

Francelia Butler Lecture
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University of Washington
June 15, 2019
Indianapolis, Indiana

A Tribute to Black Childhood in Song, Story and Pictures

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I'd like to dedicate this talk to June Cummins, my friend for 24 years, my children's literature colleague for all of that, and my conference wife for at least half of that time. As most of you know, June died of ALS or Lou Gehrig's Disease on Feb. 22, 2018. I attended her memorial service in May at San Diego State at Joseph Thomas's invitation, and both what I knew of June already and what I learned of her from her family, friends and colleagues reminded me of just how impactful one life can be and therefore how important it is to make every day count. June managed to finish the writing of her Sydney Taylor book, a longtime labor of love, with eye track on her computer, after losing the use of everything but her eyes. So whatever my excuses are for not having finished my Langston Hughes/Arna Bontemps book by now are no excuses at all. It's time to get that done. June's book *From Sarah to Sydney: The Woman Behind All-of-a-Kind Family*, will be out in the fall of 2020 with Yale University Press.

I want to begin with a story.

“The Brown Baby” (told, not written out)

Slide 3 (after story ends)

And this is Amelia, holding Sue. Lillian is my mother, and Dorothy was my grandmother, so this story is a part of my heritage. And it should be a children’s book (with a CD or link to a storytelling) but isn’t yet. More on that in a minute.

When I got the news last year that I had been selected to give the Butler Lecture, I initially felt elation, excited that ChLA had that much trust in me. Then my “oh crap” responses set in—the still-small voice of the academic ego that always whispers how little I know, how little I’ve read, and how unworthy I am to even be up here. Well, despite never being able to silence those voices completely, I decided that while I have the floor for a few minutes, I would use this time to try to push back the walls of academia a bit and offer a presentation that might make room for ideas and forms of expression that are rare at academic conferences. At the very least, I think I have prepared a presentation for this 8 am session for which everyone will stay awake. It’s the least I can do in exchange for your getting up, getting dressed, getting your tea or coffee and being here for the 2019 Butler Lecture. And for that, I thank you.

I also want to say that although it now seems to be necessary now for the ChLA board to create a code of conduct—something many organizations

have always had because of aggressive behavior exhibited at conferences—I have always found ChLA a welcoming organization and hope that we can all continue to make it so. I, for one, count on this nurturing space for exchanging new ideas and do my part to open doors for others through my involvement in ChLA. I hope we can all agree that this is an important part of why we exist as an organization.

I have begun with a personal story purposely because it's an illustration of where I want to go with this talk. I want to talk about one of the tenets of Critical Race Theory that explains why there are so many absences in children's literature—why there are so many stories, like this one, by and about people of color that aren't being told in this genre—and a second tenet that points to some answers about how to transform the genre in ways that will start to change the conversation.

The conversation I'm talking about is this one: we have all heard a gracious plenty about Nancy Larrick's bellwether 1965 article, "The All-White World of Children's Literature" that sounded the alarm and served as a wake-up call about all the children who had been left out of historical record of children's literature (63-65). And we have appreciated and used the *Times* op-ed pieces written by father & son Walter Dean and Chris Myers in 2014 on this same topic, but even they acknowledged that theirs was a follow-up to a conversation that was over 50 years old ("Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books?"). Most of us are also quite familiar with this infographic

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that Sarah Park Dahlen helped to mastermind to enable both adults and children to see what's missing in the children's book industry, who gets portrayed, who gets left out and just how much more likely it is to see yourself in a book if you're a rabbit than if you are a Native American, Latin American, Asian American, or African American child ("Children's Books as a Radical Act."). This next generation of visually represented statistics

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also comes as no surprise to anybody who has been working in this field for a while. This visual makes clear that *even* in 2017, *even* with the impact of #WeNeedDiverseBook, #WeNeedDiverseReviewers, #ReadingWhileWhite and a host of other public forums calling for diversifying the genre, this is still where we are. Why is it that in 2017 while 61% of the American population was White, 85.8% of the books that year were published by White authors? And how can 14% of America be African American but only 3.3% of the books published that year be written by African American authors?

