

Reading in the Dark: Whiteness and Racial Representation in Caldecott Books

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Abstract

Teachers often choose books for their classroom libraries on the basis of an award or special recognition a particular book has received. In this vein, the Caldecott Medal is one of the most highly esteemed recognitions bestowed on children's picture books each year in the United States. Relatively few studies have examined how race is represented among main characters in Caldecott books. Using a Critical Content Analysis (CCA), we examine how race is represented among main characters in 80 Caldecott books from 1938 to 2017. Findings indicate that an overwhelmingly disproportionate percentage of the characters are White. In addition, the non-White main characters are portrayed in very narrow roles. Implications for teachers to consider when using these books are discussed.

Keywords: race, privilege, white supremacy, education

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As former early childhood and elementary educators, Alice and I both have always had a deep passion for children's literature. Currently, in our roles as teacher educators, we believe it is our civic and moral responsibility to prepare teachers to teach in ways that affirm, support, and sustain culturally diverse perspectives in their classrooms. To accomplish this goal, we believe it is important to teach teachers how to carefully and critically examine the texts they use in the classroom for hidden and implicit racist messages and ideologies. Unfortunately, many of the books that are made available for students to read independently, and to be read by teachers in elementary and early childhood classrooms, tend to disproportionately represent and foreground the experiences of Whites and Whiteness in the world (Gangi, 2008). In an effort to better evaluate the relevance and appropriateness of specific children's texts for specific classroom contexts, we believe that it is necessary for teachers to intentionally "read in the dark" or through a racialized lens. This project grew out of ongoing conversations and a mutual desire to reinterpret Caldecott Medal books through a lens that centers race, particularly as it relates to identity, oppression, and social justice. Caldecott Medal books are often lauded by teachers and librarians as picture books with the highest quality illustrations and photographs, and thereby as being books worth reading to and with children. However, we often wondered what messages related to race and racism were being communicated directly and indirectly in these books, particularly the ways racial groups were represented and portrayed. After searching the existing scholarship related to this topic, we soon realized that few have examined the role of racial representation in Caldecott Medal books. Hence, the combined desire to find answers to our questions and a lack of research in

these areas served as an impetus behind this study.

Faced with a seemingly endless number of books to select for use in the classroom, early childhood and elementary teachers and librarians often choose books for their libraries on the basis of an award or special recognition. In this vein, the Caldecott Medal is one of the most significant and highly esteemed recognitions bestowed on children's picture books each year in the United States (Martinez, Stier, & Falcon, 2016). There are many long-range financial and political effects associated with books that receive this award. For instance, books that have been awarded this honor are purchased more often and read more frequently by teachers in early childhood and elementary classrooms. In addition, because this award carries such a high repute and distinction among picture books in the broader field of children's literature, many teachers and librarians (consciously or unconsciously) select and use these books without giving them any serious or close examination for appropriateness (Smith, 2013).

The criteria used to determine if a picture book is eligible for this award center largely on characteristics related to the illustrations (www.ala.org). Notably, nothing in the criteria necessitates that committee members consider the ways in which race is or is not represented among the protagonists and secondary characters in these picture books during the final decision-making processes. As a result of these color-blind selection processes, the main characters in most of these books have and continue to be overwhelmingly and disproportionately White. People from non-White racial backgrounds represent a very miniscule percentage of the main characters in picture books that have won this award

(Koss, Johnson, & Martinez, 2018; Koss, Martinez, & Johnson, 2016).

As demographics in U.S. classrooms continue to become increasingly diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), it is imperative for teachers to incorporate texts in their classrooms that reflect the experiences of students from diverse racial backgrounds as a means of increasing reading motivation and engagement in all student populations (Koss, Martinez, & Johnson, 2016). To date, the majority of extant studies on Caldecott Medal books and character representation center on issues of gender roles and stereotypes (Nilsson, 2005). A few studies (e.g., Koss, Johnson, & Martinez, 2018; Koss, Martinez, & Johnson, 2016) examine the degree to which non-White racial groups in society are represented in and across Caldecott Medal books specifically. Given the lack of research concerning racial representation among main characters in Caldecott books, the purpose of this study is to examine how race is represented in Caldecott Medal books from 1938 to 2017. The overarching research question that drives this study is: How is race represented among the main characters in the Caldecott Medal books from 1938 to 2017? Specifically, we ask the following:

1. What percentage of the main characters in Caldecott books are White, Black, Latinx, Asian, or American Indian?
2. Which non-White racial group is represented most/least often among the main characters in Caldecott books?
3. What roles do the non-White main characters portray in Caldecott Medal books?

