

APALA Rubric to Evaluate Asian American and Pacific Islander Youth Literature

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Inspired by the “Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children’s Books for Racism and Sexism” (Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1974) and “Criteria for Analyzing Books on Asian Americans” (Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1976).

INTRODUCTION

This rubric is intended to function as a guide, not a checklist, while reviewing and evaluating **Asian American and Pacific Islander (APIA)** youth literature for readers who are 0-18 years old. Throughout the rubric, some terms requiring context will be in boldface type and defined in the glossary attached. We use the term “APIA” throughout this rubric, though much of the criteria can be applied to the Asian diaspora, which is very diverse in terms of geography, culture, language, religion, and so on.

Here are a few important considerations. While this rubric can be used to evaluate individual books, each book must also be considered within the scope of the whole collection with caution for redundancy or perpetuation of “single stories” (Adichie, 2009). Some books might center an APIA character, while in others an APIA character is one of many. Because libraries collect books originally published outside of the United States and in languages other than English, this rubric can also be useful for those evaluations while considering the specific contexts in which those books are published. Related, portions of the rubric might apply to both text and illustrations. For example, one should look critically for slanted eyes and yellow skin in both text and illustrations, and whether the story takes place in the United States, a specific Asian country, or elsewhere. It is the reader’s responsibility to educate themselves (we provide resources below) regarding the range of subtle and obvious ways that **stereotypes** and authenticity might show up in both text and illustrations.

We are also aware that some sections of the rubric may seem to contradict each other, participating in what Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham (2009) call an “ambivalent dialectic” where “two contrasting portraits... appear to be opposite but in fact function together” to depict APIAs in “problematic ways” (p. 66). Similarly, Craig Howes (1987) attends to the “fundamental contradiction” where “Hawaiians are childlike, happy, and gentle people, but their former native leaders—the priests and the chiefs—were somehow evil, cunning, and powerful” (p. 72). For example, the refugee father who wakes early to go fishing in *A Different Pond* (Phi & Bui, 2017) might appear to fulfill the “hardworking” **model minority** stereotype. However, he is not hardworking solely because he is APIA, but because a successful fishing trip means his family will have food for dinner. Such realities must be depicted with nuance, in context, and with strong writing and artwork; otherwise, they reinforce stereotypes. Consider that Gene Luen Yang based

Chin-Kee in *American Born Chinese* (2006) on a range of anti-Asian stereotypes; Chin-Kee is a caricature who should make readers uncomfortable.

Additionally, characters must be carefully evaluated through an intersectional lens with attention to all aspects of their humanity, agency, and identities. While this rubric goes into detail regarding evaluation of APIA-specific characters and narratives, readers and reviewers must continually consider the influence that age, sexual identity, gender identity, body type, physical ability, or neurological ability have on the character’s depiction. We considered how the character of Marjane in Marjane Satrapi’s graphic memoir *Persepolis* (2003) is an example of a multidimensional human with agency, depicted within the context of oppression related to gender, feminism, state violence, and mental health. Readers and reviewers should evaluate forms of oppression beyond **racism** — these include sexism, ableism, homophobia, xenophobia, ageism, classism, etc. for all characters.

It goes without saying that children’s books depicting APIA should be high quality in terms of both text and illustration. Meeting multiple parts of the rubric below would indicate a book is of high quality.

Finally, the creation of this rubric is guided by the following: ***What impact does this book have on a child or teen reader’s understanding of themselves and the world in which they live?***

1. Consider the effects on an APIA young person’s self image.
2. Consider the messages about APIA that this book sends to non-APIA readers.

Thank You

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RUBRIC

RACISM

Text	Illustrations
Consider the way in which the creators address racist events or incidents.	
Racism is acknowledged in a meaningful way, with perpetrators of specific racist behaviors identified (such as using an active voice, rather than a passive voice; avoid “X experienced racism.”).	
Characters of different races work thoughtfully toward cultural understanding; APIA characters do not exist only to ameliorate white characters’ racial anxiety.	

Consider whether historical events or figures are interpreted with a present-day lens.	
Historical figures and events are presented in context.	

