government planned to violate their freedom and rights. Children wrote “but letters” protesting against desegregation and busing plans that listed both nominally non-racial and racially coded reasons for their resistance. The busing debates continued to fit the Black/White paradigm that had dominated battles over integration during previous decades, despite the fact that many cities’ desegregation plans affected Latina/o and Asian American students. Most children’s letters about busing
therefore presented arguments that only mentioned Black and White Americans. Children sent the majority of these letters in the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. Over the course of these years, this body of letter-writers helped force mainstream civil rights discourse to include White Americans, bringing what they and many White adults called “reverse discrimination” to the fore by the end of the 1970s. This group of children participated in the process of divorcing the concepts of civil rights and race, even as children of color engaged in the opposite development.

Many children who wrote to protest against desegregation and busing did not include mention of their racial identities. Some children in previous decades had left this information out of their letters as well, especially when writing to support integration. In such cases, a lack of specification on a child’s racial identity served to underscore all Americans’ common humanity, thereby helping to support that child’s argument in favor of extending freedom and civil rights to Black Americans. (Many White children explicitly used their Whiteness to make the same argument by demonstrating that they, as White Americans, believed in the underlying “sameness” of all people.) In the late 1960s and 1970s, when children left such information out of the letters they wrote to oppose desegregation plans that could cause real and recognizable changes in their lives, they did so in the context of their broader attempts to redefine “civil rights.” These subsumptions of their racial identities served as one way to shift civil rights discourse away from its historical association with racial minorities, especially Black people. This does not mean that all of the children who both opposed
busing and left their race unmentioned were necessarily White. I believe that discerning the racial identity of each individual letter-writer is not the most relevant question to be asked of these sources. Rather, I argue that when they wrote to oppose desegregation, children who explicitly self-identified as White and those who did not identify their race together participated in developing a particular discourse of race-blind civil rights.

In order to justify their positions against desegregation plans that involved significant changes to the racial makeup of student bodies, children relied on formats and arguments from previous decades. Many children produced “but letters,” qualifying their specific protest against desegregation with their support of Black people more generally. Pam, a White eighth-grader from Atlanta, Georgia, asked Nixon on January 8, 1970 to preserve children’s ability to be “free” to choose which school they wanted to attend: “Would you please do something about the school desegregation. It is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard of . . . We have close to six hundred children in our school [and] only six of them are negros. They are free to go to our schools any time they want to and we are free to go to theirs. What I wonder is why do they make us go to a school we do not want to go to.”\(^{622}\) Pam and several of her peers who supported her position by affixing their signatures to the bottom of her letter saw no issue with a “freedom of choice” plan that defined successful integration by the entrance of six Black children into their school. Pam clarified that her and others’ resistance to desegregation did not reflect any prejudicial feelings toward Black

\(^{622}\) Pam and Classmates to Nixon, January 8, 1970, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 11, Folder GEN HU 2-1 Education – Schooling 3.1.70-3.31.70, RMN. See also: Richard to Nixon, [June 22, 1970], RMN.
people among White students: “I do not have one thing against negros and
neither does any one else in our class.”623 This statement allowed Pam to make
desegregation about “freedom” and “convenience” for all students, regardless of
their racial identities. She removed race from her argument entirely.

Jim, a fourteen-year-old White boy from Indianapolis, Indiana, presented
the same argument and format when he wrote a letter to Ford complaining about
his upcoming switch to a school “15 to 20 odd miles into the city” in the summer
of 1975: “Blacks from very far into [the] city will be bused to our public schools. I
can say plainly and truthfully, they don’t want to be bused, and the whites don’t
want them to be bused. It’s not that I am really prejudiced in my thoughts, but I
don’t think this will give the blacks any better of an education.”624 For Jim, if, as
he claimed, busing plans would not improve anyone’s education, then a simple
and time-tested rule should be used to determine which schools American
children attended: “When [my mother] was young, you went to the school you
wanted. Usually the closest one.”625 By making this argument, which ignored
decades of housing segregation particularly endemic to the Midwest in a letter
that also stated the writer’s non-prejudicial worldview, Jim could present
convenience rather than race as the underlying reason for his opposition to
busing plans.

Defenses of “convenience” in “but letters” represented one element of
arguments made by both children and adults who termed desegregation as no

623 Pam to Nixon, January 8, 1970, RMN.
624 Jim to Ford, [Undated by author but White House response sent August 26, 1975], GRF-PP,
WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 7, Folder HU 2-1/ST 1-21 General, GRF.
625 Ibid.
less than violations of their freedom. In his study of nationwide suburban opposition to busing plans, Matthew D. Lassiter describes suburbanites' argumentation as a "novel appropriation of color-blind ideology [that] shaped an identity politics of suburban innocence that defined 'freedom of choice' and 'neighborhood schools' as the core elements of homeowner rights and consumer liberties." Suburbanites framed busing as a policy that threatened their ability to freely choose where they lived and which schools their children attended.

Children contributed to this "appropriation" of race-blind, rights-based rhetoric as well. Robin, a twelve-year-old White girl from Louisville, Kentucky, presented her testimony as a "victim of busing" in another "but letter" sent to Ford in August 1976: "In our own country communism is here. You don’t even have to look hard. I’m [a] victim of busing. Busing is insane. Communism is insane. Telling us we have to go to that school, we have no choice. I’m not against blacks but I’m against busing! I love America I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else. But what kind of country will it be when I grow up and have children? Will government be telling me where to go to church, where I have to live, what kind of career I have to pursue?" Robin connected busing with communism,

\[^{626}\] Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 122-123. For letters that communicated this worldview, especially through their focus on taxpayer dollars and home ownership, see: Janice K. [mother] and Kathy K. [daughter] to Nixon, January 29, 1970, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 11, Folder GEN HU 2-1 Education – Schooling 1.1.70-2.28.70; Liza to Ford, November, 1974 [author did not specify day], GRF-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 7, Folder HU 2-1/ST 1-21 General, GRF.

\[^{627}\] Matthew F. Delmont’s study of desegregation and “busing” argues that the mainstream media aided White parents and politicians in creating widespread opposition to what, in reality, was the implementing of *Brown*. Delmont argues that "busing" was a non-issue that the media and White resisters created that allowed them to prevent desegregation. In reality, racist policies underwrote segregation throughout the nation, and desegregation plans should have been carried out to comply with *Brown*. Delmont, *Why Busing Failed*.

\[^{628}\] Robin to Ford, [Undated by author but postage stamped August 23, 1976], GRF-PP, WHCF, Bulk Mail Sample File, Box A15, Children’s Mail Acknowledged by KO Cards (10), GRF. See also: Steve to Nixon, [Undated by author; forwarded by Sen. James Allen on August 31, 1970,
terming them both “insane.” By tracing this line of association, Robin not only echoed segregationist children who had characterized civil rights activists as communist agitators, but also and more significantly linked busing with a system of government most Americans in the 1970s viewed as suppressive, undemocratic, and totalitarian. Robin then listed a series of things the federal government might next target for intervention if its penchant for control continued to run amok: church, home, and work. Robin claimed that she was not “against blacks.” Instead, she argued that she wanted to ensure that “my children’s, children, [will be] able to say ‘I lived in a free country.’” By framing busing in this manner, children like Robin incorporated arguments that White and Black children had used in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s to describe federal, state, and local governments’ violation of Black Americans’ freedom. Robin instead argued that busing made her a victim of discrimination.

Several other children opposed to busing and desegregation joined Robin in appropriating arguments previously made by civil rights activists. A group of students from George P. Butler High School in Augusta, Georgia, protested to Nixon on February 15, 1972 that a local judge had not only instituted a “massive forced busing plan,” but he had also issued threats and restraining orders against “peaceful” protestors. The students argued that their right to assembly, which civil rights activists had also roundly defended – often to the point of injury and death – during earlier decades, could not be so easily taken away from them. In

RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 12, Folder GEN HU 2-1 Education – Schooling 10.1.70-12.31.70, RMN.
629 Robin to Ford, [August 23, 1976], GRF.
630 George P. Butler High School Student Petition to Nixon, [Undated by author but marked as
September 1975, Philip, a fourteen-year-old “Charlestown boy” from Boston, Massachusetts who did not specify his race, referenced the relationship between citizenship and military service that had resonated among adult and child proponents of integration in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s in his letter to Ford. He indicated that busing undermined his ability to serve: “How can my country expect me to fight for it, when my country’s laws are forcing me to go out of my town for an education[?]” Students from around the nation also argued that busing violated the principle of race-blind, equal education that had been protected first in Brown and then again in the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Given that the 1964 legislation had explicitly stated, first, that: “‘desegregation’ shall not mean the assignment of students to public schools in order to overcome racial imbalance,” and, second, “nothing herein shall empower any official or court of the United States to issue any order seeking to achieve a racial balance in any school by requiring the transportation of pupils or students from one school to another or one school district to another in order to achieve such racial balance,” students opposed to busing could successfully and correctly reference civil rights legislation in support of their cause. Moreover, children who fought against

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received February 15, 1972 by White House staff], RMN, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 16, Folder GEN HU 2-1/ST 1-20 Education – Schooling/Alabama-Maryland 1.1.71-12.31.72, RMN.

631 Philip to Ford, [Undated by author but postage stamped September 15, 1975], GRF-PP, WHCF, Bulk Mail Sample File, Box A10, Children’s Mail Acknowledged by Miscellaneous Enclosures (21), GRF.

632 See: Charleston Heights, South Carolina Students to Nixon, [Undated by author but marked as received March 10, 1970 by White House staff], RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 14, Folder GEN HU 2-1/ST 40 Education – Schooling/South Carolina Beginning-12.31.70, RMN; Kenneth to Nixon, August 30, 1970, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 14, Folder GEN HU 2-1/ST 33 Education – Schooling/North Carolina Beginning-12.31.70, RMN. See also: Lassiter, The Silent Majority, 170.

desegregation wrote against the backdrop of the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations’ open opposition to busing plans, as well as a Supreme Court that extended its approval for busing only in a very limited sense.\textsuperscript{634} In this manner, both the executive and judicial branches of the federal government joined children in shifting conversations about freedom and civil rights away from discrimination against racial minorities during these years.

Beyond characterizing busing plans as civil rights violations, children crafted arguments that brought together a host of more specific reasons for opposition. Children included several justifications that appeared to be non-racial and, by extension, simply “logical.” Stephen, a ten-year-old boy from Denver, Colorado who did not include mention of his race in his letter, told Ford on October 13, 1974 that he planned to “solve” the president’s problems, foremost among these being busing. He explained that he did not “like it,” because: “It wastes fuel. It wastes time. It wastes money, too.”\textsuperscript{635} On September 30, 1975, Lisa, a fourteen-year-old girl from San Antonio, Texas who also did not specify her race, added that in light of the worsening problem of Americans’ limited access to fuel that had begun with the 1973 oil crisis, “with the gas shortage [bussing] is foolish.”\textsuperscript{636} Many children also complained about the distance between their new schools and their neighborhoods and reported their sadness about having to leave their friends behind.\textsuperscript{637}

\textsuperscript{634} Lassiter, \textit{The Silent Majority}, 171, 270, 314-315.
\textsuperscript{635} Stephen to Ford, October 13, 1974, GRF-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 7, Folder HU 2-1/ST 1-21 General, GRF.
\textsuperscript{636} Lisa to Ford, September 30, 1975, GRF-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 14, Folder HU 5 (Ideologies) 10.1.75-10.31.75 General, GRF. See also: Cynthia to Ford, [Undated], GRF-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 7, Folder HU 2-1/ST 1-21 General, GRF.
\textsuperscript{637} See: Robbie to Ford, [Undated by author but postage stamped May 1975], GRF-PP, WHCF,
These arguments about gas and distance obscured the racial and economic advantages that allowed especially upper- and middle-class White Americans access to jobs and housing that provided them with the ability to send their children to “good,” well-funded public schools in predominantly White school districts. At least one child recognized the class component of many busing plans that put the burden of desegregation mainly on Black and lower-income White students. Scholars of this era argue that desegregation plans that did not account for class and suburban housing patterns in addition to race were unable to achieve racial stability because they integrated groups of students who both felt that the nation had consistently ignored their needs in one way or another. On October 9, 1974, Maria, a fifteen-year-old White girl from the mostly middle-class neighborhood of Roslindale in Boston, Massachusetts, wrote to Ford to identify one underlying cause of resistance to busing plans around the nation, including Boston’s: “lower middle class whites were being put together in a desegregation plan with lower-middle-class blacks. The whites are struggling to keep their heads above water financially and living in Boston, with its price of living being so high, hasn’t help much. The blacks claim whites get better educations. This is funny considering amoung other things, Boston’s children are amoung the

BULK MAIL SAMPLE FILE, BOX A15, CHILDREN’S MAIL ACKNOWLEDGED BY KO CARDS (4), GRF; AMY TO FORD, [UNDATED BY AUTHOR BUT POSTAGE STAMPED SEPTEMBER 16, 1976], GRF-PP, WHCF, BULK MAIL SAMPLE FILE, BOX A13, CHILDREN’S MAIL ACKNOWLEDGED BY MISCELLANEOUS ENCLOSURES (42), GRF; LISA TO FORD, SEPTEMBER 30, 1975, GRF.

638 In *The Silent Majority*, Lassiter argues that the failure of busing as a measure for desegregating schools by the mid- to late 1970s could be traced to the nationwide tendency not to institute class-conscious desegregation plans that would have involved consolidated school districts. In his 1991 study of busing in Boston, Ronald P. Formisano makes this argument as well. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*; Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*. 295
poorest readers in the nation.” Maria argued that White children in poor sections of America’s cities also suffered from low-quality education. By focusing on the class-based inequalities also inherent to many local school districts’ implementation plans, Maria underscored one of the major limitations of plans that did include suburban neighborhoods that were also resistant to desegregation.

Many of the explanations that children offered to protest desegregation adapted historically rooted, racist arguments for the busing debate. Like their complaints of empty gas tanks, children presented this evidence as non-racial. They argued that busing plans that introduced larger numbers of Black students into their student bodies would undermine the quality of their education and their safety. This body of letters contributed to the continuation of a centuries-long characterization of Black people as unintelligent, criminally inclined, dangerous, and out-of-control, embedding these claims in seemingly non-racialized defenses of “neighborhood schools.” Several children asserted that school reassignments would jeopardize their scholastic futures. On July 14, 1971, Kathy, a high school senior from Corpus Christi, Texas who did not clarify her racial identity, complained about her city’s planned reshuffling of students. She argued that the school to which she had been assigned did not offer the advanced classes she wanted to take, and she informed Nixon: “If this plan achieves racial balance, I believe it will also cause mass mediocrity.”

Rather than focusing on the

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639 Maria to Ford, October 9, 1974, GRF-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 7, Folder HU 2-1/ST 1-21 General, GRF. On the class characteristics of West Roxbury-Roslindale during this era, see: Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, 130-132.

640 Kathy D. to Nixon, July 14, 1971, RMN, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 16, Folder GEN HU 2-
disproportionate funding that caused the uneven distribution of educational resources across schools located in the same city, Kathy explicitly associated “racial balance” in the form of a more fully integrated student body with academic “mediocrity.” Other students communicated their fear that the hiring of Black teachers alongside the increased exposure to Black children would threaten their ability to obtain a superior education. Beverly, a White schoolchild from Pineville, Louisiana who sent a petition signed by several of her fellow classmates to the White House on February 5, 1970, asked Nixon: “How would you have liked your two girls to have had black teachers in the 1st grade? How would you like your grandchildren to go to a black school? Saying flou instead of flour?” Beverly replicated the strategy of segregationist children who had used interracial hypotheticals targeting the presidents’ children and grandchildren to demand political action in previous decades. In doing so, Beverly referenced racist arguments about purity and White racial superiority in her pointed questions about whether Nixon would prevent the degeneration – in this case, in speech patterns – of White children by protecting White-majority schools.

Children also protested that desegregation plans put them in harm’s way. Many of these children complained about fights between Black and White students, which, especially in school districts that instituted plans without accounting for class- and race-based animosity, certainly occurred. At the

1/ST 41-45 Education – Schooling/South Dakota-Vermont 1.1.71-12.31.72, RMN. See also: Cynthia to Ford, [Undated], GRF.
641 Beverly to Nixon, February 5, 1970, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 11, Folder GEN HU 2-1 Education – Schooling 1.1.70-2.28.70, RMN.
642 For a description of the situation in Boston, for example, which reported high racial tension and many violent incidents, see: Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, 116-115, 170.
same time, like many characterizations of urban uprisings in the late 1960s, children’s descriptions of violence in schools did not differentiate between participants and non-participants, nor did they consider rational explanations for racial tension. In September 1976, Amy, a sixth-grader from Dearborn, Michigan who left her race unmentioned, explained to Ford why she missed her old school: “Nobody had enemies, all very good friends to each other. Nobody beat up nobody.”

In January 1972, Debi, a White senior at Robert E. Lee High School in Tyler, Texas who described herself as a “non prejudiced person. I have nothing against black people!,” sent a letter to Texas Representative Ray Roberts that delved into the problem of school violence with much more detail. Debi asked for Roberts’s intervention to prevent a forced change in the school’s mascot and song: the “Rebels” and “Dixie.” Debi reported that a “fight which was tagged with the word ‘Riot’” led by Black students had encouraged school administrators to institute changes in the school’s “Rebel” culture. She mourned the loss of her school’s “spirit,” terming it a reward of Black students’ violence: “But the problem is this: These blacks have violently fought. They burned a huge sign taped to the side of our school. They beat up badly several students. I don’t know if any blacks were hurt. The thing is, they are getting what they want by violence . . . You see, if a criminal commits an act of violence he is not given his way, but instead punished. When we allow these students to fight and hurt and

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643 Amy to Ford, [September 16, 1976], GRF.
644 Debi to Representative Ray Roberts forwarded to Nixon, [Undated by author; forwarded by Rep. Roberts January 21, 1972], RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 16, Folder GEN HU 2-1/ST 41-45 Education – Schooling/South Dakota-Vermont 1.1.71-12.31.72, RMN.
then allow them to get what they want, we are destroying our nation.”645 By complaining about the apparent lack of punishment meted out to Black students, Debi referenced the supposed racial double standard of justice that many White children had also incorporated in the messages of frustrations they sent in response to urban uprisings. Debi provided a blanket descriptor of all Black students at her school (“these blacks”) and refused to countenance the possibility that the Confederate-based school spirit she defended might have motivated some of the violent interactions she described.

