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Michelle H. Martin

The Lion and the Unicorn, Volume 41, Number 1, January 2017, pp. 93-103
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2017.0006>



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Brown Girl Dreaming of a New ChLA

Michelle H. Martin

“I’m not going to ChLA conferences anymore; not enough black people,” an African American scholar once told me.

“Your not coming doesn’t help!” I suggested.

If scholars of color refuse to participate in annual conferences sponsored by the Children’s Literature Association (ChLA) or similar professional associations because so few attendees look like them, how will the organization ever make progress in terms of diversification? I understand this scholar’s frustration; I, too, am underwhelmed by ChLA’s demographics, but by staying and trying to effect change from within, I hope to contribute to making ChLA a more inviting space for people of color.

As the first and, to date, only African American president of the Children’s Literature Association (2011–12, in the organization’s forty-fifth year) and the first African American to host the annual conference (2014, co-chaired with Sara Schwebel), I feel uniquely positioned to send some words of encouragement and food for thought both to scholars of color in the field—seasoned and newer—and to scholars from the majority concerning the future of the profession. I write this piece because ChLA has been my academic “home association” for the past twenty-plus years, and likely will be for the next twenty, and I therefore care deeply about its direction. While my involvement in ChLA prompts me to write specifically about its dynamics, I would encourage readers to consider how much of this essay also applies to other associations of which you are a part.

In an era when #BlackLivesMatter has a new murder of a black man or woman to protest nearly every week, we are all likely thinking about race differently than we did five years ago. Social justice movements have impacted our field, too, and they should. Those who power #WeNeedDiverseBooks, #WeNeedDiverseReviewers, #OWNVOICES, and like-minded movements regularly let publishers and editors know that it’s past time for children’s and young adult (YA) books to better reflect the realities of the young people who read them—whether publishers and editors are

listening or not. Many of us advocate for this change not only in the public spheres where the books are produced but also in the educational pipelines where we prepare the next generation of teachers, librarians, education and youth professionals, and thinkers. This work matters because if we don't put the books of Zetta Elliott or Benjamin Alire Sáenz or Gene Luen Yang or Louise Erdrich in the hands of preservice teachers, librarians, and youth professionals, most will pass on to children only what they already know, which too often is the white canon. Then, when those children end up in our university classes, some are capable of writing evaluations of faculty like one I got early in my career: "I appreciate all this multicultural literature, but there is *real* literature too."

The demographics of ChLA have been slow to change. Marilisa Jiménez García and Sarah Park Dahlen address some of the reasons for this sluggishness in their essays in this issue. In addition, this slow pace of change may partially be a reflection of the fact that few American scholars of color earn doctoral degrees compared to their white counterparts. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, whites remained the majority of doctoral degree earners in the United States between 1999 and 2010 (77.9 percent in 1999–2000 and 74.3 percent in 2009–10) ("Fast Facts"). Given that the study of children's literature still makes up a narrow slice of the academic pie, the small number of non-white scholars in this area is perhaps not surprising. But these essays also attest to the fact that non-white scholars often feel unwelcome in ChLA. We all hope for changes in the culture and climate of the organization that would make it a space where scholars can feel they have a place, regardless of their background, research focus, or length of time in academia. Even though the organization has growing to do, ChLA is more diverse now than when I began attending in the early 1990s in terms of both its membership and its scholarship. But I believe it's time that we not just let diversity happen as it may but be proactive about these changes and create momentum for a more inclusive field.

I think that the 2014 conference, themed "Diverging Diversities," helped to nudge some of the research diversification ChLA is experiencing; it is no longer possible, as it was when I started attending ChLA in the mid-90s, to hear all of the papers focusing on LGBTQ topics, Latinx culture, African American characters, and Asian American life in a handful of ghettoized, diversity-themed sessions. At that time, as long as scheduling allowed, one could hear *all* of those papers at the conference. Now, they permeate the schedule. I attended one session at the 2016 conference in which three early career white female scholars, Dawn Sardella-Ayres, Cara Byrne, and Elizabeth Pearce, presented on black bodies. In the audience sat several scholars whose research specializations have revolved around blackness. I waited to see what

would happen on Twitter during the session and what would transpire during the Q&A. Would the seasoned scholars take these women to task for having the audacity to venture out of their own cultural backgrounds and into these dark waters? Or would these women be encouraged and welcomed while also being offered relevant suggested readings? Some of both happened. I left the session both encouraged and disturbed, with the mantra of Roberta Seelinger Trites (past president and current treasurer of ChLA and my dissertation advisor) ringing in my ears: “In ChLA, we don’t eat our young.”

