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## Colorblind Ideology Expressed Through Children's Picture Books: A Social Justice Issue

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the presence of people of color and white people as protagonists in a sample of recently published children's picture books. The author proposes that the relative lack of books about people of color in the sample is reflective of colorblind ideology, denies children of color the opportunity to find themselves in books, and may support the development of racist attitudes in white children. The need for children of color and white children to be exposed to a variety of titles in which contemporary children of color are protagonists is presented as a social justice issue, related to the Jesuit values of *cura personalis* and *magis*. Recommendations are made for teachers, educators of teachers, and parents for locating quality picture book titles featuring diverse protagonists.

### Introduction

The lack of children's books depicting people of color in an authentic, non-stereotypical way has been documented, studied, and lamented since the mid-20th century. There has been enormous progress as the number of published titles increased from the Civil Rights Era through the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Children's books with overt and intentionally derogatory stereotyping of people of color are rarely published in the United States anymore.<sup>2</sup> It is now relatively easy to find excellent, contemporary children's books about children and adults of color in the United States even if there "just aren't enough of them" to reflect the reality of American racial and ethnic diversity.<sup>3</sup> Despite the progress made, there are still significant differences in the ways children's books include people of color and white people. This analysis investigates the representation of people of color and white people in types of children's picture books with particular focus on contemporary children. Results are discussed in the context of white privilege and colorblind ideology. Furthermore, it is proposed that the underrepresentation of people of color in picture books is a social injustice for all children, the mitigation of which aligns with the Jesuit notions of *cura personalis* and *magis*.

The Jesuit commitment to social justice includes "confronting the structures of our world that

perpetuate poverty and injustice."<sup>4</sup> Contemporary scholarship of race, racism, and white privilege in the United States points to structures and assumptions within United States society that perpetuate racism in subtle ways. This analysis does not offer definitive proof that differences in the representation of ethnicities and races in children's books are supportive of white privilege and racism. However, it does explore this possibility with the aim of encouraging educators of young children, educators of future teachers, and parents to consider how racial and ethnic depictions or lack thereof in picture books may matter to children far more than they realize.

*Cura personalis* means "care of the whole person." Geger's second of his three component definitions of the term is most significant in context of this analysis: "...*cura personalis* denotes an education that is respectful of the unique needs and identity of each student."<sup>5</sup> Multicultural literature scholar, Rudine Sims Bishop, wrote of the need for literature to provide "mirrors" and "windows" to children so they may see themselves portrayed in books, and see those different from themselves as well.<sup>6</sup> This classic tenant of multicultural education is one that supports the goal of *cura personalis*. It is one way for children to construct, grow, transform, and share their identities, and it is an opportunity to develop and explore their attitudes about children who look and behave differently.

Particularly for students of early childhood, elementary, and secondary education at Jesuit institutions, exploring the subtle way in which children's literature impacts the formation of racial identity and attitudes contributes to *cura personalis* in their personal education experience, and to their ability to implement *cura personalis* in current or future teaching. Students become more aware of how children's literature has influenced their own racial identity, attitudes, and assumptions. In turn they will be able to use children's literature to promote positive racial understanding or dialogue in their own classrooms.

*Magis* is often simply defined with terms such as, "Live greater,"<sup>7</sup> "To do more for God," or "The more universal good."<sup>8</sup> It means steering choices and actions toward those that result in the most good for the most people. *Magis* is related to Geger's identification of social justice as "going beyond" in order to address social conditions that give rise to poverty and oppression.<sup>9</sup> What does *magis* have to do with picture books? For most of us following the *magis* does not mean grand gestures or working to exhaustion. It may be something as small as exploring a different perspective on a seemingly inconsequential subject, such as the choice of a child's picture book, and considering how such a choice might contribute toward the greater good.

Why picture books? Picture books compete with many other influences to teach young children about the world. They inspire children to imagine and fantasize about who they are and who they may be as adults.<sup>10</sup> Picture books are also read to children at a time when they are able to categorize individuals by race and often develop a preference for people who look like them. According to research done by cognitive developmental theorists, children start categorizing people by appearance as infants. In the three-to-five-year-old range, they make social and emotional judgments about individuals based on race, typically in accordance with prevailing stereotypes. As they age, children begin to internalize social norms regarding the unacceptability of racial prejudice and may assign negative characteristics to minority races.<sup>11</sup> Picture books are valuable tools for transmitting family and community values about race, ethnicity, culture, and equality to children during these formative years.<sup>12</sup>

Why the inclusion of white people? The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CBCC) has been compiling and publishing their *Annual Statistics about Children's and Young Adult Books about People of Color*<sup>13</sup> for about 20 years. One reader of CBCC Director Kathleen Horning's blog entry questioned why children's books about people of color were compared to the entirety of picture books received by the CBCC, rather than just picture books about people.<sup>14</sup> The analysis presented here is limited to picture books about people in order to provide a level playing field, so to speak, for those skeptics who wonder what a comparison between people of color and white people will show. White people are included because, though the tipping point is nigh, white American children are still the majority population in the United States.<sup>15</sup> This picture book audience also learns about racial and ethnic identity -- its own and others -- through literature. *What* they are learning is surely pertinent to educators and parents.

### Methodology

Rudine Sims Bishop's rational and criteria for selecting books for her 1982 survey and analysis of the contemporary African American experience in children's fiction inspired the methodology used in this analysis of picture books. Bishop wanted to provide teachers, librarians, and educators of teachers guidance for making socially responsible evaluations of children's literature about African Americans. Because her focus was on images of contemporary African American children, she did not include historical fiction. Therefore, books about slavery were excluded from her survey. Bishop found defining exactly what constituted a contemporary setting challenging, as did the author of this analysis. As Bishop chose to do for her survey, books that were "contemporary in feeling, with their historical setting making no difference to the story," were counted as contemporary in this analysis.<sup>16</sup> More recent studies than Bishop's investigate the representation of people of color in samples of children's books, but fewer focus on contemporary children.<sup>17</sup>

This analysis is different from Bishop's in that it identifies the numbers of picture books in which children of color and white children appear as

protagonists, whether the setting is historical or contemporary. The impetus for this choice was the author's suspicion that, though people of color are included in many picture books, far fewer are included as protagonists in picture books featuring contemporary children. Unlike Bishop's survey, the emphasis in this analysis is more about the presence of children of color as protagonists in types of picture books than the nuanced images therein.

The sample of picture books for this analysis was collected during 2014 and the early part of 2015, and included all recently published picture books reviewed in *Kirkus Reviews, Volume 82* (2014) that met the following criteria:

- Picture books with a human protagonist or protagonists
- Picture books including characters that the author could identify as either of color or white
- Books classified by *Kirkus* reviewers as:
  - Picture books appropriate for children three to eight years old
  - Picture book fairy tales
  - Picture book folk tales
  - Picture books based on one poem or song

Within the above selections, books classified by *Kirkus* reviewers as the following were excluded:

- Informational picture books
- Alphabet or counting books
- Popup picture books or novelty books

Once books were selected and obtained, the author did a simple content analysis to identify specific characteristics. A spreadsheet was used to record whether protagonists were of color or white. For this initial designation, picture book protagonists were differentiated based solely on the author's interpretation of their racial characteristics. Many social scientists believe appearing white confers exclusive privileges in America, and whiteness is often considered by whites to be the default American racial group. For this reason, the *appearance* of whiteness was considered in exclusion of other facets of racial or ethnic identity.

