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# Diversifying Understandings of Diversity

## Possible Routes for Nordic Children's Literature

*Abstract: This is a position paper by the guest editors of the Barnboken theme "Diversity in Nordic Children's and Young Adult Literature" in which we propose that theorising and promoting diversity in the Nordic context would benefit from a broadening of the approaches that dominate the British and American contexts. We attempt to tone down the confrontational style of discussion by outlining the value of two non-political approaches to diversity: cognitive and imagological studies. The former highlights the neurological basis underpinning the desire to compare and the reliance on visual information in producing categories; the latter maps the ways in which images of nations are circulated. We then show how these approaches can dovetail with more politically motivated approaches – such as intersectionality – to produce a pedagogy of diversity. We do not claim that these are the only possible routes, and invite other scholars to diversify further. Our argument is that pitching the need for diverse children's books solely on moral and ethical grounds has not had the pedagogical impact needed. We need to diversify approaches to analysing and promoting diverse literatures.*

**Keywords:** #weneeddiversebooks, diversity, cognitive narratology, imagology, intersectionality, critical multicultural analysis (CMA), pedagogies of diversity, Nordic exceptionalism

In this position paper, we propose that theorising and promoting diversity in Nordic children's literature would benefit from somewhat different approaches than those used in the British and American contexts. In our introduction to this theme, we provided a brief overview of some of the existing scholarship on the topic of diversity in Nordic children's and youth literature. We noted that the dominant role of English in academic discourse makes it difficult for scholars examining materials written in the "small" languages to express their ideas clearly, not least because they are so often asked to compare the materials with more widely known books available in English. Here, we expand on this subject, starting by using a cognitive approach to explain why comparisons are both common and problematic.

We claim that debates on diversity in relation to American and also other Anglophone children's literature are characterised by a highly polemical, political and moralising tone which positions people into two camps: "us" and "them." Equally, the first-past-the-post voting systems which elect representatives on a simple majority in a voting district operating in most Anglophone countries favours a two-party system, suggesting that us-them thinking is deeply engrained in such societies (see also Manderstedt, Palo and Kokkola). Unsurprisingly, this often leads to conflict and deadlock, neither of which are desirable imports. In contrast, the Nordic countries' systems of proportional representation typically produces coalition governments comprising several small parties. Conflict and deadlock still occur, but compromise and a general acceptance of the need to collaborate with people with whom one disagrees more accurately describes the regional mindset than us-them.

We argue that these differences in the political systems resemble ways of talking about diversity. In the Anglophone context, a liberal, pro-diversity "us" seems to be pitched against a conservative "them" who favour things such as the teaching of classical literature replete with racist language and so on. It is not clear what a coalition style approach to diversity would look like, but we believe that the Nordic context might be particularly suitable for diversifying approaches to diversity. We begin by attempting to tone down the confrontational style of discussion by outlining the value of two non-political approaches to diversity: cognitive and imagological studies. We then show how these approaches can dovetail with more politically motivated approaches such as intersectionality. Our argument is that pitching the need for diverse children's books on solely moral and ethical grounds does not work. We need to diversify approaches to analysing and promoting diverse literatures.

## “Compareo ergo sum:” On the Human Tendency to Compare

Comparison is implicit in all work on diversity and yet, as we observed in our introduction, comparison leads to hierarchy, and it is here the problems begin. Note how our comparison of the Anglophone and Nordic voting systems above came across as confrontational simply because the two systems were compared. The human yen for comparing has a basis in our physiology, which may also explain why binary thinking and comparison are so widespread. Research indicates that distinguishing between the familiar (“safe”) and the different (“dangerous”) is one of the first cognitive patterns infants learn (Tenngart 26). Babies distinguish on the basis of sensory information: a favourite toy may become strange after washing when it no longer has the familiar smell and texture. Sight rapidly becomes the primary tool that enables babies to distinguish people they know from strangers. This rapid distinction between the familiar and the strange is made possible by the structure and function of the left hemisphere, which supports rapid decision-making in attention-demanding situations (including flight-fight) (Tenngart 26). Distinguishing between familiar (safe) and strange (dangerous) phenomena is vital to survival.

In his broad-ranging discussion of brain lateralisation (the process of dividing functions into the left and right hemisphere), which is particularly significant during childhood and adolescence, Iain McGilchrist explains that the two halves should be considered as ways of paying attention rather than as “functions” because all neurological tasks require the collaboration of both hemispheres. He summarises the kind of attention paid by the left hemisphere as follows:

The left hemisphere deals with what it knows, and therefore prioritises the expected – its process is predictive. It positively prefers what it knows. This makes it more efficient in routine situations where things are predictable, but less efficient than the right [hemisphere] wherever the initial assumptions have to be revised, or when there is a need to distinguish old information from new material that may be consistent with it. (McGilchrist 40)

The simplest, most efficient categorisation system is the familiar/strange binary. By simplifying complex issues into “us” and “them,” the left hemisphere enables swift responses. Unfortunately, as the citation from McGilchrist highlights, once categories have been formed there are many situations when their simplicity is inefficient.

