

EDITED BY
VIVIAN YENIKA-AGBAW & MARY NAPOLI



African AND
African American
Children's AND
Adolescent Literature
IN THE Classroom

A CRITICAL GUIDE

Domestic and International Multiculturalism

Children's Literature about Africans and African Americans

VIVIAN YENIKA-AGBAW & MARY NAPOLI

Children's literature, as many educators can attest, does make a difference in children's lives, for not only does it entertain, it stretches children's imagination, reminds them of their humanity, and exposes them to other cultures (Norton, 2011; Temple, Martinez, Yokota, & Naylor, 2002; Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson 2005). In addition, Rudine Sims (1982) notes that literature should also serve a social function, helping children develop a sense of self.

With such a high premium placed on children's literature, selecting books to include in one's library collection or literacy curriculum, therefore, requires great care and thought, especially when it involves choosing books that reflect our diverse cultures. This is not necessarily because the books are not there. However, for some reason, despite the availability of appropriate resources such as Violet Harris' (1997) *Using Multiethnic Literature in K-8 Classroom*, which clearly identifies some basic criteria to consider for this purpose, some classroom teachers, like most pre-service teachers we have worked with, remain unsure as to how to select such books. When uncertainty sets in, as Henderson (2005) observes about a former student's experience, some may simply fill the void in their curriculum with classic stories with which they were familiar while growing up. Although this is a good survival strategy because classics are celebrated within our educational and scholarly commu-

nity for their artistic and aesthetic merit, some contain cultural content that may be problematic. Therefore, the story may be well-written and quite entertaining, but the characters and what they represent may be troubling, especially to young readers who look like these fictional characters.

This strategy of falling back on an old classic tale can be a nightmare to teacher educators, since most of us, like Henderson, take the trouble to expose student teachers to a variety of books about our diverse cultures and to a cross-section of professional resources that would facilitate the process as well. However, when a former student—now a teacher—is still unable to select wisely, it can be frustrating and disturbing as we learn from Henderson's experience. For example, Henderson could not understand how a former student (now a teacher in her own right) would actually think that by including *Little Black Sambo* in her curriculum, she was indeed exposing children to African American culture. Although Henderson eventually helped her figure things out, not many schoolteachers have direct access to professors who are willing to patiently guide them *again* through the process of selecting books; neither do most remain in touch with their professors nor have the resources to take advanced literature courses or workshops where this exposure would occur. The situation can be complicated further when teachers have to decide on the cultural relevance of books to their curriculum identified as international literature and those labeled multicultural. This notwithstanding, we argue that schoolteachers should include both sets of literature in their curriculum, especially as it pertains to black culture. It is the only way they would get a comprehensive understanding of who blacks are, the cultural origins of their traditions, and fate as a people vis-à-vis Eurocentric cultures. We begin by explaining our definitions of international and domestic multiculturalism; then we demonstrate one way teachers can integrate both types of literature in their classrooms as we focus specifically on literature about African and African Americans. We conclude the essay with a general discussion on the advantages of incorporating both types of literature in the K–8 curriculum.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC MULTICULTURALISM

What exactly is international children's literature? To Freeman and Lehman (2001), this type of literature basically is published in countries outside of the United States. Many perceive this literature culturally diverse primarily because it reflects multiple experiences and cultures across the globe. Some educators in the United States, however, are skeptical of this kind of diversity, partly because American society already reflects an array of cultures from racial and ethnic categories through gender and lifestyle considerations (Temple et al., 2002).

In their book *Global Perspectives in Children's Literature*, Freeman and Lehman (2001) not only clarify this issue but also provide pertinent information about international children's literature and its importance to the understanding of our global cultural diversity. To them, education should "foster children's understanding and appreciation for others so they can actively participate as citizens in a global community" (p. 12). One way teachers can promote this kind of understanding, they believe, is through international children's literature. Despite this benefit to the curriculum, many schoolteachers are still not familiar with international children's literature, especially texts that originate from non-Eurocentric traditions.¹ Perhaps this lack of awareness is partly due to the fact that international literature may inadvertently "compete" with multicultural literature—literature many in the United States believe truly reflects our cultural reality as "Americans"—hence this emphasizes what we may refer to as domestic diversity.

Temple et al. (2002) define multicultural literature as "literature that reflects the multitude of cultural groups within the United States" (p. 84). They argue that although they see value in an "inclusive definition, . . . a broad definition dilutes the focus" (p. 84). We understand perfectly what they mean; however, they make it sound as though global diversity and domestic diversity are competing for space within the American school curriculum. This should not be so. Norton (2005), on the other hand, advocates a much more inclusive definition focusing exclusively on ethnicity without necessarily distinguishing global from domestic diversity. From her perspective, the two forms of cultural diversity are interdependent. We find her definition particularly interesting, especially when she makes the connection between the cultures of the old world, as in Africa, and those of the new world, as in America. She remarks that "our journey through the study of African American literature includes both the literature from Africa and from the Americas" and that "African American traditional literature . . . cannot be understood and appreciated without also studying the literature that provides the foundations for it; namely African folklore" (p. 15). Thus, like Freeman and Lehman, she acknowledges a certain interconnectedness among cultures, in this case, between African and African American.

