



Emerging Voices

Using Ambiguity to Resist Stereotype in the 1930s: Erick Berry’s *Penny-Whistle* and *One String Fiddle*

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The 1930s were a difficult time economically for many groups suffering during the Great Depression in the United States, but this decade was especially trying for the African American population and the marginalized people of the Appalachian region. While both cultures were highlighted in the Work Progress Administration’s Federal Writers’ Project (1935-1942), a federally sponsored program for writers who collected oral histories, each group also suffered under the dominant culture’s perceptions, which viewed each culture as isolated, uneducated, and at the bottom rungs of the social hierarchy.

Despite the predominant view, these populations were featured in the works of American author Erick Berry. In 1930, Berry wrote about a black boy named Penny-Whistle in her picture book *Penny-Whistle* and then in 1939, Berry published the chapter book *One-String Fiddle* about Irby, an Appalachian boy. There is no other author in that decade who published books with African characters and Appalachian characters. The uniqueness of the choice of characters for an author, who herself was Caucasian, is remarkable and raises a series of questions. Why would Erick Berry, a New York socialite and explorer, choose characters who were African (Penny-Whistle) and Appalachian (Irby)? Why would Berry use the same basic plot for two books with cultural backgrounds that were not her own? This essay will examine the social constructs of the time period, and the otherness of Berry’s characters and their sub-communities to unearth the subversion of social norms of the dominant society through Berry’s texts. I argue that Berry worked against the dominant ideology of the 1930s as an insider of the majority to offer a subversive way to fight against racism and stereotypes through ambiguity in these two texts. While this might seem to be a paradox, fighting racist ideology through ambiguity, Berry used her texts to create space for resistant readings while still socializing her readers into an American political context.

The Other and American Children’s Literature in the 1930s

The theoretical concept of “the other” takes many different forms and ideas, and is broadly taken up through numerous fields of study. In this essay, the primary approaches concerning the other are viewed through the theories of Michel Foucault and Edward Said. Foucault claimed that “the other is created through a process of social construction in which the other takes its form through the normalization of behaviors and practices that are desirable and thereby looked upon as unremarkable” (Nunn 692). Foucault’s influence is seen in Said’s landmark book, *Orientalism* (1978). Said uses Foucault’s notions of power and knowledge in the context of the systems of power. Said writes:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Said 3)¹

Perry Nodelman (1982) applies the work of Said to the field of children’s literature and argues that children’s literature underscores the ways in which adults hold power over children, by highlighting sixteen key concepts in Said’s discussion that cross over into the ways in which adults make the child

¹ After the publication of *Orientalism*, Said changed his views on Foucault, only seemingly to change them back again. See Karlis Racevskis’ article “Edward Said and Michel Foucault: Affinities and Dissonances” *Research in African Literatures*, 36.3. Edward Said, Africa, and Cultural Criticism (Autumn, 2005), 83-97.



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“other.” Nodelman parallels the child to Said’s concept of the Orient. The idea of the child as a colonized state is furthered by Kenneth B. Nunn (2001-2002), in “Child as Other: Race and Differential Treatment in the Juvenile Justice System” when he notes that “In political terms, ...the other [exists] on the margins of society, excluded from positions of power, and placed in a subordinate position” (693). The child as other is marginalized, disempowered, and must somehow, usually by growing up, become a part of a society that, at least in their childhood state, does not recognize them as active contributing members.

Children’s literature during the 1930s reflected this othering by attempting to socialize children into a society that voiced their belief in a diminished value of African/African American culture and an Appalachian culture through the promotion of stereotypes in literature produced for children. African/African American children’s literature fared some what better during this time since the Harlem Renaissance supported African American authors financially, and encouraged more authentic representations of African and African American characters. Literature published for children with Appalachian characters had less of a presence. Jennifer S. Smith’s study, “Mining the Mountain of Appalachian children’s literature: Defining a multicultural literature” (2001), notes that during the time between the World Wars (1918-1942), only eight books were written for children concerning Appalachia in the United States. In general for both minority groups, children’s literature included representations that were often negative and constructed the African American character² or the Appalachian character as other. And yet, Erick Berry chose characters from these two groups as her protagonists; the protagonists from the two texts under consideration are doubly othered; the characters are both minorities through ethnicity and class, and both are child characters. Berry worked subversively through these two publications, demonstrating her personal experiences and ideologies, by creating discord between text and illustration to generate space for readers to alter common assumptions about African, and therefore African American, and Appalachian communities.

