PEER-REVIEWED

Diversity as Evolutionary in Children's Literature

The Blog Effect

EDITH CAMPBELL

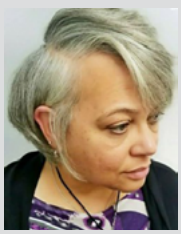
The call for better representation of African Americans in children's literature can be traced back about eighty years through the works of social and literary leaders including Sterling Brown. In 1933, he wrote of the pervasiveness of stereotypes of African Americans in literature, happy slaves and the representation of African Americans in American literature.

> But whether Negro life and character are to be best interpreted from without or within is an interesting bypath that we had better not enter here. One manifest truth, however, is this: the sincere, sensitive artist, willing to go beneath the clichés of popular belief to get at an underlying reality, will be wary of confining a race's entire character to a half-dozen narrow grooves. He will hardly have the temerity to say that his necessarily limited observation of a few Negroes in a restricted environment can be taken as the last word about some mythical the (sic) Negro. He will hesitate to do this, even though he had a Negro mammy, or spent a night in Harlem, or has been a Negro all his life. The writer submits that such an artist is the only one worth listening to, although the rest are legion.[1]

The 1930s, the age of the Harlem Renaissance, was a transformative period for African American literature. *The Journal of Negro Education* was one of the few journals that allowed Brown a public forum. While African American scholars of the 1930s found limited avenues for scholarly communication, today's scholar activists, educators, and librarians are able to reach audiences through social network sites and through these vehicles affect significant change in children's literature. This article focuses particularly on the transformative power of blogging. It accomplishes this by reviewing the history of blogs that focus on diversity in children's literature, and examining four incidents of diverse bloggers as change agents.

Librarians and Educators in the Blogosphere

Librarians often take to blogging to build a community to discuss books, technologies, or services relating to librarianship but may also find themselves serving communities as advocates or change agents. They also use blogs to address social issues in ways that initiate change.[2] When librarians or



Edith Campbell *is an Assistant Librarian in the Cunningham Memorial Library at Indiana State University. She is a Faculty Fellow to ISU's Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence's Multicultural Curriculum Learning Community. She currently serves as the Indiana State Ambassador for the United States Board on Books for Young People and is a member of the 2018 Michael L. Printz Award selection committee. She blogs at* CrazyQuiltsEdi. *Edith received her BA in Economics from the University of Cincinnati and MLS from Indiana University.*

educators focus their blog on diversity in children's or young adult literature, advocacy and transformation may be an intentional goal.

With only 14 percent of the books published in the United States depicting Children of Color or Native Americans,[3] it is not surprising that many from marginalized groups who blog about children's books focus their efforts on diversity, social justice, equity, and inclusion. Social media provides marginalized voices a decolonized platform for self-expression, critical analyses, and the creation of content. While some question the influence of blogs,[4] significant changes enacted in children's literature seem to suggest otherwise.

Children's Literature Diversity Blogs

It seems that the first children's literature diversity blog was *Into the Wardrobe* (http://peteredmundlucy7.blogspot.com), which was founded in February 2005 by Tarie Sabido, a Filipina blogger located in the Philippines. It was followed in April by South Asian American author Mitali Perkins' *Mitali's Fire Escape* (http://www.mitaliblog.com). While neither blog was originally created to reflect the bloggers' Asian heritage, they did eventually venture in that direction. Sabido began exclusively promoting Filipino books and authors while Perkins' post "Writing Race: A Checklist for Writers" has become a seminal essay for those who are writing outside their own cultural experience.[5]

Change Agents

Dr. Debbie Reese, a tribally enrolled Nambe Pueblo woman and scholar, began blogging at *American Indians in Children's Literature* (*AICL*; https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/) in 2006 when she recognized what others speak to as the need for scholars to "write in public spaces as a form of advocacy and professional empowerment."[6] Reese uses her blog to proactively ensure the dignity and presence of Native Americans in literature for all children. Her critical analyses of works with Native American characters or cultures consistently and comprehensively educate her readers. By combining her expertise as a Native American children's literature scholar with her lived experience as tribally enrolled Native American, Reese articulates and shares her expertise with the express purpose of informing her readers, many of whom are educators, librarians, editors, and caregivers.

