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A Tale of Three Histories: Picturebooks that Represent Differing Views of America

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Abstract

Current debates in the United States around book accessibility and school curriculum regulation reflect differing understandings of the essence of American history and identity. These understandings can be exemplified in elementary school instructional materials, including picturebooks. In this study, I examined three popular history-themed picturebooks that could be used in elementary classroom instruction. While I selected the texts based on immediately recognizable differences, I used qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) to conduct a systematic investigation of the messages of each. While all analyzed books were structured in ways that would make them conducive to classroom instruction, I identified distinct approaches to United States history based on my observations. Framing the discussion in previous scholarship related to approaches to history instruction, master narrative, and patriotism as a theme driving elementary social studies education, my interpretation of the data yielded three categories of perspective: glorious past, inclusive patriotic, and transformative. Examples from each analyzed book illustrate fundamental distinctions of these approaches. Yet, I note, the categories are not entirely mutually exclusive. Discussion following the analysis results suggests implications for elementary school instruction. I also offer insights on how the study might contribute to the larger approach to reconciling narratives that divide the nation.

Keywords: American history, elementary education, master narrative, picturebooks, qualitative content analysis

A 2023 story of books challenged in a Miami-Dade County, Florida K-8 school appeared in news sources across the United States. Amanda Gorman's (2021) poem "The Hill We Climb" was among four challenged texts that were promptly removed from the elementary school library to a middle school resource center (Rose & Levenson, 2023). Interestingly, another removed book titled *The ABCs of Black History* (Cortez, 2020) appeared to belong a genre common to books designed particularly for elementary school students. I was curious to learn more about this book and why it had been called into question.

Based on the information available, it seems that the *ABCs of Black History* (Cortez, 2020) was challenged due to the complainant's perspective that it promoted "CRT" (an acronym for Critical Race Theory) and "Gender Ideology" (Feinstein, 2023). Use of the term *CRT*, a framework through which systemic racism can be understood, has also surfaced in other challenges and debates related to history curriculum (Russell, 2023; The Editorial Board, 2023).

While this was a localized challenge, picturebooks are among resources being challenged and

removed from school library shelves and classrooms across the country (Pendharkar, 2023). According to Pen America (Meehan & Friedman, 2023), book bans in schools, which have increased by 33% in the past year, most frequently target books with themes related to race or racism and books that include LGBTQ+ characters. Cortez' book fits into both categories, though race is clearly the more prominent theme.

Teachers who incorporate picturebooks in history instruction have a vested interest in moving beyond the culture war rhetoric where labels are quickly assigned to explore the prominent and latent messages conveyed in books that they adopt for classroom use. Books that present aspects of American history carry particular views of national identity and convey messages to students about who is included in and excluded from significant historical narratives. I suggest that conflicts over history-themed picturebooks, as well as other resources that might be used in history instruction, are grounded in differing historical narratives and perspectives of national identity. Gaining insights on American history and identity from contemporary history-themed picturebooks may give insights into some of these differences. In this article, I explore three picturebooks through the lens of an educator, identifying attributes of these books that reveal perspectives on what it means to be American and how the stories they tell (and do not tell) and the people they represent contribute to this sense of identity.

Literature Review

Approaches to History in Education

There is a wealth of thought about the aims of and approaches to history instruction schools. Endacott et al. (2020) expanding on Seixas' (2000) discussion of orientations from which history is taught, considered the approaches of collective memory, disciplinary history, sociocultural history, and added the fourth possibility of postmodern/critical history. Two of these are particularly important in this study. The common collective memory approach suggests that there is a body of knowledge that informs an understanding of a collective *we* (for example, referencing identity as Americans). A critical history orientation delves into historiography, questioning ways that historical accounts have been generated with a specific concern about power dynamics (Endacott et al., 2020).

Stuteville and Johnson (2016), analyzing the social studies standards of five states, note how specific standards reflect perspectives on what it means to be a good citizen. An assimilation perspective, more represented in the social studies standards of some states than others, coincides with a collective memory approach that promotes national unity. Master narratives are central to history instruction that is oriented toward assimilation. Master narratives are stories that have power to shape and sustain collective national identity (van Alphen & Carretero, 2015; Heller, 2005). Van Alphen and Carretero suggest three ways master narratives are constructed: identification of past with present (for example, perceiving an essential sameness between American revolutionaries and present selves as Americans), idealization of the past wherein mythologized historical figures possess archetypal qualities, and teleological construction that uses later outcomes to make sense of historical events. For some scholars, the term *master narrative* implies national mythology used to mischaracterize acts of resistance so that

stories of events and people that could run counter to national myths are rather used to reinforce them. An example would be the inclusion of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks among heroic patriots, ignoring their messages and actions that challenged American master narratives (Frost, 2012; Woodson, 2017).

The Use of Picturebooks in Teaching History

Picturebooks offer powerful options for elementary history instruction. While definitions of picturebooks vary, the picturebook is distinct from other books in that it is a form of art where words and images are integrated (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2017; Oberman, 2023). Use of the one-word label *picturebook* is based on a growing body of scholarship that highlights unique characteristics of the genre (Pantaleo, 2008). Von Merveldt (2017) discusses ways that picturebooks can blur lines between formats and genres. For example, a book may combine elements of fiction and non-fiction or may convey factual information in poetic form. As such, analyses of picturebooks must be attentive to text, image, and their interaction (Wee et al., 2015).

According to Forsyth (2023) picturebooks can be particularly effective in helping students gain historical perspective as the multi-modal nature of the books can make historical contexts more accessible to students than can text alone. Visual features that are useful in history instruction such as maps and diagrams can enhance the educational possibilities that picturebooks offer (von Merveldt, 2017). Picturebooks can also help students build empathy because they allow readers to enter the worlds of others, seeing situations from the viewpoints of less familiar people groups (Forsyth, 2023). Presenting a meta-synthesis of studies, Oberman (2023) found that picturebooks were used educationally to activate student thinking, serve as mentor reference points in ongoing inquiry, and supply information. Researchers perceive picturebooks to be useful in educational settings because they are sophisticated forms of communication that are simultaneously navigable by students (Oberman, 2023).

The Power of Books in Classroom Libraries in History Instruction

State standards for social studies education and elementary textbooks tend to reinforce a master narrative centered in the traditional demographics of power (Busey & Walker, 2017; King & Swartz, 2014). However, classroom libraries ideally offer educators opportunities to avail students of counter narratives and texts that reflect human diversity (Howlett & Young, 2019). One benefit of a quality classroom library is that, when undergirded by student interest, voluntary reading yields several benefits for academic achievement (Bishop, 2011). In addition to facilitating independent student exploration, a classroom library provides rich resources for shared literacy experiences including book clubs, read alouds, and guided reading—any of which can be a context for critical conversation (Wood & Jocius, 2013). I suggest that there can be a reciprocal relationship between the classroom library and whole-class or small group instruction, as students can help select materials for shared literacy experiences and those experiences may catalyze student interest for further exploration in the library.

