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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes “production stories,” a genre of information literature and media responsible for teaching children how everyday things are made. As nineteenth-century families increasingly consumed tropical commodities produced by slave labor, including sugar, tea, coffee, rum, and tobacco, the production story developed in Britain and the United States as a way to explain to children where everyday household goods originate, making global trade networks visible in the home. These “production stories” developed strategies for raising or eliding ethical questions posed by who makes things, under what conditions, and for whom. Focusing on stories of sugar production, I find that production stories reveal surprising details about technical processes for making things, but conceal the human cost of production. They also end with consumption, when children use the products, symbolically affirming the conditions under which they were made. Drawing on scholarship from the history of technology and the history of the Atlantic slave trade, I contend that problematic representations of manufacturing processes feed into and support whitewashed histories for children. I conclude by analyzing contemporary picturebooks that resist certain genre patterns and encourage positive identification with enslaved black characters, who like child readers, are at once makers, readers, and consumers.

## **Keywords**

history of children's literature; slavery; abolitionist literature; race in children's literature; representations of work; consumerism; sugar; manufacturing; children's nonfiction; production story

Two 2015 children's picturebooks, *A Fine Dessert* by Emily Jenkins, illustrated by Sophie Blackall, and *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* by Ramin Ganeshram, illustrated by Vanessa Brantley-Newton, sparked debate among readers over their depictions of smiling enslaved persons. As shown by Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Debbie Reese, and Kathleen T. Horning, several black readers challenged the laudatory professional reviews for *A Fine Dessert*, by critiquing online how the picturebook minimizes the horrors of slavery, and by explaining how black children may feel while reading it (2016, pp. 6-11). By comparison, their similar topics—they are both picturebooks about making desserts—may seem like a banal coincidence. Yet sugary sweets have been central to representations of slavery through several centuries of children's literature. More recently, sugar's troubled history is the subject of Marc Aronson and Marina Budhos's young adult nonfiction book, *Sugar Changed the World: A Story of Magic, Spice, Slavery, Freedom, and Science* (2010). While examining their families' complicity in the slave-sugar economy, the authors document the numbers of Africans trafficked across the

Atlantic, demonstrating that “Sugar, with its demand for relentless labor, was a killer,” and “all this abuse was for one purpose: to produce ‘white gold’” (p. 63).<sup>1</sup>

These twenty-first century depictions of sugar and slavery have a history of their own. Explaining to children the artisanal, agricultural, and manufacturing processes behind everyday things—what I shorthand the “production story”—stretches from the Abbé Pluche’s *Spectacle de la Nature* (1732-1743) to Discovery Channel’s *How It’s Made* (2001-present).<sup>2</sup> Sugary food is no stranger to the genre’s history, and neither is controversy. While they may resemble dry technical manuals, stories about how things are made have always been political, including such texts as Amelia Alderson Opie’s abolitionist chapbook, *The Black Man’s Lament; or, How to Make Sugar* (1826) and Clara Hollos’s Marxist picturebook *The Story of Your Bread* (1948). Sugar, bread, textiles, shipping, and mining are industries consistently represented in production stories over the past two centuries—industries complicit in black slavery, child labor, colonization, abuses of migrant workers, and imperialist resource extraction. Authors and illustrators made divergent choices about whether to divulge these human costs to child readers, and in doing so, they created formulas for engaging or evading topics that today remain as core features of this genre.

Consider the representation of labor in a contemporary television production story. Discovery Channel’s “How It’s Made: Sugar” (Boyle, 2008) opens with an historical anecdote while the camera pans over an empty factory: “Next time you reach for the sugar bowl, try to imagine that it was once so rare and expensive, it was called ‘white gold.’” Sugar, we learn, was

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Irvin Hunt, Michelle Martinez, Joe Sutliff Sanders, Sara L. Schwebel, and journal readers for suggestions on drafts.

<sup>2</sup> “Production story” is my own term. I am not aware of other scholarship theorizing this genre.

first grown in India, where Alexander the Great witnessed sugar production in 300 B.C. Next we skip forward to the present. Modern “table sugar” (video pan over three packages) “has many names: mill white, plantation white, and crystal sugar,” all derived from sugar cane. In the clip, a “worker” pares away the cane with “a machete” and “chews the cane’s raw pulp to extract the sweet juice.” Then machines enter the picture. History and human faces withdraw for the remaining eight minutes of video, which shows machine harvesters, trucks, chemical processes, and packaging.

While such programs may seem apolitical or objective, “Sugar” obfuscates slave labor more thoroughly than either of the controversial 2015 picturebooks. What small traces remain in the video are vestiges of an alternate story. “White gold” became cheap and lucrative because of African slave labor, while “plantation white” references the sugar plantations that exploited slave labor. Introducing Alexander the Great credits the Greek military leader who invaded India with discovering sugar, a story that surely should be reversed. India is the sugar cradle, where cane from New Guinea was cultivated, used in religious offerings, and boiled to make pieces of rock sugar called *khanda* in Sanskrit, a word later imported to Europe as “candy” (Walvin, 1992/2001, p. 4).<sup>3</sup> Even the figure who chews the cane evolved from apologetic accounts of slavery on sugar plantations from the early-nineteenth century, which like to boast how at harvest time, slaves who “were meager and sick before,” would chew the canes they cut and soon “become healthy in a few weeks”—a claim I have seen deployed in multiple texts to refute

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<sup>3</sup> Online pages about sugar production also ignore slavery, see *Sugar Knowledge International*, an industry’s educational outreach, c.f. Liverpool’s *International Slavery*, which tracks the concurrent rise of sugar plantations and slavery.

abolitionist accounts of starved and overworked enslaved persons who die in West Indies cane fields (*Negro Labour*, 1809, p. 8).<sup>4 5</sup>

This article seeks to understand how stories with such glaring omissions came to be perceived as objective science. Analyzing children’s production narratives in English from 1790 to the present, I show the origins of strategies common to this genre that raise or elide ethical questions posed by labor exploitation. Ignoring slavery or social inequality is not inherent to the production genre. Rather, its form requires writers and illustrators to make political choices about whether to include, alongside a technological narrative, the social narrative of who makes things, under what conditions, and for whom. Following a brief overview, I theorize two of the genre’s enduring formal elements: First, the production story promises to reveal something surprising, which misdirects readers and conceals the story’s omissions; second, the production

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<sup>4</sup> In post-slavery accounts, the worker who chews sugar while harvesting masks the grueling agricultural labor required for sugar planting and harvesting. This same figure, depicted with brown skin, appears on the dustjacket for Maud and Miska Petersham’s *The Story Book of Foods from the Field* (1936), next to other children who eat grain (see my Omeka resource: Hoiem, 2020, “Sugar”).

