



## **Asian American Teen Fiction: An Urban Public Library Analysis**

Antonio Backman, St. Catherine University MLIS Program

Chayse Sundt, St. Catherine University MLIS Program

Sarah Park Dahlen, St. Catherine University MLIS Program

### **Abstract**

According to the US Census, Asians have been the fastest-growing racial group since 2000,<sup>1</sup> yet publishing and library collections have not kept up pace. While there has been some progress, more work needs to be done in both publishing and public libraries to diversify collections and make sure that acquisitions are current and authentic. The authors examined 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016 teen book acquisitions at one urban public library system to determine whether or not there was any significant increase in materials depicting Asian and Asian American characters. The results demonstrate that there is a relative and significant lack of representation and insider authorship of Asian American teen literature in an urban public library with a high Asian American youth population.

### **Introduction**

In February 2016, teen author and We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) team member Stacey Lee wrote a tongue-in-cheek article for *Hyphen Magazine* titled “Dear Non-Asian Writer,” in which she described microaggressions that many Asian Americans face on a daily basis. She also listed cultural missteps that non-Asian authors make when, without sufficient research and immersion,

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<sup>1</sup> Jesse Holland, “Census: Asians Remain Fastest-Growing Racial Group in US,” *U.S. News*, June 23, 2016, <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2016-06-23/census-asians-remain-fastest-growing-racial-group-in-us>.

they include stereotyped Asian characters in their books.<sup>2</sup> Within one week, teen author and WNDB CEO and president Ellen Oh<sup>3</sup> also wrote a post on her Tumblr titled “Dear White Writers,” which began, “Yes We Need Diverse Books. But that doesn’t always mean that we want YOU to write them.”<sup>4</sup> These Asian American teen authors tapped into a criticism that underrepresented members of the youth literature community had long been directing at the publishing industry, and which librarian Edith Campbell stated succinctly on her blog: “The call came out for more diverse books and White authors asked ‘how can I write diverse characters’ when they should have asked *how can I support authors of color*” (emphasis in original).<sup>5</sup>

While Lee and Oh were addressing stereotypes and distortions resulting from outsider authorship, in this study we focus on absence and invisibility. Outsider authorship, as Lee, Oh, and others claim, may distort stories about communities that are already underrepresented in publishing. The void of teen literature depicting people who are not white is an absence that George Gerbner refers to as symbolic annihilation. Gerbner claims that absence and erasure are forms of structural oppression that pervade our society. Since the 1970s the concept of symbolic annihilation has only gained weight in its importance. Today, many use the phrase “erasure is violence” to communicate a similar critique; for example, in 2015 Reina Gossett addressed the historical erasure of trans women as a form of violence, and that today “learning and sharing histories of trans women of color . . . [is] a strategy to transform and heal from historical isolation and erasure.”<sup>6</sup> By examining the absence of books by and about an underrepresented community, a library can determine if they are able to improve their collection by acquiring more inclusive books.

One researcher, Dahlen, is a Korean American with an academic background in Asian American studies. However, we focused on the larger issue of quantitative patterns in collection

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<sup>2</sup> Stacy Lee. “Dear Non-Asian Writer,” *Hyphen* (blog), February 11, 2016, <http://hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2016/02/dear-non-asian-writer>.

<sup>3</sup> “About WNDB,” *We Need Diverse Books*, <https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen Oh, “Dear White Writers,” *Ello’s World* (blog), February 16, 2016, <http://elloellenoh.tumblr.com/post/139448275729/dear-white-writers>.

<sup>5</sup> Edith Campbell, “Can You Hear Us Now?,” *Crazy QuiltEdi* (blog), July 29, 2016, <https://campbele.wordpress.com/2016/07/29/can-you-hear-us-now/>.

<sup>6</sup> Reina Gossett, “Reina Gossett: Historical Erasure as Violence,” interview by Barnard Center for Research on Women, *Barnard Center for Research on Women*, October 30, 2015, <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/reina-gossett-historical-erasure-as-violence/>.

development within a specific community, during particular moments in teen literature publishing. Evaluating the titles for authenticity and quality would be the next step in building upon the research we conduct here.

## Research Questions

Our research is driven by this question: To what extent has a particular urban library system included diverse and current Asian American teen fiction in its collection? We answer this question in light of cultural contexts, publishing trends, authorship, and community demographics.

## Literature Review

### *Asian American Teen Fiction*

A discussion of Asian American teen fiction must begin with a consideration of who is Asian American and what is Asian American literature.<sup>7</sup> In 1968, while he was a graduate student at UC Berkeley, pioneering Asian Americanist Yuji Ichioka coined the term “Asian American” during the San Francisco State University Third World Liberation Front strikes “as a political term of identification . . . to articulate the kinds of concerns Asian American students had about the political position of people of Asian heritage living in the United States.” It is a “political and panethnic identification” that “connotes a desire for a different and better world where Asian American contributions are recognized.”<sup>8</sup> Lisa Lowe notes that “the boundaries and definitions of Asian American culture are continually shifting and being contested,” pointing to the great diversity within Asian America.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, according to the 2015 United States Census, 21.0 million residents identified as Asian alone or in combination with another race.<sup>10</sup> And though we are aware of the critical discussions happening in both popular literature and scholarship regarding these shifting boundaries of, for example, the inclusion of South Asians and Pacific

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<sup>7</sup> Min Hyoung Song, *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Lowe, “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences,” in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, ed. Min Zhou and J. V. Gatewood (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 509.

<sup>10</sup> US Census Bureau, “FFF: Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month: May 2017,” <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2017/cb17-ff07.html>.

