Authenticity, Accuracy, and Respect in Picturebooks About Africa: Implications for Pedagogy in the United States

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Abstract

This is a conceptual paper that explores critiquing picturebooks set in Africa. The paper is grounded in BlackCrit (Black Critical Theory) and Racial and Ethnic Socialization (RES). Using pragmatism as a method, we offer a detailed analysis of 3 carefully selected books, on the broad basis of authenticity, accuracy, and respectfulness. A deeper dive into the books looks for hidden messages that dehumanize, oversimplify, exotify, and generally present Africa from a Eurocentric lens. The critique goes beyond the books by looking at how they are shared on YouTube and other forums that offer pedagogical ideas for sharing the books with children. Overall, from the critique we find that books authored by cultural insiders are favorable while the reverse is, in most cases, true with authors who are cultural outsiders. The paper emphasizes the power of accurate, authentic, and respectful pro-Blackness representations as beneficial for all children in developing positive behaviors, attitudes and agency toward pro-Blackness and antiracist rhetoric. We also found that there is an urgent need for more pro-Black books on our educational shelves.

Keywords Antiblackness · Picturebooks about Africa · BlackCrit · Picturebooks · Early childhood education · Black children · Africa

Introduction and Review of Literature

For several weeks, conversations at Mwamba's home surrounded an upcoming trip from the United States to Kenya, where his parents were born and bred. As the day for travel approached, anxiety about the trip built up in Mwamba, who was 6 years old at the time. Mwamba was born in the USA. Even though he had visited Kenya when he was 2 years old, he had no recollection of the experience. As a typical 6-year-old, well equipped with imaginative thinking skills, he had several questions as he tried to imagine what Kenya would look like: "Will we stay in a hut?" "Will people there be wearing shoes?" "Will relatives receive us at the airport with songs and ululation? "Are there huts and coconut trees at the Kenya airport?" "Do people in Kenya speak English?" His questions shocked his parents. Family and friends from Kenya had recently visited us in the United States. They spoke English and wore shoes when we picked them up from the airport. He had seen many pictures taken in Kenya that defied the stereotypes.

Mwamba loved books, as many young children do. And like many children, he read books that imprinted in him distorted and stereotypical images of people in Africa. He had also consumed stories about Kenya from movies and television, and from school, all with an underlying insinuation of the inferiority of African peoples and their cultures communicated to him—and his white peers. Mwamba's story rings true with many first- and second-generation African children who may not have had a chance to travel to their motherland.

Using Bishop's (1990) analogy of windows, mirrors, and sliding doors, for African immigrant children, reading picturebooks about Africa can be a mirror for self-affirmation (Laboy et al., 2022; Sung & Son, 2020); Bishop, 1990). For African American children, picturebooks about representations of Black people in diverse contexts and their ancestral history can provide counter narratives to dominant oppressive narratives about being Black. For white children, books

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about Africa can also be windows, and even sliding doors, to counter narratives of privilege and superiority into which they are socialized (Dumas & Ross, 2016). All children benefit from books that portray themselves and the world beyond them in accurate, authentic, and responsible ways (Aronson et al., 2018; Huber et al., 2020; McIver, 2018; Nel, 2017; Sung & Son, 2020).

But sometimes the mirrors are broken, hence offering distorted images of ourselves, the world, and our place in it. "Broken mirrors" can especially have major long-term impacts on Black children's educational success and success in other spheres of their lives (Bishop, 1990, 2012; Cueto & Brook, 2019; Larrick, 1965; Dumas & Ross, 2016; Mendoza & Reese, 2001). Unfortunately, children's books often serve as vehicles for perpetuating and reproducing notions of superiority and inferiority in society (Huber et al., 2020; McIver, 2018; Sung & Son, 2020). Distortions and inaccuracies in the images in books can successfully deliver these messages to young readers even if the storyline does not (Mendoza & Reese, 2001; Nel, 2017; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015). For Mwamba, books that accurately and authentically reflected him, his family, and his heritage were very few in the library shelves of his school, the community and in bookstores. As succinctly stated by Adichie (2009), in her widely viewed tedtalk, *The Danger of a Single Story,* the tradition of foreigners from the west telling inaccurate and dehumanizing stories about African people began with the first western explorers. One of the explorers, for instance, went so far as to describe to his relatives back in the United States, that African people had eyes on their breasts (Adichie, 2009).

Positionality

This article is influenced by the positionality of its first author. She is a Black woman who was born and bred in Kenya and migrated to the US as an adult two decades ago. Her two children were brought up in the United States. The first author has also been an early childhood education faculty in a predominantly white community and university for over 15 years. Her experiences as a Black immigrant mother, student and professional trying to navigate the system, have inevitably contributed to her involvement in antiracist work. She has strived to develop in her children a pride for their Kenyan culture and has often found herself in contention with the mainstream culture, including the school curriculum, that in a large part dishonors the African culture and peoples (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Ndemanu & Jordan, 2018). She actively participated in her children's education, and unsuccessfully sought authentic books about Africa. She dedicated some of her time toward breaking stereotypes about Africa through presentations and conversations with children and teachers in her children's classrooms and her

college students. Her audience at these presentations were in most surprised to see images of modern cities and homes, and to hear about the rigorous education system, the earlier African civilization (beyond that evidenced by pyramids in Egypt), that the average Kenyan speaks three languages including English, etcetera. She is grossly aware that picturebooks as well as middle and high school social studies textbooks effectively perpetuate and reproduce stereotypes about Africa. Her lived experiences are, therefore, foundational to this article. She recognizes her privileges as a university professor in a small city, and her scholarship in diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice.