<sup>5</sup> For the reasons explained by Martha J. Cutter, I use the term “the enslaved” or “enslaved persons” where possible to recognize that subjugation is “a process,” not an “unchanging fact.” I use “slave” where the term is necessary to acknowledge the various othering discourses of the Antebellum Period and modes of resistance to those discourses. Some authors, Cutter argues, used the term “slave” in order “to challenge its explicit denial of personhood and agency” (2017, p. xvii-xviii).

story concludes with consumption, when audiences become complicit by vicariously eating, wearing, or aesthetically enjoying the product. Since eating sweets is a primary metaphor used when adults judge children’s reading habits, these conclusions tie together reading with commodity consumption (Ross, 1987, pp. 155-57).<sup>6</sup> Next I historicize the production story by explaining its origins in related genres, and I survey the history of nineteenth-century sugar production stories, highlighting corollaries with contemporary children’s nonfiction about slavery. I conclude by examining contemporary picturebooks that represent slavery in stories about making things, yet successfully center human actors. Since my examples are necessarily brief, I refer readers to my supplementary digital resource on children’s sugar slavery production stories, which provides visual analysis of these illustrated texts with additional examples (Hoiem, 2020, “Sugar”).

As teachers and librarians seek quality children’s books on STEM subjects and black history, we must consider how children’s literature about technology, from its earliest inception, produced problematic representations of free, unfree, and slave labor. Technological utopianism promises effortless plenty—the end of scarcity and work—by deflecting attention from the people that use tools and machines, just as nostalgic depictions of antebellum America hide the exploitation of black slave labor that supports white leisure. Drawing on scholarship from the history of technology and the history of the Atlantic slave trade, I contend that these problematic representations of manufacturing processes, which normalize omitting such crucial details, feed

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<sup>6</sup> Catherine Sheldrick Ross examines two metaphors for reading used by late-nineteenth-century librarians, but pervasive in the previous century: “reading is a ladder” and “reading is eating” (1987, p. 147).

into and support whitewashed histories for children. Although a broad study risks sacrificing historical specificity, I investigate the long history of production narratives to work against the historical amnesia that views problematic books as single events, the products of individual artists; rather, I show ways that narrative choices collectively produce literary forms that, left unchallenged, can exclude black children's experiences.

### **Overview: the production story and sugar slavery**

Production stories today are a ubiquitous cultural phenomenon, with bestselling books and popular television shows that enthrall wide audiences. For example, making things is the subject of Richard Scarry's *The Busiest People Ever* (1976/1996), which depicts wood furniture, coal mining, electricity, book printing, bread, and textiles. In the education world, learning about people at work is part of Lucy Sprague Mitchell's Bank Street School publications, such as the *Here and Now Story Book* (1921) and *Skyscraper* (1933), created with Elsa H. Naumburg and Clara Lambert, as well as the schoolbooks of Maud and Miska Petersham. The tradition boasts several award-winning notables, including Lewis W. Hine's *Men at Work* (1932), Kathryn Lasky's *Sugaring Time* (1983), and David Macaulay's many architecture and technology books, such as *Cathedral* (1973) and *The Way Things Work* (1988). For the past two decades, production stories account for long-running television programs on The Discovery Channel, The Science Channel, and the History Channel, such as *How Do They Do It?*, *Some Assembly Required*, and *Mega Builders*.

These stories have their roots in the late eighteenth century. As families increasingly consumed tropical commodities like sugar, tea, coffee, rum, tobacco, and chocolate, the children's production story developed in Britain and the US as a way to explain to children

where everyday household goods originate, making global trade networks visible in the home. Couched as geography lessons, production stories by Priscilla Wakefield, Maria Edgeworth, or Mrs. Brook feature fictional families who travel to different towns or nations, where they observe workshops, factories, farms, mines, construction sites, or shipyards. Books for younger children introduce village artisans, seasoned with small-town nostalgia (e.g. *The Jack of All Trades* (1806); Mary Elliott's *Rural Employments* (1820)); while cross-over literature for older youth choosing a profession provides extensive technical detail (eg. George Dodd's *Days at the Factories* (1843); *The Boys Book of Industrial Information* (1859)). Production stories often depict multiple industries in a single volume, or they dedicate individual volumes in a series to each commodity's "story" or "progress" (e.g. sugar, bread, cotton, wool, iron, trains, coal). The juvenile library of children's publisher John Wallis included *The Progress of Wool; Harvest Home, or the Progress of Wheat*; and *The Progress of the Dairy* (ca. 1805-1820), supplemented by games, such as *The Picturesque Round Game of the Produce and Manufactures of the Counties of England and Wales* (1840). John Harris soon followed with his "Little Library for tarry-at-home-travellers" by Rev. Isaac Taylor, including *Scenes of British Wealth* (1823) and *Scenes of Commerce* (1828) with additional volumes on bread, mining, gardening, and forestry (1823-1830). The suite of industries represented in these textbooks remains remarkably consistent across two centuries, from Wallis and Harris, to Maud and Miska Petersham's series, *The Story Book of. . . (Oil, Corn, Rayon, Cotton, Wheat, Trains, etc.)*, to contemporary television. These consistencies belie claims that children's information literature merely reflects a factual reality or necessary curriculum, instead showing the far-reaching consequences of past choices for determining what we publish today.

British production stories (typically republished in the US) depict the slave-sugar economy using portable narrative strategies deployed across multiple industries. Since production story collections address commodities together, stories about sugar production might appear next to brewing, diamond mining, barrel making, or ship-building, etc., often without clarifying whether workers are enslaved. Unlike abolitionist or proslavery literature, production stories are comparatively less interested in teaching about slavery than in other learning outcomes. As a result, slavery is decentralized within production stories, even though commodity consumption is central to the rise of slave labor. For these very reasons, production stories provide valuable insight into the formulaic, repetitive narrative structures that naturalize the strategies of misdirection and omission that find their way into contemporary texts.

