

# Braided Histories and Experiences in Literature for Children and Adolescents

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This study examines how intergroup histories and experiences are represented in children's literature to foster social justice inquiry.

**“THERE'S NO UNRAVELING THE ROPE. WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER.”**

— Louise Erdrich (Goodman & Erdrich, 2008)

**LOUISE ERDRICH'S (2008)** novel *The Plague of Doves* traces how a community copes with the traumatic legacy of the vigilante lynching of four innocent Native Americans on a reservation town in North Dakota. Drawing on an actual historical hanging of a thirteen-year-old in 1897, the novel depicts the not-always-obvious intergenerational impact of murder and injustice, while employing elements of magical realism to conjure possibilities of survival and healing. It also explores difficult issues about identity and shared history. Midway through the novel, one of the main protagonists, Evelina, reflects on her own and others' hereditary implication in the original violent episode and thinks to herself, “Now that some of us have mixed in the spring of our existence both guilt and victim, there is no unraveling the rope” (p. 243). The image of a tangled rope that cannot be unraveled, thematically linked to the noose, is a grim symbol for intergroup history and experience. Yet, it is also an honest and unflinching metaphor, especially when understood within a larger national record that not only includes the conquest of indigenous communities but

also the degradations of chattel slavery and Jim Crow. The past cannot be undone, Erdrich seems to suggest, and will forever dangle before our efforts to progress.

The Gordian knot of shared history does not imply a unidirectional backward orientation, a need to exhume the past at the expense of the future. Evelina's thoughts, and life, also connote the possibility of growth and regeneration. The younger generations are in the “spring of... existence” and, reminiscent of the poet Derek Walcott's (1998) characterization of his own Creole inheritance as the “soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice” (p. 64), the soil of their mixed heritage has been cross-pollinated with the seed of “both guilt and victim.” These youths embody the insight that “the other” may not be so absolutely other, but rather inheres—culturally, historically, and often physiologically—within us by virtue of our shared humanity. Taking full measure of the past is necessary for a fertile future, which entails the ethical revelation that not only are we implicated in one another's histories but in fact our futures are also ineluctably intertwined, despite efforts to segregate our experiences; or, as commented on by Erdrich (who is of Ojibwe, German, and French descent) in

an interview about the novel, “We’re all in this together” (Goodman & Erdrich, 2008).

This article explores how children’s literature might provide a resource for students to explore how we are indeed “all in this together.” This question has significance because, following Erdrich, we believe that a nuanced understanding of our togetherness is a necessary precondition for the interrelated processes of redressing past injustices, surviving the present, and working toward a better future. At some point in their education, students—if they are fortunate—may have the opportunity to read adult novels such as *The Plague of Doves*, most likely as part of a high school or college curriculum. Yet, children’s literature remains a primary vehicle for intellectual and imaginative maturation, and it is thus important to ask whether younger students have the opportunity to transact with books that represent and raise questions about shared experiences and cooperation across social, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. We examine three promising texts from our larger study that provide a platform for investigating braided histories. Through these books, we illustrate ideological shifts in representation and draw out potential theoretical and pedagogical implications.

### Theoretical Perspectives

Researchers have noted the importance of youth engaging with literature that reflects their identities and provides opportunities for honing critical sensibilities (e.g., Cai, 1997; DeNicolo & Fránquiz, 2006; Harris, 2003; Wolf, 2004). For example, the recent *Handbook of Research on Children’s and Young Adult Literature* (Wolf, Coats, Enciso, & Jenkins, 2011) includes chapters with LGBT themes (Blackburn & Clark, 2011), Latino/a literature (Fránquiz, Martínez-Roldán, & Mercado, 2011), the history and development of African American children’s literature (Bishop, 2011), and the politics of representing Native American experiences (Bradford, 2011). Additionally, there is a burgeoning body of children’s literature authors—many of them also included in the handbook—who strive to provide a greater range of cultural representations, as well as capture how some of these identities overlap. Jacqueline Woodson described her blended identities as “I’m a writer who’s black; I’m a writer who’s female; I’m a writer who’s gay. Those different identities weave themselves into the writing. But I’m not just one of those things” (Patton, 2006, p. 48).

