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The Significance of the Arts in Culture: Learning through Children’s Literature

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Cultural studies frequently rely on the arts to reveal traditions, history, ideologies, and other aspects of a particular group. However, at what point and how are child readers asked to consider the significance of the arts to individuals’ cultural lives? This paper shares an inquiry that addresses how children’s literature, outside being a distinctive art form in itself, can offer stories that place the arts inseparably at the heart of one’s life experiences – defining culture, traditions, family history, and personal identity. The inquiry shared here focuses on a text set of 12 children’s picturebooks in which characters connect to some form of the arts in very specific and purposeful ways – facing a life challenge as a result of his or her passion for the arts or a challenge for which the arts hold resolution. Through the lens of New Historicism supported by social semiotics, a critical content analysis of these books reveals their potential for powerful, authentic insights into the role of the arts in one’s personal culture.

Keywords: critical content analysis, identity, historicism, picturebook, art

Introduction

Cultural studies frequently rely on the arts to reveal traditions, history, ideologies, and other identifying aspects of a particular group, thus going beyond the notion of the arts as mainly entertainment. As used in this study, the arts (broadly conceived) include the many crafted or shaped forms of image, language, music, and movement (such as sports and dance) carried out in skilled and creative ways.

Artists, through the application of technique and skill “achieve expressiveness through the ways in which form has been crafted or shaped” and inform through the sensory side of human experience what often cannot be seen directly (Eisner 2008: 8). In formal ways, cultural studies address the impact of the arts from social science perspectives. The notion that the meaning of an artistic artefact is historically contextualized is an accepted belief in many venues (Malpas 2013). Recently, researchers have recognized the significance of the arts in qualitative research methodologies (Leavy 2015) and, at times, suggest that the arts as method parallel the requirements of qualitative research (Knowles & Cole 2008). This is not to say that those artists whose lives are framed by their field and passion have not always recognized the importance of the arts beyond their aesthetic appeal, but as the complexities of qualitative research extend the methodological approach, insights from the arts are given greater recognition.

In classrooms today, children are frequently introduced to other cultures through music, drama, or the visual arts – tangible means to identify the unique backgrounds of varied groups. In some situations these approaches are used to reflect similarities as well as differences in life experiences; in other situations, the focus is on the unique aspects of the arts that set cultures apart. As young learners are introduced to the concept of culture very early in life, these visual symbols of culture are meaningful for young children to begin to establish a sense of the diversity surrounding them at a time when the visual is a key means to their understanding of the world around them. However, at what point and in what ways are children invited to consider the significance of the arts to an individual’s cultural identity, life experiences, and lived passions? This question echoes Elliot Eisner who asked, “Are the arts merely ornamental aspects of human production and experience or do they have a more significant role to play in enlarging human understanding?” (2008: 3).

In attempting to respond to the question of how to invite children into deeper understandings of the arts in an individual’s life, one can turn to children’s literature. Advocates of this literature are quick to acknowledge the depth of understanding and response that results from young readers’ connections to discerningly chosen and strategically shared books. Children’s literature, a distinctive art form in itself, offers stories that place the arts inseparably at the heart of one’s life experiences. The exploratory inquiry shared here examined 12 books wherein some form of the arts was intrinsic to the theme of each. Seven of the twelve books are biographical fiction, based on fact but still offering a fictional experience. Three titles are historical fiction and two blend realistic and historical fiction. Through the lens of New Historicism supported by social semiotics, a critical content analysis of these

books revealed their potential for powerful, authentic insights into the significance of the arts in one's personal culture and identity.

Theoretical frame

Children's literature has assumed many roles and responsibilities for young readers in the past few decades. Besides being a source of enjoyment, imagination, and exposure to a variety of places, people, and experiences, researchers are exploring this literature as a resource for critically considering social issues (Lehr 2001, Singer 2006, Crisp & Hiller 2011, Leland, Lewison & Harste 2012, Short 2012a), understanding culture (Cai 1997, Hade 1997, Harris 1997, Bishop 2007), and developing a sense of community, both local and global (Short 2012b, Choo 2013). Ultimately, many believe that using literature with children strategically from a critical stance has the potential to impact children's identity, agency, and their ability to take other perspectives (Harste 2014, Mathis 2015). Authenticity within the story told, therefore, has become a focus for many scholars and its complexity is acknowledged (Fox & Short 2003). In this search for authenticity and for issues that might promote stereotypes, critical content analyses have been conducted to examine closely the contents of books (Bothelo & Rudman 2009, Bradford 2009, Johnson, Mathis & Short 2016). The literature shared here focuses on the use of story within picturebooks to enhance readers' understandings of the past, present, and future. Stories are how people make sense of their worlds and the worlds of others (Short 2011, Siu-Runyan 2007) and can support readers' insights in very natural frameworks as readers relate the stories of others to the stories that shape their own lives. The literature within this study reflects the power of story to share culture, value, and identity.