Debi’s letter reflected many White Americans’ failure to reckon with the United States’ history of racism and discrimination. This, in turn, allowed adults and children like Debi to justify their positions in the debate over desegregation as “non-prejudiced.” Debi explicitly recognized that “these blacks are facing history.” She then added a statement that underscored the limits of at least some White children’s understanding of the depth of that history: “but they are not the only ones. What about the French and the Irish and the Jewish? They all face history – we all do, yet we don’t let it destroy our minds, as these few have done!”646 By including this line, Debi ignored the unique history of enslavement, Jim Crow segregation, racial violence, and unremitting political, social, and economic inequalities experienced by Black Americans, which did not parallel other immigrant and religious groups’ trajectories of discrimination followed by assimilation into White America.647 She used this historical erasure to support her racist representation of Black Americans as a group whose “destroyed” mindset

645 Ibid.
646 Ibid.
647 See: Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color.
had apparently fostered an out-of-control, violent tendency that had manifested among the Black students at Debi’s school.

Several children confessed that fear of Black violence undergirded their main opposition to desegregation. David, a fourteen-year-old White boy from East Islip, New York, explained to Nixon on March 20, 1972 that while he “got along fine with [Black people], and liked them, as friends,” he remained opposed to a plan to integrate with the majority-Black and Puerto Rican schools in neighboring Central Islip. He clarified: “the kids in Central Islip have a reputation, and it isn’t prejudice or discrimination, but just plain fear that makes me, and a lot of the kids in this district be opposed to busing, in regard to being bused there, or having them bused here. This is why I think that if they belong in our district, and we in theirs, we would be living there already. After all, despite the American way of thinking, two towns can be as far apart as countries in their thinking.”

David’s ambiguous invocation of Central Islip students’ “reputation,” which inspired “just plain fear,” invited his reader to view the Black and Puerto Rican students with whom David did not want to integrate as dangerous and possibly criminal. David therefore asked the president, as had several generations of White children before him, to protect him from the threat posed by Black children entering his schools. As such, David’s letter contributed to a decades-old racist argument that associated Black Americans with crime and used that association

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648 David C. to Nixon, March 20, 1972, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 12, Folder GEN HU 2-1 Education – Schooling 4.1.72-4.13.72, RMN.
649 See also: Gillian Frank, “The Colour of the Unborn: Anti-Abortion and Anti-Bussing Politics in Michigan, United States, 1967-1973,” Gender & History 26, no. 2 (August 2014): 351-378. Frank argues that White residents of Detroit framed both the issues of busing and abortion as “assaults on children and the white family” (Frank 357).
to justify limitations on Black people’s access to civil rights.⁶⁵⁰ On October 9, 1975, Julie, a White teenager from Miami, Florida, added to this argumentation by transcribing her belief that: “Dear God you can’t go into a black section alone or without a gun it is so that bad everywhere.”⁶⁵¹ In light of this fear, Julie claimed: “The black and white situation is getting unbelievable all over the country. The blacks are rising up against the whites even when we give them an equal chance, what are we supposed to do be run out [of] our country or to be enslaved by them. We have learned from the mistake our Fore Fathers made and we will never forget them, but they take it too far.”⁶⁵² Both David and Julie used descriptions of Black people (and, in David’s case, Puerto Ricans) as dangerous to advocate for what they presented as non-prejudicial, non-racialized equality, nominally removing race from racist descriptions of Black people that allowed for continued resistance to expansions in civil rights for Americans of color in the late 1960s and 1970s.

**Alternative Positions in the Busing Debate**

Even as the majority of children who wrote to Nixon, Ford, and other political leaders in response to busing did so to communicate their opposition, a few children sent letters to voice their approval of their newly integrated schools. These children told the presidents that while they had been apprehensive about

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⁶⁵⁰ See: Muhammad, *Condemnation of Blackness*. For an addition element of this discourse connecting Black students with drugs, see: Willis to Nixon, October 9, 1969, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 14, Folder GEN HU 2-1/ST 10 Education – Schooling/Georgia Beginning-12.31.70, RMN; Debi to Roberts, forwarded to Nixon, [January 21, 1972], RMN.

⁶⁵¹ Julie to Ford, October 9, 1975, GRF-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 4, Folder HU 2 6.1.75-10.31.75 General, GRF.

⁶⁵² Ibid.
busing, they now “liked” their new schools.\textsuperscript{653} In March 1972, Ellen, a White seventh-grader from Tampa, Florida, explained to Nixon that her diverse school environment had allowed her to make more friends and gain a better education: “I have made so many friends both black and white, that school has become really great! We are at school the majority of the day and have time to associate with others and I feel our school is one of the best. I truly feel sorry for the children who go to private school and are missing out on this wonderful experience.”\textsuperscript{654} Bonnie, a sixteen-year-old from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district that had been the plaintiff in the Supreme Court’s controversial – though tepid – sanction of busing plans in their \textit{Swann v. Charlotte Mecklenburg} decision (1971), reported to Nixon in November 1971 that a feeling of interracial “unity” had spread among her classmates.\textsuperscript{655} A class of newly bused Black and White sixth-graders from Oliver Wendell Holmes Middle School in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts sent a booklet of essays to President Ford after the completion of the 1974-75 school year. They related that while they had been “afraid” at the beginning of the year, and some had even been

\textsuperscript{653} See, for example: Andrea to Nixon, January 21, 1971, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 7, Folder GEN HU 2 Equality 1.1.71-8.31.71, RMN; Cathy to Nixon, November 17, 1971, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 12, Folder GEN HU 2-1 Education – Schooling 1.1.72-3.31.72, RMN.

\textsuperscript{654} Ellen to Nixon, [Undated by author but White House response sent March 9, 1972], RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 16, Folder GEN HU 2-1/ST 1-20 Education – Schooling/Alabama-Maryland 1.1.71-12.31.72, RMN.

\textsuperscript{655} Bonnie to Nixon, [Undated by author but White House response sent November 30, 1971], RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 7, Folder GEN HU 2 Equality 9.1.71-12.31.71, RMN. See Lassiter, \textit{The Silent Majority}, 173, for a description of the 1971 school year and the “love-ins” the students sponsored. Note also that the \textit{Swann} decision approved Charlotte’s plan, but did so in a compromise opinion that provided many school districts around the nation with mixed messages and opened the door for appeals. While the Court “approved busing as a remedial tool,” it also argued that distance, time-of-travel, and “reasonableness” needed to be taken into account when instituting such plans. These limits anticipated the much greater blow that would come with \textit{Milliken} in 1974. Lassiter, \textit{The Silent Majority}, 171.
“stoned” at one point or another, in the end, they felt that “it was not bad at all and [we] made friends.”656 One student described his experience as “one of the best school years I ever had.”657 Several students wrote stories of overcoming initial prejudices to form interracial friendships.658 While a few children also mentioned their plans to withdraw to parochial schools in the upcoming year, most children indicated that they would willingly and happily continue to attend their integrated middle school.659 The Supreme Court would render busing plans essentially ineffective as methods of desegregation after 1974, leading to worsening segregation patterns across much of the United States by the end of the twentieth century. These children’s writings about the positive possibilities of meaningfully integrated school systems reflected the brief existence of an alternative (if still flawed) path for developing more racially equitable worldviews among American children in public schools.660

While some White and Black students enjoyed the recalibrated schools created by busing plans, these students’ expressions represented the minority standpoint. As we have seen, many White children and children who did not specify their race communicated their unqualified disapproval of desegregation. On April 21, 1972, James, a Black eighth-grader from Pearl, a section of

659 Madeline, “An essay by Madeline,” in Integration,” 54, GRF.
Jackson, Mississippi, joined schoolchildren nationwide in asking Nixon to reverse his school district’s busing policy. James did not write about the distance between his neighborhood and his school, or gas, or fear that his fellow students would cause him bodily harm. Instead, he discussed the psychological damage wrought by the closure of his majority-Black school, in which Black teachers and peers had surrounded him, followed by his entrance into an institution where he and other Black children faced the racist attitudes of White teachers:

We the Black people at Pearl School originally an all white School would like for you to consider the Busing Bill Very seriously. We are not prejudice we would just like to return to our own schools. Some of the teachers at pearl are prejudice, but you will find those kind all over the United States, but at the our schools we weren’t faced with that kind of problem. I know you would say this is a cop out out if that’s the way it looks thats the way it has too be. Many of the black students are losing their identity the little identity they had found we are just sinking into a shell of hate, fear and being pushed around.

Due to the combination of the departure from a place where they had felt represented with the barrage of racial prejudice at their new school, James argued that he and the rest of the Black students at Pearl were in danger of “losing” their “identities.” James asserted that Black children had begun to protect themselves from discrimination by creating a “shell” of “hate” and “fear.” James explained that Black students living in the 1970s would no longer accept this kind of life, inscribing a message of racial pride similar to that written by many other children of color during these years:

Black student are not satisfied with just being in existence they want to be recognized too not over shadowed by white all the time Black men and women are moving up in this white world but I dont have to tell you this, because it’s plainly written in every man’s face

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662 Unsigned [James], sent with cover letter from Kathleen Gentry, Student-Teacher, to Nixon, April 21, 1972, RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 16, Folder GEN HU 2-1/ST 21-40 Education – Schooling/Massachusetts-South Carolina 1.1.71-12.31.72, RMN.
James did not mince words. The “Black man [was] closing in” in all fields, he claimed, and he predicted a day when a Black American would occupy Nixon’s office at the White House. James’s letter repeated themes from the body of writing created by the majority of children of color who presented their work to the White House or other adults in their communities during this decade. He identified and repudiated racism, explaining that he and other Black children would not tolerate it in their schools. He argued that representational education provided children of color with a space to positively foster their identities and leave their “shells” behind. Finally, he articulated his belief in Black Americans’ strengths, creativity, and ability to succeed in whichever endeavor they pursued, including the highest political office in the nation. James’s choice to write about busing in this manner not only underscored the wider meanings of race and civil rights for children of color by the late 1960s and 1970s, but also demonstrated the complexity of desegregation for Black students. The burden of busing was disproportionately placed on Black children who were forced to leave their schools and enter often-underfunded institutions unprepared to provide an equal education to every student who walked through the doors.

**New Definitions of Equality and Discrimination At Play**

As Americans grappled with the busing in the late 1960s and 1970s, debates among both adults and children over desegregation contributed to the
evolution of mainstream perceptions of “civil rights” and who deserved them. As in James’s case, opinions against busing could add to a developing discourse advocating for rights through racial representation and pride for children of color across the United States. Many White children and children who did not identity their race also claimed that their rights and freedom needed to be preserved. They composed their arguments against busing by appropriating the rights-based rhetoric of civil rights activists while also writing racist arguments embedded in purportedly race-blind defenses of equality and freedom. They also helped to introduce a paradox that would be more fully realized as children began to write about “reverse discrimination” in the late 1970s.

This paradox lay in children’s desire for White Americans to be explicitly included under the umbrella of civil rights, even as they also sought to remove race from discussions of civil rights entirely. In January 1978, a high school teacher from Pleasant Hill, California gave his class of twelfth-grade government students a final exam that asked them to write a letter to the president about the most pressing issues the nation faced. The teacher then sent the exam responses to the Carter White House. Children chose to write about a variety of problems, including welfare, control of the Panama Canal, and immigration laws. Two students picked the fight over affirmative action then before the Supreme Court in the case Regents of the University of California v. Bakke. In January 1978, the Court had not yet released its decision; later that year, a divided group of justices ruled that while race could be one of many factors in college admission, specific racial quotas were unconstitutional. At the time they wrote
their exams, the students did not know how the Court would respond to *Bakke*, and they used the period of suspension to weigh in. Neither specified their race. One argued that middle-class students should receive a scholarship that enabled them to attend college alongside upper-class students who could pay for it and lower-income students who had access to financial aid.⁶⁶⁴ The other, Linda, delved deeper, articulating both that White Americans also deserved rights and that race did not – or should not – matter in the United States:

Reverse discrimination can be just as bad as discrimination against minorities. Bakke is a good example of reverse discrimination. I believe that the problem of discrimination must be solved, but quota systems are not the answer. When quota systems are used, minorities have a better chance to get into some jobs or schools but they will go into the field before someone who might be better qualified. Everyone should have the same chance to get into jobs or schools. Minorities have the same chances for education as majors do. Minorities have the same opportunities to get into schools and take the same classes. The solution of solving discrimination has to change. The system we have is not fair. Why can’t people respect all others, whether they are black, white, chicano, or women? If everyone was created equal, why do we have discrimination? All people are not as smart as everyone else, but everyone should have the same chances to get an education. After all, this is a free country where everyone is equal. Why not prove it?⁶⁶⁵

Linda’s argument against racially aware hiring and college admission practices depended on the premise of an equal society. As demonstrated by reviewing, for example, the writings and letters of children of color from the late 1960s and 1970s, a society free from racism, racially disproportionate poverty, and discrimination did not yet exist during these years. Linda’s claim that “minorities have the same opportunities” in their educations and careers ignored the importance of multi-generational access to jobs, education, and wealth that provided many White Americans with a network of connections and capital that most Americans of color did not have. By creating the fiction of an equal

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⁶⁶⁴ Final Exam Response, Lenore, January 1978, JC-PP, WHCF, Name File, WHOA, OA 3744, JCL.
⁶⁶⁵ Final Exam Response, Linda, January 1978, JC-PP, WHCF, Name File, WHOA, OA 3744, JCL.
America, Linda could claim that “reverse discrimination” against White Americans in the form of race-conscious decision-making regarding jobs or education violated a core American principle: “all men are created equal.” She presented two key and interrelated arguments. First, everyone, “whether they are black, white, chicano, or women,” deserved civil rights. Second, in order to “prove” the truth of the first argument (“this is a free country where everyone is equal”), race needed to be discounted. Linda’s exam answer therefore reflected the culmination of a discourse that demanded the application of “equality” to all Americans, including White people, by disentangling a decades-old rhetorical connection between race and civil rights.

This discourse relied on postwar antecedents that predated the busing debate. Segregationist children had framed school integration as an assault on their rights for decades. When White children responded to urban uprisings in the late 1960s by identifying a racial double standard for crime and punishment, they, too, had argued that federal, state, and local government officials had engaged in a violation of White Americans’ rights. As children participated in conversations about busing, they incorporated many of the same formats and racist arguments that children had presented in letters written in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. In addition, between the late 1960s and the 1970s, children more fully articulated the claim that in order to be a racially equal society, the United States needed to protect White Americans (alongside everyone else) by removing race from its policy choices. In order for everyone to “get” civil rights, they argued that no one could be judged on the basis of race, even if that judgment served as reparation
for past racist wrongs.

This race-blind, pro-rights position did not apply solely to relationships between White and Black Americans, despite the fact that most discussions of busing had echoed integration debates from previous years in focusing on that racial division. Linda included “chicanos” in her list of supposedly equal Americans who should also be treated equally with respect to affirmative action. Children’s charges of “reverse discrimination” against White citizens often reflected the racial makeup of the region in which that child lived. In May 1975, Shelly, a twelve-year-old White girl from Wolf Point, Montana, expressed to Ford that she wanted both White people and Native Americans to receive equal rights:

I’m concerned about us, the whites! The indians are taking over this country! They get almost everything free, free housing, no taxes, they don’t even have to pay for [licenses]. And what do we get out of the deal? Just that we have to pay for these luxuries we have to pay most of our money to taxes and government stuff. I think you should know we are not all rich like you people. We are just common normal people that pay most of our money on taxes. You said there should be [equal] rights? I agree 100% so the whiteman can have free housing and ect. They say ‘The poor indians.’ What about us the whites?666

Shelly erroneously believed that Native Americans did not pay taxes and received housing and other public services for “free.” This misconception almost certainly derived from the existence of several federal and state tax exemptions for Native Americans related to reservation land and the income and transactions made on that land, which did not preclude Native Americans from paying all of the other forms of taxes levied by federal, state, and local governments.667

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666 Shelly to Ford, [Undated by author but postage stamped May 1, 1975], GRF-PP, WHCF, Bulk Mail Sample File, Box A15, Children’s Mail Acknowledged by KO Cards (3), GRF.

667 The Bureau of Indian Affairs lists under its section of frequently asked questions the following information: “Do American Indians and Alaska Natives pay taxes? Yes. They pay the same taxes as other citizens with the following exceptions: Federal income taxes are not levied on income from trust lands held for them by the U.S. State income taxes are not paid on income earned on a federal Indian reservation. State sales taxes are not paid by Indians on transactions made on a
Regardless of the degree of exception, Shelly likely would have termed any difference in tax policy relative to White and Native Americans in the same way as Linda described affirmative action: unequal. By ignoring the long history of violent oppression endured by Native Americans in the United States and persistent poverty and ongoing discrimination, Shelly was able to join Linda and other children arguing for race-blind civil rights in demanding that the president eradicate what she viewed as special privileges afforded to Americans of color. Shelly also argued that White Americans, many of whom were themselves poor, paid for those privileges. Shelly opposed any policy that factored in race, contending that such policy was inherently biased and anti-rights. Because children grounded these arguments in the premise that the United States had successfully achieved racial equality, their positions depended on their ignorance of the consequences of historical and contemporary American racism.