The second author is the first author's undergraduate student who has demonstrated an extraordinary commitment to antiracist work, research and praxis during her undergraduate studies. She played a significant role in the creation of this article.

Theoretical Framing

This paper is situated in the underpinnings of the concepts of racialization of African immigrants to the US (Asante et al., 2016; Awad, 2014; Kiramba et al., 2023; Ndemanu & Jordan, 2018; Metzner et al., 2022), and racial and ethnic socialization of African Americans, whites, and African immigrants (Loyd & Gaither, 2018; Vittrup, 2018). Research is clear that upon migration African immigrants face the realities of being Black in the United States and for some, a reckoning of the impact of colonization on their motherland and its relationship with anti-Black racism in the United States and around the globe (Moodie & Fricker, 2023). BlackCrit theory (Dumas & Ross, 2016), a branch of critical race theory, offers nuance that addresses systemic and structural issues of Black racism. The role of picturebooks as vehicles for perpetuating and confronting anti-Black racism is examined in the context of these concepts of racialization, racial and ethnic socialization, and BlackCrit, to address the endemic sociopolitical issue of anti-Blackness.

BlackCrit Theory

While racism impacts a wide range of racial groups, racism against Black folk is the deepest and most pervasive. (Dumas & Ross, 2016; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022). Dumas and Ross (2016) coined the Black Critical Theory (Black-Crit), to interrogate the specificity of Black folk, just like other Crits have been theorized to address the racial oppression of other groups- Latino/as, Asians and Pacific Islanders, and Indigenous peoples (LatCrit, AsianCrit, and TribalCrit). What these other "Crits" do is offer a deeper and nuanced application of how race is socially constructed for different groups. As stated succinctly by Dumas and Ross (2016):

"Black people are plainly situated as (just) "race," whereas other groups, are offered and benefit from more detailed, nuanced, historicized, and embodied theorizations of their lived racial conditions under more specific formations of racial oppression, unlike the Black person who is simply race. BlackCrit therefore helps to explain precisely how Black bodies become marginalized, disregarded, and disdained, even in their highly visible place within celebratory discourses on race and diversity" (p 417).

BlackCrit originated from Critical Race Theory and was translated into education by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) from its initial theorization in the field of law. BlackCrit offers opportunities to focus on Black struggles and counterstories (Dumas & Ross, 2016). A case in point is that of George Floyd and other Black people who have been killed or been either wrongfully incarcerated or incarcerated for small offenses. Blackcrit explains the overrepresentation of Black children in the school prison pipeline or the prevalent suspension and expulsion of predominantly Black children from as early as preschool in the United States (Beaty, 2016).

The violence against Black bodies and psyche exists in educational policies and is caused by anti-Blackness and the absence of a curriculum that is responsive to Blackness (Dumas & Ross, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2021). It also shows up in racist incidents like one in New York where a school principal described Black teachers as "gorillas" and derided their "big lips" and "nappy hair" (Klein, 2013). The endemic nature of anti-Blackness is recently demonstrated by the speed at which institutional diversity initiatives and antiracist work are being withdrawn soon after they were mushroomed as a response of the heinous death of George Floyd (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022). The Black Lives Matter movement and critical race theory have also faced fierce criticism (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022) and are used as effective political campaigning punch lines. BlackCrit helps analyze policies directly impacting Black struggle and excellence in education.

The BlackCrit lens offers a focus on Black children where an unracialized and fair existence can be envisioned (Cueto & Brooks, 2019; Dumas & Ross, 2016, Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Some scholars have even envisioned Black Education Spaces (Warren & Coles, 2020) or "fugitive spaces" (Ross, 2020, in Warren & Coles, 2020) where Black children are nurtured in somewhat exclusively Black supportive spaces where they can build self-determination, self-actualization, and self-efficacy, "live in the moment" and feel good about themselves (Warren & Coles, 2020). Such spaces render themselves to opportunities for Black people to practice seeing one another, loving one another, and granting one another breathing room in a world where anti-Black racial violence is normalized. The exclusionary spaces might not be a perfect idea, but they offer Black children a chance for success in education and life (Warren & Coles, 2020).

Global Anti-Blackness

There are more than 200 million Blacks across the globe (UN, 2023). In the United States, Blacks constitute 13.6% of the population (Pew Research, 2024). Of this, 10% (4.1 million) are a rapidly growing foreign-born population, with 50% (2.1 million) of them hailing from the continent of Africa (Migration Policy Institute, 2022). African immigrants are extremely diverse in terms of cultures, ethnicities, histories, nationalities, languages, and other identities (United Nations, n.d). For instance, the first author's country of origin, Kenya, has 42 tribes with distinct cultures and languages (Ndemanu & Jordan, 2018). Regardless of their other identities, Black folks are impacted by anti-Blackness in one way or another (Wilkerson, 2020).

