

Much Ado About *A Fine Dessert*: The Cultural Politics of Representing Slavery in Children's Literature

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The cultural politics of representing slavery in children's literature are examined via the controversy elicited by the depiction of smiling enslaved people in *A Fine Dessert*.

WHAT ARE THE cultural politics of representing the complexity of our shared national history for children and teens in the United States today? This might seem like a straightforward question, but blog posts, tweets, and media coverage in the fall of 2015 about Emily Jenkins's (2015) picturebook *A Fine Dessert: Four Centuries, Four Families, One Delicious Treat* tell us that the question is far from settled, especially when followed by a second controversy about another picturebook, Ramin Ganeshram's (2016) *A Birthday Cake for George Washington*. When selecting and evaluating historical children's literature, there are many other questions that must be considered. For example, who will be reading the book? Is the imagined young reader of these historical stories a White, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied student who was born in the United States, or are child readers from all backgrounds being kept in mind? What kind of story is being told in the book? What makes the story difficult? Who is it difficult for? Does the nature of that difficulty differ depending on the demographic makeup of a classroom, school, or community?

None of these questions are new. Because problematic depictions of children continue to be published, reading

and English language arts teachers in classrooms all over the United States, as well as the literacy educators who prepare them, must critically consider these questions as they select books for their students. After all, as children read historical fiction, they are also learning about our nation's fraught past. Many historical topics found in children's and young adult literature—slavery, conditions in the Jim Crow South, the Japanese internment camps of World War II, and the genocide of Native Americans, to name just a few—are set amid the incomprehensible horrors of the bleakest chapters of American history. As literary critic Clare Bradford (2007) noted, one of the functions of children's literature is “to explain and interpret national histories—histories that involve invasion, conquest, violence, and assimilation” (p. 97). Addressing these fraught events, however, can prove difficult in light of some of the other functions of children's literature in our culture: to transmit values, to convey a sense of nostalgia and wonder, to spark young imaginations, or to provide an expected “happily ever after” at the end of each story (Clark, 2004). Thus, fictionalized accounts of past events written for young audiences can sometimes be framed within a metanarrative, or master story, of progress, triumph, and optimism (Thomas, 2012).

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Students may be learning some valuable information about the past, but they may be learning only the dangerous single story that author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) cautioned us to avoid.

This was certainly the case with *A Fine Dessert*, a book that depicts four families making the same dessert across the centuries. Written by Emily Jenkins and illustrated by Sophie Blackall, *A Fine Dessert* was published by Schwartz & Wade in January 2015, just in time for Black History Month. This picturebook received excellent reviews from the top professional journals in children's literature: *Booklist*, *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, *The Horn Book*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *School Library Journal*. These are the five major review journals in the field, and they are used by librarians to select books for their school and public library collections. Four of the five journals gave the book a starred review, designating it as exceptional and highly recommended. Only *The Horn Book* did not give the book a star, although its review was just as laudatory as the others. From the time of its publication, there was significant award buzz around *A Fine Dessert*. Indeed, Blackall would go on to win the 2016 Caldecott Medal for another picturebook, *Finding Winnie: The True Story of the World's Most Famous Bear* by Lindsay Mattick (2015). Although there have been other controversies about the depictions of slavery in children's books, *A Fine Dessert* is significant because of the use of social media to broadcast and circulate perspectives that countered its laudatory critical reception.

The controversy around *A Fine Dessert's* depiction of smiling enslaved people is a useful case to examine, for it provides a concrete example of some of the challenges inherent in teaching young people about history through children's literature. Complicating matters is the fact that historical children's literature always exists in a larger social context, mirroring contemporary social concerns.

Often, teachers and librarians use professional book reviews to navigate the terrain of text selection. However, book reviewers, who are generally White and middle class, demonstrate varying degrees of sensitivity and background knowledge as they evaluate children's books that depict African American history. Although some reviewers can look through a more critical lens, others may be learning about a historical event for the first time through the children's book they are reviewing. Furthermore, reviewers often assume that White children are the primary audience for the book. Finally, reviewers' assumptions that their audiences are White or not raced extends to book characters themselves. Unless the reviewer explicitly mentions race in a review, the assumption is that human characters are White, much as childhood has been raced White since the inception of children's literature in the United States (Bernstein, 2011). Before turning to the specifics of the recent case, a historical overview of the depiction of people of African descent in children's stories is warranted.

