

RACE AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE:
THE REPRESENTATIONS IN CHILDREN'S
PICTURE BOOKS, 2016-2020

by

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Dedication

In recognition of their love, patience, and constant support, I dedicate this Thesis
to my husband and son.

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Abstract

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This project is an examination of race and representations of social injustice in children's picture books from 2016-2020 and is informed by black feminist theory and children's literary criticism. The objective is to examine through a critical race theory lens how these texts reflect concerns related to race and racism that surfaced during the Trump Administration, specifically police brutality. As these texts form and inform an accurate portrayal of the human experience (childhood to adulthood), the analysis will examine why there is a dearth of these kinds of representations in the Obama era, and the sudden influx of picture books addressing these topics—social injustices, the Black Lives Matter movement, race, beauty standards, and an anti-racist future—in the past four years. This study will also consider why children's picture books, of all things, are used to represent the representation of race and social injustice and how this approach might promote a progressive literary education in the future.

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Introduction

“What is a message when some children are not represented in those books?” (Walter Dean Myers/ “Where Are the People of Color in Children’s Books”)

Documenting the Situation

Discussions of race and social injustice in children’s picture books have not receded into the past, they have simply been ignored. The reason for this absence, according to Philip Nel¹, is that “America has yet to reckon with how central racist oppression is to American history and identity” (17). In agreement, political activist Susan Sontag² suggests that these issues (dating back to slavery) have been generally omitted from children’s picture books because they are “judged too dangerous to social stability to activate and create” (qtd. in Nel 17). Many other scholars allude to the suggestion that since Barack Obama’s candidacy and election (two consecutive terms—the last ending in 2016) words like “post-racial” and “color-blind” were ushered in with the new politician and brought with them the belief that the issues surrounding race and racism had come to an end.³ Indeed, Nel notes that “[w]hile young people’s books have in the past fifty years made meaningful progress in representing people of color, the growth of multicultural books for children has flatlined” (2).⁴ He further explains that “[i]n the last dozen years, the percentage of children’s literature featuring people of color has stayed fairly constant, from 13 percent (in 2002) to 15 percent (in 2015) of the total number of children’s books published annually, even though half of US school-age children are now people of color” (2).

¹ Philip Nel, *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?: The Hidden Racism of Children’s Literature, and the Need for Diverse Books* (2017).

² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003).

³ See Tim Wise, *Colorblind*, for instance.

⁴ According to Lee & Low Books, “The Diversity Gap in Children’s Books 1994-2014” (2015) 37% of the U.S. population are people of color but only 10% of children’s books in the past 21 years contain multicultural content.

Although critical examinations of children’s picture books reveal representations of race and social injustice, as of 2015 those representations were noted to have never risen above 15 percent (Nel 2). Perhaps this stagnation is an indicator that the topic of race was no longer considered relevant in children’s literature (2002-2015) as the scholarship around post-racial politics seems to suggest. I contend that studying this absence in picture books is a critical component in children’s literary criticism and that it has been mostly overlooked.

Historically, representations of race and social injustice were generally absent in children’s picture books. The absence of discussions on racial or cultural differences leading up to 2016 have in some ways been linked to Obama’s win of the White House. Activist and writer on the topic of race, Tim Wise explains this possible link and the impact it had on the “ability as a nation to tackle—or even openly discuss—matters of race and racism” (15); a “color-blind” agenda he refers to as *post-racial liberalism* (16).⁵ In his book *Colorblind*, Wise examines “the consequences of the Obama victory in terms of its likely long-term effects on the nation’s racial discourse” (15). The source for understanding the rise of *post-racial liberalism* as it might pertain to children’s literature is witnessed in Wise’s explanation of how it culminated in the election of Obama in 2008:

On the one hand, it was candidate Obama’s use of the *rhetoric of racial transcendence* that made his victory possible, by assuaging white fears that he would focus on racial injustice, or seek to remedy the same, were he elected president. But on the other hand, it is that same avoidance of race issues that has now made it more difficult than ever to address ongoing racial bias.... (15).

⁵ *Colorblind*: the rise of post-racial politics and the retreat from racial equity; *Post-Racial Liberalism*: is a form of left-of-center politics and bases its claims for legitimacy on the presumption of two pillars—racism’s declining significance and the presumption that whether or not this first maxim is true society must act as through it were, for the political reality is such that whites simply will not support, in any real measure, policies that seek to target opportunity specifically to people of color or address racial inequities directly (Tim Wise, *Colorblind* 8 and 64).

He further explains that “because the rhetoric of racial transcendence requires a similarly race-neutral policy agenda to match it, Obama [had] eschewed any direct focus on narrowing racial gaps in income, wealth, education, housing or health care” (15). Put simply, it is that same expected avoidance of race and racism in the political and social arena during Obama’s presidency that seems to have led to the subtle adoption of this approach by other institutions—including (but not limited to) publishing houses.⁶ As Philip Nel writes, “White people—the people who hold nearly all positions of power in children’s publishing, and who write the vast majority of children’s books—are much less likely to see structural racism” (5). Therefore, by avoiding representations of race and racism, children’s picture books published during this time (2008-2016) seems to create for children a facile literary world (and thereby a reality) where racial discrimination and race-specific injuries perpetrated by whites against people of color does not exist.

Most recently, the prevalence of issues related to people of color is reflected in publication. Indeed, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center⁷ (CCBC) has reported in 2016 “a substantial increase in the number of diverse books being published” (Corrie 1). This point is greater characterized by the sudden influx of children’s picture books, specifically on race and representations of social injustice, published in the following four years. According to scholars, this was indicative of the power shift from Barack Obama to Donald Trump. In other words, if the *racial transcendence* maintained throughout the Obama Administration was thought to have constructed a permanent “color-blind” society, Trump’s win of the White House in 2016 quickly

⁶ The suggestion of institutions as they relate to systemic racism, engrained racist practices, and the avoidance of race and racism—such as seen in publishing houses—is similar to the approach of CRT Scholars (Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberlé Crenshaw) who argue that social problems are influenced and created by societal structures.

⁷ The Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) is a non-circulating examination, study, and research library for Wisconsin school and public librarians, teachers, early childhood care providers, university students, and others interested in children’s and young adult literature.

lifted that veil—leaving in its wake an “America” that had not transcended race or social injustice as previous thought during the Obama Administration but had merely tried to patch over a profound chasm with race-neutral rhetoric. In fact, according to scholar Ta-Nehisi Coates, Trump’s following candidacy and election was the direct result of a need for redemption and reification of the idea of being white in America (344). In his book, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, Coates proceeds with an explanation of Trump’s dominance in this new era, despite all notions of decency, as a product of white supremacy (342). In the following months (and years), the racial tension and divisive political climate created by the Trump Administration confirmed Coates’ earlier assertion that Trump’s ideology, based in white supremacy, “is the very core of his power” (343). As such, the rise of Trump ushered in a wave of right-wing populism, bringing with it the understanding that this wave was more than just a resistance to progressive change. Rather, it was a countermovement to Obama and his policies protecting the most vulnerable members of society, including immigrant and ethnic minorities.⁸ Given the prominence of anger—of supporters and opponents alike—in the brand of populism represented by Trump, his rhetoric has “deeply affected public discourse in general” (McComiskey 3). In fact, professional writing scholar Bruce McComiskey contends in *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition*⁹ that “this negative influence of Trump’s rhetoric on social institutions and cultural interactions” has created “a generalized increase in violence and hatred throughout the country” (3). Indeed, in response to what he considers Trumps “unethical rhetorical strategies” (3), McComiskey notes:

Trump’s campaign and election represent a rhetorical watershed moment in two ways: first, there has been a shift in the way that powerful people use unethical rhetoric to accomplish their goals; and, second, there has been a shift in the way that public audiences consume unethical rhetoric. Not surprisingly, organizations that are most committed to promoting and teaching ethical rhetoric and writing

⁸ B.L. Ott, “The Age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the Politics of Debasement” (2016).

⁹ Bruce McComiskey, *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* (2017).

have viewed this rhetorical watershed moment as a direct challenge to their missions and as an exigence for calls to rhetorical action.

McComiskey further notes that rhetorical institutions¹⁰ quickly began to “identif[y] the rancorous election as a powerful exigence for an ethical response” emphasizing their core values: “diversity, inclusion, and respect” (4) and reinforcing the power behind language, which they believe should be “used and taught responsibl[y], not just strategically” (5). Although literature—children’s literature specifically—has spent the last several decades fluctuating between rhetorical strategies associated with a “commitment to diversity and justice” (5), Trump’s manipulative doublespeak throughout the last four years has brought about the necessity and dire need for a more consistent publication of texts addressing race-based concerns.

In recent figures, the CCBC reported the number of diverse books¹¹ being published since 2014 steadily increasing—“in 2016, the number jumped to 28%,” in 2018 that number hit 31% (2). However, while indication that the diversity gap is narrowing, the statistics show that the number of books written for people of color still has not kept pace with those published for a more broad audience. To understand this phenomena, Philip Nel enters the conversation once more with an explanation of institutional racism in children’s literature and the effects it has on the cultures of childhood:

Fifty years after Nancy Larrick’s famous “All-White World of Children’s Books” (1965) asked where were the people of color in literature for young readers, the We Need Diverse Books™ campaign is asking the same questions.... America is again entering a period of civil rights activism because racism is resilient, sneaky, and endlessly adaptable. In other words, racism endures because racism is structural: it’s embedded in culture and in institutions.... In her oft-cited article, Larrick lamented that “nonwhite children are learning to read and to understand

¹⁰ Specifically referring to the Rhetoric Society of America (RSA), The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA).

¹¹ The use of “diverse” here is defined as including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds. However, this study only took the figures relating to books published for or about people of color and the social problems that directly and disproportionately affect black Americans; it did not include any figures involving different genders or sexual orientations.

the American way of life in book which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them.”

In her article, Nancy Larrick further explains that “[t]hese omissions damage the child of color, and may harm [w]hite children even more” (63). She is not alone in her opinion, Nel aligns his argument with Larrick in his work: “There seems little chance of learning the humility so urgently needed for world cooperation, instead of world conflict, as long as children are brought up on gentle doses of racism, through their books” (2). This is significant to the discussion being held in this thesis regarding children’s picture books hosting discourse on racialized issues. Even before children are able to read, images covering these topics can provide deep impressions on the young mind, as research shows that when it comes to child development, the most crucial milestones occur by the age of seven (Fraga 1).¹² Although notions of social and political education through children’s literature has evolved through the years, I argue that never has it been more important than in the current political climate to utilize these texts as tools for engaging young audiences. Here, I contend that studying the racialized images and words in children’s picture books is a critical component in race studies and a dynamic educational method for an anti-racist future.

This project examines representations of race and social injustice in children’s picture books from 2016-2020. I focus on texts written specifically during this time frame—centered strictly on race and social injustice—because these texts reflect the social (racism, police brutality, protesting) and racial (skin color and self-perception) problems of the last few years. The lack of children’s picture books on racial disparity prior to the Trump Administration is significant and yet anticipated, as this time period carried the “color-blind” mentality held during the eight years Obama held office. With that, the sudden influx of texts addressing these topics in

¹² See Juli Fraga, “Do the First 7 Years of Life Really Mean Everything?” (2017), for instance.

the latter four years brought to the table new debates on why race was moving to center stage in children's picture books. It is also why I chose to enter into the conversation here. The goal of my research was to understand the ways in which these texts have the potential to form and inform an accurate portrayal of the black experience in America, decipher how these texts recommend varying methods for children (black and white) to develop the skills of social and cultural awareness, and most significantly provide an understanding of why children's picture books, of all things, are needed to do it in order to encourage an anti-racist future.

Chapter Outlines

This project is an examination of representations of race and social injustice in children's picture books from 2016-2020 and is informed by black feminist theory and children's literary criticism through a critical race lens. Ultimately, I argue that, while race studies are evolving to include children's literature in the scope of research, the objective is to show how picture books reflect the social and racial issues—racism, police brutality, skin color, and self-perception—over the last few years. Moreover, as these particular texts have the potential to form and inform an accurate portrayal of the human experience, I maintain that children's picture books are an excellent place to begin the examination. Finally, and most importantly, I contend that critical attention by race theorist as well as children's literary and black feminist scholars needs to be given to these texts in the context of cultural authenticity in children's literature, as they reflect a way to provide a new direction for diversity education for children.

In the second chapter, I introduce social injustices specifically in the form of racism and police brutality and their connection to the Black Lives Matter movement in relation to children's picture books (*A Kids Book About Racism; Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story about Racial Injustice; Momma, Did You Hear the News?; Daddy, There's a Noise*

Outside; What is Black Lives Matter?: A Story for Children; Peaceful Fights for Equal Rights). I chose these books because they explore how the current polarized climate is being reflected in these types of texts for children. Overall, I contend that the texts in chapter one can be vital for children between the ages four-eight who are developing the skills of social and cultural awareness, as these texts acknowledge racism and provide age appropriate strategies to proactively observe and engage in conversations on social injustices.

