
In his editor’s introduction to the October 1991 issue of Language Arts, William Teale wrote that the issue provided readers with both solid pedagogical strategies and new insights related to language, thinking, and text structures. He noted that the special issue, centered on the theme “Nonfiction, Language Learning, and Language Teaching” was made possible, at least in part, by growing interest in the utilization of children’s literature in language arts classrooms. He further attributed the special issue to recent shifts in the world of children’s literature publishing, writing:

Only a decade ago it seemed that one had to look fairly hard to find high-quality nonfiction books for children in the elementary grades. Now we are fortunate to have significant numbers of good nonfiction books coming out each year for children at these age levels. ( . . . ) Today, there exists an unprecedented selection of good nonfiction books that young children enjoy and that help them learn about their world. (Teale, 1991, p. 440)

The emergence of wide-ranging, high-quality nonfiction for children was a direct result of advances in printing technologies during the 1980s, which allowed creators of children’s books to illustrate texts in ways that were previously either impossible or too costly for publishing companies (Galda, Cullinan, & Sipe, 2010). Despite the increasing quantity and quality of available children’s nonfiction books, however, the texts utilized in curricula and included in classroom and school libraries have continued to consist primarily of works of children’s fiction, especially in the elementary grades (Pappas, 1993; Duke, 2000; Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010). In recent years, educational initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards (2010) have called for increased use of informational texts in elementary classrooms.

No matter how committed and enthusiastic we may be as professionals, it would be impractical to try to read every children’s book published in a given year, let alone the entirety of children’s texts published in recent history or every book about a given topic. As a result, teachers, teacher educators, librarians, and caregivers often turn to lists of award winners to guide the selection of what books to purchase and include in classrooms and curriculums (Brown, 1958/2008). Award-winning books are often considered to be among the “best-of-the-best”; readers anticipate that they have been vetted by experts and that, quite literally, these books have received the seal of approval from a reputable organization. Furthermore, award winners are more likely to be purchased by bookstores and school and public libraries with limited shelf space and, therefore, are more likely to be available to all individuals browsing shelves or perusing catalogs.

Here, I explore the pedagogical importance of careful examination of children’s nonfiction literature through a content analysis of the recipients of NCTE’s Orbis Pictus Award, an established, prominent award for nonfiction books written for children. Orbis Pictus celebrates its 25th anniversary this year and, as such, has influenced decisions by educators for more than two decades. The purpose of this examination is not to praise or castigate any award, organization, or creator of children’s books, but instead to underscore the importance of including in the process of selecting nonfiction texts a critical analysis of the quality of their content, constructions, and depictions.

Privileging Prizes: A Picture of the World of Orbis Pictus

Just as children’s fiction generally pervades elementary-grade classrooms, studies of award-winning children’s books have also focused primarily on the content of fiction texts (Kiefer &
Wilson, 2011). This is not to imply that nonfiction is entirely absent from research on award-winning children’s literature: many awards are open to nonfiction nominees, and research that draws upon the recipients of these awards may include nonfiction winners. For example, Floca’s (2013) nonfiction picturebook Locomotive dominated the children’s literature awards scene; it received the prestigious Caldecott Medal and was named as an Honor recipient of both the Orbis Pictus and Robert F. Sibert book awards. However, while nonfiction titles may be eligible for children’s literature awards, few actually receive them. In a statement that still rings true, Meltzer (1976) lamented that, when examining lists of award-winning children’s books, one can only conclude that fiction is everything to them. Nonfiction must be given short shrift in their discussions. What can one do to help them realize that nonfiction can have more literary value than a Sears Roebuck catalog or the telephone directory? (n.p.)

Meltzer continued, arguing that “imagination, invention, selection, language, form,” as characteristics of quality literature, are “just as important to the making of a good book of biography, history, or science as to the making of a piece of fiction” (n.p.).