Despite progress in the publishing field, children’s literature does not fully reflect the world of many 21st-century schools, which increasingly house students who communicate in numerous languages, claim multiple identities,

and often have ties that extend beyond our nation’s borders (Campano & Ghiso, 2011). One possible avenue for addressing students’ identities is the continued commitment to providing texts that echo students’ experiences and portray a multiplicity of cultural, linguistic, and migratory representations within any given community. The project of expanding the canon to include the “dense particularities” (Mohanty, 1997, p. 130) of specific group experiences needs to continue with vigor. However, it may be equally important to examine how our “differences are intertwined” (Mohanty, 1997, p. 130): how various communities’ histories and experiences do not merely occupy insular spaces but have also been, and continue to be, braided in ways that both reinforce power asymmetries and promote intergroup social, political, and imaginative cooperation.

This article draws on theoretical frameworks that attempt to navigate two ostensibly opposite, but really quite compatible, tendencies: the Scylla of a postmodern relativism and multiculturalism, in which students may acknowledge one another’s cultural spaces and celebrate differences but not probe deeply into either structural inequality or social cooperation; and the Charybdis of an idealized notion of common humanity that transcends difference. Our study is inspired by interdisciplinary frameworks that include realist theories of identity (e.g., Mohanty, 1997; Moya, 2000) that value people’s perspectives and identities as a source of knowledge, intersectional approaches to understanding multiple oppressions (e.g., the Black feminist work of Collins [2008]), and cultural identity as blended and pluralized (Ramazani, 2001). Our conceptual and empirical project considers how children’s literature might promote a curriculum that allows students’ particular experiences to have an integrity of their own while simultaneously being in conjunction with others’ histories and narratives (Campano, 2007).

### Methods

This article draws from a larger study that examines 100 quality multicultural children’s literature texts. We sought to explore the following question, How and to what extent does children’s literature address the topic of shared histories, identities, and experiences? This included investigating whether the texts capture multicultural identities and how, what conceptions they foster about human rights, and the ideological implications for the types of experiences represented. The texts selected for analysis were designated by the Children’s Literature and Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association (2007) as “Notable Books for a Global Society” (para. 2). Each year’s booklist consists of 25 K–12 texts

published the year before that span fiction, nonfiction, and poetry and which meet the criteria for promoting global understandings. Criteria include authentic representation of cultural groups and sociopolitical issues, avoidance of stereotypes, interaction between and within cultures, and the extent to which the text can serve as a platform for critical reflection and response (Children's Literature and Reading, 2011). These booklists were chosen because they encompass multiple group experiences and also overlap with other children's literature distinctions, such as the Coretta Scott King Award. We used the four lists that were the most recent at the start of this study for our analysis, 2007–2010.

Beginning with open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) by each researcher independently, we examined the verbal and, where applicable, visual text (illustrations, photographs, diagrams) for each of the children's literature examples, attending to character, plot, setting, and theme. We noted, for instance, who was present and absent, how each character or group was positioned in relation to others, how each group's experience intersected with another's, and whether there was mention of power asymmetries (e.g., colonization) and/or evidence of coalition building. After the independent review of the texts, we conferred to share our perspectives and form conceptual categories of how children's literature texts address shared histories and experiences through the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1978).

This article focuses on a subset of our findings—a robust category of promising texts that provide insights into how communities and individuals are implicated in one another's circumstances, struggles, and progress. We highlight three representative examples—*Denied, Detained, Deported: Stories from the Dark Side of American Immigration* by Ann Bausum (2009), *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom* by Carole Boston Weatherford (2006), and *After Gandhi: One Hundred Years of Nonviolent Resistance* by Anne Sibley O'Brien and Perry Edmond O'Brien (2009)—and detail the ideological implications inherent in their depictions of intergroup experience. As scholars and former schoolteachers of South American, Filipino European, and African American descent, respectively, we have had many conversations about the importance of solidarity across communities. We have also wondered what educational resources are available to help cultivate what historian Marable (2009) described as “the cultural contexts for multiracial, multiclass coalitional politics” (p. xxvii). The books we discuss below offer a promising start.

