

## Article

# Strong Enough to Fight: Harriet Tubman vs. The Myth of the Lost Cause

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**Abstract:** Black creators who tell Harriet Tubman's story engage in an ongoing rhetorical battle over historical memory with regard to slavery and the Civil War. This essay examines the challenges Tubman's story poses to a Lost Cause narrative that took root in the nineteenth-century and manifests in the work of celebrated children's author Robert Lawson. Reading Ann Petry's YA biography *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (1955), Jacob Lawrence's picture book *Harriet and the Promised Land* (1968), and Kasi Lemmons' film *Harriet* (2019) together, and within the context of Lawson's award-winning *They Were Strong and Good* (1940) and his historical primer *Watchwords of Liberty: A Pageantry of American Quotations* (1943) offers an opportunity to assess the rhetorical firepower of creative work about a historical figure who continues to fascinate people of all ages. Such reading also underscores the extent to which the apartheid in and of children's literature limits the imaginations of critics, thereby hindering efforts to promote social justice.

**Keywords:** white supremacy; Lost Cause narratives; Robert Lawson; Harriet Tubman; children's literature

*My favorite quote of [Tubman's] is, 'I prayed to God to make me strong enough to fight.' That's super interesting for the time we live in—there's so much that we have to pray to be strong enough to fight for.—Kasi Lemmons (Sims 2019).*

## 1. Introduction: Stories as Sites of Resistance

As a subject of interest and inquiry, Harriet Tubman has garnered attention from a wide range of constituencies, from a US Treasury Secretary proposing to put her picture on the USD 20 bill to scholars in various academic disciplines, museum curators, educators, and creative artists. In "Between History and Fantasy: Harriet Tubman in the Artistic and Popular Imaginary", Janell Hobson focuses on the latter, exploring interest in Tubman from Aaron Douglas' and Jacob Lawrence's visual art in the 1930s and 1940s to the contemporary *Black Moses Barbie* YouTube videos of Pierre Bennu. While finding the historical figure in some surprising places, Hobson argues that "[b]ecause of Tubman's frequent appearances in juvenile literature, we should revisit children's stories as sites of resistance, or what [Robin D. G.] Kelley calls the 'black radical imagination'"; Hobson cites Faith Ringgold's *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* as an example of interweaving history and fantasy in a children's picture book and thus "radicaliz[ing] youth by liberating their imaginations" (Hobson 2014, p. 63). A current example of storytelling with similar liberating potential is *Harriet Tubman: Straight Up Outta' The Underground*, an interactive virtual production of the Cincinnati Children's Theater, available via Broadway on Demand for USD 15. For an additional fee, viewers can actively participate in the story by choosing one plotline over another, although the ending remains the same for everyone. Marketed to school children in grades 3–8, *Straight Up* invites them to "[b]ring the past to the present and change the future"<sup>1</sup>. Like the fictional siblings in Ringgold's picture book, the audience gets a history lesson that functions as a call to action. This type of storytelling builds, in innovative ways, on Augusta E. Bird's 1921 biographical sketch of Tubman that appeared in *The Brownies' Book*, a children's magazine edited by W.E.B. Du Bois and Jesse Fauset. A



**Citation:** Dubek, Laura. 2023. Strong Enough to Fight: Harriet Tubman vs. The Myth of the Lost Cause.

*Humanities* 12: 67. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h12040067>

Received: 29 May 2023

Revised: 9 July 2023

Accepted: 18 July 2023

Published: 20 July 2023



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direct line can be drawn from the editors' focus on Black notables as sources of pride and inspiration at the dawn of the Harlem Renaissance to *Straight Up* and more broadly focused contemporary texts such as Kwame Alexander and Kadir Nelson's *The Undeclared* (2019), a picture book that honors dozens of Black cultural figures and that made Nelson only the fourth Black illustrator to win the prestigious Caldecott Medal.<sup>2</sup> Tubman's story has never, however, been strictly for children. Nor has it served only to instill Black pride and stir the Black imagination, even as both aims continue to be necessary and significant outcomes for artistic projects.

The fact that stories about the most famous formerly enslaved conductor on the Underground Railroad keep getting (re)told suggests the strength and resiliency of exactly what her story challenges—White supremacy. In her meticulously researched biography, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, an American Hero*, Kate Clifford Larson documents how, beginning in 1869 with Sarah Bradford's *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, the freedom fighter's story has been written and rewritten to suit the historical moment and, in the spirit of "reconciliation and reunification", robbed of its power to expose the Lost Cause as White fantasy (Larson 2003, p. 265). In other words, Harriet has been used to tell a story of US exceptionalism, not racist exploitation. Indeed, while Black-authored children's books about Tubman counter the racist imagery and revisionist history in dominant or "master" narratives, they do so largely by satisfying White expectations for what constitutes an American hero, resulting in stories that focus largely on character, not context.<sup>3</sup> This essay foregrounds that context by putting three Black-authored Tubman stories—a Young Adult (YA) biography, a picture book, and a film—in literary contestation with the Lost Cause narratives of a celebrated children's author. In his award-winning *They Were Strong and Good* (1940) and his historical primer *Watchwords of Liberty: A Pageant of American Quotations* (1943), Robert Lawson presents a narrative of US history and the Civil War that erases or distorts the role slavery played in that history while using White and Black characters to (re)define America(ns) as White. As sites of White resistance, published during WWII and reprinted in an era of expanding opportunities for Black Americans,<sup>4</sup> Lawson's texts foster radicalization of a profoundly dangerous sort: they invite and endorse White supremacist thinking. Foregrounding Lawson's Lost Cause narratives, republished as recently as 2006, makes visible the rhetorical battlefield upon which Black-authored stories about Tubman wage war against White supremacy.

While the myth of the Lost Cause circulates widely, manifesting in a variety of forms, it becomes more apparent, as well as more potent, during moments of heightened White racial anxiety. The Tubman stories discussed in this essay appeared during two such moments: the classic phase of the civil rights movement and the Trump/MAGA era. In 1955, Ann Petry, better known for her adult fiction, published *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, reprinted several times and as recently as 2018. In 1968, Jacob Lawrence, a distinguished figure in the art world, created *Harriet Tubman and the Promised Land*. In true "Brownies" fashion, Lawrence used his artistic talent to express pride in his rich Black heritage, just as he had done in 1940, with thirty-one narrative panels comprising his *Harriet Tubman* series. Both literary texts—Petry's historical biography and Lawrence's picture book—demarcate the place many people will form their first, and perhaps only, impressions of Tubman—in the pages of books marketed to young readers. Kasi Lemmons puts her 2019 film *Harriet* in conversation with representations of Tubman in children's literature. Arguing that such books "defanged [Tubman], declawed her, to make her more palatable", the filmmaker implicitly identifies (as well as implicates) a White audience for stories about Tubman, noting that "there's something quite terrifying about the image of a black woman with a rifle" (Ito 2019). At the same time, Lemmons makes clear her desire to reach an intergenerational and presumably multicultural audience: "I really wanted to create a film that a sophisticated 10-year-old could see with his grandmother, which isn't easy for a film that takes place during slavery" (Obenson 2019). This diverse group is perhaps similar to those who read Petry's biography or Lawrence's picture book during the civil rights era.

