



## **Dreaming in Color: Identifying Race and Ethnicity in YA Speculative Fiction Reviews**

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### **Abstract**

Speculative fiction is a popular YA genre that has shown a lack of diversity through the years. With the most recent call for diverse youth literature, librarians and youth advocates are in need of authentic diverse speculative fiction titles to promote. This study analyzed 2,994 reviews for YA speculative fiction published between 2010 and 2015, and identified 380 titles containing racially or ethnically diverse major characters. This study reports on what racial and ethnic diversity is present in current published YA speculative fiction and addresses issues found with racial and ethnic identification in two major review sources. The data presented and calls to action included can be used to continue the discussion of authentic diverse representation in YA speculative fiction.

### **Introduction**

Speculative fiction takes readers on adventures exploring imaginary worlds and ideas not yet possible in our reality. It is a genre that pushes our considerations of and answers to “What if?” to their maximum. It is a genre that creates the impossible through magic and technology, explains the peculiar using creatures from myths and legends, and chills the bones with horrors from the dark night. Through their craft, authors build worlds unlike our own that nevertheless reflect our society and human nature, mirror our fears and fantasies, and interpret our dreams and desires. When a young reader opens a speculative fiction novel, they can discover that anything is possible, and anything, even beyond their dreams, can come true. For some readers, though, the characters they fall in love with, dream with, and adventure with rarely ever look like them—not because they’re from distant planets or magical lands, but simply because their skin color or culture are not the same.

As a person of color who grew up reading mostly speculative fiction, I never found any black or brown fairies that were on the good side. Blond elves and princesses, male blue-eyed space cadets and dragon slayers, and monsters inspired by Greek and Roman mythology filled

the pages of my favorite genre. I didn't dream or imagine myself in color when I escaped into pages of fantasy and science fiction. I believed in order to have those fantastical or futuristic types of adventures, I had to look like those types of characters. Years later, after working with teens as a teacher, I knew of a few YA speculative fiction titles I could recommend that featured characters of color, and when I became a librarian, I added a few more, but the list of titles was not long enough. I wanted to know if there were more titles forgotten or never known amongst all the others. As I continued to read speculative fiction and search for more characters of color, I began to notice that, on occasion, titles I was familiar with were not being reviewed as having racially or ethnically diverse characters. This discovery led me to begin to question the review sources I primarily used. Were only some types of diverse characters and elements important enough to be included in reviews that are limited by word count? Were reviewers possibly missing elements of cultural diversity on occasion? Were editors of review journals providing guidance on the types of diversity to mention and how to do so? The first two questions were ones that I also asked about my own practice as a reviewer. As a volunteer reviewer for *Voice of Youth Advocates*, I primarily review speculative fiction, which can be difficult when deciding which elements are important enough to include while also reading critically and consciously through a diversity lens. These questions, along with my past and current experiences, led me to conduct this study.

For the study, I mainly wanted to find speculative fiction titles featuring major characters of color and Natives, but I also wanted a real indicator of whether or not review sources were identifying and describing this type of diversity. This article sheds light on what racial and ethnic diversity is present in more current published YA speculative fiction and addresses issues found with racial and ethnic identification in two major review sources.

## **Review of the Literature: Our Repeated History**

In 2014 Walter Dean Myers and his son, Christopher Myers, wrote editorials in the *New York Times* expressing concern and disappointment over the continual lack of people of color in youth literature.<sup>i</sup> These articles, along with annual multicultural literature statistics provided by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), spurred a revitalized movement calling for everyone interested in diversity in youth literature to push for more representation.<sup>ii</sup> The push for representation has become a trending and pervasive topic with diversity magazine issue publications, new organizations and initiatives, and recent research.<sup>iii</sup> While this renewed attention has garnered meaningful discussion and a rise in awareness of books featuring diverse people and characters, the issues surrounding the need for representation are not new.

For over a century, advocates and academics have been calling for more culturally authentic representations in youth literature and awarding diverse books that provide them. In 1910 W. E. B. Du Bois founded *The Crisis*, a magazine that included a section for African American youth to read that later became its own magazine, *The Brownies' Book*.<sup>iv</sup> This monthly publication was created to counter negativity by giving African American youth stories with positive portrayals and lessons on their history and cultural achievements.<sup>v</sup> Starting in the late

1930s, books about and by people of color and Natives began to win the Caldecott Medal and Honor.<sup>vi</sup> In 1949 Arna Bontemps was the first African American to win a Newbery Honor for *Story of the Negro*, and in 1963 the well-known classic *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats received the Caldecott Medal.<sup>vii</sup> Books by and about people of color and Natives were being recognized, but not many were being published.

In 1965 Nancy Larrick conducted a seminal study that surveyed over 5,000 books published for youth between 1962 and 1964, and she found only 6.7% to feature African Americans, mainly in folktales and historical settings. Less than one percent of the books surveyed were found to feature African Americans in contemporary settings.<sup>viii</sup> Larrick's statistics about African Americans are similar to the yearly CCBC statistics that continue to report low numbers of youth books about underrepresented groups in the United States.<sup>ix</sup>

Along with their annual statistics, the CCBC releases yearly essays on publishing trends, and in their 2015 report, they reflected on the plateauing numbers of books by and about people of color and Natives. They also conveyed hope that the attention surrounding the two Myerses' articles and the We Need Diverse Books campaign would result in higher numbers of such books.<sup>x</sup> Walter Dean Myers expressed a similar hope during the mid-1960s and 1970s regarding the Council on Interracial Books for Children.<sup>xi</sup> The Council challenged publishers to publish more African American authors, and the market for multicultural publishing grew during that time.<sup>xii</sup> However, by 1985 the number of youth books by African Americans was once again startlingly low.<sup>xiii</sup> Myers reflected on this plummet in his 1986 article and called for action not by publishers, but by the community through reinvesting in reading and re-creating demand for African American publishing.<sup>xiv</sup>

