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Laura M. Jimenez

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The Overwhelmingly White, Straight, and Able Face of Children's Literature

by Laura M. Jiménez, Ph.D.

I have always thought books were the unassailable proof that time travel isn't simply theoretical, rather it is a fact. Books allowed me to see, feel, hear, and experience different times, places, and even realities. From all of these imagined times and places, to this current moment in time, as I sit at my desk, lay on my couch, or huddle under a blanket fort with my sons, books represented an important and truly magical event. For those of us who grew up with books, we know the truth is that stories helped construct the people we became, and the people we continue to become each day. For those of us built by books, literature is often more important than we can even express. For me, it is as if the pages of books can be felt in my bones; the ink in my veins; and the stories in my heart.

Think about those favorite books you re-read every year. When you look back on a tough time in your life, what was the book that helped you, gave you comfort or distraction? Are there characters that stick with you, like ghosts, hanging around the edges of your consciousness? Was there a book that you felt was written just for you and no one else could even understand it the way you did? All of these are important aspects of the person you became, and no doubt you want to share those feelings and experiences with students. After all, many book lovers become literary gatekeepers—teachers, administrators, and librarians. For right now, for the time it takes to read this essay, I want literary gatekeepers to think about how they are enacting their book love with today's students.

Because, although I owe a debt of gratitude to the stories I read and reread growing up, I have come to ask some hard questions about the stories that were available to me. What part of myself did I have to give up every time I opened a book? How early did I learn to translate stories so I could see even a sliver of myself? How many times did I look for me in the pages of a book and only find sloth, misery, loss, and villainy? You



Laura M. Jiménez,
Ph.D.

see, I am a fat, sort of butch, White presenting, Latinx lesbian. There are still very few books that I can open and see myself reflected back at me in the pages with any sense of authenticity, love, or respect.

For this essay I want to walk through some of the issues of representation and #OwnVoices that are happening in publishing today, then I'll discuss the very real issue of "defensive-nostalgia" we are seeing in children's literature, and finally, I'll provide some resources to begin building a new reality in your classroom.

Stunning Lack of Non-White Characters in Children's Literature

Bishop (1990) wrote her observation about books being mirrors and windows as a result of her work studying the representation of African Americans in children's picturebooks. It was a breakthrough then and continues to be an important lens with which to think about and critically examine the literature we make available, and teach in the classroom. The metaphor is an elegant one; *mirrors* reflect back to the reader what is known and familiar, whereas *windows* provide a way to see and explore what is new. Consider how often your identity—race, gender, sexual identity, ability—were reflected back to you in the books that you read as a child.

What are the effects of, literally, never seeing yourself reflected in a piece of literature? It may be hard to imagine, but for many students in today's classroom that is still the norm. Too many students either never

see themselves in the stories they are told to read, or they only see a warped and damaged view of themselves. For instance, as a teen in the 80s, I read my first LGBTQ book (I can't even remember the title) I could get my hands on when I was 13 or so. It was a story of a young, White gay man who worried about the fact that he liked guys. No one was happy, and I seem to remember someone, probably not the protagonist, was gay-bashed and died. Later on I found *Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden (1982). Still very White, but it was about lesbians and no one died. Although the established (married) lesbian couple were fired from their teaching jobs because ... I can't even remember why, but the message was clear—dramatic teen romance leads to closeted adulthood as a PE teacher. I looked for other books with lesbian characters and they were full of rape, forced marriage, shock therapy, and death—and those were the good ones, with the kissing!

But, we aren't in the 80s anymore. We are not in the 2010s! Our society has progressed! Gay marriage is legal so everything is fine! (Please read the last statement with dripping sarcasm.) Things have changed, and they have also stayed the same. In 2015 Corinne Duyvis, a YA writer, coined the phrase *#OwnVoices* on Twitter. She used the term to describe “kidlit about diverse characters written by authors from that same diverse group” (Duyvis, n.d.): She went on to emphasize, “All *#OwnVoices* does is center the voices that should matter most: those being written about.” As a hashtag that is still in use on Twitter, *#OwnVoices* takes Bishop's concept of mirrors and windows one step further and recognizes that a person's life experiences provides special and unique understandings of that life, family, community, and history. In addition, *#OwnVoices* recognizes the value of children's and young adult literature as a way for us to see ourselves and to learn about others.

Duyvis wasn't simply talking about literature as entertainment or escapism (although it is often entertaining and escapist). Instead, she was addressing the literature children read as a way to help them understand and explain the world they are growing into. *#OwnVoices* literature hinges on the idea that people from an

undervalued, mis- and underrepresented communities are better suited for writing and representing those experiences. In other words—who can better write the experience of a young girl getting her first period? A cis man who has never experienced cramps, bloating, and the horror of a menstrual blood gush in 5th period, or a cis woman? The idea of *#OwnVoices* was and continues to be a strangely controversial concept.

