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*A Fusion of Music, Rhyme, Poetry, and Art: A Literary and Visual Analysis of African-American Themes in the Works of Ashley Bryan*  

AS PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in Library and Information Science  

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A Fusion of Music, Rhyme, Poetry, and Art: A Literary and Visual Analysis of Themes in the Works of Ashley Bryan

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ABSTRACT

Current social, political, and cultural events, both nationally and globally, remind us constantly of the need to identify books that celebrate positive images of diverse populations and build inclusion. For some time scholars in the fields of Library and Information Science (LIS) and children’s literature have advocated for and sought to develop collections reflecting the varied experiences and identities of young readers. This includes collections for African-American children who often do not see themselves positively reflected or represented in literature, media, and culture. This study adds to those efforts by examining if and how African-American themes are reflected in award-winning writer and illustrator Ashley Bryan’s works. Focusing only on those works that Bryan both wrote and illustrated, this project combines close reading with synthesis of critical scholarship and Bryan’s own insights from personal interviews conducted at his home. Through a process of textual and visual qualitative analysis, not only are Bryan’s own perceptions of the cultural content of his work highlighted, but the African-American themes reflected in it are also identified clearly. As a result, his works, already celebrated for their multiculturalism, can be a building block in collections that strengthen literacy representation for youth readership, particularly for African-American children.
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

It is April 25, 2007, and Ashley Bryan is the guest of honor for the Ashley Bryan Literary Festival at the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History in Atlanta, Georgia. Ashley is introduced by the library’s director, Francine Henderson, and takes the stage as the audience claps enthusiastically. Then, the audience listens as Bryan recites “My People” by Langston Hughes. With Hughes’ book, *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* (1933) in hand, Bryan looks toward the audience and inspires them with the following words: “The night is beautiful, / So the faces of my people. / The stars are beautiful, / So the eyes of my people. / Beautiful, also, is the sun. / Beautiful, also are the souls of my people” (Hughes, 1932, p. 60). It is fitting that Bryan began speaking by celebrating Hughes’ tribute to the beautiful darkness of African-American faces, the lighter windows of experience in their eyes, and the shining history and depth of the African-American soul; the poem gives a voice to a people and culture long misrepresented or excluded from the field of children’s writing and illustrating. Tellingly, it is Bryan’s desire to share his stories, storytelling, and illustrations with his own works that provide exigency for my study.

Since 1985, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin has recorded the number of books it receives that are written and/or illustrated by people of color annually, including those by African Americans. The organization estimates that 5,000 children’s books were published in 2014. Of that 5,000, the CCBC received 3,500 for review. Of those 3,500, African Americans wrote only 84, and only 180 were about African Americans; that is 2% and 5%, respectively (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2015). Such low numbers signal the dearth of images and experiences in children’s literature that resonate with youth of color. Enabling children to connect their experiences with what they read, to see themselves
represented, is integral to developing a love of reading and building literacy. This lack of representation, then, has crucial implications for those African-American children who do not see themselves in the books they read. As a result, it is imperative that school and public librarians pay close attention to broad cultural representations and understanding African-American culture and identity when building youth collections. It is their role to shape collections and curricula that reflect, inspire, and serve not just one cultural segment of their potential readers but also all segments. Kathleen Horning (2014), Director of the Cooperative Children's Center, contends,

[If] we want more diversity in literature, we have to buy the books. Buy them for our schools, for our libraries . . . We must be agents of change. Otherwise, we are all participants in “cultural lobotomy.” And it won’t be technology that threatens the existence of books. It’ll be their complete utter irrelevance in the real world that never was and never will be all white. (p. 18)

Horning urges librarians to “[read multicultural books]. Know them well enough that they become the go-to books when making recommendations or creating bibliographies. Sharing them with children of all kinds, not just because they are multicultural, but because they are good books” (p. 18). If they cannot do so, then librarians are failing the complex populations they serve by not helping readers to see, know, and read books that reflect the varied world in which they live.

Horning’s words have clear applications for a study such as mine—one that is focused around the following research questions:

• What are the themes reflected and represented in works written and illustrated by Ashley Bryan?
• What is Ashley Bryan’s perspective on the cultural content of his work?
Answering these questions takes Bryan’s work beyond the categorizations of just “good” or “award-winning” books. It is not only that his work celebrates the presence of children of color, or that it is multicultural, meaning consciously representative of elements from different cultures. Instead, it is because they are “good books” that, because of their content, expose youth readers to the importance of cultural diversity and inclusion in an engaging way—especially when it comes to African-American culture.

Ashley Bryan’s cultural background informs his work. In my interview with him, Bryan spoke of family and travel experiences that shaped his identity and art. The second of six children (four boys and two girls) born to parents who migrated from Antigua in the British West Indies, Bryan grew up in the Bronx, New York. Ashley Bryan’s parents saw how much he liked to draw and bought him a desk with cubbyholes and drawers for artwork and supplies (Bryan, 2009b). After high school, Bryan applied to one of the leading art schools, but in 1940, African Americans were not granted admission. He recalls, “The interviewer stated that mine was the best portfolio that he had ever seen. However, he also informed me that it would be a waste to give a scholarship to a colored person” (Bryan, 2009b, p. 21). Bryan did not give up, and his teachers did not either. They encouraged him to take a “blind” entrance exam for Cooper Union School of Art and Engineering, which was tuition free (Bryan, 2009b). After his acceptance and two years at Cooper Union, his schooling was interrupted when he was drafted into the segregated army during World War II. He participated in D-Day and Omaha Beach during the invasion of Normandy with other members of an all-black army battalion (Pavonetti, 2002).
Yet, during his army years, he did not stop drawing; he kept a sketchpad and art supplies in his gas mask (Bryan, 2009b). He returned to Cooper Union to finish his art degree in 1946 and won a scholarship to Skowhegan School of Art in Maine (Pavonetti, 2002). After returning home from art school, Bryan attended Columbia University as a philosophy major. His experiences both in society and at war fueled his desire to know answers to such questions as “why man, knowing the overwhelming tragedies of war, chooses war?” (Schneider, 2009). He received his degree in 1950 and, later, studied in France and Germany as a Fulbright Scholar. Although he lived and worked in a Bronx studio apartment close to his family for many years, in 1973, after teaching at Queens College and Lafayette College for some time, Bryan transferred to Dartmouth College, where he served as Art Department Chair until 1989. He is now Professor Emeritus of Art and Visual Studies (Pavonetti, 2002).

As he sought to be educated and educate others, Ashley Bryan tried for many years to enter the children’s book world to no avail. In 1962, however, Jean Karl, founding editor of children’s books at Atheneum publishing, heard of Ashley Bryan’s work and came to his studio in the Bronx. Karl was excited by the different styles Bryan used to illustrate various texts, as well as his varied approaches to text. Showing his work, Bryan explained to Karl that he was inspired by the cultures of the world and celebrated those influences in his illustrations (Bryan, 2009a). Karl was so impressed that she sent Bryan a contract to work on his first book, a collection of poems entitled *Moon, For What Do You Wait?* (1967) by Rabindranath Tagore (Bryan, 2009a). Bryan was in his forties at the time. From 1962 until her death in 2000, Jean Karl was Bryan’s editor. It was she who suggested that Bryan use his illustrations of African folktales to produce a book in which he told the tales in his own words. In doing so, Bryan reached into his past, to Langston Hughes and other African-American poets, to storytelling, and
to the tales told by his Antiguan grandmother. He “hoped [his book] would open the ear to the sound of the voice in the printed word, so that even when reading [his] stories silently, readers would hear the voice of a storyteller” (Bryan, 2009b).

Since then, Ashley Bryan has become a distinguished author and illustrator, winning numerous awards for his work, including three Coretta Scott King Book Illustrator Awards. In 1981, he won for *Beat the Story-Drum, Pum-Pum* (1980). In 2004, he won for *Beautiful Blackbird* (2003a), and in 2008, he won for *Let it Shine: Three Favorite Spirituals* (2007). He has also won six Coretta Scott King Honor Book Awards—in 1983 for *I’m Going to Sing: Black American Spirituals* (1982); in 1987 for *Lion and the Ostrich Chicks and other African Folk Tales* (1986); in 1988 for *What a Morning! The Christmas Story in Black Spirituals Selected by John Langstaff* (1987); in 1992 for *All Night, All Day: A Child’s First Book of African American Spirituals* (1991); in 1998 for *Ashley Bryan’s ABC of African American Poetry* (1997); and in 2017 for *Freedom Over Me: Eleven Slaves, Their Lives and Dreams Brought to Life by Ashley Bryan* (2016). In 1990, he won the May Hill Arbuthnot Lecture Award (ALSC). For this annual event featuring a selected author, critic, librarian, historian, or teacher considered a significant contributor to the field of children’s literature in any country, Bryan delivered a paper (American Library Association [ALA], 1999). In 2009, Bryan won the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award for Lifetime Achievement (ALSC), an award honoring an author or illustrator whose books, published in the United States, have made a substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children over a period of years (ALA, 1999). In 2012, Bryan won the Coretta Scott-Virginia Hamilton Award for Lifetime Achievement; this award, given in memory of beloved children’s author Virginia Hamilton, is presented in even years to an African-American author and illustrator who has made a significant and lasting literary contribution with the body of his or her

**Purpose of the Study**

The idea for this study came from my experience serving as children’s librarian at Atlanta Fulton Public Library and as coordinator of the Ashley Bryan Literary Conference at the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American History and Culture. I had the opportunity to observe Ashley Bryan recite the poetry of Langston Hughes and Eloise Greenfield to librarians, children, and teachers. I have also observed how poetry plays a significant role in his retellings of African tales, such as *Beautiful Blackbird* (2003) from the Ila-speaking people of Zambia. As evidenced by my research questions, the purpose of this study, then, is to identify and examine not only the themes reflected in Ashley Bryan’s writings and illustrations, but through interviews, to elicit his personal perspective on the cultural content of his work. My analysis will contribute to the growing body of research about African-American authors and illustrators for youth.

A number of highly respected scholars have written on Bryan and his work. According to Rudine Sims Bishop, Professor Emerita of Education at the Ohio State University and scholar of African-American children’s literature, Bryan’s uniqueness of style and content is part of the appeal of his illustrated works. From mosaic in the style of stained glass to block and stamp printing, to storytelling and artistic influences from Africa, Japan, the Caribbean, and other cultures, Bryan’s blending of myriad artistic styles and cultural elements differentiates him from many writers and artists. Bishop, in fact, notes that it is difficult to separate Bryan’s roles as storyteller, poet, musician, and artist from his finished art since, collectively, these roles help to
create his unique style (Bishop, 2007) His prose relies heavily on the musical components of poetry—rhythm, rhyme, onomatopoeia, repetition, and alliteration (Bishop, 2007). Yet, what sets Bryan apart from his counterparts most is his engaging and unusual way of using musical components of poetry to tell the stories analyzed in this study.

Further explaining Bryan’s unique contributions to children’s literature, Henrietta M. Smith, Professor Emerita at the School of Library and Information Science of the University of South Florida, notes that “Ashley Bryan’s role as a storyteller is very evident in his many collections of African folktales. The rhythmic beat of the text summons the reader to read these stories aloud, with the ‘uh-huhs’ in place. These books are consistently designed with a combination of ancient block prints and colors that reprints the earth tones of “Mother Africa” (Smith, 2000). As Smith explains, the rhyme and phonemic sounds are what engage young readers, and his use of ancient block print enhances their appeal (Smith, 2000). But, although Ashley Bryan’s work has long been praised for its multiculturalism—its conscious representation of elements from different cultures—by professional journals dealing with children’s literature and library services, as well as award granting bodies, this study pointedly examines his writing using textual analysis of prose and visual analysis of illustrations in an effort to determine what themes, as identified by scholars of African-American literature and the literature of the African diaspora, are incorporated and reflected in selections of Bryan’s work.

I use a synthesis of scholarly and critical commentary on Bryan’s works combined with his own commentary, including my personal interviews and conversations with him, to provide context for the analysis of his works. I will include a textual analysis of themes and visual analysis of paired illustrations for each selected work.
Need for Study

Ashley Bryan’s work spans four decades. Those interested in reinforcing multicultural representation and collections in the library profession—including children’s librarians, school librarians, library professionals, and researchers—will find, as I have found, that visual and textual analysis of his work adds to the body of knowledge regarding examinations of themes included in works by African-American authors and illustrators. While Ashley Bryan’s work is important within the larger area of African-American children’s literature (which includes such fellow pioneers as Walter Dean Myers, Virginia Hamilton, Jerry Pinkney, and John Steptoe), there are also new authors and illustrators in the profession such as Javaka Steptoe, Gregory Christie, Christian Robinson, and Christopher Myers, who, influenced by their predecessors, continue to shape both the profession and the available body of work. A study of Ashley Bryan’s use of elements from oral tradition in his prose and illustrations reveal story and visual influences drawn from many different multicultural sources; his stories and illustrations, then, may be thematic exemplars through which to examine new voices.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to identify African-American themes relevant to a study of the works of Ashley Bryan, I first looked at major scholars of African-American literary criticism. Angelyn Mitchell (1994), an Assistant Professor of English at Georgetown University, who specializes in African-American literature, gathered works by these key figures in one edited volume, *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African-American Literature from Harlem Renaissance to the Present*. In my perusal of various original work and edited volumes in African-American literary criticism, Mitchell’s collection stands out in its focus on works that have definitively “influenced subsequent African-American criticism” and critics “who have initiated movements [in African-American literary criticism] or who gave such movements definitive formulation” (Mitchell, 1994, pp. 1–2). Mitchell’s idea of “definitive formulation” is important to my study; many of the critics she includes enlighten readers to key themes that are central to African-American experience and literature across time periods. A scholar such as Ralph Ellison (1953) questioned the persistent stereotypes of African Americans as beast or imbeciles that were rooted in slavery. Robert Stepto (1979) lit a path toward the need for faithful representation of African-American experience. These critics and scholars, as well as others, called on African-American artists to resist creating art shaped by others’ racial visions, to create works that undermine negative portrayals of African Americans, and to allow the richness of African-American voices to tell their own stories. I argue that these elements are strongly reflected in Bryans’ work, along with other elements reflecting his own cultural background and the cultures he has studied.
African-American Themes

During the Harlem Renaissance new voices in African-American literature, such as philosopher and critic Alain Locke (1925), called for a “New Negro” artist who would change African American’ perceptions of themselves (Locke, p. 22). Locke argued:

[For] generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be “kept down,” or “in his place,” or helped up,” to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden. The thinking Negro even has been induced to share this same general attitude, to focus his attention on controversial issues, to see himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem. His shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality. Through having had to appeal from the unjust stereotypes of his oppressors and traducers to those of his liberators, friends and benefactors he has subscribed to the traditional positions from which his case has been viewed. Little true social or self-understanding has or could come from such a situation. (Locke, 1925, p. 22)

Much of Locke’s writing during the Harlem Renaissance, then, centered on overturning negative perceptions of both African-American subject matter and African-American artists themselves. Locke was asking artists to rise above servile images created by white Americans about black Americans, such as the Mammy or the Uncle Tom figures; his central idea was to “rise from social disillusionment to race pride” by reclaiming images of blackness from the depths (Locke, 1925, p. 27). According to Locke, race pride would be more of a positive achievement than feelings based on others’ skewed perceptions of the race. He also sought recognition and documentation of African-American artists’ achievements, urging artists not to fear
discrimination that shackled their minds and to be soul-searching, creative, dynamic, self-confident and sure of their craftsmanship (Locke, 1925, p. 27). Locke’s call for a stronger purpose in the field is important to the study of Ashley Bryan because Locke’s work suggests that African-American artists’ creative expressions could lead to racial equality and esteem for African Americans’ contributions to American society. I will argue that Bryan’s work portrays “race pride” by sharing the cultural richness and positive achievements of African Americans and positioning them as a part of (not apart from) larger American community and success. Bryan does this by sharing the poetry of Langston Hughes in the book *Sail Away* (2015) and the poetry of Nikki Giovanni in the book *The Sun is So Quiet* (1996).

Just one year after Locke wrote *The New Negro*, poet and essayist Langston Hughes (1926) penned “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” In it, Hughes concerned himself with the way that African-American artist faced negative perceptions and criticism about their work from both their own people and white people disdainful of their very identities. According to Hughes:

> So, I am ashamed for the black poet who says, “I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,” as though his racial world were not as interesting as any other world. I am ashamed, too, for the colored artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of sunsets after the manner of academicians because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his own features. (1926, p. 55).

Hughes’s ideas are extremely relevant to a study of Bryan, as I contend that close analysis of Bryan’s illustrations and writings not only shows him intentionally revealing aspects of African-American culture, but also, in his manner of doing so, reflecting a strong sense of racial pride.
and pushing the boundaries of a literary field still limited in its attention to African Americans and their lives.

Like Langston Hughes before her, Zora Neal Hurston (1934) bucked the “politics of [black] respectability” (Gross, 1997) put forth by both white critics and prominent African-American critics such as W. E. B. DuBois, who claimed that any characteristic of black life that did not show African Americans in the best light should not be published (Gross, 1997). Kali N. Gross (1997), Associate Professor and Associate chair of the African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas, suggests;

This need to affirm our humanity and the “heroic” aspects of our culture has in part been accomplished to our detriment. African-American scholars have furnished a discourse that is “respectable,” and in effect reified elitism, sexism, and heterosexism. This scholarship has resulted in the proliferation of culturally defensive forms of analysis. These culturally defensive patriarchal analyses operate through the canon of omission. (1997)

In her essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), Hurston’s argument was that African-American artists should be free to express themselves—all of themselves and their experiences, not only those facets of their lives that others deemed valuable or acceptable. She demanded celebration of not only elite aspects of African-American life and culture, but also folklore and colloquial expression, including folk heroes originating in Africa and during and after slavery. Hurston argued:

The rabbit, the bear, the lion buzzard, the fox are culture heroes from the animal world. The rabbit is far in the lead of all the others and is blood brother to Jack. In short, the trickster hero of West Africa has been transplanted to America. John Henry is a culture
hero in song, but no more so than Stacker Lee, Smokey Joe or Bad Lazarus. There are
many Negroes who have never heard of any of the song heroes, but none who do not
know John (Jack) the rabbit. (1934, p. 85)

Hurston’s idea that folklore and African and African-American folk culture and expression are to
be celebrated and shared in order to paint an accurate picture of African Americans is relevant to
my study of Bryan, for I will aim to discern in my textual and visual analyses whether his
writings and illustrations not only celebrate, but also privilege African-American folk culture and
ideas as symbols of the cultural and ancestral roots that children must know in order to know
themselves. In my research, I examine books Ashley Bryan has adapted and/or retold and
illustrated himself, as well as those books over which he has dominant artistic control.

Accurate portrayals and authenticity were also very important to Richard Wright (1937).
In his “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” he outlined what he saw as the imperative role of black
writing in the United States and the responsibility to depict Negro life fairly. Wright too spoke of
folklore and origins, arguing:

It was however in a folklore molded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that
the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complete expression. Blues, spirituals, folk
tales recounted from mouth to mouth, the whispered words of a black mother to her black
daughter on the ways of men, to confidential wisdom of a black father to his black son,
the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest
vernacular, work songs sung under blazing suns--all these formed the channels through
which the racial wisdom flowed. (1937, p. 99)

Wright’s ideas are relevant to my close analysis of Bryan’s work in that folklore and authentic
expression molded out of human condition is at the heart of his retellings; while I am not
studying his spirituals specifically, I would argue that the rhythm and cadence of life and the spoken word are manifested in much of his writing, reflecting the authentic lived experience that Wright wanted in African-American literature.

As African-American literature and culture evolved, however, African-American artists still often found themselves limited by negative images of African Americans created during slavery and lingering in the white psyche. For example, in 1953, critic and writer Ralph Ellison addressed the continued plight of African Americans to be recognized as more than stereotypes to things in the essay “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity.” He argued that:

Obviously the experiences of Negroes—slavery, the grueling and continuing fight for full citizenship since Emancipation, the stigma of color, the enforced alienation which constantly knifes into our natural identification with our country—have not been that of white American. And though as passionate believers in democracy Negros identify themselves with the boarder American ideas, their sense of reality springs, in part from an American experience which most white men not only have not had, but one with which they are reluctant to identify themselves even when presented in forms of the imagination. Thus, when the white American holding up most twentieth-century fiction, says, “This is American reality,” the Negro tends to answer (not at all concerned that Americans tend generally to fight against any but the most flattering imaginative depictions of their lives), “Perhaps, but you’ve left out this, and this, and this. And most of all, what you’d have the world accept as me isn’t even human.” (Ellison, 1953, p. 135)

Too often in western civilization, according to Ellison, the American Negro is inaccurately represented by writers who have appropriated their images and oversimplified “clown, a beast or
an angel.” “Seldom is he drawn as that sensitively focused process of opposites, of good and evil, of instinct and intellect, of passion and spirituality, which great literary art has projected as the image of man. Naturally, the attitude of Negroes toward this writing is one of great reservation (Ellison, 1953, p. 135). Noting that literature in the twentieth century reflected not simply “white racial theories,” but “processes molding the attitudes and the habits of mind, the cultural atmosphere and the artistic and intellectual tradition that condition men dedicated to democracy to practice, accept, and, and most crucial of all, often blind themselves to the essentially undemocratic treatment to the essentially undemocratic treatment of their citizens,”

Ellison felt that it was time for African-American writers to step up and explore the full and often troubled reality of the American experience (Ellison, 1953, p. 136). Ellison’s ideas are germane to a study of Bryan, for a close analysis of Bryan’s work will show whether he transcends stereotypes of blackness rooted only in slavery, whether he reclaims a history for African Americans beyond slavery, and if he shapes a reality of human experience that is inclusive.


