

IN SEARCH OF BLACK CREATIVITY AND JOY:
BLACK URBAN SPACE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN PICTUREBOOKS
ABOUT THE SOUTH BRONX

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ABSTRACT

Moving beyond conventional thinking that equates Black space with fearsome locality or dysfunction, contemporary African American children's authors define Black geographies as generative, joyful and secure. They offer alternative narratives of blackness by focusing on cultural achievements of Black communities, as well as the ways they transform the popular perception of their homeplaces. Drawing on the concept of Black Geographies (McKittrick 2006; Hawthorne 2019), which argues that Black people's contributions to geographical locations have always been political, this paper aims to analyze two picturebooks about the Black community of the South Bronx: *I can write the world* (2019), written by Joshunda Sanders and illustrated by Charly Palmer, and *When the beat was born* by Laban Carrick Hill and Theodore Taylor III (2013). It focuses on verbal and visual portrayals of the South Bronx as an urban landscape that became the birthplace of hip-hop culture as well as a site of resistance. By analyzing nuanced images of the South Bronx, the article offers an alternative reading of Black urban locations. It conceptualizes Black space as a site to be discovered and a project to be constructed for a better, more just, future. It also argues that Black joy and creativity are necessary survival strategies for those who claim the space as their own.

Keywords: African American children's literature, picturebooks, Black Geographies, the South Bronx, hip-hop.

1. Introduction

Fifty years after the birth of hip-hop as a cultural movement, the South Bronx neighborhood of New York City is still associated with urban decay, violence, and inner-city poverty.² Despite its global impact, hip-hop music remains

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² In her study *South Bronx battles*, Carolyn McLaughlin argues that “The South Bronx has carried

insufficiently recognized as emerging from Black struggles against poverty and marginalization by mainstream society. It is also an expression of Bronx residents' resilience, creativity and pride in belonging to a special place they call home.

The aim of the article is to explore the poetics of Black space which does not only involve showing the place as it is but also imagining and feeling the location. As Katherine McKittrick points out, the poetics of Black landscape "discloses the underside, unapparent histories and stories that name the world and black personhood" (2006: xxii). It presents the location in the process of making as it is changing in opposition to the outer world.

2. Black space-making

The exploration of the cultural and political significance of physical locations inhabited by African American population has led to the emergence of an interdisciplinary field of study called Black Geographies. In *Demonic grounds*, McKittrick defines Black Geographies as "the terrain of Black political struggle" (2006: 6). She claims that "Black lives are necessarily geographic" (McKittrick 2006: xiii). African Americans have a deep sense of belonging to specific communities. Yet they constantly face "discourses that erase and despatialize their sense of place" (McKittrick 2006: xiii). As outlined by Catherine Hawthorne in her article "Black matters are spatial matters," the idea of Black Geographies is to prevent the politics of exclusion, "it is a call to center those [Black] subjects, voices, and experiences that have been systematically excluded from the mainstream space of geographical inquiry" (2019: 9). Black Geographies does not equate blackness with oppression and dehumanization, but "opens up possibilities for (...) alternative, anticolonial, and liberatory forms of geographic knowledge and world-making" (Hawthorne 2019: 9). In their foundational 2007 volume *Black Geographies and the politics of place*, Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods argue that Black people's contributions to geographical locations should be perceived as political acts and expressions. Through their social and cultural activism, they make certain areas their own. Similarly, in their study of geographic analysis of blackness, *The Black Geographic praxis, resistance, futurity*, Camilla Hawthorne and Jovan Scott Lewis argue that blackness is "not just a subjectivity that experiences, that is impacted by external means of definition and manipulation, but instead a situating force, a place-making apparatus that in every geographic context makes its location more meaningful, more substantial, more human" (2023: 5).

the distinction of being the poorest congressional district in the United States for over thirty years," and describes events that caused the district to deteriorate. These are, among others, numerous fires, loss of jobs, as well as the construction of housing projects that divided the community and led to white middle-class's flight. This resulted in countless vacant lots and abandoned buildings which became the main sites of intense criminal activity, including gang life (McLaughlin 2019: 19).