In addition to designating the protagonists in the sample as white or of color, the broad racial or ethnic categories used by the CCBC were

employed, with some modifications.<sup>18</sup> The CBCC does not include whites in its *Annual Statistics about Children's and Young Adult Books about People of Color*, and some minor changes to racial and ethnic group names were made for this analysis.

Categories were:

- African Americans, Africans, or Afro-Caribbeans
- American Indians, First Nations, Alaskan Natives, Inuit
- Asians, Asian-Americans, Pacific Islanders
- Latinas, Latinos, Latin Americans, Hispanics
- Whites (not of Hispanic or Latino origin)

With the exception of the Whites category, categories were not mutually exclusive, e.g., a protagonist could be identified as African American and Latino. For each of these five categories, more specific ethnicities, cultures, or national origins further identified the protagonist. Therefore a picture book's protagonist might be placed in the African American, African, or Afro-Caribbean racial category, and more specifically designated as African American, Kenyan, or Jamaican. Characters in books assigned to the category Latinas, Latinos, Latin Americans, and Hispanics might be more specifically identified as South American, Mayan, Brazilian, etc. Current research shows that to children the psychological relevance of ethnic differences and racial differences is very similar.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it is logical to use both racial and ethnic categories.

Information about the racial identity or ethnicity of each book's authors or illustrators was not collected. Who wrote the book does matter, however, it was not the focus of this inquiry. Books that had no cultural traits unique to a particular racial or ethnic group, at least, no cultural traits the author could identify, were also included. As a result several books were categorized based solely on the author's interpretation of the physical representation of the protagonist. Some characters in picture books, such as *Miles is the Boss of His Body* by Abbie Schiller, or *Tilly's Staycation* by Gillian Hibbs, had brown skin, but no particular racial category or ethnicity. These were designated "of color" as opposed to "white," but weren't assigned a racial or ethnic group. A similar situation arose when

books were encountered about Hispanics or Latin Americans with light skin and Caucasian features. These characters were not counted as people of color, but they were counted in the Latinas, Latinos, Latin Americans, Hispanics category, and as “white” rather than “of color.”

Once picture books in the sample were assigned to racial and ethnic categories, they were further assigned to categories related to the setting or genre. These five categories were as follows:

- Contemporary Child Protagonist Engaged in Real or Fantasy Life (“Contemporary Kid Being a Kid” for short)
- Contemporary American Child Protagonist Engaged in Real or Fantasy Life (“Contemporary U.S. Kid Being a Kid” for short)
- Historical or Biographical
- Folktale, Mythology, or Legend
- Fairy Tale
- Other

Generally, if a book fell into more than one category, it was counted for each of those categories. The Folktale, Mythology, or Legend, and the Fairy Tale categories were an exception. The “Other” designation was used for books about contemporary adult characters (there were relatively few), or books that were mash-ups of so many subgenres or styles that it was difficult to determine how to categorize them. A very liberal definition of contemporary American child was used. If an American child or adult reading the book would likely assume the book was about an American child based on the text of the story and pictures only, the book was counted in this category, even when the book was an import, or written by a foreigner.

### Limitations

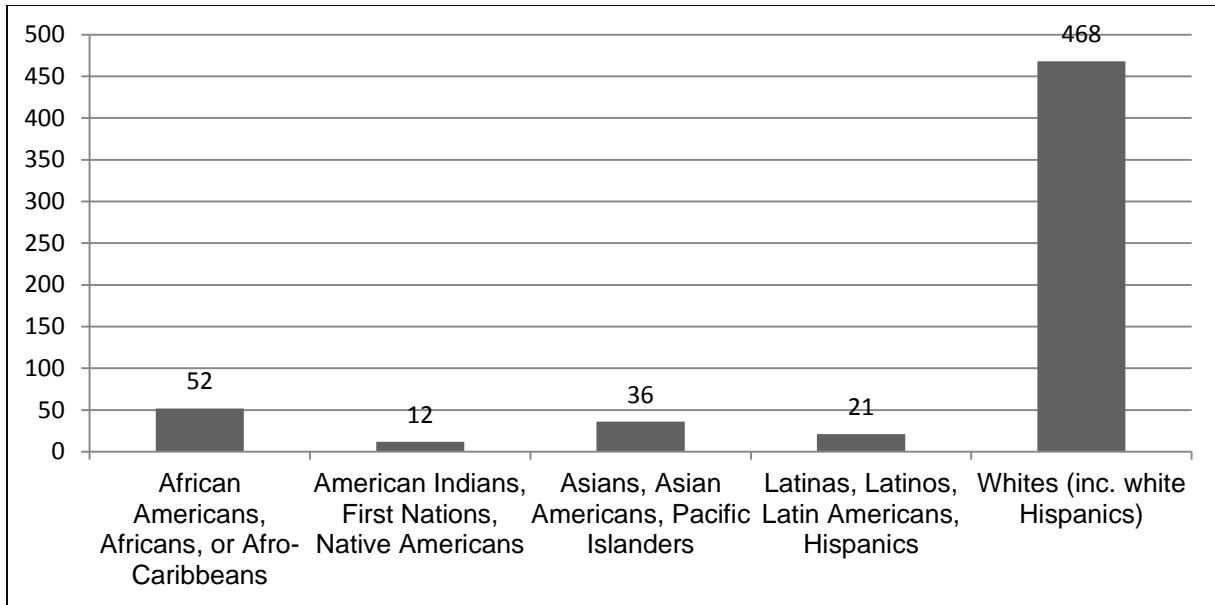
Many researchers have explored why it is very difficult for individuals to evaluate cultural authenticity, or identify stereotyping in books about racial or ethnic groups to which they do not belong.<sup>20</sup> Because the author is white, no formal, systematic evaluations about cultural authenticity and stereotyping were made about the picture books about people of color. However, egregious

examples of stereotyping are mentioned, and occasional comment is made on books that appear to represent unique cultural elements of a particular racial or ethnic group. An individual’s racial identity may not match outsiders’ general perception of her race or ethnicity. Within any particular racial or ethnic group individuals are likely to have very different preferences for how they refer to their racial identity. Though the author used scholarship produced by racial and ethnic minorities to help inform categorizations made in this analysis, the author’s identification as a white person is certainly a limitation.

Another limitation is the use of *Kirkus Reviews* to create the sample. *Kirkus Reviews* publishes reviews on mainstream children’s books, children’s books from smaller and independent presses, and independently published children’s books. This provided a good cross section of children’s picture books. However, in retrospect, including independently published picture books, particularly those for which *Kirkus Reviews* was involved in the publishing, was a confounding factor. Many of these books were difficult to locate in American libraries and bookstores and of poor quality. These titles were noted in the analysis. Furthermore, what *Kirkus Reviews* classifies as a picture book may differ from other review publications, though most classifications appear to have a wide overlap between review publications.