The discussion about classroom libraries is pertinent to this study because well-curated libraries expand options for exploration of history while offering creative ways to tie learning

beyond the traditional curriculum to state social studies standards. For example, the Kentucky Academic Standards for Social Studies for grades two through five calls for achievement in asking compelling questions as well as identifying supporting questions, identifying cause and effect relationships, effectively working with primary and secondary sources, and constructing explanations (Kentucky Department of Education, 2019). Features in history themed picturebooks such as timelines, excerpts from primary sources, author notes that explain research methods, and backmatter that provides additional historical information would be very useful in constructing lessons that address these standards.

Theoretical Framework

History is central to present identity formation including national identity. History education is, therefore, often considered by political leaders to be instrumental in forming patriotism in students (Nash et al., 2000). This study is grounded in the theory that presentations of American history are as much about the meaning of present national culture, along with prospects and fears for the future, as about past events that inform these presentations (Apple, 2001). As demonstrated by previous studies, inductive research in children's picturebooks can reveal understandings about cultural perspectives as well as offer insights to practitioners, such as teachers, for whom the research is most pertinent (Torres, 2016; Wee et al., 2015).

Significance of the Study

As opposed to using a top-down approach that categorizes material based on assumptions about perspectives of American history, I wanted to interpret these perspectives based on evidence found in authentic examples. My primary research question was: Considering themes of demographic representation, contextual selection of material, and statements and symbols pertaining to national identity, what does each book convey about the story and identity of America?

Methods

I conducted this study using qualitative content analysis to examine selected history-themed picturebooks (Schreier, 2012, 2014). The qualitative content analysis approach has been used with other studies examining children's literature (Darragh & Kelley, 2022; Hayden & Prince, 2023). I used a hierarchical coding frame with each category and subcategory designed to help create a robust response to the research question. Qualitative content analysis allows for flexibility in revising subcategories to accommodate observations and for reconsideration of interpretations based on discovery during the process (Krippendorff, 2019; Schreier, 2012). This must be the case since data (in this case, what is found in each picturebook) is used to construct understandings.

Selection of Books

In addition to *The ABCs of Black History* (Cortez, 2020), mentioned in the introduction, I located two picturebooks that, based on online reviews and recommendations, seemed popular with

educators: *Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Méndez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation* (Tonatiuh, 2014) and *Revolutionary Friends: General George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette* (Castrovilla, 2013). My basic criteria for selection included confirming that each text: a) was non-fiction and directly addressed historical topics related to America, b) evidenced historical scholarship in its creation, and c) contained features that would make it conducive to exploration of history in an elementary classroom (e.g., timeline or primary source material). All selected books were published in the past ten years (2013-2023). I looked at book descriptions and located online videos featuring readings of each book to ensure that the selections would give rich exploration opportunities. I then obtained copies—two by purchase and one by library loan.

Description of Revolutionary Friends: General George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette

Castrovilla's (2013) book, illustrated by D. Kozjan, was listed among examples of complex texts for third graders in *Florida's B.E.S.T. Standards English Language Arts* and again in the same document on a "Civic Literacy Reading List" (Florida Department of Education, 2020; pp. 155, 168). Among other recognitions, this book appears on the Reading Rockets (2023) themed booklist titled, "From the American Revolution to a New Nation." The picturebook focuses on the relationship between mentor President George Washington and the young Lafayette who has made his way from France to the American colonies to assist with the Revolution. Though the story leaves off in a hospital room after Lafayette is wounded in a battle that the colonists lost, the triumph seems to be Lafayette's survival after an act of bravery and the opportunity for his friendship with Washington to continue (Castrovilla, 2013).

The picturebook's backmatter contains additional historical information, timelines of the lives of Washington and Lafayette, a bibliography with primary and secondary sources, and a list of translated French phrases used in the text (Castrovilla, 2013). In addition to the main narrative and full-page color illustrations, excerpts from the writings of Lafayette are scattered throughout the book. The book contains some challenging vocabulary. The word *ravenous*, for example, is used to describe Washington's officers at one point in the narrative (Castrovilla, 2013, p. 26). The surrounding text, in a manner common to educational materials prepared for elementary students, provides a direct context clue to the word's meaning. The term *despotism* is used in the history presented in the book's backmatter—students would likely need an outside resource to find the meaning (Castrovilla, 2013, p. 29). Upper elementary students could engage with this book independently.

Description of Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation

Separate is Never Equal..., written and illustrated by Tonatiuh (2014), tied for fifth place among the most banned picturebooks in the US for the 2021-2022 school year according to PEN America (Tolin, 2023). It was the top book on this list that met the criteria for the present study. Conversely, among other accolades, the picturebook was a 2015 Américas Book Award winner (Dillon, 2015). It depicts the challenges that Sylvia Méndez and her siblings faced after their family attempted to enroll them in school in Westminster, California in 1944 (Tonatiuh, 2014).¹

Sylvia’s father, Gonzalo, was a United States citizen who was born in Mexico. Her mother, Felícita, was born in Puerto Rico (Tonatiuh, 2014). Sylvia’s family was told by the principal of Westminster School, the Superintendent of Schools, and the local school board that the children would need to attend what they called the “Mexican school” (Tonatiuh, 2014, p. 9). The book follows the history of Gonzalo Méndez’ attempts at grassroots organization and eventual court cases that resulted in a victory for school desegregation in California in 1947— seven years before the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court decision.

Tonatiuh (2014) has a unique style of character depiction—cut-out like figures are situated in front of spacious shaded backgrounds. The back matter of the book includes an author’s note that provides additional historical context to the case and the highlights information about the lives of central characters. It also includes a glossary, bibliography, index, and information about how the author conducted research. Tonatiuh drew his information from personal conversations with Sylvia Méndez and he also directly used material from court transcripts. This information might all be helpful in classroom instruction as an educator could use it in a lesson on methods of historical research. The glossed vocabulary includes several words that relate to legal proceedings such as *court of appeals* and *ruling*, terms related to education systems such as *school board*, and the cultural word *trenza* (hair braid; Tonatiuh, 2014, p. 38). Second grade students may be able to read this book independently.

Description of The ABCs of Black History

Cortez’ book (2020), illustrated by L. Semmer, takes a poetic approach to presenting several historical figures who are Black. It is on the 2021 Skipping Stones Honor Awards List. The picturebook presents a broad but interconnected approach to African American history. As indicated by the title, the presentation follows letters of the alphabet, sharing concepts, places, holidays, and items of material culture that begin with each alphabetic letter—in some cases only one term is explored while several are presented in others. The backmatter of this book, titled

¹ I have included the acute accent mark where appropriate when referencing family names though these are not used in the picturebook.

“Terms and Figures” (Cortez, 2020, pp. 52-63), contains additional information for the items presented with each letter. The level of knowledge shared far exceeds what one might expect from a picturebook. While some of the illustrations depict people or creatively convey a concept, a few could be used as helpful educational features. For example, the term *diaspora* is accompanied by a map that could be used to illustrate the contextual meaning of the term and the historical process it denotes (Cortez, 2020, pp. 8-9). Cortez uses a pictorial timeline to present the life of Malcolm X (pp. 48-49). While the format of this book is like other picturebooks that are commonly used in lower grades, upper elementary students would find this book both engaging and challenging.

