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All Because You Matter – Manifestations of Black Struggle and Resilience in Black Lives Matter Children’s Picturebooks

ABSTRACT

The paper examines #OwnVoices literature, a new subgenre of children’s literature that emerged with the Black Lives Matter movement, situating two sample picturebooks, *All Because You Matter* (2020) and *We Shall Overcome* (2021), within the recent political context and analysing their illustrations and themes. It argues that through such texts children’s literature is progressing out of its “diversity crisis”. These texts have a new set of themes that emphasize Black people’s struggle and resilience rather than trauma and hardship.

KEYWORDS

diversity crisis; resilience; Black Lives Matter literature; #OwnVoices literature; picturebooks

1. The diversity crisis

American children’s literature has always faced the problem of representing the nation’s racial and ethnic diversity. Like many people of colour, young Black readers either cannot find reflections of themselves in the books they read or they face distorted images of Blackness. The need for children’s books to be “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” (Bishop, 1990, p. ix), as proposed by African American children’s literature scholar Rudine Sims Bishop, has been the center of scholarly debates for decades. But they have never been so intense as in the last few years. In her seminal essay “Why Stop at Windows and Mirrors?: Children’s Book Prisms”, Uma Krishnaswami (2019) refers to Bishop’s claims nearly three decades later and argues that “those questions of whose stories get told and by and to whom have not gone away” (p. 54).

The attempts to diversify the genre of children’s literature date back to the 1960s and 1970s. The Black Arts Movement (BAM), rejecting any form of universal art and literature, and promoting “Black aesthetic”, inspired many children’s authors

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who incorporated the rhetoric of resistance into their works¹. In their politicized stories, they articulated “Black consciousness, cultural sovereignty, and beauty” (Gardner, 2020, p. 11). Authors such as Nikki Giovanni, Lucille Clifton, Eloise Greenfield, Walter Dean Myers, and Gwendolyn Brooks celebrated everyday lives of African American children while promoting the concept of Black pride and self-love. In the 1980s and 1990s the number of children’s books featuring Black characters increased due to the establishment of Black publishing houses, such as Just Us Books (JUB), as well as the growing interest in Black children’s literature on the part of already existing publishers. The beginning of the twenty-first century marks a new period in the development of African American children’s literature, with numerous references to Black cultural symbols and the use of Black discourse. However, there are still disparities between the nation’s racial minorities and the percentage of children’s books with characters and themes pertaining to those groups².

In his 2014 *New York Times* article Christopher Myers, the son of the late children’s author Walter Dean Myers, uses a provocative term “the apartheid of children’s literature” to refer to the systematic separation of Black texts from the canon of children’s literature. He believes racist practices still dominate US children’s literature, “in which characters of color are limited to the townships of occasional historical books that concern themselves with the legacies of civil rights and slavery but are never given a pass card to traverse the lands of adventure, curiosity, imagination or personal growth” (Myers, 2014). Myers’ article was treated by many scholars and children’s authors as a call to action. In 2017 Philip Nel responded to Myers’ claim in the following way: “To dismantle our children’s literature apartheid, we must change the ways we produce, promote, read, and teach literature for young people” (2017, p. 202). Another scholar who echoes the concerns of Myers is Karen Chandler. In her assessment of Black children’s literature published in *The Lion and the Unicorn* in 2019, she concludes that while Black writers seem to be in vogue, institutional practices lead to neglect and erasure of their culture. Chandler (2019) is deeply concerned that “some of the most progressive and critical voices are being prematurely silenced” (p. 172). She mentions the problem of “lost writing” caused by the fact that the books of long-established authors are no longer in print and their new stories are often rejected by publishing houses.

¹ The Black Arts Movement (BAM) is a cultural and aesthetic movement which was started in Harlem, New York, in 1965 by poet Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones]. The proponents of BAM believed that art should respond to social and political issues concerning Black lives in America (Neal, 1994, p. 184).

² The Cooperative Children’s Book Center’s Diversity Statistics. Retrieved May 4, 2023, from <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/books-by-and-or-about-poc-2018/>

While Chandler blames institutional practices for the crisis in African American children's literature, another scholar L. L. McKinney, in his 2020 article "The Role Publishing Plays in the Commodification of Black Pain," explains the issue in terms of White investment in Black pain. He compares the lack of diversity in Black books to the film and television industry in which Black actors receive awards for portraying maids, gang members, drug dealers, and addicts, rather than successful middle-class characters. McKinney notes that very few books for younger readers place Black people in safe environments. He believes this is the result of the decisions made by teachers, librarians, publishing agents, or awards committees, who choose to highlight so-called "issue" books, focusing on Black trauma rather than offering positive narratives of Blackness.