With the rhetoric of resistance, *Black Geographies* builds on Black radical tradition, which assumes that all struggles over place are the attempts on the part of Black people to attain racial justice (Hawthorne & Lewis 2023: 7). According to Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin, Black radical tradition is “a tradition of resistance honed by the history of racialized, permanent, hereditary, and chattel slavery that formed the contours of civic and social life in the Americas, Europe, and Africa. Grounded in a Black resistance more than five centuries in the making, this practice produced an enduring vision of a shared future whose principal promise is the abolition of all forms of oppression” (2017: 10). Resistance to the dominance of racial segregation in urban spaces – historically divided along racial lines – is part of Black radical tradition. In recent years, the tradition has been taken up by Black artists and authors who try to revitalize neglected areas through positive narratives of Black Geographies. By celebrating the spaces with their communities and cultures, they contribute to “Black spatial imaginary,” which George Lipsitz defines as “different assumptions about place than the white imaginary allows” (2018: 54).

The notion of Black Geographies can serve as a theoretical background for the study of the contemporary African American picturebooks which offer alternative narratives of Black urban space. As examples of urban literature,³ they present more authentic and nuanced portrayals of Black localities, inviting the readers to engage with the Black life beyond the distortions of stereotype. As Hawthorne and Lewis point out in the introduction to their volume on Black Geographies, “Black literary texts and narrative-based cognitive maps are critical sites of geographic meaning-making, as they allow us to understand the relationship between the material organization of place and discursive practices in order to undo colonial-capitalist epistemologies and chart alternative futures” (2023: 13).

Picturebooks on Black spaces subvert dominant constructions of social reality. Jonda C. McNair uses the term “counterstories” to refer to narratives which challenge the status quo of the social order (2008: 7). Ebony Thomas and Amy Stornaiuolo propose to use a similar term, “restorying,” which they define as “a process by which people reshape narratives to represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences that are often missing or silenced in mainstream texts, media, and popular discourse” (2016: 313). For both their authors and readers, restorying functions as a form of resistance and empowerment,

³ Many scholars of children’s literature use the term “urban literature” to refer to books in which the city location is the main character of the story. Urban literature is seen as a subgenre of multicultural children’s literature illustrating specific settings (Fleming et al. 2016: 71). Vanessa Morris notes that it encompasses not only locations but also situations which “highlight the socio-economic realities and culture of characters” as well as reflect “scenes and activities that realistically occur in daily [urban] life” (2012: 4).

as it allows them to finally see their homes represented in the stories. No longer reduced to the victims of incomplete literary portrayals, they assert their self-defined existence rather than one imposed by those who try to silence their voices.

The perspective of the creators of contemporary picturebooks about Black spaces can be analyzed through the lens of Black Critical Theory, which rejects any form of antiblackness and stresses the power of Black joy and creativity. As Dumas and ross explain in their study of BlackCrit in education:

[BlackCrit] confronts the specificity of antiblackness, as a social construction, as an embodied lived experience of social suffering and resistance, and perhaps most importantly, as an antagonism, in which the Black is a despised thing-in-itself (but not person for herself or himself) in opposition to all that is pure, human(e), and White. (2016: 416–417)

The authors of picturebooks to be discussed in this article reject the claim that blackness has been deprived of the sense of belonging to a place. Instead, they promote a picture of Black communities taking over the geographic location, marking it with their own cultural assets, and resisting any outside forces trying to deny its cultural significance. While transforming the image of the geographic location, the picturebooks' creators engage with its past, which is an important aspect of Black Critical Theory. At the same time, however, try to combine it with predictions about the future, offering a form of "liberatory fantasy."⁴ As Roberta Price Gardner observes, Black children's literature "needs futuristic and imaginative representations to balance the overabundance of trauma narratives related to . . . Black suffering" (2022: 302).