Anti-Blackness has existed for centuries and is often reproduced through various systems, education being one of them. In recognition of these insidious phenomena, a decade ago the United Nations (UN) declared 2015-2024 as the decade for people of African descent (United Nations, n.d). The UN summarizes the focus of the decade as recognition, justice, and development of people of African descent. It is accurate to say that though we are in the 9th year of the decade, anti-Blackness is still alive and intricately woven into the fabric of both local and global societies. Books, other societal media, and racial socialization inadvertently and systematically serve as a socialization agent of anti-Black sentiments (Derman-Sparks, 2012) Young children are especially vulnerable in the face of a story (Adichie, 2009).

The Development of Anti-Black/Pro-Blackness Attitudes in Young Children

Early childhood is foundational in the development of children's identity and appreciation of others (Derman-Sparks, 2012). From early infancy, children are wired to notice novelty and difference using their senses. Awareness of race develops as they observe attributes like skin color, facial features, and hair textures (Mann-Boykin, 2016; Williams et al., 1975). They can respond to such attributes by 15 months of age (Burns & Sommerville, 2014), and may start showing distrust or fear toward people who are different from them and their family members. Ramsey (2004), however, criticize this simplistic way of interpreting children's concrete conception of race as grossly problematic, ignoring the sociocultural influences on how children slowly conceptualize race. Ramsey (2004) points out the overapplication of Piagetian views of children as "preoperational" and

"concrete" (NAEYC, 2022) in their cognition. These theoretical frames of interpretations give schools and the broad society an excuse to not look deeper into complex and difficult societal issues (Ramsey, 2004). Within the seemingly innocent rudimentary cognitive capabilities of children is a sociocultural context that is not devoid of children's observations and internalization of power and identity.

As early as toddlerhood, children portray tendencies of demarcating power boundaries among their peers based on race (Goodchild & Gloger, 2005; Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). Toddlers and preschoolers often articulate their dislike of the "brown skin-colored" kids at the playground (Goodchild & Gloger, 2005). In fact, the first author's kids experienced this discrimination from their peers at precisely this age. Classrooms and school in general, are spaces where, from a very young age children are contesting and reproducing power dynamics that favor and oppress others (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2021). All children of all races are nurtured in these very dynamic environments that ultimately empower others and strip others their full potential and humanity (Derman-Sparks, 2012).

Goodchild and Gloger's (2005) study found that most white and about half of dark-skinned 4-year-olds chose white photographs when asked to identify who they wanted to be their friend or sit next to, who they thought would likely get into trouble, or be successful. They associated negative and positive attributes to dark-skinned and white-skinned children, respectively. Similar results have been found using the infamous young children's preference for white-skinned dolls. During the preschool and kindergarten years children learn to recognize and express situation-specific emotions (Freeney & Moravcik, 2005). They learn and express feelings based on a wide range of messages they get from their environment (Tatum, 2017). Young white children quickly learn to be silent about the topic of race (Nguyen, 2022). A meta-analysis by Raabe and Beelmann (2011) on the development of racial, ethnic, and national prejudice found that the prejudice is at its peak at ages 5–7 years. By age 10 children are hard wired with anti/racist biases depending on their socialization (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).

Racial and Ethnic Socialization

Despite the clear evidence that young children observe, learn, and enact racism (Goodchild & Gloger, 2005; Raabe & Beelmann, 2011)), many adults erroneously believe that early childhood education is not a place where race and other forms of identity should be discussed because it interrupts the preservation of childhood innocence (Nguyen, 2022; Robinson, 2013). Several studies have reported that most white parents use a colorblind approach in addressing racial and ethnic socialization, even while acknowledging the importance of talking about race (Bartoli et al., 2016;

Braden, 2020; Vittrup, 2018). This leaves the children with no option but to pick up on nonverbal messages, including that which is not said. Vittrup (2018) also found that parents' reasons for not talking with their young children about race was that it was not age-appropriate or that it might have a counter impact.

The majority of Black families in the United States talk about race with their young children. (Rockquemore et al., 2006; Vittrup, 2018). However, the Black parents address race less directly with their younger children than they do with their older children; they are more likely to focus on cultural socialization with younger children and racial discrimination with older children, thereby losing an opportunity to reduce the impact of racism (Edwards, 2017). Caughy et al.. (2002) found that Black preschoolers who have received racial socialization have better problem-solving skills and lower behavior problems.

Socialization Through Picturebooks

In a society that privileges whiteness, white children get messages from books and other avenues that they are the "kingfish", an attitude that can adversely impact a healthy development of fairness, empathy, and humility (Koss, 2015; Larrick, 1965; Neville et al., 2013). The good news is that in the past five years there has been a growing interest in parents wanting to talk to their young children about race (84% of parents), with 61% of parents surveyed feeling a sense of agency to teach children about race (Embracerace, 2023). This has also led to a surge for antiracist books (Embracerace, 2023; Laboy et al., 2022).

Just as picturebooks can perpetuate racist attitudes in young children, they can also offer opportunities for breaking the pervasive and problematic silence on racism through storylines and discussions (Chaudhri & Teale, 2013; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Koss, 2015; Nguyen, 2022). A study by Nguyen (2022) on predominantly white kindergarten children's engagement in anti-bias read-aloud discussions found that the children could engage in complex understanding of race. In addition, Robinson (2013) found that at the early age of preschool, children can identify and engage in social justice by confronting bias in their spaces Some even internalized and enacted anti-immigrant, anti-Blackness, and racial/gender discriminatory actions. Books offer an effective scaffolding opportunity to introduce antiracist knowledge, attitudes, and agency (Nguyen, 2022).

