

“Risky Business: Reading African American Children’s and Young Adult Literature with an Aesthetic of Empathy”

Over the last decade the discourse revolving around an aesthetic of empathy has had resurgence among art historians and philosophers. This interest has emerged in the field of children’s literature as well, allowing for a revitalized critical trajectory that probes the ways in which aesthetic empathy or narrative empathy is a force in the didactic possibilities found within children’s literature to reorient our society’s understanding of humanity. Employing readings of children’s literature that advocate an aesthetic and/or narrative empathy is a start to addressing the moments of shaping and reshaping fictional and nonfictional narratives concerning social justice. However, we would do well to extend this approach further by engaging aesthetic empathy’s ability to undo literary spectatorship and a literary positivism (an approach shaped by a closed close reading that insists on *universal* or idealistic citizenship readings that rely on facts obvious to a dominant readership alone; these readings tend to ignore pivotal nuances, or specters of terror, most meaningful to readerships drawn from marginalized communities). Privileged mis-reading is based, in part, on a deceptive “diversity” of sameness. According to this illusion, learning to use tools of reading correctly inducts the reader into a universal reading community that cannot misread. However, this approach erases and sanitizes the specter narratives we would rather dismiss. In her most recent work, *In the Wake: Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe has argued forcefully in these hours of digressive civil rights measures and police brutality, that African Americans have become “carriers of terror,” and if they have become “carriers of terror,” their narratives have become “carriers of terror.”

African American Children’s and Young Adult terror-carrying narratives are most at risk of mis-readings when the narrative has a universal appeal. There is no danger in universalism; there is, however, harm in raising a critical hierarchy that privileges the universal reading above the reading of terror because it is most accessible to dominant populations. This practice is even more concerning when we live in a world where African American authors find themselves creating narratives that are triage in nature—an attempt to stop the bleeding, if not literally than literarily by disrupting the palimpsest.

Using Connie Porter’s *Imani All Mine*, I will expand our understanding and practices of aesthetic empathy. Using a more nuanced approach to aesthetic empathy, I argue Porter’s sentimental repetition returns to the African American sermonic tradition, becoming a narrative litany for Imani and other African American girls who carry the terror of systemic racism and its residue of shame in variations. In an age where “blood and soil” chants reverberate at white nationalist rallies and in official policies, we need a critical approach to African American children’s and young adult literature that helps decenter privileged readers in their readings and leads to greater empathy that is transformative for the better.