In fact, many White writers, librarians, and teachers have complained about the very idea that *#OwnVoices* books deserve space in children's lives, in the classroom, and as part of the curriculum. The complaint is often thinly veiled as commentary about the “diversity fad” shoving “real literature” out of the classroom. Other times it is an accusation that writers, critics, and scholars are either being or bending to the will of the “the PC police.” Most disturbing, to me, is the not-so-hidden assumption that if we encourage students to read and deeply engage with literature that reflects anything other than White, straight, able, and (often) male experience, then we are compromising student access to “quality literature.” The unsaid, but completely obvious, assumption is that any story that falls outside the traditional Western canon is something besides *quality literature*. For a comprehensive look at this debate, see “How YA Twitter Is Trying To Dismantle White Supremacy, One Book At A Time” by Sona Charaipotra and Zoraida Córdova (2017).

When literary gatekeepers insist on framing authentic *#OwnVoices* literature as less than, or extra, or something to be gotten to after the “real” literature has been read, it results in fewer *#OwnVoices* books reaching students. This is a problem for all students, including the straight, White, able, cis kids, because they grow up seeing the world that merely reflects and reifies their own experiences (and, yes, that is a problem). To make this issue as concrete as possible the following infographic is helpful (Figure 1). The Diversity in Children's Books (Huyck, Park, & Griffin, 2016) infographic is startling but not at all surprising for non-White readers. It shows the racial distribution of characters across approximately 3500 picturebooks published in 2015.

one Muslim student a token for an entire religion? Or, would you like to talk about Pride month because you know there are students in the school being harassed for having gay parents? These and a million other reasons are why we need #OwnVoices books in the classroom.

Now, take a look at the far left, see the Native American/First Nation statistic? Less than 1%. Please note that little warped mirror on the child's hand. What kind of reflection do the few stories there are provide for Native American and Indigenous readers? The narrative written about Native American and Indigenous people has been written primarily by White authors and as such reflects a White gaze of history and community. The reflection is small, warped, and damaged because it isn't authentic. #OwnVoices matter for each of your students, because they are books that act as mirrors for students who rarely see themselves, and they act as windows for students that need to see the rest of the world.

The Defensive-Nostalgia of Children's Literature

Ladson-Billings stressed the unique place reading has historically held in marginalized communities. She states that the act of reading and writing was held as "property that was traditionally owned and used by whites in the society" (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. ix). Let that sit with you. Literacy practices are based in and controlled by an idealized White, straight, male, and able norm. That history has stayed with us so that alternative ways of knowing, being, and illustrating knowledge are not respected, looked for, or promoted in education (Haddix, 2008). Instead of providing flexible learning environments, diverse assessments, and culturally responsive content, the education system expects children to conform to this idealized White, straight, middle class, and able norm. Think about how education reifies White, middle class, straight discourse as "standard," "proper," and "academic" language. History tells us that White society has long benefitted from controlling literacy practices. Assumptions about class, straightness, and ability supported and continue to support a middle class, able, hetero-normative view of the world. Omitting these stories or providing inauthentic

versions of those stories, damages children. It is as if literary gatekeepers are asking kids to build themselves with crooked, cracked, and inferior stories.

Low (2018) published another view of this issue looking across all books published for children, instead of simply looking at picturebooks. It doesn't look any better, in case you were wondering. In 2016, non-White authors accounted for 6% of the books published for children. In 2017 that number went up to 7% (Jalissa, 2018). From the hue and cry of White writers, like Nora Baskin (*Artists mustn't fear the social media call-out culture*, 2018) who lamented the audacity of critics' focus on misrepresentation in children's literature you'd think the sky was truly falling in on White writers. The issue isn't that Whites are being pushed aside at record rates. The issue is that the White experience is so pervasive that it is seen as an unquestioned norm, often compared to "asking fish to describe the water in which they swim" (Rubin & Rubin, 2011, p. 20). Unsurprisingly, the majority of active, critical voices in children's and YA scholarship identify as members of marginalized communities. Social media has allowed for equal access and so marginalized voices can be heard, sometimes for the first time. In these online spaces, White authors, and scholars are often depicted as victims of the vicious "culture cops" (Rosenfield, 2017, August 7).