It is important to note here that we completely recognize that race is a socially, culturally, historically, biologically, and politically constructed concept that is deeply nuanced and highly problematic at times (Milner, 2015). Consequently, most substantive and critical analyses of race tend to consider broader conceptualizations of race that move beyond skin color or phenotype. Nonetheless, because the focus of our study is aimed at analyzing racial representation in Caldecott Medal books, we have purposely chosen to limit the notion of race to phenotype or identifiable skin color. In instances where the race of a main character could not be clearly identified via observation or textual content in the book, we identified the character as being “unidentifiable.” Furthermore, this was done to avoid misidentifying a main character’s race.

Why Caldecott books? The American Library Association (ALA) (www.ala.org) awards the Caldecott Medal to the most distinguished picture book annually (ALA, n.d.). A 15-person committee determines the winner of the Caldecott medal each year. Eight of the individuals on the committee are elected, while the remaining seven are appointed members of the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), which is a division of the ALA. These books are worth examining because of what Smith (2013) calls the “Caldecott Effect.” That is, many teachers and librarians blindly and hastily use these books with children with little or no additional consideration of the quality, appropriateness, and relevance of each book. Moreover, Smith argues that many teachers and librarians naively assume that if a book has received a particular award or distinction, it is automatically fit for use in their classrooms. By examining the ways in which race is or is not being represented in

these particular books, one can better determine if and how teachers should engage children with these books in classrooms – particularly in classrooms and library contexts serving diverse populations of students. It is important to note here that our intention within this article is not to advocate for Caldecott Medal books to be censored in any way, form, or fashion. Rather, our goal is to reveal the ways in which race is or is not represented among the main characters in these books to help teachers make better informed children's literature selections in their respective contexts.

We believe it is important to examine racial representation among the main characters in the books for two reasons. First, children often develop schema about people in society as they learn about groups of people in the literature they read. In this vein, Students of Color tend to feel affirmed and empowered when they interact with books that have characters that share the same racial backgrounds and experiences (Iwai, 2015). Second, White students tend to develop fewer superior attitudes towards non-White people in society if they read about non-Whites on a regular basis (Johnson & Aboud, 2017). Thus, giving serious consideration to how racial attitudes develop for both White students and Students of Color, we decided to make racial representation the central unit of analysis for this study.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory informs this study (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997; Taylor, 2009; Tyson, 2011). Critical Race Theory (CRT) was developed by legal scholars to address the effects of race and racism in the U.S. legal system (Tate, 1997). CRT uses race as

the primary lens for exploring legislation and other political processes (Chapman, 2007). CRT has been applied to various educational contexts to examine the role race plays in a number of areas, such as curriculum, school funding, and school discipline policies (Alemán, 2007; Dixon, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT has also been applied more recently to children's and young adult literature to uncover tacit assumptions and ideologies related to race, racism, and Whiteness (e.g., Acevedo, 2017; Brooks, 2009; Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010). Critical Race scholarship is broad based and nonmonolithic in nature. Drawing from the work of several CRT prominent scholars (e.g., Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997; Taylor, 2009), we highlight the following five tenets of CRT: (a) The centrality of race and racism in society, (b) challenging dominant ideologies, (c) the centrality of experiential knowledge, (d) transdisciplinary perspectives, and (e) commitment to social justice. We recognize that this list of tenets is not exhaustive in nature, as a complete discussion of all of the tenets associated with CRT is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, we discuss which of the above tenets are most relevant to the goals of this study.

CRT contends that race and racism play permanent and pervasive roles in all aspects of U.S. society and thus calls for a critical analysis and monitoring of political, economic, and social institutions to ensure that these institutions (and the policies and practices therein) do not continue to privilege Whites over People of Color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixon, 2006; Dixon & Anderson, 2016). It is important to note that racism is often inextricably connected to other forms of oppression in society (e.g., sexism, homophobia, classism,

Islamophobia, etc.), and thus CRT considers the connections between racial and other forms of oppression. A second tenet of CRT concerns challenging the dominant and often taken-for-granted racist ideologies in society. CRT seeks to challenge and refute racist ideologies commonly held by White individuals and institutions in society. In many instances, these racist ideologies are used to justify and advance individual and institutionalized forms of racism (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Some examples of these racist and dominant ideologies include, but are not limited to, notions of meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, and objectivity (Lynn & Dixon, 2013). In this same vein, counterstorytelling is defined as a method of telling a story that aims to cast doubt on the validity of premises, myths, and grand narratives that are generally accepted as truth by many White people in society (Dixon, 2006). CRT scholars (e.g., Dixon, 2006; Harris, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998) assert that counterstories validate the life experiences of People of Color and challenge the versions of reality held by those privileged in society.