The third chapter examines the resurgence—since the beginning of the Trump Administration—of texts (*Skin Again; Hair Love; Don't Touch My Hair!*; and *I Am Enough*) dealing with issues around skin color and self-perception. These texts were selected for their comprehensibility on race and black beauty standards. Because issues of skin color, race, and racial identity can be complicated, I argue in this chapter the importance of these texts as they inform the young reader (both black and white) of varying methods to develop racial adroitness.¹³

The fourth chapter considers an anti-racist future and which texts (*Woke Baby* and *Antiracist Baby*) are doing this successfully with discourse representing multi-cultural perspectives. I argue that the texts discussed in chapter four will be significant in explaining why it is important to keep the conversation on race and social injustice going in children's picture books for young children as research shows that when it comes to child development, the most crucial milestones occur by the age of seven.

¹³ "Racial adroitness" premises the importance of being skilful or quick in thinking in order to share information that differs across race.

Chapter 1

Picture Books: Evolution, Function, Creators, and Criteria

“You can’t work from standards or checklist because the best books break the rules, while at the same time keeping true to their own promises.”

(Roger Sutton/ *Children’s Books in Children’s Hands*)

1.1 Defining Picture Books

A picture book is not simply a book that happens to have pictures. A picture book in the most basic sense refers to a book that generally relies on illustrations to convey its message, but in some cases it includes books in which the illustrations combine with text to create a message (Temple et al. 171)¹⁴. Indeed, education and literature scholar Lawrence R. Sipe argues in *Teaching Visual Literacy* the “sophistication and potential of this literary form” (131). Although the specific form of picture book he was referring to is less certain, as a picture book can take many forms. According to educators Temple et al., a picture book can be in the form of a *wordless book*, which contains no text and depends entirely on carefully sequenced illustrations to tell a story. It can be an *illustrated book*, in which the story is told through text and the illustrations either help enhance or embellish the story-line. It can be a *picture storybook*, in which a tale is told through a combination of illustrations and storytelling, each of the complex art forms amplifying the other in order to create a distinct whole (171). Recent research¹⁵ indicates today that there are more picture storybooks than any other type of picture book. This has become the preferred form because of its potential to broaden children’s cultural and social

¹⁴ Temple et al., *Children’s Books in Children’s Hands*, (2015).

¹⁵ See Sharon Ruth Gill, “Kindergarten Through Grade 3: Learning the Language of Picture Books,” (2015), for instance.

consciousness through the technique of combining text and illustrations (Temple et al. 171). With that, much of the discussion in this thesis will focus on the picture storybook.

1.2 Evolution of Picture Books

Since the publication of what is noted to be the first picture book *Orbis Sensualium Pictus (The Visible World in Pictures)* in 1658 by John Amos Comenius, many factors have influenced the evolution of these books for children. While texts during this time were used to teach children about practical matters in the language they use daily, illustrations were added to increase understanding and pleasure (Temple et al. 171). Indeed, most picture books over the centuries were created to educate children and guide their moral behavior (181). From John Newberry's (1713-1767) attractive, playful formats with illustrations by accomplished artist; to Walter Crane (1845-1915) and Randolph Caldecott's (1846-1886) careful attention to synchronizing text and illustrations; to Kate Greenaway's (1846-1901) portrayal of an idealized childhood, and then later to Beatrix Potter's (1866-1943) recognition of a need to consider the audience when creating children's text, the modern picture book had taken shape (171-2).

Prior to the 1930s, picture books were mainly imported to the United States from England and Europe. It was not until the 1940s (into the 1960s) that a solid foundation of American picture books were established (172). Yet, here a question arises around the social and cultural consciences in these early books. In an examination of this blend of illustration and text, in "Inside Picture Books," Marilyn B. Joshua notes:

Picture books and fairy tales in traditional American children's literature are an exquisite blend of the artistry of author and illustrator. The illustrator's images depict dangerous perils replete with rich kings, beautiful queens, wicked stepmothers, evil witches, terrifying monsters, fire-breathing dragons, and helpless princesses waiting to be rescued by knights in shining armor. At the same time, the words are skillfully selected by the author and delicately woven to create a literary tapestry designed to capture, manipulate, and sustain the reader's attention until "... *they lived happily ever after, the end.*" (125)

In the preceding description, American picture books are summarized in a magical manner much like the text themselves read. However, despite the unique way picture books were working to tell a story that goes beyond what one tells alone (without pictures), Joshua laments on the importance of paying close attention to the message conveyed in these particular types of texts. In her essay, Marilyn Joshua writes that picture books for today's children need to be written with a focus on "the psychological effects of stories that shape young readers' lives early on and even later in adulthood" (125). While picture books have changed as their creators have explored the interplay of text and illustrations, her claim forms in the fact that they have only recently in the last few years refined their concepts heavily towards race and social justice—leaving an extremely large and unfilled gap in between the first picture books and those represented in the genre today.

Leonard S. Marcus, in *Minders of Make-Believe*, speaks on this gap and notes how Augusta Baker "the first African American to hold an executive position at New York Public," (225) was one of few individuals early on who had dedicated their life to remedying this absence. Shortly after being summoned to "head the storytelling program for the entire library system," from her position as the assistant children's librarian in Harlem, Baker explains her reasons for taking this position:

Baker's daily contacts with Harlem children during the 1930s and 1940s had left her distressed about the children's lack of knowledge about and pride in their cultural heritage. "I could not bear it," she later recalled, "when classes of children—black children—came to the library unaware of the great people and events in their background, and we had practically no books on the subjects." (225)

While her efforts, along with those of Chicago's Charlemae Rollins and later Hellen Mullen of the Philadelphia Free Library, "would have far-reaching consequences for librarianship and

publication” (225), much of the federal money that became available during this time and the proceeding years “for institutional book purchases” went towards acquiring “books about space travel and science” (258)—completely negating a demand for published texts on race, racism and social justice. More so, despite the argument being made by a few educators and varying scholars for “the need to encourage more writers and artists from minority groups to enter the field,” during the 1970s minority representation within the ranks of publishing houses (specifically publishers for children) “lacked even a single person of color” (259).

Although in the mid-1980s, the structure of the book publishing industry was morphing and reconfiguring itself¹⁶, the picture books being published focused almost strictly on early education. One reason for this, Marcus states, revolves around the “anxiety felt by middle-class parents about their children’s reading skills had to do with their own rising social and economic expectations as members of the nation’s best-educated generation in history” (296). Given the history of American education, it should be of no surprise that “the nation’s best-educated generation” was not inclusive to all communities of that generation. Since the 1970s, the research indicates a large black-white achievement gap for a number of reasons—but most importantly the “lower average level of parental education” (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). This need to obtain the most advanced educational picture books was simply a competition between white parents—and in the face of this (white) parental confusion and concern, the publishing houses recognized both a need and an opportunity—disregarding entirely texts illustrating the black experience in America (Taxel 174-6).

A steady expansion of the African American middle class in the 1990s renewed a concern for books about black heritage. Following a long period of publisher disengagement from social

¹⁶ See Joel Taxel, “Children’s Literature at the Turn of the Century: *Toward a Political Economy of the Publishing Industry*” (2002), for instance.

concerns, 1989 ushered in a “new wave of worthy books on African American themes” (Marcus 300). However, although children’s book publishing became the fastest-growing area of the American Publishing industry during the early 1990s (Taxel 154), my research reveals that picture books holding open lines of communication on the experiences of black children quickly returned to tales about the power of words, creative thought, troubles with friends and family, candid feelings, and bullying—but with the representation of *whiteness* at its core.

Black Americans have shared the same spaces with white Americans, just not equally, and their representation in children’s picture books has been allotted no exception. Almost three decades after the boom in the 1990s of picture books focused on black heritage, institutionalized discrimination of texts representing “blackness” remained the norm within publishing companies—those who determine which texts get published and go mainstream. Put simply, according to Philip Nel:

Racism is resilient, wily, and adaptable. Combat it in one form, and it mutates, finding expression in a new one. This is why we are still asking where the books for children of color are—though we are asking this question in different ways than we were fifty years ago.... However, since the percentage of non-White school children is about four times the annual percentage of books featuring non-White characters, we ask for *more*—we need diverse books. Since the gaps in representation are unequally distributed across genre, asking for more is not enough. This is one reason that focusing on genre diversity is a path toward increasing representation. (198)

Nel further explains that “[s]tructural racism’s remarkable ability to reproduce itself reminds us that victory will not be quick, easy, or total” (198). Therefore, it has become evident that while picture books on race and social injustice remained mostly absent throughout literary history in order to serve the interests and needs of the white majority culture, the sudden influx of picture books in 2016 discussing race and racism had become a good indicator that publishers were of the belief that people must (regardless of readiness) have these racially charged conversations

with young children despite the previous and prevalent need to avoid it.¹⁷ The suggestion here is that the sudden arrival of these culturally aware texts are in direct response to the Trump Administration and its continued service to “whiteness.” One of the goals of my research is to acknowledge the intersectionality of abandoned racialized issues—racism, police brutality, skin color, and self-perception— in children’s picture books during the Obama Era to the resurrection of these texts in response to Trump’s presidency.

1.3 How Picture Books Work

In most cases, picture books are understood as illustrated books used, to varying degrees in juxtaposition with words, to create enjoyment of a particular story. However, in his article *Words about Pictures*, Perry Nodelman writes that while it is assumed the main purpose of picture books is to “provide visual stimulation or to excite our aesthetic sensibilities,” it in fact is not their purpose. Instead, Nodelman argues that picture books “exist primarily so that they can assist in the telling of stories... literally “illustration”—images that explain or clarify words and each other” (vii). So, while the “pictures in picture books take up most of the space,” he also contends that they “bear the burden of conveying most of the information” (viii). On account of this, Nodelman writes that:

It is certainly true that pictures communicate more universally and more readily than do words. The sound we use to speak to each other and the symbols we use to represent those sounds in writing rarely have any significant connection with the objects, idea, or emotions they refer to: they are literally what semioticians identify as signs, in that, ... their meaning is nothing more than a matter of agreement among those who use them... Furthermore, we do not seem to have to learn how to understand at least some of the information conveyed by pictures as we do need to learn to interpret the verbal and visual signs of words; even very young children are able to interpret visual images without ever having been specifically taught to do so (5-6).

¹⁷ See the current statistics posted by the CCBC, “The Numbers Are In: 2019 CCBC Diversity Statistics” (2020), for further reference.

In evaluating his statement, it is clear that while children do not necessarily need to consider the accompanying text alongside the pictures in order to understand the message in the story and derive meaning, there is still the question on whether visual representations project an implied viewer. Considering this question, Marilyn Joshua addresses this projection. She notes that because these illustrations and texts have potential to leave a “profound and lasting impact on children” (125), the elements of visual communication—characterization (accurate visual identity of characters), multi-perspectives, settings, backgrounds, and color (especially as it relates to race and mood)—should be considered in the production of children’s picture books. According to her, this is specifically true of picture books including tales for white children on the condition of black children and adults in America, as well as those tales for black and white children reflecting the uniqueness of the black experience directly from the perspective of a black author (126).

While the argument has been made in regards to the appeal of neutral (safe) topics, making it easier for children to get involved in the story¹⁸, it has also been noted to negatively affect children’s learning of novel facts about human interaction. Because of this, research studies have shifted towards an understanding of picture books as “important source[s] of new language, concepts, and lessons” (Strouse et al., 3). In a research study by Gabrielle A. Strouse et al. for *Frontiers in Psychology*, the psychologists discuss the ways in which the research has begun to investigate “the features of picture books that support children’s learning and transfer of that information to the real world” (3). They argue that there is a direct connection between children’s ability to constructively learn and transfer content from picture books, and the disruption of their developing abilities and learning from specific book features (6). In fact, they

¹⁸ See Kenneth B. Kidd, *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children’s Literature* (2011), for instance.

indicate in their study that the many books for young children presenting social issues in fantastical and unrealistic ways may not only lead to less learning but also can affect how they transfer information encountered in children's picture books to the real world. According to other researchers in the field, Patricia A. Ganea et al. agree that some elements of picture books impact children's ability to learn and transfer lessons to the real world because "more iconic pictures lead to better learning ... than less iconic pictures." In other words, the research confirmed that "the higher level of similarity between the picture and the referent, the easier it is for children to transfer information between the two" (1). These findings are significant in regards to texts discussing race and social injustices because children are expected to learn facts, concepts, and/or values and apply them to real life (Fraga). However, regardless of whether picture books "exist primarily so that they can assist in the telling of stories" as Nodelman suggest, it is certain that picture books representing race and racism from 2016-2020 are portraying real entities in a realistic manner versus a fantastical one. I contend that these narrations from a black perspective are vital for children (of all races) between the ages 4-8 (the age range designated for picture books) who are developing the skills of social and cultural awareness, as these texts acknowledge racism and provide age appropriate strategies to proactively observe and engage in conversations on social injustices.