[T]he strident, moral voice of the former slave counting, exposing, appealing, apostrophizing, and above all remembering his ordeal in bondage is the single most impressive feature of a slave narrative. This voice is striking because of what it relates, but even more so because the slave’s acquisition of that voice is quite possibly his only
permanent achievement once he escapes and casts himself upon a new larger and larger landscape. (p. 256)

While there are other voices in a tale, the authenticity of the primary voice experiencing the tale’s action is integral to representing that person’s identity truthfully. Stepto uses the evolution of slave narratives to illustrate the claiming of agency and identity through voice. For example, using Frederick Douglass’s initial *Narrative* (1845) and his later narrative, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Stepto shows that Douglass “reinforces his posture as an article hero, while supplanting [William Lloyd] Garrison as the definitive historian of his past” (Stepto, 1979, p. 276). Because auxiliary voices and perspectives, namely white ones, had been used to validate the authenticity of the slave voice, Stepto argues that Douglass’s progression through his works shows a “slave shEd.D.ing his fetter and becoming a man by first finding his voice, and then . . . ‘speaking with considerable ease.’ In one brilliant stroke, the quest for freedom and literacy . . . is resolutely consummated” (p. 276). His journey toward and authentic representation of self, free from others’ dictates for it, is realized only as he strategically displaces others’ expressions of history and identity. Stepto’s example, then, seems to illustrate a path toward having oneself accurately represented and included. Stepto’s study of voice is integral to examining Bryan, as I will closely read Bryan’s work to identify if Bryan represents African-American experiences authentically through use of well-defined voices.

**African-American Themes in Children’s Literature**

As part of my study of Ashley Bryan, it was necessary to identify prominent themes in African-American literary scholarship in which to situate Bryan’s work, to allow discussion of the extent to which they are reflected in Bryan’s works. In order to isolate themes that are relevant to the study of Ashley Bryan, it was imperative that I identify the writings referencing
African-American children’s literature that can best help me do so. My search exposed me to various historical and contemporary scholars, critics, and librarians. Wilhelmina Crosson (1933), one of the first African-American school teachers and administrators in the highly-segregated Boston public school system, discussed the reductive and stereotypical literary depictions of African-American children in “The Negro in Children’s Literature.” Crosson believed that those entrusted with selection of the best books for children should keep in mind that no African-American child should be deprived of non-stereotypical literature of his own race (Crosson, 1933, p. 252). Crosson also felt that African-American children should be taught the achievements of their race along with the lives of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson in schools; they should be able to look up accomplished African-American figures (Harriet Tubman, Fredrick Douglass) while the white child is looking up his, and that way sympathetic understanding could be attained (Crosson, 1933, p. 253). Upon Wilhemina Crosson’s recommendation, African-American parents began to realize that their children did not receive African-American literature in school and took their children to the Boston Public Library for junior high and high school themed book clubs for both African-American and white authors. (Crosson, 1993, p. 253).

1899 (the year that The Rover Boys first appeared), the image of the African-American has not changed. He lost dialect in the 1950s, and certain descriptive or identifying words with unpleasant connotations, such as pickaninny and sambo ceased being used. But, these are superficial changes; his position in society, his general character, and his personality have never really varied (Deane, 1968, p. 140). In the 1950s, when civil rights was a growing issue in the United States, the African-American in children’s fiction always spoke in dialect. In The Rover Boys, the Rover family had an African-American servant, Alexander (Aleck) Pop. Aleck never lost his dialect or even modified it (“yo’ is a sight fo’ soah eyes, deed yo’ is,” he says in The Rover Boys in the Mountains), despite having lived in the North for decades (Deane, 1968, p. 141). Paul C. Deane points out this dialect seems an element of race, not geography (Deane, 1968, p. 141). However, since the 1940s, controversy has existed over dialect in juvenile literature. It is practically gone from series books, and since it is in these books that dialect was almost invariably degrading—it is a source of humor, and an indication of inferiority—one is inclined to applaud its passing. Except for removing the dialect, however, the series books of the time still maintain the traditional image of the African-American (Deane, 1968, p. 141).

Tracing progress in depicting African-American children fighting prejudice through literature, Augusta Baker, former coordinator of Children’s Services at the New York Public Library and first African American in any administrative role in that library system, called for publishers’ attention to characters and themes that spoke to African-American children in “Guidelines for Black Books: An Open Letter to Juvenile Editors” (1969). Augusta Baker asked juvenile editors for more stories about African-American children and city life, stories about families and children, realistic fiction with a happy or thought-provoking ending. There is still room for stories on all levels of African-American life; Baker recanted the stereotypes of all

Out of the growing body of scholarship on African-American children’s literature, there are three scholars whose work underpins the African-American experience as represented in works of children’s literature and its position in the wider world of children’s literature—Nancy
Larrick, Violet Harris, and Rudine Sims Bishops. Each not only evokes the historical elements of
the literature, but also shows how the field has grown in depicting African Americans accurately,
with attention to what is important to them culturally.

Given Nancy Larrick’s background—she had a Ph.D. in Education, teaching experience
at Lehigh University, and publishing experience with Random House—it is unsurprising that her
scholarship centered on exploring racial stereotypes and the historic lack of diversity in
children’s books, as well as changes in the publishing and library fields. Her emblematic essay,
“The All White World of Children’s Books” (1965), exposed the disproportionate numbers of
texts published with positive images of white children and few or no positive images of non-
white children. Larrick argued: “Across the country 6,340,000 non-white children are learning to
read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or
scarcely mention them” (p. 63). According to Larrick, many children’s books portrayed African
Americans as servants, as slaves, sharecroppers, migrant workers or menial laborers (Larrick,
1965). Larrick’s analysis is important in looking at the prevailing themes reflected and
represented in works of that era.

Larrick’s analysis is also important in examining how themes such as inclusion and
realism have evolved in Ashley Bryan’s works. For example, Larrick conducted a three-year
survey analyzing the output of children’s book publishers and found that out of more than 5,000
children’s books published by 63 publishers during the years 1962, 1963, and 1964, only 349, or
6.7%, included stories about contemporary African-American children and adults (Larrick,
1965). Moreover, Larrick (1965) states, “Many of the simplest picture books show Negroes in
illustrations but omit the word from the text” (p. 64). As a result, she forcefully contends that
integrating schools and American society should also mean integrating the American school
Edmondson, T.   A Fusion of Music, Rhyme, Poetry, and Art

curriculum, including literature for children. A founding member of the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC), Larrick saw books as weapons in the battle for integration.

Like Larrick, Violet Harris, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, surveys how African Americans have been depicted in literature since the seventeenth century in her seminal article, “African American Children’s Literature: The First Hundred Years” (1990). Harris divides literature into periods, detailing gradual developments in portrayals and inclusion of non-white children; in fact, Bryan’s personal history places him squarely within several stages of those developments. In the nineteenth century, the majority of African-American depictions are stereotyped, pejorative, and unauthentic (Baker, 1961; Broderick, 1973; Brown, 1933; Sims, 1982). Critic Sterling Brown (1933) analyzed the images of African Americans in American literature and determined which literary depictions of African Americans were entertaining to whites and, therefore, deemed marketable (Harris, 1990). According to Harris (1990), Brown identified seven prevalent stereotypes of African Americans in literature: “the contented slave,” “the wretched freeman,” “the comic negro,” “the tragic mulatto,” “the local color negro,” “the exotic primitive,” and “the brute negro” (p. 541). These stereotypes not only existed in adult literature, but in children’s literature as well. For example, Elise Dinsmore (Finley, 1868; 1893), a tale of a pious planter’s daughter, abounds with contented slaves, one of whom is Elise’s faithful “Mammy,” Aunt Chloe. Aunt Chloe epitomizes endurance, strong religious convictions, and loyalty to the slave system (Harris, 1990). Harris juxtaposes a negative portrayal, like that of Aunt Chloe’s, with a ray of hope—the beginnings of a new tradition with Little Brown Baby, a collection of dialectic poems first published in 1865, the first African-American children’s book by Paul Laurence Dunbar. Dunbar’s Little Brown Baby (1865) deals with comical situations and whimsical characters, and
although it includes stereotypes of the comic Negro, it is a celebration of African-American folk culture and a subtle celebration of racial pride (Harris, 1990).

Many of the texts published during the period of 1900–1920 can be labeled oppositional texts: that is, much like *Little Brown Baby* (1865) began to do, they are works that contradicted common themes, motifs, or stereotypes associated with depictions of African Americans in literature (Harris, 1990). For example, Mary White Ovington, a white activist associated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), wrote two books for children, *Hazel* (1931), and *Zeke* (1931). *Hazel* details the life of an African-American girl living in Boston, who encounters very little prejudice. She is pretty, intelligent, cultured, and kind. It is not until Hazel visits her grandmother in rural Alabama that she learns the harsh reality of racial prejudice. While Ovington oversimplifies by limiting racism only to the South, it is important to note that her depiction of Hazel is one that defies common ideas of African-American girls at the time Hazel is presented with intelligence and potential. Likewise, in *Zeke*, Ovington depicts a poor African-American boy from rural Alabama who rises to the middle class after attending a Tuskegee school (Harris, 1990). Educated and tenacious, Zeke offers a different literary model for black manhood than those previously featured in literature for children and youth. As Harris suggests, Ovington attempted to provide African-American children with truthful cultural images, as well as to entertain them, imbue them with racial pride, and inform them of the achievements of their race and the alternatives to stereotyped images of African Americans (Harris, 1990, p. 545).

Between 1940 and 1970, Harris credits Arna Bontemps and his extensive body of work—novels, biographies, poetry, anthologies, folktales, and histories—with taking African-American literature into acceptance by mainstream culture (Harris, 1990, 54). Bontemps’s work is
significant because it celebrates African-American folk culture and language patterns, building on work by artists like Dunbar, Hughes, and Hurston. It also represents the integration of African-American children’s literature into mainstream culture, as well as the shift from racial themes to the subtler use of race and emphasis on authentic depictions of African Americans (Harris, 1990, p. 549). Harris serves as a framework to chart Bryan’s work and the extent to which it demonstrates the most desirable presentation an African American artist can make in works of children’s literature: celebrating the history and grandeur of his own African roots.

According to Harris:

If African American children do not see reflections of themselves in school texts or do not perceive any affirmation of their cultural heritage in those texts, then it is quite likely that they will not read or value schooling as much. Children need to understand the languages, beliefs, ways of life, and perspectives of others. White children and other children need to read African American literature because notions of cultural pluralism are becoming more important as cultural, economic, and geographical barriers are eradicated. The task confronting educators, then is to provide all children with opportunities to hear, read, write, about, and talk about literature especially that affirms who they are. (Harris, 1990, p. 553)

A prominent scholar who is also important to my research is Rudine Sims Bishop, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of Education at The Ohio State University. In her groundbreaking book, *Shadow and Substance* (1982), Sims Bishop seeks to gauge how the field of children’s literature had responded to the directives toward authentic representation and inclusion. In exploring that response, Sims Bishop defines three specific categories of literature that emerged as a result: “social conscience” literature, “melting pot” literature, and “culturally conscious” literature. The
first, “social conscience” literature, encourages mainly non-African-American readers to develop empathy, sympathy, and tolerance for African-American children and their problems (Sims Bishop, 1982, p. 17). Sims Bishop states that these books were created from an ethnocentric, non-African-American perspective (Sims Bishop, 1982, p. 18). Of the second category, “melting pot books,” Sims Bishop notes, “The melting pot books ignore all differences except physical ones, skin color and other racially related physical features. The result is that the majority of them are picture books” (Sims Bishop, 1982, p. 33). Because the characters are the same—except for their color—the books allow readers to see themselves in some aspect of characters that do not necessarily look like them. According to Sims Bishop,

Culturally conscious literature . . . comes nearer to constituting a body of African-American literature for children. They are books that reflect, with varying degrees of success, the social and cultural traditions associated with growing up Black in the United States. The elements that are significant to culturally conscious books: major characters who are African-American, a story told from the perspective of African Americans, a setting in an African-American community or home, and texts which include some means of identifying the characters as African-American, physical descriptions, language, cultural traditions. (1982, p. 49)

In other words, these books depict African Americans living real lives as part of not only their own culture, but also part of the larger culture in which they live.

In her book, *Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children’s Literature* (2007), Sims Bishop notes that African-American picture books tend to emphasize three main themes: love in the family; pride in black heritage, history, and heroes; and fostering self-love and self-esteem. The focus on family in African-American picture books, however, is
broad, with a strong emphasis on elders and intergenerational relationships, on extended family, and on family as the primary support system (Sims Bishop, 2007, p. 148). This study attempts to the ways in which Bryan incorporates and extends these themes as Sims Bishops suggests.

Additionally, Sujin B. E. Huggins (2012), Associate Professor in the School of Information Sciences at Dominican University, is integral to my study. In her dissertation, *How Did We Get Here?: An Examination of the Collection of Contemporary Caribbean Juvenile Literature in the Children’s Library of the National Library of Trinidad & Tobago and Trinidadian Children’s Responses to Selected Title*, she explores the collection of Caribbean children’s literature in the Port of Spain Children’s Library in Trinidad and Tobago. In doing so, she not only illustrates a lack of both quality in the collection but also a lack of adequate representation of West Indian youth. While her study focuses on the Caribbean, it is salient to an examination of Ashley Bryan’s works, for there are shared connections between the literature and experiences of the Caribbean and those of the African American—two traditions that shape Bryan’s family and history. Although conversations surrounding its existence in a postcolonial space can be challenging in the United States, the concerns that Huggins raises regarding the Caribbean apply in the United States as well. In both cultural spaces, there are individuals victimized by imperial ideology privileging Eurocentrism and subordinating others. In both spaces, those subordinated often seek to conceive of and inhabit identity against a normative Eurocentrism constantly seeking to reinforce its primacy. As a result of the scarcity of scholarly information on Caribbean Children’s Literature, Huggins necessarily begins her qualitative work by positioning Caribbean Children’s Literature both within and apart from the questions of identity, migration, the journey, language, and gender inherent in Caribbean Adult Literature. In my hopes to add to the body of work on African-American themes in Children’s literature, with
Bryan as exemplar, I not only position his texts within and apart from themes in African American literature as a whole, but also illustrate that questions of identity and visual, linguistic, and cultural representation are, as I have argued, key to both scholarship on Bryan and in collection building for youth.

To ground this study and to further enrich my examination of themes in Ashley Bryan’s work, I will consider a range of primary and secondary sources related to Ashley Bryan, both personal and professional, and look at specific examinations of his work, including Bryan’s autobiography, other biographies about and interviews with him, and relevant chapters, journal articles and reviews. According to online databases such as EBSCOhost and Library Information Science Resource, there are over 2,300 scholarly professional articles in which Ashley Bryan’s life and works are mentioned or studied. Many offer repeated information, or are republished works. Articles from the Journal of Children’s Literature, Language Arts, Children & Libraries, Book Links, Horn Book Magazine, Portland Press Herald Newspaper, Bangor Daily News, Booklist and School Library Journal were most relevant to my overview. In examining these sources, I found many of them to be repetitive, focusing largely on widely known aspects of his upbringing and career. Some articles were republished in multiple periodicals in different forms; however several articles helped me gain a fuller understanding of various aspects of Bryan’s work and informed my close examination of selected titles.

The autobiographical Ashley Bryan: Words to My Life Song (2009) gives comprehensive information on Bryan’s childhood, family, influences, and experiences of being an African-American, as well as his early writing and illustrating as a child, young adult, and adult. Bryan’s own account of how he developed as a person and artist (and how his life has influenced his work) is invaluable to an examination of his work. From his family life to his development as an
artist through kindergarten, high school, and college to his ultimate publication and teaching, the autobiography traces his trajectory and shows the life experiences that shape his work.

Biographers and scholars have closely linked Bryan’s upbringing and experiences to the trajectory of his career and works. In *Innocence and Experience: Essays and Conversations on Children’s Literature* (1987) by Barbara Harrison, Ph.D. and Gregory Maguire, Ph.D., former professors and co-directors at the Simmons College Center for the Study of Children’s Literature, Ashley Bryan is featured in a segment entitled “Sing Together Children.” Bryan explains in detail his love of spirituals, their origins, the significance of spirituals for children, and why he focuses on black poets and realists, such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Paul Laurence Dunbar.

Similarly, in *Many Faces, Many Voices: Multicultural Literary Experiences for Youth* (1992) by Anthony L. Manna, retired professor of Teaching, Learning and Curriculum Studies at Kent State University, and Carolyn Brodie, Ph.D., Professor of Library and Information Science at Kent State University, Ashely Bryan discusses several elements of his work in “Deep Like The Rivers.” These include retelling and illustrating folktales, the works of Langston Hughes, the dialect of Paul Laurence Dunbar, the experiences of teens in *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* (1956) [written by Gwendolyn’s Brooks and later illustrated by Faith Ringgold in 2006] and Bryan’s own work with the spirit of voice in stories. Individual African-American themes are not mentioned explicitly, but the detail with which he discusses each element, such as creating authentic voices and capturing the spirit of voice, is a significant element of Bryan’s work.

Jeffrey S. Copeland, Ph.D. and Professor of English at the University of Northern Iowa, interviewed Ashley Bryan in a book co-authored with his wife Vicky L. Copeland, teacher and curriculum strategist at Area Education 7 in Cedar Falls, Iowa. In this text, *Speaking of Poets 2:*
More Interviews with Poets Who Write for Children and Young Adults (1994), Bryan offers insights into his writing process and thematic intentions. According to Ashley Bryan “Artist have always been drawn to texts and have drawn texts. They see images in these works and use them in their painting. It is just natural that my book work would grow out of my art (Copeland & Copland, 1994, p. 69). When asked about his writing process, Bryan shared that he always has a little notebook with him for jotting ideas or writings. Recalling the inspiration for a specific poem, Bryan (1994) offered:

One evening I was sitting on the veranda at our family home in Antigua. From this veranda I looked across the bay and saw on the hillside all the lights of the villages. These lights made long lines as they reflected across the water before me. I looked up from that reflection and there was the full moon just as it was a cloud. The poem “Full Moon” in Sing to the Sun comes directly from observing that special moment. I took out my notebook and worked on the poem right away.” (p. 70)

Writing in this moment ties Bryan’s work intimately to his life, a life that includes influences from a variety of cultural and geographic experiences. When asked, then, about his philosophy of blending illustrative material and print, Bryan touches on theme, specifically, as it relates to developing the poems and selecting the watercolors for one of his poetry collections, Sing to the Sun (1992). His attention to themes such as family and the interaction between art and what is observed in real life will be explored further in my analysis of his work.

Sharon L. McElmeel, long-time educator, literacy advocate, and respected national consultant on teaching literature to children, features Ashley Bryan as an author and illustrator in 100 Most Popular Picture Book Authors and Illustrators: Biographical Sketches and Bibliographies, (2000). According to McElmeel, Bryan collects African stories. Because there
are more than 900 dialects in Africa, Bryan uses translations written in French, German, or English as his source material (McElmeel, 2000). The examination of how Bryan collects his African stories, often using motifs from brief, skeletal ideas that are not yet stories is key to my own work. Bryan culls this information and, in creating his works, filters it through his personal and artistic experience. Elements that might be from different tribes or languages may be united through his lens because they touch him in different ways. That openness to blending cultural elements while paying homage to them individually is important because again it shows Bryan’s celebration and inclusion of multiple cultures simultaneously.

In addition, there are two resources that particularly address the thematic content of children’s literature and apply directly to my examination of Bryan’s works: The Essential Guide to Children’s Books and Their Creators (2002), and Children’s Books and Their Creators (1995) by Anita Silvey, former Editor-in Chief of the Horn Book Magazine and former vice-president of Houghton Mifflin. While Silvey’s texts are comprehensive surveys and do not deeply examine themes in reference to Ashley Bryan’s work, she does consider how an artist has used themes in storytelling and folklore, defines genres, and discusses the ways in which themes often work within those genres. Her inclusion of social and historical issues, plus an entry that discusses thematic elements central to creating successful multicultural literature provides a more general context for my analysis.

One work by Leonard S. Marcus, renowned historian and children’s literary critic, features an interview of Ashley Bryan: Show Me a Story! Why Picture Books Matter: Conversations with 21 of the Worlds Most Celebrated Illustrators (2012). On closer examination, I found that this interview also appeared in an early collection by Marcus: Ways of Telling: Conversations on the Art of the Picture Book by (2003). It features information about
Bryan’s childhood, living in the South Bronx during the Great Depression, teaching, writing, and illustrating.

Alice Swinger’s interview with Bryan entitled “Profile: Ashley Bryan” (*Language Arts*, 1984) documents precisely how Bryan uses found motifs to create stories in the spirit of the oral tradition. She details his process—his reliance on primary sources and his blending of old and new forms and sounds to develop stories that embed rich cultural history in children’s lives. In many cases, Bryan focused specifically on African tales—particularly those texts that involved authors interested in translating the Bible into tribal language without improvisation. In reading the original sources, Bryan read texts with the African language on one column of the page and English translation, searching for a motif such as redemption, joy, or perseverance that he liked. When he found one and began to develop it, he released the spirit of the story with imagery, sound, meaning, and rhythm. Bryan believes that everyone, given a theme or motif of personal interest, could develop a story in a unique way, just as each storyteller in the oral tradition interprets stories in a personal way. It also details the relationship between poetry and story. As I analyze Bryan’s works, it will be important to build on the elements that Swinger shares, especially how integration of motif contributes to creating a story from the oral tradition.

One interview, “Interview with Ashley Bryan,” by Sylvia and Kenneth Marantz (*Horn Book Magazine*, 1988), reinforced the biographical information that I later found repeatedly about Bryan. In it, Bryan reveals how his editor discovered him, how he maintains his joy of painting, and how he created his illustrations for his African or Caribbean tales, *The Adventures of Aku* (1976), *The Dancing Granny* (1977), *Beat the Story-Drum, Pum-Pum* (1980), and *Lion and the Ostrich Chicks* (1986). The interview provided a natural segue to a narrower focus on
Bryan’s background information in my literary review beyond autobiography and mere biography.

There are a number of works that include Bryan and are helpful in providing background information. For example, while Sheila Hamanaka, American children’s author and illustrator, includes Bryan’s illustrated block print work from *Walk Together Children* (1974) in *On the Wings of Peace: Writers and Illustrators Speak Out for Peace, In Memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (1995), her aim was solely to bring together a collection of authors who would foster a focus on peace. She does include a bibliography for further reading and, by featuring him, positions Bryan’s work as both multicultural and healing.