A third tenet of CRT concerns the centrality of experiential knowledge. Compared to more traditional theories of race wherein the individual and group experiences of People of Color are often dismissed, CRT invites experiential knowledge as a meaningful, valid, and powerful source of data analysis (Lynn & Dixon, 2013). Some examples of experiential knowledge that are often involved in CRT analyses include the following: storytelling, family histories, biographies, narratives, and testimonies. A fourth tenet of CRT is undergirded by the fact that race is a deeply complex, socially constructed concept that exists in historical, political, physical, and contemporary contexts (Omi & Winant, 2012).

Consequently, CRT scholars often apply a transdisciplinary approach to analyses of race to better understand how race exists and operates in individuals, institutions, and groups of people in contemporary and historical contexts. To achieve this goal, CRT often draws from key tenets in the following disciplines: ethnic studies, sociology, psychology, law, theatre, and women's studies. Essentially, one of the goals of CRT is to examine race within historical and political contexts.

CRT is openly and deeply committed to social justice for racially marginalized people in society. In other words, CRT seeks to provide transformative solutions and responses to racial marginalization and oppression in various institutions and practices in society (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997). CRT also seeks to expose superficial and "interest convergence" notions of racial justice as a means of working toward more transformative approaches to racial equity and equality (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Regarding the concept of interest convergence, Bell explains that many Whites will support forms of racial justice only if they can see themselves benefiting from this form of justice either individually or collectively. Hence, this fifth tenet of CRT is intended to empower People of Color and other marginalized communities with the tools needed to resist and combat racism in substantive ways.

Within the purview of this study, we employ the first, second, and third tenets of CRT as a frame to understand our phenomenon of interest and to interpret our findings. The first tenet centers race in examining institutional practices and endeavors, and functions as an undergirding purpose in our study. The second and third tenets allow us to examine the extent to

which the voices and experiences of marginalized racial groups are represented in award-winning children's literature.

Literature Review

Three important themes exist within the scholarship related to children's literature and race: (a) cultural authenticity, (b) racial representation, and (c) CRT and children's literature. The first theme concerns the issue of cultural authenticity in multicultural children's literature. A number of studies (e.g., Jewett, 2011; Nilsson, 2005; Smith-D'Arezzo & Musgrove, 2011) have examined the extent to which the experiences and histories of non-White groups in society are represented accurately and completely in multicultural children's literature. Findings from these studies suggest that multicultural children's literature continues to improve in terms of how it represents the experiences of various cultural groups in society. Yet, many multicultural children's texts on the market today contain covert messages about specific racial/cultural groups that are stereotypical in nature. For example, in a study involving picture books from 2000 to 2004, Smith-D'Arezzo and Musgrove (2011) found negative messages about African Americans in eight out of the 23 picture books involved in the study. Many of these picture books (through the use of illustrations and content) reinforced the notion of African Americans as unintelligent. Moreover, several of the picture books depicted African American boys as being members of gangs. What is largely missing from this body of scholarship is an in-depth analysis of the ways in which the experiences of multiple racial groups are presented in and/or absent from children's books that have received awards and honors.

A second theme that exists with this broader scholarship concerns the ways in which various racial groups are depicted in children's literature. These studies are concerned particularly with issues of racial bias and/or racial stereotypes in children's literature. On the whole, studies related to this theme (e.g., Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010; Morgan, 2009) indicate that the experiences of People of Color are represented more often in children's literature than in decades past. Nonetheless, these studies also suggest that People of Color are represented in largely narrow and seemingly homogenous ways in many children's texts. For example, in a recent study of multicultural children's literature, Hughes-Hassell and Cox (2010) point out how difficult it still remains to find high-quality children's literature wherein African American people are represented as having multiple skin tones. Most of the books available on the market today depict African Americans as having either very dark and/or very light skin. What is missing is an analysis of how People of Color are represented in children's texts that have received awards and honors in particular.

A third theme within the broader scholarship related to children's literature and race concerns the role of Whiteness and racial oppression in children's literature. CRT scholars (e.g., Brooks, 2009; Gangi, 2008; McNair, 2008) have identified ways in which racial injustice exists and is normalized in children's literature. Findings from this line of research suggest that the experiences of White people are presented disproportionately more often than the experiences of People of Color in many children's texts. For example, Gangi (2008) used CRT to examine popular literacy textbooks, professional books, book lists, awards, book fairs, and children's literature texts for multicultural content and authors.