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has some things to say about this. According to CRT theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, racism, rather than being aberrational, is the “common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country”—it’s “normal science” and therefore to be expected (Delgado and Stefancic 7). Racist systems also serve the dominant population—most often socially as well as economically—which discourages change that might alter the status quo. In addition, Robin DiAngelo, University of Washington Professor who wrote *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (2018), says that

based on a widespread and mistaken definition of racism as individual, conscious and intentional, it is impossible for the average White individual to look deeply at their socialization and to see their own internalized racism ("Why 'I'm not racist' is only half the story"). But DiAngelo implores us to change the way we define and think about racism. She says that we have all inherited a racist world view, that we are “literally swimming in racist water”—and that’s not just White people swimming in the water but that’s all of us. The impact of those waters is that racism surrounds all of our interactions, keeping oppressive systems in place, and it also means that it’s much easier to ignore its pervasive presence than to do the work of inward gazing to acknowledge racism in ourselves and do the exceedingly hard work of making change. I will give an example, a personal one, of which I am not proud, that makes clear how racism works. When I was about 5, I received for Christmas from relatives two of the same type of baby doll:

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a White Baby Go Bye-Bye and a Black Baby Go Bye-Bye (Feeling Retro; Worthpoint.com). My mother was excited about the Black doll, but several weeks later, when I was playing with the White doll, she asked me where the Black doll was, and I told her I put her away. When mom asked me why, I told her, “Because she’s too black.” This is the impact of “swimming in racist water” every day.

This is also why stories like “The Brown Baby” and maybe even this story about my Baby Go Bye-Byes need to be told. These belong to what Critical Race Theory (CRT) calls Counterstorytelling. According to CRT,

counterstorytelling includes stories that “challenge, displace, or mock . . . pernicious narratives and beliefs” (Delgado and Stefancic 49) or it is “Writing that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (159). While this narrative strategy has typically been used in courts of law to highlight the way “race is not real or objective but constructed,” authors of color and others have also used it to combat racist literary portrayals of people of color (Delgado and Stefancic 49).

In this talk, I will argue that because racism is endemic to our culture, because we all swim in these waters every day, and also because of the systemic and structural racism that exists in the children’s publishing industry, maybe it’s time to do things differently. Maybe it’s time to take a more creative approach to Rudine Sims Bishop’s windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors. Maybe it’s time for us to create new doors and open new windows that make a more creative and personal investment in the change we seek. Hence, I will approach counterstorytelling from 3 different angles today and share with you the results:

- Personal counterstories, of which “The Brown Baby” is one.
- Repurposing children’s literature to create musical counterstories
- Read-a-Rama as a living counterstory

Back to the counterstories. As with the Brown Baby story, this next one comes from my own experiences. And I will share some information afterward that will give you an idea of its cultural significance.

“The Pine Island Story” (told, no slides)

This story relates to my growing up in the “integrated” South, but it also relates to my identity as a swimmer. Keep in mind also that according to a 2017 study by the USA swimming foundation, 64% of African American children cannot swim, compared with 45% of Hispanic children and 40% of Caucasian children (“USA Swimming Foundation”). I am therefore among the minority of African Americans who *can* swim, and I have this skill because of the commitment and investment that my parents made nearly 50 years ago. And although I swim about 3 miles a week, I’m often one of the few brown people in the pool and the only African American. My mother couldn’t swim (or ride a bike—an access issue to discuss another time). My father couldn’t swim. My mom’s one sibling and my dad’s 6 couldn’t swim, and neither could any of my grandparents. A contributing factor on my mother’s side was that my mother’s cousin, Essex Clark, died at 11 years old in 1944 from drowning. This caused the adults to warn all of the kids, “You stay away from that water!” My mother, knowing how wrong-headed that was, determined to get my brother and me comfortable in the water as soon as possible. But since she knew neither she nor my dad (who was so petrified of water that I never recall him taking a bath but only showers) could help us if we got into trouble in the water, they always took us to pools with lifeguards and got us into swimming lessons as early as possible. Mom tried getting me into lessons at 4, but our Greenview neighborhood pool, in our all-Black neighborhood, didn’t teach kids that young. So she took me back at 5, and I learned to swim. Since the way to “waterproof children” is to make sure they can swim, and swim well, this

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is how we are raising the next generation of children in our family, all of whom are strong swimmers. This is Amelia and her cousins, swimming at Camp Read-a-Rama several years ago.

I have a picture book manuscript of this story that I hope will one day be a children's book. But telling "The Pine Island Story" as one that is neither too dark nor tells a falsely happy ending is what I have found most challenging. Yet, it is counterstories like these that could help young readers understand that African Americans didn't go from slavery to "White's Only" water fountains and racially segregated bathrooms to Obama. Stories like these lie in the historical grey areas between Black and White and that can instill in African American kids like I was a lifetime of mistrust of White spaces—White spaces that whisper even to my 53-year old self, "Am I good enough to be here?" And that's real.

