



2014

# Race Representations in Children's Picture Books and Its Impact on the Development of Racial Identity and Attitudes

Jenna Wilson

*Western Washington University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cedar.wwu.edu/library\\_researchaward](https://cedar.wwu.edu/library_researchaward)



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Wilson, Jenna, "Race Representations in Children's Picture Books and Its Impact on the Development of Racial Identity and Attitudes" (2014). *Western Libraries Undergraduate Research Award*. 4.

[https://cedar.wwu.edu/library\\_researchaward/4](https://cedar.wwu.edu/library_researchaward/4)

This Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Libraries and the Learning Commons at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Western Libraries Undergraduate Research Award by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact [westerncedar@wwu.edu](mailto:westerncedar@wwu.edu).

RACE REPRESENTATIONS IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS AND ITS IMPACT ON  
THE DEVELOPMENT ON RACIAL IDENTITY AND ATTITUDES

Jenna Wilson

American Cultural Studies 499: Research and Writing

March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Picture books are the building blocks from which most young children learn how to read. The images within these books help children engage with the story and help connect the images to the words they're hearing or reading, therefore easing the process of learning how to read. However, picture books have a unique influence in promoting cultural values, norms, and beliefs by exposing young and susceptible children to their images. At the time children are reading picture books, studies show that young children are also developing their own racial identities, as well as racial attitudes. Therefore, the stories and illustrations within picture books that depict diverse racial populations are likely to have an influence in shaping children's racial attitudes towards others, and their own racial identities. This paper will look at how, or if, race representations in children's picture books have changed since the twentieth century, and whether children's racial attitudes have changed throughout the last ninety years. Furthermore, the paper will discuss challenges within multicultural picture books for children, and provide resources for positive racial and cultural representations within picture books.

To begin to understand the impact of racial representations within children's picture books, it's paramount that one understands children's formation and development of racial attitudes and prejudices. Children begin to notice race by age two, and "by age three, children show signs of being influenced by societal norms and biases and may exhibit 'prejudice' towards others on the basis of gender, race, or disability."<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the age period of three to seven is considered a critical development period in which children are able to differentiate between skin colors, learn labels associated with different skin colors, and develop emotional responses to those labels, making these years the most crucial for establishing positive racial attitudes in children. Furthermore, "the development of children's ethnic identity is shaped between ages three and five," and minority children begin experiencing conflict between their racial identities

---

<sup>1</sup> Erin M. Cole and Deborah P. Valentine, "Multiethnic Children Portrayed in Children's Picture Books," in *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 17, no. 4 (2000), 307.

and societal stigma and stereotypes based on their race during this period, indicating that children's positive views on their racial/ethnic identities depend on positive associations with their race during this age period.<sup>2</sup> Psychologist Phyllis Katz found that children were less likely to maintain negative racial attitudes on the basis of race when exposed to individual images of minorities, which highlights the importance of early and consistently positive, accurate, and dynamic exposure to racial representations.<sup>3</sup> This understanding of when children begin developing racial attitudes and racial identities illuminates why it is important to create positive depictions of races and race relations for young children.

### **Children, Racial Identity, Preference, and Bias**

In 1939, Kenneth and Mamie Clark conducted a test in which Black children were asked to choose from two dolls, a Black doll or a White doll. The study was to test the children's racial preferences and racial attitudes, as well as determine their level of racial self-identification. The children were asked which doll they would like to play with, which doll is nice, which doll is bad, which doll has a nice color, which doll is White, which doll is Black, and which doll looks like you.<sup>4</sup> The results of Clark and Clark's study were alarming; of the children tested, 67% preferred to play with the White doll, 59% identified the White doll as nice, 60% identified the White doll as having the nice skin color, while 59% identified the Black doll as bad, and only 58% of the children chose the Black doll as the doll that looked most like them.<sup>5</sup> These results suggested that Black children were experiencing internalized racism, or prejudice towards their own race, and

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie Edmonds, "The treatment of race in picture books for young children" in *Book Research Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1986), 32.