Islanders in Asian America,<sup>11</sup> we err on the side of inclusion. A different organization may use different terminology. For example, the Cooperative Children’s Books Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin Madison School of Education uses “Asian/Pacifics,” and we use “Asian” to include all members of the Asian diaspora. And while scholars, library workers, educators, and policymakers use words such as “diversity,” “multicultural,” and “inclusion” in varying ways, for the sake of clarity here we use “diverse” to mean non-white.

Despite rapidly growing and diversifying demographics, the increasing number of books, and stronger buying power among Asian Americans, there is not yet sufficient research addressing Asian American stories for young people. This dearth of research matches a similar lack of scholarship that is made available to youth to learn about Asian American history. The late scholar Ronald Takaki wrote, “My teachers and textbooks did not explain the diversity of our community or the sources of our unity.”<sup>12</sup> Scholars such as Junko Yokota, Rocío Davis, Dolores de Manuel, and Sarah Park Dahlen have addressed various aspects of Asian American children’s and teen literature, but overall scholarship addressing Asian American youth literature is underrepresented in comparison to the scholarship addressing literatures depicting other non-white communities. And though Asian American literature has existed for more than a century, in *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American* (2013), Min Hyung Song writes about the relatively recent golden age of Asian American literature, analyzing works mostly written for adult readers, though some include child protagonists.

We agree with Song that “race also continues to organize social experiences, to set limits to cultural expression, and just as important, to inspire creativity.”<sup>13</sup> Despite such limits and structural barriers to publishing, the creative cultural production of Asian Americans in American literature has been tremendous. For example, Karen Tei Yamashita’s *I Hotel* (2010) was a finalist for the National Book Award, and Alexander Chee’s *Edinburgh* (2001) and many other writings have won numerous awards. Scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen’s debut novel, *The Sympathizer* (2015), won a Pulitzer Prize and a Carnegie Medal. In the realm of youth literature, Linda Sue Park (*A Single Shard*, 2001), Cynthia Kadohata (*Kira-Kira*, 2004), and Erin Entrada Kelly (*Hello, Universe*, 2017) won the John Newbery Medal. Gene Luen Yang’s groundbreaking

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<sup>11</sup> Vicente Diaz, “To ‘P’ or Not to ‘P’?,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 7, no. 3, (2004): 183–208, <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/DiazToPorNot.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore* (New York: Little, Brown, 1998), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Song, *The Children of 1965*, 10.

*American Born Chinese* (2006) was the first graphic novel to be nominated for the National Book Award; it also won YALSA's Michael L. Printz Award. Dan Santat won the Caldecott Medal for *The Adventures of Beekle: The Unimaginary Friend* (2014). Recently, writer Pooja Makhijani traced the development of South Asian youth literature, beginning with Newbery Award-winner Dhan Gopal Mukerji's *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon* (1927), all the way up to Mitali Perkins' *You Bring the Distant Near* (2017), which was longlisted for the National Book Award.<sup>14</sup>

The stereotype that Asian Americans are apolitical may lead to the conclusion that Asian Americans may be relatively silent on issues of diversity in youth literature. (There are notable exceptions, such as when Korean American parents in New England called for the removal of the novel *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* (1986) from the K–6 curriculum on the basis that the book is a one-sided portrayal of Japan's brutal colonization of Korea.)<sup>15</sup> For this reason, we are concerned that the relative lack of attention paid to Asian American youth literature may translate to low-quality and distorted representations; uninformed decision-making on the part of agents, editors, publishers, and reviewers; and misguided collection development, curriculum, and programming decisions on the part of library workers, educators, and bookstore owners.

Though to some extent we relied on book reviews to evaluate the plot and inclusion of Asian American characters, we recognize this as a limited process. First, because as the Lee & Low Diversity Baseline Survey revealed,<sup>16</sup> the majority of reviewers are white, and, second, as author Malinda Lo has pointed out, some may not “discuss diversity in a skillful way” because of their lack of knowledge and lived experiences with Asian American communities.<sup>17</sup> For example, K. T. Horning demonstrated, through her *School Library Journal* diversity keynote

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<sup>14</sup> Pooja Makhijani, “What a Forgotten Kids’ Book Reveals about U.S. Publishing,” *Atlantic*, October 3, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/10/what-a-forgotten-kids-book-reveals-about-us-publishing/539709/>.

<sup>15</sup> Sung-ae Lee, “Remembering or Misremembering? Historicity and the Case of ‘So Far from the Bamboo Grove,’” *Children’s Literature in Education* 39, no. 2 (June 2008): 85–93.

<sup>16</sup> Jason Low, “Where Is the Diversity in Publishing? The 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey Results,” *The Open Book* (blog), January 26, 2016, <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2016/01/26/where-is-the-diversity-in-publishing-the-2015-diversity-baseline-survey-results/>.