The insider: Erick Berry

There is a very American context to consider when understanding the ways in which Erick Berry is working to destabilize dominate prejudices through the two texts under discussion. Her experiences are a part of that work. Most of the biographical information about Berry comes from newspaper articles gathered and collected in scrapbooks by Berry herself. She invented herself beginning with her name; Erick Berry was Evangel Allena Champlin (1892-1974). The first half of her pseudonym paid homage to the artist Eric Pape, who she studied under at the Eric Pape School in Boston at the age of 16. After attending the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Champlin married Carroll Thayer Berry in 1917 and, although very little is known about her first husband, her married name was the name she published under her entire life. In Berry’s scrapbooks, the record of her life begins with some of her early work but quickly moves on to the newspaper clipping of her second marriage in 1926 and her career thereafter.

She began her career in advertising but in 1924, Berry journeyed to Nigeria to paint portraits of the native population. According to New York society in the mid to late 1920s, Berry’s first trip was remarkable since she went to West Africa as a single, unaccompanied woman, at a time and to a place where hardly any white men had ventured. The *New York Evening Post* in December of 1928 noted that, “No American artist has ever before painted these natives. Only two European artists have penetrated West Africa to portray the Mohammedan Haussas and the aboriginal tribes who inhabit these parts.” (Berry Scrapbook page 22). In the numerous articles Berry wrote for newspapers and travel magazines, she always wrote of the Africans she met in the highest regard. Her paintings supported a positive, progressive view of Africans, a view that would not have necessarily been shared by her fellow socialites. A reporter for the *New York Telegram* reviewed Berry’s thirty paintings that were on show in New York City at the Milch Galleries. The reporter notes, “These portraits furnish an extremely interesting interpretation of the *blacks as human beings*, intelligent, humorous, sensitive” (Berry Scrapbook 20, emphases mine). Berry’s paintings reveal a non-racialized observation of the African subject.

In 1930, Berry’s work shifted from painting to writing and illustrating for children. She abandoned her realistic style of painting used for the African portraits and engaged a more cartoonish style of illustration for her first book, *Penny-Whistle*. While not overtly radical, nevertheless, her illustrations are where she creates space for alternative readings.

² See Michelle Martin’s comprehensive study of African American children’s literature, *Brown Gold: Milestones of African American Children’s Picture Books, 1845-2002* (2004) and Kate Capshaw Smith’s *Children’s Literature in the Harlem Renaissance* (2006).



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Berry’s progressive paintings of Africans were acceptable to an upper class, adult society. It is highly doubtful that such progressive attitudes would have been acceptable in books intended for child readers given the prejudice ideas of the time. Many children’s books constructed African Americans as minstrel characters with large white eyes and big red lips. Appalachian characters were invisible, lacking any sort of representation, positive or negative. Through *Penny-Whistle* and *Irby*, we can witness Berry’s desire to change those depictions, all the while understanding that this change would only happen is subversively expressed.

Her books reveal her life experiences. In *Penny-Whistle*, her African adventure is seen. The dedication of *One-String Fiddle* provides evidence to suggest that Berry was not a stranger to the Appalachian region; “The little brown house in Tennessee” would suggest that Berry also had adventures in an Appalachian region. The two books follow the same plot: a young boy with musical skill is instructed by an adult member of their community to go out and listen to the sounds around them in order to compose their own individual song that is then deemed acceptable to the adult society, thereby socializing the child into the adult community. Both books can be seen as problematic due to the ambiguity in which the text and illustrations can be interpreted, as seen in this essay. But such ambiguity leaves space for readings that undermine dominant racial and class stereotyping through alternative readings. The discontinuity of meaning between text and illustration suggests that Berry is claiming room for audiences to rethink the espoused societal views of these two types of childhoods and cultures.

African American and Appalachian Similarities

In a close reading of the two texts that Berry published, it is clear that Berry is not confusing or muddling together her African character and her Appalachian character; *Penny-Whistle* from *Penny-Whistle* and *Irby* from *One-String Fiddle* are very different from one another. Berry demonstrates the cultural differences of both her characters and further defines how they are different from the dominant majority. The two cultures do share a number of aspects, which Berry invokes in her texts. Besides the similar stereotype placed on African Americans and Appalachians by society in the 1930s in terms of race and class, locale and music were important cultural element shared by these communities.