As Shelly and Linda's writings demonstrated, many American children remained unaware of the realities of racial inequality during this time period. While the public nature of the Civil Rights Movement in the early and mid-1960s had forced children nationwide to reckon with racial violence, many White children did so by identifying racial violence and conflict as isolated to the South. When urban uprisings occurred in cities in the North and West in the later part of the decade, most children did not view the events as civil rights crises. By the 1970s, children's exposure to the problem of racial discrimination in the United States – exemplified in part by the writings children of color produced during

_[federal Indian reservation. Local property taxes are not paid on reservation or trust land.](http://www.bia.gov/FAQs/) See: U.S Department of the Interior: Indian Affairs, “Frequently Asked Questions,”]
these years – had been left incomplete. Even when children acknowledged the existence of racial tension between various racial groups in America, they repeated the limited solutions offered by White children in decades past. Mary, a fifteen-year-old girl from Wyandanch, Long Island who did not indicate her race, told Ford in January 1975 that she wanted to increase American patriotism and unity by instituting a campaign to pick up litter and “a ‘color-blindness’ month where people would just plain be nice to white people, black people, yellow people, red people, and blue people.” Mary reiterated the rainbowesque references that had been in circulation among White children since the 1940s, using the color-based framework to define racial identities as dismissible. In a statement that equated racial conflict with litter, she also suggested that a month-

668 A few children wrote exceptional letters that proved the rule. Caroline, an eleven-year-old White girl from Chicago, Illinois, told Ford in October 1974 that she wanted her mayor to institute policies that gave Black and Puerto Rican Americans access to the same “privileges” as White people, including jobs and housing. Caroline to Ford, [Undated by author but White House response sent November 1, 1974], GRF-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 4, Folder HU 2 10.1.74-11.20.74 General, GRF. See also: Michael to Robert F. Kennedy, March 12, 1968, Robert F. Kennedy Senate Papers, Series – Senate Correspondence Subject File, 1968, Box 35, Folder – Public Activities, Children’s Letters, 3.1968-4.1968, JFK; Kim to Nixon, [Undated by author but marked as received July 31, 1969 by White House staff], RMN-PM, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 6, Folder GEN HU 2 Equality 8.1.69-8.31.69, RMN.

669 Mary to Ford, [Undated by author but White House response sent February 27, 1975], GRF-PP, WHCF, Subject File, HU, Box 13, Folder HU 5 (Ideologies) 2/12/75-3/31/75 General, GRF. For another example of this type of discourse, consider the example of the rural Wisconsin town of Stevens Point, which sponsored a Brotherhood Week celebration and letter-writing campaign to President Carter in February 1977. Many students responded with sentiments that echoed Mary’s, helping to reveal the limits of many American children’s understandings of race and ongoing racial conflict during these years. While several students discussed the need for Americans of color to be granted equal rights, many children argued that simple kindness and good manners could suffice as solutions. One child told Carter that “exchange programs” between rural and urban areas could help, suggesting the possibility that at least some children recognized the deeper causes of racial conflict. Another acknowledged that: “to some people the race really means a lot.” One student who confessed that he did not see many people of color in his town had watched Roots and believed that “blacks have been treated badly.” These children represented the minority position. Many other students interpreted brotherhood as not about race at all, arguing that Carter needed to ensure that people helped the elderly or handicapped, promoted global goodwill, or listened to their parents and teachers. Stevens Point Wisconsin Schoolchildren (Fifth and Sixth Grades) to Carter, [February 1977], JC-PP, WHCF, Name File, WHOA, OA 454, Folders 1 and 2 of 2, JCL.
long period of encouraging people not to see “color” and to be “just plain nice” could act as a viable fix for the nation’s racial problems. Mary shared her vision of a “color-blind” country in a tone of hope and with a desire to improve the world around her. But niceness alone could not solve that which children of color identified as most relevant to their lives during these years: insufficient racial representation, racism, disproportionate poverty, and equal access to quality education. Mary suggested that the best method for solving the United States’ enduring and deep-set racial inequality was for Americans to ignore race – to be blind to it. Simultaneously, many children of color argued throughout the late 1960s and 1970s that only when Americans respected and politically, socially, economically, and culturally included their racial identities in the weft and warp of the nation would they have attained civil rights and equality. As such, Mary’s letter underscored the sharp divergence in perceptions of race and civil rights that had developed among American children by the 1970s.

Between the late 1960s and the end of the 1970s, American children participated in both expanding and limiting the definition of “civil rights” with respect to race. During this time period, many different groups of Americans engaged in protests that demanded public recognition that their civil rights had been violated. In this sense, Black, Red, Brown, and Yellow Power Movements should be understood as having occurred in tandem with White Americans’ resistance to desegregation and busing. Each group of protestors sought to broaden mainstream perceptions of civil rights by refocusing attention on the particular concerns of their communities by using the rights-based rhetoric of the
1950s- and 1960s-era Civil Rights Movement. People of color involved in race-consciousness movements also argued that fully granting civil rights to all Americans involved making tighter connections between those rights and racial identity. Simultaneously, many White Americans nationwide articulated a race-blind vision of civil rights, asserting that race-conscious policies constituted racism. They argued that the best way for Americans to move past racism and racial conflict was not to “see” race at all. While various protestors together answered “everyone” to the question “who gets civil rights,” their perceptions of those rights did not match up.

While most of the children whose writings I analyze in this chapter did not identify themselves as participants in these movements, this assembly of young writers nonetheless contributed to these evolving national discourses. Children of color wrote letters, poems, essays, and speeches, conducted and transcribed interviews in their communities, led walkouts, and sent documents full of racial pride and celebration to the White House and to other adults concerned with civil rights. They advocated for their rights to live in a country free from racism that offered them access to racial representation in their educations and daily lives. They also recognized the connection between race and poverty, and they asked their political leaders to create racially equitable solutions for racially driven income inequality by giving them access to quality public services, especially education. During the same years, White children and children who did not identify their race framed busing and, later, affirmative action as violations of their rights and freedom. They founded their arguments on the assumption that the
United States had achieved racial equality by the late 1960s and 1970s. The only threat to that equality, they contended, were policies that factored in race and thereby discriminated against White Americans. Much of this advocacy for race-blind equal rights incorporated long-standing racist arguments about people of color. Children used implications of racial differences in intelligence, proclivity for crime and violence, entitlement, and an overall inability to control oneself to demand that political leaders defend majority-White schools.

Throughout the decade, many children of color argued that they deserved to have access to the histories of their people. By the late 1970s, children who either identified themselves as White or who did not clarify their race at all revealed their own lack of familiarity with the history of the United States’ violent exploitation of people of color in the United States. Their ignorance of that history and its consequences made ongoing racism and racial inequality appear disconnected from race, just as racial solutions seemed illogical and even racist. If they acknowledged that racial tension still existed in the United States by the mid- to late 1970s, these children expressed that the obvious solution was to remove the main source of tension – race itself. Not only did this fail to recognize the centrality of race to the identities of Americans of color, including children, but it also misidentified race rather than discrimination as the root of racial conflict. The divergence that had developed by the late 1970s between children who argued for the positive possibilities of “color-blindness” and children of color who fought against the loss of their “identities” would only grow sharper in the next decade as the positions of American children crystalized in opposition to one
another.

Shortly after Ronald Reagan’s inauguration in January 1981, hundreds of middle schoolers in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Central Brooklyn participated in a letter-writing campaign to the new president.\footnote{School District #17, Brooklyn, New York City Schoolchildren to Ronald Reagan (Reagan), January-February 1981, Ronald Reagan Presidential Records, 1981-1989 (RR-PR), White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Boxes 9-12, Folders 1-48, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California, (hereafter referred to as RRL). Black children had lobbied presidents on the issue of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in previous decades as well, beginning immediately after Dr. King’s assassination in April 1968. See: West Philadelphia High School Students to Johnson, April 16-17, 1968, LBJ-PP, WHCF, WHOA, Numbered, Box 343, OA 2178, LBJ.} The students, most of whom were Black, Latina/o, or Afro-Caribbean, wanted Reagan to support the institution of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day as a national holiday. Their letters repeated many of the same arguments a young Black girl named Margaret had presented to President Truman in her July 4, 1948 plea for the promotion of Emancipation Day almost four decades earlier. The children noted that no holiday appeared on the calendar for the celebration of Black people or a Black person’s accomplishments. They argued that if Americans could honor George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and even Christopher Columbus with a day set aside for rest and reflection, then Dr. King, who had given his life in service of equality, kindness, and justice, certainly merited such recognition. Several children told Reagan that while prejudice had not been eradicated in the United States, the act of making Martin Luther King Day a reality could provide a step in the right direction. Many children also added their critiques of the new president, especially deriding his planned policies (such as cuts to welfare) to address
poverty. One student, Renee, informed Reagan: “I know that you don’t like Black people but that is alright with me. Because I am colored and I am proud.”

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Americans developed and embraced divergent discourses for discussing race and civil rights. Many White Americans, including Reagan, asserted that racial inequality in the United States had been largely if not entirely solved. They argued that the federal government had gone too far and had overstepped its authority on civil rights in previous decades. As such, Reagan and officials in his administration declared that the nation’s primary civil rights objective for the decade lay in eradicating the racial prejudice they presented as inherent to race-conscious affirmative action policies. They framed such pursuits as adherence to the “colorblind” intentions of the authors of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. William Bradford Reynolds, Reagan’s Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights in the Department of Justice, articulated this standpoint in an anti-affirmative action testimony before Congress in 1981: “The colorblind ideal of equal opportunity for all that guided the framers of the Constitution and the drafters of title VII [of the 1964 Civil Rights Act] holds greatest promise of lifting the incubus of race, national origin, and sex discrimination from the Nation, and of realizing the proclamation of equality in the Declaration of Independence.”

Arguments about

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671 Renee to Reagan, February 4, 1981, School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 10, Folder 19, RRL.
the realization of racial equality and the benefits of colorblind, “merit”-based policy rested on two simultaneous developments: the visible growth of the Black middle class alongside the decline among most Americans of overt racist sentiment expressed through the support of White supremacy or segregationist policies. A professed belief in the achievement of racial equality in America ignored persistent inequality in disproportionate levels of poverty, political representation, access to quality education or housing, and rising rates of incarceration among Americans of color versus White people. Over the course of the decade and into the early 1990s, Reagan and George H.W. Bush slashed the budgets of a variety of federal programs that combatted civil rights violations or assisted poor citizens, greatly exacerbating these issues. Amidst these shifts, sometimes in direct response to racially inequitable political policies, many Americans of color continued to draw attention to the ways in which race played a central role in their lives. Children also participated in these debates by writing letters to their presidents, elected officials, and other adults familiar with questions of race and civil rights. This chapter uses these letters and other examples of children’s writings to illustrate children’s role in helping to develop two opposing racial discourses between 1980 and the early 1990s: one in which

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race was minimized and even erased, and one that recognized race as a defining feature of Americans’ lives and identities.

During these years, many Americans, children included, continued the 1970s-era subsumption of race as a relevant aspect of civil rights conversations. Moreover, given that busing and integration had receded as prominent national issues by the 1980s, many children wrote about civil rights entirely in the past tense. The archives that eventually housed children’s letters from these years reflected these trends. In their co-authored study of the twin developments of the fields of history and archival record-keeping, historian Francis X. Blouin Jr. and archivist William G. Rosenberg note: “archival records, as well as archives themselves, are produced from culturally embedded expectations and conventions.” They add that reading “against this ‘grain’ of the archive” requires consideration of what the archive may hide as much as what it reveals. Unlike children’s letters to presidents on race and civil rights from previous decades, most of which were slotted into various “Civil Rights” or “Human Rights” records at the White House and then in presidential libraries, children’s civil rights letters during the Reagan and Bush administrations generally ended up either in the overarching “Alpha/Name” file (for all correspondents belonging to the general public) or in folders labeled “Public Relations, Children, Requests to the President.” In addition to this archival “hunt” for hidden sources, the letters yielded by these archives require specific scrutiny. An analysis of children’s letters from these years demands attention to what was written and

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I argue that one of the key aspects of the discourse of racial minimization and erasure to which children contributed in the 1980s and early 1990s was the existence of several absences in many children’s letters – of their racial identities, of race itself in discussions of welfare, busing, or drugs, of awareness regarding ongoing racial inequality, and even of racist arguments so prevalent in previous decades.

When White children and children who did not mention their racial identities reflected on race-based civil rights during this decade, they generally identified inequality as a problem from past historical eras. A few children did acknowledge that racial prejudice still existed in the 1980s and early 1990s; however, they did not offer solutions beyond their expressed belief that all people were the “same.” This continued emphasis on racial sameness and the moral (rather than political or economic) imperatives of an anti-prejudice position indicated the extent to which the movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s left much unchanged by the end of the twentieth century. When this group of children wrote about national conflicts that were inherently about race, such as welfare, busing, and drugs, they rarely included any racially motivated reasoning for their particular positions. They instead presented “common-sense” arguments that contributed to the persistence of racial inequality by celebrating the government-sponsored “War on Drugs” that would incarcerate hundreds of

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677 See: Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). Stoler argues that one aspect of her attention to the “grain” of colonial archives and the sources written by colonial agents in Indonesia in the nineteenth century was to examine that which was “unwritten” because it could go without saying” (Stoler 3). I find this approach applicable in considering how children framed their discussions of race and civil rights between 1980 and 1991, especially in terms of the decisions they made about leaving race “unwritten.”
thousands of men and women of color. They also wrote about what they presented as the illogic of giving welfare to “lazy” people or wasting gas in order to bus children across town. As localities around the United States increasingly found ways to avoid desegregating their public schools, busing declined as an issue among children during these years (only one class of students wrote about it). Racist arguments about Black people’s criminality and lack of control or intelligence also disappeared from children’s letters. It seemed that as the threat of integration vanished from the national consciousness, so too did the necessity of constructing arguments against interactions between White children and children of color. By the beginning of the 1990s, these children had assisted in writing race out of the American present even as racism and racial inequality endured.

In contrast, children of color continued to highlight the connection between race and civil rights made so forcefully in children’s writings during the late 1960s and 1970s. They wrote letters and presented their essays, poems, and stories to successive presidents and first ladies and reached out to adults who shared their racial identities. Much of the content echoed the previous decade as well. These children generally focused on three, sometimes-intersecting subjects: the ways in which poverty affected their lives and education; their frustration with ongoing racism in the United States; and the importance and “specialness” of their racial

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678 It should be noted that I could not perform an exhaustive and comprehensive search of every location in the archive where children might have discussed busing in letters housed at the Reagan or H.W. Bush libraries. In the collections I surveyed, I found only one class that wrote about busing, in contrast to multiple children’s letters contained in collections at both the Nixon and Ford libraries. Due to the complexity of these archives, more research would be necessary in order to make a better comparative assessment.
identities. When they discussed their racial identities, many children showed their appreciation of their people’s histories, cultures, and languages. Some children of color reproduced arguments about racial sameness to advocate for racial equality. Even so, children of color disputed a major facet of the mainstream racial discourse of the time period: race – and inequality – existed beyond the pages of American history textbooks.

**Writing Race Out of the Narrative**

After a majority of American voters elected Ronald Reagan to be President of the United States in November 1980, Derek, a “little boy” from St. Louis, Missouri who did not specify his race, wrote to the president-elect to congratulate him on his win. He expressed his support for Reagan and his planned “changes” for the nation: “I know in January when you take office you’ll make some big and important changes. I’m glad because we need some changes.”679 He also shared his confusion regarding the way in which Black students at his school had responded to the recent election: “one thing I don’t understand is the black people at school say you’re going to ship them to Africa. They also say the school is going to be blown up that day.”680 Derek’s letter revealed both that Black children recognized the threat the new president represented to the civil rights gains of the previous two decades, and that Derek, who was presumably White, did not understand this fear. The spoken protest made by Black students at Derek’s school was rooted in history. The children

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679 Derek to Reagan, [Undated by author but White House response sent March 4, 1981, so likely sent before inauguration], RR-PR, White House Office of Records Management (WHORM) Subject File, Public Relations (PR), PR 14-1, Box 6, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from, (008000-009999), #009931, RRL.

680 Ibid.
used a familiar racist phrase, “go back to Africa,” to encapsulate American racism, and, as had other Black children in the 1950s and 1960s, repurposed it by threatening retribution and resistance to any abrogation of their rights as Black Americans. Derek’s inability to “understand” the motivations behind this protest underscored one of the major elements of the racial discourse circulated by White children and children who did not clarify their racial identities during these years. Derek and children like him exhibited a lack of awareness regarding the depth and breath of racial inequality in the United States, both in its past and especially its present iterations.

Even when educators exposed children in majority-White schools to materials aimed at increasing the students’ knowledge of the history of American racial conflict, many children responded with a limited understanding of the sources and their broader implications. In December 1982, Susan Jaffke, a sixth-grade teacher of literature at Homer Junior High School in Lockport, Illinois, wrote a letter of introduction for her students to John Henrik Clarke, a Black author, activist, and professor of Black and Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College in New York City. Jaffke’s class had been studying Black literature and had read Clarke’s short story, “The Boy Who Painted Christ Black.” The story was about a young Black student, Aaron Crawford, who depicted Jesus Christ as a Black man in a painting for his teacher. When the school’s White superintendent responded in outrage that “Christ was [not] a N—r!,” the young boy’s principal, also a Black man, defended Aaron’s artistic choice. The fictional account was based in part on the life of Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron
Douglas and had first appeared in the September 1940 issue of the Urban League’s *Opportunity Magazine*. In her letter to Clarke, Jaffke recounted her students’ enjoyment of the piece, adding that the reading had been timely given that a Black student had recently moved into the school district. She reported: “The timing couldn’t have been better since I’m sure this student really needed some genuine friends who would be helpful and understanding. Hopefully my readers have given some serious thought to the inequalities that exist in this world.”681 In their letters to Clarke, Jaffke’s students transcribed their feelings about the story, their reflections on “the inequalities that exist in this world,” and their questions for the author.

