THE EDINBURGH COMPANION TO CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Gary Soto no longer writes children's books. In 2003, the Chicano author of some thirty books for children of various ages was commissioned by the American Girl company to write the book that would accompany their 2005 Girl of the Year doll. After consulting with the company, Soto crafted his story of Marisol, a contemporary Mexican American pre-teen girl. The story's main conflict centres on her parents' decision to leave Pilsen, a majority Hispanic neighbourhood in the Lower West Side of Chicago that Marisol loves, and move to the suburb of Des Plaines, Illinois. Her parents begin their campaign to win Marisol's support for their move by citing the lack of space for a garden to grow more flavourful tomatoes and chilies than those available in the stores, but they also acknowledge that they are concerned for her safety in an urban neighbourhood with busy traffic and no place to play. Marisol is not happy about the move, especially when she discovers that there is no dance studio in Des Plaines where she can practice ballet folklórico, but she eventually adapts to her new home and finds a way to keep dancing.

To Soto's great surprise and dismay, when the book and doll appeared, angry, threatening phone calls and letters began pouring in to both Mattel, the parent company of the American Girl franchise, and Soto's home. Chicano activists, city aldermen and even a United States congressman were incensed by what they saw as the implicit message that 'Pilsen was not good enough for Marisol the doll' (Soto 2015: 62). Readers who defend the book see in it a young girl's resilience and adaptability in the face of a parental decision that was hard for her, certainly a common enough theme in children's literature. Soto believed he had written a realistic, culturally relevant story that showcased a mother's regret — her 'sighing heart' as she argued that 'urban life was not for her' (62, 63). But the activists argued, and encouraged student protestors (most of whom admitted that they had not read the book) to argue, that Soto had misrepresented the culture of the neighbourhood. The teen protestors also seemed to object to the fact that Marisol has a non-Latina white friend, shouting 'Marisol don't mix with white people!' (65). The upshot of the protest is tragic for Chicano children's literature in particular, and multicultural children's literature generally, as Soto's response to the barrage of media outrage and angry phone calls has been to change the focus of his literary career: 'I have stopped writing children's literature. At my age, it's become too dangerous' (68).

So what happened here, and what can it tell us about the current priorities of diverse children's literature? Librarians, literary critics and reading advocates have for
decades voiced concerns about what Nancy Larrick famously dubbed ‘The all-white world of children’s books’ in her 1965 article of that title. Larrick looks at the lack of representation of black people (her term is Negroes) from various angles, beginning by arguing that omissions and stereotypes do irreparable harm to both black and white children. While she says that ‘there is no need to elaborate upon the damage . . . to the Negro child’s personality’ that is incurred through their exclusion from books that represent ‘the American way of life’, she does unintentionally invoke and rename Kipling’s ‘white man’s burden’ in her elaboration of the damage such omissions and misrepresentations impose on white children:

Although his light skin makes him one of the world minorities, the white child learns from his books that he is the kingfish. There seems little chance of developing the humility so urgently needed for world cooperation, instead of world conflict, as long as our children are brought up on gentle doses of racism through their books. (Larrick 1965: 63)

Implicit in that statement is the belief that children’s identities and values are largely created by the social lessons they find in books, and that they absorb these lessons unconsciously, uncritically and based solely on a physical resemblance to the characters depicted. Under this assumption, then, it would follow that the images of children found in their books are largely responsible for real-world violence, and, properly amended, can thus effect a remedy. Ultimately and explicitly, though, Larrick presents the dearth of black representation as a missed opportunity for publishers. After citing statistics that demonstrate the economic and aesthetic viability of books that feature positive representations of black history as well as contemporary cooperation and integration, she quotes counter-arguments from publishing professionals and booksellers before rejecting their explanations by concluding:

Whether the Council [for Interracial Books for Children] gets many books into print or not, it can accomplish a great deal simply by reminding editors and publishers that what is good for the Ku Klux Klan is not necessarily good for America – or for the book business. White supremacy in children’s literature will be abolished when authors, editors, publishers, and booksellers decide that they need not submit to bigots. (85)

Flash forward, then, to the second decade of the twenty-first century: are today’s authors, editors, publishers and booksellers still submitting to bigots? Larrick’s survey of the three-year period between 1962 and 1964 revealed that only 6.7 per cent of the trade books published for children in the USA included one or more black characters. Her emphasis was solely on the inclusion of black characters rather than their importance to the plot, and she didn’t indicate the race or ethnicity of the authors in her study. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center’s (CCBC) annual statistics, collected since 1985, use a different metrics than the mere appearance of a character of colour, but still limit their origin counts to those books where the authors and illustrators are black. However, beginning in 1994, the CCBC has broken out statistics according to various ethnicities within America, and indicated the numbers of books by and about people of colour and First/Native Nations. Still, their statistics show only incremental changes in the books received, which include mostly North American publications but also some imported and translated works; for instance, in 2014 the number of books by and/or about people of colour and Native peoples showed an uptick of 10–14 per cent over the previous year. Interestingly, however, the US census of that same year reported that 50.2 per cent of children under five were of ethnic and/or racial ‘minorities’.

