Discussing Racial Trauma Using Visual Thinking Strategies

Roberta Price Gardner

This article describes how a guided exposure model provided opportunities for agency and racial healing for young readers/viewers as they engaged with a picturebook about enslavement.

When I was in second grade, I saw enslavement in a textbook for the first time. I don’t remember the words or the lesson, but I do recall the image of a partially clothed Black man in chains. The man was on his knees in a pose that appeared to beg and plead, presumably to a White authority. I remember the snickers and uncomfortable giggling that erupted from several classmates (Black and White). Without fully understanding why, I was filled with a measure of emptiness and a profound sense of shame.

Visuals are powerful, forcing viewers to experience and/or witness events, even if only from within. Witnessing forms of violence and cultural genocide are consequential because they “are still actively evolving . . .” (Felman & Laub, 1991, p. xiv). The image was one of my first memories of experiencing a crisis in representation within a school space. There would be many more visually arresting assaults within the pages of books that would cause me to read through my Black skin in less than affirmative ways (many of them through omission). Now, so many years later, I ask, “What did our teachers expect us to gain from the exposure?” (see Coates, 2015). Images can provide synthesis and renewal, but without opportunities to ask questions or express emotions, they can also create a crisis in meaning and identity (Alexander, 2004). Teachers must be aware of the ways that racial and cultural identity influence the transactions between the reader and the text (Brooks & Browne, 2012; Gardner, 2016). We also must be aware of why student voice, understanding, and agency are necessary, particularly when exposing students to racial violence.

I was mindful of these factors when I began visiting the 25 third-grade African American students in Angela’s (all names are pseudonyms) classroom to learn more about the culturally sustaining literacy practices (Paris, 2012) of these students and their African American teacher. Angela and I met when we were both students at a major research university in the South. She was an undergraduate preservice teacher, and I was the graduate instructor in her children’s literature class. (Angela and I were the only African Americans in the class.) Years later, we remain close, bound by our passion for creating empowering educational contexts for African American students.

Angela has been teaching for five years. She follows in the footsteps of her late mother who was a celebrated teacher and administrator in the same district. Angela’s school sits in the heart of a bustling urban community bordering many historic landmarks of Atlanta’s Civil Rights Movement. Churches, hair salons, check-cashing establishments, and abandoned lots and buildings also now dot the landscape around the school. Within the school, quotes by Dr. Benjamin E. Mays and other prominent African American leaders are painted on
the walls. These cultural scripts demonstrate the school’s mission to instill pride in the students’ culture and heritage.

Culturally diverse titles such as Beautiful Black Bird (Bryan, 2003) and African Christmas (Onyejulu, 2005) are prominently displayed in Angela’s classroom library. They indicate her desire to avoid “damage only” narratives about the lives and legacy of African American people (Tuck & Ree, 2016). The stories speak of individual desires and the beauty in daily life, illustrating the complexities of Black experience rather than the restrictive and one-dimensional narratives of pain and damage. Angela affirms and celebrates her students’ Black identity and humanity through exposure to quality picturebooks. In this column, I describe the guided exposure model as a tool for explicitly talking about the imagery in children’s picturebooks. Through critical conversations about race and trauma, I forefront children’s agency and voice—two critical forms of racial healing.

**Guided Exposure Model for Visual Testimony**

The guided exposure model is an adaption of visual thinking strategies used in museum and visual literacy education (Yenawine, 2013). It is an iterative and shared process of provocation, observation, and interpretation, inviting students to bring their knowledge, questions, feelings, and intuition to the text. Questions are not static, and teachers guide the discussion while being responsive to student comments related to the text type, genre, visual content, and topic. Below, I share a vignette of my reading engagement with Angela’s students to demonstrate how guided exposure with the visuals in Freedom in Congo Square (Weatherford, 2016) allowed her students to actively respond to the trauma of seeing enslavement. The book explores enslavement and the desire for freedom. It uses poetic verse and multi-layered visuals in a way that is “therapeutic and testimonial” (Kidd, 2005, p. 122). The enslaved people are portrayed with dignity, desire, and imagination without false benevolence or the denial of racial cruelty.

In looking at this text, I offered the following open-ended questions to initiate discussions about visual imagery and narrative.

1. What is happening in this picture?
2. What do you see that makes you say that?
3. How does what you see make you feel?
4. What does seeing this image make you wonder?
5. What questions do you have about what is happening, and what would you change in this picture?

The following discussion ensued:

**Malcolm:** Can we stop at that one? I think the man is hitting the people.

**Roberta:** What do you see that makes you say that?

**Malcolm:** Well, he has a whip.

**Roberta:** I see that. Is the whip hitting the people?

**Malcolm:** No. But I think he will hit them if they don’t do what he says.

**Roberta:** Okay, I see that he is standing on something. Let’s talk about why we think he is standing on something.

**Keisha:** I think he’s in charge. He wants them to do whatever he says.

**Nicole:** I think he already hit them. That’s why they are working like that.

**Roberta:** Well, how does what you see make you feel?

**Nicole:** I feel mad because we had to be slaves.

**Eric:** Yes, all the Black people.

**Keisha:** But White people should be slaves so they know what it feels like.

**Ty:** I just wonder why they didn’t run. I wouldn’t do what they said even if I got hit.

**Roberta:** I can understand why you feel that way. It was completely unfair. Do you have
Figure 1. “Dreaded lash”

The dreaded lash, too much to bear.
Four more days to Congo Square.

