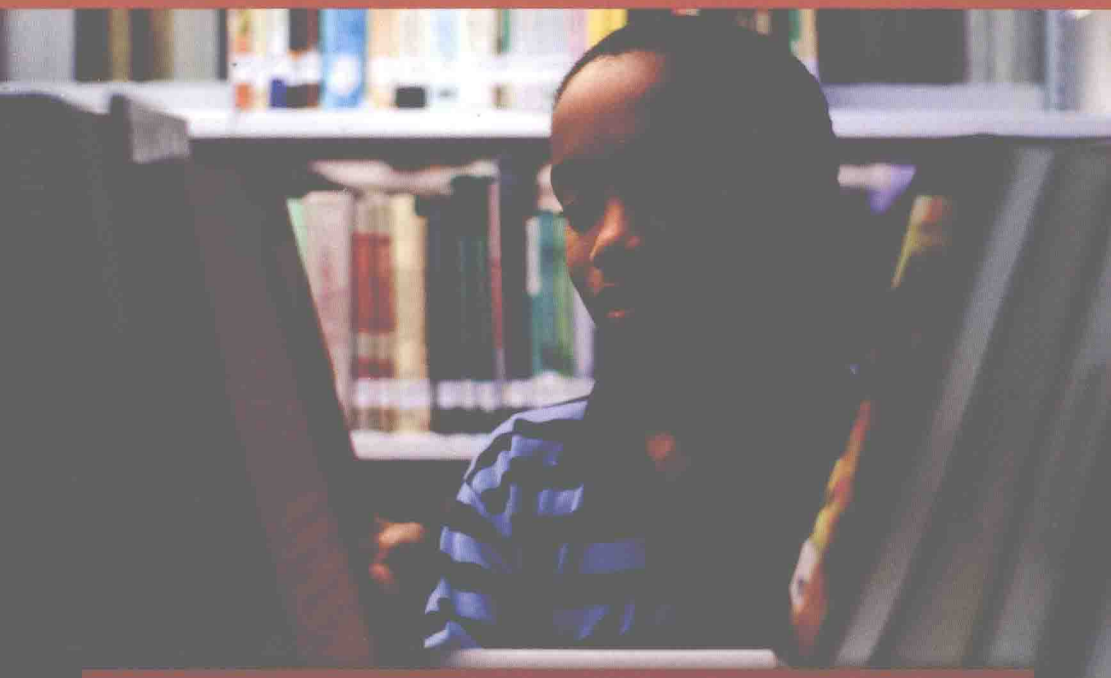


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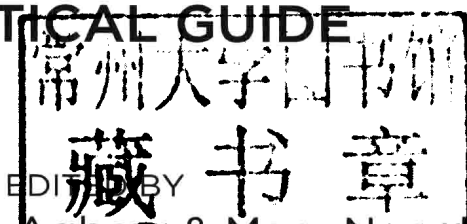


African AND  
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IN THE Classroom

A CRITICAL GUIDE

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PETER LANG

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African AND  
African American  
Children's AND  
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IN THE Classroom

# BLACK STUDIES & critical thinking

Rochelle Brock and Richard Gregory Johnson III  
*Executive Editors*

Vol. 11

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The Black Studies and Critical Thinking series  
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A version of “Domestic and International Multiculturalism” has appeared in Write4Children. We are grateful for permission to include it in this book.

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# Domestic and International Multiculturalism

Children's Literature about  
Africans and African Americans

VIVIAN YENIKA-AGBAW & MARY NAPOLI

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

## REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK CULTURE IN CHILDREN'S AND ADOLESCENT LITERATURE

When it comes to literature about Africa—its people and cultures—like African American literature, educators are still wrestling with issues of aesthetic sensibilities, cultural authenticity, and representation (Fox & Short, 2003; Harris, 1997; Henderson, 2005; Khorana, 1994, 1998; Osa, 1995a, 1995b; Randolph, 2004; Sims, 1982, 1983; Taxel, 1986; Yenika-Agbaw, 2008). Nancy Larrick (1965) drew people's attention to this a long time ago in her article "The All-White World of Children's Books." Since then, other educators have replicated the study with similar results, or they have identified stereotypes that persist despite the small gains made over the years (Chall, Radwin, French, & Hall, 1979; MacCann & Woodard, 1972; Martin, 2004; Osa, 1995b; Sims, 1982, 1983.) Karen Sands-O'Connor (2005a, 2005b) also detects similar stereotypes about West Indian blacks in British children's literature, just like Randolph (2002, 2004), Kuntz (2005), Yenika-Agbaw (2008), and other scholars have pointed out stereotypes in books about Africa set in the United States.