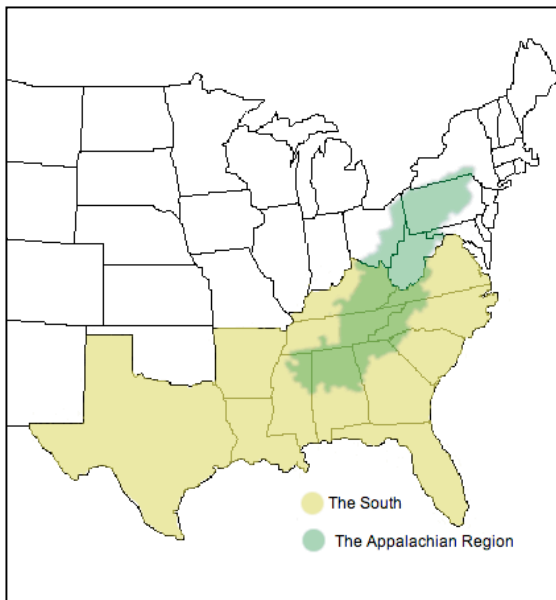


Fig. 1. The overlap of “The South” with the Appalachian region.

Although often considered as different in terms of place, geographically the Appalachian region and “The South”³ overlap (see fig. 1). Appalachia, by definition of the US government, consists of areas that are only partially within states’ borders. State boundaries determine the South, where a large majority of blacks lived in 1930. Of the seventeen states the US government defines as the South, nine states (53%) have counties or cities within their borders that are label as Appalachian. Only 31% of the Appalachian sections of four states (New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Maryland) lie outside the geographical region known as the South. Yet it is difficult to set boundary lines on where a culture begins and ends. Kathryn Trauth Taylor (2011) argues,

“One challenge of conjuring Appalachian identity lies in the façade of the mountains, which attempt to demarcate the physical separation of Appalachia from the rest of the United States. Yet despite this material border, a precise definition of ‘where Appalachia begins and ends geographically’ (Higgs xi) has long been debated....What is clear is that the Appalachian region, as defined or undefined as it is, shares space with the area of the South.”

³ “The South” is generally referred to as the southeastern and the central-eastern United States, who had broken away from the United States during the American Civil War (1861-1865). The area would include the states of South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee and North Carolina.



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That sharing of geographical space leads to an association between cultural groups. Common perception identifies Appalachian as white; yet there were numerous ethnicities living in the same area. An example of this is seen through recent DNA research, which has unearthed African roots in a large Appalachian family, whose oral tradition claimed their ancestry stemmed from either Portuguese explorers, Turkish slaves, or Gypsies. This family group “known derisively as the Melungeons” have undergone DNA testing and in 2012 were informed that “genetic evidence shows that the families historically called Melungeons are the offspring of sub-Saharan African men and white women of northern or central European origin” (Loller). Many in the family were shocked, including one member who had his DNA tested three times to make sure the results were the same. The “whiteness” myth of the Appalachians also “obfuscates the presence of Hispanics and other diverse ethnicities in the region” (Campbell 2). Space in this article does not allow for detailed explorations of the intertwining, and the segregation, of the peoples in this area but the peoples of Appalachian are learning that their “pure” whiteness is not what they thought it was and that the different ethnicities living in the same region are mixed more than expected.

Today, there is an increase of acknowledgement about others who lived in Appalachian; terms such as “Affrilachia” are now used and places, such as the Appalachian African-American Cultural Center highlight the history of “a minority within that minority” (Hoffman). John Shelton Reed argues in *One South: An Ethnic Approach to Regional Culture* (1982), that members of a regional community share more than geographic space; “they share a common identity, a common history that binds them together as a people” (Eller 27). So while the whiteness of Appalachian is still part of the stereotype, it is clear that this idea is shifting. But in Erick Berry’s 1930s, that shift had not yet started, making it even more interesting that Berry writes about these two groups. There is however something else that is highlighted in each community, making it logical for Berry to use the same plot to write about two different yet similar cultures: music.

The importance of music is a commonly shared element in both African American culture and Appalachian culture. Both communities use music to tell their unique histories and folk stories. Berry’s use of music as a means of socializing her characters into their societies and also assists her audiences in understanding the wealth of culture in these communities, creating a space for readers to reject underlying stereotypes of African Americans and Appalachians. Both cultures have a rich musical history; it is also a history that intertwines, especially in the Appalachian context. The very instruments key to most American styles of music come from these two cultures. Chris Durman, in his article “African American Old-time String Band Music” (2008), explains:

Scots-Irish settlers in the Upland South brought the violin—more commonly called the fiddle in folk music—and many traditional fiddle tunes with them as they immigrated to the United States. African Americans brought an instrument modern players would recognize as the gourd banjo, along with their playing techniques, tunes, songs, and a variety of tuning methods. (797)

