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### **“Let me Gather Spring Flowers for a Wreath”: Writing About Historical Trauma for Young People in A Wreath for Emmett Till**

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■ ARTICLES

# “Let Me Gather Spring Flowers for a Wreath”: Writing About Historical Trauma for Young People in *A Wreath for Emmett Till*

KELLY WISSMAN

Wissman explores how Marilyn Nelson bears witness to the trauma of lynching and provides embedded guidance to young readers in responding to historical atrocities.

**AFTER SEVENTH GRADERS** at Celerity Nascent Charter School in Los Angeles read Marilyn Nelson’s (2005) *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, they asked to share their response to the book at their school’s Black History Month assembly. Named a 2006 Coretta Scott King Honor Book and given the 2006 Printz Honor Award, *A Wreath for Emmett Till* tells the story of a 14-year-old African American boy who was lynched in 1955. Within 15 sonnets accompanied by illustrations by Philippe Lardy, Nelson not only provides an account of Till’s experience but also describes the wreath of flowers that she would create to honor him. Sharing this same impulse toward commemoration, the seventh graders requested permission to read aloud a sonnet from Nelson’s book and to create a wreath of their own by laying down flowers at their school assembly. School administrators, however, prevented them from doing so, claiming that the chosen sonnet was inappropriate for an event meant to be “celebratory” noting: “We don’t want to focus on how the history of the country has been checkered but on how do we dress for success, walk proud and celebrate all the accomplishments we’ve made” (Rivera, 2007, para. 7).

The school administrators’ response to the inclusion of *A Wreath for Emmett Till* in the assembly illuminates many fundamental tensions that emerge when “risky stories” (Simon & Armitage-Simon, 1995, p. 27) are shared in schools. It is also indicative of fundamental tensions surrounding an American identity in which racial inequalities were written into the country’s founding documents and maintained in subsequent generations through a range of legal, structural, cultural, and institutional means. Whereas administrators wished not to dwell on this so-called “checkered” history, Nelson takes a different point of view. By writing her poem and in her interviews and commentaries after its publication, she indicates that knowing this history is in fact essential, noting, “The most important thing is that we remember and that we claim all of our history. We can’t erase things. We can only learn from them and we learn from them by remembering them” (as quoted in Chandler, 2008, p. 102).

Nelson’s perspectives provide insight into the persistent questions that surround books written for young people

about traumatic events. How, Connolly (2012) wonders, can authors writing about such devastating realities refrain from either “minimizing the tragedy” or “overwhelming young readers” (p. 2)? These texts are asked both to be honest about the traumatic experiences described and to provide a sense of security and hope to young people (Higgonet, 2005). As Barker (2013) notes, this is an exceedingly complex endeavor as authors seek to render accounts that are “real and truthful, yet bearable” (p. 174).

In this article, I explicate how Nelson invites a remembering of “all of our history,” including lynching. I also explore how she provides guidance to young readers in ways that make reading this text “bearable.” In providing this textual analysis, I am responding to Damico and Apol’s (2008) assertion that, in response to “risky historical texts” (p. 141), the field needs analyses that focus “more squarely on the text itself and on the challenges that a particular type of text might pose for readers” (p. 143). I first provide an introduction to the field of trauma studies and consider how Emmett Till’s lynching is an example of historical trauma. Next, I include perspectives from Nelson on the inspiration for and purpose of her poem. I then provide a close reading of the sonnet sequence to show how her text guides the reader in witnessing and commemorating this trauma. As the response to Nelson’s book in the Los Angeles school suggests, however, acknowledgment of America’s traumatic racial history can cause considerable uneasiness within classrooms and schools. In my conclusion, I therefore consider how the very form and content of *A Wreath for Emmett Till*—and Nelson’s own experiences in talking with young people about it—provide insights to educators wishing to share this text with young readers.

