Teaching Children About Body Image and Ethnic Hair: A Rhetorical Analysis of Picture Books and Parenting Books

Sully Moreno
TEACHING CHILDREN ABOUT BODY IMAGE AND ETHNIC HAIR: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF PICTURE BOOKS AND PARENTING BOOKS

By

SULLY MORENO

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The members of the supervisory committee were:

Donna Marie Nudd
Professor Directing Thesis

Davis Houck
Committee Member

Jeanette Castillo
Committee Member

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above-named committee members, and certifies that the [thesis/treatise/dissertation] has been approved in accordance with university requirements.
To my parents, Sully and Ricardo, who may not see eye to eye with me when it comes to beauty, but who taught me the far more important lessons of hard work and dedication. Thank you for loving me and sending me to college.
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Children are not born with knowing what beauty is. Instead, children learn about beauty through their experiences. This study will examine the messages of beauty children receive from illustrated books and the beauty messages parents are advised to instill in their children in parenting books. This study will also evaluate the messages of race and gender that underlie these messages of beauty. The analysis will take place through a qualitative analysis of five illustrated children’s books dealing with ethnic hair, five illustrated children’s books dealing with body image, and four parenting books that focus on body image.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but the beholder is bombarded with beauty messages left and right. Just as we learn to look both ways when we cross the street and to color within the lines when we are children, we begin to learn via a multitude of messages that in order to be well-liked we must look and act certain ways.

As a child, I never questioned the importance of being “pretty;” it seemed obvious that being “pretty” should be a goal for every girl. I also never questioned why being “pretty” seemed to necessarily mean being thin and having straight hair. While my 5-year-old metabolism seemed to take care of thinness on its own, hair was a different story: I cannot remember a time when my mother did not dry my hair straight each time I washed my hair. I did not enjoy sitting still for nearly an hour to straighten my hair, but it seemed the right thing to do; after all, I did not know anyone, real or fictional, who was considered “pretty” and had curly brown hair.

It took me years to realize that I could wear my hair curly if I really wanted to despite the fact that I rarely saw other women with curly hair, either in person or in media. The invisibility of curly hair sent the unspoken message that curly hair was not attractive. My experience leaves me wondering, would I have learned to value my hair from an earlier age if I had come across messages that affirmed its beauty?

Of course, at 5 I was not aware that I learned to manage my behavior and appearance based on what I observed. But this realization has made me feel cautious towards media messages aimed at children, even those that seem well-intentioned. *Maggie Goes on a Diet* (Kramer, 2011) is a picture book depicting the weight struggles of a 14-year-old girl. Prior to its publication, it sparked criticism by concerned parents and healthcare professionals (Allen, 2011; Regnier, 2011; Sharma, 2011). The description on Amazon.com summarized the book as the story of a 14-year-old who “is transformed from being extremely overweight and insecure to a normal sized girl who becomes the school soccer star” through diet and exercise. The book is listed as appropriate for ages 4 through 8 (Amazon.com, 2011).

While encouraging children to be active and eat healthy may seem like a noble goal, I am inclined to sympathize with parents who are uneasy about exposing their daughters to what may lead to a difficult relationship with food. The cover of the book shows Maggie, a pudgy teenager holding up a pink dress in the mirror and imagining herself thin enough to fit into the dress. It’s a loaded image: a young girl who yearns to fit into the “beautiful” mold.
In this study, I will evaluate illustrated children’s books that send messages about physical appearance to elementary school-aged children. Half of the books address issues of ethnic hair, while the rest address body image issues. I will analyze the messages of gender, race, and beauty contained in these books, both in text and illustrations. Additionally, I will analyze messages related to beauty and gender in parenting books dealing with body image since parents play an important role in shaping their children’s self-perception and behavior.

Before I begin my analysis of children’s books and parenting books, I will summarize theories of performance in gender and race, and the previous research dealing with messages of gender, race, and beauty found in children’s literature. These theories will provide me with a framework to analyze the messages of beauty, race, and gender that are at work in children’s books and parenting books.

**Literature Review**

**Gender as a performance.**

“One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman.” – Simone de Beauvoir

Judith Butler’s queer theory rests on this statement. Butler (1988) used de Beauvoir’s assertion to explain that gender is not a stable identity, but rather a “stylized repetition of acts” (p. 519). Gender is a performance encompassed by the way bodies are made to behave and appear. The performance is deeply internalized, leading society and the actors themselves to believe the performance constitutes their identity.

Butler (1990) criticized the “heterosexual matrix” (p. 141) that views sex as a biological binary with clear divisions between male and female that later results in the construction of a gender identity and the development of desire towards the opposite sex. Butler stretched de Beauvoir’s affirmation that gender is a process into meaning that sex and gender are completely independent from one another, meaning that gender too could not be considered a binary: “If gender is not tied to sex, either causally or expressively, then gender is a kind of action that can potentially proliferate beyond the binary limits imposed by the apparent binary of sex” (p. 142). Butler also questioned the validity of using sex as a way to classify people; she viewed the use of sex as a classification not as a natural fact, but rather as a convenient mechanism to perpetuate the heterosexual matrix.
The argument that sex as well as gender is a social construction was explained in great detail by Cucchiari (1981). He likened gender to class structure, viewing it as a hierarchy that is produced and reproduced. However, Cucchiari considered that most theories of gender concentrate on the reproduction aspect, so he set out to explain how gender was initially produced. In his model supported by the archeological record, pre-gender society was necessarily tied to a food-gathering, pre-kinship, bisexual horde. Labor was divided into food-gathering and child-rearing activities which could be performed by either men or women. The horde foraged for food rather than hunted, since this allowed women with small children to both care for their babies and participate in the food-gathering. Once children were old enough to be separated from their mothers, they were relegated to the care of the child tenders. To ensure cordiality between hordes, child-exchange was practiced. Since the entire horde was responsible for feeding and caring for the children, no kinship ties were recognized; the horde itself was the smallest unit. This lack of kinship enabled bisexuality, since exclusive male-female pairs were not at the basis of the family unit. Bisexuality was accompanied by pre-genital sexuality, meaning that certain body parts had not yet been sexualized over others; the male-female binary was completely non-existent.

The gender revolution and thus the production of gender began when the horde began to deify women’s ability to bear children. While the horde had previously been conscious of the fact that only women could bear children, the gender revolution did not occur until the horde began to view this as a significant difference that needed to be explained. Once child-bearing became deified, the role of child tender belonged exclusively to women and that of food gatherer belonged exclusively to men. Once women with infants were not expected to participate in food-gathering, men began to hunt and the strength required to hunt was viewed as a male characteristic. This division of labor emphasized strictly female physical characteristics as distinct from male physical characteristics, and led to male-female pairings. These pairings marked the end of pre-kinship society since children have known parents, and the parents are now only responsible for the feeding and caring of their own children.

Heterosexuality resulted in intragender competition to attract mates. Men and women now exhibited “male” and “female” characteristics and behaviors in order to appeal to mates. Gender was transformed into hierarchy when the custom of child-exchange to maintain cordial relations
between hordes was transformed into bride-exchange, establishing women as commodities to be traded for the use of men.

Cucchiari puts forth an argument similar to Butler’s: sex and gender are not biological facts, but rather were constructed sometime in the past. His argument is illustrated neatly in the following passage:

Pre-gender society was as cognizant as any society of the facts of reproduction: who gets pregnant, for how long, who suckles children, and so on. But the question is, what do these facts mean? Are they viewed as the characteristics of a category of person known as “women,” embedded in a mesh of special roles, symbols, tasks, and values, and bearing a complementary relation to a category “men”? (p. 52).

Biology is directly observable, but the meaning given to biology is never imbued with the same objectivity. Cucchiari argued that a pre-gender society existed with no clear distinctions between “male” and “female.” However, once meaning was given to these categories, men and women began to act in certain ways that they found appropriate to their gender labels. Gender has always been a performance.

The idea of gender as performance has been explored both on stage and in real spaces by drag king Diane Torr (Torr & Bottoms, 2010). Torr separates her performances into three categories: feminine, androgynous, and masculine. She began exploring performances of gender as a college student taking dance lessons, when she realized that movement allowed people to become “consciously not only of our bodies and their capabilities, but of ourselves as bodies, as physical mass moving through space” (p. 45). Torr later worked as a go-go dancer, and to preserve her feminist ideals she decided to treat each bar as a “site for personal research” (p. 52), trying on different moves and observing her own performance in the surrounding mirrors. Later on, Torr attempted to export different variations of her go-go act to feminist conferences as a way to make a statement on female sexuality. Her performances at these conferences were not well-received because attendees were resistant to the sexualized outfits and moves, thinking Torr was merely perpetuating feminine stereotypes enjoyed by men.

