



# Examining Agency in Children's Nonfiction Picture Books

Margaret Vaughn<sup>1</sup> · Vera Sotirovska<sup>2</sup> · Janine J. Darragh<sup>2</sup> · Mohamed Elhess<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Given increased attention toward nonfiction and informational texts due to recent educational reforms in the nation, it is critical to examine how various cultural identities are depicted in nonfiction children's picture books. Focusing on the Orbis Pictus honor and awarded texts ( $n=60$ ) from 1990 to 2019, this article reports the findings of a critical multicultural analysis of the depictions of age, sex, socio-economic status, ethnicities, and geographic regions of these awarded texts. Using a secondary analysis of opportunities for agency, we examine how focal subjects (Crisp in Lang Arts 92(4):241–255, 2015) exert their agency in their respective contexts. Our aim in doing so is to problematize the notion of agency in these texts, specifically understanding who exerts agency, how, and for what purposes. Findings suggest that the authors of these awarded texts rely on highlighting White, European males where agency is typically depicted as an act that occurs in adulthood. As a result, discussion focuses on how such texts, although well-meaning, perhaps perpetuate the traditional notion and passivity of young children in relation to their agency and calls to question the lack of multiple perspectives and voices in the awarded texts.

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**Margaret Vaughn** is an associate professor at Washington State University. Her research explores adaptive and equitable practices to support student agency and literacy learning.

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**Vera Sotirovska** is a doctoral student at the University of Idaho. Her research explores children's literature and literacy opportunities to support all learners.

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**Janine J. Darragh** is an associate professor at the University of Idaho. Her research explores sociocultural issues in children's and young adult literature.

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**Mohamed Elhess** is a doctoral student at the University of Idaho. His research explores students' sense of belonging and identity in learning spaces.

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In the original publication of the article unfortunately contained a mistake in the name of co-author Vera Sotirvoska. The correct name should be Vera Sotirovska. The original article has been corrected.

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✉ Margaret Vaughn  
[margaret.vaughn@wsu.edu](mailto:margaret.vaughn@wsu.edu)

<sup>1</sup> Washington State University, 1155 College Avenue, Pullman, WA 99164-2114, USA

<sup>2</sup> University of Idaho, 875 Perimeter Drive, P.O. Box 443082, Moscow, ID 83844, USA

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## Introduction

In the U.S., there has been increased attention in recent years toward the inclusion of nonfiction and informational texts into elementary classrooms (Duke, 2000; Jeong et al., 2010). Although nonfiction as a genre has had a longstanding position in the field of children's literature (Aoki, 2001; Crisp et al., 2018; Gill, 2009; Smith & Robertson, 2019; Wilson, 2006) the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) signified a resurgence toward introducing and exposing young readers to nonfiction and informational texts (Malloy et al., 2017). As a result, many widely adopted curricular programs incorporate nonfiction and informational texts. Thus, the expectations adults have for young readers is that they read this genre consistently and interpret and analyze nonfiction texts with the goal of developing specialized knowledge (Daniels, 1994; Moss, 2003; Sanders, 2018; Stien & Beed, 2004). Nonfiction emphasizes, "fact and truth, [and] the presumed accuracy of the information provided, and the unique ways in which it foregrounds...an understanding of how the world looks and operates" (Crisp et al., 2018, pp. 247–248). Thus, understanding how individuals are depicted is especially important in nonfiction texts because nonfiction invites young readers into reading and learning about the world around them as it "conveys information about the natural and social world" (Duke et al., 2003, p. 22).

Deemed as an "irresistible medium" (Schwarcz & Schwarcz, 1991, p. 5), and a supergenre (Lewis, 1990) picture books communicate meaning through both illustrations and text. Huck (1993) defined a picture book as "a seamless whole conveying meaning in both art and text" (p. 24). Bishop and Hickman (1992) differentiated this genre by its dynamic interplay of both pictures and text in telling a story. Bakhtin (1981) emphasized the polyphonic nature of picture books delivering many genres in one through mixed media. Scholars have celebrated the powerful textual and pictorial narratives picture books convey and their role in children's education (Hunt, 2004; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2013). Extant research highlights the use of picture books as a medium to unpack issues of justice, oppression, content, and socio-emotional learning objectives (Morgan, 2009; Hill and Darragh, 2016; Harrington, 2016; Husband, 2019; Sotirovska & Kelley, 2020). Sipe (2000, 2008), explained that picture books afford children with freedom to take various positions and to see perspectives of individuals they might not otherwise consider. Similarly, Lazar and Offenbergl (2011) examined how through the use of picture books, students were able to discuss social topics and how to position themselves as activists and allies. Mathis (2016) argued that picture books capture students' interest with their images and provide opportunities for children to inquire about concepts, events, and vocabulary. Moreover, as students engage with picture books, they develop academic skills such as knowledge acquisition and meaning-making skills (Serafini et al., 2018) as well as connections to texts as a way to explore and see not only mirrors but also windows and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). Because