<sup>4</sup> Phillip E. Jordan and Maria Hernandez-Reif, "Reexamination of young children's racial attitudes and skin tone preferences" in *Journal of Black Psychology* 35, no. 3 (2009), 86.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

showed children who were older were more likely to correctly choose the doll that looked like their own race.<sup>6</sup> The results not only indicated that children's racial identities develop as young children age, but that the bias displayed by Black children towards the doll of their own race meant that segregation was creating devastating effects on children's racial identities.

In 2008, Phillip E. Jordan and Maria Hernandez-Reif conducted a follow-up study of Clark and Clark's study, in which they used four cartoon images of children which varied in skin color (white, light brown, medium brown, and dark brown), and asked Black and White children three to five years of age which cartoon they would want as a best friend, which cartoon looks nice, which one looks bad, which has a nice skin color, which one looks White, which one looks Black, and which one looks like you.<sup>7</sup> However, this study differed from Clark and Clark's study in that the children were able to respond with "both" or "neither" to the questions. Additionally, between the pre- and post-test, children were read a picture book about a young Black boy who saves a duck in order to measure if the positive racial depiction in the story would influence the children's answers.<sup>8</sup> The results showed that when students were given four cartoons with various skin tones to choose from, the children had no skin tone preference.<sup>9</sup> Although this appeared to be an improvement from the 1939 study, this indifference vanished when there were fewer options for children to choose between. When children were asked to choose from the white and dark brown cartoons in the pre- and post-tests, White children chose the white cartoon as their best friend, while Black children were divided in their choice between the white and dark brown cartoons.<sup>10</sup> This finding raised questions about higher racial bias in White children, which will be

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 93.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 95.

discussed. These results also indicated that Black children were more accurate in correctly identifying which cartoon was Black versus White, signifying that Black children are more astute in differentiating races at an earlier age.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Black children were less likely to identify the dark skinned cartoon as bad compared to Clark and Clark's study, and equally likely to choose the dark skinned cartoon as good, while White children were more likely to select the dark skinned cartoon as bad and the white cartoon as good.<sup>12</sup> Although the results of this study indicate that Black children's racial attitudes towards their own race, and their racial identities, are becoming more positive, this study highlights the concern that racial prejudices and negative racial attitudes are continuing to persist in White children.

In an effort to understand racial attitude development in White children, Erin Pahlke, Rebecca S. Bigler, and Marie-Anne Suizzo conducted a study that theorized that White children were absorbing these racial prejudices from their parents as a result of colorblind ideology.<sup>13</sup> In the study, comprised of White mothers and their White children aged 4-6 years old, the mothers were asked to read two books and discuss the story with their child as they would at home.<sup>14</sup> One book focused on an African American boy, though race is never explicitly mentioned, and the other book is focused on zebras becoming either black or white as a metaphor for racial prejudices and race relations.<sup>15</sup> Following the stories, children were given a sorting test to determine traits they associate with Black and White people.<sup>16</sup> The study found that during the

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 93.

<sup>13</sup> Pahlke, Rebecca S. Bigler, and Marie-Anne Suizzo, "Relations Between Colorblind Socialization and Children's Racial Bias: Evidence From European American Mothers and Their Preschool Children," in *Child Development* 83, no. 4 (2012), 1164.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 1167.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

readings of both stories, mothers were avoidant of the topic of race, and were especially avoidant of discussing race as it relates to discrimination. When children made negative comments about racial diversity during the readings, mothers “did not respond to their children’s antidiversity comments, but instead continued reading” and failed to challenge or contradict their children’s biased views.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the mothers, by consequence of not explicitly discussing the issues of racial discrimination and entering in a dialogue about race with their child, were promoting a colorblind ideology.

In the trait matching activity from the same study, children showed anti-Black bias by pairing Blacks with more negative traits, while forming positive racial identities for themselves by assigning positive traits to Whites.<sup>18</sup> While the researchers acknowledge that the colormute approach of the mothers may not be causal of their children’s racial bias, they argue that the ideology prevented opportunities to discuss positive racial attitudes.<sup>19</sup> The results show the lack of awareness mothers had of their children’s racial attitudes, which the authors saw as a direct “cause and consequence” of the colormute approach to racial socialization.<sup>20</sup> Most importantly, the study suggests that a colorblind approach to racial socialization for children is an ineffective method for preventing racial bias in White children as they develop racial attitudes.