After several failed attempts at engaging feminist audiences in performances of femininity, Torr changed her direction into performances of androgyny. She first encountered performances of androgyny inadvertently, in her aikido lessons. Both men and women attended these lessons, but the sexual binary was largely irrelevant, with all participants dressing in the same uniform
and performing the same moves. Aikido was an entirely sexless performance. This led Torr to create gender-bending performances along with a male partner, Bradley. The show, “Arousing Reconstructions,” featured Bradley in women’s clothing and Torr in male clothing, but their behavior did not always match their attire. Of Bradley’s performance, Torr concluded: “He seemed very feminine in the moment, and yet he exuded a very masculine sense of precision and control, so he was very difficult to ‘read’” (p. 77). Torr was pleased with this result, as it led spectators to question their sexual assumptions and recognize the performance underlying gender.

Torr incorporated male drag in her stage performances of androgyny; however, it was not until she began embodying a male role in real spaces that it becomes apparent how all-encompassing performances of gender are. The word “performance” carries with it connotations of stage and artifice, but in bringing her performance to real spaces Torr demonstrates that everyone performs on a daily basis. Her first experience in performing masculinity offstage came at a bar when she had no time to change costumes after a photo shoot in male drag. She embodied the male persona so fully that a woman approached her to flirt, thinking she was a man. This led Torr to develop “Drag King workshops,” where women were not only dressed as men, but encouraged to perform masculinity in real spaces rather than onstage. The purpose of these workshops was to raise questions:

“What do we mean by masculine and feminine behavior, and how easy or difficult is it to adopt a set of gender behaviors different from those in which you usually engage? How would such a process affect your own ideas of yourself, the person you think yourself to be?” (p. 97).

Race as a performance. Cucchiari (1981) likened race to gender since both are assigned at birth according to certain phenotypic markers. The question again lies in whether these physical differences are enough to set one group of people apart from another. For Cucchiari, race is also a cultural construction that assigns meaning to certain characteristics: “The construction of racial categories entails: emphasizing certain physical differences between populations, simultaneously underplaying the similarities; and endowing the distinctive features of the racial types with certain meanings” (p. 53).

The cultural construction of race is further supported by the fact that racial categories can change over time, as was the case with the initially discriminated Jewish population in America.
Rottenberg (2008) considered that Jewish immigrants were able to overcome discrimination by performing Americanness. Through performance, “Jewish” stopped being a racial category and evolved into an ethnic category that carried no social stigma. She draws from literature depicting early Jewish immigrants to describe their performance, starting with *The Rise of David Levinsky*. The title character, David, emulates American masculinity, first by discarding traditional Jewish garb and later by imitating behaviors he sees in American men. Rottenberg explains: “Dressing is not enough … ; one must also act the part – through bodily gestures, aspirations, tastes, and recognizable discourse” (p. 22).

Rottenberg also focuses on African-American literature that depicts accounts of “passing,” meaning African-American individuals who were able to integrate into white society. In the novel *Passing*, the construction of “whiteness” is examined through the stories of three black women who pass as white. Rottenberg noted that African Americans with physical characteristics that enabled passing took this route since American society inculcated the desire to be white into them. In *Passing*, the main character Irene, a black woman who passes, is depicted as craving “a civilized and cultured life” (p. 46) since Irene considered this to be a characteristic of whiteness; she suppressed strong reactions and emotions since she perceived these to be characteristics of blackness. Identification with blackness is coded as undesirable and black subjects are encouraged to perform “white” characteristics. Whiteness is positioned as the ultimate ideal in American society, with positive characteristics often associated with it. Individuals are taught to desire to embody the ideal of whiteness, but for those who do not match the physical profile of whiteness actual identification is impossible.

**Tensions in Performance.** Using the term “performance” to describe the ways individuals act must not be confused with entire freedom in choices of behavior. As Cucchiari (1981) noted, once the gender revolution took place “male” and “female” behavior became a way to attract mates, therefore privileging certain performances over others. In racial terms, Rottenberg (2008) pointed to the desirability of performances of whiteness over other racial performances.

Giddens’ (1991) structuration theory illustrates the way choice and restrictive norms interact to generate performance. Giddens did not believe that life could be viewed as either the sum of individual acts or the product of vast social forces, but rather a combination of both. This view does not define actions as merely the product of social norms and gives individuals room for choice. However, Giddens does acknowledge the powerful effect of norms on behavior, and
concedes that individuals learn to reproduce expected behaviors as a way to feel secure in their daily interactions. The process of learning acceptable behavior begins in infancy: “As developed through the loving attentions of early caretakers, basic trust links self-identity in a fateful way to the appraisals of others” (p. 38).

Butler (as cited in Gauntlett, 2008) herself corrected misconceptions that she believed gender was of no consequence since it could be performed in any way. She emphasized that performances are not chosen randomly, and that bodies are materialized and animated by norms. In other words, individuals are not free to do as they please with their bodies since norms restrict choices. Torr’s (Torr & Bottoms, 2010) performances of masculinity in real spaces do not come without risk. Butler (1990) argued that gender is a behavior, not an identity, yet she recognized that the heterosexual matrix imposes certain prohibitions, such as the homosexual taboo. Performances that circumvent genders norms are labeled deviant and tend to be silenced. Rottenberg (2008), who was influenced by Butler in her understanding of performativity, agreed that “laws or norms necessarily precede the emergence of the subject” (p. 19). This means that performance is not done in a vacuum; it takes place in a pre-existing space with pre-existing expectations. Subjects’ choices are constrained by norms, impeding them from trying on performances that would be considered deviant. However, like Giddens, she still notes that performance cannot be fully determined by norms.

Towson, Zanna, and MacDonald (1989) echoed the idea that behavior is constrained by expectations by referring to gender stereotypes as self-fulfilling prophecies. The researchers evaluated the results of experiments conducted to determine whether prior knowledge of preferred gendered behavior would affect the way women would behave in the situation, and whether men responded more favorably to women who exhibited their ideals of feminine behavior. Results indicated that women modified their behavior when meeting a potential date and a potential employer when their preferred gendered behavior was known beforehand. Towson, Zanna, and MacDonald conclude: “Consciously or unconsciously, in social or business situations, we fulfill the sex-role stereotypes of the important others with whom we interact, those with the power to punish or reward us on the basis of our behavior” (p. 105).

**Socialization.** While both gender and race can be viewed as performances, individuals cannot enact any performance they please without facing consequences. Individuals are
somehow socialized into recognizing and reproducing acceptable performances. This leads to the question: how are these performances learned?

Giddens (1991) provides us with a useful explanation of the reason why children learn to behave in ways that are condoned by social norms: “ontological security,” (p. 36) or a need to feel that the world makes sense. According to Giddens, humans feel the need to construct a shared framework of reality in order to avoid slipping into the unknowable, or chaos. This shared framework of reality is evident in the predictability of daily social interactions. As noted earlier, infants learn to respect the shared framework through their interactions with their caretakers.

Children’s behavior is not only influenced by the expectations of their caretakers; children are also influenced by their own expectations of their futures. This process is explained by script theory, explained by Steiner (1974): “People make conscious life plans in childhood or early adolescence which influence and make predictable the rest of their lives” (p. 28). Steiner argued that young people choose a role model to emulate, and behave in ways consistent with these role models. This means that even as children individuals perform certain behaviors and avoid others based on what they perceive as desirable models.

**Children’s Books.** Where do children obtain their role models? While they may strive to emulate real people who surround them, it is also possible that these role models come from media, including children’s literature. Allen (1999) recognized a “bid for independence and individuality” (p. 3) that begins as early as age two, when children seek influence from their peers and mass media rather than from their parents. At this age, before learning to read children are introduced to literature through illustrated children’s books.