The mere exposure to antiracist books is not sufficient, as it might further perpetuate the internalization of racially biased messages in the books (Adam, 2021; Lehner-Quam et al, 2017; Wiseman et al., 2019). For instance, while some picturebooks on race-related bullying might offer counter-narratives of Black characters portraying strength,

resistance, and resilience, many center whiteness, where a white character "saves' a helpless Black character (Wiseman et al., 2019). Critical dialogue using language for interpreting race-related messages in picturebooks, and other experiences is necessary in nurturing children who are proud of their racial identities, respect racial differences and are willing to speak up about racial injustices (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Derman-Sparks, 2012; Vasquez, 2014).

Authentic, Accurate, and Respectful Portrayals of Black People

In the book *Black Education: A Transformative Research and Action Agenda for the New Century,* King (2005), outlines principles constructed by a group of renowned anti-racist education scholars, that foster positive education for Black children. The principles allude to the ideas that responsive children's literature should reflect people of African descent, regardless of their diverse histories like slavery, colonization, and settler colonization (et al., 2017; Wynter et al., 2022), to exist as African People, who prioritize the collective community over the individual. Additionally, people of African descent's response to hegemony and domination are adaptation, improvisation, and resistance and that their socialization is rooted in deep and nuanced thought processes (Boutte et al., 2017). Wynter-Hoyte et al. (2022) offer another list of attributes that are often associated with Black culture. They include spirituality, harmony with each other and nature, movement, dance, and rhythm as central to psychological health, emphasis on affect and emotional expressiveness, genuine and spontaneous expressiveness, respect in strength of oral tradition and communication, a sense of agency and strength in the face of adversity, improvisation, and an orientation of time as being attached to social space rather than material aspects. Portrayals in picturebooks should respectfully cover some of these attributes.

To reject the negative depictions of Black people there is a growing push for elevating positive existing notions like Black genius and joy as age-long characteristics that are rarely acknowledged and cultivated in books and other avenues (Muhammad, 2020). Sims Bishop (2012), in her review of influential Black illustrators, pointed out how these authors have set out to dignify images of Black children in picturebooks while also depicting them in all their diversity. Centering Black excellence, joy, resistance, and resilience in picturebooks is critical counter storytelling of Black folk stories (Bishop, 1990; Muhammad, 2020; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022). African diaspora picturebooks also present African cultures, systems of thought and morality that counter western hegemony and endemic oppression experienced by all Black children in schools and society in western countries

where anti-Blackness is even more pervasive (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022).

In his book chapter,*"Mapping Settler Colonialism and Early Childhood Art"*, Clark (2015) shows how colonial early childhood art is used to portray Indians as a "dying race," then notes how art depicted landscapes with no human traces, hence protecting their illusion of" discovering" these "unoccupied" spaces. White children were depicted as innocent, often in pristine environments (Clark, 2015). Similarly, for generations of young readers of picturebooks, only white children had adventures, were courageous, smart, honest, or imaginative (Bishop, 1990; Larrick, 1965; Nel, 2017). In his book *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?*

Clearly this colonialist tradition remains in contemporary educational and socialization spaces (Nel, 2017). Pervasive depictions of settler-biased perceptions of relationships further perpetuate the persistent dehumanization of indigenous, enslaved peoples, and immigrants (Nxumalo & Ross, 2019; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015). To counter these dehumanizing narratives, Sims Bishop (2012), in her review of influential Black illustrators, pointed out how these authors have set out to dignify images of Black children in picturebooks while also depicting them in all their diversity. Centering Black excellence, joy, resistance, and resilience in picturebooks is critical counter storytelling of Black folk stories (Bishop, 1990; Muhammad, 2020; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022). Cueto and Brooks (2019) went further and did an analysis of picture books of Black illustrators of picturebooks that center Black children. They found that among other considerations, images of the Black protagonist in several of these pro-Blackness children's books are intentionally close-up, vivid, portrayed a confident attitude, a straight look at the reader and an emphasis on the skin complexion and other unique features like Black people's hair. Examples of such books are *I am Enough* by Grace Byers & Keturah Bobo and *An Ode to the Fresh Cut* by Derrick Barnes & Gordon James (Cueto & Brooks, 2019).

Regarding picturebooks set in Africa for Africans, there is a dearth of research in that area, and limited books for children to read (Ntuli, 2011). The first author of this article recalls how most picturebooks they read as children were books of white characters in western settings. As reported by Ntuli in her research on picturebooks in South African, oral tradition was the means through which learning, and culture was transmitted from generation to generation. This entailed folklores, poems and songs. Missionaries and colonizers introduced the concept of the book. On the other hand, anthropological literature about Africa represented the African people's lives inaccurately and was part of the beginnings of the tradition of telling African stories in dehumanizing and inaccurate ways. This tradition of telling

African stories from outsiders' perspective persists (Adichie, 2009).

Much of the relevant literature reviewed on anti and pro-Blackness content in children's books in this article is, therefore, based on work done in the United States. While there is a dearth of relevant research done on books set in Africa, using the prevalent global anti-Blackness as a framework, and literature on picturebooks set in the United States offers a relevant grounding for this work, while also keeping in mind the potential unique impact of colonization on how picture books about Africa and Africans, are constructed (Clark, 2015; Nxumalo & Ross, 2019).

