

LAIDLAW RESEARCH PROJECT

“The Dangers of a Single Story”

According to a study by the Cooperative Children's Book Centre, only around 12% of the 3450 children's books published in 2022 included Black characters¹. Even though this percentage has definitely been increasing in the past few years (data from 2013 show a meagre 3% of children's books published about Black characters), it is still not astonishingly high. Moreover, it is important to state that an increase in the representation of our multicultural society, does not necessarily imply an accurate one. This is especially true in children's literature, where the lines between reality and fiction are often more blurred in the eyes of the audience compared to adults' books. Because of the impressionable and malleable minds that are attributed to children and young adults, there is a higher pressure on the creators of their stories to deliver a product that meets certain criteria and expectations. Children's literature is indeed uniquely interdisciplinary, impinging on disciplines like pedagogy and education, among others. Perry Nodelman also highlights the distinctive relationship that children's literature has with its audience:

[Guides to children's literature] all made judgments of excellence in terms of the effects of books on their audience - and that astonishes me, for in the ivory tower of literary study I had hitherto inhabited, one certainly did not judge books by how they affected audiences; in fact, one often judged audiences by the extent to which they were affected by books, so that, for instance, anyone who wasn't overwhelmed by Shakespeare was simply assumed to be an intransigent dummy.²

¹ CCBC Education, Diversity Statistics, <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/books-by-and-about-poc-2002-2017/> accessed 16/06/2023

² Nodelman, *Touchstones*, p.4

The way children respond to the stories they read, hear or watch, and the interest critics have in this response, is therefore crucial in defining children's literature. But it also goes beyond the intricacies of labelling and defining a certain discipline, it has a concrete effect on our world and our society. In a New York Times article, Christopher Myers brilliantly describes children's books as maps that help them navigate the world, showing them possibilities, achievements and obstacles.³ The problem arises when these "maps" are not accurate, or sometimes purposefully damaging. They leave their young audience alone to face a reality they do not completely recognize, where the part that is indeed being represented will feel threatened by difference, and the misrepresented or altogether invisible part will have a very limited view of their own identity and potential. These inaccurate maps are also dangerous in the sense that they often create "single stories" for certain types of characters. This happens when there is a perpetuation of stereotypes that greatly limits the identity of a specific community. Emer O'Sullivan remarks in *Imaging Sameness and Difference* how there usually is a "tendency to see one's own group, society or culture as rich and diverse, [and a] predisposition to see the 'others' as monolithic, with their representatives reduced to a few typical and 'different' features."⁴ This ultimately alters the perception the 'others' have of themselves, forcing them to colour between the lines of the images set for them.

In this essay, I want to expand on this concept of "mapping" our multicultural society, and on how the Eurocentric representation that has been so rooted into our vision of the world, has influenced the writing of those minorities who are often not part of that vision (and when they are it has often been into a subaltern position). I will look in particular at children's literature written by African American writers, with the aim of understanding what type of message and image of the world they are trying to send to their audience. For the purpose of this study, any other minority group would have been equally valid, but I chose the African American community in light of the very

³ Myers, "The Apartheid of Children's Literature"

⁴ O'Sullivan, "Sameness and Difference in Children's Literature: An Introduction", p.8

distinct power dynamic that this community has had with an, historically speaking, systematically racist environment such as that of the United States.

The selection of texts I will be looking at is part of some of the latest winners of the “Coretta Scott King Book Awards” for children and young adults. This award has been chosen as it aims to reward African American writers that are able to really encapsulate the African American *identity*.

I will focus in particular on how these texts approach a narrative of victimisation that has seen the Black community as its primal subject throughout history and how they transformed it into narratives of success. In recent times, the more mainstream stories for children and young adults that present Black characters, do so in a marginalised way that focuses solely on their pain, their struggle and their sacrifice. Rather than giving the characters full agency, they are being used as symbols of sacrifice or torment. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas talks about this in *The Dark Fantastic*, saying:

“Very often, when you appear on the page or on the screen, you are a slave, a servant, or a prostitute—your body is not your own. If you have words, your speech serves only to support the narrative, never to subvert it. You are the alien Other. You are the Orc. You are the fell beast.”⁵

Starting from these considerations and looking at examples such as *The Hunger Games* or *The Vampire Diaries*, I will then analyse how the texts selected for this project try to subvert this narrative. Even when the contextual background might appear the same (most of the books deal with Black history, slavery and racism), the focus is now on the characters’ strength and empowerment, allowing them to regain their voice.