Allen contends that at this age, whether the protagonist is a boy or a girl may be largely irrelevant to the child’s identification with the character; however, this does not mean she condones biased messages in picture books. On the one hand, Allen does not condemn Maurice Sendak, author of *Where the Wild Things Are,* for making the lone human character in the book a boy, Max, since he does include female protagonists in other books when the story calls for it. Furthermore, she does not think Max behaves in any way that would be impossible for young girls to emulate. On the other hand, she disapproves of the idea that books for young children must be made to appeal to boys especially, since boys are not as interested in reading as girls. These are the books Allen finds biased, since they do not offer anything to girls. She cited *Animal Dreaming: An Aboriginal Dreamtime Story* as an example of a picture book that
deliberately ignores girls. The story details an Australian Aborigine creation story, yet it ignores women’s role in aboriginal mythology.

For Evans (1998), biased messages in picture books are still very much a problem, with books that deviate from gender stereotypes being the exception rather than the rule. Evans conducted an experiment to determine whether children pick up on these messages and how these messages shape their expectations of behavior for male and female characters. The children were told they would listen to a story with three characters: a prince, a princess, and a dragon. Before hearing the story, the children were asked to draw a picture of either the character that defeated the dragon, the character that was saved, or of the final scene in the book along with a short description of the character or scene. Children of both genders all drew pictures conforming to the usual picture book formula: the prince defeated the dragon, the princess was saved, and the prince and princess married at the end of the story.

After the children drew their pictures, they listened to the story *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch. The story offers an alternative to stereotyped portrayals of males, females, and endings in picture books. The princess Elizabeth is set to marry the Prince Ronald until a dragon destroys her castle and kidnaps Ronald. The dragon burns all of her clothes, so she resorts to wearing a paper bag and sets out to rescue Ronald. She does not resort to violence to kill the dragon, but rather uses clever maneuvers to tire him. When the dragon is exhausted, she rescues Ronald, who promptly makes fun of her paper bag attire. Elizabeth tells him off and cancels their wedding. After listening to the story, the children reported they were surprised that the princess had saved the prince, and that they had gone their separate ways at the end of the story.

*The Paper Bag Princess* breaks stereotypes, but clearly this is not the case with most other books for children, as the children seemed certain that the story would unfold in the stereotypical manner. Elizabeth’s performance does not meet their expectations of the way a princess behaves. Potential role models in picture books offer a very limited range of performances for young girls to emulate; how do female protagonists evolve as girls grow and move away from picture books?

**The Female Protagonist.** Fairy tale princesses as well as heroines in classic novels have come under fire over the past couple of decades as poor role models for young girls (Knoepflmacher, 1999; O’Keefe, 2000; Trites, 1997). Knoepflmacher (1999) flinched at the epilogue in Perrault’s *Sleeping Beauty*, which doubted that any woman would be able to remain
husbandless for years without worrying as Sleeping Beauty had. The message is clear: women are unable to lead full, happy lives without a man by their side. Despite the outdated message, Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) found that Sleeping Beauty is among the five most frequently reproduced fairy tales along with Cinderella, Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, and Little Red Riding Hood.

Trites (1997) recalled rejecting the Bobbsey Twins series as a child because the female siblings always seemed to defer to their brothers, even though they were older. O’Keefe (2000) realized that the heroine of her favorite childhood book, The Birds’ Christmas Carol, idealized weakness in girls. Carol, the main character in the book, was afflicted with an illness that confined her to bed. Her stillness was coupled with a great generosity: at age 11, she asked her parents to forgo Christmas presents and instead hold a Christmas dinner for a poor family that lived nearby. That same night, Carol died, imparting the message that a virtuous girl is synonymous to a weak girl. O’Keefe dubbed the phenomenon of sanctifying paralysis in girls as the “horizontal heroine;” these heroines taught girls that powerlessness was the most comfortable and natural state for women.

However, when reprimanding authors for their female characters in classic books for children, the time period when the books were written must also be kept in mind. After all, 21st century values are unlikely to appear in books written over a century ago. Allen (1999) pointed out a single requirement for a female character to be considered a good role model regardless of when the book was written: she remains true to her identity throughout the story. Whether her identity is built on 19th or 21st century values, a girl who sacrifices her true self to please others is a bad role model, and one who sticks to her principles is a good role model.

Two characters in classic novels for young girls have spawned debate over their suitability as role models: Anne of Anne of Green Gables and Jo March of Little Women (Trites, 1997; O’Keefe, 2000; Poe, 1997). Critics disagree on whether these girls, who were described as possessing strong personalities unlike their peers, remained true to their identities by the end of their stories.

Trites (1997) characterizes the protagonist in a “feminist children’s novel” (p. 6) as a girl aware of her own agency, meaning she recognizes her ability to direct her own life. She states: “Unlike her literary antecedents in such novels as Little Women or Anne of Green Gables (1908), the feminist protagonist need not squelch her individuality in order to
fit into society. Instead, her agency, her individuality, her choice, and her nonconformity are affirmed and even celebrated” (p. 6).

According to Trites (1997) Jo stifles her own development as an artist and a person when she marries because she then stops viewing herself primarily as a writer; her role of wife supersedes her personal ambitions. Furthermore, Trites places Anne and Jo in the same category of adult women who were indoctrinated by childhood games and relationships to grow into strictly maternal roles. Their characters may have started out promising, but by the end of the novel they were trapped in the pattern of sacrificing self for a man.

O’Keefe (2000) also detected themes of sacrificing self in the characters of Jo March and Anne. She scoffed at Elizabeth Janeway’s positive description of Jo’s evolution as a character. O’Keefe doesn’t believe, as Janeway does, that Jo “maintains her individual independence” and “gives up no part of her autonomy as payment for being born a woman” (p. 77). Instead, O’Keefe argues that Jo at the end of the novel has ended up setting her writing career aside for a man. O’Keefe includes Anne of Green Gables in her list of “books in which a strong heroine eventually sold out” (p. 78). O’Keefe points out that at the end of the novel, Anne walks away from a university scholarship to care for a sick relative, though others could have taken the responsibility, and by the end of the series Anne has given up every notion of pursuing a writing career because her six children occupy all of her time.

Only Poe (1997) placed a different spin on Anne’s story. Poe argues that Anne shows development from childhood fantasies into the realities of adult life. Poe insists that this is a necessary evolution rather than a compromise of identity. Poe also disregarded Anne’s writing as a possible career since Anne herself described her stories as “plotless fancies.” Instead, Poe viewed this as the author’s commentary on children’s literature, since Anne also wrote “things for children,” implying that children’s literature at the time was nothing but “plotless fancies.” Hence Anne never intended to pursue writing as a career. Poe finds positive messages in the novel “about making the most of what life can offer you as a woman, and as a part of society” (p. 32).

Anne and Jo stray from their identities out of duty and love, two common callings for young women in the 19th century. Nowadays, a young girl is likely to sacrifice herself in order to achieve a current ideal: beauty.
**Beauty.** As Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) noted, *Sleeping Beauty* is one of the five most reproduced fairy tales, along with *Cinderella, Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood,* and *Hansel and Gretel.* They also found that the common thread between these five tales is references to female beauty. The authors said that fairy tales:

“Convey messages about the importance of feminine beauty not only by making ‘beauties’ prominent in stories but also in demonstrating how beauty gets its rewards. So ingrained is the image of women's beauty in fairy tales that it is difficult to imagine any that do not highlight and glorify it. Recent Disney films and even contemporary feminist retellings of popular fairy tales often involve women who differ from their earlier counterparts in ingenuity, activity, and independence but not physical attractiveness” (p. 722).

Beauty remains central to children’s stories even when authors are mindful of removing other gender stereotypes. However, beauty ideals are also harmful to women (Jeffreys, 2005). Jeffreys considers beauty practices as a way to signal women’s politically subordinate position, as women are willing to engage in these practices in order to appeal to the politically empowered (men). Furthermore, Jeffreys likened common beauty rituals Western women practice, such as make up, high heels, and plastic surgery, to the harmful cultural practices the UN is trying to eradicate abroad since these rituals hinder women’s well-being in varying degrees. Likewise, Wolf (1991) classified beauty as a harmful construction since women made strides in the other aspects of their liberation but they remained enslaved by the notion that beauty is an objective quality that women must want to embody.

Women have little say in what constitutes beauty, a phenomenon Jeffreys calls culture’s “harmful grip” and Wolf the “Iron Maiden.” Women are trapped in a system they did not build; they reject their own physical characteristics if they do not match the beauty ideal and they yearn for others. Among African Americans, hair has become a contentious trait (Simon, 2000; Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Rooks; 1996; Banks, 2000).