While chapter books were also read in light of the topic at hand, the significance of the arts in culture, picturebooks are the focus of this particular inquiry. Besides being an artistic form within itself, this "intricate dance between words and visual images" (Sipe 2011: 238) is rich with sociological and ideological implications: "There is no such thing as value-free art, whether it is purely literary art or the combination of visual and verbal art that constitutes the picturebook" (244). Sipe continues in his discussion to share the potential of picturebooks to be a catalyst for shifts in readers' thinking as they invite thinking into culture, identity and ideology. He also shares with others the concern that the arts in general receive little attention in many schools, and that picturebooks can serve to nurture an aesthetic appreciation in these classrooms (Dewey 1934/1980, Sipe & Beach 2001, Nikolajeva 2005, Gadsden 2008). Through the aesthetics of these books, sociocultural implications abound that can potentially speak to the role of the arts in one's personal culture.

Examining art itself or the role of art within narratives, contemporary scholars turn to a uniquely defined lens that helps to articulate the significance of the arts for both aesthetic purposes as well as the arts as knowledge. This knowledge includes communicating ideologies, both personal and social, and documenting contemporary and historical events. The theoretical lens of New Historicism helps to frame the belief about the arts that undergirds the analysis described here as it views the arts as integral to understanding and contextualizing historical events and the cultural implications of particular eras. New Historicism is framed on the interdependence of the arts and culture. Art and literature are shaped by the beliefs and desires of society and actively sustain and challenge them as sites of power and resistance (Gillespie 2010, Malpas 2013). Therefore, artistic forms can be considered documentary texts providing insight into cultural events or historical eras (Mathis 2016).

Within the current inquiry that examines children's books with demonstrations of characters engaged in the arts, New Historicism provides support in considering art forms as integral to everyday life as they weave throughout social contexts and include power relations of particular eras. Of particular interest is the New Historicist focus on the work of Michel Foucault in questioning the production and potential change of social order. Foucault claims that "history is discontinuous; a given period is better understood as a site of conflict between competing interests and discourses than as a unified whole; and the role and function of power is redefined" (Malpas 2013: 67). As this inquiry reveals, the notion of power is evident in books for children.

Aligned with New Historicism and another theoretical lens to be mentioned later, social semiotics provides yet another lens to frame this study and clarify its findings. Semiotics involves a focus on how individuals use various sign systems, such as language, music, visual arts, movement, such as dance or the aesthetic aspects of sports, and others to communicate and represent. Social semiotics, aligned with other theoretical lenses, focuses on how people use sign systems within particular historical and cultural social settings (Van Leeuwen 2005). According to Marjorie Siegel and Deborah W. Rowe, "This implies a dynamic, reflexive relationship between text and context in which individuals acting with text shape and are shaped by their participation in activities" (2011: 206). Social semiotics supports an understanding of the integral role of the arts in everyday life: "Becoming aware of our capacity to feel is a way of discovering our humanity. Art helps us connect with personal, subjective emotions, and through such a process, it enables us to discover our own interior landscape" (Eisner 2008: 11).

Method

Critical content analysis

Content analysis is a frequently used approach to analyzing, describing, and interpreting literature. Since it is a highly adaptable method, it has been applied for a variety of purposes utilizing a variety of theoretical lenses. The present inquiry is developed within the field of education where there is a concerted interest in a critical analysis of text that emerges from current classroom issues. Therefore, the origin of the research questions and the implications of the research are intimately tied to the classroom and to children as readers (Johnson, Mathis & Short 2016). While content analysis serves to inform some aspects of this study, the notion of critical content analysis is also important within the current educational interest in critical literacy. As a result of the nature of the book choices for this study and the specific interest and questions of the researcher, the notion of *critical* that points to locating power in social practices as well as uncovering conditions of inequality, became a natural focus in the data collection. “Critical content analysis provides important insights on specific books that are significant within classrooms, particularly as related to issues of cultural authenticity and representation, all issues of increasing interest” (Johnson, Mathis & Short 2016).

