Before reading Eve Bunting’s *Smoky Night* (1994) in my children’s literature course, we watch a clip from *Matters of Race* (Nielsen, 2003), a documentary on race-relations in America. The excerpt covers the 1992 Los Angeles Riots—the beating of Rodney King, the upheaval in South Central L.A. after the officers who brutalized King were acquitted, the stoning of white truck driver Reginald Denny during the rioting, residents of South Central L.A. raising protest signs and chanting amid fierce looting and vandalism, a Korean storeowner weeping in a burning street. An aerial video captures plumes of smoke rising over the blazing city.

The class discusses the King beating and the brutal stoning of Reginald Denny. We discuss the L.A. Riots in relation to the 1965 Watts Riots. Finally, we discuss how and if one can portray this intersection of race, violence, and power ethically in a children’s book. Then we discuss *Smoky Night*, particularly its explanation for the riots:

Mama explains about rioting. “It can happen when people get angry. They want to smash and destroy. They don’t care anymore what’s right and what’s wrong.”

Below us they are smashing everything. Windows, cars, streetlights.


Has the focus on racial harmony caused us to overlook issues of power in children’s literature?

"After a while it’s like a game,” says Mama.

This semester’s discussion is especially interesting because our university is in Los Angeles and several students grew up in South Central Los Angeles during the L.A. Riots, the 1992 historical event from which Bunting’s story emerges. They recall their parents hurrying them to shelters or different parts of the city. Some try to recall their parents’ explanations: something bad was done to a man and now people are mad.

This insider perspective acknowledges power used by a nation-state to unjustly and brutally exert force against a citizen. The masses respond with a counter-display of power. However, Bunting’s text excludes this central conflict over power. For Bunting, who writes as a cultural outsider, the rioting is chaos—the event, a frenzied “game.” But for many residents of South Central Los Angeles, the violence reflects
experience. Like metaphor, the rioting concretely and viscerally compresses the legacy of systemic injustice that ghettoizes large segments of urban America into one image. Within this latter perspective, rioting in reaction to the beating becomes a moral protest, an expression of power in response to a legacy of powerlessness. The class conversation returns to several themes within *Smoky Night*—power and powerlessness, those who can speak and those who are spoken about. Does Bunting’s text liberate and empower the citizens of South Central Los Angeles? Or does it discipline and attempt to educate them on race relations without addressing the systemic issues of power that oppress and impoverish poor communities? Our discussion is complex, insightful, and provocative. As educators, we ask more questions than we can answer. And as I sort through the rich discussion, I begin to think that we will be better, more equitable selectors of multicultural children’s literature because we are now talking about literature as an instrument of power.

**THE ROLE OF POWER IN MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN’S LITERATURE**

Multicultural education has always focused on power in the forms of educational reform and resistance to racism and inequality (Banks, 2001; Nieto, 2002). Fox and Short (2003) draw on Banks and Nieto to suggest that multicultural children’s literature shares multicultural education’s purposes and raises related debates regarding intersections of power, race, and culture. The authenticity debate in children’s literature particularly addresses this intersection within racial and cultural contexts: the power to narrate, the power to tell one’s own story, the power to self-determine, the power to self-realize, the power to self-represent, the power to change inequity into equity, the power to articulate reparation for historical injustice. Rudine Sims Bishop (Sims, 1982) begins her seminal work *Shadow and Substance* this way: “There is power in The Word. People in positions of power over others have historically understood, and often feared, the potential of The Word to influence the minds of the people over whom they hold sway” (p. 1). She then identifies three distinct categories of African American children’s literature—“melting pot,” “social conscience,” and “culturally conscious”—that appropriate and manifest power differently based on authors’ varied ideological intentions. Recently, scholars engaging in the authenticity debate have extended and illuminated the treatment of power in diverse cultural and geographical contexts represented in children’s literature (Cai, 1998; Smolkin & Suina, 1997; Harris, 1996).

