African American Children’s Literature: Liminal Terrains and Strategies for Selfhood

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Selection criteria for librarians, school media specialists, and educators tasked with choosing children’s and young adult literature by, for, and representing historically and currently minoritized groups have been established by scholars over the past three decades (Murphy and Murphy 1999; Brooks and McNair 2008). Yet the number of titles featuring children and teens of color significantly lags behind their population in today’s American schools and society. Among these titles, texts featuring young people of African descent continue to be underrepresented on our shelves. Notable children’s literature critic Rudine Sims Bishop recently observed that “African American children’s literature continues to exist as a very small subset of the estimated 5000 new children’s books published each year in the United States” (Bishop 2007, xii).

However, some authors and illustrators of books featuring African American characters have achieved recent success, winning top awards and prizes including the Newbery, the Caldecott, and the Printz awards. Recent articles in venues such as The Horn Book have noted an increased concern toward and attention to issues of race and representation in children’s literature, and most professionals in the field recognize the necessity of including African American children’s and young adult literature in their libraries and classrooms.

In this chapter, I propose that African American children’s and young adult literature has arrived at a moment that literary critic Homi Bhabha theorized as liminal or “in-between” space. Bhabha contends that these spaces “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha 1994, 2). I propose that
African American children’s and young adult literature is one such space for exploring these strategies of selfhood, not just for Black youth, but also for all young people everywhere. At a time when African Americans count among their numbers some of the most admired people in our nation and world, as well as some of the most maligned, African American stories ought to be read, taught, and enjoyed as an essential cipher for decoding the true meaning of the collective American story. Often, there is a tendency for librarians, educators, and others to present, narrate, and teach African American literature as a singular metanarrative. Yet in the intricate quilt of American literature, language, and life, there have always been many stories about “Black folks” that vary according to any number of factors: historical period, region of the United States, religion, national origin, socioeconomic class, and citizenship status (Thomas 2011b, xx). In the past, as detailed below, there were sociopolitical reasons for promoting particular kinds of stories over others, at the expense of differentiation and individuation (Johnson 2008). Today, spaces are opening (albeit slowly) for authors to explore a greater diversity of possibilities for Black children and youth. Whether these new spaces will expand into a renaissance or disappear altogether is a critical question the field currently faces.

My intent and purpose is not to provide an exhaustive survey of African American, African, and African Diaspora children’s and young adult literatures. Instead, my hope is to provide a fuller context for the creation, production, and consumption of these literatures. I begin by positioning African American children’s and youth literature alongside the journey from property to fraught personhood, from forced labor to tenuous liberty, and from dehumanization to critical consciousness (Freire 1970). This survey will include a brief review of African American children’s and young adult literature, with representative titles highlighted, and some gaps denoted. Finally, I conclude with implications for shifting the selection and teaching of
African American stories for youth from binary Black/White contexts to meaningful, expansive lenses of use to twenty-first century libraries, schools, families, and communities.

Some Historical Considerations

The origins of all children’s literatures and literacies of the African Diaspora can, of course, be traced back to Africa. Prior to the Atlantic slave trade and colonization, African literature was largely oral outside of Islamic areas where the Arabic language predominated. It was valued as "one of the major means by which societies educated, instructed, and socialized their younger members" (Odaga 1985). This literate tradition included proverbs, riddles, tales, taboos, and legends across West and Central African societies. When people of African descent were first brought to Europe and the Americas, first as exotic captives, and then later as people in bondage, new traditions began to influence their songs, wise sayings, and stories. European folklore and Christian religious traditions as well as Native American trickster tales and knowledge about the landscape and geography of the New World were incorporated into the tales of those who were enslaved and colonized – forming a new, hybridized culture.