Historicizing the Debate: Portrayals of African Americans in Children's Literature

Although it is sometimes noted that Larrick's (1965) landmark article "The All-White World of Children's Books" was the first significant examination of the depiction of African Americans in children's literature (Forest, Garrison, & Kimmel, 2015; Pescosolido, Grauerholz, & Milkie, 1997), this vital work of humanizing Black children in literature goes back much further in the past (Bishop, 2007; Sims, 1982). Throughout the entirety of the history of the United States, African Americans have been active agents fighting for their own physical, social, and economic liberation from stifling oppression. In addition to the humanizing work of slave narratives, African American parents, educators, and clergy were noting and writing about problematic representations of Black people in children's books as early as the mid-19th century (Bishop, 2007; Connolly, 2013). To address the pervasive erasure and caricaturizing of Black children, church publications such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church's *The Christian Recorder* and *The Repository* contained material for children and youths. These early publications were often didactic and evangelical in tone, intended to convey Victorian-era morals to their young audiences. With the first breath of the Harlem Renaissance, however, the NAACP's *The Brownies' Book* first published such luminaries as Langston Hughes. Hughes and contemporaries Arna Bontemps and Countee Cullen were among the first to produce children's literature and poetry specifically featuring Black children. Meanwhile, Charlamae Hill Rollins at the Chicago Public Library (starting in 1927) and Augusta Braxton Baker at the

New York Public Library (starting in 1937) did much to influence the development of the field (Yokota, 1993), as did the rise of Carter G. Woodson's Negro History Week, which later evolved into Black History Month.

Literary critic Katharine Capshaw Smith (2004) observed that "the major writers of the [Harlem Renaissance] were deeply invested in the enterprise of building a black national identity through literary constructions of childhood" (p. xiii). Thus, much of the impetus of mid-century African American children's literature during the Civil Rights era and Black Arts Movement was reparative, telling celebratory tales about the victories and achievements of African Americans in spite of collective trauma and monumental odds, promoting a bourgeois ideology of racial uplift and encouraging young people to lead the race politically and socially toward American ideals of progress and individual achievement. However, despite the flowering of Black children's literature in the mid- and late 20th century, recent reports from the Cooperative Children's Book Center (2014, 2015) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison have revealed the persistence of a diversity gap. African American children and teens are 16% of the U.S. population, but only 4% of more than 3,000 children's books published annually have featured Black protagonists.

There have been a number of important studies of African American children's literature in education (cf. Harris, 1990; Sims, 1982; Tyson, 2002). Perhaps the most comprehensive recent overview of African American children's literature in education is Brooks and McNair's (2009) report for *Review of Educational Research*. They divided studies in the field of African American children's literature into three categories: contested terrain, cultural artifact, and literary art (Brooks & McNair, 2009). Although a larger multiyear study of children's responses to slavery in children's literature is ongoing, the recent controversy about *A Fine Dessert*, as well as the polarized opinions that surrounded its release and reception, are the context for the remainder of this article. Below, we provide information about the book from the text, the author and illustrator, reviews from some of the most prominent reviewers in the field, and finally, Black parents and advocates of diversity in children's literature. We conclude by calling for more inquiry into the ways we teach young people history through children's literature.

Examining Children's Literature About Slavery: The Curious Case of *A Fine Dessert*

A Fine Dessert depicts parents and children in four different centuries making a dessert called blackberry fool. Readers observe how the blackberries are acquired in each

time period, as well as the process for making the dessert. In her review for *The Horn Book*, Joanna Rudge Long (2015) wrote,

It all adds up to a thought-provoking sample of how the techniques involved in a simple task have changed over time; and how people, and food, have stayed much the same, making this an effective introduction to the very idea of history. (pp. 66-67)

Long's review is an exemplar of what the reviewers of *A Fine Dessert* have focused on: the different techniques and implements used, depending on the time period, and the relationship among the people making the dessert.

One of the four time periods featured is 1810. In the 1810 story, *A Fine Dessert* depicts an unnamed Black mother and child working in a South Carolina plantation's kitchen. In the first double-page spread, the mother gazes up at her daughter as they pick blackberries. In the distance behind them is a stately plantation home. The next double-page spread shows a horse-drawn wagon delivering cream. On the facing page are three time-sequenced images of the girl as she uses a wire whisk to beat the cream into whipped cream. The words above her head in the first image are "Beat beat. Beat beat. Beat beat." (Jenkins, 2015, n.p.). Although the language of *beating* is used in each of the other stories, in the 1810 section, it has a specific, eerie resonance: Both mother and daughter are enslaved.

