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Who Gets to Be on the Bus?: Tracing Conceptions of Race in and around *The Magic School Bus* from 1986 to 2018

Rebecca Rowe

“Seatbelts, everyone!”

With that phrase, Ms. Frizzle ushered generations of children into a fantastical science education, on page and screen. *The Magic School Bus* (*MSB*), originally authored by Joanna Cole¹ and illustrated by Bruce DeGen beginning in 1986, adapted for television by PBS from 1994–98, and, most recently, rebooted by Netflix starting in 2017 as *The Magic School Bus Rides Again*, has reached millions of children around the globe. *MSB* follows Ms. Frizzle’s third-grade class as they experience hands-on science lessons via a magic school bus that can transport the class anywhere and transform itself, and the students, into anything. The books and series were, and are, so popular that “[f]or kids growing up early in the new millennium, The Magic School Bus was unavoidable” (“Lasting Impact”). Even with this popularity, scholars have not yet explored any of *MSB*’s iterations. *MSB* is interesting for many reasons, from its popularity, to its combination of education and humor, to its inclusion of characters of color. *MSB*’s racially diverse cast seems a direct response to society’s call for more representations of race in children’s literature and culture. Scholars such as Michelle Martin, Rudine Sims Bishop, Ebony Thomas, Debbie Reese, Laura Jimenez, Cristina Rodes, Philip Nel, and Katharine Capshaw; authors Walter Dean and Christopher Myers and Nnedi Okorafor; as well as everyone working in and around We Need Diverse Books, #OwnVoices, and the Diversity Jedi have all written about the importance and difficulty of racial representation in media for children.

This article places *MSB* within these robust conversations by examining how the *MSB* book series and its two adaptations depict racial diversity. For the purposes of this article, I use Howard Winant’s 2004 definition of

race: “Race is a concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies” (x, emphasis in original). Because both picture books and animation rely on the visual depiction of its characters, their representation of race exists at this intersection of sociopolitical difference and the human body, which these media often blend together through the use of their form: Gretchen Papazian argues that “picturebooks are using the literal colorfulness of the format to take on the ‘problem of color’—that is, the idea of race—in America” (170). Analysis of racial diversity for these media can thus focus on the thematic and cultural trends surrounding characters of color and the visual codes used to design such characters.

Tracing how three versions of *MSB* have approached this connection between race and character design reveals that Cole’s and Degen’s original books engage in a multicultural project that is situated firmly in Whiteness, simultaneously normalizing people of color in STEM fields and erasing difference. Although the PBS series attempts to individualize diversity by more clearly developing characters of color and resisting stereotypes, it is still mired by Whiteness. Finally, the Netflix series marries these two projects, furthering the project of individualization and specifying race as in the PBS series but also nearly eradicating visual diversity as in the books. Consequently, the newest adaptation falls into the same problems as the original book series because Whiteness so thoroughly saturates the creation and framing of all three of *MSB*’s iterations, revealing how certain patently problematic depictions of race are changed during the reboot process even while others remain because they nod toward diversity while still serving the Whiteness still so prevalent in mainstream media.

Like most texts, the *MSB* books were products of their time, and, unlike many, included a racially diverse class of students. Cole’s and Degen’s books originally had a 10:7 ratio of White children to children of color that then went to 10:9 when some of the PBS characters, such as Keesha Franklin, were added to the later books.² The students of color included Black, Asian, and Latinx students, as well as students whose race was unclear but non-White. The ratio of White to children of color was relatively close for a time period when children of color were rarely included at all. In 1990, just four years into the books’ publication, Rudine Sims Bishop argued that what children’s literature needed were more mirrors for children of color to see themselves in. Bishop asserts that “[w]hen 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” (“Mirrors” ix–x). Amidst this dearth of children of color in mainstream children’s literature, Cole and Degen were determined that children of color would see themselves in their books.