picture books (as well as other genres of children's literature) provide an outlet for students to engage in critical conversations about social action and ways to leverage their agency in and out of school (Serafini et al., 2018; Stevenson & Beck, 2017), examining how the focal subjects in nonfiction texts exert their agency can serve as a powerful lens for reading nonfiction with young children. Yet perhaps due to its ambiguity, agency as a theme in nonfiction for young readers is elusive and runs the risk much like what Hamilton-McKenna (2020) state about other affective dimensions (e.g., belonging) in children's literature, "a universally understood state of being" (p. 2). However, agency is, "the strategic making and remaking of ourselves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embedded within relations of power" (Lewis et al., 2007, p. 18). Agency is connected to how individuals construct and negotiate their identities in complex social worlds (Vaughn, 2020a; Holland et al., 2001). Our view of agency views individuals, "as neither autonomous agents nor simply mechanical conveyers of animating environmental influences. Rather they make causal contribution to their own motivation and action within a system of triadic reciprocal causation" (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175). As a result, agency "is the ability of individuals to exert influence and to create opportunities through intentions, decisions, and actions" (Vaughn, 2018, p. 5). However, despite the important role of agency in our everyday lives, young children are situated in schools and out of school contexts where they all too often are positioned without agency (Adair, 2014; Vaughn, 2014). Although there is growing research that investigates how individuals are portrayed in nonfiction texts (Crisp, 2015; Sanders & Avritt, 2016), few scholars address the interconnectedness of cultural identities in relation to agency.

If books can indeed serve as a window, mirror, and sliding glass door (Bishop, 1990), we must be able to show children that they are represented in the books they read where children possess and exert their agency. Thus, we emphasize the important position agency has in depictions of focal subjects in nonfiction picture books. We acknowledge the vital role of racialized, cultural, and gendered identities in examining nonfiction picture books. Thus, we conducted a multicultural critical analysis to examine these dimensions. We position that despite the aforementioned important work on nonfiction texts, there remains little research that analyzes nonfiction texts for moments of departure or what we term as agentic acts (e.g., opportunities where the individual makes and acts on choices; opportunities where the individual makes and acts on decisions, intentions, beliefs, and desires; and opportunities where the individual provides and acts on an alternative). Given that award-winning books like the Orbis Pictus are widely adopted and espoused as exemplars of nonfiction for young readers, we examine these texts to understand moments of agency where the focal subjects exerted agency in their environment, thereby making visible how agency is contextualized for young readers. Accordingly, our research questions include:

- (1) What are dominant characteristics of the Orbis Pictus Award winning picture books from 1990 to 2019?
- (2) In what ways do the Orbis Pictus award-winning picture books portray agency?

## History of the Orbis Pictus Award

The first recognized picture book for children was *Orbis Pictus*, or *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (*Visible World in Pictures*), popularized as a world-renowned textbook for children written by Comenius (1810/1658). The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Orbis Pictus Award was first established to endorse and distinguish authors and their nonfiction works for children that were published or distributed in the United States during the preceding calendar year. The NCTE Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children originated in 1989 and awards up to five nonfiction books annually for exemplary nonfiction writing in books for grades kindergarten through eighth grade. The Orbis Pictus committee reviews texts published and sold in the United States and whose main purpose is “the sharing of information, including biographies, but excludes textbooks, historical fiction, folklore, or poetry” (<https://ncte.org/awards>). The review criteria include nonfiction books that present original work “written, designed, and organized to interpret documentable, factual material for children” (<https://ncte.org/awards>). The Orbis Pictus committee evaluates the books based on the following criteria (NCTE) as stated on the organization’s website:

- Accuracy of presentation in both text and illustrative material, as well as appropriate documentation, avoidance of anthropomorphism and teleology, distinction between fact and theory, and balanced treatment
- Organization of material (e.g., general to specific; specific to general) that contributes to clarity and accessibility
- Style of writing that is engaging and is distinctive in its use of language.
- Style of illustration that is engaging, informative, and complements the text
- Appropriateness of book design based on the topic or subject and with respect to the different age groups for which the topic or subject may be appropriate
- Potential contribution to the K-8 curriculum

While we recognize that there are other quality works of nonfiction for children that have not won this award, and that there are limitations when excluding specific genres for analysis (Crisp, 2015), given the prestige and influence of the Orbis Pictus Award, and the call for the reading of nonfiction texts in schools (Duke, 2000), we believe this critical analysis of representations of agency in nonfiction children’s picture books is timely.

## Methods

We used a critical multicultural qualitative content analysis (Botelho & Rudman, 2009) to analyze the awarded picture books. This approach was productive in conceptualizing dominant characteristics (i.e., age, race, sex), and how characters harnessed agency across contexts. We examined the Orbis Pictus awarded and

honor books spanning the years (1990–2019). While *Orbis Pictus* also identifies recommended titles, we chose not to review those due to both time constraints and because we believed the awarded and honor books would be most likely to be adopted in schools and in libraries given their distinction. Out of *Orbis Pictus* awarded and honored books ( $n=60$ ), 36 titles met our criteria for inclusion: a picture book; has a human character and was published between 1990 and 2019. Because agency is an abstract concept for students, we chose to use texts that had real-life examples so that students could see themselves reflected in the text. Moreover, given that our emphasis in this research is the genre of picture book, we chose to include only those identified as such. The titles that met our criteria were then examined according to the following categories: year published, age of the focal subject, sex of the focal subjects, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity of the focal subjects, and the opportunities focal subjects had to make choices, decisions, and provide alternatives. We also coded for the barriers that the focal subjects overcame enacting their agency. Our conceptual understanding of agency stems from our research over the last decade across a variety of settings (Kuby & Vaughn, 2015; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2011, 2013; Vaughn, 2014, 2018, 2020a, b; Vaughn et al., 2020a, b). Specifically, our operational definition of agency that informed our lens of agency was conceptualized as the ability of “individuals to exert influence and create opportunities in their environment through intentions, decisions, and actions” (Vaughn, 2018, p. 5). Based on this conceptual understanding and the above theoretical orientation outlined, we created the following categories to examine events by which individuals in the texts harnessed their agency: (a) opportunities where the individual makes and acts on choices; (b) opportunities where the individual makes and acts on decisions, intentions, beliefs, and desires; and (c) opportunities where the individual provides and acts on an alternative. Two authors (Authors 1 and 3) with experience in agency and picture book review methodologies met to discuss the criteria and agency-related factors and to develop a coding system for each outlined category (i.e., age, race, sex). Authors 1 and 3 then individually coded two picture books according to the outlined categories and then met and discussed responses. We reviewed the process, shared how we analyzed each page, and discussed our rationales for coding procedures. We had minimal discrepancies such as differentiating the meaning between making a choice and exerting influence. As a result, we modified the coding system to allow for more transparency in the categories. Then Authors 1, 2, and 4 met and reread these same two picture books and coded according to the revised coding system. This process was to ensure interrater reliability and to provide deeper understanding of each code. Finally, each author read and coded the picture books using the outlined coding system. Specifically, Authors 1 and 2 read and coded the majority of the books. Then, Authors 3 and 4 reread a sample of the books ( $n=15$ ) and coded each according to the identified coding system. Results were compared with Authors 1 and 2, and any discrepancies in coding were re-evaluated, with authors coming to a consensus on a final code. All of the information was inserted into an Excel file and saved on an online digital platform.

