

♥ EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

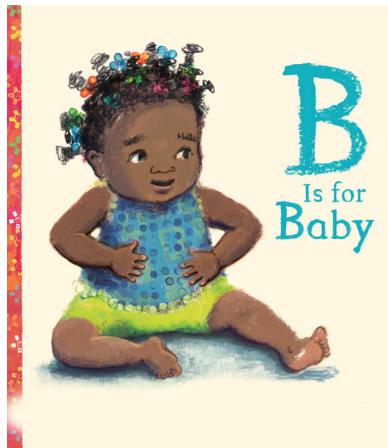
Children's Literature in an Age of Accountability: Interrogating Inequity and Power While Centering Humanity

VIVIAN YENIKA-AGBAW, ANGIE ZAPATA, THOMAS CRISP, & MARY NAPOLI

OUR CHOICE OF Atinuke's (2019) *B Is for Baby* as a cover issue for Volume 47(1) of the *Journal of Children's Literature (JCL)* is deliberate. Baby is feisty, and plays or fights on her own terms. She is an agentic character that defies the adult world and her natural surroundings, just as the baby in Mahogany Browne's (2018b) *Woke Baby* is born ready to take on the world! Black and brown babies are now empowered from birth to "push back" and not take nonsense from their oppressive racist, colonialist, classist, capitalistic, and gendered environments. They are entering a twenty-first-century global society that is tired of adults practicing the politics of the ostrich. This kind of politics has consistently done us a disservice for centuries, for pretending to look the other way can also be translated as being complicit to the "isms" that position groups as "others."

When we thought about a befitting cover page for this issue, two stood out: Lupita Nyong'o's (2019) *Sulwe* and Atinuke's (2019) *B Is for Baby*, one for its perspective on colorism and the other for its stance on community and children. After further deliberations, we decided that though both cover pages are captivating, *B Is for Baby* would anchor this issue better as we celebrate a new vision and way of being with babies, offering lofty promises for the future. In short, don't mess with our babies! You/We adults may be powerful, but don't you dare mess with our babies' mental, physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual beings and spaces.

Baby ushers in a new generation of children inhabit-



B IS FOR BABY BY ATINUKE

ing our global spaces, and while the particular baby on this cover is Black, she represents all that is mischievous and playful about childhood—the subversive nature of childhood that *we*, educators, rarely interrogate critically or may simply dismiss as a lack of adequate parental care. Is this an accepted stereotype? Hmm! Might there be more going on in this story that chronicles our baby girl's adventures? We would let each reader decide for themselves.

The simple alphabet book that revolves around the letter "b" centers a Nigerian baby girl. Baby is in control of her multiple spaces. She has a right to

be loved the way she should be loved by all around her. She believes they all mean well, and if they don't, she doesn't seem to care, as we notice in the prequel, *Baby Goes to Market* (2017), which chronicles how a village market community takes care of Baby. And "b" is also for Brother—her Black brother, who is often dismissed as irresponsible or down on his luck in children's books. "B" is also for Baba, the strong Black male patriarch Baby leaves their loving mom to go visit in the village. This village, an alternate space, offers them the opportunity to experience other kinds of adventures and reveals other ways of being.

As in the first book in this series, in *Baby Goes to Market* readers can easily deduce the notion of irony and quickly dismiss Baby as an uncared-for child and Mama as the stereotypical irresponsible, overworked Black African woman who pays little attention to her child, making it the community's responsibility to feed the baby once she is out