### *Denied, Detained, Deported: Stories from the Dark Side of American Immigration*

From the onset, Bausum's text juxtaposes the mythology of the United States as a refuge for those seeking freedom and a better life with the contradictory nature of official policies that have excluded and oppressed certain immigrant groups. This overlay is vividly captured in the opening images and the text of the endpages. A photograph of the Statue of Liberty, the iconic symbol of the United States as a nation of immigrants, is superimposed with two parallel poems: the statue's inscription on the left-hand side and a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye on the right that blends this original inscription with caveats that speak to how different immigrant groups have fared with regards to the American Dream: “Give me your tired, your poor / but not too tired, not too poor” (p. 7).

Bausum explores these contradictions and exclusions through specific cases from U.S. immigration history: the Chinese Exclusion Act; a profile of the *St. Louis*, a ship that sought refuge from the Nazis just before World War II; Japanese internment camps; the story of Emma Goldman, an anarchist who was deported for ideological reasons; and Mexican–U.S. border and labor relations. Through beautifully rendered photographs and historical documents, the text puts a human face to those who are most vulnerable in times of crisis and documents how geopolitical dynamics, such as war and the economy, fuel nativism and fear of the other.

*Denied, Detained, Deported* makes use of visual imagery as part of a countertext to the traditional immigration narrative. One photograph, for instance, features a cluster of individuals in the foreground, their backs to the reader, waving at the Statue of Liberty in the distance. At first glance, it may appear to be one of the familiar renderings of immigrants arriving in the new land—a symbol of the asylum of the United States—but the small caption alerts readers that this is an image of individuals being deported because of their political ideologies. Another

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striking visual superimposes words from a speech by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt urging Congress to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act, in which he proclaimed, “We must be big enough to acknowledge our mistakes of the past and to correct them” (n.p.), onto a photograph of a Japanese internment camp that he had approved the year prior. The multimodality of the book captures the contradictory experiences of America’s aspirations to live up to its professed ideals, an issue that harkens to our nation’s founding, when “all men are created equal” did not include women or people of African descent.

In looking back at history, *Denied, Detained, Deported* makes explicit links between past cases and more contemporary events, such as the profiling of Muslim Americans after September 11, 2001, and the xenophobic sentiments aimed at Latino workers, particularly Mexican Americans. The text ends with an immigration timeline that weaves together various episodes in American history, emphasizing that a particular moment that seems so unique and flooded with emotion is actually part of a pattern in which the reader can discern links across communities. This linkage is expressed earlier in the book when one of the passengers onboard the *St. Louis* lamented how they were denied entry while attempting to escape from the Nazis, whereas Cubans fleeing Castro were welcomed with refugee status. A friend onboard the *St. Louis* responded, “I like to think [that] because of us is why they let them in”

(p. 59). Although Bausum profiles specific historical events and figures, the interconnections imbue the text with a universalism, leaving the reader thinking that the tables can turn on any community and that no group is immune from being stigmatized or scapegoated. This is the vulnerability that we share as human beings. These experiences also create hope that there can be progress.

### *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*

Weatherford’s picture book takes place in pre-Civil War, rural southeastern Maryland. Readers follow Harriet Tubman’s escape from slavery to freedom in Philadelphia and her subsequent return to guide others on the journey. A source of strength—and a primary emphasis of the book—is her spiritual calling. Known as “the Moses of her people,” Tubman is likened to the biblical Moses,

and her work leading slaves to freedom is likened to the Exodus narrative (a theme in African American history and culture), which recounts the Israelites’ suffering as Egyptian slaves and Moses leading them out of bondage. Metaphorically, Tubman is given the name Moses because she represented deliverance in the imagination of her people. In exploring this connection, Weatherford makes links across religious and historical traditions toward social justice ends.