From her analysis, Gangi concluded that there is an “unbearable whiteness” in literacy instruction in the United States. That is, most of the texts and tools that teachers use for literacy instruction privilege the experiences of White children over the experiences of Children of Color. What is largely missing from this body of scholarship is research that applies CRT to Caldecott Medal books.

Methods

Research Design

The following research question drives this study: How is race represented among the main characters in the Caldecott Medal books from 1938 to 2017? Based on this research question, this study uses a Critical Content Analysis (CCA) research design (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2016). In short, content analysis is a method of research that seeks to interpret information and messages deeply hidden within a communication product (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Content analysis involves selecting sample artifacts to study and developing procedures to code data, classify data, and interpret the results. Simply put, content analysis asks, “What can be learned about this phenomenon by studying certain documents?” (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010, p. 31). In this vein, content analysis enabled us to consider the racial representation and portrayal of non-White main characters in Caldecott books from 1938 to 2017. Content analysis also enabled us to determine the nature of the roles that the characters (from each racial group) are portraying in these books. Content analysis can involve latent content and/or manifest content (White & Marsh, 2006). For the purposes of this study, we examined manifest or explicit content in the picture books, and thus deemed content analysis to

be an appropriate and warranted method of inquiry.

What makes this content analysis “critical”? Simply stated, CCA is a form of content analysis that focuses on examining, explaining, and exposing issues of power and social inequity in texts as a means of creating sites and spaces for critical dialogue, resistance, and change (Short, 2016). For this reason, a critical approach to content analysis signifies a critical stance or position on behalf of the researchers involved in a particular study. In other words, researchers who engage in CCA are openly and intentionally committed to uncovering, understanding, and resisting some form of social injustice in literature (Rogers, 2004). Moreover, this critical consciousness and commitment challenges commonly taken for granted and accepted assumptions about the world and the explanations for various forms of injustice therein. In our case and for the purposes of this study, we openly position ourselves as antiracist and antioppressive researchers who are concerned about revealing, resisting, and responding to implicit and explicit racist messages, stereotypes, and ideologies in children’s literature. Compared to other forms of content analysis, CCA uses a critical lens in every aspect of the research endeavor, from posing questions to reviewing literature and to analyzing and reporting data (Short, 2016). Typically in CCA, the research uses a specific critical theoretical framework to inform, guide, and orient the study. In our case, we use CRT as the specific critical theory to situate our study.

Another way that CCA differs from other forms of content analysis concerns the ways in which texts are viewed. In keeping with various forms of Critical Theory, researchers who engage in CCA believe that

texts are socially constructed by individuals and groups of people within a particular moment in time (Freire, 1970). As such, the issues of social inequity and social unrest that are present in society will be present in texts, in both politically explicit and latent ways (Vasquez, 2012). Along these same lines, the political values, interests, and ideologies of the author of a particular text, although ever present, are not always stated explicitly. In this sense, researchers who engage in CCA explain that all texts are written from a particular perspective, by a particular person, to convey a particular message, and to accomplish a particular desired purpose (Freire & Macedo, 1987). For this reason, researchers who engage in CCA seek to unveil these hidden political interests, values, ideologies, and stances by assuming a critical and questioning stance with regard to social inequity and social injustice. In our study, we seek to unveil hidden political interests, values, ideologies, and stances related to race and racism in Caldecott Medal books.

A third way that CCA differs from others forms of content analysis concerns the voices of marginalized groups in society (Luke, 2012). Given the ways in which the voices of marginalized groups in society have been minimized, silenced, and completely exempt from many texts, a researcher who engages in CCA carefully considers which voices are foregrounded/backgrounded during the knowledge deconstruction, reconstruction, and social action processes embedded in this research methodology (Short, 2016). For this reason, a fundamental goal of knowledge critique within CCA is to create spaces where the voices of marginalized groups are welcomed, highlighted, validated, and affirmed. A secondary goal, whenever possible, is to provide spaces through the knowledge deconstruction,

reconstruction, and social actions processes wherein marginalized groups can speak for themselves.

Selection of Books

Based on information acquired from the official website for the American Library Association (ALA) (www.ala.org), 80 books have received the Caldecott Medal distinction between the years of 1938–2017. All of these books (n=80) were included in the broader sample for this study. Of the 80 books that compose the broader sample for this study, 71% of these books have human beings as main characters in the book (n=57), while 29% (n=23) books have creatures and/or animals as the main characters.