### Trauma Studies, Race, and the Lynching of Emmett Till

In a review of *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, *Publishers Weekly* (2005) refers to the book as both an “elegy” and a “compelling invitation to bear witness” (p. 54) to a tragic event in American history. In doing so, the review invokes terms and perspectives that share a resonance with scholarship in the field of trauma studies (e.g., Caruth, 1996; Felman & Laub, 1992). Testimony and bearing witness, as Dutro (2011) notes, are key conceptual understandings within this interdisciplinary field that seeks to explore how human beings give voice to traumatic events and the processes by which those testimonies are heard by others. A testimony can be a discursive or written account of the experi-

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**Testimony and bearing witness...are key conceptual understandings within this interdisciplinary field [trauma studies] that seeks to explore how human beings give voice to traumatic events and the processes by which those testimonies are heard by others.**

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ence of trauma, often referring to accounts of survivors of large-scale atrocities like the Holocaust. As Simon (2000) 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” (p. 18). Writers of historical fiction often draw on these testimonies and other historical documents to construct their own “narratives of historical witness” (Eppert, 2000, p. 214) to troubling dimensions of the human experience. As readers, bearing witness to these testimonies within literature involves “having an affective encounter with massive unthinkable disaster or victimization” (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008, p. 146). Dutro (2008) therefore notes the importance of considering “the witnessing role of readers who encounter trauma on the page” (p. 427).

Paradoxically, the historical and contemporary experiences of African Americans are often marginalized within trauma studies. As Graff (2011) writes,

Since slavery would quite obviously be traumatic to the enslaved and to their children, it is surprising that slavery is peculiarly absent from the trauma literature, although attention is given to the Holocaust, floods, earthquakes, sexual abuse, rape, etc. (Gump, 2000). (p. 135)

As racial oppression took on multiple forms postslavery, Graff contends that racial trauma continued to manifest across many generations:

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**Nelson inspires in the reader what I call “dialectically commemorative witnessing,” in which readers keep many seeming contradictions in tension in an effort to witness the trauma of Till’s lynching and to commemorate him.**

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Slavery did not end the trauma and shame to which blacks were subjected. What followed was Jim Crow (a rigid pattern of racial segregation), lynching, disenfranchisement...terrorism, racial caricatures and every form of humiliation and brutalization imaginable (Litwack, 2009). (p. 136)

Rogers (2004) applies a trauma studies lens to first-person accounts of lynching in the Mississippi Delta and notes that these testimonies "suggest that the violence that maintained white supremacy produced a sense of communal trauma among the black population" (p. 119). Rogers further suggests that the emotional and psychological traumas associated with lynching were deeply connected to the pervasive physical trauma inflicted on victims:

Part of lynching's terror in African-American communities resulted from the barbaric practices of lynch mobs, which had as their aim not just the execution of black victims, but the torture, mutilation, and obliteration of black bodies. (p. 118)

With few exceptions (e.g., Damico & Apol, 2008), historical narratives written about African Americans for children and young adults are often not viewed through a trauma lens, despite the fact that, as Kidd (2005) notes, a large number of the books "are historical and often traumatic in emphasis, so pervasive is the legacy of slavery, Reconstruction, and the fight for civil rights" (pp. 133–134). From a trauma studies perspective attuned to the African American experience, it is clear that Emmett Till experienced many traumas to both his psyche and his body. At the age of 14, he traveled for the first time from his hometown of Chicago, Illinois, to visit relatives in Money, Mississippi. While there, he was perceived to have violated the strict codes governing interactions between the races in the Jim Crow South. While with his cousins in a rural country store, Till was accused of interacting inappropriately with a white woman. Based on this allegation, he was later kidnapped by a group of white men from his uncle's home in the middle of the night, tortured for many hours, and shot in the head. After tying a 70-pound cotton gin to his neck with barbed wire, these men threw his body into the Tallahatchie River. When his body was recovered three days later, it revealed signs of extraordinary abuse, including numerous broken bones, a fractured skull, and a dislocated eye.

The trauma of lynching, whether presented within textbooks or within literature written for young people, is a difficult reality to face. Rather than looking away from this history, though, Nelson implores her young readers to

consider what Goldsby (2006) calls "the histories we cannot admit we need to know" (p. 6), as I explore next through a presentation of her perspectives on the inspiration for and purpose of her poem.

### Perspectives From Marilyn Nelson

Marilyn Nelson was 9 years old when Emmett Till died. In an interview, she recalled, "Emmett Till's name, as a victim of lynching, did come to my awareness when I was a child, and so I was aware of it and frightened by it. It was a glimpse into the most violent heart, I think, of '50s America" (Chideya, 2005, para. 5). Prior to *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, Nelson had written for audiences of adults and young adults, including a book on George Washington Carver that drew much critical acclaim. When Nelson met with her editor, Andrea Davis Pinkney, about a future project, Pinkney told her, "I have always wanted to publish a children's book about lynching" (Pierpont, 2006, p. 48). Initially taken aback, Nelson asked, "Who wants to think about lynching?...You just don't want to open your mind to something like that" (Pierpont, 2006, p. 48). Upon further reflection, Nelson made her decision:

I went home and spent a great deal of time thinking about it, and finally after doing some reading and research it became obvious to me that if I was going to do this, it should be about Emmett Till. And so that's when I said I would do it. (Anderson, 2009, p. 393)

As Nelson wrote the sonnets, she anticipated that her audience would be about the same age as Emmett Till when he was killed. Although the subject matter is difficult and her choice of poetic forms potentially challenging to young readers, she notes, "I don't believe in talking down to young people" (Pierpont, 2006, p. 48). In reflecting on her purpose for writing the sonnet sequence, Nelson highlights multiple intentions of exposing students to a fuller history of America, while also promoting empathy:

I hope they will react with shock....I hope they will react with empathy. I hope they will understand and empathize with the horror that Emmett must have felt, and his mother. And I also hope they will appreciate the history that's being portrayed here, that they will learn something about a very difficult and painful and brutal period in American history. (Pinkney, 2005, para. 14)

Both the poem and the illustrations explore and represent this "difficult and painful and brutal period in American history" in ways that have great literary and artistic merit in and of themselves. As I explore next, *A Wreath for Emmett Till* also provides insights into the experiences and

responsibilities of young people who bear witness to this trauma as readers.

### Dialectically Commemorative Witnessing in *A Wreath for Emmett Till*

Informed by theoretical perspectives on trauma, I conducted repeated close readings of the complex poetic scheme, allusions, and imagery in *A Wreath for Emmett Till*. In order to build conceptual understandings as to how Nelson acts as a witness, guide, and commemorator of this traumatic event in American history, I identified specific ways that the poem testifies to the trauma while also inviting the reader to bear witness to it. Below, I illustrate these literary moves and their potential impact on the reader. First, I consider the symbolism and significance of the poem's form in guiding the reader's response to this trauma that took the life of a 14-year-old boy and inspired a movement for social justice. Next, I analyze how Nelson's poem exposes what I see as three dialectical tensions<sup>1</sup> (remembering/forgetting, American Dream/American nightmare, and individual/collective) that confront witnesses to the trauma of Till's lynching as a historical event more generally and as readers of her poem itself more particularly. In doing so, Nelson inspires in the reader what I call "dialectically commemorative witnessing," in which readers keep many seeming contradictions in tension in an effort to witness the trauma of Till's lynching and to commemorate him.

#### Poetic Form

Trauma, as Dutro (2008) writes, can often "reveal the limits of language—words crumble, clarity of explanation evaporates" (p. 424). Faced with the monumental and wrenching literary responsibility of rendering the lynching of Emmett Till, Nelson made an intentional choice to write the book as a heroic crown of sonnets. This form consists of 15 interlinked sonnets, in which the last line of one sonnet, sometimes slightly modified, becomes the first line of the next. The first line of the first 14 sonnets then form the final sonnet. In Nelson's poem, the final sonnet is also an

acrostic, spelling out "RIP Emmett L.Till." Nelson explains that the highly formalized structure both shielded her from the horrors of Till's death and liberated her artistic voice: "The strict form became a kind of insulation, a way of protecting myself from the intense pain of the subject matter, and a way to allow the Muse to determine what the poem would say" (Nelson, 2005, n.p.<sup>2</sup>). The iambic pentameter and Petrarchan rhyme scheme also lend an aura of steadiness and calm to the poem. In choosing this highly rule-governed poetic form, Nelson brings a sense of control and order to the recounting of an experience apt to create pain and disorder in both herself and the reader. As Chandler (2008) notes, the poem "foregrounds a traumatized speaker's difficult search for a way to honor Till and share his memory with readers" (p. 102).

Nelson's choice to write not just sonnets but a heroic crown of sonnets imparts additional symbolic meaning to the reader. The crown has multiple meanings and allusive qualities. It is suggestive of the honorific role that Emmett Till has within civil rights history as one of its inspirers and emblems. The crown also recalls the crown of thorns worn by Jesus at the time of his crucifixion, an allusion Nelson refers to in her Sonnet Notes section. In one of only two wordless, double-page spreads in the entire sonnet sequence, Lardy portrays Till with a crown on his head. This crown is made of the barbed wire and metal chains that his killers used to drown his body. The heroic crown of sonnets and the evocative crown imagery thus bestow honor and majesty to Till, while also suggesting the profound pain and suffering of this "boy martyr," as Nelson refers to him. Finally, within the heroic crown of sonnets where the last line of one sonnet inspires the first line of the next, Nelson deliberately writes into her poem themes of connection and recursiveness, asking the reader to carry ideas and images from one sonnet to the next and to revisit the first line of the first 14 sonnets in the final one. In doing so, the structure of the poem itself embodies and communicates to the reader central themes of connection and remembrance of historical traumas.

