“Their Own Set of Wings”: Themes of Representation in Multicultural Children's Literature

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Abstract

As the demographics of children in the United States today indicate a society of diverse races, ethnicities, and cultures, children’s literature has started to reflect and respect that diversity. Scholars of children’s literature have performed studies that emphasize the need for multicultural representation through this medium, but not much work has been done to see the methods through which people of color are positively represented. While there has been an emphasis on the need for “culturally conscious” children’s literature that deeply recognizes realistic experiences of people of color, we have yet to clarify how authors and illustrators vary in their representations of these experiences. Therefore, this capstone project functions as a research study as well as a creative project to identify practices of writing and illustrating for children of color that are positive and effective. I interrogated the text and illustrations depicting characters within the pages of fifteen multicultural children’s books in order to identify the extent to which race, ethnicity, and culture are represented in their narratives. Reflecting on themes found in the book analyses, I wrote a children’s book manuscript depicting a character of color and started the process of trying to get it published. This study and literary project are meant to provide a detailed understanding of how children’s literature provides images of characters of color, thus helping children of color identify themselves as valued identities and individuals. It concludes with practical insights on how careful analysis of multicultural children’s books can benefit the children who read the books and the adults who create or select them.

Keywords: multicultural children’s literature, race, ethnicity, culture
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“Take a look. It’s in a book. A reading rainbow!”

--a-r zachariah
“When there are many worlds, you can choose the one you walk into each day.” – Jacqueline Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014)

About a year and a half ago, my nine-year-old sister, Aisha, called me from home and told me that she just wrote and drew a story. She was particularly excited about this story because it featured, as she said, “girls with puffy hair like mine.” While I am typically proud of my sister for pretty much any action she takes, I was especially proud to hear that she created a story and made it in her image. It was that moment with my little sister that inspired my interest in children of color and their connection to the media they are presented. As I hung up the phone, I thought carefully about the children’s books I read (many of which were passed down to my sister) and television shows I watched; these deliverers of information and stories did not always have characters or stories that reflected my life or my appearance.

I recall certain books that resonated with me, such as *A Pocket for Corduroy* by Don Freeman, with a teddy bear who got in trouble and was taken care of by a light brown-skinned girl who lived in an urban area with people of different shades. Now, it is easy for me to even write that description through hindsight, but I still recall feeling comfort and ease in seeing the mother and daughter within *A Pocket for Corduroy* who appeared to me as non-white. The mother had big hoop earrings like my mother did and they used a community laundromat like the one we had in my apartment complex. Books like this latched onto my memories because they reflect a certain aspect of life that I understood as a child and feel nostalgic about in young adulthood. For my sister, she has been exposed to more representations of Black girls and urban life in her books and television shows than I was, possibly explaining why she was able to intentionally create a story and characters that looked like her.
The following project is inspired by the experiences my sister and I have with children’s books. As we exist as Black, Muslim, low-income, first-generation Americans (from Ghana) who live in multicultural apartments of a Connecticut suburban city, we very rarely find ourselves within the pages of books. So, when Aisha creates a story with girls who have puffy hair like hers, she creates a world for herself to walk into that may not always be reflected in her school or the media she consumes. When I smile about Corduroy and his antics, I jump into a world with features and characteristics like my own, even if I did not see my exact image on the faces of the characters. Speaking for myself, I know that finding a space for myself in a children’s book helped me remember that I exist because I was shown children or adults just like me; something about my life was understood and cherished. I cannot speak for my sister, but it is clear that she cherishes something about herself that she wants more stories to express. For children, a multitude of worlds to enter that reflect their own life is a gift and an acknowledgement of their wonderful worth; knowing how to create, expand, and share these worlds positively is vital for making sure kids like Aisha and I remember that we exist just as much as anyone else.
INTRODUCTION

Children’s books serve as tremendous gateways to worlds and experiences that children either connect deeply to or have never experienced. This belief stems from the work of Rudine Sims Bishop, who famously connects the impact of books as that of “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” (Bishop 1990). As a window, books help expose children to worlds both known and unknown. As a sliding glass door, books allow children to enter a world that someone has created and feel like they are actually part of it. And as a mirror, books offer a point of self-reflection and help children value the space their lives take in the larger society. While it is common for children’s literature experts, librarians, and book publishers to know the importance of creating books that serve these purposes, the landscape of children’s literature for children of color does not reflect a full understanding of their needs.