In the 1980s, Rudine Sims Bishop was already invested in analyzing the portrayal of African Americans in youth literature and had created a framework for evaluating cultural authenticity.<sup>xv</sup> Bishop's framework provided a foundation for numerous scholars to examine additional underrepresented groups through a culturally authentic lens, and researchers are still using the framework for multicultural and LGBTQIA literature evaluation and teaching.<sup>xvi</sup>

In one of her most cited works, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," Bishop also provided us with a metaphor with which to describe the power of representation and the danger of its absence: "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part."<sup>xvii</sup> Her work and words have led to countless others investing in, discussing, and pushing for diversity in youth literature. In 2009 a similar message was relayed when Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reiterated the importance of representation in her TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story."<sup>xviii</sup> Adichie's talk also reminded us of the power of counter-storytelling and the importance of not only providing stories to authentically represent others, but to also counter the misleading and damaging narratives that still exist.<sup>xix</sup> Both Bishop's and Adichie's works help keep equitable representation at the forefront of the most recent call for more diverse books.

In both of their 2014 articles, Walter Dean Myers and Christopher Myers wrote about the

delegation of characters of color to historical books.<sup>xx</sup> Christopher Myers described this delegation as an apartheid of literature where characters of color are found in historical books, but not in books that “traverse the lands of adventure, curiosity, imagination, or personal growth.”<sup>xxi</sup> Many of those types of adventures can be found in the speculative fiction genre, and while speculative fiction is only one genre of the many genres in which youth need to see various types of diversity, it is a genre that has struggled historically to include any racial or ethnic diversity. Many researchers and writers have observed the scarcity of speculative fiction titles about and by people of color and Natives and the negative portrayal when characters of color and Natives are included.<sup>xxii</sup> In the past, researchers in youth fiction have also noted the scarcity but have not focused fully on the genre because of the low number of available titles.<sup>xxiii</sup> Among the few works that do focus on identifying and discussing race and ethnicity in youth speculative fiction, the consensus is a need for more positive portrayals along with more critical discussion and analysis of what the genre offers and how it should improve.<sup>xxiv</sup> This study offers a starting point for renewed conversation about racial and ethnic representation and critical analysis of speculative fiction in youth literature.

## Research Questions

In order to purchase, share, and promote diverse titles in speculative fiction, librarians and library workers must first be able to identify these titles. Major trade review journals are among the first sources that librarians and library workers use for such identification and selection. I wanted to discover not only what recently published YA speculative fiction contained racial and ethnic diversity, but also if the major review journals that librarians and library workers use for purchasing accurately and consistently describe racial and ethnic diversity in speculative fiction.

As its name suggests, speculative fiction is comprised of a variety of genres that ask, “What if?” and provide possible answers through fantastic, supernatural, and futuristic elements. For the purpose of this study, genres defined in Table 1 were included under the umbrella term of speculative fiction.

The two questions that guided this study were

RQ1: How many YA speculative fiction titles published between 2010 and 2015 were indicated by review sources as containing racial or ethnic diversity?

RQ2: To what extent are major review journals explicitly describing racially or ethnically diverse protagonists or major secondary characters in YA speculative fiction reviews?

**Table 1. Speculative Fiction Genre Definitions**

Subgenre	Definition
Science Fiction	Works containing imagined, but plausible, futuristic concepts that revolve around science and technology. Works in the science fiction subgenre feature space, time travel, parallel universes, alternate histories, aliens, biopunk, cyberpunk, future societies,

	robots, artificial intelligence, etc. Dystopias, apocalypses, and post-apocalypses are included under science fiction for this study.
Fantasy	Works containing magical elements in imagined worlds or settings. Fantasy can take place in a real-world setting, but fantastic elements that do not exist and could not exist in our world are added. Fantasy is often derived from traditional literature such as myths, legends, and fairy tales. Fantasy can also include science, time travel, and steampunk in combination with magical elements.
Paranormal	Works usually set in the real world focusing on the supernatural and unexplained phenomena or abilities. Often described as urban fantasy, paranormal can feature vampires, shapeshifters, angels, deceased protagonists, ghosts, demons, etc.
Horror	Works inspired by and derived from gothic fiction, where terror, dread, and fear are central to the created atmosphere and story line. Subgenres lacking supernatural elements such as thrillers, slashers, splatterpunk, and so on are not included under speculative fiction.
Animal Fantasy	Works featuring talking animals as the protagonist and as major secondary characters.
Speculative Fiction Anthology/Short Stories	Collection of works written in any of the various speculative fiction subgenres.
Various Genre Anthology	Anthologies comprised of stories in a variety of genres outside of speculative fiction, but include at least one speculative fiction story.

## Methods

The study was limited to speculative fiction titles published between 2010 and 2015 that were reviewed by *School Library Journal (SLJ)* and *Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA)* in their print journals. I chose *SLJ* for its wide coverage of youth titles and *VOYA* for its focus on solely reviewing materials for adolescents. Both review sources are considered industry standards in youth collection development, and, combined, these two review sources cover the majority of titles published for youth. Because my focus was on YA literature, I only considered titles that were reviewed for an audience of grades 7 to 12 and did not include graphic novels. To address the first research question, I compiled a list of all speculative fiction titles that met the print publication and grade criteria for the study and then recorded the subgenre of each title as defined in Table 1. I determined the subgenres of the titles by noting any discussion of genre in the reviews and by referring to genre tags in *Novelist Plus* and *Goodreads*. I then analyzed the

content of each review, taking notes on any explicit descriptions of race or ethnicity, as well as any descriptions of cultural settings or other diverse elements. The other diverse elements I took note of included descriptions of cultures, histories, mythologies, use of foreign languages, and so on. For the reviews that contained these two types of descriptions, I recorded the following:

1. bibliographic information
2. speculative fiction genre as defined in Table 1
3. race or ethnicity of protagonist(s)
4. race or ethnicity of major secondary character(s)
5. cultural setting
6. other diverse elements

For the coding, I defined “explicit descriptions of race” as a direct phrase that identified the character’s race or ethnicity. For example, the phrase “John, the Japanese American protagonist” or the sentence “John and his family fight to hold on to their Japanese culture while living in America” would be considered an explicit description and coded for the protagonist’s race or ethnicity. Inexplicit descriptions—mainly the use of character names that suggest a particular racial background or ethnicity—were not coded as explicit descriptions. After careful consideration, I made this choice because the use of a cultural name, particularly in the context of speculative fiction, can be misleading due to the nature of the fantastic elements and names created, the historical issues surrounding whiteness and misappropriation in the genre, and the sometimes intentional use of racially and culturally ambiguous characters. Names of characters can provide a clue to a race or ethnicity, but at their best and most authentic, names are just that: only an indefinite clue, not the answer in and of themselves. I consulted with a second coder first to discuss explicit versus inexplicit descriptions and then to code a sample of reviews to ensure consistency and reliability.

To address research question two, I compiled a second list of known diverse speculative fiction titles to compare to the list of titles reviewed by *SLJ* and *VOYA*. I created this list of known diverse speculative fiction titles by reviewing a variety of alternate sources including book and publisher lists on diverse titles, reader and reviewer blogs, Goodreads reviews and tags, author blogs and interviews, and the “All Our Worlds: Diverse Fantastic Fiction” database.<sup>xxv</sup> I recorded and coded the same information as described for the *SLJ* and *VOYA* reviews and then compared the list of known diverse titles to the original list of all the speculative fiction titles reviewed by *SLJ* and *VOYA*. During the comparison, I was able determine if any diverse titles were missed by *SLJ* or *VOYA*, thus answering to what extent these journals were consistently and accurately describing racial and cultural diversity in their reviews.

The study does have limitations because my results only include titles reviewed by *SLJ* and *VOYA*. Combined, the review sources do provide a relatively comprehensive list of titles published during the study period, but this list is not exhaustive. This is also true for the second list created from alternate sources to determine what *SLJ* and *VOYA* may have missed. While I compiled a list of as many diverse titles as I could find in the time period of the study, this list is also not exhaustive. However, the study does provide a representative survey of the major

speculative fiction titles for which library staff would likely have seen reviews during the study period.

## Results

### *How Many YA Speculative Fiction Reviews Indicate Racially or Ethnically Diverse Major Characters?*

The first part of the results focuses on reporting the numbers and breakdown for all the racially and ethnically diverse titles found, including titles *SLJ* and *VOYA* reviewed but did not indicate as having diverse major characters.

#### *Speculative Fiction Titles Reviewed*

I analyzed reviews for a total of 2,994 unique speculative fiction titles. The fantasy and paranormal genres comprised nearly two-thirds (65.4%) of the titles reviewed with 1,102 fantasy titles and 857 paranormal titles. Science fiction was the next highest genre with 833 (27.8%) titles, followed by horror with 135 (4.5%) titles. Table 2 shows the complete number of titles reviewed by genre over the six-year period.

**Table 2. All Speculative Fiction Titles Reviewed**

Year	Science Fiction	Fantasy	Paranormal	Horror	Animal Fantasy	Speculative Fiction Anthology/ Short Stories	Various Genre Anthology	Total
2010	62	160	113	20	4	11	0	
2011	95	165	156	21	2	10	2	
2012	153	187	199	21	3	7	3	
2013	177	177	158	22	3	8	0	
2014	183	192	132	23	0	5	0	
2015	163	221	99	28	1	7	1	
Total	833	1,102	857	135	13	48	6	2,994
Percentage of total number of titles	27.8%	36.8%	28.6%	4.5%	0.4%	1.6%	0.2%	

#### *Titles Featuring Racially or Ethnically Diverse Protagonists or Major Secondary Characters*

Of the 2,994 titles reviewed, I identified 282 (9.4%) titles as containing at least one racially or ethnically diverse protagonist and 151 (5.0%) titles containing at least one racially or ethnically diverse major secondary character. Combined, 380 (12.7%) unique titles featured either a

racially or ethnically diverse protagonist and/or major secondary character.

Tables 3 and 4 show the total number of titles featuring racially or ethnically diverse major characters by genre and compare those numbers to the total number of titles reviewed within each genre. Due to the limited descriptions found for each individual story included in anthologies or short stories, those genre categories were not included in Table 4. Table 3 shows various genre anthologies and speculative fiction anthologies contained the highest percentages of racially or ethnically diverse protagonists but also had a low number of titles reviewed. Fantasy and science fiction had the next highest percentages at 11.3% and 10.3%, respectively. For racially or culturally diverse major secondary characters (Table 4), horror had the highest percentage (8.1%) followed by science fiction (6.6%). Due to some titles having both racially or ethnically diverse protagonists and major secondary characters, the numbers for the protagonists and secondary characters may represent the same unique titles.

**Table 3. Number of Titles Featuring a Racially or Ethnically Diverse Protagonist**

	Total number of titles featuring a racially or ethnically diverse protagonist	Total number of titles reviewed in each genre	Percentage of racially or ethnically diverse protagonists in each genre
Science Fiction	86	833	10.3%
Fantasy	124	1,102	11.3%
Paranormal	52	857	6.1%
Horror	9	135	6.7%
Animal Fantasy	0	13	0%
Speculative Fiction Anthology/Short Stories	9	48	18.8%
Various Genre Anthology	2	6	33.3%
Total	282	2,994	9.4%

**Table 4. Number of Titles Featuring a Racially or Ethnically Diverse Major Secondary Character**

	Total number of titles featuring a racially or ethnically diverse major secondary character	Total number of titles reviewed in genre	Percentage of racially or ethnically diverse major secondary characters in each genre
Science Fiction	55	833	6.6%
Fantasy	58	1,102	5.3%
Paranormal	27	857	3.2%
Horror	11	135	8.1%
Animal Fantasy	0	13	0%



Total	151	2,994*	5.0%
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\*The 54 titles in speculative fiction anthologies/short stories and various genre anthologies were not included due to limited descriptions of major secondary characters found for each individual story.