STEREOTYPES

Text	Illustrations
Books should avoid stereotypes, as described below.	
APIA stereotypes include exaggerated, othering, and/or dehumanizing depictions of model minority , shuffling feet, quiet, nerdy/studious/smart, submissive, accented or broken English, martial arts, inedible/smelly food, misogynistic, irrationally angry, essentialized religious faith and practices.	APIA stereotypes include exaggerated depictions of slant-eyes , rice bowl haircuts, long braids, Fu Manchu mustache, barefoot, yellow skin, short stature, large front teeth, or bowing.
Loaded words include conniving, superstitious, treacherous, terrorist, wily, crafty, inscrutable, docile, backward, exotic , boat people, fresh off the boat.	Outdated or traditional clothing not appropriate to the occasion, or ornamentation being the only identity marker for a character such as a head scarf or hijab.
	Decor not relevant to the occasion or narrative include luaus, hula dancing, grass skirts, Tiki novelties, leis, martial arts, paper lanterns, chopsticks, or Shamshir swords.
	Token symbolism including orientalist font, fake “Asian” lettering, inclusion of animals (pandas, elephants, snakes, dragons, etc.) not relevant to the story.

TOKENISM

Text	Illustrations
Books should avoid tokenism, as described below.	
APIA characters’ inclusion is not rendered in any meaningful way	
A character’s name or surname, the use of stereotypical broken English and	APIA characters look like white characters, but colored in differently or depicted as Asian

exaggerated accents, or any of the above stereotypes should not be the only indicators of Asianness.	only through Asian-appearing clothing and headscarves. Or, slanted eyes are the only characteristic that distinguishes Asian characters from other characters.
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HUMANITY

Text	Illustrations
The text acknowledges the character's humanity and race through authentic dialogue.	The illustrations acknowledge the character's humanity and race with authentically rendered images.
Each APIA character/culture is depicted as distinct from one another and not lumped together as one monolithic Asian culture. For example, Japanese and Chinese cultures are shown as distinct and not lumped together as one monolithic East Asian culture. Arab and South Asian cultures and Islam and Hinduism are shown as distinct and not lumped together as one monolithic Muslim culture. Where applicable, stories depict a variety of skin tones and body shapes and attend to issues of colorism , fatphobia, etc.	

POWER, AGENCY, AND HEROES

Text	Illustrations
APIA characters are centered and depicted as heroes and leaders and as having agency, power, and the ability to solve problems. APIA characters are not depicted in subservient and passive roles or primarily as villains or stock characters (Dragon Lady, Fu Manchu, Madam Butterfly , Aladdin, etc.).	
APIA characters' occupations are displayed with nuance, especially if they are commonly held jobs such as cab drivers, motel owners, grocery store owners, dry cleaners, technology professionals, doctors, and nurses (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).	
Female characters are not inactive observers; males are not always the active "doers."	Different genders are shown in a variety of roles.
APIA characters have as much dialogue (or meaningful dialogue) as non-APIA characters, or APIA characters speak English as appropriate, or do not communicate primarily through grunts and hand motions.	APIA people are not depicted on the margins.

SETTING

Text	Illustrations
Asian/Asian American and Pacific Island settings (Korea, Iran, Thailand, Chinatown, Filipinotown, Little Tokyo, Little India, Hawaiian Islands, Samoa, etc.) are authentically described and positively support the narrative.	Asian/Asian American and Pacific Island settings (Korea, Iran, Thailand, Chinatown, Filipinotown, Little Tokyo, Little India, Hawaiian Islands, Samoa, etc.) are authentically depicted and positively support the narrative.
APIA communities are depicted as vibrant and modern; stories that take place in the present do not depict Asian countries as inferior, backwards, or underdeveloped in relation to the west.	

STORYLINE

Text	Illustrations
APIA characters do not assimilate to whiteness (e.g., pressure to speak “perfect” English).	
Where applicable, the storyline addresses the impact of colonialism on the setting, characters, and other relevant aspects of the story.	
APIA characters can be who they are; they do not have to be extraordinarily kind, smart, hardworking, etc., to succeed. On the other hand, the storyline acknowledges that APIAs <i>have</i> to work harder to survive in the United States. Working and/or studying hard should be rendered in a way that dignifies the whole person within the context of their reality and avoids meritocracy .	
The character’s Asianness is normalized and is not posed as a problem. For example, the storylines shouldn’t only center pain, bullying, war, and rejection (especially for Southeast Asians and Muslims).	
Storylines should be evaluated for Othering characteristics, such as an overemphasis on the 5 Fs - food, festivals, folklore, famous people, fashion - or an overemphasis on immigration, looking different, etc.	

AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR BACKGROUNDS

The book indicates the author's and/or illustrator's lived experiences, expertise, and/or research that recommend them as the creators of this book, with preferences for **insider**-created books.

The author's and/or illustrator's perspective is not primarily **patriarchal**, **Americentric**, or **Eurocentric**.

COPYRIGHT DATES

Consider that “**colorblind**” ideology became popularized in the late 1970s and can be reflected in children's literature. Furthermore, a publication date before 1990 may indicate that a book was created at a time when few APIA were involved in book publishing as either writer, illustrator, editor, reviewer, critic, etc., and should be evaluated with that in mind. Children's literature also follows sociopolitical trends; for example, with the rise of **Islamophobia** in the post 9/11 environment, **South Asian** and Muslim characters were often conflated with security threats or violence. In recent years, there's been an uptick of books with what KT Horning calls “ambiguous ethnicities, eg. brown-skinned” characters with no other identifying characteristics (2017).

GUIDELINES FOR COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

The following guidelines are adapted from the *Hijabi Librarians'* [“Questions for Overall Collection Development,”](#) where they stress the importance of evaluating each book on its own merit, as well as evaluating entire collections for balance.

- There is a growing ratio of APIA stories to non-APIA stories in your collection.
- There is a growing ratio of **insider to outsider** authors and illustrators.
- A range of copyright dates are represented.
- Stories represent a wide diversity of APIA communities; East Asian stories do not dominate as compared with other parts of the Asian diaspora.
- Stories are presented in a variety of time periods, settings, and situations (i.e., they are not all immigrant narratives).
- Stories are expressed in a variety of genres and formats (i.e., folktales do not comprise the majority of APIA materials).
- Stories are intersectional.
- Stories are published by a variety of publishers, including mainstream publishers.
- There is a balance of stories that include APIA characters in a variety of roles (i.e. not merely as sidekicks) and relationships with other characters (i.e. romance novels include APIA male love interests).

DEFINITIONS

1. **Americentric**

- Americentrism is the practice of viewing the world from an overly US-focused perspective, where American standards are assumed to be of a higher relevance than those of other countries (Al-Mahfedi, 2020). Furthermore, Americentrism imposes an aspect of Western culture on other cultures and masquerades it as universal (Al-Mahfedi, 2020).

2. **Arab**

- “A member of any Arabic-speaking people; a person of Arabic origin or descent” (OED, n.d.a).
- There are 26 countries or territories in western Asia and Africa where Arabic is the official or one of the official languages of the state (countries with more than one official language and are marked with an asterisk): Algeria, Bahrain, Chad*, Comoros*, Djibouti*, Egypt, Eritrea*, Iraq*, Israel*, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia*, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Western Sahara, and Yemen (Teach Mideast, n.d.).

3. **Asian American and Pacific Islander (APIA)**

- A U.S. citizen or resident whose origin or descent is from the continent of Asia or the Pacific islands of Melanesia (New Guinea, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands), Micronesia (Marianas, Guam, Wake Island, Palau, Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, and the Federated States of Micronesia), or Polynesia (New Zealand, Hawaiian Islands, Rotuma, Midway Islands, Samoa, American Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, Cook Islands, French Polynesia, and Easter Island) (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

4. **Central Asian**

- “Central Asia includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Tibet, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan” (Asia Society, n.d.)

5. **Colonialism**

- Murrey (2020) defines colonialism as a combination of “territorial, juridical, cultural, linguistic, political, mental/epistemic, and/or economic invasion and subsequent domination of a group of people or groups of people by another group of people” (p. 315). Throughout history, “colonialism has often led indigenous people... to become a minority in an area they once were the majority (dominant) group. Examples of this process include the Maori of New Zealand, the First Nation people of Canada, and the Hawaiians of Hawaii” (Schaefer, 2015, p. 571).
- Postcolonial refers to the epoch following when a country has observed independence; however, its usage does not presume that the transfer of

sovereignty “affected a total break with all structural, economic, political, social, or cultural aspects of colonization” (Murrey, 2020, p. 315). The influences of colonialism continue to structure and inform culture, politics, and preserve “racial hierarchies, masculinist and patriarchal relations, geographical divisions, and economic inequalities” (Murrey, 2020, p. 321).