Because of this racial diversity, Cole's and Degen's books could be considered multicultural children's literature, which "validates all sociocultural experiences, including those occurring because of language, race, gender, class, ethnicity, and ability" (Gopalakrishnan 29).³ Perhaps more notably, the *MSB* books picture children of various skin colors without directly commenting on their race. This depiction engages in a project that Papazian identifies in contemporary multiculturally minded picture books which "effectively posit[s] that skin color is a simple fact, not a signifier" (180). She argues that the "representations put forth by contemporary multiculturally minded picture-books make significant headway in decoupling . . . skin color variation . . . from meaning and hierarchical value" by suggesting "that such differences do not mean anything about individuals' personalities, morality, or potentials" (181). By simply portraying these racially diverse children without creating a racial hierarchy, Cole's and Degen's books attempt to normalize equality among the children in the classroom.

In particular, the books show children of color in a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) classroom, normalizing people of color in what have traditionally been considered White spaces. In their study of why fewer students of color go into STEM fields, Yingyi Ma and Yan Liu argue that part of the problem is that "Various sorts of formal and informal support for minority students in STEM come in short supply, which only aggravates minorities' disadvantage in STEM fields" (614). Among other factors, Ma and Liu found that negative attitudes toward STEM subjects, often due to the lack of support in early STEM education, can prompt students of color to choose other fields (611). *MSB*, in all of its iterations, has attempted to show STEM subjects as engaging and rewarding for children of all races, ensuring that children of color can see themselves comfortably fitting in the STEM classroom and, eventually, STEM fields.

However, *MSB*'s vision of the multicultural classroom is situated in and through the Whiteness of its creators and its teacher. The Whiteness of the picture books can be seen almost immediately in Degen's use of color. Papazian argues that multicultural picture books created by people of color tend to use specific color palettes that are different from the bright colors of mainstream (White) picture books (174). The *MSB* books use a full spectrum of primary and secondary colors that do not skew toward the palettes used by artists of color, which can be seen most obviously in the students' clothes as each child wears a unique color combination including blues, greens, yellows, oranges, pinks, purples, and reds alongside the iconic bright yellow bus. Degen's bright and wide-ranging color scheme suggests a hegemonic view of picture books situated in Whiteness. This perspective is understandable; after all, Cole and Degen were both White. However, their

centering of Whiteness has consequences. Ambika Gopalakrishnan argues that multiculturalism exists on different levels, and *MSB* engages with the most basic form of multicultural children's literature, what Bishop⁴ calls "melting pot books" with many characters of color without cultural representation. According to Bishop, "the distinguishing characteristics of the melting pot books are that they not only make a point of recognizing our universality, but that they also make a point of ignoring...all differences except physical ones: skin color and other racially related physical features" (*Shadow* 33). The problem with melting pot books, as Gopalakrishnan later made clear, is that they "are only multicultural insofar as giving *outsider*, universalist perspectives" (33, emphasis mine). They view race from a White position, ignoring "linguistic and sociocultural characteristics of a large group of children" and so "conferring a kind of invisibility on them" because they "are permitted to exist in books only so long as they conform to the norm of middle-class Euro-American social and cultural values and life experiences" (Bishop, *Shadow* 46). In other words, children of color can exist as long as they fit into a White mold. By the 1990s, melting pot books made up a large portion of multicultural children's literature; in 1992, Kathryn Meyer Reimer noted that there is a "predominance of Euro-American authors writing about the experience of people of color" that continue to depict children who are "a mix of numerous races or ethnic groups rather than carrying the distinctive features of any one racial group" (18–19). In the melting pot genre of books, race is thus simplified to visual difference (from Whiteness), fitting people of color into the seemingly raceless and neutral White culture.

We can most clearly see how Cole and Degen attempt to fit children of color into Whiteness in the ways they design their characters. In Cole's and Degen's original books, there are seventeen students with various skin tones. However, these children have basically the same general design—the same shape of head, eyes, nose, mouth, and even bodies—with differences coming only in skin color and hair style. Besides Arnold Perlstein, with his iconic curly hair and yellow and white shirt, it would be difficult to pick one of these students out of the crowd; in fact, even after studying and cross-referencing the first six books of the series (*At the Waterworks*, *Inside a Beehive*, *Inside the Human Body*, *Lost in the Solar System*, *On the Ocean Floor*, and *In the Time of the Dinosaurs*), I was unable to clearly identify five of the students, and some of the students I was only able to identify because they correspond to characters in the PBS show. Anne DuCille studied a similar phenomenon in the creation of Mattel's Black Barbies. She noted that "Mattel's first black doll was made from the same mold as white Francie, but less by design, it seems, than for expediency" (33). Dolls, and drawn characters, look the same because that is the easiest way to design on a mass scale. Even after the mold