### *Representations of Race and Ethnicity within the Diverse Titles*

It is important to note that the following results describe characters who have been identified as being in a particular racial or ethnic group. Because speculative fiction contains characters who may not be living in our real world or completely human, ascribing real-world, human-only race and ethnic categories to characters was only done if an aspect of a character was identified as such. For example, Marissa Meyer’s novel *Cinder* is set in a futuristic China-inspired landscape called New Beijing and features the main protagonist, Cinder, who is described as having mixed Asian ethnicity even though she is 36.28% cyborg.<sup>xxvi</sup>

I coded the race and ethnicity categories as they emerged in the reviews, and two categories did not align with our usual construction of race and ethnicity. Ancient Egyptians were categorized separately because they did not fit into any of our contemporary categories of race or ethnicity.<sup>xxvii</sup> The category “unidentified” was also included to allow for characters who were described only as being of color without any additional indicators.

Table 5 provides a yearly breakdown of the race and ethnicity of protagonists identified within the 282 diverse titles. I identified a total number of 333 racially or ethnically diverse protagonists. The total number of protagonists was higher than the number of titles due to some titles featuring more than one racially or ethnically diverse protagonist. The data within Table 5 shows growth in terms of the number of diverse protagonists identified through the six-year period. Biracial/multiracial characters were the highest represented group, comprising 25.2% of the protagonists identified. Asian protagonists were the next highest, making up 21.0%, and black, African American, or African protagonists comprised 12.0%.

**Table 5. Protagonist Race and Ethnicity**

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Race/ Ethnicity Total
Black or African American or African	3	5	7	8	10	7	40
Hispanic or Latino or Spanish origin	2	3	6	7	8	6	32
American Indian or Alaska Native or Indigenous Peoples	0	3	4	6	2	3	18
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	1	2	5	3	0	11
Caribbean	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Asian	8	8	12	9	13	20	70

Southeast Asian	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
South Asian	4	5	7	3	4	5	28
Ancient Egyptian	1	0	0	2	1	0	4
Middle Eastern	1	0	0	2	3	5	11
Biracial/Multiracial	8	11	19	13	20	13	84
Unidentified	2	2	6	2	7	14	33
Total	29	39	64	57	71	73	333

Table 6 shows the yearly breakdown of the race and ethnicity of the major secondary characters. I identified a total number of 204 racially or ethnically diverse major secondary characters. The number of characters included fluctuated throughout the study period but almost doubled since 2010. Asian characters represented the highest percentage (29.9%), followed by black, African American, or African characters (20.0%).

**Table 6. Major Secondary Character Race and Ethnicity**

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Race/ Ethnicity Total
Black or African American or African	5	3	10	8	6	9	41
Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin	2	1	5	2	3	5	18
American Indian or Alaska Native or Indigenous Peoples	1	5	3	4	2	1	16
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	1	0	0	1	1	4
Caribbean	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Asian	7	12	8	11	9	14	61
Southeast Asian	0	1	1	0	0	1	3
South Asian	2	5	1	1	0	3	12
Ancient Egyptian	1	1	1	0	0	1	4
Middle Eastern	4	0	0	0	1	2	7
Biracial/Multiracial	2	2	7	5	4	4	24
Unidentified	0	4	3	0	1	5	13
Total	26	35	39	31	27	46	204

***To What Extent Are SLJ and VOYA Explicitly Describing Racially or Ethnically Diverse Major Characters?***

The second part of the results focuses on comparing the list of diverse titles identified by *SLJ* and *VOYA* reviews to the list of known diverse titles found through surveying alternate sources.

*SLJ and VOYA Compared to Other Sources*

Table 7 shows by year the number of titles *SLJ* or *VOYA* reviewed as having racially or ethnically diverse protagonists and the number of additional titles found to have racially or ethnically diverse protagonists that were not explicitly noted in *SLJ* or *VOYA* reviews. Combined, *SLJ* and *VOYA* identified 111 (39.4%) of the 282 titles found via alternate sources to have racially and ethnically diverse protagonists.

**Table. 7 Comparison of Number of Titles Identified as Containing a Racially or Ethnically Diverse Protagonist**

	Total titles reviewed by <i>SLJ</i> or <i>VOYA</i>	Titles reviewed by <i>SLJ</i> or <i>VOYA</i> as containing racially/ethnically diverse protagonists		Additional titles found containing racially/ethnically diverse protagonists not identified by <i>SLJ</i> or <i>VOYA</i>		Total number of diverse protagonist titles
		Total count	Percentage of total number of diverse protagonist titles	Total count	Percentage of total number of diverse protagonist titles	
7	370	10	43.5%	13	56.5%	23
2011	451	11	35.5%	20	64.5%	31
2012	573	23	39.7%	35	60.3%	58
2013	545	21	42.9%	28	57.1%	49
2014	535	23	38.3%	37	61.7%	60
2015	520	23	37.7%	38	62.3%	61
Total	2,994	111	39.4%	171	60.6%	282

Table 8 shows the analogous comparison for the identification of racially or ethnically diverse secondary characters. Combined, *SLJ* and *VOYA* identified 57 (37.7%) of the 151 titles found via alternate sources to have racially and ethnically diverse secondary characters.