A great number of books have been published on this topic so it presents a challenge to contextualize both histories here. In his book *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (1999), Jon Cruz marks Frederick Douglass’s autobiography as a starting point in the cultural interest in African American music. Douglass called for people, meaning white society, to listen to the spiritual songs sung by those in slavery and that through those songs, one could hear the sorrows of slavery. Abolitionists listened to Douglass’s appeal. Cruz argues,

Between the time of Douglass’s request and the early-twentieth century, black music had not only been discovered; it had been passed under a series of major interpretive lenses. During the Civil War the “Negro spiritual” emerged as a clearly recognizable cultural form; it was then grasped as a distinct, observable, and knowable element of black culture. Indeed, white moral and cultural entrepreneurs found it their *preferred* cultural expression by blacks. (Author’s emphasis 4)

White culture began to record and write down the “songs of sorrow” and in doing so, first began to move African American songs and stories from an oral tradition to a written tradition. Cruz argues that this listening that Douglass desired becomes the start of the study of American folklore and early cultural sociology.

African American music had two distinct aspects: one in which the sorrows of their particular history could be heard; and another in which the appropriation of the first was served to mock those particular sorrows. The appropriation of black spirituals by white culture was problematic. Were slaves who were forced to



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sing, whether for their masters or for those collecting their songs, the producers of their own music? After asking this question, Cruz offers this insight:

It is precisely this kind of cultural complexity that contributed to black music's function as a stage upon which other nonmusic – social, political, and cultural- struggles could be enacted. The songs of blacks, particularly the spirituals, were appropriated by people who did not produce them...yet the appropriators' relationship to the music had enormous consequences. They helped shape the cultural ground upon which black music was heard and produced. (11)

One of these appropriations, which we see in Berry's illustrations in *Penny-Whistle*, was the minstrel. Minstrels were travelling shows in which actors, both white and black, would darken their skin, usually using burnt cork, to take on the appearance of an African American. This distinct style of minstrels began in the 1840s and continued until the 1960s. Frank Dumont was a minstrel performer, as well as being a writer, producer, and theater owner in Philadelphia. In 1899, he wrote *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide*, which gave instructions on the proper application of blackface, as well as songs and jokes all based on stereotypical black characters. The library guide for his papers and extensive scrapbooks held by The Historical Society of Pennsylvania explains minstrelsy:

Songs and dances often caricatured slave culture, and performers sang and spoke with exaggerated southern "slave" dialects. Minstrels usually depicted the stereotypical "happy ducky," completely satisfied with his subservient role and too foolish to deserve better. Minstrelsy ...perpetuated the notion that blacks were lazy, thieving, simple-minded tricksters. Tunes ...portraying slaves "still longing for the old plantation," were typical of the minstrel programs. (Frank Dumont Minstrelsy Scrapbook Collection 3054)

The influence of the minstrel is apparent through illustration in many of the children's books published in the 1920s and 1930s. Characters are presented in the image of the minstrel performer, dark skin in contrast with wide white eyes and large red lips. Such depictions carried the cultural stain of the minstrel performances, layering racial stereotyping in such illustrations.

The history of music in the Appalachian Mountains in the United States has a later, yet similarly appropriated history. Like African American music, the culture of the performer was imbedded in the music itself. Stereotypical representations of the people of the region impacted the reception of the music from the area isolating the "hillbilly" music from its musical influences of blues and jazz, African American styles of music. In *A Handbook to Appalachia* (2010), authors Ted Olson and Ajay Kalra argue that Appalachian music was hailed for its differences from mainstream American music. Its separateness made it "authentic 'folk'" for those who enjoyed it or "rustic 'hillbilly'" for those that didn't (163). This separation from American mainstream music and from African American styles of music highlighted Appalachian music as different, paradoxically making it American and un-American at the same time.

Olson and Kalra point out that with the development of radio in the 1920s, commercial record companies began to search for new musical sounds and new markets to capture. Rural white southern music was "discovered" and record companies were intrigued by the apparent oldness of the Appalachian styles of music. Olson and Kalra note, "Academics, folklorists, and their audiences have long been enamored of the "authentic folk" image of Appalachian music and have done much to promote it" (165). The mid 1920s saw a rise in recordings of "Hillbilly" groups, including string bands. Erick Berry echoes this popularity, as well as mentioning the radio, in her second book under consideration, *One-String Fiddle*.

Like African American music, Appalachian music has been seen in both positive and negative ways. While being viewed as authentic, it is laden with hillbilly or redneck stereotypes. The music is used to praise the independence and uniqueness of the region yet it can also be used to further stereotype assumptions about the region. What is clear is that music is a cultural element for both African Americans and those who settled in the Appalachian area of the Eastern United States. Understanding the positioning of these two groups in larger mainstream society, and their rise in profile due to the popularity of their music when Berry was writing in the 1930s, makes it surprising that Erick Berry was the only author who decided to use characters in stories from these two cultures, presenting the characters connection with music as the way for them to be socialized in their particular cultures and societies.