Barbara Rollock, former president of the children’s division of the American Library Association (1974-1975) and New York Black Library Association (1988-1990) and author of *Black Authors and Illustrators of Children’s Books: A Biographical Dictionary* (1988), refers to the connection between interests that Bryan developed in African art, folklore, music and storyteller’s skills by saying, “*Un cont de douce les relie,*” “A tender bridge connects them” (Rollock, 1998, p. 18). In other words, the elements of Bryan’s work are so intricately and intentionally linked that Bryan’s life and art are reflections of one another. Rollock recounts the first book Ashley Bryan illustrated in 1964—*Moon for What You Wait?* (1964). The book contains poems by the Indian poet Tagore and marks the beginning of Bryan’s career with Atheneum publishing house. She also includes information about Ashley Bryan’s writing and illustrating career, as well as his teaching at Queens College of the City of New York, Lafayette College, the Dalton School and the Brooklyn Museum, plus his close work with Head Start and other community programs. While Rollock (1988), like Bryan in *Words to My Life Song*, offers
key facts about Bryan’s life and integration of his life and art, she does not delve into the themes in his writing and illustrating.

*The All White World of Children’s Books and African-American Children’s Literature* (1995) by Osayimwense Osa features Kemi Nix’s biographical sketch on Ashley Bryan entitled “The Pied Piper of Isleford: Ashley Bryan.” It tells of Ashley Bryan’s childhood, writing, and illustrating career, but it does not delve as deeply into those elements as the autobiographical works. In this piece, however, Nix reinforced the image of Bryan as one who gives hope to children needing to see themselves represented in the literature they read. He focused specifically how Bryan created his first book as a kindergartener, how he was encouraged to go to art school in high school, and how he was denied admittance to art school because of the color of his skin. His is a story of achievement through challenges. In *The Art of Reading: Forty Illustrators Celebrate RIF’s 40th Anniversary* (2005), Leonard Marcus includes Ashley Bryan as one of the feature illustrators; while Bryan explains why he is inspired by James Weldon Johnson’s and J. Rosamund Johnson’s *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925) and gives the history of the spirituals’ creation by slaves, his explanations reinforce information in Bryan’s autobiography and several interviews.

Finally, *Artist to Artist: 23 Major Illustrators talk to children about their Art* (2007) by children’s author and illustrator Eric Carle includes Ashley Bryan talking to children about his illustrative process. But, Carle (2007) focuses more on the physical nature of the illustrative process. *The Coretta Scott King Awards 1970-2004* (2004) by Henrietta M. Smith includes a brief biography of Ashley Bryan and reviews of his Coretta Scott King (CSK) award-winning and honor books for illustrations. It is noteworthy that the CSK awards are presented “annually to outstanding African American authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults
that demonstrate an appreciation of African American culture and universal human values” and these books invariably “promote understanding and appreciation of the culture of all peoples and their contribution to the realization of the American dream of a pluralistic society” (ALA, web).


Another significant article is “Wagging the Tale Off the Page” by Lonnae O’Neal Parker (The Washington Post, 1998), Pulitzer Prize-nominated reporter for the Washington Post. Writing after hearing Bryan speak, Parker describes Bryan’s event being billed as a “book talk,” but she notes that the title is a misnomer. Instead, she explains, he actually brings books to life. Using language, inflections, tone, and emotion, Ashley Bryan spins stories and recites poems that are not static, but dynamic representations of themes through which children can learn about themselves and others. Perhaps the strongest of those themes is the call to be strongly rooted in one’s own identity—to value one’s people and heritage while also recognizing the value of others identities as well. Parker suggests that cultural themes permeate Bryan’s work, for he often tells his audiences to know their roots and explore the links between their own people and other cultures of the world.

Blending cultures is also the focus of “Talking with Ashley Bryan” by Henrietta M. Smith (2000). As I have done for my study, Smith, Professor Emerita in Library Information Science at the University of South Florida, traveled to Bryan’s Maine home to interview Bryan about his art and books. In her interview, she emphasizes two books, The Dancing Granny (1977) and The Cat’s Purr (1985). Not only do Bryan and Smith discuss his inspiration for creating the books, but also how he studied and was influenced by the work of 18th-century
Japanese artist, Hokuasi. Additionally, Bryan explains how he crafts his illustrations intentionally for each story that he wishes to tell, using color as a vehicle in storytelling as well. While her study’s scope lays a foundation for mine, it does not focus specifically on acquiring information that would allow me to both visually and textually explore Bryan’s use of African American themes.

In another article, “Illustrations of Bryan: Artist Spends Afternoon with Les Belles Artes Club,” by Genoa Barrow (2000), Ashley Bryan spoke with audience members about his illustrations for Lorenz Graham’s republished *How God Fix Jonah* (2000). Originally published in 1946, Graham’s book of Bible stories, long out of print, was reworked and illustrated by Bryan using historical, religious block printing. Bryan explains: “I read from the Book of Genesis through the New Testament drawing the images suggested as I read. I now refer to these sketches for illustrating books with Biblical themes” (Barrow, B3). In other words, Bryan not only relied on that style of illustration for Graham’s book, but also uses it as a template for telling and illustrating other stories with Biblical themes. The importance of this article, then, lies in the close relationship that Bryan has created between fully developing Biblical themes such as redemption, perseverance despite hardship, faith, and family.

In her 2002 article, “Ashley Bryan: Beautiful Language, Wondrous Words,” Linda M. Pavonetti, Ed.D., Department Chair and Professor of reading and Language Arts at Oakland University, discusses Bryan’s multifaceted career as a scholar, artist, illustrator, storyteller and folklorist, poet and humanitarian. More importantly, she notes that, when writing stories, Bryan begins with library research into African motifs that were originally collected in the early 19th century by missionaries and anthropologists. Unlike other articles that discuss Bryan’s approach to storytelling and illustrating, Pavonetti’s article examines both the beautiful complexity of
Bryan’s use of language and delves deeply into his scholarly approach to illustrating. Pavonetti discusses specific texts and materials that Bryan studies, which informs any detailed analysis of his work, as this study attempts to do.

In “Celebrating Ashley Bryan,” Darwin Henderson, Ph.D., Professor of Teacher Education at the University of Cincinnati, provides a deeper understanding of the theatrically of Bryan’s work—the way in which his storytelling and illustration combine to create a multidimensional and multisensory experience for the reader. Henderson (2004) talks with Bryan about the ways in which music, poetry and art make their way into his writing; he links this discussion to the fact that in Africa, storytelling is theater. The rhythm of music and movement has influence in Bryan’s illustrations, as well as spirituals and the oral tradition of storytelling (Henderson, 2004). Bryan himself feels a strong connection to his works, as the article, “2004 U.S. Children’s Literature Award Winners” (2004) reveals. In it, Ashley Bryan ia interviewed for winning the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award and shares his perspective for writing Beautiful Blackbird (2003): “In my research of African tales to retell, the motif of Beautiful Blackbird from the Ila-speaking people of Zambia struck me at once. Here was a story in which Black was celebrated” (p. 400). Bryan discusses his research process, and it is important to remember Bryan’s desire for a medium in which blackness is “celebrated” (p. 400).

Finally, in a “Personal Visit with Ashley Bryan,” Cora Phelps Dunkley (2008), Professor of Library Information Science at University of South Florida talks with Ashley Bryan about two of his works, Beautiful Blackbird (2003) and Let It Shine: Three Favorite Spirituals (2007). Bryan used his mother’s scissors to create the collage in Beautiful Blackbird (2003), (Dlouhy, 2015). As a result, Dunkley discusses the importance of heritage with Bryan. With Let It Shine: Three Favorite Spirituals (2007), Dunkley learns the importance of spirituals in Bryan’s life and
heritage. This article not only gives more information on his creative inspiration for the illustrations for *Beautiful Blackbird* (2003) and *Let It Shine: Three Favorite Spirituals* (2007), but also offers a discussion of specific illustrations and precisely how spirituals have impacted Bryan.

Answering the research questions guiding my study requires a firm foundation in African-American literary history and theory and its connections to the wider Diaspora, studies of Bryan’s life and works, and studies of children’s literature, particularly picture books. The works included in my review of literature have provided precisely that. Rooting my literary and visual analyses in the most integral works from this literature review will allow me to clearly examine and articulate the prevailing themes reflected and represented in works written and illustrated by Ashley Bryan and to note the evolution of such themes over the course of Bryan’s career.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Methods

In seeking a methodology that would best suit the aims of my research, one clear strategy emerged—qualitative content analysis. Three articles that were particularly helpful in articulating this strategy were Yang Zhang’s and Barbara Wildemuth’s (2009) “Qualitative Analysis of Content” in Wildemuth’s (2009) Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science; Phillip Mayring’s (2000) “Qualitative Content Analysis”; and Hsiu-Fang Hsieh’s and Sarah E. Shannon’s (2005) “Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis.” Collectively, their discussion and presentation of qualitative content analysis helped me to develop a framework to identify visual and textual evidence.

Starting as an analytical tool in the health sciences (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277), general content analysis was initially quantitative (Mayring, 2000). General content analysis served primarily to record and count “text data coded into explicit categories and then described using [numerical] statistics” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Whereas quantitative content analysis quantifies the occurrence of textual elements to “test hypotheses or address questions generated from theories or previous empirical research” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 308), qualitative content analysis “goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to examine meanings, themes, patterns that manifest or latent in a particular text. It allows researchers to understand social reality” underlying the text (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, 308). In other words, the aim of qualitative content analysis is not simply to say that textual elements are there in a superficial way, but to
identify “themes and patterns” that “provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon [or text] under study” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278).

Early applications of content analysis in the United States occurred in the social sciences (Mayring, 2000). In the 1920s and 1930s, the earliest United States’ applications came from social scientist, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, founder of Columbia University’s Bureau of Applied Social Research, and Harold D. Laswell, co-founder of the Policy Sciences Center (Almond, 1987, p. 265; Mayring, 2000; Sills, 1987, p. 260). Each sought to examine the social and cultural contexts of his discipline—psychology and law/political science, respectively—for better understanding of causality (Almond, 1987; Sills, 1987). In the 1960s, however, the methodology began to change, as the approach’s applications to psychology, sociology, linguistics, the arts, and humanities made interdisciplinary thinking and reasoning more widely applicable (Mayring, 2000). Rather than focusing on “simplifying and distorting quantification” (Mayring, 2000), researchers began to focus on “sense-making” of “the volume of the material”—the interpretation of “latent contexts and content” which were not so easily quantifiable (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277; Mayring, 2000; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Similarly, visual analysis, a key element of examining art, is also rooted in “sense-making.” Its purpose is to comprehend choices that a particular artist makes in creating the visual aspects of the piece. Using this technique moves viewers toward greater understanding of the work (Schmandt-Bessarat, 2007). Yet, this technique is also linked to psychology, particularly semiotic theory—the study of the ways that signs, whether visual, aural, or multimodal, have meaning for viewers or ‘readers’ of art (Sipe, 1998). It is in this incarnation that visual analysis has been applied to picture books since the late 20th century.
Walter Moebius (1986) was among the initial scholars to use semiology to decode image meaning in picture books. He argued in terms of codes—of position, size, return, perspective, line, and color, among others (Kiefer, 2015). These codes tapped into the psychology of the viewer and conveyed meaning. Most importantly, perhaps, for my study of Bryan, Moebius (1986) focused on the psychological meaning that readers assign to color and its intensity, especially when associated with scale of images on the page (Kiefer, 2015). For young children not yet adept at reading the complex interplay of image and text, the psychological importance of color is an important factor in how they may relate to and understand text.

In *Words about Pictures*, Nodelman (1988) built on Moebius’s foundation, arguing that pictures offer readers further information about stories (Kiefer, 2015). Focusing not only on meaning, symbols, cultural codes, and other signs, Nodelman also showed the importance of image direction, perspective, point of view, focus, light, and shadow to help create meaning for readers. For example, he questioned what effect juxtaposition might create if words are read left-to-right, and images are read top-to-bottom. Where Nodelman differed most from Moebius, however, was in his contention that the relationship between images and words in picture books is always “ironic” because, while they work together simultaneously to offer and reinforce meaning, images and words also convey meaning that the other cannot (Nodelman, 1988, p. 222). Thus, the relationship between them is naturally complex. Considering Nodelman’s argument in reference to young readers whose command of words is not yet fully developed is intriguing; pictures help the reader to begin to understand word meaning, but the pictures can help to shape the way that young children understand thoughts and ideas more concretely.

In Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), the question of multimodality became central to reading picture books. Because 21st-century literacy involves “multiplicities of images and
words in forms and formats that go far beyond the book” (Kiefer, p. 376), reading picture books must incorporate the ways in which they represent ideas, interpersonal forms, and composition. In *Reading Visual Narratives: Image Analysis of Children’s Picture Books*, Painter, Martin, and Unsworth (2013), extended the idea of representation, as they argued that multimodality in picture books is important in socializing children to not only literature and literacy but also to social values and the world around them; the books help children to build understanding of the relationship between verbal and visual meaning, influencing the ways in which they engage their worlds.

Returning to the ways that style, color, rendering, visual characterization, and other elements build, varying degrees of emotional engagement and visual meaning, Painter et al. (2013) discuss the means by which the “semantic load” is shared across the visual and verbal modes in different ways. They examine particularly the ways in which there is a “metafunction” to the text and images that builds understanding of interpersonal systems, ideas, and words, themselves. The reason that this trajectory in visual analysis of picture books is so key to studying Ashley Bryan is that Kiefer (1995, p. 117) and Painter et al. (2013) furthermore argued that considering how meaning is expressed between image and text in picture books requires understanding that, while they are not identical, the verbal and visual components share certain characteristics.

Both author and artist use media elements to convey meaning. Whether through sound, words, phonemes, or morphemes for the author, or shape, color, texture, or line for the visual artist, there is a system of composition, rhythm, and pattern that helps each artist to convey meaning. For the texts that I am examining, Bryan is both author and illustrator. While few of the
scholars above incorporate a racial or ethnographic focus, their conclusions about the juxtaposition of images and words provide an interesting foundation for analysis.

Data Collection

The protocols that I followed more narrowly for the visual analyses was a modified version of Mayring’s (2000) step-by-step interpretive and deductive qualitative analytical models, incorporating Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) and Painter et al.’s (2013) use of traditional visual elements in art history for visual analysis of picture books. It included the following categories because, together, they are the elements that guide the reader’s visual understanding:

- **Shape**—not only definition of geometric forms but also how they are combined to create bodies, prints, backgrounds, and other images
- **Color**—the specific hue and its vibrancy within the larger palette chosen for the particular work
- **Line**—the length, breadth, and sharpness of marks that define shapes, pages, and scenes (for example, line style might be softer in crayon drawings versus the bolder black lines in paintings resembling stained glass)
- **Style**—the manner in which the artist portrays his or her subject and how the artist expresses his or vision
- **Palette**—the range of colors used by an artist to create a desired effect in a specific work
- **Medium**—the material or technique used by the artist
- **Perspective**—the viewpoint of the artist and audience (for example, overhead, at eye level, or from ground level)
For the thematic analysis, I employed categories identified by Huggins (2012). While my research on African American children’s literature allowed me to consider how Bryan’s works aligned with the development of the literature as a whole, Huggins’s (2012) defined themes allowed me to narrow my focus quite a bit more, as there is overlap with African American themes and specific elements from the Caribbean to which Bryan is connected by heritage. The following categories offered descriptive elements pertinent to my exploration of Bryan’s thematic representation in picture books:

- **Family relationships** – which emphasized the bond or connection that exist between two or more family members.
- **Friendship** – The stories labeled friendship were those that emphasized a strong relationship between two or more non-related protagonists.
- **Educational** – Informational books with no prevailing narrative and mistakenly classified as fiction.
- **Individuality/Being different** – Pertaining to stories where the main character was misunderstood, shunned or exhibited unusual behaviors.
- **Folktale adaptations** – identified by story structured common motifs present.
- **Coming-of-Age Story** – In the stories, the protagonist undergoes a transformation from childhood to adulthood (or significant spans of time developmentally while facing several challenges that may incorporate other themes, for example difficult family relationships, adjusting to new country, etc.)
- **Migration** – Often coexists with aforementioned themes of coming-of-age and family relationships, but these stories also involve the physical transplantation of the protagonist to another country and cultural ethos (2012). Inherent in exploring
the theme of migration is the theme of cultural pride, for often the protagonist must come to terms with his or her cultural self against the norms of a new environment.

Huggins did identify several other themes—environmental activism, historically significant events or people, visiting the Caribbean, adventure, personal responsibility, social issues, perseverance, an appreciation for nature. Yet, I found that it was most important to focus not only on those themes that linked Caribbean and African American literature, but to establish the ways in which Bryan might incorporate African-American themes for children needing to see their lives, their understanding of family, the resonances of their culture, and their realities through his works.

The Research Process:

1. Conduct and analyze personal interview/oral history with Ashley Bryan, at his home in Islesford, Maine. Identify explicit cultural themes and visual strategies mentioned.

2. Select titles that were both written and illustrated by Bryan for analysis.

3. Conduct thematic analysis by a close reading of selected texts

4. Conduct visual analysis of selected texts

5. Complete final analysis
CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

The dataset for this study is comprised of works written and illustrated by Ashley Bryan. In order to identify the prevailing themes reflected and represented in Bryan’s works, it was necessary to survey all of Bryan’s books (see Table 1)

Table 1. Ashley Bryan Books Examined: Full List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>BOOK TITLE</th>
<th>AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Fabliaux: Tales from the Old French</td>
<td>Selected and Edited by Robert Hellman and Richard O’ Gorman, Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Moon, For What Do You Wait?</td>
<td>Poems written by Tagor, Edited by Richard Lewis, Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>The Ox of the Wonderful Horns, and Other African Folktales</td>
<td>Retold and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Walk Together Children: Black American Spirituals</td>
<td>Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>The Adventures of Aku</td>
<td>Retold and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>The Dancing Granny</td>
<td>Retold and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>I Greet the Dawn: Poems by Paul Lawrence Dunbar</td>
<td>Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Jethro and the Jumbie</td>
<td>Written by Susan Cooper, Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Jim Flying High</td>
<td>Written by Mari Evans, Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Beat the Story-Drum, Pum-Pum</td>
<td>Retold and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>I’m Going to Sing: Black American Spirituals, Volume Two</td>
<td>Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>The Cat’s Purr</td>
<td>Retold and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YEAR</td>
<td>BOOK TITLE</td>
<td>AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td><em>Lion and Ostrich Chicks, and Other African Folk Tales</em></td>
<td>Retold and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td><em>What a Morning: The Christmas Story in Black Spirituals</em></td>
<td>Selected and edited by John Langstaff, Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td><em>Sh-Ko and His Eight Wicked Brothers</em></td>
<td>Retold by Ashley Bryan, Illustrated by Furrio Yoshimura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td><em>Turtle Knows Your Name</em></td>
<td>Retold and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td><em>Climbing Jacob’s Ladder: Heroes of the Bible in African-American Spirituals</em></td>
<td>Selected and edited by John Langstaff, Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td><em>Sing to the Sun</em></td>
<td>Retold and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>Christmas Gift: An Anthology of Christmas Poems, Songs and Stories</em></td>
<td>Compiled by Charlemae Rollins, Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>Story of Lightning and Thunder</em></td>
<td>Retold and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td><em>The Story of the Three Kingdoms</em></td>
<td>Written by Walter Dean Myers, Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td><em>The Sun is so Quiet</em></td>
<td>Written by Nikki Giovanni, Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td><em>What a Wonderful World</em></td>
<td>Song written by George David Weiss and Bob Thiele, Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td><em>Ashley Bryan’s ABC’ of African-American Poetry</em></td>
<td>Written and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td><em>Carol of The Brown The Brown King: Nativity Poems by Langston Hughes</em></td>
<td>Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td><em>The Night Has Ears: African Proverbs</em></td>
<td>Retold and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td><em>How God Fix Jonah</em></td>
<td>Retold by Lorenz Graham, Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td><em>Salting the Ocean: 100 Poems by Young People</em></td>
<td>Selected and edited by Naomi Shihab Nye, Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td><em>Beautiful Black Bird</em></td>
<td>Retold and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td><em>A Nest Full of Stars: Poems by James Berry</em></td>
<td>Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After reviewing all of Bryan’s works, those that best represent the union of his storytelling and illustration were selected. As a result, I narrowed my sample to 16 books Ashley Bryan has adapted (or retold) and illustrated himself (see Table 2)—in other words, those books for which he had dominant artistic control. This group of texts does not include his spirituals because, while his illustrations for them are indicative of his process and artfulness, he did not write or adapt the spirituals themselves.