With this understanding of when and how children form and develop racial attitudes, and how these attitudes impact children’s racial identities, it can be reasoned that accurate and positive racial representations can cause dramatic changes in the way children perceive race, and ultimately how they view their peers and themselves. Therefore, the depiction of race within

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 1171-1172.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 1176.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

children's picture books has significant influence on the development of young children's racial attitudes and racial identities.

Before it is possible to evaluate the racial representations within modern children's picture books, it is necessary to evaluate patterns of racial representations in children's picture books throughout the twentieth century. By evaluating the historical racial representations, the progression of representations will be put in historical context, making it easier to evaluate how and why racial representations evolved throughout the twentieth century, and continue to evolve today.

In her article, Leslie Edmonds analyzes the racial representations within 952 children's picture books that were written from 1920 to 1984. Using titles that were catalogued from the Children's Book Center of the University of Chicago, Edmonds used books that were fictional, published in English, contained a single story, and where the characters within the picture books were human.<sup>21</sup> After analyzing her sample, she found that 57% of the books sampled focused on White children, 27% were multiracial stories, 7% were focused on Blacks, 5% were focused on Asians, 2% were focused on Native Americans, and 2% were focused on Latino/as.<sup>22</sup> Edmonds found that of the books that were multiracial, half depicted the people of color characters as being dominated by the White characters, making nearly 70% of all 952 books White dominated.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the picture books that focused on people of color heavily depicted stereotypical aspects of people of color and their cultures. For example, Edmonds noted that

Blacks were portrayed as being more musical than other groups[,] Hispanics were shown to engage in more religious activity than other groups[,] Native Americans were shown to

---

<sup>21</sup> Edmonds, *Book Research Quarterly*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*



be strong and brave in undue proportion to the total sample[,] and Asians...were portrayed as reserved, with few strong or identifiable traits.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, Black characters were often portrayed in the background of illustrations as unnamed characters in a group scene, depictions of Asians were limited to Chinese and Japanese cultures (though the representations of these cultures were largely inaccurate and were primarily stories from folktales rather than contemporary views of Asians), Latino/as were portrayed as “poor, simple people who emphasize family life,” and Native Americans were shown most often as noble savages living in peace with nature.<sup>25</sup> Edmonds’ research shows that throughout the majority of the twentieth century, racial representations within children’s picture books were highly stereotyped, highly inaccurate and generalized, and most importantly, nearly invisible.

In their article, Bernice Pescosolido, Elizabeth Grauerholz, and Melissa Milkie examined the racial representations of Black people within children’s picture books from the years 1937 to 1993, and found results similar to Edmonds. However, the authors argue that the representation of Blacks in picture books during the twentieth century was not “linear in nature,” and was instead dependent on the historical context and amount of racial conflict occurring in the US at the time the books were written.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the authors note that the representations of Blacks in children’s picture books, both in terms of visibility and stereotyping, varies throughout the 1900s as a direct result of the amount of racial conflict in US society, which would likewise influence the racial representations of other people of color in children’s picture books. Using reports from the New York Times over a period of 57 years, the authors found the average number of reported

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>26</sup> 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” in *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 3 (1997), 444.

racial conflicts during monthly periods and compared these numbers to the amount of visibility and representations of Blacks within children's picture books.<sup>27</sup> The authors found a direct correlation, in that when the number of racial conflicts rose, the visibility and representation of Blacks within children's picture books decreased.<sup>28</sup> With this new understanding of how racial representations are shaped by societal changes in the US, evaluating and analyzing the racial representations in modern picture books is possible.

As evident, racial representations shift as the race relations of the US continue to evolve. As the US becomes more multicultural and diverse, the issue of multiculturalism has become stressed for all students to create a more tolerant society. The minority-majority race has become tighter over time, with the prediction that the White race will be a minority by 2050 for the first time in US history.<sup>29</sup> According to the US Census Bureau, today 63% of the US population is white, 16% are Latino/a, 13% are Black, 5% are Asian American, 1% is Native American, and 2% are multiracial.<sup>30</sup> The Group Threat Hypothesis, in which the dominant racial group responds to the increased presence and visibility of other races with feelings of prejudice and discrimination in order to maintain dominance over minority groups, has already begun to occur and is expected to continue as minority populations grow. Despite the perceived threat, multiculturalism continues to be a growing movement within the educational field, which promotes racial equity and equality. With that said, have the racial representations in modern picture books changed?

