

Using Testimonial Response to Frame the Challenges and Possibilities of Risky Historical Texts

James Damico · Laura Apol

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Abstract Literature that vividly and explicitly describes (often in the form of testimonies from one or more characters) traumatic and/or catastrophic events of human history poses particular challenges for readers. This article proposes *testimonial response* as one approach to responding to these “risky historical texts.” By way of introducing testimonial response, the article outlines a three-part framework. After considering how testimonial response extends and complements other traditional approaches to literature response to give readers a fuller experience of risky historical literature, the article applies the framework of testimonial response to the picture book, *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*. The article concludes with implications for bringing risky historical literature and *testimonial response* into the classroom.

Keywords Reader response · Testimony · Witness · History · From Slave Ship to Freedom Road

Main Article

Scholars and educators have been examining the benefits and challenges of using children’s and young adult literature that deals explicitly with complicated social issues, such as war, slavery, and racism. Simon and Armitage-Simon (1995) use the term “risky stories” to describe this literature, arguing that these texts, with their focus on topics such as the Middle Passage, the displacement of indigenous children in 19th and 20th century Australia (Kennedy 2004), the persecution and slaughter of indigenous peoples in North America, the Holocaust, and the internment of Japanese-Americans during

J. Damico (✉)
Language Education, Indiana University, 3028 W.W. Wright School of Education, 201 N. Rose Ave,
Bloomington, IN 47405, USA
e-mail: damico@indiana.edu

L. Apol
Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA

World War II, “graphically deal with degradation, pain and death” (Eppert 2000, p. 28). Understood in this way, this type of literature is comprised of historical texts that vividly describe, often in the form of testimonies from one or more characters, traumatic if not catastrophic events of human history—events that are linked to systemic forces and factors.¹ This understanding shapes Baer’s (2000) use of the term “children’s literature of atrocity,” Robertson’s (1997) use of the term “literatures of trauma,” as well as Eppert’s (2000) use of the term “narratives of historical witness,” which emphasizes how the texts “bear witness” to horrendous human acts.

Drawing from these various labels, in this paper we have chosen to use the term “risky historical texts” in an attempt to convey not only the risks involved in encountering this literature, but also to communicate ways these texts give voice to human history. When it comes to classroom connections, teachers can use risky historical texts for a variety of reasons. A primary purpose is to engender “critical conversations” (Leland and Harste 2000) about complicated topics. This can bolster readers’ self-awareness and guide them “from the unknown to the knowable” as they confront and explore the “truths” of racism and other injustices (Ballentine and Hill 2000, p. 11). Using risky historical texts can cultivate key critical thinking skills as readers move “beyond their existing understandings, to become more critical of self and society and develop greater empathy for others” (Housser 1999, p. 212). As “recovered histories” (Simon 2005), risky historical texts can also be used to shape students’ learning of key historical content and enable them to connect events of the past to the present. This cultivates what Simon (2000) calls “historical memory,” where readers not only learn about traumatic historical events on a systemic scale but also come to better understand “the ongoing implications and effects of catastrophic suffering in the world today” (Robertson 1997, p. 462). The pedagogical purpose here is for students to engage in “remembrance practices” (Simon 2005) or to be positioned “against forgetting” (Forche 1993).

While many of these scholars and educators have made arguments advocating the use of risky historical texts in classrooms, empirical studies that think about using these books with students—especially elementary school students—remain scarce. There are some studies that spotlight how readers engage with a range of multicultural (though not necessarily “historically risky”) texts. For example, Enciso (1997) found that a group of predominantly White fourth and fifth graders, for the most part, neglected to seriously engage issues of race when reading the contemporary realistic novel *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli 1990). Möller and Allen (2000), in a study of the ways four fifth grade girls (three African American, one Latina) responded to Mildred Taylor’s text, *The Friendship* (1987) (which could be considered historically risky, as it focuses on racial tensions in the 1930’s American south), documented the “engaged resisting” of the girls, providing evidence that “readers may identify strongly with characters or story events, but resist the feelings of helplessness or danger that this arouses” (2000, p. 172).

One study in particular deliberately brought a historically risky text (a text that will be returned to later in this paper) to elementary students. Heffernan and Lewison (2000) describe how Heffernan, a 3rd grade teacher, successfully guided her students’ responses after reading *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* (Lester 1998). Heffernan and

¹ Some of these texts include *Hiroshima* (Yep 1995), *Hiroshima No Pika* (Maruki 1982), *Shin’s Tricycle* (Kodama 1995), *The Faithful Elephants* (Tsuchiya 1988), *Fleeing the War* (Sharra 1996), *Nightjohn* (Paulsen 1993), *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (Nelson 2005), and *The Final Journey* (Pausewang 1998).

Lewisson's work included asking the students to respond to the book by answering the following questions: What do you want to remember about the book? What surprised you? What questions do you have? What connections can you make to our world today? Heffernan and Lewisson discuss how reading *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* enabled this group of third graders to learn important content previously unknown to them about the enslavement of Africans (e.g., how slaveholders chained slaves on ships and how the slaves were thrown overboard when they were sick). Heffernan and Lewisson also show how reading this text along with others that grappled with social issues led students to make connections to issues in their local contexts, which cultivated a more "problem-posing" approach to curriculum (Freire 1970).

