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A Step from Heaven: On Being a Woman of Color in Children's Literature Studies

Sarah Park Dahlen

I didn't know I was invisible until college.¹

When I was a child, I did not see myself in youth literature. My teachers and librarians did not connect me with the scarce Korean American children's books that were then available. In college, I majored in history and Asian American Studies and learned that my stories—and the stories of Chinese railroad workers, incarcerated Japanese, Vietnamese and Hmong refugees, and Korean adoptees—had been rendered invisible in the classroom and on library shelves. But in 2001, Linda Sue Park published *A Single Shard*, a historical novel set in Korea, and won the John Newbery Medal the following year. Also in 2001, An Na published her immigrant coming-of-age young adult (YA) novel *A Step from Heaven*, which won the Michael L. Printz Award. In 2002, we commemorated the ten-year anniversary of the Los Angeles Riots. North Korea was in the news, and in 2004, chapters of *Liberty in North Korea* (LiNK) started springing up on college campuses. By the time I began my Asian American Studies masters degree program, Korean pop culture (*Korean Wave* or *Korean Hallyu*) was spreading like wildfire across the globe.

It was in this context that I first read *A Step from Heaven*.

I had seen my culture in many places, but it was the first time I saw myself in youth literature. I identified with the heroine, Young Ju, although I had an older brother whereas she had a younger one, Joon. My family was (is) very patriarchal, and I often felt invisible next to my brother. Like many Korean American families, we had domestic troubles, enormous pressure to do well in school, and other issues. And like many Korean American families, we didn't talk about them. So when I saw all of these dynamics through Young Ju's eyes, I almost couldn't breathe. *I wasn't alone*. I saw for the first time that these things happened to other people too, other people who looked like me. Whose parents looked like mine.

Whose mother suffered as mine did. Whose father was absent as mine was.² Each time I read *A Step from Heaven*, I am overcome with emotion because I see myself, my story. *A Step from Heaven* is my mirror, the first and clearest mirror I have ever had.

As Rudine Sims Bishop has argued, and the Cooperative Children's Books Center data shows, young people today still have too few mirrors in which to see themselves, and windows through which to see others.³ And too many in the publishing industry, librarianship, and children's literature studies resist efforts for change; some do it subtly, and some actively fight against it. But I continue to have hope, because I also see scholarly, professional, activist pushback against the status quo.

This work is not easy, and it's difficult to do alone. At UCLA, Clara Chu was my masters thesis chair; she held a joint appointment in Asian American Studies and Information Studies, so in her I had a mentor who looked like me and who had had similar life experiences. I also had the privilege of working with Virginia Walter and Don Nakanishi.⁴ But as I began applying to Library and Information Science (LIS) doctoral programs, I could not find one that was both strong in children's literature *and* had faculty of color whose work included critical race studies (there were of course scholars such as the late Eliza Dresang, whose work on multicultural children's literature remains influential). In the end, I chose the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science (now the School of Information Sciences), which, despite being ranked the best LIS program in the country, did not at the time have any people of color on its faculty.⁵ However, the University of Illinois also has a strong Asian American Studies program, and within GSLIS I was fortunate to work with Christine Jenkins and Betsy Hearne, two "foremothers" who were committed to raising up the next generation of LIS scholars (both have since retired).

My doctoral experience was not perfect, and I learned much from my challenges. To be at a university with a stereotyped Indian chief as its mascot was uncomfortable; GSLIS faculty agreed that the chief "contradict[ed] . . . our teaching, especially when addressing the importance of providing accurate information, adopting a service perspective on providing information, and challenging stereotypes in literature" ("Faculty Statement"). In this climate, I watched students challenge Native scholar Debbie Reese,⁶ and I began to experience similar challenges when teaching about race, racism, and children's literature. I was not immune to student resistance even when I taught Asian American children's literature for the Asian American Studies program, which AAS arranged after GSLIS declined my request to teach a multicultural children's literature course. And I was acutely aware each time—and there were many, many times—when I was the only person of color in a classroom.

As the American Library Association reports, librarianship is currently 88 percent white, and given that my MLIS Program is in a state (Minnesota) that is majority white, most of my students do not look like me. One semester, my young adult materials class was comprised mostly of white women. I assigned *A Step from Heaven*, and during our discussion of the difficulties Young Ju's family faced after immigrating to the United States, one white student asked, "If they didn't like it here, why didn't they just go back to Korea?"