### Results and Discussion

Of the 590 picture books examined, 122, or 21 percent included people of color as protagonists. Kathleen Horning of the CBCC did a mid-year analysis of picture books in 2013, and found that of the picture books with human characters, less than 15 percent included a person of color as the protagonist.<sup>21</sup> The percentage for this analysis was quite a bit higher most likely because of the inclusion of folklore, fairy tales, historical fiction, and biography as types of picture books. In 2013, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 77.7 percent of Americans identified as white, therefore about 22 percent identified as not white. Those who identified as white alone, not Hispanic or Latino made up 62.6 percent of the population.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 1:** Picture Books about People by Race or Ethnicity of Protagonists

Comparing books to people, the children’s books reviewed in *Kirkus Reviews* correspond to the presence of white people and people of color in the United States. But it is not that simple. In 2012, about 53 percent of children in the United States were identified as white, non-Hispanic, and that percentage is projected to drop over the next few decades to 36 percent. The number of children who identified as white, and Hispanic or Latino was not provided.<sup>23</sup> When compared to the U.S. demographics of the primary audience for picture books, that is, children, people of color are underrepresented. Differences in the representation of people of color were much more dramatic for books in the American Kids Being Kids category. Of the total 590, only 57, or 15 percent, of picture books included protagonists of color and were also categorized as Contemporary American Kids Being Kids. This is because picture books about children of color in the sample generally have higher percentages of history, biography and folklore, whereas books about white children tend to include more books where contemporary children are in the role of the protagonist.<sup>24</sup>

While publishers no longer discriminate by negating children of color from children’s books, as was largely done for most of American history,<sup>25</sup> children of color are often relegated to secondary roles. Susan Dove Lempke pointed out

“a typical configuration” in picture books in her *Hornbook* article, “The Faces in the Picture Books.” The main characters are white, but there are token, secondary characters of color. She writes, “...second bananas, it seems, can be any color.”<sup>26</sup> This was also very common within the picture book sample used in the current analysis, though the books where this phenomenon was found were not counted. It is likely that white picture-book authors and illustrators struggle with a catch twenty-two. A white author or illustrator may not feel or be qualified to write or illustrate books in which children of color are the protagonists, particularly books that depict cultural attributes regarded by society as specific to a racial group or ethnicity. But white authors, illustrators, and publishers want to depict diversity in picture books, therefore they do, in incidental roles.

That’s one way to look at it. Another way is that current picture book demographics reflect a kind of white privilege – one that accepts dominant white norms and privileges, and unintentionally perpetuates them as a group. The picture book results from this analysis uncomfortably mirror what Beverly Daniel Tatum said about dominant and subordinate groups in America in her book, *Why Are all the Black Kids Sitting together in the Cafeteria*:

The dominate group assigns roles to the subordinates that reflect the latter's devalued status, reserving the most highly valued roles in society for themselves. ...To the extent that the targeted group internalizes the images that the dominant group reflects back to them, they may find it difficult to believe in their own ability."<sup>27</sup>

Children's literature has had a well-established historical role in racial domination by whites,<sup>28</sup> and it is overly optimistic to expect that it has jettisoned this role entirely. It is unlikely that many contemporary white teachers, parents, authors, illustrators, and publishers are intentionally colluding to publish more books with white children in central roles. However, the difference in the numbers of picture books depicting the agency of white children, versus those depicting children of color is a subtle reminder that there are still significant inequalities in our country.

#### **Picture Books with Protagonists Who Are African Americans, Africans, or Afro-Caribbeans**

This analysis shows that educators and parents of African American children do have great books to choose from that feature African American main characters or protagonists. Fifty-three books of the 590 in the sample included a protagonist or central characters who were African Americans, Africans, or Afro-Caribbeans. That's about nine percent of the total. This racial category had the most books aside from the White category.

Of the 53 books in this category, 20, or 38 percent were identified as historical or biographical picture books. No other racial or ethnic group had such a high percentage of historical or biographical picture books. This is likely because of the role of black history in the identity of African Americans generally, particularly the importance of the struggle for freedom from slavery and for equal rights. African American authors, illustrators, and publishers likely see reinforcing African American identity and pride through portrayals of African American greats in history as a priority.

Recently, some African Americans have begun to question the preponderance of titles focused solely on race-related struggles.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the recent historical and biographical titles included in

this analysis reflect a trend towards a more expansive and nuanced portrayal of biography and history. *The Cosmobiography of Sun Ra* by Chris Raschka, *Little Melba and Her Big Trombone* by Katheryn Russell-Brown, *A Dance Like Starlight* by Kristy Dempsey, and *Firebird* by Misty Copeland and Christopher Myers necessarily include references to racism, or a struggle with racial identity, but focus primarily on accomplishment and contribution to American history. Those picture books that are focused on slavery or civil rights also show a more expansive view. Two picture books, *Friends for Freedom: The Story of Susan B. Anthony & Frederick Douglass* by Suzanne Slade, and *Chasing Freedom: The Life Journeys of Harriet Tubman and Susan B. Anthony, Inspired by Historical Facts* by Nikki Grimes and Michele Wood cover a historical black American reformer and a historical white American reformer simultaneously – a kind of desegregation of American history picture books.

Faith Ringgold's *Harlem Renaissance Party* depicts a very light-skinned, redheaded African-American boy learning about the Harlem Renaissance with the help of his deep-brown-skinned uncle. Ringgold's depiction of an African American boy as light skinned is valuable for two reasons. First, it affirms that physical appearance is not always relevant in racial identity. Second, it made the point that skin-color is irrelevant when it comes to appreciating the Harlem Renaissance.

There will always be room for more good books about African American history, but perhaps the greatest need is still for contemporary African American children as protagonists in books. Twenty-eight or 53 percent of the books in the African Americans, Africans, or Afro-Caribbeans category also fell into the Contemporary American Kids Being Kids category. Overall, picture books where African American children were protagonists or main characters made up seven percent of *all* of the picture book titles in the Contemporary American Kids Being Kids category. It is worth noting that two of these titles were also included in the Historical or Biographical category because they included contemporary children learning about Juneteenth and the Harlem Renaissance by going back in time.

In Erin N. Winkler's study about how African American children develop racial identity, most of the children she interviewed discussed their racial identity through a historical lens. Children particularly spoke of the struggle for freedom from slavery and for equal rights. It is logical that this struggle is a fundamental part of African American identity, nevertheless, Winkler points out that the tendency of African American children to view racial identity this way may contribute to a *post-racial* or *colorblind* view of race. Winkler found that this led to "tension, confusion, ambivalence, and contradiction" when her subjects considered the role of race in their lives and their own racial identity.<sup>30</sup>

Winkler's findings relate to Walter Dean Myers' recent *New York Times* essay, "Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books?" Myers wondered at the lack of African Americans and Latinos in children's books and asked, "Where are future white personnel managers and future white politicians going to get their knowledge of people of color?" and "Where are black children going to get a sense of who they are and what they can be?"<sup>31</sup> Unlike other racial and ethnic groups in the United States, a great body of scholarly literature exists about African American children's literature spanning the past century. The most prevalent concern, from W. E. B. Du Bois to Walter Dean Myers<sup>32</sup> has been to provide African American children with books that "reflect and illuminate both the uniqueness and the universal humanness" of African Americans in the United States.<sup>33</sup> It may be that African American children's books as a whole do a better job of communicating the unique and often painful history of African Americans, than who African Americans are now.