Below are three examples illustrating how we conceptualized dimensions of agency as a code when analyzing the Orbis Pictus awarded and honor books. In *Between the Lines: How Ernie Barnes Went from the Football Field to the Art Gallery* (Wallace & Collier, 2018), awarded 2019, we coded for the following acts of agency: opportunities to act on decisions and intentions and provides and acts on an alternative. For example, when Ernie Barnes suffered a bone fracture ending his football career, he made the decision to channel his passion for football by painting scenes from football games. In terms of providing an alternative, we recorded Ernie's resilience through examples such as, when children picked on Ernie as he struggled with words, he instead went home to paint. In another picture book, *Swan: The Life and Dance of Anna Pavlova* (Snyder, 2015), honored 2016, we noted two acts of agency that changed the trajectory of the focal subject, Anna Pavlova. Anna chose to pursue ballet professionally despite not fitting the ballerina ideal at the time. We coded this act as making and acting on decisions, intentions, beliefs, and desires in an effort to transform her current circumstances. In another coded act of agency, we noted the event when Anna, as a child left her mother to go and train at a boarding school. When coding for agency in the form of making and acting on choices in *The World Is Not a Rectangle: A Portrait of Architect Zaha Hadid* (Winter, 2017), honored 2018, we recorded Zaha Hadid's choices in her decision to face adversity to become a respected architect as a Muslim woman. In our analysis, we noted the ways in which Zaha demonstrated persistence to reshape the city's landscape.

## Findings and Discussion

This study sought to answer the following questions: What are dominant characteristics of the Orbis Pictus award-winning picture books from 1990 to 2019?, and in what ways do the Orbis Pictus award-winning picture books portray agency? The dominant characteristics of the Orbis Pictus award-winning picture books and their relationship to the aforementioned opportunities for agency are discussed below.

### Race, Ethnicity, and Sex of Protagonist

Using the United States Census Bureau (2020) categories for race and ethnicity to code the books, we determined that of the books analyzed, 23 (64%) portray focal subjects from the United States, and 13 (36%) have focal subjects from other parts of the world (e.g. Japan, Iraq, Hungary). In our analysis, we found that the awarded texts portrayed historical events and figures where White, American middle/upper class males were the dominant focal subjects and events. Specifically, for the male focal subjects, out of 26 (72%) male focal subjects in total, 22 (85%) were from the United States, with 15 (68%) of those being White; 5 (23%) African American, and 2 (9%) Asian Americans (See Table 1).

Of the 10 female focal subjects in the books overall, 9 (90%) of the female subjects were from the United States, with 6 (67%) of these female focal subjects being White; 2 (22%) of those being African American, and 1 (11%) focal subject was

**Table 1** Overview of findings

Year	Title	Author	Illustrator	Setting	Sex	Ethnicity of main character	SES of main character: high, medium, or low income
2019	<i>Between the Lines: How Ernie Barnes Went from the Football Field to the Art Gallery</i>	Sandra Neil Wallace	Sandra Neil Wallace	North Carolina, US 1940s	Male	African American	Low
2018	<i>The World is not Rec-tangle: A Portrait of Architect Zaha Hadid</i>	Jeannette Winter	Jeannette Winter	Iraq and US, 1950–2016	Female	Arab	Low
2018	<i>The Quilts of Gee's Bend</i>	Susan Goldman Rubin	Susan Goldman Rubin	Alabama, US, 1937	Female	African American	Low
2018	<i>Dazzle Ships: World War I and the Art of Confusion</i>	Chris Barton	Victor Ngai	World War I, Atlantic ocean	Male	White American	Medium
2018	<i>Chef Roy Choi and Street Food Remix</i>	Jacqueline Briggs Martin and June Jo Lee	Mann One	Los Angeles, CA, US, modern day	Male	Korean	Child: low; adult: high
2019	<i>Thirty Minutes over Oregon: A Japanese Pilot's World</i>	Marc Tyler Nobleman	Melissa Iwai	US, 1942	Male	Japanese	Medium
2019	<i>The Secret Kingdom: Nek Chand, a changing India, and a Hidden World of Art</i>	Barb Rosenstock	Claire A. Nivola	Asia-"tiny village of Breian Kalan" (which is now Pakistan) then India-Chandigarh, 1930–2015	Male	Pakistani-Indian	Low
2019	<i>Pass Go and Collect 200: The Story of How Monopoly Was Invented</i>	Tanya Lee Stone	Steven Salero	Atlantic City NJ, US, 1904	Female	White American	High/medium

Table 1 (continued)