Illustration by R. Gregory Christie from Freedom in Congo Square, by Carole Boston Weatherford. Printed with permission from Little Bee Books.
any other questions or comments about this picture?
Ty: Why didn’t all of them run away at the same time . . . like all over?
Several pages later, another student wanted us to confront another image.
Justin: I want to talk about that one.
Roberta: Why?
Justin: It looks so scary. They look dead.
Roberta: What do you see that makes you say that?
Nicole: See, some are stretching up but some look dead.
Keisha: I think they’re just sleep with no beds.
Roberta: A great observation. I also want to talk about the colors and how they make us feel.
The students and I discussed possibilities of the enslaved people being cold, sad, tired, or just dreaming. They wondered why they “were floating,” and expressed fear about the “scary masks” featured. Their comments led to other books and photographs about slave resistance and rebellion, as well as images of freedom. I wanted to create a safe space for them to express their thoughts, because these images are textual sites that represent historical memories that could create painful sentiments about present racial suffering (see Dumas, 2014). This space was created by exploring the visual and narrative texts together. Together, we wondered, how do the artistic devices, stylistic choices, and coloring inform the words on the page? Their interpretations expanded opportunities for comprehension and revealed the ways that visuals serve to uniquely speak the language of trauma. I felt it was important to create a space for them to express their desires and fears and to affirm their sense of identity by juxtaposing the visual and written narrative together.

**Reading to Support Racial and Cultural Healing**

Sherman Alexie (2014) argues that the “best books for kids are written in blood.” These stories explore social, physical, and emotional violence. They can expose wounds, create new questions, or reify our greatest fears. They can also reassure readers about who they are and inspire possibilities about who they hope to become. They are particularly useful for children who navigate relentless forms of gendered racism, classism, ableism, and homophobia. As Alexie (2014) asserts, when youths grow up “enduring culturally schizophrenic lives” (pp. 93–94), exposure to these stories provides them with weapons to fight against monsters they might encounter—those within themselves and those in the world. He echoes the sentiments of literary trauma theorists and culturally responsive educators who express their faith in exposure for individual and collective healing and agency. A variety of pedagogies and tools are needed to support racial healing; together, they give rise to strategies than can engender a “usable past”—one that aims to counter current racism and the seduction to forget our pain.

To promote collective healing and agency through the sharing of trauma-related texts with children, here are five factors to consider:

1. Read picturebooks with a deeper analysis of the visuals and aesthetics rather than just the print literacy. Aesthetic experiences expand possibilities for individual and collective agency (Bell, 2010) and enhance visual literacy.
2. Purposefully choose books and artwork (e.g., illustrations, photos, graphic and fine art) that expose children to characters exhibiting agency and strong cultural, social, and political identities.
3. Allow children to express their concerns—and use their knowledge and social imagination—to expand the possibilities of the narrative.
4. Read the images and words from cover to cover to note any emotionally invasive triggers that you personally have or suspect might arise from students.
5. Provide multiple modes for responses, such as writing, art, play, or drama, to expand authentic responses where personal meanings can take shape.

*Language Arts*, Volume 94, Number 5, May 2017
And even as the plantation slept, wood was on the fire kept.
And even as the plantation slept,
wood was on the fire kept.
For Further Reading


Bell shares how art and storytelling serve as tools for teaching about racism, and how they can serve as healing contexts for racially diverse people within school contexts. She specifically writes for teachers in order to inspire the use of participatory racial dialogue and counter narratology to reveal "concealed and resistance stories" about racism and racial experience. Her storytelling model has been used in K–12 professional development programs for classrooms and institutions.


This thoroughly researched book explores how visual representations of African American childhood featured in documentary photography, coffee-table art, and photo-picturebooks for children have served as critical tools for social change during key historical movements in the fight for racial equality. It emphasizes the role of visuality in shifting attitudes about school integration, housing inequality, racial discrimination, pride, beauty, and liberation. Capshaw argues these books "invite participatory responses . . . with the child reader as critic and creative agent" (p. 273). It concludes with a conversation about Trayvon Martin and the role of his image in serving as a catalyst for social action.

**Children’s Books for Discussing Racial Trauma Using Visual Thinking Strategies**


*Language Arts*, Volume 94, Number 5, May 2017
References


Children’s Literature Cited

Roberta Price Gardner is a clinical assistant professor in the Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education at Georgia State University. She has been an NCTE member since 2010 and can be reached at rgardner5@gsu.edu.