Hence, personal counterstories like these can bring to light cultural phenomena like just how late it was historically when brown baby dolls an African American mama could be proud to give her daughter became available on the market, and how few African American children can swim. I've always believed in edu-tainment—educational material wrapped up in entertaining skins—and counterstories are, I think, an effective way to help both children and adults gain an understanding of lives they haven't lived.

My second approach to counterstorytelling is a musical one.

As I mentioned in my dedication, *Dream Keepers for Children of the Sun: the Children's Literature of Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes*, is a

book project that has been percolating and sputtering along for more than 10 years, and I've decided to get my students involved in it in the fall to push myself to finish it over the next year. One chapter of the book that I have not yet written focuses on all of the picture books that have been published recently that either offer contemporary illustrations of Hughes's poems, or tell beautifully illustrated stories of Hughes's life and work.

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- *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, originally published in 1932 and illustrated by Helen Sewell, best known for her artwork in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books, Includes 59 poems that Hughes selected for young people, many of which are his best-known poems.
- The 75th anniversary edition of *The Dream Keeper*, illustrated with Brian Pinkney's scratchboard illustrations, published in 1994 with a 75th anniversary re-issue published in 2007.
- *Coming Home* (1998) & *Langston's Train Ride* (2004) are biographies of particular episodes in Hughes's life: *Coming Home* is a biography of Langston Hughes's early life of growing up with his grandmother in poverty. When his grandmother could no longer take care of him, a kind family took him in, and there Hughes had enough to eat for the first time in his life. *Langston's Train Ride* is about the circumstances in which he composed "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and how this turning point helped him to see himself as a writer for the first time.
- *I, Too, Am America* (2012) and *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (2009) each sumptuously illustrates the titular Hughes poem.

- In *Love to Langston* (2002), a brilliant book of tribute poems, Tony Medina uses episodes of Hughes's life—often traumatic ones—as springboards for new poems that echo verses that Hughes wrote.
- And *Visiting Langston* (2002) tells of a little girl's contemporary visit to Langston Hughes's house, which inspires her own writing. Bryan Collier's amazing collage illustrations bring both Hughes's legacy and this girl's appreciation of him to life. (As an aside, I wanted you to see my birthday gift from my husband this year: Glenn works for the Seattle Opera, and after having my doc student, Liz, steal my Renaissance bonnet out of my office, Glenn had the opera's milliner make a pattern from the hat. Glenn emailed Bryan Collier and asked for an image from one of his picture books and permission to have it made into fabric, both of which Bryan granted. And here

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Is my new hat.). I do so love Bryan Collier and his art! On to the song, titled "Langston Hughes" (Michelle H. Martin © 2019). Perhaps I can call this a musical collage of Hughes counterstories since all of these picture books provide new perspectives for young readers on Hughes's life and work.

Slide 10 (title slide)

Slide 11: Chorus

Langston, Langston, Langston Hughes
Wrote poems of the people, and he loved the blues
Langston, Langston, Langston Hughes,
Wrote poems for the people and he lived the blues.

Slide 12

Langston Hughes was the keeper of dreams,
He wrote jazz poems no one had ever seen.

Slide 13

From Aunt Sue's stories to the Weary Blues,
Mother to Son and my dressed-up shoes.

Slide 14

Hughes wrote poems while he was still a teen,
For the school newspaper and the Brownies' Magazine.

Slide 15

He brought to life The Maple Sugar Child,
And he wove of tale of fairies with a rainbow style!

Slide 16: Chorus**Slide 17**

Langston's mother was a rolling stone,
Raised by his Grandma, who gave him a home.

Slide 18

Told true stories of John Brown's raid,
Of Lewis Sheridan Leary and the price he paid.

Slide 19

Langston did not like his father much,
Who said of Black people they were such and such,

Slide 20

Langston ignored what he had to say,
That writing for a living would just never pay!

Slide 21: Chorus

Slide 22

Langston set out to sail the Big Sea,
And visit lots of people who were Black like me

Slide 23

When the Negro Speaks of Rivers, he can talk a while
Of the Ganges, the Euphrates, Mississippi and the Nile.

Slide 24

He wrote of a boy who went to town,
And marveled at the people on the merry-go-round,

Slide 25

How can I ride, sir, 'cause there ain't no back,
Is there a Jim Crow section for a kid that's Black?

Slide 26: Chorus**Slide 27**

Langston said that jazz makes me sing,
But the blues is my muse that inspires my swing.

Slide 28

I'm so Black and blue right now,
I wish I could be happy, but I don't know how.

Slide 29

He said Harlem had a soul,
To help Black children grow up brave and bold,

Slide 30

Nurturing talent and paving the way,
From the Harlem Renaissance to the present day.