was changed slightly for Black dolls, Mattel's goal in mass production was reducing difference as much as possible in order to make the dolls as financially viable as possible. Essentially, "this seeming act of racializing the dolls is accomplished by a contrapuntal action of erasure" because "Mattel is only able to racialize its dolls by blurring the sharp edges of the very difference that the corporation produces and profits from. . . ignoring not only the body politics of the real people its dolls are meant to represent, but by ignoring the body politic as well—by eliding the material conditions of the masses it dolls up" (DuCille 42–43). In other words, all Black bodies are melted down into one type that is then shaped to fit a White mold better. When White creators attempt to visualize race, they often end up actually erasing the differences they claim to be representing, melting everything together into a White base with differing tones.

Moreover, *MSB* uses the classroom setting to deculturize and homogenize the characters into experiencing Ms. Frizzle's and Arnold's Whiteness. Educational texts such as *MSB* often use the educational premise in order to remove any cultural elements that might represent race, making the classroom a White space devoid of any representation of other cultures. This process echoes the American education system, which engages in a process of deculturalization, "a conscious attempt to replace one culture and language with another that is considered 'superior'" (Spring 1). Throughout U.S. history, European Americans, specifically Anglo-Americans, have sought to replace any non-Anglo language or culture with their own, which has steadily removed any other culture from the classroom until the education system only exhibits a White homogeneity that erases difference by having everyone conform to the (White) "norm." Darren Chetty argues that "Whiteness is not easily recognized by those who benefit from it" so that "whilst White teachers generally do not view race as being a significant element of their identity, children of colour generally do" (16, 18). White teachers, much like Ms. Frizzle, see their own Whiteness as raceless and so do not understand the ways in which they place their White culture onto their students of color. Classrooms do not have to be homogenized into Whiteness, but, as Joel Spring makes clear, the American education system has nearly perfected the art of removing the cultures of people of color and replacing them with seemingly normal White (Anglo) culture and language.

MSB, in its attempt to show that race does not limit one's ability to participate in STEM, does present a White hegemonic classroom as neutral or raceless. Whiteness permeates the very design of the *MSB* classroom, which is always shown with a blank white background or as a room with white or cream walls. Karen Coats argues that conceptual metaphors of darkness and lightness pervade picture books, based on an ancient "visual hegemony that

equates knowledge with what we can see and associates darkness with that which we cannot understand or bring under rational control, and that which we fear” (374). These metaphors of darkness and lightness have then been associated with people of color and White people in our culture and in our picture books so that scariness is associated with darkness and dark skin while enlightenment is associated with whiteness (Coats 375). The White classroom of *MSB*, framed by the White authors and characters, perpetuates this association between the enlightenment of learning and racial Whiteness.

More specifically, since *MSB* focuses on science, there are few cultural references. The classroom is generally filled with teaching materials related to science in general (e.g., an anatomy skeleton or beakers) and the current science topic in particular (e.g., the science projects that the children turn in, such as dinosaur models in *In the Time of the Dinosaurs*). Because of this focus on science, it does not seem odd that the room itself has no clear cultural representations, but that does not mean that race and culture do not exist in the class. Instead, the cultures of the many different races in the room are replaced with a White hegemony. *MSB* shows the world of science as raceless and neutral, with no recognition of its Whiteness. When the creators then add children of color to this world, they maintain the seemingly neutral and “color blind” science classroom by making the children of color trade their own culture for the seemingly raceless White culture.

