

Note from the Editors

Sheila Smith McKoy, Editor
Jennifer Griffiths, Guest Editor

Coming to adulthood after the decline of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1950s and 1960s, contemporary Black youth grew up during a period of initial promise, profound change, and, for far too many, heart-wrenching disappointment (3).

Patricia Hill Collins

Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism

In what is likely the first novel published by an African American author, *Our Nig* (1859), Harriet Wilson focuses on the violence that defined her life as a Black child coming of age in nineteenth-century America, a space in which Frado, Wilson's alter ego, often laments that she can only escape by death. Wilson leaves little doubt that her life as a Black child in America was ultimately defined by racial violence, its threat and its concomitant impacts. Wilson's thesis quite effectively defines the experiences of Black children in the United States, far beyond the period of enslavement in which Wilson was writing. The moments and movements that define America's shared, national history can often be documented through the graphic violence enacted on the bodies of Black children. In a sense, then, Wilson offers a view of America that has been defined by the persistent violence directed against African American children since its inception. In this special issue of *Obsidian*, guest edited by Jennifer Griffiths, we enter the conversation about endangered Black children with this volume entitled "Violence and Black Youth in the Post-Civil Rights United States."

Graphic knowledge about violence directed against African American children and the circulation of images and information about the murders of Emmett Till and the four little girls of the Birmingham church bombing, served as a catalyst for many citizens involved in the Civil Rights Movement and shaped the consciousness of an entire generation. The impact of these images has been documented. What, however, has happened to the reception of the violated black child since this historical moment? This issue

includes essays and creative texts that consider the impact of violence on this this generation, particularly in relation to violence and the young Black body in the public imagination. The issue focuses on texts that address public reception, collective memory, and traumatic legacies related to violence directed against African American children from the 1970s to the present.

In the late twentieth century, the Atlanta Child Murders sent shockwaves of fear and profound grief throughout the African American community when over twenty young people were murdered from 1979 to 1981. GerShun Avilez's "The Aesthetics of Terror: Affect and Temporality in *Those Bones Are Not My Child* and *Leaving Atlanta*" analyzes two literary representations of the Atlanta Child Murders and the writers' efforts "to map out the affective terrain of terror" defining this historical crisis. Through a close reading of several key poems, Tara Betts suggests that poetry can offer a site of resistance against the police brutality that disproportionately claims the lives of black youth in her essay "Everytime they kill a black boy . . .": Representations of Police Brutality Against Children in Poems by Audre Lorde, Jayne Cortez, and June Jordan." Leila Kamali argues that John Edgar Wideman's work takes on the whole cultural construct of childhood as following a linear development that excludes African American children, who face an "adultification" imposed by racism. In "He Looked Like A Man': Narrating Child Identities in the Meditative Nonfiction of Adultification," Kamali finds that Wideman's representations of childhood rely on "ogbanje," a Western African child figure that counters the rigid linearity associated with Western paradigms and places the African American child in a more central relation to community life and cultural memory. Jennifer Griffiths examines the way in which Sapphire's *The Kid* intervenes against "good victim" paradigms and reader expectations about male survivors in "My body of a free boy My body of dance': Violence and the Choreography of Survival in Sapphire's *The Kid*."

The issue's creative pieces also consider the cultural and individual legacies that follow incidents of violence against black youth. Vincent Carrella's "The Deep and Tragic Midnight" weaves cultural allusions involving collective resistance with a deep intimacy between mother and child in flight from domestic violence. Its themes of the child as witness and the bearer of a legacy related to historical and interpersonal violence work resonate with the themes explored throughout the issue. Read together, Diane Judge's poems "Making Postcards" and "When I Thought of Racism" compel the reader to consider the legacy of violence and raise questions about the role of the spectator historically and in the more recent cases of violence against

Black children.

This special issue addresses a significant gap in our critical and cultural understanding of violence and its profound impact on our understanding American cultural violence and its focus on Black children. “I inherited Jackson, Mississippi./ For my majority it gave me Emmett Till,” claims poet Audre Lorde in “Afterimages.” Playing loud music, walking home in a hoodie, or buying juice at a local convenience store will now mark the moment before tragedy for the generations that followed the Civil Rights Movement, catalyzed in part by a Chicago child’s mid-century murder in Mississippi. How will the voices of literary expression negotiate this inheritance? We hope this special issue participates in a response to this question and serves as a gesture toward finding meaning after violence.

Works Cited

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