Slide 31: Chorus

Slide 32

Books like Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (2019), which just came out a few days ago so I have not yet read, make us keenly aware of what has been missing in the genre for far too long: in this case, speculative fiction that features Black and Brown young people. Thomas notes that this points not just to a failure of the children's book industry but a failure of imagination. In fact, if you remove from the genre all the African American children's literature about slavery, civil rights, and key historical figures, you have very little left. This is beginning to change, but because of the high percentage of books about key Black historical figures in the genre and also the prevalence of counterstorytelling in them, I decided to focus on a few of my favorites among these in this next song, titled, "You've Got to Read." Although only one of these has an #OwnVoices writer, all of them are illustrated by African American illustrators (and in one case a pair comprised of an African American and an Asian-American).

As I was working this spring on plans for our 8th summer of Camp Read-a-Rama, which Dr. Rachelle D. Washington and I started 10 years ago at Clemson University, I thought about which picture book biographies tell counterstories that have stuck with me. I also thought about which of these might offer some inspiration and entertainment for the 4-11 year olds who read and sing and dance and participate in hands-on science, art, and outdoor activities at Camp Read-a-Rama to learn to—as we say—"live books."

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I chose these four texts as the focus of this song. Most of us have read and/or taught texts by and/or about Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr. And fortunately, in most American public schools, since these writers and visionaries are now a part of the American literary canon, most students read some of their work sometime during their K-12 education. But these picture books delve into their childhoods and talk about how conflicts they faced as young people shaped the adults they became. They also tell counterstories that often get left out of textbook renditions of their biographies.

In *Richard Wright and the Library Card* (1997), which adapts an episode of Wright's life from his autobiography, *Black Boy*, Richard's mother taught him to read from newspaper text. He realized as a young person that a library card could give him unlimited access to the books he loved, the books that fed his mind. And he gained access to a library when a White man, Jim Falk, with whom he worked in Memphis, loaned him his library card. Despite maltreatment by the librarians and White patrons, Richard checked out as many books as he could and read voraciously. For him, this was a life-changing experience. What I find most instructive about this picture book as a counterstory is both the nastiness of the librarian, who seemed to make it her personal mission to keep Richard from accessing books, and all the ways he must deceive the library staff just to be able to check out books and read. When the librarian asks him if he's sure the books aren't for him, he responds, "No, ma'am . . . heck, I can't even read," (Miller). But when he finally has earned enough money to take the train North, "the words came back to him, the stories more real than the train

itself. Every page was a ticket to freedom, to the place where he would always be free" (Miller).

Literacy and learning also figure prominently in *Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree* (1994), but, not surprisingly, the oral tradition is also a highly prized part of Zora's childhood. Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), portrays protagonist Janie as a genderbending woman who finally gets, in her third marriage, the relationship she's been seeking that privileges love over obligation. But *Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree* also paints Hurston as a tree-climbing, overalls-wearing genderbender herself whose religious father attempted to control her but whose mother taught her to dream. In so many words, this book also says that Hurston was noseey—a habit that helped her gather the stories she otherwise would not have heard that later contributed to her storytelling, her writing, and her vocation as an anthropologist.

Words Set Me Free: The Story of Young Frederick Douglass (2012), offers a first-person narrative that opens with these words: "My Mama was Harriet Bailey. They say my master, Captain Aaron Anthony, was my daddy," (Cline-Ransome). Oh, the conversations these opening sentences can generate with children! Frederick ended up on a plantation 12 miles from his mother, who would walk the distance in the night to watch him sleep. This picture book also describes and illustrates slave children eating cornmeal mush with dirty hands out of a pig trough, an historical fact that textbooks will rarely tell young readers. Frederick also narrates that his master "rented me out to make extra money" (Cline-Ransome). When his new mistress, whom he comments seems not to understand the difference

between a slave and a servant, commits to teaching Frederick to read, despite the illegality of this act, Frederick mentions hearing of a boy on his former plantation who had his “thumb chopped off when he was caught reading” (Cline-Ransome). Frederick’s lessons end when his master finds out about them and rails at his wife: “He should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do . . . If you teach him how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave” (Cline-Ransome). The rest is history.