1.4 Creators of Picture Books

Obviously, the limitations on space make it impossible to indicate every significant picture book author and/or illustrator throughout history. However, as it turns out in the genre of children's picture books, there are not many black authors to recommend. This is not because of a lack of talent in authorship or an absence of need for texts representing people of color, but simply because those who controlled which of these works were published, had a long history of

avoiding topics of race and racism in children’s literature—as well as the black authors who should have been encouraged to write them.¹⁹ In fact, the absence of black authors is almost as consistent in picture book publication as the characters of color are within them. In past research, it has been indicated that while “[O]ver 5,000 children’s books were published in 1990; only fifty-one of these were written and/ or illustrated by African-Americans” (Harris, 68)²⁰. In her 1990 article “African American Children’s Literature: The First One Hundred Years,” Violet Harris documents this discrepancy by arguing that “[t]he same cultural processes that have led to the development of selective traditions have tended to ignore the contributions of African Americans to children’s literature” (541). Furthermore, according to her research out of the fifty-one children’s books published in 1990 by black authors none spoke directly to the issue of racism or social injustice; instead, “the depictions are stereotyped, pejorative, and unauthentic” (540). In more recent studies, the ‘We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) campaign²¹ documents that out of the total numbers of books published/received by the CCBC (percentages including books written by people of color) black authors wrote just 6% of them in 2017—the percentage only jumping to 7% in 2018. According to Jalissa Corrie, in a 2018 article published by *Lee & Low Books*,²² “the majority of [children’s] books (diverse or not) are still written by white authors” (2).²³ In fact, Corrie further argues that “there still seems to be a particular resistance to allowing African American creators to tell their own stories”—noting that in recent, detailed CCBC statistics “only 29% of books about African/African American people were by black

¹⁹ See Jamie Herndon “Report: 2019 Diversity in Children’s and YA Literature” (2020), for instance.

²⁰ Violet J. Harris, “Contemporary Griots: African-American Writers of Children’s Literature” (1993).

²¹ The ‘We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) campaign, founded in 2014, is a growing movement to publish children’s and young adult books by and about diverse people in the United States.

²² Julissa Corrie is a Marketing and Publicity Manager for Lee & Low Books; she also contributes articles to Lee & Low Books’ open blog on race, diversity, education, and children’s books.

²³ See, <https://blog.leeandlow.com/2018/05/10/the-diversity-gap-in-childrens-book-publishing-2018/>, for instance.

authors/illustrators” (3). While the number of diverse books continues to increase, it is evident given the research that black authors and illustrators are incredibly underrepresented in the publication of children’s literature.

1.5 Criteria for Selecting Picture Books

Children’s picture books can serve several purposes, some of which are aesthetic, psychological, and informative/instructional. In addition to evaluating quality in picture books, according to Temple et al., “it is important to know whether a book is appropriate for particular children in particular situations” (205). While the appropriateness of picture books has long been considered by *intended audience* and *intended purpose*, previous research has determined that Black children do not always relate to the picture books available.²⁴ Indeed, one of the problems of defining the criteria for selecting picture books has been the long absence of diverse texts. As previously mentioned, Augusta Baker—the “first African American citywide coordinator of children’s services”—had spent her life compiling texts in order to publish an annotated bibliography (“Books About Negro Life for Children”) of one hundred recommended titles, but this was in 1946 (Marcus, 224-5). Although Baker had discussed her criteria for selection in her introduction—“which included language, theme, and illustration,” and which omitted “books containing condescending dialect ... [and] those preserving offensive stereotypes in word or image, ... [and] those with Negro characters in minor roles that are not stereotypes”(225)—it would hardly matter in the grand scheme of things. This is because the following two decades were not spent defying Baker’s criteria, but dismissing subject matter on black representation in picture books almost all together. America—from 1946 with the publication of Baker’s recommended titles to 1965 with the publication of Nancy Larrick’s “All-White World of

²⁴ See Ericka Swarts Gray, “The Importance of Visibility: Students’ and Teachers’ Criteria for Selecting African American Literature” (2011), for instance.

Children’s Books”—was subject to one of the most tumultuous durations of civil unrest. Black communities were being affronted on all sides—segregation; the adoption of restrictive Jim Crow laws by many states; voting rights discrimination; peaceful marches and demonstrations for civil rights; and the violent attacks of those protestors and civilians by law enforcement.²⁵ Indeed, library historian Michael Harris describes this time well as it pertains to art and literature:

The momentum of over 150 years of derogatory images and characterizations flowed down on our heads with real consequences because white power enforced and depended on black racial identity. We invented ourselves repeatedly to resist and frustrate the oppressive systems and representations that circumscribed us collectively, acting on the belief that we either became coproducers or might change the worldview by our actions. We re-presented ourselves to counter the other form of representation. (qtd. in Hine & McCluskey 1)

Harris’ assessment seems to indicate that if ever the criteria for selecting literature (specifically children’s picture books) should have been cast in order to represent the persistent racist acts and imagery steeped in U.S. culture, it should have first been informed by these two decades. However, forty years later readers and creators of children’s books are still asking how criteria for selecting picture books with black authors and non-white characters can be set when they are so scarce.

As originally contrived, this thesis was to be a study of representations of race and social injustices in children’s picture books from 2008 (Obama’s first year in office) until 2020. Research quickly convinced me to limit my focus on texts published in 2016 through 2020 (Trump’s years in office). Two factors led me to this conclusion. First, despite the potential Obama’s election to the presidency could and should have had on the discussion of race, social injustices, and inequalities, it warranted very little in children’s picture books. Apparently, the

²⁵ See, David K. Fremon, *The Jim Crow Laws and Racism in American History* (2000), for instance.

same “post-racial” rhetoric Obama used to secure and maintain his presidential seat, had been simultaneously transferred into an avoidance of race and social injustice discussions among citizens and consequently the literature they read and supplied their children—this remaining the norm for children’s literature publication through 2017. Second, I had (admittedly) found the sudden influx of children’s picture books in 2016 through 2020 with text and illustrations narrating topics previously abandoned completely astounding. This flood of texts, in my opinion, was an indication that raced-based issues had become so severe during Trump's presidency that American’s began to question the lack of these conversations in children’s picture books. Therein, I left what I initially thought was going to be a discussion on the complete lack of representation of race and social injustices in children’s picture books, to an argument based in an exploration around the rebirth of these conversations in children’s literature and the significance of it happening specifically during the Trump Administration.

Chapter 2

Social Injustice & #BLM: Racism, Police Brutality, and Peaceful Protesting

“We may be uncomfortable talking about race, but we can no longer afford to be silent. We have chosen a profession, which—like parenting—requires that our comforts come second to those children.” (Jamila Pitts/ Teaching Tolerance’s “Perspectives”: Don’t Say Nothing)

In this chapter, I analyze representations of social injustice in children’s picture books (2016-2020) specifically in the form of racism and police brutality, and the establishment of the Black Lives Matter movement in response to racially motivated violence against the black community. I argue that because these texts—*A Kids Book About Racism*; *Momma, Did You Hear the News?*; *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child’s Story about Racial Injustice*; *Daddy, There’s a Noise Outside*; *What is Black Lives Matter?: A Story for Children*; *Peaceful Fights for Equal Rights*—acknowledge racism directly with words and illustrations, they thereby provide age appropriate strategies to proactively observe and engage in conversations about social injustices. As such, I contend that they are essential for children between the ages 4-8 who according to psychologists²⁶ are developing the skills of social and cultural awareness.

Throughout the research for this chapter, I discovered similar arguments (made by scholars, psychologists, and theorists) around the importance of these representations in children’s picture books. For instance, Julia L. Mickenberg and Philip Nel write that “truly radical children’s literature encourages its readers to question received wisdom, to think independently, and to resist simple solutions to complex problems” (*What’s Left*, 352-3). In his essay, “A Plea for Radical Children’s Literature,” Herbert Kohl asserts that most of the literature for children that

²⁶ See Juli Fraga “Do the First 7 Years of Life Really Mean Everything?” (2017), for instance.

makes its way into libraries, classrooms, and bookstores should advocate for “progressive social change” (350). Since this chapter situates children’s picture books as a space for race-based discussions and contends that these particular texts have the potential to form and inform an accurate portrayal of the black experience in America, I assert they can be seen to be a critical part of the genre. While picture books encompass a wide variety of texts and serve varying purposes, those produced to take up the cause of racial justice play a significant role in child development. Psychologist Juli Fraga writes that when it comes to child development the first seven years holds importance in children developing social skills (2). This, in part, is why my study is most concerned with texts containing representations of race, social injustice and inequality. Furthermore, I argue that the influx of representations of social injustice (in the form of racism and police brutality) in picture books specifically popularized in 2016—despite a prior absence in the genre—is because of a conservative social push towards a “white” specified agenda. I further contend that in response to this prejudiced agenda the publishing industry has seen a significant push by Black authors and illustrators to keep these conversations ongoing in picture books. They claim these texts should remain essential to the genre because the purpose of children’s literature should be to engage young readers with political and social issues in order to build in them a revolutionary consciousness.²⁷ As these texts offer representations of racism and police brutality, the Black Lives Matter movement, and peaceful protesting, they must be considered with critical race theories about societal structures, cultural assumptions, and psychological factors.

Although systemic racism is deeply rooted in our history, culture, and institutions, discussions of racism are typically not had in children’s literature. Generally, picture books have

²⁷ See Black Children’s Books and Authors (BCBA); bcbooksandauthors.com, for instance.

eschewed contexts associated with racism.²⁸ Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel posit that this fear of broaching complex and contentious subject matter in children's literature has led to texts that are not socially engaged or advocating for progressive social change (350). However, in response to a rising number of those questioning the growing disparity of events involving the killing of black people by police, silence and inaction is being replaced with constructive and productive opportunities to address race. In 2014, following the killing of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, MO, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) put forth a document compiled with resources and protocols in an effort to "prepare for and navigate difficult discussions ... on race, racism and police violence" (1). DCPS proposes that these tragic events can become teachable moments for "examining, understanding, and responding to complex issues related to diversity and equality" (1). In order to orchestrate these "teachable moments," DCPS recommends thoughtfully created and managed spaces for addressing racial dynamics. While complicated, DCPS argues that understanding racial disparities and injustices are best learned through collective dialogue with a commitment to addressing racial equity (2-3). According to Philip Nel neither avoidance nor complexity should "be deployed as an alibi for racism" (*Was the Cat in the Hat Black* 23). In fact, he claims that in order to provide young readers the opportunity to effectively engage with racism, spaces need to be created in literature "for the emotional experiences that inspire reflection" (23).

Toni Morrison writes: "The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act" (46). Through texts approaching issues of race, children learn far more than how to understand diversity; they learn how to acknowledge race and how to be accountable for their own actions. While many people feel more comfortable believing in the innocent child, it is

²⁸ See the National Education Association's "Racial Justice in Education Justice" (2017) resource guide, for instance.

between the ages 4-8 that children begin developing the skills of social and cultural awareness. So, by trying to enforce innocence by excluding troubling literary works from the discussion, “children will face pain, bigotry, and sorrow all on their own” (Nel 71). After all, Herbert Kohl notes that critical reading can be a source of both power and pleasure: “children quickly come to understand that critical sensibility strengthens them. It allows them to stand their ground.... It is a source of pleasure as well—of the joy that comes from feeling that one is living according to conviction and understanding” (*Should We Burn Babar?* 16). If picture books representing race and social injustices are accepted, then there is a possibility of *words* and *illustrations* evolving into children learning “how to evaluate with sensitivity and intelligence” (16). Through these methods, a form of sensibility in children is developed.²⁹ For instance, ideas of racial equity are valued in children’s literature over discussions of racism and police brutality because the former appear in situations that are associated with designated age appropriate content (such as embracing all races) while the latter are situations of injustices usually witnessed in real life (such as police brutality). While the former situations restrict children to only certain types of comfortable stories, I read them as presenting texts that marginalize people who are targeted by racism. For the child reader, it is important that they learn how to “be aware of racism’s pervasiveness” (Nel 26). As such, the ways in which racism and police brutality in children’s books is now being presented likely will resonate with children because it affords them the opportunity to begin to associate categorical representations in literature with the tragic events happening in reality. So, if representations in children’s picture books continue to acknowledge racism and police brutality with *words* and *illustrations*, it is reasonable to argue that children will develop appropriate strategies to proactively observe and engage in conversations on social

²⁹ See, Herbert Kohl’s *Should We Burn Babar? Essays on Children’s Literature and the Power of Stories* (1995), for instance.

injustices; indeed, this argument appears throughout the research.³⁰ With that research in mind, I assert that texts engaging in political and social issues are essential to building in children a revolutionary consciousness.

This thesis was initially informed by Philip Nel's book *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?* which identifies the hidden racism of children's literature, and the need for diverse books. Since four years have passed since the publication of Nel's book, and the political climate has become more strained and racially charged, I sought to find the reasons for the dearth of these kinds of texts mentioned by Nel and the sudden influx of them during the Trump Administration. In my assessment, the three pertinent factors that led Nel to this focus on "anti-Black racism and on representations of African Americans in books for young people" are as follows:

- the frequency of Americans to elide or minimize the impact of both slavery and its impact on legacy.
- the notion of racially transcendent Obama.
- the ability of the past to haunt the present with lingering, discarded racial ideas.

The first step was to record which books acknowledge racism directly with words and illustrations. Here, picture books with representations of social injustices specifically in the form of racism and police brutality, and the establishment of the Black Lives Matter movement in response to racially motivated violence against the black community include: *A Kids Book About Racism; Momma, Did You Hear the News?; Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story about Racial Injustice; Daddy, There's a Noise Outside; What is Black Lives Matter?: A Story for Children; Peaceful Fights for Equal Rights.*

³⁰ See Cass Mabbott's "The We Need Diverse Books Campaign and Critical Race Theory: Charlemae Rollins and the Call for Diverse Children's Books" (2017), for instance.

