



## Voice and Silence in Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming*

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### Abstract

In 2014, the American writer Jacqueline Woodson published *Brown Girl Dreaming*, the story of her childhood in free verse, which was classified as young adult literature. Most US reviewers characterized and appreciated the book both as a human rights narrative of a young brown girl's coming of age against the socio-political background of racism and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States of the 1960s, and as a personal history of her development as a writer.

In this article the major focus will be on how *Brown Girl Dreaming* as both a political memoir and an autobiographical narrative of identity formation is fleshed out. On the basis of my analysis of these two plot lines, I will further argue that its categorization as young adult literature disguises that the novel addresses a dual audience of adult and young readers. In my argumentation related to the political and personal character of the novel, as well as in my discussion of the crossover potential of *Brown Girl Dreaming*, I will focus on the presence of voice and silence.

*Keywords:* memoir, autobiography, voice, silence, implied reader

### Samenvatting

In 2014 publiceerde de Amerikaanse auteur Jacqueline Woodson *Brown Girl Dreaming*, het verhaal van haar kindertijd in vrij vers. Het boek werd geclassificeerd als *young adult* literatuur. De meeste Amerikaanse recensenten typeerden en waardeerden haar boek als zowel een mensenrechtenverhaal van een jong zwart meisje dat opgroeit

tegen de sociaal-politieke achtergrond van racisme en de Civil Rights Movement in de Verenigde Staten van de jaren zestig, alsook als een persoonlijke geschiedenis over haar ontwikkeling tot schrijver.

In dit artikel onderzoek ik hoe *Brown Girl Dream* als politieke memoires en als een persoonlijk verhaal van identiteitsvorming in twee verhaallijnen is uitgewerkt. Op basis van mijn analyse van deze verhaallijnen betoog ik verder dat de classificatie 'young adult' maskeert dat de roman een dubbel publiek van volwassen en jonge lezers veronderstelt. In zowel mijn argumentatie gericht op het politieke en persoonlijk karakter van de roman, als ook in mijn discussie van het crossover potentieel van *Brown Girl Dreaming*, focus ik op de aanwezigheid van stem en stilte.

*Trefwoorden:* memoires, autobiografieën, stem, stilte, *implied reader*

## Introduction

In 2014, the American writer Jacqueline Woodson published *Brown Girl Dreaming*, the story of her childhood in free verse. The publisher, Penguin, put the book on the reading list of 'Children's Middle Grade Books'. On her website, the author categorized the book as a young adult novel. After its publication, the book was awarded the Newbery Honor Book, The Coretta Scott King Award, and the National Book Award for Young People's Literature. In 2018, Jacqueline Woodson was the winner of the prestigious international Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. These are all literary prizes awarded to books for young readers. Many critics also had high praise for the novel. Like the juries of the literary awards, available reviews discuss Woodson's novel as a book for children or young adult readers. In *The New York Times* for example, *Brown Girl Dreaming* was reviewed in the children's book section. In her review, writer and editor Veronica Chambers was convinced that the poems in the book would affect young readers in the process of discovering their own identity (Chambers 2014). Interestingly, Chambers started her very positive review with a complaint about the title of the book. According to her, 'the title seems to confine the book in too narrow a box. I wondered if the author and publishers, by calling the book *Brown Girl Dreaming*, were limiting its audience or, at the very least, the audience of girls who would pick it up right away' (n.p.). Chambers was worried that the specific title would keep young readers who were not of the same ethnicity as the girl in the title from reading this book.

Apart from the discussion about its readership, *Brown Girl Dreaming* has been characterized mainly in two ways. Reviewers and researchers evaluated the book as a memoir, motivated by human rights claims, about a brown girl coming of age, against the socio-political background of racism and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States of the 1960s. At the same time, they interpreted and appreciated it as the personal narrative of a girl who tries to find her place within her family as well as in the wider world, and who is fascinated by language and storytelling, dreaming to become a writer. Both narratives are intertwined in a text that foregrounds form, as Krystal Howard (2017) rightly argues. While the lyrical character of the book immediately catches the eye, there is more to see. Apart from the free verse the book consists of a series of haiku, a three-page author's note and other autobiographical additions such as a family tree, and a number of photos taken from family albums. Woodson uses this 'collage effect', as Howard calls it with reference to Cran (2014) and Farebrother (2009), to estrange the reader's perception 'in order to fix attention on "uneasy realities" in contemporary culture' (326). Moreover, '[u]nderstanding the connections brought about by the collage effect enables readers to trace Woodson's movement from private self-exploration to public political advocacy' (327).