**Table. 8 Comparison of Number of Titles Identified as Containing a Racially or Ethnically Diverse Major Secondary Character**

	Total titles reviewed by <i>SLJ</i> or <i>VOYA</i>	Total titles reviewed by <i>SLJ</i> or <i>VOYA</i> as containing racially/ethnically diverse major secondary characters		Additional titles found containing racially/ethnically diverse major secondary characters not identified by <i>SLJ</i> or <i>VOYA</i>		Total number of diverse major secondary character titles
		Total count	Percentage of total	Total count	Percentage of total	

			number of diverse major secondary characters titles		number of diverse major secondary characters titles	
2010	370	9	47.4%	10	52.6%	19
2011	451	10	37.0%	17	63.0%	27
2012	573	11	39.3%	17	60.7%	28
2013	545	6	26.1%	17	73.9%	23
2014	535	7	35.0%	13	65.0%	20
2015	520	14	41.2%	20	58.8%	34
Total	2,994	57	37.7%	94	62.3%	151

In both categories—protagonists and major secondary characters—*SLJ*'s and *VOYA*'s YA speculative fiction reviews consistently underreport racial and ethnic diversity by over 60%. To say the least, this was a disheartening discovery, one made only more so given the study's limitation of a non-exhaustive list of known diverse titles to compare to those found in *SLJ* and *VOYA*. In truth, it is possible the percentage for under-reporting could be even higher.

### *Considering Settings and Cultural Descriptions*

I also analyzed the data to see if when *SLJ* or *VOYA* did not identify the racially or ethnically diverse protagonists or major secondary characters, they at least identified or indicated a diverse setting or cultural element if present. For the 171 additional titles identified as having at least one racially or ethnically diverse protagonist that *SLJ* or *VOYA* did not identify, 58 of those titles were noted by *SLJ* or *VOYA* to have a diverse setting or cultural element. For the 94 additional titles identified as having at least one racially or ethnically diverse secondary character that *SLJ* or *VOYA* did not identify, 33 of those titles were noted by *SLJ* or *VOYA* to have a diverse setting or cultural element. By combining the number of titles for which *SLJ* or *VOYA* successfully identified racially and ethnically diverse protagonists with the additional titles they noted to have a diverse setting or culture, the percentage of titles found to have some mention of racial, ethnic, setting, or cultural diversity rises to 59.9%. Similarly, the percentage rises to 59.6% when considering the identification of major secondary characters along with setting and other cultural elements. While these considerations paint a somewhat less bleak picture, they nevertheless demonstrate that *SLJ* and *VOYA* still underreport racial, ethnic, or cultural diversity in some form by almost 40%.

## **Discussion**

The results of the study produced positive outcomes in highlighting the characters of color and Native characters already present in the genre but also raised issues surrounding the small

percentage of published speculative fiction titles featuring racially or ethnically diverse characters. The number of racially or ethnically diverse titles identified is low compared to the total number of titles published in the genre. The problematic nature of this low number is compounded by the lack of identification in trade reviews. The few titles that are published each year may not be consistently and explicitly identified in major trade reviews. Both of these issues contribute to the difficulty in finding racial and ethnic diversity in the YA speculative fiction genre. An additional issue raised in the study was occasional problematic language found in reviews. The first part of this discussion highlights the variety of racial and ethnic diversity found along with the positive ways in which some reviewers wrote about diverse elements. The second part of the discussion addresses problematic language within reviews, explores possible solutions, and offers a call to action.

### ***Diverse Titles in Speculative Fiction***

One way to actively address the issue of diversity in any genre is to promote the diverse titles that already exist. The following are highlights of selected titles containing major characters of color and Native characters. The highlighted titles are well-reviewed and many are featured in best books lists and are winners, finalists, or nominees of state and national book awards.

- Erin Claiborne’s *A Hero at the End of the World* is a funny, satirical “chosen one” fantasy that follows sixteen-year-old Chinese British Ewan Mao and his black best friend, Oliver Abrams. Described as a read-alike to the Harry Potter series, Ewan and Oliver discover how friendship can be tested when prophecies don’t come true.<sup>xxviii</sup>
- Sarah Zettel’s American Fairy trilogy is a fantasy set during the Dust Bowl era and features Callie, a biracial half-human fairy, who is the daughter of an African American Unseelie fairy prince and a white human mother. Callie befriends Jack, a young Jewish drifter, and together they travel between worlds experiencing adventure tainted by prejudice.<sup>xxix</sup>
- Fonda Lee’s science fiction *Zeroboxer* is a zero-gravity prizefighting adventure set in a futuristic world that realistically portrays how diverse the future will actually be. Carr Luka, the protagonist, is of mixed race like many other characters in this novel’s world, including his girlfriend, a half-Martian with Asian heritage. White mono-ethnic societies in a post-racial world are commonly created worlds in science fiction, so it is refreshing to see Lee’s world filled with nods to a variety of diverse cultures.<sup>xxx</sup>
- Set in a futuristic plague-ridden world, Mandy Hager’s Blood of the Lamb series is a science fiction dystopia that explores subversive religious authority and racism through the subjugation of Maryam and her friends, Pacific Islanders living under the rule of white missionaries.<sup>xxxi</sup>
- Dia Reeves’s *Bleeding Violet* (paranormal) and *Slice of Cherry* (horror) are violently dark creepy tales that follow biracial (black and Finnish) and black female protagonists living in Portero, Texas, a supernatural town with peculiar residents.<sup>xxxii</sup>
- Sarah Fine’s paranormal Guards of the Shadowlands series follows Lela Santos, a Latina,

as she journeys into a dark underworld inspired by Jewish and Mesopotamian mythology to rescue a friend.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