Among commodities, sugar held unique practical and symbolic significance for children—an everyday manufactured item, consumed as a sweet reward for good behavior, yet indelibly linked with slavery. Once an exotic luxury good, sugar became Britain’s number one import by value, with per capita consumption rising over the course of the eighteenth-century from 4 lbs to 18 lbs per year (Walvin, 1992/2001, pp. 5-7). Purchased weekly by families of all economic stations, sugar fed the urban working classes and came to symbolize refined female hospitality (Midgley, 1996, pp. 137-39). Over the same period, roughly half of all enslaved Africans, or almost 3 million people, were transported to the Americas aboard British or British American ships (Rediker, 2007, p. 5). The reasons for this correlation are well understood. More than other crops, sugar was so labor intensive to grow and dangerous to process, that British West Indies sugar planters faced labor shortages. They transitioned, in the mid-seventeenth century, from white indentured and convict labor to enslaved African labor, creating the plantation system dependent upon racialized slavery that soon spread to the Chesapeake Bay

tobacco region (Dunn, 1972, pp. 188-263; Menard, 2006, pp. 67-91; Walvin, 1992/2001, pp. 3-9).

For British children, eating sweet puddings and tea seemed domestic, even though sugar cane was grown far away. Commodities eaten or worn on the body, like sugar, cotton, and diamonds, began with enslaved persons working in one part of the globe, before raw materials were shipped to manufactories in other countries, where free workers refined, spun, packaged, and sold the products. As some countries made the slave trade illegal, then outlawed slavery itself, sugar cane fields spread from the West Indies, to Louisiana, South America, and Hawaii. Planters searched for the highest profits in new places where slavery remained legal, then after abolition, sought new immigrant workforces to drive down wages. Despite significant events that changed the sugar industry—the abolition of the British and American slave trades (1807), emancipation in the British West Indies (1833-43) and the US (1865), the migration of sugar plantations to other locations, and the eclipse of cane sugar by beet sugar (ca. 1880-1915)—representations of sugar production in children’s books remained surprisingly similar, relying on certain formal conventions to lend a sense of inevitability to sugar production, as something desirable and universally beneficial.

### **Theorizing the production story**

Like their eighteenth-century predecessors, contemporary production stories invite curious viewers into work spaces usually closed from public access, and through controlled revelation (they favor rigorously formulaic episodes or book series), produce a predictable narrative with the power to conceal through omission. To return to “How It’s Made: Sugar,” the episode conceals through controlled revelation. The detached, technical tone, liberally spattered

with precise measurements, metric units, and specialized language, creates a sense of unbiased precision and encyclopedic detail, as if all relevant information is accurately reported. This scientific discourse masks the choice to largely exclude the social relations of manufacturing, most especially sugar's violent history. Unnamed human workers appear as disembodied hands or torsos, left speechless in favor of voice-over narration. Minimizing the faces of machine operators discourages audiences from reflecting on the labor force that works in the industry in question, the training these workers require, or their individual lives and interiority. The episode naturalizes such omissions by creating an authoritative voice that, as Joe Sutliff Sanders argues, "disguises where a book is most vulnerable to critical engagement," where readers might question the narrative (2018, p. 48). Instead, the labor of storytelling is erased alongside the labor of manufacturing. By using a consistent, unvaried formula across the video series, *How It's Made* depicts the production of infinitely replicated objects familiar to children, such as crayons, fortune cookies, pencils, and marbles, as if these products, and the videos about them, are churned out *ad infinitum* by that impartial machine observer—the camera—unmediated by human interpretation.

A similar formula predominates in many children's books where stories are bent into conformity to create a narrative arc. For example, *A Fine Dessert* tries to invoke that same satisfaction audiences may feel at seeing products made in endless repetition, by showing four families, four centuries apart, who make blackberry fool in four geographic locations, one family an enslaved mother and daughter in South Carolina. As the dessert migrates west from Lyme, England (1710), to Charleston, South Carolina (1810), to Boston, Massachusetts (1910), and finally, San Diego, California (2010), social changes in race and gender relations contrast across a uniform recipe. With the picturebook's standardized approach to the four historical periods,

each spread precisely repeats the visual layout and textual formula of the other periods (purchasing ingredients, choosing a mixing tool, beating the cream, storing the food, serving it), a pattern enforced by the genre's enchantment with mechanical repetition and technological progress (Jenkins, 2015). So if one family eats the dessert, or smiles while beating the cream, then so must the next. As with "How It's Made: Sugar," the production narrative's restrictive, repetitive formula treats all forms of human labor the same, providing an excuse to omit details of the terror regime that enforced plantation slavery.<sup>7</sup>

After providing limited information disguised as full disclosure, production stories often conclude with a direct address that constructs child readers as consumers. The story unfolds so that a complex chain of production and consumption points back to a child consumer, who views the building, eats the sugar, or wears the cloth. An episode of *How It's Made* about "Cheesecake" concludes, "You might want to put off that diet, just one more day"; The last page in *A Fine Dessert* (2015) shows a gathering of racially diverse friends, all eating at the same table (n.p.); David Macaulay's *Cathedral* (1973) positions a child on his parent's shoulders, appreciating the finished nave (p. 76); Charles R. Smith's *Brick by Brick* (2013) concludes with a family on the White House steps, honoring the people who built it (n.p.); Clara Hollos's *The Story of Your Coat* (1946) concludes by breaking the fourth wall, and asking children, "This is the story of your coat. Do you still think it is just an ordinary coat?" (n.p.) and Hollos's *The Story of Your Bread* (1948) ends with bread for "the modern child, you" (n.p.). To take an earlier

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<sup>7</sup> Drawing on readers' analysis, Thomas, Reese, and Horning (2016) explore what is left out of *A Fine Dessert*. They call attention to genre imperatives (the required happy ending for children's literature) discourage representation of dark chapters in American history.

example, *The History of a Pound of Sugar* (1861) by William Newman concludes with two children outside the “Grocer’s shop” of “T. S. Sweet,” where “The POUND OF SUGAR” tarries here, / And waits your purchase, Reader, dear” (p. 12).<sup>8</sup> These moments invite readers to identify themselves as beneficiaries of the production process, by encouraging children to see themselves as empowered participants who can make things themselves or purchase these goods. By asking all children to identify with the narrow role of consumer, the story’s invitation to “join the table” empowers more privileged readers with greater purchasing power and potentially alienates children who strongly identify with producers.

