“Genius, Scientist, Saint”: Carver as Hagiography

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I thoroughly understand that there are scientists to whom the world is merely the result of chemical forces of material electrons. I do not belong to this class.

—George Washington Carver, epigraph to Carver: A Life in Poems

“I believe Carver was a saint.”

—Marilyn Nelson (Interview)

Marilyn Nelson’s task as biographer seems to have been divinely inspired. As she was at her home preparing to commence writing the life of St. Hildegard of Bingen, she received a phone call. It was from Albert J. Price, a friend of her father, Melvin Moton Nelson, and a fellow Tuskegee Airman—a person with whom she was last in contact when she was twelve years old. On his way from Texas to Boston, Mr. Price asked if he could stop for a glass of lemonade and a visit at her Connecticut home. After his twenty-minute visit and his glass of lemonade, Mr. Price gave Professor Nelson two things from the trunk of his car: a copy of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self-Reliance,” and a brochure from the George Washington Carver National Monument in Missouri. He said that he hoped she would write a book about Carver, and then continued on his way to Boston (Interview).

In producing Carver: A Life in Poems, Nelson did indeed answer the call to write a saint’s life. Putting aside her St. Hildegard research, she wrote a biography in verse of George Washington Carver that retains much of the flavor of a hagiography. In doing so, she not only raised challenging questions about Carver’s place in history, but also used some hagiographical tropes in order to illuminate more roundly her subject’s spiritual self.

Carver: A Life in Poems has won and been short-listed for numerous prizes, yet a full-length critical article about the work has never been published. Perhaps this is because Carver stands outside mainstream children’s literature in so many ways. It is a work of what Richard Flynn would call “challenging” poetry, meaning that it neither
“condescend[ds]” to nor “underestimate[es] children’s ability” (78). This is not to say it is the only complicated book of poetry for children in recent years, but it is one entry on a rather small list. Although this article focuses primarily on how Nelson employs tropes common to the genre of hagiography in *Carver*, it is also important to examine how the use of verse is central to the book’s success. By writing poems from a variety of perspectives using multiple voices, Nelson offers a dialogic vision of her subject. Each poem requires that the reader identify and understand its point of view before being able to fully engage with that poem’s impact on the work as a whole. The reader’s lens must continually shift its focus as speakers range from the distant observer to the introspective Carver himself. Such a polyphonic effect is achieved seamlessly through verse, which permits rapid changes in diction, style, and form, without disrupting the unity of the work. For a young reader who may be encountering his or her first book of serious poetry, the multiple voices are particularly important, as their presence helps to develop an important awareness that the speaker in a poem cannot be assumed to be the poet herself: indeed, identifying the speaker and the audience are often keys to unlocking the meaning and pleasure of poems.

If one considers the types of children’s poetry, as described by Joseph T. Thomas, Jr. in his 2007 book, *Poetry’s Playground: The Culture of Contemporary American Children’s Poetry*, Carver surely would be considered “school” poetry: that is, included or likely to be included in future canonical anthologies of poetry for children. School poetry typically is found in anthologies that favor traditional poets: for example, *The Golden Treasury of Poetry*, edited by Louis Untermeyer (1959); *A Child’s Anthology of Poetry*, edited by Elizabeth Hauge Sword and Victoria McCarthy (1995); and *The Oxford Illustrated Book of Children’s Poetry*, edited by Donald Hall (1999) (Thomas 109). Notably, *Carver* was included in the *Norton Anthology of Children’s Literature* (2005) only four years after its publication. Its swift inclusion in this anthology speaks not only to the quality of the book, but also to its importance in the canon of children’s poetry and biography.

Nelson, like many school poets such as Robert Frost, Gwendolyn Brooks, Randall Jarrell, and Langston Hughes, is read by both children and adults. Although *Carver* was not written specifically for children, its cross-audience appeal has made it popular with readers of many ages. Sophisticated in form and content, the poems in *Carver* are nevertheless clear enough to be ideal for a child seeking challenging
poetry that rewards insightful readers with stories of national significance. Photographs of Carver and his ephemera provide additional interest for young readers. Much of *Carver* is written in free verse, and few poems use end-stopped lines. Consequently, the poems’ rhythms imitate the natural rhythms of speaking, offering young readers an opportunity to encounter poetry that encourages contemplation, revelry in the subtleties of slant rhyme, assonance, internal rhyme, and thoughtful enjambment. Amid a sea of poetry for children that is light and condescending, often relying on catchy rhyme and overly familiar rhythm, *Carver* stands out as a substantial alternative. Nelson, a master of prosody, offers young readers a chance to encounter finely wrought poetry that pays careful attention to formal elements. In my analysis of hagiographic elements in the poems, I hope to also point to some particularly meaningful prosodic moments, for, like Angela Sorby, Joseph T. Thomas, Jr., and Richard Flynn, I also “tend to favor poets who write with an awareness of . . . constructedness, as they tend to exercise greater care in the making of their verse” (268).

*Carver: A Life in Poems* certainly has earned its place among notable works of American poetry and children’s literature, but it may also rightly be considered one of the great biographical poems of our time. To call a current biography “hagiography” usually is hyperbole, an accusation that the biographer has sanctified her subject by exaggerating her account of his life. As Thomas J. Heffernan asserts, “the perfectly suitable term hagiography is now virtually impossible to read, except as an epithet signifying pious fiction or an exercise in panegyric” (16). This classification plays upon a popular secularized notion of hagiography as suggesting that a book venerates more than analyzes its subject. Norman Mailer’s biography of Marilyn Monroe, for example, is called hagiography, even though it clearly doesn’t do the technical work of a religious saint’s life. In popular culture, the word “hagiography” has been divested of its original religious meaning.

Although Nelson is not literally calling for the canonization of Carver, and her work is not a technical exercise in hagiography, I contend that by repeatedly suggesting that his spiritual life was a notable aspect of his character, she invokes the hagiographic tradition. *Carver* has its roots in religious devotion, but extends its branches to offer new hope that spiritual biography can bloom in contemporary literature without being limited to restrictive rules such as those applying to works of hagiography according to, say, the expectations of the Catholic Church. Many saints are sanctified by having an account
of their lives and influence compiled so as to mark their human existence as spiritually exceptional. As opposed to historical figures like royalty, whose lives were extraordinary and documented as a matter of course, the significance of saints’ lives historically has depended on someone transforming their existence from the secular to the sacred through writing. Thus, saints have relied on the transformative power of the word to ensure their cultural relevance. More than other figures, saints exist in our cultural heritage as the result of their devotees noticing a pattern in their lives identifying them as uniquely in touch with the divine. Nelson, like traditional hagiographers, recognizes the profound transformative impact that spiritual biography can have on a person’s cultural legacy. While her work is more properly biography than hagiography, she shares with hagiographers an attention to her subject’s spiritual life, and a seeming awareness that through poetry, she can influence how Carver is understood historically.