While no similar statistics are available from the UK or Australia, it is clear that the number of books written by and about people of colour and Native peoples does not begin to align with the number of young readers in Anglophone cultures who need to, as the saying goes, ‘see themselves in books’. As population demographics shift in light of global flows and lower birth rates for white people, and as people with non-heteronormative and non-neurotypical embodiments advocate for public recognition, calls for voices and images in children’s books that countermand stereotypical and demeaning ways of conceiving diverse cultures, genders and embodiments proliferate, and social media has created effective platforms for those calls to be widely disseminated. Despite the publicity garnered by Twitter campaigns such as #ownvoices and #WeNeedDiverseBooks, however, the children’s publishing industry and other avenues of media distribution have been slow to address the diversity gap, still rehearsing the argument, called out as a false narrative by Larrick fifty years ago and by Christopher Myers in 2014, that people are not voting with their wallets for more diverse representations. But if we take Gary Soto’s Marisol (2005) as just one example of the ways in which a flourishing publishing enterprise can come under attack even when it seeks to have a cultural insider write a story about a member of the group he is from, it becomes clear that the current climate in which diverse representations appear or don’t appear is more complicated than either market forces, the need for a greater headcount of diverse main characters, or even authors sharing the cultures of their characters can give account.

For the remainder of this chapter, I want to adopt a ‘teach the conflicts’ approach of asking questions and exploring the ideologies that inform what has become, finally, some might say, a kairotic moment in the study of diversity in children’s literature, which concerns gender and ability as well as racial and ethnic representation. The Soto case makes some of these conflicts come to the surface, but there are certainly other points of contention that inform the production, distribution and reception of diverse literature for young readers. As Larrick pointed out in 1965, ‘It is not unusual for critics to disagree as to the effectiveness of the picture of the Negro [or any other identity or situation for that matter] in a book for children’ (65). What is read as a damaging stereotype to some is considered an essential element of realism or an effective means to a specific end to others; what I want to get at are some of the baseline differences that can inform such very different impressions. My approach will be necessarily interdisciplinary, traversing philosophy, developmental studies and literary theory. And while I will strive to be as objective as possible, I am aware that the pose of objective neutrality is considered by some a form of white privilege. I would claim it, however, as a point of contention that inform the production, distribution and reception of diverse literature in
various national contexts, even though my examples will be drawn from multicultural literature in the USA. In this endeavor, I want to explore the following sites where intellectual disagreement seems most polarized: why there is such a lack of diverse representation in the first place; what sociohistorical factors have ushered in and impinged upon the most recent push for diverse images; why, how and to what degree diverse images matter to the formation of individual identity; and how theoretical priorities, including developmental, aesthetic and sociological perspectives, inform critiques and definitions of quality in multicultural literature for young readers.

Why are There so Few Diverse Books for Today’s Children?

There are multiple ways to approach this question beyond the paranoid one often cited on social media – that is, that institutional racism prevents quality work from diverse authors from seeing print (see, for instance, the comments section of Sutton 2015). I would not argue against this, despite calling it paranoid; the old adage that just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean someone’s not out to get you may well hold true here. However, the Soto case does complicate, if not call into question, any simple answer to this argument. After all, Soto certainly has all of the right credentials to have written the story of a contemporary Mexican American family. First, he is an accomplished writer, having won multiple awards for both his poetry and his children’s books. While many of his awards, such as the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Film Excellence and the Children’s Literature Association’s Phoenix Award, focus on the aesthetic quality of his work, others are targeted specifically to his representation of Latino experience. He has been awarded the Hispanic Heritage Award for Literature, the Author-Illustrator Civil Rights Award from the National Education Association, and the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children’s Book Award. He is thus both a cultural insider and a well-respected, even beloved, chronicler of childhood and of the Mexican American experience, enough so that he didn’t have to promote himself to the publisher. Rather than shutting him out, as the argument for institutional racism might assert, they sought him out to write what they knew was going to be a very large print run that would ensure profits for their bottom line. Diversity is thus seen as a profitable commodity, rather than a risk or a liability, for this company. Although Soto grew up in Fresno, California, rather than Chicago, he did his research on Marisol’s particular contexts, and took pains to portray both the vibrancy of the Pilsen community and Marisol’s and her mother’s mixed feelings about leaving. He also drew from his own and countless others’ experiences of serial migration in search of better lives and opportunities for themselves and their children. Such autobiographical background experience is what many promoters of diverse literature say is the best path to authenticity of representation. But it was precisely for this fidelity to his own experience that he drew outrage from those who took offence at Marisol’s mother’s assertion that her family would be better off if they moved elsewhere. Soto told a story that many children and their parents could relate to, but because the experience that he represented did not fit the narrative that politicians and activists wanted to advance for their insular Latino community, he was shut out, public and privately, and an important voice for an underrepresented group, from an underrepresented group, fell silent.