Nearly every child in America learns about Martin Luther King, Jr. in school, and *Martin’s Big Words* (2001) emphasizes how the “big words” King heard as a child—in church, in his home, in his community—and spoke as a civil rights activist instilled persistence required of a leader who seeks to effect change (Rappaport). Though this picture book is written for very young children, it says of civil rights activists: “They were jailed and beaten and murdered. But they kept on marching” (Rappaport). While I was Clemson faculty, I participated in the service learning projects that I assigned to my students and had two book buddies with whom I read weekly and followed from Head Start into upper elementary school. When *Martin’s Big Words* came out, I read it to them, and when I got to the page that says, “On the second day there, he was shot. He died,” Taneal stopped me and told me that her grandma told her that MLK was a good man (Rappaport). Why would somebody kill him? I explained that a lot of people didn’t like what he had to say because he was speaking up for Black people. Taneal and Shawndré then insisted that I flip to the back of the book, asking if the guy who shot MLK would be pictured on the book flap, where they often saw the author and/or illustrator’s face. They wanted to see who shot Martin

Luther King. Rappaport's words with Bryan Collier's striking collage illustrations had given them hard-to-swallow food for thought that perhaps other renditions of MLK's life designed for four year olds had glossed over.

Slide 34: (Title Slide) You've got to Read

Slide 35

You've got to read like your life depends on it,
You've got to read something all the time,
You've got to read like your life depends on it,
'Cause books will open up and free your mind.

Slide 36

Richard was a poor boy, who sure loved words,

Slide 36

His Grandpa's stories he would retain,

Slide 37

A White man loaned him a library card,

Slide 39

And his life would never be the same.

Slide 40: Chorus

Slide 41

Zora had a father who was strict and stern,

Slide 42

Horizons were her mother's delight,

Slide 43

Zora heard tales told around the fire
To learn that stories keep us alive.

Slide 44: Chorus

Slide 45

Frederick Douglass was a slave, and he knew quite well
How to make the White people see

Slide 46

“Once you learn to read,” even if you’re enslaved,

Slide 47

“You will be forever free.”

Slide 48: Chorus

Slide 49

Martin Luther King spoke some big, bold words
They bombed his house and threw him in jail,

Slide 50

But he read and he wrote and he spoke and sang,
So that peace and harmony would prevail.

Slide 51: Chorus

Slide 52: Four Camp Read-a-Rama photos, Clemson 2010-2013

And a 3rd and final original musical counterstory:

Why are we still, in 2019, talking about *The Snowy Day*, which was published in 1962 (Keats)?

Slide 53: *The Snowy Day* cover

I would argue that *The Snowy Day* has made itself relevant for so long because it spoke as a counterstory in 1962 on many levels and still speaks as one today. This book and the constellation of stories about Peter's friends function as counterstories in five different ways: autobiographically, dispositionally, artistically, in terms of Keats's book design, and his attention to children and their responses to his books. And I'm well aware that Keats is not an #OwnVoices writer, but I give him kudos for doing what he did at a time when no other White illustrators or authors were attending to mirrors for Black and Brown children in the literature. Let me explain.

Autobiographically

Born Jacob Ezra Katz, Keats grew up in poverty. A child of Eastern European Jewish parents who immigrated to Brooklyn, he fictionalized many of his own personal experiences in his books. A 1972 article in the *Times Literary Supplement* lauds Keats for "the consistency with which he transmutes the everyday [existence] of poor American children living in seedy apartments to something rich and teeming with possibilities" (qtd In Nahson 2). Claudia Nahson, author of *The Snowy Day and the Art of Ezra Jack Keats* (2011) notes that:

no earlier books for the young featured these gritty landscapes.
Keats not only made such backgrounds an integral part of his

stories, but he also rendered the squalid city settings beautiful through his mastery of collage and his expressive painting. (2) He knew—intimately knew—this place that became Peter’s neighborhood and the experiences that he and his friends had with snow, bullies, trash heaps, relationships, and more, and although Keats had illustrated 25 books for other writers before he created *The Snowy Day*, because he never saw children of color in these books [although I will note that some did exist] and the authors for whom he illustrated never wrote about them, he decided that when he had the opportunity, he would illustrate Black and Brown children. In 1960, Keats illustrated a Puerto Rican protagonist in Pat Cherr’s picture book *My Dog is Lost!* (Silvey 7), a notable work of inclusion since Latinx characters were even more absent in children’s literature than were African American children. But Keats said, “when I did my first book about a black kid I wanted black kids and white kids to know that he’s there” (qtd. In Nahson 3). He also said, “My book would have him there simply because he should have been there all along” (2). You only need scratch the surface of Keats’s life to find where the tales of Peter, Louie, Archie, Jennie, and the others come from. But let it suffice to say that through making something beautiful for and about children of color out of what had been a difficult and painful childhood, Keats both wrote a counterstory for his own life and countered the prevailing stereotype that nothing of value exists in the urban ghetto, where Black and Brown children live and play.