Coding the Texts and Presenting the Findings

All material in each selected book was included in the coding process. To address the research question, I developed the categories and subcategories displayed in Table 1. In some

cases, decisions had to be made about how to code particular findings (specific rules are discussed in the following category descriptions). For ease of access and comparison between books, I presented the quantitative demographic data in chart format (Figures 1-4). Findings related to symbols and statements about America were subject to interpretation. Based on accepted methods for qualitative content analysis, I summarized these findings and presented relevant quotes and examples in continuous text format (Schreier, 2012). The latter findings are presented by case (picturebook) because the categorized units of each book are interrelated and must be used cohesively to interpret perspective.

As an example of subcategory revision, I ultimately combined the subcategories of *Asian* and *other/unclear* under one label (*other/unclear*) because of the low number of representations of people of Asian heritage and the fact that these characters, only present as illustrations, played minor roles in one text. The texts did not mention people of races or ethnicities not addressed in Table 1, though an additional illustration in Tonatiuh's (2014) picturebook was coded in the other/unclear category.

Rules for Coding Gender Representations

In the texts, the gender presentations of characters were mostly easy to interpret. In cases where an easy inference could not be made, I coded the representation as an unclear representation. I only included male and female gender categories because there were no non-binary characters identified or depicted in the selected books. Text references and pictorial representations were counted differently. Only one entry was coded for each character that was mentioned multiple times in the text. Two of the books focused on a few specific historical figures. The Cortez (2020) text, on the other hand, mentioned multiple historical figures. I followed the same rule for coding text references in this picturebook, but additionally compared interesting differences in frequency for figures who appeared multiple times. These comparisons can be found in the written summaries of coding for this book.

Because it was at points difficult to determine which pictorial representations were intended to depict specific named characters, it seemed more helpful to simply count all relevant illustrations with no regard to repeated character representation. I counted each illustration of a person who presented as female then each illustration of a person who presented as male. The goal in coding the gender demographics represented in text and by graphic illustration was the same—I wanted to determine the relative balance of gender representation within each picturebook. All mentions and representations on the cover page and in the body of the text as well as those in the backmatter of each picturebook were counted and coded.

Table 1*Coding Categories and Subcategories*

| Categories | Subcategories | |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| Demographics Represented | Text | Graphic |
| | Gender: Male/Female | Male/Female/ Unclear Representation |
| | Race: African American (Black)/ Asian/Hispanic/White (non-Hispanic)/Other/Unclear | African American (Black)/ Asian/Hispanic/White (non-Hispanic)/Other/Unclear Representation |
| Statements about America | Text Positive/Negative/Neutral | |
| Symbols of America | Text | Graphic |
| | Positive/Negative/Neutral | Positive/Negative/Neutral |
| Contextual Inclusion in Narrative | Text | Graphic |
| | Inaccurate Not Included | Inaccurate |

Rules for Coding Race Representation

The context of the narratives included information to identify the race of most characters mentioned. As the three books were nonfiction historical text, I was able to easily research named characters whose race was not clarified in the text or by observing connected pictorial representations of these characters. The illustrations in each book included characters who were described in the narratives as well as unnamed images. Several depictions of characters that made up crowds were not apparently intended to represent known historical figures. In some cases, people were not represented with whole images, or they were faintly colored to create the effect of distance. I counted these representations as unclear.

I used the context of each book to determine terminology. For example, Cortez (2020) included Queens from African nations in an illustration (pp. 34-35). It was clear that the author and illustrator intended to show continuity between these figures and more recent people in African American history. Following the author's terminology, I included the term *Black* in my coding, though for the purpose of discussion comparing picturebooks, I included this term under the same subheading as African American representations. Also based on the clear intents of Cortez, I considered people in her book known to have multiracial heritage as Black for coding purposes.

Many of the characters that Tonatiuh (2014) presented had roots in Mexico. However, a prominent character was from Puerto Rico. As segregation of people with Spanish-speaking heritage is a theme in the book, I distinguished Hispanic characters from non-Hispanic White characters.

Rules for Coding Statements about America and Written Symbolic References

I noted each statement that either directly referenced America as a nation or in which an evaluation of America (its history, character, cause, etc.) could be clearly inferred. I also noted named symbols—these are items or ideas known to stand for America. Examples might include an iconic American document or a character trait that an author clearly implied was exemplary of the American spirit. Because subjective contextual judgements were necessary for coding these references, I described each unit in my findings. I also included rationale for considering positive, negative, or simply informative (neutral) uses of the symbols and statements.

Rules for Coding Graphic Symbols of America

I considered American flags and any clearly depicted elements of the flag (for example stars used as emblems or in decorative ways where the intention was obviously patriotic) to be symbols of America. I looked for other known symbols, making judgements as necessary based on unique contextual circumstances. I described these cases in the summary sections of the findings with justification for each inclusion.

Rules for Coding Contextually Inaccurate Excluded History

Judging inaccuracies and missing histories involved the most subjective aspect of coding because I used external research to fill in what was omitted from the picturebooks' narratives, making decisions on what the authors might have done differently. While this is novel to content analysis, my theory is that the authors made conscious choices about what aspects of each narrative to include. For two picturebooks, I only coded negative examples (inaccurate and excluded). Cortez' (2020) picturebook required an additional approach because it presented multiple historical figures and narratives. In this case, there were interesting comparisons between histories that received robust coverage and those that, surprisingly, did not.

Findings

Demographic Representations

The demographic representations in each book are compared in the charts that follow (see Figures 1-4). The comparisons are presented in percentages because I wanted to capture the way proportional representations varied between texts. Figure 1 compares pictorial representations of characters in each book by gender. Figure 2 compares the numbers of individual male and female characters referenced in each text. Figure 3 compares the pictorial representations of people different races that were depicted in each picturebook. Figure 4 compares the racial demographics of individuals mentioned in the text of each picturebook.

Findings in *Revolutionary Friends: General George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette*

Additional Demographic Observations

In every illustration but one, the men in Castrovilla’s (2013) book are dressed well. Their roles appear to be important and honorable (for example, members of Congress and officers accompanying Washington, and soldiers). There are five pictures of White women. One of these women is pictured in the City Tavern carrying a what appears to be a roast turkey. Others are cheering male soldiers marching in a parade past them. The parade picture additionally includes what appears to be an African American woman waving out of a window. The illustrations clearly show women in roles that are subservient to the men. Castrovilla only named two characters individually—Washington and Lafayette. Correlating with the pictures, general groups such as the British (soldiers) are named and a doctor is mentioned by profession but is not personally named (Castrovilla, 2013, pp. 14, 29). All named groups were historically limited to men.