There is a growing number of emerging scholars and children's book creators who try to address the diversity crisis in children's literature. Although they do not ignore historical themes, they do not limit their inquiries to Black trauma but imagine different possibilities. Kathy Short (2019) defines their texts as counter-narratives "offering representations of a cultural community that resists and speaks back to mainstream depictions" (p. 10).

2. #OwnVoices literature

One of the recent attempts to diversify the genre of children's literature is #OwnVoices movement, originally created as a hashtag on Twitter in 2015 by Corinne Duyvis, a YA author from the Netherlands. While Duyvis initially used the term as a recommendation tool to refer to authentic children's literature, it was immediately applied to literature for other age groups. To use Duyvis's words, any piece of writing could be called "own voices" as long as authors and illustrators share identity with their characters, and "create not with an observer's gaze, but with the cultural nuance from being an active member of that culture" (as cited in Fuente-Lau, 2021).

Created in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, #OwnVoices texts have a new set of themes that deemphasize trauma and hardship. What the books present are stories of empowerment, hope, and survival, although they do not fail to mention that all Black lives are at risk and subject to violence in the U.S. (McKittrick, 2011). This kind of approach draws on anti-Blackness theories, including Afro-pessimism (Sexton, 2011) and Black Critical Theory (Dumas & Ross, 2016), which imply that Blackness has always been deprived of self-possession and humanity, and instead has been subjected to "social death" (Sexton, 2011). Roberta Price Gardner (2020) argues that the authors of #OwnVoices literature face the challenge of creating counternarratives that present Black characters "not as objects to be represented, co-opted, disposed, or replaced, but as human subjectivities shaped by and through historically situated racialized social experiences connected to particular values and power hierarchies" (p. 9).

The genre demonstrates the inescapable nature of anti-Black racism in the U.S. while offering empowering stories of resistance.

In addition to the content of the stories, the writing modes of diverse authors as well as artistic styles of illustrators frequently differ from the mainstream norms. This, according to Grace Lapointe, has led to further disparities in the publishing industry. She rightly concludes that “If publishers prioritize diverse stories, but not diverse authors, the biased status quo remains. Depictions from outside of a marginalized group are often inaccurate and stereotypical in ways the authors don’t realize” (Lapointe, 2022). #OwnVoices is not only about telling better stories but it is also important for equity in publishing. It led to the emergence of other hashtags, such as #PublishingPaidMe, which calls attention to racial disparities in advances paid to writers of different races, or #AmplifyBlackVoices trying to draw readers’ attention to Black authors.

With the development of the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been a growing number of children’s books which can be categorised as #OwnVoices genres or anti-racist literature. Amongst them are many picturebooks which teach how to respond to racism through simple verbal and visual narratives. Some of the recent publications refer to the thirteen guiding principles of the BLM movement. As it is stated on the website of the non-profit organisation Social Justice Books of Teaching for Change, “These book titles are unapologetically Black in their positioning. By affirming that Black Lives Matter, they center Black joy, brilliance, history, resistance, and liberation”.

3. Picturebook analysis

This article offers a critical content analysis of visual images in two picturebooks, *All Because You Matter* (2020) and *We Shall Overcome* (2021), which have garnered praise for being examples of #OwnVoices, anti-racist, and BLM literary genres. For this analysis, priority was given to titles that received awards for illustrations and spurred considerable discussion on websites dedicated to promoting positive messages about Black lives. Bryan Collier, the illustrator of both of the books, is a four-time recipient of a Caldecott Honor as well as Coretta Scott King Award recognition for nine books. *All Because You Matter* was acclaimed one of Chicago Public Library and New York Public Library’s Best Books of 2020. The positionality of the books’ creators, who are insiders to the Black culture, was the second consideration. In her “Author’s note,” Tami Charles, the author of *All Because You Matter*, admits she decided to write the book due to her fear as a mother of a Black boy. She dedicates her story to other parents who have to start the Big Talk about racism in America with their offspring. The book is supposed to “to remind all children, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, that no matter where they come from, they matter. That the people who came before them, and the work that they did to secure the life we have today, matter”

(Charles & Collier, 2020, p. 19). Collier's original motif for creating children's books was his visit in 1995 at a book store where he did not find books which could correspond to his children, so he decided to make his own stories. The final criterion for selecting picturebooks for this article was the illustrators' use of the collage technique for the visual narratives.