Her question felt like a slap in the face. It told me I didn't belong here, that I shouldn't try to belong here. It invalidated the many different reasons—push and pull factors—why Korean people leave one country and settle in another. She questioned our decision to persevere, and exhibited a profound lack of compassion and empathy. I wondered if she had any immigrant friends or family. Had she ever read narratives about immigrant families before? Did she understand her own biases and the implications of her question for the diverse library communities she would be serving? I have continued to assign, recommend, write about, and gift *A Step from Heaven* precisely because more people need to know An Na's story—which is also my story—so they can develop empathy and compassion for people with different life experiences, instead of asking, "Why didn't they just go back to Korea?"

That question is one of many microaggressions I experience as a woman of color in academia. According to Sue et al., "Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (271). Racial microaggressions include questions such as "Where are you from?" and "How do you speak such good English?" For women of color faculty, racial microaggressions include calling professors by our first names instead of addressing us more formally, or challenging our authority in the classroom in a way that white male professors are not challenged. Sue et al. adds, "Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications." I trust my student did not intend to be hurtful with her question; she genuinely wanted to know why immigrants stay, despite such significant hardship.

Graphic novelist Gene Luen Yang and I have discussed the extent to which we should be offended by microaggressions, especially if questions and answers can lead to deeper understanding and empathy. In his "Glare of Disdain" comic, Yang explains how reading about people whose experiences were different from his own—looking through "windows"—may have helped him better know one of his classmates. As National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, one of Yang's Reading Without Walls challenges is to encourage readers to read across experiences—"about a character who

doesn't look or live like you." Reading across experiences and without walls may spark productive dialogue, so if we believe, as John Stuart Mill does, that continually questioning is what leads to a "clearer perception and livelier impression of truth" (1), and that even microaggressive questions are helpful to building empathy, as Gene Yang does, then questions are necessary. Indeed, as Socrates tells us, questions are essential for learning.

Furthermore, I should not have been surprised that my student did not have a framework with which to understand immigration. In the absence of K-12 and college curricula that are inclusive, comprehensive, and truthful, and of library collections that are representative of the world in which we live, how might my student have learned about immigration? What if my student genuinely wanted to know and did not mean to offend? Wasn't it my job, as her instructor, to answer her question? Wasn't it a teaching opportunity? And who best to learn from, if not the daughter of Korean immigrants who has studied immigration?

But all these things can be true, and I can still be impacted by the question. My student may not have intended to offend, but intention does not equal impact. Poet Claudia Rankine said, "Unintentionally discriminating is as bad as intentionally discriminating because the result is the same" (Kachka). Also, I do not leave my personal history or identity at the door when I enter a classroom. As Ebony Elizabeth Thomas said at the Children's Literature Association 2016 conference's Minority Scholars panel, students read our bodies before we even open our mouths. How they treat us is based, first and largely, on how they read our racial identities. My Korean body disrupts assumptions about who is an authority in teaching children's literature. Because of how whiteness has dominated children's literature (writing, teaching, researching, etc.), this is a necessary disruption.

Disruptions also occur outside of the classroom among authors, illustrators, critics, and others. In October 2015, YA author Meg Rosoff reacted to a Facebook post by librarian Edith Campbell about the picture book *Large Fears*, which features a black protagonist who does not fit into a gendered binary. Rosoff wrote, "[t]here are not too few books for marginalised young people. There are hundreds of them, thousands of them. . . . The children's book world is getting far too literal about what 'needs' to be represented. . . . Good literature . . . doesn't have the 'job' of being a mirror." Author, editor, and educator Laura Atkins disagreed within the comment section: "It means something to read a book that in some way mirrors your experience. It means a lot. All kids deserve to have both mirrors and windows." Rosoff responded that young people should "[r]ead a newspaper. Read a magazine. Go see a movie. There are zillions of places kids can see mirrors." But, according to the Cooperative Children's Book Center, in 2015, non-white children saw

mirrors in only 14.2 percent of the publishing pie—and this is just a small jump from the 10–11 percent representation of the previous two decades (Huyck, Dahlen, and Griffin; Ehrlich). Many who posted on this Facebook thread agree with scholar Rudine Sims Bishop—readers having access to more mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, and to seeing themselves and reading across experiences and without walls, are able to build empathy, understanding, and affirmation. Children’s literature is one place where this should happen—but most often does not.