Data collection and analysis

This inquiry began with an interest in the arts as portrayed by children’s literature, especially literature that reflects global scenarios. A list of books was created over time from award lists in the United States as well as personal reading and exploration of children’s and adolescent literature. The books that were most intriguing became those historical and personal stories in which characters engaged with some form of the arts in very specific and purposeful ways – biographical fiction and historical fiction. In many of these life stories, the characters were facing life challenges as a result of their passion for the arts or challenges for which the arts held resolution. These books initiated questions regarding whether children are invited to consider the significance of the arts to life rather than just being introduced to the arts as an aesthetic opportunity.

Thus, the research question guiding this study became: How does children’s literature demonstrate the significance of the arts in cultural aspects, such as identity formation, historical insight, and sociocultural issues?

Of the many books identified over the preceding ten year period that revealed the arts being used in significant ways, a representative text set of 12 books was selected wherein the characters’ personal connections to some artistic form were tightly woven into sociocultural issues that presented the arts as a challenge or as a

means of resolution. The representative books identified here are picturebooks that reflect the strong demonstrations consistently identified over time in the overall ongoing list of books, although chapter books are also in the ongoing list. As each book was read and reread, questions were asked that evolved from the focus of the inquiry and the critical content analysis stance of the researcher. These questions began with the following, but each was expanded as further questions developed:

- Is the art form positioned as identity, a passion, a challenge, or resolution of an issue?
- What is the specific role of the arts as challenge or resolution?
- Is the challenge an issue of power? Inequity?
- Whose perspective is told and/or whose voice is missing?
- What historical or cultural contexts situate the story's artistic focus? What is missing?

These questions formed the various categories that entitled the columns of an inquiry chart used to record data and provide a frame to support the identification of themes during analysis. Once each book had been examined in light of the critical questions asked above, the answers were recorded as data on the chart (see Table 1). Examining data across the titles through an adaptation of a constant comparative method provided insight into themes that were prevalent. These themes respond to the research question above that asks: How does children's literature demonstrate the significance of the arts in cultural aspects, such as identity formation, historical insight, and sociocultural issues?

The following sections elaborate on these themes using specific examples from the text set of books and support from theoretical and scholarly perspectives. While each theme is discussed using one or two exemplary titles, the themes can also be found weaving throughout all titles as together they create a tapestry that supports the potential significance of the arts in one's culture.

Discussion

Examining the categories of the data chart revealed themes that support children's literature as a resource for insight into the role of the arts in personal culture and identity. These themes are shared here through specific titles, but they are themes that can be identified in a variety of books where the arts are integral to its narrative.

The arts persevere despite the challenges of inequity and disabilities

The arts have often been a strong source of identity, so much so that even when faced with challenges, the artist, driven by his or her passion, perseveres.

One source of challenge is that of the injustice that lies at the core of inequity. Sociocultural issues of power and the hierarchy of social constructs can undergird a narrative and create a context that exposes inequity.

In *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds: The Sammy Lee Story* (Yoo & Lee 2005), Sammy, of Korean-American ethnicity, was intrigued with the art of diving. As a twelve-year-old in 1932, he could only dream about becoming proficient since all people of color in Los Angeles were limited to using the public pool one day a week. He also became aware of the Olympics and his desire to be a champion diver grew. When he was eighteen, one man noticed him and became his coach, even though Sammy often had to practice in a specially created sand pit. With the onset of World War II and his father's death, he decided to follow his father's wishes and became a highly respected doctor while still dwelling on his love of the physical art of diving. This continued focus resulted in his winning a gold medal at the Olympics when he was twenty-eight despite the challenges of discrimination he faced along the way. His success was fed by his passion and talent for the art of diving; even in a successful medical position the artist in him never was still.

A Place Where Sunflowers Grow (Lee-Tai & Hoshino 2006) is yet another book that reflects the role of the arts in facing challenges of inequity. The perseverance of the Japanese-Americans is shown here through one family who strives to make the best of their living in an internment camp where they were taken during WWII. The mother, an artist, plants sunflowers, one of the few plants to live in the desert sun, and worries about her daughter Mari who is withdrawn as she misses her home. While in school, Mari discovers that drawing creates a "sense of purpose and peace" as she creates images of her mother's sunflowers. In this book, the use of art in the Japanese-taught schools provides a traditional means for children to cope with the sudden change in lifestyle and loss of personal possessions and freedom.