Year	Title	Author	Illustrator	Setting	Sex	Ethnicity of main character	SES of main character: high, medium, or low income
2010	<i>Almost Astronauts: 13 Women Who Dared to Dream</i>	Tanya Lee Stone	Tanya Lee Stone	US, 1958	Female	White American	Medium
2017	<i>Some Writer!: The Story of E.B. White</i>	Melissa Sweet	Melissa Sweet	New York City, US Belgrade Lakes, Maine, US, 20 century	Male	White American	High/medium
2017	<i>The First Step: How One Girl Put Segregation on Trial</i>	Susan E. Goodman	E. B. Lewis	Boston, MA, US 1847	Female	African American	Low
2017	<i>I Dissent: Ruth Bader Ginsburg Makes Her Mark</i>	Debbie Levy	Elizabeth Baddeley	New York City, US 1940	Female	Jewish White American	Medium
2016	<i>Funny Bones: Posada and His Day of the Dead Calaveras</i>	Duncan Tonatiuh	Duncan Tonatiuh	Aguascalientes, Leon, Mexico, 1850s	Male	Mexican	Low
2016	<i>Growing Up Pedro</i>	Matt Tavares	Matt Tavares	The Dominican Republic, 1981	Male	Dominican	Low
2016	<i>Mesmerized: How Ben Franklin Solved a Mystery that Baffled All of France</i>	Mara Rockliff	Iacopo Brunozz	France, 1765 and 1783	Male	White American	High
2016	<i>Swan: The Life and Dance of Anna Pavlova</i>	Laura Snyder	Julie Morstad	Petrograd, Russia 1900s	Female	White Russian	Child: low adult: high



**Table 1** (continued)

Year	Title	Author	Illustrator	Setting	Sex	Ethnicity of main character	SES of main character: high, medium, or low income
2015	<i>A Home for Mr. Emerson</i>	Barbara Kerley	Edwin Fotheringham	Boston, MA, US, 1820s; Concord, MA, US, 1834	Male	White American	Child: low adult: medium
2015	<i>Mr. Ferris and His Wheel</i>	Kathryn Gibbs Davis	Gilbert Ford	Pittsburgh, PA, US; Chicago, IL, US, 1893	Male	White American	Medium
2015	<i>The Right Word: Roget and His Thesaurus</i>	Jen Bryant	Melissa Sweet	London, England; Edinburgh, Scotland; Paris, France; Manchester, England, 1973	Male	White Swiss	Medium
2015	<i>Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation</i>	Duncan Tonatiuh	Duncan Tonatiuh	Orange County, California, US, 1944	Female	Mexican American	Low/medium
2015	<i>Star Stuff: Carl Sagan and the Mysteries of the Cosmos</i>	Stephanie Roth Sisson	Stephanie Roth Sisson	Brooklyn, New York City, US, 1940s	Male	White American	Medium
2014	<i>A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin</i>	Jen Bryant	Melissa Sweet	West Chester, Pennsylvania, US, WWI; Goshen, New York, US, 1800s	Male	African American	Low/medium
2014	<i>The Boy Who Loved Math: The Improbable Life of Paul Erdos</i>	Deborah Heligman	LeUyen Pham	Budapest, Hungary 1920s	Male	White Hungarian	Medium

**Table 1** (continued)

Year	Title	Author	Illustrator	Setting	Sex	Ethnicity of main character	SES of main character: high, medium, or low income
2014	<i>Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Maker's Strike of 1909</i>	Michelle Markel	Melissa Sweet	New York City, NY, US, 1909	Female	White Jewish	Low
2013	<i>Monsieur Marceau: Actor Without Words</i>	Leda Schubert	Gerard Dubois	Switzerland, twentieth century	Male	French	Low
2013	<i>Electric Ben: The Amazing Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin</i>	Robert Byrd	Robert Byrd	Massachusetts Bay Colony, US, 1700s	Male	White American	Child: low/medium adult: high
2013	<i>The Mighty Mars Robots: The Incredible Adventures of Spirit and Opportunity</i>	Elizabeth Rusch	Elizabeth Rusch/Design by Ellen Nygaard	Mars 1969–2006	Male	White American	Medium
2013	<i>Those Rebels, John and Tom</i>	Barbara Kerley	Edwin Fotheringham	Philadelphia, PA and New York City, NY, US, 1700s	Male	White American	High/medium: high
2012	<i>Balloons Over Broadway: The True Story of the Puppeteer of Macy's Parade</i>	Melissa Sweet	Melissa Sweet	New York City, NY, US and London, England 1900s	Male	White American	Medium
2012	<i>Pablo Neruda: Poet of the People</i>	Monica Brown	Julie Paschkis	Parral, Chile, 1904	Male	Chilean	Medium
2012	<i>The Mangrove Tree: Planting Trees to Feed Families</i>	Susan L. Roth and Cindy Trumbore	Susan L. Roth and Cindy Trumbore	Eritrea, Hargino, Africa; Red Sea 1980s	Male	Japanese-American	Low/medium