Text and Illustrations

Understanding Erick Berry's personal experiences and the shared aspects of the African American and



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Appalachian cultures underpins the readings of *Penny-Whistle* and *One-String Fiddle*. As previously noted, these books contain similar plots and use the development of song as a major plot device. The simplicity of *Penny-Whistle* and *One-String Fiddle* is deceptive. *Penny-Whistle* was Erick Berry’s first picture book for children. Penny-Whistle, the protagonist of the text, has adventures in the jungle and creates his tune from what he hears. His new song is so good, the animals are jealous and the story ends with his father complementing him on his ability to play the penny-whistle. Irby is the star in *One-String Fiddle*. A man called Old Fiddler tells him about a fiddle competition in his town. Old Fiddler thinks Irby can get third place and a prize of 50 cents if, and only if, Irby can come up with “an ‘ringle tune.” Irby listens to the sounds of nature as well as the sounds of the town and constructs such a wonderful tune that causes the “folk” to start dancing when they hear it. He ends up with a new fiddle and 63 cents, which is enough for him to buy his dog a collar.

The music in both of these texts reflects the child protagonist being socialized into his society. But in order to see the importance of how Berry achieves music as an ideological presence, we first must consider an analysis of the text and illustrations as an accompaniment to the music.

Penny-Whistle

The text of *Penny-Whistle* is short and concise. Its form is a traditional picture book consisting of 36 pages with limited text and an illustration on almost every page. Berry’s text is seemingly innocent of overt cultural messages. The didactic role of the text is to educate the reader about the jungle and the animals found there through an adventure story. The inside cover flap summarizes the plot of the story describing it as “a nonsense tale with many pictures” and continues explaining that the book is:

All about a little black boy, Penny-Whistle. How he put on his Pappy’s big, shiny, black, high silk hat, and went out into the jungle to find a tune. Where did he find the new notes? Everyone helped him: Big Bill, Mary the Parrot, Cricket, Little-yalla-bird. But the elephant gave him a scare. How funny he looked sailing on the river in his big black hat! (Berry)

Yet this tale of adventure and nonsense allows the white majority to read it in a ‘safe’ way, considering the white reader views of a black male character that follow the expectations of the time. While the minstrel influence appears in both text and illustration, Berry offers a subversive message through these elements. Berry writes:

Mammy wore a string of beads, red beads, and a most beautiful smile.
Pappy wore a great big shiny black high silk hat, and sometimes he carried a cane.
Penny-Whistle wore a wide, wide smile too. Sometimes he had on a string of red beads and sometimes he left them off, when the day was extra special hot. (n.pag.)

The reference to Mammy and Penny-Whistle’s smile is reminiscent of the actors from the minstrels in black face with wide, white smiles with bright red lips. Textually identifying Penny-Whistle and his family as minstrel characters causes a knowing audience to anticipate that Penny-Whistle will follow a traditional, stereotypical path. Berry also describes Mammy and Pappy, as well as Penny-Whistle, by their unique and strangely misplaced possessions. Mammy wears red beads - a sign of femininity in both color and shape. Pappy has a silk hat and cane - signs of phallic masculinity. Both Mammy’s flapper-like beads and Pappy’s silk hat and cane indicate wealth and social status. However, such possessions are seemingly misplaced in the context of the setting. Berry is playing a game by seemingly matching the expectations of a dominant reader, schooled in how the ways of race in America work, yet disrupting those expectations in order to re-educate the reader. It is clear that the possessions have no practical purpose, as do neither Mammy nor Pappy in the story. Yet Mammy and Pappy are both illustrated with their possessions - Mammy with her beads and smile and Pappy with his hat, cane, and a smile as well. The sole extent of their character development is that they have these material possessions. They are what they own. But what they own is unusual according to the expectations of the reader, making a space through this ambiguity. There is no explanation. Berry refuses to provide an answer. She engages the reader through her text to make them ask questions, creating a space for different ways of answering.