Despite these emphases on power, current selection criteria for multicultural literature typically promote cultural awareness and sensitivity, and often overlook the control, deployment, and management of power. Criteria across a range of sources informing the selection of multicultural literature commonly include general descriptors such as the following: The text and illustrations use historical information and develop setting accurately; the author portrays characters positively; the text and pictures affirm diversity within a cultural group; the story integrates cultural content and events naturally; the author portrays individuals and communities authentically; and the work resists stereotyping or romanticizing the experiences of minorities. Multiculturalism, in this sense, focuses on tangible traits and overlooks deeper ideologies that affect the distribution of power in society. These criteria strongly promote cultural awareness and sensitivity. In addition, they affirm the post-civil rights racial context that Gordon and Newfield (1996) identify as an era in which “most Americans believe themselves and the nation to be opposed to racism and in favor of a multiracial, multiethnic pluralism” (p. 77). However, while such criteria offer crucial support for intercultural awareness, they may also overlook inequitable management of power. As Gordon and Newfield (1996) explain, excluding power enables a spirit of pluralism to flourish while concealing pluralist rhetoric’s “repressive effects” (p. 77). Thus, examining implicit ideologies—or as Bishop (2003) puts it, “ideological underpinnings”—that manage and deploy power supports an equitable selection process. This article, then, serves two purposes: first, to build on the work of educators and artists who have inserted new standards of ethnic understanding that explore intersections of race, culture, and power within multicultural children’s literature; and second, to place this intersection in the foreground of the selection process for multicultural children’s literature in order to promote equity.

**DIFFERENTIATING ASSIMILATIONIST PLURALISM AND MULTIRACIAL DEMOCRACY**

Gordon and Newfield (1996) define the two framing categories of pluralism...
within multicultural education as “assimilationist pluralism” and “multiracial democracy.” Assimilationist pluralism “requires different groups to follow standards they had no share in making and that they may dislike, even as it presents these requirements as the bedrock of orderly freedom. These standards are very difficult to criticize because they seem inclusive, neutral, and unifying rather than racial and divisive” (p. 81). In contrast, multiracial democracy invites diverse groups to participate fully in the democratic construction of society. The former overlooks or does not fully consider power; the latter assumes active contest over and weighs the ethical and unethical uses of power. For those who hold power, the former produces comfort while the latter produces discomfort.

We can see assimilationist pluralism concretely in two popular children’s books by Eve Bunting, So Far from the Sea (1998) and the aforementioned Smoky Night (1994). Pivotal scenes in So Far from the Sea evoke what Young (2002) has called “sympathy” for suffering, which enables readers to affirm a stance of moral correctness while overlooking ethical deliberation over power. When the protagonist, Laura, asks her father why Japanese Americans were unjustly interned, he reasons that the event is inexplicable; that interment is a “thing that happened long years ago” and “cannot be changed” (p. 30); and that some tragic events in history have “no right or wrong” (p. 14). Although Japanese Americans have attempted to resolve this injustice by seeking reparations for their internment, the discourse of So Far from the Sea transforms the discourse of reparation into a discourse of racial harmony. Within the discourse of racial harmony, Japanese Americans must forgive their perpetrators without seeking just reparation. Hence, in the end, Laura achieves closure only by forgiving and moving forward. The concluding metaphor, a ship “moving on” and “heading away from this unhappy place,” reveals this moral position (p. 30).

While forgiveness is noble, when it subordinates or erases reparation, the book’s Japanese American characters cannot fully mature. Instead, at key points, rather than articulate full critical awareness, they are erased by dominant ideology. And, although the book’s powerful illustrations honor the suffering and affirm the patriotism of Japanese Americans, the Japanese American characters remain confined within the ideology of racial harmony and assimilative pluralism.