These studies focus primarily on the *readers* of these texts, allowing for increasingly nuanced understandings of the ways students—even very young students—respond to difficult textual content. However, in this paper, we situate our lens more squarely on the text itself and on the challenges that a particular type of text might pose for readers. For example, while Heffernan and Lewisson demonstrate a curricular and instructional use of a risky historical text that centers upon what readers can learn and then do after reading a piece of risky historical literature (as the above questions asked of the students suggest), they do not discuss if there was a pedagogical emphasis on guiding the children to analyze *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* and the complexities embedded in what it and other comparable texts ask of them as readers. We take up this task in this paper. Situating ourselves within the vast and diverse field of reader response theory and criticism (e.g., Marshall 2000; Rosenblatt 1978; Tompkins 1980), we draw upon Iser's concept of the "implied reader" (Iser 1974), defined as "a role a text implies and invites a reader to take on" (Nodelman and Reimer 2003), to theorize the challenges that risky historical texts pose for readers. This attentiveness to the text is based on the view that texts assume an active role in meaning-making transactions with readers, playing a part in constructing or "forming" readers as particular subjects (Bennett 1979). Because "readers not only produce interpretations of texts but are produced as subjects by the texts they read" (Surber 1998, p. 245), and because different types of texts can evoke different responses (Sipe 1999), we believe a close examination of how risky historical texts "work" (Luke and Freebody 1997) is crucial because these texts are often highly complicated—involving issues of war, genocide, and slavery—and "emotionally invasive" (Simon and Armitage-Simon 1995). Very often these texts invite readers to work through a range of conflicting emotions as they are called upon to "bear witness" to events in a story, events frequently depicted in the form of testimonies (Boler 1999; Eppert 2000; Simon and Eppert 1997).

This attention to the text leads us to make the case that we need to build upon and perhaps extend typical understandings of literature response (which most often include personal responses, close reading and textual analysis, and critical reading) when it comes to engaging with risky historical texts. Drawing upon theoretical work on testimony (Boler 1999; Felman and Laub 1992; Simon 2005; Simon and Eppert 1997), we lay out a three-part framework of *testimonial response* to make more explicit the complex challenges embedded in reading and responding to risky historical literature. We then apply this framework to one risky historical picture book, *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* (Lester 1998), and examine how testimonial response complements and builds from other types of response, before concluding with implications for bringing these books and this type of response into the classroom.

While we believe these classroom implications can be felt across primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels of education, we use Heffernan and Lewison as a benchmark and continue in this paper to focus on readers grade 3 (ages 8 and 9) and above. Having young readers in mind, of course, raises questions about the ways children can understand human suffering and traumatic historical events. While comprehensive answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this paper, we proceed with two practical considerations in mind. First, children cannot be completely shielded from human horrors; they are inevitably involved to some degree in making sense of human suffering, as examples of children's literature where young children bear witness to traumatic events—e.g., a concentration camp in *Rose Blanche* (Innocenti 2003) and a repressive dictatorship in *The Composition* (Skarmeta 2000)—can attest. Second, with teachers and researchers using and advocating the use of risky historical texts with young children in classrooms (e.g., Heffernan and Lewison 2000; Leland et al. 1999), a careful and critical look at the workings and dynamics of these texts is necessary.

Testimonial Response

Risky historical literature is in part characterized by its depictions and descriptions of horrendous events in human history, such as genocide, war, and slavery. Because authors, through the voices and experiences of characters (real or fictional), bear witness to these events, each text, or “narrative of historical witness” (Eppert 2000), can be read as a *testimony*. The characters describe their experiences and observations, testifying that the events did take place and often showing the devastating impact of these events. Bearing witness and offering a testimony is not uncomplicated. Drawing on the work of Felman and Laub (1992), Simon notes: “Testimony is a multilayered communicative act, a performance intent on carrying forth memories through the conveyance of a fraught, fragile engagement between consciousness and history” (2000, p. 18). Testimony, as Strojilevich (2006) argues, is also best understood as literary, with its “disruptive memories, discontinuities, blanks, silences and ambiguities” (p. 704). Testimonial response, then, is perhaps best understood as ethically bound practices where readers engage deeply with dilemmas of literary characters in order to “stretch [those readers’] own capacities for thinking about how life should be lived” (Booth 1988, p. 187). This gives priority to what Phelan (2005) describes as “ethical effects” of stories, which include what readers are asked to value and how they respond to textual invitations to assume these values (p. ix).

Thus, risky historical texts not only act as testimonies; at the same time, they often call for a more complicated *testimonial response* in readers—a response we believe is characterized by three interrelated components: historical engagement, emotional investment, and a collectivist orientation.

Historical Engagement

The concept of historical engagement acknowledges that testimonial response entails historical sense-making, requiring readers to see, hear, and deeply connect events of the past to the present (Simon 2005; Simon and Eppert 1997). Simon calls this “a fertile commingling between present consciousness and the staging of evidentiary traces of past presence” (2000, p. 10). Past events are not deemed distant and disconnected from

contemporary social issues. Using the Holocaust as an example, Felman and Laub (1992) point out how this is

not an event encapsulated in the past, but [is] a history which is essentially not over, a history whose repercussions are not simply omnipresent (whether consciously or not) in all our cultural activities, but whose traumatic consequences are still actively evolving in today's political, historical, cultural and artistic scene (p. xiv).