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 457.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Brian S. K. Kim, Jennifer L. Green, and Eileen F. Klein, "Using Storybooks to Promote Multicultural Sensitivity in Elementary School Children" in *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development*, 34, no. 4 (2006), 223.

<sup>30</sup> "USA QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau" *United States Census Bureau*, last modified January 7, 2014, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>.

The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison documents the number of children's books by and about people of color annually.<sup>31</sup> With approximately 5,000 books published per year, the CCBC examines samples ranging from 3,000 to 3,800 books to determine the number of books written by and about racial minorities. Analyzing their compiled data, it is clear that the number of books by people of color has remained largely consistent over the last three decades, while the number of books about people of color has fallen.<sup>32</sup> However, it is essential to note that despite the low percentage of books by and about racial minorities in today's data, there has been an increase in the representation of racial minorities within picture books when one accounts for the substantial increase in the total number of picture books published.

The CCBC reported that in 2003 there were 79 Black authors and 171 books about Blacks, 11 Native American authors and 95 books about Native Americans, 43 Asian authors and 78 books about Asians, and 41 Latino/a authors and 94 books about Latino/as.<sup>33</sup> Comparatively, in 2013 there were 67 Black authors and 93 books about Blacks, 18 Native American authors and 34 books about Native Americans, 90 Asian authors and 69 books about Asians, and 48 Latino/a authors and 57 books about Latino/as.<sup>34</sup> From 2003 to 2013, it is evident that although the amount of authors remained largely the same (with some minority groups increasing in the number of authors), the number of books about each minority group fell substantially. This data suggests that despite the increase of books by and about minorities in the last century, the representation of

---

<sup>31</sup> "Children's Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States" *University of Wisconsin-Madison, School of Education*, accessed February 7, 2014, <http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

racial minorities in children's books continues to be insufficient to accurately represent the racial makeup of the US. Consequently, the lack of visibility and racial representation negatively affects the racial attitudes and the development of racial identities in all children.

Although more books are being labeled as multicultural, not all of the picture books are promoting positive representations of racial minorities. In their article, Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese examine picture books labeled as multicultural to evaluate the accuracy and positive representations of races and cultures. The authors found that even within award-winning multicultural picture books, stereotypical depictions of races and cultures are present. For example, the article offers an in-depth analysis of the book *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*, a text written and illustrated by a White author and attributed to Chief Seattle, the Suquamish, and the Duwamish Native American tribes. In the book, the illustrations "frequently represent Plains cultures," with horses, feathered headdresses, and tipis featured prominently instead of Northwest tribal life.<sup>35</sup> This inaccurate representation of Northwest tribal culture reinforces the "long-standing stereotypes about Native dress and life."<sup>36</sup> *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*, like many other award-winning multicultural picture books, includes problematic racial representations because "the level of authenticity and first-hand knowledge is often insufficient" when White authors write multicultural literature, and therefore unknowingly depict inaccurate, harmful stereotypes of cultures and races.<sup>37</sup> Mendoza and Reese found that "reviewers and award committees often do not take into account issues of cultural and historical accuracy and authenticity," signifying that high-praised, award-winning picture books, and consequently the best-selling and most-read

---

<sup>35</sup> Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese, "Examining Multicultural Picture Books for the Early Childhood Classroom: Possibilities and Pitfalls" in *Early Childhood Research and Practice* 3, no. 2 (2001).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

picture books, frequently include harmful stereotypes and false representations which negatively impact children's racial attitudes and the development of their own self-image.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, this article indicates that relying on awards and reviews is not enough to find accurate and positive racial representations within picture books.