In the context of diversity, visual “others” can easily be placed in the category of unfamiliar-dangerous, giving rise to prejudices. But

although such distinctions are supported by the physiology of the brain, this is still learned behaviour and can thus be influenced by the environment, especially pre-puberty (McGilchrist 213). In relation to diversity, one implication of lateralisation is that enlarging the scope of the familiar to include those whom the senses identify as “other” in childhood is particularly important. During adolescence, extensive neurological pruning strengthens existing pathways meaning that it is harder to develop new categories in adulthood. Children who have no or little direct access to “others” in their real world are in greatest need of cultural experiences – film, literature, images, music and more – that can enlarge their sense of the familiar.

The above remarks are not intended to present the left hemisphere’s penchant for categorising in a solely negative light, although the act of comparing appears to produce this hierarchy. Rapid categorisation protects us from physical threats and is vital in all fields of human endeavour. In the context of literary studies, narratology grew out of this fundamental desire to structure the world by categorisation. The pattern-seeking behaviours of the left hemisphere also explain the delight many readers feel when reading formulaic plots and character types. In contrast, the literatures that promote diversity most effectively appeal to the empathetic attention of the right hemisphere.

McGilchrist characterises the right hemisphere’s disposition as caring, predominantly concerned with relationships (170): “The right hemisphere’s gaze is intrinsically empathetic, by contrast [to the left hemisphere], and acknowledges the *inevitability* of ‘betweenness’: in fact it is the fact of gaze normally being an empathetic process that makes the detached stare so destructive” (166). Much of the work within diversity and its sister fields of multicultural studies, inclusivity and equity is focused on undermining binary thinking, but we suggest that such attempts are bound to fail if the value of rapid categorisations and their physiological basis are not also acknowledged. Clichés and formulaic tropes exist to assist the brain in categorising and storing information. These underlying categorisations need to be made visible before the more caring, empathetic attention of the right hemisphere can develop. Promoting diverse literature cannot be restricted to the planes of ethics and morality, it needs to be tied to a pedagogy that supports the right hemisphere’s empathetic gaze.

In the second half of his book, subtitled “How the Brain Has Shaped our World,” McGilchrist provides a broad array of historical data to show how lateralisation has increased and, more specifically, how the kinds of attention promoted by the left hemisphere have

become more dominant since the Renaissance. He does not suggest a simple cause-effect relationship, but rather reveals a circular pattern in which culture and human cognition reinforce the human tendency to compare. One crucial cognitive structure, associated with fight-or-flight responses, involves prioritising information perceived with our own eyes over other forms of information. As a result of the primacy of vision, Karen Coats notes, “knowledge and understanding [have become] emotionally and semantically associated with vision and light in basic conceptual metaphors such as SEEING IS UNDERSTANDING OR KNOWLEDGE IS ENLIGHTENMENT” (Coats, “Visual” 373).

This reliance on visual information is evident in that most Scandinavian classification system: the Linnaean system. Carl Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae* (1735) divided human beings into four species: *Europæus albus* (white European), *Americanus rubescens* (red American), *Asiaticus fuscus* (brown Asian), and *Africanus Niger* (black African). This classification has been blown apart on ethnographic, ethical, and DNA grounds, but not before Statens institut för rasbiologi (SIFR, the State Institute for Racial Biology) was established in Uppsala, Sweden. SIFR existed from 1922 to 1959, when it was integrated into the Department of Genetics at the University of Uppsala. Much of SIFR’s research under the leadership of the Institute’s first director, Herman Lundborg, was devoted to documenting the physical racial features, especially facial features, of the five groups that would later be declared the national minorities of Sweden: Romanies, Jews, Sámi, Swedo-Finns, and the people of Tornedalen (the Torne Valley), “tornedalingar.” The aim of Lundborg’s studies was to study the life conditions and biological heritage of the inhabitants of Sweden from a racial perspective, alongside studies of criminal behaviour, mental illness, and alcoholism. The findings supported policies, including forced sterilisation, which continued until 1974. Ironically, Lundborg’s measurements were only necessary because one cannot, in fact, visually distinguish the aforementioned peoples from other Swedes. Adopting a cognitive approach to diversity requires us to engage with the biologically favoured reliance on visual information, as well as understanding how to override this tendency.

