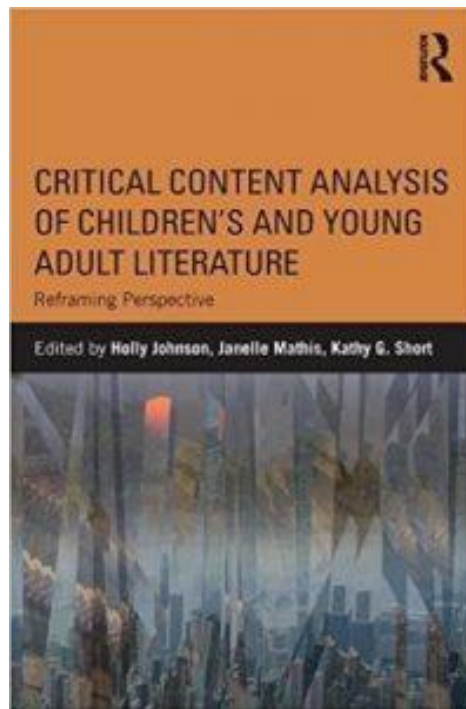


**Review of *Critical content analysis of children's and young adult literature: Reframing perspective***

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I found *Critical Content Analysis of Children's and Young Adult Literature* (2017) to be a fresh and complex volume, valuable for scholars and literacy educators alike. The editors rigorously explore the potential of critical content analysis as a research methodology when analyzing and evaluating children and adolescent's literary texts. The diverse articles examine how such texts, particularly global and multicultural literatures, can be approached and analyzed using critical stances. Thus, one of their primary goals, "to make visible the literature of the often underrepresented that has largely gone unexamined" (p. viii), is achieved with each chapter. The book is organized into 13 chapters with 11 utilizing different critical lenses to frame the individual research, and two 'bookend' sections which outline critical content analysis and directly connect the methodology to the classroom.

Short, Johnson, and Mathis begin with an acknowledgement that this book emerges from a need to better define critical content analysis as a methodology. Indeed, as White and Marsh (2006) assert, "multiple, nuanced definitions of content analysis exist that reflect its historical development" (p. 23). As such, the editors chronicle their thorough approach by consulting literary critics, reading critical content analyses by educators who similarly use critical theory lenses, reviewing the history of this approach in the field of communications, and sponsoring study groups for investigation. They are similarly detailed in their focus on the 'critical,' first outlining their political stance and clarifying that when researchers use critical content analysis, a specific critical lens is used for developing questions, choosing texts, and analyzing stories (p. 5). Ultimately, they understand critical content analysis as different from content analysis because it requires "prioritizing a lens as the frame of the study, not just as part of interpreting the findings or citing scholarship in a literature review" (p. 5), and therefore, "the thread that runs through all of [their] work is the willingness to take a critical stance as a

researcher" (p. 14). As such, overall, four thematic 'threads' that are chiefly apparent are: self-awareness coupled with reflexivity, a willingness to be transparent and vulnerable, vigilant maintenance of a critical focus, and a consistent commitment to speaking back to the world of teaching beyond the scholarly realm.

### **Self-awareness and Reflexivity**

One of the elements of this collection that is immediately apparent and consistent across contributors is a clear demonstration of self-awareness coupled with relentless reflexivity. In many respects, the editors set the tone in the opening chapter when they reveal the strategy of maintaining a journal during second readings of texts as a way to self-supervise and understand how researcher knowledge is created. Next, in their discussion of the importance of prioritizing theory, they admit their tendency to quickly locate their work in theory and then return to it for the final discussion, but "not necessarily thinking about the data *with* that theory as we analyze" (p. 6). They endeavor to correct this in the book, ensuring that contributors do so as well. An excellent example of such exercised self-awareness and reflexivity among the contributing scholars is Wilson's piece (chapter seven) on the construction of adolescent sexuality in YA fiction. She reveals that as a middle-aged woman rereading YA classic Judy Blume's *Forever* (1975), she is forced to reconsider her previous understanding of the protagonist as a liberated woman. Rather, she now understands the character as someone who must remain vigilant to deflect and manage her partner's sexual advances. Thus, while Wilson does confess her nostalgia for *Forever*, she admits that it is ultimately another example of a female character "succumbing to the needs of a boy" (p. 163). Her admission of her personal connection to the text as it relates to her process of critical content analysis embodies the editors' attitudes about using the methodology to personally experience and respond

to the entirety of a text before beginning to analyze the parts (p. 8).