Charges of institutional racism against writers from outside the culture they are representing are certainly easier to make. In A Fine Dessert: Four Centuries, Four Families, One Delicious Treat (2015), for instance, Emily Jenkins traces the history of a dish called blackberry fool. Because she depicts the situation of an enslaved mother and daughter making the dessert for a family and hiding in a closet to eat the leftovers, and her illustrator, Sophie Blackall, are white and, while they performed substantial historical research, they did not enlist black readers to vet their work prior to publication. This highlights a controversial point in the production of diverse books – that is, who is allowed to tell what stories, and who should have the final say over whether the books are offensive or not. The hashtag #ownvoices explicitly calls for writers to draw from their own experience, and many critics accuse writers who write about characters outside their culture or identity of ‘cultural appropriation’ or misrepresentation. In a letter written in 1970 (and published in 1972), for instance, Julius Lester argues:

We no longer (and never did) need whites to interpret our lives or our culture. Whites can only give a white interpretation of blacks, which tells us a lot about whites, but nothing about blacks... Whites will never understand the black view of the world until they get it straight from blacks, respect it, and accept it. (1972: 29)

But against this, we have to acknowledge that getting the Mexican American view from a Mexican American did not save Gary Soto from angry critique, so perhaps the definite article is the problem: is there a monolithic view of the world shared by members of a particular culture that members both inside and outside that culture should get straight, respect and accept? In a case similar to Soto’s, A Birthday Cake for George Washington (1975), though written, illustrated and edited by people of colour, was deemed offensive because it emphasised the pride Hercules, a black chef enslaved by George Washington, took in making a cake for his master, and relegated the story of his escape and his daughter’s continuing enslavement to an Author’s Note at the end. In addition, both the author, Ramin Ganeshram, and the critics objected to the illustrations, which added an ‘unintended levity’ to the situation (Ganeshram 2016).

Unlike what happened with Soto and Jenkins, whose publishers stood by their work, Ganeshram’s publishers bowed to the pressure of the critics and actually removed the book from circulation after it had been published. Publishers invest a lot of money in the books they bring to market, and such losses are bound to make them skittish, to say nothing of the fear that such high-profile cases induce in potential authors who understandably don’t want to be labelled racist. Ganeshram fears that ‘it’s unlikely that the industry will again censor itself post-publication... Instead, publishing will go back to safely ignoring stories that might require a delicate hand.’ Such a chilling outcome is surely antithetical to the goals of advocates for more diverse books for young readers created by members of the ethnic groups they represent, and yet public shaming through social media has become a prominent feature of the discourse surrounding diverse literature for children. When these outrages from individuals who present their opinions as representative of their entire identity group are effective in silencing...
storytellers or limiting the types of stories they are allowed to tell, we may be running the risk of eliminating diversity from diverse literature.

In Ganeshram’s discussion of the controversy, she also points out what may be one of the most salient, though largely unrecognised, ideological sticking points in the critical reception of diverse books when she says that books like hers are ‘about... singular moments in the lives of enslaved characters rather than being explorations of slavery in America’. One way of thinking about this as a more general problem for diverse literature is to say that the horrors of slavery have become what is known in cognitive theory as a ‘script’ (Schank and Abelson 1977) for black representation, so when books like A Birthday Cake for George Washington or A Fine Dessert tell stories that violate or step outside that script, they cause cognitive dissonance. Readers have to expand their scripts to accommodate the idea that even within the horrific condition of being enslaved, men, women and children were able to find moments of tenderness and joy, and take pride in a difficult job well done even though it was performed under duress. What many critics seem to fear, however, is that readers will instead replace the horror script with one that is easier to bear. And indeed, Ganeshram does fear this, pointing out that ‘Horribly, the benign rewriting of slavery continues in history books... Monstrously, some still refuse to admit the long-term ill effects of enslavement on an entire race of Americans.’ On the other hand, however, it is worth considering that the sharing of singular moments of joy and pride has the effect of individuating enslaved persons and emphasising their humanity instead of their positionality, and thus may result in throwing their unjust treatment into sharper relief than if they were simply presented as undifferentiated members of an entire race of Americans.