I will then consider how, in this empowering attitude, the selection of texts lacks that magical escapism that is so often intrinsic in YA and children’s literature, the way this choice might be influenced by social reasons and how this is affecting the audience. All the narratives considered deal with either historical facts or a very strong realism, sending the message that the African American *identity* that the Coretta Scott King

⁵ Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, p.24

Award tries to promote, does not leave space for magic or other-worldly adventures for their children and even when these stories exist, they are not put under a spotlight. Ebony Thomas comments on her personal experience with this saying that the “[b]ooks and movies about children and teens who looked like me were read and viewed out of duty, in order to learn something about the past. Books and movies that showcased the pleasures of dreaming, imagination, and escape were stories about people who did not look like me.”⁶ Starting from this consideration I will highlight how certainly the social reality requires the creation of stories and fiction that face the complexities of the obstacles that minorities have to face, but also how said fiction can ultimately influence reality itself and, alongside empowering stories of overcoming, the creation of narratives that depict everyday achievements or magical adventures that feature Black characters as protagonists, may be really beneficial into creating new stories of representation.

The books I will be looking at in detail are *A Few Red Drops: The Chicago Race Riot of 1919* by Claire Hartfield, *Copper Sun* by Sharon M. Draper, *Piecing Me Together* by Renée Watson, *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans* by Kadir Nelson, and *March: Book Three* by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell. What all these books have in common is the sense of empowerment and agency they convey. Before looking at how they each achieve this, it is important to briefly go over what kind of literary tradition they set themselves against. Hopefully, no one is a stranger to the literary and cultural tradition that to this day has seen minorities and, specifically the African American community, as completely absent, misrepresented or depicted as utter subaltern. This is the case for example, with some classic children's books that are blatantly racist, such as *If I Ran the Zoo* by Dr Seuss with its discriminatory caricatures, or the series *Babar* with its glorification of colonization. We then move to more subtle depictions of prejudice, such as in *The Vampire Diaries* and *The Hunger Games* (even though shockingly racist descriptions still occur every now and then, such as in the picture book *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* by Ramin Ganeshram, where slaves are portrayed as smiling and happy). These last two YA are analysed in detail by Elizabeth Thomas in *The Dark Fantastic*. She looks particularly at the characters of Rue in *The Hunger Games* and Bonnie in the TV adaptation of *The Vampire Diaries*. What is interesting about her analysis of these two characters is the focus on how good intentions of inclusivity become an exploitation of struggle, purity and heartache. She explains that:

⁶ Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, p.18

[t]he problem occurs when contemporary literature and media for young people include characters of color who are supposed to provide someone for every reader or viewer to identify with - and yet at the same time construct protagonists who are the only characters worth rooting for. Although the initial authorial intent may have been noble, stories constructed in such a fashion have the pernicious effect of normalizing our existing social hierarchies- including hierarchies of race.⁷

The author shows how Rue's character becomes the sacrificial lamb during the Hunger Games. She is the victim of the system of Panem, but the focus is never on her own pain. Even in the final moments before her death, all the attention is on Katniss' feelings, Rue does not have a voice nor a choice in the novels. She is described as the real spark of the revolution but does not get to be its hero, a role she hands over to an unwilling Katniss.⁸ As it often happens in narratives that include Black characters, Rue's life is not really her own, she does not have agency over her choices and represents the ultimate sacrifice for a greater good. Similarly, Bonnie's character in the TV adaptation of *The Vampire Diaries* has no power in the storyline, nor is granted any of the positive love plots that all the other characters have and that make them more alluring and worthy of sympathy. It is interesting to notice that her character is significantly different from the one in the books, as Thomas points out. In the books she is of Irish origin and has a more leading role in the plot, becoming also romantically involved with one of the protagonists.⁹ All of this focus on her role and agency is stripped away the moment she is represented in the TV show, implying that it is not conceivable that a Black character could have these attributes.

These settings of powerlessness, loss of innocence and, in Rue's case, violence, are common tropes when it comes to the representation of African American characters, and children in particular. Donna Pastourmatzi explores this concept in "Violence and Black Childhood", by saying that "the tradition of violence in the United States [...] has made it almost impossible for a Black child to escape victimization."¹⁰ She expands on this by describing how through slave narratives, autobiographies and novels, Black childhood has always been inundated by abuse. "Tongue-tied, Black children have suffered from an acute sense of self-incrimination, guilt and shame, which more often than not mutilated their self-esteem."¹¹ The actual violence that Pastourmatzi refers to when speaking about authors such as Fredrick Douglass, Richard Wright or Maya Angelou, who engage in themes such as slavery and sexual

⁷ Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, p.59

⁸ Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, pp.35-64

⁹ Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, pp. 106-142

¹⁰ Pastourmatzi, "Violence and Black Childhood", p. 212

¹¹ Pastourmatzi, "Violence and Black Childhood", p. 212

abuse, are more subtly transcribed in the recent popular texts discussed earlier. Here the depiction of violence is not as explicit, but the feeling of powerlessness around Black characters remains a huge trait of the stories that fill our books and movies.