3. Black joy

In his analysis of Black geographies in Los Angeles, Matthew Jordan-Miller develops a theory of Black joyful space-making, which he defines as "an oppositional practice of Black love in the face of hegemonic cultural injustice and racist disregard for the distinctive desires, dreams, and delimitations found within Afrodiasporic space" (2023: 218). This explanation may well be applied to the way the community of the South Bronx is presented in contemporary picturebooks. It is a site of Black struggle against domination as well as a site of Black leisure and pride.

Scholars of Black Geographies tend to emphasize that Black joy is "an emotive state of catharsis with the microgeography of a single Black body"

⁴ ross defines the term "liberatory future" as "making space for Black people to conjure various scenarios that may disrupt total subjugation and serve as a ray of hope for larger systemic change" (2019: 3).

(Jordan-Miller 2023: 217). It entails a strong sense of belonging to a place and a sense of pride in being part of the Black race. Philosopher Cornel West recognizes a significant social dimension of Black joy, distinguishing it from pleasure. Whereas the latter is understood as a highly individual feeling, joy – when combined with love, solidarity, and the struggle for justice – brings people together (Dent 1992: 1). Black joy is a long-lasting affective force that endures alongside pain in times of adversity.

Recently the concept of Black joy became a popular slogan of advocacy groups such as #BlackJoyProject. According to Kleaver Cruz, the author of the project, Black joy is a form of “healing, resistance, and regeneration” (Cruz 2017). He argues that “Centering on Black joy is not about dismissing or creating an ‘alternative’ Black narrative that ignores the realities of our collective pain; rather, it is about holding the pain and injustice we experience as Black folks around the world in tension with the joy we experience in the pain’s midst” (Cruz 2017). The Black Joy Project focuses on community transformation as well as personal healing. Its proponents are growing in numbers, including the creators of picturebooks. In response to the most pressing issues of race and equality, they use a variety of rhetorical strategies to produce narratives or material objects as forms of protest. Children’s picturebooks have recently emerged as a renewed medium for affirming Black joy in the context of racial trauma. They serve as the space where artists try to envision Blackness beyond systemic racism.

4. Black creativity

While many Black living areas are associated with poverty and crime and presented in the mainstream media as spaces of entrapment, there are parallel narratives that focus on Black creativity as a survival strategy. Black neighborhoods such as the South Bronx, popularly referred to as “Black ghettos,”⁵ are simultaneously sites of Black cultural innovations such as hip-hop music, break-dancing or graffiti art – assets that make Black communities global centers of new cultural developments.

The emergence of hip-hop culture had a large impact on the current image of the South Bronx. The neighborhood has recently gone through the process of cultural revitalization. In summer 2023, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the first hip-hop party, the borough hosted a variety of events commemorating the legacy of the local culture. Dianne Smith’s exhibition *Two turntables & a microphone* at the Bronx Museum celebrated Black joy and the community-

⁵ According to sociologist Elijah Anderson the term “ghetto” is always pejorative. He defines Black ghettos as “impoverished, chaotic, lawless, drug-infested, and ruled by violence” (2012: 9).

building power of hip-hop. With visual and auditory elements, the artist combined her own experiences of hip-hop culture with its universal message of resistance and joy. The Universal Hip Hop Museum in the Bronx, established in 2015, and still under construction, contributed to the fiftieth anniversary of hip-hop with an online exhibition *The [r]evolution of hip hop* which focused on the five elements of the cultural movement: MCing, DJing, breakdancing, aerosol art, and knowledge. The exhibition filled a gap in cultural productions about the South Bronx as the center of Black creativity, replacing its predominant representations as a symbol of economic decline.

Contemporary picturebooks about the South Bronx have recently become a new medium in the process of rejuvenating the location. Although most of the picturebooks seem to refer to the social dynamics that was there up until the 2000s, and my no longer be relevant today, they provide a different story of Black lives from those promoted in the internet media. The picturebooks explore the South Bronx as the center of Black creativity rather than a symbol of economic decline. They point out the role of young Black residents of the borough who try to reclaim their neighborhood by means of art and musical activities. Although they have suffered a range of racial inequalities, they play leading roles in building a new image of the South Bronx, as well as promoting Black culture on a global scale.