Through realistically rendered nighttime settings, illustrator Kadir Nelson depicts how Harriet Tubman used the cover of darkness to stay out of reach of surveillance, an artistic choice that also indexes how the night was the time for traveling because of the restrictions imposed during

the day by slavery. The visual setting is Tubman’s nocturnal journey, when she networked with abolitionists and liberated others via the Underground Railroad. The author and illustrator present the historic reality that collaboration is a possibility at night, which implies that people who aided others in the project of liberation had much to risk as well. This setting points to the invisible histories and shared experiences detailed in the book.

Weatherford subtly chronicles the importance of nondescript, minor actors as instrumental in Harriet Tubman’s success, suggesting that she was active in creating coalitions across class, race, and culture. On one such occasion in her journey, Harriet Tubman must find

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cover and sees a farmer and his wife. She remembers that the farmer’s wife “spoke to her and was always nice to her” (n.p.), and Tubman reaches out to them. Given historical knowledge of the context, we can assume that the farmer and his wife are White because of their class status in 19th-century rural Maryland. They provide cover, and other unnamed characters similarly aid the cause: a couple who give her a ride in a carriage and a man who hides her in his boat. These three instances implicitly speak to how people outside of particular oppressed communities have been willing throughout history to be allies in the struggle for liberation. For example, Frederick Douglass ardently participated in the Women’s suffrage movement of the late 19th century. More recently, it brings to mind theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and his endearing friendship with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., which developed during many of the Freedom Marches at the height of the

civil rights movement. Importantly, Weatherford does not name the minor characters in the narrative. Their anonymity does not diminish Harriet Tubman's agency, but rather signals how any struggle for social change involves varied networks of support.

Community is not a given, however; it is judiciously created across sectarian boundaries among people with a shared vision. Weatherford writes, "Harriet knows that most strangers will turn her in, not help her" (n.p.). For Harriet Tubman, coalitional networks involved a high-stakes reading of the world that anticipates the perspectives of Freire (1983) in order to know where to seek support. These understandings were rooted in her own family. During a moment of uncertainty in the narrative, Tubman hears from God, who encourages her to look within herself for answers: "your father taught you to read the stars, predict the weather, and make cures from berries" (n.p.). Community ties give her the knowledge to navigate her surroundings, and also result in a new collective purpose once she has reached her destination, for "freedom brings new woes" (n.p.). Weatherford portrays Harriet Tubman as weeping at the table after reaching freedom in the North, longing to restore her family and community. The definition of liberation as collective—no one is fully free until everyone is free—is deeply rooted in African American culture, passed down intergenerationally. This idea becomes the catalyst for her participation in the Underground Railroad during the remaining years of her life.

### *After Gandhi: One Hundred Years of Nonviolent Resistance*

Anne Sibley O'Brien and Perry Edmond O'Brien bring together 16 social movements from across the world, including events that have garnered less attention in children's literature, such as the Aboriginal rights movement in Australia, student activism in Tiananmen Square, and protests against the Iraq War. The authors note that their goal is not to write a history book but to portray social justice struggles that capture what they believe to be living legacies of pacifism—as they quote Gandhi, "lamppost[s] on the road" (p. 9) of a global project for human rights. The book is set up in chronological order beginning in 1908; each chapter details an episode from a particular social movement and then provides contextualizing information about that event and the leaders typically associated with it. From the opening lines of the first vignette, intergroup experience is highlighted: "Some three thousand Indian men had gathered—Muslim, Hindu, and Christian. Some wore English-style suits and hats; others were dressed in traditional Indian tunics and turbans or rectangular caps. They had come to break a law" (p. 8).