Many students used their letters to express their belief in racial equality. At the same time, the children’s reflections also demonstrated that they were unfamiliar with the histories of racism and of resistance to prejudice by Americans of color in the United States. Several children informed Clarke that they appreciated the fact that both Aaron and the principal stood up for themselves and their rights. One student, Brent, wrote a letter suggesting the possibility that he did not realize that Black people had been fighting for their rights for centuries: “I like the story because a black finally stood up for his rights and did something to show that white people were not the only smart people.”682 Other children’s responses implied that the story might have provided their first exposure to a narrative about racial discrimination. One student, Julie, told

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681 Susan Jaffke to Clarke, [Undated], SCH, John Henrik Clarke Papers, Box 5, Folder 19: Correspondence, Children’s Letters, “The Boy Who Painted Christ Black,” SCH.
Clarke: “[the story] helped me realize the way some white people treat black people.” Clarke responded to the students’ letters by urging them to read as much as they could about Black people and Black history. Clarke told Brent: “You’re right that the story showed Black people standing up for their rights. Did you know that Black people have stood up for their rights over and over again throughout history? It’s true. Read as much as you can about this. Ask Mrs. Jaffke to help you find books on the subject.” In response to Jennifer’s question about whether or not he had ever interacted with someone like the “‘stuck-up’” supervisor, Clarke simply wrote, “Yes, Jennifer, I have had to deal with people like the supervisor in the story many times during my lifetime. Many other Blacks have had to deal with such persons as well.”

Clarke’s replies to the sixth-grade students communicated his simultaneous appreciation of the children’s support of racial equality and his belief that the children still had much to learn.

Several children informed Clarke that they applauded the fictional Aaron’s choice to paint Christ Black because race did not matter to them. These children used arguments promoting racial sameness to underscore their belief in racial

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equality. In doing so, they joined a decades-old cohort of White children who sought to address racism and racial prejudice by dismissing race. Just as in previous decades, one of the ways in which these children reacted to race was by employing the color-based framework to define racial difference as variances in color only located “on skin.” Dave reflected: “I liked the story because it taught me that white people aren’t the greatest people in the world. I learned that black people have just as much rights as the white people. The only reason white people don’t like black people is because they’re black. The blacks are exactly like the whites except they have darker skin.” Another student, Tony, communicated sentiments similar to Dave’s in his letter: “I think that black have just as much rights as the whites. They’ve been worshipping a white Christ. When someone even thinks that Christ is black the whites get so mad. The whites are very prejudice just because someone has a different color of skin.” Noel asked how Clarke would feel if Christ were an entirely different color than White or Black: “Do you feel Christ is black? What if we found evidence that Christ was neither White nor Black? I wouldn’t mind. We should love him whatever color he is. Do you Agree?” Clarke responded to Noel’s questions with queries of his own. He told her that he also would not mind if Christ were neither White nor Black, but he also asked: “Noel, would you try to paint Christ

687 Dave to Clarke, December 17, 1982, SCH, John Henrik Clarke Papers, Box 5, Folder 19: Correspondence, Children’s Letters, “The Boy Who Painted Christ Black,” SCH.
then? If so how would you paint Christ?" While Clarke did not directly dispute Noel's statement about loving Christ “whatever color he is,” his reply also asked Noel to contend with the problem of racial representation. For Clarke, the purpose of the story was not about determining whether Christ was White, Black, or any other color, but rather about Black people’s right to “express themselves like everyone else, without fear.” In a world in which racism still existed, statements that delimited race as simply and only an issue of skin color elided ongoing racial inequalities justified and supported by several centuries worth of racist arguments and corresponding discrimination.

The Lockport children did not specify whether or not they viewed racism as a current issue in the United States, although several children used the present tense when they communicated their frustration with “[prejudiced] whites.” This differentiated them from many other children around the nation who specifically described racial conflict as part of America’s past. By framing racism as something that occurred not here and now, these statements paralleled the arguments that many White children had made in previous decades when they identified racial discrimination as a problem solely for Southern states. In 1983, for example, a group of children from the predominantly White, upper-middle-class town of Sudbury, Massachusetts wrote letters expressing their support of Black poet and activist Maya Angelou after they watched Angelou’s interview.

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690 Draft of Letter, Clarke to Noel, [Undated], SCH, John Henrik Clarke Papers, Box 5, Folder 19: Correspondence, Children’s Letters, “The Boy Who Painted Christ Black,” SCH.  
691 Draft of Letter, Clarke to Terry, [Undated], SCH, John Henrik Clarke Papers, Box 5, Folder 19: Correspondence, Children’s Letters, “The Boy Who Painted Christ Black,” SCH.
with journalist Bill Moyers. The piece originally aired on January 8, 1982 as part of Moyer’s exploration of artists and their creative impulses on his Creativity series. Moyers convinced Angelou to return to her hometown of Stamps, Arkansas, which she had avoided visiting for three decades. During the filmed conversation between Moyers and Angelou, Angelou stood in front of a set of railroad tracks that formed the boundary between the Black and White parts of town. She told Moyers what they represented to her: “ah, railroad tracks. This was more or less ‘no man’s land’ here, because if you were black you never felt really safe when you simply crossed the railroad tracks. You still had to go all this way, it was like an international tarmac where anybody could get you.” She added: “Bill, I tell you, to show you how much things don’t change, I’m not even going to cross it with you now. I don’t, I don’t – I’m not doing this for any reason other than I really do not want to go across there. I really don’t . . . You stay on my side and we’ll both be safe.” The pair then walked away from the tracks.

Angelou responded to the historic line made by the railroad tracks by connecting it to the present and stating, “things don’t change,” thereby referencing the continuance of racism and danger in her hometown.

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The child-viewers of Angelou’s interview, who did not mention their racial identities, used the piece to juxtapose the hardship of the past with what they presented as the untroubled present. The children’s responses may have been informed by Angelou’s age and visible membership in an older generation, as well as her story of Jim Crow-era, Southern racism. Nonetheless, their letters typified the racial discourse of the 1980s. Sharon told Angelou: “[The interview] made me [realize] how lucky children are today. I enjoyed hearing your stories of your childhood and was very touched by them. You have had a difficult life it seems.”

Suzanne also described her emotional response to the video, along with her happiness for people living “today:” “I was very touch and emotionally moved by your fantastic interview at Stamps. Now I see how some people live much harder lives [than] those of people today.”

Another child expressed her surprise that Angelou had stayed away from Stamps for so long: “I was fascinated by the way you felt toward your home. It’s hard to beleive that someone could never go back until someone asked them to. Did you really hate or were you just scared?”

While viewing Angelou’s interview had clearly affected the young letter-writers, their responses to Angelou’s story illuminated several gaps in their knowledge about American race relations. One child could not understand the depth of Angelou’s pain from the trauma of growing up in the segregated South. The other children failed to recognize Angelou’s explicit

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694 Sharon to Maya Angelou (Angelou), [Undated], SCH, Maya Angelou Papers, SC MG 830, Box: General Correspondence, 1980-1988, Folder: General Correspondence, 1983, SCH.
695 Suzanne to Angelou, [Undated], SCH, Maya Angelou Papers, SC MG 830, Box: General Correspondence, 1980-1988, Folder: General Correspondence, 1983, SCH.
696 [Unsigned] to Angelou, [Undated], SCH, Maya Angelou Papers, SC MG 830, Box: General Correspondence, 1980-1988, Folder: General Correspondence, 1983, SCH.
demonstration of Stamps, Arkansas as “unchanged,” instead noting that children were “lucky” to be living “today.” Children like them, residing in the idyllic colonial town of Sudbury, Massachusetts, were indeed lucky. But not every American child lived in Sudbury.

The redemptive narrative of the United States overcoming its past racist failings also acted as one element in the symbolic battle between the United States and the Soviet Union, which entered a new, heightened phase under Reagan in the 1980s. Reagan frequently invoked American mythology in his speeches, many of which he made to drum up support for increased military spending. Reagan described the United States as a moral and constitutional beacon of freedom worldwide – John Winthrop’s “city on a hill.” He set this narrative against a depiction of the Soviet Union as a totalitarian, godless source of “‘evil in the modern world’” that supported cadres of Communists in countries around the globe. In at least one case, Reagan’s administration drew on children as pawns in this politicized match, and the United States’ history of racism became fodder as well. In January 1985, twenty-eight Russian tenth-graders who were also members of Komsomol, a youth organization controlled by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, sent a letter to George H.W. Bush, who was then the Vice President. The Soviet high schoolers struck at the heart of the United States’ claim to be the world’s bastion of democracy and human rights.

Policy-makers and diplomats had also invoked this “redemptive narrative” during the 1950s and 1960s, juxtaposing the United States’ history of slavery with “gains” in civil rights such as the Brown decision or Black Americans’ relative economic success. Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights, 49–50.

by listing several abuses of citizens by the American government. Much of this evidence focused on Americans of color:

The U.S. mass media are always ‘trumpeting’ about protection of human rights and freedoms in America. But those are only words. Your ‘free’ life brings much grief and despair to your own citizens. In your country, out of a native American Indian population of 20 million, only 1.5 million remain . . . In your country the unemployment rate among young people at the present time is 20.6%; among the Negro population it is 46.3% . . . Even rents have risen in your country by 30%, whereas in the USSR rents for apartments are fixed. Instead of improving the living conditions of its citizens, the U.S. Government is making life more and more unbearable. 699

The students added their ire at the imprisonment of AIM activist Leonard Peltier, an Ojibwa-Lakota from Turtle Mountain, North Dakota who was convicted and imprisoned in 1977 for the murder of two FBI agents. Activists and human rights organizations worldwide viewed Peltier as a political prisoner, and they raised sincere doubts about Peltier’s guilt and the fairness of his trial. The Soviet high schoolers echoed these contentions, calling for Peltier’s release along with several other imprisoned Americans who had been involved in anti-war and nuclear weapons protests. Finally, the students charged the United States with pursuing a path of nuclear warfare, in contrast to the Soviet Union’s desire for peace. 700

After receiving the Soviet children’s letter, Vice President Bush began looking for groups of American high schoolers to produce a suitable reply. Ultimately, the White House called on students from two schools selected for their scholastic accomplishments and relative racial diversity, William G. Enloe


700 Ibid.
High School in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Jefferson City High School in Jefferson City, Missouri. On June 4, 1986, student-groups from both high schools presented their letters to Bush to be forwarded through the White House to the Soviet Union. In each of their missives, the students replied directly to the Soviet children’s accusations regarding the United States’ (continuing) record of human rights violations. Neither letter specified the students’ racial identities, although based on the school’s demographics, the groups were likely multiracial. Both groups of students presented racial oppression as having occurred in the past, especially with regard to the United States’ historical relationship with Native Americans. The Enloe students wrote: “In early American history, the United States government was more than partially responsible for the deaths of large numbers of American Indians. We cannot reverse the actions of our ancestors, but we are different people now. We are a new generation and wiser, having learned from the mistakes of our forefathers. The remaining Native Americans were granted citizenship decades ago and we heartily regret that they were caused to suffer so much.” Despite this troubled history, the students claimed that the United States government now ensured that all “individuals” had the “opportunity” to “succeed or fail.” They acknowledged: “social problems, for

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701 The White House compiled background research on both schools, including information about the racial demographics and scholastic achievements of the student body. Both schools were racially balanced. See: Packets, William G. Enloe High School and Jefferson City High School, [Undated], GHWB-VPR, Records of the NSA, Donald P. Gregg Files, Soviet/U.S. Exchange Program Files, Folder: 1986 Soviet/US Student Letters [2], OA/ID Number: 29330, Folder ID Number: 29330-002, FOIA Number: 2013-1196-S, GHWB.


703 Ibid.
example unemployment, have been cited as shortcomings of the capitalist economic system . . . these problems, such as 46% unemployment among American Negro youths, do exist.” They attributed these “social problems” to new technological advancements in manufacturing, and they neither further addressed nor explained the racial disparity in unemployment statistics.\footnote{Ibid.} The Jefferson City students provided a more extensive discussion of current racial and class-based differences among Americans. They argued that the American government assumed full responsibility for all of its citizens, ensuring racial and economic equality for everyone in the nation:

In your letter, you stated that our government and society should be responsible to our minority, poor and Indian populations. Our government and population as a whole are sensitive to these issues. All citizens regardless of race, color or ancestral heritage are treated equally under the law. For those few citizens who are experiencing temporary difficulties our government, along with independent social organizations, provides a variety of programs. These programs include educational opportunities, monetary assistance, and job training. Assistance is also provided for the elderly and physically handicapped. There is a government agency and program for virtually every need.\footnote{Jefferson City High School International Relations Class to Komsomol members and youth of the Soviet Union, June 4, 1986, GHWB-VPR, Records of the NSA, Donald P. Gregg Files, Soviet/U.S. Exchange Program Files, Folder: 1986 Soviet/US Student Letters [1], OA/ID Number: 29330, Folder ID Number: 29330-001, FOIA Number: 2013-1196-S, GHWB.}

The students differentiated this characterization from a description of the Soviet Union’s suppression of religious worship and political, economic, and social freedoms, both of its own citizens and of people living in Eastern European countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.\footnote{Ibid.}

The exchange of letters represented a political performance for the American and Soviet students, as well as their adult counterparts. Both groups of children wrote as direct representatives for their governments. The Vice President and his advisors specifically selected the two groups of American high
schoolers after conducting extensive research on their schools and teachers. The chosen students forwarded their letters (which were almost certainly vetted at multiple levels) through diplomatic channels in Washington. On the Soviet side, the Komsomol had long been the body responsible for “carrying out Communist Party policies among [Soviet] children and young adolescents.”707 In addition, the American children’s letters and responsive interviews with students from two Moscow high schools were published in an article in Komsomol’skaia pravda, the official newspaper for the youth organization. The adult authors of the article presented the Soviet children as open, fair-minded youths, contrasting them with biased American children spouting what sounded like “official Washington propaganda.”708 One student-interviewee, Dmitry, voiced his disappointment with the Americans’ letters: “To be frank, I didn’t sense in their letters a desire to learn anything. Their views are already set and very categorical. Rather, their questions are designed to hurt us, to ‘convict’ us of something.” Aleksey added: “Human rights – political, economic, and social – which the American letters talk about in such high-sounding phrases, are not only guaranteed in the Soviet Constitution but safeguarded by our socioeconomic system.”709 Undoubtedly,

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707 Peacock, Innocent Weapons, 17, 96-97.
709 Department of State, Division of Language Services, Translation Sheet of Russian Text, Dmitry and Aleksey quoted in Baranov and Tsvetkov, “Let’s Start a Dialogue,” GHWB. See also the Moscow students’ written replies to the American high schoolers. The Students of School no. 51, Moscow, to American Students, [Undated], GHWB-VPR, Records of the NSA, Donald P. Gregg Files, Soviet/U.S. Exchange Program Files, Folder: 1986 Soviet/US Student Letters [2], OA/ID Number: 29330, Folder ID Number: 29330-002, FOIA Number: 2013-1196-S, GHWB; Ninth and Tenth Grade Pupils of Secondary School no. 141, Moscow, to American Boys and Girls, [Undated], GHWB-VPR, Records of the NSA, Donald P. Gregg Files, Soviet/U.S. Exchange
adults affiliated with both the American and Soviet governments took the opportunity offered by the letter exchange to use students as members of the “new generation” in a battle to define each of their respective countries as free and prosperous.

Beyond the symbolism and pageantry of this highly mediated interaction, the way in which the American students chose to respond to the Soviet high schoolers’ pointed critiques about racial and economic inequality reflected shifts characteristic of the racial discourse articulated by many American children during these years. The students acknowledged past racism and violence, especially focusing on discrimination targeting Native Americans. For the present, the students constructed a narrative of individual opportunity and responsibility, arguing that the government provided equal treatment and assistance to all of its citizens no matter their race, national origin, or religious background. In this rendering of the American system, poverty and unemployment existed as the natural and non-racialized results of a competitive economic market. These children, who did not mention their racial identities, asserted that race played no part in any American’s life – for good or for ill.

In this formulation, explicitly accepting the shame of the United States’ racist past became a method of celebrating the present. By comparing the 1980s and early 1990s to previous decades or even centuries, children created a narrative arc of racial progress that ended with the achievement of full racial equality and the corresponding irrelevance of racial difference. In January 1991,
Jason, a middle school student from Des Plaines, Illinois, wrote a letter of this type to First Lady Barbara Bush to relate his excitement about his recent discovery of Matthew Henson’s story. Henson was a Black man and the son of Maryland sharecroppers who participated in the one of the first expeditions to the North Pole with Commander Robert E. Peary in 1909. Jason’s familiarity with Henson likely resulted from the 1909 expedition’s renewed notoriety beginning in 1988 after the *National Geographic* reassessed Peary and Henson’s claim to have been the first men to “discover” the North Pole.\(^{710}\) Jason, who did not specify his own race, identified Henson as the first person to have reached the Pole, a claim that the *National Geographic*’s story actually disputed. Jason characterized Americans’ lack of knowledge about Henson as evidence of past racial discrimination: “I just read the story about who was the first . . . person to reach the North Pole. I found out that the first person was Matthew Henson and the only reason that somebody else got credit was because he was black. I think that he should get the credit he deserves. I also think that he shouldn’t of been disregarded like that in the first place.”\(^{711}\) Jason concluded his letter by stating: “I am glad that now they do not do stuff like that to people just because there

\(^{710}\) The author of the 1988 story concluded that Peary (and therefore also Henson) likely did not reach the Pole. The magazine also included biographical accounts of both the Henson and Peary families, both of which consisted of mixed-race Inuit descendants of the explorers. See: Wally Herbert, “Commander Robert E. Peary: Did He Reach the Pole?,” *National Geographic Magazine* 174, no. 3 (Sept. 1988): 387-402, 412-413, *National Geographic Virtual Library*, http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/47QkV7; Allen S. Counter and Bob Sacha, “The Henson Family,” *National Geographic Magazine* 174, no. 3 (Sept. 1988): 422-429, *National Geographic Virtual Library*, http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/47R2AX.

black.” Jason did not clarify what fit under the umbrella of “stuff like that.” In the narrowest sense, he may have meant the act of giving undue credit to White versus Black arctic explorers. But his vague statement seemed to imply much more. Jason invoked a present, “now,” in which “they,” presumably White people, did not discriminate at all against Black people on the basis of race. By using “they,” Jason differentiated himself from these unidentified racist actors. This act of distinction did not necessarily reveal Jason’s racial identity; it may just as easily have been in reference to a “they” of the past or a “they” from which his age barred him – adults with power in society. Whatever his racial identity, this single line in Jason’s letter represented the culmination of a particular racial discourse characteristic of this time period. Jason presented an America from which racism had gently departed, leaving behind only its stories.