This White classroom is further framed through Whiteness because the only two characters to be consistently named and depicted in the book series, especially before the addition of the PBS characters to the books, are Ms. Frizzle and Arnold, both White characters.⁵ Lindsay Pérez Huber, Lorena Camargo Gonzalez, and Daniel G. Solórzano argue that in analyzing children’s literature about people of color, “researchers must consider whose story is told and from whose perspective” because different people will have different access to the culture they are representing (12). Because *MSB* is framed from the perspective of two White characters, the classroom is viewed through Whiteness. Throughout the books, though all of the students comment on their adventures, Ms. Frizzle and Arnold are the ones who frame the story, Ms. Frizzle through her role as teacher and Arnold through his perpetual worries about the safety of the adventures. These two characters appear on almost every two-page layout and feature prominently on the covers. It makes sense that Ms. Frizzle would be so clearly present since she is teaching both the characters and readers, but Arnold stands out just as much, even among an entire class of children. Some of the other students are not even consistently distinguishable from each other, especially when they change outfits to explore new areas, but Arnold’s outfit always has his iconic yellow and white stripes; this consistency, along with his curly red hair, make Arnold stand

out from the rest of the class. In an interview, Cole says that “Arnold is the most developed of the characters” because, even though she had not planned to focus on him, children kept writing to her and Degen asking about Arnold until they decided to focus on him (Degen). This White student, along with his White teacher, are thus the two characters who get the most backstory, the most personality, while the other children fade into the background. Thus, *MSB*, while containing characters of color, is always framed by Whiteness, from the White creators to the White focalizers. Multicultural classrooms with White teachers can decenter Whiteness,⁶ but Cole’s and Degen’s books do not work toward that goal.

The picture books were initially developed by an all-White team, so their basis in Whiteness makes sense, even if the consequences of that Whiteness are unsavory. They did not have other perspectives to help balance their depiction of race. What is distressing is the Whiteness of the much larger teams that developed the PBS and Netflix shows, each of which also develops multicultural classrooms through a White perspective. The PBS and Netflix shows approach race from two different directions: PBS increases the specificity of their visual diversity while Netflix adds more consistent nods to culture while simultaneously decreasing visual diversity.

The PBS *MSB* series was developed when animation was struggling with racial depictions in similar ways to the children’s literature industry. Television in the 1990s often lacked diverse racial representation whatsoever. In a comprehensive study of gender and race in primetime television over fifty years, Nancy Signorielli finds that whereas, in the 1990s, American primetime television overall has the same proportion of Black people as the American census (largely due to African American sitcoms), “Other minority groups (e.g., Latinos and Asians) are nearly invisible” (23). Although her study focuses on American primetime television, much of her work suggests that 1990s American television in general has few mirrors in which viewers of color could see themselves. In fact, as late as 2016, Jobia Keys argues that “Only recently has there been a shift in gender and race representation in US animated cartoons” that would include more children (especially girls) of color (355). However, according to Bradley S. Greenberg and Dana E. Mastro, “public television offerings [in the 1990s] provide a richer racial and ethnic environment with attention specifically paid to issues of diversity” (80). In particular, “55 percent of PBS children’s programs contained a cast in which at least 33 percent of characters were racial and ethnic minorities,” though they had a “focus on African American character portrayals as the hallmark of diversity” (Greenberg and Mastro 80). PBS, in shows like *MSB*, was trying to increase the racial diversity of animated television programs. When these books were adapted into the hit PBS series, they kept the diverse cast

of characters, including children of color as seen in the books and increasing the percentage of children of color to fifty percent by decreasing the overall number of students in Ms. Frizzle's classroom. Unfortunately, much like the books, even this animation showed different skin tones without delving into culture: animation "in spite of the projection of obvious differences, insist[s] on a universal humanness" (King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo 160) so that "[c]onformity is the desirable mode of social participation" (Steinle 109).⁷ The PBS show has the same White classroom enmeshed in the White hegemony of American education and framed through its White teacher. PBS's animation, such as *MSB*, thus shows characters of color but, just like melting pot books, gives all characters the attributes of White culture.