Similar arguments can be made about the enslavement of Africans and the slaughter and displacement of American Indians—historical events with reverberations that can still be traced and felt in our current society.

This sort of moving within and across temporal boundaries signifies the importance of memory and remembrance work through witnessing; as Cohen (1994) puts it:

Witnessing is an event of two disjunctive temporalities, an event in which another's time disrupts mine. It is a new time, an interstitial time, neither mine nor yours; an extraordinary disjuncture of I and other, an experience of proximity that initiates an "infinite distance without distance." (cited in Simon 2000, p. 19)

Historical engagement, then, is not just about historical events and the impact of these events on people who experienced them. Historical engagement is also about how readers exist in an ongoing witnessing relationship with the people or characters from the past—how readers work productively in the conceptual spaces between "I and other," as well as between the past and the present.

Emotional Investment

In addition to historical engagement, risky historical texts also invoke emotional involvement from readers, challenging them to enter into the texts and forge relationships with the characters who share their testimonials. Readers are not passive and distant spectators; instead, they are positioned to bear witness to events in the text, and, in so doing, these readers often experience strong, even conflicting, emotions in response to the literature. In other words, these texts compel readers to confront complicated issues that can lead to a range of internal conflicts as they strive to understand competing emotions like sadness, anger, guilt, and shame.

Drawing on psychoanalytic theories and practices, Laub (1992) outlines the specific challenges for readers with this type of response, pointing out that the reader who is bearing witness to events in the text needs "to feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony" (p. 57–58). Similarly, Robertson (1997) describes how risky historical texts, or "literatures of trauma" as she calls them, "engage 'sleeping' readers and threaten to disturb the pleasures of forgetful being" (p. 460). Making an explicit link between the past and present, Robertson contends that readers can no longer shield themselves and "seek refuge from discomfort by imagining that mass suffering is confined to a 'safe' or 'finished' past that doesn't have continuing implications for human relations in the present" (p. 460–461). Instead, readers must engage with the issues on a deep emotional level, which can be difficult work, as readers are encouraged to confront disturbing issues and emotions. As a result, testimonial reader response, and the emotional investment it requires, is often, for all involved, "fraught with emotional landmines" (Boler 1999, p. 179).

Collectivist Orientation

Finally, testimonial response also involves a collectivist orientation. When engaging with risky historical literature, readers bear both individual and collective responsibilities. As individuals, readers engage with the content of the texts, forging connections between the past and present through relationships with the characters who share their testimonies. However, readers do not read in isolation, devoid of a social location and corresponding affiliations with particular racial, ethnic, gendered, economic, sexual, and religious groups. In fact, these affiliations are powerfully present in responses to risky historical literature.

For example, consider one of the authors of this article, James. His responses to risky historical literature (and all texts) are shaped by his experiences as a European American, male, educator and professor, being raised Catholic, etc. While these social locations are not static or deterministic, they do interact with the ways authors/texts position him as a reader. A text depicting the slaughter of indigenous peoples in North America, for example, addresses him as European American, not American Indian, and encourages him to see himself as part of this ethnic group.

In this sense, risky historical literature entails “collective witnessing” rather than individualized self-reflection (Boler 1999, p. 176), and collective reading or witnessing is fundamentally relational, requiring readers to engage with texts and see each other in relation to broader social identities and histories (i.e., cultural, racial, ethnic, gendered, etc.). This corresponds to a social and systemic framework for understanding risky historical texts, since any individualistic framing of larger social issues like genocide or slavery is both insufficient and inaccurate.

Summary

We believe that testimonial response—with its focus on historical engagement, emotional investment, and a collectivist orientation—is particularly well suited to risky historical literature given the unique qualities of the literature itself, the particular power and purpose of this literature, and the challenges that the literature poses both for readers and for teachers. To demonstrate the ways testimonial response addresses the challenges that risky historical texts pose for readers, it seems helpful to examine one text in some depth. To do so, we have selected the picture book that Heffernan and Lewison (2000) used in their work with third grade students, *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*.

From Slave Ship to Freedom Road (1998) is an example of a risky historical picture book that clearly invites a testimonial response.² In this text, the author, Julius Lester, and the illustrator, Rod Brown, implicitly and explicitly ask readers to engage with the

² We selected this text for several reasons. A primary reason is that educators (e.g., Heffernan and Lewison 2000; Leland et al. 1999) have identified this picture book as particularly effective in exposing readers to injustices about the Middle Passage often overlooked or covered superficially in classrooms. Our decision to use *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* was also informed by our own reading and responses to this text. We were impressed with how the author and illustrator chose to deal with the topic of slavery in such direct and visceral ways—ways that were especially evident when juxtaposed with a different, less explicit, more sterile text about slavery (Apol 1998). We appreciated the ways the text spoke directly to us as readers, challenging us to think and feel deeply about slavery, and how it encouraged readers to confront feelings of guilt. (We also recognized and explored the problematic nature of some of the text; for a more thorough and critical discussion of this text, please see Apol 1998).

text historically, to invest themselves emotionally, and to adopt a collectivist orientation. Throughout the text, Lester's narrative and Brown's paintings describe the horrific exploitation of enslaved Africans, depicting and describing, in graphic detail, Africans being transported to America, being bought and sold on auction blocks and being whipped, beaten, and hung. Lester and Brown also show how slaves toiled on plantations, recharged themselves in secret spiritual meetings, escaped via the Underground Railroad, fought for the Union during the Civil War, and grappled with the ambiguous consequences of emancipation.