Collage is perceived by many scholars as a metaphor of African American experience (Bishop, 2007; O'Meally, 2021). It is based on combining paintings with pieces of paper or fabric produced by different people into one whole work, thus representing a variety of voices and perspectives on Black people's life. As Rona Cran (2014) points out,

Collage is about encounters. It is about bringing ideas into conversation with one another. Its advent in the twentieth century brought about the deconstruction of old barriers between language and art (p. 4),

or as we can read on collagist Bryan Collier's website:

Collage is more than just an art style. Collage is all about bringing different elements together. Once you form a sensibility about connection, how different elements relate to each other, you deepen your understanding of yourself and others.

In his picturebooks Collier draws the readers' attention to the connection between current problems of African Americans and historical moments. Rather than contrasting the problems, he brings them together, creating two layers of the story.

As a multi-layered narrative, collage can do more than a verbal text. Collage is a subjective form of art, which reflects the creators' individual perceptions of the surrounding world. Making a collage involves a range of activities such as selecting materials, cutting, associating, and editing into a new combination. To use Tom Feelings' words, it is about "improvising within a restricted form," using the available resources and reusing them for new purposes (Feelings, 1985, p. 73). As a result, new and unexpected meanings are produced. Importantly, too, as Robert O'Meally (2021) has put it, collage "offers open corners for viewers to collaborate with the artist in the creation of meaning" (p. 162). It is an open form of art, and its final meaning is up to the reader. Collage has the potential to activate readers who may individually interpret different layers of the pictures. As Collier writes in "Illustrator's note" to his story of Martin Luther King, Jr.:

In some places, the imagery had to stay true to history. In others, I tried to push to an emotional level that allows the reader to bring his or her own experience to it, without actually losing the intensity or the intention of the story" (Rappaport & Collier, 2021)³.

³ Conventionally picturebooks are not paginated.

The analysis of the selected picturebooks is based on visual methodologies developed by Clare Painter, Jim Martin and Len Unsworth in their seminal study *Reading Visual Narratives* (2014), as well as Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar outlined in their work *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2006). Specifically, it draws on Painter's three categories of ideational meaning: participants – the identities and attributes of the characters as portrayed in visual images, process – the portrayal of characters as engaged in specific actions, and circumstances – the physical environment in which the participants interact (Painter et al., 2014). The analysis of the three elements rather than a series of events enables to construct the meaning of the narratives. The analysis is guided by the following research questions: How do the books address current Black issues? How do they manifest the concept of Black resilience? How do they empower the readers to continue Black struggle?

We Shall Overcome

In *We Shall Overcome* Collier brings to life the gospel anthem that was the Civil Rights protest song. He is following in the footsteps of a young girl, while simultaneously traversing between historical moments and contemporary political protests. His unique images use both watercolour and collage pieces. The visual story is interwoven with song lyrics which embody the message of strength and overcoming adversity. Lyrics of the Civil Rights protest song "We Shall Overcome" are printed in orange capital letters against a strip of brown background along the bottom of each spread. Although the book could be interpreted without the verbal text, the lyrics intensify the emotions depicted in the pictures, sending a message of hope for a better tomorrow.

The book illustrations give special prominence to Black child characters as significant agents in the process of social change. With the book jacket featuring a young girl holding a leaf with the symbol of peace, set against the black and white image of the Baptist Church in Birmingham, the site of the Ku Klux Klan historical bombing and killing of four young girls, the book claims its literary space to represent an alternative to the racist past. The pictures inside the book expand on the roles Black children are to play in the changing world. *We Shall Overcome* begins with a static image of a young Black girl staying in her home and looking out of the window. As we cannot see her face, the image requires reflection, especially that the text beneath the picture reads: "Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome someday" (Collier, 2021). The next illustration adds positive emotions to the story. Now we observe the girl's face, joyful and optimistic, as she is waving to her friends. The following double spread illustrations take the viewers to exterior locations. They show the girl and her friends walking past sites known for the Civil Rights protests – from the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Little Rock Central High School, the Rosa Parks bus, up to the current sites of the Black Lives Matter protests.