As the population of children in the United States grows in number and in cultural diversity, the selection of books they read have yet to grow at a quick enough rate. In 2016, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin, Madison found that about 22 percent of children’s books were about characters of color, with 58 percent of those specific books being written or illustrated by people of color.¹ This may be an improvement compared to how rare these books were in the twentieth century, but it is not enough to support the 38 percent of people of color who are reading these books today.² Bishop’s idea of giving every child a mirror, window, and sliding glass door is valuable, but it is hard to achieved when a large section of the country barely has their worlds presented in the books they are asked to read.

Therefore, to further support the movement towards more diverse books, this study interrogates what current authors of multicultural children’s books are doing well to represent children of color. In identifying their methods and choices, I plan to provide practical advice on how writers and illustrators should think through the process of creating books for a multicultural audience. “Multicultural children’s literature” in this study means broadly those children’s books that express the lived experiences of people of color and First/Native Nations books that reflect the lives of real marginalized groups in this nation, as well as books that provide children of all backgrounds new ways of viewing and living life that they would not typically see. Through this definition, I will ask how subtle or explicit thematic choices used in multicultural children’s literature help in representing characters of color. How can an understanding of these thematic choices translate into the creation of children’s books that reflect the diversity of our society in its current and growing state? To answer this question, I have shared the thought process and work I have done in creating a children’s book manuscript focused on a character of color who was inspired by my little sister. By performing research and by putting that research into artistic practice, I believe this project showcases the work that can be done to support more writers and illustrators who want to create worlds that children of color can access and cherish.

To present this project, I will first provide a short literature review on some key findings from multicultural children’s literature analyses. Next, I will describe the books I collected and the methods I used to analyze them. This will be followed by an explanation of two main findings from the book analyses. In connection to the findings, I have added a section on how they impacted my process in writing a children’s book manuscript. Lastly, I will discuss the implications of these themes and provide recommendations for how children’s book creators and adults who curate them should critically analyze multicultural books that they want to share with children. The sections following the discussion include the first draft of my children’s book manuscript, as well as
appendices with the list of children’s books I analyzed and the worksheet I created to analyze each book.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on the presence of diverse children’s books was initiated with a bold claim that altered the foundation of what society believed to be a sanctified form of media for children. Nancy Larrick (1965) flagged to many in the children’s book community that they were part of the “all-white world” of children’s books, creating stories and supporting creators who only showcased experiences typical for a white child. While the number of children’s books with at least one Black character started to increase after Larrick’s article, the content of those books and the presentation of those characters did not improve. Not only were Black characters in children’s books being depicted with harshly stereotypical representations, but also they were being depicted in a negative light that taught white children to think poorly of the Black body and existence (Broderick 1973). For example, many researchers in this field saw that the plantation stereotypes in children’s books were replaced with stereotypes of the “Black matriarchal family” and “the Super Negro” (Alexander 1970; Latimer 1972; McCann and Woodard 1972). Scholars like Larrick could identify the broader, statistical issue of representation in children’s books, while scholars like Broderick focused on the specific ways characters were represented even if the number of diverse children’s books increased.

Once researchers broke through the guise of improvement by analyzing the actual depictions of characters in children’s books, more critical thought was put into how one creates a children’s book for a child of color that is positive and deep. Rudine Sims Bishop, in her work *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American in Contemporary Children’s Fiction* (1982), deconstructs the narratives and themes that were common in children’s books with Black characters during that time, providing an extensive model for how this study will be performed. Of her many findings,
one that struck me was the concept of “Any Child” in children’s literature. It connects to those stories that are meant to present “everyday” experiences that any child can relate to, yet deeper analysis shows that they simply repackage the lives and experiences of white, middle-class children and establish them as a norm. As Killens (1971) says, “a story that could have been about anybody is probably a story that could have been about precisely nobody at all.” By relying on this stock narrative of whiteness and framing it as “anybody” or “any child,” children’s book creators do the work of simply coloring a character’s skin brown without adding any substance in the text or context regarding that character’s identity. These books feign diversity by creating stock images of people in different shades who are not acknowledged or celebrated for their difference; rather they are celebrated for how closely they emulate the white middle class.