What separates from this tradition the selection of books chosen is that, although settings might be similar, the focus is completely shifted to the strength and agency of the characters. For example, *Copper Sun* tells the story of Amari, a fifteen years old girl who, towards the end of the 17th century, is stolen from her village in Ghana and sold as a slave in the Carolinas. The novel follows her journey through the transatlantic trade, her life and suffering on the plantation and her escape towards Fort Mose, in Florida, where she finds refuge together with an indentured servant named Polly. Even though the novel is extremely graphic in the description of torture, rape and psychological violence towards Amari, the reader (and Amari herself) is constantly reminded of the incredible resilience that lies in the soul of this young girl. “I see power in you. [...] You know, certain people are chosen to survive. I don’t know why, but you are one of those who must remember the past and tell those yet unborn. You must live.[...] They will not break your soul.”¹² says to her one of the characters in one of the most heartbreaking parts of the novel, right after Amari has lost all her family and has embarked towards the New Continent. Amari is far from a passive protagonist, she is extremely smart and compassionate. She learns English incredibly quickly and uses it to her advantage, helps Polly to survive after their escape and teaches her how to be more in touch with nature. She does not allow herself to die even after the most cruel beatings and tortures.

Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*, discusses the novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, which also focuses on a story of slavery and then escape. However, Morrison highlights how, after the escape of the slave Nancy, the only focus is on the feeling of betrayal that her mistress feels. She disappears completely when no longer associated with her masters, as if she did not exist.¹³ *Copper Sun*, on the other hand, is solely concentrated on Amari’s experience, granting her a loud voice in a tradition that has forced for so long characters like hers into silence and invisibility.

Other incredibly loud voices come from *March: Book Three*, *A Few Red Drops* and *Heart and Soul*. All three of them are historical accounts of important parts of African American history. In *March*, Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell help John Lewis bring his story and the Civil Rights Movement to life through an incredibly meaningful graphic novel. The main purpose of the book is to show that people can indeed change the world when their cause and determination are strong enough. Opposite to *March*, *A Few Red Drops* and *Heart and Soul* are not told from a first person perspective, they

¹² Draper, *Copper Sun*, p.37

¹³ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, pp.14-16

are rather broader accounts of events. The first refers to the Chicago Race Riots of 1919 and draws an accurate and effective picture of its leading causes and of the social environment that preceded it. *Heart and Soul*, on the other hand, presents a more general recap, even though less detailed, of the African American experience, starting from slavery up until the election of Barack Obama. These three texts are a statement for the African American community to be heard, seen and acknowledged. The authors are writing back to not only a culture but an entire system that wanted to make them invisible or erase them altogether. In the first chapter of *Heart and Soul*, Kadir Nelson describes the Capitol of DC and its artworks, and he points out that “[t]he paintings tell the story of how America came to be. Strange though... nary a black face in all those pretty pictures. There’s plenty of white folks and a few Indians here and there, but none of us. It’s as if we never existed - stricken from the record, like Moses from the walls of Egypt.”¹⁴ He then goes on to specify not only the rightful presence of African Americans but their essential contribution to the making of the country. “[W]e deserve to be in those pictures just as much as the Europeans and the Indians. And if you really want to know the truth, honey, *we* are much of the reason they would later have a chance to fight for their ‘liberty’ in the first place.”¹⁵ This demand to be seen is also clearly expressed in one of John Lewis’ speeches in *March*:

We’ve come to this state with a spirit of love and brotherhood. We have suffered the beatings and arrests. We have witnessed the burning of our churches and homes. We have demanded answers as our friends and colleagues have been murdered. How long will it take the federal government to see what is happening?! If they don’t want to see, we’ll go to Atlantic City and we will make them see!¹⁶

The educational aspect of these three texts highlights the importance of an aware and informed young citizenry, who is rendered proud through the learning of the strength and resilience of those who fought for freedom, and represents a tool to better understand the roots of the current social climate.