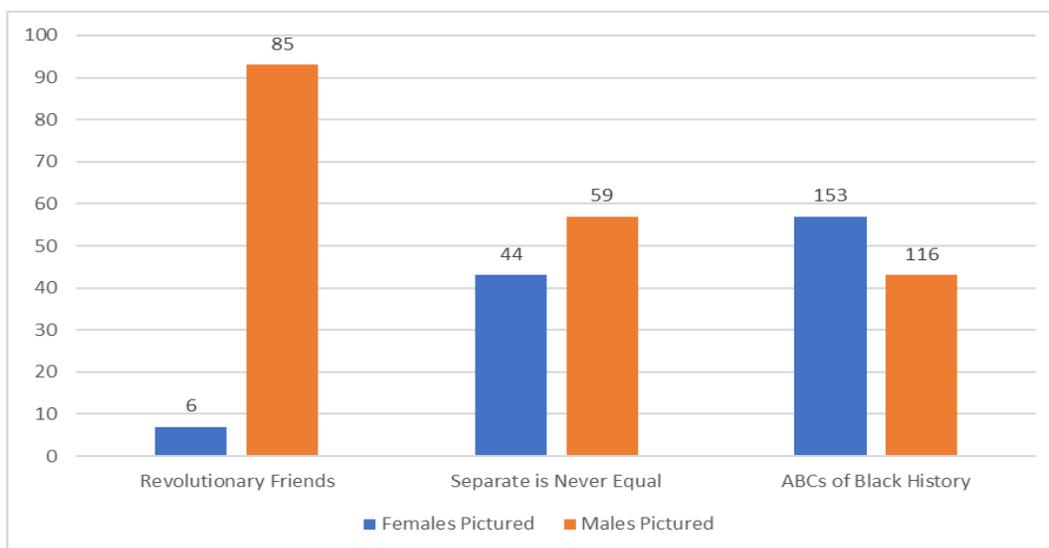
Symbols and Statements Related to America

The title page features a symbol of America—an illustration of a bald eagle perched just below portraits of George Washington and Marquis de Lafayette—that seems to announce the patriotic vision of the book. When Lafayette had arrived in America, in the text, he thought, “What a thrill to dine at City Tavern, among American patriots he so admired” (Castrovilla, 2013, p. 3). This positive theme of admiration continues throughout the book. As Lafayette is the central protagonist, his views of America seem to be very influential. Lafayette’s thoughts are described like this: “He had always felt a call to glory. His heart enlisted when he learned of America’s struggle” (Castrovilla, 2013, p. 4).

Though Lafayette was certain, in the text, of his desire to lead American troops, Congress is depicted as being uncertain of Lafayette. Castrovilla (2013) reported, however, that “Still, it was in America’s best interest to invite Lafayette into Washington’s military family” (p. 9).

Figure 1

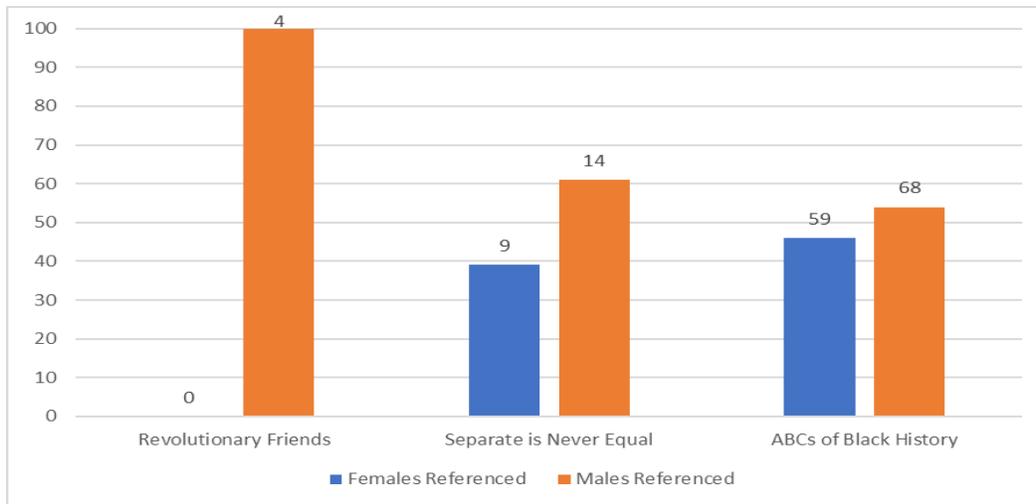
Comparison of Pictorial Depictions by Gender in Each Analyzed Text



Note. The number of occurrences for each category is displayed as the data label above the corresponding bar.

Figure 2

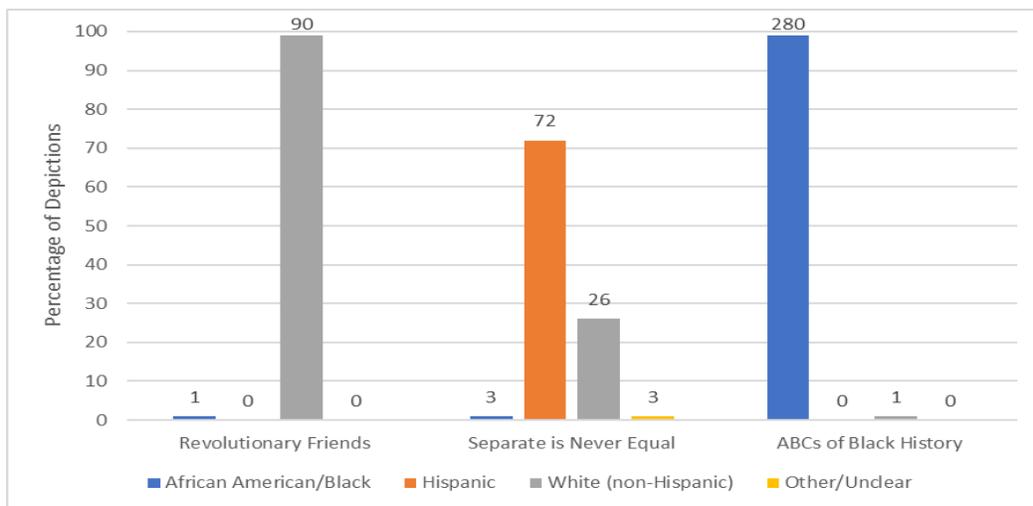
Comparison of Text References by Gender in Each Analyzed Text



Note. The number of occurrences for each category is displayed as the data label above the corresponding bar.

Figure 3

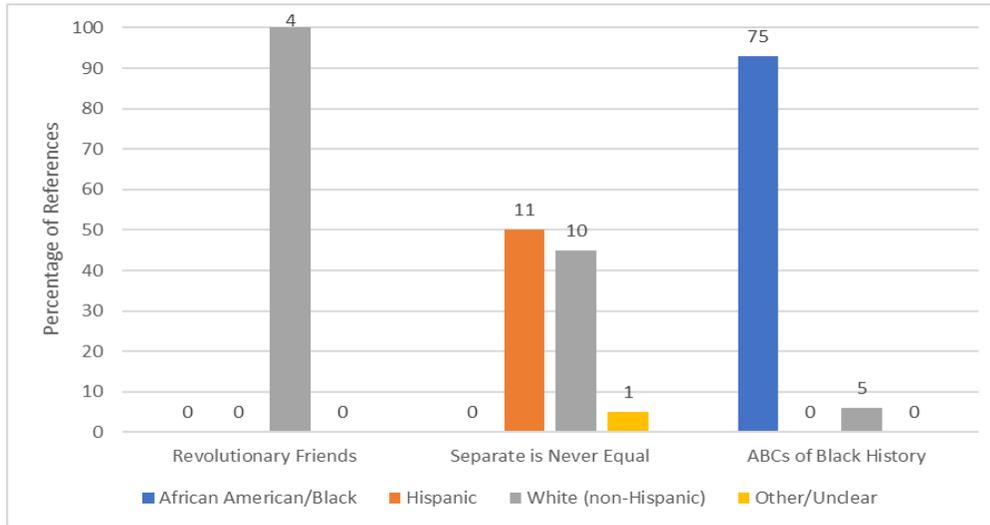
Comparison of Pictorial Depictions by Race in Each Analyzed Text



Note. The number of occurrences for each category is displayed as the data label above the corresponding bar.