5. Picturebook as tools of geographical representation

The following sections analyze two picturebooks: *When the beat was born: DJ Kool Herc and the creation of hip hop* (2013), written by Laban Carrick Hill and illustrated by Theodore Taylor III, and *I can write the world* (2019) by Joshunda Sanders and Charly Palmer. While the first one is a historical account of how hip-hop music was created, the second one explores the cultural significance of the South Bronx within the context of contemporary social issues. By focusing on verbal and visual portrayals of selected geographies, the article argues that Black space is something to be searched for and created for a better future.

The picturebooks should be read through the perspective of “the urban ethos,” defined by British music scholar Adam Krims as the relationship of music to the urban setting. He believes music is deployed socially in urban settings, while social effects of space shape new forms of music and their functions. There is a range of urban representations, including music videos, lyrics, or the portrayal of urban landscapes as the sites of music developments in visual and verbal narratives of such genres as picturebooks. Yet, each of these works might present a different image of the urban-music relationship. As Krims maintains in his book *Music and urban geography*,

The urban ethos is thus not a particular representation but rather a distribution of possibilities, always having discernable limits as well as common practices. It is not a picture of how life is in any particular city. Instead, it distills publicly disseminated notions of how cities are generally, even though it may be disproportionately shaped by the fate of particular cities. (2007: 7)

The picturebook format plays a very important role in texts which focus on highly contextualized locations and experiences (Bishop & Hickman 1992), such as living in the Black community of the South Bronx. Pictures convey social and political meaning of the place in the making that would be hard to express verbally. The collages of diverse images included on particular pages reveal the complexity of the location and how its specific elements relate to each other. Reading visual images thus requires a great deal of attention from the reader, as well as the ability to confront the verbal narrative with the pictures, or, to use David Lewis's words, "find routes through the text that connect words and images" (2001: 32).

The following discussion of the selected picturebooks draws on the existing methodologies of studying picturebooks (Arzipe, Noble & Styles 2023, Painter, Martin & Unsworth 2014, Kress & van Leeuwen 2006, Nikolajeva & Scott 2001), including the visual rhetoric of the illustrations, particularly composition of visual space and the function of space markers, the interactions between text and images, and the ways they create the meaning of the stories.

6. Claiming space with hip hop music

When the beat was born (Fig. 1) celebrates the beginnings of hip-hop culture, including its four elements – graffiti, breakin', DJing, and MCing, and the ways they all share the same urban space. It explores the pre-recording period of hip-hop, spanning the years 1973-1979, before it became commercialized and popularized outside the Bronx (Williams 2011). It is the streets of the South Bronx that are in the center of the narrative. The picturebook's illustrator guides the readers through the visual transformation of the public place, from a site of neglect to the space of Black artistic creation to be remembered and recognized globally.

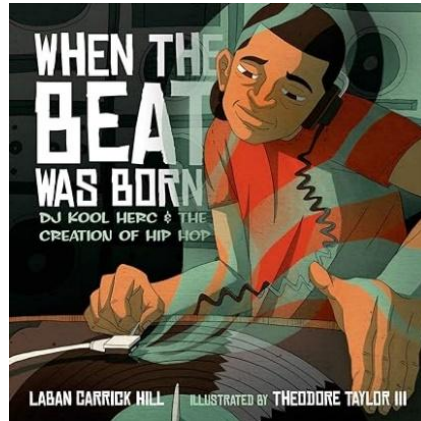


Fig. 1. Image copyright Theodore Taylor III, 2013, text copyright Laban Carrick Hill, 2013, <https://celebratepicturebooks.com/>

The story of hip-hop starts with a street party that was organized by young Bronx resident DJ Kool Herc (born Clive Campbell) and his sister in a community room of the housing project at Sedgwick Avenue in the summer of 1973. But before that happened, music had always played an important role in the life of the young character, who had always wanted to be a DJ. As we read at the beginning of Laban Carrick Hill's story:

Clive [later known as Kool Herc] loved music. It didn't matter what kind. Whether it was a wah wah scat of a jiving trumpet, a sorrowful twang of sad voice, or the belting boom of a gospel singer, little Clive liked the way sound thumped and bumped all the way down in his stomach. He loved the way the music made his feet go HIP HIP HOP, HIPPIITY HOP. (Hill 2013: unpaginated)

There are a few symbolic illustrations which reveal the childhood dream of the boy. One picture shows the boy as a DJ standing on an unusually large sound speaker, surrounded by piles of records. In another illustration, we can see the boy in his home while listening to music from "a monster sound system with giant six-foot speakers" (Hill 2013: unpaginated). As the accompanying text says: "the sound was BIG (...) like an entire block in the Bronx" (Hill 2013: unpaginated), which implies the future impact of the hip-hop music.

The following pages of the picturebook take the reader to the streets of the South Bronx, with the typical housing architecture – concrete block-like forms cramped within limited space. The image does not make an impression of a site of creativity, but probably due to a lack of attractions, the South Bronx inspired young people to invent their own artistic styles. Elena Martinez, a co-producer of the documentary *From mambo to hip hop: A South Bronx tale*, similarly explains the emergence of the new culture: "Young kids, out of nothing,

used devastation to create. They didn't have instruments. (...) They used abandoned buildings to perform. Amidst all this destruction, they were able to create out of sadness and decay" (quoted in McLaughlin 2019: 115). However, *When the beat was born* is not a narrative of decline. It does not portray the dismal economic conditions of the neighborhood, but it romanticizes the South Bronx as a site of artistic activity. While the initial illustrations show a dull image of the city as a place dominated by a number of similar blocks, the images focusing on the moment hip-hop emerged in the community are livelier, with lots of details marked with vivid colors. They depict single musicians playing on street corners as well as crowds of listeners heading for block parties.

The street corner is one of the space markers that characterize Black urban life. While mainstream media tend to focus on the corner as a site of crime and violence, Black artists contextualize the place as a site of community gathering which results in artistic creativity.⁶ Thus, in the context of Black neighborhoods, the street corner is a place where Black people express their feelings freely, and their words, movements, and rhythms become art. As Elijah Anderson has put it, street corners "provide settings for sociability and places where neighborhood residents can gain a sense of self-worth. . . . Here they can sense themselves to be among equals, with an equal chance to be somebody. . . . This is their place" (2003: 1).

In Hill's picturebook *When the beat was born*, hip-hop music spreads from the street corner to larger public areas of the South Bronx. The illustrations of street parties reveal the power of the music that begins to dominate the whole neighborhood. The consecutive images reveal the growing impact of hip-hop on Bronx residents. One illustration shows two DJs with their turntables and large sound systems plugged into the lampposts, as well as the audience of listeners who surround them. Then we can see break-dancing crews, and finally everyone is moving to the rhythm of hip-hop. The Black community becomes a site of creativity and joy. There is a clear relationship between the urban space and the quintessentially urban music produced there. The city is renewed by the young musicians, drawing the attention of a wide audience of listeners, who begin to see the place as a worthwhile location. The music transforms the lives of many Black youngsters who used to spend most of their time in the streets, resorting to crime and violence.

⁶ In his poem "The corner," Common, a Black rapper and activist from Chicago, writes about the power of the Black corner:
 The corner was our magic, our music, our politics
 Fires raised as tribal dances and war cries
 Broke out on different corners
 Power to the people
 Black Power
 Black is beautiful (Common, *Be*, 218).