In addition to speaking on the issue of universalizing childhood, Sims Bishop focuses on the idea of “culturally conscious” children’s books that are created by people of color or by individuals who can accurately write on spaces shared with people of color. This concept has led to a recurring debate in children’s literature and media at-large of who is “allowed” to create and write about characters of color. However, Sims Bishop pushes back that debate by saying a good culturally conscious children’s book is defined “by the use of setting, by the creation of an ambience, and of course, by telling a good story and telling it well” (p. 64, 1982). She recognizes that those books that best identify a cultural milieu or setting that is common for Black people and that respectfully present Black life without caricature or stereotypical language are necessary to add into children’s book selections. They create an ambience, context, and series of interactions that Black children can realistically connect to, as well as introduce characters with traits and experiences that are common across children of different backgrounds.

Thus, the work of this project stems from the work of these scholars and many who have followed in their footsteps. It is clear from previous work that there is a lack of representation
and a lack of accurate, positive representation at that. This work can be bolstered by my own question of how authors and illustrators go about creating the positive ambience and cultural milieu that Sims Bishop describes in her work. In applying her work to stories across races and ethnicities, I hope to expose trends in how one reads or sees context in a multicultural children’s story. This information will help researchers and children’s book advocates push forward in developing a diversity of literature that stays loyal to goal of accurate representation, not just representation for the sake of statistics.

METHODS

For this project, I analyzed fifteen children’s books that are considered “multicultural” (Appendix A). These books are derived from a larger bibliographic list created by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC), titled “50 Multicultural Books Every Child Should Know.” The CCBC is a library within the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s School of Education that serves as a research space for academic scholars and youth professionals with interests in children’s literature from several eras. After speaking to Kathleen T. Horning, the director of the CCBC, I decided to rely on one of the many bibliographic lists of book suggestions that she and her colleagues have compiled for adults who interact with children and adolescents. Since this list was intentionally by research librarians to identify high quality children’s books that exemplify racially and ethnically diverse experiences, I trust that the sample of fifteen books drawn from it are representative of most multicultural literature.

In selecting from the larger set of fifty books, I focused on those picture books that the CCBC identified for ages 0-9. The original list separates these into sections of Preschool (0-5 years old), 5-7 years old, and 7-9 years old. I decided that the books for all ages are similar because they

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are illustrated texts within the 32-page standard format (or slightly longer). The preschool age books have more of a focus on concepts, such as shapes and learning words, but they match the books for older children in telling unique stories or using playful poetry to showcase characters of color.

These books were collected from the Ives Main Branch of the New Haven Free Public Library, which means I was limited by the selection that was available there. Of the fifteen original books selected from the CCBC list, there were six books not available at the library. Therefore, I replaced those books with books created by the same author or author-illustrator pair within a similar time period. I believed that these books were similar enough in style, length, and creative intention to make up for the books originally on the list. Within this sample of fifteen books, there is variation in terms of the racial and ethnic groups represented. However, I was not able to find the First/Native Nations books that were on the CCBC list in the New Haven Free Public Library. Therefore, stories about all the groups mentioned in the CCBC’s definition of multicultural literature besides First/Native Nations are identifiable within these book pages.

The fifteen children’s books were analyzed using content analysis of both images and text. I structured my analysis criteria based on the characteristics of multicultural children’s books featured in Rudine Sims Bishop’s *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children’s Fiction* (1982). By reading through the books three times, I would develop an understanding of the story’s plot, review the text and how it may indicate specific cultural cues, and review the images to see their connection to the text or visual expression of cultural cues. The analyses worksheets were then compiled and compared to search for noticeable themes within the execution of these stories. So, the two themes that most reflect the works that I analyzed are based on a thorough review of the books in their entirety and in an equal comparison to each other.
FINDINGS

Building Context through Images

The first key theme that emerged from my analysis of these fifteen books is the creation of a cultural context through illustrations, thus establishing realistic spaces in which characters of color can exist. This theme emerged in subtle ways, but my ability to determine subtle indications towards races and cultures that were not my own was stifled by a personal discomfort of assuming stereotypical images of groups to be accurate. Therefore, the books within this theme are those that represent Black characters, a racial group that I identify with that has certain cultural experiences I understand through myself or through close Black friends. Despite this mentality, I was able to find a consistency in how author’s built realistic worlds in their stories for characters through smart dialogues and images.