Much of the recent firestorm around books such as *A Fine Dessert* (E. Jenkins), *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* (Ganeshram), *When We Was Fierce* (Charlton-Trujillo), *There Is a Tribe of Kids* (Smith), and *Ghosts* (Telgemeier) divided along racial lines. White pushback to criticisms of appropriation, distortion, and/or erasure have been vehement. YA author Justine Larbalestier (*Liar* and *My Sister Rosa*) identifies this pushback as white fragility. According to Robin DiAngelo, white fragility is visible when “even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (57). Larbalestier echoes DiAngelo: “When we are called on our (usually) unthinking racist statements and acts [,] we tend to fall apart.” When white people are unable, or unwilling, to acknowledge and discuss the effects of whiteness and white supremacy in children’s literature, or when they resist criticism, these are instances of their white fragility or “lack of racial stamina” (DiAngelo 56). However, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas takes it further on her Twitter account: “Connotations of ‘fragile’ don’t satisfy. That’s what got us into this in the 1st place—idea that y’all are eggs when we’re getting fried.” She continues, “It’s evil to dehumanize other humans for acting like humans would under a similar set of conditions. Nothing ‘fragile’ about it. . . . One day we’ll stop referring to the most privileged humans in history as if they must be handled with care” (@Ebonyteach).

On the other hand, according to medical professionals, people who suffer from race fatigue should be handled with care. Specifically, women of color need care because we endure much in regard to race and gender fatigue. Nadia-Elysse Harris and Monnica T. Williams note that in 2013, the *Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* broadened its definition of post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) so that both overt forms of racism and “the more lasting effects of subtle racism,” or what we call microaggressions, can “be considered in the discussion of race-based traumas.” We who are racially Other are fatigued by repeated distortions and erasure, and by exposure to micro- and macroaggressions in our daily lives and in spaces that masquerade as safe but actually exist to uphold the status quo. Racial battle fatigue is real. White fragility is entirely different. White fragility maintains power.

The cost of being a woman of color in majority white professions (the

professoriate, librarianship, and publishing are majority white, and both librarianship and publishing are also majority female) have been well documented, through both official channels (peer-reviewed scholarship, petitions to appeal tenure denials) and anecdotes (storytelling among women of color, etc.). The women of color who spoke on the ChLA Minority Scholars panel are, at this time of writing, junior scholars. None of us wanted to be there; we would not have spoken on the panel if not for each other, and we would not have been there if not for the graduate students and other junior faculty of color in the room. We take risks to make space for them, in the same way that senior scholars (Patricia Enciso, Michelle Martin, Junko Yokota) have made space for us.

The intersections of microaggressions and white fragility are productive spaces for thinking about silencing, tone policing, and validity. Where does our validity lie? Is it enough to be a woman of color or a Native woman, with both lived experiences and academic credentials?⁷ At what point do our lived experiences, our embodied realities, count? (They certainly count against us, but do they count *for* us?) What does it mean that white students and white scholars disagree with our perspectives on and criticisms of representations of our very lives? How does white fragility manifest in—and masquerade as—critique? And what does pushback against criticisms of the traditionally white (and white-authored) canon of children's literature and children's literature scholarship say about those who currently dominate both the industry and the field?

When white people are unprepared for and/or resistant to discussions of race, racism, and whiteness, their defensiveness essentially diverts attention away from issues and works to re-center and restore “white racial equilibrium” (DiAngelo 57). But white racial equilibrium cannot be maintained; people of color and Native people are increasingly unwilling to tolerate erasure, misrepresentation, and white fragility, and this is certainly true in children's literature. The story is often the same: a book garners attention; cultural insiders communicate criticisms; white backlash is swift; and then the next book relaunches the cycle. And there is always another book, another story. But we can read the cycle in this way too: our speaking out is an opportunity to defend the integrity of and our autonomy over our stories (Dahlen, “On Autonomy”) and reject white fragility. Each book controversy is, potentially, an exercise in the discussions that Mill believes will lead to a “clearer perception and livelier impression of truth.” However, we must consider the emotional, psychological, social, and professional cost they may have to people of color and Native people in majority-white professions.