The text takes as its narrative starting point the power of the collective, the coming together across differences of religion and tradition to take peaceful action against institutional racism. Throughout the global contexts and struggles featured, *After Gandhi* juxtaposes, both in the verbal text and through its illustrations, such group representations with portraits of individuals associated with specific movements. For instance, the aforementioned opening follows an illustration depicting a faceless mass of people, sketched in vigorous strokes with individuals barely distinguishable from one other, gathered around a fire where they have come in protest to burn identification papers. It is not until 10 pages later that readers encounter a close-up image of Gandhi. This pattern is repeated throughout the book, featuring, for instance, a rendering of the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, followed later by a drawing of Martin Luther King Jr. The panoramic representation of crowds with blurred faces underscore the vast number of anonymous people involved in collective projects for change.

One way to understand this oscillation between the vivid, up close portraits and the faceless masses in collective struggle is through Foucault's (1977) conceptualization of the author function. He argues that individuals are not the sole authors of their ideas and experiences, but the product of larger discourses and dynamics happening in society. The opening illustrations of the lampposts on the struggle for social justice and the iconic portraits that follow situate particular figures within the social and political context: The text highlights the movements that speak through such individuals and through which they speak.

The collective images also call attention to the structural inequalities and oppressive circumstances at the root of these social movements. Each chapter opening illustration pauses an active scene, allowing the reader to inspect the situation more closely and reflect on the circumstances of context. One example is the 1965 Great Delano Grape Strike, described by the authors as "an action of two unions, the mostly Mexican NFWA [National Farm Workers Association] and another group that was mostly Filipino workers" (p. 74). On the right-hand side of the two-page spread stands a crowd of protesters, their faces obscured, a sign reading "Huelga" (Strike) held aloft. The crowd is engulfed in a cloud of dust, and a tractor looms nearby. The ensuing narrative details how tractors "churn[ed] up clouds of brown dust" over the strikers in an effort to break the resistance of the farmworkers, while the protesters tried to encourage hired strikebreakers to join their struggle. The text continues: "Again and again, for nearly an hour, the tractors backed up and drove at them,

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until every protester was completely covered with dirt. They refused to budge” (p.71).

The illustration and accompanying description bring into stark relief the dehumanizing and violent nature of the inequalities being protested and the notion of resistance as holding one’s ground—that not acting is a form of action. Similar vignettes throughout the book portray the details of oppression as well as pacifism and noncompliance as a form of resistance: White students in Moore, Australia, who blocked the entrance to the town pool to protest its exclusion of Aboriginal children while townspeople threw garbage, rocks, and broken bottles at them; a crowd of Catholic and Protestant peace marchers who protested religious division in Belfast and, when attacked with rocks, bricks and bottles, protected themselves by opening their umbrellas; a bus scene in which Rosa Parks is in the background, her gaze turned from the reader, while in the foreground a policeman looms aggressively over her with a club in his hand and his back to readers. We are left to contend with profound issues related to ethics, social justice, and what it means to live and participate in a democratic society.