Figure 4

Comparison of Text References by Race in Each Analyzed Text



Note. The number of occurrences for each category is displayed as the data label above the corresponding bar.

From this point in the book forward, a subplot centers on Lafayette’s efforts to prove himself. This theme can be observed as Castrovilla states that Lafayette “...studied English while on the rough sea. He adored America” (p.10). The statements are not only intended to be positive toward the idea of America, but they also begin to paint a picture of expected American characteristics—here, speaking English is uplifted.

One problem is encountered when Lafayette accompanies Washington on a review of the troops. The mood shared in this context seems negative. According to Castrovilla (2013), the sight was, “An embarrassment! Eleven thousand ill-armed, barely clothed men who did not look ready to fight” (p. 12). While this passage could be viewed as merely informative, I believe that the passage functions in a way that makes a mythologized American character—the soldiers were an embarrassment specifically because they were not well dressed, well-armed, or prepared to fight. Two flags are depicted in the picture accompanying this text. One is an American (Betsy Ross) flag and the other is the Gadsen—*don’t tread on me*—flag (Castrovilla, 2013, p. 13). These flags seem to function as positive symbols of a truer character of America amid a bleak historical moment.

As the text presents the story, Washington easily saves the day. With British troops on the way, Washington proposes a “parade through the streets” of Philadelphia in order to “raise spirits” (Castrovilla, 2013, p. 17). The accompanying illustrations feature an American flag waving high in front of a line of now well-clad instrument and weapon-bearing soldiers. Excited onlookers wave joyfully (Castrovilla, 2013, p. 17). The triumphal patriotic display is clearly intended to be positive.

Though Lafayette, toward the conclusion of the book, has not been given the opportunity to command forces, a situation with distressed American troops at Brandywine causes Washington to

personally authorize Lafayette to proceed. The following seems to be a statement about America because it reinforces the theme of character: “The marquis could get himself killed! But he looked so excited to prove himself” (Castrovilla, 2013, p. 20). On the pages that follow, the American flag is again in the foreground, this time as the soldiers return to battle “Sparked by Lafayette’s courage” (Castrovilla, 2013, pp. 21-22).

Inaccuracies and Excluded History

One notable inaccuracy in *Revolutionary Friends...* concerns prominent illustrations of what is known as the Betsy Ross flag (Castrovilla, 2013, pp. 11, 15, 21). While some have argued that this flag was first carried at Brandywine, recent scholarship would indicate that this was unlikely (Harris, 2014). Even if American flags were available to the infantries at this time, displaying one in the manner depicted in the battle scene would have drawn unwanted attention to soldiers. There is no primary source documentation of the American flag’s presence at this battle nor in the march through Philadelphia. According to Harris, infantries did possess flags, but these came in a variety of designs and colors. The flag we recognize as the first American flag was first used on naval vessels (Harris, 2014). This inaccuracy is interesting because the use of a patriotic symbol that readers recognize (much like the eagle on the title page) connects the book’s historical figures and military images with a sentimental patriotism.

The frequent display of Lafayette’s memoirs (e.g. Castrovilla, 2013, p. 3) is complicated by the fact that many of his writings from the time of Revolution were destroyed—he later rewrote them (Bowers, 2019). According to Bowers, the later edits were made to suit the sensitivities of some readers and his family. Since the excerpts were likely included to give elementary students experience with primary sources, a deeper dive would have made for interesting discussion on authenticity of sources and the work of historians.

If Lafayette’s relationship with Washington, and other American founders, over a longer period of time were discussed, Lafayette’s abolitionist beliefs surely would have surfaced. Lafayette campaigned for a gradualist approach—strangely at one point by owning a plantation with enslaved people in what is now French Guiana (Trull, 2023). Lafayette apparently had the goal of modeling humane treatment of enslaved people with eventual liberation (Trull, 2023). But in the Castrovilla (2013) text, the horrible reality of American slavery is hidden. In the first memoir excerpt in the book, Lafayette attributes his journey to America as his own flight of what he labeled *slavery*—the conditions in France at the time (Castrovilla, 2013, p. 3). In the back matter, Lafayette is quoted as calling the French Bastille, that he had demolished, as a “fortress of despotism” (Castrovilla, 2013, p. 28). It seems odd to promote Lafayette’s vision of freedom from tyranny in France while completely omitting the more terrifying tyranny of slavery that Lafayette would have seen all around him as he formed close connections with slave holders in America.

Perspective on American History

Castrovilla’s (2013) book holds to a very traditional form of the American master narrative in representation and in retelling a piece of the nation’s origin myth. Some might find value in the intercultural exchange between the colonists and a Frenchman. In the contemporary American

classroom, though, it is most likely that French heritage would be a form of symbolic ethnicity. The idea of European privilege, in any case, is clear—Lafayette’s background afforded the opportunity to begin his American experience among the elite. Inclusion of Black patriotism would have been a historically authentic option for this book, minimally finding representation in illustrations of soldiers or parade watchers (Gilbert, 2012). The near absence of women (of any ethnicity and race that would have been historically present) and of Native American groups and individuals is also telling. In a sense, though, there is something very accurate about Castrovilla’s (2013) representation of Revolutionary America. There is no pretense, for the sake of contemporary readers, that the people not represented were considered important in places of power.

Revolutionary Friends (Castrovilla, 2013) contains messages about prized American characteristics. Wealth is compared to poverty with contrasted scenes of poorly clothed men in despair and well-dressed men and women on a glorious occasion. Bravery and friendship are the values exalted throughout the text. Though the book introduces several French phrases, learning English seems to be an admirable quality.

The picturebook contains no criticism of Washington, Lafayette, American society of the period, nor the Revolutionary War (Castrovilla, 2013). This is a hero tale—the cause is assumed just and the actions noble. This exemplifies what Waters (2005) refers to as the *glorious past*—a history that justifies the present through a telling that glosses over extreme contradictions. Attention cannot be given to flaws of the heroes who are meant to serve as near-perfected models that are always beyond reach (van Alphen & Carretero, 2015).