However, although the PBS show engages in much of the White multiculturalism seen in the books, it also works to specify race and then work against stereotypes. With fewer students, the creators were able to design characters that were more distinct from one another. There are only eight children in this class, and they each have a recognizable personality, name, and look, unlike in the books. For example, Tim Wright, a Black student, is not a carbon copy of Ralphie Tennelli, an Italian-American student: Tim's head is more ovalular while Ralphie's is circular; Tim is slim and tall with long limbs whereas Ralphie is shorter and rounder; Tim has a very rigid posture while Ralphie slumps more; Tim has a tall flat top haircut while Ralphie wears his hair loose and short. These two boys look significantly different, and not just because of their skin color. Likewise, Keesha (a Black girl) does not look like Phoebe Terese (a White girl) or Wanda (an Asian girl). If, as DuCille argues, mass production erases difference, then what happens in the adaptation to PBS's series is a specification. Each of these characters is specific and unique. They are not copies of White children colored in with different skin tones nor are they an amalgamation of what all racialized people look like. Their design actually shows difference rather than trying to erase or minimize it.

Most importantly, unlike other educational television shows in the 1990s, such as *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*, PBS's "kids on the bus mostly avoided manifesting obvious racial stereotypes" (Hodge). For example, Wanda, an Asian-American girl, was never represented as a model Asian minority who was overly obedient or much smarter than the rest of the class. Instead, she was known in the PBS series "as the tomboy of the class" (Anthony). She is competitive, once going so far as to convince Arnold to chew gum for her when her new filling keeps her from competing in a bubble gum competition in "For Lunch." She also relishes danger, goading her class to chase a monster that has appeared in Walkerville Lake in "Ups and Downs." Her personality is best summed up in "Takes a Dive" when, instead of working on a school project with her partner, Dorothy Ann Hudson, she chases after

pirate treasure. She can be a bit brash at times, but she is always able to hold her own with the boys. Her character constantly pushes back against gender *and* race stereotypes. The series thus worked to ensure that children of color could see nonstereotypical representations of themselves.

Moreover, part of the educational framing of the PBS series demonstrates people of color operating in a white-collar professional role. Signorielli argues that whereas in primetime television “White men were more likely than . . . nonwhites to be portrayed as professionals and white-collar workers,” people of color “were found in less prestigious, blue-collar jobs” (26). However, at the end of each *MSB* episode, a fictional child would call into the “producers” of the *MSB* television show (a Black man and an Asian woman) to ask about elements of the episode, allowing creators to clarify what was science and what was magic. Neither the children nor the “producers” were real, but this segment showed people of color thriving as professionals. PBS thus uses this educational tool in order to further normalize people of color in professional roles often not seen in other television series. This framing device resituates the White classroom within the control of people of color, but that control is only illusionary as the actual PBS show only consistently included one person of color (Kristin Laskas Martin, a Black man) among its directors, writers, and producers. Even when the show acknowledges the importance of people of color behind the camera by including the fictional producers of color, they did not diversify their production staff to reflect that reality. The show may be framed with professionals of color, but it was still created primarily through Whiteness.

Netflix borrows tactics for representing diversity from both the books and the PBS series, with decidedly mixed results. On the one hand, building on the PBS series, Netflix’s *The Magic School Bus Rides Again (Rides Again)* does increase individualization, as can be seen specifically with the newest character, Jyoti Kaur. We learn in the first episode of *Rides Again* that Phoebe, known for her catchphrase, “At my old school . . .,” appropriately “went back to her old school.” In her place, we have Jyoti, an Indian-American girl whose race and ethnicity are specified. In the *MSB* books, race was reduced to skin tones. The PBS series did slightly better in individualizing students and their racial representation, but characters such as Wanda Li (Asian-American) and Carlos Ramon (Latinx-American) are still stand-ins for multiple cultures; for example, it is never clear what Asian culture Wanda derives her heritage from. What we see with Jyoti is a shift in the way that the creators understand the specificity of race: Jyoti is identified, in the show and in the supporting materials, as *Indian-American*. Although various cultures do exist in India, this is by far the most specific *MSB* has ever been about what culture their characters come from. By identifying Jyoti so clearly as having heritage

from one specific country, the show attempts to move away from the mass production of the books toward the specification of race that acknowledges the lived experience of its viewers.