The critique that follows highlights elements of picturebooks set in Africa and their impact on Black immigrant children as well as Black African American children, white children and children of other racial and ethnic groups in the U.S.

Method of Critique

The intention of this paper is to examine three picturebooks set in Africa, to illuminate portrayals of authenticity, accuracy and respect about Africa and Africans. Influenced by the first author's positionality, the authors chose to focus on two picturebooks about Kenya and one on neighboring Tanzania because of its excellence as an example for the critique.

The analysis uses principles of pragmatism as a method for critiquing children's books portraying Black folks. Pragmatism asks critical questions about the meaning of sociopolitical issues, such as race, we ask learners to engage and the consequences of their learning (Glaude, 2007; Lehner-Quam et al., 2017; Woulfe, 2017). Pragmatism can engage us to look deeply into the complex layers of children's books to discern what is accurate and authentic in content and what is responsible and responsive (Ladson-Billings, 2021) in the ways children are asked to engage the content, and lastly, what are possible consequences and for whom (MacMullan, 2022). We reviewed multiple children's books that consistently appeared across multiple online resources from educational association book lists (e.g., National Council for the Social Studies, International Literacy Association) and diversity-oriented book review websites (e.g., Diversity Book Finder) as recommended books about Africans for early learners. Among the 30 books we identified, for the purposes of this paper, we chose four in which the protagonist is a child, and the story is set in rural community life (it is important to note that majority of picturebooks set in Africa and widely available to the American market are set in rural life, making African urban settings potentially assumed to be nonexistent).

We critiqued the three books through the following pragmatic question with particular focus on representations of African peoples, contexts, and lifeways imagining possible pragmatic consequences in reflection of African American, African immigrant, and young white learners.

The question we ask is: Given the power of picturebooks in developing identity and pro/anti-Blackness in young children, how are authenticity, accuracy, and respect for Africa and African people portrayed through picturebooks set in Africa and available to the U.S. population and, how are they used or render themselves as instructional resources for young children? Specific elements examined to determine authenticity, accuracy and respect include: 1) dehumanization in images and storyline, 2) stereotyping & oversimplification of characters and lifeway, 3) othering vs alterity, 4) cultural appropriation vs cultural consciousness, 5) focalization, affect and ambience in images, and authors as cultural insider vs outsider, and author commitment based on notes and biographic information. (Bradford, 2007; Cueto & Brooks, Kaczmarczyk & Adams, 2021; Nel, 2017; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012; Taylor, 2014).

Table 1 below shows the criteria that was used to analyze the books.

We included reviews of the books, online instructional outlines for teachers (e.g., *Teaching Books, Achieve the Core, Teachers Pay Teachers*), and YouTube presentations of the books. We present some possible interpretations of 2 of the 4 books to illustrate an approach to interrogate literature intended to be multicultural and enriching, framed within Blackcrit, anti-Blackness, and (de)colonization concepts. Specific pragmatic orientation offered.

The Critique

For You are a Kenyan Child, written by Kelly Cunnane and illustrated by *Anna* Juan (2006)

First, both the author and illustrator are cultural outsiders. In the author's notes, Cunnane describes the unique context of the Kenyan tribes and languages spoken by the many tribes of Kenya. The book is therefore focusing on an audience outside of Kenya. The book won an Ezra Jack Keats award and had positive reviews in various platforms.

The book is variously described as a fascinating adventure and a sweet, whimsical story of a young boy who wanders his Kenyan village all day long. The prose and illustrations are beautiful, but it is also full of Eurocentric rhetoric. Below are the publishers, Simon & Schuster's (nd), description of the book:

Imagine you live in a small Kenyan village, where the sun rises over tall trees filled with doves. You wake

Table 1 Elements for critiquing the picturebooks about Africa

Themes of Elements of Critique	Negative/undesirable Elements	Positive Elements
Dehumanization in images	1) Animalization/beastalization/exotification Caricature images (e.g., exaggerated, and distorted) 2) Apparent limitation to product of entertainment 3) Unusual and displaced relationships with animals	1) Characters & settings are nuanced and complex 2) Colorful and vivid descriptions 3) Richness in illustration to depict strengths in black culture and other attribute
Stereotyping & oversimplification in Storyline & images	1) Depicting attributes, especially negative) as common by members of a group 2) Deficit depictions 3) Oversimplified & uncritical judgment 4) Devoid of nuance of complexity 5) Characters and settings lacking names	1) Depiction of characters in *naturalistic style* (viewer more likely to engage deeply with character: empathy, identify with their circumstances, etc.) 2) Portrayals of complexity of race & identity 3) Characters named and specificity of setting provided
Othering vs alterity & cultural consciousness Cultural appropriation	1) Othering often includes stereotyping 2) Comparisons made of African vs western cultures simplistically 3) Often Eurocentric and superiority vs inferiority implied	1) Alterity provides room for two truths to co-exist alongside each other 2) Offering respectful and diverse context of African life and people
Focalization, affect & ambience in images	1) No speech or point of view represented). Invisibility, underrepresentation & misrepresented 2) Estrangement & distance with black characters):	1) Focalization, affect, pathos & ambience 2) Visibility, presentation of thoughts and desires of Africans 3) Colorful and vivid descriptions 4) Closeness with black characters): Proximity, positive attitude
Author & Illustrator factors: Insider vs outsider	1) Outsiders often offer a narrow Eurocentric view	1) Insiders tend to write more authentic and accurate books
Author & Illustrator factors: Author's notes & biographical factors	1) Tourist and/or Eurocentric- orientation notes, focusing on differences, othering, and dehumanizing elements	1) States intentionality on amplifying voices, stories, complexities of African peoples