**Table 1** (continued)

Year	Title	Author	Illustrator	Setting	Sex	Ethnicity of main character	SES of main character: high, medium, or low income
2011	<i>Ballet for Martha: Making Appalachian Spring</i>	Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan	Brian Folca	PA, CA, NY, US, 1930s	Female	White American	Medium
2010	<i>The Secret World of Walter Anderson</i>	Hester Bass	E. B. Lewis	Horn Island, New Orleans, US, 1900s	Male	White American	Medium
2010	<i>Darwin: With Glimpses into His Private Journal and Letters</i>	Alice B. McGinty	Mary Azarian	England; Edinburgh, Scotland, Galapagos Islands, 1800s	Male	White British	High/medium
2010	<i>The Frog Scientist</i>	Pamela S. Turner	Andy Comins (photographs)	Wyoming, US, 1970s–present	Male	African American	High/medium
2010	<i>Noah Webster: Weaver of Words</i>	Pegi Deitz Shea	Monica Vachula	Hartford, Connecticut, US 1758	Male	White American	High/medium

Latinx of Mexican descent. Such a finding suggests that there is an overrepresentation of White American, male focal subjects in the books analyzed. The overrepresentation of White American males hints that the authors of these awarded books rely on homogenizing portrayals of male and Whiteness in these texts with the exclusion of multiple representations of sex and ethnicities. In our review, we position that the examined books appear to perpetuate Eurocentric views of US history by excluding various underrepresented groups such as characters from indigenous backgrounds. For example, there were many awarded and honor books portraying this phenomenon, including books that center on a White male protagonist (See Table 1) and books that glorify presidents and politicians of British descent, perpetuating the narrative of the United States being founded and established by only White European male, Americans (e.g. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams).

### Age, Socioeconomic Status, and Location

The majority of books 22 (61%) spanned the focal subject's life, meaning that the texts portrayed a timeline spanning from the individual's birth to adulthood. However, 12 (32%) of the books depicted an adult protagonist, and only 2 (5%) of the books focused on a child as the focal subject. Although it is noteworthy that the books show the timeline of the focal subject from birth to adulthood, agentic acts primarily occurred during adolescence or adulthood. We find this to be particularly troubling as nonfiction texts show young readers how the world in which we live in operates and can help young readers see visions of themselves as agents in their lives. Within these awarded texts, children are viewed as passive individuals who are able only to exert their agency as they enter into adulthood. Moreover, as literature plays an important role in how agency is cultivated, a more varied representation of young children as agentic individuals is essential. Nonfiction literature can facilitate this reflection among students that may lead to autonomy and empowerment and can make a difference in how students respond to social topics. Depictions were scarce across the low socioeconomic dimension as, for example, only one book depicted a White male of lower socioeconomic status (e.g., *Monsieur Marceau: Actor Without Words* (Schubert, 2012), awarded 2013. Overall, the majority of the books, 26 (72%) portrayed focal subjects of middle or high income; 7 (19%) portrayed focal subjects with low-income; and 3 (8%) portrayed focal subjects that went from a low to high income status. Among the focal subjects from low-income families, two were African American females, one was White female, one was a White male, and one was a Korean American male. Predominantly, the Orbis Pictus books were set in the United States (63.9%) and in urban locations (e.g. eight books taking place in New York City, four in Boston, and three in Philadelphia) which may also further distort young readers' perceptions. As previous research has demonstrated the lack of attention to rural poverty, (Kelley & Darragh, 2011) depictions of rural poverty were fairly nonexistent in these texts as well. Such a lack of representation negates the dialogic potential of books and the potential for nonfiction to act as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). Overall, language and images where

middle-class Whiteness was at the center was pervasive in the *Orbis Pictus* awarded books, which can inadvertently model to children a lasting imprint on children of their perception of who is noteworthy within this genre.