- Jonathan Maberry's award-winning, high-energy zombie horror series *Rot & Ruin* follows Benny Imura, a biracial (Japanese American and Irish) teen, as he struggles with not only surviving the zombies filling his world, but also the human monsters it has created. Maberry's series also includes Benny's Japanese American half-brother and Chinese American best friend.<sup>xxxiv</sup>
- Dan Wells's *Partials Sequence* is a dystopian science fiction series set in a world devastated by a plague. Kira, the Indian protagonist, kidnaps a Partial, a genetically created humanoid, in order to find a cure to the spreading virus the Partials created.<sup>xxxv</sup>
- Karen Sandler's *Tankborn* series is a dystopian science fiction with a world inspired by the Indian caste system. Sandler flips the color hierarchy by placing darker skin at the top of the ranking. Kayla, the black protagonist, faces prejudice not because of her skin color, but because of her status as a GEN (Genetically Engineered Non-Human).<sup>xxxvi</sup>
- Using Chiricahua Apache history and culture, Joseph Bruchac's post-apocalyptic science fiction series *Killer of Enemies* follows Lozen, the Apache protagonist named after the legendary Chiricahua warrior, as she fights monsters and gains legendary powers.<sup>xxxvii</sup>
- Rinsai Rossetti's novel *The Girl with Borrowed Wings* is set in a Middle Eastern desert and tells a coming-of-age paranormal romance about Frenenqer Paje, the female protagonist of Thai descent, and the shapeshifter she meets.<sup>xxxviii</sup>
- Short story collection *Dancing with the Devil and Other Tales from Beyond / Bailando con el Diablo y Otros Cuentos del Más Allá* by René Saldaña contains six supernatural tales based on Mexican American folklore presented in English and Spanish.<sup>xxxix</sup>
- Edited by Tobias Buckell and Joe Monti, the *Diverse Energies* speculative fiction anthology contains a wide variety of stories featuring racially and ethnically diverse characters including Asian, black, Indigenous Peoples of the Americas, and Hispanic.<sup>xl</sup>
- Edited by Nick Mamatas and Masumi Washington, *Phantasm Japan: Fantasies Light and Dark, from and about Japan* contains a collection of speculative fiction stories featuring Japanese characters and culture.<sup>xli</sup>

Even though the number of racially or ethnically diverse major characters in speculative fiction is low, there are titles currently available to purchase and promote.

### ***Highlighted Reviews***

While the study did not focus on whether or not the titles found were authentic in portraying the racial, ethnic, or cultural elements it included, this is an important and essential step after identification, and some *SLJ* and *VOYA* reviewers did address authenticity. The common negative racial and ethnic tropes found within the speculative fiction genre have persisted, and some *SLJ* and *VOYA* reviews did address issues surrounding the usage and treatment of characters of color and Native characters. For example, in a review of Mark Frost's *Paladin*

*Prophecy*, a reviewer noted that “nonwhite characters either hew closely to hoary stereotypes (a Latino cabbie who calls Will ‘esse,’ ‘holmes,’ and ‘cabron’ in the space of two pages; immense Samoan security guards who are all ‘friendly, trustworthy, and incorruptible’) or are dramatically opposed for comic effect (an ethnically South Asian boy with a deep Southern accent).”<sup>xlii</sup> A review for Robin Gregory’s *Improbable Wonders of Moojie Littleman* describes an off-putting usage of “Orientalist hodgepodge that is the culture of the Hostiles that Moojie befriends. The mystical Native American, given magical power by his connection to the past and the earth, is a problematic trope that is reinforced, rather than upturned, here.”<sup>xliii</sup> For Michael Griffo’s Darkborn Legacy series, separate reviewers throughout the series noted the continued stereotypical portrayal of Native and multicultural characters and disrespectful cultural depictions.<sup>xliiv</sup> Another review called out Jane Nickerson’s problematic portrayal of U.S. slavery and race in *The Mirk and Midnight Hour*. A white family has African slaves, and “Violet’s family’s slave, Laney, is referred to as a ‘servant’ and promises she won’t leave, since her family and Violet’s are linked. The villains are also the shadowy VanZeldts, who practice a mix of hoodoo and snake worship they learned in Africa.”<sup>xliv</sup> I also found reviews describing the pronounced lack of diversity in settings that would require it for historical accuracy, reviews noting shallow usage of racial and ethnic characters as placeholders, and descriptions of white characters misappropriating various cultures.

### ***Problematic Language in Reviews***

Outside of the significant issue of the lack of *SLJ* and *VOYA* reviews identifying racial and ethnic diversity, I also found occasional problematic language used to describe race and ethnicity in the reviews. This is an issue that has been reported before in Malinda Lo’s “Perceptions of Diversity in Book Reviews” study. Lo’s analysis reviewed a variety of YA genres and listed common, specific ways in which YA trade journal reviews contained micro-aggressions toward nonwhite characters and other diverse population groups.<sup>xlvi</sup> Her findings parallel some of the more problematic issues I found in *SLJ* and *VOYA* reviews. The majority of my findings, though, surrounded the use of blanket statements to describe diversity. Common generic phrases such as “colorful cast of diverse characters” and “diverse group of characters” were used as the only indicator of diverse elements in the title. These types of blanket statements provided little context to even begin to answer what type of diversity was present. Slightly more specific statements—such as “characters of color,” “ethnically diverse,” “non-white protagonist,” and “various multicultural elements”—gave a better sense of the type of diversity, but were still too general for specific identification. For librarians and library workers who are looking for books with specific types of diversity, these types of vague statements are not considerably helpful.

Some less frequent but considerably more concerning issues included a lack of sensitivity in terminology used to describe characters of color and Native characters, the promotion of titles that included questionable treatment of diverse cultures, and negative promotion around titles that included *too much* racial and ethnic diversity. In noting the following issues, I intend only to highlight the problems themselves, not individual reviewers. While individual reviewers have

contributed to these issues by including questionable language, the editors of the professional journals should be ultimately responsible for what is printed in their reviews.