Claudia Tate (1998) makes a similar point when she discusses the critical reception of five neglected adult novels that tell stories about the desires of individual black people rather than centring their discourse on the more general problems of being black in America. Tate argues that these books, by Emma Kelley, W. E. B. DuBois, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright, violate the expected narrative of the collective representation of black people, treating their characters as distinct individuals focused on concerns other than those of a resistant social group within an oppressive society. As such, the white critics of the time (that is, the early to mid-twentieth century) didn’t know what to make of them, so they dismissed them as inferior outliers in otherwise solid and celebrated oeuvres. In a striking turn of events, many of today’s most vocal non-white and Native critics of children’s books, in their reasonable desire to wrest control from the dominant culture over how members of their groups are represented, work out of a sense of corporate cultural identity that actually produces similar dismissals of stories that don’t fit their own prescriptive narratives. Of Kiowa writer and film-maker Thomas M. Yeahpau’s complex, hard-hitting, satirical young adult book, X-Indian Chronicles: The Book of Mausape (2006), which doesn’t shy away from the drug use, abuse and intra-racial betrayal of contemporary Native teens, for instance, well-known blogger and activist Debbie Reese says, ‘I have to read that one again. It set me back on my heals when I read it the year it came out’ (2013) – a remarkably ambiguous comment from someone who normally knows exactly and immediately what she thinks about the portrayals of Indians in youth literature. Reese is outspoken in her critiques of books that contain even the subtlest appropriation of or demeaning or out-of-context reference to Indigenous cultures, and she is equally

What are the Sociohistorical Causes and Stakes of Multiculturalism?

An emphasis on individual identity is, however, often considered a myth of Western ideology, and a damaging one at that, by those whose sense of self depends on specific cultural affiliations or other forms of collective identities that, as Ani Appiah notes, ‘come with notions of how a proper person of that kind behaves’ (159). This way of thinking, he argues, works against some well-known figures from history, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Taylor argues that Rousseau articulates a belief that was already emerging in culture that children are born with a deep sense of connection to nature, including their own inner nature. This, he notes, is a source of moral authenticity that is progressively lost through our exposure to others, which induces a will to variously concede, compromise and conform in social interactions. Although Taylor does not make the connection, this relocation of moral authority from external to internal sources was surely instrumental in the revolutions that replaced monarchies with more democratic political and social structures.

Of course, the hierarchical sensibilities of a monarchy do not simply disappear in a democratic society. Indeed, one of the persistent problems that continue to plague literary representation is the differential value of social images, as Larrick lamented: the social and economic elites get to establish, at least at first, the aesthetic value of a culture. But the promise of equal treatment under the law, ongoing social revolutions and the evolution of democratic sensibilities have led to what Taylor describes as ‘politics of recognition’ (1992: 25). Recognition matters on an individual level precisely because our sense of self does not proceed from some inward quality of authenticity, but is instead constructed in dialogue with others. This is why, in multicultural society, children need to ‘see themselves in books’; what they are looking for is a sense of affirmation of their own ways of being, images that connect up with significations that have been assigned to them by significant others and that they have taken...
self-definitional. They are also looking to establish boundaries by disidentifying with images they consider as other, that is, not themselves. As they grow older and expand their social interactions, recognition becomes important on a political level as well, and this is largely in reaction to the images they have found to identify and disidentify with. For instance, the lack of representation or multiple negative representations of East Asian characters create scripts that assault the dignity promised to an East Asian American, Australian, or British teen by their democratic society. They therefore seek out or create positive stories of East Asian identity that set themselves against these scripts. Without recognition, however, their new scripts don’t have the once they need to transcend the notion that being East Asian somehow puts them essentially at odds with the democratic promise of equal dignity and treatment under law. They must seek out others who share their identity so that together they can develop a platform for recognition not as individuals, but as a group with a shared purpose to insist that they be given the recognition for this particular aspect of their identity from the dominant culture. Such is the problem that Gene Luen Yang allegorises in *American Born Chinese* (2006). Both the Monkey King and Jin suffer from a lack of recognition from the dominant culture that they wish to be a part of. Yang concludes in a somewhat remarkable way (for mainstream young adult literature, that is) that the only recognition that matters comes from Tze-Yo-Tzuh (the creator) other than the dominant culture, a move which nonetheless affirms Jin’s identity as Chinese and allows him to embrace it and apologise for not recognising Wei-Chen as the good friend he was.