Reading Petry, Lawrence, and Lemmons together, and within the context of Lawson's Lost Cause narratives offers an opportunity to assess the rhetorical firepower of creative work about a historical figure who continues to fascinate people of all ages. More importantly, putting Tubman in literary contestation with Lawson and the myth of the Lost Cause underscores not only the significance of children's literature as a field of study, but also the extent to which apartheid within and of children's literature<sup>5</sup> limits the imaginations of critics, thereby hindering efforts to promote social justice.

## 2. Robert Lawson's Lost Cause Narratives

Black creators who tell Tubman's story engage in an on-going rhetorical battle over historical memory with regard to slavery and the Civil War. In *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, David W. Blight describes this battlefield by foregrounding debates, carried on by politicians and in the pages of newspapers, about the terms of reunification following Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox in 1865. What would be the consequences of the Confederacy's defeat? Blight argues that to the extent reunion occurred, it did so by denying the full emancipation of millions of formerly enslaved Black people. Denying Black people citizenship, and thereby (re)defining American identity as White, required constant vigilance, an all-hands-on-deck approach to creating, disseminating, and recycling a narrative about the Civil War that erased or distorted the role slavery played in a bloody conflict that left hundreds of thousands of Americans dead. In *Slavery in American Children's Literature, 1790–2010*, Paula T. Connolly chronicles, in spectacular fashion, the role books for children have played in this ideological battle, covering an impressive array of texts and authors and noting the tension between (and within) dominant White-authored narratives and resistant Black-authored ones. The historical sweep of her study demonstrates the importance of children's literature to the debate over race and national identity, a significance evident in our own era via attempts to whitewash the story of Rosa Parks in social studies textbooks; ban the showing of documentaries about Ruby Bridges, the six-year-old who, in 1960, faced a White mob when she integrated an elementary school in New Orleans; defund libraries that refuse to comply with demands to remove books deemed dangerous or divisive; and establish a 1776 Commission to promote "patriotic education".

Robert Lawson's work represents a literary tradition encompassing a wide variety of texts that rewrite the narrative of the Civil War by casting White Southerners as freedom-loving patriots who stood tall against tyranny. The type of patriotism these texts espouse equates *patriot* with *White nationalist*. The Black pride Lawrence artfully expresses in both his *Harriet Tubman* series and *Harriet and the Promised Land* contrasts sharply with the White pride depicted in Lawson's *They Were Strong and Good*, a picture book awarded the Caldecott Medal in 1941 and reprinted by Viking Press sixteen times between 1940 and 2006. Lawson is the only author recognized with both a Caldecott and a Newbery Medal,<sup>6</sup> such recognition securing an exalted place for him in US children's literary history. Every October, a festival is held in Lawson's honor at the Connecticut home that bears the name of his Newbery-winning *Rabbit Hill*. In 2009, Connie Rockman, the program coordinator for the event, responded to a blog post in which Peter Sieruta, a writer and reviewer for *Horn Book Magazine*, mused about whether Lawson's home still existed: "Yes, Peter, there really is a Rabbit Hill" (Sieruta 2009). In a rare pulling back of the curtain to reveal how racism thrives in darkness, Rockman then compared what she called the "racially insensitive comments" recently expunged from *Rabbit Hill*, to those in Lawson's other award-winning book: "The racist comments and—even worse—images are most prevalent in his Caldecott winner, a book we tend to downplay in promoting his legacy" (Sieruta 2009). Lawson followed *They Were Strong and Good* with *Watchwords of Liberty: A Pageant of American Quotations*, published in 1943, reprinted nine times by Little, Brown, and distributed by Scholastic Book Services in 1957 and 1965. Resurrected during key moments of the civil rights movement, conspicuously absent from many lists of Lawson's published works, *Watchwords* resonates strongly with the White nationalist fervor in our

own era. Whether Lawson continues to be widely read or not, the racism underlying his Lost Cause narratives, as well as the particular insidious brand of patriotism they promote, remain a prominent part of both his and our cultural legacy, presenting the opportunity to contextualize Black-authored stories about Tubman in a way that draws attention to children's literature, as Connolly's book-length study does, as a significant arena for the perpetuation of as well as challenges to White supremacy.

*Watchwords of Liberty* covers more than three hundred years, from the arrival of the Mayflower to the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Lawson begins by quoting George Washington, encouraging his young readers to "erect a standard to which the wise and honest may repair" (Lawson 1965). This standard is defined almost entirely by White men: of the fifty-seven quotes Lawson uses to demonstrate US devotion to "independence and freedom of thought and action", only one comes from an African American, and none comes from a woman. Lawson considers Booker T. Washington noteworthy for the principle upon which he built Tuskegee Institute, quoting a line from the Black notable's 1895 Atlanta Exposition Address, included in his autobiography *Up from Slavery*: "No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem" (Lawson 1965, p. 113). A controversial figure in African American history, Washington is remembered primarily, and perhaps unfairly, by the accommodationist stance he advocated, most (in)famously in another line of his Atlanta speech: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."<sup>7</sup> Washington's position on segregation is perfectly in line with *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court ruling, made the following year (1896), that established the doctrine of "separate-but-equal", thereby legalizing Jim Crow. His position is also in line with the Southern Manifesto, or Declaration of Constitutional Principles, put forth sixty years later, in 1956, by ninety-six members of Congress who vehemently opposed *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the 1954 Supreme Court decision declaring segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Citing "chaos and confusion" caused by the ruling, Southern governors in Arkansas and Virginia chose to close schools rather than comply with a federal order to integrate.