The aim of this article is twofold. The major focus is on how *Brown Girl Dreaming* functions both as a human rights narrative and as a narrative of personal growth. I will examine how the idea of social justice, more in particular people's right of telling one's own story and of having control over that narrative, is fleshed out, and how Woodson used her childhood narrative to create, as Marianne Gullestad (2004) calls it, a 'sustainable self-image, a concept that implies the possession of self-respect and dignity over time, in spite of challenges and attacks' (218). In particular in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement that was founded in 2013, stories such as Woodson's are important and urgent as they 'unsettle received conceptions of personal and national identity' (Schaffer and Smith, 2004, 31) and provide alternative perspectives on social justice. Published life narratives 'can be seen as a way to take part in civil society, to exercise citizenship and democratic participation' (Gullestad 2004, 239).

On the basis of my analysis of *Brown Girls Dreaming* as both a personal and a human rights narrative, I will further argue that, in disagreement with Veronica Chambers (2014), it is not the title of the book that narrows down its potential readership, nor its content and form, but the context of its production and reception that I briefly summarized in the beginning. Through a narrative analysis I will posit that *Brown Girl Dreaming* is a so-called ambivalent or crossover text. Both terms, the first introduced by Zohar Shavit (1986) and the second coined by, among others, Rachel Falconer

(2009) and Sandra Beckett (2009) imply that there are books that address a dual audience of adult and young readers, as these texts can be interpreted on different levels, depending on the reader's literary and cultural competence.

In arguing that the book can be seen both as a human rights memoir and a personal, autobiographical narrative of becoming a writer, as well as in my discussion of the crossover potential of *Brown Girl Dreaming*, I will focus on the presence of voice and silence in this novel. As both concepts are more nuanced than may seem at first sight, I will provide a framework for how these terms can be applied in the context of life writing.

### Voice and silence

In *Reading Autobiography* (2010), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson discuss the two meanings of voice. In a general sense, they use voice as a characteristic of the narrating 'I': 'When we read autobiographical texts, they often seem to be "speaking" to us. We "hear" a narrative voice [...]. In those "sounds" we have an impression of a subject's interiority, its intimacy and rhythms of self-reflexivity' (79). This narrative voice invites readers to engage with the story. Because readers of autobiographical texts tend to equate the voice of the narrating 'I' with that of the author, they often think of life writing as monovocal. However, the narrator more often than not is a combination of voices, related to the different roles the 'I' performs in the narrative. Moreover, autobiographical narratives also include other voices, of which the voice of the narrated 'I', the past self of the narrator, is the most important. Although the narrating 'I' and the narrated 'I' seem to refer to the same historical person, they have distinct voices. The interaction between these voices is often complex, in particular in autobiographies of childhood, which consist of an adult narrating 'I' and a narrated child 'I'. In her discussion of voice in *Contesting Childhood* (2010), Kate Douglas also discusses the distance between the self of the adult author and his or her former self. She argues that a dialogue between an adult self and child self is inherent to autobiographical narratives of childhood. This dialogue can occur in three forms: 'via the all-knowing, retrospective adult speaking for the child, within the juxtaposition of the adult and child voices, and in the use of the naïve child voice' (89).

Finally, yet importantly, Smith and Watson emphasize the presence of external voices in autobiographical narratives, including the voice of the implied reader, defined by them as 'the reader to whom the story and its mode and texture of storytelling are directed' (81).