The defensive reaction of White authors, librarians and teachers when faced with the assertion that stories written by and about mis- and under-represented people are more likely to be authentic stories than ones written by outsiders is a textbook example of what DiAngelo (2011) referred to as *White Fragility*. White Fragility is a "state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 1). Literary gatekeepers want to share their experiences with important literature with their students. That's good and important. But, the experience you had was of seeing yourself, of seeing a great expanse of possibilities, of feeling lost and enveloped in a story. All kids deserve to have those feelings, but it may not be with the same books that brought those feelings out in you. Instead, it will be with new books, by new authors, telling stories you

Diversity in Children's Books 2015

Percentages of books depicting characters from diverse backgrounds. Based on the 2015 publishing statistics compiled by the Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison. ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pclist.asp

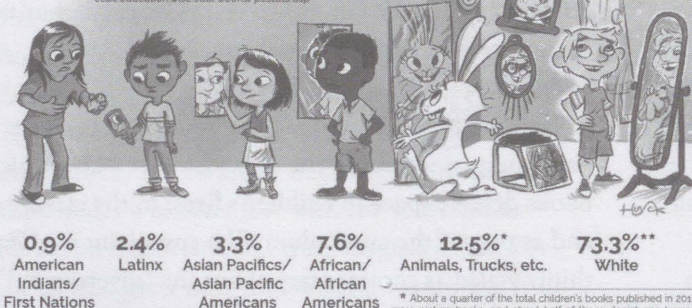


Figure 1. Diversity in Children's Books, 2015 (Huyck, Dahlen, & Griffin, 2016), an infographic illustrating representation of race in picturebooks.

Note: Statistics compiled by the Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison: <http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pclist.asp>. Released for non-commercial use under a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 license

The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), located in The University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Education, has been a driving force in scholarship around representation in children's literature. They collect children's and young adult literature published in the United States of America and then they do what librarians do best. They catalogue the holy bajeabis out of the books. In this case they spent their time coding picturebooks for the race of identifiable characters. What that boiled down to is that if a character was identifiable, they were coded. If, on the other hand, an illustration showed baseball stands filled with fans, the crowd was not coded. I love the CCBC for providing the children's literature field with some BIG BEAUTIFUL DATA!

I want to walk you through reading this particular image, and I want you to reflect on your own reading experiences, and that of your students. Starting from right to left. What do you notice? See that White kid?

Turns out 73.3% of characters in picturebooks are White and look just like that boy. And, in this case, gender is important because there is also an overwhelming male representation in picturebooks. Take a moment, look at all the ways this boy is being reflected back to himself; king, fireman, scuba diver, baby, old man, and many other stories provide this guy with lots of ways to see himself. The stories in the picturebooks published just a few years ago, in 2015, show an enormous variety of mirrors to White boys in particular (Bishop, 1990). They can imagine themselves into science, art, adventure, love, sadness, and anything else a White boy could want. That White boy sees a world of possibilities to explore, grow into, take on, and walk away from. The thing is, that is also what the non-White, non-boy, disabled, readers see; a White boy with all the opportunities. They read about White boys loving a dog, or going to the moon, or learning to dance. But, their own story is missing—deemed unworthy of study, reflection, and time.

The overwhelming Whiteness is a problem for White readers as well ... you see, the boy's reflections crowds out all other views of the world; he stands like Narcissus drowning in his own reflection.

The next most populated category in 2015 was sentient non-human characters (12.5%). Do you understand what that means? You have more of a chance of seeing yourself in a picturebook if you are a talking train or a thinking rabbit than if you are non-White kid. Let that sink in. How many talking hedgehogs do you teach every year? Have you ever worried that the White students in your class have a hard time understanding how to connect with a walking tomato? No? Huh.

On the other hand, have you been wondering how to explain the atrocities happening at our southern borders? Do you find yourself wishing you could share the story of Eid at the end of Ramadan without making the

may not relate to or understand. That needs to be ok. You can hold onto the stories that build you at the very same time you are reaching for stories that will help the next generation of readers see themselves, and others, in this complex world.

One major issue literary gatekeepers have is the assumption that a book that was good for them is good for all readers. Books written today have racist, homophobic, ableist, sexist representations, so you can bet your sweet bippy that books written 10, 20, 30, 50 and 100 years ago hold miserably racist, ableist, homophobic, sexist depictions. That can't be a surprise, can it? It is the simple truth. Kids don't need to see more problematic depictions of themselves or others. Instead, you need to stand up and demand books that will help all of our students grow to be curious and knowledgeable about themselves and others. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1963/1994) warned against the "appalling silence of the good people" (p. 259). The silence in the face of a racist, ableist, homophobic representation is often viewed as civility. But, that silence provided to the status quo means that too many adults either don't see or don't admit to the importance of representation. Those of us who speak directly to the overrepresentation of a White, straight, able, and male idealized norm in children's literature do so because we do not have the privilege of silence to protect us, our families, our histories, or our cultures.