Carver’s life certainly has not suffered from lack of attention, especially in the genre of biography for children and young adults during the mid-twentieth century. Many recent biographies of him are pitched at a much younger audience than is Nelson’s work, and are put out by mass-market publishers like Scholastic. Each biographer, as expected, chooses the Carver she wants to see, and the Carver she imagines the public wants to see. In so doing, the biographer shapes young readers’ impressions not only of the man himself, but of his cultural context and historical import. Most of these books emphasize Carver as either a scientist or a role model for improving race relations. Nearly all children’s biographies make mention of his faith, and much is made of him as a hero particularly because he was born a slave. In young adult biographies, the focus is on Carver’s desire for education and his scientific achievement. Some older works in this category do tend to emphasize Carver as a model for race relations, such as in Lawrence Elliott’s *George Washington Carver: The Man Who Overcame* (1966), and the chapter “Sweet Potato Wizard” in Edwin R. Embree’s *13 Against the Odds* (1945). Other biographies for a young audience stress his importance to the field of science, as in Shirley Graham and George D. Lipscomb’s *Dr. George Washington Carver: Scientist* (1944). Such biographies can seem like hagiographies in the pejorative sense, as they tend to shield children from seeing Carver as a rounded figure, with failings as well as successes.

Nelson too, selects a Carver to present to her audience: the spiritual Carver. But unlike the other biographies that children are likely to
encounter, this book eschews simplification and weaves its subject’s existence through moments of scientific discovery, enduring friendship, and racial strife. *Carver* offers readers a fresh and nuanced perspective, not only emphasizing talents and accomplishments, but also suggesting flaws and struggles. It is through poetry that such nuance is achieved, because each poem allows for a fresh voice, a unique point of view, and a strategic use of prosody creating a multidimensional understanding of Carver that achieves artistic, biographical, and spiritual goals for a young audience.

By presenting Carver as a saint-like figure, Nelson adds to but also challenges former notions of his place in history. While his reputation and status in American culture, especially children’s culture, had previously made Carver a scientific hero, Nelson’s work unambiguously repositions him as a spiritual hero as well. In doing so, *Carver* essentially realizes Elizabeth Aldrich’s assertion that “hagiography... in American literature... involves an alternative or adversative reading not only of the hero, but of history itself” (3). As *Carver* suggests, sainthood and its requisite trappings of miracles, faith, and divine intervention must be released from the strictures of dogma that segregate the everyday from the divine. Indeed, as Nelson presents Carver’s life in poems, she blurs the lines between miracle and science, faith and fact, and divine intervention and genius in a way that invites the reader to reconsider the terms of both the spiritual and the material worlds. In *Carver*, the spiritual world is not only a place one enters in prayer or devotion, but it also is essentially the world of the mind: the place of imagination, invention, and inspiration. At the same time, the material world is infused with a sense of wonder and opportunity: the ability to see endless iterations of possibility in a peanut. Nelson’s *Carver*, then, creates a new hagiographic form within children’s literature, as well as a new version of the biographical hero.

Nelson’s poems certainly do not adhere to the strict definition of a saint’s life. Instead of applying a modern Catholic understanding of the rules for achieving sainthood, or a medieval understanding of hagiography, she seems to draw from a variety of commonly held beliefs about saints’ lives. Hagiographic tenets in Nelson’s book include a continual threat of bodily harm to the saint by a dominant authority; miracles; an emphasis on divine intervention; voluntary poverty; greater intimacy with God than with humans; and a legacy of iconography and relics. Combining elements of a traditional form with a unifying, progressive vision, Nelson creates a text that challenges complacent
assumptions regarding race, religion, and science. In looking at how specific poems suggest a hagiographic tradition, it becomes apparent that these poems also subvert traditional ways of thinking, particularly in terms of current attitudes that separate science from religion and seek to make them mutually exclusive.8

A children’s book that tackles difficult religious questions may not be commonplace in the twenty-first century, but its tradition stretches back to *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* (1559), which was one of the first texts children encountered in Puritan America. This gruesome book illustrates the bloody deaths of Christian (especially Protestant) martyrs; rather than shying away from violence, it graphically describes horrific death, whether by burning, torture, or other forms of cruelty. Yet for all its diverse torments, its message remains remarkably steadfast: If you endure a horrifying death by preaching the Gospels, you will be revered by future generations. The suggestion is that courage is saintly; that there must be a dire correlation between doing what you believe in, and risking agony. Carver is not martyred, and indeed no violence is acted upon his body in Nelson’s book. Nevertheless, courage under the constant threat of brutality characterizes his experience. *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* is no longer popular among mainstream adult audiences, and would almost certainly not be recommended for children, but it does provide a pattern and a precedent for making the life of the martyr or saint publicly known and widely available.

The traumas described by John Foxe have much in common with the lynching that was rampant in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An early poem in Nelson’s book, “The Perceiving Self” (17), describes a lynching in Fort Scott, Kansas, that Carver witnessed in 1879 at the age of fifteen. The poem is unique in that it is written from the perspective of a flower, who describes a “he” who “[speaks]” to the flowers. The musical quality early in the poem is achieved through assonance (“The first except birds” [line 1], and “many-petaled as the meadow” [line 5]), creating a harmonious scene soon to be disrupted. The rhythm of the triple spondee “brown lips, white teeth, pink tongue”9 stands out in the poem to emphasize that the flower describes what he sees in terms of color—the very color that effectively marks people as lynching targets. And although the poem starts with a description of someone who seems very much like Carver—one who would speak to flowers, sing outdoors, and pollinate flowers—it quickly moves on to describe a “he” that “[squeals] like a field mouse taken/without wingbeat,/with no shadow.” As feet “tram-
ple” past, “spew” “burn[s],” and “urine” “scald[s],” the reader becomes unsure whether Carver is running in horror after having witnessed the lynching, or whether the flowers are perceiving another person with “brown lips, white teeth, pink tongue” running to save himself from a lynch mob. Although Nelson’s note clarifies that Carver is not the victim but the witness, this chilling ambiguity speaks to the constant, indiscriminate threat that African Americans faced in Carver’s time. The “barking laughter/ from the cottonwoods at the creek” that closes the poem suggests the lynch mob’s continued presence.

Thus, when in the poem “Cercospor” (31) the “whiteman laughter” resurfaces in a scene in which Carver is blindfolded, then “[p]ushed and dragged down the street,” the reader is immediately aware of the grave peril in which Carver finds himself. And although he recognizes his assailants’ voices, he repeats to himself, “But they are white men./ White.” The word “white” appears six times in the poem—five are in the second stanza, after Carver’s “door bangs open.” The reader soon finds out that Carver’s white friends have arranged to surprise him with a “new suit, shirt, hat, and tie.” Observe also the sibilance present early in the poem, before the friends break in: “mossy watersong over stones. This species, with/ conidial scars on the conidiogenous cells . . .” (31). The alliterative “s” creates a hissing sound, perhaps the manifestation of a lurking fear of KKK attacks, as a later poem, “Friends in the Klan: 1923,” refers to the KKK with the symbol of a threatening snake: “the KKK uncoiled/ its length and hissed” (81). The generosity of the white friends’ gesture is undercut by their ignorance in failing to recognize the parallel their surprise has with lynching—or, if one reads the poem more cynically, the friends use that parallel in an attempt to heighten the gratification of the gift. Either reading complicates the question of race relations in Carver’s life by nodding both to his long-term friendships with whites, and to the racially charged context within which those friendships were formed.