For example, the books Wings and H.O.R.S.E. by Christopher Myers were of interest to me because they are examples of race not being explicitly stated, but of a racial culture and spatial culture being presented as a context for all that occurs. Ikarus Jackson, in Wings, is shown to have black skin and hair that could be a high top, while he and many other characters have afro-centric facial features that emulate statues and silhouettes in West African art (Fig. 1). These characters interact and live amongst a backdrop of collaged urban landscapes that Myers uses to emphasize a city landscape that these children inhabit. By having bodies inspired by African diaspora drawn on top of urban landscapes (where many Black and Latinx children live in the nation today), Myers works to respect that space and share an experience that Black children can visually understand.

H.O.R.S.E. does the same work as Wings in its use of collaged urban spaces and characters who appear Black (Fig. 2). In this instance, the characters are also playing basketball, a game that many Black children in urban areas can be seen playing outside. Now, it is important to clarify when images such as Black people in urban spaces can be presented as a negative stereotype
or caricature. However, Myers avoids these depictions by instead focusing on the character’s personal situations that lead to something positive (in *Wings*) or the characters’ fun activities within this space (in *H.O.R.S.E.*). It would be easy for a writer or illustrator who is not aware of the lived experience for city kids to depict negative interactions with gang members or struggles with poverty, but those topics fall into stereotypical images that draw readers away from experiences that bring them joy and that they feel is possible for them.

The subtlety of Myers’ work is important because he structures stories of encouraging difference and being imaginative within a contextual and social frame that is more instinctual to children of color in urban areas. By shifting the “Any Child” narrative from the white middle-class model to a model of Black urban spaces, Myers still leaves from for any child to connect to the story. The only difference is that he shares a new and growing perspective on life that children in the white middle class may never see and children of color in cities inspire every day. It is from my
analysis of Myers works that I was reminded to think of a definition of culture that is not limited by racial or ethnic identity; instead, my analyses revealed that “culture” encompasses identity, space, and social interactions. So, books like these enable children to access interactions of cultural forces without asserting difference to the point of exclusion.

Subtle productions of culture and context are common even when the setting is not clear. This was clear in *Pecan Pie Baby*, written by Jacqueline Woodson and illustrated by Sophie Blackall (Fig. 3). While the family in this book is not placed within a particular residential setting, the population of children in the main character Gia’s school shows a multicultural community. In addition, Gia is shown having Black parents, but also has uncles and aunts who are Black and white. Woodson and Blackall never make any indication of interracial marriages through these characters, but it adds to the idea that Gia lives in a multicultural area where it is possible for her friends and family to be connected to people outside their racial group. This is a reality for some Black families, particularly those in suburban areas of varying socioeconomic levels.

Even when the urban space is the setting of a story, the illustrator’s placement of characters within that space can change their experience and the world they live in entirely. Tamika in *Grandpa’s Face* (written by Eloise Greenfield and illustrated by Floyd Cooper) seems to live in a place like New York City, but is shown mostly in her home (a brownstone), at the park, and in a theater (Fig. 4). These spaces differ from the basketball courts and tall buildings that Myers uses when telling his stories. In this situation, the reader is exposed to a different experience of a Black character than the experience of Ikarus Jackson or the boys in *H.O.R.S.E*; the reader is given more imaginative worlds that could be a few blocks away from each other in reality. *Pecan Pie Baby* and *Grandpa’s Face* do the work of not only expanding the Black experience outside of the city space, but also present the variations in where Black people can spend their time and with who. By recreating spaces that are rarely depicted and by showing realistic actions or dialogues
happening within those cultural frames, illustrators (and the authors that support them in thinking of images) successfully produce stories within cultural milieus that respect differences in people of color’s lives and positively shares them with others.