Since the 1960s, the concept of voice has also been used in a political sense. In particular in the context of oppression and discrimination, voice has been and is used as a metaphor for speaking out and for 'talking back', as bell hooks calls it in *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989). In the decades following the 1960s, the feminist slogan 'coming to voice' invoked women, black people and all others excluded from the hegemonic group of white males to participate in society, to stand up against oppression and discrimination, and to put their own experiences on the political agenda. Following another slogan 'the personal is political' (Hanish 2006), life writing became an important genre through which people from excluded groups 'could find, claim and deploy a "liberated" voice in becoming agents and actors' (Smith and Watson, 85). Smith and Watson consider self-life writing such as autobiography and memoir, to be 'proofs of human agency' (54). 'Voice' in the political meaning of the word is thus related to 'agency', which has to do with being able to act autonomously and intentionally under given circumstances. Agency means that people can make their own choices and that they feel and take responsibility for what they do (see, among others, James and James 2012). An interesting question related to the political use of voice and agency is how people from excluded groups tell their stories and which cultural script they use. How we remember and how we structure our personal narratives is culturally determined (Smith and Watson, 24-25). So how do people who have been silenced for ages 'write back'; how do they get agency through the choices they make with respect to the content and form of their life narratives? To what extent is the political meaning of language thematized in texts?

It is in this political context that voice is contrasted with silence in the sense of being silenced. In this opposition, voice is often related to power, whereas silence is conceptualized as 'imposed', resulting in a 'loss of power and self' (Fivush 2010, 88-89). However, as Robyn Fivush rightly argues, silence can also be interpreted as 'being silent', which has more positive connotations. According to Fivush, 'being silent' can have multiple meanings and functions: it can be experienced as 'quiet, restful, reflective', as 'a form of intimacy', of 'privacy', and of 'respect', and even as 'a form of power: by not speaking, one is claiming that one need not explain or justify' (90-91).

In literature and other art forms, being silent can take on yet another meaning, one that is not discussed by Fivush. In literary texts, authors often employ silence as an aesthetic device, a literary strategy. I am referring here to the concept of tell-tale-gaps or 'Leerstellen', to use the German term coined by Wolfgang Iser (1978), one of the founding fathers of the so-called 'Rezeptionsästhetik' or reception aesthetics in Germany. In contemporary literature, literary critics value this 'aesthetics of silence'

as Susan Sontag (1969) has called it, 'as a prime standard of seriousness' (n.p.). Silence as an aesthetic device is not so much opposed to voice as equated to it. Again, in the words of Sontag: '[s]ilence remains, inescapably, a form of speech [...] and an element in a dialogue' that 'opens up an array of possibilities for interpreting that silence, for imputing speech on it' (n.p.). According to Wolfgang Iser (1978), silence in the form of tell-tale-gaps invites readers to become active partners in the literary communication. He posits that in literature there is no 'best interpretation' of a literary text. Literature is an act of communication between author and reader. A literary text refers to a world that the reader is to some extent familiar with but that never coincides with it completely. There is always a certain degree of indeterminacy, which asks from readers that they fill in the gaps with their imagination and their background knowledge. The level of indeterminacy in a text determines the implied reader, that is the reader incorporated in the form and content of a text (Iser 1974). A literary work with relatively many tell-tale-gaps asks for an experienced reader, whereas a text with only a few blank spaces implies a reader with less literary and cultural competence. Therefore, what is left silent in literary texts in general, and in life writing in particular, is equally important for the meaning of a text and the life shaped in the text as what is voiced. In some cases, silence is even more telling than what is said.

### **Memoir and human rights claims**

Reading *Brown Girl Dreaming*, the association of voice and silence that immediately comes to the fore is with 'being silenced' and 'coming to voice' in a political sense. On her website, Woodson presents the story of her childhood as 'my memoir in free verse'. Although Smith and Watson argue that autobiography and memoir are used interchangeably, they themselves make a distinction between these two forms of life writing. Whereas in autobiographies the personal history of the narrating 'I' is foregrounded, the focus in memoir is on the social context, on the experiences of the I that are interconnected with those of other people (Smith and Watson, 274). In 'Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity', Julie Rak also points to differences between autobiography and memoir. Until recently, memoir has been evaluated 'as a minor form of autobiography' (Rak 2004, 305). However, today, the genre of memoir is booming and 'has gained currency in popular and scholarly arenas. Predating the term autobiography, memoir is now the word used by publishing houses to describe various practices and genres of self life writing' (Smith and Watson, 3). For Nancy K. Miller (1996), memoir fits the dynamics of postmodernity, since 'it hesitates to define the boundaries between private and public,

subject and object' (2). According to Julie Rak, '[m]emoirs blend private and public', as 'they are written by the most powerful public men and the least known, most private women' (Rak, 316). For many scholars, the term memoir is more malleable than the term autobiography. It is also considered to be a genre that challenges its readers 'to think about the significance of that choice and the kind of reading it invites' (Smith and Watson 2010, 4).