Concluding with consumption symbolizes a privileged child reader’s willingness to join the economic community represented in the story, and in doing so, accept its conditions for labor and exchange. The terms of this implicit social contract are that children accept the status quo in exchange for material plenty. Especially adept at this move, Richard Scarry’s books always end with a feast. In Scarry’s foldout panorama, *Busiest Busytown Ever!* (1996), Huckle and Lowly observe everyone at work on their way home, where they enjoy Mother Cat’s apple pie. Likewise, *The Busiest People Ever* (1976/1996) concludes with every character who “worked hard to help their families and friends” eating dinner together (p. 94). The story invites readers to join the meal, affirm the value of efficient hard work, and “think of all the things we can do when we all work together!” (p. 95). By addressing readers in the second person, the conclusion asks children to approve this social compact.

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<sup>8</sup> Reproduced in *Sugar Changed the World* (Aronson & Budhos, 2010, p. 46-47), *The History of a Pound of Sugar* was originally published both separately and in the series *Rhymes and Pictures about Bread, Tea, Sugar, Coals, Cotton, Gold* (1861-63).

These modern examples show two problems that emerge from the genre formula for production stories. First, production stories overwhelmingly celebrate technological progress, and while these STEM stories can fire children’s imaginations (attested by the popularity of such memorable television and book series), they collectively tend to undervalue worker intelligence and experiences. Because they celebrate streamlined processes, reproducibility, linear timelines, and efficiency, these stories can treat human experiences as uniform by stripping away cultural specificity and individuality. Second, production stories represent consumption as a child’s primary form of political engagement. They generally encourage readers’ identification with a manager’s visual perspective and desire for profitable production, or with a consumer’s point-of-view. When combined with a confident, authoritative “voice,” such stories “disguise” the “cracks,” where a nonfiction book is open to “critical engagement” (Sanders, 2018, p. 48-49). The resulting formula leaves little room to deeply address histories of trauma and oppression.

### **The historical development of production genre conventions**

The magician’s strategy of misdirection originates with the production genre itself, which developed at a time when enlightenment scientists performed experiments on stage as public lectures and celebrated scientific wonders as “natural magic.” Slight-of-hand was how science reached wider audiences, both in public lectures and in technical writing (Morus, 2007, p. 337). Historian of technology Simon Schaffer credits the eighteenth-century French Encyclopedists with first applying the showman’s controlled revelation to essays describing artisan and manufacturing processes. Meticulously documenting and publishing this information put the Encyclopedists at odds with the master craftsmen they observed, whose livelihoods depended on safeguarding methods perfected in their workshops. In order to educate a rising class of

industrial engineers, capable of reorganizing workshops and deskilling labor, the Encyclopedists developed ways of visualizing and describing machines that foregrounded their genius as inventors, while concealing the intelligence required for workers to operate their machines (1999, pp. 126-65). The industrial engineer reveals in order to conceal; he shows everything, but only where he directs his audience to look.

Two decades before Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, however, the Abbé Pluche's eight volume *Spectacle de la Nature* (1732-1743)—a children's encyclopedia, and the fourth most common book in Parisian private libraries—premiered the technical writing strategies identified by Schaffer (Koepp, 2009, pp. 153-55). Similar to families today visiting a museum of industry, Pluche's young pupil and his tutor visit artisan workshops, where they observe skilled labor and try their hand at carpentry or silk weaving. Praising Pluche for his child-centered pedagogy, Cynthia J. Koepp argues that these hands-on lessons “undermine traditional aristocratic values” by respecting artisan labor (2009, p. 171), but there is a fine line between valuing workers and appropriating their knowledge. The youth readers empowered by Pluche were destined as future managers, and their rise to power upended not only aristocratic privilege but the livelihood of skilled artisans. The enlightenment-era production narrative thus was founded on an unacknowledged class and race hierarchy between its privileged readers—whom the author grants special access to a workspace usually protected from view—and those they observe at work, while claiming that disseminating practical knowledge promotes social equality and educational access for all.

Similarly, when production narratives represent slave labor, the hierarchical divide between producer and consumer is reinforced by literary conventions used to dehumanize the enslaved. Even in abolitionist literature, the enslaved could be depicted in ways that denied their

agency, political resistance, and subjecthood, or that encouraged white readers to engage in pleasurable sympathetic identification with their suffering. To promote the cause, abolitionists circulated images of downcast black bodies, objects of pity that imply a permanent state of abjection, on fashionable domestic tableware such as tea sets and sugar bowls (Sanchez-Eppler, 1993, p. 25; Sheller, 2011, pp. 171-78). If such images make the enslaved into consumable objects, how much more so on plantations, where, as Vincent Woodward argues, “institutionalized hunger” kept enslaved persons undernourished, while both literal and metaphorical “practices of human consumption” destroyed their cultures and bodies (2014, pp. 5-6).

Furthermore, Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) has argued that slavery produced modern modes of surveillance used to enforce colonial rule, where the overseer reserves the power to watch over the plantation, while literally or figuratively removing the enslaved person’s “right to look.” Mirzoeff’s theory of controlled viewing resembles what Schaffer describes as the “view of the machine” reserved for industrial managers (1999, p. 130), suggesting that the production narrative has multiple strategies for misdirection in its repertoire: those used to hide workforce expertise in manufacturing, reinforced by those developed to visually empower white overseers. Production stories for children are thus doubly unlikely to represent enslaved persons with individualized features looking at the reader, or to represent the technological expertise of enslaved skilled workers who managed sugar distillation and boiling (Walvin, 1992/2001, p. 92).

In addition to encyclopedias, accounts of slavery and production processes appear in travel literature, a genre that thrives on discovery.<sup>9</sup> Through John Gabriel Stedman’s popular travelogue, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796), European and American consumers could learn about slavery in Surinam, despite living in places remote from where their goods were produced; similarly, they could read William Cooke Taylor’s *Notes on a Tour of the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire* (1842) to consider the conditions in factories in industrial regions. Such powerful eye-witness accounts of coal mines, textile mills, slave ships, and sugar plantations were incorporated, sometimes word-for-word, into children’s production stories. Excerpted in newspapers and incorporated into social problem novels, travel accounts ultimately convinced the public to pass legislation that regulated workplaces and ended slavery (Bizup, 2003, pp. 18-30). This dual inheritance—the encyclopedist’s misdirection and the travel writer’s exposé—makes the production narrative unpredictable. Production stories may imperfectly conceal, stimulating knowledgeable readers to fill in what remains painfully unspoken. Or they might establish bodily connections across far-flung geographies, closing that distance with empathy.