## The Dominance of Visual Information: Social and Literary Consequences

The inclination to categorise as a basic means of survival can help to explain, albeit not justify, how xenophobic attitudes based on visual markers such as skin colour and clothing, but also gender, (dis)abil-

ity, weight, and beauty come into being. But they do not fully explain how such attitudes are maintained. Since none of these features actually reveals whether a person is “safe,” “dangerous” or indeed anything else, one might hope that encounters with people in the real world and characters in fiction would undermine the immediate recognition of visual otherness. The reality of racism, sexism and more means that cognitive approaches alone will not suffice: we also need to understand how social structures dovetail with human tendencies to compare and to rely on visual information

Our first impressions of a person are largely based on their appearance, which leads to the “halo effect,” in which positive characteristics (for example, intelligence and kindness) are attributed to attractive people. The reverse is also true. Fatness is a case in point. Fat studies, like queer studies, reclaims a term of abuse. Scholars of fat studies address a broad range of areas helpfully mapped by, for example, Charlotte Cooper. The primary goal of fat studies is to acknowledge and challenge the medicalisation of body size, especially the insinuation that fatness (and by implication fat people) should be erased. The medical sciences present fatness as a neutral fact rather than a social category, thereby reducing fat people to measurements of their body parts (just as Lundborg reduced race to facial measurements). Assumptions that fat people cannot be healthy abound, and affect everything from the way doctors and other health professionals offer treatment to wage levels and promotions (Powroznik). In the context of children’s literature, Linda Wedwick refers to fatness as “[t]he last accepted prejudice” (19). By way of example, consider the portrayal of the male Dursleys in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. Dudley and his father, Vernon, are not just fat, they evince many of the negative stereotypes associated with fatness: greed, laziness, and self-indulgence. At the 2017 IRSCL conference, Nordic scholars Åsa Warnqvist, Mia Österlund and Maria Jönsson presented a panel, “Body Politics and the Fat Child,” in which they identified such attitudes in both Anglophone and Nordic children’s fiction. The social acceptability of such prejudices compared with, for example, portraying racial stereotypes in children’s literature supports Wedwick’s claim.

Fatness is immediately visible, allowing prejudices to be activated before the person has spoken. The same is true for skin colour. A pivotal tipping point in the perception and categorisation of skin colour coincided with the historical period known as the Enlightenment (note the reference to “light”). Distancing themselves ideologically from the so-called “Dark” Middle Ages, Enlightenment scientists

increasingly started to rely on empiricism instead of metaphysics. Darkness or lightness as human characteristics referred to someone's spiritual – not physical – state (Coats, "Visual" 374), but the ideas became conflated. Chattel slavery required the inability to recognise the full humanity of Black and Brown peoples. In relation to children's literature, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's work on the "dark fantastic" unequivocally demonstrates that darkness of skin and darkness of the soul remain so interwoven in the cultural imagination they are difficult to unpick.

The privileging of visual information in rapid category formation partially explains why discrimination based on visual difference has proven so resistant to change. In the context of non-illustrated fiction, reliance on the visual poses significant challenges. Authors wanting to incorporate diverse characters into their fiction need to incorporate information that is normally visual into written words (Harde and Kokkola 40–41). The balance between descriptions that make minority bodies visible and problematic over-marking is delicate. In *The Hunger Games* (2008), Suzanne Collins describes the character Rue as having "bright, dark eyes and satiny brown skin" (120). The racist reactions of some White readers to Amandla Stenberg's Black body when she portrayed Rue in the film version demonstrated that even when the racially-specific information was provided, many White readers ignored it: for them, the standard body is White (Thomas 60–63). Or rather, as Thomas has shown, good characters are White, but evil is associated with darkness. Equally, unless otherwise marked, other aspects of diversity, such as fatness, are difficult to bring to the readers' attention.

The fact that many are currently engaged in the fight to assert what should be the self-evident truth that #BlackLivesMatter demonstrates how painfully topical this issue is. The focus on the visual – Black – rapidly segues into race in the reporting on these events. Unfortunately, because the situation is so acute in America, complacency may be normalized elsewhere. For instance, Sweden's response to #BlackLivesMatter, like that of its neighbouring countries, has mostly taken the form of messages of support for those in America rather than looking closer to home. The discovery that police in Skåne (a region in southern Sweden) were keeping a record of people with Traveller backgrounds led to an investigation which identified systemic racism in the Swedish police's treatment of Romanians, Muslims and Afro-Swedes (Schclarek Mulinari). Evidence of racial profiling by the police is also available for Finland (Keskinen et al.) and Norway (Sollund). The Danish situation is slightly more

nuanced with racial profiling evident in stop-and-search behaviour in certain areas of the country, especially within Copenhagen, but less evident in the data on arrests or treatment in custody (Nour and Zarrehparvar). The racialisation of visual “others” may be even more developed in areas where there is less visual diversity, and the recent rise in votes for nationalist parties in the Nordic region may well reflect such attitudes. All the more reason, then, to investigate literatures that can contribute to what the novelist Zetta Elliot refers to as “decolonizing the imagination.”