<sup>17</sup> Malinda Lo, “Perceptions of Diversity in Book Reviews,” *Diversity in YA* (blog), February 18, 2015, <https://www.malindalo.com/blog/2015/02/perceptions-of-diversity-in-book-reviews>.

webinar, how some reviewers missed some significant issues when reviewing E. E. Charlton-Trujillo's *When We Was Fierce* (2016).<sup>18</sup>

### *Mirrors and Windows*

It remains that publishers must diversify the books they publish, and libraries must be proactive in collecting, promoting, and programming diverse books. As Rudine Sims Bishop writes, young people need to see reflections of themselves in the media around them (mirrors), and they also need to read about people whose experiences are different from their own (windows),<sup>19</sup> whether it is due to race, class, gender, ability, status, and so on. For these reasons, Gene Luen Yang began his tenure as the fifth National Ambassador for Young People's Literature with the platform Reading Without Walls, in which one of his challenges to readers is to "Read a book about a **character** who doesn't look like you or live like you."<sup>20</sup> In his "Glare of Disdain" comic, Yang illustrates how not having window books caused him and a classmate to misunderstand one another; had they read books such as Mike Jung's *Geeks, Girls, and Secret Identities* (2012) or Uma Krishnaswami's *The Grand Plan to Fix Everything* (2011), he asks, "would things have been different?"<sup>21</sup> Moreover, YALSA<sup>22</sup> and ALSC<sup>23</sup> emphasize that library staff and educators need to be culturally competent, particularly because the profession is majority white and

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<sup>18</sup> K. T. Horning, "SLJ Diversity Course: Keynote Lecture by K. T. Horning" (lecture), *School Library Journal*, YouTube, July 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjk7qT0mXI0>.

<sup>19</sup> Rudine Sims Bishop, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," *Perspectives* 1, no. 3 (1990): ix–xi.

<sup>20</sup> Gene Luen Yang, "Reading Without Walls" (2016), <http://read.macmillan.com/mcpg/reading-without-walls/>.

<sup>21</sup> Gene Luen Yang, "Glare of Disdain," *New York Times*, April 1, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/04/01/books/review/28sketchbook-yang.html>.

<sup>22</sup> The 2010 YALSA *Competencies for Librarians Serving Youth* says, "3. Demonstrate an understanding of, and a respect for, diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic values," under Area II: Knowledge of Client Group (<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/guidelines/yacompetencies2010>), while the 2017 *Teen Services Competencies for Library Staff* lists "Cultural Competency and Responsiveness: Actively promotes respect for cultural diversity and creates an inclusive, welcoming, and respectful library atmosphere that embraces diversity," as one of seven major content areas ([http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org.yalsa/files/content/YALSA\\_TeenCompetencies\\_web\\_Final.pdf](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org.yalsa/files/content/YALSA_TeenCompetencies_web_Final.pdf)).

<sup>23</sup> Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), "Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Public Libraries" (revised 2015), <http://www.ala.org/alsc/edcareers/alsccorecomps>.

female.<sup>24</sup> Regarding collections, the authors of *The Future of Library Services for and with Teens: A Call to Action* note that in an “envisioned future,” “Materials in the collections reflect the demographics of the community. . . .”<sup>25</sup>

Looking back on publishing, Rudine Sims Bishop writes, “In spite of all the attention to diversity and multicultural literature in the past two or three decades, the percentage of books in which historically underrepresented children, such as African-Americans, Asian/Pacific-Americans, Latinos, and Native/First Nations people, can find their mirrors has not substantially increased over the years.”<sup>26</sup> Junko Yokota agrees: “In more recent years, the representation of Asian and Asian Americans in literature has grown substantially”; however, there is still much room for improvement. As Yokota concludes her essay, “So much of the Asian world is still underrepresented.” And according to the CCBC research, the number of books depicting the Asian diaspora is not growing at the same pace as our diversifying society.<sup>27</sup> Nor are a lot of those diverse books written by Asian and Asian American authors.

It is vital for libraries to embody the ALA Core Values of Librarianship concerning diversity: “We value our nation’s diversity and strive to reflect that diversity by providing a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve.”<sup>28</sup> Being aware of the library’s own collection of diverse materials or lack thereof is an important step in the work of “providing a full spectrum of resources.” This also reflects the Core Value of Social Responsibility: “the contribution that librarianship can make in ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society.” For example, racism and hate continue to be social problems; the Southern Poverty Law

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<sup>24</sup> See the following for the whiteness of librarianship: American Library Association, “Diversity Counts,” (report, revised 2007), 3–4, <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/diversity/diversitycounts/divcounts>. See MIT Library Director Chris Bourg’s blog post “The Unbearable Whiteness of Librarianship,” *Feral Librarian* (blog), March 3, 2014, <https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2014/03/03/the-unbearable-whiteness-of-librarianship/>.

<sup>25</sup> Linda W. Braun, Maureen L. Hartman, Sandra Hughes-Hassell, Kafi Kumasi, and Beth Yoke, *The Future of Library Services for and with Teens: A Call to Action* (Chicago: YALSA, 2014), 15, [http://www.ala.org/yaforum/sites/ala.org.yaforum/files/content/YALSA\\_nationalforum\\_final.pdf](http://www.ala.org/yaforum/sites/ala.org.yaforum/files/content/YALSA_nationalforum_final.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Rudine Sims Bishop, “Multicultural Children’s Literature: Where Are We?” *Kirkus*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/multicultural-childrens-literature-where-are-we/>.

<sup>27</sup> Junko Yokota, “Asian Americans in Literature for Children and Young Adults,” *Teacher Librarian* 36, no. 3 (2009): 15.

<sup>28</sup> American Library Association, “Core Values of Librarianship” (2004), <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>.

Center observes that the number of hate groups continues to rise,<sup>29</sup> and specifically as “Trump electrifies radical right.”<sup>30</sup> Libraries can provide diverse and accurate reading materials to counter harmful stereotypes persisting in media and popular culture, leading to a society that is better informed and inclusive, and prepared to fight these “critical problems” in our society.