Today, several book awards designate categories specifically for the recognition of exemplary nonfiction literature written for children and young adults, including the Golden Kite Award, Stone-wall Book Award, and Boston Globe–Horn Book Award. The Children’s Book Council collaborates with the National Science Teachers Association and the National Council for the Social Studies to select outstanding children’s nonfiction titles through their annual lists of “Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People” and “Outstanding Science Trade Books for Students K–12” respectively, and the Washington Post/Children’s Book Guild Nonfiction Award recognizes authors or author-illustrators who, through their life’s work, contributed significantly to the quality of children’s nonfiction. Finally, a handful of awards recognize exclusively children’s nonfiction: the Carter G. Woodson Book Award (first awarded in 1974), Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal (first awarded in 2001), YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults (first awarded in 2010), and, perhaps most well-known to readers of Language Arts, the Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children.

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The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and its Committee on Using Nonfiction in the Elementary Language Arts (CUNELA) established the Orbis Pictus Award in 1989 to “promote and recognize excellence in nonfiction writing for children” (Zarnowski, 2001, p. 1). Since 1990, the prize has been awarded to a single piece of children’s nonfiction published or distributed in the United States during the preceding calendar year. Committees select up to five additional “honor” titles and, with the exception of the inaugural awards in 1990, have also recognized multiple “recommended titles.”

In addition to having “the sharing of information” as their central purpose, recipients of Orbis Pictus are selected based upon their adherence to a set of “literary criteria, mainly its accuracy, organization, design, and style” (Vardell, 1991, pp. 476–477). Vardell wrote that “accuracy” included such elements as current and complete facts and a balance between fact and theory, as well as the avoidance of stereotypes and anthropomorphism (p. 476). Acknowledging that the process of selecting award recipients is inherently subjective, Vardell noted that committees would operate from the perspective that “an outstanding work of nonfiction for children should also encourage thinking and more reading, model exemplary expository writing and research skills, share interesting and timely subject matter, and appeal to a wide range of ages” (p. 478). Excluded from consideration for Orbis Pictus are textbooks, historical fiction, folklore, and poetry. As with all prizes, the criteria adopted are ultimately categorical decisions that immediately eliminate many deserving candidates from award consideration. In this case, however, the decision to exclude these types of books may be viewed as especially ironic when one considers that Comenius’s Orbis Sensualium Pictus or Orbis Pictus, the book to which the award is an homage, was designed with instructional purposes in mind; in other words, Orbis Pictus (the book) may not have been eligible to receive Orbis Pictus (the award).

Nonfiction is a text type that remains difficult to define (Maloch & Bomer, 2013); the term is nebulus and has been both differentiated from and viewed as synonymous with terms like “information books,” “informational texts,” “creative nonfiction,” “narrative nonfiction,” and “expository text.” As opposed to defining specifically what nonfiction is, NCTE and CUNELA instead identified characteristics they believe are found in most exemplary nonfiction texts and created a picture of what nonfiction is through their identification and description of what was not nonfiction, an approach that allows Orbis Pictus committees to adapt to shifts that occur as the genre continues to develop and evolve (e.g., Wilson, 2013).

Research on Orbis Pictus recipients is important because the award is referenced in professional and academic publications more than any other award that recognizes exclusively nonfiction literature for children. Most studies of Orbis Pictus books have focused on issues related to genre, form, and structure (e.g., Wilson, 2006) or the use of nonfiction in pedagogical settings (e.g., Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002). The research presented in this article responds to concerns about the lack of critical analysis of children’s nonfiction. In light of the prestige and influence of Orbis Pictus and its historical connection to Language Arts, it seems an appropriate time and venue to begin analyzing how various culturally constructed identities are depicted in Orbis Pictus winners and honor books. This project builds upon and extends Anderson’s (2013) content analysis of 12 years of winners of the Sibert and Orbis Pictus awards, in which she examined children’s books to interpret how image may shape girls’ beliefs about their future role in society, as well as work I conducted previously with coauthors (Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Crisp, Knezek, & Almeida, 2014).