#### Remembering/Forgetting

While the structure of the poem carries significant symbolic meaning, the poem's content also communicates the complexities inherent in witnessing and testifying to trauma. Nelson captures not only the profound feelings of instability and disorder produced by trauma but also the unexpected realizations and healing that can occur in its aftermath. A striking feature of her poem is that it expresses a full range of these responses to trauma, refusing to simplify or overlook contradictions.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Chandler (2008) argues that the sonnets capture the many "overlapping conflicts" (p. 103), including conflicts between the American Dream and American nightmare, brought to light by Emmett Till's lynching. I use the term *dialectical tensions* to suggest how Nelson keeps many contradictory ideas and experiences unresolved.

<sup>2</sup>Given that all pages of *A Wreath for Emmett Till* are unnumbered, the remaining citations do not include the demarcation "n.p."



According to Simon and Eppert (1997), "historically traumatic events simultaneously summon forgetting and remembrance" (p. 176). These contradictory impulses to remember and to forget in the face of trauma are explored throughout the sonnet sequence, with Nelson keeping them in a taut dialectical tension. She writes memory into the first line of the first sonnet: "Rosemary for remembrance, Shakespeare wrote." As she describes how "Flowers had / a language then," the speaker gives the meaning of such flowers, such as roses for "*I love you*" and, more ominously, goldenrod for "*Be careful*." The speaker then asks, "What should my wreath for Emmett Till denote?" In this opening sonnet, Nelson names heliotrope for justice, mandrake for horror, daisies and white lilacs for innocence, and three different flowers for grief. In the final line, she adds forget-me-nots to her wreath, noting, "Though if I could, I would." She modifies the phrasing slightly when repeating this line as the first two lines of the next sonnet: "Forget him not. Though if I could, I would / forget much of that racial memory." Here, Nelson suggests the multiple and often conflicting emotions in the face of trauma: to remember, to commemorate, and to try to forget when the grief becomes too painful to bear. After contemplating the possibility of forgetting, the speaker immediately interrupts her train of thought, stating firmly and declaratively in the second sonnet, "No, I remember, like a haunted tree." The sonnet then goes on to describe what the tree witnessed the night of Till's death, itself dying, "pierced by the screams of a shortened childhood." The third sonnet shifts to the voice of the tree that recounts "A running boy, five men in close pursuit. / One dark, five pale faces in the moonlight." The tree ends its testimony, noting how grief can vex speech: "Emmett Till's name still catches in the throat." In remembering, trying to forget, telling the story plain, and then becoming choked with grief into silence at the thought of Till, the multiple speakers in the poem embody the multifaceted experiences of witnesses to trauma.

In the fourth sonnet, the original speaker of the poem returns, again connecting the themes of seeing, speaking, remembering, and forgetting in the aftermath of trauma. In this sonnet, Nelson recounts how Till's mother prepared him for his first trip south, telling him "a Mississippi anecdote: / Some white folks have blind souls." In the very distinctive images that follow, Nelson insists that readers *do* see Till, naming the undeniable markers of his boyhood (his comic books, his baseball cap, his "chubby face") and the role of his mother in looking after him. Nelson recounts how Mrs. Till wrote a note for the train conductor in Chicago to ensure her son's safe passage. Writing clearly and specifically, Nelson asks the reader to take note of Emmett, to see this boy who was deeply cared for, and

to remember him. She juxtaposes this portrait against the "blind souls" who without concern, without knowing him, without really seeing him, murdered and discarded him, "a body left to bloat" in the Tallahatchie River.