One of the most popular of the early diversity blogs was *Reading in Color* (http://blackteensread2.blogspot.com/). It was established in 2009 by African American/Dominican American teen blogger Ari Valderrama, who described her blog as one "that reviews YA/MG books about people of color (poc). There is a serious lack of books being reviewed by teens that are YA/MG about people of color, I hope my blog is one step closer to filling in this void."[7] Ari found her voice and came of age through her social networking.[8]

Ari networked with readers across the blogosphere, creating a dialog about diverse books. Around the time her blog began, an advanced reading copy of the US edition of *Liar* (Larbalestier, Bloomsbury Kids US) appeared with a close up image of white teen's face on the cover, although the book was actually about an African American female. This misrepresentation is often referred to as whitewashing. Ari spearheaded a movement, asking people to contact the publisher to share their displeasure with the cover. It was changed prior to release.

Ari graduated high school and went to college, leaving her blogging behind. Consequently, she wasn't around in 2014 when the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement was founded on Twitter and made diversity a mainstay in children's literature discussions. And, she was not around when controversies arose over *A Fine Dessert: Four Centuries, Four Families, One Delicious Treat* (Jenkins and Blackall; Schwartz & Wade) and *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* (Ganeshram and Brantley-Newton; Scholastic). Reese's *AICL* blog maintains posts with complete timelines relating to both *A Fine Dessert* and *A Birthday Cake*.[9]

Elisa Gall, a white school librarian in Illinois, first blogged about problems with *A Fine Dessert's* portrayal of smiling, working slaves in a blog post. In August 2015 she wrote, "I appreciate the creators' efforts to not ignore that part of history, but I wonder: 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?"[10]

Debate about the book's portrayal of enslaved people expanded in November to author Ellen Oh's blog (http://elloecho.blogspot.com/), author Varian Johnson's blog (http://blog.varianjohnson.com/), and to the *Reading While White* blog (http://readingwhilewhite.blogspot.com/). More blogs picked up the story, and momentum of protests against the depiction of enslavement spilled into popular media sources. This controversy evolved into necessary conversations about effective ways to teach with this book, the portrayal of enslavement in children's books, insider/outsider authorship, and the existence of Whiteness of publishing. On November 1, author Emily Jenkins apologized for her work in a comment on *Reading While White*, stating, "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."[11] Sophie Blackall, the illustrator, continues to stand by her work.

These conversations were too close for those involved in the production of *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* to reconsider their book. Scheduled for release in January 2016, this picturebook also contained problematic portrayals of enslavement. Vicky Smith's review at *Kirkus* alerted many to concerns.[12]

My own blog, *CrazyQuiltEdi* (campbele.wordpress.com) carried a critical review of the book on January 13, 2016.[13] On that same day, Leslie MacFadyen, founder of the Ferguson Response

Network, entered the dialog on Twitter by creating the hashtag #slaverywithasmile. African American scholar and blogger Dr. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas "Storified" her tweets, creating an important document of the debate around this book.[14]

Parents and activists started to become aware of what many of us have known for years: children's literature is fraught with misrepresentations of marginalized people. Nathalie Mvondo, a Cameroonian American blogger at *Multiculturalism Rocks* (https://multiculturalism.rocks/) wrote, "The topic of slavery in picturebooks will remain a sensitive one as long as parents will fear for their children's safety, every time they step outside of the house, and as long as children themselves will refrain from smiling or get nervous simply because they have spotted a police officer."[15] Thousands signed a protest petition directed at Scholastic on Change.org,[16] while Deborah Menkart and Allyson Criner Brown at Teaching for Change used their online network to disperse news of the offensive text that was about to be released.[17] Once again, articles began appearing in mainstream publications. Scholastic seemed to have been aware enough of the instance of *A Fine Dessert* to have prepared a marketing campaign with statements from the book's author and also from the editor, Andrea Davis Pinkney, yet they only added fuel. On Sunday, January 17, Scholastic released another statement on their blog: they were stopping distribution of the book because they did "not believe this title meets the standards of appropriate presentation of information to younger children."[18]

Scholastic's January 17 statement did not acknowledge the voices on Twitter, on blogs, or even the press that led to their decision. Without a doubt, there were also individuals engaging with Scholastic through other channels and thus amplifying the furor social media generated. Those disengaged from social media may think that the company acted solely on their own merits when nothing could be further from reality.