Rides Again also more effectively includes small cultural references that, for the first time, imagines the school space as something besides hegemonic Whiteness. In “Nothin’ But Net,” the class is emailed to Jyoti’s grandmother (Pariksha, whom Jyoti calls Naanii), who lives in London. While *MSB* often went to students’ homes, those homes, like the school, exuded middle-class Whiteness and all looked the same: Dorothy Ann (a White girl) and Wanda could actually live in the same house, their homes look so similar. Jyoti’s grandmother’s home, on the other hand, is a mixture of British and Indian cultures, with a full-service tea set, pictures of British iconic sites, and what looks to be a traditional Indian rug on the floor. Likewise, Jyoti’s grandmother’s clothes are simple and look much like everyone else’s except for the bangles she wears on her neck and wrists. Her home at least briefly gives us a picture of the Indian population of England and London in particular, giving a small glimpse into a culture that many American children may not know. We get another taste of culture in “Tim and the Talking Trees.” Tim brings in a pop-up book and explains some of the stories around the African baobab tree, specifically that it is called the tree of life, the talking tree, or, in Sudan, Mother. While Tim is not African by birth, the show does have a Black child tell the story of the baobab trees, which sparks a lesson in how trees communicate with each other. The baobab tree is important to many areas of Africa, and having Tim explain them acknowledges his Blackness beyond his skin color and then wraps that cultural reference into the lesson for the day. These two cultural references are subtle, but they allow the show to continue focusing on education (how the internet works and how forest life communicates) while also acknowledging that students can and do bring their culture into the classroom with them.

Although Netflix’s series thus specifies and individualizes culture, it also visually homogenizes the students in problematic ways. The students in *Rides Again*, now two years older, look even more homogenized than the original *MSB* because of the new animation style. Even more so than in the original books, the students look shockingly similar, with little variation beyond skin color. For example, both Keesha’s and Tim’s black skin tones are significantly lighter, blending in with their White peers and engaging in colorism that privileges light black skin over dark. The students’ voices likewise sound even more similar, with almost no variety between the characters; if we close our eyes, it is extremely difficult to clearly distinguish one student from another. Netflix, in trying to recapture the magic of *MSB*, has locked itself into the same racial representations the books first created in the 1980s.

This relapsed racial depiction is epitomized in the replacement of Phoebe. On the surface, replacing a White student with an Indian-American student continues the books' and PBS series' focus on depicting as many different people of color as possible. However, this replacement is not as straightforward as it seems. Phoebe is gone, but her characteristics are not. Instead, they have been transferred to Wanda, who is now portrayed primarily as an animal-lover like Phoebe. For example, in the PBS episode "All Dried Up," Phoebe forces the class to spend a day in the desert in order to save animals, which the class and viewers learn have adapted to survive in the desert. Likewise, in the *Rides Again* episode "In the Swim," Wanda drags the class away from a relaxing trip in Hawaii in order to save a small fish she later learns has adapted to survive both its environment and predators. Instead of the adventurous Wanda who is constantly the first to try daring and dangerous feats, this Wanda takes on Phoebe's personality traits, even dressing like her with Phoebe's iconic headband and 1960s look. The new animation style also erases almost every physical trait that made Wanda look Asian in the first place so that she looks like a tan Dorothy Ann. Netflix has taken a White character's personality and given it to an Asian character who no longer looks Asian, erasing Wanda's personality and racial appearance but keeping her name, a more individualized version of replacing people of color's culture with Whiteness.

By decreasing the visual diversity of the classroom, *Rides Again* seems to be going back to the books' original project, rewinding time. The problem here is that Whiteness saturates all three versions of *MSB*, simplifying and ignoring race. According to George Yancy, the White gaze is a White mode of representation that "attempt[s] to install the Black body as inferior, a 'thing' fit for comedy" (xxiii). From Cole and Degen to the predominately White creators of the PBS and Netflix series, the creators of this content are influenced by their own White gaze. As Chetty argues, a person's Whiteness can often make it hard to understand the prevalence of Whiteness, how Whiteness is not neutral, and the experiences of people who have been racialized due to the normalization of Whiteness (a problem that I, as a White woman, most likely struggle with in ways that I do not even realize). DuCille argues that "Difference is always relational and value-laden" because people of color "are not just *different*; we are always *different from*" the Whiteness that so clearly centers itself in *MSB* (57). These White creators are designing characters that are different from them, and so they are only able to show Blackness or Asianness or Latinness from the perspective of an outsider. Capshaw argues that this concern with authenticity has been an issue for multicultural children's literature scholarship since the 1990s (244).⁸ She notes that most of the current and past scholarship on multicultural children's literature has this