Like other forms of life writing, memoirs often function in a political context. The connection between politics, human rights, and life writing also underlies *Human Rights and Narrated Lives. The Ethics of Recognition* (2004) by Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith. In the introduction to their book, they describe how since the 1990s human rights and life narratives, in particular memoir, have come together:

The post-Cold War decade of the 1990s, has been labeled the decade of human rights [...]. Not incidentally, it has also been described as the decade of life narratives, what commentators refer to as the time of memoir. Many of these life narratives tell of human rights violations. Victims of abuse around the world have testified to their experience in an outpouring of oral and written narratives. (...) As people meet together and tell stories, or read stories across cultures, they begin to voice, recognize, and bear witness to a diversity of values, experiences, and ways of imagining a just social world and of responding to injustice, inequality, and human suffering. Indeed, over the last twenty years, life narratives have become one of the most potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims (1).

### Being silenced and coming to voice

The definitions of memoir by, among others, Miller (1996), Rak (2004), and Smith and Watson (2010), and the connection Schaffer and Smith make between life narratives and human rights claims, are an apt characterization of *Brown Girl Dreaming*, more in particular of the plot line that centers on young Jacqueline Woodson, who is born and raised in a family determined by the larger political context of slavery and racial discrimination in the United States. References to this socio-historical context are already present in the paratext of the book. One of the folded flaps of the dust cover of the book tells the reader that the story will be about Woodson's childhood, about growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in the South and the North: 'Raised in South Carolina and later in Brooklyn, New York, Woodson often felt halfway home in each place, and describes the reality of living with the remnants of Jim Crow and her growing awareness of the civil rights movement'. Jim Crow here refers to a caricature

of the black slave, introduced by white American Thomas Rice in his minstrel shows which later became a negative stereotype used by other white Americans. The name also alludes to laws that denied the rights of black Americans and that were meant to maintain the segregation between white and black people in the United States until the 1960s (<https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/origins.htm>). The reference to the civil rights movement of course refers to the struggle for legal rights by African Americans that started in the nineteenth century but came to a climax in the 1950s and 1960s.

The motto of the book, a poem by Langston Hughes from his 1932 collection *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, refers to the harsh circumstances under which young Jacqueline grows up. It points to the importance of holding on to dreams when 'life is a barren field frozen with snow' (n.p.).

The actual narrative starts in the very first chapter of the book, titled 'february 12, 1963', in which the narrating 'I', the adult Jacqueline Woodson, tells us where and when she was born. She immediately positions her younger self in the context of racial inequality:

I am born on a Tuesday at University Hospital  
Columbus, Ohio,  
USA –  
a country caught  
between Black and White.  
[...]  
I am born as the South explodes,  
too many people too many years  
enslaved, then emancipated  
but not free, the people  
who look like me  
keep fighting  
and marching  
and getting killed (1-2).

'As the South explodes' is an allusion to the protests by African American people against racism, taking place in the early 1960s. With the explicit connection between the larger political context and her birth, the narrating 'I' suggests that these circumstances will have an impact on her entire life. Woodson continues to provide more context, connecting her birth to her family's history of slavery, and by relating her future and that of other children to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and



1960s. In the second chapter about her ‘second day on earth’, she describes how her birth certificate racialized her from the moment she was born, labeling her and her parents as ‘negro’. By referring to Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, James Baldwin, and Ruby Bridge, she further relates the first part of her life to the fight for racial equality, explicitly stating that she was destined to share their ambition ‘to change the world’ (5). By mentioning Ruby Bridges, who was only six years old when she entered an all-white school, the narrating ‘I’ makes it clear that the narrated ‘I’ was, at a very young age, conscious of the fact that not only adults but also children were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Throughout the narrative, Woodson keeps referring to how her personal story, and the history of both her father’s and her mother’s families are part of the greater (African) American history. She does this, among other things, by linking her family’s story to that of well-known North-Americans such as Thomas Jefferson. These references reveal how the history of slavery has imposed silence on the African American people and how the narrated ‘I’ has learned how remembering family stories can be used as a source of strength in coping with situations in which she is the only black person and is supposed to keep silent. Woodson’s mother teaches her how to survive in these circumstances by telling her the story of Woodson’s great-great-grandfather, William J. Woodson, who was the only brown boy in an all-white school:

*You’ll face this in your life someday,  
my mother will tell us  
over and over again.  
A moment when you walk into a room and  
no one there is like you.  
It’ll be scary sometimes. But think of William Woodson  
and you’ll be all right (14; italics by Woodson).*

*Brown Girl Dreaming* shows that despite the Civil Rights Movement, in the 1960s there was still a long way to go before all black people dared to speak out, to come to voice. The narrating I exemplifies this by sharing painful memories. She tells of her grandmother ‘in her Sunday clothes’ having to wait in Woolworth’s ‘long past her turn’ (238), and of her mother, teaching her children survival strategies for coping with discrimination and racism, as in the fragment just quoted. Woodson also remembers how her mother moved her and her siblings to the back of the bus to avoid problems, only daring *to whisper* that ‘we’re as good as anybody’ (31). Woodson’s mother also always insisted on the ‘right way to speak’ (69), which was the way white people

spoke. She forbade her children to use slang or to listen to music with the word 'funk' in it, out of fear for discrimination by white people (see also Trites 2018, 49). She especially didn't allow her children to use words like 'ain't', 'y'all git', 'gonna' and 'ma'am', because 'the word [was] too painful a memory for my mother of not-so-long-ago southern subservient days...' (69; three dots added by Woodson). In this fragment, the political meaning of language is thematized. It shows how language determines people's position in society and the degree of agency that goes with it. On their own, the connotation of these words is perhaps not immediately clear, but against the background of what by then has already been said in the book about racism in the South, the sentence is relatively easy to interpret. By revealing how her family and her younger self were affected by laws that denied the rights of African Americans, the adult narrating 'I' emphasizes that discrimination and racism are not just the matter of history books. All the examples that Woodson presents underline the impact of legalized segregation on the everyday life of black people, on how many African American parents did not dare to speak out and complied with the laws out of concern for their children.

Another interesting example of how the political meaning of language is made explicit in *Brown Girl Dreaming*, is the poem about family names. The narrating 'I' tells how she and her siblings used to discuss with their parents and grandparents the names of their family members. In particular the sentence '*Gave their kids names that no master could ever take away*' (86; italics by Woodson), reveals that giving names was considered to be a politically meaningful act and that having the choice to choose names was a relevant aspect of regaining control over their own lives.

*Brown Girl Dreaming* can be considered a 'counter-story', a term used by critical race theorists such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado and Kimberlé Crenshaw. Delgado and Stefancic (2000) define the counter-story as a methodology to contest 'the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race' (xviii). Through stories opposing to the one-sided narratives in a world dominated by white people, counter-stories by people who are excluded 'illuminate the fact that the social world is not static, but is constructed by people with words, stories, and also silences' (Martinez 2014, 20). In her counter-story, Woodson voices resistance to the dominant narrative, explicitly challenging racist constructions of social life. In doing so, she also thematizes the complicated relation between ethnicity and language use, for example by discussing her mother's insistence on 'proper' language, i.e. the language register used by white people.

All taken together, the political plot line in Woodson's memoir repeatedly testifies to the fact that changes in the law are meaningless as long as people's attitudes stay

the same. In 'what everybody knows now', the narrating 'I' expresses the need that black people stand up for their rights, even though white people continue showing their contempt. Despite the fact that the 1964 Civil Rights Act had officially ended segregation in public spaces, Jacqueline's mother and grandmother still take their (grand)children to the back of the bus. Jacqueline disagrees:

But we aren't dirt. We are people  
paying the same fare as other people.  
When I say this to my grandmother  
she nods, says, *Easier to stay where you belong* (237; italics  
Woodson)

While her grandmother still adjusts to what white people expect her to do, young Jacqueline claims the agency established by law. Throughout Woodson's memoir there are similar instances in which the tension between voice and agency on the one hand, and silence and subservience on the other becomes tangible.