Although literature for children set in Africa continues to be dominated by stereotypes (Maddy & MacCann, 1996, 2002; Osa, 1995a; Yenika-Agbaw, 2008), some of the authors attempt to capture the complexity of the cultural experiences in their books. This notwithstanding, the problem remains endemic partly because of the capitalistic nature of our society and the role publishers play in aiding and abetting this socially irresponsible behavior from otherwise talented individuals. In an interview with Cristina Kessler, an award-winning author of several children's books that are set in Africa, Brenda Randolph remarks that Kessler was "dismayed to find the appended subtitle" "A Tale from Africa" added to her title (p. 77) *The Beekeeper of Lalibela: A Tale from Africa* (2007). The understanding then is that a subtitle that mentions the continent will sound more appealing to the average American book buyer, hence adding more commercial value to the precious picture book. Dan Hade reiterated this point, emphasizing that "80 percent of children's books are published by only eight companies" and, in addition, that corporations such as Disney and Viacom "play an enormous role in deciding which children's books will meet commercial success" (Trotter, 2007). Moreover, McNair (2008) discovered that Scholastic, one of the major book clubs for students and teachers, did not include many selections of literature written or illustrated by people of color. From all indications, then, there is no doubt that corporations inadvertently decide what needs to be published and also who should author a particular book. We are drawing attention to these issues, so teachers should also be aware of this capitalistic frenzy that has taken hold of the publishing industry, forcing us to read only *what they want us to read*.

## DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM

As schoolteachers contemplate developing a unit on Africa and African Americans, the first thing we would recommend is for them to decide on a rich theme that has both a universal and specific cultural appeal. Next, they should consult their district curriculum guidelines or the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association websites for the necessary standards as they select the necessary resources and brainstorm possible activities for the unit.

Including both domestic and international multicultural literature in one's curriculum, especially as it pertains to black culture, is necessary. Not only do these literatures provide us with possible outlets through which we can further understand black cultures in the continent and in the diaspora, they can also enable us to be acquainted further with aspects of our socio-cultural history not necessarily covered in depth in the social studies curriculum. It is such gaps in our official stories that at times create tension between Eurocentric values and black people and between blacks from the continent and blacks in America. We do not expect miracles to happen overnight, for as Dianne Johnson reminds us, "Anglo-American parents and book buyers are not, for whatever reasons, consciously or not, purchasing books with images of non-white characters" (Henderson & May, 2005, p. 371). We believe, however, that as we evolve as an inclusive society, with time this may change, and we are eagerly looking forward to that moment.

This edited volume is broken down into three sections to represent the needs of the different teaching levels: Pre-K-3, Upper Elementary and Middle Grades 4-8, and High School Grades 9-12. There are seventeen chapters excluding the Introduction and Afterword, grouped under three sections according to grade levels. These chapters explore a variety of themes with six that stand out. Cultural identity/authenticity is the primary focus in chapters 10, 11, and 17; critical literacy and disability in chapters 7 and 14; family life in chapters 1, 5, 6, and 13; hopes and dreams in chapters 9 and 16; social class/justice and/or discrimination in chapters 3 and 12; and spirituality in chapters 8, 15, and 4. In addition to identifying issues directly related to blackness and how they are constructed, contributors provide pedagogical ideas for classroom implementation. In the chapters following this Introduction, contributors share their visions of multiculturalism and literary texts and how these create possibilities in the classroom, especially when informed by theory. Each chapter provides a window through which readers may further understand the diversity in experiences of black people and cultures in literature.

While we are particularly pleased with the wide selection of texts that in a way introduces us to literary experiences of blacks in the continent and the diaspora, we

are hoping that readers would take advantage of some of the theoretical lenses that inform classroom practices in all of these chapters. In so doing, we are hoping this will enable schoolteachers to reflect further on the complexity of what it means to be black in Africa and America, and across the globe. This book is a peek at the fascinating diversity amongst black communities, demonstrating how historical factors and geographical landscapes continue to shape the experiences of people of African descent in our global society.

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## NOTES

1. As a matter of fact, in "Using International Literature to Enhance the Curriculum," Clark, Cox, White, and Bluemel (2004) define international literature as "books originally written in English by authors in countries such as New Zealand, England, Australia or Canada, then published or distributed in the U. S." and as "books first published in a foreign language, then translated and published in the U.S." (unpaged in the online version of an article that was originally published in *Teacher Librarian*, 31(5), 12–15). Nowhere in their definition does a list of books published in continental Africa feature; one could only speculate that they might have insinuated this in the second half of their definition. Even then, it is not clear.
2. See suggestions on selection criteria for multicultural literature and some possible instructional ideas in Violet Harris' (1997) *Using Multiethnic Literature in the K–12 Classroom* and Pamela Gates and Dianne L. Mark's (2006) *Cultural Journeys*
3. See The American Library Association website for a complete listing; also check out the websites of the different awarding institutions for specific titles.



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