Dispositionally

It is also clear from the accounts of artists who knew Keats and admired or even emulated his work that his disposition was oriented toward composing

counterstories. Jerry Pinkney, dedicated African American illustrator, best known for his watercolor picture books, discusses Keats's dispositions for writing counterstories about children of color when it would have been easier to maintain the White status quo that existed in children's publishing. Pinkney said that in 1983, he got a call from the California African-American Museum, wanting to display his work in an exhibit called *Lasting Impressions: Illustrating African-American Children's Books*.

They wanted to include those illustrators whose work demonstrated excellence in portraying people of color. It was important that the works endow the characters with a sense of dignity and self-respect, and above all else, that they celebrate African American life and culture. Ezra Jack Keats was one of the illustrators who led the list. His role in giving an African-American a central part in the story was a benchmark in mainstream publishing. . . Did Ezra think of himself as courageous for presenting realistic images of Black families? Was he an advocate for the disenfranchised, for those who were left out of the mainstream? I suspect he simply saw all people with heart, eye, and a paintbrush equally. He enlarged the world of children's literature, by instilling his characters with energy and by filling each page with exquisite design and dazzling color. (Silvey 27)

In other words, Keats was not an activist who was marching in the streets to bring the Civil Rights Movement into being. But he relied on paper, paint and both memories and a fondness of the variety of children with whom he grew up to create mirrors and windows, in Rudine Sims Bishop's characterization, that all children needed to see.

Book Design

The process of designing *The Snowy Day* also points to its role as a counterstory. According to Anita Silvey, the book had originally been designed to alternate color pages and black and white pages, but when Annis Duff, Viking editor, saw the dummy of the book, she encouraged Keats to illustrate it all in color despite the expense of full-color reproductions and the challenge that Keats's intricate collages presented for color separation technology of the time. The cover image that Keats had proposed also changed because of Duff's insistence that Peter needed to be featured more prominently on the cover (Silvey 8). This also points to the fact that conditions must be favorable on the editorial side as well as with authors and illustrators to effect change in an industry that was then and still is largely White.

Artistically

Keats's intentionality about composing *The Snowy Day* as a counterstory also relates to his artistic process in its creation. Reynold Ruffins, who won a Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award for *Misoso* (1994), makes clear that Keats had a special dedication to making art depicting children of color in an honorable way and with meticulous care. Ruffins writes:

As a young illustrator, I was more interested in the bigger bucks and fast turnaround of the advertising business. So I was a bit bewildered by Ezra's great dedication to kids' books. He could spend days considering character, color, and composition. I've watched him ponder one or another color of paper he had hand dipped, trying to choose between them. All such decisions were

painstakingly arrived at. Yes, from this effort, he panned a golden classic—*The Snowy Day*. (Ruffins 89)

He said Keats turned “snow into gold.” Ruffins also commented on the uniqueness of Keats’s contribution: “In the sixties Ezra believed there should be children’s book characters other than Dick and Jane, their Granny, and her damn blue birds. And he did something about it” (89).

Finally, Attention to Children

Keats’s integrating his own life into his work, his disposition toward characters of color, his book design and artistic commitment to lifting up those who had been left out of the genre all figured into Keats’s composition of the counterstories featuring Peter and his friends, but his identification with children and their responses to his work also contributed. Cherishing the feedback he got from his readers, he often quoted this favorite letter from a child: “We like you because you have the mind of a child” (Silvey 9). Susan Hirschman, who served as his editor for many years, said that Keats agonized over the mistakes he made in his early picture books. When a child pointed out that a guinea pig’s tail in Millicent Selsam’s *How Animals Sleep* (1968), which Keats illustrated, was actually the tail of a rat (naked rather than hairy, as it should be), he wrote letters of apology to both the mother and the child (9). In a better-known conflict, when Nancy Larrick, former president of the International Reading Association, published her 1965 “The All-White World of Children’s Books,” in the *Saturday Review*, she attacked Keats for his portrayal of the mother in *The Snowy Day*. Though praising the book for its sympathetic depiction of Black characters in general, she labeled the mother a stereotype, “a huge figure in a gaudy yellow plain dress” (qtd. In Silvey 10). Keats faced

further critique in the 1970s from the Council on Interracial books for Children, who, though this was long before the #OwnVoices movement, basically told him that a White man had no business writing about Black characters, which “was stealing money from legitimate African American creators.” Absolutely devastated by the criticism, Keats stopped working altogether” (10). He picked up the craft again only at the insistence and encouragement of his friend Augusta Baker, the NYPL’s first Black Coordinator of Children’s Services, who praised Keats’s work and encouraged him to put the criticisms behind him “and move on” (10). He did.