In both of these scenarios, issues of power emerge as obstacles in the lives of these very different individuals and yet, artistic endeavors are the source of inspiration that propel Sammy to Olympic victory and Mari into drawing which serves as comfort in a challenging time. The notion that "power is everywhere [...] a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (Foucault 1984: 93) is evidenced in many children's books reflective of different stories of power creating social injustices during World War II and other historical eras.

Disabilities also provide challenges to engaging in the arts and pursuing one's passion. Yet these challenges can be met with a determination and passion to continue. In fact, many authentic narratives reveal the arts as providing both the goal and the impetus to overcome the limitations of the disability and go beyond what might be possible otherwise. One such book is *A Splash of Red; the Life and*

Table 1. Data obtained from the sample analysis.**Tablica 1.** Podatci dobiveni analizom odabranoga uzorka.

Title, author, year published	Genre	Culture/country/era Historical context situating the artistic focus	Art form	Role of the arts: Passion Challenge Resolution Resiliency
<i>Sweethearts of Rhythm</i> (Nelson & Pinkney 2009)	Historical fiction (in poetry format)	US WW II	Music/swing	Passion Resolution Resiliency
<i>Memories of Survival</i> (Krinitz & Steinhardt 2005)	Biographical fiction – autobiography	Germany/US WW II/Holocaust	Needlework	Resolution
<i>Show Way</i> (Woodson & Talbott 2005)	Biographical fiction – autobiography	US, from about 1800 to present; focus on culture of slaves as enacted by this family through contemporary times	Quilting Writing	Passion Challenge Resolution Resiliency
<i>Jose! Born to Dance</i> (Reich & Colón 2005)	Biographical fiction (historical)	Mexico and US 20 th C	Dance	Passion Challenge
<i>Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave</i> (Hill & Collier 2010)	Biographical fiction (historical)	US 17 th C	Pottery	Passion Resolution (adding poetry to pottery)
<i>A Song for Ba</i> (Yee & Wang 2004)	Realistic fiction (some historical reference)	Canada Chinese-Canadian	Chinese opera	Passion Challenge
<i>Silent Music</i> (Rumford 2008)	Realistic fiction (some historical reference)	Baghdad	Calligraphy	Passion Resiliency
<i>Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds</i> (Yoo & Lee 2005)	Biographical fiction (historical)	US 20 th C	Olympic diving	Passion Challenge
<i>Henry and the Kite Dragon</i> (Hall & Low 2004)	Historical fiction	US/New York Early 20 th C	Kite making/ pigeon training	Passion Challenge Resolution
<i>A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin</i> (Bryant & Sweet 2013)	Biographical fiction (historical)	US 20 th C	Painting	Passion Challenge
<i>Django</i> (Christensen 2009)	Biographical fiction (historical)	Belgium Gypsy/Roma camp & beyond as book progresses Early 1900s	Music Jazz guitarist	Music was part of early cultural experiences & guitar became his identity
<i>A Place Where Sunflowers Grow</i> (Lee-Tai & Hoshino 2006)	Historical fiction	US Japanese- American WW II	Drawing Painting	Art was part of schooling in internment camp