focus on making sure that the author's personal identity matches the identity being represented because of the fear that cultural outsiders cannot and do not represent cultures in complete and nonstereotypical manners, exacerbated by the White gaze. This concern has led to movements such as #OwnVoices in children's literature that calls for stories about people of color to be written by people of color as well as calls for more people of color to be included behind the camera in film and television. When, as in the case of the PBS and Netflix series, White people continue to control the way the story is shaped, Whiteness pervades the resulting product.

However, this Whiteness is not due simply to one set of creators but rather speaks to larger industrial patterns. Bishop and Reimer note that such depictions are endemic to children's literature, Richard C. King, Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, and Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo and Steinkle notice similar trends in children's animated film and television, respectively, and an entire field of critical Whiteness studies has developed around just such phenomena. Such scholars note that this superficial diversity serves a wider purpose: it "actively encourage[s] forgetting through distortion and erasure . . . or by unconsciously reinforcing the invisible norms of society" (King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo 6). In other words, the diversity we see in children's texts such as *MSB* attempts to erase difference to reinstate Whiteness as the "correct" norm, to blur the edges of difference into White sameness. King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo argue that when this diversity happens through a White racial framing, as it does in *MSB*, it "allows audiences to forget the difference that difference makes and enjoy the delusion of a society after racism" (158–59). This post-race/ism ultimately reinforces Whiteness, as it "serves to drive any substantive analysis of race underground so that structural or systemic inequality is preserved in the name of neutrality" (Powell 20), "reify[ing] a normative, racialized whiteness" (Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliff 1) which "is the privileged yet unnamed place from which to see and make sense of the world" (Gray 86). By including these characters of color but framing them through and in Whiteness, *MSB* erases difference, focusing on similarity but tacitly arguing that the similarity comes down to neutral, White culture. This depiction of diversity is still being portrayed today in *MSB* and in wider children's culture because it allows dominant White culture to stay dominant while claiming to be representative.

What I find most fascinating about this case of adaptation and rebooting is the way it reveals which elements are deemed worth updating or not. The PBS series thought it worth updating the visual representation of the children, but not the cultural; Netflix's *Rides Again* updated the cultural references but regressed on the physical representations. Each iteration exposes what the creators thought were the most important elements of race to highlight.

These focuses become even clearer in comparison to other reboots. In the last few years, there have been numerous reboots of children's television from the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. Many of these update the original shows' representations of various identities, including race. For example, around the same time that Netflix was rebooting *MSB*, it rebooted Mattel's 1985–87 *She-Ra: Princess of Power* as *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (2018–). The original show aired when the *MSB* books were first being published, but, unlike *MSB*, it did not include any characters of color. The reboot includes characters of multiple races, body types, and sexualities, and these identities are important parts of the show's visual character design and character development. In other words, the show combines the visual focus of the PBS series and the cultural focus of the Netflix series, as do several other recent reboots. Reboots like Netflix's *She-Ra*, based on animated series that included no racial diversity, may thus actually do more work to update their racial representations than shows like *Rides Again* because the original *MSB* books and PBS series were believed to be progressive for their time period. What the adaptation history of *MSB* reveals is how shows that are clearly problematic or lacking in diversity are updated to match representations seen more commonly in television today, but shows like *MSB* that included diversity from the beginning, even if only on the surface, continue to perpetuate problematic representations because their originals are seen as acceptable in comparison.