Rich literacies and literate traditions emerged during the slavery period, despite severe penalties for most enslaved persons and some freedmen for learning how to read and write. Punishments ranged from beating, to maiming, and in some cases, such as forgery of free papers, being put to death. Yet even in this perilous environment, many enslaved people still risked everything to become literate, linking literacy learning and liberation for the first time in human history. We have many first-person accounts about their lives, known within the American literary canon as the slave narratives. Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Jacobs, Henry Bibb, and many others wrote their own stories, leaving no doubt that slavery was morally
and ethically evil (Gates 2002). The authors of the slave narratives typically began by writing about what it was like to be a child in bondage. Thus, in these narratives, we have the origins of textually represented African American child life. Julius Lester and Afua Cooper are but two of the many contemporary authors who have provided juvenile versions of slave narratives, both accounts from the nineteenth century intended for abolitionist audiences as well as memories of elderly enslaved persons interviewed in the 1930s for the Federal Writers’ Project (Lester 1968; Cooper 2009).

Enslaved persons who did not have access to traditional print literacies also produced, engaged in, and transmitted to their children rich literate traditions. Centuries before the invention of the telegraph, West African cultures communicated information over long distances by the use of the talking drum. When talking drums were forbidden in the United States, the enslaved persons used other means of communication. Over time, they coined a new language, African American English, a creolized and complete variety of the speech they heard from their masters (Baugh 1993; Rickford 1999). They used spirituals, trickster tales, and freedom stories as metaphoric devices. It was through these stories that they protested the injustice and inhumanity of slavery, and gleaned information about escape on the Underground Railroad north. One of the most prominent African American children’s authors to introduce these traditional trickster tales and freedom stories in her work was Virginia Hamilton (Hamilton 1985; Hamilton 1993; Hamilton 1996).

In 1865, chattel slavery in the United States ended at the conclusion of the Civil War. Newly liberated African Americans were eager to obtain knowledge of and proficiency the print literacies that had been denied them. Free women, men, and children made significant political, social, and educational gains during the first decade after Emancipation, also known as
Reconstruction – as prominent African American educator and founder of Tuskegee Institute Booker T. Washington remembered those first years of freedom, “it was a whole race going to school” (Fairclough 2006, 27). Then the Compromise of 1877 removed all remaining Federal troops from the Southern states that had seceded from the Union. As the North turned a blind eye, Southern Redemptionists sought to set up a new caste system that brutally repressed the freedmen, denied their right to vote on the grounds of illiteracy, and suppressed their ability to get a good education or earn a living. The Plessy v. Ferguson decision in 1896 upheld all segregated institutions in the South, including schools. From the 1890s until the 1930s, sociologist Jim Loewen has documented thousands of incidents where Black residents, homeowners, businessmen, and farmers were violently forced from their homes all over the United States (Loewen 2005). Until the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance began in the 1920s, most of the depictions of Black people in mass media and society were egregiously negative (Riggs 1987).

Against this backdrop, there were many pockets of resistance and counternarrative formation. Throughout the late nineteenth and early churches published local bulletins with stories and sketches for their children. W.E.B. DuBois, co-founder of the NAACP was also deeply concerned with the racist images of Black children that prevailed, and along with writer Jessie Fauset founded The Brownies' Book in order to, as one seven-year-old reader put it, “begin to learn something about my own race” (Lewis 2009, 384). As Bishop notes, “a magazine with a mission, The Brownies' Book was a prime example of literature as social action” (Bishop 2007, 23). The magazine was an oasis for young African Americans in the early twentieth century amid a social backdrop of damaging caricatures and stereotypes. It not only included
literature for youth, but literature by youth. One such youngster was Langston Hughes, who began his career as a nationally published teen poet in this venue (Rampersad 2002, 45).