Lawson essentially uses the founder of an industrial school for Black people to legitimize an insidious anti-democratic understanding of liberty. In the pencil drawing accompanying this vignette, Lawson presents Washington in a three-piece suit and bow tie, holding a book to his chest. Behind him, a Black man wearing overalls holds a plow and walks behind a horse. The background for both men is an ornate building with pillars and a dome, set in a landscape suggesting neglect or ruin, presumably at Tuskegee. In her fascinating (and chilling) cultural history, *White Supremacy in Children's Literature: Characterizations of African Americans, 1830–1900*, Donnarae MacCann provides relevant context for this era: "After the armed conflict, the South reinvested a cheap labor system by means of ex-slave contract labor, convict leases, crop liens, indenture contracts, and obsolete forms of industrial education in place of education opportunity." MacCann wryly points out that the North "did not intervene in this process" (MacCann 1998, p. 235), nor, as Lawson's illustration implies, did Black folks living and working in the South. After all, the leading Black spokesman at the dawn of the so-called Progressive era seems, at best, not to mind the marginalization of Black people and, at worst, believes it is necessary and proper. The role Washington plays in Lawson's "pageant" is to express a preference for maintaining order by accepting second-class citizenship over liberty. Put another way, at a time when Du Bois, a sociologist and contemporary of Washington's, identified the "color line" as the problem of the twentieth-century, Lawson concocts a version of American history that does not minimize this problem so much as deny that any such problem exists.

*Watchwords of Liberty* presents an unabashed White nationalist version of US history that, if understood as fact, makes any claim of racial discrimination or inequality an absurd, unpatriotic attempt to divide the nation based on color. It is precisely the type of revisionist history promoted by groups such as the 1776 Commission. Lawson begins his story of the Civil War with "Cotton is King", a quote from a speech given in March 1858 by US



Senator James Henry Hammond. He then exploits the personification of cotton in a way that denies the reality of race and racism: “His realm was broad and rich; through many of the Southern states all people served him. From wealthy planter to humble slave, merchant, blacksmith, lawyer, carpenter—even the lean mule, all served King Cotton and depended upon his bounty for their very existence” (Lawson 1965, p. 70). Having set up an us-and-him, Lawson extends the King’s reach to the North as well as East, beyond the borders of the US: “In the factory towns of New England and old England across the sea, cotton-mill owners waxed fat and prosperous, built themselves monstrous, ugly mansions; while in the mills the white slaves of King Cotton coughed their miserable lives away in the lint-filled gloom” (Lawson 1965, pp. 70–71). Challenging Hammond in this story is Abraham Lincoln, who, together with people “all over the country”, realized “that slavery, the cheap labor on which King Cotton’s throne uneasily rested, was a wrong thing; that this nation could not exist half slave and half free” (Lawson 1965, p. 72). By redefining slavery as “cheap labor”, Lawson strikes a populist note, acknowledging “slavery” as economic exploitation while simultaneously evading the question of Black freedom. Such evasion is a crucial component of the Lost Cause narrative.

While equating the “humble slave” in the South with the “white slaves” of the North, Lawson evokes nostalgia for the pre-Civil War South via popular (and stereotypical) images of Black people in service to Whites. One of only three illustrations in *Watchwords* that feature Black people, the drawing that accompanies “Cotton is King”, depicts the front lawn of a well-tended plantation house. In the shade of a large oak tree stands a White couple, exquisitely dressed, and their male child, who wields a sword. Behind the child is a Mammy figure, wearing an apron and kerchief. While the White adults look lovingly at the boy, who presumably will grow up to slay dragons and rule the kingdom, the Black woman appears with exaggerated minstrel-inspired features and a blank expression. Pictured with a doll dangling from her right hand, she is both the young boy’s caretaker and play-thing. In the foreground, five Black figures march in formation, two with bags of cotton on their heads and the others carrying hoes. Black people in Lawson’s history appear as props, part of the landscape but never the focus of the narrative. These “humble slaves”, like their Northern (and European) counterparts, are in service to and dependent upon the King. The collective memory Lawson constructs completely erases the fact that White people bought and sold Black people as commodities, often without regard to family ties, that the quality of life of enslaved Black men, women, and children was wholly dependent on the economic fortunes and whims of their White owners, and that these owners, or the overseers they employed, wielded whips to enforce submission and to satisfy their (psychosexual) desires to dominate and subjugate. In other words, Lawson’s revisionist history denies slavery as an economic system of racist exploitation put in place and maintained by a White majority who value profits and what W.E.B. DuBois called “the wages of Whiteness” more than the idea of freedom and justice for all.

In *Watchwords of Liberty*, Lawson advances and fortifies the myth of the Lost Cause, and by keeping his White nationalist primer in print, the White-dominated publishing industry helped that myth take root and spread. The literary-critical establishment assisted in this process by turning a blind eye to Lawson’s racism, declaring “freedom, liberty, the courage to fight for independence—these are the virtues celebrated in Robert Lawson’s books” (Schmidt 1997, p. 2). In his Foreword to the 1957 edition of *Watchwords*, written two months after the Montgomery Bus Boycott successfully challenged segregation in Alabama and put the national spotlight on a young charismatic preacher named Martin Luther King, Jr., Lawson (re)presents his carefully curated selection of quotations that he insists “live[s] in the hearts of most Americans” (Lawson 1965). The “one fact” that “stands out strikingly” for Lawson is that “nowhere in the words of our most honored fighting men does one find a trace of hate or venom. There is determination, but behind it lies sorrow and regret”; hence, Lawson encourages his readers to hold Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee in equal esteem—the former a “ruthless bulldog” who in victory called for peace; the latter, a “magnificent general” who in defeat “counseled his ruined and embittered people to

‘bury contention with the war’” (Lawson 1965). Lawson’s history gives readers no reason to think that the “contention” requiring burial had anything to do with slavery. While Black people obviously existed, they were victims along with practically everyone else. As in the Revolutionary War, the problem facing American patriots in 1861 was a “King” whom “all people served” and whose insatiable greed made nearly everyone’s life—aside from cotton mill owners—a misery (even wealthy Southern planters were just one storm away from ruin, thanks to the King’s insatiable appetite for cotton). While injecting a great deal of ambiguity over what Grant and Lee’s armies actually fought about, Lawson expresses certainty over how the battle ended: “The Cotton Kingdom fell in civil war, in flame and blood and the roar of combat. It fell in bitterness, destruction and desolation, bringing mourning to almost every home in the land” (Lawson 1965, p. 72). Readers are thus encouraged to mourn this loss as if no one is actually to blame, and in this way, Lawson provides one of the key “ingredients” of the Lost Cause, which Blight, in his study of the Civil War in American memory, describes as “people forming a collective identity as victims and survivors” (Blight 2001, p. 38).<sup>8</sup> A master of misdirection, Lawson perpetuates White supremacy by denying any such thing as White power manifesting as anti-Black racism. White Southerners took up arms and fought valiantly because that is what men do: just like Daniel Boone, Lawson tells us in the Foreword, each man must “kill his bear” (Lawson 1965).