### **Transparency and vulnerability**

The next thematic ‘thread’ emerges as several of the authors endeavor to be transparent and personally vulnerable as they reveal their process in applying critical content analysis. Transparency is clearly a goal of this project as every decision is qualified as much as possible; for example, to return to the foreword, the editors outline: “At a practical level, we developed a shared understanding of the processes that we engage in as researchers in using this methodology, recognizing its flexibility by a researcher within a particular context” (p. 6). As well, they create space for vulnerability at the beginning, admitting: “Readers will notice that some aspect of the process described in this chapter was not followed or was greatly adapted in every study reported in this book. We see this variation as a strength of critical content analysis” (13). Here, the authors celebrate inconsistencies and choose to see them as a strength and as opening spaces for exploratory possibilities rather than being concerned with a fixed structure. Yenika-Kanu, who focuses on the possibilities of emancipatory writing in chapter eight, immediately reveals that because she is a woman of African heritage, she is “sensitive” (p. 106) to negative portrayals of African children (p. 106). Yenika-Kanu’s vulnerability in this moment is refreshing, and like her, many of the contributing authors are admirably willing to be somewhat raw in their writing. The book thus reflects a collective endeavoring to speak authentically about scholarship.

One celebrated inconsistency lies in the engaging literary quality of Dimmett’s writing in chapter twelve, which illuminates the “possibilities” that the editors made room for in their exploratory work. Unlike several other authors, Dimmett does not explain the tenets for the theories she engaged with;

rather, she slips into a narrative tone in her discussion of theoretical frameworks. In one moment, while discussing Foucault’s work with the episteme in *The Order of Things* (1971), she writes, “Like handling a snake during a church service, applying poststructuralism is an act of faith that one’s most cherished and fundamental beliefs are extricated from the power relations that framed those beliefs. The snake always bites” (p. 172). Next, she describes that reading poststructuralist theory “is like being slapped, hard, in the face, and as the burning intensifies, all you can remember is the sharp sound of the slap” (p. 172). Certainly, for many who have similarly explored this theory, her simile will likely resonate with your experience, as it did mine.

### **Maintenance of a critical focus**

While exercising self-awareness, reflexivity, vulnerability, and transparency, the authors do not lose sight of their critical focus. Throughout the book are many explicit calls to action; for instance, the call to include diverse literature in school undergirds the volume. Mathis is one such scholar who voices this, advocating that books such as *Sweethearts of Rhythm* (2009), which incorporates elements of poetry, visual art, and music, are “important for readers to access a comprehensive perspective of history that invites them to understand history’s intrigue and role in contemporary lives” (p. 134). Further, many authors pose critical questions regarding how we explore complex themes in books. For instance, in chapter twelve, Dimmett investigates *Serafina’s Promise* (2013), a novel about a young Haitian girl, and critically questions the discourse of ambition and what it means to ‘emerge’ in developing countries; she asks whether this emergence is solitary, collective, and how these ideas might be written into texts (p. 178).

The contributors are often unflinching in their assertions about how the critical literacy classroom experiences can be enhanced. They effectively interrogate normative understandings, especially how Western critics sometimes struggle with texts that portray minorities. One of the scholars that best embodies resistance against such conditioning is Martinez-Roldan, who, in chapter five, examines the commodification of literature and the negative consequences of this process, especially on underrepresented groups. She particularly analyzes Judy Schnachner's *Skippyjon Jones* series and the portrayal of Mexicans in these texts, interrogating the use of racist stereotypical images including a Chihuahua dog to represent Mexican characters despite controversy and evidence by scholars that such imagery fosters racist stereotyping (p. 70).