To link historical moments with contemporary circumstances, the artist uses the collage technique by creating two layers of the illustration: the background made of greyscale drawings, and the vibrantly hued images of contemporary child figures. As Painter, Martin and Unsworth point out in their visual grammar, “a symmetrical presentation of comparable images on the page is a way of ‘covertly’ constructing them as members of the same class” (2014, p. 66). An example of this co-classification relation is found in the picture of the Rosa Parks bus, where contemporary characters are lined up along historical marchers. Being of identical size and orientation, they seem to be walking in the same direction, believing that “we [they] are on to victory someday” (Collier, 2021). Another contrasting image is that of Little Rock Central High School. The double spread is divided into half, with the left-hand side showing the children walking towards the building, and the right-hand image depicting armed guards blocking nine Black students from entering the school. The words placed beneath the pictures – “We are not afraid, we are not afraid, we are not afraid today” (Collier, 2021) – empower the readers that whatever the circumstances they will overcome their problems. As well as these co-classification relations between characters, it is common for pairs of participants to be compared and contrasted. The picture of Rosa Parks inside the bus strongly foregrounds this relation. Her bus seat appears on the verso in black and white, while on the recto the modern child smiles and waves in full colour on a present-day bus. We can see simultaneously likeness in their facial features but the contrast in the setting and the colours of their clothes indicate a different attitude towards Black issues, a dichotomy of misery and joy.

The second part of the book portrays the characters walking along their living area up to a place of current protests. Although it is a sequence of pictures with repetition of characters from image to image, each of them can be analysed individually. For example, the close-up of the girl’s footprints indicates the heritage of Black struggle and protest. The placement of the footprints in the empty background suggests they can be read as symbolic attributes. Interestingly, the footprints are filled with the images of Black revolutionaries, both in black and white, and in a variety of different hues. They mark the border between the past and the present, and finally bring the children to contemporary protests depicted within three double spread illustrations. While in the first one we can see a crowd of protestors walking in the middle of the road marked with the Black Lives Matter mural, the other two pictures are based on simultaneity. They include two facing images involving different participants. We can see historical protestors together with Martin Luther King portrayed in a black and white drawing placed within a larger picture of contemporary characters involved in making an art project, painting a mural depicting wings of peace and hope, which is a continuation of the Black struggle. Finally, the focus is on the main participant of the story. The girl is wearing the collage wings, in petal shapes, including the faces of her ancestors, all

painted in various colours, suggesting that their work will carry her to a brighter, more peaceful future. Added to this, she is holding a green plate with the peace symbol, thus reminding the readers of the message of hope.

The contrasting scenes usually depict the same setting but viewed from different perspectives. While the black and white illustrations may suggest that the issue of Black struggle is over, the colourful pictures of contemporary sites, which make another layer of the collage illustrations, remind the readers of the ongoing problem. As we read in the Illustrator's note: "The battle continues in the quest for justice and equality, and my hope is in the end, we may find Peace" (Collier, 2021). The collage technique makes it possible to show how the historical struggle interacts with the contemporary one. The book's illustrations reveal the impact of Black legacy on Black Lives Matter activists. The colourful petals with the images of historical Black leaders bring the contemporary characters to the actual site of protest, where they are embraced by other participants and empowered with the feeling of Black pride.

All Because You Matter

All Because You Matter is designed to empower marginalized children and affirm that their lives have always mattered. The poetic text of the book provides, in author Tami Charles's (2020) words, a "starting point for conversations about the racial climate in our country today". Added to this, through Collier's watercolour and collage masterpieces the book becomes a visual experience that communicates how the lives of Black children matter today. The story focuses on the early childhood of the main character, a brown-skinned boy. While his parents await his birth, the concept of "matter" is widely discussed. The story examines the relationship between people of all origins to the universe, as well as emphasizes how our life ambitions are connected to the objectives of our ancestors. Inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, this book reminds young readers of their roots and strengthens them with joy and comfort for the days to come.

The fact that the main character is a boy makes the book extremely political as it is mostly young Black men who are increasingly targeted by the police over that last decade. Yet the boy is not presented in terms of victimization but he is taught strategies of resistance by the community he lives in. Although several illustrations depict the boy's face expressing a range of negative emotions, he finally overcomes his vulnerability, that is the susceptibility to being easily harmed and exposed to hostile factors. In the moments of despair, while the boy is facing trouble at school or watching the news about violence aimed at Black people, he is incessantly reminded that he matters, or that "beauty, strength, power, and beauty lie within [him]" (Charles & Collier, 2020, p. 15). *All Because You Matter* employs what Noemi Michel (2018) calls "critical black politics of vulnerability" (p. 90), or as Paul Clements (2017) has put it, "cultural resistance" to the status quo (p. 1), as the main character refuses to be shaped by the existing racial norms.