Researcher Positionalities

As a Black early childhood teacher educator (Terry) and an Asian American elementary teacher educator (Alice), we define ourselves as critical researchers. As such, our racial and social identities directly inform and shape the ways we see the world and position ourselves in this study. First, as members of racially marginalized groups in society and in schools, we continuously wrestle with the way racism operates in conscious and unconscious ways within the formal and tacit curriculum in schools. We have vivid memories of feeling disconnected from the Eurocentric curriculum and literature taught in schools. Reflecting on much of our K–12 English and Language Arts experiences in majority White schools, we are reminded of how nearly all of the award-winning, classic, and important literature centered the experiences of Whites. To this day, we cannot recall many opportunities to read about the experiences of Black people in society and/or other People of Color. Even more so, we have

little or no recollections of ever reading texts that dealt with issues of racial bias and/or discrimination. Though this form of racism was not overt in nature it, nonetheless, led to ongoing feelings of racial isolation and alienation. As People of Color, teacher educators, and researchers, we have been made more conscious and sensitive to the ways in which covert forms of racism function in classrooms by these firsthand experiences with racial isolation and alienation (in school and society).

Additionally, we believe these firsthand experiences with racial marginalization served as tools when formulating research questions and analyzing data. Some might argue that positioning ourselves in this way is subjective in nature and has an undue influence on the research process. However, as Freire (1970) explains, all research emerges and is carried from the subjective and political stance of the researcher involved. Compared with other researcher positionalities that purport researcher objectivity, we attempt to be transparent about our positionings. Hence, we believe our deep commitment to antiracism in children's literature and the world serves as an asset (instead of a hindrance) as we conduct research and teach about issues related to race in children's literature.

We are also critical researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Kincheloe, 2003; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011). Consistent with critical approaches to research, we render knowledge as socially constructed by individuals and groups within a particular social and cultural community of inquiry. As such, knowledge construction is never a politically neutral endeavor. While the interests of some groups are equitably represented in research endeavors and scholarship, the interests of

other groups are often neglected and marginalized (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011). Therefore, our goal as researchers is to construct knowledge in ways that consider issues of racial and social justice. We believe the ultimate purpose of research is to identify issues of injustice through posing critical questions and challenging commonly accepted assumptions related to power and oppression. Furthermore, regarding this study in particular, our goal is to examine, interrogate, and expose inequity and injustice with regard to racial representation in Caldecott Medal books.

Data Analysis

We began our data analysis by identifying, locating, and reviewing a copy of each of the Caldecott Medal books from 1938–2017 to familiarize ourselves with the characters, events, and illustrations in each text. We used a survey instrument to record/code the content in each of the Caldecott Medal books from 1938–2017. This survey instrument was an adapted version of the survey used in two similar studies (Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, & Young, 2006; Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross, 1972) related to gender representation in picture books. The validity of this instrument was tested and proven through a rigorous process involving the researchers' graduate students (see Weitzman et al., 1972). The original version contains 110 questions related to the characters and text in children's picture books. The first 45 questions from the original survey were applicable to the present study, since the focus of these questions was on the basic elements of each book. The remaining questions on the original survey relate to the roles and representations of mothers and fathers in picture books, which are *not* the focus of our study. Furthermore, because the

focus of our study is racial representation (gender was the focus in studies cited above), we revised the “main characters” section of the original survey to include additional questions related to the race of the characters in each book.

The initial questions on the survey instrument pertain to the title, year of publication, illustrator, and author of the book. The next set of questions in our survey instrument deal with frequency counts (Krippendorff, 1980) of the race of the main characters in each book. Our rationale behind conducting frequency counts was to address the first two research questions, which focused on identifying the number of books with White and non-White main characters. In cases where the race of the main characters was not easy to identify visually and/or through the supporting text, we coded the race as unidentifiable. The categories for race we used were: White, Black, Asian, Latinx, American Indian, and Unidentifiable. The final questions on the survey relate to the role that each character is portraying in these books. To control for potential bias, we coded each book independently and compared our coded data to determine the degree of inter-rater reliability (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). There was approximately 99% of agreement between the data coded by the researchers. Furthermore, this represents a significant degree of inter-rater reliability (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

During the second phase of our data analysis process, we conducted a frequency count to identify the Caldecott books with human and nonhuman main characters. We input the race of each of the main characters from the larger sample into a frequency chart. We divided the larger sample of books (n=80) into two smaller subsamples: books with human main characters and books without human main characters. As

mentioned, there were 23 books in the sample with animals/creatures as the main characters and 57 books with humans as the main characters. We coded this information into a frequency table and tabulated the percentage of characters from each of the aforementioned racial groups. Given the purpose of this study, we chose to focus on the 57 books with human beings as main characters.