**Children Celebrate Racist Policies in “Non-Racial” Terms**

In reality, race remained a major factor in several policy debates that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. Reagan and Bush rolled back civil rights gains by supporting and pursuing anti-busing, anti-welfare, and “anti-drug” initiatives throughout their administrations. They appointed conservative lawmakers to federal benches and civil rights commissions, and they made coded, seemingly non-racial remarks that circulated long-standing racist arguments about people of color in order to promote their platforms. While busing no longer represented a

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712 Ibid.
truly effective method of desegregating schools after the 1974 *Milliken* decision prevented cross-district exchanges of students, single-district busing plans remained in place at schools across the nation in the 1980s. Reagan actively campaigned against these plans, terming busing a failed and unwanted federal social experiment. He declared his support of “states rights” at a campaign event in Philadelphia, Mississippi in 1980, the small town in which three civil rights activists had been murdered in 1964. Reagan did not mention the victims. By 1991, Reagan’s active re-shaping of the Supreme Court resulted in the final death knell for busing. In *Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell*, new Chief Justice William Rehnquist declared that busing plans were no longer necessary even when they had been instituted to address *de jure* (identifiably purposeful) segregation. Paralleling many children's statements about race during these years, Rehnquist argued: “the institutionalized discrimination of the past ha[s] been eliminated.”

Alongside these developments, Reagan also shaped Americans' perceptions of welfare recipients, criminals, and drug users. Reagan began a “War on Drugs” in 1982, despite the fact that only two percent of Americans believed drugs represented the country’s most pressing issue at that time. By mid-decade, after several years of sensationalizing drug use, especially of crack (an inexpensive version of cocaine), and the violence of (Black male) drug dealers in American cities, Reagan officially encoded racially unequal punishments for drug abuse. The 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act required a five-year

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715 Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 433.
minimum prison sentence for the possession of five grams of crack versus a five-year minimum for five hundred grams of powder cocaine, the form typically used by White and high-income users. This outrageous disparity not only relied upon but also reinforced decades-old racist perceptions about the danger of Black people, especially Black men living in urban areas. Reagan touted the bill as a “tough” policy that should encourage users to “just say no,” hiding the racial disparities in policing and punishment that would lead to the explosion of the prison population over the next several decades.\textsuperscript{716} This increase was disproportionately composed of inmates of color, even as Whites consumed drugs at equal rates.\textsuperscript{717} By the mid- to late 1980s, Reagan and many other Americans used racialized interpretations of the drug problem to comment on the “declining Black family,” which they argued was plagued by laziness and welfare reliance spawned by absent fathers and unmarried, young Black mothers.\textsuperscript{718} Reagan had introduced the “welfare queen” stereotype during his 1976 presidential campaign when he hyperbolized the story of one woman, Linda Taylor, whose activities of illegal welfare fraud equaled about $8,000. While Reagan and the press then and since portrayed Taylor as a Black woman, thus associating welfare reliance and “laziness” with Black women more generally, compelling evidence suggests that Taylor (born Martha Miller) was White; census records identified her as such in 1940.\textsuperscript{719} When Reagan told Taylor’s story of

\textsuperscript{717} Kendi, \textit{Stamped from the Beginning}, 435-436.  
\textsuperscript{718} Ibid., 439.  
\textsuperscript{719} Josh Levin, who investigated Linda Taylor’s story, characterizes her relationship with her racial identity as one aspect of Taylor’s broader criminal activities, as well as an element of the stories Americans later told about her. “No matter her bloodlines, the more persistent truth was that
fraud, he identified the amount she stole as “‘over $150,000’” in order to make a broader critique of what he viewed as bloated welfare budgets and overly permissive access to governmental programs. Because many Americans by the 1980s viewed racial inequality as a thing of the past, circulating portrayals of Black and low-income people, both men and women, as criminal, lazy, and dangerous caused a large number of observers to view any economic or social problems experienced by people of color as personal failures rather than as reflections of systemic racism. As a result, all of these policy standpoints, which without question caused rising levels of racial inequality throughout the nation, could be discussed in non-racial terms.

Children also made arguments about busing, drugs, and welfare. They often repeated Reagan’s rhetoric in order to communicate their approval of the president’s policies. In doing so, they acted as one mode of circulation for the racist arguments that allowed Reagan’s political agenda to gain support. Vicky, an eighth-grader from San Jose, California who did not identify her race, protested against welfare for immigrants and teenagers in her November 18, 1981 letter to Reagan: “What I don’t think should be happening is the welfare. It’s just wasting more and more money which could be used for better things. The people who came into this country or state should find a job not just sit around all

Martha Miller—who would later shed her childhood name for a nearly endless set of aliases—was a racial Rorschach test. She was white according to official records and in the view of certain family members who couldn’t imagine it any other way. She was black (or colored, or a Negro) when it suited her needs, or when someone saw a woman they didn’t think, or didn’t want to think, could possibly be Caucasian.” Josh Levin, “The Welfare Queen,” December 19, 2013, Slate, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2013/12/linda_taylor_welfare_queen_ronald_reagan_made_her_a_notorious_american_villain.html.

Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning, 424.
day and watch T.V. [. . .] I also think you shouldn’t give welfare to the teen-agers who would just by other stuff instead of using it to find a job.” On March 4, 1981, Kenny, a fourth-grade student from Saint Cloud, Florida who also left his race unmentioned, relayed his father’s opinion about welfare, using multiple underlines and capitalization to convey his family’s strength of feeling: “my dad think[s] that the clean up the welfare give the money to people who need it. People who can’t work Because of medical reasons – old age ect. Not Because They Are Lazy.” Vicky and Kenny presented welfare recipients, whether they were immigrants, teenagers, or “lazy” people, as undeserving and irresponsible. Although neither description explicitly specified the racial identities of people who received welfare, both children’s letters included the assumption that welfare users chose not to work or actively look for jobs. With the articulation of this perception, arguments for the reform – and significant reduction – of welfare budgets appeared to be logical and non-racial.

Children helped to disassociate several of Reagan and Bush’s policies from their racial implications and undertones. They acted as important players in this process because they often presented themselves as the children that antibusing and anti-drug programs protected. Their letters therefore sanctioned the symbolic “politics of childhood” that Reagan and his surrogates employed through rhetoric that presented children as innocent, potential victims of, for

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721 Vicky, Student in Mr. Crenshaw’s History and Civics Class, Sierramont Middle School, to Reagan, November 18, 1981, RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 7, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from (050000-054999), #051352, RRL.
722 Kenny, Member of Mrs. Fisk’s Fourth Grade Class, Jeffries School, to Reagan, March 4, 1981, RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 7, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from (018000-020999), #018223, RRL.
example, “forced integration” or drug use. First Lady Nancy Reagan acted as the face of “Just Say No” by making anti-drug speeches at schools across the nation, providing a softer side to her husband’s lawmaking while also relating drug legislation to the protection of students.723 Oona, a ten-year-old from San Jose, California who neither specified her race nor discussed racial issues in her December 1983 letter to Reagan, included a message for the First Lady in her note: “I would also like to thank your wife, Nancy for all her work to help young people stay away from drugs. God Bless You Both!”724 When children expressed either thanks or desire for racially inequitable policies, they participated in establishing those policies. A class of fifth-graders from Los Angeles, California who did not clarify their racial identities wrote letters to Reagan in January 1981 to both congratulate him and inform him of their opinions about busing. The students listed a variety of reasons why busing was “unfair” to children: “kids don’t like [busing] because the school is far from our homes,” “kids want to stay in their own school,” “kids don’t like to go far away from there family,” and “its just wasting gas, money, and time.”725 Only one student mentioned race in relationship to busing. She did so to discount racial difference as relevant to the decision-making process regarding busing: “I also think you should stop busing it’s not fair to children even though people say it is good for kids. Black kids and

724 Oona to Reagan, [Undated by author but written December 1983 based on other letters in batch; forwarded to Reagan by Congressman Don Edwards on February 24, 1984], Children of Fred Watson Community Center/Contributors to Young People’s Tribune, RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 8, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from (180000-210000) #197124, RRL.
725 Susan, Marianne, Arisa, and Sean, Members of Miss Attarian’s Fifth Grade Class, to Reagan, January 29, 1981, RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 3, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from (003240-003272), #003272, RRL.
white are all the same.”

Children did not always isolate their arguments to governmental policies’ consequences for their generation. Just as in previous decades, some children provided broad commentary about social problems, acting as concerned citizens rather than as children seeking protection. After President Bush made the “War on Drugs” one of his own administration’s priorities in the late 1980s, several children sent non-racialized messages that did not specifically address their status as young Americans. These writers added their voices and opinions to the chorus of Americans expressing approval of the shift toward the mass incarceration of (predominantly Black and Brown) Americans associated with the drug problem. On September 29, 1989, a few weeks after Bush addressed the nation on his plan for “drug control,” Tryna, a student from Lathrop High School in Fairbanks, Alaska, sent a letter informing the president: “I am behind you 100% in your decision to fight the drug war we have today . . . I strongly feel that we should, and can, stand up to drugs and win.” Also in September 1989, a student from Monroe, Wisconsin communicated her endorsement of the punishment of drug users and dealers: “the most appealing aspect of the plan to me is the battle being waged internally. I agree with the idea to capture drug pushers and put them in jail for an extended period of time. Also, the drug users

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726 Joanie, Member of Miss Attarian’s Fifth Grade Class, to Reagan, January 29, 1981, RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 3, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from (003240-003272), #003272, RRL.


728 Tryna to Bush, September 29, 1989, GHWB-PR, WHORM, Public Mail Drug War, Box 4, Folder: 9/89 [25], GHWB.
should be punished.” Both students echoed American politicians by casting the drug problem in the United States as a war – a pitched battle to be fought and won. Race was absent from these children’s letters. In this interpretation, the “battle being waged internally” against drug users and dealers in America was not only just, but it also appeared to have nothing to do with race, racial bias, or racial inequality.

Over the course of the 1980s, many American children – almost none of whom clarified their racial identities – helped to develop a racial discourse that presented race as irrelevant and racial discrimination as a problem relegated to American history. Throughout the decade and into the 1990s, this discourse helped hide the racist justifications and effects of policies that drastically increased racial inequality in the nation, especially for low-income people of color. By lobbying the presidents for the implementation of such laws through the repetition of politicians’ coded, purportedly non-racial rhetoric, children co-authored a story written in disappearing ink. Race faded from view, present on the page but invisible to those who read it.

**Children of Color Demonstrate the Enduring Relevance of Race in America**

Many other American children attempted to combat policies that threatened low-income citizens and people of color. A large number of these children wrote about race and their racial identities, connecting subjects such as poverty, welfare, and education with racial difference. They advocated for themselves and their communities, writing letters to Reagan, in particular, to

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729 Amber to Bush, September 29, 1989, GHWB-PR, WHORM, Public Mail Drug War, Box 4, Folder: 9/89 [25], GHWB.
demand that the president confront the consequences of his actions. To these children, budget cuts that targeted welfare and educational programs jeopardized their day-to-day lives.

When middle schoolers in the overwhelmingly low-income neighborhood of Crown Heights in Central Brooklyn wrote letters to Reagan in January and February 1981 about making Martin Luther King Day a national holiday, several children discussed the implications of Reagan’s planned economic policies for their neighborhood. Charles maligned the president’s intelligence and demanded that he change course: “I think you are an idiot. Only the rich people need cut taxes and by you cutting them it will hurt us . . . All the Spanish and Black people need more jobs. I also think kids from the age 12 and up should get small good paid jobs, so that they won’t steal. The people out here are talking about killing you because you were gonna cut down welfare. These people are not playing so you should straighten things up.” Another student, Ronald, added his frustration regarding the imminent loss of bilingual instruction in public schools: “President Reagan I’m one of the many people who think you are only for the white rich folck’s. I think you shouldn’t have tacking out the bylingual classes because if some forengers come to new york how are they to learn any English and one more thing you are going to let us folck’s [suffer] by raising the

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731 Charles to Reagan, February 2, 1981, School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 9, Folder 13, RRL. See also: Michelle to Reagan, February 4, 1981, School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 11, Folder 38, RRL.
prizes of things so you could make back that 8 billion dollars. Why did you bring back all this bombs." Charles and Ronald’s statements revealed the human costs of “Reaganomics,” Reagan’s combination of tax cuts for wealthy citizens and corporations with explosive investment in the military and extreme minimization of spending in the public sector. Unlike children who wrote in support of Reagan’s policies, both Ronald and Charles centered race in their letters by arguing that Black and Latina/o citizens and immigrants would suffer the most from this economic approach. They distinguished this pain from the benefits that would accrue to the “white rich” Americans the boys identified as Reagan’s exclusive interest group.

Reagan’s budget cuts resonated in communities across the nation, including those in Native America. Over the course of his presidency, Reagan not only slashed federal funding for education, job training, health, and welfare on reservations, but also stalled policies implemented during the Carter administration to encourage private investment in Native localities. For Native students attending schools that were operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), an agency of the Department of the Interior, constrictions of the federal budget caused dire concern. In one instance, Reagan’s dispute with Congress over his desired spending cuts forced a government shutdown and the closure of federal agencies, including BIA schools, in November 1981. Amidst the crisis,

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732 Ronald to Reagan, February 6, 1981, School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 9, Folder 13, RRL.


734 Dylan Matthews, “Here is every previous government shutdown, why they happened and how they ended,” September 25, 2013, Washington Post,
a group of Navajo third-graders from the rural town of Tohatchi in Northwestern New Mexico wrote the president to report their anger over the cancellation of their school's Thanksgiving arts-and-crafts fair. As had some Native children during the 1970s, one student presented himself as one of the “first Americans,” and he argued that Reagan had a responsibility to serve the children at his school: “I am a third grader at the Chuska School Be sorry for us ok get us some money . . . Mr President We are Indian we [were] the first . . . here. While students at BIA schools felt some of the most immediate effects of governmental cuts, the overall disinvestment in Native communities prompted responses from Native children attending community-controlled schools as well. In 1984, a class of Navajo eighth-graders attending the Na’Neelzhiin Ji Olta’ Day School in the predominantly Diné community of Torreon, New Mexico, outside of Albuquerque, reported their ongoing anxiety over the president’s policies: “We have many concerns about our future and that of our people. Even though we are only in the 8th grade many things worry us. We are concerned about jobs and budget cuts, wars and welfare. We want the same chances and respect that others receive. We hope you help us.” The students at Na’Neelzhiin Ji Olta’ knew that decisions Reagan advertised in Washington as good for everyone in the nation introduced unequal “chances” into their lives. When they demanded that the president acknowledge their concerns, they associated Reagan’s accountability


735 Jeremy to Reagan, Member of Third-Grade Class from Chuska Boarding School, [Undated by author but White House response sent January 11, 1982], RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, IN, Box 2, Folder IN (052001-053200), #052593, RRL.

736 Eighth-Grade Students, Na’Neelzhiin Ji OltaTorreon Day School, to Reagan, [Undated by authors but marked as received December 12, 1984 by White House staff], RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, IN, Box 9, Folder IN Indian Affairs (267001-281000), #279102, RRL.
with “respect” for them and their people. Their letter intertwined economic justice with racial equality.

Some children foregrounded poverty rather than race in their letters, often leaving their racial identities unmentioned. To some extent, such letter-writers participated in the subsumption of race that occurred in a large amount of children’s writings during these years. These children also used their communication with the White House to report on the hardship of being poor in America, resisting the narrative of equality also typical of many children’s letters from this era. Some of these children disparaged Reagan’s tax policies and budget plans by attacking the president and his character. In December 1983, Jessica, a ten-year-old girl from San Jose, California, used the president’s well-known love of jellybeans and the legend of Robin Hood to communicate her frustration with Reagan’s first term: “you are not good for a president not to [mention] all those Jelly beans you have been eating you are proble fat buy now. You are not anything like Rowbeenhood. You are the aopposite of him you take from the poor and give to the rich.” Jessica’s comparison of the United States to Sherwood Forest did not include any personal confessions about the daily experience of poverty, but many other children used their letters to do exactly that. In January 1981, a third-grade teacher in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of

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737 See: Albion Middle School Students to Reagan, December 10-15, 1982, RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 8, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from (076000-082999), #120626, RRL.
738 Jessica to Reagan, [Undated by author but written December 1983 based on other letters in batch; forwarded to Reagan by Congressman Don Edwards on February 24, 1984], Children of Fred Watson Community Center/Contributors to Young People’s Tribune, RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 8, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from (180000-210000) #197124, RRL. See several other letters in this batch that also criticize Reagan’s attitude toward poor Americans.
Brooklyn introduced her students’ letters by explaining: “My students are Black and Hispanic. They were very fearful when you were inaugurated. I suggested that they write to you to share their ideas and concerns. They are afraid that you will not be fair to the Blacks and the poor. They were amazed to think that they could write to you and tell you what they think.”739 Unlike their teacher, the students did not specify their individual racial identities. Instead, several children demanded that Reagan “Be good to the white and black.”740 Based on the content of their letters, one aspect of this racially equal treatment included giving the children access to homes and schools that were warm and safe. Priscilla noted: “Some times it is cold in the class room,” and Michael told Reagan: “I am a good boy in school. I know a lot of math. My landlord does not give any heat. So my mother keeps on [the] oven.”741 Tonya added: “I want you to make the subway safe and tell the landlord to give people heat.”742 Sherry asked Reagan for immediate aid: “Will you please help me and my family. We are too poor, and we haven’t enough [to] pay the rent. So please help us.”743 These confessions and requests communicated the fear and frustration of children whose warmth was constantly imperiled. When they asked Reagan to “be good” to everyone

739 Marie L. DeCillis to Reagan, January 20, 1981, RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 3, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from (002495-003239) #002495, RRL.
740 Danielle to Reagan, January 20, 1981, RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 3, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from (002495-003239), #002495, RRL. See also: Darelle, Annette, and [Unsigned], January 20, 1981, RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 3, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from (002495-003239), #002495, RRL.
741 Priscilla to Reagan, January 20, 1981 RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 3, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from (002495-003239), #002495, RRL; Michael to Reagan, January 20, 1981, RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 3, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from (002495-003239), #002495, RRL.
742 Tonya to Reagan, January 20, 1981, RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 3, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from (002495-003239), #002495, RRL.
743 Sherry to Reagan, January 20, 1981, RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 3, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President from (002495-003239), #002495, RRL.
alongside such pleas, these third-graders interrupted any narrative about the nation having arrived at equality – racial or otherwise.