**Multiracial democracy invites diverse groups to participate fully in the democratic construction of society.**

Within this ideology, critical awareness remains infantile. Although the characters mature as they cope with loss, they cannot realize full economic, cultural, and political development, since they repress questions and hard truths that might otherwise move them to activism. Literary scholar Candace Fujikane (1997) reminds us that fiction plays a major role in reproducing narratives of development and underdevelopment. Because So Far from the Sea transforms reparation into racial harmony, the characters and their communities remain underdeveloped, or infantilized.

Hence, when children’s fiction substitutes racial harmony in place of reparation, the work may masquerade as advocacy when, in reality, it subverts minority causes. Eve Bunting’s Smoky Night is a good example. Smoky Night substitutes racial harmony in place of systemic critique, and this leads to misinformation in two ways. First, rather than address the systemic inequities that catalyzed the L.A. Riots, the book lifts the event out of its historical and socioeconomic contexts, ignoring the political and social structures that created the subsistent living conditions that ignited the upheaval. Rather than address these conditions, Smoky Night focuses solely on the racial conflicts among the characters. Rather than address the debilitating social context, Smoky Night harmfully assigns substandard social values to the citizens and communities residing in South Central Los Angeles. As the quote at the outset of this article suggests, the residents of South Central Los Angeles riot because they cannot differentiate between right and wrong. For them, rioting becomes a “game” played out by minorities plagued by substandard morals.

Second, although at the end, the characters learn interracial understanding from their cats, this discourse does not empower the ethnic communities that are the text’s subjects. The closing dialogue follows:

“Look at that!” Mama is all amazed. “I thought those two didn’t like each other.”

“They probably didn’t know each other before,” I explain. “Now they do.”

Everyone looks at me, and it’s suddenly very quiet.

“Did I say something wrong?” I whisper to Mama.

“No, Daniel.” Mama’s tugging at her fingers the way she does when she’s nervous. “My name is Gena,” she tells Mrs. Kim. “Perhaps when things settle down you and your cat will come over and share a dish of milk with us.”

*I think that’s pretty funny, but nobody laughs.*
Discourses of racial harmony are appealing because they celebrate good will and benevolence.

The text coupled with the final illustration—the two cats snuggled against each other—becomes a metaphor for interracial harmony where previously there existed strife and ignorance. Discourses of racial harmony are appealing because they celebrate good will and benevolence. But while the discourse of racial harmony nobly condemns bigotry, it has tangible limits. Sustained by the discourse of racial harmony, Smoky Night cannot awaken young readers to the economic and social conditions that continue to ghettoize urban pockets of America and that create the substandard social conditions that catalyze violent upheaval. Because this discourse overlooks power, it cannot change the inequitable systemic structures and hierarchies that reproduce these conditions in the material world.

**FOREGROUNDING INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND POWER THROUGH AUTHENTICITY**

Dana Fox and Kathy Short’s (2003) recently edited volume *Stories Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children’s Literature* provides an important context informing this discussion. In the introduction, the editors intelligently synthesize the authenticity debate, mapping the discussion without lapsing into finite and binary explanations. The editors note that they were concerned “by how often the debates seemed to swirl back to dichotomies and simplistic outsider/insider distinctions. “One of our goals in pulling together this edited collection was to invite new conversations, questions, and critiques about cultural authenticity” (p. 4). Chapters by Mingshui Cai, Laura Smolkin and Joseph Suina, Weimin Mo and Wenju Shen, Violet Harris, Rudine Sims Bishop, Thelma Seto, and Jacqueline Woodson, among others, indeed complicate this simplistic binary by dealing thoughtfully with issues of power. The multiracial poet Ai (1999) has said that more than ever, race is “a medium of exchange, the coin of the realm with which one buys one’s share of jobs and social position.” If transcending race “were less complex, less individual it would lose its holiness” (p. 277). Authenticity valuably preserves the sacredness, or “holiness” of race. At the same time, authenticity’s continued debate calls for more terms that articulate complex intersections of ethnicity, culture, and power.