In examining children's picture books from 2016-2020, I discovered that many texts hold conversations regarding racism and social injustice. Indeed, racial disparities and injustices from the 2016-2020 texts most often depict concepts of police brutality, white supremacy, and racism. These concepts are not as prevalent in picture books pre-2016; however, as current protests over the police murders of black Americans continue and politics grows more divisive, parents seek to find honest, age-appropriate literature to assist them in teaching their children about these concepts and what they are seeing in the world.³¹ I expand the observations of Nel to create a space for examination of present-day children's picture books and notice that: these texts are now situated as an emissary for race-based discussions; they have the potential to form and inform an accurate portrayal of the black experience in America; and if kept at the foreground of published children's works, they will become vital to a successful anti-racist education.

In regards to the psychological factors, starting an early education on race is important. According to an article by the American Academy of Pediatrics, children as young as six months old can recognize race-based differences, and between ages of two and four, children begin internalizing racial bias.³² The persistent dramatization of racism and historical events in these texts suggests that these strategies are productive in helping children psychologically deal with and react to tragic and racially-charged current events. Indeed, while it is moderately difficult to have discussions on racism and discrimination with young children, the research has determined it to be imperative.³³ A recent study by Maria Trent and others points to articles in child development such as "Perceived Racism and Discrimination in Children and Youths: An Exploratory Study" and "Police Equity, and Child Health" to illustrate the point (8, 14). In the

³¹ See Dr. Ashaunta Tumblyn Anderson's "The Detrimental Influence of Racial Discrimination on Child Health in the United States," *Journal of National Medical Association* (2020), for instance.

³² --- "Talking to Children About Racial Bias," *American Academy of Pediatrics* (2020), for instance.

³³ See Maria Trent, et al.'s "The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health" (2019), for instance.

peer-reviewed texts, I find in the research this emphasis of a direct connection between the crucial role a literary education on racism and police brutality and the significant impact that has on children's health and the progress towards racial equality and equity (1). The idea is that failure to address these race-based issues in children's literature will continue to undermine the development of social and culture awareness in children. My conclusion here aligns with Psychologist Juli Fraga's argument that children developing social skills often do so in their first seven years. My conclusion also connects to children's literature scholarship since it aligns with Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel's argument that literature should be at the forefront of addressing racism and police brutality; so, for example, it is unquestionable that children literature needs to challenge the existing social order, and to socially engage young children in order to promote progressive social change (*What's Left* 350). I argue that the influx of racism and representations of police brutality in picture books specifically popularized 2016 through 2020 is in response to a conservative social push towards a "white" specified agenda. In fact, I consider how, in the wake of Donald Trump's election to the US Presidency, the texts teach the young reader how to understand social structures that shape the ways they see themselves and others.³⁴ In these texts, the *words* and *illustrations* foreground racial injustice; so, "if children of color are going to survive in America, they will need to learn how to respond to racism" (*Was the Cat in the Hat Black?* 75). A picture book is where that education can commence.

³⁴ As Rogers Smith and Desmond King writes in *America's new racial politics: white protectionism, racial reparations, and American identity* (2020), "[a] 2011 study found that while both black and white Americans believed anti-black bias had declined from the 1950s through the 2000s, many whites thought anti-white bias had risen through those decades, eventually becoming more extensive, in their eyes, than anti-black bias. By 2017, 55% of whites believed that whites suffer discrimination in modern America ... Those who viewed whites as discriminated against opposed not only race-conscious policies, but also all ostensibly race-neutral policies that they saw as aimed chiefly at aiding non-whites, thereby victimizing whites. This rising white ethnic identity was the fodder for the Trump movement's success in 2016" (173).

This chapter identifies trends in the representation of racism and police brutality in children's picture books. It begins with an examination of *A Kids Book About Racism*, a picture book published within the scope of this study in order to establish a clear description of what racism is, how it makes people feel when they experience it, and how to spot it when it happens. The second section then considers *Momma, Did You Hear the News?* and *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story about Racial Injustice* as a representative of the concepts of police brutality. The second section examines texts that create teachable moments to discuss the police shootings of unarmed black folks in their communities. The texts aim to answer children's questions about such traumatic events, and to help children identify and counter racial injustice in their own lives. The third section considers three texts *Daddy, There's a Noise Outside*; *What is Black Lives Matter?: A Story for Children*; and *Peaceful Fights for Equal Rights* in which the concept of protesting is broached. Finally, I argue that these stories provide a clear way for children to get a better understanding about the Black Live Matter movement, and how to support what is right in non-violent ways. Through the analysis in this chapter, I establish a continued existence of picture books constructively approaching racism in ways children can understand and identify. In the texts examined, crucial conversations about racism and police brutality are presented in picture book style with words and illustrations used to explain these topics in a simple but effective way. Ultimately, the continued presence of race-based discussion in the texts creates a literary experience that socially engages young readers and promotes positive social change.

2.3 Racism: A Childhood Introduction to Prejudice and Discrimination

Published towards the end of the Trump Administration, Jelani Memory's *A Kids Book About Racism* (2019) presents a straight-forward approach to teach racism. *A Kids Book About*

Racism is not a plot based text; instead, it reads more as an informational primer on racism. Because the author is a man born to a black father and a white mother, he decides to start the conversation there. Memory uses his own experiences to facilitate the discussion and begins with an explanation of the color of his skin, how he has been treated and his reaction. From those experiences, Memory utilizes the next dozen pages to explain to his young readers the concept of racism, a definition of it, the frequency for which it happens, and finally the ways in which transpires in real life. By the end, the reader is given several ways speaking up and out against racism can create positive and safe spaces for all races.

Direct and to the point, *A Kids Book About Racism* illustrates its concepts not through drawings but through color, size, and emphasis. Appearing first, the young reader is introduced to the books purpose—an open dialogue about racism.



2.1 Racism 1

Here, the sentences are cast mid-page, simply in black text the key words “racism” and “kids” bolded in color. The image is shown in a stark-white frame with the author, Jelani Memory, engaging in a reading of the text with his hands (brown in color) holding the pages down on either side. His introduction to the topic of racism while disclosing his own race with the presence of his hands emphasizes the books goal to identify the different ways children see race

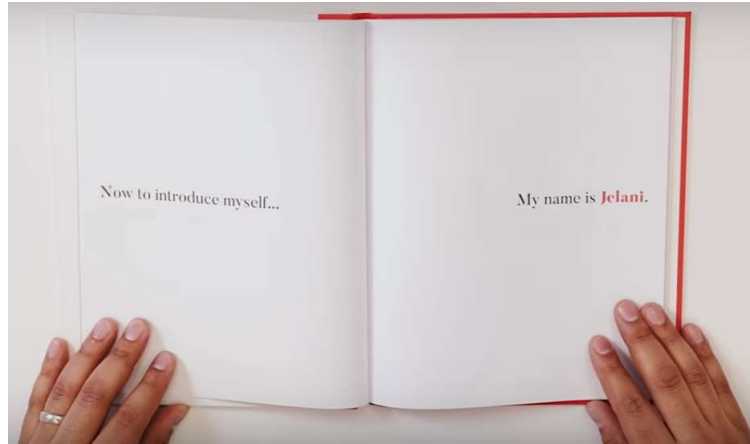
in themselves and others. Because children (mostly white children) are typically oblivious to the ways in which race shapes their lives, the following frame places the adults in their lives in a position to responsibly continue the discussion on racism.³⁵ This care to put the responsibility back on the adults to engage children in difficult and painful, but sadly necessary conversations is a critical part of helping young readers see the ways in which avoiding it can actually reinforce racism.



2.2 Racism 2

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of Memory's introduction of himself by name in one frame and a description of his skin color with the word "this" cast in larger font and a shade of brown similar to that of his hands in the next frame sends a race defined message; he is the author of this book on racism while also a person of color (e.g., African American, biracial, black).

³⁵ As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes in *Between the World and Me* (2015), "[f]or the safety of children of color, their parents or guardians *need* to talk with them about racism. In contrast, white children ... face little risk of bodily harm from the threat of racism, whether or not adults discuss it with them. However, if parents of white children fail to talk with their children about racism, then they are allowing white privilege to remain unacknowledged and thus the social structures of prejudice to go unchecked" (9).



2.3 Racism 3



2.4 Racism 4

The representation of Memory's race as the focal point appears throughout the text, and it relates directly to his relationship with racism. For instance, several frames after his introduction of himself and his topic, Memory shifts to a conversation on what being a person of color has meant for him, the connection between race and racism is established here. The regeneration that the author Memory claims to have felt due to becoming a racialized subject very early in life results in his eventual explanation in the text that children of color tend to become aware of their racialized subjectivity early on; thus, his examples in the following frames aids in providing age-appropriate material to help children recognize racial injustice.



2.5 Racism 5

Here, the understanding that children of color grapple with racial prejudice at a younger age is emphasized in the text through *sight words*—“hurts,” “me,” “a lot,” “feel,” and “small.”³⁶ Interestingly, these particular sight words possess some distinctive, comprehensive qualities; first, in the frequency children use these words and therefore are familiar with their meanings at a glance. Furthermore, in a typographical manner these sight words are cast in *emphasis*—**boldface**, italics, SMALL CAPS, color, LETTER CASE, and s p a c i n g —throughout the book to strengthen their meaning. The sight words, like racism, serve as both an emboldened and present force between children and comprehension. In this frame, comments by Psychologist Juli Fraga that developing social skills persist alongside memorized sight words because in the first seven years of life, “the brain rapidly develops its mapping system” apply (3). In my reading, the subject matter, the use of sight words, and the typographical emphasis used to cast them in the frames symbolize the idea that this link between literature and how to respond to racism can

³⁶ Sight words are a collection of words that children learn to recognize without sounding out the letters. Sight words are both common, frequently used words and foundational words that a child can use to build a vocabulary. See, Ehri, Linnea C. “Grapheme–Phoneme Knowledge Is Essential for Learning to Read Words in English.” *Word Recognition in Beginning Literacy*, L. Erlbaum Associates, 1998, for instance.

form the foundation for “how a child learns social norms, communication skills, and relationship ins and outs” (Fraga 4).



2.6 Racism 6



2.7 Racism 7

I contend that *A Kids Book About Racism* constructively approaches racism in ways children can understand and identify through its text and (color, size, and emphasis) illustrations. Because these frames rely more on design through text and typography, children are able to focus on the words and the meanings themselves. These unique technical writing elements seem to be employed in the hopes that children will have more meaningful discussions with an adult after reading. Furthermore, there is generally a bigger impact when reading if children are able to envision themselves on the pages, as shown in this book by a lack of images. This connectedness between the books shift away from traditional illustrations and towards a typographical design

suggests that the work has provided a space for children to see themselves on the page rather than whatever illustration might have been provided on the page for them.³⁷ Ultimately, this straight-forward approach results in a literary education on racism and creates safe space for children to continue to broach social injustices that may cause anger, confusion, and/or sadness.

2.4 Police Brutality: Traumatic Events and Teachable Moments in Picture Books

The texts in this section appeared at time during which the police shootings of unarmed black people seemed to be on the decrease.³⁸ Presumably, then, the number of black people shot and killed by police would further drop as the years advance. As previously stated, that is not necessarily true.³⁹ Although there was indication that racial bias by police in unarmed shootings had declined, the rate of unarmed black people killed by police remained the highest per capita. The first text examined, *Momma, Did You Hear the News?*⁴⁰, depicts the discrimination in law enforcement and the persistent police shootings of unarmed black folks throughout 2017. The second text *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story about Racial Injustice*⁴¹ dramatizes racial bias that includes police brutality; the race of an individual being the reason they are labeled as dangerous and targeted by police. In both texts, the concept of police brutality creates a teachable moment to discuss with children the police shootings of unarmed black people in their communities. Collectively, the texts aim to answer children's questions about

³⁷ The inferences I have made in this section regarding writing technique and purpose in *A Kids Book About Racism* are supported by my personal communication with Jelani Memory's publishing house (Savannah Kan, A Kids Book About) via email (9 December 2020).

³⁸ According to the research conducted at American University, the number of black males killed in 2017 was 68, this number is significantly lower than the 94 unarmed black males fatally shot in 2015. The research also indicates that while the number of black males who have been killed by police has fallen, they continue to be shot at disproportionately high rates—Black males accounted for 22 percent of all people shot and killed in 2017, yet they are 6 percent of the total population.

³⁹ The research at American University further discovered that the rate of unarmed black men killed by police compared to that of Hispanics and whites and is still at the highest despite a drop in 2015.

⁴⁰ *CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform* (2017)

⁴¹ *Magination Press* (2018)

such traumatic events, and to help children identify and counter racial injustice in their own lives.