Establishing Categories

This content analysis generally provides a numerical “count” and overall “snapshot” of some depictions of human focal subjects within Orbis Pictus

It is essential that nonfiction literature provide young readers with opportunities to see multiple nuanced representations that depict accurately the people they love, the people they can become, and the people they are already.
recipients across the award’s 25-year history. It does not provide an in-depth, critical content analysis of the range of depictions within each category. That work is greatly needed, but should, I believe, privilege perspectives of those individuals who self-identify as members of the population being represented and are best qualified to analyze texts for accuracy and cultural authenticity (Bishop, 2003).

Volumes have been written about who and what “counts” when examining representations in children’s literature (e.g., Botelho & Rudman, 2009). The work presented here, however, subscribes to the notion that populations are included in the multicultural “canon” as a result of their subordination by dominant groups. Categorizations such as these are not without problems and limitations. For example, some researchers include “American Indian” as a racial identification or view American Indians as “people of color” (Horning, Lindgren, & Schliesman, 2014), categorizations rejected by many insider scholars (Reese, 2012).

This research focuses specifically on depictions of populations identified frequently as being under-represented and/or marginalized within children’s literature. Categories for data collection and analysis were informed by scholarship on diversity and multiculturalism (Banks, 1993; Tatum, 1997; Sue & Sue, 2008) and include age, region, religion, socioeconomic status, dis/ability, sexual identity, and parallel populations. Notably absent is the category of gender, which has been excluded from this essay because its analysis in relation to these books was supported by funding through the International Reading Association and is the subject of a critical content analysis available elsewhere (Crisp, Knezek, & Almeida, 2014).

In addition to identifying and defining the cultural identity categories to include in this analysis, other parameters framed the study. One goal of this project was to conduct the most comprehensive analysis of Orbis Pictus recipients possible, while remaining systematic across award years and without sacrificing rigor. Therefore, because recommended texts were not selected during the inaugural 1990 award year, recommended books were excluded and the sample was limited to the 125 Orbis Pictus winners and honor books across the history of the award (1990–2014). In an effort to ensure I had access to all textual and peritextual (e.g., dust jackets) elements in the books as they were initially disseminated, I obtained first edition copies. Presumably, these were the versions of the books under consideration by Orbis Pictus committee and, as predominantly hardcover books with dust jackets, these versions often contain content not available in library or paperback editions.

I tried to divorce myself from any outside knowledge that I might bring to my reading of the text, approaching each text as a reader searching for information about a focal subject, but having no knowledge or resources to learn anything beyond what was included in a given book. In addition, while there were sometimes multiple depictions of focal subjects, each was analyzed independently; data included in one depiction could not inform any other depiction. I examined all text contained within a book (including dust jackets, authors’ notes, forewords, indexes, timelines, bibliographies, Library of Congress and copyright information, etc.) and this provided the only basis for the picture of the focal subject that emerged. For example, if a book did not indicate in textual or peritextual elements that the focal subject was deceased, the depiction was classified as fitting within the category of a focal subject that could possibly still be living. In the case of Markel’s (2013) *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers’ Strike of 1909*, nothing in the text provided evidence that focal subject Clara Lemlich is no longer living—including peritextual elements like the Library of Congress information (which often specifies focal subjects’ birth and death years). Because Lemlich’s status could not be verified from this book, the text was classified as containing a focal subject possibly still living.

Finally, for the purposes of this study, a “focal subject” is defined as the person or people a book is about or through whom a text is presented for readers. The former (those books about a person or several people) is likely the more familiar type of focal subject and can be viewed in what Lounsberry (1996) refers to as nonfiction books about “lives.” The latter involves books in which the focal subject
serves as a sort of “lens” for readers. For example, pilot Charles Lindbergh is a focal subject in Giblin’s (1997) *Charles A. Lindbergh: A Human Hero* and in Burleigh’s (1991) *Flight*, the former is about Lindbergh’s life, whereas the latter focuses on an event—Lindbergh’s 1927 flight across the Atlantic. Because nonfiction books are considered books that present “real” people, places, things, and events, this analysis includes only focal subjects that were “actual” people. Thus, anthropomorphized animals, inanimate objects, and fictionalized human subjects were excluded from analysis. Following Davis (1984), books included for analysis had to contain between one and four leading focal subjects.