There were some great picture books in the sample that did depict contemporary African-American children both as uniquely African American and with characteristics and experiences that will resonate with children of any racial or ethnic background. *The Hula Hoopin' Queen* by Thelma Lynne Godin, *I Got the Rhythm* by Connie Schofield-Morrison, *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña, *Irene's Wish* by Jerdine Nolen, and *My Three Best Friends and Me, Zulay* by Cari Best all depicted contemporary, and uniquely African American lives. *Maci's Magic*

*Hairbrush* by Kris Anise Broussard, and *Me, Salsa Dance?* by Michael Hickman were two more titles by African Americans that had unique African American content. Unfortunately, these latter two titles were independently published, not the quality of the other books, and not available in many libraries. Another two books categorized as African American and Contemporary American Kids being Kids were about African and African American children who were adopted by white, middle-class families. One of these, *My Sister Abby* by Allison Barberi, was told from the perspective of a white girl, who is Abby's sister; the other, *A Thirst for Home* by Christine Leronimo, was told from the perspective of the adopted child. These titles don't represent the typical or common African American experience in the United States, but they do depict authentic African American lives.

Several titles depicted African American children as protagonists, but had few or no cultural elements that might distinguish them from any other children in the United States. These were, *Lola Plants a Garden* by Anna McQuinn, *Goodnight Football* by Michael Dahl, *Lion, Lion* by Miriam Busch, *Cat Napped* by Leeza Hernandez, *If I had a Raptor* by George O'Connor, *I'm Not Moving!* by Wiley Blevins, and *No, No, Kitten!* by Shelley Moore Thomas.

None of these titles were written or illustrated by African Americans. The sole reason they were placed in this category was the appearance of the protagonists. The prevalence and significance of books that Bishop called "melting pot books"<sup>34</sup> but in the present might be called, "colorblind" books, has been debated in the past several decades.<sup>35</sup> These titles are examples to all children that white children are not the default in sports, humor, or fantasy. However, Bishop points out that melting pot books "not only make a point of recognizing our universality, but that they also make a point of ignoring our differences."<sup>36</sup>

There's good reason to celebrate these "colorblind" books. The quality and popularity of books such as the *Lola* series and *Lion, Lion*, ensure that they are read to many children of diverse racial and ethnic identities. These titles have high Amazon Best Seller's ranks and good availability in libraries across the United States.



Renowned illustrator and author of picture books Jerry Pinckney remembers *Little Black Sambo*, a title he later re-titled, reworked, and re-illustrated, as the only book in his childhood home depicting a child of color.<sup>37</sup> During the Civil Rights movement, “virtually no Blacks appear in children’s picture books” – a phenomenon likely related to black/white conflict and tension.<sup>38</sup> The fifteen or so years following the end of the Civil Rights Movement saw a dramatic increase in the availability of books with black characters in picture books, which stabilized up to the present time.<sup>39</sup>

However, after several decades, stabilization is beginning to represent stagnation. There still aren’t enough books about African Americans even to reflect the demographics of the United States. Furthermore, there were relatively few books in the sample about contemporary African American children in settings that that are distinctively African American. Such books are best written by African Americans, and these results indicate a shortage. Scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas proposes that African American children’s and young adult literature now occupies a “liminal” terrain where readers of all cultures and ancestries may explore “strategies” of selfhood. She writes, “Spaces are opening (albeit slowly) for authors to explore a greater diversity of possibilities for black children and youth. Whether these new spaces will expand into a renaissance or disappear altogether is a critical question....”<sup>40</sup>

**Picture Books with Protagonists Who Are American Indians, Native Alaskans, First Nations, or Inuit**

Twelve, or two percent, of picture books in the sample fell into the American Indians, Native Alaskans, First Nations, Inuit category. Three titles were historical or biographical in nature, four were folklore, and four were assigned to the American Kids being Kids category. Americans who identified themselves as American Indians or Alaskan Natives and another race make up over two percent of U.S. population according to the 2010 census. About half of those identified as solely American Indians or Alaskan Natives.<sup>41</sup> If one believes that representation should be based on population, Americans would seem to have enough picture books about American Indians.

While members of tribal nations are likely more concerned with providing their children with titles in which they can identify themselves, there’s reason to be concerned with the rest of the children in the United States. In her blog, *American Indians in Children's Literature*, Debbie Reese writes, “Generally speaking, schools in the United States do not include instruction about tribal nations and our sovereignty.”<sup>42</sup> Research shows that most non-American Indian children view American Indians as historical beings, or as contemporary people who live as stereotypical historical Indians.<sup>43</sup>

Unsurprisingly, there are very few books in this sample about what it means to be an American Indian today. The United States has sovereign nations within its borders. Yet American Indians and Native Alaskans are still presented as long-ago people in the majority of picture books available to American children.<sup>44</sup> It’s as if we’re still doing what Edward Curtis did in the early 20th century when he photographed American Indians at their most “traditional” even if it meant modifying photographs to strip them bare of “non-traditional” accoutrements or dressing them himself. We provide children with portrayals of American Indians that focus on their historical role, but don’t include enough exposure to who American Indians are today.

Three books in the sample, *Hungry Johnny*, by Cheryl Minnema, *Charlie and the Blanket Toss* by Tricia Brown, and *Sweetest Kulu* by Celina Kalluk, portray contemporary American Indian, Native Alaskan, or Inuit children. Both author and illustrator of *Hungry Johnny* are Ojibwe, and the book is about an Ojibwe child. Johnny is hungry, but he has to wait for the tribal elders to get their food at the community feast. His grandmother kindly, but firmly helps him develop patience as she teaches him community values. This title is a great example of a child doing something that any child can relate too, yet it includes many cultural elements of the Ojibwe. Unfortunately, *Hungry Johnny* was difficult to find in the author’s large metropolitan library system as well as the larger regional library consortium. *Sweetest Kulu* is a more popular title for very young children. Simple, beautifully illustrated, and sweet, the main character was categorized as a contemporary

American child, though this was not explicit in the text and pictures.

*Walking Eagle: The Little Comanche Boy*, by Ana Eulate is a perfect example of why people who are not American Indians should be wary of writing books about them. The Spanish author and illustrator who wrote this ode to a New-Age, European-style mythology of American Indians, likely had good intentions. Sadly, it is not intended for an American Indian audience, and it just misinforms other children. There are thousands of Comanche people in the United States, but a cursory search found no fiction picture books written in the last ten years that were about contemporary Comanche.

The remaining books in the American Indians, Native Alaskans, First Nations, Inuit category were either historical or folklore. The three historical books show the diversity of American Indian experiences. *Elan, Son of Two Peoples* is about an Acoma Pueblo and Jewish boy. *The Hogan that Great-Grandfather Built* connects contemporary Navajo with their past by describing the construction of a hogan and its role in family life. This title was very difficult to acquire, as it was unavailable at nearly all libraries in the author's region. *Not My Girl* is about a child's readjustment to life after attending one of the many boarding schools intended to assimilate American Indians, Native Alaskans, First Nations, and Inuit children.