Summary

Anita Silvey notes that Keats’s contribution of *The Snowy Day* is significant as a 1960s picture book with substantive staying power. *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) is another. But unlike Sendak’s book and body of work, Keats made an additional contribution in helping to bring multicultural publishing to the forefront as both a concern and a challenge to be met. This exhortation to widen representation in the field of children’s literature obviously still resonates today (11). Keats is not an #OwnVoices writer, and he didn’t always get everything right, but I believe that the deliberateness and care with which he told counterstories through Peter and his circle of friends makes him worthy to be included in this tribute to Black childhood. Furthermore, this next song, which I’ve titled “Peter’s Song,” is the first tune that came to me as I started considering this presentation a year ago.

Often, I get song snippets when I’m driving. And they nag at me until I do something about them. (Sung) “What makes the snow disappear from my

pocket overnight?” That was all I got. But I want to share what it has become.

Slide 54: Book Cover Slide for “Peter’s Song”

And these are all of the Keats books featured in this song.

Peter’s Song

Slide 55

My name is Peter and I love my dog,

Slide 56

When I whistle for Willie, he comes right along.

Slide 57

He’s black and he’s brown and he’s low to the ground.

Slide 58

When he’s looking for me, I’m happy to be found.

Chorus:

Slide 59

What makes the snow disappear from my pocket overnight?

Slide 60

When can I go out to play?

Slide 61

‘Cause when I turn my toes like this,
And I turn my toes like that,
Surely they will lead me somewhere.

Slide 62

I have a sister and she has a chair

Slide 63

That used to be mine, but now she will sit there.

Slide 64

My cradle's now pink, it's as plain as this day,

Slide 65

It's time to call Willie so we can run away.

Slide 66: Chorus.

Slide 67

Louie, Roberto, the Man in the Moon,

Slide 68

Jennie and Maggie, we'll come to play soon.

Slide 69

Keats made these mirrors and windows for me,

Slide 70

Starting with Peter, under a snow-covered tree.

Slide 71: Chorus

Slide 72

My name is Ezra, and I had a dream

Slide 73

To take that boy, Peter, from *Life Magazine*

Slide 74

And paint him on pages for brown kids to see

Slide 75

That books are for kids who look a lot like me.

Slide 76: Chorus**Slide 77**

What makes the snow disappear from my pocket overnight?

Slide 78

When can I go out to play?

Slide 79

'Cause when I turn my toes like this,
And I turn my toes like that,
Surely they will lead me somewhere.

Slide 80

I said surely they will lead me somewhere.
I know surely, they will lead me somewhere.

I do want to let you know that I have recorded the 3 songs that are in this presentation and have made them available on a link from the Read-a-Rama site (www.Read-a-Rama.org). They are free to download, and in exchange for this gift, I would ask that you make a donation to Read-a-Rama so that we can continue the work of improving literacy nationally, one child and one book at a time.

Read-a-Rama as a living Counterstory:

I call it that because

1) it wasn't something I had anybody's permission to start doing;

- 2) it has never been funded in any consistent way, but I keep doing it anyway
- 3) it serves the kids who are underserved
- 4) it's been thrown out of a major research university
- 5) it has produced lots of success stories for children who were slated to fail and these successes have also been documented in a social science research study.

Slide 81 (The Read-a-Rama section is notes, not verbatim transcription)

- I started Read-a-Rama in 2001 as a service learning project for my students. How many English classes do you know of that do outreach?
- Read-a-Rama programs always have a theme and a book or (for camp) a set of books
- Every child gets a free book at every program, regardless of program length: research shows that building home libraries is an important component of literacy acquisition
- Read-a-Rama always brings together college students trained in the study of Children's Literature in English, Education, Library Science, Art, or other fields with children, esp. underserved children. And for camp, we position camp in communities where children are most subject to summer slide, or 3 months of summer learning loss.

Slide 82: Dr. Washington, co-founder of Read-a-Rama teaching campers about bowling

- In 2009, I met Dr. Rachelle D. Washington, we became fast friends, and I told her of my dream of combining my Girl Scout passion and my Children's Literature degree to create a camp that would use Children's Literature as the springboard for all camp activities.
- The mantras for Read-a-Rama have always been: "100% engagement 100% of the time because dead time will kill your program."
- We ran camp out of Clemson University for 5 summers, out of University of South Carolina for the first 3 years I was the Augusta Baker Chair. And in 2014, my Director and Dean called me into the office and told me that Camp Read-a-Rama was not a good use of my time and was not commensurate with the goals of the Augusta Baker Chair. If they thought that would stop me from pursuing this dream, they had no idea who I was.