This mantra may be true, but how many of us *say* to students from backgrounds underrepresented in academia, “Oh, you really shouldn’t go on for a Ph.D.; the market is not good; you won’t get a job,” but the *real* reason for the advice is that no one else in that student’s family has even earned an undergraduate degree, much less a Ph.D. The implicit query: why aim so high? Isn’t a master’s degree good enough, given your background? How many of us advise minority students into less prestigious programs? We tell them, “The faculty are research superstars in the field so they won’t have time to mentor you.” What we’re really thinking, deep-down, is that this student who is black or Latinx or from a poor family is less capable of succeeding in a rigorous program than our white advisees or students who are on track to become second- or third-generation academics. How many of us write tepid or less-than-glowing letters of recommendation for students who had to work three jobs to be able to eat while they matriculated through our program, telling the addressee the student wasn’t as “focused” as (s)he could have been (which, of course, causes the readers to wonder if the applicant can therefore be a focused faculty member or postdoc or scholarship recipient)? Many of us mentor students selectively, either taking only some of them to our professional conferences or bringing all of them but introducing only some of them to everyone we know who might, ultimately, hire them. We invite *those* students to have drinks with our closest colleagues at other institutions, while we only attend the research presentations of the others to appear supportive but leave them to wonder why they didn’t get invited out to dinner with you, the lucky advisees and your professional buddies. In elementary school, when you were the last to get picked for dodgeball, it was sad. When you’re a doctoral student, finishing your dissertation, and you’re the last to get picked for dinner at conferences, it’s deadly. And then your warning that “You won’t get a job” becomes true, but you had a hand in that . . . and you didn’t even know.

On the surface, “We don’t eat our young” implies beneficence, suggesting that ChLA as a community doesn’t engage in the sort of intellectual cannibalism, posturing, and destructive interrogation that sometimes take place during Q&A at conclave-sized conferences like The Modern Language As-

sociation (MLA). I am thankful never to have seen this behavior at ChLA, and I hope that continues. But scratch the surface of this mantra, and the analogy assumes a power dynamic akin to that between a parent (powerful) and a child (powerless or at least less powerful). It suggests that those who have been in the discipline the longest have more to offer than less seasoned scholars and are “in charge” the way most parents are. Parents also tend to know what’s best when the kid doesn’t have a clue. The problem with this power dynamic, however, is that when scholars come through the doctoral pipeline whose educational experiences have been rife with racial and gender microaggressions from more seasoned scholars (even well-meaning ones) and peers and when they, like Marilisa Jiménez García, constantly struggle to have their work acknowledged as (1) scholarship and (2) relevant, “we don’t eat our young” is little comfort. Some of us feel that we’ve been eaten our entire careers.

In a recent blog post titled, “Academia, Love Me Back,” Tiffany Martínez, a Suffolk University undergraduate and McNair Scholar, who describes herself as a “first generation college student, first generation U.S. citizen, and aspiring professor,” relates an encounter she had with her English professor earlier that day that changed everything for her. In front of all of her classmates, her professor returned an essay she had written, with the word “hence” circled, beside which the professor had written “This is not your word.” The professor accused Martínez of plagiarism. Publicly. Martínez comments: “My professor assumed someone like me would never use language like that. As I stood in the front of the class while a professor challenged my intelligence I could just imagine them reading my paper in their home thinking *could someone like her write something like this?*” Although this incident was seismic for her, Martínez suspects that the professor might have already forgotten it.

Martínez opens her piece with a list of her accomplishments—a list that brought to my mind Phyllis Wheatley and Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs. Brent’s introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1987, originally composed in 1857) is accompanied by an endorsement from a well-respected white person (Lydia Maria Child, her editor) who could “vouch for” the fact that a slave girl actually had the intelligence and literacy skills to write the manuscript that became the book. This line from Child’s introduction mirrors the assumptions of Martínez’s professor: “It will naturally excite surprise that a woman reared in Slavery should be able to write so well” (Jacobs 3). Martínez then acknowledges the necessity she feels to list her credentials and later writes: “**There are students who will be assumed capable without the need to list their credentials in the beginning of a reflective piece.** How many degrees do I need for someone to believe I am an academic?” (Martínez, emphasis in the original). As the editors and essay