Four titles in the American Indians, First Nations, Alaskan Natives, Inuit category were of Canadian origin, and it was difficult to decide whether to include them. Even though there are differences between Eastern Canadian Inuit and those who live within the bounds of state of Alaska, there are many similarities between the cultures (and the boarding school phenomenon in the United States and Canada). In the end, Inuit books were included whether or not they were peoples located in Canada or the United States.

It is clear that the U.S. education system is not going to take on introducing children to authentic, contemporary American Indians during their preschool and early grade-school years. It is not a priority and it never has been.<sup>45</sup> If educators and parents want non-native children to learn about

contemporary American Indian children through picture books, they'll have make concerted efforts to find and purchase the few titles in existence.

### **Picture Books with Protagonists Who Are Asians, Asian Americans, or Pacific Islanders**

Thirty-six titles, or six percent met criteria for the Asians, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders category. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Asians make up about 5.3 percent of the population, and another .2 percent of the total population identifies as native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander.<sup>46</sup> This category lumps together such a diverse population, it is nearly irrelevant to compare the number of books in this category to the percentage of the U.S. population of Asian ancestry. Many cultures and heritages are not represented at all in the sample.

Thirteen, or 36 percent of the books in this racial category were also placed in the American Kids Being Kids category. Another seven books were about contemporary children in other countries. Six titles fit into the Historical or Biographical category, and another six were folklore. There was one fairy tale.

Several of the books in the American Kids Being Kids category had no significant Asian cultural elements, but featured Asian-looking children in prominent roles. *Jake at Gymnastics*, by Rachel Isadora, is for younger picture book readers and features a very diverse cast of children tumbling about. Jake is a central character, but it is mostly a concept book. *The Twins' Little Sister* by Hyewon Yum is a warm and funny title about twin girls adjusting to a new baby sibling. It is also for the younger set. *The Rules of Summer* by Shaun Tan, was a *Kirkus Reviews* "Best Books of 2014." It depicts the complex relationship between two brothers in another of Tan's surreal settings. Brief of text, it is nevertheless most appropriate for older picture book readers.

Children's literature about Asian people follows a pattern similar to other groups of color in the United States over recent decades. Prior to the 1980s, there was significant stereotyping of Asian people in the few children's books about them. The 1980s and 90s saw a sharp reduction in stereotyping and inauthentic portrayals,<sup>47</sup> but researcher Junko Yokota pointed out that most

available books about contemporary Asian Americans were folklore. A decade later, Yokota reexamined the content of children's literature about Asian peoples and found much more diversity within this category.<sup>48</sup> This is reflected in the results of the current analysis as well.

In 1999, Yokota found a disproportionately high percentage of books about Japanese American interment during World War II, and commented on the need for a more expansive image of Japanese Americans in children's literature. There were several examples in the current sample that filled this need. *Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin* by Chieri Uegaki blends Japanese cultural elements with American ones in a story about the value of perseverance in the face of naysayers (in this case Hana's brothers). *Hannah's Night* by Komako Saka is a Japanese import. The author chose to include it in the American Kids Being Kids category because there were so few distinct cultural details linking the story to Japan. Intended for younger picture book readers, this title recounts a quiet, nighttime adventure, equal parts magical and scary, as a little girl explores her house while other family members sleep. *My Red Balloon*, by Kazuaki Yamada, *Red Knit Cap Girl and the Reading Tree* by Naoko Stoop, and *The Great Day* by Taro Gomi were three more notable titles with Japanese protagonists.

Eight titles were about Indians. Two were about Gandhi, and the other six included children as protagonists. All but one of the six about children were imports from publisher, Karadi Tales, based in India. The children's book market in India is purported to be growing rapidly, and the large number of Indian books in the Asians, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders category may reflect this. Indian Americans are also the third largest Asian ancestry group in the United States.<sup>49</sup> The Karadi Tales titles were very difficult for the author to find; two were available through a regional library consortium, the others were requested through interlibrary loan.

Other titles in the Asians, Asian-Americans, Pacific Islanders category included books with characters who were Moroccan, Lebanese, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Korean, and Nepalese. Chinese Americans make up the largest group of Americans of Asian ancestry, yet there was only

one book that was distinctly Chinese in nature, a folklore picture book titled *The Dinner that Cooked Itself* by J.C. Hsyu. There were no books specifically about Filipinos or Filipino Americans, the second largest group of Americans of Asian ancestry.<sup>50</sup>

### **Picture Books with Protagonists Who Are Latinas, Latinos, Latin Americans, or Hispanics**

Twenty-one, or four percent, of the books in the sample were categorized as Latinas, Latinos, Latin Americans, or Hispanics. Over 17 percent of the current American population identified as Hispanic in 2012 according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics reported that 24 percent of U.S. children were Hispanic.<sup>51</sup> Compared to Hispanic demographics in the United States, the number of books in this category is very small. Ten, or 48 percent of books in this ethnic category also fell into the Contemporary American Kids Being Kids category.

Not much has been published about children's books depicting Latino children in the United States probably because of the dearth of such literature in existence historically. A study of 64 picture books with play themes published from 1945 to 1974 found only one Mexican child depicted.<sup>52</sup> Pura Belpré found a similar issue for children of Puerto Rican heritage when she began working in libraries in New York City in the 1920s. She went on to publish Puerto Rican folklore in order to address the gap. As with children's books about other minorities in the United States, books by and about Hispanics increased in the 1970s and 1980s, though the amount was meager compared to the whole.<sup>53</sup>

More recently published work noted steadily declining, but still significant, stereotyping and negative portrayal of Hispanics in children's books in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>54</sup> Scholars have reported almost no stereotyping in children's books with Latino subjects in the 21st century. However representation in children's books is still very low, and many scholars have pointed out that Hispanics are grossly underrepresented relative to the Hispanic population in our country.<sup>55</sup> According to the CBCC's statistics, the number of

books published about or by Latinos has leveled off over the past 20 years remaining at one or two percent of the total books received by the CBCC, between 1994 and 2014.<sup>56</sup> This is despite the founding of awards and websites in the 1990s to help recognize and promote children's books by and about Latinos, and the growth of the Latino population in the United States.<sup>57</sup>

There were some standout picture books occupying both the American Kids being Kids Category and the Latinas, Latinos, Latin Americans, Hispanics category. The Spanish and English *Call Me Tree* by Maya Christina Gonzalez is an ode to the growth and diversity of trees and children. Illustrations are magical and full of fresh vivid greens, and there's a hint of yoga thrown in if you look for it. Though the book is not about Latino culture, a Latino boy and a tree share identities throughout. This title was chosen as one of *Kirkus Review's* "Best Books of 2014." The protagonist in the wordless *Draw!* by Raúl Colón takes an imaginary trip to Africa where he draws, and is drawn by African animals. It was placed in the Latino category because the author is Latino, and the boy has some characteristics that Colón had as a child in Puerto Rico. Colón illustrates books about all kinds of people, and this title is not distinctly Latino in any other way. The protagonists in *Cecilia and Miguel are Best Friends* by Diane Gonzales Bertrand do have experiences that are uniquely Latino as they grow up together and eventually marry. It is a title in which many Hispanic Americans will identify elements of their culture, but also an excellent title for teaching non-Hispanic children some aspects of Hispanic American culture. All three titles were authored and illustrated by Hispanic Americans.