*Explanation is not justification.* The crucial point for the purpose of our discussion is that dualisms never stand alone: the production of difference creates a hierarchy which normalises the unmarked category, thereby elevating its status (Hvenegård-Lassen and Maurer 6–9). However, the natural tendency to visually distinguish between “us” and “them” is socialised and, thus, can be overridden. Literature provides readers with opportunities to meet characters whose ways of being in the world are different from their own, thereby prompting the work of decolonizing the imagination.

### Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Doors: Pedagogies of Diversity

In *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children’s Fiction* (1982), Rudine Sims Bishop introduced the metaphors of mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors to describe the place of books in developing children’s understanding of new worlds, new peoples and – sometimes – themselves. She helpfully summarised the metaphors as follows in a brief article in 1990:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (Sims Bishop, “Mirrors” ix)

Sims Bishop’s conceptual pairing of mirrors and windows offers an invitation to investigate the kind of empathy or perspective-taking a text elicits, examining which readers are positioned to feel empathy and with whom readers are prompted to empathise. Sims Bishop’s



terminology precedes the now commonplace but contested role of “mirror neurons” in empathy. Neurological measurements demonstrate that the brain is primed to perform actions (such as kicking) not only when the person themselves is executing the action, but also when observing or – most importantly for literary scholars – *when reading about* the action. This priming – known as “mirror neurons” – have been investigated in relation to developing empathy whilst reading. In her review of these studies, Margaret Mackey is optimistic but cautious: “at most, mirror neurons account for only some of the story” (187).

Establishing the empathetic dynamics proffered by a text can provide insight into the “cultural flows” in which the text participates (Stephens 18). A key feature of Sims Bishop’s work was to highlight the uneven expectations of empathy. She noticed how the absence of African American characters in literature for children meant the loss of mirrors for children of colour, and a demand for empathy with White characters. Moreover, children from White homes lacked opportunities to open the sliding glass doors and join their peers through empathy. Citing Sims Bishop, Michelle H. Martin concludes her study *Brown Gold: Milestones of African-American Children’s Picture Books 1845–2002* (2004) with a chapter setting out why and how diverse materials should be integrated into education, with specific examples from her own courses, mostly attended by future teachers. Her discussion also includes references to non-illustrated works, but her focus is on presenting picturebooks where visual information obviously dominates. As part of this *Barnboken* theme, Jaana Pesonen also concludes her study of a Finnish picturebook depicting refugee experiences by homing in on the educational potential of the work, but also the need for critical literacy skills to overcome shortcomings in the materials.

Maria José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman’s *Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children’s Literature: Mirrors, Windows, and Doors* (2009) overtly builds on the work of Sims Bishop to provide a pedagogical model: Critical Multicultural Analysis (CMA). CMA aims to scrutinise how difference is fabricated and maintained:

‘Critical’ implores us to pay attention to the social work of language because how we use language shapes perceptions and social processes. ‘Multicultural’ acknowledges the multiple histories among us; the dynamism, diversity, and fluidity of cultural experience; and unequal access to social power. Critical multicultural analysis requires inward and outward examination, recursively. (Botelho and Kabakow Rudman 5)

Their study includes numerous examples of educational implications and classroom activities, encouraging not only teachers but also children to consider whether the text prioritises the majority standpoint or whether it might also allow insights into less well-represented experiences.

In addition to the topics of race and ethnicity signalled by the term “multicultural,” Botelho and Kabakow Rudman also address the subjects of class and gender, thereby endorsing an intersectional approach. Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the term “intersectionality” to consider how vectors of difference – Blackness and Womanhood – shape the oppression of Black women. By highlighting how racialisation and gender intertwine to collude against them, Crenshaw drew attention to the social structures that maintain oppression. If we combine Crenshaw’s work with observations from the cognitive sciences, we see how her categories – Blackness and Womanhood – are visual codes that are easily categorised. A pedagogy seeking to undermine the categorisation needs to acknowledge the tendency to compare as well as social structures that maintain the hierarchies that arise from comparison.