Findings in *Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family’s Fight for Desegregation*

Additional Demographic Observations

The issue of terminology for racial demographic representation is complicated in Tonatiuh’s (2014) text because, while racial perceptions by non-Hispanic Whites was a major factor in segregating California schools, people with Hispanic heritage were legally deemed White and identified as such. The book deals with the fact that among the people with Hispanic heritage there were different skin complexions. I chose to use the term *Hispanic* as a demographic category because of the common thread among the Méndez family’s community was descent from Spanish-speaking countries (e.g., Mexico and Puerto Rico).

Symbols and Statements Related to America

A drawing of Sylvia Méndez on the title page depicts her with stars above and stripes below—a clear indication of the book’s patriotic flavor (Tonatiuh, 2014, p. 1). American flags are included in illustrations on two other pages. One of these is outside of the courthouse where lawyer David Marcus is headed to file a lawsuit on behalf of the Méndez family and other families who have joined the case against segregated schools (Tonatiuh, 2014, p. 23). The other is inside of a court room (Tonatiuh, 2014, p. 25). Aside from the fact that flags are typically displayed in government buildings, the function of the symbol seems to be to convey the idea that justice in America can be achieved through the legal system. The book’s title serves in a similar function, alluding, in the American psyche, to the landmark *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954)

Supreme Court case that was influenced by the Méndez case.

In *Separate is Never Equal...*, Tonatiuh (2014) seems to associate the idea of America with traditional middle-class norms. Though the first statement regarding Sylvia's identity as an American is about legal citizenship: "She was not Mexican—she was American," it was followed by the statement, "She spoke perfect English" (Tonatiuh, 2014, p. 9). The idea of belonging at (what was considered) the White public school based on language and attire were reiterated throughout the book. In another example of an ideal of American character, Mr. Estrada, a man whose family joins the legal case, had returned from service in World War II. Though now a veteran, he is depicted in the book in military uniform. The connected text states that "He had risked his life next to Americans of all races and backgrounds" (Tonatiuh, 2014, p. 22). The implication is that Mr. Estrada's service certifies his family's belonging as Americans, but also that the ideals he fought for were contradicted by the discrimination that the families were facing.

Inaccuracies and Excluded History

One aspect of the history of *Méndez v. Westminster* is omitted from the book's main narrative and backmatter (Tonatiuh, 2014). The Méndez' lawyer, David Marcus, argued that those with Hispanic heritage were White, exempting them from the types of legal discrimination that African American and Asian American residents faced in California—an argument that the court accepted (Sadlier, 2014; Strum, 2014). The case was not truly about racial segregation. It is however accurate, as the picturebook claims, that the Méndez case laid groundwork that would be used in *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954), particularly in the use of psychological and sociological arguments about the harmful nature of segregation (Sadlier, 2014).

There is a statement regarding the aftermath of the case that seems misleading: "That June, Governor Earl Warren signed the law that said that all children in California were allowed to go to school together, regardless of race, ethnicity, or language" (Tonatiuh, 2014, p. 33). Segregation in California did not end at this time. The California legislature repealed an earlier code that allowed the state to create segregated schools based on particular racial and ethnic descent including Indian (Native American), Chinese, and Japanese (California Act to Repeal Sections 8003 and 8004 of the Education Code, 1947; McCormick & Ayala, 2007).

Tonatiuh (2014) gives Felícita Méndez credit for managing the farm while Gonzalo, her husband, traveled to meet with people regarding action to desegregate (pp. 21-22). The text does not mention that Felícita also acted as a community organizer during this time (Strum, 2014). It is possible that this information, along with several other aspects of the story, was omitted for the sake of brevity. However, there are ways that it seems this text attempts to portray a story that is far from radical. Rather, Tonatiuh seems to use the ways that characters of Hispanic descent living in California conformed to accepted patriotic American standards and societal norms.

Perspective on American History

Callan (2002) suggests cultivating a multicultural democratic patriotism through history education. Such a call requires the formation or recognition of the collective *we*. Grounded in the collective memory tradition (Endacott et al., 2022), Tonatiuh (2014) attempts to explain how *we* have

come to the present reality of desegregated schools. Tonatiuh's text seems to fit an inclusive patriotic model. It does not appear that the Méndez family has been co-opted into a master narrative they would have opposed, as has been the case with some Civil Rights movement leaders. Yet, this story could fit into the construction of master narrative that incorporated what van Alphen and Carretero (2015) called a teleological approach, as it seems Tonatiuh explains how we have arrived at a present reality with no apparent need of future action. Beyond this, the picturebook has similarities to Castrovilla's (2013) book in uplifting as American traits good attire, the English language, and military service.

Findings for *The ABCs of Black History Additional*

Demographic Observations

As *The ABCs of Black History* (Cortez, 2020) picturebook is filled with busy illustrations, it is difficult to get exact counts of people representing various demographics. It is interesting to note that this is the only book of the three analyzed that included more depictions of females than males and it was the only book to name a transgender person—Marsha P. Johnson (Cortez, 2020, p. 24). Among four White men that Cortez mentions in the book's backmatter is Mildred Loving's husband (Richard)—his name is not given in the text. He is also depicted in the body of the book in an image of a family photograph (Cortez, 2020, p. 25). Virginia law forbade interracial marriage, but this couple took the case to the Supreme Court and won (Cortez, 2020, p. 57). I am mentioning this in relation to demographics as I find it interesting that the only person pictured in the book who is White seems to be included because of his relationship with an African American woman.

Symbols and Statements Related to America

Most of the symbols of America in Cortez' (2020) book are connected with people and are associated with what those individuals are known for. Explorer Mathew Henson is pictured next to a flag and a rocket illustrated next to astronaut Mae Jemison is decorated with a small flag emblem (Cortez, 2020, p. 10). Four Olympians are drawn with "USA" on their attire—three of their outfits also have decorative stars (Cortez, 2020, pp. 36-37). American colors and stars also decorate airplanes representing the Tuskegee Airmen (Cortez, 2020, pp. 40-41). In all cases, it seems that the symbols say more about what the individuals in the illustrations have done for the nation than about the idea or ideals of America.

A protester is pictured holding a small American flag along with a pride flag (Cortez, 2020, p.27). This perhaps makes the positive statement that protest is part of national citizenship. Or it may be interpreted to reflect the contribution African Americans demonstrating for justice have made to the country. A checkmark in a box symbolizing voting might be interpreted as a positive symbol of America—accompanying text reads, "V is for vote—do you know what that means? The freedom to pick and choose as you please" (Cortez, 2020, p. 44). This symbol of democracy is portrayed as a positive aspect of America, though it may be intended to say more about the importance of Black voter participation—there are no people of other races represented in the voting cue.

The most telling reference to America of *The ABCs of Black History* (Cortez, 2020) is a

strong statement that is placed in front of a flag that is explained in the backmatter to be an image inspired by the *African-American Flag* created by artist David Hammons (Cortez, 2020, p. 49). Cortez states: “U is for United States—this story is tough. The birth of a nation was deadly for us. We the people? In the land of the free? No one who was enslaved would agree” (p. 42). These words seem to be tied to a line on the following page: “So U is for unfinished, this American tale. With courage and strength, we will prevail” (Cortez, 2020, p. 43).