Figures 3 and 4: Pages from *Pecan Pie Baby* and *Grandpa’s Face*.

*Cultural Items and Traditions*

The other theme that emerged from my analysis is the use of items and traditions to specify a cultural identity or set of unique actions. In this theme, images and text work very closely together as the reader is either subtly shown an array of items common to the character’s cultural identity or explicitly shown how the character and supporting characters go about fulfilling cultural traditions. In either case, the reader is brought into a world with a very different status quo, but has the guidance of a narrator who relates the information in a way to concepts any child would understand.

For example, in *Uncle Peter’s Amazing Chinese Wedding*, written by Lenore Look and illustrated by Yumi Heo, the main character Jenny takes the reader through the traditional
ceremonies of a Chinese wedding (Fig. 5). The journey through the wedding is led by the fact that Jenny is worried about losing her uncle’s attention to his new wife. In this story, images are provided of traditional Chinese clothing, while the text describes different actions that all the family members take in preparation for the day. By couching a story about extended family and fear of losing a loved one’s attention in a lesson on Chinese weddings, Look and Heo intelligently introduce readers of any culture to see what is common in Chinese or Chinese American weddings while giving them aspects of life that exist across cultures. Furthermore, readers are given a visual cue to items or events they may see occurring in the real world later in their lives.

Some books serve more as bilingual concept books, using images to make sure the reader understands how an item they know in English is translated in another language. *Green is a Chile Pepper*, written by Roseanne Greenfield Thong and illustrated by John Parra, does this by presenting Latinx people of different skin tones participating in traditions or interacting with items that the text then provides a Spanish word for (Fig. 6). Rather than telling a linear story, this book is suited for both English and Spanish-speaking children to understand different concepts and their appearance. Books like these are valuable to include in multicultural children’s literature not because they showcase a deep lived experience, but because they set the standard for broad experiences, terms, and ideas that are representative of Latinx cultures. By being so specific about items and traditions, the book leaves room to be broad and allows readers to learn new information rather than fully imagine themselves in a new world. This kind of book is balanced well with books that have characters participating in social interactions within such contexts.
The subtlest inclusions of items and traditions come in the form of casual statements and images. Similar to the creation of cultural contexts, books that are subtler in showcasing items and traditions do so by making the different lives of the characters appear as the norm. The best example for this is in *Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin* written by Chieri Uegaki and illustrated Qin Leng (Fig. 7). This book focuses on a Japanese American girl and her relationship with her grandfather from Japan. Throughout the story, Hana speaks about hearing her grandpa’s music “through the shoji screen” or “resting on a cool buckwheat pillow.” These moments would be accompanied with images that would show what a shoji screen or buckwheat pillow looked like, thus doing the work of showing the reader these objects and presenting them being used in intuitive ways. Not only does the story have Japanese culture and language involved (Hana also refers to her grandpa as Ojiichan, which is Japanese for grandfather), but also it shows a child in a home that is different from those in the Western world. Uegaki and Leng recognize that there are aspects of Japanese culture that may not be common for most Americans, but are common in their
experience. So, rather than overemphasizing difference as if others would not understand, they
display it casually with clear visual definitions of certain items’ use and placement in their lives.

Both themes, the creation of context and the presentation of cultural items, are important
because they are ideas that future authors and illustrators can explore. It is possible for someone to
look back at Myers’ work and see how contexts can be built, while it is also possible for someone
to see Thong and Parra’s work and think critically about the concepts they want to translate
between cultures. Therefore, it is with these themes that I started the process of creating my own
children’s book manuscript. By understanding how prevalent these choices of representation are, I
felt confident in building a story close to my personal identity that would have similar success in
terms of sharing perspective and doing so with respect to others like me.
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON WRITING A CHILDREN’S BOOK

“Then, one day, something amazing happened. My idea changed right before my very eyes. It spread its wings, took flight, and burst into the sky.” – Kobi Yamada, *What Do You with an Idea?* (2013?)