As effective as blogs are in creating change, many disengage from social media because of the disruptive tones in the conversation, whether actual or perceived. Conflict can arise from the unmonitored and unfiltered exchanges that occur in these environments. Many find that the only solution to maintaining a sense of civility is to withdraw completely from the sites.

Some perceive a negative tone when their way of thinking is challenged. This perception often develops when a white person faces a person of color or Native American intentionally speaking publicly about race in order to address a problematic situation. There can be discomfort caused by the very nature of the conversation, by a person of color speaking up in such a way, or a combination of both. Dr. Robin DiAngelo credits this unease to white fragility, "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves."[19] Justine Larbalestier describes it by saying, "my theory is that it makes us feel like we are the baddies. A notion we recoil from because we have been taught all our lives that white people are the goodies. So many of our stories are about us saving (some part of) the world from racism and exploitation: *Dances with Wolves*, *The Help*, *Avatar* (some other world) etc."[20] While conversations develop among those already comfortable with race, many with fragile feelings are offended and leave, finding little chance to grow. Still others watch, read, and learn from the transparent discourse.

These public conversations when held by marginalized persons are replete with opportunity but they can also be mired in situations that breed misunderstanding, hostility, public shaming, and tone policing.[21] Scholars of color tread in this space without a net,[22] with no support other than their willingness to engage and educate. Despite it all, this public forum shines light in unseen places while enabling colonized voices to not only be heard, but also to be empowered. Even when publishers refuse to openly recognize those who have called them out, blogs revolutionize the public discourse by empowering previously unheard scholars, librarians, and educators, and leave a public record.

More recently, there were concerns about *When We Was Fierce* by Latinx author e. E. Charlton-Trujillo.[23] The book received starred reviews in *Publisher's Weekly*, *Kirkus*, and *Booklist* and these reviews avoided many of the issues contained in the text. During an online conversation between myself and Jennifer Baker, creator of the *Minorities in Publishing* podcast,

we quickly realized that she needed to prepare a review of the book.[24] Her review posted on *CrazyQuiltEdi* critiquing the narrative structure of the book, contrasting its artificial dialect to authentic African American Vernacular English appearing in other children's and young adult books.[25] The critical analyses in the reviews provided textual evidence of the stereotypes, misrepresentations, and poorly created language. How did the professional reviewers get so much wrong about these books?

This review, along with additional reviews written by K. T. Horning, a white blogger and children's literature scholar,[26] and by myself,[27] spread through Twitter. These reviews enlightened readers and led to proclamations of "mea culpa" and "how did I miss it." Dr. Zetta Elliott, blogger and children's book author, wrote, "There's the actual annihilation of Black bodies that's reported on the nightly news, and then there's the symbolic annihilation where White editors and agents show preference for non-Black writers and their narratives that distort our image/voice."[28] Candlewick announced their decision to postpone release of the book.[29]

With Aboriginal author and scholar Ambelin Kwaymullina blogging about the relevance that this protestation to *When We Was Fierce* should have among Australian readers, as well as with newspapers in London, Paris, and Stockholm reporting on this story,[30] the global importance of voices of resistance becomes discernible. As publishers continue to respond to the voices of individuals of color that are expressed through blogs and microblogs and as these voices grow to receive a global awareness, it becomes apparent that we're looking at the empowerment of change agents.

Conclusions

The autonomy of these voices as described by Korean American scholar and blogger Dr. Sarah Park Dahlen intersects here along with scholarship and activism.[31] When marginalized people intentionally speak in free and open spaces, the conversations they generate become transparent, effective, and transformative. Global alliances are created and the ability of these communities to negotiate, create, and mobilize for themselves in their own voices begins to lead more people to not only question why there are so few diverse books, but also to demand more, and to demand better quality.

Talk continues as it has for the past eighty or so years around the representation of children who are African American, Native American, Latinx, Asian American, LGBT+, or disabled. But now, thanks to social media, voices from these same marginalized groups become revolutionary as they connect with audiences and allies, and the talk becomes an unstoppable movement.

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