

“Why We Love *The Snowy Day*: Whiteness and Historical Memory”

This paper argues that discussion around the US Postal Service’s 2017 stamps commemorating Ezra Jack Keats’s *The Snowy Day* (1962) reflects the prevalence of white historical amnesia. The US Postal Service claimed, “Before this book, children of color — African-American children, in particular — saw very little representation of themselves in picture books. And then came Peter. . . . Through Peter, children of color found a positive representation of themselves, which instilled a sense of pride and self-acceptance.” This statement effaces the Black community’s intense debate about the commercial success of a white author’s representation of Black childhood, and objections to the text’s depoliticized version of Black youth at the height of the Civil Rights Movement.

Exemplifying the insidiousness of white forgetting, Maria Russo’s *New York Times Book Review* essay on the stamps wondered whether Martin Luther King, Jr. “had seen ‘The Snowy Day,’ maybe even read it to his own four children, who made such a momentous appearance in that [“I Have a Dream”] speech. He might have found . . . a glimpse of the world he was dreaming about, in which his children would be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” Citing only this moment in the speech is a common way of effacing its radicalism. As noted in my *NYTBR* response, Russo embodies the erasure of pre-Keats Black children’s literature, and how white audiences’ embrace of this “apolitical” book obscures increasing Black activism.

I historicize whites’ attraction to Keats’s book via its 1960s reception, connection to the Civil Rights Movement, and afterlife in classrooms and libraries. Often assumed by whites to be a Black writer, Keats evidences the persistence of race liberalism in children’s literature — eliding injustice, but doing cultural work in the quiet of images. Even Andrea Pinkney, a supporter of the text, notices that “the ad copy and the text of the book never mention Peter’s race, which speaks to the story’s universal celebration of every child having fun.” Centering on this silence around race and Peter as representational “every child,” my talk concludes by addressing why “mainstream” audiences have not embraced the books of key Black writers who preceded Keats.