### *Representations Across Various Media*

Absented, whitewashed, and problematic representations of Asian Americans are not isolated to teen literature, but persist across all media. In *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism* (2016), Nancy Wang Yuen comments on the larger issues of nonwhite representations when she writes, “Far from neutral, mass media institutions such as Hollywood are major transmitters of racist ideologies. . . . Hollywood’s dominant narratives of whites as heroes and actors of color as sidekicks or villains legitimates and reproduce hierarchies existent in US society.”<sup>31</sup> Kent A. Ono and Vincent T. Pham observe, “Representations of Asian Americans in the media have been both sparse and problematic.”<sup>32</sup> Similar issues exist in theater, as Josephine Lee explains, “Until recently the history of Asian characters on the American stage was dominated by the repetition of stereotypes.”<sup>33</sup> Esther Kim Lee describes how “popular representations of Asians in mainstream theatre were stereotypical or overtly mocking of Asian culture, and nearly all Asian roles were given to white actors.”<sup>34</sup>

Asian American actors have been both proactive and reactive to these problems. For example, in 1992 political activists formed the Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) to monitor and advocate for better representations.<sup>35</sup> The protest of the “yellowface” casting of *Miss Saigon* was a “landmark instance of Asian American activism against derogatory

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<sup>29</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, “Hate Map,” <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>.

<sup>30</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, “Hate Groups Increase for Second Consecutive Year as Trump Electrifies Radical Right,” February 15, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2017/02/15/hate-groups-increase-second-consecutive-year-trump-electrifies-radical-right>.

<sup>31</sup> Nancy Wang Yuen, *Reel Inequality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>32</sup> Ono and Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, 173.

<sup>33</sup> Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 90.

<sup>34</sup> Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 24; cited in Lori K. Lopez, *Asian American Media Activism: Fighting for Cultural Citizenship* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 41.

<sup>35</sup> Ono and Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, 165–69.

representations.”<sup>36</sup> Proactively, Asian Americans established theater companies such as East West Players (Los Angeles) and Mu Performing Arts (Twin Cities), making for themselves a third space where they could both challenge stereotypes and create new possibilities for their communities.<sup>37</sup> As well, movements such as #OscarsSoWhite and #WhiteWashedOUT demonstrate that Asian Americans will not tolerate how the media—and Hollywood specifically—continue to erase and distort their experiences.<sup>38</sup>

Because of this lengthy history of relative erasure and distorted representation in media, as well as the accumulation of decades of relatively homogenous reading materials, it is even more vital for libraries to include diverse stories. White supremacy has shaped publishing<sup>39</sup> and has led to such accumulated privilege that it has also resulted in relatively white collections in libraries and schools. An accumulation of absence has resulted in relative erasure for Asian American readers. Additionally, the persistent imbalance of outsider authorship over #OwnVoices writers is also deeply problematic.

Perhaps writers feel capable of writing stories from different communities because they genuinely believe they are familiar with the variety of diverse backgrounds that exist. However, while people have never been more technologically connected, this “illusion of close proximity may mask our actual lack of contextual knowledge and understanding of material relationships with others.”<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the Public Religion Research Institute survey reports that “among white Americans, 91% of people comprising their social networks are also white.”<sup>41</sup> If that is the case, then how do white people know enough about Asian Americans to write their stories?

### *Collection Development*

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>37</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>38</sup> Yuen, *Reel Inequality*, 1–6.

<sup>39</sup> Donnaræ MacCann, *White Supremacy in Children’s Literature: Characterizations of African Americans, 1830–1900* (London: Routledge, 2000); Zetta Elliott, “Let’s Talk about Reparations: What Does the Publishing Industry Owe Our Kids?,” *Medium*, October 22, 2016, <https://medium.com/embrace-race/lets-talk-about-reparations-what-does-the-publishing-industry-owe-our-kids-3f58e5986607>.

<sup>40</sup> Ono and Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, and Robert P. Jones, “Race, Religion, and Political Affiliation of Americans’ Core Social Networks,” Public Religion Research Institute, August 3, 2016, <https://www.prrri.org/research/poll-race-religion-politics-americans-social-networks/>.

Collection development is an essential component of library work. Every library must have a detailed collection development policy, “a formal document that describes the library’s collections of materials and documents its goals for collection development.”<sup>42</sup> Supplemental policies may enhance the collection development policy; specifically, the library might create a document that “[describes] the population’s cultural, economic, and linguistic diversity, specifying the presence of linguistic, ethnic, or cultural groups the library may have a goal of serving.”<sup>43</sup> These documents should demonstrate a commitment to advocating for the “needs and interests of the library’s or collection’s service population.”<sup>44</sup> Ongoing review of the collection is also important, as is reviewing a collection for inclusion of materials depicting particular topics or representing particular communities. For example, Thomas Crisp et al. found that books in some early childhood classroom libraries “were relatively homogenous, especially given their very diverse student population, and even the racially diverse backgrounds of the teachers.”<sup>45</sup> They write, “We did not evaluate the representations coded here according to quality of representation (e.g. accuracy of depiction, authenticity), and many of these depictions would be deemed problematic when examined with evaluative criteria for diverse representations.”<sup>46</sup> In a methodologically and topically different study, Beth Brendler et al., examined the inclusion of LGBTQ\* young adult materials in multiple public libraries across the nation and found “nuanced” results regarding the extent to which they included particular books; for example, libraries serving smaller communities had the largest ratio of copies, while libraries serving large populations tended to have more books in various formats, but relatively higher ratios per copy.<sup>47</sup> These kinds of analyses on particular topics may reveal significant strengths or gaps.