Intersectional pedagogies are needed to overcome the poor quality of many materials (see, for example, Pesonen). As John Stephens explains: “at the inception of multicultural children’s literature cultural flows tended to be in one direction, because perspective and focalisation were usually located with a principal character from the dominant, or majority, culture” (18). By continuing to “see” race from a supposedly “neutral” but in practice White perspective, many of the issues multicultural literature was intended to address remain present or even worsened. Examining which readers are offered mirrors and which are predominantly invited to look through windows without ever seeing themselves reflected is important in decolonising the imagination.

Work that enables the brain’s right hemisphere empathetic attention to override the knee-jerk categorisations of the left hemisphere is needed urgently. Intersectionality provides a framework for such approaches and has another advantage. Very few people are entirely “unmarked”; most people have some facet of their selfhood that provides insight into the experience of being othered. It might be something visible (like the presence of a wheelchair) or invisible (like neural atypicality). It might be permanent, transient or fluid. A pedagogy of diversity that takes into account the lateralisation of the brain will work from recognising aspects of similarity as the basis for empathy. Empathy develops during childhood, but a pedagogy based

on intersectionality and empathy also needs to acknowledge the limits of empathy. As Sims Bishop clarified already four decades ago, minorities are frequently overburdened by the work of empathy.

A pedagogy of diversity must acknowledge the physical limitations of the brain. The plasticity of the child's brain (that is, the flexibility with which it can adapt) is rightly celebrated, but the physiological form of the brain means that some parts are more suited to certain tasks. Infants tend to have more active right hemispheres – they favour empathetic attention (McGilchrist 359). During adolescence, brain lateralisation becomes more fixed. Physiologically, this is due to the clarification of some synaptic pathways (through the growth of myelin, also known as “white matter”) and synaptic pruning (pathways that are not used frequently are discarded) (Griffin). In short, this means that empathy with “others” will be easier if the brain has gained familiarity with them prior to the completion of the lateralisation process. Diverse children's literature is vital.

## The Politics and Images of Diversity

CMA and other pedagogic endeavours concerned with issues of diversity have a decidedly political focus as they promote social change (see for example Botelho and Kabakow Rudman 9; Dresang 19). CMA developed in the United States, a nation which is home to many universities that have an overtly political and/or religious alignment as well as more neutrally aligned state universities. The existence of aligned higher education institutions indicates that political views are both acceptable and commonplace in much academic discourse. In contrast, academics in state-financed Nordic universities are not expected to be overtly political, which poses a challenge when investigating diversity. One major European school of thought that overtly renounces its ideological dimension is imagology. Hardly known outside Europe, imagology or image studies is a comparative branch of research that inventories and compares images – mental constructions – of home and foreign nations, and how those images are circulated (Leerssen). In “Imagology Meets Children's Literature” (2011), Emer O'Sullivan argues that children's literature scholars should embrace imagology since literature is one of the prime sites where the concept of nationhood is learned (6). Drawing on the work of Joep Leerssen, O'Sullivan lists points that form easily-applied lenses for examining literature, most notably, the distinction between factual statements, such as “Norway is a Kingdom,” and “imaginated discourse” (O'Sullivan 4; Leerssen 28),

such as “Norwegians live close to nature.” O’Sullivan then outlines a number of projects where imagology could improve the study of children’s literature.

O’Sullivan focuses on identifying the potential of imagology as a research paradigm, and so she concentrates on nations as unified entities rather than on diversity within nations. Whereas imagologists claim to adopt a culturally-neutral stance, postcolonial critics engage in their work for overtly political reasons. Nevertheless, Lies Wesseling teases out the underlying commonalities between imagology and postcolonialism to show how the two could become mutually beneficial.

Imagologists should refrain from pronouncing themselves on the rightness or wrongness of national images, all stereotypes being equally wrong so to speak. Imagologists generally cultivate an attitude of scholarly objectivity, hovering above and beyond the political arena in which national stereotypes do their dirty work. [...] [A]lthough imagologists write about politics, theirs is not a political stance. (Wesseling)

Despite its intended neutrality, imagology lends itself particularly well to politically motivated and ideologically-critical work, precisely because it lays bare an archive of stereotypical ethnic notions. Imagology is uni-directional: literature is regarded as a *reflection* of social reality, as Leerssen puts it: “Imagology is ... not a form of sociology; its aim is to understand a discourse of representation rather than a society” (27). As such, it may provide another way to lower the heat of the debate, a way to look at the circulation of images without instantly connecting them to moral standards. For instance, noticing how certain characters (such as Pippi) become icons of a nation (Sweden) through the sharing of images (for example, on t-shirts) helps us map patterns of influence. These may later be connected to the political work of intersectionality and the social structures of power, thereby diversifying our understanding of how national images are normalised.