Table 2. Selected Ashley Bryan Books (Written/Retold and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>BOOK TITLE</th>
<th>AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td><em>The Ox of the Wonderful Horns, and Other African Folktales</em></td>
<td>Written by Ashley Bryan, Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td><em>Let It Shine: Three Favorite Spirituals</em></td>
<td>Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td><em>Words to My Life Song</em></td>
<td>Written and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan, Photography by Bill McGuinness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td><em>All Things Bright and Beautiful</em></td>
<td>Written by Cecil F. Alexander, Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td><em>Who Built the Stable: A Nativity Poem</em></td>
<td>Written and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td><em>Can’t Scare Me!</em></td>
<td>Written and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td><em>Ashley Bryan's Puppet's: Making Something from Everything</em></td>
<td>Written by Ashley Bryan, Photographs Edited by Rich Entel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td><em>Freedom Over Me: Eleven Slaves, Their Lives and Dreams Brought to Life By Ashley Bryan</em></td>
<td>Written and Illustrated by Ashley Bryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YEAR</td>
<td>BOOK TITLE</td>
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<td>------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td><em>The Adventures of Aku</em></td>
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<td>1977</td>
<td><em>The Dancing Granny</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td><em>Beat the Story-Drum, Pum-Pum</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td><em>The Cat’s Purr</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td><em>The Lion and Ostrich, and Other African Folk Tales</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td><em>Turtle Knows Your Name</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>Story of Lightning and Thunder</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td><em>The Night Has Ears: African Proverbs</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td><em>Beautiful Black Bird</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td><em>Words to My Life Song</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td><em>Who Built the Stable: A Nativity Poem</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td><em>Can’t Scare Me!</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td><em>Ashley Bryan's Puppet’s: Making Something from Everything</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td><em>Freedom Over Me: Eleven Slaves, Their Lives and Dreams Brought to Life by Ashley Bryan</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thematic Analysis

The following table outlines the results of the thematic analysis of the sixteen selected texts. Again, the themes identified and selected in the protocol derived from Huggins (2002) are as follows:

- *Family relationships* – which emphasized the bond or connection that exist between two or more family members.
- *Friendship* – The stories labeled friendship were those that emphasized a strong relationship between two or more non-related protagonists.
- *Educational* – Informational books with no prevailing narrative and mistakenly classified as fiction.
- *Individuality/Being different* – Pertaining to stories where the main character was misunderstood, shunned or exhibited unusual behaviors.
- *Folktale adaptations* – Identified by story structured common motifs present.
- *Coming-of-Age Story* – In the stories, the protagonist undergoes a transformation from childhood to adulthood (or significant spans of time developmentally while facing several challenges that may incorporate other themes, for example difficult family relationships, adjusting to new country, etc.)
- *Migration* – Often coexists with aforementioned themes of coming-of-age and family relationships, but these stories also involve the physical transplantation of the protagonist to another country and cultural ethos (2012).
Table 3. Thematic Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>BOOK TITLE</th>
<th>Family Relationships</th>
<th>Friendship</th>
<th>Educational</th>
<th>Individuality/ Being Different</th>
<th>Folktales Adaptations</th>
<th>Coming-of-Age</th>
<th>Migration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td><em>The Ox of the Wonderful Horns, and Other African Folktales</em></td>
<td>Mungalo and his kind and loving mother are promised a great white ox</td>
<td>Ox magical abilities gives Mungalo wishes of food</td>
<td>After Ox’s death, the horns bring Mungalo good fortune and wealth that stay with him</td>
<td>Common motifs similar to Cinderella</td>
<td>Mungalo is mistreated by mothers and has a difficult family life.</td>
<td>Mungalo goes to another village with horns, marries, brings his wife back, and becomes chief</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td><em>The Adventures of Aku</em></td>
<td>Onyema and her son Aku</td>
<td>Aku, Dog, Okraman and</td>
<td>Aku is sent by his mother to</td>
<td>Cat gets Aku ring back dog</td>
<td>Aku journeys into the forest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td><em>The Dancing Granny</em></td>
<td>Granny Anika</td>
<td>Granny Anika loved to dance. She dance in the morning. she was never too busy to dance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td><em>Beat the Story-Drum, Pum-Pum</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>The husband that counted spoonfuls, counting servings</td>
<td>Five Nigerian adaptations retold</td>
<td>Five Nigerian adaptations retold</td>
<td>African oral tradition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td><em>The Cat’s Purr</em></td>
<td>Cat and Rat are best of friends</td>
<td>Cat played a small cat drum</td>
<td>Why Cat Eats Rat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td><em>The Lion and Ostrich, and Other African Folk Tales</em></td>
<td>Mama and Papa Ostrich and six chicks</td>
<td>Mongoose rescues the ostrich chicks telling Lion, “fur begets feathers”</td>
<td>Mongoose outwits Lion and helps Mama and Papa Ostrich</td>
<td>Mama and papa Ostrich have six ostrich chicks. Lion claims the six Ostrich chicks were his children</td>
<td><em>The Masai, Their Language and Folklore</em>, Alfred C. Hollis. Oxford: The Clarendon: Press, 1905. page 198</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YEAR</td>
<td>BOOK TITLE</td>
<td>Family Relationships</td>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>Individuality/ Being Different</td>
<td>Folktale Adaptations</td>
<td>Coming-of-Age</td>
<td>Migration</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Turtle Knows Your Name</td>
<td>Granny teaching Upsilimana Tumpalarado his name</td>
<td>Turtle knows Upsilimana Tumpalarado’s name and Granny</td>
<td></td>
<td>Upsilimana Tumpalarado is shunned by his playmates because his</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Sing to the Sun</td>
<td>Family life, African American and Caribbean Island life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collection reflects nature, heritage, and original poetry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Story of Lightning and Thunder</td>
<td>Thunder was mother sheep, and Lightning was her son</td>
<td>Ma sheep and Thunder and son Ram Lightning called rain down when</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ma Sheep Thunder and Son Ram Lightning are banished to the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>The Night Has Ears: African Proverbs</td>
<td></td>
<td>Twenty six African proverbs from a variety of tribes, including Ashanti, Swahili, and Zulu</td>
<td></td>
<td>African wisdom passed collectively from generation to generation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Beautiful Black Bird</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Blackbird is the most beautiful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Words to My Life Song</td>
<td>Ashley Bryan is the second of Atheneum editors Jean</td>
<td>Autobiography Ashley’s tour of</td>
<td></td>
<td>Published first book in kinder-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Who Built the Stable: A Nativity Poem</td>
<td>Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus</td>
<td>Young shepherd boy/carpenter apprentice offers shelter to Mary and Joseph</td>
<td></td>
<td>Nativity story told from perspective of shepherd boy who built the stable</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Discussion of Table 3:

A closer textual examination of the selected books in Table 3 showed the presence of the defined African-American literary themes to differing degrees. Of the sixteen books, there were ten books with stories centering on family relationships, or emphasizing the bond or connection that exists between two or more family members. In three of the books, The Ox of the Wonderful Horns, and Other African Folktales, The Adventure of Aku, and Story of Lightning and Thunder, the relationship was between a mother and son. But, the enduring relationship in Sing to the Sun, Turtle Knows Your Name, and Can’t Scare Me was between grandmothers and grandchildren.
Who Built the Stable: A Nativity Poem, Bryan not only shares the Nativity story but also focuses on the familial bond within it; additionally, he shows a nurturing relationship between Mary, Joseph, and the young shepherd boy, suggesting an extended familial relationship. The Lion Ostrich, and Other African Folk Tales features a full family as well—Mama, Papa, and Ostrich chicks. Freedom Over Me: Eleven Slaves, Their Lives and Dreams Brought to Life by Ashley Bryan features slave family relationships and their challenges to show their defining spirit. And Bryan reveals close autobiographical family bonds in both Words to My Life Song and Ashley Bryan’s Puppets: Making Something from Everything,

In my interview with Bryan, he mentioned that love of family has been a source of continued strength and inspiration. Because his work is often done in isolation, he indicated that family bonds, whether biological or professional, and the ways in which his works are tied to them offers him both a closeness to the work and a connection to something beyond it. He offered, “When you are doing your artwork and writing, it’s in relation to whatever material you are working with. If you’re working in a different form, you have a whole ensemble of people working. If you are directing a play or you’re doing a theatrical piece in which you have a designer for the backdrops or the costumes, for the music, for the words, you’re working an ensemble. Other than that you’re working uniquely on your own. Even for each aspect of an ensemble work, people alone are working on a design of the costume, but interrelated with everything that’s going on. The feeling of the family, I told you.”

The seven stories incorporating the theme of friendship emphasized a strong relationship between two or more non-related protagonists. The importance of friendship and the qualities in it that shape, heal, and nourish people are featured in Bryan’s Words to My Life Song—particularly Ashley Bryan’s strong and supportive relationships with Atheneum editors Jean Karl
and Caitlyn Dlouhy. In five of his retellings, interestingly, the main characters and protagonists are either animals who befriend other animals or humans. In *The Cat’s Purr*, cat and rat are best friends. In *The Ox of the Wonderful Horns*, Ox befriends Mungalo and grants him both wishes and food. In *The Lion and Ostrich, and Other African Folk Tales*, Mongoose helps Mama and Papa Ostrich by rescuing their chicks from lion. *Turtle Knows Your Name* features Turtle befriendng Upsilimana Tumpalerado and Granny; unlike others, he knows Upsilimana’s name. In *The Adventures of Aku*, there is a bond between Aku and his dog and cat, Okraman and Okra. And although there are elements of a foster-familial relationship with the shepherd boy in *Who Built the Stable: A Nativity Poem*, the relationship begins with an act of compassion that cements their bond in friendship—the young shepherd boy/carpenter offering Mary and Joseph shelter before the birth of Jesus.

According to Bryan, one holiday season, he was looking at all of the elements in the Nativity scenes at Christmas—the child in the manger, the wise men, the shepherds, and the angels. He told me that he asked himself, “But who built the stable?” Indicating that he wrote that question down, he decided to tell a new story, one of a young boy who knows little of religion or the promise of Jesus being born. The innocent act of kindness and friendship is what stands out in the book. Bryan said that the boy, having been “told that people have turned [Mary and Joseph] aside,” says, “My animals will welcome you. I will sweep clear a space.” Ultimately, Bryan says, he “wanted that feeling of the child thinking the little baby’s going to be like him”—that there was a sameness in their innocence that made him act without prejudice or other motives.

There were three *educational* books—informational books with no prevailing narrative that are often mistakenly classified as fiction. For example, *The Night Has Ears: African
Proverbs contains 26 African proverbs from a variety of tribes, such as the Ashanti, Swahili, and Zulu; they reveal elements of those tribes’ cultures. Ashley Bryan’s Puppet’s: Making Something from Everything is a book of handmade puppets accompanied by a poem representing each, but the focus of the book is truly the ways in which materials are repurposed to make “something from everything.” And although Words to My Life Song is written like a work of fiction, it is an autobiography celebrating Bryan’s life with illustrations, writing, and storytelling.

The books featuring individuality/being different include main characters who were misunderstood, shunned, marked by unusual behaviors or characteristics, or unaware of who their identities. The fact that this was a recurring theme in all of the selected books is worth noting. In the Dancing Granny; Granny Anika loved to dance; she was never too busy or too tired to dance, and Ananse thought she could be easily tricked because of it. In The Cat’s Purr, cat played a small cat drum, an odd behavior for a cat, but he is literally his own drummer and marches to his own beat. In Turtle Knows Your Name, Upsilimana Tumpalerado is shunned by his playmates because his name is too long. Beautiful Blackbird tells the tale of a black bird voted most beautiful in a forest full of red, green, blue, and yellow birds; he is so beautiful that others want to be like him, not realizing that his beauty comes from his comfort with himself—from within. Can’t Scare Me is a tale where a boy knows no fear, which leads him to danger and lessons learned. In Story of Lightning and Thunder, Ma Sheep, Thunder, and Ram Lightning set fire to the farmers’ fields when they are dry and are banished to the sky from the earth for their actions. In Freedom over Me: Eleven Slaves Their Lives and Dreams Brought to Life by Ashley Bryan, 11 slaves’ hopes and dreams are brought to life; their stories show their humanity and how they live with strength and spirit despite difficulties. Who Built the Stable: A Nativity Poem is told from the perspective of the shepherd boy who built the stable for Mary, Joseph, and baby
Jesus; when others turn them away, he does not. In *Beat the Story-Drum, Pum-Pum*, The Husband Who Counted Spoonfuls, Tagwayi, can never manage to keep a wife because he counts spoonfuls and focused only on material things. And in *Lion and Ostrich and Other African Folktales*, Mama Ostrich and Papa Ostrich have six little ostrich chicks; when Lion claims the six ostrich chicks as his children, though they do not resemble him at all, Mongoose steps in to help the parents. Bryan said, “Even when a story may have an outcome where the story turns upon the character trying to trick somebody, still the story told in a way that it will be a lively, exciting experience and you’ll have a good time, but you also have learned from it, that you can’t always put over your tricks on others.” Bryan’s words indicate the importance of retaining what makes you yourself but also realizing the impact that you have on others.

Two of the stories can be considered *folktale adaptations*; they are identified by the fact that the stories are structured around common motifs, such as disobedient children, similar to Hansel and Gretel. *The Ox of Wonderful Horns, and Other African Folktales* includes motifs similar to *Cinderella*. Mungalo is mistreated by his stepmothers and leaves his village with his great white ox. *The Dancing Granny* is a West Indian story of how Anansi keeps granny dancing while he fills his basket with food from her garden. It is important to recognize that each of the following books is considered a retelling, and each includes some element of the motifs that shape the original: *The Cat’s Purr* is Bryan’s retelling of *Why Cat Eats Rat* (Montserrat); *The Lion and the Ostrich Chicks* is a retelling of *The Masai: Their Language and Folklore* (Hollis, 1905 p.198); *Turtle Knows Your Name* is retold from *Turtle Knows Her Name* (qtd. in Parsons, 1936—Saint Eustatius English Antilles); *Beat the Story-Drum: Pum-Pum* includes five Nigerian tales retold; *Beautiful Blackbird* is adapted from a tale in *The Ila-speaking Peoples from*
Northern Rhodesia (Smith, 1968, p. 350-51); and Can’t Scare Me is originally told in Folk-Lore: Lore of the Antilles, French and English by Elise Clews Parson as well.

In my interview with him, Bryan indicated that he did his research for his books in New York while he was teaching. He went to The Schomburg Library (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), which housed the most extensive collection on black life. Each time he happened upon a story that he loved, he would jot it down or make a copy of it. His research was so extensive, he says, that he has enough copies to prevent him from every having to go to the library again. Later, when books of folktales from the late 1800s and early 1900s began to be published in the 1960s and 1970s, Bryan says he would just buy them whenever he could get them. In fact, it is in this time period that he came across anthropologist Elise Clews Parsons’ book about folktales of the Antilles in French and English. Inspiration for several of his retellings came from her work, including the central motif of Can’t Scare. A young kid told her the story, and she copied it exactly as it was told. Bryan, then, took the motif and developed it in poetic form, rooting his work in the past but capturing it in a way that translates to the present.

Another theme is the coming-of-age story; in the stories, the protagonist undergoes a transformation from childhood to adulthood (or a span of time that allows for personal development while facing several challenges, such as difficult family relationships, adjusting to new country, etc.). In The Ox of the Wonderful Horns and Other African Folktales, Mungalo has a difficult family life and is mistreated by his mothers; he sets out on his own to grow and learn before returning home to become chief. In Can’t Scare Me, after encountering the giants, the little boy learns true fear and promises his grandmother he will be good if she will tell him stories of the giants. In the autobiography Words to My Life Song, Bryan is drafted into the segregated army and keeps a sketchpad and art supplies in his gas mask as an outlet to process
what he experiences. And in Freedom over Me: Eleven Slaves Their Lives and Dreams Brought to Life by Ashley Bryan, each slave endures hardship, but each learns the importance of strength and the human spirit to overcome life’s challenges. According to Bryan, Can’t Scare Me employs the popular folktale motif of the trickster. The central conflict of the story is how a child works his way out of trouble against odds stacked against him and how, in doing so, he comes of age, learning lessons that will help him to be a better person.

The theme of migration often coexists with the aforementioned themes of coming-of age and family relationships, but these stories also involve physical transplantation of the protagonist to another country or location and, as a result, exposure to different influences and experiences. This theme is apparent in The Ox of the Wonderful Horns and Other African Folktales when Mungalo goes to another village with horns, learns lessons, marries, brings his wife to his old village, and becomes chief with the magical horns. In The Adventures of Aku, Aku journeys into the forest using a magical ring and, in the middle of the forest, builds a village for his mother and himself. In the Story of Lightning and Thunder, Ma Sheep, Thunder, and Ram Lightning are banished from their kingdom on earth to their new home in the sky after setting the farmers’ crops on fire. In Ashley Bryan’s own life, as he reveals in Words to My Life Song, that he goes to war, lives in different cities and countries, and, in the late 1980s, leaves Dartmouth and relocates to Cranberry Isles year-round; each experience changes him in some way.

Visual Analysis

The following Table 4 (Visual Analysis) continues with the modified Mayring (2000) approach and incorporates Keifer’s (2015) model outlining the following aspects of the illustrations:
• **Shape**—not only definition of geometric forms but also how they are combined to create bodies, prints, backgrounds, and other images

• **Color**—the specific hue and its vibrancy within the larger palette chosen for the particular work

• **Line**—the length, breadth, and sharpness of marks that define shapes, pages, and scenes (for example, line style might be softer in crayon drawings versus the bolder black lines in paintings resembling stained glass)

• **Style**—the manner in which the artist portrays his or her subject and how the artist expresses his or vision

• **Palette**—the range of colors used by an artist to create a desired effect in a specific work

• **Medium**—the material or technique used by the artist

• **Perspective**—the viewpoint of the artist and audience (for example overhead, at eye level, or from ground level)

Table 4. Visual Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>BOOK TITLE</th>
<th>Shape</th>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Palette</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Perspective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td><em>The Ox of the Wonderful Horns, and Other African Folktales</em></td>
<td>White round</td>
<td>Red Ochre Black</td>
<td>Black Ochre</td>
<td>African paintings based on studies</td>
<td>Bold, Earthy Red Ochre</td>
<td>Tempera paintings</td>
<td>Close-ups showings facial expressions middle distance shots</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>village</td>
<td>Ochre Red White</td>
<td>Black White</td>
<td>of African sculpture</td>
<td>Black White Paint</td>
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<td>YEAR</td>
<td>BOOK TITLE</td>
<td>Shape</td>
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<td>Style</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td><em>The Adventures of Aku</em></td>
<td>Cat Dog</td>
<td>Red Ochre</td>
<td>Black Red</td>
<td>African paintings based on studies</td>
<td>Earthy/Warm Red</td>
<td>Tempera paintings</td>
<td>Framing, boxing and enclosures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td><em>The Dancing Granny</em></td>
<td>Swift brush strokes</td>
<td>Black and</td>
<td>Swift bush line paintings</td>
<td>Swift bush paintings in-</td>
<td>Bold contrast-Black and</td>
<td>Black and white bush paintings</td>
<td>Close-ups Framing, box-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td><em>Beat the Story-Drum, Pum-Pum</em></td>
<td>Hen Frog</td>
<td>Black Red</td>
<td>Paintings reminisce of line African (Nigerian)</td>
<td>Bold, Earthy Black</td>
<td>Tempera paintings</td>
<td>close-ups, facial expression,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td><em>The Cat’s Purr</em></td>
<td>Cat and</td>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Pencil crayon</td>
<td>Pencil drawings with brown</td>
<td>Single color (varied shading)</td>
<td>Pencil drawings</td>
<td>facial expression, framing</td>
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<td>1986</td>
<td><em>The Lion and Ostrich, and Other African Folk Tales</em></td>
<td>Animals humans geometric prints</td>
<td>Red Ochre Black White</td>
<td>Paintings reminisce of line drawings</td>
<td>African paintings based on studies of African sculpture</td>
<td>Red Ochre Black White</td>
<td>Tempera Paintings</td>
<td>two- and three-dimensional shadow blocking</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td><em>Turtle Knows Your Name</em></td>
<td>Animals humans geometric prints</td>
<td>Yellow Green Blue Red</td>
<td>Strong multicolored lines</td>
<td>African Caribbean</td>
<td>Yellow Green Red Brown</td>
<td>Watercolors</td>
<td>Two and Three-dimensional image framing and boxing</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td><em>Sing to the Sun</em></td>
<td>Geometric shapes</td>
<td>Black Yellow</td>
<td>Strong Geometric</td>
<td>Reminiscences of Picasso</td>
<td>Brown Orange</td>
<td>Watercolors</td>
<td>Overlap light sources two and</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td><em>Story of Lightning and Thunder</em></td>
<td>Geometric shapes triangles,</td>
<td>Brown Black</td>
<td>Strong Geometric</td>
<td>Reminiscence of Picasso</td>
<td>Watercolors</td>
<td>Tempeera Paintings</td>
<td>Two-dimensional</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td><em>The Night Has Ears: African Proverbs</em></td>
<td>Interlocking shapes of stain</td>
<td>Green Red</td>
<td>White outlines</td>
<td>Tempera gouache and</td>
<td>Blue Black</td>
<td>Tempera gouache</td>
<td>Perspective</td>
</tr>
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<td>2003</td>
<td><em>Beautiful Black Bird</em></td>
<td>Different shapes of birds</td>
<td>Black Yellow</td>
<td>Clean lines</td>
<td>Collage</td>
<td>Colored Paper</td>
<td>Paper Collage</td>
<td>Close-ups showings</td>
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<tr>
<td>YEAR</td>
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<td>Shape</td>
<td>Color</td>
<td>Line</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Words to My Life Song</td>
<td>Colorful Rectangle</td>
<td>Pinks Greens</td>
<td>Clean Lines</td>
<td>Autobiography Photography</td>
<td>Photographs are by</td>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>Framing, boxing and enclosing</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>Who Built the Stable: A Nativity Poem</td>
<td>Squares Rectangles</td>
<td>Yellow Red</td>
<td>Detailed bold lines of animals</td>
<td>Vibrant bright multicolored</td>
<td>Orange Brown</td>
<td>Tempera paintings</td>
<td>Close-ups Framing, box-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Can’t Scare Me!</td>
<td>Stripes Circles</td>
<td>Red Orange</td>
<td>Black lines underscore</td>
<td>Rainbow hued</td>
<td>Purple Yellow</td>
<td>Tempera paintings and</td>
<td>close-ups, facial expression,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Ashley Bryan's Puppet's: Making Something from Everything</td>
<td>Various shapes of shells, bones, nets, seagrass, and driftwood</td>
<td>Brown Green Red White Orange Purple</td>
<td>Thread Glue</td>
<td>Puppets</td>
<td>Shells Bones Sea glass Driftwood Crab claws Fish Net Spoons Shells</td>
<td>Sea glass Driftwood Cranberry Fish Net Spoons Shells</td>
<td>Facial expression, framing enclosing image</td>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Freedom Over Me: Eleven Slaves, Their Lives and Dreams Brought to Life by Ashley Bryan</td>
<td>Collages and mixed media with various shapes of portraits</td>
<td>Brown Green White Orange Black Red</td>
<td>Black lines</td>
<td>Mixed-media collage, pen, ink collage photo reproductions of historical deeds</td>
<td>Red Yellow Blue Green Orange</td>
<td>Diluted tempera and felt-tip pen on paper</td>
<td>two- and three-dimensional shadow blocking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion of Table 4**

Ashley Bryan’s illustrative process has evolved over the years. As seen in my visual analysis of themes, he has never stayed with one style. In *Artist: 23 Major Illustrators Talk to Children about Art*, (2007), Eric Carle includes Ashley Bryan talking to children about his illustrative process (2007), and Bryan tells them:

When I illustrate a story, a song, a poem, images dance in my head, I’ve studied art of world and I’ve used different sources to illustrate my books. Some artists have basic
style, yet they make the art of each book a new adventure. I have no one style of
illustrating my books. The text inspires the style and I celebrate the sources. (p. 18)

Even when I interviewed Ashley Bryan about what inspired his illustrative process, he revealed
he simply grew up loving art. As a result, he has studied the art of the world, of peoples of the
world, and the mediums in which people have worked. He has also watched children work with
endless types of materials and found inspiration in their natural creativity. Changes in his
illustrations reflect this constant inspiration.