This identity through possessions extends to the main character; Penny-Whistle is named after something he owns, the penny-whistle which his father bought at the market. His identity is defined by his possession, and his possession therefore becomes his identity, just as his parents’ possessions define them. And this is where Berry’s brilliance in her use of music offers the ultimate rewriting of racial



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stereotype. In this historical context of the 1920s and 1930s, black Americans were expected to sing and dance to the tunes from either spirituals or work songs from the field. Penny-Whistle sings neither. When Pappy threatens to break Penny-Whistle’s penny-whistle because Penny-Whistle only plays one note, Pappy is attempting to shape Penny-Whistle’s personality by socializing him - to break him so that his behavior fits with the society into which he is growing. Pappy’s position of power comes from his role as adult. Penny-Whistle is helpless in his child-ness. In order to survive Pappy’s threat of extermination – by being forcibly broken - Penny-Whistle must go out into the world of the jungle to find other ways to perform. The boy Penny-Whistle is literally a performance instrument, and he learns to play what the world wants him to play - multiple notes. Textually, Berry offers a coming of age story. Yet Penny-Whistle’s tune comes from mimicking and then modifying the notes of those he meets in the jungle. While he learns from the world around him, he is at the same time performing. He is able to survive in his world by learning to cope with it and in it. Berry gives him agency to perform however he chooses. He picks the notes. He is the instrument. The combination of Penny-Whistle playing his own arrangement and doing so with his selfhood offers a construction of the black child which resists the racial stereotyping present at the time of the book’s publication.

Berry’s illustrations offer what Jean-Marie Floch and Felix Thurlemann call the “presence of a double layer of signification.” Floch and Thurlemann describe the levels of meaning as being “iconic” and “plastic” (cited in Bouissac 2012). The iconic level is the basic level in which the viewer recognizes the object whereas the plastic layer serves to convey something abstract. This double layer of signification clearly appears in *Penny-Whistle*; the iconic and plastic levels offer the viewer two different ways of reading and constructing black childhood. The iconic level offers easily read and understood cultural signifiers, understanding that those signifiers depicted African American culture in ways acceptable to the white majority culture in 1930, i.e. the minstrel style of illustration. In other words, this iconic level satisfied the dominant majority, offering identities that the white segment of the population accepted as “normal.” Penny-Whistle does not threaten the status quo because he is depicted as a minstrel performer.

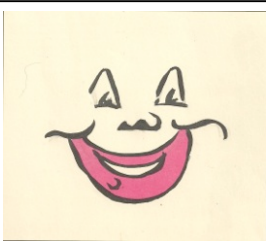


Fig. 2 The first illustration of Penny-Whistle’s face

Berry’s illustrations are far different than the carefully detailed watercolor paintings she created in Africa. Penny-Whistle is illustrated in a cartoonish style. The first illustration of Penny-Whistle (see fig. 2) and his parents (see fig. 3) is only the eyes, nose and smile of the characters – minstrel depictions with the

baggage that come with such illustration. However, they are without body. Their blackness is not represented on the page. This is the abstract concept presented in the plastic level of Berry’s illustration; Berry’s lack of the black body erases the racial stereotypes that would have accompanied the black body in this time.

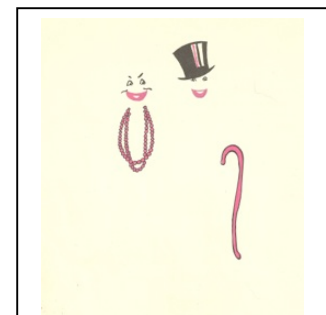


Fig. 3 Penny-Whistle’s parents



Fig 4. Berry’s illustration style throughout most of *Penny-Whistle*.

Through the rest of the text, Berry illustrated Penny-Whistle as a very young boy, possibly five or six years of age, with a very black body (see fig. 4), but Berry never offers an explanation for the lack of body when we are first introduced to Penny-Whistle and his parents. Berry wanted her readers not to concern themselves with race, and the stereotypes that would have accompanied race in 1930, but instead depicts her characters in the most positive way possible for the time period. Berry’s life experiences and her previous work in painting the portraits in Africa would lead us to believe that she was not interested in making the black body invisible. The lack of black body in *Penny-Whistle* encourages the reader to put aside negative stereotyping of the character and frees the reader to focus on the story itself.

Berry’s iconic text offered roles for black characters, making prescriptive roles and constructing blackness via white expectations. But she then shows the error of predetermined positions. Berry’s story is about a little black boy, who is literally and visually lost in her illustrations; her illustrations offer a subversive positioning enabling the reader to read race in opposition to the text and to the expectations a reader would bring to the text. Her use of music, which depicts Penny-Whistle’s own rhythm and adaptation of notes gathered from four different birds, an elephant, and a cricket – all of which are extremely jealous of Penny-Whistle’s skill – presents a subversive message in



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which music becomes the way to an individualized, non-racial stereotyped subjectivity within his cultural context.