During the third phase of our data analysis process, we input the data from the frequency table for further analysis. Using descriptive statistics, we determined the degree to which the 57 Caldecott books (with human main characters) had characters from six specific racial groups (White, Black, Latinx, Asian, American Indian, and Unidentifiable). Our goal in this phase of analysis was to compare the degree to which specific non-White racial groups were represented among the main characters. Table 1 in the appendix provides a list of the books with non-White main characters and the books with main characters that were considered unidentifiable.

The final phase of analysis examined the roles that non-White main characters portrayed in the books. As such, we engaged in a qualitative content analysis (White & Marsh, 2006) of the non-White main characters in these books. We reviewed the 57 books with human main characters and identified the books with the non-White main characters. Next, using concrete observations and the information provided in the text, we assigned open-ended codes to each of these characters. Then, we developed inductive and analytical categories to understand the relationship among and between the coded data and sorted the coded data into categories based on similar themes and patterns (Patton, 2002). We analyzed the relationship

between and across the sorted data in each category. Next, we developed assertions that were supported by at least two warrants from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, to contribute to the overall validity of the research findings, we participated in what Denzin (1978) calls investigative triangulation. That is, we compared, discussed, and ultimately confirmed our understandings of the ways in which the non-White characters were portrayed in these books.

Findings

Our inquiry into the racial demographics and comparison of non-White main characters in Caldecott books indicate that a disproportionately large number of the human characters in Caldecott books are White. More specifically, we found that approximately 44 of the 57 books with human characters had main characters that were clearly identified as being White. At the same time, only 11 of the 57 books with human characters had main characters that were non-White. Moreover, two of the 57 books with human main characters had characters whose race could not be identified by the researchers. Thus, 77% of the Caldecott Books in this study had their main character as White.

After further analyzing the data according to each of the six racial categories, we found that only 7% of the Caldecott books (with human main characters) had characters that were Black. Similarly, only 7% of the Caldecott books had characters that were Asian. The least represented non-White main characters were American Indians (3.5%) and Latinx (2%). That is, of the 57 books only 1 had a Latinx as the main character. Lastly, 3.5% were unidentifiable. As previously mentioned, two of the Caldecott books had characters

whose race could not be identified by the researchers.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a lens that gives voice to groups marginalized by race and other experiences and interrogates how these groups are currently represented across institutions. Given the results reported above, we see that the voices represented by non-White main characters are 23% comprehensively. Less than one in four Caldecott books with human characters features a Person of Color. Compared to all 80 Caldecott winning books, the percentage of Caldecott books with a non-White main character drops to 14%. In some regard, the percentages listed above embellish the actual number of books representing various races. Four Caldecott books cannot begin to capture African American or Asian American stories. The idea that one Caldecott book portrays the diverse voices within Latinx communities is grossly under-representative. Given these numbers alone, any attempts at representing diverse communities are insufficient. CRT utilizes the voices of racially under-represented groups to resist ideologies shaped by White dominant norms. With a minimal quantity of these voices, efforts to reshape dominant notions—beginning with children’s literature receiving the highest accolades—are an unattainable endeavor. Our findings from the qualitative content inquiry in this study also indicate problematic issues related to the representation of diverse voices.

The third research question guiding this study relates to roles that non-White main characters in Caldecott books portray. In this section, we describe our thematic findings organized by racial groups. Consistent across racial groups were themes of superficial depictions of culture and race, portrayals of non-White main characters in

stereotypical ways, and negation of historical contextualization. Additionally, none of the Caldecott books with non-White main characters addressed issues related to social justice.

Black characters. Regarding the Caldecott books with Black main characters, we found examples of superficial depictions of culture and race, and portrayals of African culture in stereotypical ways. The Table 1 in the appendix provides a summary of the roles that the Black main characters portrayed in the Caldecott books. *Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat* (Step toe, 2016), however, is a recent Caldecott winner that departs from the examples we found. While the book does not explicitly address race, it divulges Basquiat’s cultural background being half Puerto Rican through his mother. Basquiat shares her lens of viewing art—one that considers the language and everyday experiences of children and people living in the city. In this way, Step toe employs the viewpoint of a Puerto Rican woman with mental illness to affront dominant ideologies about art. Step toe also explained how he offered a counternarrative to Basquiat’s life in his 2017 Caldecott Medal acceptance speech (Step toe, 2017). In it, he shares how he wanted to counter misconstrued ideas about Basquiat’s life in *Radiant Child*—ideas that portrayed Basquiat as poor, uneducated, and a drug addict. Thus, Step toe tells Basquiat’s stories based on facts—from his upbringing in a two-parent home to the way art was cultivated in his life early on. CRT employs counterstorytelling as a method of challenging narratives supporting White dominant ideologies. Step toe’s telling of Basquiat’s life in *Radiant Child* functions as a counterstory to false narratives informed by racial stereotypes.