In Bryan’s earlier illustrations, I saw a recurring colors, a palette consisting of red, ochre,
black, and white. Because Bryan is such a skilled artist, his illustrations in this palette, most
evident in The Ox of the Wonderful Horns, and Other African Folktales (1971), The Adventures
of Aku (1976), Beat the Story-Drum Pum-Pum (1980), Lion and the Ostrich Chicks and Other
African Folk Tales (1986), are often mistaken for block prints or silk screens instead of
paintings. By “painting in this fashion, he avoids the reduction that often occurs in the translation
from painting to picture storybook illustration” (Pavonetti, 2002). Additionally, there is a
stylistic focus on African paintings based on African sculpture. The illustrations, then, are based
on his study of African sculpture, masks, and rock paintings, and they are absorbed into his own
style that is his own (Marantz & Marantz, 1988).

Bryan changed his style for the Dancing Granny (1977) and had his grandma in mind
when he used the swift brush strokes inspired by the eighteenth-century Japanese artist, Hokusai,
and his Manga series of swift brush paintings [See Image 1 & 2]. Bryan also expanded his palette
with the publication of Sing to the Sun (1982), using not only black and red but also yellow, blue,
tree orange, and brown. In Story of Lightning and Thunder (1993), he incorporates brown, black,
pinks, purples, and oranges. In The Night has Ears; African Proverbs (1997), he adds green,
yellow, and orange to brown and black base colors. In *Can’t Scare Me* (2013), his palette includes red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple.

The changes in his palette for illustrations have stimulated questions regarding how he chooses his colors. In Smith (2000), he answers: “Color is a word of its own. It has its own vocabulary and defines itself in each work you do. For example, there is no red, as such. The color it [becomes] is in the context of the painting and it takes on various qualities according to what it is surrounded by or enriched by!” (p. 11). As with his process, his color choice reflects the importance of experience and context.

Changes in medium are an additional aspect of his illustrative journey. I found that Ashley Bryan used mostly tempera paint and water colors in his illustrations. Yet, he transitioned to collage in his Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award-winning book *Beautiful Black Bird* (2003). When I asked him why during my interview with him, he indicated that he was inspired by wonderful artists of our time who are collage artists, such as Faith Ringgold, as well as Matisse and others. He noted that he had created a story in which black was celebrated, and he said “You know, I would like to cut and paste colors, do collage for the colored birds, rather than painting them.” Created just after his dear editor and friend, Jean Karl, died, the change in medium also reflected a desire for change that new editor Caitlyn Dlouhy supported. He remembers her saying, “Ashley it would be interesting to see, from the varied ways in which you have been working in a material you have not used; colored papers which are cut and pasted.” Bryan noted in his interview he also has on the end papers of those books a photo of the crochet scissors that his mother used for dressmaking and embroidery. There is a note in the books: “These are the scissors I’ve used for all the illustrations in this collage book.” He wants children to know that there is a lot you can do with scissors. Although children are not allowed to use very fine razors
or cutting for collage, Bryan uses them for all the compositions for Beautiful Black Bird, All Things Bright and Beautiful, and Let it Shine. As a result, he is able to experiment with composition and range of color.

Other stylistic focal points include the incorporation of African art, clearly inspired by African sculpture masks and the Bushmen rock paintings; Japanese art inspired by Japanese artist Hokusai (as previously mentioned); and African-American and Caribbean art—the art of the diaspora that blends influences. Bryan’s illustrative style illuminates the spirit of the text in each book. Obviously influenced by the rhythm of the text, he is inspired by each tale or story’s origin (Henderson, 2004). *Story of Lighting and Thunder* (1993), *Turtle Knows Your Name* (1989), *Who Built the Stable: Nativity Poem* (2012), *Can’t Scare Me!* (2013), and *Freedom over Me: Eleven Slaves Their Lives and Dreams Brought to Life by Ashley Bryan* (2016) showed a focus on folk art inspired by his sister Emerald’s drawings (Pavonetti, 2002)—drawings that included vibrant hues.

In terms of shape, there seems to be a tendency toward organic shapes, for Bryan features few angles in his work; the shapes seem to rise from the content. In *Sing to the Sun* (1992), *The Story of Lighting and Thunder* (1993), *The Night Has Ears: African Proverbs* (1997), there are geometric shapes that resemble stained glass windows, but there is fluidity rather than harsh angularity. In these books, I also saw a common use of both two- and three-dimensional images, depending on the subject. For example, three-dimensional images are used for boxing images, and both two- and three-dimensional images are used for light sources.

Bryan’s use of lines offered an interesting study. I examined the *Dancing Granny* (1977) and realized the prevalence of black and white flowing and curvy lines. According to Henrietta Smith, Professor Emerita at University of South Florida, Bryan realized the “power of the
flowing lines and fluid rhythmic curves,” just as he understood the power of fluidity and rhythm in language. For this book, he understood that the use of this line technique best represented the dear lady who loved dancing more than anything else. When I interviewed Ashley Bryan, he said that knew he wanted for that figure of Granny—to keep moving. It didn’t matter how old that granny was; she was able to spin, twirl, to do all these kinds of rhythms and motions, and the brush paintings would portray the spirit of the dance throughout the story (see fig. 2). The same flowing lines are used but elongated to create the trickster, Ananse, who in this tale, attempts to use Granny’s love of dancing to his advantage (Smith, 2000); his manipulations are distortions, and that is reflected in the lengthening of his lines (see fig.1). The Cat’s Purr (1985) also used similar brown striking outlines and curving lines similar to the Dancing Granny (1977), as cat marched with his cat drum—the only one doing so.

Ashley Bryan has used a variety of media in his illustrations because, for him, media rises from content and form. From tempera paintings, Japanese brush painting pencil drawings, watercolors, acrylic, and collage, this understanding that the story chooses the media, so to speak, has been constant in his work. For example, Bryan’s latest book, Freedom Over Me: Eleven Slaves, Their Lives and Dreams Brought to Life (2016), is one for which he won both the Newbery Honor Book Award and Coretta Scott King Book, Illustrator Honor in 2017. For this book, he alternately uses and often merges tempera painting, watercolor, collage, and photo reproductions of historical deeds to bring each individual character to life in a way that best represents him or her. This variation reveals, as he offered when I interviewed him, that “the text is what you start with” and then, you wonder, “How am I going to work these illustrations?” Form rises out of content, for part of the book’s message seems to be that each slave has not only humanity but also his or her own name, identity, life, and spirit.
Figure 1: Illustration of Granny Anika and Spider Ananse, inspired by Japanese artist Hokusai. Reproduced with permission from *The Dancing Granny*, by A. Bryan, 1977.
In my interview with Ashley Bryan, he noted that when he is writing and illustrating his books, he feels like they would be for all ages because he wants to entertain himself as an adult. But there is a child in him as well, and he feels that everyone has that in common. There are experiences that every adult survives from childhood as they grow from innocence to maturity—belonging and feeling like an outsider, joy and grief, ignorance and understanding. He says of his content:

If I can tap that childhood, I’m tapping the initial spirit of adventure of learning and growing, and I don’t want ever to be lost. It has been said [that] one of the most tragic experiences of life would be the loss of a child, and so, never let that child within you die . . . . It is a part of me that I will not let die, and it is a very rich source in every way because it’s at the spirit of adventure.
In childhood, there is such a rich canvas for learning and experiencing how we become who will become. That period of time shape the ways we understand and treat others. Bryan uses rhythm, rhyme, and illustrations to tap into that open space of childhood. Yet, the intersection of childhood and adulthood is also a rich space; tapping into the child that adults often forget allows adults to step back and consider what might have happened to that child who so badly wanted to learn, took joy in hearing and learning new things, and became excited about experiencing new things that changed perspective. In that way, Bryan’s art and words can be transformative. He says,

In my work, the cultural themes that come up, what's happening today, [are] very common in novels and writing. Black writers are using all kinds of themes of what's happening in life today. They're making everything open and present. You can talk about all these aspects of life that are contemporary and what young people are feeling and enduring as they go through the teenage stage into their adulthood. They're very important themes. You can't overlook them.
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

My research explores which themes are reflected and represented in works written and illustrated by Ashley Bryan, and attempts to capture Bryan’s perspective on the cultural content of his work. After limiting my sample to only those 16 works written and illustrated by Bryan, I collected data using a modified Mayring (2000) model for both textual and visual analysis, as well as a personal interview with Bryan in his Isleford, Maine home. Collecting my textual and visual data in tables allowed me to both see the evidence of themes clearly and track the prevalence of themes across texts. Table 3 is centered on textual analysis at the word level, using Huggins’s (2012) articulation of the most prominent African-American literary themes. In Table 4, I began visual analysis, studying the shape, color, line, style, palette and medium of the illustrations to locate trends. In Table 5, incorporating Kiefer’s (2015, p. 376) terminology, I conducted a visual analysis considering the ways in which style, color, shape, line, perspective, and choice of media reflected subject.

While there are a variety of themes in Bryan’s work, there is a heavy focus on exploring family relationships and individuality/being different. Bryan also tends to use bold colors more often than not, and while he has explored and blended various artistic styles and media, the style and medium to which he returns most often are African-textile influenced and tempera painting. Where there seems to be the most variation in his illustrations is in his use of shape.

Summation

After collecting data and undertaking “sense-making” as the final step in my methodological model, I can attest that Bryan’s works are not only closely tied to African-
American culture and traditions, but they also reflect themes consistent with works of the African diaspora. Both in his own words and in my analysis, there is evidence that Bryan actively engages these themes and both wants children to see the distinctions of a different culture and see the sameness in the human experience beyond those differences.

It is important to acknowledge that this study could have been expanded to include all of Bryan’s works. But, the need to locate those works that best reflected Bryan’s original engagement with a topic or theme seemed key to answering my research questions most accurately. Thus, the choice to limit my study to books that Bryan had written and illustrated himself made sense. Additionally, because Bryan loves what he does, has a wealth of knowledge, and is so engaging, interviewing him was challenging. His humility is inspiring, and his joy is infectious. While I had specific questions, they were purposefully designed to be open-ended enough to give Bryan room to elaborate. My difficulty was that I often simply wanted to hear him talk rather than focusing the conversation.

**Further Study**

Further study building on this project could take multiple forms. Most readily, the study of whether the themes exist could be transformed into a study of what it means that they do so—both to youth and adult readers. Additionally, because Bryan has both adaptations and deconstructions of existing folktales from various countries, it could be informative to examine the themes registered when Bryan translates them, whether they align with the originals, and, later, how both the originals and their adaptations speak to a need for cultural literacy.
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Appendix A. Interview 1 with Ashley Bryan (April 7, 2014)

Interview with Ashley Bryan, Monday, April 7, 2014. Question number one; might we take a moment to discuss your use of spirituality in your work? For example, in *Let It Shine, Three Favorite Spirituals, Walk Together Children, Black American Spirituals*; and *All Night, All Day, a Child’s First Book of African American Spirituals*, A; how do African American spirituals and spirituality play a significant role in your writing and illustrating, and B; why is it so important to you that the message you include reach your intended audience?

The black American slaves tapped their roots of faith and belief to create. They were forbidden to read or write, it was a crime to be in jail for that. So, they used their voices and that was a gift of God. They believed in a force above themselves, as people throughout the world have that belief. How could they translate that belief under the oppression in which they live? Their voices were free, they created song. They created song based on what they had heard of biblical stories and other themes, but they wanted those songs to express their desires to be free, to recognize themselves as human. The spirituals are a mark that thousands of those songs created, was that undeniable effort of a people to create, no matter what the odds or oppression. People will find a way to create during their lives. This body of thousands of songs created by the black American slaves is a unique contribution and record of a gift of a peoples to transcend oppression by a spirit of faith and belief, by their created act of a God-given gift, which were melodic gifts of song.

Okay. Why is it so important to you that the messages you include reach your intended audience?
Ashley. It is more than ever important the spirituality of our lives always be brought up and considered. We live on faith and belief and forces beyond ourselves because it is evident in every turn of the way. When we are writing, we are tapping those resources of belief in ourselves that we would like to get across to our audience, whether they are young or whatever their age. We are all involved in expressing ourselves in the most important aspect of being alive and that is, what is the mystery of being? How is it that we have faith in spite of everything that happens to us? The belief grounded on love and our sense of being in some force beyond ourselves, which will support us and make us love the fact that we are in a family, a family of human beings. We are all of one family, which is affirmed in the spirituals. We are not different nations, different genders, different ages. We are all one family, the family of God and that is attested to in the rhythm and the words of the spirituals, which is incredible in the vast understanding these oppressed people had, to give to us the real essence of what it is to be human and to be alive.

Teffeny. Number two; will you spend a few moments relating specific stories about the types of responses children have given you about your books and presentations at schools and public libraries? Were any expected? How so?

Ashley. Whenever I meet with any groups, whether it's children or adults, my first effort is to dramatize the sound of the voice in the printed word. The words are not just words on a page, but when you're reading a story, something of the spirit of the oral tradition comes into your ear, even when reading silently. When I am writing an African folktale or any of my writings, I am invoking the spirit of voice, and I use the poetic devices to enhance my prose. When you are reading one of my African folktales, I would like the reader to feel that the storyteller is at his or her side and they are not only reading words, but they are at a performance. They are hearing the drama of words. Those words
have a resonance and a meaning and feeling, which is not just words on a page. They have a vitality, they have a sound, they have a rhythm, they have tones.

All of these things are at play when you are reading silently as well. Now, when I am standing before the audience, even though I know my story or my poem by heart, I hold the book. Why; I want to associate what my voice does, that it comes from a book, from the printed word in the book. Very often, children have dissociated the sound of the voice from the printed word, and they will pronounce words, "The boy went to the s-s-store." And you say, "What have you read?" They cannot tell you. They've pronounced words, they have not listened to the sound of the word, the voice in the printed word. I hold the book, very often at the end of a program, the child will say, "Oh, you forgot to look in the book," but I hold the book and whatever my voice does, it has come from the dramatization of the printed word.

_Teffeny:_ Okay. Did any of these responses change the way that you saw your work or your role as an author and illustrator? How so?

_Ashley:_ It's always interesting being near the audience because of their responses. They give you first a sense of, is your work communicating? Is it getting across? Does the spirit of what you wanted to get across, do they have that spirit of it? And that's the major thing that you get from it. Now, you may get certain ideas, but your work is already completed and finished that you're reading and sharing with them, but it's their response to that that encourages you when you're back alone, at your table, in your studio writing, you remember that. You can see the faces of the audience of the people, you see the rhythm of excitement when you've completed, how they've really felt so much of being in your presence. It was not that you were on a stage, but that you were in the audience with them, talking to each one of them as if you
were sitting right by them, opening up in an eloquent way something
that you love to share.

_Teffeny._ Okay. Did any change the way that you approach future work? How?

_Ashley._ Every contact will always open up ideas and feelings and spirit, but the
important thing is you have a direction of work that is your focus, it is
what steers you, it's your rudder that keeps you in a direction. You
have your North Star guiding, whatever, but that's what you keep by.
Other things will keep playing into it and will enhance the excitement
with which you get to work, but it doesn't necessarily change anything
unless something specific happened and there's some story that some-
thing came out that you would want to do differently another time.
That does not happen. When you have worked with your story that
you hand out to the audience, you are standing by it. I would not
hand it out to anyone unless I felt I had done my very best.

Now, a critic can write anything they wish about it but I know I
have done my very best and I will hold to that. I always go by that
saying of Walter de la Mere, "Only the rarest kind of best in anything
can be good enough for the young," that's what he wrote, the great
English writer and poet. I go by that, I give only the rarest and best of
what I have to offer and I do not let it go until I know I have reached
that stage in what I'm doing.

_Teffeny._ Number three; you use block print inspired by early religious medieval
block print books as a means to illustrate your books of African Ameri-
can spirituals. _Walk Together, Children, Black American Spirituals;_ and
_I'm Going to Sing Black American Spirituals Volume Two_; in the works,
each block print is intricately detailed with the words of each spiritual
on the opposite page. While scholars have asserted the significance of
this inclusion, what is the historical or cultural significance for you of
using block print as a way to illustrate these spirituals?
It was very important to me, when I started out, to work with those. When I came into the field with Jean Carl in the early ’60s, that I would do a book of spirituals. At that time, there were no books of these songs, the greatest contribution to world music the America had given. No books for young people of those songs. So, I worked first on, *Walk Together, Children*. Now, I decided to do block prints to give it the spirit of the medieval block printed books. Why? I did that because it is said in medieval times, all art was created for the greater glory of God, the great cathedrals, the ritual dramas, the illuminated manuscripts, the stained glass windows, the ritual performances, everything was created for the greater glory of God. It is stated, the only time that spirit of an art created for the greater glory of God came from black American slaves in these body of song, the spirituals that they created. Now, you may not have known that connection for me, but I was willing to wait two, three, four years to get that spirit in my first books of the spirituals because I wanted my life, my head, my working to be inspired by that connection. This is an art of song that was created first for the greater glory of God and then hoping it would open out to everyone. By working in that spirit, these blacks created songs that are now universal.

When you’re doing something particular, individual, it’s not for black people, it’s not for young people, it’s not for old people, it is universal. It crosses all lines of interest and when I travel to other countries, people will always say, if there’s a concert of American singers, “Oh, I hope they’ll be some spirituals on that program.” Abroad, the people know these songs. They have been traveled throughout the world by our great singers, they always include these spirituals on their programs. So, it’s that sense of connection and art created for the greater glory of God. That inspired every step. The reason why I not only cut the il-
Illustration, I cut every note to give the weight that I want in relation to the block print, those little black notes printed. The wonderful thing is, in the clarity of those notes, children from fourth grade in the elementary school learning the treble clef and reading music, use a C recorder, and those notes are so clearly defined that children have an easy time of learning the melodic lines of those spirituals with their C recorders. Wherever I go, I carry my C recorder with me and I will play one of the songs on the recorder, to give them an idea of how, looking at those notes, you pick up the song. So, it's the connection of an art created for the greater glory of God that led to my doing them in that way, when there were no books of the spirituals for young people.

_Teffeny._ Did you find the block prints increase accessibility of your work for young populations? How so?

_Ashley._ Oh my, did that increase the interest for young people. One of the mothers once said to me, "You know, my child is coloring in your block prints," I said, "Oh my, that's the way it was done in the early times before color printing, they would hand-color the block prints," so that child was simply doing what was done in earlier time. It is a desire, a love of doing that and I, myself, with some of the prints that I make that are not in the book, I have done colors and had them as special, because they become very special when I've hand-colored the block print. So, I also use that when my spirituals are being reissued, I colored the block prints on the front and back covers so it would be distinguished from those that came out 40 years earlier, which were plain block prints on those colors. Oh, yes, the block prints has meant a lot, children went right to it. Adults have just loved them for the power and the force of design and they've asked again and again if they could use them for their programs in different ways in their communities.
Okay. Number four; what inspires your selection of different media for different stories? For instance, you transition from block print to the vibrant colors of other media such as oil, watercolor, pencil, and collage in works such as *Beautiful Black Bird; Let it Shine,* and *The Story of Lightning and Thunder.* Why?

That is one to the easiest questions to answer. Why; because I grew up loving art. I studied the art of the world, of peoples of the world, and the means in which people have worked. I also watch children, who work with endless forms of materials in their work. I’ve never confined myself to just one material or one style or way. Now, there are very fine artists who have a way and an approach where they can always be identified from one book to the other, and they will make it fresh each time they do it. I am working always with my love of the contributions of people of the world in what we call "the history of the art of world culture." I draw upon those sources in my illustrations. So, if I am working, at times, with a direction, say I’m doing my first African folk tales. I am working from African sculpture, the masks, the rock paintings. I use the colors that are prominent in the earth colors; the red, the yellow, the ochre-ish color, the black, the white, and I create in that way. When I am doing a book in full color, *The ABC of African American Poetry,* I’m using Tempera paints, I’m using varied colors for that. If I am doing my earlier books of the spirituals, *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder; What a Morning,* I’m working from the tradition of the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages. I want that quality of control, of borders, to carry the design in those. When I’m working with my collage, I’m working with a world of collage. Wonderful artists of our own time who are collage artists that have inspired me, as well as Matisse and others. I use a collage for that. When I did my first collage book, *Beautiful Black Bird,* I had used many materials. I had used pencils, I had used paints, I had used watercolors, I had used block prints, but I had not used collage. That story, which was from South Africa, Zambia, it started out saying, "The birds were all colors of
the rainbow and when they got together, the birds said, 'Who's the most beautiful?' They all said, 'Black bird's the most beautiful, how very black he is.' Well, that was the motif that got me into retelling it, because I had so many stories where black was the lousy color and you're put down. Here was one celebrating black and I said to my editor, "You know, I would like to cut and paste colors, do collage for the colored birds, rather than painting them."

Now, that book came about just after my very dear editor of all the years, who brought me into [inaudible 00:17:09] Jean Carl, had died. I was now beginning to work with a wonderful person, Caitlin [00:17:15] and she agreed. She said, "Ashley, it would be interesting to see, from the varied ways in which you have been working, a work in a material you have not used; colored papers which are cut and pasted." Now, in those books that I have done in collage, I always have on the end papers a photo of my mother's scissors for dressmaking and her embroidery crochet scissors. In it is a note that these are the scissors that I've used for all the illustrations in this collage book. I do that, I want the children to know, there's a lot you can do with just scissors. They are not allowed to use all those very fine razors and things used for that kind of cutting, when you get very intricate and detailed in collage work. With scissors, they have done all of the compositions for Beautiful Black Bird; for All Things Bright and Beautiful; for Let It Shine; those are the two instruments that have allowed me to explore composition with a range of color.