Shifting Stereotypes in *One-String Fiddle*

Nine years after *Penny-Whistle*, Erick Berry revisited the same plot but shifts that discussion of stereotype from African American to Appalachian. At the time of Berry's writing, Appalachian peoples were considered poor, unintelligent, inbred, and violent. Brian E. Stewart (2011) in his introduction to a collection of essays on the history of violence in Appalachia notes that:

Since the late nineteenth century, the national media had popularized mountain whites as "hillbillies" whose culture and genetic makeup encouraged them to act irrationally when confronting change. They were supposedly 'a different breed of people': social misfits devoted to kinfolk and suspicious of others. (2)

That description does not differ greatly from the way that African Americans had been described in the past. Only seven years after Berry's publication of *One-String Fiddle*, author Arnold J. Toynbee's *A Study of History* (1946) confirmed that the people of Appalachia were considered, even by the educated of society, to be the "riff-raff of civilization." He wrote

The Appalachian 'mountain people' today are no better than barbarians. They have relapsed into illiteracy and witchcraft. They suffer from poverty, squalor, and ill-health. They are the American counterparts of the latter-day White barbarians of the Old World... (quoted in Stewart 4).

In *One-String Fiddle*, Berry tries to use music in the same way as she did in *Penny-Whistle*, yet her ending does not free her character from cultural stereotype as she did with *Penny-Whistle*. Irby plays in a style that is expected and therefore accepted by the adult society. Instead of finding his own song to make him an individual, his song allows him acceptance into an already existing community. Instead of an individual, Irby becomes one of many.

Irby is depicted in both text and illustration as a poverty stricken child (see fig. 5). He doesn't wear shoes for the majority of the text. He has to be careful what pocket he puts a note in because his pockets all have holes except one. His straw hat is frayed and has a hole in the top. He is older than Penny-Whistle and is responsible for helping his parents on their farm. Because this book was intended for older readers, the text is the tool for transmission of meaning more so than the limited illustrations which are located towards the margins of the page, rather than centrally located on the page as in *Penny-Whistle*. The text and limited illustrations offer a stereotypical Appalachian boy. The dialect used also supports the stereotype. While the text of *Penny-Whistle* is completely written in standard English, Berry used standard English narration in *One-String Fiddle*, but presents the dialog entirely in Appalachian dialect. The contrast in voices serves to support stereotypical ideas about uneducated Appalachian people, yet this is how Berry creates space. She preserves authenticity, in much of the same way as Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn*. When we hear Old Fiddler saying, "And as for these her outlandish tunes that come in over the radio ye hear in town, they're sometimes music, and the airs is kinda purty but the ain't *mountain music*." Or when Irby plays his fiddle, Fiddler asks the folks listening, "How'd ya like *that*? Once again, boy. Once again and I'll carry ye!" we can hear the sound of the language coming through the dialog.

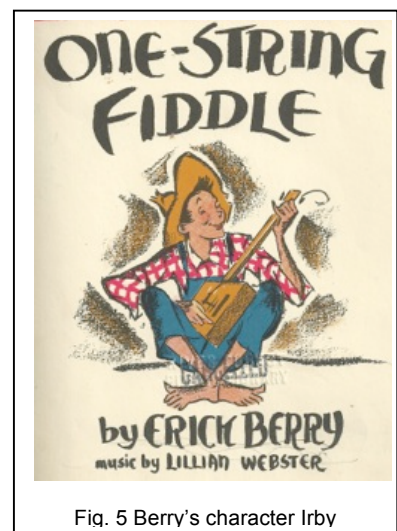


Fig. 5 Berry's character Irby

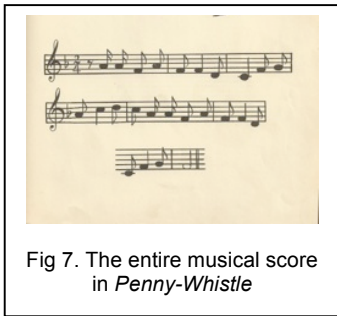
The plot of the story begins with Irby talking to his dog as he plays his one-string fiddle. He recounts the way that he made his own instrument, using a cigar box and whittling the neck and the bridge "just right." An immediate difference between the two texts is noted: *Penny-Whistle* is given his instrument, whereas Irby constructs his own. Irby is given a string by Old Fiddler since Irby recounts that he had tried to make the string for his fiddle but was unsuccessful. This string can be seen as the first step in socializing Irby into his society as it marks him as being favored by a respected member of the community. Much like *Penny-Whistle*, Irby is tasked with finding his own original tune to play. While *Penny-Whistle* finds notes in nature, Irby finds notes everywhere. Nature, in the form of his dog Billiam and his mule Marthy, serves as the jury which approves of his song. Billiam falls asleep and Marthy