The research tools for this study were created and revised across multiple iterations, influenced by my time with the books, informed by the perspectives of researchers and scholars like Lounsberry (1996) and Rudman (1984), and shaped by the results of tests for inter-rater reliability with a colleague and a research assistant. I replicated as closely as possible the approaches for conducting content analyses of children’s literature utilized by previous researchers, beginning with an instrument I developed previously—a tool based upon a variety of instruments used by researchers since the early 1970s (see Crisp & Hiller, 2011, for information).

The final sample included 74 books (59.2 % of the initial 125 books) with 86 focal subjects. After the total set was identified, I and a research assistant read each book at least twice more, coding while reading.

**Toward a New Picture of the Orbis Pictus World**

**Examining Age**

One of the assumptions of children’s literature is that readers expect to encounter texts depicting young people who have agency (Nodelman &
Reimer, 1995/2002). Therefore, data was collected about the stage(s) of life in which focal subjects were depicted in texts as “historically important” as a result of some recognizable, outstanding talent or quality or as “extraordinary ordinary people,” individuals that are “not sports or movie stars, politicians or generals, artists or philosophers, but persons whose strength of character makes them extraordinary in some way” (Galda, Cullinan, & Sipe, 2010, p. 297). Each focal subject was coded according to whether or not they were depicted primarily as making a difference/being noteworthy as a child, across their lifespan as both a child and adult, or as an adult. As can be seen in Figure 1, of the 86 focal subjects, only 4 (4.7%) were depicted primarily as extraordinary or important children. Thirteen focal subjects (15.1%) were depicted as worthy of note throughout their lives as both children and adults, and 69 (80.2%) were depicted exclusively as adults or as children who were not especially noteworthy, but grew up to become extraordinary adults.

A second area of age-related interest involved the number of focal subjects who were possibly still living. If one purpose for including focal subjects in children’s nonfiction texts is to demonstrate that the world continues to be shaped by individuals living in the present day (Galda, Cullinan, & Sipe, 2010), the extent to which focal subjects in Orbis Pictus winners were still living matters. Again, a focal subject was coded as being deceased only if this was stated clearly somewhere in the book; otherwise, the focal subject was coded as being depicted as someone who was “possibly living.” Ultimately, only 19 (22.1%) could possibly still be living at the time the book was published, while 67 (77.9%) focal subjects were identified explicitly as deceased.

All 125 Orbis Pictus books were initially sorted according to “type” based upon Lounsberry’s (1996) work with creative nonfiction, including books about a) the lives of individuals, b) events or time periods, c) places and things, and d) philosophical and religious ideas. When examining only those books with focal subjects, these categories provided an opportunity to consider the author’s purpose in drawing upon the use of a focal subject. Were the focal subjects profiled because of their accomplishments or roles in an historical moment, to humanize an event, or to help readers understand a career, a way of life, a moment in history, etc.? In other words, was remembering the individual focal subject important? When viewed this way, 61 (70.9%) focal subjects were individuals whose accomplishments or roles in history were thought to merit readers remembering their names; of those 61 individuals, 58 (95.1%) were deceased.

It should be acknowledged that the influence of an individual’s life and work may not be understood until much later. In addition, an individual’s perceived influence may change across time and context. That said, there are countless contemporary individuals whose contributions to the world merit representation and, ultimately, with only 3 (4.9%) of these 61 focal subjects identified as “possibly living,” the overall message to readers of Orbis Pictus books is that the individuals who helped shape the world lived in the past.

