

# What, actually, do we mean by “diversity” in children’s literature?

\*\*\*SHORT!\*\*\*

**Kyle L. Chong**

LATTICE Fellow, 2022

*Ph.D. Student, Curriculum, Instruction & Teacher Education Michigan State University*

A quick caveat:

**I do not use the language of level/age/grade appropriateness.**

Instead:

**I prefer the language of “older” and “younger” kids (more generic ranges).**

# “DEI” in children’s literature

# DEI:

- **Diversity** = presence of differences (genders, races, abilities, etc.)
- **Equity** = giving people what they need, both just the same.
- **Inclusion** = “diverse” people feeling welcomed.
- “Diverse books”
- “Inclusive libraries”
- “Reading globally”

# DEI: What we often miss

- Diversity = **Presence doesn't mean [substantive] representation (seen vs. heard)**
- Equity = **too often mistaken for equality.**
- Inclusion = **The power to include is the same power to exclude.**
- “Diverse books” — **often tokenize, or fail to take into account the identities/ experiences of authors.**
- “Inclusive libraries” — **often lump many communities of people in single labels for ease (“Asian American”).**
- “Reading globally” — **often centers damage, privilege, and American Exceptionalism.**

# The Global Lens:

The definition of “global” is “of, relating to, or involving the entire world.” Sometimes words like “international” or “transnational” are used alongside “global”, but these terms are not the same. In short, terms like “international” and “transnational” presume the world is solely organized around nation-states (i.e. Russia, China, Canada). Instead, we will use the term “global” in this course as a way to attend to human experiences that cross **contexts** (geographical, cultural, national, regional, linguistic, etc.), recognizing that things like COVID-19, climate change, and even children’s literature do not necessarily know borders.

In this class, we consider the Global Lens to be a **way of reading** rather than a set of texts. Instead of limiting “global” reading to a set of texts from outside the US, it means that you can read “globally” books that are set or authored within or outside the US. In reading globally, readers cultivate an awareness of the ways their own situated experiences (the things that have happened in their life and where those things have happened) do or do not connect to the situated experiences of the characters in the book that is being read.

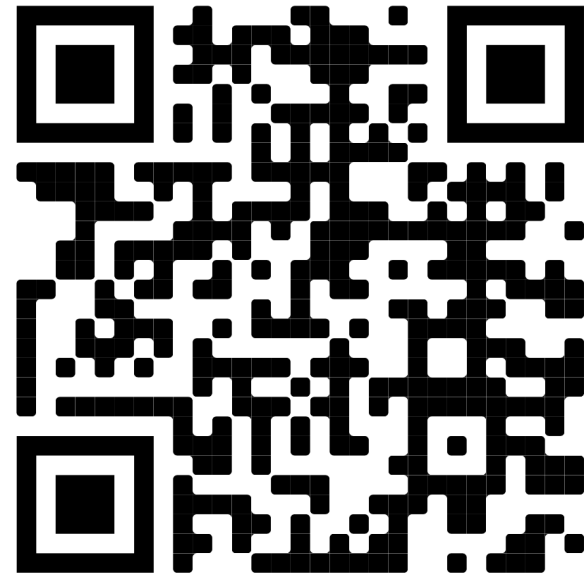
Children’s books often distort history or personal experiences through their narratives by implicitly or explicitly perpetuating colonizing ideologies and worldviews. Some books contribute to national myths of foundation, especially in settler-colonial contexts such as the US. Books may also include depictions of “racialized others” in order to “valorize the superiority” of European cultures and a Euro-centric worldview (Bradford, 2017, p. 2). Recognizing these distortions and racialized depictions is part of reading globally.

As you read with a global lens (that is, from a global perspective or position) you will use the literary and artistic elements that you have worked with for the past few weeks. You will begin to identify your own situatedness (the contexts in which your life experiences happen), your biases/prejudices (based on those experiences), and the social responsibilities you bring as the reader of a text. The goal is to become more aware of and committed to understanding and participating in a global literary conversation and community.



Or... put another way,

**This is the danger of the single story.**



And...

# Why we need windows and mirrors in children's literature.



So what does it mean to

***Critically* read globally?**

# Questions to consider:

- Who is/are this author(s)/illustrator(s) to tell this story?
- What work do you (the reader) have to do to understand this story?
  - Consider asking students:
    - “what do you not know?”
    - “what do you want to know for this story to make sense?”
- Who could be the intended audience for this story?

I don't like the language of "authenticity" (there's no single story)

**Instead, I prefer the language of  
proximity (closeness to an experience).**

**Consider: If a story is going to be told by people from a different community, how close is this story to the one the community would tell about themselves?**

# What are some of our situated experiences?

- Born in the United States
- Where we grew up (homogenous communities)
- Going to school (unique features of American public schools)
- Not necessarily having to worry about displacement *from war, natural disasters, etc.*
- Pledge of Allegiance (“liberty for all”)
- **American Exceptionalism: America can basically do no wrong. Inherently different (better). Imperialism.**
- Privilege(s), security, safety

## Consider:

- Sometimes we/our students/authors have insider knowledge of some parts of an identity, but not others.
- Authenticity presumes there's a single story. Instead of assuming there's a single "Asian American" experience, consider how people tell their **own** stories.
- Try letting the story speak for itself. What the character(s) say/believe/do interface with our experiences — notice when we get defensive, etc.!

# Things I might do with my students:

- Look up the author and illustrator.
  - What did you find? What do you want to know still? What does the author say about this work?
- Does the author claim to be an insider?
  - What is the value in doing that or not?
- Consider the cultural elements in the book.
  - What do you notice?
  - Does the book try to feel ‘global’? Is that ethical?

# Teacher Questions for *My Beautiful Birds*

- del Rizzo (2017) describes finding inspiration for this book in a news article she found. What work does this author have to do to tell this story?
- If Sami's story is the only one that students experience about refugees, whose stories do we not get to experience?
- The book can be seen to romanticize living in displacement. What are some of the themes you notice about the book? Could they have been told in a different context?
- del Rizzo (2017) describes this story as one that “illuminates the ongoing crisis.” Why/how does she do this, or not?



# Teacher Questions for *Double Happiness*

- How useful do you think is use of Mandarin throughout the story?
- What insights does Tupper Ling have into her kids' experiences in this story?
- What work do we have to do to help kids understand the Chinese cultural symbols and references in this text (artistic and literary)?
- One of this text's strengths is its showing a multiracial family. Why is this a good book, or not, to demonstrate a 'global' reading? Or 'diversity'?