Carver, then, has much in common with the class of saint whose commitment to a social cause—in this case healing racial division—put him at odds with the larger community. For social heroes, poetry of veneration becomes an important component of communal memory. Carver’s practice of maintaining friendships regardless of race at times alienated him from members of the African American community, and almost certainly made him the object of scorn among hostile whites who believed in social segregation. By refusing to compromise his friendships, even at great risk of bodily harm, Carver reminds one of saints like
St. Martin de Porres, who served people of all races in sixteenth-century colonial South America, and who suffered discrimination due to his own racially mixed heritage. More to the point, Carver makes the reality of racism present and persistent through the sensory experience of reading poetry. Rather than being told that racism exists, the young reader is invited to emotionally engage with the racially charged landscape of Carver’s life through the visual and aural sensualities of verse.

Nelson embraces complexity in her treatment of lynching and white threat in these poems. Rather than presenting Carver as a placid hero of race relations even in the face of physical peril, she emphasizes the violent potential of skin color in the same poem that presents interracial friendship and seeming solidarity. Carver’s life was in danger not only because of his skin color, but also because of his dedication to his professional life and those of other African Americans. The poem “Friends in the Klan: 1923” (81) brings to light for young readers the extremely segregated world in which Carver was living, using poetic devices like the caesura in the fifth line where a veterans’ hospital was opened “for Negros only. Under white control.” The hard stop in the middle of the line emphasizes the enforced separation of the races. In the same poem, Carver defies an anonymously written note that reads, “If you want to stay alive, be away Tuesday,” in order to support the right of fellow professionals at Tuskegee to pursue their careers. Instead of being “away Tuesday,” Nelson writes, “The Professor stayed. And he prayed for his friend in the Klan.” The internal rhyme found in both lines (“away Tuesday” and “stayed . . . prayed”) calls attention to how Carver transforms the Klan’s directive into an opportunity for him to pray for his friend. Although not a martyr for Christianity, Carver is willing to risk martyrdom for his beliefs.

The poem “Goliath: for J. B.,” which features rhyming couplets, describes Carver’s Bible study in the days following a lynching that is described in appalling detail: “Another lynching. Madness grips the South./ A black man’s hacked-off penis in his mouth” (76). Here, Carver answers terrifying violence with prayer, in order to keep “contact” with the “Creator” in the face of atrocity. Additionally, his refusal to espouse racial hatred, as shown in this poem and several others, does call attention to one of the major types of children’s biographical sketches of Carver (i.e., as a role model for race relations), but Nelson always presents the racial hatred–free aspect of Carver’s personality in such a way as to suggest that it is the result of his spiritual attitude toward humankind. Spirituality is both an antidote for hate, and, as
the allusion to the story of David and Goliath suggests, a bulwark for courage to do the impossible.

In addition to revealing the nature of martyrdom, *Carver* also displays the saintly virtue of poverty. If readers wish to correlate Carver with a patron saint of a particular cause, perhaps his endurance through violent threats as well as poverty would make him the patron saint of an oppressed people. The poverty expressed in the early poems is severe, even life-threatening (as in “The Prayer of Miss Budd: Simpson College, Iowa, 1890” [22]), but even more remarkable is the portrayal of Carver’s intentional poverty as he gains recognition for his scientific work. Between early poems that mention his stomach-gnawing poverty, and later poems describing him as the recipient of a diamond of “many carats” from Henry Ford, Nelson includes “Bedside Reading” (41). This is the only poem that mentions specific amounts of money, and it is the most concrete example of the meaning of money in Carver’s life. Nelson writes, “folded in Aunt Mariah’s Bible:/ the Bill of Sale./ Seven hundred dollars/ for a thirteen-year-old girl named Mary” (41). That with money comes a great capacity for evil becomes a daily reminder as the sales slip for Carver’s mother moves through the Bible “. . . from passage/ to favorite passage” (41). In the poem, this seven hundred dollars is broken into parts—“Three hundred fifty dollars/ for each son./ No charge/ for two stillborn daughters”—just as at the time of Mary’s sale, her body was perceived as little more than a labor-saving machine that could reproduce. That the devastating experience of giving birth to two stillborn babies is rendered with the phrase “no charge” emphasizes how money was valued over human dignity and emotion in the history of Carver’s family, as was the case for most enslaved African Americans. Line breaks in the second stanza separate the three lines mentioning money—“Fifteen cents,” “Three hundred fifty dollars,” and “No charge”—from the lines associated with human life, again highlighting the disconnect between money and human dignity.

A poem like this puts other poems about wealth and poverty into perspective concerning the cultural weight of money in the decades following slavery. Poetry is necessary here, for it is only through careful use of the poetic form (in this case, the use of line breaks and parallelism) that the unbearable heft of oppressive economics is rhythmically underscored. After all, as an enslaved person, not only was one’s body a commodity; any personal property or money was unprotected by law. Even with the support of postslavery law, economics and the white economic system become for Carver representative of great
oppression. In resisting such a system he, like Henry David Thoreau (who is compared to St. Francis, and called the secular patron saint of the environmental movement), rejects the moneyed system that had derived so much economic momentum from “buy[ing] and sell[ing] men, women, and children like cattle at the door of its senate house” (Thoreau 162). While Thoreau’s economic and political statement gained more attention, as he resisted both commerce and tax paying, he and Carver both recognized that how one uses or refuses money is a statement of personal ethics. Poetry enables this recognition for the child reader with lines like “seven hundred dollars / for a thirteen-year-old girl named Mary.” Readers, perhaps thirteen years old themselves, cannot look away from the cold reality that under slavery the economic system stamped out human autonomy.

Carver’s poverty—particularly the voluntary poverty later in his life and his general disavowal of money—earmarks his life once again as one of spiritual exceptionalism. Though saints need not be impoverished in all traditions (indeed, many beatified and sainted people were aristocrats), the Catholic Dominican and Franciscan orders emphasize voluntary poverty. Saints in these traditions, most famously St. Francis of Assisi, combine “asceticism with charitable works and teaching” (Head xxii). The Carver of Nelson’s biography not only turns down luxurious (or even comfortable) conditions, but, as in “The Year of the Sky Smear,” he appears utterly uninterested in his financial affairs. In this scene, Carver sorts through his mail:

A couple of thank-yous. Offers to pay for answers the Creator gives him for nothing. A note From the school treasurer: Will you please deposit your paychecks so I can balance the books? (63)

The poem shows Carver’s potential to become a well-paid scholar, but accentuates his rejection of the economic system entirely. Rather than wearing new tailored suits, which he could likely afford even on a modest salary, in these poems Carver chooses to wear “mismatched suits” and “trousers all bagged out at the knees” (34), descriptions that recall sackcloth. Carver embraces the ascetic life in many ways, only valuing material signs of wealth, such as the “flawless/ many-carat stone” given him by Henry Ford (93), for their usefulness in educating both himself and his students. Carver keeps the diamond in a dusty box
labeled “MINERALS” (93). His life, then, becomes a model for success on an other-worldly scale. In opposition to the economic system that quantified his mother’s worth with a “sales slip,” Carver measures his own worth not in bank receipts or showy material possessions, but in terms of how widely his contributions to humanity can reach.

While the threat of violence and voluntary poverty characterize the lives of many saints, they are perhaps even more widely associated with the miraculous. There is no paucity of the miraculous in Carver, but Nelson suggests that in the age of rapid scientific advancement the very idea of a miracle has changed. In the early twentieth century scientists sought explanation for every natural occurrence, and the rational displaced the miraculous. Standards of modern science demanded that results be reproducible, and that researchers account for every mental step in the science lab. When results could not be recreated, or proven, then they were libeled as fraudulent rather than lauded as miraculous. In other words, there were (and still are) two very different sets of expectations for scientists and saints.