Hooks (1992) proposed that loving blackness is an act of political resistance. She argued that whiteness carries with it certain privileges, and as such is deemed as a desirable trait while blackness is not, echoing Rottenberg’s analysis of novels about passing. Purposefully going against the socially sanctioned love of whiteness and embracing black traits can therefore be considered an act of resistance. Following hooks' argument, hair can be controversial because it
can be used to either conform to ideals of whiteness or as a tool of resistance when it projects blackness. Patton (2006) echoed this position in her assertion that White European standards of beauty are reified in the United States, a phenomenon she considered harmful to all women whose beauty deviated from the ideal.

Banks (2000) conducted a survey among African American women ranging from teenagers to elderly women to gauge their attitudes towards hair and hair alteration. She divided opinions on hair alteration into three groups: those who viewed hair alteration as self-hatred, those who did not, and those who were hesitant to judge either way. Interestingly, women who viewed hair alteration as self-hatred and those who did not presented similar reasoning behind their viewpoints. Women who agreed with the self-hatred perspective thought African American women used hair alteration as a means to enter certain circles where their natural hair would be viewed as inferior, and therefore internalized the (white) oppressor’s mentality. Women who did not view hair alteration as self-hatred viewed it instead as a necessity to succeed; they acknowledge that black women learn to value altered hair over natural hair. Hair alteration is further complicated by the position the beauty salon occupies in African American women’s lives. Rooks (1996) recalled enjoying her trips to the beauty salon as a teenager because she enjoyed listening to the older women talk. Jacobs-Huey (2006) described the beauty salon as a socializing agent that contributed to girls’ passage into womanhood.

Black hair is a complicated issue. Rooks (1996) noted that African American hair cannot be discussed alongside other ethnic groups as if the issues surrounding it are identical to those surrounding other types of hair. While the adjectives “good” and “bad” may sound innocuous, they are loaded with connotation when applied to black hair in ways that they are not when applied to other ethnic groups. Lester (2000) decried the terms “good hair” and “bad hair” as expressions of intragroup racism. Comedian Chris Rock (2009) was inspired to produce a documentary surrounding the issue of ethnic hair after his daughter asked him why she did not have “good” hair, leading him to realize that even African-American children are aware that certain types of hair are valued over others.

While African American women face unique beauty struggles dealing with hair, white women are more likely to struggle with their weight. According to Patton (2006), European American women are more likely to suffer from bulimia and anorexia since, unlike their African American counterparts, they tend to hold the belief that men prefer thinner women. Additionally,
70 percent of African American women reported feeling happy about their bodies while only 10 percent of European American women reported the same. Frisby (2004) also cited research showing that African American women are less concerned with being thin than Caucasian women in her study of the effects of media images of white women on African American women. Her experiment found that African American women do not tend to engage in social comparison with Caucasian models in advertisements, nor do these advertisements have a significant effect on their self-esteem. However, women in the sample who reported low self-esteem were negatively affected by viewing advertisements featuring African American models. Frisby’s study confirms that African American and Caucasian women adhere to different standards of beauty.

Younger (2003) noted the relationship young adult literature creates between thinness and positive traits, as well as the linking of fatness with negative characteristics. She found that books that treated female sexuality as a positive force also held messages that contributed to a negative body image and an obsession with weight. Younger also observed that in books aimed at young adults contain descriptions of female bodies, while male bodies are rarely discussed, a phenomenon that somewhat echoes the trend of reproducing fairy tales with frequent mentions of female beauty observed by Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003).

Adult women of all races strive to fit into beauty ideals, though these ideals may vary by race as demonstrated in the cases of hair and weight. Therefore, it may be said that beauty practices are part of women’s performances of femininity. These performances partly stem from media representations of womanhood viewed during childhood, including picture books aimed at young children. This study will focus on performances of gender, race, and beauty found in illustrated children’s books targeted at elementary school aged children, mainly girls, guided by Butler’s understanding of performativity and previous research on children’s literature and beauty. The analysis will focus on the messages of gender, race, and beauty found in the text and illustrations of these books, and on comparisons of the messages on ethnic hair and the messages about body image. Furthermore, the study will compare the performances advocated by these picture books and the messages issued to parents in parenting books that deal with appearance since parents exert great influence in shaping their children’s self-perception and behavior.
Methodology

Two chapters in my thesis will focus on a qualitative analysis of children’s literature, and a third chapter will focus on a qualitative analysis of parenting books related to body image issues.

A sample of ten illustrated children’s books chosen due to their subject matter and target audience will be analyzed: five books dealing with ethnic hair, and five books dealing with body image. All ten books are directed at elementary school age children, and all ten are illustrated. All books, save one, have been published in the last fifteen years.

The children’s books dealing with ethnic hair are: Hair Dance (Johnson & Johnson, 2007), Nappy Hair (Herron & Cepeda, 1997), Cornrows (Yarborough & Byard, 1979), Happy to be Nappy (hooks, 1999), and I Love My Hair (Tarpley & Lewis, 2001); those geared at body image are: Maggie Goes on a Diet (Kramer & Kuwayama, 2011), My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions and Eating (Schechter & Chin, 2009), Shapesville (Mills, Osborn, & Neitz, 2003), Eddie Shapes Up (Koch, Koch Thaler, & Hoefer, 2011), and Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat? (Zimmerman & Inglesby, 2009).

In my analysis of children’s books, I will focus on the messages of gender and race that underlie these books’ messages of beauty. These books purport to send liberating messages of beauty, and I will evaluate if they in fact do. Moreover, I’ll evaluate whether the accompanying messages of gender and race are liberating. I define liberating messages as those that do not constrain children to act within certain limited norms.

I will focus on both text and illustrations because text and illustrations do not always tell the same story. This idea is further developed by Nodelman (1991) who argued that there is an “essential doubleness” (p. 1) in picture books since the story is told both by words and illustrations. According to Nodelman, it is impossible to focus our attention on both the words and the pictures at the same time, so we must divide our attention between the two. Furthermore, we understand words and pictures differently: our understanding of words is determined by our knowledge of the set conventions of grammar while our understanding of pictures depends on our agreement on the meanings of different images as well as shapes and colors. This doubleness then results in three different narratives: the story as told by the words, the story as told by the pictures, and the story as told by the combination of words and pictures. Additionally, according to Cianciolo (1970), a picture book illustration is meant to go beyond the text. This means that
illuminations are not meant to be just decorations or visual representations of the text; they are supposed to deepen our understanding of the story.

Based on this understanding that text, illustrations, and their combination may tell different stories, I will consider all three of these questions in my analysis:

- What messages are present in the book’s text regarding beauty, gender, and race?
- What messages are present in the book’s illustrations regarding beauty, gender, and race?
- What new meanings emerge when text and illustrations are combined?

I will also compare the messages of beauty, gender, and race put forth in the picture books dealing with ethnic hair and those dealing with body image:

- How are the messages presented in each set of books similar?
- How are they different?

The parenting books dealing with body image I will analyze are: *You’d Be So Pretty If... Teaching our daughters to love their bodies – even when we don’t love our own* (Chadwick, 2009), *101 Ways to Help Your Daughter Love Her Body* (Richardson & Rehr, 2001), ‘You have to have to say I’m pretty, you’re my mother: ’ How to Help Your Daughter Learn to Love Her Body and Herself (Pierson & Cohen, 2003), and *Good Girls Don’t Get Fat: How Weight Obsession Is Messing Up Our Girls and How We Can Help Them Thrive Despite It* (Silverman & Santorelli, 2010).

I chose to incorporate these books because parents also serve as role models for their children’s beliefs and behaviors related to beauty, race, and gender. I will evaluate the advice parents receive from these books regarding their children’s body image issues, and whether this advice is infused with messages of gender and race:

- How are parents advised to deal with body image issues in their children?
- Is this advice infused with messages of gender and race?

Additionally, I will compare the advice parents receive from these books to the messages of beauty, race, and gender children receive from the books dealing with ethnic hair and body image:

- Does this advice differ from the messages the children’s books contain?

My analysis will take place over the following chapters:
• **Chapter II: Ethnic Hair.** This chapter will analyze the five children’s books dealing with ethnic hair. I will determine which messages of beauty, gender, and race are present in these books’ text, illustrations, and their combination.