**EMPHASIZING POWER IN THE INSIDER—OUTSIDER DEBATE: ON ETHICAL AND UNETHICAL PASSING**

One criterion for determining a work’s authenticity is the author’s use of power. For example, Gary Paulsen’s *The Tortilla Factory* (1995) unintentionally elevates European Americans and subordinates ethnic communities by romanticizing ethnic agricultural and factory labor: “in the spring the black earth is worked by brown [emphasis mine] hands that plant yellow seeds, which become green plants rustling in soft wind.” Rather than questioning the social structures that relegate segments of the population to labor, the book locates such labor within an idyllic landscape. Moreover, none of the ethnic characters that labor in the Tortilleria, or tortilla factory, speaks; these voices are subsumed within the pastoral text that erases hardship. The characters become the objects of an outsider’s gaze, which romanticizes their existence. In contrast, in *Under the Blood-Red Sun*, Graham Salisbury (1994) uses his authorial power ethically by advocating for Japanese Americans. Through his novel, Salisbury enables readers to understand human suffering as he portrays the racism directed toward Japanese Americans following the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

In separate studies proposing related versions of critical literacy, Caughie (1998) and Young (2004) make an important differentiation between two kinds of cross-cultural/interracial passing—*passing as deception* and *passing into advocacy*. The former signifies passing as other, or using one’s elevated position to co-opt the identity of another for personal gain. The latter signifies replacing one’s comfortable position with a deeper understanding of power relations that enables one to comprehend and advocate for another’s cause. The former excludes power; the latter foregrounds power. This distinction between deceptive and ethical passing pervades critical debates on cross-cultural authorship in children’s literature. Critiquing outsiders who steal cultural material from marginalized groups, Seto (2003) objects to European American writers who pass deceptively, i.e., who attempt to pass as other without attending to issues of power. According to Seto, this unethical form of passing is equivalent to “cultural theft” (p. 93). Scholars and writers also suggest that awareness of power is a necessary prerequisite for passing into advocacy. As children’s author Jacqueline Woodson (1998) insists, “My hope is that those who write about the tears and the laughter and
the language in my grandmother’s house have first sat down at the table with us and dipped the bread of their own experiences into our stew” (p. 38). The dinner guest, or cultural outsider, neither exploits the host’s generosity for personal gain nor determines the menu and directs the course of the meal. Rather, she defers graciously and humbly to the host. She receives the meal—or the gifts of culture, experience, and memory—with the utmost care.

**POWER AND EQUITY IN SELECTION**

Hence, as Young (2004) suggests, equitable representations of ethnicity and culture must emphasize the explicit and implicit uses of power in texts. Below, I characterize two kinds of multicultural literature for children by differentiating between works that focus primarily on pluralism and works that embody both pluralism and power. Pluralism celebrates diversity, inclusiveness, and common humanity. The following books are examples of ones that fall under pluralism:

- Sandra and Myles Pinkney’s *Shades of Black* (2000) beautifully celebrates diverse skin tone in the African American community;
- Bernard Most’s *The Cow That Went Oink* (1990) humorously supports bilingualism;
- Eve Bunting’s *Jin Woo* (2001) celebrates inter-country adoption;
- Pat Mora’s edited volume *Love to Mama: A Tribute to Mothers* (2001) celebrates mothers in the Latina community;
- Edna Coe Bercaw’s *Halmoni’s Day* (2000) portrays intergenerational acceptance between a Korean granddaughter and her grandmother;
- Ken Mochizuki’s *Passage to Freedom* (1997) recounts the heroic story of Chiune Sugihara, who saved thousands of Jewish refugees in Lithuania during WWII;
- Jonah Winter’s *Frida* (2002) tells the story of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo;
- Janet E. Hoffelt’s *We Share One World* (2004) calls for global peace and the embracing of all cultures; and

These books advocate knowledge of diverse cultural practices, experiences, and significant people. They also express appreciation for cultural differences and instill pride in one’s own culture. Against the history of a traditionally European-American canon, they insert perspectives representative of a diverse nation. They reveal and affirm diversity within a single culture. They express faith in a common humanity that is enhanced when shared faith in human goodness emerges from embracing differences.