My experience writing a children’s book manuscript is summarized by my commitment to a singular image. I was not sure what the full story would be when I started to brainstorm or even what the best format of story would be, but I knew that the image of a little Black girl like my sister playing at night in an apartment complex was etched into my mind. While I had small ideas written in my notes, I moved forward with exploring this story of a girl playing at night because I could imagine it so vividly and the aspect of playing in apartment complexes was something that resonated with my own childhood. After reading the books in my study, I realized that writing from personal experience is a wonderful choice because it does not limit you; it allows you to focus even the most minute aspects of your life and figure out a way to give those parts the spotlight. So, in this process, I decided to spotlight a few things that I cared about: playing at night, apartment complexes, the moon, and a little Black kid like my sister and I who liked our moments of silence and calm.

Before fully writing out my manuscript, I spoke with Lauri Hornik, president and publisher of Dial Books for Young Readers at Penguin Young Readers Group. In our conversations, she told me about some of the best multicultural children’s books she has seen and the format that these books typically take. She encouraged my work and emphasized that the best way to move forward on writing a manuscript is to try to imagine or draw the images I believe would accompany the text. Since I learned that my book would have to fall within a page limit of 32 pages to be a regular picture book, I tried to think carefully of the whole text as well as how I would separate each section of text. Both Ms. Hornik and Professor Stephen Longmire, an English professor at Yale, agreed to review and revise the first draft of my manuscript when it was completed. Once, I
knew the page limitations, a way of thinking through the writing process, and people who would be willing to edit for me, I began building the full story.

I wrote a long text in my first sitting titled “Windows” and it depicted the experience of a kid playing kickball at night and the action of life happening within their apartment complex as they played. In this long text, I tried to capture my memories of life in a multicultural apartment complex, of bright windows and moonlight, and of families enjoying each other’s time. However, after writing, I realized that I had lost a central story as I was trying to capture too many moving parts within this community I was trying to build. I was focused on making subtle cues at the race of community members and the culture of my apartment complex, but was so broad or subtle in my statements that it felt more like a conversation with myself than a book to share with others.

So, after I wrote that long text, I pulled out parts of it that I felt most excited about and that I think encompassed all the parts of playing in the apartment complex at night without losing track of a story. When I centered on the characters playing traveling around the courtyard playing different games, it became easier to explain the way they use the space and the way they interact with their environment. From my memories, playing in the apartment courtyard was as much playing with other kids as it was playing with the landscapes. We would use large rocks as kickball bases and hide behind giant trees or bushes. And the moon or stars could be seen from right in the center of the courtyard, shining on us as we play. With this all in my head, I rewrote and imagined this landscape being navigated by a character who I felt embodied both myself and my little sister: a quiet, happy child who would sometimes follow the bunch and other times walk around alone.

Thinking of items and cultures was hard in writing this story because I was not sure how to turn the actions within my apartment complex into a packaged culture for someone to understand. However, when I thought about the porches of each apartment entryway or the multiple floors people lived on or the mix of grass and cement, I realized that there are some images I latch on to
when thinking of apartment life. While I had no specific words to translate, I had this experience and this space to translate to those children and adults who may rarely interact with it.

The last part of writing the first draft of this manuscript was thinking of a name for the character and the voice used to describe the story. I kept switching from using a narrator’s tone to speaking in the second-person point of view, using the phrase “you” in addressing the main character. The decision became easier when I decided on a name for the character: Amaya. I looked for the name after thinking about my sister and I’s identity as Black Muslims. I thought it would be good to make the character a Black Muslim girl because that identity is so rarely presented in different forms of media. Black people tend to be Christian and Muslim people tend to be from the Middle East in most literature and visual media. So, I found the name Amaya, which means “dreams” and thought it not only connected to that identity, but also had a beauty to it that represented the nighttime narrative I was building. Once I knew the character was named Amaya, a name similar to my sister’s and one that starts with an “A” like both of our names, I felt comfortable speaking directly to her. It felt easy making the character a real person to speak to because in my mind, she was as real as my family.