Through the power of written text and artistically rendered images, Lester and Brown challenge readers on each page to participate in the terror-stricken experiences of slaves. To this end, Lester frequently addresses the reader directly in the text. For example, he imagines a dialogue among three African slaves who have been captured and chained near the bottom of a slave ship. He then asks readers, "What would it be like not to know where you were going, or what was going to happen to you when you got there?" (p. 9). Later, Lester invites readers to interact with one of the slaves in his text, an older slave named Tibby, who is depicted in Brown's painting with red, watery eyes, wearing tattered clothes, and with blood and cotton congealing to his fingers. Lester writes: "Tibby looks as if he is more there than here. What do you think he is seeing? Or who? If you could ask him a question, what would it be?... Go ahead. Close your eyes. Ask him a question. Then wait. If you are patient and listen closely, he will answer you" (p. 18). These questions, posed by Lester in this way, encourage readers to stop, think and imagine, which, along with the graphic imagery in the imagined dialogue and Brown's bold and powerful paintings, invoke immediate engagement with the text.

Imagination Exercises

Although Lester addresses readers directly throughout the text, it is in the "Imagination Exercises" interspersed throughout the text that readers are called to even stronger (i.e., "testimonial") response. The first of these Imagination Exercises is "For White People," the second is "For African Americans," and the third is "For Whites and Blacks." This explicit naming and categorizing of readers demonstrates from the outset how the three interrelated components of testimonial response—historical engagement, emotional investment, and a collectivist orientation—begin to come into play as readers encounter these sections of *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*.³

Exercise One

Lester labels the first imagination exercise, "IMAGINATION EXERCISE ONE: For White People." The painting that accompanies this exercise depicts a group of African men, chained from their necks to their wrists, wearing nothing but loincloths. Given their close proximity to one another, the men are probably chained to each other as well. The expressions on the men's faces convey anguish, anger, and pain. Lester's written text for the exercise reads:

³ These three imagination exercises are in many ways unique; authors and texts do not typically confront readers so directly. Yet, these overt imagination exercises are particularly useful in helping lay out the complex challenges of reading this kind of text. While scholars, teachers, and readers need to tease out similar challenges that can be less overt with other risky historical texts, the ensuing analysis of the imagination exercises in *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* can offer some guidance.

It is a sunny day. Suddenly a spaceship lands and people of a skin color you have never seen come out of the ship and drag you aboard – you, your family, neighbors, and friends. The ship takes off and flies for three months. When it lands, you are in a place you never knew existed and the people speak a language you have never heard. They have weapons that hurt, maim, and kill. They give you a name – Mammy, Remus, Jemima, Sambo. They do not care what your real name is or who you really are. You are their slave and you exist to work for them.

Imagine a rage so fierce it would scorch the earth, leaving behind only a giant cinder to circle the sun. You do not have to be black to be this angry. Your ancestors need not have been Africans. You need only wonder: How would I feel if that happened to me?

When we can imagine the hurt and anger of another, we have an understanding in the heart. When we understand in the heart, each of us is less alone. (p. 10)

This exercise targets White readers and contains two parts. The first, set apart by italicized print, is a scenario that Lester creates to simulate the terrifying experience of being captured and enslaved. Here, Lester poignantly describes the violence of this experience, portraying the stripping away of identity, and the pain, torture and murder of enslaved Africans. Other word choices (e.g., “suddenly” and “never”) ask the reader to imagine a scenario that is both bewildering and chilling. In the second part of the exercise, the last two paragraphs, Lester offers explicit imagination instructions. By directly addressing White readers (“you” appears four times in the second paragraph), Lester insists that White readers imagine the pains of enslavement (e.g., “the hurt and anger of another”) because only this kind of work will yield “understanding in the heart.”

Written entirely in the present tense (“It *is* a sunny day...), the Exercise insists on what is the first aspect of testimonial response: historical engagement. In collapsing a sense of present and past, the text asks White readers to imagine and experience the scenario as if it were currently taking place. This use of present tense suggests the critical need for White readers to enter into the historical relationship between Whites and Africans as part of the process of healing or understanding. This presumed call to bridge the gulf between the past and present might also suggest a way to preempt potentially defensive reactions of White readers, reactions like “Slavery happened a long time ago, so it has nothing to do with me.”

The second aspect of testimonial response—emotional involvement—is particularly crucial in this Exercise. By using language that is poetic and sharp (e.g., “Imagine a rage so fierce it would scorch the earth, leaving behind only a giant cinder to circle the sun”) and by asking the provocative question, “How would I feel if this happened to me?”, Lester clearly does not intend this exercise to be a harmless thought experiment. In fact, he implores his White readers to become enraged by what happens in this simulation.

Finally, the Exercise also seems to address White readers both as individuals and as a collective. Lester wants individual readers to insert themselves into the text. The use of “you” throughout the Exercise seems to be more of an individual you (e.g., “How would *I* feel if that happened to *me*?”). However, by creating the Exercise *for White People*, Lester also has a collective in mind. White readers do not respond solely as individuals; they also exist and can be identified as part of a larger racial group. Moreover, it seems noteworthy that Lester shifts to “we” in the final paragraph—a “we” which might indicate that we can best talk about “we” *after* White individuals acknowledge (and possibly accept some responsibility for) slavery.