Despite these strengths, these books serve only half the purpose of multiculturalism in education. Collectively, as a group, they do not directly address power. Hence, if one hopes to teach multiculturalism’s full complexity, one must venture into the latter sphere—plurality that manifests power. These literary works foreground the ways in which power, race, and culture produce equity and inequity in society. What follows are some books that fall under this category.

Lenore Look’s *Love as Strong as Ginger* (1999) beautifully portrays the relationship between Chinese American Katie and her Grandma. Through both the author’s note and the story, the book succeeds in challenging structures of power that create oppressive labor conditions. The author’s note that introduces the book sets the framework:

*This story was inspired by my grandmother, who worked in a Seattle cannery in the 1960s and 70s. She was among the older immigrant women, mostly from Southeast Asia, who, because they lacked English and job skills, did the only work they could find: shaking crab. The work paid very little: three pennies for every pound of crabmeat. . . . Though Seattle canneries are gone now, and my grandmother has passed away, it isn’t hard for me to remember that time in our lives when I lived without yesterday or tomorrow and Grandma served heaven on a spoon.*

The story renders this hard life through vivid details of the factory where one “minute” equals one “penny,” where crab meat sticks to Grandma’s cheeks, where the only place to sit is the “toilet upstairs,” and where Grandma weeps, exhausted. Allen Say’s *Grandfather’s Journey* (1993) similarly challenges nationalism. While dominant representations of nationalism erase differences and force homogeneity, Say’s text suggests that one may realize dual citizenship in two countries without compromising one’s allegiance to either. Referring to Japan and the United States, he says: “The funny thing is, the moment I am in one country, I am homesick for the other” (p. 31). More than longing nostalgically for Japan, Say affirms his American and Japanese identities with equal weight. This stance enables Say’s text and illustrations to counter assimilation narratives and melting-pot ideology.

Michael McGuffee’s *The Day the Earth Was Silent* (1996) both evokes the discourse of racial harmony and awakens children’s awareness to issues of power. Through the eyes of innocence, the book and illustrations idealize global peace. Through the eyes of experience, the book measures and contemplates the meaning and costs of such peace. The book expresses the former through its main storyline in
which a classroom of children dream of world peace. The children take their dream to higher levels of administration—the principal, the president, an international tribunal of nations. Through this persistence and idealism, they initiate an international peace-day. In addition, the book expresses the latter through its final image of an African American child, a few years later, holding a marble at arms length and measuring within its sphere the full depth, complexity, costs, and profundity of global peace. While the book celebrates racial harmony through child-like ideals, it simultaneously evokes the complex and difficult realities of achieving such peace. In a discourse intelligible to the child, it articulates the “worldliness” that Edward Said (2000) once stated.

In this way, while books do not explicitly assert political discourses, they may still politically affirm the minority child’s presence in American society. Likewise, overtly critical books may include elements that detract from the book’s political function. For example, Love as Strong as Ginger evokes the narrative of the American dream—or America the land of opportunity where all things are possible—and this partly overshadows the book’s systemic critique. As Grandma states, “Katie, in America, you can become whatever you dream.” This affirmation of America’s benevolence partly excuses its contrasting brutality.