The most frequent and common insensitive term found was “gypsy,” which was used to not only describe actual characters of Romani heritage, but to also describe white characters who were misappropriating elements of Romani culture. Even when a review noted a problem with a white character not having a Romani heritage, the review still described the culture as a “gypsy culture” and recommended the title. “Gypsy” is a term that some groups of the Romani culture have embraced, but for authors and review sources to still be using the term so casually as outsiders of the culture is culturally insensitive at best.

Another descriptor, “an illegal,” was used without any context to describe a character that I later found from a different review source to be Hispanic. While the character of the story was in fact an illegal Hispanic immigrant, it was not clear in the review, and the usage of the term alone without additional context plays a part in perpetuating stereotypes about Hispanic immigrants. An additional example involved a recommended title that contained stereotypical hyphenated Native names and misappropriated Natives’ cultures. Other recommended titles were also found that depicted Native characters and cultures stereotypically.

Most damaging were reviews that described racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity as a weakness. In these cases I found reviewers highlighting authentic usages of culture, language, history, and mythology, only to then not recommend the title because it would be too much or too confusing for readers not within the culture. These types of reviews reinforce the exclusion of cultural diversity, and Lo found similar reviews of this nature in other YA genres about various types of diversity.<sup>xlvii</sup> An additional similar problem found was the recommendation of ethnically diverse titles specifically to libraries serving ethnically diverse populations. As librarians and youth advocates, we must agree on the importance of the inclusion of authentic diverse literature in all kinds of libraries serving all types of populations. While all readers deserve to see characters like themselves in any genre, they also need stories outside of their own lived experience.

### ***Call to Action***

For too long, speculative fiction has been excused from owning up to its diversity issues. While the overall number of YA speculative fiction titles including major characters of color and Native characters is still low, the genre is slowly growing to include more racial and ethnic diversity. As more past titles are found and new ones written, it is our responsibility to identify the problematic and promote the authentic. While race and ethnicity in the YA speculative fiction genre was the focus of this study, the following calls to action apply to the various types of diversity and genres found throughout all youth literature.

#### *Engage in the Search for Diversity and Diversity Conversations*

Librarians and youth advocates serve as one type of gatekeeper between youth and the books



they read. It is our responsibility to not only be aware of which books contain authentic diversity, but also to purchase and promote them. If the primary trade journal review sources we use do not consistently report on this information, we must use other sources in combination with those we have come to rely on. Appendix A lists a variety of sites that promote diversity of all kinds across genres, highlight authors who are including diversity in their books, and provide spaces for conversations about the numerous issues surrounding diversity in youth literature. Using these resources and engaging in research or discussions through professional or social networks will help to keep the issue at the forefront of our professions.

### *Advocate for More Representation and Authenticity*

As librarians and youth advocates who care about serving all populations, we must continue to support and push for initiatives challenging publishers and authors to evaluate their messages and produce more authentic diverse materials.<sup>xlviii</sup> We also must continue to be allies for underrepresented groups and carefully use the power and privileges we have to push back against damaging and stereotypical books. However, all of us—particularly library staff—should also keep in mind the issues surrounding silencing any voice, the reasons we keep offensive books on the shelves, and the power in using even offensive books as tools for critically engaging in discourse about the issues.

### *Support Industry Diversity and Reviewer Training Initiatives*

Lee & Low Books released the results of their Diversity Baseline survey in 2016, showing the demographic makeup of review journal staff and publishing staff to be almost 80% white, 78.2% cis female, 88.2% heterosexual, and only 7.6% identifying as having a disability.<sup>xlix</sup> Being aware of the privileges that many of us have is a start to understanding why we need to support groups that advocate for underrepresented voices. Appendix A provides a link to small publishing presses committed to publishing diverse books. Keeping these publishers in mind when making purchasing decisions and recognizing authors and publishers when they produce award-worthy work will help to drive the market.

Many librarians and youth advocates volunteer review for *SLJ* and *VOYA*. Pushing for more reviewer diversity is a helpful start in helping to highlight diverse books and erase problematic language in reviews, but asking for more diversity review training, resources on diversity issues, and guidelines on writing about diverse characters is an impactful way to help all reviewers, even diverse ones, to review more consciously on these issues.<sup>1</sup> The tendency to “default white” is a struggle for many reviewers, including myself: even as a reviewer of color who actively looks for race, I sometimes still find it difficult to recognize when it is there. It is not easy to review titles with lenses we have no experience wearing, but it is an important enough issue for us to recognize our limitations and seek to improve them.<sup>li</sup> The more we talk, write, and report on the issues, the better we will become in identifying diversity when it is present, evaluating what we find, and writing about diversity consciously in reviews or other

platforms.

Fortunately, the reviewing issue is one that popular trade review journals have begun to address. Vicky Smith, Children's and Teen Editor of *Kirkus*, has written and talked about recruiting diverse reviewers, defaulting white in reviews, and writing more explicit descriptions.<sup>lii</sup> Kathy Ishizuka, Executive Editor of *SLJ*, reported results from an internal reviewer survey and described actively recruiting more diverse reviewers.<sup>liii</sup> Kiera Parrot, *SLJ*'s and *Library Journal*'s Reviews Director, has reported on *SLJ* offering an eight-week online course for reviewers on diversity and cultural literacy, providing internal sensitivity training, and creating updated reviewer guidelines.<sup>liv</sup> *VOYA*, after being pressed and challenged online for offensive language in a past review, updated their reviewer information pages, which now include an updated editorial philosophy for reviews, updated review guidelines, new reviewer FAQs, and new resources for reviewers on writing with more sensitivity toward diverse issues and avoiding censorship.<sup>lv</sup> These changes show that editors are listening and responding.