A study that considers imagology in concert with its feedback loop with social reality is *Imagining Sameness and Difference in Children’s Literature: From the Enlightenment to the Present Day* (2017), an anthology edited by Emer O’Sullivan and Andrea Immel. The contributions probe the real-life social stature that accrues to literary representation. In their introduction, O’Sullivan and Immel acknowledge the power that language imbues some social categories with

and that it denies others. They advance as imagology's most prominent questions to ask – in tandem – “Who is seeing?” (10) and “What (or who) is seen?” (11). (Note how the visual dominates once again.) As such, O'Sullivan and Immel's introduction aligns closely with Sims Bishop's mirror-and-windows metaphors and the projects the latter inspired. In O'Sullivan and Immel's view, the question “Who is seeing?”

leads to the heart of the political dimension of representation, the question of the relationship between perspective and agency and discursive power. It is the issue at the center of postcolonial studies of those “more written about than writing, more spoken about than speaking” (McGillis 2000: xxi). (O'Sullivan and Immel 10)

Thus, they overtly connect their findings with postcolonial criticism, an association that most imagologists have endeavoured to circumvent. Given the propinquity between imagology and CMA, it seems to us that close collaboration ought to be possible.

### Diversity in the Nordic Region

Writing from a White American perspective, Coats' entry on diversity in *The Edinburgh Companion to Children's Literature* (2017) suggests that the best way to teach diversity and diverse fiction is to teach the conflicts that surround certain books. Her examples highlight instances where writers of colour have been criticised for producing literature with characters whose actions do not suit prevailing views of political correctness (her examples include a Hispanic family who wish to leave an area of Chicago known for its high concentration of Hispanic inhabitants and a slave who appears to be proud of his work producing a birthday cake for George Washington). In each case, Coats identifies a debate that includes suggestions that the books be banned, thereby returning to a binary decision: ban or not. To the best of our knowledge, no American scholar of colour advocates a conflict-centred approach. As our overview has already shown, CMA advocates highlight the celebration of culture, and holistic, engaged representation. From a cognitive perspective, a conflict-centred approach does little to broaden the category of familiar-safe. From an intersectional perspective, it reveals nothing about how the vectors of oppression interplay, and from a CMA perspective it seems to corral readers of already oppressed groups into a defensive position.

From a Nordic perspective, the relative absence of such conflicts to teach limits the value of such an approach: quite simply, there are too few conflicts. This is not to claim that concerns about misrepresentation, appropriation, and underrepresentation are not voiced in the Nordic region. This *Barnboken* theme includes many such debates, some of which closely resemble debates in America. Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking novels (1945–1948) include decidedly racist terms, practices, and illustrations (see also Hübinette, "Racial Words" for similar debates outside children's literature). Lindgren's elevated status in the Swedish context is such that the debate closely resembles discussions of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), one of the books Philip Nel discusses in *Was the Cat in the Hat Black? The Hidden Racism of Children's Literature, and the Need for Diverse Books* (2017). Nel, a White American, suggests that White scholars have a particular responsibility to select alternative literature in their courses (212–219).

In Sweden, similar debates are starting, but resistance is evident in public debate. For instance, although the heirs to Lindgren's estate have approved the removal of the offensive term "neger" (and an image of Pippi pulling her eyes to appear "slanted" whilst singing in Chinese), 81 % of the first 25,000 readers of *Aftonbladet* (a popular national newspaper) to respond to a Facebook poll on the topic opposed the change. The main argument in favour of retaining the original, as Tobias Hübinette observes with respect to similar debates, "is that the word belongs to a historical heritage and is part of a Swedish vocabulary, and hence regarded as authentic and important to protect and preserve for the future" ("Words that Wound" 63). This willingness to express an exclusivist majority perspective is an example of Swedish exceptionalism: exceptionalism is the belief that a nation is somehow "special" and "better" than other nations. Hübinette explains that Swedish exceptionalism "can also be seen as a deliberate forgetfulness grounded in a desire for not wanting to understand that minorities may feel offended and humiliated by certain words and expressions that are loaded with Europe's colonial and racist history" ("Words that Wound" 66–67). Anne Neutelaers and Sara Van den Bossche address such matters in relation to Lindgren's Pippi books in a forthcoming article in *Barnboken*. They propose a need to evoke stereotypes in order to undermine them, but note that this increases the risk that uncritical readings will continue to endorse negative ideologies. Although their article is not educationally oriented, like Pesonen they suggest that even "imperfect" literature can promote positive attitudes towards diversity when readers make the effort to examine both the text and their own prejudices.