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<sup>42</sup> Amy S. Pattee, *Developing Library Collections for Today’s Young Adults* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2014), 25.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Crisp, Suzanne M. Knezek, Margaret Quinn, Gary E. Bingham, Kristy Girardeau, and Francheska Starks, “What’s on Our Bookshelves? The Diversity of Children’s Literature in Early Childhood Classroom Libraries,” *Journal of Children’s Literature* 42, no. 2 (2016): 33.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Beth Brendler, Lindsay Beckman, Denice Adkins, Heather Moulaison Sandy, Natalia Wiggins-Prelas, and Vanessa Adams, “‘Provide the Highest Level of Service’: Public Library Collections of LGBTQ\* Materials for Adolescents in the United States,” *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults* 8, no. 1 (2017): 1.

A collection must be continually reviewed in order to ensure that it is meeting the needs of the community, and the Crisp et al. and Brendler et al. studies provide strong models of how to do so. As well, in 2017 Lee & Low Books published a “Classroom Library Questionnaire” to help educators evaluate the extent to which their classroom libraries are diverse. This template is “a tool to analyze the books in your library and determine where there are strengths and gaps in diversity,” by asking questions such as whether or not books “are written or illustrated by a person of color or a Native/Indigenous person,” “are set in contemporary Asia,” or contain “generalizations about a group of people”<sup>48</sup>—all considerations that the researchers are also concerned with. This questionnaire can be used to complement and deepen the work the researchers have begun here.

## Methods

We selected a midwestern urban public library system with a sizable Asian American population. We searched the catalog to see how many books the library held that were published in a given year and examined how many of those books—published in that year—contain Asian content. On July 20, 2016, we looked at books published in 2010, 2012, and 2014. On January 4, 2017, we examined the acquisitions that were published in 2016 to see if the authorship and representation trends we found in our 2016 research continued.

First, we searched the library’s catalog for the following subject terms: Asia, Asian, Biracial, Burma, Burmese, China, Chinese, East Indian, Filipino, Hmong, India, Japan, Japanese, Korea, Korean, Laos, Philippines, Racially Mixed People, Thai, Vietnamese; and we noted those that were cataloged as teen collection, fiction, and physical books, but not graphic novels. We limited our search to these Asian subject-term categories because they also had the biggest demographic presence in the community. Second, we compared our search results with the CCBC multicultural publishing statistics lists from 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016, which Director K. T. Horning generously shared with us. The CCBC, often used as a baseline for research, “receives the majority of new U.S. trade books published for children and teens each year.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Veronica Schneider, “Classroom Library Assessment: How Culturally Responsive Is Your Library?,” *The Open Book* (blog), May 22, 2017, <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2017/05/22/classroom-library-assessment-how-culturally-responsive-is-your-classroom-library/>.

<sup>49</sup> Cooperative Children’s Book Center School of Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison, “See: Publishing Statistics on Children’s Books about People of Color and First/Native Nations and by People

Therefore, it was useful to see how many books they received with Asian content and to use their lists to supplement our initial searches. Third, we examined the book summaries and reviews for each of the cataloged entries for books published in those four years for books we may have missed through our first two searches, though it is possible that there exist books where the summaries do not indicate that a character is Asian. Through this manual search, we found additional results that were not cataloged as Asian or on the CCBC list.

We did not include graphic novels because many are in series or originally published in other countries and would have inflated our numbers. We did not want to obscure the need for our domestic publishers to publish more diverse books. Also, including books that originated in other countries, which most likely depict Asians in those countries, might perpetuate the idea of the Asian as “forever foreigner,” a stereotype that, according to Asian American studies professor Min Zhou, is a source of “frustration among second-generation Asian Americans who detest being treated as immigrants or foreigners.”<sup>50</sup> Graphic novels, comics, and manga are often released more frequently than other kinds of books, which again would alter our data. We also did not include nonfiction in order to keep our data set manageable. We discussed whether or not to include anthologies, and how. We also discussed whether or not and how to include books that are part of a series and books where the setting is somewhere in Asia but the protagonist is not Asian. In the end, we decided to limit our research to fiction with an Asian protagonist; further research should be conducted on other genres and formats. Finally, we should also consider that the weeding of books due to physical damage and declining interest may decrease the number of books in the catalog.

## Findings

Our results show snapshots of what the catalog contained on July 20, 2016, and January 4, 2017.

For 2010, we found that only 11 books, or 2% of the total fiction teen books collected (544), included an Asian protagonist. Of those 11 books, 5 were authored by people we identify as Asian, while 8 authors were not Asian (one book was co-authored by a trio, bringing our total authorship numbers to 13).

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of Color and First/Native Nations Authors and Illustrators,”  
<https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>.

<sup>50</sup> Min Zhou, “Are Asian Americans Becoming White?” in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, ed. Zhou and Gatewood, 383.

For 2012, we found 19 books, or about 2.5% of the total fiction teen books collected (749), included an Asian protagonist. Of those 19 books, 7 were authored by people we identify as Asian, while 13 authors were not Asian (one book was co-authored, bringing our total authorship numbers to 20).

For 2014, we found 31 books, or about 3.5% of the total fiction teen books collected (896), included an Asian protagonist. Of those 31 books, 9 were authored by people we identify as Asian, while 22 authors were not Asian.

For 2016, we found 53 books, or about 7.9% of the total fiction teen books collected (671), included an Asian protagonist. Of those 53 books, 15 were authored by people we identify as Asian, while 38 authors were not Asian.