Traditional racist imagery appears in *Momma, Did You Hear the News?* and follows the pattern identified in the preceding sections. The 2017 picture book was illustrated by Kim Holt and written by Sanya Whittaker Greg. Based on deadly encounters with police, mostly taking place in black communities, the text is set in present time. *Momma, Did You Hear the News?* begins with Avery, a young child who becomes concerned after seeing another police shooting of an unarmed man on the news. He shares this concern with his mother, and his parents decide it is time to have “The Talk.”⁴² In addition to dramatizing what Avery and his younger brother should do if ever approached by a police officer, the text also includes an emphasis that not all police are bad.

Since the text is set in 2017, the events being illustrated fit the time period; but not only does this visual imagery suggest a specific time period, it also notes prejudices and discriminations against the black community identified by this study. Avery appears a young black boy clothed in a baseball t-shirt, and his head is covered with a baseball cap. Indeed, he looks almost like any other young boy in the twenty-first century.



2.8 *Momma* 1

⁴² “The Talk” is a colloquial expression for a conversation some Black parents in the United States feel compelled to have with their children and teenagers about the dangers they face due to racism or unjust treatment from authority figures, law enforcement or other parties, and how to de-escalate them.

Situated in his home, Avery stands in front of the television with his hands clutched behind his head and a look of concern on his face. In the later image, Avery is seen sharing his concern with his mother who is also troubled by this senseless murder.

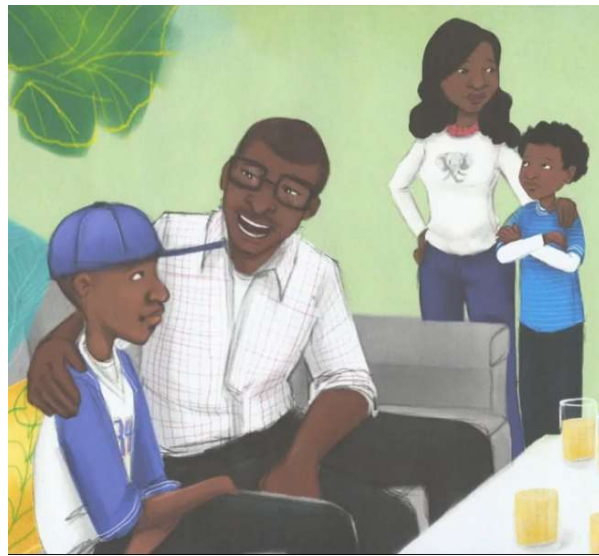


2.9 *Momma 2*

This image is reminiscent of Jelani Memory’s discussion on racism: In both of the preceding scenes, Avery’s disconcertment relates directly to Memory’s own relationship with racism. Like Memory, the concept of racism for Avery is difficult, and when he becomes too overwhelmed, he shares his distress with his mother. Memory even makes the suggestion that reading his book about racism should be done with a “grownup” because it is likely more questions will arise. Unlike Memory’s book, *Momma, Did You Hear the News?* is plot based and the characters are developed through the roles they play in the plot. Indeed, Avery’s entire family is responsible in this book for sympathetically explaining police violence and racism through their motives and personal qualities.

Serving as an advocate for their sons because both are conscious that he and his younger brother really do not understand why the police keep taking people’s lives, Avery’s parents realize that “it’s time [they] have “THE TALK”” (Whittaker Gragg). While both parents admit “they just don’t have words” and that they “wish [they] had an answer ... to calm [their] fears,”

they agree that it is time to teach the young boys a phrase once taught to their father—“A to the L to the I-V-E, come home ALIVE, that is key!” (Whittaker Gragg).



2.10 *Momma* 3

Here, the discussion on racist violence does not resolve the potential conflict, but it does serve as an initiation ritual. While exposed to a conversation about extreme pain and danger, this act of learning the phrase implies a trade-off: the boys must trade innocence for experience.

While the theme is similar to that of *Momma, Did You Hear the News?*, the plot in *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child’s Story about Racial Injustice* follows two families—one white, one black—as they discuss a police shooting of a black man in their community. Illustrated by Jennifer Zivoin with text by Marianne Celano, Marietta Collins and Ann Hazzard, *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child’s Story about Racial Injustice* (2018 award winner)⁴³ was inspired by the frightening media content of incidents of community violence, including police shootings. The text relates Emma’s and Josh’s experiences as they are forced into an awareness of racial bias and injustice. After hearing that a black man was shot by

⁴³Something Happened in Our Town: A Child’s Story about Racial Injustice is ‘A Little Free Library Action Book Club Selection National Parenting Product Award Winner (NAPPA), (2018).

the police, Emma, a young white girl, becomes both saddened and confused at her parents' explanation. In a neighboring house, Josh, a young black boy, is also confronting his parents about the traumatic event. The text addresses race and racism as both children learn to identify and counter racial injustice in their own lives. The book begins with Emma and Josh asking two different but equally important questions: "Why did the police shoot that man?" and "Can police go to jail?" (Celano et al.).



2.11 *Something Happened 1*



2.12 *Something Happened 2*

Next, Emma and Josh are both shown in conversation with their parents about the different ways black and white people are treated by law enforcement and society in general. While similar in context, the way in which each set of parents broaches the questions of racism and inequality with the children are unique to the families' own experiences in society. Significantly, this text is the only award-winning text that addresses race and depicts both white and non-white

characters.⁴⁴ Because the space for a diverse interpretation appears, the plot gives way to varied social attitudes—which question a particular set of ideas about society without influencing. Despite the tragic event and the negative racial stereotypes outside their homes, the children in *Something Happened* realize they have the power and intellect to make positive change. This is best demonstrated in the scene at recess. Emma and Josh take in their charge a new, foreign student, Omad, when he is treated badly by the other students. This insistence that Omad belongs despite being from another country and not speaking English well denotes Emma and Josh’s role as young reformers.



2.13 *Something Happened* 3

Despite both books’ disturbing, but realistic elements, *Momma* and *Something Happened* provide ways to examine the unexamined, question the unquestioned, and hold up to scrutiny the unspoken assertions society is making about the way black lives are lived and taken away. These texts continually imply that growing up requires pain and struggle, embracing some things and giving up others—which are scary steps for a child. If we accept Nodelman’s suggestion that picture books “exist primarily so that they can assist in the telling of stories” (vii) and that the images “bear the burden of conveying most of the information,” (viii) then the use of racial

⁴⁴ While written for children of all races, the other either contain only non-white characters and/or have not received an award.

charged characterizations, multi-perspectives, settings, backgrounds and color within the texts become undeniable features of successful story-telling. In addition to having the potential to leave a “profound and lasting impact on children” (Joshua 125), these texts reinforce the necessity for tales that represent the condition of black children and adults in America.

2.5 Peaceful Protesting: Black Lives Matter Movement

Certainly, a frightening reality regarding racism and police brutality is that whites folks often “leave the job of fighting racial inequality to non-White people” (Nel 202). While marginalization and violence are common experiences in the black community—invoking demonstration—, people from other communities often do not take the time to discuss with their children how and why protest to injustice occurs. For some, it is simply easier to avoid conversations with their children that do not or will never directly affect them. On the other hand, however, there are parents who do want to hold these conversations with their children but previously lacked age-appropriate materials to do so. In my research, it is apparent that many adults believe children sit on the outside of concerning social activities, when in truth, they are very aware of the change in the environment around them.⁴⁵ Much like their parents, unrest has a way of making itself known to children. In Salina Harris’ *What is Black Lives Matter?: A Story for Children* (July 2020) Josh, a young black child becomes scared after witnessing a Black Lives Matter protest on TV. Because this experience followed a friendly visit from Noah, a white

⁴⁵ Kathy Sanders-Phillips (a Professor in the Department of Pediatrics, Howard University and an Adjunct Research Professor in the Center for Drug and Health Studies in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of Delaware) states in her review that regardless if parents want to (and/or have) conversations with their children about race-based issues, “[a]wareness of racial differences and the negative stereotypes that are associated with particular groups begins quite early” (178). Furthermore, because “[y]ounger children are limited in their cognitive ability to fully understand issues like race and are often buffered from the deleterious effects of racial discrimination by their families and communities, younger children are especially vulnerable to messages regarding race from macrosystem sources such as the media/television.” According to Sanders-Phillips, this is dangerous because it could result in self-consciousness, decreases in self-esteem and self-efficacy, and depressive symptoms” (179).

friend, Josh is confused by talks of the mistreatment of black folks in the community. In the image that follows the moment of reassurance by his parents, Josh comes to the realization that his friendship with Noah provides a great example of how people should treat each other, regardless of skin color. While an introduction to the subject of protest, this light-hearted text leaves fertile ground for a more in-depth discussion.



2.14 *What is Black Lives Matter 1*

Only one text focuses on both violence and the subsequent protest. The text attempts to speak to young children about “protests,” why they occur, and what it means to be a protester. In the 2020⁴⁶ picture book *Daddy, There’s a Noise Outside* (written by Kenneth Braswell, illustrated by Joe Dent and Julie Anderson), the story follows the characters, Samantha and Brandon, who are awakened to different forms of protest by their parents. Immediately following the murder by police of a young black boy in their inner-city neighborhood, people take to the streets in demonstration, and the children’s parents spend the next morning explaining to them what was taking place in their community. A sense of tension emanates through the illustrations as the black parents navigate protests and community anger around policing and the treatment of black communities.

⁴⁶ The 1st edition of *Daddy, There’s a Noise Outside* was published December 18, 2015; however, the 2nd edition, which I refer to above, was published in 2020.



2.15 *Daddy 1*

While the images are very representative of black culture, the book aims to speak to any family wishing to discuss these issues with their children. Through information about protest marches, demonstrations, and civil disobedience, the text and illustrations provide a great example of how protesting occurs due to police brutality.

A unique experience appears in *Peaceful Fights for Equal Rights* (2016) written by Rob Sanders and illustrated by Jared Schorr in which peaceful protest, resistance, and activism are at the forefront. The text introduces abstract concepts like “fighting for what you believe in” and explains how they can be made actionable. Following a diverse group of adults and children, this verb-driven picture book puts heavy emphasis on action. Interestingly, the adults and children of varying types⁴⁷ marching with homemade signs, going to the voting booth, and knitting for causes is depicted with paper-cut illustrations.

⁴⁷ “varying types” here referring to people of various body sizes, various abilities, various styles of dress, self-expression, and gender expression, various skin tones and hair styles.



2.16 *Peaceful Fights 1*



2.17 *Peaceful Fights 2*



2.18 *Peaceful Fights 3*

In addition to the graphics, *Peaceful Fights* is remarkably effective at assisting children to make sense of adults' personal politics while encouraging them to discover their own. Through the lens of a cross between an alphabet book and a how-to on social change, this lyrical picture book provides an age-appropriate way to discuss with children the thinking behind non-violent protests.

2.6 Concluding Thoughts: Observing and Engaging with Social (in)Justice in Picture Books

A Kids Book About Racism presents the most developed example of picture book for children that constructively approaches racism. Although there are no illustrations in the text, the omittance of them allows a multitude of children (regardless of race or ethnicity) to envision themselves on the pages. As texts like *Momma, Did You Hear the News?* and *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story about Racial Injustice* demonstrate diverse characters, conflicts, and transparency situate children's picture books as a space for race-based discussions. Indeed, in my reading, these texts promote, even encourage the status quo⁴⁸ to offer the type of picture books to children that form and inform an accurate portrayal of the black experience in America. As *Momma* indicates, even when the conversation is extremely difficult, the helpfulness of broaching injustice remains significant. *Something Happened* advocates this through a forced awareness of racial bias and a persisting desire to create change. Through their discussions, children are urged to question and resist all forms of social injustice. In fact, the dialogue and illustrations in these texts reinforce constructive and productive opportunities to address affective responses to racism, prejudice, and police brutality. Philip Nel writes that:

What we read when we are young shapes us deeply because, when we are children, we are still very much in the process of becoming. That is why children's literature is one of the most important arenas in which to combat prejudice.

In evaluating his statement, we must consider literature for young people that works towards openly dismantling racism. By doing so it becomes conceivable that children's literature will become the best place to influence constructive responses to race and racism. Previously lacking a representation of picture books for children that address such vital social issues, *What is Black*

⁴⁸ The "status quo" here refers to all major publishing companies for children's literature, schools, and public libraries.

Lives Matter?: A Story for Children, Daddy, There's a Noise Outside, and Peaceful Fights for Equal Rights introduces the unfamiliar to social activism. As the texts above demonstrate, the importance of having literature that teaches children how to have an opinion and belief, and fighting for it in the right ways that make it respectful and kind to all is vital. Because these picture books involve examples of protest and depictions of a diverse array of people in the illustrations, they create a space to teach young children how they too can fight for what they believe in, in a peaceful way.

Despite having only a handful of children's picture books discussing social injustice to observe, I view the overall representations of racism, police brutality, and peaceful protest as encouraging. The similarities between the fictional messages and realities of the black experience in America is significant. The preparing and framing of conversations on racism, police brutality, and protest in picture books allows children, especially those who have experienced racial profiling and/or violence, to be seen and heard. In this way, it also engages children who lack this knowledge or experience(s) a process for examining, understanding, and responding to these complex issues.