When it comes to the memories of Woodson's childhood, in the just discussed plotline regarding the bigger context of racialization, segregation, and civil rights activism, the text guides the reader through the narrative, as it clearly explains the differences between the north and the south of the USA with regards to the rights of black people. The text makes more concrete how these rights were violated and clarifies what the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power were about, and how they differed from each other concerning the use of violence. This explicitness not only reveals young Jacqueline's growing awareness of racism, but also contributes to the knowledge of readers who are not familiar with the history of ethnic injustice in the USA. Because this plotline has few tell-tale gaps, it implies a relatively inexperienced (child)reader who has little or no knowledge regarding this part of African American history.

### **Being silent and the aesthetics of silence**

Interwoven into this counter-narrative, *Brown Girl Dreaming* reveals another plot line, which, by the definition of Smith and Watson (2010) discussed earlier in this article, should be characterized as an autobiography rather than as a memoir, because this plot line centers on Woodson's personal life. It is the story of young Jacqueline developing imagination and creativity, her struggle to achieve literacy, and her ambition to become a writer. In this plot line, the voice of the narrating 'I' is much

more silent than in the first one, in the sense that there are many more gaps to be filled in by the reader than in the part about the political context. In the beginning of the book, Woodson shows us the rich imagination of the narrated 'I' rather than talks about it, as young Jacqueline makes up a story about her family while she is looking at photos of her aunts and uncles. When one reads between the lines of the verses about literacy, stories, the power of imagination, and poetry, one discovers how sound and language make the narrated 'I' feel comfortable, how she is enchanted by storytelling. At the age of three, Woodson had already experienced the magic and power of words when she attempted, with the help of her older sister, to write words:

'How amazing these words are that slowly come to me.  
How wonderfully on and on they go.  
*Will the words end*, I ask  
Whenever I remember to.  
*Nope*, my sister says, all of five years old now,  
and promising me  
infinity.' (62-63; italics by Woodson; HvL)

The amazement and enthusiasm in this verse about what words can do, reveals young Jacqueline's passionate desire to express herself through words. The same goes for the intense joy she feels when she receives her first composition notebook: 'I don't know how my first composition notebook/ended up in my hands, long before I could really write/someone must have known that this/was all I needed' (154). These poems express young Jacqueline's fascination with language, writing and telling stories, although in the text, all this is not stated explicitly. The first time the narrated 'I' writes her own name she experiences an intense moment of self-realization. It is all the more painful, therefore, that she is having a hard time struggling to become literate, and that her family and some of her teachers compare her to her older sister Odella who is getting high praise for her knowledge and her reading skills, but who, in Jacqueline's own words, 'can't even begin to understand' (155) the importance of language and stories. However, the narrating 'I' does not explicitly explain how this comparison with her older sister hurts her younger self, and how her family's mixed reactions to her storytelling and her ambition to become a writer confused her. The narrating 'I' chooses to be silent about the pain and confusion of her past self, and instead shows rather than tells how her younger self continued developing her talent and passion for storytelling. She shares young Jacqueline's excitement about reading a picturebook 'filled with brown people, more brown people than I'd ever seen in a

book before’ (228), but she leaves it to the reader to hear what is not said: how valuable diverse stories are for children who believe that they have no story, and how important these stories are for their identity-formation.

*Brown Girl Dreaming* contains two verses that show the narrating ‘I’’s awareness of having a choice to speak out or to keep silent, and that both can be equally powerful. The first verse, titled ‘sometimes, no words are needed’ emphasizes the aesthetics of silence. Words are not always necessary or enough to describe feelings. In some cases, silence speaks louder than words, and is more appropriate and productive than speech. In the second poem, called ‘each world’, the narrating ‘I’ realizes she is able to control her own story, that she can choose when to come to voice and when to remain silent. She describes how

all the worlds you are –  
 Ohio and Greenville  
 Woodson and Irby  
 Gunnar’s child and Jack’s daughter  
 Jehovah’s Witness and nonbeliever  
 Listener and writer  
 Jackie and Jaqueline –  
 gather in one world  
 called You  
 where You decide  
 what each world  
 and each story  
 and each ending will finally be (319-320)

This last poem testifies to the fact that the narrating ‘I’ has created what I earlier, following Gullestad (2004), called a sustainable self-image. She has a mature view on the world and has developed a grown-up relation to reading, writing, storytelling, and memory. The narrating I knows that her storytelling skills give her the power to determine what story will be told and how it will be done, with or without silences. Her ability to control her own narrative has not only provided her with tools to reflect on racism and discrimination, but has also given her insight in who she herself wants to be.