### **Commitment to the teaching world**

Another admirable and useful quality of this collection is its consistent commitment to speaking back to the world of teaching as well as the scholarly realm, solidifying this book as a useful resource for educators as well as researchers. For example, in chapter ten, Short's critical examination of service learning in schools outlines the importance of children developing a critical consciousness by questioning how they might best act as critical social activists- to "not just serve lunch in a soup kitchen" but to also "analyze the reasons for poverty in the community" (p. 148). She suggests that educators make service learning meaningful by designing longer units of inquiry with multiple texts sources so that children might build deeper understandings (p. 150). Next, reflecting back on chapter five, Martinez-Roldan highlights how "white teachers who represent most of the teaching force in the United States" are "often unaware of the negative effects of Mock Spanish" (p. 72), and provides much-needed food for thought for white educators in particular. In chapter six, Brooks similarly connects her findings to pedagogical implications. She outlines best

practices for teaching *The Land* (2001) and makes suggestions for incorporating complementary texts, naming several titles that might work well. Indeed, the authors build a library of text suggestions, staying true to their commitment to highlight diverse literature. This collaborative 'library building' consists of (1) succinct summaries of recommended books, (2) insightful analysis, and (3) multiple pedagogical entry points. For instance, Short calls for educators to examine "the demonstrations offered by the books we share with children to determine whether they support children's development of agency and voice or provide further evidence of adult domination" (p. 138). She then compiles a list of twenty-nine picture books, from seventeen different countries, about children making social change, including *The caged birds of Phnom Penh* (2001), *The carpet boy's gift* (2003), and *Yasmin's hammer* (2010), which emerge from Cambodia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, respectively (p. 153). Next, in addition to highlighting several significant texts themselves, Johnson and Gasiewicz point to other scholars who have similarly compiled helpful book lists, including "Elizabeth Clifford and Maya Kalyanpur (2011) [who] examined 20 young adult novels presenting immigrants' experiences, finding that a "hybrid" reality of combining a home culture and the new American culture" (p. 30). The examination and celebration of so many books throughout this volume evidences a strong commitment to teaching and supporting educators.

### **Final thoughts**

One slight issue with the book lies in the breadth of approaches that are explored. Although such diversity might seem compelling, the 'net' of approaches has perhaps been cast too widely. As such, the editors' struggles with defining critical content analysis as a methodology might lie in how differently the authors take up this methodology. As well, while each chapter certainly investigates texts

that represent often-underrepresented voices found in diverse literature, the themes that structure future editions could be more tightly aligned. It might also be advantageous to separate the critical content analysis research on children's and adolescent texts. For example, although this collection certainly contains excellent examples for both age ranges, an elementary teacher or early childhood literacy researcher might only find the chapters focused on the age-appropriate texts useful for their work. For myself, as a former high school teacher and current researcher of adolescent literacy, I was more interested in the chapters on young adult literature. Thus, perhaps with future editions, the volume might be split so as to maintain a more specialized focus.

Ultimately, however, this book examines a constellation of issues and serves as an exceptional resource for both researchers and educators. Each chapter is compelling in its own right, and the exploratory tone of the whole volume makes the work approachable and 'user friendly.' A genuine love of literature and commitment to young people's

literacy rings true throughout the book, and it is filled with excellent ideas and insights for scholars and practitioners to take up in their own contexts. Thus, it is an excellent read for those interested in literature and education because it opens up an important dialogue about what critical content analysis as a methodology might offer the field of literacy education. Certainly, as I read, I wished that I had this book during my teaching career because during several moments, I found myself slipping back into my former creative and generative headspace of lesson planning. Although I no longer have a classroom, this text has already greatly informed my thinking and is a resource I continue to draw from for my own scholarship; particularly, Wilson's piece in chapter eleven deepened my knowledge about depictions of sexuality in young adult literature, which greatly contributes to my explorations of sexual assault literature in adolescent literacy learning. Overall, this is an excellent resource for a spectrum of readers- literacy teachers of all levels, including pre-service educators, school administration, librarians, scholars, graduate students, and lovers of literature.

### References

White, M. & Marsh, E. (2006). Content analysis: A flexible methodology. *Library Trends*, 55(1), 22-45.