On this double-page spread where the sonnet on the left describes Till's preparations for the trip to Mississippi and his demise once there, Lardy has placed a bloodred tree trunk across the gutter. On the right, with a gray patina whitewash, the poem's speaker directly addresses Till's mother, reprising and modifying the last line of the previous sonnet, "Your only child, a body thrown to bloat." Here, Nelson identifies the key role of Till's mother in keeping her son's memory alive, noting how she called for a "public remembrance of how Emmett died, / innocence slaughtered by the hands of hate." After Mrs. Till insisted on an open-casket funeral in her hometown of Chicago, tens of thousands of people viewed Emmett Till's body. The caption of a photo of him in a widely distributed magazine read, "Mutilated face of victim was left unretouched by mortician at the mother's request. She said she wanted 'all the world' to witness the atrocity" (as quoted in Alexander, 1994, p. 87). Mrs. Till's efforts had a catalyzing effect in bringing to public consciousness the specter of lynching. The two sonnets on this double-page spread render Till as a mother's son, as a young boy who met a horrific death, and as a martyr whose death galvanized the Civil Rights Movement because of the bravery of a mother who insisted her son be witnessed and remembered.

As the sonnet sequence continues, though, the tensions between remembering and forgetting in the face of trauma reemerge. In the sixth sonnet, the speaker of the poem goes as far as to imagine an alternative "nice, safe universe" in which Till becomes a grown man where his gifts could "bloom into a livelihood." Even while desperate to forget the terror of Till's murder and to believe in a reality devoid of its horrors, the speaker sadly notes, "But parallel / realities may have terrorists, too." With this recognition, the speaker asks if at least the horrible events of human history could be "confined to a horror-movie world," detailing the plot line from a popular 1967 horror movie in which a blind girl is stalked by a mentally ill killer. Chillingly, Till's story becomes intertwined with the horror movie: As the character in the movie screams, he screams; as her door is being knocked in, his door is bashed in by "neighbors with names he knows, a mob / heartless and heedless, answering to no god." When the movie character prays, "Please, God, forget me not," Nelson evokes the forget-me-nots in the wreath she started to weave for Till in the earlier sonnets.

Throughout the sonnet sequence, Nelson brings forth and reflects back to the reader the powerful and sometimes conflicting impulses to remember and to forget when confronted with trauma in real life and on the page. Reflecting the profoundly destabilizing effect of trauma on one's sense of the world and sense of security, Nelson ends the eighth sonnet by writing that Till's nightmarish abduction from his uncle's home "tears through the patchwork drapery of our dreams." Here, she also alludes to the second dialectic of the American Dream and the American nightmare, as I explore next.

#### American Dream/American Nightmare

Nelson's entire sonnet sequence recalls a time in American history that many would like to forget and that challenges notions of America as a land of equality and liberty for all. She directly addresses what she calls this country's "Janus face": "One mouth speaks with forked tongue, / the other reads the Constitution." As with remembering and forgetting, Nelson holds both sides of America in dialectical tension, choosing not to ignore the country's violent history but also choosing to highlight the "grand dream" at the center of the American experiment: "My country, 'tis of both / thy nightmare history and thy grand dream, / thy centuries of good and evil deeds, / I sing."

In continuing to weave her wreath in memory of Till, Nelson incorporates natural elements to represent this complicated history in general and the history of lynching in particular. She adds oak twigs for sincerity. Noting that oak trees served as sites for many lynchings, Nelson writes that these trees "groaned with the weight of men slain for their race, / their murderers acquitted in almost every case. / One night five black men died on the same tree, / with toeless feet, in this Land of the Free." Nelson highlights here not only the horror of lynching but also how perpetrators were rarely brought to justice within the legal system. She provides the arresting image of "toeless feet" on American bodies killed in a country known as the "Land of the Free." Nelson's wreath becomes a physical embodiment of these contradictory impulses and deeds. She adds to her wreath flowers that represent America as a beacon of hope across the world (Queen Anne's lace signifying sanctuary) and flowers that represent the unspeakable violence conducted in its name (bloodroot poppy that when picked "bleeds / a thick red sap").

As Nelson constructs her wreath across the entire sonnet sequence, she retains a singular faith in the promise of America. In an earlier sonnet, she writes of the "blind souls" that Till's mother warned her son of before he journeyed to Mississippi. As the speaker in the poem continues to gather

flowers for her wreath, she does so with the hope "that a blind soul / can see again. That miracles do exist. / In my house, there is still something called grace, / which melts ice shards of hate and makes hearts whole." Nelson holds onto this faith even while writing that the "fruited plain" of American prosperity is undergirded by an "undergrowth / of [poisonous] mandrake." Despite the acknowledgment that both coexist, she posits that individuals and the country as a whole must work toward remembrance and regeneration, as I explore in more depth next.