Chapter 3

Race & Beauty Standards: Skin Color, Hair and Self-Perception in Picture Books

“Books can be windows into other people’s lives and mirrors of their own.” (Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop/ “Rudine Sims Bishop: ‘Mother’ of Multicultural Children’s Literature”)

In this chapter, I analyze the fictional representations of race and beauty standards in children’s picture books, ultimately arguing the need for literature composed of conversations around skin color, hair and self-perception. Throughout the research for this chapter, I was inspired by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop’s comment that: “[l]iterature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us” because I identify the potential for that reflection to positively influence the young reader (Bishop, ‘Mother’). This chapter situates picture books as a reflection on multiculturalism and contends that these fictional texts reflect issues that have been theorized by black feminist thought. The presence of a space to conduct and present storytelling grounded in the experiences and knowledge of black children creates in picture books an unprejudiced discussion on skin-color, hair and self-perception. In postulating a connection between fictional representations and multiculturalism, this project follows in the tradition of critical race scholarship; for example, Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso write that literature for children “can be used as theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tools to challenge racism, sexism, and classism...” (23). Although I recognize the optimistic and fanciful ideas in some picture books and reject that they should wholly focus on major concerns of reality, I do agree that picture books serve as a method to explain the persistence of racial discrimination and social suffering. In fact, children’s picture books are significant in that way because they *can be* fun, and in the

process enhance the development of language and critical thinking skills.⁴⁹ I agree with Solórzano's and Yasso's assertion that "critical race theory can inform a critical race methodology in education" and that "critical race methodology provides a tool to "counter" deficit storytelling" (23).

As mentioned throughout this project, one of the main considerations of my research is the modern representations being transmitted to young readers through picture books about race-based topics. Therefore, I believe it is important to note the patterns of historical racial representations in order to put the progression of these representations in context. While I am most concerned in this chapter with picture books that currently offer children the opportunity to explore literature where black characters are no longer distorted or unrecognizable, it is significant to note what these images looked like and where they occurred in children's picture book previously. For instance, in 1986 Leslie Edmond analyzed the racial representations in children's picture books from 1920-1984 and found that nearly seventy percent of the books examined were white dominated, and the few books that focused on blacks depicted stereotypical aspects of them and their culture (32-33). Indeed, Edmonds notes in her analysis that black characters were often placed in the background of illustrations as unnamed characters (34). Ultimately, Edmonds' research shows that representations of racial minorities (specifically black representations) in children's picture books throughout the twentieth century were either highly stereotyped, generalized, and/or nearly invisible. Since this chapter evaluates complicated issues involving race, racial identity and beauty standards, I considered picture books that inform the young reader (black and white) of varying approaches in developing racial competency. In this chapter, characters representing diversity in picture books are identified as follows. They come

⁴⁹ See Martha Crippen "The Value of Children's Literature" (2012), for instance.

from all walks of life, are engaged in self-empowerment, reinforce the acceptance of all body types, and are motivated towards an effort to erase racist perceptions of black hair and skin. In summary, the illustrations depict positive racial representations that challenge white standards of beauty.⁵⁰

As discussed in the previous chapter, my reading of the crucial role a literary education has on children's health aligns with Maria Trent's points on children's development and Julia Mickenberg's and Philip Nel's argument that literature needs to challenge the existing social order—both concepts emphasizing the need for progressive social change. Similarly, bell hooks comments that discussions of race are frequently color-blind since they fail to examine “whiteness” as a racial category of equal significance to “blackness” (*Black Looks* 220). Indeed, hooks identifies with the philosophy of teaching children to “transgress” in order to achieve the “gift of freedom” when learning how to accept cultural practices different from their own (*Teaching Transgress* 51). Here, the perceptions of racial identity and beauty standards in the picture books read as influential because the characters either engage in representations or in explanations of a cultural reality. In regards to “transgress[ing],” the picture books provide an opportunity for children to identify with or face squarely the many racial microaggressions black children encounter regarding their hair and skin. The books also put forward illustrations and dialogue that allow children the opportunity to understand body image perhaps “beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable” in their own homes and communities (12).

Although critical race theory and children's picture books have different aims and audiences, it is significant to note here that these selected texts are contributing to conversations

⁵⁰ Current studies are examining body image concerns among African Americans (e.g., Grabe & Hyde, 2006; Hrabosky & Grilo, 2007; Lovejoy, 2001). These studies suggest that African American bodies (characteristics such as skin tone and hair) are often scrutinized against traditional body images associated with European Americans.

for children about body positivity and are helping to counter negative perceptions much in the same way critical race scholars do through their scholarship. Generally, critical race theorists focus on an understanding of racism as ingrained into the fabric of our society, and in institutions in particular. However, critical race research also focuses on how blacks experience racial microaggressions, which are often presented in society and institutions as subtle but significant verbal or nonverbal attacks.⁵¹ I assert that it is here in the ideology that children’s picture books can be examined through a critical race lens—mainly because these “attacks” in children’s books often appear as remarks (or lack thereof) about identity, which occur because of institutionalized racism⁵². For instance, furthering the thoughts of hooks, philosopher Patricia Hill Collins writes that black women’s oppression “is systematized and structured along three interdependent dimensions” (qtd. in *Feminist Thought* 116). For the argument being made here, the third ideological dimension⁵³ is applicable—an ideological dimension imposing a “freedom-restricting set of “controlling images” on black women, thus serving to justify as well as explain whites’ treatment of them” (*Black Feminist Thought* 7). In other words, Collins’ claim that negative stereotypical images applied to black women have been fundamental to their oppression, aligns with the significance of issues like hair and skin tone, and why addressing them in children’s literature is an attempt to counter the negative impact of white beauty standards on young black girls and later adults (67). Indeed, Collins urges those responsible for producing images within the ideological dimension to avoid demeaning and degrading stereotypes imposed on blacks by

⁵¹ See Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp, and Angela P. Harris’ *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory* (2002), for instance.

⁵² See Daniel Solórzano and Lindsay Pérez Huber’s *Racial Microaggressions: Using Critical Race Theory to Respond to Everyday Racism* (2020), for instance.

⁵³ According to Collins, the other two dimensions refer to the “economic dimension” which relegates black women to “ghettoization in service occupations” and the “political dimension” which denies black women the rights and privileges routinely extended to all white men and many white women, including the very important right to an equal education (*Feminist Black Thought* 6, 7).

whites (qtd. in *Feminist Thought* 117). Instead, she advocates that it is possible to have one's own identity "without viewing it as the absolute norm for everybody" (*Black Feminist Thought* 237). Interestingly enough, the picture books examined in this chapter are doing just that through the use of responsible dialogue and illustrations regarding representations of race.

Understanding representations of race in picture books is necessary because my research focuses on the impact those depictions have on children's development of racial identity and attitudes. As such, I avoid analyzing picture books that contain problematic racial representations—stereotypes, tokenism, and invisibility—and where dialogue and illustrations project unjust and highly biased racial attitudes⁵⁴. Instead, I considered only texts reflecting positive attitudes in our society about diversity and those capturing various social identities. Within the 2016-2020 picture books examined, I encountered a number of texts engaging in conversations on body image. Certainly, these types of texts help children engage with racial representations, but I posit that they may also be influential in shaping children's attitudes towards others, and their own racial identities. I consider the presentation of positive racial and cultural representations in the picture books encouraging because these images promote an understanding of and have the capacity to change cultural values and norms. In the texts, I find this emphasis on exposing children to positive depictions of races and race relations. The ideal picture book insist that accurate and dynamic exposure to racial representations will lead children to be less likely to maintain negative racial attitudes when exposed to individual images of minorities.⁵⁵ My conclusion here aligns with Bishop's argument that "multicultural literature is one of the most powerful components of a multicultural education curriculum, the underlying

⁵⁴ The reference to picture books that contain problematic racial representations include those texts with animals and/or objects as main characters—*Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote*; *Stick and Stone*; *The Sneetches*; *Mixed: A Colorful Story*; and *Different is NOT BAD* to name a few.

⁵⁵ See Leslie Edmonds, "The treatment of race in picture books for young children." (1986)

purpose of which is to help to make the society a more equitable one” (*Multicultural Literature* 40). I argue that literature (specifically the stories and illustrations in picture books with positive race representations) has the power to keep children from developing racial prejudices and negative racial attitudes. In fact, if picture books avoid the topic of race, especially as it relates to discrimination, they will advance racial prejudice as a result of colorblind ideology.⁵⁶ Therefore, I argue that the following texts— *Skin Again*; *Hair Love*; *Don’t Touch My Hair!*; and *I Am Enough*—depict important representations of varying skin colors, hair types and an understanding of worth through characters’ self-perception. I further contend that transparency on race and beauty standards similar to the one identified by scholars in regards to liberal race discourse and black feminist studies can be applied to a reading of children’s picture books (2016-2020) depicting race representations, and I advocate for its evaluation in critical race theory.

This chapter begins with an examination of *Skin Again*, an award-winning book reissued at the beginning of this study (June 2017) to argue for a method on how to talk about race and identity to the youngest of readers. This section focuses on the importance of children’s strong self-awareness in relation to their ability to tune into feelings, thoughts, and actions. The second section then considers *Hair Love* as a representative of the understanding of worth through self-perception, and *Don’t Touch My Hair*, which presents an exploration of personal boundaries and respect. The second section examines texts that focus on characters with healthy self-image who work toward obtaining self-empowerment through acceptance. The final section considers *I Am Enough* in which the main character shares a pep talk to all the children in the world. The text aims to show the young reader why it is important to love themselves as themselves. I argue that

⁵⁶ Here, I refer to Tim Wise’s concept of “colorblind” discussed in the introduction.

I Am Enough depicts a picture book of diverse body shapes and skin tones in order to promote self-confidence and kindness. The text hints towards a sense of equality in the character/reader relationship and in doing so establishes the importance of self-acceptance. The texts examined in this chapter act as the perfect medium to initiate and reinforce discussions on inclusion and diversity. Ultimately, these picture books are significant because their varied racial/cultural representations create messages that resonate and empower young children who are learning how to accept difference and embrace their own individuality.

3.3 Race: A Young Readers Introduction to Diversity and Self-Acceptance

Skin Again introduces the reader to various diverse, unnamed characters who talk about the meaning of race and identity. Originally published in 2004, this award-winning picture book was reissued in 2017 in the midst of ongoing social and political unrest.⁵⁷ Illustrated by Chris Raschka and written by bell hooks, *Skin Again* presents the interconnectivity of race, diversity, and acceptance of self and others. Like most texts lacking a plot, *Skin Again* reads as a small introductory book on social identities among different groups of children. Because the author centers part of her critical work on identifying and challenging systems of discrimination based on race⁵⁸, the text is understandably a unique approach to positive reinforcement of differences. By the end of the picture book, the young reader, regardless of race, is left with inspirational ways to confidently accept themselves and others.

Right from the start, *Skin Again* works to build community with the young reader. A poem turned picture book, the poetic and rhythmic repeating of words utilizes a common

⁵⁷ According to research conducted at the University of Chicago, Economic and Social Researchers determined in 2017 that new government policies, high-profile police-involved shootings, a recession and, fiscal retrenchments created an environment of social unrest.

⁵⁸ Toni Morrison is another example of an author who centers their work in critical race studies but has also written children's books discussing race-based topics.

learning strategy⁵⁹ to help children understand racial differences and how to deal with and react to those differences.



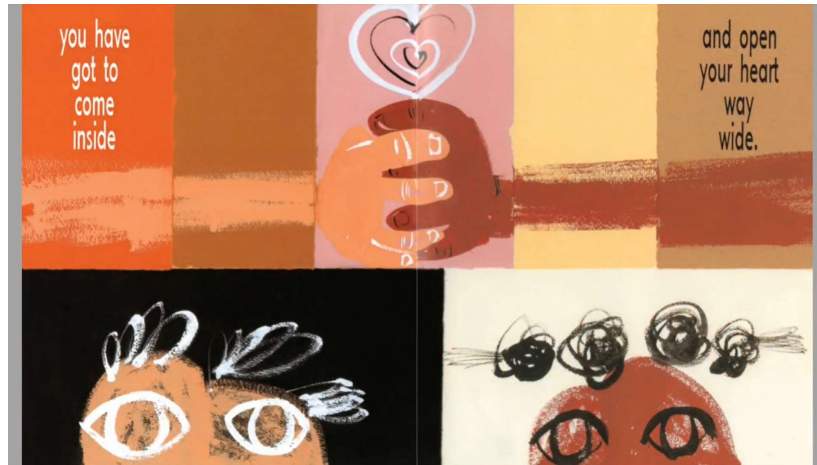
3.1 *Skin Again 1*



3.2 *Skin Again 2*

Here, instead of negating race, the dialogue underscores that it is just simply one part of a person. The text also accomplishes this through illustrations characterizing the differences in people by emphasizing the importance of looking beneath the surface of skin.

⁵⁹ According to the Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, using rhyme in literature aids in teaching literacy skills like phonemic awareness and fluency development—both of which influence textual interpretation.