The next Caldecott-winning books discussed highlight how Black characters are portrayed in stereotypical and superficial ways. In both *Shadow* (Brown, 1982) and *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions* (Musgrove, 1992), Black characters are situated in the continent of Africa. The illustrations in *Shadow*, however, depict African people in primitive ways—from living in huts to women walking with baskets on their heads. These stereotypical images of African people perpetuate negative perceptions of those residing on the continent and negate the wide diversity of countries and ethnic groups within Africa. *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions* does identify 26 different African tribes but provides superficial descriptions of each cultural group. CRT is a lens that creates space for the experiences of African people to be represented. Those portrayed in *Shade* and *Ashanti to Zulu*, however, are not accurate depictions of those living on the African continent, nor do they contextualize race within global Whiteness.

The Snowy Day (Keats, 1963) is about a boy named Peter who has a day full of adventure as he plays in the snow. This book has been considered a classic text, especially since it was the first Caldecott winner to feature a Black boy as its main character. Still, aside from Peter’s skin color, his story in no way broaches any authentic experiences related to being a Black male in America. Bishop (1997) has referred to the superficial representation of race through skin color alone as the usage of an “Everychild” character. In other words, any child of any race could have played the main character in *The Snowy Day*, and the only identifying feature of Peter being Black is his skin color. The usage of an “Everychild” character to represent groups marginalized by race is inconsistent with CRT’s tenet to utilize marginalized

experiences as a way of pushing back on Whiteness. It is also important to note that in the four books containing Black main characters, none of those characters were female.

Asian characters. Regarding the Caldecott books with Asian main characters, we found that characters were not accurately portrayed in historical context, revolved around stereotypical notions of Asians being from East Asian cultures (rather than the array of other Asian cultures), and perpetuated notions of Asians in America as “forever foreigners.” First, in *Grandfather’s Journey* (Say, 2008) the main character is an Asian Japanese grandfather who leaves his homeland and travels to America. This story is set within WWII, in which Japan and the United States were at war, and Japanese American citizens were forced into internment camps on American soil. This historical reality, however, is not alluded to at all. While the grandfather experiences emotional responses to the war, there is no mention of how he lives as he travels between Japan and the United States. Additionally, there is a point in the book in which the grandfather “shook hands with black men and white men” (p. 12). This event portrays the Japanese grandfather as apolitical between Black and White Americans and perpetuates colorblind ideologies.

The stories of *Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Story from China* (Young, 1996), *The Funny Little Woman* (Mosel, 1993), and *Mei Li* (Handforth, 1955) revolve around characters situated in China or Japan. *Lon Po Po* is about three young sisters who enact a Chinese version of the popular “Little Red Riding Hood” tale. *The Funny Little Woman* is about a Japanese woman who chases a runaway dumpling. *Mei Li* follows a young Chinese girl who attends the Chinese New

Year festivities with her brother. Each of these stories portrays the characters within their cultural country—however, in so doing perpetuates the notion of Asians being “forever foreigners” (Tuan, 1998). Asians in America, regardless of how many generations their families have lived within the United States or of their citizenship, are often perceived to be foreigners. By awarding only stories that portray Asians from their cultural countries perpetuates the association of Asians as belonging to foreign countries. Additionally, *The Funny Little Woman* attempts to authentically tell a story with traditional Japanese elements (e.g., dumplings, the *oni*, *Jizo*, the role of humor in Japanese culture), but fails to contextualize the cultural significance of them. As a result, the title itself, as well as the cultural decontextualization of this story reify Asians and their stories in diminished ways. Finally, all the of the books mentioned in this section focus on Asian characters from China or Japan. Highlighting only the stories of East Asians perpetuates stereotypical notions of Asians being from East Asia and ignores the wide diversity within Asian cultures (e.g., Vietnamese, Hmong, Samoan, Indian, Filipino). From a CRT lens, it can be argued that the Caldecott books with Asian main characters do not represent the experiences of myriad Asian and Asian American voices and perpetuate Whiteness by portraying Asians as “forever foreigners.”