Role of the arts as related to identity of character(s)	Unique aspect/ significance of the arts revealed in book	Issues of power or equity	Voices/perspectives Heard – or not heard	Other challenges faced
	Integration of 3 art forms; music shown as bringing people together in challenging times	Civil rights issues woven throughout; Jim Crow laws	Voices of women and minorities heard through music/swing	
Provided a way to tell her story, leave story for others, through art and text	Needle work is a personal art form; extensive time required; family heirloom with significance to history	One family/girl's experience fleeing from Hitler and death; power over Jews	One victim's voice speaking for family and neighbors as well	Moving from place to place as a child
Linking generations & handing down a strong sense of self and family; assuming the role of "show way"; identity through family art	Symbolism within quilting is handed down to generations as each finds their own show way; Woodson is writing her story	Slavery; injustice during civil rights era	Voices of slaves heard through quilts at a time when they had no voice and were denied literacy; Woodson's writing gives her voice in contemporary times	
Jose hears rhythms all around from childhood; seeks way to share his art	Drive of the artist to pursue dream; movement from one art form to another to communicate to others (audience)	Cultural conflict because of socioeconomics as an immigrant; leaving family to pursue dream	Jose's artistic "voices" of rhythm shared throughout book	Situating himself in the art form most appropriate
Unique glimpse of many aspects of art of this slave; identity through voice of lyrics	Talent in the trade he was assigned; using lyrical verse to claim the pottery as his own	Slavery	Voice found in the art of pottery for which he was known and in lyrics he engraved on pottery at a time when slaves were not allowed to learn to read or write	
Hopes of pursuing a role in opera to follow father and grandfather	Conflict of old and new; traditional opera form vs new culture	Not necessarily power or equity; economics an issue as opera becomes less popular		Changing culture with less demand for performances
Ancient culture of calligraphy is hobby of boy; sustains in times of conflict	Arts/war in ancient and modern times; continuity of traditions	Not power in immediate focus but bombing points to power issues in setting	Voice found in calligraphy	
Determination despite injustice and success as physician	Artistic satisfaction found in Olympic sports	Racism kept Lee from practicing in public pools	Voice in perseverance to achieve dream despite obstacles and success as physician	Desire of father for Lee to be a doctor
Each group followed cultural artistic endeavors; kite making handed down by elderly	Conflict due to artistic interests but art helped to resolve conflict	Effort made towards equality in resolution	Both groups' voices heard	
Painting was his joy and later his way to proclaim his message	Perseverance overcomes even disability	Not focus	Voice through painting to include messages about conflict/war	Disability caused by war injury
From Gypsy/Roma camps to Paris, became famous; overcame disability caused by fire	Artist desire so compelling that he developed a new sound	Not focus but economic situation, perhaps, resulted in fire	Voice through music/ guitar	Disability caused by fire
Painting was her escape from the injustice imposed on her family for being Japanese American	Art even within "unartistic environments" creates solace	Japanese internment during WW II		

Art of Horace Pippin (Bryant & Sweet 2013). This award-winning title relates the story of self-taught artist Horace Pippin, an African American born in 1888, who revealed his talent for drawing as a young child. He quit school to take care of his family when his father left home, and eventually Horace fought in World War I. His honorable service in the army was a turning point in his life as he was injured, and the implications were that he would not be able to draw again. However, with determination he returned to painting, creating images of the everyday world around him but also of his memories of the war. His work is now highly regarded in major museums in the USA. The author's note in the book speaks to the topic here as Bryant says, "Through his art, he transcended personal loss, injury, poverty, violence, and racism" (2013: np). The illustrations by Melissa Sweet also speak to the voice Pippin gained through his art. A quote in *Publishers Weekly* Review column (2013) states, "Quotations from Pippin about the psychological scars of war and his artistic process are hand-drawn into Sweet's images, underscoring how art was not only a joyful outlet for Pippin, but also a vital means of interpreting the world." Art as "a vital means of interpreting the world" is a concept that weaves as well through the other themes identified here.

Django (Christensen 2009) is the story of a well known jazz guitarist that begins in a "Gypsy" or Roma camp in Belgium in 1910, where he grew up around music and taught himself to play the guitar. Moving to Paris, he played on street corners and sometimes in concerts until he was badly burned in a home fire and told he would no longer play. Determined, however, he overcame this disability and continued into a career that was world renowned. His innate talent and passion for guitar music knew no boundaries and when his burned left hand required him to create a different way to play, the result was a unique sound that led him to continued fame.

The arts bring people together

While we can learn of other cultures through artistic means, young readers can also realize the potential of the arts in crossing cultural borders. *Henry and the Kite Dragon* (Hall & Low 2004) relates this concept as two groups of children are brought together through a misunderstanding of the artistic hobbies of each other. In the 1920s many different ethnic groups were living in New York City and as an immigrant population, they brought with them many different cultural traditions. This story is about two groups of children from China and Italy whose favorite pastimes, making and flying kites for one group and training homing pigeons for the other, interfere with each other in problematic ways. Just as cultural differences can present tension or conflict, so people must learn to overcome these tensions to create better ways to live together. Such is the case with the young men in this story.

Based on a true experience, the story of these young men reflects the authentic artistic activities that comprise the plot.