In Carver the miraculous and the mysterious abound, and Nelson shows her readers a mind that is in such constant communication with the divine that there seems to be virtually no separation between inspiration and thought. Indeed, Nelson’s poems ask, what is the difference? Carver’s choice to call his ideas inspiration and to invoke the Creator, even at the risk of losing his reputation among scientists, suggests that he is unfailingly committed to the belief that scientific discovery is a gift from God. The effect of this choice, as Nelson’s book suggests, is that science can and does happen by means of divine inspiration, and the results call into question our definitions of, and the differences between, science and miracle. In the same way Carver’s choice blurs the lines between science and religion, the biographical poem softens the boundaries between the facts of a person’s life and the imagination of the poet/biographer. Poetry is transformative; it takes prosaic fact and reshapes it into sublime literature. Nelson’s work, like Carver’s, sees an opportunity for the extraordinary and miraculous in the everyday.

In “A Charmed Life” (32), Nelson hints at how one can understand a miracle in the context of Carver, whose subject is dubbed “An astonished Midas/ surrounded by exponentially multiplying miracles,” which suggests two important things: not only is the everyday experience seen in terms of wonder and miracle, but that it is Carver’s exceptional hand (or perspective) that makes the world so. As “Midas,” Carver turns everything he touches into figurative gold, and it is notable that his power
“astonishe[s]” even himself, suggesting that he becomes a conduit for God’s action on earth. The end of the poem leaves the reader with an image of one daily “miracle”: “Light every morning dawns through the trees.” The sun rising is a miracle and a mystery for Carver—for although science can explain how it happens, only faith can offer a reason for its existence.

A following sonnet, “From an Alabama Farmer” (39), again asserts that the miraculous often has its roots not in mystical, otherworldly events, but in joyful occurrences that can be attributed in part to scientific discovery and in part to faith. By “follering/ the things [he] herd” (sic) from Carver about farming, this farmer reaps a “bompercrop” (sic). The farmer’s injunction combines science and miracle with ease: “I want to know what maid my miricle” (sic). The term “miraculous,” in this situation, does not apply only to the unexplainable or the unpredictable. The power of knowledge in this context becomes the power to perform miracles, and “miracle” now includes the scientific, as “science” includes the spiritually miraculous. This poem meshes a dialect of the Deep South and phonetic spelling with a literary form long seen as high art. The marriage of such seeming opposites is striking; putting in sonnet form the voice of one unlikely to have any formal literary training elevates the subject and lends dignity to the vernacular. Poetry provides the artistic medium through which Nelson is able to transform the voice of the laborer into high art.

Both Carver and the Alabama farmer consider agriculture and scientific advancements miraculous. However, the scientific community as a whole does not, nor would many religious traditions. Since before Galileo was put in house arrest by church authorities for questioning biblical accuracy in light of his astronomical observations, or Darwin labeled a heretic for his evolutionary theory, science and religion have been uneasy bedfellows. As Carver combines spirit and science, the voices of his critics grow stronger. In “Eureka” (85) he is dismissed publicly by the New York Times: “REAL scientists/ do not ascribe their successes/ to ‘inspiration.’” Carver’s refusal to divide his scientific methods from his connection with the Creator incites harsh criticism from the press: “Talk of that sort simply will bring/ ridicule on an admirable institution/ and on the race for which it has done/ and still is doing so much” (85). Carver is faced with a public whose strict lines between science and religion exclude his perspective, and mock his ideas by creating an opportunity to openly shame all African Americans.
Such criticism only anticipates Carver’s later intermittent success with a polio cure in “The Penol Cures” (88), a poem strongly suggestive of hagiography as it highlights his miraculous healing. Since the most powerful miracles attributed to saints typically are associated with bodily healing, it is not surprising that Nelson’s work includes an instance of Carver healing people. In complicating his healing miracles, Nelson serves to emphasize further their miraculous nature. The press ultimately dismisses his cures, calling them “unsatisfactory and irreproducible.” And because “the cause of those cures [is]/ unquantifiable/ and wholly unscientific,” the public may be inclined to forget that indeed, “there were many successes” under Carver’s care. The magic of this poem is that there is no clear statement as to whether the Penol Cure is more rightly a scientific or a spiritual achievement. While the first stanza suggests that Carver’s first patient and his father “were willing to believe,” it leaves ambiguous just what they were willing to believe in: Carver? Science? God? Themselves? The ambiguity seems intentional, and calls upon readers to consider their own definitions of what is miracle and what is medicinal.

With such wide impact on agriculture, health, animal science, education, botany, nutrition, and art, one wonders whether the sin of pride or arrogance might complicate this saintly life. Not only do the poems suggest that some of Carver’s peers might have thought so (“He thinks he’s better than us” [“My People” 34]), readers may be surprised at poems like “Called” and “The Nervous System of the Beetle” (28, 33) that suggest he may have struggled with hubris. Toiling against allowing it to be a force in his life was perhaps his especial burden. A flaw like pride reveals a more nuanced Carver than one would find in most children’s biographies. However, Nelson’s poetry suggests that the potential for pride and the satisfaction that comes with it is tempered, even eliminated, by the knowledge that his work is used for destructive purposes as well. The poem “Out of the Fire” is vitally important to understanding the hagiographic underpinnings of this biography, as it foregrounds Carver’s potential for overarching pride and concludes with that sin’s resolution. Carver’s “growing list of firsts,” in combination with a dream vision in which Tuskegee is placed under his direction, put him in a position of high honor. His merits gain him professional respect internationally: “...the British name him/ a Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts” (68). His presence haunts the dreams of powerful people in a way reminiscent of biblical stories:
First came the dream.  
Washington’s daughter-in-law  
told Carver in passing she’d dreamed  
dear Mr. Washington had said  
Carver will carry on for me.  
I have faith in him. (68)

The first stanza of “Out of the Fire” shows both Carver’s achievements and the real potential for hubris to consume him. Nelson accentuates this high point in his life with two hopeful line endings, “At last,” and “Discovered,” only to undercut that hope with the final line in the stanza, “by the war machine” (69). The moment of clarity and despair is both personal and universal; his products are used to fuel the war economy, and defeat the opposition, but there is also the sense that “disaster” and “triumph” are always interwoven: “He sees how disaster/ is seeded with triumph . . .” (69). The personal result is simply that “The Professor is humbled,” but in this moment, one can see the weight of this recognition pulling Carver into the sadness and implicit cruelty of the human condition. Within the morass of this cruelty he recognizes that his high achievements may contribute to, rather than alleviate, the quotidian sorrow of the suffering masses. A poem like “Out of the Fire” emphasizes that moral questions have no easy answers, and refuses to cater to simplistic didacticism.