Adapted from: Cueto and Brooks (2019), Kaczmarczyk and Adams (2021), Nel (2017), & Bradford, 2007)

to the sound of a rooster's crow, instead of an alarm clock. Your afternoon snack is a tasty bug plucked from the sky, instead of an apple. And rather than kicking a soccer ball across a field, you kick a homemade ball of rags down a dusty road. But with so much going on around you, it's just as easy for a Kenyan and American child to forget what your mama asked you to do!

Topically, the images are accurate in the sense that they are factually correct. There are Kenyan villages, multi-generational farms, and native flora and fauna as represented in the text and illustrations. Introductions to the book on YouTube presentations as well as online teacher guides immediately approach the book topically: a little Kenyan boy who spends the entire day wandering his village visiting people and animals along the way. Children are asked to imagine they are that Kenyan boy—it is in fact the title of the book.

However, inaccuracies are noticeable. The language, Kiswahili, is mistranslated where *maziwa lala* (buttermilk) is translated literally as "sleeping milk", and *chapati* (a kind of flatbread) is translated as "a pancake". There are obvious

instances of racial, Black stereotypes. Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor (2015), in their focus on unsettling colonialism, talk about the fraught representation of African children's encounters with animals and the reinforcement of fixed self or static culture and other categorical notions of cultural identity. The cover portrays the main character, the boy, riding a cow with a monkey riding on his shoulder. His engagement with animals in the storyline is depicted as parallel to his engagement with people. The representation in this book lends itself to Westernized stereotypical expectations. Novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) explains that when we hear a single story about another person, place, or an entire people, especially one outside of our own experience and worldview, we risk critical misunderstanding. In *For You Are a Kenyan Child,* the risk is apparent. There is no distinction made of the tribe or region of Kenya he lives. Kenya is a highly diverse country with 42 tribes with distinct languages, geographies, histories, and cultures. The portrayal, as we interpret it, is neither accurate nor authentic as a representation of a Kenyan people.

Pedagogically, the story and title, as well as the teacher guides (Atlanta Public Schools, 2021; TeachingBooks, n.d.a) and questions asked on video readings of the book are simplistic and overwhelmingly ask children to compare their experience to the boy's experiences portrayed in the story. The underlying theory with such a task is to connect prior knowledge with novel knowledge. However, when the comparison is a lived experience, lifeways, and culture outside of one's own, it is problematic. The nature of comparison is to find evidence of differences and similarities to form a conclusion, kind of judgment.

Based on the first author's experience and the overwhelming presence of this book in multiple pedagogical and literary platforms online, books like *For You Are a Kenyan Child* are included in the early childhood curriculum under the guise of multiculturalism. Pedagogically, the intent is to include representations of people and places and through reading, children are to respect diversity. The issue arises when the instructional strategies engage children in "imagining" themselves as being an "other." Implicitly in the content of this story, children are to make comparisons, for instance, a bug or an apple for a snack. The title itself prompts such comparison and in the videos, we viewed online, the story was often interrupted to make such comparisons. As the boy moves through the village, one online teacher asks questions like, "Do you have monkeys in your neighborhood?" and with enthusiasm lets out a long and loud, "Euuuu eating a bug for a snack?" The above are perhaps obvious instances of pedagogy and curriculum that are neither responsible nor responsive if the intent of including books about African people and African contexts is to be a window, mirror and sliding door for children.

Replete in the text and as noted in the title itself, children are to imagine they are a Kenyan child as they follow a story about one undistinguished, generalized Kenyan boy in one village. Asking children to imagine that they are a Kenyan child as a literary device undermines children's authentic learning. For children for whom Kenyan peoples are unknown, the only points of comparison children have is their own lived experiences, which can lead them to misunderstandings and distortions perpetuating already entrenched ideas and beliefs about "others." Children are to take the content through a logical transformation to arrive at some point of knowledge or meaning to learn something real about Kenyan "other" people to mature into culturally respectful and literate persons. To ask children to "imagine" a lived experience to which they have no relatable comparison points and to instead create artificial comparison points (e.g. we all have families), is neither responsible nor responsive. Responsible in the sense that children are engaged in learning about the authentic lives of peoples and places outside of their worldview to understand and honor, in this story, a Kenyan people. In the context of this paper, it is not

responsive to African immigrants, African American, nor white children.

A final critique we offer is the manipulation of cultural values and ways of being that are authentic to many Kenyan peoples to serve a storyline that allows the boy, the main character, to take the reader for a" tour" of his village for the reader to learn about Kenyan life. The representation is inaccurate and oversimplified to many Kenyan people. In reality, children take on roles that engage them in tasks through which they learn, among many cultural values and teachings, responsibility for themselves and the welfare of their community. Tending his grandfather's cows is not merely a chore nor because the boy is young, a task that is not real. To use the boy's distraction from his responsibility – an entire day –would have consequences that impact the family livelihood and welfare. It would not have been taken as flippantly as in the book. His neglect would have become a moment of teaching about the consequences of failing one's responsibilities to the family and community.