Exercise Two

Lester labels the second Imagination Exercise, “IMAGINATION EXERCISE TWO: For African Americans.” Two paintings accompany this Exercise. In one, a large and muscular slave named Mammy sits on a stool while washing clothes in a washtub. A young White boy and a White baby in a bassinet are to her immediate right. In the other painting, an older slave, Sarah Jane, hoes the field while another slave works right behind her. A White man with hands on hips stands looking at them from a distant porch. Lester’s text for this Imagination Exercise reads:

Let’s be honest, black people. Many of us are ashamed that we are descendants of slaves, aren’t we? Something inside of us cringes at the sight of these black women washing the white man’s clothes and hoeing the white man’s field. But what if the shame is ours and not theirs?

Look at Mammy and Sarah Jane. Look at the power in Mammy’s shoulders and arms. Look at her feet and how solidly they rest upon the earth. Look at her face. What do you see there? Defiance? Anger? Self-possession? Now look at Sarah Jane. She looks resigned, but is she? You are free, but are you? (p. 15)

As with the first Imagination Exercise, Lester pushes for a type of historical engagement that spans the distance between the present and the past. Written in present tense, this Exercise directs contemporary African Americans to see *themselves* in their ancestors, and Lester suggests that this process requires emotional investment and understanding—in this case a more profound understanding of shame. In the second paragraph of the Exercise, Lester suggests one damaging consequence of slavery is a legacy of hurt and shame that continues to exist in current times. And to acknowledge and deal with this shame, Lester demands that African American readers “look” closely (the command “look” appears five times) at the slaves depicted in Rod Brown’s paintings. One way Lester challenges African American readers is by impugning their understandings of slaves who might be regarded as compliant. Mammy and Sarah Jane may not have openly resisted or rebelled against their masters, but Lester suggests they cannot be blamed, pitied, or distanced from the emotional and psychological experiences of contemporary African Americans.

Similar to Exercise One, African American readers are also encouraged to respond both as individuals and as a collective. As individual readers engage with the text, the imperatives in the second paragraph (e.g., “Look at Mammy and Sarah Jane. Look at the power in Mammy’s shoulders and arms”) impel their critical self-examination. There is also an unequivocal focus on the collective, as the opening text indicates (“Let’s be honest, black people. Many of us are ashamed that we are descendants of slaves, aren’t we?”). Here, Lester positions himself as an African American and clearly indicates that African Americans as a group, like “Whites” in Exercise One, also have work to do.

Exercise Three

Lester labels the third Imagination Exercise, “IMAGINATION EXERCISE THREE: For Whites and Blacks.” Two paintings accompany this Exercise. In one, a slave hangs from a rope tied to his wrists. His back is exposed, bloodied from numerous lashes of a whip. In the second painting, we see the shadow of a slave who has been hung. Two slaves embrace each other underneath the shadow, one gazing up at the hanging dead man. Lester’s text reads:

I am tempted to ask you to imagine the pain and suffering of slaves such as these who were beaten unmercifully, slaves who were murdered. But that is too easy. We know slavery was cruel and we are ready, even eager, to lather sympathy on the poor slaves.

So I will ask something more difficult. Imagine not the victim, but the aggressor. We may think that we would never whip someone until their flesh cried blood. But what if you would not be punished for doing it? What if your peers approved and deemed you honorable and good for beating someone? What then?

Evil is as mesmerizing as a snake's eyes. Though difficult, we must imagine our capacity for evil.

Unless and until we do, unseen shadows of hung men will blot the walls of our homes. (pp. 22–23)

Rather than sympathizing with slaves, Lester asks readers to engage in “something more difficult,” challenging both White and Black readers to see the aggressors within themselves. White readers who might position slave owners as distant “Others” and who believe that those slaveowners do not resemble themselves in any way must re-examine this idea. And Black readers must likewise interrogate their own potential for being aggressors. Readers need to “imagine our capacity for evil,” which suggests that Lester wants all readers, regardless of racial identity, to recognize that the capability to carry out evil actions is shared.

As with the first two Imagination Exercises, this one bridges any distance between the present and past. Also written in present tense, this Exercise communicates that evil actions (such as slavery) are not to be viewed as occurring solely in the distant past; they are also thriving in the present. It is easy to agree that slavery was wrong and to respond with statements like “We’d never do something like that today,” but Lester refuses to leave such a statement unchallenged. His use of “we” throughout this exercise unites readers in this collective effort to process the repercussions of slavery. By situating the exercise for Whites and Blacks in the present, Lester summons Black and White readers as a collective to chart a path toward understanding, reconciliation, and change. Again, this work is not fueled by pitying slaves from a distance; rather it comes through understanding that the route to reconciliation requires embracing our common humanity, a humanity rooted in a culture and social context where racial oppression and violence are still with us and within us.

Taken together, both the dominant narrative as well as the Imagination Exercises in this picture book require intense response on the part of the audience. Lester and Brown ask readers to bear significant responsibilities when engaging with both the text and the illustrations—responsibilities that are understood more fully through the historical engagement, emotional investment, and collectivist orientation of testimonial response.