One growing racial demographic that modern picture books are beginning to represent is multiracial children. As interracial marriage becomes less stigmatized throughout the US, there is a growing population of multiracial children, though they have not always been represented in children's literature. For example, Cole and Valentine found that from the years 1958 to 1984, only four children's books were published that had multiracial characters.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, many picture books depicting multiracial children and families "fall into the trap of promoting difference as the key—and sometimes the only—attribute," which effectively portrays multiracial families and children as "different" rather than as peers.<sup>40</sup> Often, books focused on multiracial families contained two opposing narratives: the illustrations depict one culture or race on one page with the other culture or race on the opposite page to create a negative racial/cultural dichotomy, while the text promotes positive self-image for multiracial children.<sup>41</sup> In her literature review, Karen Sands-O'Connor argues for a more complex depiction of differences between races/cultures in the families within multicultural books, rather than an emphasis solely on the differences.<sup>42</sup> By creating a balanced representation of similarities and differences between cultures and races, Sands-O'Connor argues racial and multiracial representations will be framed

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Cole, *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 306.

<sup>40</sup> Karen Sands-O'Connor, "Why are People Different?: Multiracial Families in Picture Books and the Dialogue of Difference," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 25, no. 3 (2001): 414.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

in a more positive light and will promote positive racial attitudes and racial identities for, and towards, multiracial children.<sup>43</sup>

Evidently, much progress has been made in modern children's picture books in regards to racial representations with increasing numbers of books by and about racial minorities. However, these examples make it clear that many of the racial representations remain inaccurate and highly biased. The representations of racial minorities offer romanticized views of cultures and races, focus on differences rather than similarities, and there continues to be a disproportionate underrepresentation for people of color. Though the racial representations are not as overtly racist and discriminatory as representations in the twentieth century, the more discrete forms of racism, false portrayals of race and culture, and persistent invisibility continue to negatively impact racial attitudes and identities in children today.

Although multicultural children's picture books are more popular than ever, many texts labeled as multicultural literature remain problematic, as discussed. Beneath the issues of false racial representations and the lack/invisibility of people of color in children's picture books, more complex and troubling ideologies and lenses are found underlying these multicultural texts. For example, Jennifer Willis-Rivera and Melissa Meeker argue that diverse populations are viewed from an objectified position, while Bogum Yoon, Anne Simpson, and Claudia Haag argue that there is blatant assimilationist ideology embedded within modern multicultural literature and picture books.

Through examining racism in how picture books are used, and racism within picture books, Willis-Rivera and Meeker uncover a worrying lens through which racial minorities are viewed. Willis-Rivera and Meeker argue that many multicultural texts "can often only be read

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

‘correctly’ from the standpoint of whiteness,” or what they call the White gaze, in which race is depicted as an object to control and investigate rather than a characteristic to embrace.<sup>44</sup> For example, the authors analyze the book *Let’s Talk About Racism*, in which a white American boy and girl are depicted eating peanuts and popcorn with the caption, “You might be surprised to learn that Native Americans gave us popcorn, and Africans gave us peanuts.”<sup>45</sup> The caption explicitly creates an “us versus them” dichotomy, and supports their argument of the White gaze in children’s picture books while simultaneously supporting the notion that to be American means to be White. Additionally, the authors examine the representation of racial groups as exotic and placed in positions of objectification for the White gaze. For example, the authors discuss the book *Nina Bonita*, in which a white rabbit is “intrigued with the beauty of a young Black girl” and decides to marry a black bunny so he can have a beautiful black daughter like the Black girl.<sup>46</sup> In this way, the young Black girl is objectified as an exotic object, and therefore positions readers in the White gaze as they view the Black girl as a commodity, rather than a well-rounded character. These examples support the authors’ assertions that often race representations within multicultural books are positioned from the White gaze, which objectifies people of color while simultaneously and implicitly “otherizing” racial minorities.

Similarly, Yoon, Simpson, and Haag uncover another problematic ideology embedded within children’s picture books. In their study, they argue that many multicultural picture books contain an assimilationist ideology, in which people of color and cultures other than American are presented as “inferior” and that the American people of color characters need to forgo their cultures in order to blend in with the dominant culture since being White and American are often

---

<sup>44</sup> Jennifer Willis-Rivera and Melissa Meeker, “De Que Colores: A Critical Examination of Multicultural Children’s Books,” in *Communication Education* 51, no. 3 (2002): 272.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 276.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 274.

depicted as one in the same.<sup>47</sup> The authors randomly examined 12 multicultural picture books from a middle school in Texas. They found that one third of the sample contained assimilationist ideals, half were neutral, and the remaining books promoted cultural pluralism.<sup>48</sup> Within the four books containing assimilationist ideals, two themes were present: transitioning from cultural resistance to assimilation as well as depicting the American dream.<sup>49</sup> In both themes, children needed to forgo their native cultural values in order to assimilate to and become part of American society.<sup>50</sup> The impact of these ideologies and lenses results in viewing people of color and cultures other than American as inherently different and exotic, while implying that to be one of “us” means to assimilate to the dominant White, American culture. Both the underlying assimilationist ideology and White gaze within multicultural picture books create problematic depictions of people of color and cultures other than American, which ultimately results in negative racial attitudes towards racial minorities and in shaping negative racial identities in people of color and children who are not Americans.