Teffeny: When you crafted Ashley Bryan's ABC of African American Poetry, you incorporated the first few stanzas of the work of well-known and not-so-well-known poets to develop an alphabet for children, but the book was so much more than simply that. Please share what inspired you to create that book in such a unique way.

Ashley: I was very happy to do that book of poetry of the black American poets because I love poetry, all of my programs begin with readings of
poetry and always with a back and forth, call and response play of the
audience chanting back lines to open up the sound of the voice in the
printed word from poetry. I made this selection an ABC book and a
few of the poems are complete, but many of them are partial. There’s
a bibliography at the end which will give you the source, so you can
track out that. Why did I do this? Black American poets have contrib-
uted significantly to poetry, to literature in the United States. They are
very rarely included in any studies of literature. I had a chance then to
open the work of 25, the 26th I used was a spiritual, because the spir-
ituals, for me, are the source of inspiration for everything I do.

So, one of the songs was a spiritual, but all of the others are
poets. Some are well-known and many of them are not well-known
but they all are wonderful poets who you would enjoy reading more
of. So, in working with that book, I found that I couldn’t use the first
letter of the alphabet with each name if I wanted to include those that
I wanted in that way. I wouldn’t have enough alphabetical names in
that way. By using the words of a poem at times for the letter, I was
able to do a very direct alphabet book including whoever I wish and
simply emphasizing the letter of that alphabet whenever we’d come to
it, even if it wasn’t the very first letter of the poem, when it came to
that word, I’d make that a capital. So, it’s in that way that book is now
out there. It’s an introduction to some of the marvelous world of po-
etry.

Poetry is at the heart of all language. All languages are meas-
ured by their poets. It is through poetry that we have retained our
lives. The [inaudible 00:21:04] of Africa retained their history through
the poetic ways in which they could chant the history of a peoples.
We know that poetry is the earliest life form in which we’ve contained
out literature. The earliest works that we have down, Homer, The Iliad;
The Odyssey; all were oral, they were told in poetic forms. Poetry al-
 lows you to retain in the memory, whereas prose is more difficult.
With poetry, you retain, and it’s those early retentions of lines of poet-
ry that were then later written down, and we attribute it to these early writers. But they picked up on them in the oral tradition and then they became written.

So, it's that sense of the spirit in which words come to life when they are finally written down, and poetry is just extraordinary in what allows anyone to explore what your voice can do, by selecting different poems, studying them and finding out, "What is that poem asking of my voice? I love this poem, I want to work with it and find out what my voice can do with it. Will it ask me to have a great volume in saying it? Will it ask me to be very quiet? Will it ask me for a rapid pace? Will it ask me to slow down?" Poetry will keep you at the test of the heart of reading and literature.

_Teffeny._ If you had that book to do over again today, would you include the same works? Why?

_Ashley._ Where is that, on that page?

_Teffeny._ Yeah, right here.

_Ashley._ Oh. You know, you can do the same poets again and again endlessly. It's in the same way, every year Mother Goose books will come out, right? Well, everyone has seen Mother Goose books, but you're always interested in how does the artist see these works? Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack jump over the candlestick. How does this artist see it? How does this artist interpret it? What are the materials that this artist used or that artist? Now, all the poets in the poem, I could do the very same poetry book with the same poems, but have a different scene selected out of those poems for the illustration, it'd be a completely other presentation of that. I could do it using other poets, of course, in a different way. There are all sorts of ways open to one, but you can always do it, but the individual artist very rarely does the same book that he or she has done over again. You will have endless
retellings of Hansel and Gretel, of the Mother Goose rhymes, of different stories that are very popular in the children's literature, someone else will want to do pictures for it. Certain books have become so fixed in image, we don't try to do another Alice in Wonderland, you can't compete. The Wizard of Oz, they stay fixed in how they have been felt and known, but there are other books that have been known, the Arabian Knight stories, the folktales, they're endlessly reinterpreted, re-illustrated.

Teffeny: Okay. Are there new poets, poets that inspire you and shape thought in new ways for a very different generation of youth that you might include? Why?

Ashley: Poets are born every day and to me, it is a miracle, in the United States, that poets are born in every generation. I would go to hear poets at the university when I was a professor at the university, I would go to hear the poets' presentation. They were always very interesting on how they created their work and their sources, their life and everything. Then they would read a poem, that's when they lost you. They brought nothing to the reading except saying words. Maybe 20 percent of the poets who came had a feeling of expressive reading of their work that opened up another revelation of those words by the reading. Why the poets who did not read well bring someone who loved their poems, had studied them, and step aside at that moment, I do not understand. Now, it is not expected that a writer of songs be a great singer. So, composers have written beautiful, melodic lines for songs that are interpreted by generations of singers. The literature of poetry still is for a generation of readers who will seek the voice and open it up.

Contemporary poets generally do not understand that you need, for an audience, an expressive reading of what you have written.
So, you very often are lost in that way, and that's why that's so important. When the new poets come, there are different movements in poetry that has opened up another way. You have what they call "poetry slams," you have "rap poets," you have all of these kinds of things come, which open up a spirit of saying in the voice. They are generally specific forms of poetry, which generally have to be enunciated with a rhythm and beat. They do not include the poems that are tranquil, thoughtful, slow. You would lose an audience at one of those competitions if that was the way you were reading, but it's the kind of vigorous, quick, close, thoughtful statements that come up in those new forms. You also have poets who are writing in thoughtful, rhythmic ways. You would like to go to them and include them in anything you have to offer to young people, so that they would know that the tradition, the art of poetry is living with you today.

There are young people who are born who find their voices. In most schools, children will be asked to write a poem at some time or other, but are they asked to read it well? No. When I go to a school and they are going to read what they have written, it's a perfunctory reading that has nothing to do with the words on the page. What I bring to the school is the speaking with a feeling of love and caring for those words on the page, the desire to find a life and bring them alive. So, my hope is that young poets today are beginning to recognize the need for an expressive reading, so when they're doing a program for an audience at a library or a university, that at the moment when they are to read a poem, they have practiced it. They're not going to stumble in reading it, they're not going to be saying just words, or they will have someone with them, since they do not feel that they can interpret their poem expressively, who they have worked with and felt very much at home with that person's interpretation and have that
person read for them. It's very important because young poets are being born every day.

_Teffeny._ Thank you. Number six; you have done a number of books that involve writing your own original poetry and using poetry of other poets, such as Eloise Greenfield, Langston Hughes, and Nikki Giovanni. In your opinion, how has the African American oral tradition influenced and shaped the poetry in your work?

_Ashley._ Well, that's always at the heart of what I've been saying, the need to be expressive in what you are reading. And these poets, who are a part of my ABC book as well, they are very important to me because they inspire my work. Now, when I am writing my poems, I am also working with the sounds of them. So, when I say, "Sing to the sun, it will listen and warm your words. Your joy will rise like the sun and glow within you. Sing to the moon, it will hear and soothe your cares. Your fears will set like the moon and fade within you." The expressive interpretation of those words is what is so important to me. Every poem in that book has a different call for the voice of a way to work with it to bring it about. So, as I spoke up above about the young poets, it is what has been important to me in my original poetry, that inspiration of how other poets have gotten such a rich voice into what they do, that has inspired me. Eloise Greenfield, Langston Hughes, Nikki Giovanni, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Countee Cullen, all of these, Keats, Shelley, [inaudible 00:30:39], Wordsworth, Henderson, Blake, Yeats, all of these people, they live in me as inspiration for how to find your voice and then how to open it expressively.

_Teffeny._ Okay. You kind of answered this one, but when did you first discover a love for poetry as a genre and why?
Ashley. My love of poetry came about, as it many does, through elementary school. I grew up in New York City in the Bronx and in elementary school, a very part of our work when we were reading was poetry. Now, from the second or third grade on, we are always given a week, two weeks, or three weeks to go over the words of a poem we selected and then we would read it expressively and we were judged by how expressively we read that poem. So, every morning in those English classes, a student or two would stand up in front and speak the poem with as much feeling as they could in interpreting the words and we’d all talk about it. Now, on Fridays, it was a time in New York City in the ’30s when I was growing up, they had auditoriums in the schools. Now I’m in lunchrooms, cafeterias, I’m in gyms, whatever, but then they had auditoriums. We would have Fridays assemblies and in the Friday assemblies, the different grade levels would have one or two students come up on the stage and speak that poem to the audience as beautifully as he or she had prepared it. Now, at the end of the term, they had what they’d call poetry competitions, elocution competitions. We would all compete on our grade levels for the best speaker of the poems on that grade level. Now, that has always stayed with me. I discovered that as timid and shy a person as I was, when I got up on the stage, given a poem, the moment I began to say the poem, the only important thing to me was my love of that poem. My timidity, my shyness, my fear disappeared. I would give that poem everything I had. It came to the point where my readings were so strongly given that in the competitions, I would win the prize as the best speaker on that level. Now, I was lousy in sports, but I had that to be looked up to, in the art, in the drawing, the painting, and the speaking of poetry. I was recognized for that, and that gave me the strength and courage to be who I was, to admire what others could do, but know that I couldn’t be them. But give me a poem and I would do everything to bring it to life. So, it was that sense of getting across that love of poetry that has never left me, and it goes back to the earliest elementary school years, has grown through all the years. Even in junior high school, I have a certificate for oral presentations,
for the best speaker in that grade level in junior high school. In the Bronx, that's in the '30s depression years, when these things were done.

*Teffeny.* Number eight; African American folktales and retellings play a major part in your work. You are known for your authenticity. How do you go about researching these tales, those from African countries, for example, and then translating the richness to audiences that may be wholly unfamiliar with them?

*Ashley.* Well, I've always loved African folk tales and the folk tales of the world, so I was always reading and drawing to them. I did extensive research work when I was working with retelling and illustrating African folk tales for Jean Carl at Atheneum Publishers when she came upon my work in the '60s and asked me to follow up with things she had seen in my studio. Now, in working with the African folktales, I would go to the Schomburg Library in New York City and do my research. A research library has extensive materials of a culture. You cannot take the books out but you can copy information or materials that interest you. So, I would copy out stories that interested me that I thought I'd like to work with at home, and I did much of that research in that way. Nowadays, you do not have to go to the library to do the research because my friends tell me, you can sit right wherever you are and you get it on the internet. Still, I'm not up to any of that. I have extensive research materials.

Whenever I do a book, five others are in mind of what my next step will be. Now that I've cut back on traveling and doing programs, I have been working to do something each year. A book each year has been coming out because I have extensive materials that I'd like to work with and get to, and at this point in my life, it's more important
that I spend time working with that research material. Many of the stories, I have worked with, brought to a certain extent, put it aside. Then at a certain point, I'll pick it up. Every so often though, an idea will come into my head that has nothing to do with my research, but just a question.

One holiday season, I'm looking at all the materials of the nativity, of the Christmas season. I see the child in the manger, I see the manger, I see the wise men, I see the shepherds, I see the angels, I see everything. I just happened, that Christmas, looking at the scene, to ask myself, "But who built the stable?" I wrote that in my sketch pad, "Who built the stable?" Now, the following January, late January, I'm doing my work in Kenya, in Africa, and it's in a little village four hours from Nairobi. I'm in the van, taking us up to this village and I always have my sketch pad.

Whenever the van would stop, I would do a little drawing. Well, this time now, when I was flipping the pages to do the drawing, I come upon these words, "Who built the stable?" When that van continued, by the time we reached Niari, this village four hours away, 6,000 feet up, a small village with very poor, rural schools, I had made an outline that became a poem. "Who built the stable where the baby Jesus lay?" Those are the words. And I followed them, "Was it built of bricks? Was it built with clay? Was it built of wooden sticks? Was it built with sod? Was it made by human hands? Was it built by God?" Now my motif in doing that, I worked on the poem, it reached a point in that poem where I was so moved by it, I'd almost cry because that idea, which had not to do with research, it's research in the sense of loving art of the world.

I'm always in museums, I'm seeing endless interpretations of biblical stories and I wanted to know. I decided, this is going to be a boy, a child. This child knows nothing of religion, no halos in that book. I had it simply as, this is a child out late at night. As a child, he's a car-
penter with his father, he's a shepherd. I'm sort of giving something of a color of a biblical story but it's not direct. This is a boy whose father teaches him carpentry and he builds his own stable for the animals that he will shepherd. He's out one night alone, after he's brought the animals to the stable. He's sitting out at the night watching the stars because there's this very bright star. He happens to see two elders wandering in the dark and he asks them, "Can I help you?"

I wanted that story to be one of a child who sees someone who needs help and offers to help. When he asks that question, Mary speaks to him. He doesn't know it's Mary or Joseph. But she says, "My child will soon be born and there's no room at the inn." And this child, wanting to help, says, "Oh, come with me and my stable's a warm place, and my animals will welcome you." He's been told that people have turned them aside, but yet, "My animals will welcome you. I will sweep and clear a space," and then he makes a space for the baby in the crib. When the baby is born, he looks in the baby's eyes, he knew the child would be a carpenter. He'd be a shepherd, too. I wanted that feeling of the child thinking the little baby's going to be like him.

That poem had such resonance to me that when I showed it to the editor, at a certain point, she was so moved by it, she usually doesn't look at anything when you give it to her, but because it was a poem, it looked like she could read it right off, and that's what happened.

Halfway through, she started to clod up in reading. When she finished, she said, "This is so beautiful, Ashley, you must go ahead and do it." She did not say, "Wait until I make my presentation with all the other editors for approval of what we will be planning for the coming year." When the editors meet with the publicists, the salespeople, the president, the vice president, and they decide on what an editor presents at [inaudible 00:40:53] other companies, what their plans are. If the group does not vote to go ahead with it, they have to give it back to the person and say, "I like it but my company cannot do it, and maybe I can give suggestions of another place." Before they would
have this meeting, my editor said, "Ashley, go ahead, get started working on it." She said, two months later, when she was going into that meeting, Caitlin [00:41:23] said, "That's the only time I went to a meeting with my fists roll up. I was going to punch them in the mouth if they didn't accept that." She said, "They were all so moved, it was right off accepted."

So, you see, other than the research, I always have projects that I'm working on, so it goes on and on. That's why I've cut back on programs because when you've reached the age of 90, you're more thoughtful of how your time is going to be used. At any time, anybody could go at whatever age. At 90, you know more clearly that it's not in that big scope that you worked with before, taking many years to do this or that. You want to get to what you're doing because you've been so filled with the desire to get this out, you want to give up your gifts now.

*Tiffany.* Okay, number nine; according to a recent cooperative children's book report, publishing trends of 33,600 books it received in 2012, less than eight percent were by or about people of color. In your opinion, how do such statistics factor into publishers' choices?

*Ashley.* One would hope, these statistics must be brought up again and again because it's going on and on, and it keeps lagging. You always have to open that up and get a fair representation of our populations, the diversity of peoples in the United States. The United States means people from all over the world, who have become citizens, who are one generation, two or three generations removed from certain countries or cultures, but they are American and they have remembrances on stories of their own people that they would like to tell. They have nothing against other people who immerse themselves in another cul-
ture and want to tell that story, but they want to have a chance to do it as well. So, what has happened is a very important thing, that these people who work up, what they call the multicultural group, have tried to come into the field.

At one point, in the '70s, '80s, '90s, they were really moving in, more and more young people were coming into the field. Now, again, they get to this thing that, "Oh, the people in this area won't be interested. This is not for a child, this and that." All kinds of things which will keep people of different cultural backgrounds with special ideas, the publisher not open to taking the chance, the editors maybe not being informed enough for that outreach. You always have this coming up, this isn’t new. Every few years, they speak of it. You have to keep speaking of it, hoping that young people will see that as the vision of possibility. You would like, of the millions of the young people growing in the United States, that many of them are having visions beyond a narrow spectrum of peoples of the United States. That other people that make up their country, other people that they might know, they may know a child who is from a Polish background, a child whose family comes from Nigeria or from Kenya, and they might think, "Oh, it’d be nice to read a story from someone of your culture. Are there any books that you know that you would recommend for me?"

Well, we always hope that gifted librarians understand this and are well-versed, so when a parent comes in and stands before a multitude of books and that parent is of a different ethnic background or asks for something, that they can direct and help that parent, that family, for books for their young people growing up. We always hope that the librarians are trained in that way, but you have constantly to bring to mind the vast potential of peoples that make up the United States
who are not represented, of finding a way for opening the taboos, the restrictions, the blocks, the closed mental attitudes that can be held in the publishing world, and fight against it to break it down, to keep making in-roads and keep growing in that grass. So, much comes up about it; in the past year, there have been many significant addressing of that, but we must always address it so that people who come into the field of publishing are aware of it and might consider it in what they are choosing in books that have come to them, they would like to do.

*Teffeny.* Okay. Is there a sense that publishers' choices are validated by such trends? How so or not, or do you think there are spaces where publishers truly feel the effects of choosing works with that attention to inclusion of diverse voices? How so or not?

*Ashley.* We are never closed in the way we look at a work that we do. If you're working with books for young people as readers, you must be open. You cannot be closed about trends or ideas or what this piece will think or that, censorship and all of that. What you want is the very best of material that will inform the minds and the hearts of people reading, and that must be the basic concern. All the other things, that's just fluffery, that's stuff. You want to get to the heart of what is that which opens our lives and makes us see ourselves and understand that there are other people who feel as we do. There are other people of different backgrounds or of even background are not isolated, are not alone. Reading opens up an identification with others so that we find ourselves through that identification.
It is very important for the publishers to keep open to the wide variety of possibilities that should always be explored and discovered and found anew, and never close into one small set of ideas of what is selling, what is popular and all of that. That's one aspect of things, but the major import of any publisher is have an open mind and especially an open heart.

_Teffeny._ Okay. Number ten; you obviously grew up with a strong sense of place and that comes through in your work, particularly in _The Dancing Granny_ and _Turtle Knows Your Name_. How do those roots continue to shape you as a writer?

_Ashley._ Well, that's very clear. Everyone will say, "Your experiences have always shaped you." It's inescapable. _Dancing Granny_, my grandma came to visit us from Antigua in the West Indies when she was in her 70s and she loved to dance. She would pick up the latest dances from the great-grandchildren and she out danced them all. She loved that rhythm and dance. When I did that story, I had my grandma in mind. I used the swift brush painting inspired by the Japanese artist, Hokusai, his Manga series of swift brush paintings. I knew I wanted that figure to keep moving, it didn't matter how old that granny was, she was able to spin, to twirl, to do all these kinds of rhythms and motions that would go into the brush paintings to get the spirit of the dance throughout that story.
My grandma used to say that she’d out dance and do the latest dance steps, she’d be out there on the floor with them dancing. One day, my granny was in the hospital, she had a minor operation on her toe. She had an ingrown toenail or whatever it was. She came home, but she’d come from the hospital, now she’s supposed to have been sick. She’s sitting on the couch and she’s sitting there and some friends come in to visit my parents. Grandma’s sitting on the couch there and she’s just sitting there looking up, with the grandchildren around her, the great-grands, and she’s smiling and, “Oh, Granny, I heard you just came from the hospital, that you had an operation.” She says, “Oh, Lord, Lord, Lord, my foot, it hurt me too bad. They done chop off me foot, they cop off me foot.” They said, “Oh, Granny, we’re so sorry for you,” and so they petted her and cuddled her. Then they went into the kitchen. Now, my grandma just wanted to be petted and cuddled and she [inaudible 00:50:08] "Looking so happy and I’ve come from an operation. Lord, Lord, Lord, they done chop off me foot.” When they come back out of the kitchen, Granny is up in the center of the room and she’s dancing and spinning and twirling with the great-grands, dancing around. And they all said, “But Granny, Granny, I thought you say your foot hurt you so bad.” She said, “Oh, yeah, but the music sweep me soul.” It didn’t matter how the foot felt, but the music "sweep me soul." So, I use that in the Dancing Granny story, where the music [inaudible 00:50:40] Granny has to dance. She dances miles away and then she will pass. So, it’s that spirit of drawing upon our experiences that feed into what is the most traditional of sources, because experiences of people are recounted again and again through the ages.

Teffeny: How do they influence the way that you experience and process a world that is constantly in flux?
Ashley: Well, the spirit of the dance is constantly in the rhythm of the movements. Everything is in flux, every moment is in flux. The early Presocratics, Heroclitus had said, "You never step into the same river twice. All things flow, nothing abides." That's the Presocratics speaking, you know. That's true, this moment with you is moving, we're going on and on in our talk. The time is moving, experiences are moving, nothing is static or still. When you look at a painting, you think it's still on the wall, no. You are bringing rhythm, movement, color, ideas and everything to that experience.

Static is just a word, you can describe it, but there's no experience that is absolutely still. Anything that you have had that you thought is moving, so when you recount it, you are recounting things which another person with you is recounting in a different way. They're experiencing it in a different way and at any other moment, you're experiencing in a different way. Every time I read Mother Goose, I'm experiencing it differently. It keeps moving, it keeps changing, it keeps growing with me.

[End of Audio 0:52:16]
Appendix B. Interview 2 with Ashley Bryan (April 7, 2014)

[0:00:00]

Teffeny: Okay. Question number 11; how would you say that your poetry and folktales have evolved? What kinds of surprises have you discovered along the way?

Ashley: Okay. You ready?

Teffeny: I’m ready.

Ashley: Poetry and folktales for me are interrelated. It’s not so much that they’ve evolved but they’ve always been there, the folktales of the world, my love of the folktales of the world. And because of the way in which those stories were told, I’ve always related them to poetry as well. So, as I do my work, as I go along, there’s such a tremendous store of material of the folklore of the world, and that’s what I’ve developed and work with. The surprises are not real surprises, it’s something that is almost universal, the interrelatedness of the folktales of almost all cultures. When I’m doing African folktales, it’s related to other folktales of the world as well.