Because of this instability, the production story’s conclusion with consumption—a joyful, inevitable appreciation of past pleasures, vicariously renewed—could be turned on its head by abolitionists, who represented consumption as complicity. In the antebellum US and in Britain, “conscientious consumers,” who believed that consumers were responsible for slavery by creating a demand for stolen goods, opened “free labor” stores and sought new global market

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<sup>9</sup> For analysis of British West Indies travel literature on sugar, see Sandiford, 2000; Sheller, 2003, pp. 36-70.

sources for cotton and sugar, similar to today's fair-trade movement. (Glickman, 2004, pp. 889-912; Sheller, 2011, pp. 182-88). In England, an estimated 300,000 English families boycotted sugar in the 1790s, energized by what Timothy Morton calls the "blood sugar topos," deployed by abolitionists, politicians, and poets to render sweet food "suddenly nauseating" by treating "the commodity as metonymized body," as literally refined by human blood (1998, p. 88; Sandiford, 2000, p. 124; Sheller, 2003, pp. 88-97). In one influential example, "Pity for Poor Africans" (1788) by William Cowper, the speaker, an apathetic consumer, justifies enjoying goods produced by the enslaved in order to reveal his argument's absurd hypocrisy. While the speaker is "schock'd at the purchase of slaves," he remains "mum / For how could we do without sugar and rum? / Especially sugar, so needful we see? / What? Give up our desserts, our coffee, and tea!" The speaker concludes by comparing himself to a boy, who objects to his friends' plan to steal apples from a poor farmer but joins them when his protest fails: "He blam'd and protested, but join'd in the plan; / He shar'd in the plunder, but pitied the man" (1788/1999, pp. 74-79). This children's fable about eating stolen apples—also a staple episode in children's moral tales—pronounces that pity without action is complicity, and people should boycott sugar made with slave labor. Printed by the Society for Abolition of the Slave Trade and distributed in the thousands, Cowper's poem targeted women, whose household purchases they hoped to influence, with the line "A subject for Conversation at the Tea Table" (Midgley, 1996, pp. 143-44; Sussman, 2000, pp. 110-58). The appropriation of children's moral tales may explain why children's publishers Harvey and Darton reissued Cowper's poem with "The Negro's Complaint" as a chapbook in 1826 during the sugar-boycott resurgence, likely using the same illustrator for Amelia Alderson Opie's children's production narrative, *The Black Man's Lament*;

or, *How to Make Sugar* (1826). Cowper invites families to feel nauseated by the speaker's hypocrisy in the very act of eating.

Where abolitionist literature depicts eating as complicity, slave narratives use descriptions of forced eating to viscerally communicate experiences of daily abuse. Nancy in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), recounts the story of a woman who became very ill when her master forced her to eat a bowl of porridge that was incorrectly prepared, a torture he regularly inflicted on the enslaved persons who cooked for him (Jacobs, 1861/2015). Antislavery literature also illustrated instruments of torture that included mouthpieces used to prevent the enslaved from eating dirt to commit suicide. Forced eating or starvation both capture the complete lack of control that the enslaved have over their bodies, standing in for other abuses, such as beating or rape, which were more difficult to publish in print. These stories about eating endure in the cultural consciousness, resurfacing in the black cut-paper silhouettes of artist Cara Walker, or in the image of children eating porridge from animal troughs, which haunts Dana, the time traveling protagonist of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979). The irony of these episodes is that what you are forced to eat can be worse than hunger—while the story's readers must eat (i.e. confront, internalize) an uncomfortable truth about the food and clothing intimately connected with their own bodies.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Documenting the race and gender dimensions of moralized consumption in abolitionist literature, scholars highlight the unique place of sugar and cotton as commodities intimately connected with women's bodies. See Tompkins, 2012; Sheller, 2003, pp. 71-104; Sheller, 2011; Sussman, 2000.

By invoking these conventions of moralized eating, socially conscious authors disrupt the production story's sense of benign inevitability, instead concluding with consumption as a moral reckoning. The home—the place where children read, eat, and dress—becomes a space for negotiating politics through consumer choices. What the family buys; what children wear and eat; what they choose to incorporate into their bodies, approves or disapproves of global markets, labor conditions, slavery, and power relations (Sheller, 2011, pp. 173-182). Eating in these production narratives stands in for consumption more generally and represents the child's intimate, embodied participation in ethical questions about how goods are produced. By bringing consumption close to the body, stories about work and manufacturing processes make overwhelmingly vast global networks feel personal, while abstract economic principles seem navigable through tangible, concrete ethical choices.

But this empowering call to action has the effect of elevating privileged white children as consumers and heroes in a suspect global economy. Even when socially conscious, such an address is historically tied to a power differential between the enslaved persons who make goods and the leisured child consumer (or child reader), who imitates work as child's play. Developed at a time when few families could choose to raise children who did not work, the formula for these early-nineteenth-century production narratives anticipates a child reader of leisure who learns about artisan, agricultural, or manufacturing work like the protagonist in *Spectacle de la Nature*—by observing bricklayers, basketweavers, etc., and imitating that work in their playtime. A class and/or race hierarchy, between the child reader and the people who work in the story, was built into this genre. It is how the story imparts its paternalist closing moral, when children purchase a product in order to display their charitable virtues and reward the humble, deserving worker or slave.

Such invitations to play-act work, which are common in today's children's museums and children's nonfiction, and often celebrated uncritically as experiential education, can easily slip into nostalgia for an era before child labor laws and civil rights reforms. Both *Birthday Cake* (Ganeshram, 2015) and *A Fine Dessert* (Jenkins, 2015) close with recipes for children to make and eat the sweet in question, along with limited historical context about slavery, a combination that literalizes the production story's close relationship between reading, consumption, and culpability. Asking children to finish these stories by happily working in the kitchen is one way that they imply a white reader. Since children may not want to blithely make a cake after reading about the actual conditions under which the enslaved worked in kitchens, the genre imperative to act out what we read through play can impede writing an honest story. Both picturebooks invite readers to swallow the version of history they offer, which readers may find a nauseating prospect.

Thus far I have argued that production stories conceal through controlled revelation and conclude by judging consumption as either benign or complicit. Storytellers greatly differ, however, in what they do with this formula. In the next section, I close-read sugar production narratives from 1790 to 1940, exploring the range of ideological positions espoused by these narratives.

