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# The Journal of Social Studies Research

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## Racialized space and discourse in the picture books of Ezra Jack Keats

Anna Falkner

Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Texas at Austin, 1912 Speedway STOP, D5700, Austin, TX 78712-1293, USA.

### ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*  
Accepted 23 May 2017

*Keywords:*  
Race  
Racial discourse  
Space  
Social studies  
Children's literature  
Ezra Jack Keats  
Picture books

### ABSTRACT

Scholars have argued elementary social studies is uniquely suited to build a foundation of critical knowledge of race and racism with young children (e.g. [Bolgatz, 2005, 2007](#); [Wills, 2005](#)). To build this foundation, we must more deeply examine the materials, such as picture books, that are used in early classrooms. This research is a qualitative content analysis of one set of picture books: the neighborhood books of Caldecott award winner Ezra Jack Keats. Drawing on [Goldberg's \(1993\)](#) theory of racialized discourse and [Neely and Sumatra's \(2011\)](#) theory on racialized space, this research analyzes the racialized fictional space of Keats's neighborhood, and contextualizes the texts within broader socio-historical racial discourse. The author argues Keats's texts racialize neighborhood space through the characters' relationships with each other, their interaction with the space, and the physical depiction of the setting. This research contributes to a growing movement toward addressing race and racism in elementary social studies by demonstrating how scholars, teachers, and students may interrogate picture books as transmitters of racial knowledge and history.

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### Introduction

Scholars have argued as a field, that social studies has failed to adequately address race and racism in schools and research, despite being uniquely positioned to address these issues ([Bolgatz, 2005](#); [Daniels, 2011](#); [Howard, 2003](#)). This is particularly true in elementary social studies, where the assumption holds that children are either incapable of understanding complex topics such as race or they need protection from the sensitive nature of race ([Bernstein, 2011](#)). As Holmes noted in her (2016) dissertation, when race is addressed in elementary classrooms, it is as a, “catalyst to help children relate to the content in hopes to increase their academic skills” (p. 164) rather than the primary focus of study.

To that end, researchers have suggested scholarly work and professional development focus on supporting elementary teachers with research and resources to celebrate narratives of agency ([Bolgatz, 2007](#); [Daniels, 2011](#)) and center the stories of every day resistance ([Alridge, 2006](#); [Wills, 2005](#)). In addition, teachers must critically examine and discuss with students depictions of race and racism in official curriculum, classroom materials, and current events, both in the classroom and society ([Brown & Brown, 2011](#); [Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2016](#)). In other words, early childhood and elementary social studies should build a foundation of racial literacy ([Guinier, 2004](#)).

However, elementary social studies suffers from limited inclusion, both in time taught and in the depth to which it is addressed ([Au, 2007](#)). Elementary teachers report making time for social studies instruction is one of the biggest obstacles to

E-mail address: [Anna.Falkner@UTexas.edu](mailto:Anna.Falkner@UTexas.edu)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2017.05.006>

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Please cite this article as: Falkner, A. Racialized space and discourse in the picture books of Ezra Jack Keats. *The Journal of Social Studies Research* (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2017.05.006>

its inclusion (Sunal & Sunal, 2007). Additionally, students from marginalized communities experience a social studies gap, in which they are less likely to have opportunities to develop social studies knowledge than students in high-SES communities, who are more likely to be white (Berson & Camicia, 2013; Camburn & Han, 2011). When social studies is taught, elementary teachers often report doing so by integrating social studies with other subject areas, particularly language arts (Rock et al., 2006).