3.3 *Skin Again* 3

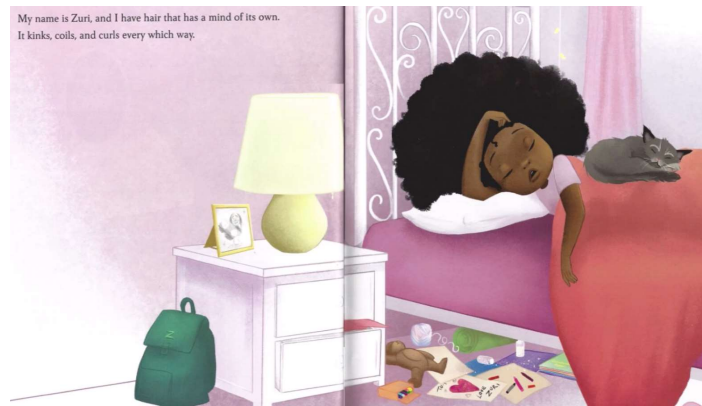
To put this another way, the picture book seems less invested in theorizing race and more interested in the inner components of the characters. For a picture book filled with repetitive words and phrases, the illustrations offer unique interpretive possibilities. Indeed, the central theme in *Skin Again* invites an intersectional interpretation that finds value in its race representations. Therefore, in addition to identifying dissimilarities between the characters' skin color, the text indicates the similarities of the children and in doing so encourages the reader to learn from what the characters lack in common (as well as what they share).

I contend that *Skin Again* argues against the idea that the reader needs to be of the same race to invest in the experiences of the fictional characters through its text and illustrations. In fact, these images remove the obstacle of human variance to show children how to learn about someone different from them. Because the picture book embraces diversity by not overlooking dissimilarity, children are receiving a lesson on how to respect one another by not ignoring differences. Ultimately, this approach results in a message that has the potential to leave deep impressions on children's visual imaginations and permanently alter the way they see themselves and others.

3.4 Racial Identity: Physical Features and Self-Perception

At its core, racial identity both constructs an individual's sense of self as a member of a group and integrates the impact of race and related factors.⁶⁰ The impact of *related factors* here take into account a child's attitude toward self, others of the same and different racial groups, and dominant racial groups. The more striking of the first type of picture books introducing models of racial identity development is *Hair Love*. In this 2019 award winner by Matthew A. Cherry, the main character (a young girl named Zuri) asks her father to fix her hair since her mother is away. In the process, Zuri's father tries (for the first time) to help his daughter get her hair the way she wants it.

In this first scene, Zuri is depicted as a young girl with “hair that has a mind of its own” (Cherry). She is lying in bed, but the focus is centered on her hair which is described as having “kinks, coils, and curls every which way” (Cherry). Although this is rather specific characterization of her hair, Zuri becomes more than just her hair in the following scenes.

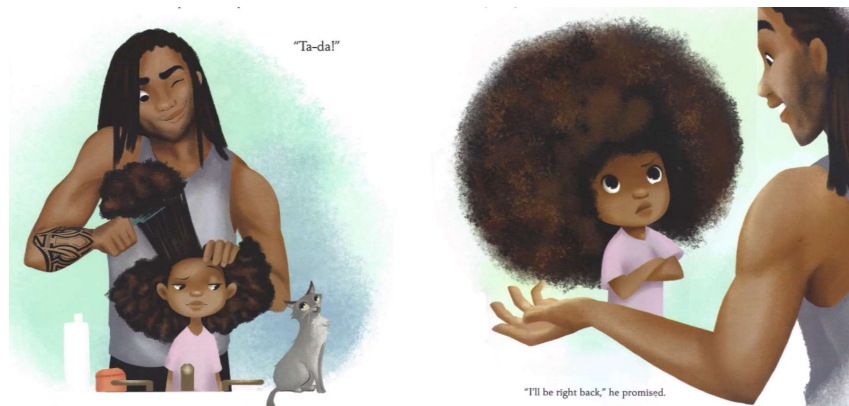


3.4 *Hair Love* 1

Shown over the next few frames with various hair styles she can have, Zuri's hair is representative of what she claims makes her beautiful and important. Yet, with her mother away

⁶⁰ See, Carter, R. T. (1995). "The influence of race and racial identity in psychotherapy: Toward a racially inclusive model."

she must enlist her father for the first time to help her style her hair. In fact, while Zuri’s father is struggling to get her hair just “right,” he is reassuring that any style will be perfect. For black children (and adults), hair is deeply politicized.⁶¹ It often serves as a key marker of racial identification. Therefore, rather than avoiding the conversation on the pressures to conform to beauty standards perpetuated by a pervasive cultural message that idealizes “white” hair styles, Zuri’s father encourages her to celebrate the unique ways her hair can be styled.

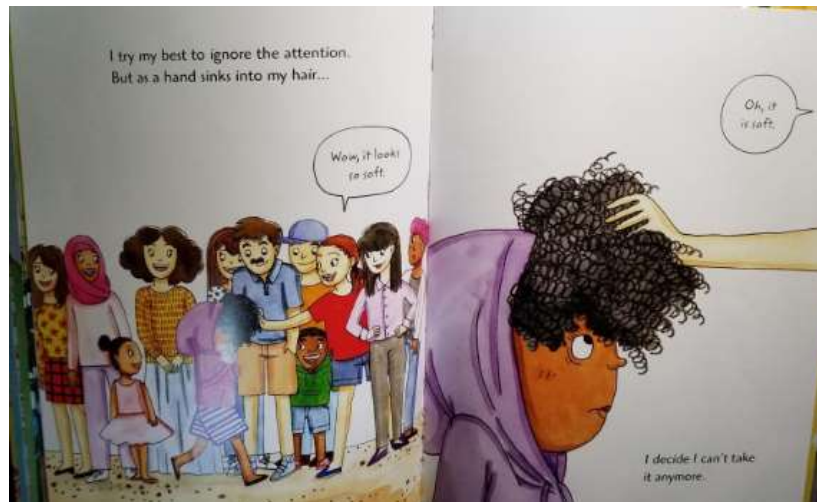


3.5 Hair Love 2

This approach in the book is significant because the text and illustrations challenge traditional norms of what is appropriate and attractive for black hair—a type of “challenge” similar to the one Collins’ asserts is essential in combating “ideas about ‘normal’” when questioning ideologies that defend racism (*Black Sexual Politics* 96). In a final analysis, *Hair Love* calls into question the cultural norms that have racialized beauty standards. In doing so, the text and illustrations serve to engage children (black and white) in a dialogue on different hair types and styles. Thus providing an opportunity for the young reader to learn positive attitudes towards racial differences.

⁶¹ See, Laurie A. Rudman and Meghan C. McLean’s *The Role of Appearance Stigma in Implicit Racial In-group Bias*, Sage Journals (2015), for instance.

Another example of racial identity development is found in author-illustrator Sharee Miller's text *Don't Touch My Hair* (2019 best seller in Children's Fiction on social situations, manners, and black story books). Here, a young black girl (named Aria) finds that wherever she goes strangers want to touch her hair.



3.6 *Don't Touch* 1

Similar to the thought-provoking collection of biographical essays (and New York Times Bestseller) *You Can't Touch My Hair: And Other Things Still Have to Explain*⁶², the adult and children's book versions confront the critical subject of race and hair politics. Indeed, *Don't Touch My Hair* follows the trend of adult works—*Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism & Politics of Respectability* (E. Frances White); *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps); *Textures: The History and Art of Black Hair* (Tameka Ellington); and *Twisted: The Tangled History of Black Hair Culture* (Emma Dabiri)—discussing hair prejudices and fetishes but in a way appropriate for children.

⁶² Written by Phoebe Robinson; Foreword by Jessica Williams (2016)



3.7 Don't Touch 2

Although Aria is distraught by the amount of people and things (a mermaid, monkey, and aliens) that want to reach for her curls, the book serves to teach the important lesson of asking permission. Since this is a skill in manners that children are often taught in youth, the text and illustrations present a compelling approach about respecting boundaries—even those of children. True to her role, Aria represents a character with a healthy self-image who demonstrates courage in communicating with others about acknowledging black beauty without encroaching upon it. Like other award winning books for adults and children discussing race representations, this picture book dissects culture obsessions and calls out inappropriate behavior. In doing so, *Don't Touch* provides an effective conversation of finding beauty in difference while also respecting the personal boundaries of others.

3.5 Self-Perception: A Child's Path Learning to Be and Become

The final text in this section, 2018 award winner *I Am Enough* by Grace Byers (illustrated by Keturah A. Bobo) introduces a young girl who remains unnamed throughout the reading.

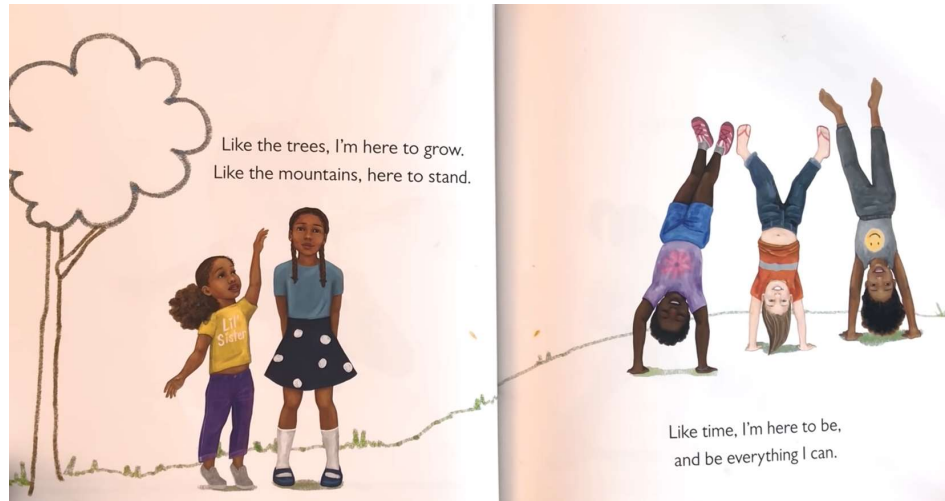
Despite the first-person narration provided by the unnamed girl, the work provides an inclusive discussion on race and acceptance of self. Specifically, the work serves as a collection of positive affirmations for children of any race. While the message and images appeal to many different faces, it also resonates and empowers young children who are learning to embrace their individuality and celebrate difference in others. I contend that *I Am Enough* is a perfect medium to initiate and reinforce the discussion of inclusion and diversity without invoking stereotypes. This picture book displays an indispensable source of information about self-perception and does so with depictions of genuine children with distinctive (rather than stereotypical) features.

Not unlike other child characters, the unnamed girl is bold with her positive message. In fact, cast in the first scene as innocent and natural she proclaims “Like the sun, I’m here to shine” (Byers 2).



3.8 *I Am Enough* 1

The text continues this way, flowing like a poem and full of analogies. In addition to the unique fictional representations of diversity, *I Am Enough* is remarkably effective at avoiding stereotypes. Indeed, throughout all of the illustrations children of various races are visible and cast as real human beings, as opposed to an anti-black bias where black children are paired with negative traits and white children are assigned positive racial identities.



3.9 *I Am Enough 2*

Interestingly, this is a significant aspect of storybooks and what defines them as acceptable learning tools.⁶³ Like the other picture books in this section, *I Am Enough* shows visual diversity and avoids biases related to people of various identities in the story line. As discussed, this visibility in the illustrations teaches children about who matters in society and separates itself from other texts that undermine children's affirmative sense of themselves and reinforces prejudices through invisibility and stereotypes. Far from a plot-based text, the ode to self-acceptance counteracts messages that teach children to feel inferior or even superior because of their race. Ultimately, this dimension of accurate illustrations and respectful dialogue contributes to a learning experience for young children; one showing how to accept diversity beyond their family and neighborhood.

3.6 Concluding Thoughts: Engaging with Black Hair and Body Politics

Picture books that influence young readers should offer a space to explore issues of diversity and anti-bias. As mentioned in the previous discussion of racial identity, a distinguishing characteristic in the picture books noted is that they reflect positive attitudes about

⁶³ See Lawrence R. Sipe's *Teaching Visual Literacy*, for instance.

diversity with visual and verbal messages young children absorb easily. In all of the picture books discussed, the narration of information about racial and ethnic identities suggest that, only in this manner in the text, do they teach children about who is important, who matters, and who is visible.

Certainly, the inclusion of specific ethnic and cultural groups invites young children to establish connections with those from different cultures while countering stereotypes that they may have already absorbed elsewhere. Still, Juliana Buss and Tania Stoltz argue that “children have their own ideas about beauty and ugliness and that they change these perceptions according to age” and further that “cultural patterns and practices have great influence on children ... through experience and learning” (1). So, while most picture books offer some sort of appropriate start for early childhood learning, it is significant that the stories and illustrations focus on the messages about diversity and equality and do so in ways recognizable to young children.

In a sense, picture books like *Skin Again*, *Hair Love*, *Don't Touch My Hair!* and *I Am Enough* support the correlation between literature exposure and social and emotional development. In fact, they encourage the child to learn from experiences they have had or have never had—including those that arouse difficult emotions—within the safety of a picture book. In the examined texts, the illustrations and interactions of the fictional characters is similar to real-life social experiences. This makes these particular picture books a necessary medium with which children can explore human social and emotional life in order to better empathize with others and to see the world from different perspectives.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ See Annie Paul's "Your Brain on Fiction" (2012), for instance.

Chapter 4

Concluding Thoughts: An Anti-Racist Future through Children's Picture Books

“To all the children of tomorrow who deserve fantastic worlds endarkened and whole.”