Examining Region

Since Orbis Pictus is for nonfiction literature published or distributed in the United States, one might anticipate that many depicted would be identified as North Americans. However, children’s literature scholars have argued that children’s literature helps readers learn about people whose lives are different from their own (e.g., Nodelman & Reimer, 1995/2002; Short, 2012). Another area of interest regarding depictions in Orbis Pictus, then, was to examine the region of the world with which focal subjects were identified. While the concept of a regional identity is, like all cultural categories, not without its problems and complexities (McGillis, 2000; Paasi, 2003), the purpose here is to begin examining which parts of the world are potentially depicted.

Each focal subject was coded according to the region of the world with which they were primarily identified. While Figure 2 is organized according to continent and based upon a 7-continent
model, this should not be taken to imply unity of experience or worldview within each continent. In most cases, the regional identification of focal subjects remained static across a text; in only 2 cases were focal subjects depicted within one regional context before being re-identified with another (e.g., Lobel, 1998). All but 3 focal subject depictions included explicitly stated regional identities; the results are based upon the 83 with the following regional identities: 1 (1.2%) Africa, 2 (2.4%) Asia, 1 (1.2%) South America, 18 (21.7%) Europe, and 61 (73.5%) North America. If one of the purposes of these books is to teach readers about the world in which they live, these percentages are troubling. Further, although 5 continents are represented, those interested in selecting books that represent regional cultures other than North America will find this set of books insufficient, especially considering that only 4 (4.8%) depictions are of individuals from Africa, South America, and Asia combined.

**Examining Religion**

It is not surprising that children’s literature, with its didactic roots, has a long-standing relationship with religion, particularly Protestant Christianity (Werner & Riga, 1989). As Wood (1999) writes, “Ever since the Puritans codified the doctrine that children, no less than adults, need to read the Bible and understand what it says, religion and religious issues have been part of children’s literature” (p. 1). While children’s texts often attempt to shape readers’ worldviews according to particular moral codes and worldviews, the focus here is on focal subjects who are identified explicitly as belonging to a particular religious faith.

Of the 86 focal subjects, 58 (67.4%) were not identified with a particular religious affiliation, with an additional 5 (5.8%) identified as not religious. Of the 23 (26.7%) focal subjects linked explicitly to a specific religious tradition, 17 (73.9%) were coded as “Christian.” A single (4.3%) focal subject was identified as a “Quaker,” and, conflating religious...
and cultural identities (Silver, 2002), 5 (21.7%) focal subjects were identified as “Jewish.”

Several models similarly identify the breakdown of world religions along the following lines: Christian (33.39%), Muslim (22.74%), Hindu (13.8%), Buddhist (6.77%), Sikh (0.35%), Jewish (0.22%), Baha’i (0.11%), other religions (10.95%), nonreligious (9.66%), and atheists (2.01%) (World Factbook, 2013). The religious traditions assigned to focal subjects in Orbis Pictus books fail to include any representations of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, or Baha’i traditions. The lack of discussion of religion in these books parallels larger trends in contemporary children’s texts, where most books entirely avoid addressing religion. Facing the complexities of religion and navigating life guided by a religious theology is a reality for many readers (Miskec & Schmidt, 2010), and there is a need for wider representation of various religious traditions that shaped (and were challenged by) the lives and work of focal subjects in children’s nonfiction.

Examining Socioeconomic Status

Children’s literature tends to adhere to middle class subjectivities (Nodelman, 2008), treating poverty as something from which a person emerges or escapes (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Similar to depictions of religion, many Orbis Pictus books did not state the socioeconomic status of focal subjects. In fact, 26 (30.2%) focal subjects did not have clearly discernable socioeconomic identifications and were coded as “not identified.” For the remaining 60 (69.8%), depictions of class were generally distributed across socioeconomic categories as follows: 31 (51.7%) focal subjects were coded as working class, 12 (20%) as middle class, and 17 (28.3%) as
upper class. For many of those focal subjects coded as working class, the narrative trajectories followed the trends in children's literature: “in spite” of poverty, they would go on to do great things. While future researchers will want to further interrogate the functions of socioeconomic status in these books (i.e., the type and range of possibilities represented along socioeconomic lines), this breadth of class identities is commendable.