A connection with the kind of internal conflict that grips and afflicts the common person is characteristic of the most enduring and widely read hagiographical work, The Confessions of Saint Augustine. Augustine’s Confessions is a chronicle of his own struggle against what he saw as sins of the flesh, or lust. Other Christian biography focuses on “life depictions” that “emerged whitened and clean, as moral exemplars to others” (Hamilton 54). Quite often saints’ lives mention no romance whatsoever, whether potential, imagined, or real. Nelson’s poems about Carver’s intimate relationships offer only veiled suggestions as to his love life. Carver never married, but in “The Sweet-Hearts: Sarah Hunt, rumored suicide” (51–53), readers are given their only glimpse into a traditional courtship. There appears to be mutual admiration between Sarah Hunt and Carver, but the relationship is strained. Clearly, her “invisible, disapproving family” (52) hopes that she will marry someone who will not prevent her from passing for white, thereby giving her children and herself a chance to live with greater safety and opportunity. Had she married Carver, “[she] could never again ride/ in the white car, or sleep in a decent hotel” (52). The poem, in Hunt’s
voice, is a suicide note to her children and husband, but also tells the reader much about her relationship with Carver. They appear to have had a chaste courtship, but the intimacy and structure of marriage are present in the attention she gives to his appearance, as if his clothing reflects something about her character. In a household at that time, it likely would have, as she would probably be the one taking care of the mending, washing, and all other aspects of attire for the family. The short lines remind one of a laundry list. In sum, she oversees his dressing:

I straightened his ties,
told him when
his sleeves and collars
needed turning,
suggested he give away
his baggiest trousers,
that there’s such a thing
as too much mending. (52)

In the poem, Carver has the last word in the relationship: “Miss Sarah, I believe you care/ more about my clothes/ than you do about me or my work” (53). He points out that “Miss Sarah” seems to be valuing appearance over substance, and the kinds of things that become a banal part of the institution of marriage (like wives taking care of the laundry and mending), above the more passionate aspects of a relationship like falling in love with a person, mind, body, and soul (“me or my work”).

How does Carver’s early failed relationship with Miss Sarah Hunt add to our understanding of how Nelson’s work is modeled on hagiography? What does such a relationship, fraught with social and familial pressures, add to constructions of intimacy in children’s literature? What can we learn from Nelson’s poems about Carver’s intimate relationships by thinking of them in terms of the lives of the saints? Virginia Burrus suggests that saints’ lives are often marked by a resistance not only to the physical intimacy of traditional romantic relationships, but also to the social structure of such relationships. “Saintly love,” Burrus writes, “begins with the resistance to the temptations of ‘worldly’ eroticism—resistance not merely to the transient pleasures of physical intercourse . . . but also to perduring familial and political hierarchies, institutionalized relations of domination and submission that both structure, and are structured by, relations of sex and gender” (14).
The Carver of Nelson’s work resists pleasures on both levels: hand-holding is the only explicitly physical pleasure he shares with Hunt, and he chooses not to pursue their relationship further, which might have led to marriage and the kind of “familial hierarchy” to which Burrus refers. If indeed “saintly love” resists “institutionalized relations of domination and submission,” then certainly Carver ultimately would distance himself from a relationship that already had started to mimic a gender-normative situation, with one partner taking care of the other’s appearance largely because it is part of her duty in fulfilling a prescribed gender role.

The complex relationships between intimacy, resistance, and saintly love in Carver do not end with “The Sweet-Hearts.” The poems lean toward intimacy again in “Lovingly Sons” (79), and this level of intimacy in social relationships is sustained through the end of the book. Carver’s relationship with Sarah Hunt is portrayed as vexed; so, too, are those with The Blue Ridge Boys, a group of men who looked to Carver as a mentor, the first of whom he met at a YMCA Blue Ridge Conference (n. 82). Much more than “The Sweet-Hearts,” the poems about Carver’s “Boys” are intensely spiritual. They are also familial in tone: the letters are addressed “Dear Dad” and “Dearest Father,” and closed in one instance with “Your lovingly son” (79). The filial mimicry implicit in the father/son dynamic suggests a deep but chaste intimacy. It also has some similarities to the kind of relationships found in biographies of great men of antiquity, which, according to Burrus, “typically focus on the erotic relationship of disciple and master” (161). While the level of eroticism in “Lovingly Sons” is nearly nonexistent, the poem does end with a gesture of pleasure, if not eros. As Carver replies to the letters, “A smile, dancing radiance,/ plays over his face” (80). While this is not an erotic scene, the words “dancing radiance,” with their pleasurable consonance, suggest that it is the smile of a deeply satisfied man, one who has the kind of glowing aura that surrounds those in newfound relationships.

Indeed, the mentoring friendships Carver cultivated are finally the most meaningful, and in many ways the most Christ-like, of his life. The disciple and master relationship, Burrus notes, “is replicated in the relationship of the writer to his hagiographical subject, as well as in the relationship of the saint to Christ” (161): the Blue Ridge Boys are to Carver as Nelson is to Carver, but also as Carver is to Christ. Christ is the shared object of adoration between Carver and his “Boys,” the safe medium through which he is able to become intimate with others,
connecting Carver with other works of children’s literature that eschew overt sexual content and rely on alternative subjects to imply intimacy. The opening line of “Lovingly Sons” uses language that positions Carver himself as the object of desire: “Everybody wants a piece of him” (79). Taken out of the context of the poem, the phrase is unambiguously sexual, one often used as a euphemism for sexual attraction. Later, Carver and his protégés exchange “a lifelong vow/ to pray for each other.” Couched in the terms of marriage or ordination, Carver commits himself to a spiritual relationship with his younger colleagues. The intimacy Carver has in his life is an intimacy with the Creator, and it is through the Creator that he fosters intimacy with others. The relationship he creates with the younger scientists is one that enables them also to grow closer to Christ: “They write You/ must have been praying for me./ I felt so near/ you and Jesus” (80). Additionally, “Lovingly Sons” is the only poem in the book to refer to Carver as a saint. Men in lecture halls across the United States “called [him] to the dais/ and proclaimed [him]/ Genius, Scientist, Saint” (80). Sainthood is bestowed upon him in an end-stopped line that seems to emphasize the last stressed syllable, “Saint.” But, at this late point in the book, the perceptive child reader has already recognized Carver’s sainthood through the poetry; this declaration, rather than becoming a proscriptive reading, supports the child’s experience of the poems.

The poems centered on Carver’s relationship with Jim Hardwick are vitally important to a twenty-first-century adaptation of hagiography, because they offer a model for how a saint-like figure may act as an “invisible friend” in the lives of the faithful (Brown 50). Although Hardwick and Carver did enjoy a real friendship, the poems suggest that a richly rewarding relationship between patron saint and follower can flourish, even when much of it is dependent on letters and prayer. Thus, Carver invites readers to step into the place of Jim Hardwick, befriend Carver, and seek out his wisdom and spiritual friendship. The extended example of Hardwick and Carver’s friendship mimics the “deep warmth that always welled up in ancient Mediterranean men around the figure of the beloved teacher and spiritual guide” (Brown 59). Peter Brown emphasizes that it was this warmth of male friendship that helped kindle the cult of the saint in Mediterranean countries during early Christianity: “the warmth of late-Roman senatorial amicitia and the intensity of late-Roman loyalty to patroni and to beloved teachers suffused their newly forged style of relationship with the [pagan past]” (60).
Similarly, Jim Hardwick’s friendship offers readers an example of how to invite Carver, as spiritual guide, into their own lives and traditions. In “My Dear Spiritual Boy: Letter to Jim Hardwick, October 1923” the most sincere words of love are used: “I love/ you,” “I needed you most,” “soul mate” (82). The question of whether Carver and Hardwick were lovers is salient. Readers recognize the words of love, and quite naturally want to categorize the relationship in terms of sexuality. However, Nelson’s portrayal of this relationship fits best into a framework of disciple and teacher, or saint and Christ. The line break between the fourth and fifth lines, “My friend, I love/ you. . . ,” connects the terms “friend” and “love,” rather than isolating the more intimate, “I love you.” In the previous poem Carver is faced with warnings from his white friends in the KKK: “If you want to stay alive,/ be away Tuesday. Unsigned. But a familiar hand” (81). This poem, entitled “Friends in the Klan: 1923” depicts a situation occurring in the same year that he meets Jim Hardwick. Faced with betrayal by his friends because of his race and his refusal to bend to the pernicious wishes of the KKK, Carver befriends Hardwick, who is “A college athlete. White. And a soul mate,” a circumstance underscored by being part of the closing couplet that ends with the word “fate.”