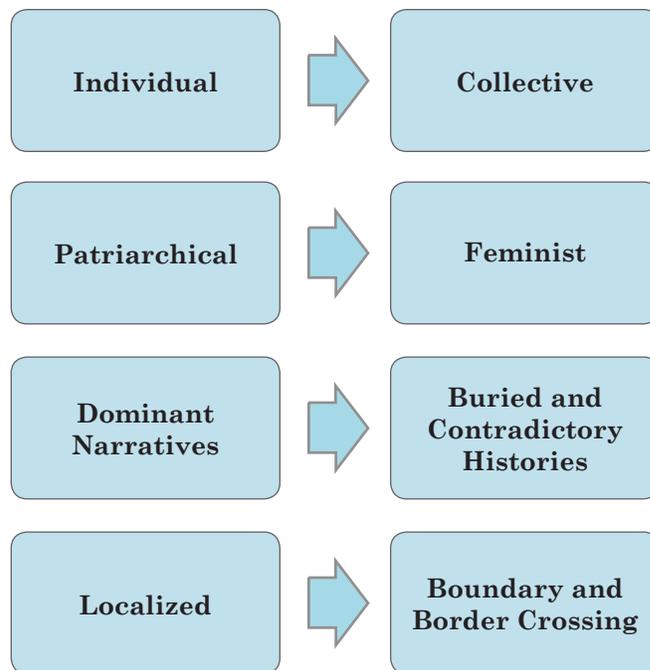
**Discussion**

In an issue of the journal *Daedalous* themed “On Cosmopolitanism,” philosopher Nussbaum (2008) draws on several figures who are prominent in the books that we feature in this article, including King and Gandhi, to delineate the contours of what she terms “a globally sensitive patriotism” (p. 78). A revision of an earlier position advocating for the primacy of cosmopolitanism in a comprehensive ethical and political doctrine, Nussbaum argues that it is necessary to “draw on symbol and rhetoric, emotional memory and history” (p. 93) associated with patriotism for progressive ends, less they be monopolized by a political agenda of intolerance and fear. One way to think about the texts highlighted in this article is that they provide a reservoir of symbols, emotions, and memory for students to transact with in order to both confront the trauma of the past—the braided rope—and become edified by the ways that people have worked together for change. These texts are promising because they signal

what we have identified as four shifts in representation (see Figure 1), which we detail below, that can serve as a platform for understanding and investigating our shared experiences.

Although what we looked for when selecting children’s literature texts for analysis was a greater emphasis on intergroup, rather than exclusively intragroup, histories and on instances of commonality and cooperation, we also found these to be coextensive with other changes in orientations. First, the books share a move from focusing on the individual to emphasizing the collective. As we examined in earlier sections, this characteristic is concretely exemplified in *After Gandhi*, as key figures in global movements for peace are portrayed as part of larger collective struggles. The individuals profiled in *Denied, Detained, Deported* are everyday people who responded courageously to their time. These characterizations are interwoven with commentary on social policies and events, past and present. The timeline at the end of the book reinforces how the particular circumstances depicted in the text fit together within a larger pattern of U.S. immigration history. In *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*, Weatherford portrays the anonymous underground who aided in the collective abolitionist movement; that they remain unnamed in the text points to the many who

FIGURE 1  
Shifts in representation in promising children’s literature texts



constituted networks of support. Not unrelated to this notion of collectivities is the shift from patriarchal to feminist orientations, which challenge the “great man” version of history, in which social change is the result of the efforts of individual charismatic leaders (often male). While the books certainly profile many individuals, they also highlight cooperative social struggle and the role that women played, such as the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina.

The promising texts also display a shift from focusing on dominant narratives to delineating buried and contradictory histories. Set against the ideological backdrop of the American Dream, *Denied, Detained, Deported* profiles individuals for whom America is not a refuge. In the United States, known as the Land of the Free, not everyone was counted as free, a reality that is underscored in Weatherford’s *Moses. After Gandhi* brings to the forefront a range of political struggles from around the world that seldom receive treatment in children’s literature. The books that we featured break away from a simplified gloss on historical events and instead provide counternarratives that expose the contradictory and complex nature of struggles for social justice amid structural inequalities. One dominant narrative disrupted in the texts is the notion that stark differences are the cause of conflict; instead, the books evidence how, throughout history, people have been scapegoated and persecuted for what Freud characterized as “the narcissism of minor differences” (as cited in Jacoby, 2011, p. xiii). One rich example is the detailed rendering of U.S.–Mexico border relations in *Denied, Detained, Deported* that emphasizes the colonization of Mexico, the link between the two economies for over a century, and the populations of Mexicans who have always lived within the United States. Unlike the us/ them polarizing rhetoric prevalent in immigration media discourse, the text highlights the similarities and intricate links between both nations.

We also identified a shift from localized group representations to ones that denote boundary and border crossing. *Denied, Detained, Deported*, for example, reminds readers that the phenomenology of immigration involves constantly navigating the politics of national borders and that the United States is constituted by those who were considered “other” and who were themselves subject to exclusionary policies at home and colonizing practices abroad. *After Gandhi*’s weaving together of events from around the world emphasizes how social justice ideas have circulated across political borders, challenging notions of national exceptionalism. *Moses* situates Tubman’s agency, and her coalitional networks, on the border between the North and the South,

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which may have been as wide a gulf as between nations. These texts do not characterize identity as static but, to echo Anzaldúa (1999), as a “borderland” that is actively negotiated.