After a page turn, the next two images show the little girl visibly tired from her work and then smiling as she proudly holds up a bowl of whipped cream. Turning to the next double-page spread, the little girl is shown carrying a bucket of water to wash the berries, smashing the clean berries through a sieve, and then pouring the resulting juice into the bowl of cream as her mother mixes the cream, juice, and sugar with a spoon. The girl licks the spoon clean when they are finished. Mother and daughter carry the bowl to a box of ice in the basement. Turning to the final double-page spread, they are shown serving the dessert to the master and his family. A little boy is also shown on that page, pulling a cord to fan the master and his family as they eat. On the far right of the page, the girl and her mother, having served the "fine dessert" to the master, are shown hiding in a closet where, together, they lick the bowl clean.

In historical children's literature about slavery, authors and illustrators often include more information about the historical period in an afterword. These notes are primarily read by adults, who can then provide more context while

talking about the story with children as they chaperone meaning for them (Sanders, 2013). *A Fine Dessert* follows this convention. At the conclusion of all four families' stories, Jenkins and Blackall each share more about the research they did in order to write and illustrate their story. Although both the author and the illustrator address slavery, the bulk of their notes are about the making of the dessert. In her list of sources, Jenkins does not cite any that are specifically about slavery. In her note, Blackall writes that she read slave owners' diaries, but does not indicate that she read any first-person narratives by enslaved women and girls. There is no reference information included in the book about the extensive work by scholars and experts of slavery, museum and historical site curators, or even eyewitness accounts from enslaved Black Americans themselves. This absence raises many questions about how the choices related to the depiction of slavery were made.

For some readers, the polarized reaction to the book requires an overview of the history of slavery in South Carolina. Schwalm's (1997) *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition From Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* provides an overview of more than 2 centuries of enslavement in the state. In 1664, South Carolina mandated lifelong servitude for all Black people who were enslaved. In 1730, enslaved Africans began to resist the work that they were forced to do. In 1739, a group of approximately 100 tried to run away in what is known today as the Stono Rebellion. Their revolt was put down, and 60 people were executed, but the rebellion itself led the South Carolina legislature to pass the Slave Codes, also known as the Negro Act, in 1740. In force until 1865, the act forbade enslaved people from traveling; having group meetings; raising their own food; possessing money; learning to read; and using drums, horns, or any instruments by which they might communicate with one another.

It is likely that the slaveowner depicted in *A Fine Dessert* was running a rice or cotton plantation. King's (2011) *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* provides a critical look at what the daily lives of the mother and daughter in the picturebook might have been like. The slaver who owned both mother and daughter very likely owned many men and women who worked in the rice fields, sustaining the elegant life depicted in Blackall's illustrations. We see no depictions of these enslaved people, however, nor do we glimpse life in the slave quarters. Although the mother and daughter are shown in a single task (making and serving blackberry fool), this was not their only job. Enslaved people assigned to work in the slaver's home worked very hard to maintain it.

Enslaved house servants cleaned windows; cleaned and pressed draperies; took up and beat carpets; and dusted and polished woodwork, furniture, banisters, rails, bookshelves, mantles, and window and picture frames. They swept floors and changed, laundered, and repaired bed linens. They turned and repaired mattresses, replenishing washstands with newly laundered and pressed linens and fresh water. They laundered and repaired clothing, in addition to spinning and sewing clothing for slaves and the slaveowner's family. They carried in wood and maintained fires. They nursed, fed, diapered, rocked, walked, and dressed infants. They dressed, fed, watched over, and entertained children and assisted adults in dressing and personal care. Seasonally, they packed and moved the slaveowner's household to and from city homes or ones on the coast. Women were careful not to complain, because punishment for complaints could result in being demoted from the work inside the house to work in the fields. Women were also vulnerable to sexual exploitation and frequently bore children fathered by their masters. Women selected to work in "the big house" were chosen based on their appearance. Owners tended to select those who were lighter skinned and genteel in appearance (King, 2011; Schwalm, 1997). Thus, making a dessert was but one of enslaved house servants' many concerns, even when they were young children.