The last text of the selection, *Piecing Me Together*, is the coming-of-age story of Jade, an African American girl from Portland who is trying to find her place in a world that seems to have been built to break her. Coming from a disadvantaged social and economic background, she has to face all the power dynamics that the environment of the private school she attends puts in front of her. Jade’s character is deeply moving, as she shows perseverance and determination against a system that not only does not fully accept her, but is also constantly trying to fix her. The protagonist describes the

¹⁴ Nelson, *Heart and Soul*, p.6

¹⁵ Nelson, *Heart and Soul*, pp.6-7

¹⁶ Lewis, *March: Book Three*, pp.99

microaggressions she endures every day from inside and outside her school, and brings up an interesting topic that is not often discussed, that of forced opportunities. This is particularly clear in the novel when Jade goes to talk to Mrs Parker, the student counsellor, who instead of offering her the study abroad programme for which she has prepared so much, introduces her to a mentorship programme for “at risk” Black girls.

[B]ut sometimes I wish I could say, *Oh, no, thank you, Mrs Parker. I have enough opportunities. My life is full of opportunities. Give an opportunity to someone else.*

But girls like me, with coal skin and hula-hoop hips, whose mommas barely make enough money to keep food in the house, have to take opportunities every chance we get.¹⁷

Renée Watson opens up through Jade’s experience on the problematic experience of a society that for centuries has been oppressive and, even when trying to do better, forces its victims into pre-established pathways. Jade’s best friend gets to go on the study abroad programme she chose, even though her grades are not nearly as good as Jade’s, while she has to accept what is handed to her because it is more fitting and more helpful for a Black girl from the school’s perspective. Jade is able to learn from this imposed experience nonetheless, but the unfairness of it is strongly felt throughout the novel. Jade, however, is depicted as the perfect example of resolution, she remains true to herself and her aspirations, confronting her teacher about the study abroad programme and getting a place in it, alongside an internship in an art gallery. No matter the positive ending of the story, *Piecing Me Together* really sheds a light on the many biases that still crowd our society today that go beyond the more shocking and blunt acts of racism. Renée Watson is able to beautifully develop the idea of set models and stories that Christopher Myers brings up in the article “The Apartheid of Children’s Literature”.¹⁸ When there are only a few types of pathways available to some people, it becomes incredibly hard to break free from them and reimagine a different life, but this is what Jade is able to teach to the young readers who might identify with her experiences.

Even though the empowering aspect of these stories leaves the reader with a great sense of purpose, I could not help but notice that they do not bring back that comforting feeling often associated with children’s books. Stories for young readers, are commonly perceived as having the power to carry you into another world, perfused with magic and adventure. When thinking about the books and stories that filled my generation of children, tropes such as little wizards with glasses, talking

¹⁷ Watson, *Piecing Me Together*, p.7

¹⁸ Myers, “The Apartheid of Children’s Literature”

animals or singing princesses come to mind. None of these were present in this selection of books. In short, it seems like in the representation of the African American identity that the Coretta Scott King Award wants to honour, there is no space for fantasy or magic. This observation brings up the question of the privilege of childhood. What I mean by this is that this analysis shows a different approach to what being a child means when it comes to books written primarily for Black children. On one hand, when we think of popular books for children and YA (which very rarely include black characters and if they do they are never the protagonists), there is usually a primary space for imagination and dreams. I am referring to books such as *Harry Potter*, Disney classics or *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The stories I analysed, on the other hand, are either the narration of actual history or very realistic, showing kids what the world they live in looks like, including its very ugly but extremely true sides. “To the past and future children of the movement”¹⁹, recites the inscription at the beginning of *March: Book Three*, before addressing episodes of police violence, discrimination and incredible acts of rebellion and revolution. John Lewis is drawing children’s attention to the harm that was done, he is educating them on the strength of their people and on their own, as the inscription implies the fight is still not over. He requires of his audience a level of maturity and awareness that is not expected of a child reading, for example, *Harry Potter*. This selection of books, being targeted primarily for Black children, demands them to grow up faster by exposing historical and social realities that they will have to face in the future, if they are not facing them already. And even though this is serving a purpose for them, it also takes away some of the innocence that is commonly associated with being a child. Now, defining what a child is is an extremely complicated question that this essay does not attempt to answer, but for the sake of the argument, it is possible to say that we as a society tend to distinguish a child from an adult on many levels and we make it an important pillar of our system to protect the former in particular. This is why children benefit from special rights, they are protected by the law in different ways compared to adults and the kinds of entertainment they consume are usually PG verified and created specifically for them. Our Western society tends to provide them with toys and narratives that generally preserve their “purity”, shielding them from things such as sex or violence.