The success of *The Brownies’ Book* was contemporaneous with the apex of the nadir period of race relations in American history. Returning soldiers of color who had been treated as liberators in Europe returned home from the war to the Red Summer of 1919, filled with anti-Black riots, violent expulsions, and lynchings (Loewen 1995). In some Southern towns, wearing a uniform was seen as a threat, so veterans had to hide their military insignia before returning to their hometown. The infamous ethnic purgings at Rosewood, Florida, and Tulsa, Oklahoma happened during this period, as did the mental institutionalization of the entire multiracial community of Malaga Island, Maine, described in Gary D. Schmidt’s Newbery Honor novel *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* (Schmidt 2004). Of course, contemporary literature for children at the time did not detail these events, even though many children of all races witnessed and were affected by them.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, and the three decades immediately following it, laid the foundation for today’s African American children’s and young adult literature. Sparked by the elite young poets, novelists, dramatists, and other artists envisioned by DuBois and Fauset during the early years of the NAACP, the Harlem Renaissance was the first period in American history during which African American artists and writers appreciated and celebrated their people, culture, language, and folkways unapologetically. For the first time, Black people were not always victims of racism and dehumanization. They were celebrated as people with their own traditions, artistic forms, and indigenous knowledge. During this decade, former *Brownies’ Book* contributor Langston Hughes rose to prominence, writing poetry for adults as well as
children, and historian Carter G. Woodson established Negro History Week, which today has evolved into Black History Month.

During and after the Harlem Renaissance, writers began to position African Americans as active agents fighting for their own physical, social, and economic liberation from stifling oppression. Literary critic Katharine Capshaw Smith observed that “the major writers of the time were deeply invested in the enterprise of building a Black national identity through literary constructions of childhood” (Capshaw Smith 2004, xiii). Thus, much of the impetus of mid-century African American children’s literature was reparative, telling celebratory tales about the victories and the achievements of African Americans in spite of collective trauma and monumental odds, promoting a bourgeois “uplift” ideology, and encouraging young people to lead the race politically and socially towards American ideals of progress and individual achievement.

**African American Metanarratives: Multiple Stories, Multiple Tellers, Multiple Genres**

All human beings engage in storytelling and story creation to make sense of an oft-nonsensical world (Daiute 2004). When we humans construct and structure our inner worlds, we shape them using the logic of our lived and embodied experiences, as well as the stories that we have received from others. In the early twenty-first century, story yet remains one of the prisms that we can look into to see ourselves and to imagine what we might become. Still, even after much progress has been made towards equity in children’s and young adult literature over the past half century, there are more images reflected back in those prisms for some children than others.
Stories about African Americans have long had implications for young readers from all backgrounds. It is through these stories that children and teenagers first form critical consciousness around issues of race, racial difference, diversity, and equality. As public librarians, school library media specialists, and educators, we make choices in the ways that we present, frame, and contextualize literatures about African American people, cultures, and lives. It is usually in our schools and children’s libraries that young people are first introduced to these texts; however, we often leave students with the impression that there is a singular, uncontested metanarrative, privileging only certain kinds of stories as appropriate ways of talking about African American experiences. These metanarratives have changed over time, depending upon the political climate. Children of a century ago consumed texts that presented the Black American story as one of deficit, dependency, and comedy. Dianne Johnson reminds us that during this time period, “poems such as ‘Ten Little Niggers’ were commonly appearing in the pages of St. Nicholas, the preeminent American children’s magazine from 1878 through 1945... cartoons, misrepresentations, and stereotypes of the Negro were legion therein” (Johnson 1990, xx). Since that time, our society’s sensibilities have progressed. Today’s children read texts that generally present slavery as wrong, the Civil Rights Movement as necessary, and Black characters as fully human (even if not always present, or represented as authentically as others).