The racist ideology of *Watchwords* is matched by the racist imagery of Lawson’s award-winning *They Were Strong and Good*, imagery which the keepers of his legacy “downplay”. *The Oxford Companion to Children’s Literature* characterizes the illustrations in Lawson’s pictorial family history as “racially insensitive”, which is like calling the characterization of Mammy and Prissy in *Gone With the Wind*, David Selznick’s homage to the Lost Cause and winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1940, *perhaps* problematic, depending on one’s point of view. In her essay suggesting how teachers can use eight Caldecott award winners to meet Common Core standards, Kathleen T. Horning calls the illustrations of Native Americans and African Americans in *They Were Strong and Good* “extremely dated”, a fact she considers “unfortunate”, presumably because of Lawson’s remarkable skills as an artist (Horning 2012, p. 12). But at least Horning read the book before ultimately endorsing it. Writing nearly four decades before Horning, Judith Sloan Hoberman wonders whether librarians recommend Lawson’s Caldecott winner based solely on previous recommendations. After calling attention to what the National Council of Teachers of English had to say about the book in 1973—“Lawson’s straightforward, irrepressibly humorous and sometimes touching stories and his vigorous pictures of our ancestors should, as the artist hoped, make us ‘proud of the country that they helped to build’”—Hoberman concludes that “the book’s merits cannot compensate for the pain inflicted by passages that are blatantly racist” (Hoberman 1976, p. 469). Published in the *Harvard Educational Review*, Hoberman’s sober assessment of Lawson’s work has not, unfortunately, carried the day. To confront racism is to resist seemingly insurmountable market forces. For example, consumers searching for award-winning children’s books will find the following summary on the Penguin Random House website:

Awarded the Caldecott Medal in 1941, *They Were Strong and Good* is a classic book that follows the path of one family’s journey through American history. Robert Lawson introduces us to his forefathers and with them we brave Caribbean storms, travel to the wharf markets of New York, and fight in the Civil War. Amidst these adventures Lawson’s grandparents meet, marry, and raise a family, and later his parents follow the same cycle of life. But this book is more than just the story of one family, it’s a social history of our country. It reminds us to be proud of our ancestors—who they were, what they did, and the effect that they had on the nation we live in today.<sup>9</sup>

In a comment posted on Peter Sieruta’s blog, “MC” describes purchasing Lawson’s picture book based on this type of marketing. Identifying as someone who works at a domestic violence shelter, MC hoped to use the book to work with children, many of whom identify

as African American, on “building a family history they could be proud of”. But after reading *They Were Strong and Good*, MC could not “figure out how it will work in this context”. Children, she explained, “are very perceptive and will pick up [sic] on the subtle racism”, adding, “I don’t think I can use it” (Sieruta 2009). While downplaying the racism in Lawson’s legacy obviously helps sell books, refusing to confront that racism makes us complicit in a literary culture that perpetuates White supremacy, limiting the imaginations of *all* readers.

The nostalgia in (and for) *They Were Strong and Good* is rooted in and seeks to perpetuate a collective false memory. A critical component of this false narrative is the idea of fighting for a righteous cause, without defining it and without confronting the question of Black freedom. Asserting his authority not only over his own personal story, but also the story of the country, Lawson admits in his Foreword that his version may not be entirely accurate, but that accuracy “does not really matter”:

This is the story of my mother and my father and of their fathers and mothers. Most of it I heard as a little boy, so there may be many mistakes; perhaps I have forgotten or mixed up some of the events and people. But that does not really matter, for this is not alone the story of my parents and grandparents, it is the story of the parents and grandparents of most of us who call ourselves Americans. None of them were great or famous, but they were strong and good. They worked hard and had many children. They all helped to make the United States the great nation that it now is. Let us be proud of them and guard well the heritage they have left us. (Lawson 1940)

The heritage Lawson urges his young readers to “guard well” is the same way of life Ashley Wilkes and Rhett Butler defend, with their lives and livelihoods, lest it be “gone with the wind”. In this fictional world, created by interweaving history and (White) fantasy, Black people not only serve the interests of White people, they prefer and are content to do so. Both the racist imagery and White nationalist ideology in Lawson’s picture book should be understood in the context of a tradition of Lost Cause literature that stretches back to the Civil War era and includes General Grant’s bestselling *Personal Memoirs*,<sup>10</sup> history and social studies textbooks that erase or minimize slavery as the cause of the Civil War, travel literature that mythologizes the South, and songs such as “Dixie” and “The Bonnie Blue Flag”<sup>11</sup>. The most egregious example is D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, a virulent racist film that swelled the ranks of the Ku Klux Klan. Screened at the White House, the 1915 homage to the Lost Cause turns terrorists into patriots by celebrating, promoting, and normalizing White nationalism. Over a century later, the inheritors of this tradition marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the removal of a statue to Robert E. Lee. In the current era, the tradition of the Lost Cause manifests in calls to “take our country back”, on bumper stickers, hats, and T-shirts declaring “heritage not hate”, and in speeches by political leaders such as Nikki Haley, the former Governor of South Carolina, who proclaimed, without apology, that for many people, the Confederate flag symbolizes service, sacrifice, and heritage.

Through text and image, Lawson positions the White reader of *They Were Strong and Good* to identify with his White ancestral pride, ingenuity, and above all, fighting spirit. Reviewing the book for *The New York Times*, A. T. Eaton underscored its educational value: “Of all the books designed to teach boys and girls the meaning of democracy and to encourage patriotism that are being hurried to press today, this one is likely to make the deepest impression on children” (Schmidt 1997, p. 18). One wonders whether Eaton considered the impression children of color would get from Lawson’s picture book or if “children” always meant White children. Lawson introduces his maternal grandfather as a Scottish-born sea captain who braves violent storms as he sails from New York to the Caribbean islands for “monkeys and parrots, sugar cane and sometimes Panama hats” (Lawson 1940). The illustration accompanying this introduction depicts a young Black

boy, presumably the sea captain's slave, wearing only tattered shorts, no shirt or shoes, carrying a monkey and balancing another on his head. Whether his grandfather engaged in the slave trade is unclear, although the drawing suggests he traded the commodities—timber, tobacco, rum, and sugar—typically exchanged for Black people in chains. Lawson introduces his paternal grandfather as an Englishman living in Alabama who “was always fighting something”. After successfully fighting the Indians, he became a preacher so that he could “fight the Powers of Evil” (Lawson 1940). In the corner of the drawing that accompanies this statement, a Black boy looks up at the preacher mounted on his horse, as if standing in the White man's shadow. In two pages, Lawson thus associates both Indigenous people and Black people with evil, while defining America and American identity as White-only. The introduction of Lawson's father coincides with the beginning of the Civil War. In the illustration marking this moment, everyone is distraught that the grandfather “quit fighting Satan and went off to fight the Yankees instead” (Lawson 1940). Only twelve at the time, Lawson's father is pictured crying, with his face turned away. The twelve-year-old's slave, and hunting companion is also crying, with his head down and his hand covering his face. In the foreground, standing on the porch is a distraught Mammy figure wearing an apron, her hands covering her face as well. Even one of the dogs has his head bowed. Lawson depicts the grandfather standing tall in his uniform, carrying a rifle, with a canteen hanging from his belt, engraved with the letters CSA—Confederate States of America. In his book-length study of Lawson, Gary Schmidt emphasizes “the pain of separation” in this scene, one of many illustrations that, for him, conveys the “moral impetus” of the nation (Schmidt 1997, p. 17). How this illustration (and others) reveals the *immorality* of a nation seems not to concern Schmidt.