Recently, I had been in Greece, a tour in Greece, and later they were having a conference. They asked me to talk about the experience in Greece. I related it directly to folktales in Africa related to Greek mythology and the stories in that. I did a story, Jim Flying High, where the God of the sea, Olukun, steps in to help a fish that’s stuck in a tree. Well, here you have the God of the waters and he has this power to do things, to help others. So, that’s a direct relation. The interesting thing is that we as a peoples are really related in many ways and there’s a basic relation of people in their art, in their music, in
their poetry. There are distinct aspects of it to every culture, but there is a related sense of being a part of all the cultures of the world. So, my work with poetry and the African folktales has opened up the relation that it has to all the folktales and poetry of peoples of the world.

_Teffeny._ Okay. Number 12; each of your books of poetry for children has been richly illustrated. Besides your own illustrations, what role, if any, have you had in the art or design of your poetry books for children?

_Ashley._ When one does a book, one always works with a designer at the company. I will do my artwork and the designer is the one who's going to work with how the text is going to be set in relation to the artwork. I will be able to see some of the proofs of that material and talk about it. Is the typeface one that really works along with the design? But essentially, I often have actually done the design of my books because I relate the space for the words to where I set the artwork, so the design is simply following those descriptions of how I've outlined that.

You always want your illustration to go with where the text is, so that part, we're working interrelated with the designer. You're always working with the designer, even if you have designed the whole book, because what you have done is in sequence in that way. The designer is one who you will go over with for the final setting of everything about the book, so that the text and the illustrations work sequentially and give a sense of the rhythm of the whole work.

_Teffeny._ How important is it that your illustrations are accurate and authentic?

_Ashley._ Now, we're talking about fiction and non-fiction, two worlds of how people write. If you're writing fiction, you're in another world because the imagination is really at play. If you're doing non-fiction, what you're asking about, authentic and so forth, is more important. It's direct in that way. You have to be accurate when you're working in an academic way with the material. I am working as an artist who is touched by the material and takes off from the material to reflect the
culture, but I'm not involved in authenticity in an exact way. If I want to work with a feeling of color or shape or so, it's imaginative. I'm doing characters in a story, I'm conceiving them. They may be resembling people in my family but I'm using them for my African folk tales and I'm using that to open up the spirit of what I am working with.

So, when I've taken the academic translation of a story, my work with it is not academic. It's no longer non-fiction, it is entering a world where I can now play as a storyteller that material. That's the way I as an artist play with the visual character of whatever material, whatever culture or whatever tribe of Africa from which that story may come. I will do research and look into the background and things like that, but when my art begins, I am opening up and taking off from those suggestions and the things that it directs me into my own self in my own work.

Teffeny: Okay. In your extensive work in schools... number 13.

Ashley: Yes.

Teffeny: In your extensive work in schools and public libraries, what do you find is the key to unlocking children's interest in poetry? What of unlocking that interest in reading as a whole?

Ashley: When I'm working with an audience, whether they're children or adults, I'm changing their world of what poetry means because I'm now working with interpretations of that material. The important thing is, the interest comes when they discover what poetry means, how poetry can open up the experience of listening. So, whether it's a child or an adult, I'm unlocking an aspect of the world that they're not aware of because we do not have programs of the literature of English and American poets.
People are always dealing with it, words on a page, but that is not the way that you hear a poem when you’re thinking of it in terms of its dramatic and its expressive content. So, for all the audience I’ve met, it’s changed their lives. What poetry means when you face it in terms of what that artist has created, how it relates to your own life, because all art has not to do with just the person who created it. It has to do with how it connects with your own life and has made something different and unique, an opening in yourself. That is the aim of the artist, not just to set forth what he or she does. That is there, but how does it touch you so that it reveals something of yourself which is a discovery?

Teffeny: Okay. Thank you. Number 14; can you talk about the relationship between text and illustrations? How do the pictures reinforce and extend textual messages in your work?

Ashley: All illustrations for an assignment will begin with the text that you’re going to work with. The text is what you start with. When I read a text, I’m getting ideas of, "How am I going to work these illustrations? What is the direction I would like to take for that text?" Now, in reading that text and loving the literature and the art of the world, I begin to get visual ideas. Everyone who reads also is creating because if you’re reading about a child playing in a garden, you’re not seeing a man in the garden digging ditches, you see. Your mind has created an image. You are always creating in reading. Now, when I have a text, I am reading it and I am thinking, "What direction would I like to take in illustration?"

Now, because my work in illustration is not fixed, I may choose, I would like to do this one in block prints. I’m going to limit my colors, red, yellow, black and white. I’m going to use a whole spectrum of colors using Tempera or watercolor, you see, or if I’m using collage, a variety of color. When the text inspirers in me how I’m going to go about the illustration; am I going to be influenced by medieval manu-
scripts? If that's what I would like to do, the illuminated manuscripts at that time, does that come to my head? That's the direction that that text is going to take, whether it's a song or words. The text is primary and in my work, because I'm working from the history of art of the world, I am not fixed to one way of being known. No person is known in just one way, even if they present their art so it's always recognizable as, "This style is by so-and-so," it is always presented in a way you're discovering something new about that artist.

Mine is literally different in each text that I'm working with. I may use an approach several times. My African folktales are red, yellow, black and white, I've done four books using that direction. Then I did others where I'm using Tempera paints or watercolors, you see. The important thing is, I am telling you, you're not going to know me in any one way, you're going to have to know something that leads you to other things of myself in order to get a rounded picture of who I am.

_Teffeny._

Okay. Number 15; how do you approach your research for writing books, _Beautiful black bird; Can't Scare Me;_ and _Turtle knows Your Name_?

_Ashley._

I was living in New York when I was doing my work. I was teaching in New York at the universities, Queens College at that time. My research was in New York. I went into Harlem, the Schomburg Library. The Schomburg Library houses the most extensive collection on black life and literature that you can find in a library. It's a part of the public library but its focus is black life and literature. I did my research in the Schomburg Library. In the course of doing that research, when they had card catalogs, I'd be flipping through the cards, I'd be going for the book that I wanted, but along the way, I was making other discoveries. I'd make a note of them on the little papers and I would take those books out, too, to look at in the library. When there was a story idea that I loved, I would copy it on the copy machine.
Over the years of doing that research, I built up a large collection of copied material that I’ve not gotten anywhere near dealing with. I never have to go into another library again to do my research. Today, now living on this little island, I moved to the Cranberry Islands. I would take a boat to Northeast Harbor, to the harbor. I’d take a bus or taxi to the airport. I’d get to the airport to LaGuardia, New York. I’d get a taxi to the home where my friend lived nearby. I’d get out at that house, it was not far from the Schomburg Library, I could either walk there or take the bus to the Schomburg Library. I’d do my research there, I’d reverse my suspect. I’d get to my friend’s house, I’d take the bus to the airport, I’d take from the airport to the harbor, I’d take the taxi to the boat, I’d take the boat home and I’d come home. Now today, you can sit where you are with the technology, tap into the African folktale collection at the Schomburg and it’s right at your hand, you can do it. But I have at my hand what people who tap into those resources can get and because I’m not technologically proficient, I don’t suffer from not being able to do that because I did extensive work in collecting folktales. When books began to come out in the ’60s and ’70s of folktales that were published in the late 1800s and early 1900s, whenever I could get that book, I would buy it. I would go to [inaudible 00:12:51] in New York, in Harlem. He had his bookstore and it was a famous bookstore in black life and literature and I’d often find these republications of old books.

One of the books that I used for a number of the stories come from a wonderful anthropologist, Elsie Clews Parsons, who did folk tales of the Antilles in French and English. And the motif of Can’t Scare Me comes from one of those stories. A young kid told her that story, she copied it out in the direct way in which she was told. I took that motif and then I developed it in a poetic form, you see. But I was doing all the
research and this anthropologist who did an extensive collection of stories in the Caribbean and whenever I come upon a motif, I'll use it. Beautiful Black Bird from Zambia in South Africa. I was studying that collection, I came upon the story of the beautiful black bird and it was so exciting to me to have a story which was celebrating black, that I knew I could do that. I didn't have to go very far even into that story to know that I had a story.

When all the birds of all colors chooses black bird as the beautiful one, there I was. So, I am also countering aspects of the mind of others, not just children, of what black means. Some people's favorite color is black and they're white people as well. They're not thinking of what that really means when they have their racist ideas and things like that, and yet they're dressed in black. But to recognize that black is a rich, beautiful resource of color and adventure, that's what that story opened to me and that's why I used it. Now, [inaudible 00:14:37] if I could tell you why I chose that story was because it gives a celebration of the color black. At the end of that story, when I have read it to children, they've followed the pictures, I ask them, "Here is a picture of the birds of all colors of the rainbow," and I ask a child, "Can you point out a yellow bird?" and the child picks the yellow. "A red bird, a green bird, a blue bird, a black bird," they point them out, okay. Now, later in that story, the birds are so excited by what black bird can do when he paints the ring around ring dove's neck, that they all want a touch of black, too. So the black bird says, "I'll do what I can do," he says, "Whatever I do, I'll be me and you'll be you," and he touches the birds with black, the large ones and the small ones. Now they all have a touch of black and they sing, "Our colors sport a brand new look, a touch of black was all it took. Oh, beautiful black, uh huh, uh huh. Black is beautiful, uh huh." So, they emphasize what that touch of black means. Now, when I reach the end of that story, I open back to the page and I ask the children about the colors, the red, the yellow, what they pointed at. Then I turn to the page where the birds are marked with black. And I ask the child, "Can you point out a yellow
bird? Can you point out a red bird?” They touch it. “A blue bird,” yes. The birds have been touched with something that’s enhanced their feeling of themselves. That mark of black does not change who they are but it adds a sense of excitement of being.

I tell the children, “Not only does that touch for the birds enhance them, but every day that you come to school with all of your learning, you are being marked. And those are the marks by which you grow to be the good person you would like to be.” I say, “The negative things, you cannot use, they roll off your back. But the good things, you are marked by learning every time you come to school.” So, for me, that story has these two meanings. The first meaning is that touch of black enhances your feeling of who you are. The second is you and we all, adults and children, by learning, by education, are always being marked. You retain those marks because they make you the rich, giving person that you would like to be.

_Teffeny._ Number 16; there seems to be a resurgence of interest in creating trickster tales. What was the genesis of _Can’t Scare Me_?

_Ashley._ The genesis of _Can’t Scare Me_ is the popular folktale motif. You have this little child who meets the giants and by his wits, gets by. It generally is a child who’s not been orderly, he’s not been obedient. He goes into a way which gets him into trouble. The motif of the story is how does this little child work his way out of the trouble? That’s the motif of _Can’t Scare Me_. The trickster tales work in that way. It generally is a smaller animal, insect, person, and the odds are much larger.
Now, a spider is one of the smallest of creatures, a little spider. But yet spider has to use his wits to outwit the larger forces that he's contending with, or if there's something he wants to get from another, how he can use his wits to attain that. We know all children are contested with the adults around them and they're always trying to find a way to assert themselves. Trickster tales are natural out of that desire of the child to get by this tremendous force of adults, by stories that tell how a small force meets a larger one and prevails against him. Sometimes, in those tales, you may have the trickster caught up in his tomfoolery and gets trapped by it. I have done a spider [inaudible 00:19:09] story in which he does get caught up in his trickster tale. In others, spider would get away because the point of those stories, the trickster tale, is the small force that meets against a large force.

Everyone knows, it doesn't matter how grown you are, as an adult, you are always being met with forces greater than yourself. The attitudes of the society, the need to pay your rent, your food, your clothes, to meet the demands of a family, great forces that you are meeting. How can you meet those? You're always contending with forces beyond yourself. The trickster tale takes it down into the child's form. It relates to every individual, there is no one who realizes anything without contending with forces greater than him or herself.

_Teffeny_: How is writing a trickster tale different from writing any other story and in your opinion, what is the purpose of the trickster tale for young audiences?

_Ashley_: I think I've explained that just now, in telling you how that relates so much to how a child is always contending with great forces. You see a little baby and the baby is just several months old and the baby is in-
sisting upon what he or she wants. You’re feeding the baby, at a certain point, that child closes its mouth, it will not take the spoon that you’re feeding it. It’s insisting that, “I have a life. I have a mind. I have an energy and I want it to be understood and felt and appreciated.” At all stages, we have this desire to make it known that if we are to get by, we will always be contending with forces beyond ourselves. The trickster tale, in that way, it presents a way in which we can just get, in reading, a way of understanding ourselves. We understand it through the story being told.

_Teffeny:_ Okay. Number 17; in the trickster tale _Can’t Scare Me_, a little boy is the protagonist. How important is it to use a child to tell this story and why?

_Ashley:_ I use a child because adults and children love stories with children. It doesn't matter how old you are, you’ll always appreciate a story of how a child maneuvers and works its way. Now, in that story, I chose a little boy because I love those kinds of stories where a child, that folktale motif, where you meet up with a greater force and you have to do something to get past it.

In that story, the little boy is fearless, there’s nothing that he’s afraid of. Even the lions, he stamps his feet and they run away. His parents can't handle him, so another wonderful motif in folktales is a grandma steps into it. The grandma will take care of him because she knows that love and stories will be all that he really needs and he loves his grandma. He says, “You can't scare me. I’ll escape from any old giant, one head, two or three,” and she said, “Don’t be out late because they'll catch you and eat you.” So, when he is out late, he loves his music, he loves to sing, he loves to play his flute and he’s entertaining the giants he meets along the way.

They love his music and everything he plays for them and he is fearless. So, when this very popular motif occurs, "Hop up on my toe,
my ears will hear you better. Hop up on my knee, they'll hear you better," this is a three-headed giant talking to him and he's fearless. To prove he's not afraid, he jumps up on the knee. The giant says, "Will you hop up now on my chest, I'll really hear you better," and he's fearless; he hops up on the chest. And that's when the giant snatches him and flings him in his sack and takes him home. Now the little boy has been playing his song and singing his song, "Toodle loodle loodle loodle loo. Tanto, tanto, I'm wild, I'm free, Grandma's stories can't scare me. I'm bold, I'm brave, though I may be small, no many-headed giant scares me at all." So, he's singing and playing, but now he's flung into the sack. The giant takes the sack, now the giant is walking home to his maid, Jane, to bring it to be cooked. And he's in the sack, the little boy knows no fear but he's in the sack. The giant starts to sing. This is where I bring my twist to the story. The giant sings, "Tanta baraba dooda la la ba la la," but oh, he got it wrong. He thought he knew the song but he got it so wrong. His singing voice was terrible, a rumbling and it terrified the little boy. Ah ha, at last he now knew fear.

So, I made this twist in the story, he's not so much afraid of being eaten as he is the terrible voice of the giant. He wants to escape that voice and never hear such horrible, off-key singing. When Jane takes him out of the bag, he first plays his song, she puts him back in. The next day when the giant goes out, he says, "Cook him up for me tonight. I'll eat the boy for dinner. Instead of getting fatter, he might be getting thinner, so cook him up for me tonight, I'll eat the boy for dinner." So, Jane says to the boy, in the sack, after the giant leaves, "Would you play and sing your song again?" So, he says, "Open the bag a little bit. Fresh air will clear my flute. I'll play and sing, you'll dance and sing. Toodle loodle loo." So she opened the bag to his neck and he plays and Jane starts to dance. Oh, the music gets her, she cannot stop dancing. When he stops, she says, "What? You've just begun." He says, "If you'll open the bag down to my waist..." you see how his wits are now at work. You know what he's
going to finally do, just as, "Hop up on my toe, on my knee, on my chest," he said, "You take it down to the neck, to my waist and will you take me out of the bag?" He says, "My song will make you dance upon your head." And so when she's dancing on her head, he runs out of the door and she runs after him. "Come, come back, come back. This running, you won't be fit for dinner." So, he keeps running until he runs into his grandma's arms and then they sing and play together. He says, "But singing to him was worse than any threat to eat him," and then he says, "Oh, Granny, now that I know fear, I will be good. Don't worry. If only you would tell me now soon, four-headed giant story."

So, that's a basic folk take motif of "hop up on my toe, my knee, my chest," but I made the twist, that rather he be in fear of being eaten, he's more afraid of the voice of that giant. So, in that way, when you start something, you don't know where it's going to take you, but you follow your ideas as it develops. I may have had the idea I'm going to make it with the giant going to eat him, but along the way, with his singing and playing, the thought that when the giant sings a song, it's so horrible that that's what he learns what fear is.

Teffeny. Oh. Okay. Number 18; in your retellings of The Dancing Granny and The Cat's Purr, music is a vital part of the storytelling. In The Dancing Granny, singing is used and in The Cat's Purr, the bamboo flute and drum are used. It is well-known that your family enjoy singing and dancing, but beyond that, why is so music so significant in creating retellings for your audiences and why is it so central to the African American culture?

Ashley. My feeling is that music is essential in all cultures. There's a rhythm to the beat in the song, in whatever the culture, that feeds into one's body. So, when I'm doing a story like The Dancing Granny, the rhythm
of the dance is to play through. The way I'm going to work with the words is going to have a rhythmic play. I'm going to infuse my poetry into the prose so that you'll get a feeling of dance all the way through. In *The Cat's Purr*, it's that purr-umm, purr-umm, purr-umm beat, which is that rhythm of sound that plays into it. It's that rhythmic rhyming of sound to sense that's so vital in writing. So, I use those devices.

Now, we know that singing is at the beat of the heart. The exciting thing about music is that it is repeating something of the heartbeat, which is the life-beat. Music becomes a life blood as poetry because it taps that source of that rhythmic beat within one. No matter what it is, there is a sense of cadence and timing that music feeds us, why we desire and love so much to make music a part of our life. When I am reading, I see no categories, I use what it will take to make something come alive, and I know that these are basic essentials to language. The rhythm, the beat, they're essential to language, that's essential to music. So, if I'm writing a story in which that may occur, I will use things in which it literally becomes a part of the story in that case. It doesn't matter what I'm writing, you're going to feel that in the way I've spaced my voice, I've spaced my words. I want to keep that constant rhythmic beat so that you are kept alive. When your heart stops, you're not alive. When the beat stops, your story is dead. I want to keep that beat always going.

*Teffeny.* Number 19; when writing and retelling stories, I noticed the phonemic sounds are used to engage young readers. For example, in *Beautiful Black Bird*, “Coo-hoo, coo-hoo, coo-hoo, coo-hoo, coo-choo, coo-choo.” And in *The Cat's Purr*, "Pitty-tap, a la pat, pat, pit tap a lat pom, lightning and thunder, bye bye [inaudible 00:30:15]." How do these sounds help to convey the deeper meaning of the story and in
your experience, how do such sounds impact building a love of reading and language in children?

*Ashley.* When you’re writing a story, there can be moments when you’re trying to imitate the sound of something, whether it’s lighting or thunder, or it’s a drum or a flute, and you try to find words that will give that sound. We call that onomatopoeia, the rhythmic rhyming of sound to sense. So, if you say "baa baa, moo moo" these are sounds that approximate the actual experience of the animal or the event in nature that brings that about. To enclose those sounds in what you’re writing, when they come into it, gives the audience a closer connection to what you’re telling. And very often, there are moments when you can ask the audience, “Would you repeat that with me?” so they will make these sounds as well and keep the story engaged for them and make themselves a part of that happening. So, the onomatopoeia is a very vital part of any writing, the rhythmic rhyming of sound to sense. All artists work with that, all poets live in that, that sense of the sound. It could be a simple phrase where you want something to go very quietly, and so it will have that sound that’s very quiet to give the feeling of the mood as well. You can always work with the sounds that you’ve heard around you and incorporate them when they come into a story. Grab onto them and make it a part of it, to accentuate the other rhythmic aspect of reading.

*Teffeny.* Number 20; what historically, culturally conscious themes do you feel are reflected most in your poetry retellings and writings? To what extent were these conscious choices on your part and to what extent did these themes emerge simply because they are central to your experiences?

*Ashley.* Well, the historic and the cultural are a part of every one. I’m a black person, I’m a black man. I’m having to make my own discoveries of what my people have offered, enormous contributions they have made. If I don’t do some work on my own, I do not get it. These
have fed into me all through my life, I keep them at hand. I re-read every day a portion of how black people contributed despite the obstacles. So, these feed into my sense of being, of who I am. So, when I am writing, I'm drawing upon those sources. I could be writing other materials; I chose to write African folktales.

Well, it's a natural, I'm a black person, I want to get those out, too. White people are retelling African folktales, I would like to have my chance of using my voice, my experience, my culture, my people in having a voice. The fight for cultural contributions of the whole world of multiculturalism has to do with people of these backgrounds wanting a chance of their own. Not that they'll push out others who are using their culture and materials in their way of expressing things of their own, but I would like, as a black person, to have a chance to work with my African folk tales, too, and find a way of telling that story, based on what I know of the voices of my community, the voices of my family, the voices of the people that I know, my studies in the history of our cultural contributions, how these work in African life. How the rhythm, the dance, the poetry, the song are a part of every engagement and every meeting. You do not just sit there and be entertained, you are engaged, you're brought into it. That's vital in what I do. My sources have been my roots and that's natural. So, I wanted that chance, as a black person, to express my roots as well as others may have drawn upon them.

_Teffeny._ Okay. Number 21; literally and culturally, scholars often identify lists of themes that are common in literatures of diverse groups. In recent years, what new themes have risen in African American literature, in your observation? How have you worked to address these themes in your work?

_Ashley._ In my work, the cultural themes that come up, what's happening today, very common in novels and writing, black writers are using all kinds of themes of what's happening in life today. They're making
everything open and present. You can talk about all these aspects of life that are contemporary and what young people are feeling and enduring as they go through the teenage stage into their adulthood. They're very important themes. You can't overlook them. What is happening in the world today? What is happening in our society? And writers of novels are taking that on. When I am writing my folk tales, I'm drawing upon other themes, other sources. I'm not dealing with what has to do with the problems of the black community as such, in a direct way in which it becomes a theme of a novel or a story or of a non-fiction history engagement.

I am using material that are opening up a tradition of storytelling and poetry that may, at times, include something of what is going on locally and in the present, but it's not often that can happen in the way I'm working. I cannot take an African folktale and tie it in to what is happening today in what a young person is feeling as they reach the teenage problems of sex and drugs and all of these issues that you face now, but I can use the themes of my culture that express the aspect of what it means to have a tradition of storytelling and poetry alive going. I am not working in the fiction, in the non-fiction area of getting things in terms of what is happening at any moment and drawing upon that as a motif or a theme.