As the above historical section has illustrated, there have always been multiple ways of reading, talking about, and teaching what it means to be Black in America. Whether Black histories, life, and letters are taught as stories of triumph, pilgrimage, reaction, or deficit, or in other ways, each of our readings (and “tellings” to children) about the phenomenon of being Black in America is rooted in specific philosophies and ideologies that are directly correlated to the identities, social subjectivities, and sociopolitical concerns of the individuals and groups who
espouse them, both today and in the past (Thomas 2011b). Since metanarratives about race are pervasive in contemporary media and culture, and there are many competing frames for analyzing this often hyper-racialized information, it has become difficult for many adults today to process current events, statistics, and data about Black Americans and distill fact from fiction, let alone children and young adults. Recently, I have argued that “the rethinking of the African American metanarrative is central to the essential work of encouraging students to move from passive consumption to thoughtful analysis of all of the diverse narratives in our society. Providing young readers with frames to analyze the ways in which texts are raced in explicit and implicit ways can help further their appreciation for American stories both old and new” (Thomas 2011b, xx).

As we consider stories, we must also consider their tellers. A persistent debate in the field has been over who has (and what people have) the right to tell African American stories to young people. This is a question that has been revisited often over recent decades as greater numbers of Black authors rise to prominence. In her analysis of the development of Black children’s picture books, Michelle H. Martin, the first African American president of the Children’s Literature Association, acknowledged the importance of texts such as Ezra Jack Keats’ *The Snowy Day*, which was the first book featuring an African American child to win the Caldecott Award, while highlighting the contributions of recent authors and illustrators of African descent (Martin 2004). A few years later, African American children’s author Nikki Grimes asked in *The Horn Book*, “if this nation can manage to put a Black man (President Barack Obama) in the Oval Office, why can’t the Caldecott committee see its way clear to give the Caldecott medal to an individual artist of African descent?” (Grimes 2009). The numbers of books published children’s and young adult authors and illustrators of African descent fluctuate
from year to year, but Black voices still are a minuscule proportion of the field. The fact that most literary representations of African American children and youth come from those from outside of the culture is one that invites critical consideration, and necessitates attention, if not direct action.

Another gap between African American children’s and young adult literature and other offerings is found in issues of race and representation. African American writers for youth and their allies have historically (and necessarily) been concerned with recounting the past and refuting negative depictions of Black children by providing authentic counternarratives and positive images. Unfortunately, I contend that this has created an imbalance in the kinds and the types of literature featuring Black characters available to all youth. While almost always present in historical stories about the antebellum South, and often featured in tales about Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Era, African American youngsters are rarely protagonists in mysteries, romances, science fiction, or fantasy stories. Although there are more middle and upper class Black characters appearing in literature for young people, both historical and contemporary fiction in the field tends to skew towards portraying Black children and families as financially impoverished, or at least struggling, especially in urban contexts (Thomas 2011a).

It is absolutely true that there remain a disproportionate number of Black young people in poverty, and that persistent social inequities yet remain. Stories of oppression and inequality are important ones that must be told and retold. Nevertheless, those of us tasked with presenting these texts to young people would do well to consider the impressions of African American children and youth they might be left with if the majority of the Black American characters they encounter are enslaved, suffering under Jim Crow, living under duress during the Civil Rights Movement, and/or struggling to survive the nation’s postmodern inner cities. If there are few (or
young African American detectives, doctors, crime fighters, superheroes, brave soldiers and knights, or princesses in our stories, what ideas about the humanity, the diversity within, and the inherent worth might young people from other cultures take away from their readings? What might Black kids and teens themselves come to believe about their inherent worth? How does this affect the development of young readers’ imaginations, dreams, and aspirations?

As a teacher and teacher educator, I find that my students are experiencing the same frustrations today that I dealt with ten, fifteen, and even twenty years ago when trying to search for diverse representations of African American children and teens in print. Black characters are often confined to the same roles over and over again in juvenile fiction. I posit that this is a phenomenon that leads to many Black students becoming aliterate by the middle grades – when they do not see their lives, dreams, hopes, and aspirations represented in the available literature, many choose not to engage in leisure reading at all. Yet the kind of literature that mirrors their lives is not always necessarily aligned with the financial interests of publishers. A few years ago on a professional listserv focused on children’s literature, an editor at a major children’s publishing house confirmed something that I have long suspected -- the bulk of the reading public is just not that interested in multicultural stories (except for when for political correctness' sake they have to be), and is most comfortable seeing minoritized children and youth in acceptable and/or expected roles. Thus, it seems that characters of color are still often positioned as multicultural “set dressing.”

