

Color Multiculturally: Twenty-First-Century Multicultural Picturebooks, Color (ing) Beyond the Lines.

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Gretchen Papazian

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Abstract

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"Color Multiculturally" puts the contemporary multicultural American picturebook in conversation with postsemiotic visual rhetoric to argue that these books' efforts with color expose and counter the white supremacist, Western-bound, color meaning-meaning conventions that have supported the idea of race, as well as racialized oppression, in the United States.

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In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois identified “the color line” as the “problem of the twentieth century” (16). In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed that his “four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” In 1984, James Baklwin lamented “[t]he conundrum of color” as “the inheritance of every American, be he/she legally or actually Black or White” (xii). Put together, “problem,” “color,” “children,” and “inheritance” ask us to think about the dissemination of racialized notions of identity across generation. The terms also neatly frame recent prominent discussions of the problem of twenty-first-century children’s literature: namely, “Where Are the People of Color in Children’s Books?” (Myers).

This question of “where” is an important one, especially if we accept the view that literature is ideological, that it not only reflects but that it actively constructs a society’s system of beliefs and ways of thinking, knowing, and feeling. The question is a pressing one, especially if we accept the view that childhood is a time of life wherein humans’ thoughts and values are “under construction”—perhaps more potently than at any other moment. As significant as the question of “where,” though, is the question of “what.” That is, what are children’s books saying about people of color and about the problem of the color line to their young readers?¹ It is this second question—what—that stands at the center of this essay. For, while it is undeniably true that more, deeply complex, authentic, and thoughtful representations of race, racism, culture, diversity, and conflict are needed in books for children, it is also true that such books do exist. There are not enough of these books and they can be hard to find, but there is a growing body of twenty-first-century children’s literature that is taking on the Du Boisian “color line”; carrying out King’s charge to uncouple the signifier “skin color” and the signified “character”; and drawing attention to Baklwin’s “conundrum of color.”

Nowhere is twenty-first-century children’s literature making efforts to acknowledge and alter American history’s ideological bequests more effectively than in the picturebook format.² In part, their accomplishment



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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
muse@press.jhu.edu



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