The arts are an active, visible demonstration of individual identity and voice

Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Story of the Greatest All-Girl Swing Band in the World by Marilyn Nelson and Jerry Pinkney (2009), another story set in the mid-twentieth century, is a powerful example of this theme. During World War II swing was a popular form of music for listening and dancing even though the men who usually comprised swing bands were away fighting in the war. In a small school created to teach a trade to young people of color from low economic means, a group of young female students formed a band and set out to entertain a nation and help provide resilience during wartime. Told from the voices of instruments in a New Orleans pawn shop, writer Marilyn Nelson and illustrator Jerry Pinkney have created a story in poetry and art that not only describes and honors these young women but also gives readers a sense of the sociocultural environment during the time of the Jim Crow Laws. Thus, their sense of identity and agency through their music surpassed the challenges of cultural injustice and the struggle for human rights, discussed previously as a theme of this inquiry, as they traveled nationally and internationally. Music became a form of resiliency during World War II, and this book reveals that it was not limited to the predominant ethnic or gender group.

In *Jose! Born to Dance* (Reich & Colón 2005), a young artist struggles to share his soul with the world. As a young child in Mexico, Jose Limon heard music in all that was around him. When the Mexican Revolution of 1910 erupted, his family left the familiar surroundings and began the journey to the United States. He worked with and for his family once they arrived in their new homeland, all the while showing great talent in painting. After his mother died, he made the decision to go to New York City to become a great painter; however, he felt uninspired and yearned for a way to give to others. Once he experienced a dance performance, he realized his love of music and art could be combined in this form. Jose Limon ultimately became a renowned choreographer. Dance was part of his being and his struggles to find a place to grow in this art is described simply but effectively. While based on fact, fictionalized musical allusions help young readers realize the music that is around them daily.

The arts are a source of comfort and strength in trying times

Silent Music: A Story of Baghdad (Rumford 2008) provides a more contemporary story of Ali, a fictional but typical boy who loves playing soccer with his friends and music. He loves to practice calligraphy and is inspired by Yakut

who lived in Baghdad 800 years before Ali was born. Just as traditional stories tell of Yakut going to his tower and using calligraphy to comfort himself in times of conflict, so Ali does the same when Baghdad is bombed. This traditional art is described through both a modern-day boy and a historical figure whose work is still remembered in this part of the world. Both use calligraphy to cope with the tensions and uncertainties of war. A closing metaphor of the difficulty in writing the word “peace” versus writing the word “war” sends a strong message about the necessary effort to achieve peace.

The previously mentioned, *A Place Where Sunflowers Grow*, is another example of the arts as a source of comfort during challenging times. Mari doesn’t understand why she is sent from her home to the internment camp, but drawing becomes a joy to look forward to in her daily life.

As a cultural bridge, the arts connect generations

Times are changing, and living in a “New World” adds to the difficulty of keeping one’s own culture alive. In *A Song for Ba* (Yee & Wang 2004), Wei Lim wants to follow his father and grandfather in being part of the Chinese opera. However, Ba, his father, is troubled by the lack of public interest in the opera. Additionally, his fleeting opportunities to play the larger and more demanding male roles have delegated him to take female parts even though his voice struggles to do this. Wei Lim’s grandfather has secretly taught him how to sing these parts, and it is Wei that comes to his father’s rescue in assisting his performance as well as reflecting on the ongoing effort to maintain this cultural aspect of their lives. Realizing that historical and cultural contexts differ from generation to generation is pivotal for readers to potentially recognize, later on, the need to redefine “the ways in which art and literature were produced, experienced and valued” (Malpas 2013: 69) during a given historical period. Also, when one generation realizes what is culturally important to a previous generation, a strong lesson in why history matters has occurred.

The arts provide a venue for telling one’s story

One way of connecting generations as shared above is that of telling one’s life story, so it is never forgotten. In *Memories of Survival* (Krinitz & Steinhardt 2005) Esther Krinitz survived the Holocaust, but her stories remind readers and viewers of the horrific events that millions experienced. At the age of 50, she decided to tell her life story in embroidered panels that included some description of her own. She created a visual reminder of the horrific events and her daughter decided to place this in a book to share with readers. The actual panels are in a museum, but the reproductions in the book capture the details and emotions of Krinitz as a young

girl. Her art was a way of telling her story but also a way of preserving this historic event “lest it be forgotten.”

In *Show Way*, Jacqueline Woodson (Woodson & Talbott 2005) shares her own heritage as she traces stories of her ancestry from the early days of slavery in the United States to present times through the traditional art of quilt making. Of course, quilt making served also as informational tools with hidden messages sewn within for slaves to follow in their escape to freedom prior to and during the Civil War, so the role of the arts in this book has layers of significance in the lives of those within the narrative. Woodson shares in carefully created dialect the “show way” art of her ancestors that continues in her own writing as a “show way” to readers. The notion of quilts as symbolic messages is acknowledged by Helen Ball, who states (2008: 365):

In some cases quilts are used as subversive acts – as a medium for the expression of resistance, rage, grief, and the celebration. The irony is that while these stories were created, not a word needed to be said. For many, quilts are merely beautiful presentations of colors and patterns, but to those who know how to read them, they contain complex stories and meanings.