Slide 83: Read-a-Rama Let's Have a Ball Theme

- So we sought help from the USC Law Non-Profit Clinic and with their help got incorporated in the state of SC, obtained 501(c)(3) and went through the process of trademarking Booker, the Read-a-Rama bookworm.

Slide 84: Booker, the Read-a-Rama Bookworm

- By that time, I was beginning to see that if Read-a-Rama wasn't welcome at USC, neither was I.

Slide 85: Read-a-Rama Spooktacular

- So when Dean Harry Bruce called me up from the Information School at the University of Washington about the Cleary Professorship, at first, I thought he had called the wrong number, but later I realized this could be an amazing opportunity for both me and for Read-a-Rama. I wasn't wrong.

Slide 86: Richmond Beach with Camp Read-a-Rama Summer 2017

- I arrived at the iSchool in 2016, and in 2017, we held our first summer camp at Compass on Dexter, an affordable housing complex for formerly homeless families. Our themes that summer were "Read-a-Rama Rocks: Geology and Music" and "Read-a-Rama Tell Your Story." We provided 2 weeks of camp for 35 children from Compass and Mary's Place homeless shelter; took 7 field trips in 10 days and started a longterm partnership with Compass Housing Alliance that continues to be mutually beneficial.
- In the last year, we have re-constituted the Read-a-Rama board, shut down the corporation in South Carolina and re-incorporated in Washington State, renewed our 501(c)(3) status, and established 4 new partnerships. Between May and August, we have programming at the Magnuson Park YMCA in Seattle (8 weeks of after school programming), 2 weeks of summer camp at Dearborn Park International School in South Seattle (the first camp to be run by a school librarian), in the most diverse zip code in the city; 7 weeks of camp at North Spokane Public Library in Eastern Washington, the first camp to be in a library, run by librarians and Americorps VISTA volunteers; and again 2 weeks of camps at Compass Housing. My students and I also provided four 1½-hour programs this year at

Compass and plan to expand to Seattle Public Libraries next year. In addition, we are in early conversations with Kent State University about a partnership that would enable us to begin spreading Read-a-Rama through academic programs like those most of us teach in. So stay tuned for more details about the “scaling up” of Read-a-Rama, especially if you are not satisfied to keep your Children’s Literature expertise in the ivory tower but want to effect change in ways that will matter for children in your communities while it also gives your students hands-on experience with kids and community engagement.

- If you want to support our efforts:
 - Download & enjoy the songs (QR code and link on the last slide; cards available as well) and while you’re there, donate to Read-a-Rama
 - We’re in search of a few new board members, who are now in South Carolina, Washing, Illinois and Georgia, including Tharini Viswanath.
 - If you want to be a part of the scaling up through academic children’s literature & children’s culture programs, let me know. We could use some extra hands.
 - We also need a lawyer—if not on the board, at least for pro bono consulting for now.

So I have talked about personal life counterstories, and picture book counterstories, as well as the living counterstory that Read-a-Rama has become on a number of levels, but I’d like to end by encouraging you to think about what your counterstories are and how you might bring them to

life in your own creative ways because we need to hear them, and maybe kids need to hear some of them too.

I want to end with a final Read-a-Rama story but I have a few thank yous first.

Slide 87: Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge several people who helped me prepare for this talk—or counterkeynote. Nate Bogopolski, one of my music coaches, whose business, Music in the Stacks with Style, enters Seattle school classrooms and within an hour or two, facilitates children’s writing original music about books that inspire them; they then record those songs and make them available on Style’s expansive website. Mike Eisenberg, former Dean of the UW iSchool and guitarist extraordinaire, coached me through guitar challenges I couldn’t solve. Molly Barnes, my church choir director at Ballard First Lutheran, helped with song lyrics and harmonies. Lee Talley and Libby Gruner, who are my ChLA songbird buddies with whom I have sung at several ChLAs, graciously agreed to let me send them drafts of the songs as I composed them, and be up here to sing with me today. I also want to give a shout-out to my daughter Amelia, now 16, who is at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival on a first week of summer trip with her school, since she was the only one with whom I shared all the drafts of these original pieces, since my music has always been in her bones, and I can count on sharing a new tune with her and hearing her whistle it in the bathroom a few hours later. Nobody else gives me that kind of artistic support and encouragement.

Khalabrial's Story (told, not written down)

Slides 89 & 90: Works Cited

Slide 91: QR Code for the 3 Songs

Thank you.

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