The appearance of Hardwick in Carver’s life marks a moment when his faith is tested by racial hatred, but Carver finds answers in his relationship with Hardwick, which he sees as one given to him by God. In “My Beloved Friend: Letter to Jim Hardwick, April 1924,” the reader again is faced with homosocial intimacy that might suggest a sexual relationship. While I do believe such a reading can offer valuable scholarly insights, I argue that it is not primary to the book as a whole. The poem seeks to establish love that exists in the “brotherhood of man,/ the fatherhood of God” (86); by foregrounding love for humanity (the “Brotherhood of man”) Nelson advocates for a spiritual biography that is politically and socially relevant to its modern audience, whose world is still torn by intolerance, poverty, and prejudice. In a religion dominated by masculine imagery, with the Trinitarian godhead represented as male, on what is a devoted Christian man to model friendship, if not the “love Christ in others” model offered in the New Testament? Nelson refers to this as the basis of their friendship in the last two lines of the poem: “It was the Christ in you,/ of course” (86).

Virginity, chastity, sexual temperance, and sexual temptation have long been a part of the traditions of both children’s literature and hagiography. In her nuanced play on love and intimacy, Nelson in this
case is within the tradition of hagiography, and the poem’s ostensible subversion has more to do with modern assumptions about sexuality than with the erotic tradition within hagiography itself. A queer reading of *Carver* is no doubt glaringly obvious to some readers, if one considers how some of the poems subscribe to stereotypes about gay men. Carver has close male friendships, a tendency toward some nongender normative roles like washing and needlework, and outsider status with respect to the heteropatriarchy. I intentionally resist this reading for a number of reasons. Admittedly, I am influenced by knowing that Nelson disavows a queer subtext, characterizing Carver as a “lifelong celibate” rather than homosexual. But also, in the act of resisting a perhaps popular queer reading, I hope to imitate the kind of resistance I see at play both in Carver’s personal life and in the lives of the saints. By not queering *Carver* in this paper I offer up a space of resistance in the critical work—there is something a bit queer about resisting a queer reading in the age of queer theory.

Certainly there is a long-established relationship between erotic love, resistance, and sainthood. In her writing about saintly love, Burrus emphasizes that

> . . . resistance to cultural norms, aptly coded in contemporary terms as “queer,” does not take an anti-erotic turn, proffering the sterile safety of a desexualized “agape” in exchange for the firm repression of sexual desire. Rather, it gives rise to an exuberant art of eroticism in which the negativity harbored within resistance is eclipsed by the radical affirmation of desire also conveyed in resistance. (14)

In this context, Carver’s enduring chastity perhaps coexists with the kind of resistance through which saints have transcended the body in their discovery of a relationship with the divine. Rather than reading a repression of all consummated desire in *Carver*, one can see an ecstatic connection with God which, although not physical, is passionate and fervent. The erotic energy readers perceive in the poems might be most accurately described as religious, not corporeal, ecstasy. Thus, the resistance to physical intimacy evidenced in *Carver* offers a space charged with desire, but desire without an earthly object. As a result, the happiness (I daresay, bliss) derived from Carver’s relationship with Hardwick is couched in terms of what Karmen MacKendrick calls “desire beyond subjectivity,” or perhaps a desire that transcends an earthly object and trains its eye on the divine.
The *jouissance* evident in the poems about Carver and Hardwick intensifies as the book nears its close, but with an increasing sense of “self-mortifying *jouissance*” such as Burrus sees at play in “ancient hagiography” (14). There is a painful strain in “Letter to Mrs. Hardwick: December 1934” (90); a marked separation between Carver and his “beloved friend” occurs when Hardwick marries. The tone of the poem is one of shock (“I confess/ that I have not yet recovered from the shock/of dear Jimmie’s marriage”), and a bit of befuddlement (“I feel very sure/ the dear boy has done well. I did not know/ a thing about it!”) (90). The sadness in the poem comes perhaps from not being told the news directly by his friend, but also from the recognition that Hardwick has “[entered] into a world they will never share” (90). Carver’s choice to lead a celibate life means that the “joy” of marriage, the intimacy between a husband and a wife, will replace—or, it seems, already has replaced—the intimacy of friendship. This leaves Carver very much alone.

The last of the Hardwick poems is a slow-paced one about death. There is no talk of friendship or love; instead it grapples with the meaning of death for one with faith in God. “Nature” is capitalized, as are “God” and “He,” suggesting a worldview that sees God in the natural world. The poem does offer a final remark on the friendship between Carver and Hardwick; it is a radical affirmation of life, as was their friendship. Both men were mutually devoted to Christianity and to the advancement of peace in a country rent by racial hatred and prejudice. This poem looks at death with the unequivocal gaze of one who can say that he has loved his neighbor and can meet his Maker: “When I die I will live again” (95).

As Nelson continues to explore both hagiographic traditions and modern thought by challenging the separation of science and religion, as well as erotics and brotherly love, she also develops an innovative way of incorporating the ancient tradition of iconography into a modern text. *Carver* is placed firmly within the tradition of illustrated books for young readers; However, while Nelson includes iconography, she reverses its relationship to hagiography. Historically, hagiography precedes iconography, but *Carver* shifts the traditional relationship between saints’ lives and saints’ images and underscores the circumstance that many saints from the age of photography had images made of them long before their canonization occurred. An essential part of the rendering of a saint’s life is providing readers with the fodder for veneration. *Carver* offers numerous sites for veneration, all mediated through the photograph. I wish to argue here that the portraits suggest a tradition
of painted iconography, and the photographed items saints’ relics. Importantly, the photographs of Carver himself are not only sites for spiritual veneration in that they are akin to icons, but they also mark a crucial aspect of his life: his special place in American life and letters as an African American professional who was widely recognized for his work on behalf of science and humanity.

The photos interspersed throughout *Carver* offer more than a visual timeline to accompany the story of a man’s life. They work toward a stylized, iconic composite picture, much like the depictions of saints who can often be identified by specific attributes or objects. For example, one could reasonably identify an icon or statue of Saint Francis of Assisi by the birds or animals around him, and need nothing more. Of the twelve photographs of the adult Carver as an individual, eleven show him with flowers or plants around or on his person. More often than not, he has a flower in his lapel. He is photographed standing by his paintings of flowers, or in a field of flowers, but almost invariably, when you see Carver in this book, you see him in the company of that to which he devoted his life. Hagiographers set the tone for the kind of icons that are created to represent the saint in order to represent spiritual qualities. Likewise, Nelson’s work, although written long after the photographs were taken, uses visual clues to give the reader a lasting image of Carver. Since his profession as a botanist naturally presented Nelson with the opportunity to write about Carver’s constant companionship with flowers, her decision to include his flower in the lapel as an identifying attribute reverses the medieval tradition of hagiography dictating the content of icons. Instead, the photographic icon dictates the content of the hagiography. Additionally, there is an inversion of the conventional composition of a children’s text, in which illustration comes after the language. Unlike the illustrations in many books of children’s poetry, the photographs in *Carver* offer documentary evidence that suggests content, rather than the reverse.