## Dimensions of Agency

Across the books, there were cumulatively 181 acts of agency. The following analysis was determined across these acts: agency in the form of making choices comprised 51 (28%) of instances; agency in the form of making decisions, intentions, beliefs, and desires comprised 45 (25%) instances; and agency in the form of providing alternatives comprised 85 (47%) instances. For example, a focal subject who portrayed agency in the form of making choices was found in *Amelia Earhart: The Legend of the Lost Aviator* (Tanaka & Craig, 2008), awarded (2009). In this text, Amelia Earhart, chose an unconventional path in the world of aviation. Amelia decided that working as a nurse aide would be more useful than going to college; a path that would later on lead her to become a pioneer aviator. In this way, she made a life altering choice that changed her life's trajectory as in 1932 Amelia set out to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. Such an example was coded as agency in the form of making choices. In another example, *Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Rappaport & Duncan, 2002), honored 2002, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. chose to become a minister and to get involved in shaping the Civil Rights Movement. He made this deliberate choice, which ultimately altered his life's trajectory. Characters making and enacting decisions were found across 45 (25%) of the books. For example, *Some Writer!: The Story of E.B. White* (Sweet, 2016), awarded (2017), depicts how White reimagined children's prose by mixing fantasy and reality through anthropomorphism, writing novels like *Stuart Little*, considered as unconventional children's literature at the time. Inspired by the uniqueness of Dr. Seuss's writing and finding most other children's books lackluster, White was determined to write children's books. Despite being warned not to publish *Stuart Little* by critics and librarians, White decided to go forth with the publication. Today his text is deemed a beloved children's novel and a literary classic.

In terms of providing alternatives, in *When Marian Sang* (Ryan & Selznick, 2002) awarded (2003), Marian Anderson wanted to enroll in music school but was refused because she was African American. Because Marian was denied the opportunity to get music education due to her race, however, she pursued an alternative. Her church community paid for the music lessons, and she then moved to Europe to study and perform music. Another example of providing alternatives is in the case of Tyrone Hayes in the book *The Frog Scientist* (Turner & Comins, 2009), honored 2010. Despite the obstacles he faced growing up with segregation, Tyrone became a notable African American scientist. When Tyrone was hired to work for the biggest producers of the chemical atrazine, he realized the harmful effects on frogs. Tyrone found that atrazine created disturbances in the hormones of frogs, making male frogs female. Tyrone acted with agency when he decided to publish a paper exposing the company, knowing that he would be fired for doing so. Instead, Tyrone quit his job and became an independent researcher, testing chemical effects on frogs.

Because of his choice to pursue research he made a groundbreaking discovery in natural science. In both cases, the alternative paths that the focal subjects chose led to notable accomplishments in their lives and careers.

### Relationship of Types of Agentic Acts to Age, Sex, Race and Ethnicity

Breaking down the types of agency portrayed in conjunction with other coded characteristics yielded the following: In terms of making choices, focal subjects were largely depicted making choices during the span of their lives (31 instances, 61%) followed by focal subjects making choices as adults in (17 instances, 33%). Children were depicted as making choices in only 3 instances (6%). Regarding sex and race, the majority of choices were made by males (37 instances; 73%) and focal subjects who were White Americans (24 instances, 47%). Findings were similar in terms of agency in the form of decision-making. There were 27 instances (60%) of decision-making spanning the focal subject's life, 15 instances (33%) of decision-making occurring in adulthood, and 3 instances (7%) of decision-making among children. Regarding sex, most decisions were enacted by males (32 instances, 71%) as compared to females (13 instances, 29%). The majority of decision-making was done by focal subjects who were White (21 instances, 47%), followed by African American (6 instances, 13%). In terms of providing alternatives, the results were again similar, with most agentic acts performed throughout the focal subject's life (52 instances, 61%). Regarding sex, male focal subjects provided the most alternatives and exerted the most influence (61 instances, 47%) compared to females (24 instances, 28%). Finally, in terms of race, focal subjects who were White exerted the most incidences of influence (40 instances, 47%), and focal subjects who were African American were represented in 12 instances (14%).

### Barriers

There were a variety of barriers that the focal subjects faced, including: classism/poverty (7 instances, 19%); instances where society resisted the protagonist's ideas or innovation developed by the protagonists (7 instance, 19%), war (6 instances, 18%), racism (5 instances, 14%); and sexism (5 instances, 14%). There were other barriers depicted multiple times including technology (3 instances, 8%) and death and disease (3 instances, 8%). In the following, we highlight select examples of these barriers due to word constraints. For example, in the book *The First Step: How One Girl Put Segregation on Trial* (Goodman & Lewis, 2016), honored 2017, racism was portrayed as the protagonist Sarah Roberts faced several barriers when she attended a school for White children. Sarah's parents made the decision to fight for Sarah's freedom to attend the school she wanted. Similarly, in *Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation* (Toniatiuh, 2014), awarded 2015, the protagonist Sylvia Mendez, was not allowed to go to school because of her skin color and last name, though her cousins, also from Mexican descent, had lighter skin and were allowed to enroll. The judge ruled in favor of the Mendez family, but the school administration appealed the case. Ultimately, these efforts helped to

create the law for equal educational opportunities in the state of California. In these two highlighted examples, the barriers focal subjects faced stemmed from racism.