The story of hip-hop is not just about renewing the place but also the people, serving as an alternative to gang violence. Instead of committing crimes, the local youth are involved in all kinds of artistic endeavors. This social aspect of hip-hop is mentioned by the picturebook's author who observes that "[e]ven street gangs wanted to dance, not fight" (Hill 2013: unpaginated). In her book *South Bronx battles*, Carolyn McLaughlin argues that hip-hop culture was a peaceful solution to street life: "Rather than violent fighting, rivals battled with words, dance, and music" (2019: 115). In the picturebook, the locations of the South Bronx are no longer presented as spaces of entrapment, but, as Lipsitz points out, "wonderfully festive and celebratory spaces of mutuality, community and solidarity" (2018: 51). Such portrayals of Black spaces are a form of resistance to the white spatial imaginary, which usually assumes that Black ghettos are the sites of dysfunctions without any artistic potential.

The space presented in the picturebook is challenged by the Black bodies that dominate most of the illustrations. Black DJs and dancers occupy the streets of the South Bronx. Through their arts and music, the hip-hop artists resist traditional perceptions of Black ghettos. As Hawthorne observes, this form of resistance is thus spatialized and embodied: "Resistance here is understood through the production of racialized spaces and subjectivities that are part of continuous and dynamic struggles for survival and social justice and includes the ways in which bodies and individuals access and move within particular spaces" (2023: 170).

The illustrations of Black youth involved in creative activities in public places are a response to the continuing crisis of mistreating Black people in community settings. The social function of the book illustrations can be compared to a recent artistic project *Living While Black*, started by African American artist and educator Ajuan Mance. She rejects superficial categories that have been assigned to Blacks, and instead proposes more humane definitions of Black experiences. In her series of drawings highlighting the harassment of Black people in public places, the artist stresses that everyday routines are acts of resistance to the distorted perceptions of Blackness. Daily businesses are labelled in the same way, e.g. "Driving While Black," or "Studying While Black," and defined from different perspectives. "Jamming While Black" is one of such phrases, which is defined in three ways:

1. A label applied to any incident in which Black people are reported to law enforcement for listening to music.
2. A reference to hostile and sometimes violent reaction of non-Black people to African American recorded music played at a high volume, most frequently in response to hip-hop and rap played by African American youth.

3. The use of Black recorded music, played loudly in a public setting, to claim space for, call attention to, or assert the presence of African American people and culture, especially in predominantly white environments. (Mance 2022: 41)

While the first definition reveals the perspective of white people along with negative emotions about Black music, the second and the third ones express Black people's resistance to the excessive surveillance and violence aimed at them in public settings. Likewise, in Hill's picturebook, the images of Black street dancers and musicians, jamming in front of the audiences of different races, emphasize the positive impact of Black music. Black musicians claim space for African American people and culture within the area that is judged from the white perspective. They show the larger society that Black music deserves respect, especially in areas marked with crime and poverty. Thus, hip-hop culture serves as a social commentary on the transformations taking place in well-known Black neighborhoods.

7. A story of renewal

I can write the world (Fig. 2) is based on the author's experience of living in the South Bronx. Joshunda Sanders calls herself a Bronx expert, and as she says on her website, "it's a place of great beauty and potential and culture" (2020). Her picturebook is a story of the South Bronx not just as a characterless and devalued environment but as a rich reference point for the concept of blackness and Black culture. It is another story of renewal. Through the eyes of an eight-year-old girl, it shows the difference between media images of the Bronx and the reality of a vibrant neighborhood filled with music and art. The girl's name is Ava Murray, which is a direct reference to two Black women: Ava DuVernay, a filmmaker, and Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray, a civil rights icon.⁷ The picturebook introduces the readers to some of the beauty and rich history of the Bronx by way of the verbal narrative but also through the beautiful illustrations of Coretta Scott King-Award-winning illustrator and artist, Charly Palmer. The story reveals the girl's struggle over space which has been racially defined. It pushes against a "single story" of blackness as represented by violence, death and poverty. Instead, it proposes a different, imagined reality of Black joyful space, where Black creativity is a form of resistance.

⁷ Ava DuVernay (born 1972) is an American filmmaker who is known for her movies on African American people. She directed *Selma* (2014), as well as popular drama series *When they see us* (2019) and *Colin in black and white* (2021). Anna Pauline "Pauli" Murray (1910-85) was a civil rights activist and a priest.