In this last poem Woodson points to yet another meaning of being silent by emphasizing her role as listener, an aspect that has been elaborated on by Krystal Howard. Howard points out that with one exception, all haiku in *Brown Girl Dreaming*

have the title 'how to listen', which directs the reader's attention to 'the process by which Woodson as a poet learned to listen' to the unspoken, in order to be able to speak out, 'to tell the story of her past and her people' (332). In other words, how her listening functioned as a prerequisite of voice.

The narrative about her development as a writer has a relatively high degree of indeterminacy because of the many tell-tale-gaps. As it uses the aesthetics of silence to create a coherent sense of self, this part of *Brown Girl Dreaming* implies a reader who has enough literary and cultural competence to interpret the maturation process Jacqueline Woodson goes through in her childhood.

### **Memory: the distance between the narrating 'I' and the narrated 'I'**

Throughout *Brown Girl Dreaming*, most verses about Woodson's childhood are written in the present tense, suggesting that it is the voice of the narrated 'I' that is heard most. The immediacy evoked by using the present tense may be interpreted as a gesture of authenticity for young readers (Van Lierop-Debrauwer 2018). However, through the information provided, in particular through the explicit interpretation of the facts concerning the position of African Americans, the voice of the narrating 'I' in the political plot line interferes with the voice of the narrated 'I', explaining what a young child cannot understand on its own, thus creating a considerable distance between the two voices. This distinction between the narrating 'I' and the narrated 'I' is reinforced by the focus on memory, which is an important theme in the text as the verses discuss the problematic as well as the positive aspects of how remembering functions in people's life. Problematic, for example, are the different stories family members tell Jacqueline about her birth. These narratives show how memories are unreliable and subjective and how they make the narrated 'I' feel lost. However, memories can also be comforting, as for example when Jacqueline's mother recalls pleasant experiences from her own childhood. In combination with the free verse, the focus on memory and its inaccuracy and subjectivity gives *Brown Girl Dreaming* a fragmented character, which is even more emphasized by the lyrical form. In her discussion of autobiographies of childhood, Douglas (2010) states that for adult readers a fragmented representation of the past and an autobiographical voice, which explicitly stresses the limitations of memory, are considered to be important devices in convincing adult readers of the authenticity of the narrative. For young readers it may work differently, as the presence of an adult and young voice in *Brown Girl Dreaming* and the distance between these voices may complicate the young readers' possible identification with the protagonist.

## To conclude

My discussion of voice and silence in *Brown Girl Dreaming* tells us that the book consists of two intertwined plotlines that use the meanings of voice and silence in different ways. The first plot line is a family story, embedded in the stories of other African Americans, of coming to voice as a reaction to being silenced. It functions as a counter-narrative that opposes the danger of 'a single story' (Adichie 2009) by making voices heard in stories formerly unacknowledged. The second plot line is a personal narrative about a young girl growing up with a fascination for stories and the ambition to become a writer.

In their discussion of the narratological meaning of 'voice', Smith and Watson point to the voice of the implied reader(s). Through my analysis of the two main plot lines in *Brown Girl Dreaming* I have presented arguments for what I call the crossover character of the book, meaning that this book has the potential to appeal to a dual audience of young and adult readers. Whereas the memoir part of Woodson's story does not put a high claim on the literary competence of readers, the autobiographical narrative implies an active and literarily experienced reader. This plot line asks for a reader who is familiar with the literary device of silence and with the idea that authors, for a variety of reasons, can choose to be silent and to challenge the reader's own imagination to fill in the tell-tale gaps. Of course, there is no one-to-one relationship between literary competence and age: child and young adult readers can be as literary competent as adult readers. However, this does not alter the fact that the different levels in the story, the different uses of voice and silence, make *Brown Girl Dreaming* a multi-layered text that also addresses literary competent adult readers and thus cross the age boundaries created by the literary context of production and reception that I referred to in the beginning.

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