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## Using imagery to explore African American literature

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Soon after I accepted a fourth grade position at a new school, a colleague directed me to a storeroom that contained sets of children's literature. Looking through the boxes, I was pleased with most of the titles. However, when I skimmed through a collection of tall tales, I was disappointed, especially with the rendition of **John Henry**. Although the story included a number of descriptive incidents in John Henry's life, I felt that this version did not emphasize his intellect and resourcefulness. Instead, it focused primarily on John's physical strength, which was subtly exploited by white bosses. Disturbed by the implicit discriminatory messages, I decided to leave the books on the shelves.

A few years later, I read Julius Lester's powerful version of this same tale (1994). Here I found a John Henry whose birth changes the sun and moon's daily rhythm, a man so mighty a rainbow drapes itself around his shoulders. This John Henry speaks with quiet authority to a boss who finds it fruitless to argue. This John Henry gives his life to overcome a mountain "as big as hurt feelings" (unpaged). Jerry Pinkney's illustrations poignantly extend the characterization, particularly as John Henry emerges triumphant from the mountain, hammers held high in the sunlight. His characterization in both words and pictures is consistent with Sims' (1982) definition of culturally conscious books: "The goal of the characters in these books is to achieve their own ends—such as survival, land-holding, education, a sense of independence—in the face of racism, discrimination, violence, and other misuses of white economic and political power" (p. 55). I thought again about the dusty set of books in the cabinet. I realized that rather than censor

the old version, I could pair the two stories and discuss the two perspectives (NCTE, 1982). I also suspected that studying Lester and Pinkney's imagery might heighten the students' appreciation of a second powerful book, **The Story of Ruby Bridges** (Coles, 1995). I decided to group the three stories together in a mini-unit.

The children read the older version of **John Henry** alone or with a partner. Before we discussed the first story as a class, I read Lester's book aloud. The children were eager to talk about this version. Many commented on the pictures, particularly the rainbow. Ryan suggested that the "falling star rainbow" on the last page reminded him of hope. When I asked about the lesson in the story, Randy spoke his favorite line with reverence: "Dying ain't important ... What matters is how well you do your living." These words echo Lester's own purpose that he expressed in his author's note: A desire to illuminate "... the transcendent quality of John Henry's humanity."

After discussing the similarities and differences between the two stories, I asked, "Which version of **John Henry** would Martin Luther King, Jr. like better?" I phrased the question in this way because the children had recently studied King's life in honor of his birthday, and they were very familiar with his stance and his struggles. The answer was unanimous: Julius Lester's. "Why?" I asked. Several children said that Lester's **John Henry** seemed "stronger" for several reasons. John Henry is strong enough to make mean Ferret-Faced Freddy nice. In the collection, the boss "pushes John Henry around," but in Lester's, John Henry thinks of the steam-drill contest, and the boss doesn't argue. In addition, the rainbow symbolizes strength, and it

hints of spirituality, particularly when it drapes itself “around him like love.” The children’s ideas connected John Henry’s independent thinking and strength of spirit with similar qualities in Dr. King.

“Is there anything else you like about Julius Lester’s version?” was my next question. They mentioned the illustrations, and in the words of one child, “I liked the way it sounded.” Heads nodded in agreement. Their enthusiasm led me to probe further. “What parts of the story sounded particularly good to you?” Their responses highlighted Julius Lester’s imagery: the rainbow draped over John Henry’s shoulders, the boulder “as hard as anger,” “the wind was out of breath,” “he didn’t look much bigger than a wish that wasn’t going to come true,” and “a mountain as big as hurt feelings.” This image-rich literary style highlights one of “the social and cultural traditions associated with growing up Black in the United States” (Sims, 1982, p. 49).

The children’s interest in this imagery opened up an opportunity for personal response that could enrich their appreciation for the cultural traditions of African American literature. Specifically, I wanted the children to use Lester’s style to deepen their understanding of John Henry’s character. I decided to have them create interpretive sketches for similes in John Henry.

### **VISUAL IMAGES TO EXPLORE VERBAL IMAGES**

The children were familiar with the strategy, “Sketch-to-Stretch” (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996; Whitin, 1996), in which readers use shapes, colors, lines, symbols, or other pictures to express the meaning or idea of a story. Sketching puts children in the active role of creating meanings for themselves. For this experience, I wrote several phrases on the board: “a rainbow draped around him like love,” “shining and shimmering like hope that never dies,” “as hard as anger,” “not much bigger than a wish that wouldn’t come true,” and “a mountain as big as hurt feelings.” I especially wanted to explore the image of the hurt feelings, but I thought it was a little more abstract than some of the others, so I turned to “as hard as anger” first. I asked, “How can anger be hard?” Some of our brainstormed ideas included that you feel like hitting something hard when you’re angry, or you feel hard. Their ideas made me think of a clenched fist, and we stopped to think of how a tense body feels. Next I suggested that they could show “as hard as anger” with a sketch. “Just sketch what-

ever comes to your mind in your journal, and write what was going through your mind as you drew. We’ll talk about our ideas in a few minutes.” I bent over my own journal, and the children sketched, pausing occasionally to quietly compare their work with the other members of their groups.

When we stopped to share as a class, we noticed that many children used arrows to show violence, volcanoes to emphasize anger’s energy and explosiveness, and mountains to signify anger’s “hardness” as a rock. Some of their ideas seemed to be directly tied to Pinkney’s illustrations and the story line (particularly the mountains), but the children extended the imagery in new ways. Amber’s sketch and commentary were particularly intriguing. She drew both a volcano and a person smashing a vase. In her commentary, she wrote:

I thought that a mountain has snow and snow falls down off a mountain and then I thought of a volcano and lava falls down, and a mountain and a volcano is almost the same thing, but different things fall down. And if you’re mad you feel like you want to put your hands in something really hot like lava and something really cold like snow on a mountain.

Amber captured a feeling of an oxymoron: anger can be “hot like lava” or “really cold like snow.” Both are extremes of intensity, and anger is intense. After discussing the children’s interpretations, I felt that they were ready to turn to a more abstract image, “a mountain as big as hurt feelings.”

As we sketched again, I felt the impact of our conversation about “as hard as anger.” I started to draw a mountain with tears in it, but I noticed that my mountain was too rounded to be “hurt.” I redid my sketch with a jagged top, wondering about the influence of the children’s peaked mountains and volcanoes for anger. Maybe, too, I was influenced by Amber’s smashed vase with the sharp shards. My brief reflection made me more aware that our talking about our images would enrich and extend them. In turn, considering various perspectives inspired by these images could deepen our appreciation of the text. These thoughts influenced my role in our next sharing session.

The second group of sketches were more varied and detailed than the first. To show “a mountain as big as hurt feelings,” Carla sketched a smashed ant pile, because the ant pile is “big to an ant.” Jacqui drew a person in the shape of a mountain. Sharnise drew Earth smaller than the moun-

tain to show the magnitude of the hurt feelings. Jake showed the size of a mountain by drawing clouds around the bottom of his mountain. He read his commentary aloud: "I thought about drawing a mountain that covered the whole page, but then I got the idea of clouds at the bottom of the mountain because then it looks like it's so tall that the clouds are at the bottom." As Jake talked, I noticed that several of the children picked up their pencils and sketched clouds at the bottom of their mountains, too. I was pleased to see this response. I firmly believe that readers extend their understandings through collaborative talk and sharing, and I want the children to value the contributions that others make to their thinking. I therefore asked the children who were sketching clouds to add a reflective comment that related Jake's idea to their own. Ashley, one of the students who revised her sketch, had originally drawn a mountain making fun of another mountain. After hearing Jake's comments, she added clouds in different locations around each mountain. She put clouds above the hurt mountain, emphasizing its feeling small, while she drew clouds at the bottom of the mean mountain to show its hurtful nature. Figure 1 shows her revised sketch and her acknowledgement to Jake's idea.



Figure 1. Ashley's revised sketch

Nathan used still another idea to show the enormity of the mountain "as big as hurt feelings." We recently had been studying the Pacific West in social studies. Nathan drew his mountain topped with sequoia trees, but the sequoias looked tiny in

relationship to the mountain. The contrast of large sequoias actually looking small emphasized the mountain's size. Nathan's sketch also showed clearly that the students were extending the metaphors by making connections to personal knowledge.

I felt as though the students were able to appreciate the character of John Henry by thinking more deeply about his facing mountains (real or figurative) "as hard as anger" or "as big as hurt feelings." Their sketches, although influenced by Pinkney's illustrations and Lester's style, showed the children's personal and collaborative interpretations. I wanted to further capitalize upon both of these aspects of literary analysis as we turned to another African American story of determination: Robert Coles' **The Story of Ruby Bridges** (1995).

#### COLLABORATIVE METAPHORS TO DESCRIBE RUBY BRIDGES

**The Story of Ruby Bridges** relates the remarkable role that one six-year-old child had in the issue of school desegregation. The family's strong faith plays an important part in the opening, as well as in the climax in which Ruby prays for the angry mob that blocks her way to her elementary school. Ruby and her family also show their belief in the value of education. Ruby was determined to learn despite the fact that all the white parents pulled their children from school in protest. The afterword explains that by the end of the academic year, two white children finally came to school, and the next year the school functioned more normally.

After reading this story, I again wanted the children to think deeply about the text and its implications. First we brainstormed words to describe Ruby Bridges, including strong, courageous, determined, faithful, powerful, and persistent. Building upon the idea of metaphorical descriptions in **John Henry**, I asked, "What simile could we make with, 'as strong as ?' to describe Ruby?" Ideas came: bear, cheetah, lion, an ocean, nuclear explosion, and a rock.

At this point I wanted the children to consider the attributes of their suggestions more closely, so I asked, "What kind of rock?" "A diamond," Chrystal volunteered. "How is a diamond like Ruby in another way?" I continued. "A diamond is rare," mused Danny, "and a diamond is made under pressure. Ruby had to hold her feelings in." Extending the children's metaphors gave additional insight into Ruby's character.

Having introduced the idea of extending their metaphors, I looked at the list again. “Let’s look at our suggestions. Some of them give a feeling of violence. Is violence like Ruby Bridges?” Hearing a chorus of “no,” I asked them to think of examples that might be both strong and nonviolent. Danny, who had contributed “nuclear explosion,” revised his thought, and said, “nuclear fusion.” I asked him to explain his choice. He replied, “Nuclear fusion pushes together and Ruby Bridges pulled her feelings inside.” As a final example, we explored the suggestion of “as strong as a river.” The children contributed several ideas for an extended metaphor: it keeps going, a river is helpful, and it changes the land. Ruby likewise kept going in spite of a struggle; she helped others, and her example changed history.

Our collective brainstorming generated many ideas for the children to consider, and we moved to our culminating project. Small groups of children worked together to create and develop a simile to describe Ruby Bridges, and to show their ideas symbolically through drawing. Deciding how to make their sketch gave them the opportunity to talk more about their understandings of the story. After the groups completed their posters, they presented them to the class. Several posters showed extensions of the class’ original ideas.

Danny, Todd, and Bradley divided their poster into four sections, each of which featured a symbol: a diagram of nuclear fusion, a black hole, a river, and a ring over a bridge. They included the nuclear reaction upon Danny’s suggestion, but as they worked, they developed a new meaning for their symbol. When they presented their poster to the class, they explained that they now saw that fusion could stand for people because Ruby “pulled people together.” The black hole signified Ruby “sucking up her strength and going through the mob.” Their ideas about the river changed as the boys sketched and talked. At first the river showed Ruby’s determination because “she keeps on going.” Bradley wanted to add animals by the river, but the group knew that they needed to have a reason for this addition. They decided that the river helped the animals, and Ruby helped others overcome prejudice. Perhaps it was the river that made them think of a bridge, an idea that sparked excitement when they realized the connection to her name, Ruby Bridges. They discussed how Ruby’s spirit could “hold up a bridge” and how her helping others could be like a bridge helping all people. Remembering the discussion of diamonds in our

brainstorming, Danny thought that they could draw a ruby ring, and show that a ruby is “polished from intense heat. And rubies are rare, and it’s rare for a first grader to go through a mob.” Through their drawing and writing, these boys discussed Ruby’s unusually strong determination as well as her place in history.

When Ryan and Jake drew a volcano for the metaphor, “as strong as a volcano,” they discussed Ruby’s place in history as well. Ryan wanted each of the colors to stand for something. They decided that the red and orange lava could stand for love, and the cooled black lava could signify African American freedom. While talking, they realized that hardened lava builds up over time. The idea of “building up” inspired them to add that the black rock could stand for the community as well, that is, the entire community strengthened over time. The shape of the lava spewing out of the volcano looked “like wings.” With this new idea in mind, they thought back to the story and wrote, “The lava is like wings like it’s flying away. It helps Ruby get out of the crowd.” During their presentation Jake added orally, “Lava comes out in a shape like wings because the lava is lifting up the community.” Thus, through the image of a volcano, the boys emphasized the relationship between Ruby’s strength and her role in building a new community.

Nia, Jacqui, and Carla decided that Ruby was as “strong as the ocean” because her faith helped her face the mob (Figure 2):

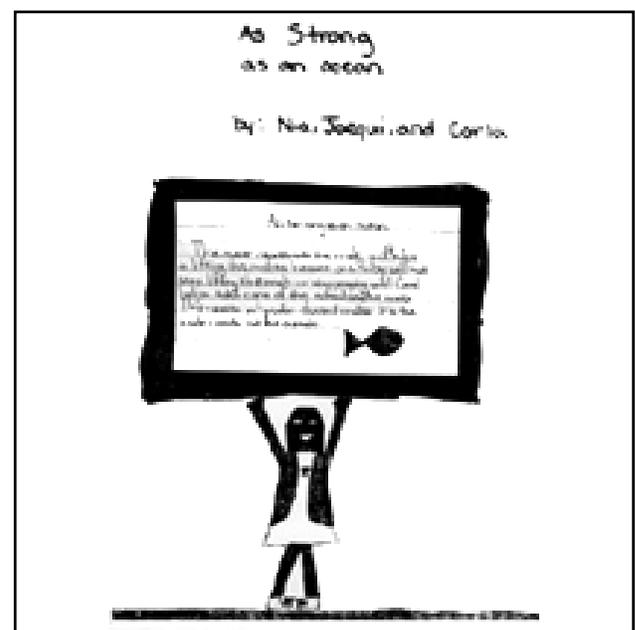


Figure 2. Nia, Jacqui, and Carla’s illustration

While sketching, they decided that Ruby's action seemed impossible; she persevered in the face of the wild mob. Part of their discussion focused on the signs of "WHITES ONLY" in the book's illustrations.

I visited the group at this point of the discussion, and we all held our arms together to compare the shades of our skin: olive, brown, ivory, and yellow-tan. When the girls wrote their commentary, they captured both the strength of Ruby's faith and the need to look for the good in all people: "The ocean represents the mob, and Ruby is lifting the mob to heaven, and Ruby will not stop lifting the mob or stop praying until God helps take care of the school and the mob. The reason why color doesn't matter it is the inside that counts, not the outside."

Sharnise and Chrystal's poster also connected the ideas of faith and strength. They drew a diamond for strength, but they explained their precious stone in this way: "A diamond stands for being strong, caring, believing, and listening to her elders, praying for people. She shines with faith; she walks in love. Ruby Bridges is showing courage like a diamond. It shows her love and shows that she is holding on to the heavens." Building off the afterword, they also drew Ruby "flying to the heavens because she's happy the kids like her. God didn't let her down." Although heaven wasn't mentioned in **Ruby Bridges**, their image echoed the final page of **John Henry**, where John's spirit is symbolized by the shooting star rainbow.

Casey, Amber, and Amanda decided that their metaphor would begin "as faithful as ...". Unsure of a comparison, they looked at the brainstormed list on the board, and saw "rainbow." Amber commented that "rainbow" was a good choice because it was like John Henry. Next they drew a church with Ruby's family around it, but they were unsure where to place the rainbow. Casey sketched a rainbow above a church on scrap paper, but the girls weren't satisfied with its appearance. Suddenly Amber, noticing that Ruby's dress was the only garment left uncolored, reached for a crayon. She had realized that Ruby could wear the rainbow. The others agreed. This decision highlighted a spiritual link between John Henry and Ruby Bridges. Each was adorned with a symbol of faith, carrying it as closely as one carries clothing. The rainbow hinted of heavenly approval, or in Julius Lester's words, a "transcendent quality" in both personages.

Each of the group's sketches helped illumina-

nate important aspects of Ruby's character. Symbols such as the ocean, the black hole, and the precious gems highlighted Ruby's courage. The rainbow, hot lava, and diamond signified love and faith. The images of a bridge, nuclear fusion, and cooled lava amassing over time emphasized Ruby's historical contributions toward the causes of justice and equality. Creating these sketches collaboratively afforded the children the opportunity to shuttle back and forth between visual imagery and literary insight, thereby deepening their understanding of this significant moment in African American history.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Although this study focused on African American literature, it is possible to extend teaching implications to other multicultural studies. First, poorly written, stereotypical texts can become a positive teaching tool when contrasted with culturally conscious books. Secondly, it is important to capitalize upon both literary style and content to build understanding of a broad range of ethnic histories and cultures. Third, sketching as a tool for reader response can open additional avenues for in-depth literary analysis. One variation of the strategy described here might be to respond to pairs of texts from different cultures. In this way children's imagery can be the beginning point of discussions of various cultures' unique qualities as well as commonalities among them. Through these means teachers and children alike can work toward the goal of increased appreciation for the diversity of human experience.

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