contributors of *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (2012) can attest, even a doctoral degree does not ward off racism, sexism, and classism. I cannot help wondering if, after being “eaten” by this professor, Martínez, a student who has worked multiple jobs throughout her educational career and who aspires to the professoriate, will change her plans and find somewhere more welcoming to be. Will she, like Laura Jiménez, ask “[W]hy do we do it? Why do we place ourselves into such vulnerable spaces where we are undervalued, ignored, and hurt?” (Jimenez, emphasis in the original). Will Laura, like Marilisa Jiménez García did with ChLA a few years ago, pull out because what should have been educational felt too much like a fight? Will she, like the African American scholar I mentioned in my opening sentences (who has, indeed, left the professoriate, though I hope not permanently), decide at some point that it’s not worth the heartache to engage with a professional community that has not done enough inward gazing to know that it is still haunted (in Annette Wannamaker’s words) by the ghosts that once labeled minority literature “ephemeral or faddish”? What will it take to ensure that scholars like Tiffany Martínez can come into ChLA not just with the assurance that what’s left of her won’t be eaten but that she and her scholarship are equally as important as that of seasoned scholars in the profession who study canonical Anglo and American texts like *Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *The Wizard of Oz*? She needs and deserves not only this assurance but also needs and deserves professional mentors and colleagues who will *listen* to and *learn* from her, since her life journey has taken her places most scholars who come from privileged backgrounds have never been and will likely never go.

Listening to and learning from students sometimes challenges those of us who have built our careers around expertise in X; we want to tell and to teach because it’s what we make a living doing. But we all know that in addition to teaching, the professoriate is also about being lifelong learners. Notably, though, the nature of what we need to learn is shifting as America becomes browner, more international, and more gender-diverse. And these are lessons for which our graduate school training failed to prepare us because the first step involves looking within. If we truly want to become a welcoming discipline, it’s time for each of us, regardless of background or research expertise, to take an active role in issuing in a new era of diversity, to push open the doors of the field.

I would like to adapt ideas from “crossover literature” and “cross-writing” to scholastic practices that could help to move children’s and YA scholarship

into a more diversity-rich twenty-first century. When Sandra L. Beckett writes about “crossover literature” in *Keywords for Children’s Literature* (2011), she defines it as “literature that crosses from child to adult or adult to child audiences” (58). She uses J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series as a prime example of crossover literature—written for children . . . and also read by adults. This phenomenon even prompted Bloomsbury to reprint the series with more adult-looking black-and-white woodcut-illustrated covers. This made it less obvious in public that adults were reading children’s books and enabled publishers to sell more children’s books to adults who don’t have the excuse of a child reader. Beckett distinguishes between crossover works and cross-writing: “Cross-writing includes authors who write for both child and adult audiences in separate works, while crossovers address the two audiences simultaneously . . . but they are not necessarily written or marketed intentionally for both audiences” (59). Borrowing from Beckett’s use of the term in *Transcending Boundaries: Writing for a Dual Audience of Children and Adults* (1999), Kate Capshaw (Smith) also writes about “cross-writing” in *Children’s Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (2004). Here, she refers to “deliberately unsettling lines between adult and child audiences, appropriating adult texts into children’s culture and vice versa, masking political treatises as children’s books and building postmodern children’s narratives that interact with adult categories of knowledge” (xix). According to Capshaw, in some cross-writing, “the child becomes primarily a conduit to reach the adult” (xix). I have also heard scholars use the term “crossover texts” for books like Phil Nel’s *The Annotated Cat: Under the Hats of Seuss and His Cats* (2007) that will appeal equally to a popular audience and a scholarly audience (and might therefore be profitable, unlike most academic books).

I would like to offer up the term “crossover scholarship” to describe scholarship written about groups to which the scholar does not belong—the type of research that Sardella-Ayres, Byrne, and Pearce presented at ChLA 2016. This term diverges from the genre of children’s literature, which is defined by audience rather than authorship, as is the term “crossover text.” “Cross-writing” points to both author and audience since the author writes for both adult and child readers, usually in separate texts. “Crossover scholarship” differs from all of these in that it points squarely to authorship and the writer’s crossing racial, ethnic, geographic, socioeconomic, gender, and other identity boundaries to write about people who live and look differently than the scholar does.