#### Individual/Collective

While Nelson's sonnets attend to the particulars of Emmett Till's lynching, she also makes allusions to historical traumas that preceded and followed his lynching, including the Holocaust, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Rwanda, and the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States. In this way, she makes not only connections between individual victims of trauma and the historical times in which they lived but also explicit connections among acts of terror across time. In the ninth sonnet, this contextualization is most evident. Nelson describes how these acts were often undertaken publicly and communally with "crowds standing around like devil choirs." While she suggests the great scope of many of these tragedies, she also attends to the individual bodies and experiences of victims, such as the "piles of shoes" outside the Nazi death chambers and "the air filled with last breaths" as the World Trade Center towers fell. Following this ninth sonnet, in a wordless double-page spread, Lardy depicts nine coffins, one with an image of Emmett Till's face transposed onto it and the other coffins bearing generic human visages. Like Nelson, Lardy calls attention to the individual death of Till while also paying tribute to the many named and anonymous victims of historical atrocities.

Nelson not only places Till's story in the larger story of human history but also places herself as an individual writer and wreath maker into that history. It is noteworthy that in the final line of the ninth sonnet—a sonnet that includes arguably the bleakest, most damning indictment of the atrocities that human beings have afflicted on one another across history—she declares, "Let me gather spring flowers for a wreath." Here, she responds to the full weight of the human suffering that she had just documented by choosing to take purposeful action, adding flowers symbolizing hope, innocence, and promise to her wreath. She later calls on her reader to bear witness as well. In the penultimate sonnet, she writes in the collective *we*. Here, she addresses readers directly and contends that in the face of human suffering, "we must bear witness to atrocity." Nelson invokes the power and place of

individuals, including the readers of her poem, to serve as witnesses to a larger collective. Noting our responsibility to move beyond stunned silence, she asserts, "We can speak what we see." She proclaims pointedly that individuals *must* speak "or bear unforgettable shame." Emphasizing this need to remember and to bear witness, she ends this sonnet with the first line of the first sonnet, "*Rosemary for remembrance*, Shakespeare wrote," imploring her readers to remember Till once again.

Throughout these three dialectics of remembering and forgetting, of the American Dream and the American nightmare, and the individual and the collective, *A Wreath for Emmett Till* embodies and expresses the trauma of lynching and invites the reader to bear witness to it. The testifying that Nelson does in the poem goes beyond the telling of events, however. As Simon and Eppert (1997) note, witnesses to trauma must "stay wide enough awake to attend to the requirements of just recollection and the work of transforming the future" (p. 189). Within the creation of her sonnets and her wreath, Nelson's actions reflect this transformative impulse. She also asks for a transformative response in the reader. Nelson does not ask that we engage in empty ritual; rather, in order to commemorate Till properly, we must confront the full weight of his tragedy, embrace the contradictions and difficulties that his story reveals about America, and leave the encounter with the text ready to "speak what we see."

#### "They Want to Talk About Injustice": Responding to *A Wreath for Emmett Till*

Nelson's poem makes a unique contribution to discussions surrounding the composition of texts about historical trauma written for young readers as well as their incorporation into the classroom. First, she provides embedded guidance for supporting students' own responses to the trauma they encounter on the page. This guidance takes the form of the speaker's embodiment of the multifaceted and often contradictory responses of a witness to trauma. The speaker of the poem vacillates between an unflinching documentation of the horror and a denial of it, between hope in the American Dream and despair at its lack of realization, between a focus on the individual survivor and a recognition of the connections across human atrocities to one another over time and across geography. In doing so, Nelson's poem may reflect back to the reader his or her own response to the trauma witnessed on the page. The speaker thus guides young readers to a recognition of multiple responses to trauma and illuminates how they can and often do emerge in unexpected and contradictory ways. Second, Nelson provides young readers with an example of a productive outlet for response to trauma

through creative acts. Throughout the sonnet sequence, the speaker weaves a wreath full of meaning and significance, capturing a full range of emotions, histories, and complexities to commemorate Till. In refusing to look away, to simplify, or to lend easy comfort, Nelson's sonnets explore the multifaceted nature of bearing witness to trauma, the complex and often paradoxical realities of race in America, and the necessary place of hope in the aftermath of traumatic events.