Michael Levy and Farah Mendelsohn in *Children’s Fantasy Literature* show how literature for children has changed significantly throughout time, but in the majority of cases it has always presented a romanticization of reality. They also highlight how, after WW2, there has been a significant spike in the production of children’s fantasy. By doing this, they show an even more important trait than escapism when it comes to fantasy:

¹⁹ Lewis, *March: Book Three*

To some extent, it is true, the reading of fantasy is a form of escapism. There is considerable comfort to be had in a trip to Middle Earth or Narnia or Hogwarts [...]. [H]owever, [...] the best children's fantasy is, over all, far from escapist. The exotic settings of Tolkien, Lewis, Rowling and even the much maligned Stephenie Meyer may actually make it easier for children to deal with serious issues by presenting them once removed from reality as they may otherwise be too threatening to confront.²⁰

Fantastical settings are therefore granting critical distance that does not necessarily snatch its young audience away from reality but rather allows them to understand it in a less traumatic way and with a softer approach. However, this way of approaching the world seems to not be accessible to Black children. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas discusses her experience with this inaccessibility in *The Dark Fantastic*, by saying:

My mother was doing me a favour by letting me know that magic was inaccessible to *me*. The real world held trouble enough for young Black girls, so there was no need for me to go off on a quest to seek it. [...] In order to survive I had to face reality. [...] When people of color seek passageways into the fantastic, we have often discovered that the doors are barred. Even the very act of dreaming of worlds-that-never-were can be challenging when the known world does not provide many liberating spaces.²¹

Not exploring this genre that is so structural for children's literature then, implies an exclusion for, in this case, African American children on many levels. They are denied "the act of dreaming", the critical distance to better understand the world around them that fantasy provides and the "protection" (even though how effective this protection is is very debatable) from a straightforward depiction of the ugliness of the world that is usually granted to all other children.

It is crucial to highlight that this is not a criticism of the authors of these books in particular (nor of any author that has dealt with similar issues in this way in their work). They are simply responding to a need that is felt in a society that has consistently undermined and discriminated against minorities. Children do need to know about these realities, it grants them agency and recognition. Walter Dean Myers when talking about the experience of young audiences encountering stories that they can resonate with, says: "[t]hey have been struck by the recognition of themselves in the story, *a validation of their own existence* as human beings, an acknowledgement of their value by someone who understands who they are."²² And validation of one's existence is exactly the purpose of these texts. However, this need still

²⁰ Levy, *Children's Fantasy Literature*, p. 225

²¹ Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic*, pp.1-2

²² Myers, "Where are the People of Color in Children's Books?"

underlines the disparity that is present to this day and the way in which some children have the privilege of actually being so and how others are forced to grow up so much faster.

Nonetheless, I am deeply convinced that stories, literature, and narratives in general, are influenced by reality just as much as they are able to influence it. Ian Hawking describes in his “looping effect of the human kinds” theory how categorising a group of people in a society is going to affect not only the way society acts toward said group, but is also going to change the perception the people in question have of themselves and how they interact with the rest of the world.²³ Therefore, creating a new narrative in which all children (and people more generally) have the same opportunities and privileges and are an integral part of the mosaic around them, is crucial to make it a reality. Cornelia Funke wrote in an article for *The Guardian* that “we won’t try to change this world unless we are able to imagine another reality. One could say all change starts with fantasy.”²⁴ If what she says it’s true, including children from all minorities into adventure stories, fantasy and so on, is crucial to grant them the freedom of change and of dreams.

Through this essay, I highlighted the still very problematic approaches that some popular fiction has towards the representation of Black characters. Starting from those considerations, I analysed a selection of books written by African American authors to see how they responded to this tradition that has been so rooted in the Western culture, finding that through the strength of their protagonists they are subverting the narrative, focusing on their voice and agency. These authors are creating a new stage where they are not shying away from the obstacles and disparities created by a discriminating society, but rather confronting it head-on and putting the spotlight on those who are often forgotten or overlooked in the entertainment we consume. However, this essay also highlights how the necessity to do so, generates a different approach to the idea of childhood, forcing their target audience to grow up so much faster. This creates an imbalance in the privilege that some children have to be carefree and serene, and others who cannot escape the ugly side of reality. I believe this project to be important as it opens up discussions that can go beyond the writing of the authors selected, raising questions about the detrimental effects of misrepresentation in children’s literature for us all, and how a more diverse body of literature can help us move towards a more informed and inclusive society, that truly provides the same opportunities and dreams for everyone.

²³ Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* p.59

²⁴ Funke, “Through Fantasy, Children Face their Fears and Become Braver”

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