

We Need Them But What Are They?: A Conceptual Analysis of Diverse Books

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ABSTRACT

Use of the term “diverse books” has increased radically in the professional library discourse in recent years. In this paper, I ask what criteria we think a book must satisfy to be properly characterized as “diverse.” To begin answering that question, I conduct a preliminary conceptual analysis of “diverse books,” using the intuitive responses of MSLIS students in a class on genre fiction as a jumping-off point for philosophical inquiry. My aim is twofold: first, to kickstart the process of clarifying what we mean to talk about when we talk about diverse books and, second, to demonstrate how the LIS classroom can serve as a resource for populating the conceptual imagination.

TOPICS

critical librarianship; social justice; reading and reading practices

INTRODUCTION

Use of the term “diverse books” has increased radically within the professional library discourse since the advent of the *We Need Diverse Books* campaign in 2014. While efforts to promote children’s literature by and about people of color stretch back further (Mabbott 2017, 508), it is clear that LIS scholars and practitioners increasingly endorse the active inclusion of *diverse books* in library collections (see, e.g., Brown 2018; Fullerton et al. 2018; Cooke 2017, 63; and Ostenson et al. 2016). Much of this discussion, however, has proceeded despite a lack of definitional clarity around the concept of a “diverse book.” We thus find ourselves in something of a conceptual free-for-all that sometimes impedes the force of the political and ethical calls to action that result.

In order to productively intervene, I ask in this paper what criteria we in the library field think a book must satisfy to be properly characterized as “diverse.” To answer that question, I conduct an exploratory analysis of “diverse books” using the intuitive responses of MSLIS

students in two iterations of a class on genre fiction as a jumping-off point for philosophical inquiry. The aim of this investigation is twofold: first, to kickstart the process of clarifying what we (ought to) mean when we talk about diverse books and, second, to demonstrate how the LIS classroom can serve as a resource for populating the conceptual imagination. I conclude with some thoughts on future research directions and the largely untapped value of international librarians' perspectives on diverse literature.

DEFINING “DIVERSE BOOKS”

To identify potential definitions, I make use here of my own experience teaching a class on popular romance fiction. The 35-odd students in two sections were enrolled in a master's program in LIS. I have omitted a more granular description of these students *qua* sample because this project is not a qualitative study. Rather, I am drawing on classroom dialogue as a source of everyday intuitions that have expanded my own sense of the diverse books dialectic, as it were. (For more in-depth discussion of the use of pre-theoretic intuitions in philosophical research methodologies, see Climenhaga [2018], De Cruz [2015] and Pust [2000].)

Students participated in a classroom exercise during which the instructor presented a sequence of fictional works and asked students to explain why each of these did or did not constitute a diverse book. The subsequent conversation illuminated four heuristics commonly utilized to make that determination:

- (1) *the presence of representation* (i.e., Does this book represent members of particular [or particular kinds of] social groups?);
- (2) *the quality or authenticity of representation* (i.e., Does this book represent members of these social groups well?);
- (3) *the identity of the author* (i.e., Does this book's author identify as being from a social group that is underrepresented in the mainstream publishing industry?);
- (4) *the relationship between representation and the identity of the author* (i.e., Does this book's author identify as being from one or more of the social groups represented in the text?).

Each of these heuristics is indicative of necessary and/or sufficient conditions for a work's classification as a diverse book. Regarding the first heuristic—"the presence of representation"—it is worth noting that different speakers adopt broader and narrower views of the appropriate target of representation. For instance, some take representation of varied social groups to qualify a book as “diverse,” while others single out one or more groups that depart in some respect from the sociocultural mainstream (via, e.g., race, gender identity, and so on). There are also speakers who apply more stringent criteria such that the scope of “diverse representation” includes only those groups that are, e.g., underrepresented in mainstream publishing or subject to institutional oppression.

Note that all four heuristics, though different, serve to articulate judgments about what kinds of literature ought to be promoted in and by the library. In our professional context, it would seem that a book is diverse in virtue of some sociocultural feature(s) that we as librarians are morally called on to valorize in our collection development and readers' advisory practices.

CRITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Ultimately, this paper is less concerned with arriving at a single prescribed definition of “diverse books” than it is with fostering a deeper understanding of the multifarious (and often underspecified) uses to which we put the term. On the basis of my preliminary analysis, I posit that the definition of “diverse books” a particular speaker deploys is tightly linked to the course of action that speaker endorses. That is, the meaning we assign to the term is shaped by the changes we seek to bring about. The category “diverse books,” it would seem, is a fundamentally political one, aiming in each instance to capture some class of literary works that librarians must make an ameliorative effort to include in collections. Consequently, overly liberal definitions—that is, those that affirm maximally inclusive approaches to diversity (often as mere social difference)—threaten to weaken the very political project they intend to advance. This is because such definitions admit books for which no special effort is needed to ensure inclusion in library collections—books about, for instance, Italian Americans, or baseball players, or political extremists dedicated to reinforcing the hegemonic social position of their own ethnic groups. Significantly, pervasive ambiguity around one’s use of the term “diverse books” has a similar effect, since it marks the classification as one with perennially elusive or porous boundaries.

NEXT STEPS

The “diverse books” discussion initiated here calls for a wider look at applications of the term. My own future work will thus incorporate an examination of the concept-as-employed in the recent LIS literature and the *We Need Diverse Books* campaign, taking into account existing critiques of diversity talk in the discipline (see, e.g., Peterson 1999; Honma 2005; Pawley 2006; Hussey 2010; Hudson 2017). This critical literature review will aid in refining a taxonomy of uses of the term “diverse books,” the concomitant conditions that govern those uses, and the degree to which these succeed or fail in advancing social justice. That the term is a political or pragmatic one means we ought to transition from questions about common usage to questions about *normatively appropriate* or *politically expedient* usage, critically assessing which of the definitions on offer do the kind of work we need them to do.

There is also much room to examine the ways in which the demographics of librarianship shape our (and our students’) understanding of diverse books (see ALA 2012). Indeed, the social locations of the voices dominating the library profession—white, cis, straight, non-disabled, US-centric—inform and circumscribe our imaginations. More attention must be paid to global considerations related to social and historical contingency. We might ask, for instance, how conceptualizations of diversity embraced by librarians working outside of the United States

differ from our own, or whether the location or time in which a book was published should bear on its designation as “diverse” and in what way(s). Such an interrogation is likely to have significant implications for our professional and pedagogical practices.

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