But Appiah worries that the politics of group recognition puts the autonomy of future individuals at risk. He shares this concern with Jürgen Habermas (1994), who argues that when constitutional democracies go beyond the limits of individual rights such as free association and non-discrimination to treating cultures as if they were indistinguishable species that must be protected, they deprive individual members of those cultures the right to revise or even reject their cultural identities. Appiah agrees, arguing that ‘the ethical principles of equal dignity that underlie liberal thinking seem to militate against allowing... a whole generation of one group... to imposes a form of life on the next generation’ (1994: 157–8). Moreover, Appiah continues,

The politics of recognition requires that one’s skin color, one’s sexual body, should be acknowledged politically in ways that make it hard for those who want to treat their skin and their sexual body as personal dimensions of the self. And personal means not secret, but not too tightly scripted. (163)

While the freedom to ‘organize my life around my “race” or my sexuality’ (163) is what emerges out of a promise of equal treatment, the demand to do so is too often the unintended consequence. Appiah ‘would like other options’ (163). The ideological questions this opens up might be: does this political argument transfer to an argument about the politics of diverse representation in children’s literature? Does the reification by critics of diverse literature of a standard narrative for cultural or gender identity run the risk of depriving young readers of the opportunity to revise or reject those narratives for themselves? And does it insist that children organise their identities and forms of life around their race or their sexuality as a kind of new essentialism? Or does a politics of recognition truly open up new avenues for positive identity construction? And if this constitutes a false binary, what might ‘other options’ look like?

### The Importance of Images on Identity Formation

The concern for more representation of people who identify as other than white, Anglo, middle class, able-bodied and heteronormative proceeds from two main principles: first, that the portrait which dominates children’s literature is not now nor ever has been representative of the embodiments and social realities most children actually experience, and second, as we have just discussed, that social recognition, both positive and negative, is a crucial factor in identity formation in contemporary culture.

White European cultures became ideologically dominant through force rather than through an accurate representation of the ways in which the majority of people live their lives – that is, they colonised, enslaved and/or killed the people whose lands and resources they wanted to claim as their own, in the process repressing and/or appropriating their arts, religions and social practices. This history is well known. The question for children’s literature and culture critics is how the ideological sense of entitlement that suborned the use of force in this way was engendered; that is, are people predisposed to a rage for social dominance, and, if they are, is there anything we can do to change that? If, on the other hand, behaviours are learned and identities constructed according to cultural scripts, to what degree can the replacement of negative scripts with positive ones effect individual and social change?

Social learning theorists, including those who believe in the implicit goodness of children as well as those who subscribe to the *tabula rasa* model, would argue that a sense of entitlement is a learned behaviour; in order to summon up the will to go forth, colonise and kill other human beings, children must be brought up in an environment that convinces them of their own superiority, and of the other’s inferiority. This is in fact what haunts Larrick’s assumption of a reparative potential in children’s literature that nevertheless leaves white social dominance intact; she implies (and I am sure this was not her intention) that if we can eliminate these portraits of implicit and explicit white superiority and entitlement from children’s books, white children, by learning humility, will lead the way in securing the world’s cooperation just as they have, up to this point, led the way in propagating conflict and asserting imperial dominance.

The danger imagined for non-white children in a social learning model is that, through either a lack of representation or a restrictive or degrading image in mainstream children’s literature, children who don’t identify with the dominant culture have internalised a sense of their own inferiority such that even if legally or socially sanctioned obstacles are removed, they still won’t be able to access the benefits of an equal and just society might make available to them. Damaged self-esteem comes into view as equally as harmful as material exploitation, social and economic inequality, and other forms of systemic injustice, with the added burden that these things are often intersectional. Sherman Alexie has his character, Arnold Spirit, Jr., explain it this way:

*It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow deserve to be poor. You start believing that you're poor because you're stupid and ugly. And then you start believing that you're stupid and ugly because you're Indian. And because you're Indian you start believing you're destined to be poor. It's an ugly circle and there's nothing you can do about it.* (2006: 13)