Reviewers of *A Fine Dessert* failed to note these troubling omissions. Analyzing reviews published in the five top professional journals in children's literature before the controversy, all failed to note the fact that only the 1810 story featured Black characters who were in bondage, serving others instead of enjoying the dessert themselves. (The 1710 and 1910 stories featured only White characters, and the 2010 story featured an interracial community.) Most mentioned the date or period matter-of-factly, usually in a chronological list of all four time periods, referring to "an enslaved mother and daughter" ("*A Fine Dessert*," 2014, p. 211) or "a mother and daughter, slaves on a plantation" as the central characters (Hunter, 2014, p. 59). Two of the reviewers make reference to this section as a special challenge for the author and illustrator. Writing for *School Library Journal*, Kiera Parrott (2014) wrote,

The story set on a Charleston plantation could have been uncomfortable in less capable hands. A spread shows a white family sitting down to supper as a slave family waits upon them. Jenkins and Blackall show rather than tell, allowing young readers to draw their own conclusions about the fact that the characters must hide in a closet to enjoy the dessert they've worked so hard to make. (p. 103)

Deborah Stevenson (2015), in *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, noted,

The untold backstory of the sequence featuring the enslaved African-American woman challenges the book's tranquil domestic presentation, but there are subtle indicators (the girl and her mother "hid in the closet" to lick the bowl together) that point the observant to the troubling truth (and the author's note delves deeper into the issue), and her inclusion is an appropriate acknowledgment of the importance of such women in the culinary tradition. (p. 405)

Although Parrott and Stevenson both showed recognition that the section stood out as potentially "uncomfortable" and "troubling," they seem to imply that the author and illustrator portrayed this part of the story skillfully enough that observant young readers would pick up on it. Both reviews were starred.

A Fine Dessert was published by Schwartz & Wade on January 27, 2015. The 1810 section of the book was not called into question by any professional reviewer until 8 months later. Elisa Gall (2015), a teacher-librarian at the Latin School in Chicago, Illinois, reviewed the book for her blog, Trybrary, on August 4, 2015. She was the first reviewer to note that the book showed "smiling, working slaves" (para. 4). She wrote: "Showing smiling slaves might not be ignoring this part of history technically—but isn't it ignoring a huge, essential part of it? Is illustrating a watered-down snapshot any better than leaving it out all together?" (para. 7).

Gall's (2015) blog post got very little attention at the time, but nearly 2 months later on September 23, 2015, Robin Smith linked to it as part of her overall post on the book as a contender for the mock award discussion hosted on *The Horn Book's* influential blog Calling Caldecott. Like the reviewers for *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* and *School Library Journal* earlier in the year, Smith also pointed out the inequities shown in the 1810 section:

Blackall and Jenkins could have avoided the challenge of setting the 1810 scene on the plantation. They did not. They could have simply chosen a family without slaves or servants, but they did not. They clearly approached the situation thoughtfully. The enslaved daughter and mother's humanity is secure as they work together and enjoy each other, despite their lack of freedom. In the 1810 table scene—the only time in the book when the cooks don't eat the dessert at the

dinner table—each of the African American characters depicted has a serious look on his or her face (i.e., there is no indication that anyone is enjoying their work or, by extension, their enslavement) while the children in the family attend to their parents and siblings or are distracted by a book or a kitty under the table. In its own way, the little nod to books and pets is also a nod to the privilege of the white children. (para. 3)

It is notable that all seven of the reviewers mentioned up to this point are White, and only one of them questioned the smiles on the faces of the enslaved Black woman and her daughter.

The comments of the Calling Caldecott blog soon began to take up the issue of the 1810 section of *A Fine Dessert*. On October 23, 2015, Blackall joined the public discussion on the blog, pointing readers to her post, "Depicting Slavery in *A Fine Dessert*." It included images of the enslaved family. Blackall wrote,

I have shown isolated moments of their day which may appear pleasurable, but I don't think I have made slavery out to seem pleasurable or fun....Reading the negative comments, I wonder whether the only way to avoid offense would have been to leave slavery out altogether, but sharing this book in school visits has been an extraordinary experience and the positive responses from teachers and librarians and parents have been overwhelming. I learn from every book I make, and from discussions like these. I hope *A Fine Dessert* continues to engage readers and encourage rewarding, thought provoking discussions between children and their grown ups. (paras, 10, 14)

Blogging and listservs have been used by the children's literature community for decades, but in the social media age, a blog post about a racial controversy is often shared rapidly via Twitter, Facebook, and other sites. Blackall (2015) continued the conversation with an edit to her post:

It seems that very few people commenting on the issue of slavery in *A Fine Dessert* have read the actual book. The section which takes place in 1810 is part of a whole, which explores the history of women in the kitchen and the development of food technology amongst other things. *A Fine Dessert* culminates in 2010 with the scene of a joyous, diverse, inclusive community feast. I urge you to read the whole book. (para. 16)

When images of the enslaved family in *A Fine Dessert* began circulating on social media, parents of color

responded to those images from their Twitter accounts. Fangirl Jeanne identifies as a Polynesian woman of color, and on October 25, 2015, she tweeted,

White authors are free to write characters of color, but they better keep in mind kids of color are reading their books too. (10:52 a.m.)

Those kids of color know way more than those white author [*sic*], because they've have been getting master classes in racism since birth. (10:54 a.m.)

Fangirl Jeanne's remarks signal the questions that opened this article. Who are the students we imagine when we think about young readers? Other parents began to question the book. In a series of tweets on October 26, 2015, Mikki Kendall, an African American writer, activist, and mother, wrote,

The descendants of enslaved people in America don't even factor into your idea of how you present these stories. (9:23 a.m.)

Little kids will see the pretty pics & get a one sentence explanation & have no idea why the mother & daughter had to hide to lick the bowl. (9:25 a.m.)

So we talk about how long it takes to beat whipped cream, but not the beating the girl & her mother risked if they were caught. (9:33 a.m.)

These candy coated images of slavery aren't about teaching your kids reality, they are about you dodging reality. (11:05 a.m.)

On November 1, 2015, Emily Jenkins, the author of *A Fine Dessert* issued an apology, saying,

As the author of *A Fine Dessert*, I have read this discussion and the others with care and attention. I have come to understand that my book, while intended to be inclusive and truthful and hopeful, is racially insensitive. I own that and am very sorry. (para. 1)

Daniel José Older (2015), an author and a critic, also expressed criticism of the book. Prior to any of this, Older, who is Cuban American, was scheduled to appear on a panel at the 26th annual fall conference of the New York City School Library System on November 3, 2015. During the panel, titled "The Lens of Diversity: It Is Not All in What You See," he and fellow panelists, Sophie Blackall and Sean Qualls, discussed their views on diversity for

children. After the panel, Older used YouTube and his Twitter account to share video recordings from the panel. He prefaced his remarks about the book by addressing Blackall, telling her he had no doubt that she had good intentions in creating the art for her book. He went on to say that intentions do not matter once the work is out in the world and that the whole community of children's literature needs to be

having the conversation about her book. Among his questions was, "Who decided to publish them?" He said that his reaction to the book was visceral and that "slavery is an open wound in America because we have been lying to ourselves about it forever" (1:14–1:19). In his view, *A Fine Dessert* continues that lie. The problem, he stated, is about context and the lived experiences of people of color. It is, he said,

The ongoing cycle of violence against children of color by the state, it's the Confederate flag still flies until there's a massacre to bring it down, it is that we are still fighting the Civil War in many, many ways, it is that we're still dealing with the fallout of slavery.... People of color don't have the luxury of being able to sugarcoat history to our children, and when we do, people die.... Children's books need to speak to that without trying to provide umbrellas or make it sound like everything is OK, because it's not. The role of literature is to tell us the difficult truths, which, again, I believe you tried to do, but to arm us for the world in all of its ugliness, and that's not an easy thing to do in a children's book, and I think there's a lot of honesty in the end, where you guys wrote that you were going to bring up an issue that you couldn't fully take in the whole birth of, but from my point of view, where I stand is if you can't, then you shouldn't touch it. (2:00–3:15)

As these quotes demonstrate, parents and communities of color care deeply about what their children are reading, how the violence and dehumanization of slavery are depicted in books, and how children of color are depicted in children's literature. Parents and communities of color

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are part of a long tradition of activism toward humanizing children's literature. Stories about the harsh realities of life during slavery and Jim Crow have been passed down from one generation to the next within the Black community, and they are the basis on which vehement objections are put forth to the smiling slaves depicted in *A Fine Dessert*.