Once the manuscript was finished, I sent it to Professor Longmire and Ms. Hornik, who helped me in thinking of specifying my story even more. Mainly, I will try to identify who exactly is speaking to Amaya. While the second-person perspective was appreciated, they both felt it would be sincerer if the voice had an actual person associated with it. In addition, Ms. Hornik commented on specifying one game that the kids are playing so that they can go through a whole game rather than jumping between activities and confusing the narrative. With these comments, I plan to move forward with my manuscript and send it in for a second round of edits before looking for publishers who may be interested in turning the text into a full picture book.
Throughout this whole process, I tried to balance my adherence to what I found in my book analysis with what I wanted to share from my lived experience. While this is difficult in the first attempts to write a story, I felt having those themes on hand helped me think through some basics that I wanted my story to express, if anything at all. I believe reflection on successful multicultural children’s literature fused with reflection on cherished memories allows for the creative process to be both unrestricted and intentional in achieving a defined goal.

**DISCUSSION**

“No present in your work because kids live in the moment, so as soon as you’re not in the present, you’re not being authentic.” – Kadir Nelson, artist and children’s book writer/illustrator

This study and creative project have revealed to me that the work of creating more multicultural children’s literature is possible if people start to look critically into the best books available. The two themes that stuck out to me are particularly important for children’s book creators to understand because it helps them think of representation beyond the characters’ appearance and dialogue. The settings and interactions with items or traditions can define how much a book is respectfully presenting a culture or simply plastering various shades of people onto a page. Aside from children’s book creators, these themes also help parents, librarians, and researchers think critically when evaluating books to share with children. Instead of simply creating selections that provide shallow depictions of people of color, these adults choose depictions that are accurate and positive. While I believe the work done in this study is valuable, I know that it would be improved by the inclusion of researchers from other cultural backgrounds. For me, it was easy to find the depictions of different Black characters to be accurate, but I could not easily say that the presentations of Asian or Latinx were extremely accurate and positive for people who come from those backgrounds. Therefore, further work in this field must be more communal, relying on the perspectives of children and adults from a variety of cultural identities.
Regarding my own creative work, I think my current thought process and my future work in children’s literature will be defined by how I extend identity and experience throughout the whole story. It is not enough to describe a character that looks like me or a loved one; I must put them in a space where they are fully themselves and look comfortable interacting with their world. My hope is to share this work with those in the field of children’s literature, both creators and curators, to produce more appreciation for stories that give depth to the moments and situations that children of color have in this nation. Giving their lives attention in books means we do more as a society to recognize their presence and worth in the real world.
Your Night

Little one, so fast and so happy, this is your night.

When the world is its hottest on summer days, you escape your apartment’s walls and grab the cool breeze in the courtyard. This is where you chill.

Amaya, is your name, because it means dreams and nighttime is when dreams feel very real. You are very real tonight, brilliant girl, as you laugh with other kids in the courtyard and double dutch to the rhythm of hip-hop coming from a nearby apartment’s window.

When you all get bored of spinning those ropes on the sidewalk, you play a game of nighttime hide-and-seek using the trees, bushes, and rocks. For you and many of your friends, the night feels like an extension of your skin. You blend in when you want to and pop out when you want to, because the darkness of the night is yours like the darkness of your skin.

One-by-one, you night-blended-children find each other and giggle each time you get tagged. Are you all tired of running around now? Are you done spreading yourselves in the night to see how much it can cover you?

Then rest. Sit on your porches and look up. Amaya, your friends all point out different stars and constellations - Orion’s belt, the big dipper, Aquarius - but, you don’t know about stars like that. What you know about is the moon.
You know that the moon takes on a different shape every few days. You know to tell your friends that this particular moon is full. Full and happy because only a happy moon would shine so brightly. As a matter of fact, it is the moon who always wins hide-and-seek because it gleams off of your skin and shows you the different browns and tans of your friends who blend into the night when light disappears. As you think about the moon and you, your friends get tired of sitting and decide to play kickball with your baby brother’s little purple bouncing ball. It’s so light and so perfect for a night game because it gets lost in the dark. But, if someone kicks it high enough, then the moon will catch it before anyone else can.

A few kids try to kick the ball, but keep striking out. The ball is rolling too fast or it goes off course or it just isn’t good enough, they say. Right before everyone stomps away for the night, they hear someone scream “wait!”