*Migrant* by José Manuel Mateo is a title in American Kids Being Kids Category that was difficult to categorize. Since *Kirkus Reviews* recommends this book for children from six to 12, it was included in the sample, although it seems most appropriate for ages 10 and up. Done in the style of a codex, it recounts a family's journey from Mexico to the United States. This title conveys the emotional toll, the loss of culture, and loss of family during a time when there are many children in the United States who have recently had similar experiences. This is a perfect social justice title to match with current events for

kids who have no concept of what this experience is like or those who know it too well.

There were six books with child protagonists in non-U.S. settings. *Soccer Star* by Mina Javaherbin is about a boy named Paulo and his soccer player sister who challenge the sexism of the favela's informal soccer games. There is much to learn here about Brazilian culture and families, and the impact of poverty on children. The bilingual *Dalia's Wondrous Hair* by Laura Lacámara explores the diversity of Cuban flora and fauna through Dalia's magical hair. Finally there was, *Why Are You Doing That?* by Elisa Amado. The protagonist, Chepito, is just emerging from toddlerhood and has many questions about how food is produced, processed, and consumed. It is a warm book with kind and helpful adults who take the time to answer Chepito's inquiries within an agrarian Central American or Mexican setting.

The author categorized *Drum Dream Girl* by Margarita Engle, *Vina Frida* by Yuyi Morales, and *Colors of the Wind* by J. L. Powers as historical or biographical. Finally, one book was a fairy tale, *Little Roja Riding Hood* by Susan Middleton Elya. There were no titles in the sample about the role of Hispanics in American history or pre-American history.

In recent years, the *New York Times* has reported on the lack of suggested books about or by Hispanics and Latinos within the Common Core Curriculum. This is something that the curriculum developers are trying to address, but in the meantime Latino children, many of whom are English language learners, are learning about books and learning to read with very few titles in which they are represented.<sup>58</sup> While teachers and students seem hungriest for books about contemporary Latino kids in America, the issue is that there aren't that many to choose from at all.

### Whites

There were 463 books in the sample with white, non-Hispanic protagonists or main characters.<sup>59</sup> Of these, 321, or 69 percent, were books assigned to the Contemporary American Kids being Kids category. Fifty-seven, or 12 percent were placed in the Historical or Biographical category. Thirteen, or three percent, went into each of the Folklore and Fairy Tale categories. In addition to the books

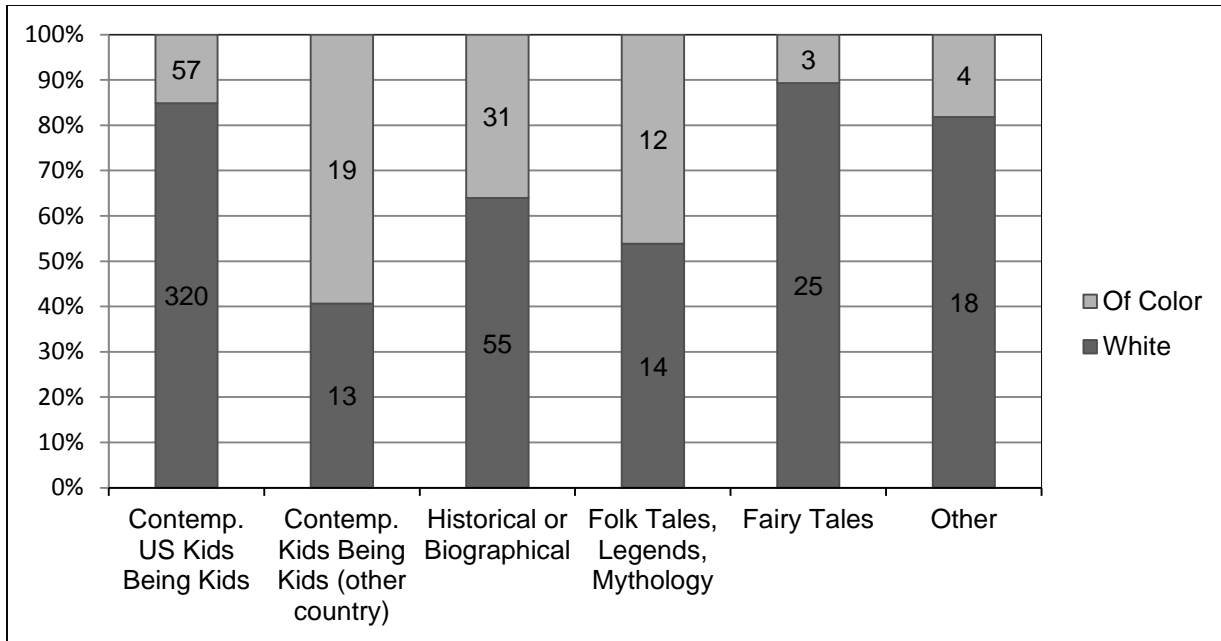


Figure 2: Picture books about people of color and white people by type

placed in the White category, there were many more removed from the sample because they were about white fairies, angels, and tractors, or even Caucasian-looking silhouettes. This was not an issue with picture books about children of color. Many of the titles in which contemporary white American children were the protagonists also included many secondary or incidental characters of color.

Of the books placed into the American Kids Being Kids category, 85 percent were about white children.<sup>60</sup> The poor representation of children of color as protagonists in this category is consistent with the concept colorblind ideology, or Bonilla-Silva's less benign-sounding, *colorblind racism*. Colorblind ideology is a means by which societies or members thereof choose to deal with racial differences by minimizing or dismissing the role of race wherever possible.<sup>61</sup> This ideology supports racism because it allows whites to disregard racism as a structural component of United States society. However, it is well-established in scholarly psychological literature that many white children *are* racially biased and do not necessarily adopt the professed racial blindness of parents, teachers, and other adults in their lives.<sup>62</sup>

Americans identifying themselves as white are among the most highly segregated in American

society, and whites generally experience high levels of racial isolation in their lives. The picture books about white children in this analysis likely show more racial and ethnic diversity than most white American children experience in their lives, but this diversity is usually presented in the form of secondary or incidental characters of color. Bonilla-Silva, in his book *Racism without Racists*, points out that in surveys whites generally profess openness to a more integrated lifestyle, but typically normalize their own segregation, not seeing it as a racial issue, or a problematic one.<sup>63</sup> Is it possible that the tendency for white educators to disregard or fail to notice the high ratio of books in which American white children are front and center is reflective of unconscious attempts to normalize white American children's primacy?