Solaris (2015), a Black commenter on the Reading While White blog, wrote,

What I see as a black woman is a skilled house slave training a slave girl how to be a proper house servant for the master's family. This skill actually would make her more valuable on the market, so it is important that she learns well. The master would usually have them doing small things like picking up garbage at 3 and fully laboring by 7 years old, so you have the age right. It's likely she would have never known her mother and was being trained to be a proper house slave by a woman she didn't know. The woman would likely be strict, maybe even beating the girl herself if a mistake was made on this dessert, for she too would suffer if it were not right. The girl would know she was property by then and the "beat" you mentioned would be the pace of her heart, for fear of the punishment, if she made a mistake. (para. 2)

We are, by choice, featuring the voices of people of color in this article in an attempt to demonstrate that they responded to *A Fine Dessert* out of a sense of history and injustice and a commitment to the well-being of their children. As indicated, they did not feel that the author and illustrator or the reviewers—anyone in the community of people who worked on this book—imagined children of color as readers of the book. In response to their concerns, stakeholders involved in the creation and positive reception of the book stated, as Blackall did, that they should read the whole book, which the commenters in question had done. Others said that critics of *A Fine Dessert* ignored the final spread in the book, which depicted a broad range of diversity in the characters gathered around the table in 2010 San Diego enjoying the blackberry fool dessert. To them, *A Fine Dessert* ended on a high note because it celebrated diversity and people of all ethnicities in a triumphant depiction of people who learned how to get along across their differences.

Study of the extended discussions on social media led some reviewers to revisit their initial praise of the book. On November 7, 2015, Kiera Parrott, the review editor at *School Library Journal*, sent out a series of tweets stating

that she had a new perspective on the book and that with new information, people should not be afraid to change their minds about a book. These changes led to broader discussions on blogs about the continuing role of race in the children's literature world. When *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* was published in January 2016, several reviewers noted its depiction of smiling slaves within weeks of its publication. Eventually, it became the first book that its publisher, Scholastic, had pulled from distribution in 17 years (Schoenberg, 2016). It also raised uncomfortable questions about whether the issues of depicting slavery in children's literature were simply about a White industry that has been historically inaccessible. The author, the illustrator, and the editor of *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* were all women of color, showing that the problem is not about individuals but is as historic and systemic as racism itself.

Given the cultural politics surrounding adult discussions about the depiction of slavery in children's literature, how should we introduce this topic in our schools, libraries, communities, and homes today?

Implications and Recommendations

Given the cultural politics surrounding adult discussions about the depiction of slavery in children's literature, how should we introduce this topic in our schools, libraries, communities, and homes today? Answering this question requires us to consider the implications of narrating both the trauma and the triumph of African American history through children's stories, especially when teaching history through literature can be challenging at any grade level (Baker, 1984; Boerman-Cornell, 2012; Cole, 2007; Kharem, 2006; Loewen, 1995; Nodelman, 1990; Oglesby, 2007; Schwebel, 2011; Wineburg, 2001; Wineburg, Martin, & Monte-Sano, 2013). As we provide historical texts and facilitate reading and discussion in classrooms, libraries, and communities, we must consider the history that is being presented by the texts (Edinger, 2000; Edinger & Fins, 1998; Martin, 2002/2008), as well as the ways that teachers and learners construct narratives of society and self through literature and the curriculum (Glenn, 2012; Tatum, 2008). This is especially true of African American children's literature, which has a long history of combating racist representations of people of color (Bishop, 2007).

Furthermore, the ways that authors interpret and narrate historical events may interfere with student understanding and engagement, causing feelings of disconnection from reading and school (Tatum, 2008). Finally, racial issues raised during the teaching of literature can cause considerable discomfort for teachers and students (Thomas, 2015). Therefore, even when using excellent, award-winning African American children's literature about slavery in the classroom, recent research recommendations for learning and teaching African American children's and young adult literature should be consulted prior to the unit (cf. Bishop, 2007; Brooks & McNair, 2009; Harris, 2003).

How, then, should teachers, parents, and community members choose books that depict slavery? What should be the criteria for evaluation? In her comprehensive volume *Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature*, Rudine Sims Bishop (2007) provided a five-point summary of the literary tradition created about (and around) African American children and youths. 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 (p. 273)

These principles for selecting authentic children's literature about slavery have the potential to expand the depiction of the lives of the enslaved beyond bondage. For instance, the unnamed mother and daughter in the 1810 section of *A Fine Dessert* could have been shown in their accommodations, whether in a back room of the big house or in the slave quarters. Although this is not the equivalent of the private homes in the other sections of the picturebook, it is still space outside of the context of their work. Seeing the little girl and the little boy outside of their service to the White family, perhaps playing that night near the cabins, would have reminded the reader that they were children who should be imagining,

dreaming, and learning, not working (King, 2011). Even if these choices were not possible, the mother and daughter talking about freedom as they worked could have been another choice. We know from the slave narratives and historians of slavery that people in bondage were aware of their condition and wished to be free; interrupting the troubling "Beat beat" rhythm with the mother humming a spiritual encoded with agency and a desire for liberation could have sparked conversation.