Through interplay between the photographic image and the imagery of language, we can see how Nelson plays with the idea of sainthood, rather than delineating an exact saint’s life, as literal hagiography. The flower in the lapel is a repeated motif in the poems: “He wore a snapdragon/ I remember it was yellow and purple,/ in his lapel” (“A Ship Without a Rudder” 21); “a rosebud boutonniere” (“The Last Rose of Summer” 24); “And always in his threadbare lapel/ a flower. Even in January./ I’ve never asked how.” (“Green-Thumb Boy” 29); “Always some old weed in his lapel./ like he’s trying to be dapper.”
“My People” 34); “Always some kind of a flower/ in his faded lapel.” (The Sweet-Hearts” 51). No doubt the many pictures of Carver with a flower in his lapel inspired Nelson to turn this photographic evidence into a rhythmic element of the poems. This reversal—the icon suggesting details of the hagiography, rather than the hagiography suggesting details of the icon—is meaningful considering the impact of photography on our cultural conceptions of race and class at the turn of the twentieth century.

Scientists and eugenicists with racist agendas largely controlled the kind of public photographic imagery of African Americans available during much of Carver’s life. In *Photography on the Color Line*, Shawn Michelle Smith argues that “race and visual culture” are “mutually constitutive,” and that “photographic archives” can be read as “racialized sites invested in laying claim to contested cultural meanings” (3). Indeed, the photographic archive presented in *Carver* is laden with consequential cultural meaning, since his aptitude in both art and science place him among the nation’s elite during a time when pseudoscientific evolutionary theories regarding the so-called degenerate nature of people of African descent supposedly were being verified with photographic evidence. Much like W. E. B. Du Bois’s “American Negro Exhibition” displayed at the 1900 Paris Exposition, which aimed to show sociological and scientific “evidence of African American ability and leadership” (Smith 12), the photographs included in *Carver* bear witness to the inanity of such theories. They situate him squarely within the tradition of upper-middle-class professionals; from the formal portraits of Carver taken while at Iowa State Agricultural College and Tuskegee Institute to the photos at work in the lab or the field, all show him participating in a life that white supremacists wanted to deny to people of color. The gentility and joie de vivre suggested by the flower in his lapel further emphasize all that white supremacists hoped to obfuscate.

The photographs offer young readers the opportunity to understand one of W. E. B. Du Bois’s most famous ideas: that of “double-consciousness” or “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (38). Shawn Michelle Smith argues that above all, Du Bois’s theory is an intensely visual one; in her work she explores the “legacy of visual psychological ideas that Du Bois draws on and fundamentally reconfigures to theorize double consciousness” (26; emphasis in original). She emphasizes that “it is the image of himself that Du Bois sees through the eyes of white others that makes him feel his ‘two-ness’; it
is the image of self as other that Du Bois cannot fully assimilate” (26). While the photos of Carver appear to be relatively regular protocol for men of his education and stature, one is simultaneously aware of the many different gazes they meet, both in Carver’s time and more recently with the publication of Nelson’s work. The poems—often in the voices of others, not of Carver himself—suggest an acute awareness of a dual self: one that struggles to exist freely, and another that feels gazed upon, evaluated, dismissed, and threatened by an outsider.

The notion of the “perceiving self” is developed explicitly in two poems, “The Perceiving Self” and “Four a.m. in the Woods,” but implicitly through text and image throughout Nelson’s work. She chooses the lesser-known phrase “perceiving self” instead of “double-consciousness,” linking her poetic ideas more closely with William James than with W. E. B. Du Bois, who studied with James at Harvard.14 The idea that the self is not one unified being, but is divided into consciousness (the perceiving self) and the body (the perceived self), has seen many permutations in philosophy, psychology, and cultural studies.15 For the purposes of my work here, I wish to emphasize that for the form of Carver, poems and photographs exhibit in themselves a kind of example of the dual selves: the perceiving self being the poems written from Carver’s perspective, and the perceived self found in the photographs (taken by an other and viewed by an other) and the poems written from the perspective of others. The poems in various voices and the photographs can be particularly fruitful ways of introducing the complicated but important ideas of dual-consciousness to young readers. As children’s literature, Carver offers a young audience the opportunity to connect with advanced philosophical ideas that have been formative in American culture.16

There are seven photographs of items which are somewhat analogous to relics in the context of this paper: Carver’s school slate (15); his glasses and case (42); a sample of Carver’s paint “Egyptian Blue,” with a miniature landscape painted by him (50); a detail of his lacework sampler (56); his specimen case (74); his Bible and pocketwatch (75); and a specimen of a peanut plant (89). A relic—a tangible item believed to be imbued with some spiritual power—needn’t be a morbid bone fragment paraded about in a bedizened shrine to be of religious significance for followers. It can be an item that was of prosaic importance to the saint with whom it is associated. Each object included in the book signifies something important about Carver’s life, inviting contemplation, respect, and introspection on the part of the observer.
Found among poems that situate the relics within stories about how Carver’s life touched the lives of others, the photos carry much more weight than typical illustrations normally do. They are stand-ins for the real objects that are presented as museum pieces and open for public visitation—or veneration, as the case may be. Being in the presence of Carver’s ephemera has the potential to impact upon a visitor through inspiration, encouragement, and hope; they are tangible evidence of Carver’s life on earth that, through Nelson’s book, end up in the hands of children. Just as poetry encourages a more sensory engagement with biography than does prose, photographs offer substantive engagement that seeks to inspire a youthful audience. Saints’ relics are credited by devotees with causing miracles, healings, and spiritual visions. Keeping in mind how the poems in *Carver* blur the lines between science and miracle, faith and fact, the possibility of miracles and visions following an encounter with Carver’s relics is not beyond one’s ken. The poems repeatedly suggest that readers reconsider how we view the world, and how we understand science to work in modern times. The relics included in this work remind readers that “his faith, his science,/ his miracles” could not be separated (“God’s Little Workshop” 84). Thus, the objects of veneration need not remove boils from lepers, but perhaps need only to open the ears of young readers, so they may hear “The Creator’s small, still voice” 83).