Research on implementation of the integration of language arts and social studies indicated it is done haphazardly and often prioritizes language arts instruction (Alleman & Brophy, 2010; Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere, & Stewart, 2008; Levstik, 2010; Sunal & Sunal, 2007). This is often to social studies' detriment (Pace, 2012). Sunal & Sunal (2007) described elementary social studies as a "patchwork curriculum," constructed based on tangential connections to focus texts in reading instruction or textbooks. As Boyle-Baise et al. (2008) noted, "Integration seemed to be a coincidental effect. It was an unplanned, opportunistic moment of supplementary explanation derived from reading topics and exercises" (p. 246). In other words, social studies is often simply an extension of realistic fiction texts chosen largely for their benefits to reading comprehension. If elementary social studies is to thrive through integration, researchers need to better address how teachers may use children's literature as a way to deeply address social studies across the disciplines (Bauml, 2016). Furthermore, if early social studies experiences are to provide a foundation of racial literacy, we must more deeply interrogate the materials used in classrooms both so elementary teachers may make race-conscious choices about which materials to include, and so researchers and elementary teachers may better engage in inquiry about race and racism using the texts that young children encounter frequently, both in and out of school.

Picture books are a significant form of racial discourse for young children that act as curricular texts both in schools and in children's homes (Brown & Brown, 2015). In that capacity, picture books transmit racial narratives and racial knowledge, and while social studies researchers argue for their inclusion, this form of curricular text seldom receives the same interrogation or content analysis that textbooks do. Therefore, in this research I analyze one set of picture books, drawing on theories of racial discourse and racialized space, and suggest implications for elementary social studies teachers.

Ezra Jack Keats wrote a series of picture books set in a mid-20th century urban neighborhood that largely feature the same cast of characters. These neighborhood picture books, because they are situated across two decades and because they held a lot of discursive power within the field of children's literature, are a powerful potential example of how teachers might examine racialized spaces with students. Ezra Jack Keats' neighborhood books featured young children of color—particularly two Black boys, Peter and Archie. Previous research has examined that neighborhood in place discourse and reactions to Caldecott award winner *The Snowy Day* by civil rights advocates of the 1960s. Today, Peter is still hailed by many as an everyboy character. In the article, "We Don't Only Need More Diverse Books. We Need More Diverse Books Like *The Snowy Day*," Rumaan Alam argued,

It's important not to sell Keats' work short by discussing it only through the lens of race, but leaving aside the question of blackness would be either disingenuous or treacherous, like claiming Muhammad Ali "transcended race." The blackness of *The Snowy Day* is indivisible from its excellence. (Alam 2016, no pagination).

Because Peter is seen as an everyboy, we need to better examine how his and other characters' stories fit into the spaces of American Black boyhood. Therefore, in this research I ask: How is the fictional space of Keats's neighborhood racialized, and how does that racial construction fit within a broader racialized discourse?

I begin by outlining my theoretical framework, drawing primarily on Goldberg's (1993) theory of racialized discourse and Neely and Sumara's (2011) theory of racialized space. I then situate this work within research on Ezra Jack Keats's writing, and briefly review sociological discourse on Black boys, families, and neighborhoods. Next, I provide an overview of my methodology and discuss three key findings. I conclude with implications for practice.

## Theoretical framework

Drawing from Goldberg's (1993) theory of racialized discourse, I explore the power of Keats' neighborhood books as racialized discursive objects. Goldberg's theory of racialized discourse is useful in considering how discourse is historically situated. Within discourse is a set of assumptions about people and their relationships, often rooted in cultural or historical information. The production of racialized discourse is defined by previous scholarly and public work. Goldberg wrote, "Production of social knowledge about the racialized Other then establishes a library or archive of information, a set of guiding ideas and principles about Otherness: a mind, characteristic behavior or habits, and predictions of likely responses (Goldberg, 1993, p. 150). In other words, discursive objects refract narratives of the racialized Other, either reifying or countering assumptions and constructions of race.

I intersect Goldberg's theory of racialized discourse with Neely and Samura's (2011) theory of racialized space in order to critically examine how space is organized through racial discourse. Neely and Samura define space, as the, "meaningful embodiment of place" (p. 1936). They argue space and race share four major characteristics. First, definitions and practices related to both are highly contested along social and political lines. Second, both race and space are historically contextualized, as in, for example, the history of United States political entities' manipulation of housing markets and the availability of public housing to various groups. Third, they are both relational—Othering practices are inherent in the power

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