Consider the attitude of whites towards the depiction of African Americans in picture books over time in the United States. In the era before the Civil War, black characters in novels for white children were sometimes central and multidimensional.<sup>64</sup> During this time there was little doubt among most whites of their complete intrinsic and extrinsic superiority over blacks. Following the Civil War, African American characters were either absent or relegated to stereotypical, incidental, or negative positions in children's books. Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and

Milkie suggest this reflects an upheaval and insecurity in white/black relations.<sup>65</sup> Generally speaking, all people of color were treated in this fashion in books and in broader society until the end of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>66</sup> Few whites railed against the racist depiction or absence of people of color in children's books during this period because it was socially acceptable, comfortable, and useful for whites to be overtly racist. In the decades following the Civil Rights Movement, whites' overt racism became more and more socially unacceptable. Whites became more cognizant and supportive of the need of black children (indeed all children of color) to have books about themselves, for white children to see children of color in books, and for white children to learn that racism is wrong. Stereotyping or generally being disrespectful of minority groups in the United States in picture books came to be considered unacceptable.

In her study of the portrayal of African American children in children's books, Bishop pointed out that many books in her analysis appeared to be attempts by white authors, illustrators, and publishers to teach white children what they wanted white children to know about African Americans. Many titles depicted white children as defenders or protectors of black children.<sup>67</sup> There is little of this phenomenon within the picture books about African American children within this analysis. However, titles about contemporary white children, because they are in the great majority, may teach white children (and possibly children of color as well) that the ideal world should include lots of racial and ethnic diversity, but white children have primary agency.

This supposition is supported by research indicating that while parents seem comfortable with reading books depicting racial diversity to their children they avoid *discussing* racial differences depicted in children's books. Research by Katz and Kofkin found that when white parents were asked to discuss wordless picture books depicting racially diverse children with their own children, they tended to avoid discussing race at all, and focused their discussions mostly on white children.<sup>68</sup> A more recent study by Pahlke, Bigler, and Suizzo found that even when reading a book clearly about race relations between blacks and whites, only 11 percent of mothers in their sample

discussed race with their preschool-aged children. The phenomenon of white parents avoiding the topic of race in general with their children is a well-known one.<sup>69</sup>

Unfortunately, same-racial-group preferences have been shown to increase "drastically" in white children around age five to six – a phenomenon not seen in black children. Katz found that not talking about race to children in general is a strong predictor of high-bias attitudes among children of preschool and early elementary ages. She suggests that this may be why parent and child attitudes about race do not tend to correlate. The lack of parental input on racial differences leaves the field open for the media, peers, and other influences.<sup>70</sup> White parents' discomfort and avoidance of discussing race as a component in picture books (even when asked to) is reflective of a broader refusal on the part of many white people to acknowledge the enormous role race plays in their own lives and the lives of their children, psychologically and socially.<sup>71</sup>

African-American, young adult author, Nikki Grimes relates how school librarians have said to her, "I love your work! I only wish I had more African American students so that I could use your books." to which Grimes replies, "A good book is a good book, is a good book. Period."<sup>72</sup> The comment reveals two assumptions – white children do not need to read books about African American people, and even if it is a great book, it is either not appropriate for white students or white students would not be interested in it. In a 2009 review of prejudice reduction studies, Paluck and Green found positive evidence that, when children read or are read books that portray people of a different race or culture their attitudes are less prejudiced towards that different race or culture.<sup>73</sup> Studies most positively correlated to positive attitudinal outcomes were those in which the subjects read books about children racially and ethnically similar to themselves who interacted with children of different races and cultures. Paluck and Green suggest that narrative stories may have particular impact because they "encourage perspective taking and empathy...."<sup>74</sup>

"Perspective taking and empathy" may be easiest for children if they are reading about other contemporary children. Based on availability and

popularity picture books including contemporary children of color as protagonists that *are* read to white children tend to depict mainstream, and “colorblind” American culture and very little information about how the lives of American children of color are different than white children’s lives. There is nothing wrong with these books, but they do perpetuate the myth of a colorblind, post-racial society to children, or they teach children that, though they are curious about racial and ethnic differences, it is unacceptable to point them out.

It is not enough for a parent to simply add a book in which Fancy Nancy’s black best friend Bree is featured and call it a day. Nor does it mean that a teacher should read books about minorities, only on special days, weeks, or months celebrating the minority groups’ accomplishments. White children in white majority schools should not get their information about people of color exclusively from books about the latter’s historical oppression by whites. This promotes the “single-story” model of cultures of color.<sup>75</sup> White children need to read

books about children of color within context of the truth: children of color are individuals who have varied experiences and viewpoints that are similar and different than those of white children.

Unfortunately for white children, particularly those from primarily white neighborhoods and schools, the picture books that are most easily available and most read to them offer a skewed view of the United States and the world.<sup>76</sup> Most picture books depict a world in which white people tend to be front and center, and people of color, if present, are benignly situated in the background, as best friends, classmates, and bystanders. If we don’t want books to teach white children that people of color are nonexistent or incidental to our country and our world, it means acquiring and reading many high quality books that portray people of color in realistic settings, in primary roles, and in many different situations. In her oft-cited, 1965 article, “The All-White World of Children’s Books,” Nancy Larrick starts with a question posed to her by a five-year-old, African American girl about a