Interestingly, Arnold doesn’t blame books. In fact, he cites books as his mother’s and his sister’s escape from an unsatisfactory lifeworld – a world where intergenerational
poverty has deprived his parents and grandparents, 'all the way back to the very first poor people' (11) of the opportunities to follow their dreams. More interestingly, Arnold does break out of the ugly circle that starts with poverty but includes other aspects of his internalised self-image such as physical unattractiveness and his devalued cultural heritage. His path toward internalising a positive, more capacious view of his own identity is instructive in a general sense. Junior begins the book with what social psychologists call an ingroup/outgroup bias. In the beginning of his story, he sees the members of his ingroup as distinct and diverse individuals, some good, some bad, but most complicated mixtures of admirable and less than admirable traits. On the other hand, he pictures white people as a homogeneous outgroup of caricatured privilege. This individuation of ingroup members and lumping together of outgroup members is a common feature of the bias, even when, as Arnold does, you see the outgroup as more appealing than the ingroup. By widening his view of the world through individual relationships with people outside his culture, he transforms them from imaginary exemplars of the mythical source of all hope to Gordy, Penelope, Roger and Coach, all individuals with flaws and virtues. In doing so, he individuates himself as well by listing all of the many traits that connect him to others by personal affinity rather than by culture. Still, his identity is not completely satisfactory until he has been recognised by his best friend, Rowdy, as a nomadic Indian.

Recent investigations into the way children think indicate that the kind of bias Arnold illustrates is an implicit trait of human beings, rather than a result of social learning. Infant studies have made it clear that babies as young as three months old have started to develop ingroup/outgroup bias, which reveals itself not only as a favouritism expressed for people who are perceived to be like them, but also as a greater ability to differentiate the members of one's ingroup as individuals (Hamlin, Wynn and Bloom 2010; Kubota and Ito 2016). These findings have been cited as evidence of the early onset of racial bias because most researchers base their experiments on visual markers of race in terms of facial recognition and preference (see, for instance, Kelly et al. 2003). However, studies undertaken at the Infant Cognition Center at Yale University locate bias differently. Their work reveals that babies as young as five months old show a preference for those who are perceived as helpful over those perceived as obstructive (Hamlin and Wynn 2011). Eighty per cent of infant respondents prefer a puppet that helps another puppet open a box to get a toy over a puppet who slams the box shut as the toy-seeking puppet tries to open it. This indicates a nascent understanding of goal setting, cause and effect, and benevolence. Moreover, though, once slightly older babies have established a relationship of similarity or dissimilarity between themselves and another, they prefer that help be given to those who are like them, and hindrance or punishment be meted out to those who differ (Hamlin et al. 2013).

Interestingly, the similarities and differences which matter to the babies are based on culturally neutral preferences rather than the categories that adults insist are salient such as gender and race or ethnicity; in these studies, the researchers established connections between the babies and the puppets through a shared preference for either graham crackers or oat rings. These studies indicate a capacity to assess similarity and dissimilarity from the self based on traits other than physical markers, as well as an early sense of justice based on how a social other is perceived in relation to the self.

This might sound like pretty bad news for the social learning theorist, but further research shows that such bias is not insurmountable. In a study with four- to six-year-old children who rarely if ever saw African faces, researchers first identified racial bias by using racially ambiguous faces they created by combining traits from Chinese and African faces, and asking children to indicate which race they were (Xiao et al. 2015). In accordance with ingroup/outgroup bias, the children categorised the happy faces as Chinese, and the angry ones as African. The children were then trained to recognise individual African faces by attaching them to names. Once they had learned to individuate African faces through naming, their racial bias regarding who was happy and who was angry was significantly reduced. On the other hand, children trained to individuate Chinese faces did not show a similar change in their racial bias. The researchers conclude that it may be possible to mitigate implicit racial bias by teaching children to individuate members of other races.

These infant and older child studies are relevant to researchers in multicultural children's literature in multiple ways. First, they indicate that the development of ingroup and outgroup biases are not learned primarily through images as books, nor are they necessarily mitigated through the presentation of more diverse images. Second, they indicate that racial bias can be reduced through the use of words attached to images in such a way that the words individuate the images. If one of the problems of ingroup/outgroup bias is an inability to see members of an outgroup as diverse individuals within that group, then telling more stories where characters stand out from scripted expectations, and telling stories where characters have their own scripts explicitly challenged, would contribute to a lessening of bias. What this might mean for literary critics who encounter such books, however, is that any strategy that amounts to holding the line on collective cultural identities — that is, insisting that modes of behaviour or appearance are right or wrong, sanctioned or offensive, with respect to some basic script of cultural or even historical representation — is exactly the wrong one if the goal is to reverse racial bias. In order to intervene in ingroup/outgroup bias, it may be more effective to have children learn to individuate images in such a way as to de-emphasise affiliative identities and instead to see characters as individual people with names and idiosyncratic traits and personal histories rather than as representatives of a particular group. If, on the other hand, the goal is the preservation of a distinctive collective identity, the survival of the values and practices of a particular way of conceiving a cultural heritage, then critics must be willing to accept some degree of recalcitrance with respect to ingroup/outgroup bias. The push to preserve and protect such a heritage as a key emotional and psychological resource for resisting the negative scripts imposed by a dominant culture may indeed necessitate what Jean-Paul Sartre called ‘anticapital racism’ (1965: 18), but he saw such a move as a temporary stage towards the development of a society without racial distinctions. However, if the goal is to preserve the autonomy of a culture and ensure its continuance through future generations, then the cost may well be the equal preservation of bias.