- Neocolonialism is the congruence between colonialism and postcolonialism in which the economic power, political influence, and/or cultural and educational hegemony is maintained by the former colonizers in a postcolonial society (Murrey, 2020, p. 322). Thus, colonialism should not be perceived as a “historical artifact but a persistent force in the contemporary world,” in particular settler colonialism as an “ongoing elaboration of racialized elimination” (Murrey, 2020, p. 321).

6. **Color-blindness**

- Color-blind racial ideology implies that, living in a post-racial society, an individual’s skin color does not impact their existence, and that any acknowledgement of race is itself racist (Neville et al., 2016). However, color-blindness avoids acknowledging power, defends or perpetuates the culture of privilege, and is effectively “oppression-blindness” where blame is placed on the victim for their oppression (Ferber, 2012).

7. **Colorism**

- Colorism privileges people with light skin over people with dark skin and is a manifestation of racism. It exists as a result of White supremacy ideology imposed by European and U.S. colonialists along with a preference for white skin which predates European colonization. “Although the preference for fair skin is the central feature of colorism, phenotypical traits such as hair texture, nose width, and eye shape are other markers of one’s color” (Chanbonpin, 2015, p. 646). “In the Asian American community, colorism is the product of a complex set of social and historical interactions with gender, immigrant, generational, and class dimensions...” such as the impact of colonial forces. Chanbonpin (2015) continues, “Within Asian ethnic groups, differences in skin color frequently determine social standing and marriageability” (p. 642).

8. **Dragon Lady**

- A stereotype most often applied to Asian women as “surreptitious and sinister”; a “feminized version of yellow peril.” “She is untrustworthy, deceitful, conniving, and plotting, and she may use sex or sexuality to get what she wants” (Ono & Pham, 2009, p. 66).

9. **East Asian**

- A person whose origin or descent is from East Asia, which includes the countries Japan, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea), Republic of Korea

(South Korea), Taiwan, and most of China (excluding Tibet, Qinghai, and Xinjiang) (Chapman et al., n.d.).

10. Eurocentric

- Eurocentrism is a cultural phenomenon that views the histories and cultures of non-Western societies from a European or Western perspective (Al-Mahfedi, 2020). It brings European or Western cultural heritage to the forefront without acknowledgement of the contributions made by civilizations in other parts of the world (Al-Mahfedi, 2020). A byproduct of colonialism and cultural hegemony, Eurocentrism signifies that European values have been the foundational source of meaning upon which individuals and societies develop (Al-Mahfedi, 2020).

11. Exotic

- Making “those outside the US mainstream” “appear intriguing, but also curious, strange, and alien... [underscoring] differences not similarities” (Ono & Pham, 2009, p. 4).

12. Fu Manchu

- A stereotype most often applied to East Asian men as “diabolical, sinister, and evil, a particular, masculine representation of yellow peril” (Ono & Pham, 2009, p. 34). He is both “fascinating” and “inspires fear” (p. 35).

13. Insider/Outsider

- An insider is a writer or illustrator who has the lived experiences depicted in a book of their creation (also known as #OwnVoices, a term created by writer Corinne Duyvis, n.d.). This may include gender, queerness, nativity, racial, ability, ethnic, cultural, religious, or any intersection of more than one identity (WNDB, n.d.).
- An outsider is a writer or illustrator who does not share identity categories with the characters or content.

14. Islamophobia

- “Islamophobia is distinct prejudices and stereotypes that result in ‘indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions’ and related behavior and practices directed at Muslims or Islam. Among the features that characterize Islamophobia is the view that Islam is seen as a monolithic and static bloc that is unresponsive to change, and irrational and inferior to the West, while hostility toward Islam is seen as natural or normal and is used to justify the exclusion of Muslims” (Skenderovic & Späti, 2019, p. 135).

15. Madam Butterfly

- A stereotype that depicts Asian women as “sexually attractive and alluring and demure, passive, obedient, physically non-imposing, self-sacrificial, and supplicant (especially to white male suitors)” (Ono & Pham, 2009, p. 66).

16. Meritocracy

- “a system that rewards merit (ability + effort) with success” (Cooper, 2015).

17. Middle East

- “Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Libya, and the various states and territories of Arabia proper (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States, or Trucial Oman [now United Arab Emirates])” (Britannica, n.d.).