Nelson's own perspectives on how the book has been received by young people provide essential insights into its pedagogical possibilities. She shared the book with middle school students while she was writing it. This experience reaffirmed her belief in the value and need for this book and for exploring historical and contemporary injustices with young people. The following interview exchange captures some of the insights she gained from the students:

**Chideya:** Is it too much for them?

**Ms. Nelson:** I hope not. This book is published as a young adult book, not as a children's book. And when I was working on it, I took it to a group of eighth-graders in a middle school near where I lived, and they were shocked. They had not heard the story. They wanted to talk so much that they had to get special permission to spend an extra hour with me when the class period ended....

**Chideya:** So what did these students get out of your work? I'm presuming that you read to them before you spoke.

**Ms. Nelson:** They wanted to talk about injustice and racism and contemporary injustice and bigotry. They were very aware of things that are going on right now in the United States, and they were very eager to discuss their images of the world. (Chideya, 2005, paras. 8–11)

Throughout these three dialectics of remembering and forgetting, of the American Dream and the American nightmare, and the individual and the collective, *A Wreath for Emmett Till* embodies and expresses the trauma of lynching and invites the reader to bear witness to it.



These responses to Nelson's work share similarities with the ways in which young people have responded to other historical injustices portrayed in literature for children and young adults. After engaging with picture books about the Japanese American internment, fifth graders in a study by Youngs (2012) responded with confusion, anger, and multiple questions. Similar feelings of shock and outrage emerged among students reading about the realities of Jim Crow (Ballentine & Hill, 2000) and the violence of racism in the rural South (Brooks & Hampton, 2005). Heffernan and Lewison (2000) explored how third graders eventually came to understand the suffering of the enslaved after initially denying it, while Connor (2003) documented high school students' visceral and emotional responses to the horrors endured on the Middle Passage. Across these studies, students experienced a profound sense of disequilibrium and initial confusion at the atrocities represented; however, these texts also inspired multiple readings and an intensive need for discussion of them.

Nelson's work with the middle school students suggests how creating a space of dialogue and conversation can promote inquiries into present-day issues and the complex realities of racial injustice and inequalities. There is an important corollary here to Dutro's (2008) articulation of what she calls a "circle of witness and testimony" (p. 428), in which young readers and their teachers share their own experiences of loss, sadness, or trauma in response to literature. What is noteworthy in both Nelson's approach and Dutro's is the underlying belief in the importance of creating opportunities for students to talk about literature and to listen to them as their responses and thoughts emerge. In both approaches, adults also make available to young people their own responses and experiences. What Nelson and Dutro both emphasize is not the creation and delivery of rigid lesson plans that go forward without consideration of students' emergent responses; rather, they both highlight the creation of arenas for speaking and listening to students about serious topics and providing opportunities for them to "discuss their images of the world."

In my view, essential to incorporating *A Wreath for Emmett Till* into the classroom would be the listening stance (Schultz, 2003) that both Nelson and Dutro employ in their interactions with young people, as well as opportunities

for students to respond creatively and aesthetically to the poem. I would also argue that engaging students in close readings of the poem's structure and allusions has potential to provide key interpretive lenses in approaching this difficult text. Similarly, surrounding the poem with both primary source documents and the author's own perspectives also lends integral insights. Furthermore, the conceptual terminology of trauma studies provides productive entry points to understanding the lynching as well as the reader's response to it. Finally, teachers should be prepared for the range of responses that students may have to this text, from anger to confusion, from denial to pain, from expressions of sadness to expressions of hope for a more just world. Simon and Simon-Armitage (1995) recommend that teachers be aware of the possibility that students may create "shadow texts," or "secondary narratives constructed in response to the unresolved questions a primary narrative elicits" (p. 30). Discussing the meaning, significance, and reasons for the emergence of shadow texts in response to *A Wreath for Emmett Till* would provide further opportunity to make meaning with the text and to validate the range of responses that students may have to it.

When Robertson (1997) asks, "what knowledge are we trying to teach when we ask children to read stories about incidences of horror?" (p. 457), possible answers in relation to Nelson's text might include a more complicated understanding of American racial history, a way to understand the individual and collective forces in traumatic events, and the potential power of readers and writers to engage in acts of commemoration and creation toward a more just world. As the seventh graders mentioned at the opening of this essay could attest, *A Wreath for Emmett Till* has the potential to catalyze multiple and deeply felt responses in readers. Within opportunities for both "just recollection" (Simon & Eppert, 1997) and for generative response through the arts, students can bear witness to this historical trauma and engage in creative acts to commemorate Emmett Till's life and legacy. ■

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