• **Chapter III: Body Image.** This chapter will analyze the five picture books dealing with body image. I will determine which messages of beauty, gender, and race are present in these books’ text, illustrations, and their combination.

• **Chapter IV: Parents’ Roles.** I will evaluate the messages of beauty that parenting books regarding body image suggest parents instill in their children, as well as any messages of gender and race that underlie beauty messages.

• **Chapter V: Conclusion.** This chapter will present my conclusions on the messages of beauty, gender, and race contained in the children’s books, as well as on my comparisons between both categories. I will also present my conclusions on the advice parents receive regarding their children’s body image issues and how this compares with the messages presented in the children’s books. Finally, I will present recommendations for future children’s books, future parenting books, and future academic studies.
CHAPTER II: ETHNIC HAIR

My hair is possibly the feature I’ve suffered over the most. I cannot remember a time in my childhood when my hair was allowed to curl freely. Instead, my mother dried it straight every time I washed it. She herself visited the beauty salon once or twice a week to straighten her own hair; she says her hair is also naturally curly, but I’ve never seen it that way. Of course, as a child I hated sitting still for up to an hour to have my hair straightened, but my mother insisted. She also insisted that once I grew older I would be the one insisting to have my hair straightened, and for the beginning of my teen years that was true. No one else I knew wore their hair curly, not at school, not for a night out, not even for running errands. Panamanian women live in high heels and sleek hair.

I’m not sure what exactly prompted me to put a stop to the straightening. I like to think I realized I could be more beautiful naturally; maybe I just didn’t feel like taking the trouble of straightening my hair myself. I was sixteen when I stopped straightening my hair on a regular basis, and by then my hair had suffered a good thirteen or fourteen years of heat from the blow dryer. I had even gotten a relaxer a few times as a teenager. My hair was, in a word, a mess. It had dried out and would not even curl anymore. It couldn’t really be called curly hair anymore; it was damaged hair. But I knew (or maybe just hoped) that if I was patient, the results would be worth it. The damaged hair would eventually be cut out as the new, healthy hair grew in. While my hair was in this transitional stage, I was under a lot of peer pressure to revert to my old straightening ways, even from my parents. But I stood my ground and six years later I feel like I should be in a shampoo commercial.

In Panama, I always felt somewhat alone in my quest for healthy curly hair. Women with naturally straight hair were envied and women with any other hair texture altered their hair. I felt that no one in the world empathized with my rejection of hair straightening and my desire to cultivate my natural curls. But then as a college student, when I watched an episode of The Tyra Show that featured African American mothers that chemically altered their young daughters’ hair I felt an incredible connection with the girls. They cried because the chemicals burned their scalps, but their mothers insisted because they wanted their daughters to be “beautiful.” And there sat Tyra, pounds of weave on her head, seemingly appalled that these mothers would subject their children to these treatments in the name of beauty.
As a communication undergraduate, I just wanted to scream at Tyra “They straighten it because of you! They see your straight hair and they think that’s the only way to be beautiful!” I feel that one of the reasons it took me so long to embrace my natural hair was because I saw no messages that affirmed its beauty. When the media and one’s own parents send the message that natural hair is unacceptable, how can a child, a pre-teen or even a teenager, possibly muster the confidence to stand up for her natural beauty? This question has been brewing inside me for years, and it’s the seed of my entire thesis. I chose to focus on children’s books because girls read them at a time when they are molding their impressions of what beauty means.

In this chapter, I will analyze five children’s books dealing with ethnic hair: *Hair Dance* (Johnson & Johnson, 2007), *Nappy Hair* (Herron & Cepeda, 1997), *Cornrows* (Yarborough & Byard, 1979), *Happy to be Nappy* (hooks, 1999), and *I Love My Hair* (Tarpaley & Lewis, 2001). These five books represent the body of illustrated children’s literature that addresses ethnic hair. I will determine which messages of beauty, race, and gender are present in these books’ text and illustrations. I will begin with a description of the five books, and then I will carry out my analysis through three sections: an analysis of the books’ written texts, an analysis of the books’ illustrations, and then an analysis of how the illustrations reinforce and supplement the text.

**The Books**

The five books I chose form a very specific genre: illustrated children’s books about ethnic hair. With the exception of *Cornrows*, all of these books were published within the past ten years.

In *I Love My Hair!*, the protagonist Keyana is having her hair combed by her mother. Though her mother is gentle, the comb still hurts Keyana and she cries for her mother to stop. Her mother stops and begins to tell Keyana why she is lucky to have “this head of hair” (p. 8): she is able to style it many different ways. The book then lists the different styles Keyana can try, ending with her favorite: two ponytails that make her feel she can fly.

*Nappy Hair* takes place at a family gathering, where Uncle Mordecai begins to tease his young niece Brenda about her nappy hair. The narrative is written in a call-and-response style, with Uncle Mordecai delivering one line and an anonymous relative in the crowd chiming in with a brief response. Initially, the relatives condone Uncle Mordecai’s light-hearted teasing, but eventually they begin to chastise him for picking on Brenda too much. At this point, Uncle Mordecai turns his teasing into praise.
Cornrows is about a brother and a sister who come home to find their grandmother braiding their mother’s hair into cornrows. The children want their hair braided as well, and as their mother and grandmother create the hairstyle they share their history with the children, and how hair is woven into that history.

Happy to be Nappy features watercolor illustrations of various hairstyles that can be achieved with nappy hair. The illustrations are slightly abstract and the text appears to be handwritten, giving the book a whimsical and carefree look.

Hair Dance! is a collection of photographs featuring girls sporting different hairstyles that can be achieved with nappy hair. The text is written in short fragments, giving the sense that the text is a poem or a song.

The Written Text

The Sub-genres. These books can be classified in two categories based on their text: Nappy Hair, I Love My Hair!, and Cornrows are written in prose while Hair Dance and Happy to be Nappy are written in a more poetic format. The first three books are more plot-driven than the former two. The first three focus on specific characters and chronicle a sort of hair journey, while the former two have no named characters or plot. They simply rhapsodize about hair. Thus, two separate genres emerge in children’s literature about ethnic hair: the hair journey and hair poetry.

The hair journey is centered on a specific child: Brenda in Nappy Hair, Keyana in I Love My Hair!, and Sister in Cornrows. At the beginning of the book, some sort of catalyst leads to deep reflection about the child’s hair. In Nappy Hair, the catalyst is Uncle Mordecai’s comment on Brenda’s hair at a family reunion; in I Love My Hair!, it’s Keyana’s mother brushing her hair; in Cornrows, it’s Sister seeing her grandmother give her mother cornrows. After this initial spark of interest, the child learns about the significance of her hair through the guidance of an adult. The bulk of the journey transpires in this section.

Some of the lessons imparted in the middle of the hair journey vary from story to story, but one lesson is present in every journey: heritage. The adult teaches the child that part of what makes their hair so special is its reflection of their heritage. Uncle Mordecai takes heritage further back to Africa in Nappy Hair, saying that while families were sold “this nap come riding express, coming on across the ocean from Africa, wouldn’t stop for nothing” (p. 22) and would not be tamed in America. The reference is brief in I Love My Hair!: Keyana remembers being
teased at school for wearing her Afro hairstyle, and her teacher comforts her by saying that when she was growing up “folks counted their hair as a blessing” because their Afros were a way “to let the world know that they were proud of who they were and where they came from” (p. 20). In *Cornrows*, the entire lesson of the hair journey is based on heritage. Sister’s mother and grandmother describe braided hair as a symbol of the “spirit” (p. 10) that permeated Africa. They described how Africans were taken as slaves but kept the spirit alive through their cornrowed hair. The mother and grandmother pushed heritage into the present by suggesting the children name their braids after civil rights activists and other African American personalities.

At the end of the journey, the beauty of the child’s hair is somehow affirmed. Brenda received a collective compliment from Uncle Mordecai and the rest of the family in *Nappy Hair*. Keyana finds happiness in her favorite two ponytails hairstyle that makes her feel that she can fly. For Sister in *Cornrows*, it’s through her father’s compliment.