**Table 1. Teen Fiction Acquisitions Including an Asian Protagonist**

Collection	2010	2012	2014	2016	Total
Asian Teen Fiction	11	19	31	53	114
Total Teen Fiction	554	749	896	671	2,870
Percentage	2%	2.5%	3.5%	7.9%	4.0%

**Table 2. Authorship**

Authorship	2010 <sup>1</sup>	2012 <sup>2</sup>	2014 <sup>3</sup>	2016	TOTAL
<i>Asian</i>	5	7	9	15	36
Total Authors	13	19	31	53	116
Percentage	38.5%	36.8%	29.0%	28.3%	31.0%
<i>Non-Asian</i>	8	13	22	38	81
Total Authors	13	19	31	53	116
Percentage	61.5%	68.4%	71.0%	71.7%	69.8%

<sup>1</sup> One book had three non-Asian authors: *The Clone Codes* (2010) was written by Patricia C. McKissack, Fredrick L. McKissack, and John Patrick McKissack.

<sup>2</sup> One book, *Burn for Burn* (2012), had two authors: Jenny Han and Siobhan Vivian.

<sup>3</sup> One author wrote two books: Jenny Han wrote *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2014) and *Ashes to Ashes* (2014).

**Table 3. Breakdown of the Big Five Publishers**

<b>Publisher</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>Total</b>
Simon and Schuster (1924)	3	4	6	3	16
Penguin Random House (2013)	0	0	9	17	26
HarperCollins (1817)	0	3	4	9	16
Hachette (1826)	2	1	1	1	5
Macmillan (1843)	1	2	2	8	13
Penguin (1935)	2	1	0	0	3
Random House (1927)	0	2	0	0	2
Total	8	13	22	38	81

According to our data, in 2010, 3 of the books acquired by the library were published by Simon and Schuster. Hachette and Penguin both published 2 of the acquired books, with Macmillan publishing 1.

In 2012, Simon and Schuster again ranked at the top with 4 publications, followed by 3 from HarperCollins, 2 each from Macmillan and Random House, and 1 each from Penguin and Hachette.

In 2014, Penguin and Random House merged, and 9 of the library's acquisitions were published by Penguin Random House. Simon and Schuster published 6 of the books, followed by 4 from HarperCollins, 2 from Macmillan, and 1 from Hachette.

In 2016, 17 of the books were published by Penguin Random House, followed by 9 from HarperCollins, 8 from Macmillan, 3 from Simon and Schuster, and 1 from Hachette.

In total, over the four years, the library acquired the most books published by Penguin Random House at a total of 26. The library also acquired an additional 3 from Penguin and 2 from Random House prior to the merger. Simon and Schuster and HarperCollins were the next largest acquisitions, with 16 each; Macmillan followed with 13, and Hachette had 5. The numbers of books acquired increased each year, going from 8 in 2010, to 13 in 2012, to 22 in 2014, and to 38 in 2016, for a total of 81 books acquired from the Big Five publishers.

**Table 4. Other Publishers**

<b>Publisher</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>Total</b>
Algonquin	0	0	2	0	2
Arsenal Pulp Press	0	0	1	0	1
Bloomsbury	0	0	1	1	2
Candlewick Press	0	1	1	2	4
Charlesbridge	1	0	0	0	1
Cinco Puntos Press	0	0	0	1	1
Disney-Hyperion Books	0	0	0	3	3
Flux	0	0	0	1	1
Groundwood Books-House of Anansi Press	0	1	0	0	1
Haikasoru	1	0	0	0	1
Interlude Press	0	0	0	1	1
Lee & Low Books	0	1	0	0	1
Lerner	0	0	0	1	1

Month9Books	0	0	0	1	1
Orca Books	0	0	1	1	2
Pajama Press	0	0	1	0	1
Polis Books	0	0	0	1	1
Scarlet Voyage	0	0	1	0	1
Scholastic	1	1	1	1	4
Skyhorse	0	0	0	1	1
Splinter Sterling Publishing	0	1	0	0	1
Tuttle Publishing	0	1	0	0	1
Total	3	6	9	15	33

Over the years, in terms of non–Big Five publishers, the library acquired 4 books published by Candlewick and Scholastic; it acquired 3 books from Disney-Hyperion Books, and 2 from Algonquin, Bloomsbury, and Orca Books. The library acquired 1 book from each of the following publishers: Arsenal Pulp Press, Charlesbridge, Cinco Puntos Press, Flux, Groundwood Books-House of Anansi Press, Haikasoru Press, Interlude Press, Lee & Low Books, Lerner, Month9Books, Pajama Press, Polis Books, Scarlet Voyage, Skyhorse, Splinter Sterling Press, and Tuttle Publishing. As with the Big Five acquisitions, the numbers increased each year; they went from 3 in 2010, to 6 in 2012, to 9 in 2014, to 15 in 2016, for a total of 33 books acquired from non–Big Five publishers.

## Discussion

This library system has collected a small number of Asian American teen fiction books (4.0% of total acquisitions across four years of data), and the majority of these books (69.8%) are not written by Asian American writers (see table 2). These numbers stand in stark contrast to the library community’s demographics. Fifty percent of the students in K–12 are not white; specifically, 13% of the students are of Asian descent. Twenty-one percent under 20 are of Asian

descent. These youths are being served by a library profession that is predominantly white (88% nationwide; it is likely that this midwestern library system has a higher percentage of white library staff), and they are being taught by a profession that is also very white (82%; similarly, it is likely that this midwestern community has a higher rate of white educators). This kind of imbalance can lead to biases in selecting what books would be good in the library or classroom. We also wonder what kind of coursework, training, or professional development opportunities library staff and teachers have had in regards to critically evaluating, collecting, and programming diverse books.