As these theories show, the racial and cultural representations within multicultural picture books are further complicated by their underlying ideologies and viewpoints. Correcting race representations within children’s picture books is evidently more complex than accurately and authentically depicting races and cultures, as well as providing more books with people of color as the protagonists. While those aspects are vital to improving race representations in picture books, it is necessary to eradicate the White gaze and assimilationist ideology in order to appreciate each race and culture rather than objectifying and transforming them. Although many

---

<sup>47</sup> Bogum Yoon, Anne Simpson, and Claudia Haag, “*Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 54, no. 2 (2010): 110.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-114.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*



of the modern multicultural picture books present problematic racial representations, and therefore project unjust and highly biased racial attitudes onto the children who read the picture books, there are still many steps individual families, as well as the publishing industry, can take.

### **Racial Representations in Picture Books and Publishers**

As discussed, many award-winning and highly praised multicultural picture books contain problematic racial representations, and therefore relying on awards and reviews when choosing children's picture books for positive racial and cultural messages is ill-advised.<sup>51</sup> Because the publishing industry is dominated by White employees as well as White authors, the accuracy, authenticity, and visibility of racial representations is often insufficient due to a lack of knowledge or unawareness from publishers and authors.<sup>52</sup> There needs to be an urgency within the publishing industry to close the diversity gap and find more authors and employees who are people of color and can bring differing perspectives and voices to children's literature.<sup>53</sup> Until then, smaller publishing houses or award organizations with specialized focuses (many specialize in multicultural picture books about a specific race or culture) are more likely to publish accurate and comprehensive racial and cultural representations which can foster positive racial identities and racial attitudes.<sup>54</sup> Some examples of these smaller publishing houses and award organizations include Cinco Puntos, Lee and Low books, the Coretta Scott King awards, and the Pura Belpre awards, among countless others.

---

<sup>51</sup> Mendoza, *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Jason Low, "Literary Agents Discuss the Diversity Gap in Publishing," *Lee and Low Books* (blog), November 6, 2013 (8:00 a.m.), <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2013/11/06/literary-agents-discuss-the-diversity-gap-in-publishing/>.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

Beyond finding books through specialized publishers or award organizations, it is essential that children be exposed to a wide variety of texts because one book cannot accurately portray the collective experiences of a racial group or culture.<sup>55</sup> By providing more than one text about a racial group or culture, children are more likely to deconstruct stereotypes and begin building more positive racial attitudes and identities when they are exposed to multiple voices and representations of the same racial or cultural group.<sup>56</sup> As parents and educators, facilitating discussions with our children about race, rather than approaching race with colorblind ideologies, can ultimately influence positive racial attitudes towards others, and promote positive racial identities in themselves.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Hughes-Hassell and Cox argue that publishers ineffectively market multicultural books because they are viewed as a niche market, rather than a genre of book that appeals to the masses.<sup>58</sup> However, as consumers, Hughes-Hassell and Cox argue that when we purchase multicultural books we are voicing our book preferences and encouraging more output of whatever we buy. Therefore, Hughes-Hassell and Cox state that to buy multicultural books and support the authors of these books, the publishing industry would find the investment in multicultural picture books to be financially rewarding over time, which would eventually begin to shape the books consumers find on the bookstore shelves.<sup>59</sup>

As shown, racial representations have superficially undergone transformations over the last hundred years for people of color within children's picture books. However, there remains an overrepresentation of Whites and an invisibility of racial minorities within children's picture

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Pahlke *Child Development* 83.