Another book that takes readers to a slavery era is *Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave* (Hill and Collier 2010). The story of Dave, a slave whose task was that of making large pottery pieces, is told in short lyrical verse and richly created images that reflect an individual of both extreme strength and warmth. Although the description here reveals the art of pottery as both a gift and passion, we realize that while the evidence of Dave’s talent lives on today in the artifacts that remain, his passion has to be contextualized in the culture and ideology of the times. Nevertheless, what Laban Carrick Hill brings to the attention of readers about Dave are the short lyrical lines engraved on the bottom of his work. Although it was highly unusual at this time for a slave to write, or at least for slaves who could write to reveal themselves as such, this touch of verbal art imprinted on the clay art provides another example of the arts as significant to culture. In this case, Dave’s voice found life beyond his own through his engraved pottery that can still be seen and read. The author provides examples of Dave’s lyrical lines and where they were found at the end of the poetic historical account.

The art of lyrics is an ancient one that continues in many forms throughout history: “Lyric language is often grounded in the particular and has been described as resonant and embodied” (Neilsen 2008: 95). Neilsen continues to acknowledge that lyric language is marginalized by some since it is associated with the personal or imaginative. But she continues by stating a powerful notion by Zwicky that “we need to recognize that imagination allows us to enter the experience of another without appropriation, ownership, or reductiveness” (2003: 95). Such a belief can

be applied to any experience with literature and is of special note in this inquiry as the books discussed here ask readers to consider the personal connections of characters to the arts.

Conclusions

Returning to the theoretical lens undergirding this inquiry, New Historicism, any exploration into historical and social implications of the arts must be prefaced with the understanding that historical artists are using their talents and creative imaginations in the context of the social discourses of their cultural eras: “The work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society” (Greenblatt 1989: 12). While this concept may be beyond the developmental parameters of the children reading these stories, educators can indeed turn to historical contexts for explanations of how and why certain events, emotions, and dialogue led to the artistic engagement at the heart of such stories.

Maxine Greene describes the arts as public spaces for social transformation. However, she also recognizes that “of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions” (2000: 3). Children’s literature can invite readers into situations and events, both past and present, where their imaginations flourish if such spaces are created by educators. These spaces need to be supported, however, by insights into historical contexts that invite the reader to suspend his or her disbelief while imaginatively contemplating other realities.

Learning about other people, both within one’s local community and the global community is clearly implied in the selected stories shared here – stories that represent other cultural narratives that exist across developmental levels of readers and across genre. Engaging in thoughtful discussions, asking critical questions of their reading, relating the contents of literature to contemporary people and events, and finding personal connections to the arts as a cultural medium are possible outcomes when teachers use such books to empower students. Perceiving the arts as natural, functional sources for cultural insights, dissemination, and individual growth becomes a potential goal in classrooms where literature empowers young readers. The diversity of people and situations serves as demonstrations to readers that their own cultural identities can flourish within their artistic passions.

While this study was focused on literature accessible within the United States, the notion of the inseparable relationship between the arts and culture is a universal belief. One overarching theme arising from this analysis is that engagement in

the arts knows no boundaries – socioeconomic, geographical, race, historical, or gender. This notion cuts across all books offered to young readers today where the arts are significant to cultural lives. As these narratives potentially serve to invite young readers to realize the significance of the arts in their own lives, they can also realize their significance for others in the global community.

Literature invites readers to immerse themselves into storyworlds to gain insights about how people live, feel, and think around the world – to develop emotional connections and empathy as well as knowledge. These connections go beyond the surface knowledge of food, dance, clothing, folklore and facts about a country to the values and beliefs that lie at the core of each culture (Short 2011: 130).

As educators everywhere expand the notion of literacy to include the many ways we understand and communicate with the world around us, insight into the role of the arts becomes critical in building knowledge of past and present cultures, and understanding the sociocultural contexts that frame the extent and depth of our knowledge. Children’s literature can invite young readers into such insights as well as the realization of the potential of the arts to build personal identity and cultural expression. While educators of all types entertain the arts for aesthetic enjoyment, or rather let the arts entertain them, the cultural significance that ensures the continuation of this entertainment also positions it at the heart of historical events and personal endeavors of artists.