Unlike Anglophone countries, the Nordic states draw a distinction between “national minorities” and other minorities. National minorities are people from ethnic groups who have a long-standing history within the countries’ histories. Norway, Sweden, and Finland acknowledge the Sámi (the indigenous people of Sápmi – referred to in English by its colonial name “Lapland”), and Greenlanders have a special status within Denmark. Other peoples acknowledged in most Nordic countries are the Jews, Romani and Travellers. Sweden also acknowledges those of Finnish descent and *tornedalingar* (the people of Tornedalen, the borderland between Finland and Sweden). Norway also acknowledges two groups of Finnish descent: the Forest Finns and the Kven. Finland acknowledges Swedish-speaking Finns, the Tatars, the Karelians, and Russian-speakers, and Denmark recognises the German speakers of southern Jutland. Quite simply, in the Nordic countries, some minorities are more equal than others. And it is noticeable that White minorities (such as Finno-Swedes and Swedo-Finns) are favoured over minorities who can be visually distinguished (such as Romanies, Afro-Swedes and Muslims) (Schclarek Mulinari; Hübinette and Lundström). More positively, the distinction acknowledges long-standing histories of minorities within each nation. On a less positive note, the existence of different categories of minority reinforces exceptionalist thinking: in this context, the belief that the Nordic countries are “special” in that they are less racist than other countries.

### Nordic Exceptionalism

Drawing on the work of bell hooks, Botelho and Kabakow Rudman explain that “[r]ace, class, and gender matter. Critical multicultural analysis brings socioeconomic class into the conversation about race and gender, so we can better understand how these systems of oppression intersect” (xiv). They situate their study in the American context, proposing that such an approach to children’s literature can challenge “the social myth that we live in a classless, equitable and just society” (xiv). Although they connect this idea to the American dream, the social myth they describe holds traction in Nordic contexts as well. Although not quite premised in the same dreams of success, wealth, and power as the American dream, belief in classlessness, equitability, and a just society are perhaps even more widespread in the Nordic countries, where affordable healthcare, free education, and social provision for the most vulnerable (for example the homeless, the aged, and pre-schoolers) are the norm, not the exception. Indeed, the many privileges enjoyed by the majority of Nor-

dic citizens may make it even harder to recognise those who cannot enjoy these offerings (such as undocumented persons), or those who have the legal right to enjoy them, but in practice cannot. Botelho and Kabakow Rudman highlight race, class, and gender, but of course there are many other factors that can affect how well a person is able to enjoy opportunities for benefitting from society. Learning difficulties, mental and physical health, familial bonds and connections, and the physical location of one's home will affect how individuals flourish within the Nordic countries.

The pervasive (self-)image of Scandinavia as a prosperous, socially just region seems to have affected the ability to recognise enduring and systemic injustices. This inability to face such problems pertains to both the present and the past. Hübinette pinpoints "a desire to remain neutral and objective to all that has happened outside the borders of Sweden to be able to feel benevolent, advanced and moral" as one of the main components of Swedish exceptionalism ("Words that Wound" 66). Together with Catrin Lundström, Hübinette has identified the "Three Phases of Hegemonic Whiteness" (2015) that have led to the emergence and gaining influence of the Sweden Democrats, an openly racist political party. The rhetoric of this and other populist parties in the Nordic region "does not manifest as a triumphalist whiteness, but a whiteness in crisis, and a whiteness structured by feelings of bewilderment and loss" (67), that is, to put it in Robin DiAngelo's terms, "White fragility." This manifests itself "not wanting to take in that Sweden today is a country marked by racial diversity" (Hübinette, "Words that Wound" 66).

A further manifestation of Nordic exceptionalism is the failure to acknowledge participation in the colonial project (Hübinette, "Words that Wound" 66). With Stuart Hall, Kirsten Hvenegård-Lassen and Serena Maurer identify this negating impulse as "colonial amnesia," "or the 'forgetting' of colonialism as something internal to and formative of Europe" (156). They conceive of "Nordic exceptionalism [as] a sort of opting out of colonialism all together [sic] which means there is no 'burden of guilt' ... for the Nordic countries to carry" (Hvenegård-Lassen and Maurer 156). Much of the problem lies in the fact that the terminology used to describe colonialism do not suit the Nordic context, but as Jukka Nyssönen points out, there is also "great reluctance to perceive the Nordic Sami histories as colonialistic [sic]," as the Nordic self-images are those of "good states" (117–118). This reluctance also applies to Sámi scholars, who are hesitant to apply the colonial/imperial lens developed in the contexts of European colonisation on other continents to the Sápmi region