### **Children's Sugar Production Stories from 1790 to the present**

The earliest production stories quickly established mechanisms for concealing or revealing the horrors of slavery that remain with us today. Some textbooks go remarkably out of their way to say nothing about slavery. *Scenes of British Wealth* (1823), a geography book by Rev. Isaac Taylor (father of poets Ann and Jane Taylor), published ten years before the abolition

of slavery in British territories, manages to describe a family's visit to Bristol, where they tour sugar and rum refineries, while avoiding the word "slavery" or "slave trade." Bristol was Britain's number one slaving port from 1723 to 1743, and while few enslaved persons from Africa were brought to the city, the triangular trade was visible in Guinea Coast goods available in its markets (Dresser, 2001, p. 8; Kowaleski-Wallace, 2006, p. 47). In Taylor's account, the parents note the curious presence of black sailors and servants among the city's population, ambiguously credited to "trading much to the West Indies." In a description laden with subconscious violence, the children express shock that sugar is refined with "about a gallon and a half of bullock's blood, fresh from the slaughter-house" (pp. 60-61). The fact that bull's blood makes sugar white is parodied in proslavery sugar production stories with joking references to skin color, and vestiges of this material process no doubt drove home the claim of conscientious consumers that eating sugar is cannibalism. The "blood sugar topos" haunts a mother's casual attempt to explain sugar to her daughter over tea in Maria Elizabeth Budden's *Key to Knowledge, or, Things in Common Use* (1814/1823). While silent on slavery, Louisa finds the bulls blood "shocking," and vows, "I will forget the dirty part of the business" so that she can keep eating sweetmeats (p. 37). As Vincent Woodward argues, the meaning behind such violent and erotically charged language of consumption was more prevalently understood at the time, when slavery was critiqued in abolitionist slave narratives as an incestuous, cannibalistic institution, in which slave owners desire and consume black children (pp. 127-70). Budden controls the emotional register of her story, deflecting such tense meanings by using the technical language of numbers and measurements. Like Discovery Channel's "Sugar," such books include resonant silences, when information omitted leaves legible traces of erasure for readers who know about sugar slavery.

While some sugar production stories carefully avoid slavery, others interject lengthy abolitionist accounts. Published three years before the abolition of the slave trade, Priscilla Wakefield's *A Family Tour Through the British Empire* (1804) includes a visit to Liverpool's shipyards, where the children, "uncorrupted by prejudice or interest," express disgust at its source of wealth in the African slave trade (p. 5). Wakefield was a prolific, influential author of children's geographies, which covered slavery extensively (Smith, Johanna M., 2004, pp. 175-93). In her *Mental Improvement, or, the Beauties and Wonders of Nature and Art* (1794), Mr. Harcourt informs his son, Charles, that in the West Indies, "almost all laborious operations are performed by the hands of negro slaves." His daughter, Augusta, asks, "Are those countries inhabited by negroes? I understood that they were the natives of Africa" (p. 1:161). In the first American edition (1799), Mr. Harcourt relates how Africans are "snatched from their own country, friends, and connections, by the hand of violence, and power," by British slavers, and "sold to the planters of sugar-plantations, in an open market, like cattle, and afterwards employed in the most laborious and servile occupations, and pass the rest of their lives in an involuntary and wretched slavery" (pp. 1:76-77). For several pages, he describes the resulting wars in Africa, the middle passage, starvation and overwork, the abolitionist movement, and deceptions of proslavery arguments, before returning to how to make sugar. Reflecting on the vast human price of a single lump, he asks whether the children are willing to refuse "the fruit of their labour? Sugar, coffee, rice, calico, rum," and the children resolve to boycott them (p. 1:80).

Despite their condemnation of slavery, such books may also contain resonant silences, when they gloss over the history of slavery after key abolitionist victories. Following the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, the posthumous London edition of Wakefield's *Mental Improvement* (1840), excises nearly all detail of slavery's abuses, instead closing with

Mr. Harcourt's self-congratulatory statement: "I am happy to state that slavery is now almost at an end" (p. 81). The assumption behind this revision is that once children can celebrate the moral achievement of abolition, they no longer need to revisit slavery's abuses in detail. A more egregious example, *Negro Labour, or The Progress of Sugar* (1809) praises the British abolition of the African slave trade in 1807 in order to excuse the continuation of slavery: "Before the horrid Slave Trade was abolished, it very often happened that the poor Blacks were shockingly worked and ill-used," but since its abolition, we may "hope, that their sufferings will be much lessened; for it is now become the interest of the Planter to take more care of his Slaves, . . . since he cannot now supply the places of those who die among them" (p. 4). The lie of benevolent slavery, supported by *Negro Labour* and alive today, was already widely discredited by nineteenth-century writers (Woodward, 2014, pp. 1-5). By speculating that conditions for the enslaved will improve, the text of *Negro Labour* implies that racial violence is a thing of the past. These books show more subtle forms of concealing and revealing information, which have corollaries in children's publishing today. Contemporary children's books may celebrate past victories over oppression, for instance, but have more difficulty depicting the ongoing legacy of white supremacy in contemporary settings.

As these texts attest, early production stories might address histories of violence, avoid the subject, or apologize for slavery by minimizing its cruelty. Whether a nineteenth-century production story frankly depicts slavery foreshadows its concluding position on sugar consumption. Opie's abolitionist pamphlet, *The Black Man's Lament; or, How to Make Sugar* (1826), published in Britain and the US, exposes the human cost of eating sugar and enlists children in the sugar boycott. Published as a chapbook by Harvey and Darton, a Quaker abolitionist firm that also published Cowper's poetry, the front illustration depicts children

signing a petition for the global abolition of the slave trade, while the action-oriented opening lines plead for children to “listen” and “*end* the griefs you hear” (p. 1). The ballad’s speaker is a first-hand observer, a man abducted from Africa by British slavers. His “*tale of truth*” recounts how slaves died in the West Indies cane fields and his own conflicted feelings of rage and hope. By showing the man’s life and family in Africa, Opie’s book depicts “how the enslaved is turned into a commodity, but also indicates that a human subjectivity precedes this metamorphosis” (Cutter, 2017, p. 76). While ostensibly a production story about sugar, Opie shows how a man is made into a slave, decentering the production narrative’s biographical focus on the “progress” of commodities over human subjects. Indeed, technical details about sugar production, so often used to push aside human characters, are relegated to footnotes, while the enslaved speaker subsumes the poem’s narrative voice in its final stanzas, concluding with his refusal to passively wait for Christian redemption in heaven: “I burn with rage! And *then* I think / I ne’er can *gain* that place of rest” (p. 25), a passage Maria J. Cutter argues extends his anger beyond poem’s conclusion by alluding to slave revolts (p. 84).