Throughout the decade, children of color presented evidence that highlighted the problem of ongoing racial prejudice in the United States. The act of letter writing thus became a direct challenge to the notion that racial equality had been achieved in America. Beyond enumerating the racially disparate effects of poverty and budget cuts, many children also discussed the problem of overt racism perpetuated by individuals and organizations. In particular, several children protested against the existence and actions of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Between 1971 and 1980, the Klan experienced a revival, tripling its national membership. In the late 1970s and 1980s, Klan members and other avowed racists were involved in several violent incidents and shootings that targeted Black citizens. In the 1980s, the KKK “operated with little federal pressure,” such that the group felt emboldened enough to stage a racist demonstration at Martin Luther King Jr.’s gravesite in January 1990. Children of color reacted to these trends by communicating their dismay. On February 23, 1980, Matica, an eighth-grade student from Nashville, Tennessee who described herself as “a Hispanic-American,” wrote a letter of complaint to President Jimmy Carter. She wanted the president to address the dissonance between the United States’ stated principle of equality and its sanction of the racism inherent to the KKK:

I was very surprised to find that in a nation as grand and advanced as this one, there still is prejudiced people. If being racist is against the constitution of the United States of

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744 Marable, Race, Reform, and Rebellion, 171; Minchin and Salmon, After the Dream, 200; Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning, 430. See also: John Drabble, “From White Supremacy to White Power: The FBI, COINTELPRO-WHITE HATE, and the Nazification of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1970s,” American Studies 48, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 49-74.
745 Marable, Race, Reform, and Rebellion, 174-174, quotation on 202.
America, then how come there exists a group called the K.K.K. of America! why doesn’t your government pass a law against this group, that hates blacks and Hispanics like I am; we are concerned Americans, and we think that if your government wants to succeed at least, you should outlaw this; this is a free country, then why cant the people act as brothers and sisters and make this country the best, instead of giving it bad reputation, by being selfish! America doesn’t need more problems!746

Relying on a well-established rhetorical strategy, Matica argued that the United States Constitution along with the nation’s status as “grand and advanced” should compel the president to “outlaw” the KKK for its racism and hatred. Matica also identified herself, as a Latina, and Black people as members of the national citizenry, using an underline to emphasize her point. When she called for Americans to be “brothers and sisters,” Matica envisioned a nation that equally protected and valued people “like I am” by fighting against racial prejudice and criminalizing racist organizations like the KKK.

For some children, such protection also involved answering lingering questions about the government’s unequal prosecution of the KKK versus Black Power groups such as the Black Panthers. In 1981, Robert, one of the Crown Heights middle schoolers, used his Martin Luther King Day letter to demand such information from Reagan: “Black people had a group to make people like one another, their group was broken up. The Klu Klux Klan never had their group broken up. I know this has nothing much about King’s holiday but after all it has to do with the rights of black people.”747 In March 1982, after scholar-activist John Henrik Clarke visited his son’s sixth-grade class at Hunter College Elementary School in Manhattan, one student, Jason, included a question in his thank-you

746 Matica to Carter, February 23, 1980, JC-PP, WHCF, Name File, WHOA, OA 9415, Folder 2 of 2, JCL.
747 Robert B. to Reagan, February 4, 1981, School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 9, Folder 15, RRL.
note to Clarke: “how come the government lets the K.K.K. roam around but not the Black [Panthers?]”

While neither Robert nor Jason stated their own racial identities, their letters contributed to the body of writing that acknowledged the role race played in a variety of disparities regarding the treatment of different groups of American citizens. The boys’ letters alluded to the divergent histories of the BPP, which was infiltrated and suppressed to the point of destruction by the United States Justice Department and the FBI, versus the KKK, which flourished through a combination of federal apathy and continued racist law-making pursued by governmental officials at the highest levels. When children wrote letters about the Klan after a decade during which the organization had experienced renewed growth and energy, they demonstrated that even the most overt forms of racism still existed in the 1980s – unthreatened by any scales of justice wielded by the federal government.

Many children also focused their attention on the prejudice expressed by individual Americans who did not belong to identifiably racist organizations. Children often articulated the straightforward argument that racial prejudice and inequality still existed in American society. These simplistic statements acted as important parries in the debate over race-based civil rights during this decade, given that many other American children writing in the 1980s and early 1990s either argued or implied that racial prejudice existed only in the past. In May 1980, several months after First Lady Rosalynn Carter visited the Oakland Unified School District in Oakland, California, students from Oakland’s middle and high schools contributed their essays and poems to a booklet that they sent

748 Jason to Clarke, [March 9, 1982], SCH.
to the First Lady. One high schooler, Karen, wrote a poem titled “This World Was Made for All Men,” reflecting on the continued experience of inequality in the context of a long fight for change:

From the day we are born
From the time that we are loved
From the time that we were beaten
From the time that we are sad
From the time that we are poor
From the time that we were happy
To the time that we die,
This world was made for all men!
Men of Power
Men of Hate
Men of white, black, red, and yellow
[...]
This world was made for all men
Wasn’t it?

This what the black man knows
This is what the white man says
This is what our eyes don’t see
This is what our hands can’t reach.
This is what our hearts moan for.
Is this what we’ve been fighting for?749

With her use of the present tense, Karen identified sadness and poverty as contemporary states of being in the lives of “we,” Black Americans, preceded by birth and love and followed by death. She used this constellation of experiences to narrate the common humanity of all people, arguing in the majority of her first stanza that the world “was made for all men.” She amended her statement at the end of the stanza, asking: “Wasn’t it?” Her second stanza recounted the pain derived from the bars that prevented Black people from grasping everything the world had to offer its occupants, even as “the white man” also said “this world is made for all men.” Karen’s poem elucidated the racism of the 1980s, which

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promoted racial inequality while also celebrating the achievement of its opposite. By asking, “is this what we’ve been fighting for?,” Karen voiced the frustration of Black children surveying the country as it stood twenty years after the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Many found it wanting.

Several children in the Crown Heights group added their own testimony that “some people” still exhibited racial prejudice. These students’ letters recounted instances of racial hatred while also arguing that Martin Luther King Jr.’s example would inspire people to be better. Alongside her hope that “Dr. King’s Dream” would come true, Theresa asked Reagan about the roots of racial prejudice: “What did we do wrong Was it when we were born. I don’t think so I think some people are just Right down prejudice and I’m not only talking about the white people. I think we should live like brothers and sisters to make Dr. King’s Dream to come true.” Lisé maintained that the issue of Martin Luther King Day itself revealed many Americans’ prejudice: “some are still prejudice. They don’t want their white kids associating with other kids of different races . . . I realize you’ve heard all this talk about racism but, if Abraham Lincoln and George Washington can have their birthday nationalized why can’t Mr. King. I know Lincoln and Washington are two of our great presidents but what difference does it make. It seems to me that the only reason people object to this idea is because their prejudice.”

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750 Teresa to Reagan, [Undated], School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 10, Folder 22, RRL.
751 Lisé to Reagan, February 3, 1981, School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 10, Folder 20, RRL. See also: Rhonda, February 4, 1981, School District #17,
A few children accused the president of this kind of racism, arguing that his resistance to the holiday exposed his prejudice toward Black people.\textsuperscript{752} One student, Dawn, communicated her anger that Jimmy Carter was no longer president, using imagery of lynching to underscore her horror at Reagan’s inauguration: “[Carter] did a good job and I don’t think He hate black people like you do a person like you should be hang. from a trees because you lie about everything you Promise.”\textsuperscript{753} Zelda added her contention that the battle underscored the need for Black Americans in government, especially in light of Reagan’s opposition to something that meant so much to Black people: “I heard you don’t like blacks but [Dr. Martin Luther King] does deserve a holiday for as much as he has done. We should at least have somebody black somewhere up at the top. But you I know will try to stop it. But we need a black president or something for once.”\textsuperscript{754} Others attempted to lobby the president, asserting that Reagan had a responsibility toward his Black constituents. Jennifer pled with Reagan: “I dont really know if you are a prejudice man but please sir do this for us blacks. It is very important to us,” and Robert stated: “I know you might not

\textsuperscript{752} See: Michelle to Reagan, February 4, 1981, School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 9, Folder 13, RRL.

\textsuperscript{753} Dawn to Reagan, February 8, 1981, School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 9, Folder 17, RRL.

\textsuperscript{754} Zelda to Reagan, February 6, 1981, School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 9, Folder 5, RRL.
like us. But help us make King’s a nation holiday." The students were correct that Reagan initially opposed the holiday; in 1981, he obliquely suggested that King had been a Communist. After a few years, the famous line about judging a person based on the “content of their character” from King’s “I Have a Dream” speech had been decontextualized and incorporated into Reagan and many other Americans’ colorblind racial discourse, making the institution of the holiday appropriate and expedient. Reagan signed Martin Luther King Day into law on November 3, 1983.

During these developments, children of color resisted the erasure of race from American discourse not only by discussing racism, but also by displaying pride in their racial identities. Children produced letters and writings that explained to their readers that they wanted to be celebrated for every aspect of their personhood. When the Navajo eighth-graders from Torreon, New Mexico wrote to Reagan in 1984, their primary purpose was to “inform [him] that the week of Nov 12-16 has been designated as Navajo awareness week.” They elaborated: “Navajo Awarness week is a time for the Navajo students at na’neelzhii Ji [Olta] (Torreon Day School) to learn a new appreciation of themselves. Our classroom motto is ‘Being Navajo is Being Special.’ Since you are our nation’s leader we wanted to share this with you . . . Please remember


Minchin and Salmond, After the Dream, 213.

Ibid., 236.
what we already know – ‘Being [Navajo] is Truly Being special.’” The students’ tribal chairman had instituted the celebratory week to help the children appreciate themselves as Navajos. By participating in “Navajo Awareness Week,” community members in Torreon encouraged their children to internalize the celebration’s motto and to believe that they were special by virtue of their membership among the Diné. When the students asked Reagan as the president and “our nation’s leader” to remember this fact, they purposefully imbued the motto with national significance. It was not enough for them to recognize that being Navajo made them “special.” They wanted it known in the Oval Office.

Black students who contributed to the 1980 booklet for First Lady Carter from the Oakland Unified School District and members of the Crown Heights group in their 1981 letters to Reagan also communicated their racial “specialness.” They proudly proclaimed their Blackness while also arguing that Black Americans should enjoy the rights and social worth the United States conferred upon White people by virtue of their Whiteness. Bess, an Oakland high school student, wrote a poem that asked: “Must I be white to live/In this humanity?” She answered: “Black is all I’m gonna be.” Calvina, a sixth-grader from Crown Heights, advised Black people: “every black person should tell every white person that sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never kill me. I kind of think that if the white bothers the black about their color the only thing that the black got to say is ‘I am black and I am Proud and i can say it

758 Eighth-Grade Students, Na’Neelzhiin Ji Olta Torreon Day School, to Reagan, [December 12, 1984], RRL.
759 Bess, “[Untitled],” in “A Student Tribute,” [40], JCL.
loud." Other students joined Bess and Calvina in declaring that their racial identities were both extraordinary and deserving of respect. Two Oakland middle schoolers made the joy of being Black the central theme of their pieces. Larry explicitly called for respect for himself and all Black people in his essay, “Respect Me…. I’m Black,” which opened with the line: “I am special in life because I am Black!” Kathryne’s poem, “Little Black Girl,” characterized Black girls, their features, and their people as beautiful: “Little Black girl stands in her/Black world with her Black people/and her Black nature./Her dark beauty and her Black hair/shining under a white sun.” Expressing pride in all aspects of their Blackness acted as a way for these children to self-identity as people worth valuing. Given the United States’ historical and contemporary degradation of Black Americans, these writings represented crucial spaces in which Black children could express love for themselves and people who looked like them.

Children of color’s writings also connected their racial identities to their American citizenship. These writers explained to their readers that their national pride rested on their belief in racial equality. Recall that in her 1980 complaint about the KKK, the Latina student from Nashville, Matica, identified herself and Black people both by stating their races and describing them as “concerned Americans.” Also in 1980, Debbi, a sixth-grade student from Waseca, Minnesota, used her letter to Carter to define “patriotism.” She began with a series of

761 Larry, “Respect Me…. I’m Black,” in “A Student Tribute,” [17], JCL.
762 Kathryne, “Little Black Girl,” in “A Student Tribute,” [36], JCL.
dictionary-like statements that focused on national unity, personal dedication to the country, and global friendship: “Patriotism means to me: Love and Loyalty to our country. It also means peace against other countries in the world. Also to love your brothers and sisters, even try to be nice to your enemies around you.” She concluded by using the color-based framework to advocate for racial equality through her declared belief in people’s racial sameness and shared humanity: “Patriotism means one more thing to me equal rights for me the black . . . blacks can have equal rights they are just a different color so what they are still people it doesn’t make any different of there color.”\textsuperscript{763} Both Matica and Debbi stated that their sense of belonging in the United States depended upon America’s protection of equal rights for all of its citizens. These were hopeful communications from children who knew that the nation did not yet ensure the equality they desired. But just as in previous decades, letters from children of color that claimed their citizenship acted as important protests in the fight for racial equality.

Children in the Crown Heights group engaged in this type of letter writing as well. In her demand for Martin Luther King Day, Crystal included nods to her age, race, and, finally, her membership in the citizenry: “As a young black citizen I think that we should have a national holiday for a black man who did so much for us.”\textsuperscript{764} Another student, Bernadette, transcribed her racial pride alongside her

\textsuperscript{763} Exam Response, Debbi, Band Assignment enclosed as letter to Carter, [Undated by author, likely written February 18, 1980 based on other students’ submissions], JC-PP, WHCF, Name File, WHOA, OA 9220, JCL.
\textsuperscript{764} Crystal to Reagan, January 30, 1981, School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 11, Folder 46, RRL.
identification with the nation: “As a American, I am proud to be black and I would like to remember, many years to come, that our country had one famous black person, they loved so dearly that a day was named after him.” By describing themselves as both Black and American in letters that sought to put the name of a Black man on the federal calendar, Crystal and Bernadette underscored the importance of having all aspects of their identities represented and protected in the United States. Like Matica and Debbi, their patriotism and citizenship were tied to the fight for equal rights in the nation that they maintained belonged to them too.

As during the previous decade, children of color in the 1980s and early 1990s continued to demonstrate the importance of having “their people” represented in their writings and in the world around them. Many children mobilized their letters, poems, stories, and essays to put their people’s languages, histories, and cultures in print, and they often sent these pieces to be read outside the boundaries of their homes or classrooms. For multilingual children, one of the most important elements of equal representation rested in the protection and proclamation of their linguistic knowledge. In the winter of 1983-1984, the San Jose, California Parks and Recreation Department and the San Jose Mercury News in participation with several area elementary schools published the Young People’s Tribune, giving local children the opportunity to circulate their writing among members of the community. Many of the San Jose children used their contributions to demonstrate that they could speak or write in

765 Bernadette to Reagan, January 29, 1981, School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 10, Folder 22, RRL.
Spanish. One part of the *Tribune* featured “Dear Santa Claus” and “My Christmas Story” submissions. A nine-year-old boy, Gorge, responded to this likely adult-sponsored prompt by writing in Spanish about meeting and taking a picture with Santa Claus and his nana. While asking students to write letters to Santa Claus or stories about their Christmas activities surely represented a common December activity in classrooms across America, Gorge reacted to this request by submitting a Spanish-language text, layering the Santa story with evidence of his Spanish-language skills. Similarly, nine-year-old Javier participated in the “My Last Will and Testament” section in Spanish, leaving his entire estate to “mi mejor hermano,” his best brother. Another writer, a ten-year-old girl named Luz Maria, wrote her essay for the segment on “How I Drive My Parents Crazy” about a generational, language-driven tension between her and her mother: “I drive my mom crazy when I put on the records in English. She tells me to turn it off because she doesn’t understand them.” Luz Maria’s anecdote provided a one-line portrayal of her life in a multilingual home in which she could have been the only English speaker. While her essay briefly summarized the incredible lingual work she likely undertook for her mother, the tone of her piece remained playful and mocking rather than resentful. By writing about a nana, a brother, and a mom, Gorge, Javier, and Luz Maria’s pieces each demonstrated the connection between language and family in their lives, stressing the daily importance of their

766 Gorge, “Cuando Conocí a Santa Claus” [When I Met Santa Claus], in Richard J. Desmond, Steve Alden, Kraig Kliwer, Mona Kellum, and Betty Wood, eds., *Young People’s Tribune*, (Winter 1984), [3], RR-PR, WHORM Subject File, PR, PR 14-1, Box 8, Folder PR 14-1 Children, Requests to the President From (180000-210000), #197124, RRL.
767 Javier, “My Last Will and Testament,” in *Young People’s Tribune*, 13, RRL.
768 Luz Maria, “How I Drive My Parents Crazy,” in *Young People’s Tribune*, 7, RRL.
ability to communicate in Spanish. While none of these children explicitly lobbied for their right to a bilingual education, their writings acted as one-line pieces of evidence that proclaimed the value of multilingual children’s knowledge.