<sup>58</sup> Sandra Hughes-Hassell and Ernie J. Cox, "Inside board books: representations of people of color," *Library Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (2010).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

books, as well as underlying problematic ideologies that promote assimilationist ideals while objectifying people of color. Therefore, the modern day picture books fail in many of the same ways the children's picture books failed during the early and mid-twentieth century. As a result, studies have shown that the racial attitudes and the forming of racial identities in children of color continue to be negative towards their own race and favor White racial depictions, which is consistent with the findings collected in the 1960s.<sup>60</sup> Although changing the racial makeup of authors and employees within the publishing industry is not an immediately plausible next step, it is one that consumers can bring awareness to and voice their demand for more accurate and representative multicultural texts. As individuals, entering a dialogue about race with children at an early age can influence the development of positive racial attitudes and identities, while buying from small, independent and diverse publishers can make a difference for future generations. By supporting the smaller specialized multicultural presses, they will not only be able to produce more multicultural texts, but it will also financially encourage more mainstream publishing houses to provide more multicultural picture books in the future. As the US nation becomes increasingly diverse, the need for multicultural children's books will become increasingly important. As consumers, parents, and educators, the responsibility of finding and demanding more accurate and positive racial representations within children's picture books falls on all of us.

---

<sup>60</sup> Pahlke *Child Development* 83.

## Bibliography

- “Children’s Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States.”  
*University of Wisconsin-Madison, School of Education*. Accessed February 7, 2014.  
<http://cbbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>.
- Cole, Erin M., and Deborah P. Valentine. “Multiethnic Children Portrayed in Children’s Picture Books.” *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 17, no. 4 (2000): 305-317.  
<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1023%2FA%3A1007550124043>.
- Edmonds, Leslie. “The treatment of race in picture books for young children.” *Book Research Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1986): 30-41.  
[http://download.springer.com/static/pdf/90/art%253A10.1007%252FBF02684576.pdf?-auth66=1391106690\\_fddf9064b97cb24cf09a481ea308a231&ext=.pdf](http://download.springer.com/static/pdf/90/art%253A10.1007%252FBF02684576.pdf?-auth66=1391106690_fddf9064b97cb24cf09a481ea308a231&ext=.pdf).
- Hughes-Hassell, Sandra, and Ernie J. Cox. “Inside board books: representations of people of color.” *Library Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (2010): 211-230.
- Jordan, Phillip E., and Maria Hernandez-Reif. “Reexamination of young children’s racial attitudes and skin tone preferences.” *Journal of Black Psychology* 35, no. 3 (2009): 388-403. <http://graduate.ua.edu/mcnair/journals/2008/Jordan.pdf>.
- Kim, Brian S. K., Jennifer L. Green, and Eileen F. Klein. “Using Storybooks to Promote Multicultural Sensitivity in Elementary School Children.” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development*, 34, no. 4 (2006): 223–234.  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2006.tb00041.x/abstract>.
- Mendoza, Jean and Debbie Reese. "Examining Multicultural Picture Books for the Early Childhood Classroom: Possibilities and Pitfalls." *Early Childhood Research and Practice* 3, no. 2 (2001). <http://ercp/uiuc.edu/v3n2/mendoza.html>.
- Pahlke, Erin, Rebecca S. Bigler, and Marie-Anne Suizzo. “Relations Between Colorblind Socialization and Children’s Racial Bias: Evidence From European American Mothers and Their Preschool Children.” *Child Development* 83, no. 4 (2012): 1164–1179.  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01770.x/abstract>.
- Pescosolido, Bernice A., 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): 443-464.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2657315>.
- Sands-O’Connor, Karen. “Why are People Different?: Multiracial Families in Picture Books and the Dialogue of Difference.” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 25, no.3 (2001): 412-426.  
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/uni/summary/v025/25.3sands-oconnor.html>.
- “USA QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau.” *United States Census Bureau*. Last modified January 7, 2014. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>.

- Willis-Rivera, Jennifer, and Melissa Meeker. "De Que Colores: A Critical Examination of Multicultural Children's Books." *Communication Education* 51, no.3 (2002): 269-279. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03634520216515#.Uv0N22JdXT0>.
- Yoon, Bogum, Anne Simpson, and Claudia Haag. "Assimilation Ideology: Critically Examining Underlying Messages in Multicultural Literature." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 54, no. 2 (2010): 109-118. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20775366>.