Anyone who has read the introduction to my book, *Brown Gold* (2004), knows that I embrace inclusion in most literary situations; hence, I consider William Miller’s picture book about Zora Neale Hurston and his other books about important African Americans just as much African American children’s

literature as the works of Jerry Pinkney. I view scholarship similarly. In my estimation, excellence in research and writing is more important than writing only from one's own background or realm of experience. This is, I realize, a controversial stance for a scholar of color to take in an era when #OWNVOICES, #WeNeedDiverseBooks, and other movements are so strongly advocating for more primary texts by non-white writers. I am in full accord with these movements. Diversification of children's literature scholars and scholarship also needs to happen, and what I am advocating is *not a long-term solution* but a bridge, a short-term solution to a long-term and historically grounded problem. What needs to happen for long-term diversification is for all of us to be more proactive about recruiting diverse scholars at the *undergraduate* level to make our master's and doctoral pipelines more diverse. Clearly, such a commitment must be at the university and institutional level. For instance, Dr. Ana Mari Cauce, president of The University of Washington, instituted a Race & Equity Initiative in Spring 2015 that seeks to "confront racism and bias at the individual, institutional and systemic levels" through three key ways: "Confronting individual bias and racism; transforming institutional policies and practices; and accelerating systemic change" ("Race & Equity at The UW"). Some professional associations are also getting their diversity house in order: the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) have a Diversity Statement that makes clear that their "positions, policies, procedures and programming" are "representative of **all** individuals who contribute to the field of literacy education" (NCTE, emphasis NCTE's). NCTE's initiatives like the Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color, which began in 2000 and has "supported more than eighty scholars of color across seven cohorts," make a positive and concrete impact in the field and the profession (Cultivating New Voices). Despite the difference in size and resources between associations like NCTE and ChLA, the ChLA Board could begin to make change with a public statement of its commitment to diversity. The process of organizational change deserves its own essay. But in this one, I would like to make suggestions for responsibly engaging in crossover scholarship.

Young people's author Lamar Giles wrote a post entitled "Reading Our #OWNVOICES" on the Book Riot website in September 2015, in which he offered advice to authors of children's and YA literature who tell stories about characters outside of their social, socioeconomic, cultural, ethnic, or geographical backgrounds: "[I]f you do it, you better get it right and that won't be easy. I have said you'll get called out for perpetuating stereotypes. I have said you might get called out even if you aren't perpetuating stereotypes. Criticism is part of this job" ("Reading Our #OWNVOICES").

How does one "get it right"?

In a 2015 article in *Reading Today*, Junko Yokota discusses the social pressure being exerted on the children's book industry to diversify the genre and

then asks, “But with all this attention to the call for more diversity in books, what really needs to happen?” (20). She then offers a number of suggestions for moving forward. I would like to borrow a few of them that I see as also relevant to crossover scholarship and offer a few of my own:

1. “Insist on authenticity” (Yokota 19) and “fight unintended insensitivity or bias” (21). Just as diverse books must be free of stereotypes and negative portrayals, the scholar must be steeped in the cultural and research conversations that have already been established on that literature. If it is possible to co-author a piece with someone who has been writing from within that culture or to “apprentice” with them, do so since there’s no better way to learn from someone than to write with that individual.
2. “Talk about the challenges of being between cultures” (19), and be an ally of authors and scholars from backgrounds underrepresented in the literature. Scholars should acknowledge intersectionalities not just in the literature but in their own lives and must also be open about their relationship to the research. This inevitably involves inward gazing and facing one’s own biases. The “Reading While White: Allies for Racial Diversity & Inclusion in Books for Children and Teens” website offers an excellent example of these ideas in their Mission Statement:

We are White librarians organizing to confront racism in the field of children’s and young adult literature. We are allies in the ongoing struggle for authenticity and visibility in books; for opportunities for people of color and First/Native Nations people in all aspects of the children’s and young adult book world; and for accountability among publishers, book creators, reviewers, librarians, teachers, and others. We are learning, and hold ourselves responsible for understanding how our whiteness impacts our perspectives and our behavior.

We know that we lack the expertise that non-white[s] have on marginalized racial experiences. We resolve to listen and learn from people of color and First/Native Nations people willing to speak about those experiences. We resolve to examine our own White racial experiences without expecting people of color and First/Native Nations people to educate us. As White people, we have the responsibility to change the balance of White privilege.

Those who engage in crossover scholarship would do well to embrace the humility and perspective articulated in this Mission Statement.