In presenting characterizations of group histories in ways that complicate and extend conventional renderings of children’s literature themes, the books remind us that historical narrative is always an interpretive act. These texts provide an opportunity for investigating “historical truths...[that] cannot be sugarcoated” (Harris, 2003, p. 124) as well as potential sites of connection across experiences. It is important to situate such endeavors within an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), in which the books become part of a larger exploration of social justice movements in the past and perhaps even in students’ own lives. These texts provide fertile ground for inquiring into how experiences are interwoven, how people are/have been included or excluded, and ultimately, how they create coalitions for positive social change.

### Conclusion: Literature as a Platform for Inquiry into Our Shared Histories

We conclude by discussing a picture book, too recently published to be included in our main study, that beautifully captures many of the shifts that we have identified: *We Are America: A Tribute from the Heart* by Walter Dean Myers (2011) and illustrated by his son Christopher Myers. In a move similar to Nussbaum’s, author and illustrator frame the book as a tribute that reclaims patriotism in terms of its social justice and abolitionist legacies. The cover and frontmatter also depict the Statute of Liberty and contain images of discovery and westward expansion: an iconographical constellation that sets readers’ expectations for a conventional narrative of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny. This triumphalism is immediately complicated in the author’s note, in which Walter Dean Myers describes his witness to the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack,

the “collective grief” and “outrage,” as well as the “spate of patriotism” (n.p.) that to him often felt jingoistic and exclusionary. The book was inspired by his desire to “take responsibility” and represent a more inclusive America, accounting for the “many millions [who] chose to come to our shores or, if they did not arrive by choice, how they still have prevailed” (n.p.).

Christopher Myers’s colorful, mural-like illustrations make connections across histories and experiences. Sometimes parallels are made between oppressions. One particularly poignant visual blends images of a lashed slave, the massacre of Wounded Knee, and the Japanese internment. Others capture an American sense of hope and possibility, whether in a Whitmanesque juxtaposition of the explorer John Smith sailing alongside a Haitian refugee boat or a panoramic view of workers who built the nation, including brickmakers, Chinese laborers of the intercontinental railroad, and Detroit automakers. The illustrations are accompanied by quotes from the nation’s foundational texts, such as the Treaty of Paris, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution, as well as some of its most eloquent leaders, such as Patrick Henry, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Barbara Jordan. The endpage is a quilt of individual profiles (e.g., Gertrude Stein, Thomas Jefferson, Dolores Huerta, Kalpana Chawla, Helen Keller, Maria Tallchief) that convey an inclusive, pluralistic national history and vision.

The “we” in *We Are America* reinforces the notion presented by all of our promising texts, that “we’re all in this together.” They invite students to enter the symbolic contest and participate in interpreting and defining our shared narratives, metaphors, and legacies. This involves directly confronting a past that has not been sanitized, neither its tragic nor more edifying episodes, in

order to define our present and imagine a better future, together. Continuing to represent various experiences as insular may perpetuate unproductive dichotomies in the curriculum. We believe children’s literature that emphasizes shared histories and stories can play a key role in educating students about cultural understandings and misunderstandings. Such texts enable children to see representations of social cooperation and the interconnectedness of humanity while also fostering critical discernment and empathetic sensibilities about the ways in which difference is often produced by inequality. This pedagogical and inquiry project is elegantly expressed in the artist’s note to *We Are America*, in which Christopher Myers shares vignettes from his biological and adoptive grandparents, from varied descents and walks of life, all actively asking, “What is America, and what will I make of it?” (n.p.). Reflecting on the picture book as a means of answering these questions, he concludes, “in some way the beauty of this country is its open-endedness, the question mark of it. Where other places in the world end in periods, neat packets of sealed identities, we end in possibilities” (n.p.).

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