_Teffeny._ Oh, okay.

_Ashley._ Oh, I did that one, 22. When I talked about the *Beautiful Black Bird._

_Teffeny._ Yes, you did.

_Ashley._ You want to go over that? Read that one again.

_Teffeny._ Number 22; in the book, *Beautiful Black Bird*, the story teaches readers that the color black should be celebrated, rather than looked upon with negative connotations. In other words, your work served to
changed the perceptions of not simply the color, but by extension, of
blackness as racial and social construct. What are some other ways
that you attempt to help readers reconsider socialized understandings
in this story for children and adults?

_Ashley._ I answered a lot of this in question 19 where I spoke of _Beautiful Black Bird._

_Teffeny._ Yes.

_Ashley._ It has more than just the one meaning of being excited by what black
means as a color, but also what learning means as marked. Being
marked by learning, being marked by education. It's very important to
me to always talk about growing and learning. It doesn't matter
whether you’re 5 or 50 or 95, the desire to keep growing and learning
is a lifelong enterprise, a lifelong adventure. So, I could use that story
to open that aspect out as well. Now, it's not written into the story in
that direct way.

The story directly enhances and celebrates what it means to be
black, but when you get to the deepest meanings of that story, it en-
hances the fact that education, you are being marked by learning, by
education. I wanted to make that clear because that often is not con-
sidered, that children are going and coming every day, they're not
thinking that they're being marked every day by the good things
they've picked up. Now, when it comes to the bad things, they roll off
your back. There's much studies today of what bullying has been do-
ing to children and so forth, that kind of thing has to roll off your
back, you can't take that in or it will prevent you from the positive
things that you would like to grow with. You get caught up in the
negative and you stay with it and you think you're the only one, and
you reduce your abilities. You have to counter the negative always,
and so that's why I made that point in the story above. When I men-
tioned it, I would like the reader to enjoy the story, to have a good
time with the story, but also get the subtler message of what it means to be marked by learning.

*Teffeny.* Number 23; to what extent then do all of your works of poetry, writing, and retelling serve as tools for cultural understanding and communication?

*Ashley.* One of the wonderful things of writing that I've done with the poetry and stories is that through the voice, even if you don't know the language, there is some connection being made. I have been in other countries where people have a different language and I've sat in on a storyteller and something about the expressive voice, the gestures, the rhythms of the telling, makes me follow the story in a way. There is something about that bridging of differences. The more we see the relatedness of all things, the less we get into stereotypes and racializing and doing things that will be of harm to others, thinking that they are different. The more we work toward understanding the relatedness of all people, the stronger we become, the stronger the cultures of the world become, and the stronger our work toward a world in which war is diminished and we can live a way of exploring peacefully how you grow as a human being.

So, it's been everything to me that the works of poetry and writing, they are always... you know, we say the world "tools," it makes it kind of un-poetic, but they are gifts. They are the gifts by which we have treasures that gave us an increase of being. The more we open ourselves to these gifts which are there... if you open yourself to the gift of the day, of the sun, the moon, the clouds, the rain, all of these are gifts, you see, and you are seeding them into yourself to flourish and to originate and to permeate and to also irrigate and make fertile what is within you. So, it's in that sense that we have that openness of way in what we are doing. We don't want it to feel that it is just for the people in the United States, but they could spread out to peoples of the world.
Number 24; The Story of Lightning and Thunder, Turtle Knows Your Name, and Beautiful Black Bird have positive moral messages, yet life often throws negative paths and children are often exposed to negative imagery, sounds and messages very early. Is it necessary for you that your writings and retellings always have a positive moral outcome and message? Why?

When you are writing, you're not thinking in those terms. You just want a story to come alive and be really structurally sound and the very best you have to offer. Everything else is by the critic looking in, that is out of your hands. If you are working as an artist to explore and discover and do your very best, you then offer it and you stand by it. The critic can have any comment that he or she wishes. If it affirms what you have done, you're very happy. But if that critic denies what you have done, you will stand up because you know you have done your best. It's a matter of always working to the heart that runs the root of it. You're not working to have this or that outcome or so. You're working out of the richness of the adventure, and you're seeking something that is creative and positive. That was one thing that was always important to me. If you are seeking to do things that are creative and positive, never let anyone or anything stop you.

When I was denied entrance to college in New York City in 1940 as a black person, because it would be a waste to give a scholarship to a black person, that did not stop me. I could've given up then and said, "Since they say there's no place for you in the field, best portfolio we've seen," but I knew that what I was trying to do was creative and culturally progressive and how could I find a way around that? So, with the help of others, I found a way of it. I found a way of getting a
scholarship to go to college, because with six in the family and three cousins, we could only go beyond high school through a scholarship. I knew I had to have a scholarship and I wanted to keep growing as an artist. How could I find a way? So, it had not to do with any stricture of if what I’m doing is going to be progressive, it had to do with my desire as an artist to find a way to express myself and to always want to give the soundest and strongest I have to offer. Even when a story may have an outcome where the story turns upon the character trying to trick somebody, still the story is told in a way that it will be a lively, exciting experience and you’ll have a good time, but you’ll also have learned from it, that you can’t always put over your tricks on others.

_Teffeny._

Okay. Number 25; please share a few memorable correspondences or memorable feedback that you have received from librarians and teachers who have read your books. Over your career, what do you find is the most common response from those groups? Why do you think this is the case?

_Ashley._

Well, you know, in the world of young people’s books, we do get letters and we do get responses from audiences. They’re always very meaningful to the author or illustrator. When I visit a school, for instance, one of the most meaningful things is the school will be prepared for my visit, the children will be writing African folktales, they’ll be doing artworks because I am coming. My work is now inspiring in others something in themselves that will be of themselves, that is creative and contributes to their own lives, but they are doing these works. The most exciting thing that an author or illustrator can ever get is to visit a school and see what your work has done to open the creativity in another. There is no greater feeling of resolve, resolution and ex-
citement that an artist can get than to know what you have done has allowed someone to tap resources in him or herself and act upon it.

When I visit a school, I will often say to the children, "When I entered this school, I see all this beautiful artwork you've been doing because you've been reading my stories. You're responding to my way of illustrating. I see all the stories you've written are posted up there." I said, "Listen, when you have a birthday or a holiday or an anniversary in your family, don't say, 'Mama, give me five dollars to buy you a present.' No, no, no, no, take something you have created, something you've written, something you've drawn, a poem that you've learned to say beautifully, and say to the other, 'This is my gift to you. It's nicely wrapped,' if it's a drawing or a story. Or, 'Stand and I will recite this poem as my present to you.'" I say, "Those gifts that you offer another, that you have taken the time to work out yourself will give you more encouragement than anything else in life and it's through that encouragement that you will continue to grow." We need encouragement in what is creative and cultural to stay with it and not give up.

Now if somebody says, "Oh, you're no good at that, that's no good, you'll never do that," let it roll off your back. You cannot use that. You will not keep developing if you take negative criticism to guide you, you see. So, I tell the children, "You have so much to offer and you also are inciting something in the other that is responding to you as a person. They are seeing you now as a person who has something to offer. And you haven't just gone out and bought something, which can be fine as well, but you've done more. You have taken the time, you've thought of the person to whom you offer that, and you've done
something that you would like to touch them in a way that they will say, 'Thank you.'"

_Teffeny._ Number 26; rhythm is fundamental in your writing and illustrating. How do you narrow in on the rhythm and natural voice in telling your stories? Is this also a matter of authenticity or are there other factors at play? What might they be?

_Ashley._ Well, in studying art, of course, I learned all the basics in the art colleges. You always are working with rhythm in any design that you make, you want something for the eye to work rhythmically across the page in understanding the illustration and staying with it, and coming back to it again and again because it's always a new rhythm that you're picking up as you see it, no matter how simple it may look. That's very much a part of it, the rhythm that works through these.

When you're writing the story, then you're tapping those sources of how, in the outlay of a composition, how would you like the eye to play? How would like they eye to move through it? How would you like it to be kept always an exciting viewing of that space? That's a basic to anything that you're doing, that you're finding what you do for that particular text and the images that will work for it. The authenticity, as I've said, comes through what is important in what you are doing in that story. If you are doing a story that is very closely about a specific tribe, in a way in which you need indications of those, your research will give you all that you need, in how the people dress, what they wear, the foods they eat, their utensils, all of those things
will come about through research. Then you incorporate what you will need for that story. Sometimes, you will find, even when you’ve done that research, that you have a more open way of dealing with how you’re illustrating that story and you’re hoping that what your text offers allows that illustration to flow, so that it will keep moving in an integral way with whatever you’ve written that is valid. That’s the main thing, you have to authenticate through your own work what you have put down. That is the ultimate authenticity, it’s not whether it’s exactly this or that, it’s of how real is that artist giving off him or herself that is incontrovertible, it has to be.

Teffeny: Okay. Number 27; your autobiography, *Words to my Life Song*, relates your love of family and this has been a key factor in overcoming obstacles during your life journey, but what of writing and illustrating? How have writing and illustrating helped inspire you to overcome obstacles in your life and to what extent would you like your writing to do the same for others?

Ashley: Well, the interesting thing is, the love of family has been one of the sources of continuing the work that I love to do. It’s wonderful when you have that feeling of closeness in your work, because your work is done more or less in isolation and alone. When you are doing your artwork and your writing, it’s you in relation to whatever material you are working with. If you’re working in a different form, you may have a whole ensemble of people working. If you’re directing a play or you’re doing a theatrical piece in which you have a designer for the backdrops or the costumes, for the music, for the words, you’re working an ensemble.
Other than that, you’re working uniquely on your own. Even for each aspect of an ensemble work, people alone are working on a design of the costume, but interrelated with everything that’s going on. The feeling of the family, it told you. It is natural to want a challenge because with no challenge, you do not grow. If something is easy, you don’t give it a thought. The children sometimes ask me, “Mr. Ashley, is that easy to do?” I said, “Oh no, it is not easy. It is the hardest thing in the world to do. Sometimes, if I was out digging ditches, I’d realize why I’m so tired.” But I said, ”No, meeting the demands of what you are doing is the hardest thing in the world but if you can put together having fun with working hard, there is no obstacle that you will not overcome. If a thing is easy, you do not give it any thought. You just go ahead with it, you’re doing it. But when you meet with that challenge and it is hard to do and you pit yourself against it so that you can meet that demand, then you’ve grown and then you understand the excitement that’s coming to you, the flush of growing through that challenge.” So, it’s always important to me, when I’m with the children, to open up.

Say you want to be a good track runner, you’re in college. Every morning, your coach knocks on the door at 6:00, your class isn’t until 8:30 or 9:00. He knocks on the door at 6:00 and says that you can go and run the track for an hour or so to be fit for the races that you’ll be competing in. And every day this coach comes, he knocks on your door, and you get out of bed and you go and do it. One day, the coach comes to knock on the door and you’re already gone.

You have taken on that challenge yourself now, it’s not dependent on anyone getting you up to do it, but it has now meant so much to you, you have realized so much in yourself by taking on that challenge.
yourself, you do not need anyone to knock. That’s when you know it means so much to you and you’ve learned so much about yourself by taking that on yourself, you see. So, I tell the children... I’m with the elementary school, the children are in third grade. I’m saying, “Obstacles; look at, how did you reach third grade? You couldn’t get out of second grade if you didn’t meet obstacles or overcome so you can be a third grader now. If you want to go to fourth grade, you’re going to meet a lot of obstacles in the way, in all your studies, to overcome, to meet those challenges so you can go onto the next grade.” The obstacles are natural, necessary and exciting, and it’s through the obstacles that we overcome, that we recognize ourselves as a people and we understand peoples of the world by knowing there is no one who is facing anything in life, no matter how wealthy you are, without obstacles to overcome and realizing the day and an understanding of yourself.

_Teffeny._ Number 28; in _Who Built the Stable?_ a nativity poem, a child is used to tell the Christmas story through the rhythm and rhyme of poetry. I think you answered this.

_Ashley._ Yes.

_Teffeny._ Why use a child in this instance? What was your inspiration and aim for retelling the Christmas story in poetry with such diversity of the characters, something that had never been done?

_Ashley._ Well, I answered that in a way earlier when I was speaking about that Christmas, seeing the images that I’d known so well from my visits to museums of the holy family, with the holy family and the shepherds and the wise men, and I asked myself, “Who built the stable?” and I mentioned then that the child meant everything to me. I wanted to
say that something in the child wants to help. The child not only wants to learn; the child wants to also help. You can be moving a piano, a little child will come, pushing like he's going to help you move the piano. It's a tremendous force, but the desire to help is innate in children as well.

This gave me a chance to use a child as the motif because all the adults have turned aside this couple, the mother, the woman expecting a child. Yet, every knock on the door there's been no room for them. I felt that in this idea that I had of who built the stable, I will use the stable as a place for them because we know that's where they end up, in a stable. But I'm going to have the stable as built by a child, a child who learned carpentry and shepherding, who built a stable to house his animals. When he sees this family, these elders in the night, walking, he simply asks, "Do you need help? May I help you?" Now, this is a child, as I said earlier. To me, that's a powerful moment, when the child asks, "Can I help you?" He doesn't know this is Mary and Joseph and in those illustrations, I put no halos on the people. The child has no idea, other than he sees two elders wandering in the dark and asks to help them, and then he takes care of them. He says, "My animals will welcome you," even though they had been turned away by people.

That was significant to me, that he could feel that, that I not only have a place that's warm for you but I have a welcoming group for you as well, and they are my animals that I've cared for. Then he says, "I'll take care of it and I'll sweep and I'll clear and I'll make a cradle where the baby can be laid when it's born." Then when the baby is born, he sees himself in that baby. And he does that same projecting that parents do about their children, "Oh, he's going to be an artist, he's going to be a writer, he's going to be a composer, he's going to be an electrician, he's going to be a mathematician, he's going to be an engineer." Adults often see themselves, their own professions, in the little baby that's born. [Inaudible 00:59:21] going to be an opera
singer. You see all these things. So, I wanted this little child to do the same thing, he sees this child become just like him, a carpenter and a shepherd and that closes it. That story means everything to me. I don't know how far it will go. I do my work believing in what I'm doing, loving what I'm doing. I would like it to move out but I have no control over that. I always hope that people will sense what I have put into it and make it special, feel it special to themselves and not only want it, but also want to share it. Even if it's a book they borrow from the library and share with others, but somehow to get that message out.

Teffeny: Okay. Thank you. Number 29; in your book of original poems, Sing to the Sun, the poems represent happiness, sadness and family. To what extent are these poems a representation of children's ups and downs? To what extent are they indicative of something beyond childhood?

Ashley: Well, the poems, in feeling that spirit of ups and downs is natural, not only just to children. As I say, I am writing for all ages. I am being published in the young people's division but I am writing as an adult and the books that get to children come through adults. Adults read them, if they're getting a lot out of them, they want the children to get them. They'll review them in that way. It's not children reviewing the books, it's the adults. They get to children because of the love of adults in that area of reading.

So, when I am doing my books, I always would like to feel that they will be for all ages because I want to entertain myself as an adult but there is a child in me. I've always felt that when I am with an adult audience, I can get across to them by tapping their childhood, because everyone has that in common who has survived. Every adult you meet who has survived childhood has that in common with you, their child-
In one form or another, that is there. If I can tap that childhood, I'm tapping the initial spirit of adventure of learning and growing that I don't want ever to be lost. It has been said, one of the most tragic experiences of life would be the loss of a child, and so, never let that child within you die.

My feeling is, that is to be always nurtured, that exciting spirit of adventure, of applause, of excitement. Don't diminish it because you're grown up, but acknowledge that it is festering and opening up in you to come alive again, to say something that's surprising, that is like an outburst of the adult reminding the excitement of that experience. You don't ever want to lose that. It's not that I'm tapping the childhood in that way; that childhood has never left. It is a part of me that I will not let die and it is a very rich resource in every way because it's at the spirit of adventure.

We know a child can get a present in a box and you'll see that child playing with the empty box. He's getting more out of playing with an empty box than the present you've given, the toy that was in the box. The imagination sees something can be constructed rather than something that's already been given. They want that adventure of making something of nothing, that adventure of recreating out of their own imagination something that seems embodied in just a form that's to be cast off. That desire to recreate what is cast off is what is at the heart of all art.

The experiences, the adventures of learning, they've gone, but you want to recreate them. If I'm walking the shore and pick up shells, bones and driftwood, I'm not just seeing shells, bones, driftwood and glass... how can I recreate these? When I hear the language of people, going, "I don't hear just language, how can I create those words and bring them into poetry so that they have another life?" I would like to persist in those aspects of being that are at the mystery and heart of being. We cannot get to that source. I think, as Oscar Wilde once
said, "You can figure out the movements of the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, all those rhythms, but who can ever describe the generation, the turnings of the soul?" Something of those words I remember from De Profundis in which he says, "The soul... who can get to the depths of what it means?" and that's at the heart of our desire to do things creative. It's trying to understand what this undecipherable soul is asking of you, is always plumbing and charging and challenging, you know.

Whenever you think you have an answer, you find that now the real answer is more distant. It's what Paul Laurence Dunbar once said, when someone said, "Does it get easier as you go on in your writing?" He says, "No, the challenges are deeper, stronger, harder because your horizon keeps getting further and further away. You've never realized it." If you realized what you're after, you would stop.

People who are in the arts, as long as they have the ability, physical and mental, they keep working. They don't have a retirement age. You never hear of a poet or writer or people like that retiring really. There's something about what they do that is the food, the blood in their life. It keeps resurging and freshening and being oxygenated so that they are active and fresh and alive to it.

Teffeny: Okay. Number 30; children are given an introduction to spirituals in Let It Shine, Three Favorite Spirituals. You once noted them when you asked children when you asked children what a spiritual is. They often say they do not know, yet when you ask them to sing a particular song, they know it without understanding that it is a spiritual.
Given the history of the spiritual, it seems important for all children to be introduced to spirituals in the context of the history of slavery. How have you worked to do this? In your opinion, how might authors of children’s books work to introduce both the fairest and darkest aspects of our collective history with attention to the potential for weathering the storms and experiencing triumph?

Ashley: There is nothing more exciting than working with the spirituals. I have done six books with the spirituals, in different ways of presenting them. I’ve used block prints, I’ve used collage, I’ve used watercolor and Tempera paintings. I’ve tried in those ways to get those books of it out, to tell something of where they come from, that they are a gift of black American slaves.

Now, it’s important to recognize what our history is. If we have not recognized all the oppression that black people have lived through, then we are not recognizing our day. You cannot go further if you do not recognize the past. There is an image in African culture called Sankofa, of the bird with his beak turned backwards. Remembering the past so you can live in the present and go forth to the future. You must always recognize your steps. You cannot go on without recognizing the oppression of slavery, of what that meant to black peoples in the United States and in other parts of the world, what slavery has done. If you recognize it, then you are more open to affirming and exploring ways in which peoples can work together and grow as humans.
Now, in this history of the songs, our people do not know it. When I travel to other countries, they always know the history of “This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine; When the Saints go marching in; He’s got the whole world in his hands,” they sing them and they know where they come from. Unfortunately, in the United States, the main thing is the songs are loved. They really love the songs and sing them, but it would be really exciting to know where they come from because then you would say to yourself, “How can I have a racist attitude? How can I put down the contributions of a people, when they’ve given us this gift of such tremendous feeling and meaning?” Those songs celebrate the richness and the happiness and the desire of the people. When the Saints go marching, I want to be in that number. When the Saints, those who are blessed, will be going in. When they sing, “Sometimes, I feel like a motherless child,” who in the world, anywhere, has not felt that? Anywhere I go in the world, people can hear that song, they’ll break down in tears as the singer sings it. They may not know the words, but there’s something in the mood, the feeling that those artists have brought to those songs that make them identify directly with themselves. Or, “By and by, I’m going to lay down this heavy load,” who at some time haven’t felt they are carrying so very much, if only they could lay it down? Black slaves under oppression experiencing these have sung and found a way of expressing that. We identify with that. When they have the rich, “This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine. Light of mine, going to let it shine. No matter what, hide it under a bushel, no, I’m going to let it shine. Don’t let Satan blow it out, I’m going to let it shine. Everywhere I go, I’m going to let it shine.” You sing exciting, open. Yes, you’re being oppressed, you’re being prevented from doing, but you’re singing and countering that.

When Israel was an Egypt land, “Let my people go,” [inaudible 01:10:15] you’re singing a Bible song, but you’re singing of your own desire. When you say that story of the Israelites being freed from the
Pharaoh, it's the same way when we're singing those songs, we're identifying with our own history and now we can use expressively to get the message across. When you sing a song like those, "Did my Lord deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel? Well, didn't my Lord deliver Daniel? And why not every man?" Now you're singing for your own freedom. It's a Bible story, you can get away with it. At the end of the Civil War when they sang, "Oh, Freedom, oh, Freedom, oh, Freedom over me. And before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave, I'd go home to my Lord," They're singing of their desire for freedom, could they sing that under slavery? No. It was only during the Civil War. Those indicate the very last of the thousands of those songs created, songs like, "Oh, Freedom," or, "No more auction block for me. No more, no more, no more auction block for me. Many thousand gone." That could not be openly sung before, but in the Civil War time, they were expressed.

The end of the Civil War marks the end of the spirituals. After that, no more spirituals. Since then, there have been song created in the form of spirituals and they are sung and love, and sometimes even identified as spirituals, but in those cases, we know the composer of the words and the music. Of the spirituals of that tremendous body of thousands of songs, we have lost the individual who created, "One more river to cross," and, "Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?" We do not know the individual creators of those thousands of spirituals, we only know it comes from the genius and the musical genius of black American slaves and that's what identified them. That is, to me, that's at the heart of everything that I do. That gift that makes me able to be able to relate in a very deep way to anything that's happening and get through it and survive it, either in great joy or in the oppressive way of having something to have within me to carry me through, and that's been vital.
Teffeny: Okay, thank you.

Ashley: Now, the next one is a blank. What do you say to a blank? You say, "Blankety, blank, blank," and you say let's have a little... (audio ends abruptly)

[End of Audio 1:13:00]