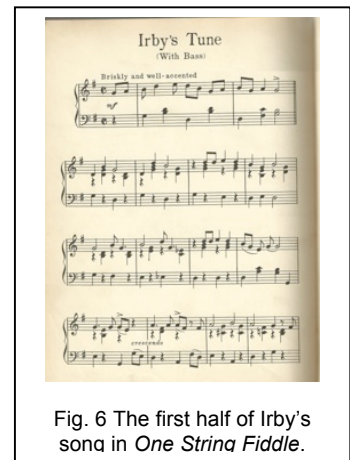
Tammy L. Mielke – “Using Ambiguity to Resist Stereotypes in the 1930s: Erick Berry’s *Penny Whistle* and *One String Fiddle*.”

swivels her ears forward when Irby tries tunes they do not approve of. When Irby gets it right, Billiam thumps his tail and Marthy’s ears swing back to listen.

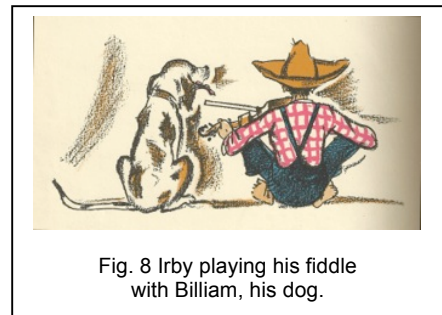
The music in this text is more detailed (see fig. 6). The musical structure is more complex – possibly due to the fact that Erick Berry did not write the music. Musical credits are given to a Lillian Webster. Irby’s tune is listed on the last two pages with full musical notation.



The last paragraph of the text tells the reader: “And if you want to play Irby’s tune on your piano, here it is, all through, with a bass, because maybe you haven’t got a second fiddle” (n.pag.). At the end of *Penny-Whistle*, the reader is also provided with the musical score in full (see fig. 7). However it lacks the detailed musical notation, and bass, that is provided in *One-String Fiddle*.



While Berry is clearly trying to undo racial stereotype in *Penny-Whistle* by allowing him to be his own individual, the ending in *One-String Fiddle* muddies Berry’s intent. If we view Irby as being the progressive, yet underprivileged, child who builds his own instrument and then makes his own song, then Berry’s social commentary in both her books is clear. However, *One-String Fiddle* ends with Irby winning “a shining, yellow fiddle, the wonderly kind you saw in the mail-order catalog pictures” (n. pag.) and planning on using 50 cents of his 63 cents earned in playing his tune for the audience to buy a dog collar for Billiam. Upgrading Irby’s instrument from a self-made fiddle to a mass produced product lessens Irby’s independence. Buying a collar for his dog further reinforces Irby’s transfer from independent child to fully socialized, productive, law abiding citizen of his community. However, Irby’s transfer to socialized citizen actually is the subversion, demonstrating that his success in his Appalachian world is entirely valid, and does not need further acceptance by the “Middle-American” norm. The story ends with Irby, still shoeless, playing his new fiddle with his dog next to him (see fig. 8), an echo of the first scene of Irby playing his one string fiddle with Billiam by his side (see fig. 9).



Conclusion

What is clear about Berry’s work in these two texts is that she creates space through the ambiguity in text and illustration as way to fight against bias based on race or class, and uses cultural markings to allow characters to become individuals, separate from the dominant societies view of their ethnicity and culture. The problematic illustrations in *Penny-Whistle* and the ending of *One-String Fiddle* do not change the



agency to the child character, or deny the freedom of the reader to accept the ambiguity offered and to question to dominant ideology. Berry’s publications offer resistance to the ways in which both African American and Appalachian children were viewed in the 1930s by seemingly following common held assumptions while subversively making space for new ways of thinking about race and class within the United States. By showing these characters, Berry makes them visible, which is ironic since Berry herself became invisible through time. During her long career, she wrote, illustrated and/or edited over one hundred books for children, many of which were completed with her second husband, Herbert Best, whom she met while in Africa in 1924. Berry won a Newbery Honor medal for *Winged Girl of Knossos* in 1934, a text she also illustrated. She also illustrated two titles, *Garram the Hunter, a Boy of the Hill Tribes* (1930), and *Apprentice of*

Florence (1933) both written by Best, which were Newbery Honor winners in 1931 and 1934 respectively. And yet today, the name Erick Berry is relatively forgotten. By remembering her attempts to create space for revising ideas about the other, both child and minority, Erick Berry was working to changing the course of a nation by using ambiguity, music, and plot to subversively undermine the use of stereotypes in children’s literature.



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