Another strategy used by the creators of the book are references to the legacies of African American people. The verbal text addresses the boy by asking: “Did you know that you were born from queens, chiefs, legends?” (Charles & Collier, 2020, p. 15), thus reminding him of the historical achievements of his people. The illustrator uses several layers of paper to visualize the story of the child’s ancestors. There are lots of symbolic leaves and petals decorated with images of faces, eyes and smiles of Black people which make a quilt-like narrative of Black people’s struggle and empowerment. At the very beginning of the book there is an illustration of several pairs of Black hands which are holding a number of colourful petals, or the figure of a Black man with his fist raised above his head, surrounded with a circle of similar petals. The petals accompany the boy from his early years. They emerge from the books he is reading with his mom. He is surrounded with the leaves after he watches the news about Black victims of police brutality, or the leaves are placed around him and his parents as they are celebrating together with their community. The pictures are always accompanied with empowering verbal text: “Long before you took your place in this world, you were dreamed of, like a knapsack full of wishes, carried on the backs of your ancestors” (Charles & Collier, 2020, p. 5). The leaves empower the character, support him in his struggle and offer hope. The historical achievements of Black people instil in the boy the feeling of collective strength and resistance, as well as the need to continue the Black struggle. As Isabel Wilkerson (2016) rightly observes, “And we must know deep in our bones and in our hearts that if the ancestors could survive the Middle Passage, we can survive anything” (p. 47).

The circumstances in which the character is growing up to become a Black man also pose a threat to his identity, self-worth and survival. He is navigating today’s challenges – the risk of being shot like many contemporary Black boys or the necessity to protest against social injustice. Although some illustrations depict the boy in the middle of the racial conflict, he finally seems to use his ability to thrive. With the support of his community, he learns how to cope with prejudice and celebrate his Blackness. The final illustration shows the boy embracing his parents, a picture of a happy Black family hard to be found in the media.

All Because You Matter is a prime example of #OwnVoices literature. Drawing on their own experience of growing up in a racist environment and then raising their own children in racially unequal society, the creators of the book bring their own voices by producing cultural resistance against status quo. They problematize everyday life and express their desire for a different version of the world. The vulnerable position of the Black boy is turned into a small form of resistance, which is celebration of his Blackness. As E. Lâle Demirtürk (2019) contends, Black Lives Matter literature, irrespective of its target audience, proves that “discursive threats of whiteness cannot manage to deprive the Black person of his dynamic and interior subjectivity, as well as his agency” (p. 12). In *All*

Because You Matter vulnerability mobilizes the Black boy into action. In fact, his vulnerability becomes a fiction, and his true identity is far from stereotypical representation of ordinary Black men.

4. Final remarks

We Shall Overcome and *All Because You Matter* address the context of the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement. They empower the readers with positive images of Black struggle and resistance, as well as the expression of Black pride as a subversive strategy. They celebrate Black life in ways that challenge mainstream media attempts to fix Black people into a position of despair, presuming that Black life is worth noting only when it is connected to crime, poverty, or death.

Like the Black Lives Matter movement which tries to intervene in a world that violates Black lives, contemporary African American picturebooks establish new discursive practices which bring Black struggle to the foreground. They remind the readers that Blacks' lives are under constant threat, but it is not an unending battle. The books feature accurate representations of Black life, thus they serve as "mirrors" or "sliding doors" to many young Black readers who can see themselves in the books and become part of that world.

BLM children's literature, also designated as #OwnVoices literature, is changing the publishing industry in the US. There is a growing number of picturebooks created by Black authors who previously found it hard to get their works published. These days many publishers believe these people can offer a more nuanced representation of their identity than writers from other ethnic groups. This issue, however, leads to controversies over who has got the right to tell the story of Blackness. Some scholars point to the negative impact of #OwnVoices campaign claiming that it forces minority authors to limit their writing only to stories about their own culture, and it makes white authors avoid African American themes, which might result in rejection of equally good writing. Despite the above claims, Black Lives Matter movement as well as the #OwnVoices campaign are renewing focus on diversity and shaping the current discourse of Black life. This is changing the landscape of today's publishing, which is gradually coming out of the diversity crisis.

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