Building a Responsive and Responsible Classroom Literary Experience

One of the hardest things as an adult is to realize that as a teen I was really, really wrong. My 15 year old self just *knew* adults had it made. They had all the knowledge but were keeping it from me, just like they kept everything else to themselves. After all, adults had money, power and car keys. What I didn't realize then, and am constantly being reminded of now, is that adults are faking it a lot of the time. We don't want to show our ignorance, our vulnerability, and our errors in judgment. I think we fear the appearance of not know-

ing more than we fear or understand the richness of learning and growing—especially when we are dealing with students. But, I will tell you something, adulthood has taught me to be both humble and expectant. Life is messy. I do NOT know it all and so I am constantly learning. I have more to learn, room to grow, and I will make mistakes both big and small each time I venture into new territory. And, so will you.

At the beginning of each semester I ask the teachers enrolled in the children's literature courses I teach to watch three TED talks before we meet. I ask them to take notes as they watch, specifically looking for the following: Ideas you already know, ideas you were surprised by, and ideas you disagree with. I also ask them to watch them in this particular order.

1. Brene Brown's *The Power of Vulnerability* (2010). She explains how rich and wonderful life is when you are open to vulnerability.
2. Chimamanda Adichie's *The Danger of a Single Story* (2009). She explains how easy and seductive and wrong it is to paint an entire culture with a single narrative.
3. Katheryn Schulz's *On Being Wrong* (2011). She explains how and why we hate being wrong, and how to get a little better at being wrong.

These three women provide a frame for us to start looking at children's and young adult literature in a new way. If we can all agree that books are important, and that stories help us become the people we are, then we need to give kids the chance to discover who they are with the best stories available. And, those stories are going to be different than the ones you had because the world has changed, and these kids are different, and the world is going to continue to change, and you'll need to change, too. Too often undervalued communities are framed in a "single story" narratives that hyper focus on struggle and nothing else. As Durand and Jiménez-García urge, "We—scholars and teachers of youth literature—also need more books that can serve as windows for youth of color to envision their identities and experiences in nurturing, restorative ways" (2018, p. 20). Your students deserve that and there are people who are ready to help.

There is a chance you are having many feelings right now. You may be angry with me, or feeling defensive. That is totally normal and happens a lot. I suggest you go back to the top, when you were agreeing with me about the importance of stories. Or you can read Dr. Robin DiAngelo's (2015) work, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard to Talk to White People About Racism*, at The Good Men Project website (<https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/white-fragility-why-its-so-hard-to-talk-to-white-people-about-racism-twlm/>).

You might be panicked and unsure where to go next. Or, you are curious and want to learn more. For these feelings, there is good news—you are not alone. There is an ever-expanding web of teachers, librarians, children's literature scholars, and authors who want to share their expertise with you. These are people who believe in and practice public scholarship focused on issues of representation in children's and young adult literature. I'm leaving you with a list of resources you can trust. These folks are doing the work and want to share ideas and scholarship with you in the hopes of positively effecting your classrooms.

Children's and Young Adult Literature Resources

American Indians in Children's Literature - <https://americanindiansinchildrens-literature.blogspot.com/>
 Booktoss: No Easy Book Love - <https://booktoss.blog/>
 CrazyQuiltEdi - <https://campbele.wordpress.com/>
 Disability in Kidlit - <http://disabilityinkidlit.com/>
 Latinxs in Kid Lit - <https://latinosinkidlit.com/>
 Lee and Low Books: The Open Book - <http://blog.leeandlow.com/>
 Reading While White - <http://readingwhilewhite.blogspot.com/>
 Research on Diversity in Youth Literature - <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/>
 Social Justice Books - <https://socialjusticebooks.org/booklists/>
 The Brown Bookshelf - <https://thebrownbookshelf.com/>
 We Need Diverse Books - <https://diversebooks.org/>
 We're The People 2018 Reading List - <https://wtpsite.wordpress.com/2018-summer-reading-list/>

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Author Biography

Dr. Laura M. Jiménez is a lecturer at Boston University Wheelock College of Education and Human Development. She teaches children's literature courses that focus on both the reader and the text, and enacts an explicit social justice lens. Her work spans both literature and literacy, with a special interest in graphic novels and issues of representation in young adult literature. Her scholarship appears in *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, and the *Journal of Literacy Research*. Her graphic novel reviews can be found on her blog, <https://booktoss.blog/>. She can be reached at Jimenezl1@bu.edu or on Twitter @booktoss.