American Indians and Latinx characters. American Indians were represented as the main character in only one of the 57 Caldecott books with human main characters. In *The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses* (Goble, 1993) the main character is a Plains Indian girl who prefers to live with horses rather than others in her community. The illustrations clearly identify the characters as American Indians through

stereotypical clothing and living in teepees. This portrayal of American Indians perpetuates notions of Indigenous people as more primitive than Whites. Additionally, there is nothing else in the storyline that signifies authentic aspects of Plains Indian culture. The use of stereotypical clothing and living spaces is akin to the ways Peter's skin color is used in *Snowy Days*—a cultural drape for an “Everychild” story. Similarly, *Song of the Swallows* (Politi, 2009), which features the only Latinx main character in Caldecott winners, is about a young boy named Juan who welcomes swallows back to the Mission at Capistrano on St. Joseph's Day. Aside from his name having Latinx roots, the storyline of *Song of the Swallows* also fits that of an “Everychild” story, in which culture is represented in superficial ways, and race can be easily switched out of the plot. For these reasons, we do not find the two books including American Indian and Latinx main characters representative of their cultures or the experiences of groups that continue to be marginalized by race.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how race was represented among Caldecott books from 1938 to the present day. More specifically, we were interested in determining the degree to which Caldecott books have White and non-White characters as one of the main characters in the book. In addition, we were interested in identifying the roles that non-White characters portrayed in these books as well. Based on our reflections on the data from this study, we make three important recommendations for teachers and librarians to consider as they use Caldecott books.

First, it is evident that there is an overwhelming lack of racial diversity among the main characters in Caldecott books.

Findings showed that the overwhelming majority of Caldecott books have White characters as the main characters, and that non-White main characters were portrayed in racially superficial ways. What was most troubling from our analysis was that despite dramatic demographic shifts in the United States, this trend has not changed over the past 80 years. What this implies for educators, particularly those interested in teaching for social justice and integrating multicultural perspectives in their classrooms, is that they should consider searching for texts that highlight the experiences of People of Color as means of providing a more balanced and diverse understanding of the world. Just because a book has earned a Caldecott Medal does not necessarily mean that the images and or surrounding textual content adequately reflect the rich diversity in U.S. society.

Our analyses also indicate that non-White main characters are frequently portrayed in very narrow roles. In like manner, the nuanced, rich, and intersectional experiences of People of Color were missing from nearly all of the books receiving Caldecott distinction. Additionally, Caldecott books with non-White main characters portrayed these characters as consistent with heteronormative and able-bodied norms and expectations in society. Consequently, we argue for teachers and librarians to supplement Caldecott texts with literature that portrays non-White characters with diverse and intersectional social identities.

Lastly, we conclude from our analyses that the current colorblind criteria used by the Caldecott selection committees over the past 80 years to award Caldecott Medals disproportionately awards more books with White main characters with the Caldecott distinction than books with People

of Color as the main characters. In an attempt to combat this disproportionality, we advocate for the ALA to move away from colorblind (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Pollock, 2005) approaches and employ more color-conscious approaches when selecting Caldecott award-winning books. The danger in honoring children's books that submit to color-blind ideologies and dominant portrayals of groups marginalized by race is that such notions are perpetuated in classrooms across America. Ignoring the racial realities of diverse communities reifies the White supremacy that continues to oppress children inside and outside schools. In clearer terms, we believe that critically examining the ways in which race is or is not represented among main characters can dramatically change the landscape of books that ultimately receive this renowned distinction. Furthermore, it is our belief that a failure to consider race representation will continue to produce a similar degree of disproportionality for many years to come.

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Appendix
List of Caldecott Books

Table 1

Caldecott Books with Non-White Main Characters

<u>Book</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Illustrator</u>	<u>Main Character</u>	<u>Race of Main Character(s)</u>
Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat	Javaka Steptoe	Javaka Steptoe	Jean-Michel Basquiat-Artist	Black-Haitian and Puerto Rican
Shadow	Marcia Brown	Marcia Brown	African StoryTellers	Black-African
Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions	Margaret Musgrove	Diane Dillon, Leo Dillon	African People	Black-African
The Snowy Day	Ezra Jack Keats	Ezra Jack Keats	Peter	Black-African American
Grandfather's Journey	Allen Say	Allen Say	Grandfather	Asian-Japanese
Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Story from China	Ed Young	Ed Young	Shang, Tao, Paotze	Asian-Chinese
The Funny Little Woman	Arlene Mosel	Blair Lent	Little Woman	Asian-Japanese
Mei Li	Thomas Handforth	Thomas Handforth	Little Girl	Asian-Chinese
Song of the Swallows	Leo Politi	Leo Politi	Juan	Latinx-Mexican American
The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses	Paul Goble	Paul Goble	Girl	American Indian-Plains Indian
Arrow to the Sun	Gerald McDermott	Gerald McDermott	Little Boy	American Indian-Acoma Pueblo
Smoky Night	Eve Bunting	David Díaz	Mrs. Kim, Daniel, Daniel's Mother	Unidentifiable
The Hello, Goodbye Window	Norton Juster	Chris Raschka	Boy, Nanna, Poppy	Unidentifiable