As they had in the 1960s and 1970s, some multilingual children engaged more directly in the debate over the importance of native languages to students’ overall education. In the spring of 1991, for example, high school students from Kamehameha Secondary Schools, a Native Hawaiian private school in Honolulu, Hawaii, sent three editions of their student newspaper to one of Hawaii’s representatives in Congress, Patsy Mink. Students writing for the newspaper, *Ka Mōʻī* (meaning “the King,” in honor of King Kamehameha, who formally established the Kingdom of Hawai‘i in 1810), printed several articles about students’ experiences learning Native Hawaiian. In the May issue, the opening story of the paper covered an open letter that had been written by the Hawaiian Studies Department and Hale Kuamo‘o Hawaiian Language Center faculty at the University of Hawaii, Hilo addressed to Hawaiian high school principals and counselors. The letter charged counselors with advising high school students planning to attend college not to learn Native Hawaiian. The writer of the piece in *Ka Mōʻī*, a student named Kapua, quoted Kamehameha’s counselor, Herb Wilson, as stating, “I think that at Kamehameha we’ve done a great job of informing the students of the merits of taking Hawaiian language . . . I don’t think that the claims in the letter apply here.”769 The author also quoted several

students’ responses to the letter and their experiences with counseling at Kamehameha. One senior reported: “During my freshman year, my counselor told me not to take Hawaiian because it wouldn’t help me in college. But I chose to take it anyway because I wanted to learn the language. I’m not going to teach it or anything but I really feel that I’ve benefitted because I’ve learned so much more about my culture due to my new understanding of the language.”770 A second-year student suggested that the counselors’ views of Hawaiian-language programs had improved in recent years: “The attitude of the counselors has changed because they have realized Hawaiian language is popular among the students and is being accepted by colleges.”771 Both of the students that Kapua chose to put on the record relayed their appreciation – along with that of the broader student body – of their access to Hawaiian-language courses and the cultural enrichment provided by such education. A few pages later in the same edition, another story acted as a follow-up to these claims. In “KS language students speak out,” student-writer Leolani proudly noted that Kamehameha students had picked up a string of first- and second-place prizes in the Hawaiian-language division at the third annual State Language Festival.772 At the beginning of the paragraph listing the award winners, Leolani included a popular phrase among Hawaiian-language activists and proponents: “E Ola Mau Ka ‘Ōlelo

770 Marisha quoted in Kapua, “Schools underestimate,” 2, LOC.
771 Leo quoted in Kapua, “Schools underestimate,” 2, LOC.
Hawai‘i,” or “The Hawaiian Language Shall Live.”

Beyond reporting on Kamehameha students’ appreciation and mastery of the Hawaiian language, writers for *Ka Mōʻī* also used the pages of their newspaper to discuss students’ broader relationship to their Hawaiian heritage. In the March and April 1991 editions, reporters wrote articles on a variety of subjects that reflected both their own and their fellow classmates’ active engagement with Hawaiian culture. Writers noted that students at Kamehameha excelled in a Hawaiian Song Contest, sought out places (often their homes) to eat Hawaiian food, and participated in debates over Hawaiian sovereignty.

When staff-writer Leolani contributed her opinion on sovereignty in an editorial on the issue, she confessed her conflicted feelings about being Hawaiian-American:

“Being of Hawaiian ancestry, I find myself having to choose between the American life that I live now and have grown accustomed to and the life of a Hawaiian and a part of the Hawaiian ‘ohana.” Leolani argued that those who

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wanted to remain “American” “should be allowed to do so in peace.” The bigger issue, she believed, was for Hawaiians stop being “the worst critics of our culture, our ‘ohana . . . we call our own brothers and sisters delinquents, high-school dropouts, and lazy.” She lobbied for unity and shared aid among Hawaiians so that “there wouldn’t be hostility and hatred between one another, but rather the aloha of our Hawaiian hearts would be shared.”775 In the 1980s and 1990s, Native Hawaiians experienced the highest rates of poverty of any ethnic group living in the state of Hawaii, and Leolani’s editorial reflected some of the discord and racist arguments surrounding this kind of inequality.776 Rather than degrading “our ‘ohana,” she wanted Hawaiians to find resilience in “our culture” so as to create a supportive community. Pieces like Leolani’s represented one of the apparent purposes of the newspaper: to narrate the lives and feelings of Native Hawaiian students. The motto of the paper, which was provided in both its Hawaiian and English translations on each issue’s banner, encapsulated this mission: “Ua lehulehu a manomano ka ‘ikena a ka Hawai‘i, Great and numerous is the knowledge of the Hawaiians.”777 Ka Mōʻī acted as a place to celebrate and promote that knowledge.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, children of color like those at Kamehameha consistently used their writings to tell stories about their people. Some children chose to write such accounts to contend with the past trauma and

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775 Leolani, “Hawaiians scramble,” 3, LOC.
oppression their ancestors had experienced in previous decades and centuries in the United States. In the 1980 Oakland students’ booklet and in the Crown Heights children’s letters, several writers reflected on the history of American slavery and its implications for their own present. One Oakland high schooler named Darrell submitted a poem to the First Lady’s booklet titled “The Shadow of Darkness Looked Over the Graves of a Hundred Slaves.” The text combined the concept of memory with images of enslavement to create both a monument to Black people’s pain and a demonstration of their longstanding fight for freedom:

He saw the memories of Dixie Cotton being picked;

He saw the deaths of slaves who couldn’t breath in the cargo hole;

He saw the memories of men and women sold as cattle,

He also saw the memories of a unforgotten dream of being free.

Darrell, seemingly the “he” in this poem, remembered and recorded several of the most recognizable and wrenching aspects of slavery for his reader, but he ended the poem by also recalling an “unforgotten dream” held by his enslaved ancestors and now him: “freedom.” By including this line, Darrell used his poem to connect past struggles with Black Americans’ ongoing activism to achieve expanded civil rights. In doing so, he demonstrated the value of the history his poem narrated for Black children like him.

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778 See: Yolanda, “Poetry,” in “A Student Tribute,” [28], JCL; Cheyney to Reagan, February 3, 1981, School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 9, Folder 10, RRL.
779 Darrell, “The Shadow of Darkness Looked Over the Graves of a Hundred Slaves,” in “A Student Tribute,” [31], JCL.
A decade later, a thirteen-year-old Japanese-American girl named Emi used her National History Day project to recover stories from Japanese-American citizens, including Emi’s grandparents, who had been held in internment camps during World War II. Emi, who was from Kahului, Hawaii, wrote a research paper based on questionnaire responses from sixty-nine internees and follow-up oral interviews with fifty-nine of those respondents. In addition, she reached out to Representative Patsy Mink, who was also Japanese American, for help on the project. After Mink suggested she read Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston’s 1973 memoir, *Farewell to Manzanar*, Emi replied with a thank-you note informing Mink that she had already done so.\(^780\) When Emi was interviewed about her project, she made a definitive comment about the atrocity committed against her grandparents and others: “‘the government made a mistake . . . It should never happen again.’”\(^781\) For the next year’s History Day competition, Emi continued to explore instances of racial discrimination against Japanese Americans by examining the case of a Japanese-American Marine, Bruce Yamashita, who had been forced out of Officer Candidate School in 1989 following months of racial harassment.\(^782\) Emi’s successive projects reflected the same process of purposeful remembrance in which Darrell had engaged when he wrote his poem. Both children documented instances during which the American people and

\(^{780}\) Emi to Patsy Mink (Mink), [Undated], Mink Papers, Box 1927, Folder 3, Congressional II, Hawaii, Issues 103, HI 6015-6018, “S”, Student Letters, General File, 1993-1994, 3 of 4, LOC.


government had oppressed Black and Japanese Americans on the basis of race, and, as rejoinders to this history, both included subtle statements regarding the present. Darrell pursued something unforgotten but unrealized; Emi wanted to ensure that certain things never happened again. For each child, the telling of these painful stories underscored the relevancy of their people’s pasts to their own lives.

Work like Darrell and Emi’s demonstrated the importance of race to the United States’ past and its present, resisting racial discourse that dismissed race as a relic of bygone eras. When children of color made racial discrimination the subject of their writings in the 1980s and early 1990s, their choice in itself communicated the personal significance of race for those individuals. Because race factored into their identities and daily experiences, many children of color also expressed the existential value of seeing themselves represented in the world around them. As one student articulated, the purpose behind the Crown Heights children’s letters regarding the federalization of Martin Luther King Day was to gain a “Symbol” for “We blacks” on a national level.\(^{783}\) (Although at least one student desired a Black president more than the holiday.)\(^{784}\) Children of color wanted people who looked and spoke like them to fill offices in every echelon of government and to be the subjects of holidays and stories. Over the course of his two-decade career as a children’s author, John Lewis Steptoe dedicated himself

\(^{783}\) Nichel to Reagan, February 6, 1981, School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 9, Folder 7, RRL.

\(^{784}\) Zelda to Reagan, February 6, 1981, RRL. See also: David to Reagan, February 6, 1981, School District #17, Brooklyn, NYC, Letters, RR-PR, White House Staff and Office Files, Melvin L. Bradley Papers, Office of Public Liaison, Series II, Subject File, OA 9686, Box 10, Folder 22, RRL.
to providing such books to Black children. They noticed, and they thanked him for it. In 1987, Vickie, a Black sixth-grader from Richmond, California, told Steptoe: “I really like your books. They are really great. They show reality of how some of us blacks seem to talk. Your books make it so we can understand them . . . and that’s what makes us more eager to read your books.” Steptoe’s choice to use vernacular language and to paint pictures featuring Black children on the streets of New York City gave young Black readers the ability to relate to the glossy pages in front of them, making them “eager” for more.

In a nation in which many Americans voiced their belief that people should not “see” race, the active searching by children of color for stories, symbols, and people who shared crucial pieces of their identities offered evidence of the ongoing significance of race in America. In the spring of 1991, Representative Mink received a request for information on her political record and viewpoints from a high school student named Miyako. Miyako, who was role-playing Mink in the mock Congress at her high school in Decatur, Indiana, used her salutations to emphasize her connection to Mink. She addressed her letter with Mink’s maiden name, writing to “Ms. Takemoto,” and signed off both with Japanese characters and, below, in English. For children of color living in the 1980s and 1990s, the definition of civil rights as racial representation – in all its forms – advanced by many children in the previous decade remained apt and necessary.

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During the 1980s and early 1990s, American children around the nation participated in constructing opposing racial discourses. Children wrote about race in a way that erased it on the one hand, and centered it on the other. For many children, conversations about race and civil rights appeared to belong only in history classrooms. Race seemed so irrelevant to these children that their own racial identities did not merit mention. Within this group of children, knowledge regarding the history of American race relations, both in terms of racial oppression and resistance to racism, remained absent from their writings. When they contended with what history they knew, they did so in order to locate racial conflict in the past. They juxtaposed instances of (regrettable) racial violence and discrimination with a contemporary world in which each American had an equal opportunity to rise or fall on their own merit. This fictional dichotomy aided children in acting as circulatory partners with politicians who framed race-driven policy debates on welfare, busing, and drugs as non-racial and equitable. When children demanded protection from the danger of drugs and the waste of welfare or busing, they helped to institutionalize practices that gave racial inequality in America new energy and appetite. In contrast, for children of color who wrote letters, poems, stories, essays, and articles about race, rights, and representation throughout the decade, racial equality remained a “dream.” Many of these children lived in poverty, and they knew that race played a part in whether or not their neighborhoods and schools received care and attention from the government. They recognized that racial prejudice remained a mainstay in Americans’ interactions with one another; some children accused the president
himself of racism. They attempted to combat inequality with their letters and writings, telling stories about the past and the present in order to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of race to their lives. They also used the written word to express love and joy in themselves, and to seek representation for pieces of their identities that they embraced. For many American children living during these years, race still mattered in ways that evoked both pride and despair.

On March 3, 1991, just a few short months after a boy named Jason declared: “I am glad that now they do not do stuff like that to people just because there black,” four White police officers brutalized an unarmed Black man, Rodney King, in the streets of Los Angeles. A year later, an all-White jury in the L.A. suburb of Simi Valley, the incipient home of Ronald Reagan’s presidential library, found the officers not guilty. Los Angeles exploded in uprisings. Vice President Dan Quayle blamed a “poverty of values” among Los Angeles’s Black residents.\textsuperscript{787} By the time all of this occurred, a host of Americans – with help from children – had developed a discourse that interpreted the nation as “colorblind” and beyond racism and inequality. But such claims were the stuff of fantasy.

\textsuperscript{787} Kendi, \textit{Stamped from the Beginning}, 450-451.
CONCLUSION

On a shelf in the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library in Abilene, Kansas sit three archival boxes containing folders labeled “PPF 28-B Letters to Children – Heart Interest.” The assortment of numbers and letters at the beginning of the label indicates that officials in the White House Office of Presidential Correspondence slated these letters for the “President’s Personal File” and assigned them to the collection coded with the number twenty-eight for “Heart Interest Letters.” Along with congratulations to the Eisenhower couple on the occasion of their anniversary and birth announcements that new parents shared with the president, officials apparently decided that certain letters from children could tug at the heartstrings of their readers – hence the “B” for child writers. The letters that staff members chose for “PPF 28-B” adhered to a form. These “Heart Interest” folders house letters from young correspondents who described their experiences with illness, especially polio and rheumatic fever. Researchers can also flip through several hand-made birthday cards, along with a letter from one girl who told Eisenhower that she and her brother had named their pet turtles Mamie and Ike. Turning the pages of these letters reveals a particular story about children that White House staff members authored as they

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788 See: Finding Aid for Dwight D. Eisenhower, Records as President, 1953-1961, President’s Personal File, 111, https://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/finding_aids/pdf/Eisenhower_Dwight_Records_as_President/Presidents_Personal_File.pdf. Note that the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library has a similar case in its Bulk Mail Sample Files; certain letters from children are labeled “Special Interest/Gems.”

789 See, for examples: Paul to Eisenhower, October 1, 1954, DDE-RP, WHCF, PPF, Box 725, Folder “PPF 28-B Letters to Children - Heart Interest A (1),” DDE. Sally Jo to Eisenhower, September 15, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, PPF, Box 725, Folder “PPF 28-B Letters to Children – Heart Interest B (3),” DDE; Carole and Douglas to Eisenhower, August 22, 1956, DDE-RP, WHCF, PPF, Box 725, Folder “PPF 28-B Letters to Children - Heart Interest B (1),” DDE.
chose which youthful writers fit the PPF 28-B mold. The children in this tale – now recounted by three archival boxes – are innocent and passive. They are often victims of tragic circumstances. They are invariably cute.

I did not find in these boxes the letter from Marion, the eleven-year-old Black girl from Marshall, Texas who feared she might be killed for petitioning Eisenhower to end segregation and racism.\footnote{Marion to Eisenhower, September 25, 1957, DDE.} Nor was it in the folders meant to move my heart that I found the five extant letters from children writing to Eisenhower about the murder of Emmett Till. I made these discoveries – along with the realization that the Eisenhower White House destroyed the vast majority of correspondence from the general public written in reaction to Till’s brutal death and the subsequent acquittal of his murderers – elsewhere in the archive.\footnote{For this record, see: Memo, Hopkins, December 17, 1957, DDE. As I mentioned in footnote 88 in chapter two, this memo shows that White House staffers disposed of “3 drawers & 1 scroll” of “Material re the Emmet [sic] Till case” and an unspecified amount of “Material on the subject of segregation” in December 1957. An archival staff member at the Eisenhower Library estimated that three drawers (meaning file cabinet drawers) could have contained as much as 20,000 pages of material.}

In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, letters to presidents experienced something of a publicity heyday. In a piece in the January 17, 2017 issue of the \textit{New York Times Magazine}, Jeanne Marie Laskas reflected on President Barak Obama’s longstanding practice of reading ten letters a day (10
LADs) from the general public when he was in residence at the White House. Laskas, a professor of creative writing at the University of Pittsburgh, noted that constituent mail has not experienced uniform treatment from presidents. Reagan liked reading letters on the weekend. Nixon never wanted to see a negative assessment of his presidency. Obama was the first president to institute the “10 LAD” approach. Assessing the life of these letters once they departed the White House, Laskas added: “historians don’t focus on [constituent mail], presidential libraries don’t feature it; the vast majority of it has long since been destroyed.”

Laskas was a little bit right and a little bit wrong in making these claims. Few historians have written about letters from the general public to presidents, although some scholars, archivists, and journalists have published edited collections of the letters themselves. It is also true that presidential libraries have not historically promoted their holdings of “Bulk” or “General” mail. These collections are large and unwieldy, and they are time-consuming for archivists to fully process and for researchers to explore. Their breadth appears to have precluded clear understanding of what they do and do not contain, further limiting

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793 Cohen, Dear Mrs. Roosevelt; Holzer, Dear Mr. Lincoln; Bill Adler and Bill Adler, Jr., Kids’ Letters to President Obama (New York: Random House: 2009); Bill Adler, Kids’ Letters to President Bush (New York: HarperCollins, 2006); Bill Adler, Kids’ Letters to President Reagan (New York: M. Evans & Co., 1982); Bill Adler, Kids’ Letters to President Carter (New York: TBS, 1979); Bill Adler, Dear President Johnson: Kids’ Letter to LBJ (Camarillo: AboutComics, 2016 [1964]); Bill Adler, Kids’ Letters to President Kennedy (Camarillo: AboutComics, 2016 [1961]); Dwight Young, Dear Mr. President: Letters to the Oval Office from the Files of the National Archives (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2007). Susan Eckelmann’s forthcoming book on youth activism and politics during the 1960s will feature children’s correspondence to Lyndon B. Johnson. Beyond this, some historians have examined public mail to the presidents in order to supplement their source base. See, for one example: Rosier, Serving Their Country, 125-129.
historians’ awareness of (and interest in) these files. Laskas was quite incorrect about the mass destruction of this material. Because so many presidential libraries maintain their Bulk Mail Files, the archives represent key repositories for future scholarly research on the American public’s written enactment of citizenship and their responses to the vicissitudes of political rights and repression. As my dissertation shows, children composed a critical segment of that writing public.