18. Model Minority

- A stereotype created in the 1960s that presents a “glowing image of a population that, despite past discrimination, has succeeded in becoming a hardworking, uncomplaining minority deserving to serve as a model for other minorities” (Chun, 1995, p. 96).

19. Multicultural

- “‘Multiculturalism’ is the co-existence of diverse cultures, where culture includes racial, religious, or cultural groups and is manifested in customary behaviours, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking, and communicative styles” (IFLA, 2016).
- However, Honma argues against “a benign liberal multiculturalism that celebrates difference and promotes ‘cross-cultural understanding’ empty of critical analyses of race and racism that instead adopts a commodified diversity management more in line with capitalist market relations than emancipatory anti-racist struggles,” thus “a more rigorous intervention is needed in order to dismantle liberal multiculturalism and to promote a critical or revolutionary multiculturalism (if the ‘multicultural’ discourse is to be used at all) that re-centers the importance of race, as well as other social axes of domination, in the analysis and practice within the field” (Honma, 2005).

20. Muslim

- “A follower of the religion of Islam; of or relating to Islam, its followers, or their culture” (OED, n.d.b). Islam is the name given to the religion preached by the Prophet Mohammad. The Five Pillars (fundamental practices) of Islam include: Profession of Faith, Prayer, Alms, Fasting, and Pilgrimage (Rahman et al., n.d.).

21. Pacific Islander

- A person whose origin or descent is from the Pacific Islands, which include Melanesia (New Guinea, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands), Micronesia (Marianas, Guam, Wake Island, Palau, Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, and the Federated States of Micronesia) and Polynesia (New Zealand, Hawaiian Islands, Rotuma, Midway Islands, Samoa, American Samoa, Tonga,

Tuvalu, Cook Islands, French Polynesia, and Easter Island) (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

22. Patriarchy

- “a societal structure of male supremacy that operates at the expense of women” (Higgins, 2018).

23. Racism

- “a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities” (Kendi, 2019, pp. 17-18).
 - i. “A racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups. ... [including] written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and guidelines that govern people” (p. 18).
 - ii. “A racist idea is any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior to or superior to another racial group in any way. Racist ideas argue that the inferiorities and superiorities of racial groups explain racial inequities in society” (p. 20).
 - iii. “Racial inequity is when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing” (p. 18).
- “The opposite of racist isn't 'not racist.' It is 'antiracist.' What's the difference? One endorses either the idea of racial hierarchy as a racist, or racial equality as an antiracist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and policies, as an antiracist. One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of 'not racist'” (p. 9).

24. Slant-eye

- A person with “slanting” eyes, typically used in illustrations to denote that the character is East Asian. The concept is based on the epicanthic fold that covers the corner of the upper eyelid (Fat Pink American, 2012), leading to what some call a lack of a “double eyelid” for people of Asian descent. Coupled with eyes that are illustrated at an angle, increasingly exaggerated “slanting” eyes are more egregious and racist. They have their origins in yellow peril imagery—such as the political cartoons of the late 1800s—that depicted Asian others as threatening and sinister.

25. South Asian

- A person whose origin or descent is from South Asia, which includes the countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (International and Area Studies Library, 2017).

26. South East Asian

- A person whose origin or descent is from South East Asia, which includes the peninsula and islands east of India and Bangladesh and south of China (Temple, n.d.). This region includes the countries of Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam (NIU, n.d.).

27. Stereotype

- “A preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person, situation, etc.; an attitude based on such a preconception. Also, a person who appears to conform closely to the idea of a type” (OED, n.d.c).

28. Token

- “passing into *adj.* Serving as a token; pro forma; (purely) symbolic; constituting a gesture (only); minimal, nominal, perfunctory” (OED, n.d.d).

29. Transnational

- “extending or going beyond national boundaries” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a).
- For example: transnational relationships, transnational ties, transnational social support

30. Transpacific

- “crossing or extending across the Pacific Ocean” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b).

31. Transracial

- “the adoption of a child that is of a different race than the adoptive parents. The term most often refers to children of color adopted by white families in the Global North” (McKee et al., 2015).
- The term “transracial” “has been extensively examined and documented for more than 50 years by academics and members of the adoption triad: adoptees, birthparents, and adoptive parents” and cannot be co-opted to describe someone of one race who is appropriating the race or culture of another (McKee et al., 2015).

32. Western Asian

- “West Asia includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cyprus, Georgia, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen” (Asia Society, n.d.).

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