Interestingly, these two methods of approach take us back in time to the debates that surfaced over Ezra Jack Keats’ The Snowy Day (1962). M. Tyler Sasser (2014) explores the differing receptions of this book as exemplary of the conflicting goals of the early 1960s concerning the direction of black identity politics and recognition. For some critics, Tyler notes, including Langston Hughes, Charlemelie H. Rollins, and the members of the American Library Association’s Caldecott Award Committee, The Snowy Day was a charming story of an innocent child doing an ordinary thing, and
thus fit their goals for the natural integration of black children into children's books, for those who championed the Black Arts Movement, however, which set out to define a black aesthetic that was not simply different from but antagonistic towards white ideologies, the fact that Keats was white and his protagonist, Peter, was 'unextraordinarily black' (Martin xviii; quoted in Sasser 2014: 365) was problematic primarily because the 'whole social, political and cultural significance of being black is left out' (Dixon 123; quoted in Sasser 2014: 366). These two ways of seeing, one integrationist, one separatist, contextualise two very different goals with respect to the creation of identity, and thus lead to very different modes of critical response.

In both extremes of response, however, what first caught the eye of readers was the fact that Peter was brown. And indeed, this is where many readers and critics focus their attention in terms of diversity in children's literature; that is, as I've said twice before in this essay but with a new emphasis here, there is general agreement that 'children need to see themselves in books'. This privileging of vision emerges out of the strong link between image and identity formation, either as an intuition or as an actual theoretical commitment to Jacques Lacan's formulation of the mirror stage, wherein a child recognises themselves through a specular image that they idealise. In a different economy of value, that is one not dominated by the literary or specular image, one might imagine the lack of representation to constitute a kind of social freedom, perhaps the kind of freedom Appiah desires to organise his life on his own terms. But that is not the economy in which we live; instead, we are captivated by the visual images in our highly mediated culture, and held in thrall to the value assigned them by social recognition.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that, in the service of constructing an individualised identity, we are not wholly determined by the specular or cultural images before us. The sense of fragmentation that the child feels in front of the totalising image they see in actual and cultural mirrors can open up a psychic mechanism for identifying with parts rather than wholes, as the infant studies prove. This is where the idiosyncrasies of desire enter into economies of value. That is to say, readers may solace and identify with individual traits that have little or nothing to do with visual semblances, and they may, through the use of innovative language and nonsense, revise scripts or even whole language systems that seek to assert an authority they wish to throw off.

It is with such understanding that we can approach a book like Skippyjon Jones (Schachner 2003), which children adore, and which critics have called out as racist and extremely offensive. The objections have to do with the fact that Skippyjon plays into stereotypes made popular by cartoons and ads; using a fake Spanish dialect, he produces tongue-pleasing nonsense words that end in -ito as he imagines himself as a Mexican Chihuahua hero, saving his multicoloured Chihuahua companions from an evilumblebee that turns out, when the fantasy is all over, to be piñata full of candy beans. This enjoyment of Skippyjon's linguistic fantasy play, according to online reviewer Beverly Slapin (2013), 'prepare[s] young children to accept immigrant-bashing, stop-and-frisk searches, the forced breakup of Mexican families, the impoverishment of farmworkers, and the racist campaign against the Mexican American students in Arizona'. In Slapin's opinion, Skippyjon holds a funouse mirror up to an entire culture that distorts to the point of extensive material damage. But it might be said that she is doing to Skippyjon the same thing his mother is doing when she insists that he must be a Siamese cat, and 'not a bird, nor a mouse or a grouse' (Schachner 2003; n.p.) or any of the other critters of his imagination. He is punished because he refuses to limit himself to what his mother and his embodiment insist that he is, rather than the hero he sees and identifies with when he looks in the mirror.