Laskas acknowledged that letters from children appeared in the mail delivered daily to the Obama White House. She mentioned that a separate staff team “upstairs” reviewed “all the letters from kids,” and she referenced one child’s drawing of her cat to convey the diversity of mail sent to the president. Laskas also included a transcription of the widely shared letter from Lily, an eight-year-old girl who last year asked Obama to wear a tie-dye shirt in order to make the “sad” nation—fearful of Zika and warfare—have more “spunk” and “fun.” Just like the narrative assembled by the staff of the White House Office of Presidential Correspondence in the 1950s, Laskas’s brief story of children’s letters to their president is a sweet one. In this telling, children’s voices stand

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794 Presidential Libraries Acts passed in 1955 and 1978 gave authority to “the Archivist” to “dispose” of material that no longer had permanent historical or evidentiary value. The Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Ford, and Nixon Presidential Libraries have not engaged in a systematic destruction of Bulk Mail. Clearly, some disposal occurred in the White House itself (consider the case of mail sent on the Till case). Still, the majority of this material has been retained. At the Kennedy and Johnson Libraries in particular, hundreds of boxes of Bulk Mail on civil rights subjects remain intact. In a deeply troubling and saddening departure from the theretofore norm, however, the Carter and Reagan libraries destroyed their collections of Bulk Mail. I do not know and have been unable to satisfactorily determine what precipitated the shift. Both libraries only retain a tiny sample of what the public sent. I can only hope that as the value of this material becomes better understood, future presidents and archivists will work harder on retention and preservation. See: “Laws and Regulations,” https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/laws.

795 Laskas, “To Obama.”
apart from those of adults. Children are rendered somehow above the political fray, with adults sentimentalizing children’s writings even as children themselves often use their letters to engage with political realities. This plotline of endearing, apolitical kids is a stubborn one, and Laskas is not alone in maintaining it.  

After approximately sixty-two million Americans elected Donald J. Trump to the presidency in November 2016, stories about children writing letters to the president-elect began circulating through major news outlets and on social media. Groups of parents and educators fostered the production of many of these missives through student letter-writing campaigns meant to make the election a teachable moment and to provide a platform for the amplification of students’ voices. Reporters covering the campaigns framed the children’s letters as requests for Trump to “be kind” and “not mean.” All it takes is a short scroll through the Southern Poverty Law Center’s ongoing “StudentsSpeak” Facebook album to find letters from children doing much more than asking

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796 In another article about mail sent to the Obama White House, NPR reporter L. Carol Ritchie focused solely on children’s mail. Even in this piece, the author highlighted letters that emphasized the non-political aspects of children’s letters. Ritchie mentioned one child’s use of puffy paint and noted how another young writer tried to convince the president to intercede on her behalf and convince her parents to allow her to get her nose pierced. In contrast to the extended treatment of these letters, Ritchie wrote only one line on children’s letters about controversial personal and political issues: “Children also write with their problems, says volunteer Michael R. Moore — health issues, homelessness, immigration status or families breaking up. Many are sent to other offices for followup, Moore says.” L. Carol Ritchie, “Dear Mr. President: Obama Staff Mobilizes To Answer Kids’ Letters,” January 18, 2017, NPR, http://www.npr.org/2017/01/18/510084897/dear-mr-president-obama-staff-mobilizes-to-answer-kids-letters.

797 See the Facebook album “#StudentsSpeak,” which was created by the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance project after the November 2016 presidential election. https://www.facebook.com/pg/TeachingTolerance.org/photos/?tab=album&album_id=10154666934373446.

President Trump to be a better person. Children demand that Trump not build his wall, that he recognize the rights of LGBTQ folks and women, and that he “not hang with racists.” Just as they did throughout the second half of the twentieth century, children write letters to demonstrate their awareness of debates over race, civil rights, and equality, and to choose a position in those conflicts. They are more than cute and sweet. They are political.

When Americans debated the meanings of race and rights in the decades after World War II, children weighed in. They did so in part by putting their thoughts and opinions on paper. Children’s written participation enabled them to perform a dual role in conversations about race-based civil rights. Young writers mobilized their identities as children in need of protection to sway adults into adopting their positions and pursuing the actions they desired. Even as many adults from the 1940s through the 1990s employed the “politics of childhood” in arguments about saving children from a series of racialized threats, children themselves magnified such discourse. Children also advocated for themselves as American citizens with a stake in the nation’s present and in its future. They produced sheaves of paper to fight for their rights and the rights of other Americans. Interpretations of what those rights were abounded, and they often clashed.

Particularly after *Brown*, many children’s letters and writings focused on their right to a quality education. Children’s visions of what that education looked like contrasted sharply. Black children in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s advocated for integrated schools as part of their fight for broader racial equality, including an end to racial violence. On the other side of this struggle, many White children from the 1940s to the 1970s argued that racially “mixed” environments ensured the downfall of their schools. They marshaled every racist piece of evidence they could commit to print to preserve segregated education. But by the 1970s, children of color no longer wrote about integration. By then, they defined quality education as equal investment and care for their schools and a curriculum that reflected and promoted celebrations of their racial identities. Their requests were sometimes pointedly pragmatic: heated school buildings and rat control.

Reading and analyzing the letters and writings that children produced about education and other issues of race and civil rights over the course of the second half of the twentieth century is a critical historical undertaking. First and foremost, these documents give historians access to children’s firsthand perspectives, allowing us to see the myriad ways in which children interpreted race and rights. Given that several historians who study the racial socialization of children in twentieth-century America have written about the paucity of children’s writings about race, it is crucial for us to understand the falsehood of this claim.  

800 At the same time, because of children’s daily interactions with adults

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800 Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow*; DuRocher, *Raising Racists*. Both Ritterhouse and DuRocher defend their choices to rely primarily on memoirs and oral histories by explaining that few written sources by children exist. While their books both cover an earlier time period than mine (1890-1940), I suggest that the belief that children’s sources do not exist has, in fact,
who attempted to exercise some authority over the formation of their opinions, children frequently offered clues as to what information parents and educators shared with them about racial conflict. But as they repeated, adapted, and circulated adults’ arguments, children revealed their ownership of their own strain of racial argumentation. By focusing primarily on children’s correspondence to presidents, this dissertation provides a narrative that traces the development of children’s arguments about those race-based civil rights problems they believed occupants of the White House could influence. As such, my dissertation is only a drop in the pail of work that needs to be done to recover children’s writings about race in the United States. They are out there, and we must recover them if we intend to understand the persistent interplay of race and inequality in this country. Children do, after all, grow up.

precluded many historians from looking for them. Ritterhouse adds that sources from White children are particularly hard to track down because White children did not exhibit an awareness of their Whiteness. Ritterhouse, Growing Up Jim Crow, 6. Again, I contend that this presumption has prevented extended searching and, therefore, a full understanding of children’s participation in the development of racial conflicts and racist thinking. In part because of the nature of my sourcebase, I paint with broad brushstrokes in a national framework. I stand by the choice to do so, but there is excellent recent work on Black girls in particular that exemplifies the value of local studies. See, for examples: Chatelain, South Side Girls; LaKisha Michelle Simmons, Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015). Simmons and Chatelain both participated in a roundtable in the Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth detailing their approaches and the rich research possibilities offered by focusing on delimited geographic space. Corinne T. Field, Tammy-Charelle Owens, Marcia Chatelain, LaKisha Simmons, Abosede George, and Rhian Keyse, “The History of Black Girlhood: Recent Innovations and Future Directions,” Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth 9, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 383-401. While I agree with the arguments presented in the roundtable, I would add that geographically wide-ranging approaches complement local stories by highlighting experiences that were often national in scope.

802 The strategy of searching for children’s letters to public figures appears to be one that can be applied widely. In my forays outside of presidential libraries, I was rewarded with children’s letters at each archive. I tentatively offer the assertion that if a figure was enough in the public’s eye, children wrote to them.
As I wrote this dissertation, the abiding relevance of children’s voices and children’s lives to American racial discourse and the state of race relations in the nation struck me with the constancy of an ocean tide. Over the past several years, stories about children, race, and tragedy whispered along the edge of the nation’s consciousness – and conscience – and occasionally exploded at its center. Headlines unceasingly proclaim the ongoing crises of racism and racial inequality in America and their devastating effects for children of color. “Native American Youth Suicide Rates Are At Crisis Levels.” “The Black Girl Pushout.” “Forest Grove High students walk out over ‘build a wall’ banner.” “Flint Weighs Scope of Harm to Children Caused by Lead in Water.”

Michael Brown. Tamir Rice. Dajerria Becton. Black children’s names, deaths, and abuses fly across newspapers in a horrific paean to the American justice system. We learn, too, about White children and youths’ complicity in the violence of White supremacy. Dylann Roof had been twenty-one for just a few months when he acted on the racist and murderous thoughts he wrote down in his manifesto; in this document, Roof reproduced the same racist arguments about White

victimhood and Black criminality that generations of White children before him had helped to perpetuate.\textsuperscript{804}

Amidst all this, many White children hold fast to the position that race no longer matters in this country, and they continue to use their writings to erase race from racial discourse even as they advance racist arguments. In the spring of 2013, the \textit{Wall Street Journal} gave White high school senior Suzy Lee Weiss a soapbox in the form of their opinions pages. Weiss, smarting from several rejections from Ivy League universities, penned a piece complaining about the college-admissions process and her apparent inability (as a White, straight girl) to stand out from the crowd. “‘Diversity!’, she wrote. “I offer about as much diversity as a saltine cracker. If it were up to me, I would’ve been any of the diversities: Navajo, Pacific Islander, anything.” Without using the words affirmative action, Weiss logged her opposition to the practice. She trivialized and ridiculed her fellow young Americans’ “diversities,” remarking: “had I known two years ago what I know now, I would have gladly worn a headdress to school. Show me to any closet, and I would’ve happily come out of it.” Weiss also included a racist stereotype targeting Asian American mothers in her diatribe, lamenting that she had not benefitted from the childrearing tenacity of a “tiger mom.”\textsuperscript{805} While detractors quickly used Weiss to complain about millennials’ “entitlement” and propensity to “whine” about their circumstances, White


} When Weiss appeared on NBC's \textit{Today} in April 2013, she termed her piece a “satire” on political correctness, and she proclaimed that she had received “only positive” feedback from her peers. Although she acknowledged that “diversity” is a “wonderful thing,” she used her interview to share her belief that colleges should accept the “most qualified” candidates. Not once did Weiss or broadcaster Savannah Guthrie utter the word “race” during the segment.\footnote{Eun Kyung Kim, “Op-ed attacking colleges that rejected her was ‘satire,’ student says,” April 4, 2013, \textit{Today}, \url{http://www.today.com/news/op-ed-attacking-colleges-rejected-her-was-satire-student-says-1C9212432}.
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In March 1965, Jacqueline, a Black girl attending the Peter Burnett School in San Francisco, California, informed President Lyndon B. Johnson: “If Selma goes on like it has, I don’t know what will happen. They are even shooting with tear gas.” She added: “Mr. President, please write back.”\footnote{Jacqueline to Johnson, [Undated by author but postage stamp March 31, 1965], LBJ-PP, WHCF, Public Opinion Mail, Civil Rights, General, Box 235, Unfolded, LBJ.} Jacqueline viewed her letter as the opening of a conversation. She requested and perhaps hoped for an answer. She may have received one; if she did, it no longer exists in the archive. While the record of the White House’s response to Jacqueline’s letter may have disappeared, so much of what prompted her and hundreds of other American children to write down their testimony about race, civil rights, and equality over the course of five decades has endured. The pages of their writings wind around us like question marks.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ARCHIVES:

CSR Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico Libraries, Albuquerque, New Mexico
DDE Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas
GHWB George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, College Station, Texas
GRF Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan
HST Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, Independence, Missouri
JCL Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, Georgia
JFK John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Massachusetts
LBJ Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas
LOC Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
OSU Special Collections at The Ohio State University Library, Columbus, Ohio
RMN Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, California
RRL Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California
SCH The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at The New York Public Library, New York, New York

RECORDS:

Birmingham Bombing 1963 pressure mail protesting Birmingham bombing
Birmingham Troubles 1963 letters and telegrams re Birmingham, Alabama civil rights troubles
DDE-RP Dwight D. Eisenhower: Records as President, 1953-1961
GHWB-PR George H.W. Bush Presidential Records
GHWB-VPR George H.W. Bush Vice Presidential Records
GRF-PP Gerald R. Ford Presidential Papers
HST-PP Harry S. Truman Papers as President
HU Human Rights, Subject File Designation
IN Indian Affairs, Subject File Designation
JC-PP Jimmy Carter Presidential Papers
JFK-PP Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers
LA Labor, Subject File Designation
LBJ-PP Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Papers
OF Official File
OA Oversize Attachment
PPC Presidential Program Con
PPF President’s Personal File
PPP Presidential Program Pro
PR Public Relations, Subject File Designation
Pressure May-November 1963 pressure mail re civil rights
RMN-PM Richard M. Nixon Presidential Materials
Selma  Correspondence re: the situation in Selma, Alabama, and the
         president’s Message to Congress on Voting Rights, March 15, 1965
TV Address  Mail on reaction to the President’s radio-TV address on Civil Rights,
            June 11, 1963
Watts  Correspondence re: the riots in Watts, Los Angeles, August 1965
WHCF  White House Central Files
WHOA  White House Oversize Attachments
WHO  White House Overflow
WHORM  White House Office of Records Management

ORGANIZATIONS:

AAPA  Asian American Political Alliance
AIM  American Indian Movement
BIA  Bureau of Indian Affairs
BPP  Black Panther Party for Self-Defense
CDGM  Child Development Group of Mississippi
CIC  Commission on Interracial Cooperation
FEPC  Fair Employment Practices Committee
KKK  Ku Klux Klan
NCCJ  National Conference of Christians and Jews
NAACP  National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NIYC  National Indian Youth Council
SCLC  Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC  Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee
APPENDIX

I. Charts

A. Age Distribution of Letter Writers, 1946-1991

- Age 5 to 7: 25
- Age 8 to 10: 271
- Age 11 to 13: 641
- Age 14 to 16: 474
- Age 17 to 18+: 110

B. Gender Distribution of Letter Writers, 1946-1991

- Boys: 28%
- Girls: 61%
- N/A Boys and Girls: 2%
- Total: 1521
C.

Race Distribution Among Sample of Children that Explicitly Self-Identify, 1946-1991

$n = 767$

- White 79%
- Black 16%
- Latina/o 1%
- Native American 2%
- Asian American 1%
- Multiracial Group 1%

D.

Black Children's Gender Distribution, 1946-1991

- Girls 72%
- Boys 25%
- N/A 1%
- Boys and Girls 2%
E.

Note: For the purposes of Charts C-E, I strictly excluded all letters from children who did not provide explicit identification of their race. In the analysis itself, I often included letters from children who gave indication of their race through implication, context, or word choice. In my quantitative data collection, however, I listed such children as “unspecified.”
F. **White Pro-Civil Rights Letter Writers, by State, 1947-1952**

$n = 31$

- New York: 32%
- California: 10%
- Pennsylvania: 6%
- Oregon: 6%
- Tennessee: 3%
- South Carolina: 3%
- Wyoming: 3%
- Missouri: 3%
- Michigan: 3%
- Idaho: 3%
- Maine: 3%
- Mississippi: 8%
- Arkansas: 8%
- Georgia: 8%
- Lousiana: 8%
- Iowa: 6%
- New Mexico: 3%
- Texas: 17%
- Missouri: 25%
- Virginia: 9%

G. **Segregationist Letter Writers, by State, 1947-1951**

$n = 12$

- Texas: 17%
- Missouri: 25%
- Virginia: 9%
- Alabama: 8%
- Georgia: 8%
- Idaho: 8%
- Lousiana: 8%
- New Mexico: 3%
- Idaho: 3%
Black Letter Writers, by State, 1948-1952

- Washington, D.C.: 11%
- Florida: 6%
- Illinois: 17%
- Kentucky: 12%
- Louisiana: 12%
- Mississippi: 12%
- New York: 12%
- Pennsylvania: 6%
- Virginia: 12%

$n = 17$

Pro-Civil Rights Letter Writers, by State, 1954-1958

- New York: 20%
- California: 14%
- New Jersey: 6%
- North Carolina: 5%
- Pennsylvania: 5%
- Oregon: 2%
- Ohio: 5%
- New Mexico: 2%
- Minnesota: 2%
- Missouri: 1%
- Montana: 1%
- Nevada: 1%
- Nebraksa: 1%
- Washington: 2%
- Idaho: 2%
- Iowa: 2%
- Kansas: 2%
- Kentucky: 1%
- Louisiana: 1%
- Maine: 1%
- Montana: 1%
- Missouri: 1%
- Montana: 1%
- Nebraska: 1%
- Nevada: 1%
- New Mexico: 2%
- New Jersey: 6%
- North Carolina: 5%
J.

**Letter Writers with Neutral and/or Mixed Views on Civil Rights, 1956-1958**

*n = 25*

![Pie chart showing the distribution of letter writers by state.](chart1.png)

K.

**Segregationist Letter Writers, by State, 1954-1959**

*n = 80*

![Pie chart showing the distribution of segregationist letter writers by state.](chart2.png)
L.

White Pro-Civil Rights Letter Writers by State, April 1963-April 1965

$n = 189$

M.

White Segregationist Letter Writers, by State, April 1963-April 1965

$n = 48$
Neutral and Pro-Uprising Letter Writers, by State, 1965-1968

* n = 15


* n = 43
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