Grandfather’s Journey also evokes and affirms the immigrant dream—the myth of the land of opportunity and the myth of assimilation—before it complicates it. The Day the Earth Was Silent makes a significant gesture toward global issues of conflict stemming from unequal distributions of power, but the book refrains from situating these issues prominently in the text’s foreground. Nappy Hair evokes problematic images of minstrelsy in the faces of the characters even as it uses these images within a context and storyline that subverts racist attitudes and empowers African Americans. Esperanza Rising situates its critique of American racism and unfair labor practices within its main narrative, the immigrant dream. This narrative, which partially subsumes the novel’s critical perspectives on power, also

**Scholars and writers also suggest that awareness of power is a necessary prerequisite for passing into advocacy.**

including children, who sacrificed for liberty, stating that, “a sweet smell of roses is a tribute to them. The brave boys and girls who—like their adult counterparts—could not resist the scent of freedom carried aloft by the winds of change.” Last, Pamela Munoz Ryan’s coming-of-age novel Esperanza Rising (2000) raises issues of power such as labor, class, and inter- and intra-racial conflict and strife.

These books collectively address issues of power. They present their multiethnic characters as subjects rather than objects. They counter dominant, oppressive ideologies. They also portray the full cultural and political development of their characters, and they elevate underprivileged communities or nations. In this way, they directly attend to issues of power within intercultural contexts.

The goal of my argument is not to reduce multicultural literature into two finite and opposing camps; rather, it is to show the complex layers of discourses composing any work and how books function differently within the broad umbrella of multicultural literature. Thus, as Bishop (2003) notes, the “ideological underpinnings” of an apparently non-political book may indeed give the text political function, as in Sandra and Myles Pinkney’s Shades of Black (2000), which affirms the beauty of the African American child against a history of negative representation in public media. Edna Bercaw’s Halmoni’s Day (2000) may function similarly, presenting dignified images of Korean Americans against a history of anti-Asian immigration legislation. In this way, while books do not explicitly assert political discourses, they may still politically affirm the minority child’s presence in American society.
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by acknowledging Japanese American-ness, which commemo- rate a community’s struggle and survival, evoke a mythical place in the community’s memory. Such books serve the community as much as the child by affirming the arc of the child’s cultural existence—the struggles that have come before and those the child will fight in her/his lifetime. Such books commemorate the community that has persevered before and, by imparting the memory of this struggle to the child, affirms that child’s participation in the community’s future.

SUPPORTING EQUITY IN MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

If multicultural education and debates over authenticity in multicultural children’s literature have always addressed power, we must ask why selection criteria for multicultural children’s literature commonly subordinate power and focus more on interethnic understanding. Researchers, librarians, and book critics have long debated and deliberated over the aspect of “safety” related to violent content (Tomlinson, 1995; Harris, 1996; McClure, 1995; Kiefer, 1995). However, they have not fully challenged the structures of American imagination that associate critiques of American nationalism with violence inappropriate for young readers. I believe that safe narratives “protect” young readers from fully comprehending the violence that modern nation states necessitate in their formation and sustained unity. As Renan (1990) notes: “Forgetting . . . is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation . . . . Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence that

We must ask why selection criteria for multicultural children’s literature commonly subordinate power and focus more on interethnic understanding.

related to Asian Americans. Once labeled a “yellow peril,” Asian Americans have historically been perceived as strangers within the nation (Takaki, 1989). WWII Japanese internment exemplifies this exclusion. Because the Japanese American characters are literally “homeless” (excluded from citizenship because of ethnicity), they remain orphaned—“lost together” (p. 16)—within the sterile national landscape of the book. In different parts of the narrative, cast on a barren landscape, swept down a turbulent river, enclosed within a dark tunnel, lost upon a stark plain, and situated amid dust-blown barrack, the characters struggle to survive. In the end, as the characters “watch their nametags drift into the air . . . to a homeland elsewhere, each individual seems to dream of a ‘home’ in America that the nation has yet to realize” (Ching & Pataray-Ching, 2003, p. 127). The book’s title—home of the brave—intensifies this critique by acknowledging Japanese Americans who served America honorably in WWII. In this context, the title ironically suggests that, because of race, America rejects its bravest citizens from full participation in citizenship.