and the Sámi peoples. For instance, Veli-Pekka Lehtola argues that although the concepts of colonialism and oppression are useful starting points, they imply clear-cut divisions between oppressors and oppressed that are not fruitful for interpreting the complex relations between the Sámi and Finnish populations that include extensive intermarriage and shared goals. As Nyyssönen observes, “the multiplicity of this encounter is lost if it is lumped under the category of colonialism” (104). The borders of Finland within Sápmi were first determined by the Swedish and Russian empires when Finland was ceded to Russia in 1809, and renegotiated under the Peace Treaties following the 1939–1945 hostilities. As such, Finland can claim “innocence” and overlook its own complicity in colonial practices such as settlement (Rastas; see also Kokkola and Merivirta).

Peter Forsgren also notes how postcolonial studies in the Nordic region differ by country, with Denmark taking a broader, more global perspective, whilst Sweden has tended to focus on colonialism in relation to the Sámi. In short, although Nordic exceptionalism is a useful concept, we need to constantly remind ourselves of more subtle variations within the region. In relation to literature for youth, a further factor worth noting is the translation of colonial literature into Nordic languages. Books such as Laura Ingalls Wilder’s quasi-autobiographical *Little House* series (1932–1943) and James Fenimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* (1826) were widely available in the Nordic countries through translation, thereby spreading and perhaps normalising colonial attitudes towards indigenous peoples.

Cracks in the surface lay bare the fragility of the Nordic countries’ auto-perception as non-racist. Tomas Hübinette suggests even the terms “race” and “racism” are such sore topics in the Nordic countries that the words are “taboo” (“Racial Words” 25). Whereas race is the main distinguishing identity category that Anglophone diversity theories have tended to build on, by contrast, Hvenegård-Lassen and Maurer suggest that “[r]ace is a concept generally evaded in continental Europe” (156). In the Nordic countries, they observe a tendency to place themselves outside of discourses of racism and colonialism, often deflecting the wrongdoings of the past onto other nations to appear innocent. If race is discussed at all, it is used to refer to “the colonial and racist practices of other powers out there – that is *outside* Europe” (Hvenegård-Lassen and Maurer 156). The only context in which race played a role that is widely acknowledged is World War II. “As a consequence,” Hvenegård-Lassen and Maurer write, “discourses of race and racism are in the European context either deemed irrelevant or associated with individual delusions. It

is within this context that race has evaporated as a speakable term" (156). Instead of race, Scandinavian scholars tend to revert to terms such as "'ethnicity' and 'majority and minority'" (Hvenegård-Lassen and Maurer 156; Hübinette, "Racial Words"). As Hvenegård-Lassen and Maurer aptly remark, these seemingly less laden concepts make circumventing current and historical racist thinking easier. In our view, failing to engage with the notion of racialisation by steering clear of the term "race" could therefore be seen as part of the problem (see also Hübinette, "Racial Words").

## Concluding Remarks

We began this article by proposing that we need more diverse approaches to diversity in children's literature. Much of the debate has become politically heated and/or focused on conflict (Coats, "Conflicts"). We proposed two routes that might diversify our understanding of diversity, thereby leading to more useful pedagogical strategies. We proposed that a pedagogy of diversity must recognise the cognitive basis of bias in order to tackle the consequences, and to do so as early in childhood as possible. We acknowledged that the labour of empathy is far from evenly spread, and yet empathy remains central to overcoming cognitive bias. Later in the article, we presented imagology as a research paradigm that eschews the political, and yet showed how central European scholars have harnessed the tools of image studies to perform post-colonial critiques. In between, we have summarised the work of scholars from the Anglophone, especially American contexts, showing how diversifying our approaches to diversity does not mean ignoring the good work that has already been done.

We, like the other contributors to this theme as well as the majority of those whom we cite, are politically committed to working towards an inclusive society that celebrates diversity. Like politicians in a coalition government, we recognise lack of agreement within the ranks, but collaborate to find pragmatic solutions to shared concerns. By trying to steer the discussion away from ethics and morality, to focus on the cognitive basis of othering and the circulation of images of otherness, we have endeavoured to avoid blaming and shaming. This does not mean we are afraid of pointing out White fragility or exceptionalist beliefs, but rather a pragmatic recognition that characterising diversity through conflict does not produce the results we seek. Highlighting conflict simply encourages people to entrench or fall silent, neither of which is helpful. We need an approach based on

understanding the root causes in both the human body and within social systems. We need to accept that we share the same concerns, even when we come from varied positions. We need to keep asking questions. We need to diversify the way we address diversity in children's literature.

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