Wait! It was you, Amaya! You know how to play this game with the night’s rules. Just like when you found your giggling friends and heard the snapping of jump rope on the sidewalk, kicking the ball depends on listening closely in the night.

Because you know that at night, silence and sound are yours to control. So, you tell the pitcher to roll the ball again and, this time, you listen for every bump of the ball and you listen for every gust of wind until BOOM! You connect with that ball and send it flying so that the moonlight spotlight catches that purple sphere. That’s a homerun, Miss Amaya. That’s all you who got that ball to shine in the night.
Go ahead, dance in celebration! Show everyone else how to command the night like you. Teach them how to be a night-owning-girl like you. Have all the moms, dads, and kids in the windows watching the game wish they had skill like you.

Just before you all decide to start a new game, you hear a chorus of adults yelling out those windows to tell your friends it’s time to come inside. Your mom doesn’t yell out for you just yet so you say bye to your fellow moonlight-masters and sit on your porch for a little bit.

Amaya, I gotta tell ya, this was your night! The dark skies are still full of your laughter and joy, but they get quieter as your friends enter their apartments one-by-one. This last bit of silence, this last breeze touching your face: they are yours Amaya. It’s the night thanking you for filling it with more brightness than the moon.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


## APPENDIX A: LIST OF CHILDREN’S BOOKS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Illustrator</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pages</th>
<th>Ages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Auntie Yang’s Great Soybean Picnic</td>
<td>Ginnie Lo</td>
<td>Beth Lo</td>
<td>Lee and Low</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5-10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cherries and Cherry Pits</td>
<td>Vera B. Williams</td>
<td>Vera B. Williams</td>
<td>Greenwillow</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4-8</td>
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<td>Crouching Tiger</td>
<td>Ying Chang Compestine</td>
<td>Yan Nascimbene</td>
<td>Candlewick Press</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4-8</td>
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<td>Dinner at Aunt Connie’s House</td>
<td>Faith Ringgold</td>
<td>Faith Ringgold</td>
<td>Hyperion</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5-9</td>
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<td>Grandpa’s Face</td>
<td>Eloise Greenfield</td>
<td>Floyd Cooper</td>
<td>Philomel Books</td>
<td>1988</td>
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<td>Green is a Chile Pepper</td>
<td>Rosanne Thong</td>
<td>John Parra</td>
<td>Chronicle</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3-5</td>
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<td>Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin</td>
<td>Chieri Uegacki</td>
<td>Qin Leng</td>
<td>Kids Can Press</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>H.O.R.S.E.: A Game of Basketball and Imagination</td>
<td>Christopher Myers</td>
<td>Christopher Myers</td>
<td>Egmont</td>
<td>2012</td>
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<td>Oh No, Gotta Go!</td>
<td>Susan Middleton Elya</td>
<td>G. Brian Karas</td>
<td>Putnam</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>Pecan Pie Baby</td>
<td>Jacqueline Woodson</td>
<td>Sophie Blackall</td>
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<td>2010</td>
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<td>Take Me Out to the Yakyu</td>
<td>Aaron Meshon</td>
<td>Aaron Meshon</td>
<td>Athenium</td>
<td>2013</td>
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<td>Uncle Peter’s Amazing Chinese Wedding</td>
<td>Lenore Look</td>
<td>Yumi Heo</td>
<td>Anne Schwartz / Atheneum</td>
<td>2006</td>
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<td>3-7</td>
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<td>What Can You Do with a Rebozo?</td>
<td>Carmen Tafolla</td>
<td>Amy Córdova</td>
<td>Tricycle Press</td>
<td>2008</td>
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<td>3-7</td>
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<td>Christopher Myers</td>
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APPENDIX B: CONTENT ANALYSIS SHEET

Book Title: ________________________________

# of Pages: Author: Illustrator:

Year of Publication: Age Group:

Main Character:

Race/Ethnicity: Gender: Age:

Setting:

Urban Suburban Rural N/A

Supporting Characters:

Homogenous group (specify the group):

Heterogenous group (specify the groups):

Representations of Race and Ethnicity

How is race/ethnicity referenced through the text?

How is race/ethnicity referenced through the images?

Are these references...

Specific Broad

Summary of the Plot