However, of the 26 focal subjects without an explicitly identified socioeconomic status, the majority would be coded as middle or upper class, which complicates the initial picture presented here. In a pattern discussed later in this article, dominant subjectivities are often undeclared in these depictions, while those that are “other” are almost always named explicitly.

**Examining Dis/Abilities and Developmental Differences**

Despite progress in attitudes toward people with dis/abilities and developmental differences across the past few decades, depictions in children’s literature are often paradoxical and ambiguous. Authors who depict people with dis/abilities often do so in an effort to make readers aware of some of the “problems” these individuals might face and have to overcome (Tal, 2001). Further, authors of these books “have often been limited by their own narrow view and lack of any real understanding of what it is like to be disabled” (Keith, 2001, p. 196). The use of the term dis/ability (Anderson & Merrell, 2001) reflects a perspective that what is constructed as ability and disability is discursive, fluid, and contextual, a stance sometimes reflected in Orbis Pictus.

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winners. People with dis/abilities or developmental differences in books I studied (even if it was a diagnosis that would be inaccurate today [e.g., Fleming, 2008]) were identified as such in the text, as was the time in which they lived.

This study of Orbis Pictus books resulted in 12 (14%) focal subjects coded as individuals with dis/abilities or developmental differences, of which 4 (33.3%) were “physical,” 2 (16.7%) were “sensory,” 5 (41.7%) were “mental health/emotional,” and 1 (8.3%) were “developmental.” Interestingly, many dis/abilities and developmental differences were eliminated from depictions of focal subjects and, therefore, are not reflected in the statistics presented here. In addition, even those books that do mention dis/abilities and developmental differences often do so only once in passing and describe them as behavioral tendencies or personal struggles that could be overcome or regulated through willpower.

**Examining Sexual Identity**

While books with LGBT and queer content for children have been available for more than a century (Tribunella, 2012), recent efforts for queer equality have resulted in increased interest in and demand for books depicting individuals who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and queer (McLean, 1997; Cart & Jenkins, 2006). For the purposes of this study, focal subjects were coded as “heterosexual,” “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” or “not identified.” Because they relate to gender and sex role (non-)identification and expression (and are part of the separate study mentioned previously), transgender identities are not included in this analysis; queer identities are also excluded because, as an umbrella term once affiliated with LGBT cultures, the term is now used much more broadly and relates to the rejection of any binary categories.
Although the categories rely upon binary and fixed identities, they are deployed purposively for the goals of LGBT visibility. Focal subjects were categorized as “heterosexual” if they were described only as having romantic or sexual attractions toward/relationships with individuals depicted as members of the “opposite” biological sex, “lesbian” if described as biological females with romantic or sexual attractions toward/relationships with individuals depicted as biological females, “gay” if described as biological males with romantic or sexual attractions toward/relationships with individuals depicted as biological males, or “bisexual” if described as having romantic or sexual attractions toward/relationships with individuals of multiple biological sexes. Any depiction that did not include mentions of romantic or sexual attractions/relationships was coded as “not identified.”

Of the focal subjects, 48 (55.8%) were assigned a sexual identity. As Figure 6 (“Focal Subjects and Sexual Identity”) illustrates, 100% of those coded were identified as “heterosexual” with no depictions of explicitly identified lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals. Although Orbis Pictus books include focal subjects who are LGB-identified people, the only types of romantic/sexual attractions/relationships represented are between individuals of the “opposite” sex, ultimately reinscribing the invisibility of LGB-identified individuals.

Examining US Parallel Populations

In multicultural research, the term “parallel populations” is sometimes employed to describe cultural groups discriminated against and marginalized (Bishop, 2003). Here the term is used to describe some—again, this list is certainly not exhaustive—of the populations that exist within a US context and are often included in research and scholarship about diverse children’s and young adult literature: African Americans, Middle Eastern Americans, American Indians, Latino/a Americans, and Asian Pacific Americans.