Librarians and library workers have been engaging, advocating, and supporting the push for diverse books for well over a century, yet our work is far from finished—indeed, it may never be. As our youth population continues to become more diverse, we must always advocate for authentic representations of groups too readily simplified, ignored, or demeaned. Our libraries should be true, nuanced representations of the depth and breadth of our society.

## Conclusion

Books can serve as a tool for social justice. They can embolden readers by describing achievements in history and the work that must be continued. They can guide readers through the realistic social issues they currently face, or help readers become the next expert in a field. They can comfort, provide humor, excite, and reassure in the face of a society that at times seems hopeless or dark. They can help to erase negative narratives that continue to be spoken. In so many ways, the best books inspire readers to see the impossible as possible, only a short leap from reality. Any of these books, though, can be lost if we don't know them, recommend them, or push for more of them to be written. Regardless of settings in the past or future, on Earth or distant planets, in nations we inhabit or worlds we've never seen, all readers should be able to dream of any aspect of themselves—gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, culture, creed, or ability—in the stories they seek.

## Appendix A: Youth Literature Diversity Resources

### *Organizations*

- Children's Book Council, CBC Diversity: <http://www.cbcdiversity.com/>
- Cooperative Children's Book Center: <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/>
  - Annual Statistics on Multicultural Literature in Publishing: <http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>
  - Small publisher presses owned and operated by people of color or First/Native

Nations: <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pclist.asp>

- We Need Diverse Books: <http://weneeddiversebooks.org/>
- Worlds of Words: <http://wowlit.org/>

#### *Critical Evaluation and Conversations*

- Reading While White: <http://readingwhilewhite.blogspot.com/>
- Teaching for Change's "Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books": <https://socialjusticebooks.org/guide-for-selecting-anti-bias-childrens-books/>

#### *Diversity Book Blogs and Websites*

- Crazy QuiltEdi: <https://campbele.wordpress.com/>
- Cynthia Leitich Smith's Diversity lists: <http://cynthialeitichsmith.com/lit-resources/read/diversity/>
- Diversity in YA Tumblr: <http://diversityinya.tumblr.com/>
- The Pirate Tree, Social Justice and Children's Literature: <http://www.thepiratetree.com/>
- Rich in Color: <http://richincolor.com/>
- Social Justice Books: <https://socialjusticebooks.org/>

#### *Diversity Book Sites about People of Color and Natives*

- Africa Access Review: <http://africaaccessreview.org/>
- American Indians in Children's Literature: <https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/>
- The Brown Bookshelf: <https://thebrownbookshelf.com/>
- The Dark Fantastic: <http://thedarkfantastic.blogspot.com/>
- De Colores: The Raza Experience in Books for Children: <http://decoloresreviews.blogspot.com/>
- I'm Your Neighbor: <http://www.imyourneighborbooks.org/>
- Latinas for Latino Lit: <http://latinas4latinolit.org/>
- Latinxs in Kid Lit: <https://latinosinkidlit.com/>
- Talk Story "Asian Pacific American Book List": <http://talkstorytogether.org/asian-pacific-american-book-list/>

#### *Disabilities*

- Disabilities in Kidlit: <http://disabilityinkidlit.com/>

#### *LGBTQIA*

- Gay YA: <http://www.gayya.org/>
- I'm Here. I'm Queer. What the Hell Do I Read: <http://www.leewind.org/>

## Notes

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<sup>iii</sup> Rebecca T. Miller, ed., “The Diversity Issue,” special issue, *School Library Journal* 60, no. 5 (May 2014); RoseMary Honnold, ed., “Race and Culture in Teen Literature,” special issue, *Voice of Youth Advocates* 39, no. 2 (June 2016); We Need Diverse Books, “WNDB,” <http://weneeddiversebooks.org/> (accessed November 1, 2016); Corinne Duyvis, “#ownvoices,” *Corinne Duyvis Sci-Fi & Fantasy in MG & YA* (blog), <http://www.corinneduyvis.net/ownvoices/> (accessed November 1, 2016); Jon Ostenson, Rosie Ribeira, Rachel Wadham, and Katie Irion, “Hunky Cajuns and Gay Sextons: Diversity as Represented in Adolescent Book Reviews,” *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults* 7, no. 3 (December 2016), <http://www.yalsa.ala.org/jrlya/> (accessed January 3, 2017).

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<sup>v</sup> Du Bois, “The True Brownies,” 286.

<sup>vi</sup> Association for Library Service to Children, “Caldecott Medal & Honor Books, 1938–Present,” <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/caldecottmedal/caldecotthonors/caldecottmedal> (accessed October 13, 2016).

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<sup>viii</sup> Nancy Larrick, “The All-White World of Children’s Books,” *Saturday Review*, September 11, 1965.

<sup>ix</sup> CCBC, “Children’s Books by and about People of Color.”

<sup>x</sup> Kathleen T. Horning, Merri V. Lindgren, and Megan Schliesman, “A Few Observations on Publishing in 2014,” in *CCBC Choices 2015*, ed. Emily Mcknight Townsend, Megan Schliesman, Merri V. Lindgren, and Kathleen T. Horning (University of Wisconsin–Madison: Cooperative Children’s Book Center, 2015), <https://minds.wisconsin.edu/handle/1793/74176> (accessed November 1, 2016).

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<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xv</sup> Rudine Sims, *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982).

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<sup>xvii</sup> Rudine Sims Bishop, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6, no. 3 (Summer 1990): ix–xi.

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<sup>xxi</sup> Myers, "The Apartheid of Children's Literature."

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<sup>xxxiii</sup> Sarah Fine, *Sanctum* (Guards of the Shadowlands series) (Seattle: Skyscape, 2012).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Jonathan Maberry, *Rot & Ruin* (Rot & Ruin series) (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

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<sup>xliiii</sup> L. Lee Butler, review of *The Improbable Wonders of Moojje Littleman*, by Robin Gregory, *School Library Journal* 62, no. 1 (January 2016): 99.

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