Lawson links his Southern male ancestors—his evangelizing grandfather and his father—with the CSA canteen and the image of a White man on a horse. Lawson uses this iconic image (which occurs in *Watchwords* and replicates the statues of Robert E. Lee erected throughout the South, many in the early years of the twentieth-century) to advance the cult of the fallen soldier, another crucial trope of the Lost Cause narrative. After the grandfather leaves to fight the Yankees, Lawson's father, despite his young age, “walked to where the war was” and joined the army: “He was pretty small, so they made him guidon bearer in the artillery and gave him a mule to ride” (Lawson 1940). When the mule is gone, the boy stands as straight as before, holding the flag, now tattered: “There had been four guns in the battery at first, but later there were only three, then two, and finally there was only one. But my father still stood up where the Captain told him to, very stiff and holding his flag very straight. He still felt proud, even though there was only one gun to line up beside him” (Lawson 1940). After “a big battle over Atlanta”, when only a bit of the flag remains, the boy tucks it under his shirt for “a souvenir” and retreats, using the stick as a crutch. Prominent in the drawings, prior to the defeat in Atlanta, is the adolescent's canteen, engraved with the letters CSA. Participating in the war, aligning himself with the Confederate cause, becomes the boy's initiation into (Southern) (White) manhood, and despite a devastating loss, the war has given him, as well as his heirs, something of which to be forever proud: “I am proud of my mother and my father and of their mothers and fathers. And I am proud of the country that they helped to build” (Lawson 1940). While Lawson does not claim that his ancestors were the *only* ones who built America, he makes clear that his family, and everyone like them, are the true Americans—patriots upholding that standard to which, as Lawson tells us in *Watchwords* “the wise and honest may repair”. In this way, the award-winning author uses his picture book not just to promote values such as service and sacrifice, but to engage in the insidious business of White nation-building.

### 3. Writing Harriet into History

What makes the stories Ann Petry, Jacob Lawrence, and Kasi Lemmons tell about Harriet Tubman noteworthy, in addition to bridging the artificial divide between a child and adult audience, is that each occupies the rhetorical battleground upon which Robert Lawson raises the flag for the Lost Cause and conflates patriotism with White nationalism.



In doing so, they use Tubman's legacy to fight against White supremacy and for a collective public memory that foregrounds the contradictory nature of our history as well as the consequences for choosing power over justice, order over liberty.

A formidable adversary to the myth of the Lost Cause, Petry's *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* challenges the paternalistic view that White men not only get to write and interpret history, but also to represent it. Drawing from existing historical research and utilizing her skills as a novelist to create a compelling narrative, Petry writes Tubman into history by chronicling the freedom fighter's life within the sociopolitical context of a nation at war with itself over the question of freedom. A hybrid text that defies categorization, either by genre or readership, *Harriet Tubman* contains twenty-two chapters, beginning with "The Quarter" and Harriet's birth in 1820, and ending with "The Last Years" and the text inscribed on the bronze tablet erected in her honor during a mass meeting (attended by Booker T. Washington) in Auburn, New York, in 1914. All but two of the chapters end with an italicized section that contextualizes Harriet's life story within a much larger national drama. These sections chronicle important events in the timeline of abolitionist activity leading up to the Civil War, including references to William Lloyd Garrison, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, John Brown, and Frederick Douglass (among others) as well as the Fugitive Slave Act, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Kansas–Nebraska Act, and the Dred Scott decision. Petry strengthens the documentary nature of her text by including primary source material, such as letters written by Thomas Garrett and excerpts from William Still's journals. Petry imagines conversations between Harriet's parents and among the enslaved community that further instruct her readers, providing insight into the Middle Passage, White psychology, and Black resistance strategies. A narrative of US history spanning nearly one hundred years, with a focus on how one woman's life exemplifies not only the nature and cost of freedom, but the lengths to which people will go to secure (or deny) it, Petry's text is valuable not because it exposes histories such as Lawson's *Watchwords of Liberty* as incomplete or impartial, but because it shows them to be ideologically driven and purposefully inaccurate.

Whereas Lost Cause narratives, via denial and deflection, impede progress toward the democratic idea(l) of liberty and justice for all, *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* forces a confrontation with what the Southern Poverty Law Center calls "hard history". Petry's work appeared during a period of heightened White racial anxiety—the year after *Brown vs. Board*. In *Remember: The Journey to School Integration*, Toni Morrison (another Black writer better known for her adult fiction) commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of this landmark decision, taking young readers on a journey "through a time in American life when there was as much hate as there was love; as much anger as there was hope, as many heroes as cowards" (Morrison 2004). The archival photographs that help tell the story in *Remember* put a spotlight on White hate, anger, and fear: a group of White women scream at Black children entering a previously all-White school, a White man throws water in the face of a young Black man protesting outside a segregated lunch counter, a White boy wearing a Klu Klux Klan robe watches, along with his little sister, a cross burning. Fostering the sense of a shared "hard history", Morrison's and Petry's creative nonfiction acknowledges that what some Americans have fought for is the *denial* of liberty and justice for all. Indeed, the White boy in the KKK costume is being taught that such denial is a righteous cause. The institution of slavery is the single most heinous example of the anti-democratic and immoral impetus of a majority White nation. Petry cites the inadequate and inaccurate coverage of slavery in textbooks as her reason for writing *Harriet Tubman*. In his Foreword to the 2018 edition, Jason Reynolds, the former National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, recounts the lack of attention paid to slavery in his own schooling. Although Reynolds grew up in a different era than Petry, the context within which he lives is eerily similar to hers. The White mob that threatened nine Black teenagers integrating Little Rock's Central High School in 1957 has its twenty-first-century equivalents in White militia groups and Stop-the-Steal "patriots" who stormed the US Capitol, assaulted police officers, erected a gallows, and proudly waved Confederate flags on 6 January 2021.