there in the market. But let's take another look: This baby is "woke," like the new generation of children we now encounter in diverse children's books who defy *adult* dominance and ideology, and their politics of the stomach—their placing ceilings on others' heads, silencing minoritized voices, throwing one another under the bus, telling everyone to ignore or numb their pain and truths. They are sick and tired of the way adults have been controlling them, so they come into our world now ready! Above all, this nameless baby is as "woke" as her diasporan brother in Langston Hughes's (1932/1996) "Baby" (p. 47), whose Mama has to remind him not to "play in dat road," and as Browne's (2018b) *Woke Baby*, who is "up before the sun smiles, eyes open"; she is equally as "woke" as her diasporan sisters in Browne's (2018a) *Black Girl Magic*, who reject society's expectations of how they should look and act. These babies are loved by their community, in the way their respective local communities know how, especially given their communities' endless struggles against all forms of oppression, manipulation, deprivation, deception, and more. Baby is also as "woke" as her global older siblings in Browne et al.'s (2020) *Woke: A Young Poet's Call to Justice*. Our children today are "woke" because they truly cannot rely completely on their adult guardians and mentors who as humans contend with their humanness and are always in the process of becoming, too. Oftentimes, these adults get caught up in their own struggles and personal sufferings within the power hierarchies. So, twenty-first-century children remain aware and stay alert and subvert in transgressive ways.

Baby manifests aspects of carnivalesque tendencies (Bakhtin, 1984/2009), whereby "transgressive social behaviour thrives beneath the veneer of social order, constantly threatening to upset things" (Oxford Reference, n.d.). Children who exhibit these tendencies understand the power structure that governs the new physical space they have been born into, whether it is in the diaspora or elsewhere. They understand the complicated nature of the new space—a space that nurtures but that also has the capacity to stifle, as readers might notice in William Blake's famous poems about childhood, "Infant Joy" (1789) and "Infant Sorrow" (1794). So, as constructed in children's books such as Astrid Lindgren's (1945) *Pippi Longstocking* and the recent books in the *Woke* series, these children come ready to disrupt that space in a carnivalesque sense—turning the tables on the adults (Bakhtin, 1984/2009) through humor. From a postcolonial perspective, they also understand when to ignore the bourgeois adults within their cultural spaces that are high on mainstream educational indoctrination (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986/2011), and who sometimes unconsciously or consciously facilitate the colonization of children's minds—coercing our young to conform to the dictates of the status quo or serve as brokers who perpetuate

This issue of *JCL* presents readers with eight inspiring articles (as it is a double issue) to reawaken us from our slumber, nudging us to take action and to be kind to one another regardless of how our global, national, racialized histories have positioned us vis-à-vis one another on the power continuum.

social injustices even within private spaces that are supposed to be sanctuary for our youths.

But from a critical multicultural perspective, children understand the power struggle that exists in their worlds between them and their "nurturing" adults, as well as the institutions that are set in place to socialize them as conformists and consumers of dominant ideologies. They understand their place in the power continuum, and some actively reject or subvert it. Some recognize when adults interpret their Childist (Young-Bruehl, 2012) perspectives for childlessness but continue to be the "woke" babies, children, and youths they are, making their voices heard: Witness activists such as Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg.

In this spirit, this issue of *JCL* presents readers with eight inspiring articles (as it is a double issue) to reawaken us from our slumber, nudging us to take action and to be kind to one another regardless of how our global, national, racialized histories have positioned us vis-à-vis one another on the power continuum. It raises these questions:

- ▣ How does power play out in children's books through race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, dis/ability, and environment?
- ▣ Who benefits from such constructions?
- ▣ How might we nurture students to cultivate the necessary skill sets that enable them to tackle the power dynamics they notice in texts for children?

The articles reflect the modern global racial and power pandemic, with white, Western paradigms being interrogated, disrupted, deconstructed, rethought, and reconstructed by scholars and youth across the globe. Human-centered discourses are also revisited, reminding readers that Earth is a shared space and that we must work together to continue to make it a better place for everyone.