This analysis included only individuals identified within the region of North America; because one focal subject was identified as Canadian Inuit, this analysis is based upon a total of 60 focal...
subjects. Within these 60 depictions, 17 (28.3%) were coded as members of US parallel populations, including 15 (88.2%) African Americans, 1 (5.9%) Asian Pacific American, and 1 (5.9%) American Indian. These findings are obviously problematic and indicate a startling lack of diversity in these texts: there are no focal subjects identified as Middle Eastern American or Latino/a American. Further, the books containing Asian Pacific American and American Indian focal subjects were both written by “outsiders;” at least one of the two has been criticized by cultural insiders (e.g., Seale, 2005) and would be difficult to consider an “authentic” representation. Of all the parallel populations included in Orbis Pictus winners, the most broadly represented are African Americans. However, 12 (80%) of these 15 focal subjects are framed within the contexts of slavery and/or movements for civil rights. Depicting African American focal subjects almost exclusively within these contexts is limiting and does not represent the totality of African American experiences.

As a final note, only 1 (1.7%) focal subject was identified as White/Caucasian. However, as Tatum (1997) noted, people who self-identify as members of populations that have been traditionally marginalized often state their identities when describing themselves, while those identifying as a member of a dominant group do not. The presumption that dominant identities do not need to be stated appears to be true when considering Orbis Pictus books. For example, even within Library of Congress information, the Asian Pacific American and American Indian focal subjects are identified along cultural lines. There are numerous examples of cultural identifications through categories like “Singers—African American” and “Indians of North America—Biography”; Parallel categories, such as “Singers—European American” do not exist. Therefore, while only 1 focal subject is identified explicitly as being “White,” it stands to reason that the vast majority of the 42 (70%) focal subjects labeled as “not identified” within this analysis would be popularly viewed as members of the dominant culture.

Figure 7. Focal subjects as members of US parallel populations

Note: N=60
Exploring Further (and Beyond) the Orbis Pictus World

Building upon the work of individuals like Rollins (1941/1967) and Heaton (1947/1963), Larrick’s (1965) landmark essay, “The All-White World of Children’s Books,” brought widespread attention to the blatant racial bias of textbooks and tradebooks. It is discouraging that, more than 50 years later, the results of this analysis suggest the world of nonfiction texts continues a long-standing tradition of excluding minority populations from children’s media and other artifacts of popular culture. While many have argued for the need to read children’s literature critically and treat seriously the content of these cultural artifacts (Nodelman & Reimer, 1995/2002; Hintz & Tribunella, 2013), research on children’s literature continues to focus predominantly on fiction. There is a dearth of research on children’s nonfiction in general, and the limited research tends to examine classroom use of and children’s responses to non-fiction rather than the nonfiction texts themselves (Kiefer & Wilson, 2011). The limited research on nonfiction children’s books tends to center on the “use-value” of the texts, such as its ability to communicate content (e.g., Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002). Children’s literature, however, is not a neutral tool: it is a powerful artifact, a repository of cultural and social values that acculturates young readers toward particular ways of understanding and viewing themselves and the world in which they live (Crisp, 2008; May, Holbrook, & Meyers, 2010). The process of selecting texts, then, must involve more than a consideration of how easily a book may lend itself to the instruction of subjects like history or social studies. It must include a critical examination of the quality and content of its focal subject depictions, literary elements, and artistic elements.

There is no such thing as a “perfect” book. As others have indicated (e.g., Kohl, 1991; Crisp, 2008; May, Bingham, & Pendergast, 2014), any book can provide a productive classroom learning experience. However, issues of representation matter, and with the existence of so many exemplary children’s nonfiction books, we may question why representations are limited and a single text is burdened with the responsibility of providing the only depiction of a population; perhaps more problematic are the instances in which no depictions testify to the existence of a population. The importance of critical literacy and having the opportunity to see reflections of oneself in fiction has been argued for decades; it is essential that nonfiction literature, too, provide young readers with opportunities to see multiple, nuanced representations that depict accurately the people they love, the people they can become, and the people they are already.

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