Where Opie depicts a violent moral reckoning for thoughtless consumption, publisher John Wallis uses joyful images to encourage consumption in three pro-slavery production narratives, published in Britain and the US: *Cuffy the Negro’s Doggerel Description of the Progress of Sugar* (1823), *Cuffy’s Description of the Progress of Cotton* (ca. 1833), and *Cuffy’s Description of the Progress of Coffee* (1825). The frontispiece for *Progress of Cotton* shows two women selecting cotton cloth for purchase, aided by smiling shopkeepers, while an interior cover image shows a black peddler, possibly the narrator himself, tipping his cap with an open box of small items for sale. Wallis’s books directly contradict charges that enslaved persons are worked and starved to death, an accusation that Parliament confirmed in 1833 by tracking West Indies

island demographics, reporting “as the production of sugar and the distress of the planters have increased, human life has diminished” (Stanley, 1833, p. 1214). Slaves planting sugar cane are, in Cuffy’s account, “merry as we can be!,” (Wallis, 1823, p.6) and they do not mind packing cotton, since they stop for lunch: “Hard the work, ‘tis true; What of that? We’re willing; Idleness makes sick, / Working is not killing” (Wallis, 1833, p. 7). For good measure, the book also compares “Busy girls and boys” who attend spinning-jennies in British factories to “ants and crickets” buzzing in “gully thickets” (1833, p. 9).

Wallis’s books undermine abolitionist literature by underscoring the hierarchical dimension of charity and sympathy. Speaking in an offensive mock-dialect, Cuffy introduces himself as a wronged freedman, lured away from the West Indies by promises of English liberty, only to find himself a beggar in a cold climate: “Cunning captain coax’d him to walk across de sea, / ‘Come,’ he said, ‘to England, land of liberty’” (Wallis, 1823, p. 3). The reversal ridicules accounts of how captains lured Africans onto their boats, while turning English air, the medium of freedom cited in the Somerset Case (1772), into a buffeting climate. Cuffy then involves the reader in a charitable exchange, by asking for money to recount what he knows about sugar, making readers participate in the slave economy as his reading audience, a strategy reminiscent of Cowper’s nauseous teatime.

Both Opie’s *Black Man’s Lament* and Wallis’s Progress books depend, for their effective messaging, on readers’ awareness of the narrative conventions of production stories, with Opie pushing back against the hierarchical relationship between consumer-readers and enslaved sugar-producers that Wallis’s series reinscribes. Opie’s work presages the socially conscious production stories published well after the abolition of slavery, during the New Deal Era, when the “consumer movement” promoted alleviating poverty and resisting fascism through boycotts

and ethical purchases (Glickman, 2004, p. 907).<sup>11</sup> One example, Stella Gentry Sharpe's photobook, *Tobe* (1939), illustrated by Charles Farrell, includes production story commodity segments like "Harvesting Wheat," "Making Molasses," "At the Cotton Gin," "My Garden," all familiar production story topics treated in other schoolbooks. But these poetic vignettes of daily life on a family farm in rural North Carolina are narrated by a six-year old African American protagonist, interspersed with family portraits. Tobe troubles the production/consumption divide by tending crops, while also enjoying the produce and demanding to know its uses. At the sugar mill, the children boil juice to "make candy," while at the cotton mill, they imagine themselves as capitalists, evaluating the cotton for purchase (p. 64). "I looked at it the way the men do," says Tobe, approving his own work (p. 60). Tobe's story conforms to the traditional capitalist moral tale about hard "work" over "luck," although, to its credit, Tobe dreams beyond immediate needs. Picking peaches for his uncle, Tobe eats the small ones, "all that day" and "all the next day. / Yet we wanted more" (p. 114).

Yet the labor history of *Tobe* undermines its aims. Sharpe was a white schoolteacher who wrote *Tobe* in response to an African American boy, Clay McCauley Junior, who asked her: "Why does no one in my books look like me?" The McCauley family were sharecroppers on farmland owned by Sharpe's family, which inflects how readers perceive the story's omission of the hard realities of farm labor and segregation. The style also strikes many readers as different

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<sup>11</sup> Clara Hollos challenges the production narrative in a similar way as Sharpe, by personalizing workers, giving names, expertise, immigrant cultures, genders, education, and aspirations (Mickenberg, 2005, p. 197).

from African American storytelling in rural North Carolina, as if Tobe's voice remains unrecorded (Stokes, 2018, pp. 53-59).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, we do not see Clay McCauley, who grew up before the photos were taken; instead Farrell's photographs feature Charles Winslow Garner, whose father later sued Farrell for failing to compensate his family for their work (pp. 8-11). Written after the end of slavery and the decline of cane sugar, *Tobe* shows how the challenges of representing black labor in children's literature extend to the racial politics of the publishing industry itself.

### **Contemporary production narratives that challenge the genre**

I conclude with two contemporary picturebooks that represent slavery while wrestling with production story conventions. Pushing back against the long-established practice of reducing workers to disembodied hands, *Dave the Potter: Poet, Artist, Slave* by Laban Carrick Hill (2010) humanizes Dave by combining close-ups of face and hands. Its biographical subject, David Drake, was a master potter who created enormous clay vessels, used to store food provisions for a growing regional population, at an industrial sized kiln in the Edgefield District of South Carolina. Despite laws prohibiting the enslaved from reading and writing, Dave signed many pots and inscribed rhymed couplets. In Bryan Collier's illustrations, Dave's hands are the instruments he uses to shape clay into pots and carve his poetry verses, a creative transformation that parallels the Genesis account of God's creation of human beings as clay vessels infused with

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<sup>12</sup> For reader responses, I rely on accounts given of group conversations among local teachers and community members about *Tobe* from an April 2017 book club hosted at UNC Charlotte (Stokes, 2018, p. 53-59).

His life-giving breath. The Biblical significance of clay jars underwrites Dave’s assertion of his human worth, just as Job declares his humanity when all is taken from him, “Behold, I belong to God like you; I too have been formed out of the clay” (n.p.).<sup>13</sup> Clay and spirit capture Dave’s artistic vision, his ability to see beyond his humble material for its future potential—what clay might become: “To us it is just dirt, / the ground we walk on. / . . . But to Dave it was clay, / the plain and basic stuff / upon which he learned to / form a life / as a slave nearly / two hundred years ago.” The line break after “life” suggests that Dave shapes his own life like clay on the pottery wheel. The accompanying illustration shows his pot transposed over the Atlantic Ocean, implying the middle passage is the saltwater he mixes with earth. Dave’s hands wrestle with this medium, “wet and stiff and heavy.” Dense, resisting, clay requires strength to throw and shape. At the creative climax in his process, Dave “pulled out the shape of the jar,” active words accompanied by a fold-out quadriptych image series, focused on Dave’s hands, which allows children to join Dave’s creative strength by pulling the book open. As instruments of his strong command over earth, Dave’s hands are greater than a reductive, disembodied synecdoche; hands are poetry’s medium, a spark of contact between heaven and earth.