Published in 1968, Jacob Lawrence's *Harriet Tubman and the Promised Land* is an outlier in the world of picture books that tell Tubman's story. In *Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature*, Rudine Sims Bishop honors Lawrence's work as a "precursor of the modern African American picture storybook", connecting it to a tradition "of celebrating the historical achievements of African American heroes and 'sheroes'" dating back at least to Du Bois' *The Brownies Book* (Bishop 2007, p. 117).<sup>12</sup> Bishop notes, however, that Lawrence's expressionism "disturbed" a late 1960s Black audience that desired "realistic and appealing images of Black people in books for children" (Bishop 2007, p. 117). Lawrence himself reports receiving angry letters, a New England librarian chastising him for making Tubman look "grotesque and ugly". Lawrence's tart reply suggests more than impatience with this view: "Isn't it sad that the oppressed often find themselves grotesque and ugly and find the oppressor refined and beautiful?" (Wheat 1991, p. 41). Both the personal and political nature of Black representation is clearly evident in this exchange. Devoting four chapters (a third of her study) to picture storybooks, Bishop considers this genre crucial to combatting the racist images of Black people pervading not just children's literature but US popular culture: "Picture books, with their combination of verbal and visual art, would seem to be an obvious choice of weapon for Black writers and artists engaged in a battle over what kind of images of Black people are presented to children" (Bishop 2007, p. 115). In this context, the librarian who wrote to Lawrence suggests that the distinguished artist is doing the Devil's work. Lawrence's reply puts the Devil in the eye of the beholder who has internalized racism by adopting White standards of beauty.

Contemporary readers of *Harriet Tubman and the Promised Land* would benefit from learning about Lawrence's artistic influences and development, particularly his lifelong interest in Tubman as an American hero. In his Foreword to the 1993 edition, Lawrence recalls learning about "the drama and the exploits of Harriet" at a very young age (Lawrence 1993). His fascination with Tubman was not, however, confined to childhood. In 1940, after completing projects honoring Toussaint Louverture and then Frederick Douglass, Lawrence completed his *Harriet Tubman* series. In thirty-nine narrative panels, the artist tells the freedom fighter's story within the context of political debates about slavery and freedom, planting a flag in the rhetorical battlefield that would determine the fate of four million enslaved Black people. In narrative panel #1, the artist dispels the notion that enslaved Blacks were content to serve by choosing a quote from Henry Ward Beecher: "With sweat and toil and ignorance he consumes his life, to pour the earnings into channels from which he does not drink" (Wheat 1991, p. 81). Lawrence follows Beecher's anti-slavery argument with the pro-slavery position articulated by Henry Clay:

I am no friend of slavery, but I prefer the liberty of my own country to that of another people, and the liberty of my own race to that of another race. The liberty of the descendants of Africa in the United States is incompatible with the safety and liberty of the European descendants. Their slavery forms an exception (resulting from a stern and inexorable necessity) to the general liberty in the United States. (Wheat 1991, p. 82)

The painting accompanying Clay's rationalization for denying liberty to Black people—that such liberty will threaten the safety of White people—depicts a brown figure hanging, arms outstretched suggesting crucifixion, three pale yellow gashes across his chest. Lawrence follows his panel visualizing the deadly consequences of Clay's preference for White liberty with a quote from Abraham Lincoln: "A house divided against itself cannot stand [...] It will become all one thing or the other" (Wheat 1991, p. 83). Lawrence thus sets the stage for the entrance of his heroine, who appears in panel #4 as one of four nearly identical children doing cartwheels on a sunny day. Harriet the child reappears twenty-eight years later in Lawrence's picture storybook, first as a newborn with adoring parents and then as a young child holding a White infant, sitting on the steps of a house with white pillars, in the shade of a blossoming cottonwood tree. The White infant is dressed in an ornate White gown made of cotton. Both image and text suggest that although still a child herself, Harriet has

been robbed of her childhood, slavery putting her in a state of perpetual service: “Harriet, clean;/Harriet, sweep./Harriet, rock/The child to sleep” (Lawrence 1993).

Although *Harriet and the Promised Land* is devoid of the political debate Lawrence foregrounds in his *Harriet Tubman* series, when read within the context of Lawson’s Lost Cause narratives, both of Lawrence’s Tubman stories shatter the myth of White victims and survivors as well as the fiction that slavery had nothing to do with the Civil War. The most striking feature of Lawrence’s picture storybook is that the text, written as a poem, does not avoid harsh truths about slavery: “Harriet, Harriet/Born a slave,/Work for your master/From your cradle/To your grave” (Lawrence 1993). Lawrence brings this scene to life by featuring both children and adults engaging in different kinds of labor—preparing food, doing laundry, carrying water, splitting wood, hauling planks, sacks, and farming tools. Lawrence does not minimize the danger of escape, either: “Some were afraid,/But none turned back,/For close at their heels/Howled the bloodhound pack” (Lawrence 1993). The bloodhound pack returns when the runaways must march through snow, presumably having reached the north: “Then the north wind howled/Like a bloodhound pack;/But none were afraid,/And none turned back” (Lawrence 1993). When read as civil rights literature, Lawrence’s picture storybook connects the Black children in Birmingham facing dogs and firehoses in Kelly Ingram Park and the marchers crossing the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma with enslaved Black people who risked everything for freedom: “They marched through the cold,/They marched through the heat;/And the only sound/Was their marching feet” (Lawrence 1993). *Harriet and the Promised Land* read alongside *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, reminds us that a century before King told a sea of supporters gathered at the Washington Mall that “we cannot turn back”, Tubman was leading enslaved men, women, and children through enemy territory, threatening to shoot anyone whose courage faltered. Allowing them to turn back would have endangered everyone involved in the nineteenth-century freedom movement. Writing for *The Brownies’ Book* in 1921, Augusta E. Bird did not think young readers should be spared that detail.<sup>13</sup> Nor did Petry, who titled one of her chapters, “Go On or Die!”