MSB is a case study for understanding how depictions of racial diversity in some reboots have stagnated since the mid-1980s. Although the books and PBS series offer mirrors for children of color to see themselves in children's literature and television, it also depicts a multicultural classroom mired in Whiteness that attempts to erase the culture of its students of color. In a country divided by racism, where Black teens are murdered in the street, Syrian refugees are called terrorists, and a president of the United States won an election, in part, by promising to build a wall to shut out Mexicans, it can be easy to praise *MSB* for including characters of color or vilify it for erasing culture. We need to see *MSB* from both perspectives, the good it provides to children of color seeking mirrors in the STEM classroom as well as its shortcomings due to its position within Whiteness. Although we should not simply dismiss *MSB*, which worked so hard to fill a hole that it saw, reboots cannot continue with the bare minimum of their forebears if we are to make progress on our racial representation. While Nel argues that "Adults often fail to acknowledge the racism in beloved books, toys, films, or games from their childhoods because doing so would complicate their affective relationship with their memories" (22), he also posits that inculcating an "abundance of varied representations" in children's texts "might help to counter the. . . racist tropes embedded in the culture we consume" (16). We cannot allow

our love for childhood texts to blind us to social and racial issues; we must move forward, acknowledging our past and fighting for a brighter future. In the words of Ms. Frizzle, we need to take chances, make mistakes, and get messy, and we cannot do that if we are not willing to get off the bus.

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Notes

¹ Joanna Cole passed away while I was drafting and revising this article. While I want to honor her legacy, I think it is important to do so critically so we can better understand both her importance to many children and how we need to couch this series in critical conversations moving forward.

² *Magic School Bus* books can be broken into roughly three categories: books written by Cole and Degen before the PBS series, books written by Cole and Degen after the PBS series began, and books adapted from the PBS series by other writers. My focus for this article is primarily the first of these categories because Cole and Degen changed some of their writing and design styles to correspond to the PBS series after it first began airing. My concern, in analyzing the books, is in Cole's and Degen's original views of racial diversity and *not* the hybrid that their books became after the series began, though that would make for interesting further research.

³ As the definition of multicultural children's literature I use makes clear, I acknowledge that multicultural can mean more than just depictions of race, which is my focus here (Botelho and Rudman 84–86). Race has been the foundation of multicultural studies since their inception, specifically studies in African American culture (Botelho and Rudman xiii–xiv), but scholars now call for multicultural studies in areas such as gender, class, and ability and intersectional studies as well. *MSB* across all its iterations does interesting work with gender, and both television series include characters with disabilities. In fact, *MSB* is rather intersectional: it has not just people of color, but girls of color and disabled people of color, ensuring several identities exist not just in the show but also in a single person. While *MSB* thus has many different kinds of intersectionality and multiculturalism, I focus in this article on race because the representations of race and gender or disability in *MSB* differ significantly. The depiction of gender, in particular, is more developed as many of the girl characters actively

work with and/or against gender stereotypes. Gender, disability, and intersectional identities in the different iterations of *MSB* are important topics that should be dealt with in time but are outside the scope of this present project.

⁴ At publication of this particular work, Bishop was publishing under the name Rudine Sims. However, in order to avoid confusion and maintain continuity, I use Bishop throughout.

⁵ While the PBS series clearly identifies Arnold as Jewish, both by giving him the last name Perlstein and by having him and his family celebrate Hanukkah in the “Holiday Special”, Cole and Degen’s books give no such indication. Instead, he is presented as a White child throughout all of the pre-PBS books.

⁶ Many educators and education scholars have introduced Critical Race Theory into classrooms to decenter Whiteness. Daniel G. Solorzano argues that the “overall goal of a critical race theory in teacher education focuses on the work of progressive Teacher Educators of Color and their Fellow Travelers who are trying to develop a pedagogy, curriculum, and research agenda that accounts for the role of race and racism in U.S. education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination in education” (7). Without a clearer centering of race, racism, and how they affect the classroom, *MSB* is unable to engage in such pedagogy, leaving Whiteness centered and unquestioned.

⁷ Neither King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo nor Steinle reference *MSB* but rather the field of animation. King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo analyze animated film from the 1990s to 2009. Steinle discusses children’s television in the 1990s in general, not focusing on *MSB* but shows like it, such as *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*. Even if they do not refer directly to *MSB*, they do analyze the animated cultural milieu that *MSB* is a part of.

⁸ Capshaw actually argues against the concept of authenticity, suggesting that it can lead to simplifications of race and culture as people believe that if they “read Maya Angelou and [they] know black culture” (242), but acknowledges that this is a large part of the conversation around children’s literature.

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