The books that fall in the hair poetry category speak about children in general, not about one specific child’s experience with hair. Both praise the versatility of ethnic hair, and find freedom in natural hair. For these authors, one of the greatest values of natural hair is allowing children to play freely without worrying about the state of their hair. *Hair Dance!* refers to braids that “swing with me like water, moving free” (p. 9) and braids that “fly high into the sky” (p. 26). Both images convey a sense of fluidity and freedom, of hair that moves with the girl instead of hair that controls what the girl does. The same feeling is present in *Happy to be Nappy*, saying natural hair can be “just let go so wind can carry it all over the place” (p. 9-10) and that braids “let girls go running free” (p. 22).

These books also make a strong connection between natural hair and the child’s happiness. *Hair Dance!* sees “faces full of happy, heart happy, hair happy” (p. 22-23) and *Happy to be Nappy* views it as “hair to take the gloom away” (p. 16), and sees children “Happy with hair all short and strong. Happy with locks that twist and curl” (p. 27-28). The book’s title is also repeated throughout the book, “Happy to be nappy!” (p. 25-26) and “Happy to be nappy hair!” (p. 29).

The text of the books in the hair journey category focuses on messages of the connection between beauty and heritage, while the books in the hair poetry category relay mainly messages that connect beauty to happiness and freedom. The hair journey books associate ethnic hair with the past and pride in one’s roots. Each book explains to children what their hair stands for, and
the importance of preserving their ethnic hair mainly stems from the past it symbolizes. In *Nappy Hair* and *Cornrows* the past stretches as far back as the children’s African roots, and ethnic hair represents strength since the locks survived the difficulties of slavery. *Cornrows* and *I Love My Hair!* also reference the civil rights movement, and in this case ethnic hair symbolizes the pride associated with the hairstyles during that time period.

The books in the hair poetry category do not reference the past. Instead, they focus on the happiness and freedom of ethnic hair. They send the message that hair’s beauty lies in the enjoyment the girls derive from their hair, and there is more value in hair that accommodates to the girls’ whims than in hair that requires girls to be conscious of what they do for the sake of their hair. The underlying message is that beauty should be something that gives us happiness, not something that takes work. This message can also be related to gender, since it tells girls that they do not need to suffer or sacrifice the things that make them happy for the sake of conforming to beauty ideals. Instead, they should adapt beauty to fit around their lives. Furthermore, just as ethnic hair is versatile, their beauty is versatile. They are not limited to a single definition of beauty and happiness; instead, they can choose the beauty that fits their lives from a multitude of options.

The association of beauty to movement and freedom sends the message that beauty is active. Beauty does not expect young girls to sit still, but instead it allows young girls to be active. This message is a stark contrast to the “horizontal heroine” that O’Keefe (2000) observed in classic children’s literature, which convinced girls that to be virtuous meant to be passive. To the contrary, these books send the message that to be beautiful, which is the 21st century version of virtuous, is to be active.

**The language.** Of the five children’s books, *Nappy Hair* and *Happy to be Nappy* are the only books that contain the word nappy. The other three do not use any specific adjective to describe the hair’s texture. For example, in *I Love My Hair!* Keyana’s mother asks her “Do you know why you’re so lucky to have this head of hair, Keyana?” (p. 8). “This head of hair” is as specific as it gets in acknowledging that there is a differentiating trait to her hair.

“Nappy” is a charged word, and *Nappy Hair* caused outrage when a white elementary school teacher in New York City, Ruth Sherman, read the book to her third grade class shortly after the book was published (Kennedy Manzo, 1998). Sherman read the book to her class of mainly African American and Hispanic students, and the students enjoyed the book so much they
requested photocopies of the book. However, a parent who saw the photocopies was offended by the illustrations and the use of the word nappy and rallied other parents to run Sherman out of the school. Carolivia Herron held an assembly at a Brooklyn church, where the pastor expressed his reservations “about the use of the word ‘nappy’ in the sense that … it has always come to us with derogatory connotations” (p. 2). This sentiment is echoed by a handful of reviewers on Amazon (Amazon.com) and Google (Google.com) who found the book insulting, citing stereotypical portrayals of African Americans as the reason, though none outright attacked the use of the word nappy.

Herron and hooks use the word nappy in their books in an attempt to de-stigmatize the word. Indeed, the majority of reviewers felt that Nappy Hair had an uplifting message rather than an insulting message. However, the fact that three out of five children’s books regarding ethnic hair shy away from the word nappy indicates that it is still a hushed word. Silencing the word nappy in a book that celebrates ethnic hair sends a mixed message that the word is offensive while glorifying the hair that the word describes. Keyana’s mother could have asked “Do you know why you’re so lucky to have nappy hair, Keyana?” but instead she replaces “nappy” with “this head of hair.” “This head of hair” is not nearly as specific, but the word “nappy” is silenced due to the unrest that still seems to surround it. Paradoxically, the only way to dissipate the unrest that surrounds the word is to replace any negative connotation that it may carry with a positive connotation, and the only way to do this is to speak the word in a positive context. If society continues to view the word “nappy” as a negative term, the hair described as “nappy” will also be viewed as a negative hair type. To change the connotation of the word we must speak the word, since silencing the word is equivalent to allowing the negative connotation to remain, both related to the word and to the hair type.

The extensive use of metaphors to describe hair is present in both the hair journey and hair poetry books. In Nappy Hair, Uncle Mordecai likens combing Brenda’s hair to “scrunching through the New Mexico desert in brogans in the heat of summer” and “crunching through snow” (p. 7, 9). I Love My Hair! describes Keyana’s hair as “fine, soft yarn” (p. 10) and “thick as a forest, soft as cotton candy, and curly as a vine winding upward, reaching the sky and climbing toward outer space” (p. 22). The two ponytails of her favorite hairstyle “flap in the air like a pair of wings” (p. 23). He also says “one nap of her hair is the only perfect circle in nature” (p. 28). In Hair Dance!, hair swings “like water” (p. 9), looks “like a work of art” (p. 13), and an afro is a
“halo heavenly hair” (p. 15). *Happy to be Nappy* says nappy hair is “soft like cotton, flower petal billowy soft” (p. 3) and calls it “a halo” and “a crown” (p. 5).

These metaphors reflect the messages of female beauty that the authors want to relay to their audience of young girls. The metaphors for softness transmit fairly conventional messages of beauty since “soft” has a connotation of delicate and dainty, traits typically associated with feminine beauty. However, other metaphors expand on this traditional definition and give beauty a connotation of strength. Hair that is “thick as a forest” and behaves like a vine “reaching the sky and climbing towards outer space” is not hair that is delicate; it is hair that is strong. Similarly, hair like the deserts of New Mexico and like deep snow is tough hair. These metaphors send the message that strength is also a desirable characteristic for a girl. *Nappy Hair* goes beyond the metaphor and personifies nappy hair as an entity that survived through slavery and “danced on through all the wimp hair … stomped it, kicked it, snuck on around, and came on through” (p. 24). Nappy hair, and the people who wore it, did not survive simply because of beauty; they survived because they were tough. This communicates to girls that beyond striving to be aesthetically pleasing, they should concentrate on being strong and perseverant because these are the traits that will really be celebrated and valuable in the long run.

**The Illustrations**

The purpose of the illustrations in these books is to put an image to the hair the text describes. For the message that natural hair is beautiful and desirable to be effective, the text’s praise needs to be paired with hair that the books’ audience of young African American girls can relate to.

*I Love My Hair!* begins with illustrations of a mother combing her daughter’s hair and the girl scrunching her eyes in pain. It is an image that is probably familiar to African American girls since it is likely a part of their life.
The illustrations evolve into more imaginative images: the girl spinning her hair on a loom, her braided hair extending back into a cornfield, her hair fading into an image of Earth in space.
These images set the stage for her hair to be treated as something more significant than just tissue growing out of her head. Her hair as yarn suggests that hair is a malleable canvas that can be spun into all styles of artwork. When her hair grows out of her head and into a field, her hair in its natural state connects her to nature. Additionally, these images of hair as yarn and hair as a field connect the girl to the past and to her heritage. The image of her hair as a globe suggests that the importance of the way the girl views her hair and by extension her beauty should not be belittled. Hair cannot be disregarded because the way we feel about our hair and our beauty informs the way we feel about ourselves and relate to the world.