In her 2019 film *Harriet*, Kasi Lemmons underscores the contradictions at the core of the American experiment by placing Tubman firmly within a tradition of freedom-loving patriots, and in so doing, she reclaims patriotism as distinct from White nationalism. In a pivotal scene shortly after she escapes the plantation, “Minty” (Cynthia Erivo) faces her master and his posse on a bridge in Dorchester County, Maryland. Instead of surrendering, she jumps into the river below, right after proclaiming, “I’m gonna be free or die” (Lemmons 2019). Lemmons conducted extensive research while collaborating with Gregory Allen Howard on the screenplay, and like others before her, she noticed a recurring theme: “To live free or die is a very powerful concept; Tubman says it over and over again” (Sims 2019). Indeed, Lawrence has Harriet saying it in his picture storybook, presenting her choice in the context of her enslavement: “A runaway slave/With a price on her head,/‘I’ll be free,’ said Harriet,/‘Or I’ll be dead!’” (Lawrence 1993). In *Watchwords*, Robert Lawson develops this theme by quoting the source, giving Patrick Henry the fourth position in his *Pageant of American Quotations*, right after “taxation without representation is tyranny”, a phrase the author tells us became one of the “slogans for lovers of liberty” (Lawson 1965, p. 13). Lawson presents Henry as the spokesman for “the small shopkeepers, the carpenters, shipwrights, farmers, lawyers and the men of the frontier”, whom he calls “all the little people [...] to whom independence was as dear as life itself” (Lawson 1965, p. 15). In 1775, Henry spoke in Richmond, Virginia, at the Second Revolutionary Convention, urging preparations for war: “Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!” (Lawson 1965, p. 16). Equating taxation without representation with enslavement required a staggering amount of self-delusion about an economy that relied on the literal enslavement and exploitation of Black people. It also displays a pathological level of comfort with contradiction, with what Henry Clay would

later describe as making an “exception” with regard to the principle of liberty when it comes to Black people.

The dramatic scene on the bridge parallels an even more intense confrontation near the end of the film when Lemmons takes direct aim at the myth of the Lost Cause. Having renamed herself Harriet, and having garnered a reputation as the slave-stealer “Moses”, our heroine again faces Gideon (Joe Alwyn), only this time, she has a rifle and, thanks to her skill at moving through the landscape undetected, the advantage of surprise. Forcing her former White master to his knees and holding him at gunpoint, Harriet rejects Gideon’s false memory that she cared and prayed for him in his youth. Most importantly, she names his family’s greatest crime (Figure 1): “I asked God how a sickly young boy could think he owned me. [...] Ever since your daddy sold my sisters, I prayed for God to make me strong enough to fight. And that’s what I prayed for ever since. I reasoned there was one of two things I had a right to—liberty or death. If I couldn’t have one, I’d have the other” (Lemmons 2019). Gideon responds by predicting a gruesome lynching for Harriet, her rotting flesh smelling “like roasting pig”. Harriet then makes a prediction of her own: “You gonna die right here. On a freezin’ blood-soaked battlefield, the moans of a generation of young men dying around you in agony—for a lost cause, for a vile and wicked idea, for the sin of slavery.” Mounting Gideon’s white horse, a triumphant Tubman proclaims, “God has showed me the future, and my people are free. My people are free!” (Lemmons 2019). While the twenty-first-century viewer is left to ponder the extent to which Harriet’s people are *actually* free in the future she envisions (and we inhabit), the film, by pitting Harriet and her rifle against Gideon and his racist view of Black people as pigs, frames the Civil War as a battle between a righteous cause of liberty waged by Black revolutionaries and a wicked one of enslavement, human trafficking, dehumanization, terror, and torture waged by White nationalists.



**Figure 1.** Harriet (Cynthia Erivo) takes aim at the Lost Cause (Lemmons 2019).

The most significant contribution Lemmons’ film makes to the tradition of storytelling about Tubman is that it presents the freedom warrior ensconced within a web of close relationships based on kinship and the shared values of service, sacrifice, love, and liberty. From the first scene to the last, Lemmons reminds viewers that Harriet is the daughter of loving parents. In this way, the filmmaker brings to life the early chapters of Petry’s historical biography, which highlight a mother and father worrying about their child’s future, and the first page of Lawrence’s picture storybook, which depicts a tiny Harriet and two proud and adoring parents. *Harriet* features multiple displays of tenderness between “Minty” and her father Ben Ross (Clarke Peters). When Minty decides to run, Ben gives her a small wooden figurehead carved in his likeness, assuring his daughter: “I’ll be with you.” Before Minty slips into the night, she says, “I love you, daddy”, and once the door closes and Ben collapses into his chair, he whispers, “I love you, too” (Lemmons 2019). Each time Minty returns to the Brodess planation, her father embraces her. Harriet’s circle widens



in Philadelphia to include William Still (Leslie Odom, Jr.) and Marie Buchanon (Janelle Monae), both of whom provide friendship, counsel, and comfort. The strength of those close attachments allows Harriet to express vulnerability: in response to the “defanging” and “declawing” of Tubman she sees in children’s literature, Lemmons humanizes her heroine, presenting her as both the superhero *and* grandmother Jason Reynolds imagines her to be.

By contrasting Harriet’s humanity with the inhumanity of the slave-owning, slave-selling Brodess family, Lemmons keeps the attention on the type of violence she highlights—family separation. Elizabeth Brodess (Jennifer Nettles) exemplifies that inhumanity, even as she reveals the psychic consequences of treating humans as property to use and abuse, telling her son Gideon, “I’m suffocating in this place. I’m being imprisoned, awaiting my execution, surrounded by hostile black-faced guards” (Lemmons 2019). In the next scene, Elizabeth faces down her angry White neighbors who demand restitution for the loss of their property now that Moses has been identified as Minty Ross. In a fiery speech, Elizabeth voices the key component of the Lost Cause narrative: “We are victims of this diabolical n\*\*\*\*, just like you are!” (Lemmons 2019). Her plan is to put Harriet’s niece up for auction, thus luring Moses to return, at which point, she and her neighbors, White folks who value vengeance even more than property, will “burn [Harriet] at the stake like Joan of Arc” (Lemmons 2019). The victimhood and bloodlust of the Brodess family highlights the heartache and pain of a series of separations endured by the Ross family. The film’s ending, featuring a tearful Harriet resting her head once again on her father’s shoulder, reminds viewers of the toll those separations take even as it reunites Harriet with her remaining kin. Lemmons gives us a Hollywood ending that nonetheless serves as a reminder of not only what has been torn asunder, but also exactly who is responsible for that tearing apart and the tortured logic and lies they told to either deny or justify it.

#### 4. You Ready to Kill the Snake?

At the end of Lemmons’ film, just before viewers witness Harriet’s tearful reunion with her parents and extended family in Auburn, New York, they watch her leading a Black regiment at the Combahee River. To rally her troops, she tells them a story about a snake “coiled at your feet” that “shoots up to bite you”. While the doctor is cutting out the bite, the snake bites again, “in a new place this time”. Finally, Harriet says, “you realize the snake ain’t gonna stop until someone kills it.” Telling the men that “slavery is still alive”, she asks a question that will be the last words she speaks in the film: “You ready to kill the snake?” (Lemmons 2019). When Tubman equates the snake with slavery, she leaves no doubt as to the cause and purpose of the Civil War. The snake as a metaphor for slavery appears throughout African American literature, from Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) to Lawrence’s *Harriet and the Promised Land* (1968) to Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016). But it would be more accurate (as well as more productive) to think of the snake as White supremacy because while the Emancipation Proclamation, Lee’s surrender, and the era of Reconstruction dramatically altered the conditions of formerly enslaved Black people, White supremacy remained as both an existential threat to democracy and a literal threat to the health, safety, and prosperity of Black people living *anywhere* in the US. In other words, the snake in Tubman’s story simply took on other forms, rising up, over and again, to bite “in a new place this time”.