By extension, then, can it be said that the major purpose of characters of color, non-Judeo-Christian characters, LGBTQ characters, or other characterizations of underrepresented groups in children's and young adult literature is to serve mainstream audiences? If that is the case, it makes perfect sense that these characters often only show up in issues-oriented fiction.
Some may contend that audiences just are not very interested in reading about a Hmong warrior or a Palestinian princess or a Jamaican sorcerer unless it is time for those cultures to be featured during their month/week/assembly at school. If this is not the case, then why not expand children’s and young adult literature beyond binary representations of Black/White, rich/poor, urban/rural, ethnic/not-ethnic, etc.? Might we finally expand our horizons to authentically represent the dreams, the visions, and the imaginations of all children? Until our literature can provide answers to these questions in the affirmative, all of us involved in selecting, choosing, and evaluating texts for the young have a responsibility to do this kind of expansive, generous, and humanizing program planning, storytelling, and teaching in our own libraries and classrooms.

**Criteria for Selection**

In her comprehensive volume, *Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children’s Literature*, Rudine Sims Bishop provides a five-point summary of the literary tradition created about (and around) African American children and youth. These points provide succinct guidelines for those tasked with selecting texts for young people:

**Authentic African American children’s and young adult literature:**

1) Celebrates the strengths of the Black family as a cultural institution and vehicle for survival;

2) Bears witness to Black people’s determined struggle for freedom, equality, and dignity;

3) Nurtures the souls of Black children by reflecting back to them, both visually and verbally, the beauty and competencies that we as adults see in them;
4) Situates itself through its language and its content, within African American literary and cultural contexts; and

5) Honors the tradition of story as a way of teaching and as a way of knowing.

**Landmark Texts**

*The Snowy Day* (Keats 1962)

*Sounder* (Armstrong 1969)
- First novel with an African American protagonist to win the Newbery Medal (1970).

*Martin Luther King, Jr.: Man of Peace* (Patterson 1969)
- First winner of the Coretta Scott King Award (established 1970).

*M.C. Higgins, the Great* (Hamilton 1975)
- First novel by an African American author to win the Newbery Medal (1975).

*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor 1976)
- Second novel by an African American author to win the Newbery Medal (1977).

*Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters* (Steptoe 1987)
- Caldecott Honor Book, 1988

*Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis 1999)
- First novel by an African American male author to win the Newbery Medal (2000).

*Monster* (Myers 1999)
- First novel by an African American author to win the Printz Award (2000).

*The First Part Last* (Johnson 2003)
• First novel by an African American woman author to win the Printz Award (2004).

*The Lion and the Mouse* (Pinkney 2009)

• First picture book by an African American author/illustrator to win the Caldecott Medal (2000).

**Some Key Authors**

Arnold Adoff
William Armstrong
Arna Bontemps
Lucille Clifton
Christopher Paul Curtis
Sharon Draper
Sharon Flake
Eloise Greenfield
Nikki Giovanni
Nikki Grimes
Virginia Hamilton
Langston Hughes
Angela Johnson
Ezra Jack Keats
Julius Lester
Patricia McKissack
Walter Dean Myers
Marilyn Nelson
Eleanora Tate
Joyce Carol Thomas
Mildred D. Taylor
Rita Williams-Garcia
Jacqueline Woodson

Some Key Illustrators
Moneta Barnett
Ashley Bryan
Carole Byard
Bryan Collier
Floyd Cooper
Donald Crews
Nina Crews
Pat Cummings
Leo and Diane Dillon
Tom Feelings
Jan Spivey Gilchrist
Fred and Patricia McKissack
Christopher Myers
Kadir Nelson
Brian Pinkney
Jerry Pinkney

James E. Ransome

Faith Ringgold

John Steptoe

Works Cited


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