In his article "Multicultural Literature and the Politics of Reaction," Joel Taxel (2003) takes the debate one step further, providing a slightly more complex definition of multicultural literature advanced by Cai and Bishop. For these children's literature scholars, there are three kinds: "World literature, Cross-cultural literature, and Parallel literature" (as quoted by Cai & Bishop, 1994, pp. 65–67, 144). Each of these three can therefore be considered multicultural literature depending on the individual and his or her purpose. Without necessarily rejecting this view, Taxel (2003) simply reminds educators and authors of their social responsibility to all chil-

dren. This means, despite our lack of consensus as to how the term should be defined, or how the concept should be implemented in practice, we may still be held accountable. And as Cai (2003) adds, we must never lose sight of the fact that books do impact children in ways that many may not realize.

We gather from this debate then that inasmuch as African American literature and literature set in Africa emphasize different cultural experiences in their capacities as multicultural and international literatures, it is still important to read them simultaneously. We believe that regardless of how educators reconfigure the cultural diversity landscape, there will still be an overlap among cultures, especially between African and African American literary traditions (Harris, 1997; Norton, 2005). In this case, literature set in Africa, although considered rightly as international literature, continues to be relevant to our overall understanding of African American culture and people. We are not arguing here that African and African American cultures are one and the same; rather, we are suggesting that to fully understand black experience as a collective whole, it is important to read the international version of its literature vis-à-vis the domestic version. In the closing chapter of their edited book, Henderson and May (2005) share a dialogue they had with Dianne Johnson, a children's literature scholar and children's book author on this topic. Johnson declares that "multiculturalism has to be interpreted in terms of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the limited states and of the world" and that "multicultural children's literature, like any literature, (is) a cultural product that can help people to think about their own humanity as individuals and as members of small and large communities" (Henderson & May, 2005, p. 371). Multicultural literature, therefore, whether from a global or a domestic perspective, remains a cultural product that has tremendous value to the community at large and to the schools. What we as educators should do then is harness the benefits it provides as we seek to understand who we are right now, where we came from, and how we can make our world more accepting of everyone. It is for all these reasons that we advocate for the pairing of books about Africans with books about African Americans, in the classrooms, especially those that explore similar themes or issues.

It is true that there are some cultural differences that exist between Africans and African Americans and that there may be friction among pockets within the groups. When it comes to the school curriculum, however, black culture in general unsettles many educators just as it fascinates some. However, with consistent exposure to high-quality literature, be it international or domestic, this pervasive uneasiness and/or objectification of blackness may slowly dissipate. Thus, although literature set in Africa may not necessarily fall under the domestic category of multicultural literature, we reiterate that it is worthy of the classroom teacher's attention. Teachers

need to be familiar with this body of literature in order to further understand African American children and recent African immigrants' children and how black culture has evolved over the centuries, just like they need to be well-versed with other types of multicultural literature that are available to us.²

A good place for teachers to start looking for possible books to include in their curriculum would be with award-winning books that depict black culture in Africa and America. Why start here, some may ask? We would go ahead and acknowledge that whether educators would admit it or not, there is something magical about awards within the American culture. For lack of a better word, they seem to add more “value” to products, ideas, professionals, and, yes, to books as well, and as Kidd (2007) notes, they “prolong the shelf life of a book” (p. 178). Sometimes, we ponder the obsession over awards. However, having taught children's literature at the college level for more than ten years, in the departments of Education and English, we have come to appreciate the warm glow on our pre-service teachers' faces when they discover that a book they liked had won an award, regardless of how minor or major the award really is. So we reckon there's some cultural value in this word and/or idea called *award*.

Some key awards given out specifically to books that portray black cultural experiences include the Coretta Scott King Award and the Children Africana Book Award. However, there are other mainstream awards in the United States such as the Newbery Medal and the Caldecott Medal, and now the Notable Books for a Global Society award, that also recognize books that have depicted African and African American cultures.³ However, some concerns have been raised about award-winning books. In his analysis of three award-winning historical fiction novels (*Words by Heart*, *The Slave Dancer*, and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*), Taxel (1986) draws readers' attention to the culturally flawed content of the first two books. In doing so, he reiterates the point of balancing aesthetic consideration with cultural and historical accuracy to establish quality. This is so that the “demands for realistic, non-stereotyped characters, and for historical and cultural accuracy and authenticity in writing about the black experience, need not conflict with the demand for literary excellence” (Taxel, 1986, p. 249). Thus, when selecting literature for a unit on Africans and African Americans, like literature from other ethnic and social groups, teachers should therefore remember that cultural content is equally a great indicator of quality as literary aesthetics, regardless of whether the book in question has won an award.