By analogy, then, must those who would object to his taking on an embodiment other than the one he was born with also object to Jazz Jennings, who dared to exchange her birth sex for what she felt was her true gender (Herthal and Jennings 2014)? Is there something akin to 'cultural appropriation' and stereotyping in transgender identity? And what of Skippyjon's language play? Is the Spanish language so iniolate that a child cannot take joy in manipulating it in ways analogous to Dr. Seuss's On Beyond Zebra (1955)? Should English speakers be similarly outraged by the nonsense words created by poets like Jonarno Lawson and Lewis Carroll to delight the ears and tongues of children and loosen the authority of linguistic determinism? Slapin gives her approval to the 'gifted' Chicano poet, Jose Antonio Burciaga, for creating poems in inventive street language that blends Spanish and English, but disallows the kind of free play that delights by its sound and, frankly, its transgression of adult norms of correct language use, rather than its sense or propriety. If identity is created though language and image, then language play and image creation are intimately linked. Might it be argued then that insisting on fidelity to cultural norms or embodiment is the imposition of an essentialism that deprives children of agency, enslaving them instead to grand narratives of fixed identities that progressives and, indeed, multiculturalists have fought hard to dismantle?

Reading as a Literary Critic

A similar problem has arisen with e. e. Charlton-Trujillo's verse novel, When Was Fierce. This contemporary story of a group of black male friends caught in a nightmare of gang violence participates in the same ethos and, indeed, features some of the very same problems of S. E. Hinton's The Outsiders (1967), but has been criticised for stereotyping black characters and for not conforming to the standards of African American Vernacular English. Like critics of Skippyjon Jones, founder of the Minorities in Publishing podcast, Jennifer Baker, and blogger Edith Campbell accuse Charlton-Trujillo of mocking black speech (Flood 2016). From an aesthetic point of view, however, I would argue that Charlton-Trujillo does for African American Vernacular English what the beat poets did for poetry in Standard English, that is, liberated it from conventions in order to de-familiarise the scripts that had too narrowly defined the social and aesthetic identities of a generation committed to reimagining the future. The text is not, as Baker avers, hard to read, but it does require that readers approach it as poetry rather than prose, and it works best orally, so that readers can hear the phrasing, the pauses, and the musicality of the voice. Throughout this chapter, I have surfaced what I see as many of the ideologies underlying the critiques of multicultural literature from political and sociological perspectives, but there is another way of reading that doesn't demand the kinds
of tight reproductions of a particular critic's view of what reality is or should be like for today's children. Charlton-Trujillo's book can be read as work of literature that challenges readers with an innovative poetic form that conveys a powerful message that allows young people to revise the standard script and write their own stories, even inventing their own vernacular if they need to. At the time of this writing, however, the publishers have postponed publication as a result of the vitriolic responses to the book on social media. Apparently, the need for more diverse books is not as strong as the need by some to control the narratives of cultural identity.

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Primary


Secondary

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Posthumanism: Rethinking 'The Human' in Modern Children's Literature

Victoria Flanagan

One of the principal attributes of the critical discourse known as 'posthumanism' is its ability to evade precise definition. Cary Wolfe has famously argued that the term 'generates different and even irreconcilable definitions' (2010: xi). The etymological ambiguity associated with posthumanism arises because of its expansive ideological mission, which might best be summed up as the radical de-centering and de-privileging of the autonomous, coherent and rational humanist subject. Although posthumanists can agree that 'humanity' is a concept that requires redefinition in the modern era, precisely what this definition should be remains an enigma. Rather than seeing this as a flaw, writers such as Iván Castaño suggest that this fluidity is an integral component of posthumanism. According to Castaño, 'we resist an exhaustive definition of posthumanism because part of the efficacy of posthumanism is that it permits the evolving nature of its own project, which mirrors our contemporaneous cultural situation' (2015: 77-8). The self-reflexive and interrogative qualities of posthumanism enable it to perform a critical examination of many of the binary concepts that have traditionally been used to structure and make sense of human experience. Western culture, argue Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens and Rona McCallum, has been 'underpinned ideologically by binary oppositions such as natural and artificial, organic and technological, subject and object, body and embodiment, real and virtual, presence and absence, and so on' (2015: 154). Posthumanism seeks to reshape and reconfigure these boundaries and oppositions, primarily by focusing on the notion of 'otherness' and examining how certain subjects and species have been strategically excluded from humanist definitions of humanity.

Posthumanism plays a particularly significant role in relation to children's literature for two reasons. Firstly, literature for children and adolescents is thematically preoccupied with the processes of subject formation. From picturebooks for the very young to coming-of-age stories for young adults, literature produced for children and adolescents is always concerned – at least implicitly – with the experience of growing up and how a subject might negotiate their relationships with other individuals in the world. A concomitant consideration within a wide range of children's literature is the ethical dimension of this process of maturation: such literature actively seeks to intervene in a child reader's perceptions of self by exploring existential questions such as, 'What makes a good person?' or 'What makes a just society?' This focus on subject formation consequently makes children's fiction a potentially rich space