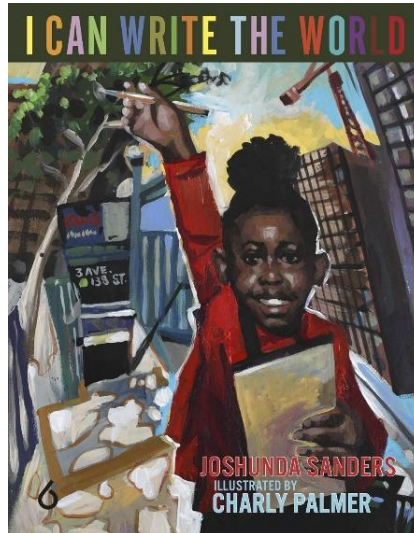


Fig. 2. Image copyright Charly Palmer, 2019, text copyright Joshunda Sanders, 2019. <https://acl.bibliocommons.com/>

The story begins with the main character looking out of the window and absorbing the colors, sounds, and smells of the city. The girl seems to be fascinated with urban life and everything that creates the special atmosphere of the place: colorful street art, with murals of historical figures, different types of music and dialects. She calls the South Bronx her home and is proud of being part of the community. However, her joy is destroyed with the news reported on TV. These are crime stories about her neighborhood, which are then presented visually in several illustrations. One image depicts a Black girl being arrested for painting graffiti, or as the author has put it, for her creativity and “sharing talents with the world” (Sanders 2019: unpaginated). At this moment, Ava Murray realizes that “how [she] feel[s] and what [she] see[s] don’t always match” (Sanders 2019: unpaginated). Through graffiti as a form of individual and communal expression and protest, Ava enters into an active relationship with the South Bronx. As she navigates the urban settings, she exhibits keen awareness of her community’s problems.

The following pages of the picturebook are based on a dialogue between the girl and her mother, who tells her the story of creativity in the Bronx. When the woman was the age of her child, as she recalls, the circumstances were more challenging for the development of Bronx art:

There were no
 Art classes at school
 But Black and Brown kids taught themselves to
 Move, sketch, and made hip hop culture cool. (Sanders 2019: unpaginated)

Then she defines Black creativity in terms of music and art. There is one symbolic illustration depicting the head of the girl's mother filled with lots of ideas defining the Black neighborhood: hip-hop dancers, the Bronx Zoo, Zaro's family bakery. The accompanying text defines what creativity is:

Creativity is using what you have
To make a map of your dreams
What you see in your mind
Or feel in your heart
Can come out in dance, colors, or beats. (Sanders 2019: unpaginated)

The following illustrations focus on the contributions of Bronx residents to American culture. They present images of street graffiti or huge parties of hip-hop dancers on the block. The vibrant South Bronx neighborhood appears as a stage for cultural innovations which spread far beyond the Black community.

However, the main message of the picturebook is that Black geographical spaces are not given enough attention and care. They tend to be undervalued and ignored as far as their cultural assets are concerned. Ava's mother uses the concept of the window frame to explain to her daughter how white people create stories of blackness:

"See the frame around the window? It shapes
Everything you see below
Journalists on the news are
Like the window frame," Mom says
"They tell the stories they think we should know." (Sanders 2019: unpaginated)

Ava's mother makes her believe that the power of stories lies in the hands of those who write them. The girl decides to become a journalist to reexamine her neighborhood and tell a different story. She knows that "[w]hat makes the Bronx stand out may not always be understood." Thus, she wants to remind others of the people from the Bronx "who have always made the most of the world" (Sanders 2019: unpaginated). The story reveals the girl's struggle over space which has been racially defined. It pushes against a "single story" of blackness as represented by violence, death and poverty, and, instead, it proposes a different, imagined reality of Black joyful space, where Black creativity is a form of resistance.