Across the texts, classism and sexism were also among the noted barriers. Two examples where classism and poverty were barriers were found in *Growing Up Pedro* (Tavares, 2015), honored 2016 and *A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin* (Bryant & Sweet, 2013), awarded 2014. In this text, Horace Pippin was an established African American artist of the 1940s. He injured his arm in WWI. No longer physically capable of painting and selling his art, Horace faced poverty. However, he taught himself to use his other arm to move the injured one so that he could paint. Horace immortalized in his art a variety of themes, from World War I, slavery, and segregation. In the following two books, sexism was the predominant barrier. *I Dissent: Ruth Bader Ginsburg Makes Her Mark* (Levy, 2016) honored 2017, depicts how Ruth Bader faced barriers as a female pursuing a career in law in the 1950s. Ruth was expected to get married, not to pursue a college degree. However, she overcame these barriers by persisting in her choices and beliefs. Likewise, in *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Maker's Strike of 1909* (Markel, 2015) honored 2014, Clara Lemlich showed that women should be able to unionize for better conditions and enjoy the same rights as their male coworkers. By starting the largest walkout of women workers in U.S. history, Clara's leadership and efforts persuaded certain bosses to allow workers to unionize. Clara persisted through the barriers; for example, Clara came to New York City as an immigrant and hardly spoke any English. Clara began to work as a garment worker in subpar conditions for minimal pay because she was female and became enraged with how she was treated at the factory – not as a worker but because she was female. Clara got fired, injured, and arrested 17 times, and six of her ribs get broken. Still, she persisted and worked towards equality for women in the workplace.

Scholars emphasize that readers often have a strong preference for texts with non-linear patterns, and nonfiction texts allow children to engage with them in a non-linear manner (Mohr, 2006; Pantaleo & Sipe, 2012; Moss & McDonald, 2004). Although there are texts that highlight how individuals persist (e.g., *She Persisted Around the World: 13 Women Who Changed History* by Chelsea Clinton) the field needs more nonfiction picture books for young readers where they can see that they too can harness their agency in their local and broader communities as children. Future research should explore additional nonfiction texts that portray multiple perspectives and representations of agency in young children.

## Conclusion

Given the increased emphasis of nonfiction as a promoted genre in many schools across the US, examining the pedagogical importance of children's nonfiction literature through a multicultural critical analysis of the recipients of the NCTE Orbis Pictus awarded books is essential. In our analysis of Orbis Pictus awarded children's picture books, we see dominant characteristics that privilege White, American males. Moreover, we see minimal opportunities where young children can see ways of harnessing their own agency in and out of school spaces. Nonfiction picture

books have the potential to help young readers develop as agents in their lives. The Orbis Pictus books have the potential to be windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990)—especially as these awarded texts are true stories of people and events in history. However, most of the Orbis Pictus books show agency as being displayed as an adult, not as a child. While nonfiction books afford readers with a nuanced way of being in the world and with others, they can also prevent readers from seeing themselves or others alike in popular narratives. That few of the texts focus on multiethnic focal subjects or children as models of agency is troubling. Our recommendation is that there needs to be more inclusive books in the Orbis Pictus award and honor categories. We put forward a call to NCTE and the authors of these awarded and honor texts to recognize the need for diversity in selecting works that represent a variety of lived experiences of individuals. Similarly, we also call to action the authors of nonfiction and informational texts to create texts that reflect children engaging in opportunities for agency. At this critical time in the field, we must be diligent in efforts to include multiple voices and perspectives and to be cognizant that texts provide powerful messages to children about what is (and is not) valued—and ultimately whose lived experiences are worth sharing.

**Data Availability** Data used in project is displayed in tables in the manuscript.

**Code Availability** Coding procedures as well as codes are outlined in the manuscript.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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