Using Bishop's (2007) framework to evaluate *A Fine Dessert*, the following recent children's books that depict enslaved characters are within the literary tradition that she delineated. This is by no means a comprehensive list; it simply represents recent selections that are currently still in print. As noted recently by the *Chicago Tribune*, "The best children's books about slavery can...telegraph injustice in a phrase or a glance, without unduly scaring kids or unwisely letting them off the hook" (Schoenberg, 2016, para. 5). Along with other experts, we recommend the following titles:

- *Love Twelve Miles Long* by Glenda Armand (2011), illustrated by Colin Bootman
- *Light in the Darkness: A Story About How Slaves Learned in Secret* by Lesa Cline-Ransome (2013), illustrated by James E. Ransome
- *Underground: Finding the Light to Freedom* by Shane W. Evans (2011)
- *The People Could Fly: The Picture Book* by Virginia Hamilton (2004), illustrated by Leo Dillon and Diane Dillon
- *Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave* by Laban Carrick Hill (2010), illustrated by Bryan Collier
- *All Different Now: Juneteenth, the First Day of Freedom* by Angela Johnson (2014), illustrated by E.B. Lewis
- *Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story From the Underground Railroad* by Ellen Levine (2007), illustrated by Kadir Nelson
- *Hope's Gift* by Kelly Starling Lyons (2012), illustrated by Don Tate
- *Almost to Freedom* by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson (2003), illustrated by Colin Bootman
- *Juneteenth* by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson and Drew Nelson (2006), illustrated by Mark Schroder
- *Freedom Song: The Story of Henry "Box" Brown* by Sally M. Walker (2012), illustrated by Sean Qualls
- *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom* by Carole Boston Weatherford (2006), illustrated by Kadir Nelson
- *Show Way* by Jacqueline Woodson (2005), illustrated by Hudson Talbott

Beyond refining selection criteria for this category and highlighting award-winning literature (the Coretta Scott King Award list provides a wide range of excellent books about slavery), recent controversies around diversity in children's literature in the digital age have led to new resources, such as the blog *Reading While White*, for surfacing issues of racial justice in the children's book world. Even some of the professional review journals—the gatekeepers—are changing their policies in response to feedback from people of color. Earlier this year, *Kirkus Reviews* children's and teen book editor Vicky Smith wrote about the journal's recent decision to specify the race for all protagonists in their book reviews. About the practice, she wrote,

It hasn't been easy. There's the practical problem of what it does to the experience of our print readers to encounter review after review after review that somehow includes the adjective "white." There's the fact that both my reviewers and I are almost all, as one of my black reviewers said, "socialized to see white as the default"—it's hard to train yourself to *notice*, much less write consciously about it. There's the fact that as a rule, many of my reviewers and I, like many white people, are not comfortable talking about race, so the information is frequently plopped in awkwardly. (para. 13)

It remains to be seen whether blogs like *Reading While White* and new practices like *Kirkus Reviews*'s decision to name race in all reviews will have an impact on the publishing world.

The case of *A Fine Dessert* and the cultural politics surrounding the discussion of how to depict slavery in books for children have import for the way Black children are present in children's literature and how the rest of the world sees them. It also raises other critical questions

for literacy education: How are students from other backgrounds responding to historical stories like these across the grade span? Does it matter if the students are African American when it comes to reading about slavery or civil rights? How would children attending a school with few or no Black children respond to reading a picturebook like *A Fine Dessert*? What might the teaching of historical children's literature, intended to transmit the metanarrative of American progress and triumph, mean for students at a school that has a majority first- and second-generation immigrant population? Might we consider positioning contested U.S. historical fictions within broader canons of global multicultural children's literature? Thinking about how stories matter across similarities *and* differences—the stories that students read and the stories they tell in response to reading—may inform how we might use historical fictions as healing fictions for all children and, ultimately, all humanity. ■

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