Overall, a new world order is setting in that allows for a healthy and inclusive dialogue moving forward. Thus, we are all watching the crumbling of the old ways of doing and knowing that ranked Western epistemologies at the top of the

knowledge hierarchies. In the process of these deconstructions and social reconstructions, many have lost their lives, but thankfully many more people are no longer shying away from conversations on equity and social justice issues. In our situation as educators and teachers, the impacts of these conversations on our pedagogical practices are important. What does it mean to engage in meaningful, culturally sustaining pedagogy? These conversations are reflected in articles that encourage such pedagogies in classrooms in North America and other regions across the globe—all in our attempt to disrupt the hegemony of racial/ethnic, class, heterosexual, cultural, gendered, geopolitical, able-bodied, and environmental powers. We hope you enjoy the dialogue as you also look for novel ways to engage students in this struggle to be *awoke* in an important moment of our global sociopolitical history. And yes, otherness has the tendency to cause tension, but that doesn't mean *we* persecute those who do not look, speak, act, live, think, worship like us.

In the first set of four articles, power dynamics around otherness are apparent through the racial/ethnic struggles that emanate from historical practices of social injustice. This set ends with an article that draws attention to environmental concerns regarding children, play, and urban spaces. The second set of four articles continues in this vein, centering gender, environmental concerns, sexuality, and disability. It opens with an article on women from our historical past, then shifts to an article that problematizes humans' place as the leader within the ecosystem. This is followed by an article that discusses new lenses through which to read queer life in children's books, and finally exits with an article that not only

explores constructions of cancer in picturebooks but shares responses to select books by children in active cancer treatment.

This theme of power disruption, subversion, and interrogation continues in the Critical Conversations column through the books that are reviewed, and in the Teachers' Voices column that shares one teacher's action research and pedagogical practices around a novel. The Scholars' Commentaries revisit some of the key tenets of critical multiculturalism as they pertain to children's literature. The first piece analyzes power in Thai preadolescent literature, and the second revisits the metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding-glass doors to draw attention to endemic issues of misrepresentation in children's literature. The podcast brings together familiar and new voices to reacquaint listeners with critical multicultural discourses in our attempt to map out the future in this struggle for equity within our beloved field of children's literature, helping us to continue to figure out how to collaborate in constructive ways through research, scholarship, teaching, publishing, and dialoguing that center children's well-being.

The Children's Literature Assembly Master Class, Research Award winner, and president's message wrap up the issue. We pause here to thank the contributors for their excellent pieces, the blind reviewers for their thoughtful reviews that pushed the authors' thinking further, and our entire editorial staff and executive board for their tireless support. We also thank our community of readers for their unflagging support and commitment to children's literature and literacies, for without you, what is really the point of writing? □

References

- Bakhtin, M. (2009). *Rabelais and his world* (Helene Iswolsky, Trans.). Indiana University Press. (Original work published 1984)
- Blake, W. (1789). Infant joy. Poetry Foundation.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43665/infant-joy>
- Blake, W. (1794). Infant sorrow. Poetry Foundation.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45951/infant-sorrow>

- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. (2011). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. Currey. (Original work published 1986)
- Oxford Reference. (n.d.). Overview: Carnavalsque. In *OxfordReference.com*. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095550811>
- Young-Bruehl, E. (2012). *Childism: Confronting prejudice against children*. Yale University Press.

Children's Literature Cited

- Atinuke. (2017). *Baby goes to market* (A. Brooksbank, Illus.). Candlewick Press.
- Atinuke. (2019). *B is for Baby* (A. Brooksbank, Illus.). Candlewick Press.
- Browne, M. L. (2018a). *Black girl magic* (Jess X. Snow, Illus.). Roaring Brook Press.
- Browne, M. L. (2018b). *Woke baby* (Theodore Taylor III, Illus.). Roaring Brook Press.
- Browne, M. L., Acevedo, E., & Gatwood, O. (2020). *Woke:*

- A young poet's call to justice* (Theodore Taylor III, Illus.). Roaring Brook Press.
- Hughes, Langston. (1996). Baby. In *The dream keeper* (p. 47). Knopf Books for Young Readers. (Original work published 1932)
- Lindgren, A. (1945). *Pippi Longstocking* (Tiina Nunnally & Susan Beard, Trans.; Lauren Child & Mini Grey, Illus.). Oxford University Press.
- Nyong'o, L. (2019). *Salwe* (Vashti Harrison, Illus.). Simon & Schuster.