Other Response Approaches to Risky Historical Texts

In the case of risky historical literature, testimonial response does not replace or supersede, but rather extends and enriches more traditional classroom approaches to literature response. Consider, for a moment, three other types of response often employed by classroom teachers: personal response, textual response, and critical response—each a legitimate and productive way of engaging with literature. Looking at

each of these responses (albeit briefly and necessarily superficially here) makes visible what these approaches afford and what testimonial response offers to unify and make more explicit a variety of ways to promote students' deep engagement with risky historical literature.⁴

Personal Response

One common approach with a risky historical text is for a reader to bring to the reading his or her reaction to or firsthand experience of such an event. With *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, the reader might recall his or her own personal relationship to slavery, as a descendant of slaves, slave owners, abolitionists, etc. The reader might connect firsthand to the sense of terror or the fear that is expressed in the book by exploring times when he or she has experienced fear. Or the reader might bring up other things he or she has heard or read about slavery and how those readings made them feel.

These are legitimate personal responses, but none of them parallels in a deep sense the issues that lie at the heart of the slavery experience. And, in fact, when students provide personal response to risky historical literature as an end in itself, often the richness of the literature (and the power of its message) is overlooked. Even if a student's personal experience maps on more directly to the literature (in this case, a student is a descendant of slaves), a one-to-one correlation between the reader's life experience and the reader's response to the text is necessarily limited.

Thus, it can be the case that personal response—when used as an end in itself—may stray from the text (connecting only to a piece of what the text contains); it may devalue the complexity and potential power of the literature; or it may put the reader in the difficult position of requiring personal disclosure of what may be a very private and/or painful experience. Ultimately, personal response is a piece of a rich and engaged response to risky historical literature. Considering the framework of testimonial response more explicitly, we can see that while personal response might attend to the ways *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* invokes an emotional investment from readers, it does not foreground the import of historical engagement (working productively within and across the past and present) or a collectivist orientation (aligning oneself with broader social groups).

Textual Response

Another common approach to working with a text like *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* is to focus on its textual elements. This would lead to talk about the genre of the book and how this book fits (or does not fit) the characteristics of that genre (historical fiction, for instance). Students might also discuss the literary elements of the text; they might look at the setting, discuss the shape of the plot (what is the conflict? what is the climax?), or examine the way characters are developed (are these round or flat characters? Do they change over time? Are they believable and fully developed?).

⁴ It is not our intent nor within the scope of this article to go into much detail about what we have termed "more traditional modes of response." We acknowledge that our "gloss" of these types of response is extremely limited and oversimplified; while we recognize that in our oversimplification we run the risk of mis-representing these types of response, we feel it is important, in spite of these limitations, to use such generalizations to demonstrate how testimonial response brings together and adds to other more traditional types of literature response.

While these are important ways of understanding a piece of literature, and while each of them can lead to more complicated conversations about a text, in and of themselves they are only part of what is possible with risky historical literature. In privileging literary analysis, this approach requires a reader to parse a piece of literature into manageable elements, often without engaging the larger issues that the text brings out. Readers may understand how a piece of literature “works” on a textual level but never grapple with the demands risky historical literature makes on its audience.

Again, when textual response is considered in light of the framework of testimonial response, it seems that this approach might begin to address issues of historical engagement through an emphasis on historical fiction or biography, yet the deeper implications—i.e., the emotional challenges that “bearing witness” entails and reading from a collectivist orientation—are not addressed explicitly.

Critical Response

A third approach, less commonly found in classrooms, is critical response, which involves the reader stepping back from the text to look at the ways authors, contexts, and literary elements attempt to bring about a desired effect in the reader. Put another way, successful critical reading requires that readers *disengage* and distance themselves from the text in order to bring into sharper focus both the explicit and the implicit ideologies of the text. In this sense, critical response privileges a rational, intellectual engagement with a piece of literature, asking readers to identify and often *read against* the message the text contains.

Consider once again *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*. Identifying the messages of the text is clearly important, and considering how those messages are communicated to readers (what ideologies are at work? Who has power? Whose voice is not heard? Are there subtexts that stand in opposition to the explicit message of the text? What choices does a reader have as he or she resists, complies with, or negotiates the textual agendas?) is a valuable enterprise for thoughtful readers. In fact, in the case of *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, a reader would want to critically examine the binary construction of race as “White” and “Black” in the text, raise questions about Lester assuming that contemporary African American readers will be ashamed by images of their enslaved ancestors, as well as think about Lester’s heavy-handed approach in the imagination exercises and in the graphic violence that the text contains. However, this approach, when used in isolation from other approaches, might feel sterile, esoteric, and emotionally removed from the center and theme of the book. By keeping literature response within the “safe” realm of the intellect and the head, the reader can distance from the more emotionally gripping aspects of the text (for instance, the cost in human lives along with the terror, grief, and lack of power that are part of the experience of being enslaved). Often, this particular kind of response can feel like a violation of the text, particularly if the text contains troubling and/or emotionally powerful material.

Considering the framework of testimonial response more explicitly, critical response begins to attend to the ways a text encourages historical engagement and a collectivist orientation. With an emphasis on how texts position readers to bring about desired effects, a critical response could entail an examination of the ways historical events are portrayed and shaped by contemporary concerns and ideologies, thus inviting readers to explore the ideological relationships between the past and present. Critical response might also promote a collectivist orientation, encouraging readers to interrogate the ways a text positions and places them into broader social groups. Yet, critical response

often does not foreground the deeper and more experiential implications that are embedded in historical engagement (e.g., “bearing witness”), nor does it necessarily depend upon a collectivist orientation. Its focus on disengaging or distancing oneself from the text leaves these deeper, more visceral connections and emotional issues not explored explicitly.

Taken together, these three approaches to text (*personal, textual, and critical*) complement and are complemented by testimonial response as a framework for engaging risky historical literature. This literature, with its powerful and often troubling content, requires more complicated responses than are generally exercised, even by experienced and thoughtful readers and teachers. Testimonial response offers an integrative approach that makes more explicit the complex challenges risky historical texts pose, thus helping guide deeper and more thoughtful engagement with these texts.

Classroom Considerations: Challenges and Possibilities

Simon and Armitage-Simon (1995) contend that authors who create risky historical texts, such as *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, have two basic intentions: first, “to memorialize victims [and to] serve as a lasting memory to those who suffered and were killed”; and, second, “to present a warning that would instill caution and protect against future evil and indifference” (p. 29). They also believe that these authorial intentions are consistent with broader educational goals and purposes, which include developing moral sensibilities about human suffering, cultivating critical understandings of stereotyping and prejudice, and assuming responsibilities to act in ways that promote and protect human rights (p. 29).

However, such defensible authorial intentions and connections to broader educational goals and purposes are not without their own challenges in classrooms, since risky historical texts and testimonial responses place particular demands on students and teachers—demands that are complicated and troubling, and that disrupt some of the safeties and certainties of traditional responses to literature. The challenges begin with teachers feeling ready and equipped to facilitate testimonial response. Providing opportunities for them to “consider their own acts of reading” (Soter 1999, p. 14) with risky historical literature is a place to start and teacher study or discussion groups can provide one avenue for reflective and critical conversation about their own responses to the texts before considering how they might use the texts with their students. Traveling down this road, however, can itself be quite challenging. Florio-Ruane and de Tar (1995) and Florio-Ruane (2001), in their studies of teachers reading ethnic autobiographies in a book club format, highlight the challenges the participants experienced in working to cultivate “cultural imagination” as they discussed the “hot lava” topics of race, class, and gender. Smith and Strickland (2001), in a study of how a group of multiracial urban elementary in-service school teachers discussed multicultural literature in a readers’ discussion group, found it difficult to encourage the teachers to view multicultural literature as an approach to foster ethical respect for others. And, Lewis et al. (2001), in a study that examines their discussions of multicultural young adult literature with rural, White teachers, report that the group sustained particular Whiteness norms despite their attempts to unsettle these norms.

Then there is the challenge of actually facilitating testimonial response with students. When difficult conversations are opened, students may respond with candor, offering information teachers don’t expect or aren’t prepared to address—information about

present-day traumas that are somehow linked (at least in the reader's mind) to the topic at hand. If the classroom becomes the site of real discussion about difficult and even traumatic events, who, then, determines which boundaries (if any) are in place, and how do teachers (or other students, for that matter) know how to respond when the information shared is highly personal and/or deeply troubling? In addition, when authentic dialogue takes place around risky historical literature, some of the horrors of the past that are depicted can bring about (are designed to bring about) a powerful emotional response. Students may be shocked, angered, fearful, sad, embarrassed, or confused. They may not be able to identify the strong reactions they are experiencing, and they may need help knowing where to go with their powerful emotions. Teachers who use risky historical literature and testimonial response must be prepared to understand and deal with a range of strong emotions and be alert for signs that students are in need of help processing what they may not understand about their feelings.

For example, teachers must be aware of the role that "guilt" might play in students' testimonial response to risky historical literature. Because testimonial response requires strong identification, shared responsibility, and an emotional embodiment of historical and present-day events, students can experience a strong sense of guilt for wrongs that have been—and continue to be—perpetuated by (or imposed on) a society or group with which they identify. The sense of collective responsibility promoted by testimonial response can make it difficult for students—and teachers—to find a healthy boundary between connection and distance when dealing with the human-made traumas depicted in risky historical literature. Because a testimonial response implicates readers within a social framework, young readers may not know how to deal with the complexities of identification. They may feel pressured to reveal family stories that under other circumstances they would not disclose; they may react with strong hostility or fear; or they may be troubled by their own racial, ethnic or geographic associations with the topics brought up by risky historical texts. Put a different way, they may opt for guilt by association with oppressors, they may adopt a victim stance by association with the oppressed, they may choose heroism by association with those who resist oppression, or they may disconnect because historically "their" families were not directly involved. (To ameliorate the intensity of these feelings, students may move quickly to the present-day, where they do not participate in the sorts of overt oppressions they may be encountering in literature and where they "help" and/or are friends with "Other" children.) Seeing inhumanity and injustice as ongoing and systemic is complicated; a healthy sense of responsibility (rather than guilt or shame or defensive innocence) for large-scale human behavior can be difficult under the best of circumstances.