(Ebony Elizabeth Thomas/ *The Dark Fantastic*)

Founded in anti-racism, the representations of race and social injustice in children's picture books from 2016-2020 support an ideology of cross-racial dynamics that create goals and objectives towards positive racial socialization. The dialogue and imagery methods used in the books also ensure a clear demarcation between those texts that enrich social and emotional development and those that reinforce bias. Apart from its illustrative appeal to young children, the anti-bias ideal supports an appropriate strategy to observe and engage in social justice conversations, situates children in a safe space for race-based discussions, characterizes an accurate portrayal of the black experience in America, intimates positive racial identity and attitudes, and limits stereotypes, tokenism, and invisibility. Further, it participates in critical race methodology⁶⁵ (grounded in black feminist scholarship) and prevents colorblind socialization⁶⁶.

Previously, the most obvious construction of this type of methodology to evaluate children's understanding of race was Sesame Street's model of racial harmony. Indeed, at Sesame Street's inception a majority of the children's literature available still held racist stereotypes⁶⁷. Emerging during a continued struggle over the rights of blacks in America and

⁶⁵ According to Solórzano and Yasso, critical race theory can inform a critical race methodology in education as it offers space to conduct and present research grounded in the experiences and knowledge of people of color as well as a method on how the stories can be used as theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tools to challenge racism, sexism, and classism and work toward social justice. (*Critical Race Methodology*, 2002).

⁶⁶ Colorblind socialization, sometimes referred to as *colormute* or *racemute socialization*, involves parents discouraging children from talking about race or racism by framing overt discussion of race as irrelevant, disrespectful, or racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

⁶⁷ The children's literature available at this time that still held racist stereotypes includes but is not limited to: a majority of the Dr. Seuss collection

violent race riots⁶⁸, Sesame Street became the first successful “initiative designed to be more explicit about physical and cultural differences, and encourage friendship between people of different races and cultures” (Lovelace et al. 70). Compared to the other television programs and classic literature available to children in 1969, Sesame Street contained greater complexity, primarily because it earned a place in the national debate over reforming children’s television through an aim to “spread a message of tolerance and diversity.”⁶⁹ As such, Sesame Street created a space for greater transparency in racial bias as well as the potential for a type of cultural work that provided strategies for the socialization of children’s racial attitudes. For instance, Sesame Street strives to present characters that embody the following characteristics: realistic, diverse, inquisitive, and adventurous. Although some of the characters are cast as humanoids, the depiction of visual diversity (people of color, women, low-income families, and people with disabilities) encourages a proper understanding of race relations and anti-bias. Indeed, Sesame Street was (and still is) frequently a proactive force that works against a colorblind ideology.

Sesame Street appeared in 1969 at a time mired in ongoing racial conflict. Presumably, then, television programs for children developed ways to promote positive interactions between different racial groups. As previously stated, this is not necessarily true of all children’s television programs. Despite the rising racial unrest, Sesame Street was the main program broaching racial conflict through fostering an appreciation of racial and cultural differences.

⁶⁸ The race riots mentioned here are often referred to as the *King Assassination Riots*. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a “catalyst for civil unrest and many took to the streets to express their grief and anger in the forms of marches and protests. Not all of these demonstrations remained peaceful and in some of instances turned violent. Some of the most notable riots occurred in Baltimore (Maryland), Chicago (Illinois), Louisville (Kentucky), New York City (New York), and Washington, D.C.”

Braimah, A. (2017, November 04). *The Martin Luther King Assassination Riots* (1968). BlackPast.org.

⁶⁹ See Robert W. Morrow’s *Sesame Street and the Reform of Children’s Television*, p. x (2005), for instance.

From the very beginning, the title sequence played alongside the theme song ‘Sunny Day’ follows the diverse pattern identified in the preceding sections discussing picture books. Based on a goal to emphasize the similarities that make us all human, Sesame Street is set in a neighborhood where children are “encouraged to view people who look different from themselves as possible friends, [and] to bring a child who has been rejected because of physical and/or cultural differences into the group” (Lovelace et al. 70). Every episode, from the very first one, advances a successful representation of friendly exchanges between black and white (human) characters. For instance, in episode #2, there is a scene mid-way through where Bob (a white, adult male) is sitting on the front steps of a Brownstone with both black and white children when he is pleasantly addressed by Gordon (a black, adult male) who is looking for Oscar. This interchange of dialogue between the characters is significant because the friendliness is made common and presents to children a respectful way to engage with others who look different. Ultimately, these friendly exchanges are strategies created in every episode to provide a sense of consistency to the child viewer learning manners and how to become racially and culturally socialized.

Further consideration of racial/social relationships in Sesame Street may contribute to ways other mediums (such as children’s literature) navigate difficult discussions on blatant racism. Indeed, when creating teachable moments regarding racial dynamics and disparities the program is explicit. In episode #3140 (1993), the scene starts as best friends Gina (white) and Savion (black) walk to Hooper’s after having seen a movie. Once there, Gina receives a call from someone who states they “can’t stand to see it when people of different races are friends.” Overhearing the whole exchange, Telly (a humanoid character) expresses his confusion and concern. In response, Gina and Savion explain to Telly (and by consequence to the audience)

that those who feel negatively toward races different from their own are “just some really stupid people.” Although the word choice here might be contrived as inappropriate for young children, the episode proceeds with an age-appropriate solution to the racial conflict—a “1¢ Information” booth. Here human and humanoid can stop by and ask questions about characters different from themselves in order to get to know them better. Fundamentally, the information booth serves as a safe, respectful approach to encourage participation in discussions concerning incidents of racism and/or profiling.

Understanding the many ways Sesame Street can extend its techniques to literature⁷⁰, specifically in regards to positive racial socialization is necessary because my research focuses on how representations of racial violence, different lifestyles, relationships between people, and self and social identities might encourage children to engage in actions for change as adults. Children’s literature, as storytelling books, tends to be a very appealing medium to a wide range of young children; so, I speculated that picture books may now provide the same dynamic, educational method introduced by Sesame Street for an anti-racist future in literature. Much like Sesame Street, children’s picture books—such as those I have chosen for this study—possess many characteristics of positive racial socialization. I chose these texts specifically because they hold significant ideas on race relations, were written for young children, and/or have won an award for dialogue and illustrative techniques. In the decades following Sesame Street, very few picture books held conversations of diversity and almost none were holding discussions on social injustice issues. Yet, the need for these topics to be presented in an age-appropriate manner was increasing as the violence and mistreatment of the black community escalated in society, leaving parents and teachers without a way to approach them constructively. Certainly, because these

⁷⁰ Although Sesame Street publishes children’s books, a majority of the work published contains only humanoids. It contains little to no exchanges between (culturally diverse) humans.

types of texts recommend varying methods for children (black and white) on how to develop the skills of social and culture awareness, their consideration for educational material on racial socialization in individual homes and classrooms becomes vital.

Ralph Ellison writes: “while fiction is but a form of symbolic action, a mere game of ‘as if,’ therein lies its true function and its potential for effecting change. For at its most serious, just as true of politics at its best, it is a thrust toward a human ideal” (*Invisible Man*). In order to move closer to that ideal, I argue that children’s picture books must include frequent representations of social and racial issues. Indeed, beneath the issues of racism and police violence, the representation and inclusion of the black experience in picture books suggests a way to move forward while combatting prejudice in society. The most striking examples of this type of progressiveness is the push for equity and social justice in *Woke Baby*. In this 2018 picture book by Mahogany L. Browne (illustrated by Theodore Taylor III), the main characters (ambiguously gendered babies) rise in the morning ready to take on the injustices in the world. Lyrical and empowering, the symbols and mores of social activism in the book represent the promise and possibility change can bring. Instead of casting babies that need to be protected from a racist/violent world, the illustrations and words challenge the consciousness of both adult and child. Ultimately, *Woke Baby* posits that a human’s power and capacity for change is innate, and I argue that the book serves as the type of “symbolic action” Ellison referenced.

Another example of a picture book that advances and advocates for equity and social justice is found in Ibram X. Kendi’s popular text *Antiracist Baby* (2020 award winner). Here, the conversation and illustrations introduce young readers as well as adults to antiracist concepts. Similar to *Woke Baby*, the literature sets out to provide an opportunity to address racism and racial injustice while teaching acceptance, inclusivity, and how to stand up to social injustices.

Still, *Antiracist Baby* takes on the added task of imparting the language necessary to being critical conversations on social and racial issues. This approach is valuable because it brings the ramifications of racism to the foreground while introducing nine-steps on how to recognize and dismantle racist thoughts and actions—all of which are vital for a push towards an anti-racist future.

In a sense, picture books like *Woke Baby* and *Antiracist Baby* are the precursor to the exchanges found in juvenile and adult literature about racism and anti-racism. They address how to work actively against racism in a way that is not inappropriate but “that support[s] children’s learning and transfer of that information to the real world” (Strouse et al. 3). Specifically, these books and the others examined in this project establish a base for children on how to think about racial and ethnic inequality. Although the appropriateness of complex racial issues in the genre of children’s literature may be questionable to some, I insist that picture books containing representations of race and those focused on how racial inequality produces social problems a valuable component of literature for young readers. Indeed, in many ways, the texts examined demonstrate that picture books have the potential to influence children to accept or question a particular set of ideas about society.

In deciding which texts to analyze, I chose those integrally bound up with racial factors that influence children’s thinking and actions. I analyzed texts published from 2016-2020 because their publication followed the eight year term of the first black president, Barak Obama, into the following subsequent four year term held by Donald Trump; all of which coincides with a major shift from a “colorblind ideology” to an increased focus on racial tension and violence in society. Although I found a slight progression in the representation of race and racism in picture books published before 2016, a significant amount more of those published after that year

addressed the ongoing racial bias that was previously avoided. Since this project is informed by critical race theory, one of my original hypotheses was the need for an examination of picture books in the critical work—which is not something that occurs at present. After examining the texts, I advocate that a consistent evaluation of these types of picture books is imperative for scholars interested in racial attitudes, inequality, and policies that promote social change.

Throughout the study, I suggest that children’s picture books have the ability to communicate histories and current events meant to encourage and document social changes and developments. Whether the stories address racism and body positivity or simply advocate for inclusion within the texts, they are all aspects vital to improving the representations in picture books as well as for the eradication of ideologies (literally and figuratively) that objectify and transform race and culture. The emphasis in my project that children’s picture books have the ability to accurately and authentically depict races and cultures in order to shape positive racial attitudes parallels Philip Nel’s argument in *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?* that “children’s literature and culture are among the best places to imagine a better future” (224). As the texts examined in this project provide positive racial and cultural representations, it is not unreasonable to postulate that they should be recognized as a critical component in race studies and a dynamic educational method for an anti-racist future.

Although the picture books in this study may provide an effective response to racism and encourage change, the recognition of their potential will be for nothing if the mainstream publishing industry does not reverse its view on diverse books as a niche market.⁷¹ In the publishing industry, a niche market becomes problematic because it suggests that picture books

⁷¹ A “niche market” refers to a segment of a larger market that has its own demands and preferences. Generally, a “niche market” caters to a largely overlooked audience. Susan Ward’s “What Is a Niche Market?,” *The Balance Small Business* (2020).

hosting racial and cultural representations will only be published so long as there is a heavy demand regardless of their importance to racial and cultural socialization. Another area of contention between the mainstream publishing industry and the literature published for children is that it is still dominated by white employees and authors.⁷² Certainly, the absence of black employees and authors is a problem. Without the inclusion of more black authors and employees, the mainstream publishing industry runs the risk of publishing inaccurate, unauthentic racial representations in children's picture books—which the research in this project determined has the potential to foster negative racial identities and attitudes in developing young children. Ultimately, as children develop strategies in dealing with racialized issues, it is essential they be exposed to a variety of texts portraying the collective experiences of different racial groups and cultures.⁷³

As shown throughout this project, racial representations in children's picture books have advanced over the last hundred years.⁷⁴ However, a closer examination the police violence and subsequent racial tension reveals a significant need for representative texts in order to dispel the underlying problematic ideologies that promote racial prejudices and negative racial attitudes. Certainly, as American society becomes increasingly diverse, the demand for more accurate and positive racial representations within children's picture books will become increasingly important. Although changing the racial makeup of society and the institutions within it is not something that can immediately happen, I argue that critical race and children's literary studies

⁷² In 2015, the Diversity Baseline Survey results found that 79 percent of the industry to be White/ Caucasian: 86 percent at the executive level are White/ Caucasian, 82 percent of editors are White/ Caucasian, 83 percent of sales are White/ Caucasian, 77 percent of Marketing and Publicity are White/ Caucasian, and 89 percent of Book Reviewers are White/ Caucasian. Jason Low et al. "Where Is the Diversity in Publishing?" *Lee and Low Books* (2015)

⁷³ See, Jean Mendoza's and Debbie Reese's "Examining Multicultural Picture Books for the Early Childhood Classroom: Possibilities and Pitfalls." *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2001, for instance.

⁷⁴ See Violet Harris' "African American Children's Literature: The First One Hundred Years," (1990), for instance.

must include frequent analysis of children's picture books that influence the development of positive social interactions and identities and react to the continued presence of anti-racist illustrations and rhetoric.

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