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Six Seuss Books Bore a Bias

Racism must be exorcised from culture, including, or maybe especially, from children's culture.

By [Charles M. Blow](#)

Opinion Columnist

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As a child, I was led to believe that Blackness was inferior. And I was not alone. The Black society into which I was born was riddled with these beliefs.

It wasn't something that most if any would articulate in that way, let alone knowingly propagate. Rather, it was in the air, in the culture. We had been trained in it, bathed in it, acculturated to hate ourselves.

It happened for children in the most inconspicuous of ways: It was relayed through toys and dolls, cartoons and children's shows, fairy tales and children's books.

At every turn, at every moment, I was being baptized in the narrative that everything white was right, good, noble and beautiful, and everything Black was the opposite.

The first book I ever bought was a children's book about Job from the Bible. Job was the whitest of white men in the book and so was the white savior with white beard lounging on a cloud. Indeed, every image I saw of Christianity featured white people. My great-uncle had a picture of a stringy-haired, blue-eyed white Jesus hanging over his bed.

Some of the first cartoons I can remember included Pepé Le Pew, who normalized rape culture; Speedy Gonzales, whose friends helped popularize the corrosive stereotype of the drunk and lethargic Mexicans; and Mammy Two Shoes, a heavysset Black maid who spoke in a heavy accent.

Reruns were a fixture in the pre-cable days, so I watched children's shows like Tarzan, about a half-naked white man in the middle of an African jungle who conquers and tames it and outwits the Black people there, who are all portrayed as primitive, if not savage. I watched the old "Our Gang" ("Little Rascals") shorts in which the Buckwheat character summoned all the stereotypes of the pickaninny.

And of course, I watched westerns that regularly depicted Native Americans as aggressive, bloodthirsty savages against whom valiant white men were forced to fight.

[As James Baldwin put it in a 1965 essay:](#)

"In the case of the American Negro, from the moment you are born every stick and stone, every face, is white. Since you have not yet seen a mirror, you suppose you are, too. It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, 6, or 7 to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you. It comes as a great shock to see Gary Cooper killing off the Indians, and although you are rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians are you.

But, as [the Equal Justice Initiative points out:](#)

“Throughout history, Native people have been subjected to more than 1500 wars, attacks, and raids authorized by the United States government. Under the guise of ‘expanding civilization,’ the drive to amass land and widen borders incited decades of racial genocide.”

In elementary school we celebrated Columbus Day by coloring pictures of a happy, smiling white man and his three boats, not knowing that Columbus was a brutal enslaver and slave trader and [who wrote in 1500](#) of enslaved women and girls: “A hundred castellanoes are as easily obtained for a woman as for a farm, and it is very general and there are plenty of dealers who go about looking for girls: those from nine to ten are now in demand.”

In fact, it is in the early years that we become conscious of race, and it is then that we can begin to assign value to it.

As the American Psychological Association [pointed out last year](#), new research indicates “Adults in the United States believe children should be almost 5 years old before talking with them about race, even though some infants are aware of race and preschoolers may have already developed racist beliefs.”

I was a teenager before I could start to understand what had been done to me, that I had been taught to hate myself, and for me to start to reverse it. The most illuminating — and sad — realization came when I became aware of the doll tests in which very young children were presented with a white doll and a Black one and asked to describe each. Most of the children preferred the white dolls and described them positively.

About 30 years ago, in my own version of the experiment, I grabbed an old yearbook from a school I attended whose student body was roughly evenly split between white and Black students. I gave it to my nephew who was 4 or 5 years old and told him to point to the people he thought were pretty. Every face on which that little brown finger landed was white.

It underscored for me that the things that we present children with, believing them innocent, can be highly corrosive and racially vicious.

So, this week when the company that controls the [Dr. Seuss books](#) announced that [they would no longer publish](#) six of the books because of racist and insensitive imagery, saying “these books portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong,” I cheered as some bemoaned another victim of so-called “cancel culture.”

Racism must be exorcised from culture, including, or maybe especially, from children’s culture. Teaching a child to hate or be ashamed of themselves is a sin against their innocence and a weight against their possibilities.