Later, her hair is depicted as a climbing vine and as a pair of wings. These unconventional ways to think about hair send the message that the girl’s hair is anything she makes it out to be.
By extension, her beauty is also anything she makes it out to be. The image of the girl’s hair merging into the vine again suggests that her hair connects her to nature. The vine is strong and thick and climbs upward, implying that her natural hair also lends her strength and the ability to overcome adversity. The final image of the book shows the girl flying, and this suggests that for the girl beauty is feeling free to do whatever she wants. The message is simple: hair and beauty should not be treated as a force that controls girls’ lives. Instead, we should place value in hair and beauty that fits into girls’ lives and does not interfere in the things they want to do.

Figure 2.5 Hair as a vine.

Figure 2.6 Hair as wings.
These last three images, of hair as a globe, as a vine climbing upwards, and as wings, also suggest a connection between hair and spirituality. The globe doubles as a halo around the girl’s head, suggesting there is an angelic quality to natural hair. The vine curls upward to the heavens, and the girl is shown looking upwards at something that cannot be seen by the reader. Pigtails that double as wings again carry an angelic connotation, and the image of the girl flying again takes us upward to the heavens. These images suggest that embracing ethnic hair helps lift girls up and bring them closer to both their heritage and their spirituality.

The images in Cornrows lend a mysterious quality to hair, also suggesting hair means more than covering for our scalps. Again, the illustrations begin with a mother and grandmother fixing their children’s hair, an image familiar to young girls. But after a few pages, the images literally show the mother and grandmother breathing life into the past. This past the the mother and grandmother recreate gradually leads to hair. In the past, people braided each other’s hair just as the mother and grandmother do in the present.
Through this chain of images, *Cornrows* establishes hair’s role as a connection to the past and heritage. Images of the past are followed by an illustration of mother, grandmother, grandson, and granddaughter huddled together with an open-mouthed spirit lingering above them.

This image suggests that the significance hair held in the past cannot be lost because it is being carried on through the generations. The illustrations send the message that beauty is in the meaning of the things we do, and cornrows are beautiful because they hold a whole history of meaning.
Hair Dance! is the only book that includes photographs instead of drawn illustrations, so the illustrations are more realistic than those in the other books. The photographs show girls with their hair styled in different ways. The book also repeats the image of a child having her hair styled by an adult, which again connects the illustrations to the readers’ experiences. The most striking photograph, which is also used for the cover, shows a girl’s profile with her eyes closed and her hair flying behind her like a lion’s mane. Though it is a still image, the picture captures movement. The hair is alive with movement behind the girl, but it does not bother her and she looks completely serene. To me, this image completely captures the message that hair and beauty should not control what girls can do. The girl’s hair has gone wild behind her but she does not need to fuss about it. She can let it be.

![Figure 2.10 Hair like a mane.](image)

Other photographs in the book communicate movement as well. A girl is shown on a swing with her head tilted backwards and her braids cascading down. Again, this image suggests that hair moves with the girl.
In another photograph, a girl is shown with her braids flying behind her. The picture does not show what causes the movement, again giving the impression that hair is alive and that it is meant to move.
In *Nappy Hair*, the hair overpowers the girl in one of the initial illustrations. The hair seems to weigh her down and take up more space than she does. The book also includes illustrations that suggest the hair should be tamed, with the girl trying to comb her hair and her relatives chasing her with combs. The image also shows images of an oversized brush and comb suspended in the air. They seem to have a life of their own, chasing Brenda along with the relatives. The comb and the brush seem to represent the constant reminder that the world wants to tame natural hair, a message that girls encounter whenever they come across a woman or an image of a woman with altered hair. The comb and the brush are a threat to women and girls who want to maintain their hair natural. These initial images send the message that natural hair is a burden that should be altered.

Figure 2.13 Overpowering hair.

Figure 2.14 Chasing with combs.
However, as the book goes on, the girl’s hair becomes more proportional to her size, seemingly lighter to carry. The final image stands in stark contrast with the gloomy girl weighed down by her hair. The girl is shown smiling at the reader, and while at the beginning she looked like a girl attached to an overpowering head of hair, she ends the story seeming in control of her hair. While the basic characteristics of the hair remain the same, the demeanor has changed entirely from the beginning to the end of the story.

Figure 2.15 Happy with her hair.

*Happy to be Nappy* is similar to *Hair Dance!* in that the illustrations show children sporting various hairstyles, but *Happy to be Nappy* is illustrated with watercolors so the hairstyles shown are somewhat more abstract.

Figure 2.16 Different hairstyles.
The illustrations communicate movement, showing children at play and hair that flows behind the child. Again, the message is that beauty should not be cumbersome. The children do not need to worry about their hair during their play.

![Image of children playing](image)

Figure 2.17 Children playing.

**Text and Illustration**

The illustrations in these books serve to reinforce and supplement the messages found in the written text. In the books in the hair journey subgenre, the main message that ethnic hair’s beauty lies in its rich heritage is reinforced by images of the past. Wearing natural hairstyles is likened to honoring the struggles and successes of the past, and living with the same fortitude required of the past bearers of the hair.

The heritage associated with ethnic hair is also communicated through images of mothers styling their children’s hair. The styling techniques are handed down through the generations; the girls will learn from their mothers and in the future they too will style their daughters’ hair. In the case of *Happy to be Nappy*, this message is communicated exclusively through the illustrations. While there is no mention of heritage in the book’s written text, the illustrations feature mothers styling their daughters’ hair.
Books in the hair poetry subgenre value the movement and freedom allowed by ethnic hair. In *Happy to be Nappy*, this message is reinforced by the overall look of the book, including the loops of the cursive writing that resemble the images of hair that coils and flows as children play.

In *Hair Dance!*, the striking image of the girl in profile with wild hair blowing behind her is juxtaposed to the text “It’s a wind song a hair song,” suggesting that the book’s title should be taken literally: hair is beautiful because it moves and dances. The book’s final image is of a girl jumping and her braids flying into the air with the text “HAIR DANCE!” next to it, again suggesting a literal hair dance.
In *Nappy Hair* and *Happy to be Nappy*, the illustrations also serve to supplement the text since they help understand the authors’ redefinition of nappy hair. The text indicates that the word nappy should not be vilified since it describes a valuable sort of hair, and the images give a picture of what exactly the authors mean by nappy hair. *Nappy Hair* concludes that one nap of Brenda’s hair “is the only perfect circle in nature,” (29) indicating that Brenda’s hair is special and that in its unaltered state it is just the way it was meant to be. As previously noted Brenda’s hair is not always shown in the same light. At the beginning of the story, Brenda is seen weighed down by her hair, but as Uncle Mordecai explains what makes Brenda’s hair so special we see Brenda’s demeanor change and at the end of the story she seems happy with her hair. According to Enekwechi and Moore (1999), the illustrations “fail to capture the dramatic build and shift of the story” (197), but I disagree. Enekwechi and Moore feel that it is Brenda’s hair that should change as the story goes on, and since her hair stays fairly the same they feel that the illustrations do not evolve with the text. It is true that Brenda’s hair remains the same; it is her attitude that changes. This corresponds with the redefining of nappy hair: nappy hair will still look the same, and it is the way we feel about it and how much we value it that needs to change.

The images in *Happy to be Nappy* portray nappy hair as a thick and flowing cascade when the hair is long and as small circles when the hair is short. The book redefines nappy hair not through realistic illustrations that show the hair’s beauty, but with abstract illustrations that show the feelings that should be associated with the hair. Nappy hair is shown to be whimsical and
carefree, letting girls play freely either because it does not obstruct their movement in the case of “short tight naps” (p. 21) or because it moves with the girl in the case of long, flowing hair.

Figure 2.21 Long hair.

Figure 2.22: Short hair.

Conclusion

The text and illustrations of the five children’s books dealing with ethnic hair convey similar messages. In the text, we find the connection of ethnic hair to heritage and to children’s happiness. The books explain the significance of ethnic hair by exploring its meaning in the past, and this reveals several reasons why ethnic hair should be preserved. The text also explains how children with natural hair can play freely, and a connection is established between natural hair
and a child’s happiness. The illustrations echo these themes, with images of the past and images of children moving and playing.

The text relies heavily on metaphor to describe ethnic hair and the reasons why it is special. These metaphors are at times illustrated, showing readers that there is more to hair than meets the eye. The metaphors connect hair to nature, the past, and strength. This message corroborates the significance the books attribute to ethnic hair; ethnic hair means more than its physical representation, its importance also lies in its journey from Africa and the struggles of the people who have worn their ethnic hair with pride.