Included and Excluded History

Because Cortez’ (2020) book is not one narrative, but the weaving together of many stories, it is difficult to pinpoint pieces missing. The research behind the history that is shared seems quite solid. What is interesting, though, is a careful examination of the parts of African American history get much attention as compared to other parts that are barely mentioned or omitted. Black Power plays a major role in this text. A large picture of a panther serves as a backdrop for the following text: “P is for power, It’s part of our core. Sometimes it is quiet, sometimes it must ROAR like a Panther—isn’t that right Huey P.?” (Cortez, 2020, p. 40). In addition to Huey P. Newton, Fred Hampton is named in the text (Cortez, 2020, p. 38). The narrative that accompanies the letter *X* is entirely devoted to Malcom X and an illustrated timeline with stages of his life includes a picture representing his imprisonment in 1946 and another his journey to Mecca in 1964 (Cortez, 2020, pp. 46-47). Stokely Carmichael and Bobby Seale are other known figures in the Black Power Movement that Cortez listed in the book’s backmatter (Cortez, 2020, p. 49).

In addition to the emphasis on Black Power, it is interesting that Cortez (2020) never mentions the nonviolent direct action that was prominent in the Civil Rights Movement. The closest representation is a picture of a demonstration in front of a diner that has the following text connected: “O is for organize, for getting together to sit-in and boycott...”—Diane Nash is mentioned and presumably pictured on the page (Cortez, 2020, pp. 30-31). Martin Luther King Jr. is pictured and mentioned twice. The words near a picture of him read: “Did you hear Reverend Kind preach his dream of civil rights, human rights, a powerful theme?” (Cortez, 2020, p. 6). Rosa Parks, James Farmer, and James Lawson, among other activists involved with non-violent direct action, do not appear in the book at all. Cortez included telling a picture of people marching to demonstrate over time—marches from Selma to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement are portrayed in the same panorama. While some of marchers in these events would have included people of different races, only Black demonstrators can be seen (Cortez, 2020, pp. 26-27).

Perspective on American History

It is important to note that Cortez (2020) was not primarily concerned with American history in a traditional sense. The opening of the book proclaims, “A is for anthem, a banner of song, that wraps us in hope, lets us know we belong” (Cortez, 2020, p. 2). The reference to the Black National Anthem, the discussion of the African diaspora, and the prominence of the Black Power Movement in the text suggest an affinity to Black nationalism. Yet, the statement “...this story is tough...” (Cortez, 2020, p. 42) indicates a view of American history, and a future a prospect for America can be seen in the statement “...unfinished, this American tale. With courage and

strength, we will prevail” (Cortez, 2020, p. 43). *The ABCs of Black History* can be categorized as transformative, based on how the picturebook relates to American history, for a couple important reasons. It disrupts the master narrative, challenging core concepts, while offering an alternative that creates a space of belonging for African American students (Miller et al., 2020). The book, additionally, is not centered in a completed past, but uses history to promote future action (Busey & Walker, 2017; Galloway & Meston, 2022).

There is also a sense in which *The ABCs of Black History* (Cortez, 2020) reflects the glorious past motif, though not at all in the sense of traditional American history. All featured characters are portrayed as heroes. Where the book portrays the historical debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, the historic gulf between them is minimized: “They had different ideas, but here is what’s true: In their own way, they were thinking of you” (Cortez, 2020, pp. 40-41). The glorious past in this picturebook reminisces about Black history while the counter narrative challenges the White-centered master narrative of American history. While the characters represented in the book are models to be emulated, following the example of many of them would involve working for change.

Discussion

How Demographic Representations Relate to Perspectives on American Identity

The comparisons between demographic representation in the texts are stark. Castrovilla’s (2013) traditional telling of history focuses entirely on White men. It is interesting that the glorious past motif, in this case, is coupled with little concern for inclusion. The idea conveyed is that whiteness and masculinity are central to the American identity. While other picturebooks depicting US history between colonial times and the Civil War have uplifted the strength of women (Anderson, 2002; Schwartz, 2022), *Revolutionary Friends...* reinforces the concept of women in traditional, background roles. Another popular picturebook presents the American Revolution from the perspectives of the colonists and the English monarch (Schanzer, 2004). The justness of the revolutionary cause is assumed by Castrovilla. As such, the book does not invite critical thought or analyses that would help students make sense of the complexities of the world.

Of the analyzed picturebooks, Tonatiuh’s (2014) *Separate is Never Equal...* displays the greatest racial and ethnic diversity. It seems that the goal of inclusive patriotism is to reframe American history in a way that presents a vision of America as a nation for all people. While the Méndez family is successful in challenging unjust rules based on prejudice, their story as rendered in Tonatiuh’s writing, can fit into a larger American master narrative that is constructed with a teleological approach (van Alphen & Carretero, 2015). Though discrimination is the conflict in the picturebook that must be resolved, the story ends with the beginning of a harmony that seems to set the stage for a happy ever after.

This narrative reflects a belief apparently held by many college students studying history. While they acknowledge very troubling chapters in America’s past, they believe that, thanks to heroes who stood up for justice, these problems have been solved. Though this understanding is certainly not universal, I have observed it in verbal comments and written reflections by students

from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Educators may reinforce this belief. Thinking back to my previous role as an elementary school teacher, I admit that inclusive patriotism was quite attractive. It was convenient to present a history that few would object to and that everyone could feel part of. This fuels my curiosity as to why this picturebook, of the three, has faced the most challenges and book bans.

The ABCs of Black History (Cortez, 2020) is the most gender-inclusive of the three picturebooks. Cortez is also the only author represented in this study to scratch the surface of including people with LGBTQ+ identities. The content analysis highlighted the rather surprising fact that the racial diversity represented in this picturebook was proportionally like that of *Revolutionary Friends* (Castrovilla, 2013)—the difference being that the characters in Cortez’s book were almost exclusively Black. This can be understood in light of the context of underrepresentation and marginalization of people of color in traditional American history. The need for books that specifically address Black history (or the history of any minoritized group) in American classrooms is due, largely, to the fact that the narratives these books tell have been excluded from or sanitized for White histories that are meant to undergird a national collective memory. This condition warrants the creation of resources that demonstrate pride in the strength of people who have historically been marginalized.

Thinking about my experience as elementary teacher, however, I find myself wishing that the pictures of groups of protesters would have depicted some level of racial diversity or that, along with the *unfinished* American story, Cortez (2020) would have included a depiction of Dr. King’s (1963) dream in which “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers” (para. 17). Part of this desire is grounded in my constant effort to help students see the ongoing quest for Civil Rights as a struggle for the soul of the nation instead of simply the fight for the rights of African Americans and other minoritized people. Would diverse representations in a few appropriate places not make the call to action implied by the text more accessible to all the students who might be in my classroom? I recognize, however, that this picturebook is grounded in the soil of Black Power. The purpose of the picturebook, it seems, is more to inspire students who are Black, strengthening knowledge of cultural and political heritage, than to educate all students about history (though the latter may be a secondary effect). One value that I have adopted as an educator is the recognition that I, as a White male, need to intentionally avoid dominating the narratives presented in the classroom. Making room for a diversity of voices affirms the agency of others and fosters democratic education.

The categories that emerge from this study—glorious past, inclusive patriotism, and transformative—are neither fixed nor discrete. Pointing out that Tonatiuh (2014), in a similar vein as Castrovilla (2013), misses a good opportunity for gender inclusion or recognizing that the works of Castrovilla (2013) and Cortez (2020) both present all included characters as a cast from the heroic past suggests that the picturebooks have more complexity than can be addressed by labels. There are potentially other perspectives of America that would be teased out of different picturebooks. Conducting the present study requires valuing process over product and the acceptance of partial answers to complex questions.

A Word on Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is commonly brought into national debates about history curriculum and even challenges to picturebooks (as referenced in the introduction to this study). While some would deny the relevance of CRT to elementary education, pointing to the pejorative use of the term (Wallace-Wells, 2021), the concept speaks to contemporary questions about history instruction as well as the present picturebook analyses. Beginning as a legal theory, CRT has attracted the interest of researchers in education since the mid-1990s (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). In the field of education, the specific concerns raised by CRT include systematic application of a theory for understanding inequalities in educational systems (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). With concerns about systemic racism in school curriculum, CRT advocates have looked to school and classroom libraries to offer counter narratives in which picturebooks that provide master narrative alternatives are used in lessons that foster critical literacy (Demoigny & Ferraras-Stone, 2018). The picturebook, *The ABCs of Black History*, serves as an example of such a counter narrative text as it offers a different perspective on history than one that relegates African American people to subservient roles as they await White rescuers.

Interestingly, CRT scholars have pointed to the failure *Brown vs. The Board of Education* (1953) to increase educational opportunities for African American students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As exemplified in the connection between the landmark Supreme Court decision and the Méndez case highlighted in *Separate is Never Equal* (Tonatiuh, 2014), *Brown vs. the Board of Education* is important to the inclusive patriotic narrative. The Court's decision is, in our national collective memory, the critical action that paved the way for racially diverse classrooms today. Findings in a fairly recent study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2016) may raise questions about this national myth. According to the study, more than one third of US students in K-12 education were enrolled in schools in which at least 75% of students were of the same race or ethnicity. The CRT challenges to *Brown vs. the Board of Education* are, I believe, too nuanced to make for a helpful conversation in the elementary classroom. Tonatiuh's picturebook, however, helps to reinforce the idea, burned into our collective psyche, that questioning the significance of the case would be unfathomable.

Toward a More Inclusive and Transformative History

King and Swartz (2014) offer a vision for inclusive history with the idea of re-membering (putting together in a new way). An aspect of successfully holding diverse histories together, according to these authors, is changing the power dynamics that centralize European/White histories and ideals while moving others to the margin. It is critical, in this shift, that people who have been previously seen as subjects of the actions of others in history are understood as actors. As an example of viewing people who have been marginalized as actors in history, Anderson (2013) points out that historical action in the Civil Rights history must be taught more collectively and as an ongoing movement as opposed to selecting a few past messianic figures to investigate. In this regard, the Tonatiuh (2014) and Cortez (2020) picturebooks can be valued as resources that address lesser-known individuals and events of the Civil Rights movement. Cortez's view of the unfinished nature of the American story creates space for helping students understand their roles as actors. History, then, might be viewed as a story we are creating as opposed

to a past that is merely studied. Through reflection, writing, and discussion, students can work toward identity formation in response to encounters with narratives and characters in picturebooks.

While I have engaged in critical analysis, I have not suggested a ban on some books. Upper elementary students would benefit from critical discussions on representation in picturebooks as well as activities designed to identify messages that books convey. Demoiny & Ferraras-Stone (2018), for example, suggest an activity wherein books emphasizing master narratives are paired with books that present counter narratives for critical discussion. As students are often not independently aware of the hidden curriculum in picturebooks, it might be better to judge the classroom library by the communities represented and messages conveyed across the many books that it holds than to be overly concerned with the historical perspective of an individual book. This must be qualified, of course, by the realization that there are a few books that are deeply problematic.

The Essential Questions We Must Ask

Backing up a bit, educators might ask questions about the degree to which national identity is a useful goal of school instruction. Myers et al. (2015) discuss the idea that multiple layers of citizenship, including national and global identities, can be explored through history education. These layers of citizenship need not be seen as mutually exclusive. Similarly, approaches to history in the classroom will not be monolithic—the approaches discussed by Endacott et al. (2020) including collective memory, disciplinary history, sociocultural history, and postmodern/critical history may all influence the curriculum. In as much as history instruction is driven by a collective memory approach, the critical question to ask is: Who is (fully) included in the national *we*? In my view, differing versions of national collective memory carry a lot of political and social weight. Democracy may only be preserved through much effort to reform and unify national narratives. But, even in moving away from this approach, issues of inclusion and participation affect students, and all people, at the local community levels. In education, the concern includes inclusion and participation in the school and classroom communities.

The questions addressed here are pertinent beyond the classroom. The tensions in the US that lead to fights over curricula and books in schools are based in the deeper narratives that tell us who we are. The differences are not over mere accuracy of information and, therefore, cannot be resolved through logical argument over content. Much of the information presented in the picturebooks in this study is factually accurate. Yet, individuals reading the three books may have different prerational responses based on the narratives they already embrace. It is difficult to come to terms with a retelling of our collective story that seems unfamiliar and, at times, unsettling. This is especially true for those whose familial and cultural identities are deeply entwined in master narratives that they embrace.

To address this, I suggest making counter narratives accessible. The same principles that undergird building an effective classroom library can be applied to facilitating platforms for public history education such as museums, public historical markers, art displays, and books. The definition of public history, in this case, can be expanded to include theater, Web presentations,

movies, and television series (etc.). Interaction with counter narratives, particularly those presented in a spirit of hospitality, may foster understanding at levels that arguments fail. As a powerful model for this work, I lift the Legacy Sites—The Legacy Museum, The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and the soon-to-open Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery, Alabama—sponsored by the Equal Justice Initiative (2023). As

with the use of picturebooks in history education, transformational learning must include ways of engaging people in critical conversations. Technologies for interactive online engagement provide a host of possibilities for public education. The immensity of the need calls not only for the recognition of the importance of educators but a robust definition of education, inclusive of the role of popular education, that leads to cooperative efforts for reframing national discourse.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Educators

Books available to children should reflect human diversity and resource dynamic instruction. Classroom libraries can hold a plentiful array of interesting and engaging books, including picturebooks, that collectively meet these objectives. I believe that the role of classroom library curation should be fully returned to educators, perhaps in partnership with students. Teachers, to make informed decisions about text selection, need opportunities to deeply engage with the materials that they are using. The content analysis in this study has provided a model for the work that I am calling for. Professional learning communities may provide environments for corporate engagement and beneficial discussion about materials, including picturebooks, that will be used in history instruction. That educators are engaging in the process of analysis and critical reflection is of greater importance than specific conclusions drawn from the process. As we *read* a picturebook in this deeper fashion, I suggest that we do so with an openness to having our own presumptions and identities *read*. This, alone, will be a catalyst for change in our instructional spaces.

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