3. “Recognize the benefits for all students” (20) and faculty. Research that our students engage in—especially our graduate students—becomes a part of a vibrant research community that impacts both students and faculty. Invite that.
4. “Recognize what you know and don’t know” (21). Near the end of my doctoral program at Illinois State, I wanted to take a children’s literature creative writing class; none was offered. So Roberta Trites, my advisor, asked David Foster Wallace, Creative Writing Professor and author of the 1,004-paged *Infinite Jest*, to partner with her on advising me through this independent study. Both readily admitted that they had no skills or experience in the discipline of the other, but together, they gave me a positive

learning experience. I have served on thesis and dissertation committees both in the United States and abroad for students with advisors who felt I could serve the student better than they, and I have tapped the expertise of faculty outside of my university for the same reason. I know from experience that minority faculty can suffer fatigue from having more than our fair share of service and also from mentoring faculty and students of color across the country—officially and unofficially. But reaching out to those with expertise you don't have is better than habitually redirecting students to write within the realm of experience you know.

5. Be okay with stepping out of your comfort zone to support students who engage in crossover scholarship.
6. Know why you're writing crossover scholarship and be prepared to answer that question from other scholars . . . because they will ask.
7. Be prepared for the research to *change you*. In Jacqueline Woodson's 1998 essay, "Who Can Tell My Story," she suggests that writing outside of your experience *has* to change the writer.
8. Do your homework, and make sure the students who engage in this kind of research also do theirs. Discourage "drive-by" scholarship—crossing into scholarship of cultures unfamiliar to the writer only to dabble, with no intention of research depth or commitment. The last thing you want to do is alienate or insult those who have spent their lives studying this subfield by approaching it as if it's not important enough to deserve your time. Also know going in that at some point, the library and the computer will not be enough. Jacqueline Woodson puts it this way:

My belief is that there is room in the world for all stories, and that everyone has one. My hope is that those who write about the tears and the laughter and the language in my grandmother's house have first sat down at the table with us and dipped the bread of their own experiences into our stew. (38)

Excellence in this kind of research often involves finding the community's cultural brokers who can help you gain access to folks like Woodson's grandmother who otherwise might have no interest whatsoever in talking to you. And sometimes, not even the cultural brokers can convince a community member to talk to you. But if you are engaging in this endeavor for the right reasons, you will realize the value even in being shut out. This might be the closest you'll get to understanding what people of color and American Indians face in this country every day. You will learn persistence. In fact, the essays in this forum are appearing in *The Lion & the Unicorn* instead of in the *Quarterly*, ChLA's own journal, because the editors didn't consider these pieces research. But we are used to finding alternate routes to have our say.

9. Learn from scholars like Nancy Larrick, Donnarae MacCann, Kate Capshaw, and Robin Bernstein, who have successfully written crossover scholarship that is respected and widely used in the field of children's literature.
10. Listen.

In short, writing crossover scholarship should not be undertaken casually but with a commitment to excellence, with humility, and with a teachable spirit.

As children's literature professionals and members of ChLA and other professional organizations that focus on children's literature, we can also help diversify the field by inviting scholars from other disciplines *in* to share their research at the conferences. This requires travel funding as well as a commitment on the part of scholars outside of children's literature to come in, which takes time, money, and outreach effort. On the other hand, for scholars like Marilisa Jiménez García who already straddle two or more disciplines, crossover scholarship is a natural fit, and the students she mentors will have the benefit of coming into the discipline already scholastically ambidextrous. Making change from *within* the field is a much easier and more immediate way to increase diverse scholarship than recruiting from outside, although that needs to happen, too. This professional cross-pollination will strengthen and diversify the field as a whole and will also make conferences and professional associations like ChLA more welcoming places for newcomers from a wide variety of fields and backgrounds. And while the demographics of ChLA are likely to continue to change slowly, making safe spaces for crossover scholarship will signal both to those within the organization and those not yet a part of our community that they and their diverse scholastic pursuits are welcome. After all, if you counted up *all* of the scholarship that has been written about, say, African American children's and YA literature, it would likely not equal the amount of scholarship that has been published just on *Little Women*. Hence, this genre—and other underrepresented genres—has room for lots more scholarship. Encouraging thoughtful, self-reflective, and well-considered crossover scholarship written by those who will become the next generation of children's literature scholars will stretch *all* of us. I am up for the challenge. Are you?

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