In multiple readings of this book, I have asked myself the following:

• Does the book’s subject matter, topic, or theme demand attention beyond racial harmony and require emphasis on equity or reparation? In the case of Home of the Brave, the context of Japanese internment does demand equity and reparation. This stance is portrayed ethically in the text. The haunting images of homeless Japanese American children and their unresolved suffering at the end suggest that equity, which can only be achieved through reparation (both in material compensation and recognition of full citizenship free of prejudice), is still forthcoming.

• Does the historical context demand a narrative of cultural survival? Unlike So Far from the Sea, which excuses national accountability for Japanese WWII internment, Home of the Brave directly confronts legislative injustice and holds the nation accountable for its actions.

• Does the historical context demand a narrative of cultural survival? Unlike So Far from the Sea, which adopts a narrative of racial harmony, i.e., mutual forgiveness without reparation, Home of the Brave resists cultural genocide and affirms the cultural survival of a people. By doing this, it names and refuses to forget the injustices that need to be corrected in order to ensure a people’s existence.

• For books that may exceed a child’s social development, does the book’s communal function justify its selection? Indeed, a book like Home of the Brave is difficult for young readers, and in my children’s literature course, we often raise this issue. Yet, we also discuss the book’s commemo- rative importance. Books such as Home of the Brave, which commemorate a community’s struggle and survival, evoke a mythical place in the community’s memory. Such books serve the community as much as the child by affirming the arc of the child’s cultural existence—the struggles that have come before and those the child will fight in her/his lifetime. Such books commemorate the community that has persevered before and, by imparting the memory of this struggle to the child, affirms that child’s participation in the community’s future.

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For centuries Euro-Americans have separate politics from literature. Seto (2003) insists, “You can never negate harmony; it is always a negotiation of power. As Seto (2003) insists, “You can never separate politics from literature.”

Equity in multicultural children’s literature must affirm our common humanity and call attention to issues of power.

The two spheres of multicultural literature discussed in this article have qualities that are equally important. Pluralism emphasizes interpersonal openness and a common humanity. In school settings, books operating in these spheres teach children to work collaboratively, to cultivate interethnic friendships, and to see each other through eyes of care rather than hate. The awareness of power is equally important, for it pushes beyond racial harmony and explores issues of power that help us understand why heated social issues often divide schools, communities, and nations along racial lines.

Our common humanity is so fragile. All the more, we should cultivate that humanity on both interpersonal and systemic levels. Equity in multicultural children’s literature must affirm our common humanity and call attention to issues of power. In the applied context of children’s literature, these combined objectives differentiate Gordon and Newfield’s (1996) two forms of multiculturalism, assimilationist pluralism (which includes pluralism but excludes power) and a true multiracial democracy (which foregrounds power within a pluralistic society). The framework of a multiracial democracy, which is comprised of pluralism grounded in a critique of power, is the only equitable stance for evaluating and teaching multicultural children’s literature.

In the PBS film series Matters of Race, Christopher G. Bourdeaux of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, Oglala Lakota Nation, recounts the devastating effects of the boarding school experience. He states that the boarding schools were supposed to “educate us till we could be good, productive members of society. Kill the Indian and save the man—it was the law.” Resisting cultural genocide, Bourdeaux affirms his permanence: “Look what we all went through, all indigenous people, look what we went through all these years, and we’re still here . . . we’re still here . . . .”

Bourdeaux’s testimony is compelling, clear, straightforward—and intelligible to young readers. It embodies a cry for cultural survival. Voices like Bourdeaux’s belong in children’s literature, but their absence is the norm. In 1996, Maria Nikolajeva spoke of a new era of children’s books—as the title of her landmark book suggests, Children’s Literature Comes of Age. Although children’s literature has come of age, multicultural children’s literature has much room to grow. In order for this literature to mature, educators may evaluate books and their potential with power foremost in mind. This stance supports the diverse classrooms of the nation and, within each classroom, the children who deserve this right to equity in literacy.
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Children’s Books Cited


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Author Biography

Stuart H. D. Ching is assistant professor of English at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles.