The Sociopolitical Contexts of Cultural Authenticity
1 The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children’s Literature: Why the Debates Really Matter

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Cultural authenticity in children’s literature is one of those contentious issues that seems to resurface continuously, always eliciting strong emotions and a wide range of perspectives. Authors, illustrators, editors, publishers, educators, librarians, and scholars all have different points of view about authenticity that they each feel strongly about based on their own sociocultural experiences and philosophical views. But do these debates about cultural authenticity really matter?

We first became closely involved with these issues when we were editors of The New Advocate, a professional journal for those involved with young people and their literature, where we published a number of articles on cultural authenticity. The controversy and debates intrigued us, so we read everything we could locate on the topic. We were impressed by the complexity of the issues being discussed, but we were also concerned about how often the debates quickly moved to simplistic insider/outsider distinctions, specifically whether whites should write books about people of color. We found that no one article dealt with the complexities of the debates about cultural authenticity, and we realized that, given the nature of the issues, no one article ever could reflect this complexity and range of viewpoints. That is when the idea of this edited collection came into being.

Often, publishers discourage edited collections, believing that they have less coherence and appeal for readers, but in this case we believed that cultural authenticity needed to be addressed through a collection of differing voices and perspectives. We knew from our own explorations that these voices are passionate and strong, and that the arguments are not merely academic but reflect deeply held beliefs at the heart of each person’s work in creating literature for young people and using these books with children. It was the complexity and intensity of
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the debates about cultural authenticity that we found provocative, and that complexity demanded an edited book to highlight the range of multiple perspectives, viewpoints, and voices.

We were also concerned, however, by how often the debates seemed to swirl back to dichotomies and simplistic outsider/insider distinctions. One of our goals in pulling together this edited collection was to invite new conversations, questions, and critiques about cultural authenticity, but we knew that those conversations had to be based in thoughtful and thorough understandings of what had already been discussed. We believe that this edited collection on cultural authenticity does just that through a range of voices that provide a sense of history, a broad understanding of the current issues and debates, and a glimpse of possible new conversations and questions.

A unique feature of this book is the continual interaction between authors, as writers refer across their pieces and positions to the texts, ideas, and stances of others in the volume. Thus, the book itself becomes one whole, seamless experience for readers rather than a collection of discrete essays or chapters. Although edited collections are often approached by reading individual chapters separately from others, this volume is indeed a complex conversation about cultural authenticity, and we believe the conversation is much more powerful if the book is read as a whole.

Readers of this book will not only find a rich overview and background, but they will also be invited to consider new directions for the field as they reflect on topics such as the social responsibility of authors, the role of imagination and experience in writing for young people, cultural sensitivity and values, authenticity of content and images, and authorial freedom. Importantly, in exploring cultural authenticity in children’s literature, each chapter author cites specific children’s books from a wide variety of cultural groups, including African American, American Indian, Asian American, Canadian, Chinese, Latino/Latina, and West African cultures.

Since this is a book about cultural authenticity, we knew that we would be expected to provide a foundational definition of cultural authenticity to frame the book. This undertaking seemed appropriate and important to us, until we attempted to draft a definition. We then realized why so many authors and educators who discuss cultural authenticity are reluctant to define it in formulaic or prescriptive terms. We found ourselves agreeing with Rudine Sims Bishop, who argues that cultural authenticity cannot be defined, although “you know it when you see it” as an insider reading a book about your own culture. In defining
cultural authenticity, Howard (1991) states that we cannot ignore what
the book does to the reader, and she argues that we know a book is
“true” because we feel it deep down, saying, “Yes, that’s how it is.” The
reader’s sense of truth in how a specific cultural experience has been
represented within a book, particularly when the reader is an insider
to the culture portrayed in that book, is probably the most common
understanding of cultural authenticity.

Howard (1991) argues that an authentic book is one in which a
universality of experience permeates a story that is set within the part-
ricularity of characters and setting. The universal and specific come
together to create a book in which “readers from the culture will know
that it is true, will identify, and be affirmed, and readers from another
culture will feel that it is true, will identify, and learn something of value,
sometimes merely that there are more similarities than differences
among us” (p. 92). Given that each reading of a book is a unique trans-
action which results in different interpretations (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995),
and given the range of experiences within any cultural group, this defi-
nition of cultural authenticity immediately hints at why there are so
many debates about the authenticity of a particular book. Weimin Mo
and Wenju Shen argue, however, that even though there are always dif-
ferences within a cultural group, cultural authenticity can be defined
as whether or not a book reflects those values, facts, and attitudes that
members of a culture as a whole consider worthy of acceptance or be-
ief. Rudine Sims Bishop defines cultural authenticity as the extent to
which a book reflects the worldview of a specific cultural group and
the authenticating details of language and everyday life for members
of that cultural group. She notes that while there will be no one image
of life within a specific cultural context, there are themes, textual fea-
tures, and underlying ideologies for each cultural group that can be used
to determine cultural authenticity.

Although these understandings about cultural authenticity serve
as the basis for the chapters in this book, we decided not to offer one
specific definition of cultural authenticity. In fact, one of the key issues
under debate is the definition of cultural authenticity. Instead, the au-
thors of each chapter offer their own perspectives related to how cul-
tural authenticity should or should not be defined. Because there are
no easy answers to the questions of cultural authenticity in children’s
literature, we hope that this book will provide readers with an opportu-
nity to engage in productive discussions about a range of issues.

In the remainder of this chapter, we provide important back-
ground and contextual discussions on cultural authenticity to introduce
and frame the chapters in this book. Before we can move into the complexities of this issue, however, we begin with a broader discussion of the central role that literature plays in an education that is multicultural. An understanding of the role of culture in our lives and the lives of the young people with whom we work is essential as we look at more complex issues of cultural authenticity in literature and its usefulness in multicultural education. Next, we explore several complex issues of cultural authenticity that emerge from the various chapters in this book and discuss how each chapter author characterizes this concept. Finally, we turn our attention to the most significant audience of culturally authentic literature for young people—the children and adolescents with whom we work—and conclude with a discussion of the implications of these complex issues for those who create, publish, and teach children’s literature.

The Sociopolitical Nature of Multicultural Education

Central to these debates about cultural authenticity are definitions of culture and multiculturalism. Although culture and multiculturalism are sometimes defined superficially only in terms of the awareness and appreciation of the traditions, artifacts, and ways of life of particular groups of people, the authors in this book base their discussions in more complex understandings of culture and the goals of multiculturalism.

Culture can be understood as all the ways in which people live and think in the world. Geertz (1973) defines culture as “the shared patterns that set the tone, character, and quality of people’s lives” (p. 216). These patterns include race, ethnicity, gender, social class, language, religion, age, sexual orientation, nationality, geographical regions, and so forth. Banks (2001) states that most social scientists define culture as primarily consisting of the symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of society—the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one group of people from another. He also argues that cultures are always dynamic, complex, and changing and must be viewed as wholes, rather than as composed of discrete parts. Weimin Mo and Wenju Shen agree, characterizing culture as a seamless significant experience shared by a group of people that influences the way they view themselves, society, and human relationships, including what they value and believe to be true. Florio-Ruane (2001) stresses the notion of agency, stating that culture is “both meaning and the process of making meaning,” an idea fundamental to the process of education. “As both the web and the weaving,” Florio-Ruane argues, “we
all make local cultural meaning,” and we also connect our webs to “a much more complex network of webs linking human beings over time and across distance and difference” (p. 27).

Multiculturalism is often viewed as a curriculum reform movement that involves changing the curriculum to include more content and children’s books about ethnic groups, women, and other cultural groups. This view limits multicultural education to lessons on human relations and sensitivity training along with units on ethnic festivals, foods, folklore, and fashions (Nieto, 2002). Mingshui Cai points out that this practice conflicts with the goals of multicultural education, which have never been just to appreciate cultural differences, but to transform society and to ensure greater voice, power, equity, and social justice for marginalized cultures. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1994) proposes that a “culturally relevant” pedagogy is built on the cultures of students to maintain those cultures and to “transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture” (p. 17).

Both Banks (2001) and Nieto (2002) note that while the specific definition and list of qualities for multiculturalism may vary, there is consistency across major theorists on the goals and purposes of multicultural education. Those goals emphasize the sociopolitical nature of education through challenging and rejecting racism and discrimination and affirming pluralism, particularly for individuals and groups considered outside the cultural mainstream of society. They argue that, from the beginning, multicultural education has had reforming education as its goal, so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social class groups can experience educational equality. Issues of inequality, discrimination, and oppression cannot be excluded from multiculturalism without changing its very nature. Sleeter (1991) writes that “multicultural educators give voice and substance to struggles against oppression and develop the vision and the power of our future citizens to forge a more just society” (p. 22).

Underlying this focus on sociopolitical goals is the belief that multiculturalism is not a special unit or piece of literature, but a perspective that is part of all education. Sleeter and Grant (1987) argue for the use of the phrase “an education that is multicultural” to indicate that multiculturalism is an orientation that should pervade the curriculum.

These understandings about the underlying sociopolitical nature of multicultural education provide an important backdrop for many of the debates about children’s literature and cultural authenticity. One controversy addressed by Joel Taxel, Kathryn Lasky, Violet Harris, and Hazel Rochman is that multiculturalism and cultural authenticity are
often dismissed as “political correctness,” a movement characterized by the popular press as the suppression of statements (or books) deemed offensive to women, blacks, or other groups. Kathryn Lasky, for example, views cultural authenticity as political correctness, a fanaticism which has led to “self-styled militias of cultural diversity” who dictate who can create books about specific cultural groups. Hazel Rochman believes that concerns about authenticity have sometimes led to “politically correct bullies” who use pretentious jargon to preach mindless conformity.

Joel Taxel, in contrast, believes that the labeling of multicultural education as “political correctness” is a backlash against the goals of multiculturalism. He argues that cries of “political correctness” ignore the history of racist representations in children’s books and the lack of equal access to publishing. Violet Harris points out that this lack of access continues today, with the field of children’s book publishing and the academic study of children’s literature remaining overwhelmingly in the control of whites. Joel Taxel believes that the term “political correctness” has been used to denigrate those who raise questions about the cultural content of children’s books and question white privilege.

Although multicultural literature is typically defined as books about specific cultural groups, either people of color or people who are members of groups considered to be outside of the dominant sociopolitical culture, Rudine Sims Bishop, Mingshui Cai, Joel Taxel, and Laura Smolkin and Joseph Suina all point out that the definition of multicultural literature has more to do with its ultimate purpose than with its literary characteristics. They state that multicultural literature is a pedagogical construct that has the goal of challenging the existing canon by including literature from a variety of cultural groups. Debates about multicultural literature and cultural authenticity, therefore, are not so much about the nature of the literature itself, but about the function of literature in schools and in the lives of readers.

If “multicultural literature” is a pedagogical term rather than a literary term, then the issues of cultural authenticity take on significance related to the role of literature in children’s lives, specifically in the power of literature to change the world. Viewed in this way, literature serves a crucial role in multicultural education, social justice, and reform. Cai and Bishop (1994) argue that multicultural literature “opens the group’s heart to the reading public, showing their joy and grief, love and hatred, hope and despair, expectations and frustrations, and perhaps most importantly, the effects of living in a racist society” (p. 68). As Rosenblatt (1938/1995) reminds us, literature has the potential to be
a powerful educational force, fostering the kind of sensitivity and imagination needed in a democracy. This potent force, combined with dynamic and informed teaching, can enable young people to empathize with others, develop moral attitudes, make sound choices, think critically about emotionally charged issues, and understand the consequences of their actions. All literature may be read as “voices from the heart” that, “once heard, can change other hearts” (Cai & Bishop, 1994, p. 68).

Given these understandings about multicultural education and the role of children’s literature within an education that is multicultural, the debates about definitions and issues of cultural authenticity included in this book are not just ivory tower bickering. As Mingshui Cai points out, different definitions reflect different stances and different courses of actions that change what happens in classrooms and in children’s lives.

**The Complexity of Debates about Cultural Authenticity**

Each of the chapter authors in this book adds another layer of complexity to identifying and interpreting cultural authenticity. These layers relate to their differing perspectives as authors, editors, and scholars and to their various sociopolitical experiences and beliefs as members of a range of cultural groups. A quick overview of some of the words and phrases used by chapter authors hints at the diversity of their ideas about cultural authenticity:

- **Authenticity is the success with which a writer is able to reflect the cultural perspectives of the people whom he or she is writing about, and make readers from the inside group believe that he or she “knows what’s going on.” (Rudine Sims Bishop)**
- **This movement isn’t about white people; it’s about people of color. We want the chance to tell our stories, to tell them honestly and openly. (Jacqueline Woodson)**
- **Although authenticity is often based in personal relationships, negative intercultural experiences can also play an important role in heightening awareness of our prejudices. (W. Nikola-Lisa)**
- **An authentic work is a work that feels alive—something true from the culture exists there and creates a connection between its creator and its reader. (Susan Guevara)**
- **When an author who has written a book from outside his or her own culture shows up at a school for an author visit, students should be surprised to learn that the author isn’t a member of the culture depicted in the book. (Judi Moreillon)**
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- Our world is not made up of separate cultures who have a view that belongs to a people, but instead is the “mess of stories” that we receive and write. (Marc Aronson)
- The first criteria for publication should always be that the book is good literature. Aesthetic heat is not the product of ethnicity, but of the artist’s craft. (Kathryn Lasky)
- What better way to control the images of “otherness” than to define the cultural discourse by representing everyone yourself and silencing those who demand the right to represent themselves. (Thelma Seto)
- Authenticity matters, but there is no formula for how you acquire it. The only way to combat inaccuracy is with accuracy—not with pedigrees. (Hazel Rochman)
- The important question is not authorial freedom, but the arrogance of authors who demand the freedom to write about any culture without subjecting their work to critical scrutiny. (Violet Harris)
- [O]ur histories, individual and collective, do affect what we wish to write and what we are able to write. But that relation is never one of fixed determinism. No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world. (Henry Louis Gates Jr.)
- The attacks on cultural authenticity as “political correctness” are a backlash against those who have demanded long-overdue changes in children’s literature and throughout society. (Joel Taxel)
- The crux of the issue is not the relationship between an author’s ethnic background and literary creation, but the relationship between imagination and experience. (Mingshui Cai)
- Writers and illustrators have a responsibility to ensure that they are providing accurate information and authentic cultural images. (Elizabeth Noll)
- Cultural authenticity is not just accuracy or the avoidance of stereotypes, but involves cultural values, facts, and attitudes that members of the culture as a whole consider worthy of acceptance and belief. (Weimin Mo and Wenju Shen)
- No culture is monolithic, so no single member of a culture can issue a final assessment of the cultural authenticity of a text. (Laura Smolkin and Joseph Suina)
- Postcolonial theory provides a framework through which scholars can identify and resist subtle and blatant social injustices that privilege Western cultural practices. (Vivian Yenika-Agbaw)
- Secondary language elements can evoke powerful bilingual images, but the actual words incorporated into a book and the
The debate over definition is not just bickering over terminology in the ivory tower of academia, but rather is concerned with fundamental sociopolitical issues. (Mingshui Cai)

- The discourses of power and dominance that are written into literature are sustained when readers are not encouraged to engage in a critical reading of these books. (Zhihui Fang, Danling Fu, and Linda Lamme)
- The role of the teacher is not to represent identities but to create a space where students can represent themselves and see themselves represented within the books in our classrooms. (Curt Dudley-Marling)

In the paragraphs that follow, we identify what appear to be the key debates that occur across the chapters through a series of interrelated questions about cultural authenticity.

**Can Outsiders Write Authentically about Another Culture?**

As we noted earlier, the outside/insider distinction is probably the most frequently, and endlessly, debated issue in discussions of cultural authenticity. The question is often asked and answered from oppositional positions, with both sides vehemently arguing their perspective. Some children’s authors, such as Kathryn Lasky, see this question as a form of censorship and an attempt to restrict an author’s freedom to write. From this perspective, cultural authenticity seems to be a personal attack on an author’s ability as a writer.

Other children’s authors, such as Jacqueline Woodson, argue that the question reflects larger issues of power structures and a history of negative misrepresentations of people of color. Violet Harris and Rudine Sims Bishop agree, pointing out that this question often ignores the historical context of racist stereotypes and misrepresentations of people of color in children’s books by white authors, as well as the desire of people of color for their children to see themselves more positively portrayed within literature.

The majority of authors in this book note that this question is simplistic and sets up a dichotomy that overlooks the broader sociopolitical issues. They provide a variety of discussions about ways to problematize this question. Jacqueline Woodson finds it troubling that this question is typically posed by whites to authors of color and argues for changing the question to examine “why others would want to try to tell my story.” Hazel Rochman and Violet Harris note that publishers often limit
the creative choices of authors of color by asking them to write books featuring only their own specific ethnic group. Violet Harris argues that authors of color are often viewed as representative of their racial identity and not allowed to assume multiple perspectives, while white authors are allowed to do so because they are seen as the norm.

Susan Guevara believes that consideration of the question of authenticity needs to address the complexity of those who create children’s books. Speaking from a biracial perspective, she argues against definitions that establish rigid boundaries based on appearances and experiences. She believes that valuing the complexity in what is “true” makes literature and life rich and varied. Questioning the simplicity of the insider/outsider debates, Henry Louis Gates Jr. suggests that authors’ social identities do indeed matter and that their personal and collective histories affect what they wish to write and what they are able to write. However, he also believes that all cultures are accessible to those who make a thoughtful and careful attempt to understand and learn about those cultures.

These discussions of how various assumptions reflect broader issues of power structures and white privilege lead to questions about the social responsibilities of authors.

Does an Author Have a Social Responsibility, and, If So, How Does That Responsibility Relate to Authorial Freedom?

Violet Harris points out that many children’s authors see authenticity as standing in opposition to authorial freedom—the freedom of authors to use their creative imaginations and literary skills to tell a powerful story. Kathryn Lasky argues that it is this freedom that is at the heart of great literature and is endangered by the call for cultural authenticity. Joel Taxel maintains that this debate is really about social responsibility and that authors have both a social and artistic responsibility to be thoughtful and cautious when they write about characters, plots, and themes related to specific cultural groups, whether they are insiders or outsiders to that culture. Rosenblatt (2002) maintains that social responsibility does not stand in opposition to freedom, because while authors need freedom to determine their own writing, their work has social origins and effects that also need to be examined and critiqued.

Another related issue is whether authors have a social responsibility to provide multicultural characters that are role models. Violet Harris argues that these stories and characters should provide role models who either inspire readers or correct stereotypes. Hazel Rochman notes, however, that stories can be too reverential and that they
need to provide a complex picture of individuals, showing both their faults and their courage.

Violet Harris and Joel Taxel believe that the real issue is the contrast between authorial freedom and authorial arrogance, or the belief that an author should be able to write without subjecting his or her work to critical scrutiny. Rudine Sims Bishop connects authorial arrogance with white privilege, noting that whites have been socialized into a racialized society which gives them particular privileges and statuses that are not available to people of color and that are not acknowledged but simply taken for granted as the way life is for everyone. Without critical scrutiny, white authors are often unable to transcend their positions of privilege when writing books about people from marginalized cultures and thus perpetuate subtle forms of racism, even when the more blatant racism and misrepresentations of the past have been eliminated from their writing. This cultural arrogance is based in the unconscious assumption by many members of mainstream society that what they value is universally valued by other cultures (Nodelman, 1988) and in what Morrison (1992) calls the “willed scholarly indifference” of those who fail to recognize the blatant and subtle presence of racism, sexism, and prejudice in literature.

Thelma Seto states that it is arrogant for whites to assume that they can represent everyone themselves. She believes that this arrogance silences those who demand the right to represent themselves. Jacqueline Woodson argues that the issue is not whether white people should be prevented from writing certain stories, but the rights of people of color to tell their own stories. Woodson feels that the focus on authorial freedom for white writers keeps whites in a position of power and ignores the more complex aspects of cultural authenticity. Rudine Sims Bishop agrees that the real issue is the desire of members of a particular culture to tell their own stories as a way to pass on their culture, and that this desire is not the same as restricting the freedom of authors to choose their own topics.

Questions about authorial freedom and how that freedom relates to an author’s social responsibility are intimately connected to exploring the relationship of literary excellence and authenticity in evaluating children’s books.

How Do Criteria for Cultural Authenticity Relate to Literary Excellence in Evaluating a Book?

Most of the chapters in this book address some variation on the question of what criteria should be used to evaluate children’s books, specifically
the use of cultural authenticity as a criterion when the book reflects the experiences of a specific cultural group. While everyone agrees that children’s books should always be evaluated according to standards of literary excellence, most believe that cultural authenticity should also be an essential criterion. Some see this view as problematic and believe that literary excellence should stand alone as the primary criterion for evaluating a book. Marc Aronson is concerned that authenticity involves judging a book only by the ancestry of the author and so does not reflect the complexity of culture with conflicting values and points of view. He discusses the cultural crossing that occurs continuously in music and argues that multiculturalism is the “mess of stories” that we all receive and write. He believes in demanding high standards of artistry rather than trying to assess the author’s cultural qualifications. Kathryn Lasky agrees that authenticity often leads to prejudging a book based on authorship, instead of allowing a book to stand or fall based on its own literary merits and ability to generate “aesthetic heat” through the artist’s craft.

Many of the chapter authors, however, take the stance of Mingshui Cai that literary excellence and cultural authenticity are not in opposition and are both essential. He notes that a book is always evaluated for both content and writing style and that cultural authenticity focuses on content while criteria of literary excellence focus on writing. He argues that there is no dichotomy between a good story and an authentic story. The majority of chapter authors agree that the debate is not whether or not cultural authenticity should be a criterion for evaluating a book, but what kind of criteria and understandings should be used, particularly when the book is created by a cultural outsider. The development of criteria that can be used to evaluate authenticity has been discussed in a range of other sources including Harris (1993, 1997), Slapin and Seale (1998), IRA Notable Books for a Global Society Committee (2002), the Council on Interracial Books for Children (1980), and Yokota (1993). Yokota, for example, argues that cultural authenticity can be evaluated through criteria such as richness of cultural details, authentic dialogue and relationships, in-depth treatment of cultural issues, and the inclusion of members of minority groups for a purpose.

The belief that cultural authenticity should be a criterion for critiquing children’s books brings us back to the issue of the essence of cultural authenticity and raises another group of questions. One such question connects to the definition of cultural authenticity as the reader’s sense of truth in how a particular cultural experience has been represented within a book (Howard, 1991), particularly when an author is writing outside of his or her own cultural experience.
What Kinds of Experiences Matter for Authors in Writing Culturally Authentic Books?

The questions of how “experience” is characterized and what types of experiences authors and illustrators need in order to write with genuineness as a cultural outsider are raised by many of the chapter authors. Mingshui Cai directly addresses this issue through his discussion of the relationship between imagination and experience. He notes that imagination is needed for a book to have literary excellence but that too much imagination without experience leads to inaccuracies and bias and defeats the purpose of multicultural literature to liberate readers from stereotypes. The chapter authors seem to agree that specific authors have successfully crossed cultural gaps to write outside their own experiences and do not argue that only insiders can write about a particular culture; however, most believe that it is very difficult and requires extreme diligence by authors to gain the experiences necessary to write authentically within another culture. There is disagreement, however, on what counts as the experience needed to cross a cultural gap as an outsider.

Thelma Seto believes that it is morally wrong for whites to write about other cultures unless they have direct, personal experiences that lead to understanding a particular culture within their hearts. Jacqueline Woodson uses the metaphor of sitting around a dinner table to argue that an author must experience another’s world through personal experiences and/or significant personal relationships in order to write with truth about that world. She makes it clear that she is not arguing that authors can only write semi-autobiographical literature, but that the experiences must be deep and significant. W. Nikola-Lisa notes the increasing diversity of those who sit around our tables and the multiracial nature of communities, families, and individuals. He argues that there are other kinds of experiences beyond personal relationships that count, including negative intercultural experiences and an awareness of one’s own prejudices.

Reese and Caldwell-Wood (1997) point out that non-native authors often “rely on their own perceptions of what it means to be an ‘Indian,’ rather than on careful research or spending long periods of time with the tribe about whom they write” (p. 159). They are thus more likely to portray American Indians as heroic or mystical rather than to capture the authenticity of their emotions and lives as real people. Mingshui Cai agrees, stating that most authors who successfully write outside their own culture have had significant in-depth experiences over many years within the culture they portray and have engaged in careful and thorough research.
Judi Moreillon provides insights into the strategies she used as an author writing outside her own culture, including consulting a range of information sources, asking for responses to her text from an insider who also had expertise in the study of that culture, and hiring an insider illustrator for the text. She also shares the ways in which readers from a range of cultural backgrounds have responded to her book, reflecting the notion that cultural authenticity relates to readers’ interactions with books.

Susan Guevara believes that all authors create from their own experiences, intuition, and research, so there can never be a simplistic scale for evaluating authenticity based on appearance or experience. As an illustrator, she reads a story from the perspective of whether or not the story moves her, whether she experiences the world of the story, not whether or not the text seems “authentic.” If she is able to experience the world of the story, she knows she will be able to draw from her own experiences, relationships, and multiple identities to illustrate the book; what she is unable to envision through experience, she researches. If she does not feel a sense of intuitive connection, she chooses not to illustrate that text.

Rudine Sims Bishop argues that authors should be explicit about the difficulties inherent in writing outside their own culture and indicate how they have worked to gain the “real” experiences needed to write a particular book. Evaluating authenticity could thus involve an author’s note or some other indication of the process by which a book was created. Susan Guevara also discusses her concern about so much emphasis being placed on the product, divorced from the complex process of thinking and research that went into creating that product.

The types of experiences necessary to write a particular book relate to the author’s intentions for that book. Bishop (1992) has noted that children’s books that are multicultural are both specific and universal in that they reflect difference by portraying a culturally specific experience as well as commonality through universal themes. Some authors write generic books that are based only in universal themes and experiences. The intentions of these authors is not to portray a specific cultural experience, so the ethnicity of the characters may only be apparent by skin color, not in the character’s actions, dialogue, relationships, or ways of thinking. Bishop believes that an author who intends to write a generic book does not need the same depth of experience as an author who intends to write a culturally specific book. These generic books can be evaluated on literary criteria, but not for authenticity, since a specific cultural experience has not been portrayed.
Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, however, argues that these universal or generic books are problematic because they are based on the assumption that a unitary and homogeneous human nature exists. This focus on “universal” themes, separate from a specific cultural experience, maintains the superiority of the dominant culture and so marginalizes and excludes oppressed cultures. Her discussion of this issue connects to the concerns of other chapter authors about cultural arrogance and white privilege wherein the dominant worldview is accepted as the “normal” one.

Many of the chapter authors draw from the framework created by Sims (1982) for examining the distinguishing characteristics of African American books. She identified a category of culturally conscious books that place a child of color within the context of families and neighborhoods, tell the story from that child’s perspective, and indicate through text and illustrations that this is a story about a child of color. Elizabeth Noll suggests that authors need to write with cultural consciousness to accurately portray the cultural traditions, behaviors, and language of a specific cultural group while also drawing on human universals. Authors write, however, not only out of experiences but also out of particular intentions, which leads to the next question.

What Are an Author’s Intentions for Writing a Particular Book?

Violet Harris, Jacqueline Woodson, Thelma Seto, and Rudine Sims Bishop suggest that authors should ask themselves why they want to write a particular book. When authors make their intentions and ideologies explicit, this disclosure influences the evaluation of their writing for its cultural authenticity. This process also engages authors in clarifying what kind of story they are really seeking to write and in examining critically whether or not to write outside their own cultures. These chapter authors point out that authors of color often write within their own cultures with the intention of enhancing the self-concept of children of color, challenging existing stereotypes and dominant culture assumptions, and passing on the central values and stories of their own cultures to their children. Authors writing outside their own cultures often intend to build awareness of cultural differences and improve intercultural relationships. These differing intentions result in different stories for different audiences and, thus, different evaluations of authenticity.

Several chapter authors point out the problematic nature of the intentions of authors who write outside their own culture for monetary gain. Thelma Seto believes that writers who do not have direct, personal...
experiences with the culture they are writing about are engaging in cultural thievery. Laura Smolkin and Joseph Suina label these intentions as cultural exploitation where property and possessions are taken from the culture for the financial benefit of the author.

Questions of authorial freedom, social responsibility, and intentions are perspectives that authors consider in selecting and creating a piece of literature. Once the literary work has been created, however, other questions need to be asked to evaluate the cultural authenticity of the product.

**What Are the Criteria beyond Accuracy for Evaluating the Cultural Authenticity of the Content and Images of a Book?**

The first types of criteria that are typically considered in evaluating the content of a book are the accuracy of the details included within the book and the lack of stereotyping and misrepresentation. As Mingshui Cai notes, authors cannot ignore cultural facts, which include the accurate representation of both the visible facts of external reality and the invisible facts of internal reality.

Elizabeth Noll provides criteria related to recognizing culturally offensive images and raises the issue of historical literature where there is a necessity to provide accurate perspectives without perpetuating negative images. She discusses the need to portray accurately the prevailing views of a particular historical time period while also presenting alternative views.

Laura Smolkin and Joseph Suina argue that simply locating inaccuracies is not enough to determine authenticity. They use the term “cultural sensitivity” to determine whether or not a book is sensitive to the concerns of the culture that is portrayed. Mingshui Cai refers to this cultural sensitivity as an ethnic perspective, the worldview of a specific cultural group that has been shaped in part by ideological difference from the majority view. He is most concerned that authors who write outside their own culture often do not take on this “ethnic perspective” and instead may unconsciously impose their own perspective onto the depicted culture with an attitude of cultural arrogance.

Weimin Mo and Wenju Shen agree that authenticity not only requires accuracy or the avoidance of stereotyping but also involves the cultural values and practices that are accepted as norms within that social group. They argue that accuracy focuses on cultural facts while authenticity focuses on cultural values. Evaluations of accuracy can therefore indicate whether or not the facts in a story believably exist in a culture but not whether those facts actually represent the values held
by most of the people in that group. From their perspective, a story can be accurate but not authentic by portraying cultural practices that exist but are not part of the central code of a culture. This central code relates to the range of values acceptable within a social group and also recognizes the conflicts and changes in beliefs within a culture. However, they also argue that there are certain values that are appropriate to all cultures and that authenticity does not provide the right to introduce values in violation of basic human rights. They further complicate authenticity by discussing issues involved in value conflicts between the culture from which a story is taken and the culture for whom the book is intended and the need to consider both cultures in determining authenticity.

Illustrations provide the basis for additional criteria for authenticity. Weimin Mo and Wenju Shen indicate that authenticity is based on whether the art form serves its purpose in relation to the story, but they also argue that an authentic art form does not have to be rigidly interpreted as the typical traditional style. They value the creative process that leads to art that is part of the story to create an authentic whole. Laura Smolkin and Joseph Suina note, however, that the role of art differs across cultures and that mainstream traditions of graphic experimentation with art elements can change or confuse meanings for members of that culture when that experimentation contradicts specific cultural traditions.

Rosalinda Barrera and Ruth Quiroa state that another factor to consider is the use of particular words and phrases from a specific culture within an English-language book. The issue is not so much accurate translations of how words are used, but rather whether the words are added stereotypically for cultural flavor. These words should be used strategically and skillfully with cultural sensitivity to create powerful bilingual images of characters, settings, and themes. Not only must these phrases and words enhance the literary merits of the book, but they must also make the story comprehensible and engaging to both monolingual and bilingual readers without slighting the language or literary experience of either. The tendency to stay with formulaic and safe uses of the language of a specific culture and to translate these words literally in order to cater to the needs of monolingual readers often results in culturally inauthentic texts for bilingual readers and poor literary quality for all readers.

Although many of the chapter authors write about cultural authenticity within books reflecting specific cultural traditions within North American society, Weimin Mo and Wenju Shen and Vivian Yenika-
Why the Debates Really Matter

Agbaw extend this frame to international literature, arguing that the same issues of cultural facts and values are relevant in international contexts. Vivian Yenika-Agbaw adds a postcolonial theoretical perspective to a consideration of authenticity in particular international contexts. She argues that postcolonialism is essential in deconstructing colonial ideologies of power that privilege Western cultural practices, challenging the history of colonized groups, and giving voice to those who have been marginalized by colonization. She extends the notions of domination and unequal power distribution to nations rather than only to specific cultural groups within a nation. She also points out that there is no one outsider or insider perspective. The issue of insider perspectives leads to a final question that further complicates the criteria for cultural authenticity.

What Is an “Insider” Perspective on Cultural Authenticity?

Several chapter authors provide powerful demonstrations that there is no one insider perspective that can be used to evaluate cultural authenticity. Laura Smolkin and Joseph Suina document how variations within a particular culture lead to completely different evaluations of the authenticity of a book by readers from different groups of insiders. Vivian Yenika-Agbaw shares examples of books where insiders inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes of their own culture. In addition to showing how insiders vary in their views of their own culture, she also examines how outsiders create different types of stereotypes and images, based on their own intentions and ethnic perspectives.

Recognizing the complexity of both insider and outsider perspectives adds another layer to all of the issues that have been previously raised, including cultural facts and values and what is considered “truth” about a particular cultural experience. Rudine Sims Bishop argues that because variance always exists within a specific culture, no one set of definitive criteria can ever be created to evaluate books about that culture. However, she also points out that scholars can create a set of criteria that show the range of themes and ideologies at the core of a particular culture through a serious scholarly study of the body of books published by insiders.

So Why Does Cultural Authenticity Matter?

An entire book on the issues of cultural authenticity might be viewed by some as simply pedantic academic debates that are insignificant in the lives of children, parents, and educators. As Mingshui Cai points
out, however, those definitions determine the actions we take in classrooms and the ways in which children approach the reading of a book. Joel Taxel, Violet Harris, and others argue that cultural authenticity matters because all children have the right to see themselves within a book, to find within a book the truth of their own experiences instead of stereotypes and misrepresentations. Several of the chapter authors, including Jacqueline Woodson and Rudine Sims Bishop, extend this argument to assert the right of authors of color to tell the stories that are used within a particular cultural group to pass on their cultural identity to children within that culture. Repeatedly, the authors of these chapters contend that literature is one of the significant ways that children learn about themselves and others; therefore, those literary images should not be distorted or inauthentic.

Curt Dudley-Marling points out that culturally authentic books are more engaging for children from the culture portrayed and also serve as a source of intercultural understandings. In addition, these books provide children with insights into power and sociopolitical issues while also serving to challenge the dominant, monocultural perspective that characterizes most schooling. While he argues convincingly for the necessity of making a wide range of culturally authentic books available for children, he also points out the dangers of teachers assuming that they should match their perceptions of children’s cultural identities with specific books. The teacher’s role instead is to make available authentic texts reflecting diverse cultural and ethnic images and to create a space where students can represent themselves and find themselves represented within books.

Laura Smolkin and Joseph Suina and Vivian Yenika-Agbaw argue that evaluations of the cultural authenticity of a book are not designed to lead to censorship. Instead they want to engage children in reading these books critically and learning to question the meanings embedded in texts from dominant cultural perspectives. Mingshui Cai points out that since the goal of multicultural education is to work for equity and social justice, children need to be able to tackle issues of cultural difference, equity, and assumptions about race, class, and gender as they read literature. Thus, the criteria for evaluating cultural authenticity and for raising complex issues are not merely of concern for those who create or choose books for children, but criteria that children themselves need to understand and employ as critical readers.

Zhihui Fang, Danling Fu, and Linda Lamme document how the dominant cultural code tends to get reinforced and sustained throughout the entire process of writing and reading a book when there is no
attention to the discourses of power and dominance. They document the misuse of books about specific cultural groups within classrooms where students are taught to look at culture through categories such as food and holidays that actually reinforce stereotypes and mainstream domination. These chapter authors argue that children and teachers need to learn how to take negotiated and oppositional positions in their interpretations of literature and to analyze the authenticity of a book and the perspectives it presents to the reader.

**Stories Matter**

Taken as a whole, these discussions about cultural authenticity provide much more complex understandings than simply judging whether or not the author is an insider or outsider to the culture depicted in a book. We believe that these discussions invite the field into new conversations and questions about cultural authenticity instead of continuing to repeat the old conversations. At the heart of these new conversations is the powerful role that literature can play in an education and a society that are truly multicultural.

Stories *do* matter, particularly in this troubling time when the constraints of scripted reading programs, mandated high-stakes testing, and monocultural standards often relegate literature and multicultural concerns to the fringes of classroom life. The recent changes in the creation and publishing of children’s literature are also disturbing, particularly the acquisitions of publishing companies by huge entertainment conglomerates. This consolidation of control has led to less diversity in what and who are being published.

We must ensure that young people have regular, meaningful engagements with high-quality children’s books that are culturally authentic and accurate. “From the standpoint of multicultural education,” write Barrera, Ligouri, and Salas (1993), “authenticity of content and images in children’s literature is essential because inauthentic representation subverts the very cultural awareness and understanding that such literature can build” (p. 212). Because children’s literature has the potential to play such a central role in an education that is multicultural and focused on social justice, all young readers should have access to culturally authentic literature. We should also take an active role in enabling students to “read multiculturally” (Hade, 1997) and in helping them explore, create, and use criteria for evaluating cultural authenticity in the books they read.

Above all, we must hold fast to our belief that literature and democracy are intertwined, and that the thoughtful use of literature can
“enhance the education of people for a democratic way of life” (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, p. xx). Democracy highlights the value of individual beliefs within the context of considering the consequences those values may have for others and of maintaining an open mind to other points of view. The debates about cultural authenticity in children’s literature matter because they foster the dialogue that is essential to democracy and to the struggle for social justice.

References