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Važnost umjetnosti u kulturi: učenje iz dječje književnosti

Kulturni studiji često se oslanjaju na umjetnost da bi otkrili tradicije, povijest, ideologije i ostale aspekte određene skupine. Međutim, u kojemu se trenutku i na koji način od djece traži razmišljanje o važnosti umjetnosti u kulturnome životu pojedinca? Ovaj rad istražuje kako dječja književnost, osim kao samosvojna umjetnička forma, može ponuditi priče koje neraskidivo smještaju umjetnost u središte životnoga iskustva neke osobe – definirajući kulturu, tradiciju, obiteljsku povijest te vlastiti identitet. Istraživanje je usmjereno na dvanaest slikovnica, dječjih knjiga u kojima se likovi povezuju s nekom umjetnošću na poseban i svrsishodan način, pri čemu se svaki lik suočava sa životnim izazovom koji je posljedica strasti za nekom umjetnošću ili s izazovom za koji umjetnost nudi rješenje. S pomoću novohistorističke književne teorije, dopunjene društvenom semiotikom, kritička analiza sadržaja ovih knjiga otkriva njihov potencijal za snažan i autentičan uvid u ulogu umjetnosti u kulturi pojedinca. Dok se u obrazovanju koncept pismenosti proširuje različitim načinima na koje razumijemo svijet koji nas okružuje i na koje s njime komuniciramo, uloga umjetnosti postaje presudna u izgradnji znanja o prošlim i sadašnjim kulturama te za razumijevanje društvenoga i kulturnoga konteksta koji uokviruju opseg i dubinu našega znanja. „Samo odbijanjem razdvajanja umjetničkoga izraza od drugih formi društvene i kulturne interakcije, ističu novohistoristi, umjetnost ili književnost mogu postati smislenima i važnima za sve nas“ (Malpas 2013: 67).

Ključne riječi: kritička analiza sadržaja, identitet, novi historizam, slikovnica, umjetnost

Wichtigkeit der Kunst in der Kultur: Lernen durch Kinderliteratur

Kulturwissenschaften greifen oft nach der Kunst, um die Merkmale der Tradition, der Geschichte, der Ideologie und sonstiger Aspekte des Zusammenlebens einer Gruppe festzuhalten. Es stellt sich jedoch die Frage, in welchem Augenblick und auf welche Weise man von den Kindern verlangt, dass sie über die Wichtigkeit der Kunst im kulturellen Leben des Einzelnen nachdenken? Im Beitrag wird die Art und Weise untersucht, auf welche die Kinder- und Jugendliteratur Geschichten anbietet, worin die Kunst zum Mittelpunkt der Lebenserfahrungen wird, indem sie Kultur, Tradition, Familiengeschichten sowie eigene Identität bestimmt. Es werden zwölf Bilder- und Kinderbücher besprochen, worin die Gestalten mit einer der Kunstformen verbunden und zugleich mit Lebensherausforderungen konfrontiert werden, welche das Ergebnis ihrer Begeisterung mit der Kunst sind oder eine Herausforderung darstellen, wofür die Kunst eine Lösung anbietet. Anhand der durch die Theorie der gesellschaftlichen Semiotik unterstützten neuhistoristischen Literaturtheorie wird der Inhalt dieser Bücher einer kritischen Analyse unterzogen und ihr Potenzial für die Erlangung von Einblicken in die Rolle der Kunst in der Kultur des Einzelnen festgestellt. Während im Bildungssystem das Alphabetismuskonzept auf verschiedene Weisen, auf die wir die umgebende Welt verstehen und mit ihr kommunizieren, erweitert wird, wird die Kunst zum entscheidenden Faktor im Ausbau der Wissensbestände über die vergangenen und gegenwärtigen Kulturen sowie für das Verständnis des gesellschaftlichen und kulturellen Kontextes, welcher den Umfang und die Tiefe unserer Wissens umrahmt. „Nur dadurch, dass man die Abgliederung des Kunstausdruckes von anderen Formen gesellschaftlicher und kultureller Interaktion ablehnt, erlangen Kunst oder Literatur nach den Neuhistoristen für uns Sinn und Wichtigkeit“ (Malpas 2013: 67).

Schlüsselwörter: kritische Inhaltsanalyse, Identität, Neuhistorismus, Bilderbuch, Kunst