The main narrative is interrupted with the images of street murals which reflect the cultural significance of the place. One double-page illustration shows a large mural with the figures of hip-hop dancers, their music equipment, and a variety of swirling lines in various colors reflecting the hip-hop rhythms. In the very center of the illustration, one can notice the hands of a DJ changing records, which is a celebration of the Bronx music tradition which emerged in the 1970s. Another mural portrays several music traditions that came to the Bronx

from Puerto Rico, Haiti or Jamaica. The images present musicians playing various instruments as well as dancers who become part of the cityscape. One mural specifically celebrates Barbadian DJ and producer Grandmaster Flash and Kool Herc, a Jamaican American DJ, who is a pioneer of hip-hop music in the Bronx. In front of the murals, we can see the main characters of the story, Ava Murray and her mother, walking round the town and absorbing its special atmosphere. All of the murals, as a form of graffiti, not only tell the story of the South Bronx but also convey the original function of street art. As Joseph Ewoodzie has put it, graffiti is “a dialogue between the anonymous individual and the world” (2017: 31). It expresses the desire of Black youth to assert their territory through naming and to resist the forces of urban decay which surround them.

Hip-hop culture entails not only music and dancing but also graffiti art. In Sanders’ picturebook, the images of the Bronx youth tagging their names in public places with brightly colored spray paints accompany the story of hip-hop. One illustration highlights the tension between the law enforcement and the activities of the local young Black artist. The interaction takes place in front of the mural that has just been created on one of the public buildings. The police officer regards the creation of street art as a criminal activity and arrests the culprit. With such a symbolic image, the picturebook responds to the process of criminalizing Black street life by American law enforcement and devaluing both the spaces and the communities that inhabit them.

The book’s creators advocate for the preservation of Black spaces that hold cultural value. Rather than perpetuating the popular claim that “Blackness and equal access to public space are indeed incompatible” (Demirtürk 2019: 1), they point to the importance of the urban space markers of Black geographies, such as street corners, public parks, or walls of public building, which have been adapted for artistic and socializing activity.

Conclusions

Analyzing contemporary picturebook narratives of the South Bronx through the prism of Black Geographies reveals the borough as both a site of resistance to social inequalities and the center of Black joy and creativity. While the authors acknowledge the persistent social challenges faced by the community, they point to how the young South Bronx residents try to improve their lives by creative practices. They demonstrate an emotional attachment to their homes, organizing street parties, creating public art or launching careers in journalism. Their sense of belonging to the Black community underpins their social and cultural activism. Consequently, the stories of the South Bronx reveal the intertwined nature of race and space. As Caroline Knowles argues, a setting is active because “it interacts

with people and their activities as an ongoing set of possibilities in which race is fabricated” (2003: 80). Due to this strong connection geographic sites can be renewed, and racial identities are more likely to be recognized and appreciated.

The poetics of Black landscape in the selected picturebooks serves not only to reflect its physical properties but also to portray the hidden aspect of the urban structures, primarily associated with their economic decline. The narratives disclose unapparent assets of Black culture, either totally ignored or marginalized by mainstream journalists. To use the words of Anderson and Wilson, the books “allow for thinking through spaces that embody remembrance, beauty, cultivation, knowledge, belief ...” (2021: 20). They remind the readers that Black neighborhoods are “spaces of resistance and refusal, imagination and liberation” (Anderson & Wilson 2021: 21).

The stories are also a call for action, stressing the need to reject a common perception of Black ghettos. They are narratives of reversal – they turn a popular vision of the South Bronx as a dilapidated neighborhood into a picture of a significant center of Black music which emanates with Black joy and pride. By restoring the image of the neighborhood, the picturebooks can reshape the dominant perceptions of the place. As Hood concludes, “[t]he contested and forgotten landscapes, renewed through a myriad of expressions, can give us incentives to obligations for years to come” (2020: 4).

Picturebooks about the South Bronx undoubtedly offer rich insights and significant challenges for contemporary literary critics and readers. They question conventionalized assumptions about the roles picturebooks can play in representing geographic locations. While they engage with a long-lasting tradition of Black resistance and racial affirmation, they expand the scope of U.S. children’s literary tradition to encompass a complex issue of Black joyful space-making.

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