According to table 1, the number of books containing Asian content increased every two years. The first several years were slow (2% to 3.5%), but a big jump occurred between 2014 and 2016, from 3.5% to 7.9%. Interestingly, the number of books the library collected that were published in 2010, 2012, and 2014 increased slowly, but decreased in 2016, which partly explains the higher percentage of 7.9%. According to table 2, both the numbers of non-Asian and Asian authors has increased. However, the number of non-Asian authors has risen significantly, so over time the percentage of Asian authors *decreased*, demonstrating that more non-Asian than Asian authors are publishing books for teens and being acquired by libraries. Libraries are limited to what agents and publishers acquire and publish; however, although the majority of books for young people published in 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016 were written by Asian Americans (CCBC),<sup>51</sup> the majority of texts collected and retained by this library were not written by Asian Americans (see table 2). This was generally true across bigger publishers.

Outsider authorship may increase the likelihood of stereotypes and misrepresentation. For instance, some Asian Americans criticize the representations of biracial Park and his Korean military bride mother in *Eleanor & Park* (2012) by Rainbow Rowell.<sup>52</sup> Specifically, we found that although the numbers of books with Asian characters increased overall, this did not necessarily reflect an increase in the number of culturally authentic stories. While we did not read and evaluate every book, we noted for example that Graham Salisbury's *Hunt for the Bamboo Rat* (2014) contains stereotypes such as the inclusion of model minority characteristics

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<sup>51</sup> The CCBC tracks books for all reading levels, so it is possible that insider authorship skews to younger readers.

<sup>52</sup> See this blog post as well as those linked at the bottom of the post: "Is *Eleanor & Park* Racist? And Other Questions to Ask," *Rich in Color*, March 26, 2014, <http://richincolor.com/2014/03/is-eleanor-and-park-racist-and-other-questions-to-ask/>.

and the trope of the forever foreigner. Salisbury is not Asian or Indigenous; he grew up in Hawai‘i and has written many stories set there. Not only is there a lack of books set in Hawai‘i and the South Pacific, but many of the existing stories are not written by Indigenous people. Considering this, it is important to support more #OwnVoices<sup>53</sup>—authors who write stories that are representative of their own experiences, perspectives, and lives.

Specifically regarding 2016 data, we identified a least two Asian American authors (Marie Lu and Julie Kagawa) whose novels do not include Asian characters, supporting the CCBC’s observation that, at least from 2012 to 2015, more Asian American authors were writing about non-Asian topics than they were writing books that depicted Asian topics or people.<sup>54</sup> We did not include them in our final data. However, we did include Traci Chee’s *The Reader* (2016), even though Chee herself says, “*The Reader* isn’t an Asian-inspired fantasy,” because in the same Tumblr post, Chee writes, “But she has straight black hair and teardrop-shaped eyes, and she’s small but mighty, which is generally how I feel about my own stature. *She looks like me.*”<sup>55</sup>

Finally, one of our major observations is that nearly all books found across the four years were authored by women, whether Asian American or not Asian American. While Gene Luen Yang, past National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature (2016–2017), is probably the most visible and popular Asian American male teen author, his books are not included in our data because they are in graphic novel format.<sup>56</sup> In other years, Asian American male authors such as Ken Mochizuki, Paul Yee, and David Yoo have published stories for teen readers. The one Asian American male author we found out of a total of 115 authors across our four years of data was Rahul Kanakia, author of *Enter Title Here* (2016).

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<sup>53</sup> Corinne Duyvis, “#OwnVoices,” *Corinne Duyvis* (blog), September 6, 2015, <http://www.corinneduyvis.net/ownvoices/>.

<sup>54</sup> In 2014, when the CCBC data first showed that Asian American writers wrote more “by” than “about” stories (<https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>), author Zetta Elliott interrogated this phenomenon in two roundtable discussions on her blog; the first on July 16, 2015 (<http://www.zettaelliott.com/race-representation-in-asian-american-kid-lit/>), and the second on August 7, 2015 (<http://www.zettaelliott.com/asian-pride-in-kid-lit/>). In 2016, these numbers returned to more “about” than “by.”

<sup>55</sup> Traci Chee, “The Stories You Have to Tell,” *Diversity in YA* (blog), September 16, 2016, <http://diversityinya.tumblr.com/post/150358076512/the-stories-you-have-to-tell>.

<sup>56</sup> According to the APALA Talk Story bibliography (<http://talkstorytogether.org/>), which Sarah Dahlen compiles, most contemporary male YA authors create graphic novels.

Overall, the number of Asian characters has increased over the years, but those characters may not be easily discernible if reviewers do not make note of them in their reviews or if they are secondary characters. Related, libraries need to pay special attention to how books are cataloged. We found about one-third of our books through a manual search, which raises questions about how those books may or may not be findable in terms of subject terms and catalog searches. This is also related to the issue of whether or not a book should be called “diverse,” “multicultural,” “Asian,” and so on, because a book is more than the ethnicity of its protagonists. In a situation where a library decides to explicitly label their books with specific keywords, we also wonder about the extent to which catalogers have taken courses in cultural competence, diverse literature, et cetera. Subject headings have historically been biased toward a white, Western, male bias. For example, in 1971 Sanford Berman published *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*, in which he pointed out numerous instances of racism within Library of Congress Subject Headings. Though this tract was published fifty years ago, issues remain; in 2016 the Library of Congress announced it would remove “illegal alien” and replace it with “noncitizen” and “unauthorized immigration,” causing significant criticism from certain members of the House of Representatives.<sup>57</sup>

This particular library system has retained the most copies of best-selling authors’ books, regardless of whether or not the author was Asian American. This is unsurprising given that libraries base their collection management policies (such as weeding) in part on how often an item circulates in a given year, and this policy favors best sellers, popular authors, and books to which publishers have devoted more promotion. However, circulation statistics alone should not determine whether or not a book should be weeded. Renee Vaillancourt writes, “The library’s mission and role priorities as well as the scope of the YA collection should provide guidance on what types of materials to emphasize.” She continues, “Consideration should also be given to what kinds of YA materials are available in other institutions nearby.”<sup>58</sup> If the library’s mission is to empower patrons and strengthen their community, then providing a wide variety of authentic stories is paramount.