Moreover, these discussions may not happen if white fragility leads people to “[leave] the stress-inducing situation” (DiAngelo 57), rather than listening

and learning. Leaving situations and spaces forecloses even the opportunity to have difficult conversations that may lead to deeper understanding and empathy. People of color and Native people need safe, private spaces where we can speak freely and support one another, but we also need brave, public spaces where we can speak hard truths to each other, and push each other along the path to justice and equity. People of color and Native people are brave in speaking out, and allies (such as those who write about white fragility [Larbalestier], who remove the inaccurate use of “totem poles” from their texts [Pérez, quoted in Reese, “Out of Darkness”], who amplify the writings of people of color and Native people [Horning]) are brave in speaking up. Just as we have seen increasing instances of white fragility in children’s literature, there is a long history of pushing back. And with every instance that re-animates this issue, we will keep pushing back, because if white fragility seems uncomfortable, racism is intolerable.

White fragility leads people to minimize the very real and harmful effects of whiteness and racism in our profession. White fragility makes it hard for us to talk about racism at all. It keeps us from doing our work. It keeps people from seeing not only our work, but from seeing *us* in our full humanity. Just as racism is a distraction (Morrison), white fragility is a distraction.

We push back on white fragility because we are thinking of our child-selves who did not have mirror images in the literature we read. We push back because we are thinking of Reese’s Native family members and of all the Native youth who have so few mirrors that accurately reflect Native lives, and of the so very many that are, upon reflection, more like funhouse mirrors that garishly distort. We are thinking of author Mike Jung’s daughter, who, when she was three years old, first said she didn’t like having brown hair and brown eyes (@Mike_Jung). We are thinking of my daughter, now three, who may someday say the same.

We all have a stake in ensuring that the literature we provide for children is the best we can offer. For people of color and Native people, the stakes are higher because historically our images have been distorted or invisible, so counternarratives carry the double burden of unmaking and remaking our images. I am thankful that I have a career reading, thinking, writing about, and teaching youth literature. But this is not the heaven that so many people imagine it to be; no, it is a step from heaven, and as long as my colleagues fight to maintain the status quo, it will remain a step from heaven.

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Notes

¹ I am not alone in this. YA author and We Need Diverse Books president Ellen Oh wrote, "I didn't know what I was missing until I was an adult. The first time I saw myself in the pages of a book was when I read *The Joy Luck Club*. I cried like a baby. Weeks, months later, just thinking about that book would set me off again. And when the movie came out? Niagara Falls. I related to this book in such a deep and compelling way. It was a spiritual connection for me. Because this once upon a time was about a girl like me, with immigrant parents like mine."

² My father worked long hours at our grocery store.

³ In 2016, David Huyck, Molly Beth Griffin, and I created an infographic of the CCBC's 2015 data (Huyck, "Picture This").

⁴ It is largely understood that ethnic studies would not be the robust field it is today had Dr. Nakanishi not fought and won his tenure appeal case at UCLA in the 1980s. His victory signaled to academia that ethnic studies was a valid field of study, and, as Xichen Li and Nakanishi himself argue, his successful appeal case paved the way for future ethnic studies scholars. Nakanishi was the director of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center, my professor, and a member of my thesis committee. He passed away unexpectedly in early 2016.

⁵ At this time of writing, the iSchool includes a number scholars of color whose work on diversity issues have made tremendous contributions to the library profession and scholarship. For example, Dr. Nicole Cooke is an award-winning scholar who publishes extensively on diversity and social justice topics, and she teaches courses such as "Information Services to Diverse Populations."

⁶ At the time, Dr. Reese was an assistant professor in the American Indian Studies Program, and I enrolled in her "The Politics of Children's Literature" course. For more information on Dr. Reese's work, please see her blog at americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/.

⁷ For example, Debbie Reese, who is tribally enrolled at Nambe Owingeh, has a Ph.D. and was faculty in the American Indians Studies Program at the University of Illinois. I am Korean American and earned both a B.A. and M.A. in Asian American Studies. Yet we both have faced resistance to our criticisms of the way children's and young adult literature has depicted our cultures' experiences.

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