My Rows and Piles of Coins, written by Towolwa Mollel and illustrated by E. B. Lewis (2019)

The author is from Tanzania and expresses commitment to writing stories that are authentic and that teach children varying cultural backgrounds. In his author notes for this book, he talks about how the story originates from his own childhood growing up in rural Tanzania. The illustrator is a renowned illustrator of over 70 children's books centering the life and culture of Black folk.

The story is about a young boy set in a Tanzanian community. Reviewers of the book describe it as a lively tale of generosity and determination that earn unexpected rewards. The illustrations capture the warmth of Saruni's family and the color and excitement of the Tanzanian market. It is a lovely book that speaks to the African experience in an authentic voice. Like *For You Are a Kenyan Child*, *My Rows and Piles of Coins* portrays a young boy growing up on a multigenerational farm in an African context.

In this book, children hear the main character, Saruni, narrate his own story. Children meet Saruni as a person. In the story, the boy who is 8 years old, lives with his parents and grandparents. He helps his mother sell their produce at the market for which he earns some money. He chooses to save his money so that he may buy a bicycle he can use to help his family transport produce to market. The story takes him around the market where he sees many things he could buy, but he saves his money instead, in a secret box. At home, the boy practices riding his father's bicycle with his father's assistance. There are many details in the story that are accurate to a family's life in Tanzania. The market setting, the clothing worn by the villages, and the reference to the currency as shillings, are accurate. The significance of the bicycle in the story is accurate as in many

places in the world, bicycles are important transportation for work and trade. This story of an African boy and his family is accurately represented and authentically portrays their lives in the nuances of the context in which the story is set.

Many of the teaching guides and reviews of the book highlight elements of the storyline that align with concepts in curriculum for young children. One, for example, focuses on the merits of saving money as both an economic concept and an admirable quality in a person. Other concepts reflect cultural values such as responsibility to family and community. While Saruni earns ten shillings for assisting his mother at market, he is focused on purchasing a bicycle to contribute to the work and welfare of his family. In many African cultures, and among indigenous peoples globally, the individualism that is dominant in capitalism does not exist ((Boutte et al., 2017; King, 2005). Rather the greater good is the community and the individual's relationship with the community is primary and inseparable from leading a good life. In the context of this book, those grounding values and ways of living are significant elements of the story and authentic to much of African cultures.

The story is authentic in the representation of familial relationships which are developed among the characters. Throughout the story Saruni and his parents share a loving and caring relationship. The people and the context of their lives in the book are not exoticized, they are humanized (Nel, 2017.) The illustrations are of contemporary people rather than caricatures. The text and illustrations engage children in a cultural heritage and provide allusions to the values and ways of being of one Tanzanian family (Stephens & McCallum, 1998). There is no false generalization of the family and their life to all Tanzanian peoples. There are no artificial literary devices to manipulate the story; there is no need as the text and illustrations are an accurate and authentic portrayal.

In our reviewing of instructional guides and video readings (e.g., Lincoln Parish 2013; TeachingBooks, n.d.b), we found the instructional strategy of engaging children in comparison persisted. For example, in one video the reader stopped and asked listeners to compare the market to a U.S. grocery store. The pragmatic question here is. "Why?" Such a question again asks children to make a comparison to come to some conclusion which can be misguided and lead children to distorted understanding and perpetuate racist tropes of, in this case, African people. It is difficult to find an authentic and responsive (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) purpose for learning in the above question, if again the intention is for young children to develop cultural competencies and comprehend diversity.

Because *My Rows and Piles of Coins* portrays an African – Tanzanian – family in accurate and authentic ways, the possibilities of engaging children in responsive tasks of authentic learning are myriad. There are several worthy instructional guides that provide positive pedagogical approaches. There

is no instructional value to ask children to compare topical features of the story or ask children what they would do with the money, or to imagine how they would feel when given the bicycle. Rather the substantive elements of the story such as the loving and caring relationships of the family, the cultural values of responsibility to self and community, or the personal qualities of persistence and aspiration are real human experiences. But here too the intent is not to ask children to "pretend" they are someone else or compare their experience to an "other." A responsive and responsible approach guides children into listening to and seeing the boy's experience and his culture in its own terms. Questions to guide children in their learning about the people, culture, and lifeways in the story begin with and build upon the authentic culture and lifeways portrayed in contrast to comparison points from what a perspective is often they are taught. A perspective that privileges its own values, beliefs, and lifeways as it dismisses and denigrates that which is different. Asking children to describe the relationship the boy has with his father, asking children to describe why Sunari does not spend his earnings, or asking students to describe the role the market has in the family's life draw children into the context of lived experience that is not their own in authentic and responsive ways; that is, for children for whom the experience is not theirs. For children who do share the cultural heritage of people portrayed in books such as *My Rows and Piles of Coins,* its accuracy and authenticity can be that affirming mirror through which they know themselves. It can be an affirming experience for African immigrant children when the story that affirms them authentically and responsibly engages African American and white children (all children).