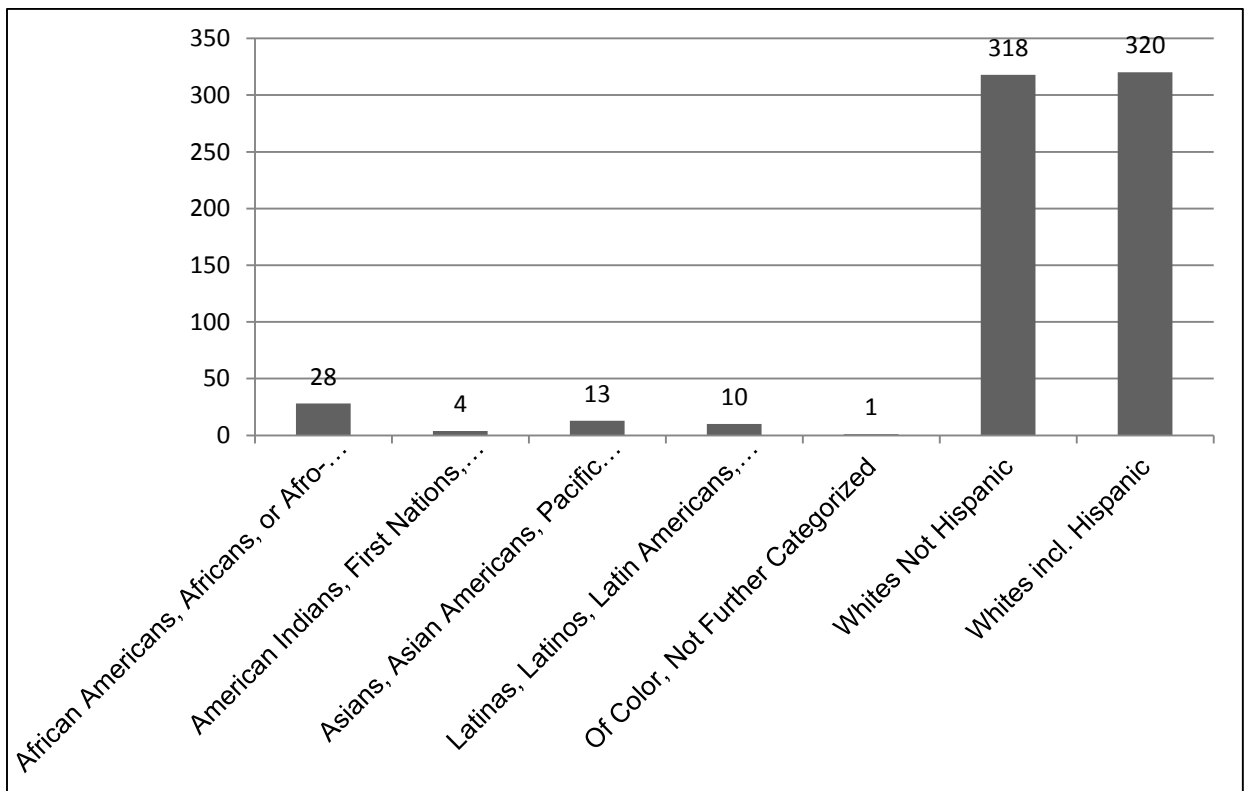


Figure 3: Books about Contemporary American Kids Being Kids by Race or Ethnicity

picture book, “Why are they always White children?” Larrick found the damage to African American children learning to read solely from books in which they have no part, to be obvious. Less recognized, but “probably even worse,” Larrick noted the impact on white children, too. It still rings true today:

“Although his light skin makes him one of the world’s minorities, the white child learns from his books that he is the kingfish. There seems little chance of developing the humanity so urgently needed for world cooperation instead of world conflict, as long as our children are brought up with gentle doses of racism through their books.”<sup>77</sup>

### Conclusion

This analysis highlights some of the excellent racially and ethnically diverse picture books available in the United States, but the results also show that the racial and ethnic profile of picture books, at least in one book review magazine, includes many books about contemporary white children, and relatively few about children of color. Jesuit and Catholic social teaching includes a directive to dedicate ourselves towards a more socially just world.<sup>78</sup> Part of this involves examining social structures and systems that alienate groups within societies. According to Kammer, “These systems and institutions socialize us, promoting and reinforcing values and behaviors that we would call ‘sinful.’”<sup>79</sup> This analysis suggests that the skewed representation of race and ethnicity in children’s picture books is reflective, if not supportive, of a negative social structure within the United States. Sociologist Joe R. Feagin and others refer to this as systemic or structural racism within the United States.<sup>80</sup>

A very Jesuit response is to ask, “What can I do?” For whites, this can be a complicated question. Beverly Applebaum, in her book *Being White, Being Good*, discusses the tendency for whites to immediately ask, “What can I do?” when confronted with white privilege. This is a well-meaning, genuine question, and a valid one, but Applebaum and others caution against white individuals’ immediate impulse to place

themselves at the center of a solution and outside the realm of responsibility for the problem.

Think of the Dr. Seuss story, *The Sneetches*, written in the 1960s, in which creatures with stars discriminated against creatures without stars. Once the Sneetches figured out that this system was folly the problem was solved.<sup>81</sup> Unfortunately, scholars find race such an enormous presence in the lives of humans that they doubt we can ever be colorblind.<sup>82</sup> Though this book is a good one for teaching children about the ridiculousness of discrimination based on physical appearance, it also reflects the tempting, naive view that if we know excluding people based on physical attributes is ridiculous, we can fix racism in our society.

Perhaps the answer to the “What can I do?” question in the context of picture books is to let people of color teach white children about racial and ethnic differences through books and openly discuss similarities and differences in appearance and culture. It means being cognizant that a seemingly “little” issue, such as a lack of diversity in children’s books may contribute to and support racially-biased attitudes, and we can counteract this lack of diversity when opportunities arise in our daily lives. It seems a small thing when considering the grand efforts of many individuals dedicated to social justice. However, as Bishop says of children’s literature enthusiasts:

We are realistic enough to know that literature, no matter how powerful, has its limits. It won't take the homeless off our streets; it won't feed the starving of the world; it won't stop people from attacking each other because of our racial differences; it won't stamp out the scourge of drugs. It could, however, help us to understand each other better by helping to change our attitudes towards difference.<sup>83</sup>

For teachers of young children, following the *magis* of picture books might mean creating a high quality, diverse collection even in a majority white classroom. For faculty members who prepare teachers for the classroom, it might mean teaching a multicultural children’s literature course, or in the absence of such a class, familiarizing students with the need for and availability of diverse books. For those who borrow, purchase, and read books to their own children, following the *magis* might



mean making a concerted effort to check out diverse books at the library, or tucking an excellent children's title with a protagonist of color into a birthday or holiday gift for a child's friends or relatives.

To find more diverse books, the We Need Diverse Books website continues to provide many recommendations for children's and young adult literature.<sup>84</sup> Librarians from any library that includes children's books, including academic libraries, are also great resources. Finally, Regis University Library's "Education Research Guide" includes a guide to "Diversity in Children's and Young Adult Literature" with links to awards and blogs that are helpful for finding great titles.<sup>85</sup> [HJE](#)

### **Acknowledgements**

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Harlin and Hani Morgan, "Review of Research: Gender, Racial and Ethnic Misrepresentation in Children's Books: A Comparative Look," *Childhood Education* 85, no. 3 (2009): 187–90, doi:10.1080/00094056.2009.10521389; Cooperative Children's Book Center, "Children's Books by and About People of Color," accessed August 12, 2014, <http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>.

<sup>2</sup> Rudine Sims Bishop, *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982); Bernice A. Pescosolido, Elizabeth Grauerholz, and Melissa A. Milkie, "Culture and Conflict: The Portrayal of Blacks in U.S. Children's Picture Books Through the Mid-and Late-Twentieth Century," *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 3 (1997): 443–64; Weimin Mo and Wenju Shen, "Reexamining the Issue of Authenticity in Picture Books," *Children's Literature In Education* 28, no. 2 (1997): 85–93; Violet H. Harada, "Issues of Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Quality in Asian-American Picture Books, 1983–93," *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries* 8, no. 2 (1995): 135–49.

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<sup>4</sup> Society of Jesus, "Social Justice," accessed December 1, 2014, <http://jesuits.org/socialjustice>.

<sup>5</sup> Barton T. Geger, S.J., "Cura Personalis: Some Ignatian Inspirations," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 3, no. 2 (2014): 14.

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<sup>7</sup> Saint Joseph's University, "What Is Magis?," accessed July 11, 2015, <http://www.sju.edu/news-events/magazines/sju-magazine/sju-magazine-winter-2013/what-magis>.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Bishop, "Mirrors, Windows."

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<sup>12</sup> Harlin and Morgan, "Review of Research; Bishop, *Shadow and Substance*.

<sup>13</sup> The CCBC uses the term multicultural literature and books about people of color synonymously. There is no uniform definition of "multicultural literature" or "people of color." The author of the current analysis used "people of color" to denote people of a racial or ethnic minority in the United States, but has chosen not to refer to the literature about people of color as "multicultural."

<sup>14</sup> K. T. Horning, "I See White People," *CCBlogC*, July 11, 2013, <http://ccbloc.blogspot.com/2013/07/i-see-white-people.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, "Demographic Background" in *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2013*, xiii–xiv, -accessed September 5, 2014, [http://www.childstats.gov/pdf/ac2013/ac\\_13.pdf](http://www.childstats.gov/pdf/ac2013/ac_13.pdf).

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