If it is true that saints’ “earthly remains—both bodies and material possessions—bec[o]me the conduit through which God work[s] miracles out of regard for the merits of the saints” (Shinners 157), then it follows that Carver’s admirers would look to his possessions as items of transformative power in their own lives. His glasses and his school slate are particularly rich in meaning and hold special relevance in the spiritual biography. Each is imbued with spiritual importance, not simply for its close daily proximity to the saint, but also for the transformative power it had in Carver’s own life. The poem featured on the same page as the school slate, “Watkins Laundry and Apothecary: Mariah Watkins, Neosho, Missouri,” takes place in Carver’s earliest moments as an aspiring botanist and hopeful student. In the last stanza, readers learn that his brief stay with Mariah Watkins is over, as he seeks the next step in his education: “He left to find a teacher that knew/ more than he knew” (15). The slate at the bottom of the page is empty, and the negative space reminds us of all that has been written and erased. What the slate doesn’t show is all that led Carver to consider
how the seed
this flower grew from
carried a message from a flower
that bloomed a million years ago,
and how this flower
would send the message on
to a flower
that was going to bloom
in a million more years. (14)

The poem highlights the precocity of Carver’s perception. The stacking effect of the repeated word “flower” four times mimics his vision of botanical potential. The slate, like the Black-Eyed Susan he describes, holds both the memory of what has been written and erased as well as the empty space that will hold a record of his future thought. A slate by its nature is the catalyst for both what came before and what is yet to be. Its presence in the text is a tangible nod to Keatsian “negative capability,” the ability to live comfortably between knowing and not yet knowing: the recognition, even within a life of science, that life is more process than fact. Its presence in the text suggests to readers and followers educational potential. To believers in the power of this relic, being in the presence of Carver’s slate might grant the follower clarity of thought and perseverance in intellectual pursuits.

The personal objects of saints, called “contact, symbolic, or representative relics,” are of great value to their followers (Snoek 12). Carver’s glasses are pictured after the poem “Bedside Reading,” and though the act of reading is facilitated by the glasses, the presence of the relic invites a closer analysis. For those with glasses, the visual world is always mediated by an object that helps them see more clearly. Furthermore, eyes are freighted with great cultural and symbolic meaning. Through his eyes, Carver witnessed atrocities like lynching. With his eyes he spotted “red clay” on a “hillside” and created the perfect “Egyptian blue” that “no artist of scientist had duplicated since the days of old King Tut” (“Egyptian Blue” 49). Carver’s eyes made him a scholar, painter, and interpreter of scripture. If Carver’s eyes, the windows of his soul, encountered the world through lenses, those lenses can perhaps carry the sensitivity of the soul who looked through them. Carver is able, as in “Bedside Reading,” to see his own life in the biblical stories:
When the ram bleats from the thicket,
   Isaac . . . like me . . . understands
the only things you can ever
really . . . trust . . .
are . . .
   the natural order . . .
   . . . and the Creator’s love . . .
spiraling . . .
out of chaos . . . (42)

To see what Carver sees—to look through Carver’s lens, as it were—is
what the seeker finds in the relic of the glasses. The follower may want
spiritual or scientific visions, and in proximity to the glasses, find the
ability to see through Carver’s eyes. This imaginative act enables the
child reader to more wholly connect with the complicated issues sur-
rounding racism. This is the apex of poetic power and the hope that
can be found in children’s literature: not that language can tell a young
reader that our nation is scarred by racism, but that it can invite him
or her to imaginatively experience what others have experienced, and
to vicariously feel the weight of another person’s existence.

In Carver: A Life in Poems, Marilyn Nelson uses the art of the bi-
ography in verse to elevate what has been the rather prosaic genre
of George Washington Carver biographies for children to a kind of
literary hagiography. Just as Carver himself rejects binaries and ties
together science and miracle, so, too, does Nelson bring together
genres in this biographical poem for children. In Carver one sees a
new and revivified form of didacticism. Rather than projecting his
life as a series of lessons about overcoming racial prejudice and the
importance of scientific achievement, Nelson’s poetry encourages chil-
dren to emotionally identify with Carver as an authentic person whose
existence was both entirely human and almost mystically exceptional.
Since Carver’s publication, biography in verse for children has grown,
suggesting that Nelson’s work has influenced the direction of both
poetry and biography for children. Works like Carole Weatherford’s
Becoming Billie Holiday (2008) and Margarita Engle’s The Surrender Tree
(2008) have been published in Carver’s wake.17 Perhaps most signifi-
cantly, the legacy of George Washington Carver will shift, so that he is
remembered not simply as a dry symbol of the model scientist or the
man who rose out of slavery to become a national icon, but as a person
with the kindness, humor, intellect, and spiritual depth to inspire and
transform new generations of children.
Notes

I am grateful to Katharine Capshaw Smith for her significant and insightful suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay, and to the anonymous readers who helped shape the essay into its current form. I would also like to thank Marilyn Nelson for generously spending some of her time to speak with me about her work.

Interestingly, St. Hildegard of Bingen’s interests in science, art, and humanitarian efforts make her akin to George Washington Carver.

Carver has won the Boston Globe–Horn Book Award, and was a finalist for the Coretta Scott King, the Newbery, and the National Book awards (Flynn 74).

Richard Flynn’s “Consolation Prize,” commenting on the general state of poetry in 2003, does discuss Carver as an extended example of quality poetry for children.

Chapter one of Thomas’s Poetry’s Playground offers a detailed explanation of “school” poetry.

Nelson’s Fortune’s Bones (2004), on the other hand, was written specifically for a young audience.

Carver offers highly formal poems such as sonnets (“From An Alabama Farmer,” “Driving Dr. Carver,” and “Professor Carver’s Bible Class”), as well as poems written in blank verse (“My Beloved Friend,” “Arachis Hypogaea”).

Although individual poems were published in journals before the publication of Carver as a united volume, it does the work of a biographical poem, in the tradition of Robert Penn Warren’s Audubon: A Vision and Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce.

In an era when science teachers have to battle certain religious groups in order to continue to teach basic evolutionary principles, a book that contests the line between science and faith is particularly relevant and provocative. Carver rejects the polarization of science and religion, and his legacy suggests that good science can co-exist with belief in God—a notion worth exploring for young people as they contemplate their vocations.

While this line could also be convincingly read as iambic, in a free-verse poem it may be hard to determine the meter of a single line. There is no overall meter in the poem itself to serve as a guide: in John Hollander’s words, no “metrical contract” set out in by the first line. The spondaic reading refers to the line’s rhythm, not its meter. (My thanks to Jennifer Holley for this clarification.)

Although there are many saints of African descent, there are no official African American saints. So, as one who faced obstacles at the turn of the last century due to a racist society, Carver may be considered the secular saint of black experience in the United States, because his experiences speak to the postslavery conditions of life for many freed slaves.

Correspondence with Marilyn Nelson, December 2007.

As Kenneth Kidd points out in his introduction to The Lion and the Unicorn’s 1999 issue, Sexuality and Children’s Literature, sexuality is both “specific and diffuse” in children’s texts (v). It is often sublimated, and other kinds of desire (be it for food or other expressions of physical/emotional intimacy) are made manifest. In Carver, desire for spiritual intimacy could certainly be read as a sublimation of sexuality.

In using the ideas of the double-consciousness in a text about a Tuskegee scholar and friend of Booker T. Washington, Nelson implicitly offers a bridge between two turn-of-the-century schools of thought considered by some to be irreconcilable.

The influence of William James on W. E. B. Du Bois is contested. Certainly they were colleagues and correspondents, but the degree to which James rather than Hegel was Du Bois’s major influence is debatable. Shamoon Zamir downplays the connection between Du Bois and James in Dark Voices (1995), while Shawn Michelle Smith in Photography on the Color Line finds connecting their thought useful.

For a brief overview, see D’Andrade 163–64.
Nelson’s work is part of a growing interest among African American writers in representation and the photographic image; Walter Dean Myers’s *Monster* (1999) is another such example.

Thanks to Sylvia M. Vardell for this insight on the child_lit e-mail list, 5 December 2008.

**Works Cited**


———. Personal interview. 20 Nov. 2005.