I Love Ugali and Sukuma Wiki, Written, and Illustrated *by* Kwame Nyong'o (2013)

In the author notes of "I love Ugali and Sukuma Wiki"*,* Nyong'o, referring to his 3-book picturebook series writes: "By revealing some of the multitudes of authentic and uplifting narratives from today's continent, these children's books are a great way for young people to embrace African culture".

The main character Akiki is an 8-year-old Kenyan boy who engages in very typical day to day activities of a child in a Kenyan village and enjoys eating a very country-wide common meal of *ugali* and *sukuma wiki* (cornmeal and collard greens). The book is described among several sites:

> The story brings to life the world of one energetic Kenyan boy, Akiki, and his love for his favorite food… Set in western Kenya, where the sun dances with Africa's largest lake to create the most incredible sunsets, Akiki's carefree life faces the challenge of personal responsibility.

Kwame Nyong'o is a cultural insider who is very intentional in representing real and typical experiences of Kenyan children. The storyline is underpinned with many nuances accurate to life in a Kenya community. People are depicted in actual activities such as soccer, gardening, cooking. There are elements in the story that reveal the setting's Western Kenya location. The portrayal of the people and Kenyan culture in the story are not exoticized (Bradford, 2007; Nel, 2017). There are for instance, no random animals to stereotypically "Africanize" the story or use images that perpetuate inaccurate and inauthentic content to children. With the accurate and authentic representation of a Kenya family, the instruction is considered responsive and responsible. As curriculum, the book offers a mirror that is affirming to African, particularly East African, immigrant children, as well as being a window for children that do not have experience with the culture and lifeways. Strongest among the 3 books we critique, *I Love Ugali and Sukuma Wiki,* is potentially a sliding door according to Bishop's (1990) categorization. There are potentially relatable elements included in the story such as the enjoyment of a favorite food and the anticipation of a birthday celebration without distorting the underlying culture of the Kenyan family. Throughout the story are distinguishable cultural elements such as language and food. The storyline draws upon *ugali* and *sukama* wiki, to draw children into deeper aspects of the culture in a responsible way. This story is not the "food, holidays, and heroes" curriculum that is found so often in early childhood curriculum.

In this book, the familial relationships are represented authentically, reflected in the relationship between the boy and his grandmother. That the grandmother teaches him how to garden, harvest, and prepare food and other roles and responsibilities, is characteristic in Black cultures. The sense of belonging is strongly portrayed. That the young boy begins to assume responsibility for family and community are authentic in the story, including living a good life within the community.

For the Kenyan immigrant child, the family is likely to have *ugali* and *sukuma wiki* in their diet in America. Further, the book will be inviting enough to persuade Kenyan parents to share their culture in an American classroom. This would be supported by the recipe that is included in the book and offers an opportunity to show children where Kenya is situated.

In reviewing multiple sites offering instructional strategies, some ask children to pretend they are Kenyan or compare how they celebrate birthdays. Again, such comparisons are inauthentic and the potential for children to draw distortions and inaccurate understanding is high. Such strategies also miss the possibilities of children experiencing authentic learning and perspective.

The story lends itself to activities that engage young children in experiencing the food. And engaging in more complex ideas about the relationship of foods and cultural traditions and lifeways such as the traditional way of eating a meal with ugali. Such instruction is authentic and responsible. It is important to note that instructional guides for *I Love Ugali and Sukuma Wiki* do not appear in the popular reading guides, however, the YouTube read aloud by Story time with Mrs Ndungu (2021) offers a guide that offers children an opportunity have positive and accurate picture of the Kenyan experience presented in the book.

Conclusion

In this conceptual paper we explored an alternative lens of critiquing picturebooks set in Africa grounded in the global sociopolitical issue of anti-Blackness (Dumas & Ross, 2016) to appropriately inform pedagogy in early childhood education. We situated the paper within the frameworks of BlackCrit and racial and ethnic socialization, with books being seen as a socialization agent. We selected picturebooks set in Africa as the target of the critique, drawing upon principles of pragmatism (MacMullan, 2022) as the method for the critique. For the 3 books we selected to review, we ensured they had a similar setting—a rural community- and a young child as a protagonist.

In two of the books, we identified elements in the texts and illustrations that supported positive portrayals of African cultures and lifeways, reflective of responsive and responsible portrayals of Blackness. The two books had nuanced contexts in which the protagonists, their experiences, and surroundings were authentic, accurate, and respectful. Additionally, relationships and complex emotional expressions were present and relatable to children in the United States and other contexts where the books can be shared to develop children's cultural competency and pro-Blackness attitudes. On the other hand, the other book we critiqued was problematic in that it fostered "othering" and was disrespectful in character, setting and overall cultural portrayals. This included dehumanization, exotification, and the pointless addition of animals as part of the setting (Bishops, 2012; Cueto & Brooks, 2019). Unfortunately, anti-Black books affect Black, white and all other children alike. Conversely, good books give hope for transforming the world into an antiracist place by engaging young children with respectful, authentic, and accurate representations of Black folks. Teachers and parents have a responsibility of using appropriate pedagogical strategies when sharing these books with children. Based on our analysis of online resources like Teachingbooks, achievethecore.org, youtube read-alouds and other teacher support forums of the books we examined, we are far from successfully passing on positive messages to the impressionable young children through picturebooks.

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