Hands also reach out to a wider community. On the following page, Dave examines his work. His face suggests his mental immersion while making his judgment, his gaze almost meeting the reader, but more concerned with self-evaluation than audience reception. That

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<sup>13</sup> Readers may recall “jars of clay” from the Bible, when Paul compares persecuted early Christians to “earthen vessels” strengthened by God: “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed” (*2 Corinthians, 4:7-9, New King James Version*).

expression makes Dave an artist—someone who chooses to write poetry for his own reasons, despite the danger of displaying his literacy. Dave balances on that edge, alone with his art, for one moment. Then interiority inverts as Dave reaches out, embraces the reader, and his pot expands—his clay earth becoming *the* Earth, that turns and turns on its wheel, and burns in a kiln, like alchemy’s crucible womb, and Dave is her child: “The jar grew so large / Dave could no longer wrap his strong arms around it. / If he climbed into the jar / and curled into a ball, / he would have been embraced.” The faces of Dave’s brothers and sisters look outward and inward, their eyes closed as they flow in dark rivers that stretch out from his closed eyes and outreached hands. The librarian and actor, Darion McCloud, who posed as Dave for Collier, sees these as branches of “a family tree” and “a world community” (Chaney, 2018, p. 211).<sup>14</sup> Dave writes on his pot, a poem that reflects inward and reaches out: “I wonder where / is all my relation / friendship to all— / and, every nation.” Like other production narratives, *Dave the Potter* concludes by gesturing toward the reader who consumes Dave’s art, but departs from the production story formula by reaching toward a future audience of Dave’s choice, inviting today’s readers to consume his art. Just as Dave sees what clay might become, he sees a future beyond slavery.

A similar visual iconography of faces and hands appears in *Brick by Brick* (2013), a picturebook written by Charles R. Smith and illustrated by Floyd Cooper that tells the story of the enslaved and free black artisans who built the White House alongside white artisans. The

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<sup>14</sup> Dianne Johnson’s essay on *Dave the Potter* foregrounds the role of Darion McCloud in producing a cooperative artistic rendering of David Drake, making for a provocative contrast with the fraught labor context for *Tobe* (Chaney, 2018).

story's opening refers unflinchingly to workers as "many hands" who "work together as one" (n.p.). But self-reflexive repetition, accompanied by face/hand close-up illustrations, transforms the synecdoche into a critique: "Black hands, white hands, free hands, slave hands." In free verse poetry, the text baldly states, "Rented as property, / slave hands labor," but illustrations feature close-ups of bodies and faces, dialoging between minds and bodies. Faces display complex feelings about work—a spread with face close-ups includes pride and anger, hope and exhaustion, eyes closed inward or eyes meeting viewers, alone and with families—as varied as they are individuals. The text confesses the problem of recovering faces or names of these "Nameless, faceless, / daughters and sons" who built the nation, but periodically suggests names, set one to a line with stanza breaks: "Jerry / Jess / Charles / Len // Dick / Bill / Harry / Jim." The metric stride forces the reader's individualized attention on each name. The result is a story about a group composed of individuals who accomplish something together, a rare approach when publishers prefer biographies of individuals with recognizable names.

*Brick by Brick* does not invite children to identify with enslaved workers by making their task more inviting than it was. Building the White House is unpleasant ("slave hands ache, / dark skin to white bone."); the work of the enslaved was stolen ("Slave hands saw / twelve hours a day / but slave owners take / slave hands / pay."); and child slave labor appears without nostalgic whitewash ("Clay, sand, / and water is mixed / by young slave hands / to create brick."). Lastly, the book is fairly honest about to what degree these workers enjoy what they build. At the narrative's close, they gather on the White House lawn and survey what they built. Some appreciate the building, but most look tired. Just a few have wages to "purchase freedom / earned brick by brick," but this is not their house, not yet. On the next and final spread, we skip forward in time. Standing now on the White House steps—in the elevated position that President

Washington once held—another family in modern dress enjoys what their ancestors fought to provide. Similar to *Dave the Potter*, the closing message finds renewal only by crossing into the reader's time, an approach to history that reverses nostalgia by imagining a better future.

*Brick by Brick* is a useful foil for *A Birthday Cake* because President Washington oversaw the construction of the White House, and he appears in the opening pages, respectable enough at a distance but culpable. His position on horseback, elevated over workers, later repeats with the form of a wealthy, armed overseer. After his initial cameo, Washington never reappears as the “cake eater,” so-to-speak, just as Washington never lived in the White House. Instead, beneficiaries include the workers who purchased their freedom, and in the final spread, African American youth during Barack Obama's presidency (when the book was published), although the American flag remains at half-mast. Work remains to be done.

*Dave the Potter* and *Brick by Brick* open new avenues for audience participation by representing more than one recipient of both the picturebook and the products of slave labor. The people forced to build the White House for presidents who owned slaves also built for all generations to come. Like the White House builders who envision freedom for themselves and their children, Dave offers his jars and poetry to an audience of free black children glimpsed across time and space. His prescient gift both acknowledges and thwarts the unpaid labor exchange that Dave was forced to make with his owner. Both of these stories take place in a double-temporal register reminiscent of Afrofuturism, acknowledging two exchanges and two audiences (one past, one future), and blending together history with contemporary reception in ways that complicate the genre's original power differential between maker and consumer. The result is a more meaningful empowerment of child readers, who can identify with artisan

characters whose impressive works survive their oppression, and will continue to survive into the future these children build.

Linear production lines, timelines, and scholarly essays all need their temporal disruptions. Rather than imply linear progress with this essay, I conclude with the opening stanza of “The Little Builders” from *Poems* (1871/2017) by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, to indicate that making and building benefit from long tradition within literature by African American authors:

Ye are builders little builders,  
Not with mortar, brick and stone,  
But your work is far more glorious—  
Ye are building freedom’s throne. (pp. 314-15)

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