While these challenges are daunting, two sets of factors can affect the ways teachers and students are able to address these complexities. The first set focuses on the classroom, school, and community contexts, while the second concerns the stance and skillfulness of the teacher. With the first set of factors, the politics of the school and district and the deeper assumptions about the goals of education (e.g., to transmit already-established community norms or to encourage exploration and free-thinking among students) come into consideration when engaging in testimonial response with risky historical literature. To help teachers and students negotiate the complexities of testimonial response in classrooms, curricular goals and expectations of various stakeholders—teachers, parents, administrators, and the community—need to be aligned. Because a text like *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* diverges from typical curricula and opens up potentially troubling pathways, there needs to be some shared understanding about the relevance and importance of exploring this content in the

classroom. The likelihood of successful use of testimonial response with risky historical literature is greater when teachers have more autonomy with curricular decision-making, when parents and administrators have trust, and when there is a shared commitment to authentic (if sometimes difficult) learning among the various stakeholders in an educational context.

The second set of factors that affect the potential success of testimonial response in classrooms pivots on a teacher's stance and skillfulness with risky historical literature. This stance begins with a willingness to question one's own relationship to historical events, such as white teachers examining their "white history" in "emotional, psychological, and historical terms" (Daly 2005, p. 218). This stance also begins with a recognition that "remembrance [is] a contested activity" which situates that teacher (and the teacher's students) in the struggle of defining "what and whose stories and images are worth remembering, as well as what it might mean to learn from different representations of the past" (Simon 2005, p. 17). In other words, a teacher views "remembrance practices" as an integral part of the curriculum. Building from this type of stance, a teacher works as a critical facilitator or guide, making her or his best decisions concerning when to push ahead, nudge gently, or temporarily abandon the exploration of a risky historical text with students. This also includes guiding students to not efface "dramatic historical differences" between events, such as equating atrocities of Auschwitz with nuclear bomb testing in the Arizona desert (Tansman 2004, p. 259). While there is, of course, no blueprint for this kind of work, teachers who do not emphasize "correcting memory" in their students, but rather have a desire "to renew a reconstructed living memory for a community" stand on more pedagogically solid ground (Simon 2005, p. 18).

Conclusion

With children's books about trauma and complex historical events on the rise in the past 10–15 years (Kidd 2005), there remains much work to do. We recognize that our work in exploring the possibilities and limitations of testimonial response has only begun, and we offer it in these early stages as a turn in the professional conversation that seeks to better understand and utilize risky historical literature in the classroom. Because we are in early stages of this work, many questions remain. For instance, beyond risky historical literature, which types of text elicit or support a testimonial response? Is this about the reader (where response is usually thought to occur) or about the text itself (which seems to be assumed if this response is more relevant to a particular type of text rather than to texts in general)? At present, we are exploring just how testimonial response shifts if the text being read is not historical—if it is, instead, a contemporary text, such as *Whitewash* by Ntozake Shange (1997), *Way Home* by Libby Hathorn (1994), or *Smoky Night* by Eve Bunting (1994). Our current thinking, for example, is that the issues embedded in these three texts (racism, homelessness, riots) can be—and perhaps need to be—historicized. Questions such as these push us to continue to evaluate the three-part framework (*historical engagement, emotional investment, and collectivist orientation*) of testimonial response.

We are also exploring what happens to the notion of "witness" if the text contains a natural disaster (earthquake, flood) rather than a human-made trauma, or if the crisis is of a personal nature (rape, homicide, or other acts of violence; disease, injury, despair) rather than connected to a wide-spread systemic event. This line of thinking pushes us to

examine how these particular social ills are constructed, since acts of violence and many diseases are considered part of larger systems of injustice, oppression, or victimization.

We also recognize the need for more systematic studies of the ways teachers envision and enact approaches to facilitate testimonial response as well as how readers of varying ages respond to risky historical texts. Given the varied and complex makeup of classrooms, a broad and diverse array of studies will go a long way in furthering our understandings about this aspect of reader response theory and practice.

In that testimonial response represents a powerful way for readers to engage with literature, it offers much promise to the world of education. Testimonial response weaves history (especially a profound sense of the interconnectedness among past, present, and future), culture, race, class, gender, and other identity markers into an intricate web designed to cultivate individual and collective emotional and analytical understandings within and across groups. As a result, readers in classrooms incur profound responsibilities regarding justice and social change in the world, as Simon and Eppert (1997) remind us:

When memory and history are brought together in these aspirations, testimony imposes particular obligations on those called to receive it – obligations imbued with the exigencies of justice, compassion, and hope that define the horizon for a world yet to be realized. (p. 177)

This is challenging, yet worthy and indispensable “imagination” work; as Lester puts it in *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*,

It is difficult to imagine times and places long past. We must try if we are to redeem those times and ourselves. The means by which we can do this is the imagination, which gives flesh and blood and soul to past – and present. (p. 9)

As educators increasingly incorporate risky historical texts in classrooms, these texts offer teachers and students unique opportunities for transformative engagements with literature. When used by teachers in a thoughtful way, these texts can engender responses that spark critical conversations and understandings of historical traumas and the possible “ethical effects” (Phelan 2005) of these traumas in our society today. Because they enrich and are enriched by testimonial response on the part of readers (including historical engagement, emotional investment, and a collectivist orientation), they also can stimulate responses and acts of imagination that can help students envision more democratic and compassionate ways of being with each other—both now and into the future.

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