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<sup>57</sup> Lisa Peet, “Library of Congress Drops Illegal Alien Subject Heading, Provokes Backlash Legislation,” *Library Journal*, June 13, 2016, <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2016/06/legislation/library-of-congress-drops-illegal-alien-subject-heading-provokes-backlash-legislation/#>.

<sup>58</sup> Renee J. Vaillancourt, *Managing Young Adult Services: A Self-Help Manual* (Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2002), 81.

## Conclusion

In this research, we evaluated the extent to which a public library collection includes Asian American teen literature by studying its new acquisitions in light of publishing trends, authorship, and community demographics, and found that the library had acquired a relatively small number of books written mostly by non-Asian writers. Additionally, only one of these books is written by an Asian American male. The problems of misrepresentation, erasure, and appropriation are systemic and multi-pronged, so resolving these issues must happen in different arenas, such as in MFA programs, libraries, library science education, and, of course, the publishing industry.

We all have a responsibility to help readers access quality diverse books, and the acronym LEAD (Listen, Evaluate, Advocate, Diversify)<sup>59</sup> can guide us as we work for change. Library workers and other educators, especially those who are not Asian American, can *listen* to Asian American community members, writers, critics, and researchers. Additionally, we must *evaluate* our collections, using resources such as Lee & Low's "Classroom Library Questionnaire."<sup>60</sup> Related, we should examine the extent to which specific books are discoverable. We spent dozens of hours and employed various search strategies to find teen fiction with Asian characters; patrons may not invest as much time as we did, or library staff may pick only the first few books that appear in a search when planning for a display. Some books may never be discovered because of the way they are cataloged, so technical services must ensure that books are appropriately tagged.

There are many points along the publishing and library processes where we can *advocate* for change. First, we can identify, mentor, and connect emerging writers; demand that publishers acquire more #OwnVoices authors; and support independent publishers such as Lee & Low Books and Cinco Puntos Press and imprints such as Salaam Reads that publish diverse books. Next, social media has revolutionized the way we advocate and has expanded the reach of our advocacy. For example, in "Diversity as Evolutionary in Children's Literature: The Blog Effect," librarian Edith Campbell shares how "today's scholar activists, educators, and librarians are able to reach audiences through social network sites and through these vehicles affect significant

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<sup>59</sup> Antonio Backman came up with the LEAD acronym during the course of this research.

<sup>60</sup> Schneider, "Classroom Library Assessment," <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2017/05/22/classroom-library-assessment-how-culturally-responsive-is-your-classroom-library/>.

change in children's [and teen] literature."<sup>61</sup> Similarly, in the award-winning article "Much Ado about *A Fine Dessert*: The Cultural Politics of Representing Slavery in Children's Literature," scholars Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Debbie Reese, and K. T. Horning write about how "the use of social media to broadcast and circulate perspectives . . . countered [the] laudatory critical reception" originally accorded to *A Fine Dessert* and shifted the direction of the discussion.<sup>62</sup> Readers, library staff, educators, writers, and illustrators can engage through blogs, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms.

Finally, library educators must *diversify* required readings so students read and research diverse books and learn how to evaluate them. It then follows that librarians and library workers must acquire, promote, and program #OwnVoices books, including self-published books. We can bring authors of different backgrounds into our libraries and surrounding schools. Readers can also make a big difference by diversifying their reading. For example, readers can take Gene Luen Yang's National Ambassador for Young People's Literature challenge to "read without walls." By so doing, readers can avoid the "glare of disdain" that Yang himself experienced as a child.

But in order for readers to find those books, they need to be acquired and accessible. Our research demonstrates that public libraries may not be acquiring enough Asian American teen literature, and that the majority of the acquired books are written by non-Asian authors. We suggest publishers and libraries set goals to invert the ratio so that the majority of teen literature depicting Asians is also authored by Asians, and that libraries make sure the books are appropriately cataloged and promoted. They must also ensure that the books depict a range of experiences and perspectives on the Asian diaspora. Yokota notes, "No one book can be 'the best book' for representing Asian American literature. In fact, it takes many books to create a multidimensional look at a culture."<sup>63</sup> Books such as *Watched* by Marina Budhos (2016), *When Dimple Met Rishi* by Sandhya Menon (2017), *A Line in the Dark* by Malinda Lo (2017), *Fred Korematsu Speaks Up* by Laura Atkins and Stan Yogi (2017), and the *Prophecy Trilogy* by Ellen

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<sup>61</sup> Edith Campbell, "Diversity as Evolutionary in Children's Literature: The Blog Effect," *Children & Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children* 15, no. 3 (2017): 9–13.

<sup>62</sup> Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Debbie Reese, and K. T. Horning, "Much Ado about *A Fine Dessert*: The Cultural Politics of Representing Slavery in Children's Literature," *Journal of Children's Literature* 42, no. 2 (2016): 6–17.

<sup>63</sup> Yokota, "Asian Americans in Literature for Children and Young Adults," 16.

Oh provide diverse authorship, genres, topics, and time periods, thereby creating those multidimensional looks that Yokota tells us we so clearly need.