*Harriet* debuted amidst a national discussion about slavery prompted by the publication of *The 1619 Project*, a discussion that *seems* to have opened up space to talk more directly about White supremacy.<sup>14</sup> For several reasons, that conversation has proven to be extremely difficult to have. While the current director of the FBI reports that the greatest threat the country faces is from domestic White extremism, state legislatures continue to pass laws banning the discussion of “divisive concepts”, and hysteria over critical race theory fuels efforts to ban books. Writing at the end of the twentieth-century, MacCann, in the final paragraph of *White Supremacy in Children’s Literature*, asks: “In the upcoming century, can we expect the arts and institutions to maximize social justice? Or will the record reveal once

again that the Confederate cause wins?” (MacCann 1998, p. 241). Perhaps we should pose the question differently: What will it take for the Confederate cause to loosen its grip over the radical imaginations of so many White Americans? We may not be able to end what MacCann rightly calls America’s centuries-long “exercise in cultural self-deception”, but we can commit ourselves to the kind of interdisciplinary textual analysis that highlights the relationship between storytelling and political power (MacCann 1998, p. 234). Being strong enough to fight in our era and in the sphere of literary studies means engaging in a righteous confrontation with stories as weapons of repression. Without denying or diminishing the aesthetic pleasures of literature, we need an all-hands-on-deck approach to meeting the rhetorical power of texts and images that promote White nation-building with the rhetorical firepower of stories that advance the cause of democracy and liberty for all.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://thechildrenstheatre.com/shows/harriet-tubman-20-21/> (accessed on 28 April 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Since its conception in 1938, the Caldecott Medal has been awarded to only four Black illustrators: Kadir Nelson (2020), Javaka Steptoe (2017), Jerry Pinkney (2010), Leo and Diane Dillon (1977, 1976). In 1962, Ezra Jack Keats, a White artist, won the Caldecott Medal for illustrating *The Snowy Day*, the first book with a Black protagonist to be so honored.

<sup>3</sup> Carole Boston Weatherford’s award-winning *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom* (illustrated by Kadir Nelson) is interesting to consider in this regard. Connolly (2013) discusses the picture storybook as hagiography. I find the framing devices noteworthy. While the text and the images present Tubman as simply doing God’s will, the Foreword and the Author’s Note provide the context needed for readers to understand Tubman’s contribution to an ongoing struggle for Black freedom. The book thus presents a “palatable” story within a “hard history” frame.

<sup>4</sup> In 1941, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802, banning discrimination in employment practices and establishing the Federal Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). In 1948, President Eisenhower ended segregation in the armed forces with Executive Order 9981.

<sup>5</sup> In “The Apartheid of Children’s Literature”, a March 2014 op-ed for the *New York Times*, Christopher Myers notes that of the 3200 books published for children that year, only 93 focused on Black people. In “Children, Too, Sing America”, a 2022 Special Issue of *College Literature*, the editors take up this term and discuss its causes and consequences: <https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/48102> (accessed on 28 April 2023).

<sup>6</sup> For the 100 years of Newbery award, only five Black authors have won the medal: Amina Luqman-Dawson (2023), Jerry Craft (2020), Christopher Paul Curtis (2000), Mildred Taylor (1977), and Virginia Hamilton (1975). For *Story of the Negro* (1949), Arna Bontemps became the first Black writer to receive a Newbery honor.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/BookerT.pdf> (accessed on 26 April 2023).

<sup>8</sup> In addition to “organizations” and “rituals”, Blight lists the following as the ingredients forming the Lost Cause: “a public memory, a cult of the fallen soldier, a righteous political cause defeated only by superior industrial might, a heritage community awaiting its exodus, and a people forming a collective identity as victims and survivors”. Blight points out what is erased—slavery and Black freedom (Blight 2001, p. 38).

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/323479/they-were-strong-and-good-by-robert-lawson/> (accessed on 24 April 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Blight discusses Grant’s memoirs as a significant contribution to the Lost Cause narrative, the General memorializing his personal feelings upon Lee’s surrender as reinforcing “Lost Causers, reconciliations, and war romancers of almost any persuasion.” Grant wrote that he felt “sad and depressed” at vanquishing such a worthy foe: “I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse. I do not question, however, the sincerity of the great mass of those who were opposed to us.” Blight reads in Grant’s memoir “the terms of the American reunion rendered in probably the most oft-read chapter of one of its best-selling works: shared grief at war’s costs coupled with Northern respect for the sincerity of Southern devotion to their cause, even when that cause was judged repugnant.” Grant, he concludes, engaged at this death in a “politics of forgetting”, thus mirroring “the culture he was about to depart” (Blight 2001, p. 215).

<sup>11</sup> In Selznick’s award-winning film, Rhett Butler calls his beloved daughter Bonnie Blue. The opening lyrics of the song do the work of revising history to advance the myth of the Lost Cause:

We are a band of brothers and native to the soil  
 Fighting for the property we gained by honest toil  
 And when our rights were threatened, the cry rose near and far  
 Hurrah for the Bonnie Blue Flag that bears a single star  
 Hurrah! Hurrah!  
 For Southern rights, hurrah!

- 12 Katharine Capshaw and Anna Mae Duane extend the roots of this tradition in (Capshaw and Duane 2017).
- 13 Bird (1996) writes: “Sometimes members of her party would become exhausted and footsore, and declare they could not go on; they must stay where they dropped down, and die. Others would think a voluntary return to slavery better than being overtaken and carried back, and would insist on returning; then there was no alternative but force. The revolver carried by this bold and daring pioneer would be pointed at their heads, “Dead n\*\*\*\*\* tell no tales”, said Harriet. “Go on or die” (pp. 95–96).
- 14 Nikole Hannah-Jones and her Pulitzer Prize-winning *The 1619 Project* sparked heated debates among historians and educators, politicians seizing on the publication and wielding it as a weapon in the culture wars, Trump issuing an Executive Order establishing a 1776 Commission and calling for a ban on critical race theory. Hulu presented *The 1619 Project* as a four-part mini-series in 2023.

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