Combining the text and illustrations adds to our understanding of the books in two ways. First, the messages of heritage and movement are strengthened by the combination. Pairing the text that speaks about heritage with illustrations of mothers styling their daughters’ hair communicates that heritage has not stopped. Mothers will pass it on to their daughters, who will someday pass it on to their daughters. Styling hair is a way to remember the past and ensure that its significance will never be lost to future generations. For messages of movement, *Happy to be Nappy* is a prime example of a book where the combination of text and illustrations provides an enhanced message. The references to happiness and play in the text are reinforced by the very shape of the text, since the flowing cursive writing mirrors the flow and coil of the hair in the illustrations.

Second, the combination of text and illustration attempt to redefine the word nappy in the books *Nappy Hair* and *Happy to be Nappy*. The praise for nappy hair is paired with illustrations that convey the image of nappy hair. This redefinition is more successful in *Nappy Hair*, where Brenda’s demeanor changes as her hair is built up, since the illustrations in *Happy to be Nappy* do not provide a realistic picture of nappy hair. While the watercolor illustrations are useful in depicting the movement and freedom of ethnic hair, any texture is lost due to the medium.

The books communicate that beauty is in the freedom that ethnic hair allows. Beauty should not constrain girls from being active and playing; on the other hand, beauty should mold itself to the girl’s activities. The books send the message that natural hair does not keep girls from doing what they want, that it is not obtrusive and that it is versatile. It is beautiful because when a girl wears natural hair she is in control of the situation, not the hair. This directly segues into messages of gender: girls should value their freedom to move and they should not allow beauty ideals to hinder them. Just as the ideal to be virtuous set limitations on 19th century
heroines, the ideal to be beautiful can set limitations on contemporary girls. The books suggest that girls should find beauty in traits that allow them freedom.

It's important to note that this message "to be free to do as you please" is directed not to African American *children* in general, but rather to African American *girls*. The books exclusively focus on the bond between African-American girls and their mothers, effectively erasing fathers and sons. The books assume a female reader sharing the story with her daughter, and this assumption communicates two messages to children: that hair is a women’s issue and that parenting is a woman’s responsibility. These messages do not benefit African-American children, since they invalidate the feelings of African-American boys and men who may struggle to accept their ethnic hair, and they create the expectation of absent fathers.

Messages of race were prominent in the books. To the authors, preserving ethnic hair is important since it serves to remember past struggles and the strength of those who overcame the struggles. Two of the books also attempt to reclaim the word nappy from a derogatory term to an adjective that can be used with pride. While messages of beauty and gender figured in the books, race seems to be the driving force in these books. The message that ethnic hair is beautiful for the heritage it represents is a statement of racial pride. Race is at the center of the text and illustrations because the purpose of the books is for girls to find beauty in the natural traits associated with their race.
CHAPTER III: BODY IMAGE

I may have escaped the Panamanian beauty myth that only straight hair can be beautiful, but I have to admit that I have been guilty of the pursuit of thinness. I like to think that I have always been thin, and I was happy when I did not gain weight after moving to the United States and being confronted with peanut butter and large servings. But I was too early in congratulating myself for maintaining my weight. My first semester of graduate school involved more writing papers and grading speeches than exercising and cooking at home, and the scale tipped in what I considered to be the wrong direction. I was determined to bring the weight gain to a halt, so I wrote gym time into my schedule for the next semester.

I felt great about my new healthier routine and I felt I was seeing results until I went dress shopping one day about three months into my exercise routine. I pulled a size 4 and a size 6 into the dressing room, and to my horror both sizes were too small for me. In my memory that had never happened to me. Disappointed, I asked the dressing room attendant to bring me a size 8, which zipped right up. I really liked the dress, but I could not believe that after three months of exercising I needed a size 8, a bigger size than I had ever needed before, and only one size away from double digits. As I stood in the dressing room brooding about my dress size, I realized how ridiculous I was being. I was letting a number on a label make me think that all of my workouts had been worthless when I knew that was not true. My muscles felt firmer, and the workouts that had felt like torture at the beginning of the semester had started getting easier. I knew I was getting stronger and healthier but I was letting a dress size tell me otherwise. Besides, whatever size it was, I looked great in the dress.

That day made me realize just how difficult it is to escape the messages of beauty we encounter in the media and that are reinforced by our peers. As a communication scholar I knew in my brain that we find a certain body type beautiful because it is what we see glorified all around us. But despite that knowledge, as a woman trying on dresses I had let myself feel defeated by a larger dress size. And if I felt that way armed with my knowledge of communication, it is no wonder that young girls do not feel good about their bodies sometimes, either.

In this chapter, I will analyze five children’s books dealing with body image: *Maggie Goes on a Diet* (Kramer & Kuwayama, 2011), *My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions and Eating* (Schechter & Chin, 2009), *Shapesville* (Mills, Osborn, & Neitz, 2003), **
Eddie Shapes Up (Koch, Koch Thaler, & Hoefer, 2011), and Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat? (Zimmerman & Inglesby, 2009). I will focus on the messages of beauty, gender, and race that these books communicate, both in their text and in their illustrations. I will begin with a brief summary of each book.

The Books

The five books I chose deal with body image issues in children. They are all directed at the children, and they are all written in the form of an illustrated story. All five books were written recently, within the past ten years.

Maggie Goes on a Diet is the story of a chubby teenager who decides to change her lifestyle to stop her classmates from teasing her and to become better at sports. She changes her eating habits and she starts exercising. As she loses weight, she gains friends and she becomes the star of the soccer team.

My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions and Eating deals with Jenna’s urges to eat whenever she is sad even if she is not hungry. With encouragement from her family and friends as well as a counselor, she is able to curb her emotional eating. The book is written in email format, with the narrative being emails between Jenna and her friends, family, and teachers.

Eddie Shapes Up is about a boy who dislikes recess because his classmates make fun of him when they play dodgeball since he is slow. He decides to stop eating unhealthy snacks and to start exercising with his friends. Eventually, he is able to move faster and he begins to enjoy recess and dodgeball.

Shapesville is about a world called Shapesville where various shapes live. Though they all look different, each of them has a special talent.

Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat? is about a girl who complains to her mother that she feels ugly and fat. The mother is worried and she discusses the problem with a friend. The mother then realizes that her daughter criticizes her body because it is a behavior she has seen in her mother.

The Text

The books can be separated in two categories based on their overall theme: Maggie Goes on a Diet, Eddie Shapes Up, and My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions and Eating encourage children to change their habits (and consequently their bodies in some
cases), and Shapesville and Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat? encourage children to appreciate the bodies they currently have.

**Changing habits.** The three books that advocate children changing their habits present the same motivation for the children: they are teased by other children. Maggie “could not understand why some kids could be so mean” (p.2) and she “was teased and made fun of just about every day at school” (p. 7). Eddie did not enjoy recess because when he played dodgeball with the other children they called him “fatso” and “slowpoke” (p. 18). Jenna was called “Miss Piggy and Jenna the Hut” (p. 8) by two of her classmates, but the true catalyst came when her own grandmother told her parents that she has “PACKED ON A LOT OF POUNDS” (p. 16). My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions and Eating is the only book in the category that acknowledges family’s effect on children’s body image.

For Maggie and Eddie, a desire to play sports also motivated them to change their habits. Maggie tried playing baseball and soccer but “she was not only clumsy, but also quite fat” and she knew “she was the worst on the team” (p. 2). Eddie decided to change his eating habits when he had a dream that he was a wonderful dodgeball player after he was too slow to enjoy a game of dodgeball at recess.

Each child’s path to changing their habits and their bodies differs significantly. Maggie’s decision to lose weight was very sudden: after suffering from her classmates’ teasing and performing poorly in sports, Maggie “promised herself she was going to reduce her stomach as well as her big behind” (p. 10), and that she would begin her new eating patterns the next morning. Though Maggie had previously shown signs of emotional eating, raiding her refrigerator after she was teased on the baseball field, she never faltered in her new eating pattern once she began. Her new diet also seems to be self-imposed, since in this book there are no adults at all, no one is guiding Maggie along in her new eating patterns and exercise plan. She never discusses how she is losing the weight with anyone, either parent or friend.

Before Eddie came to his decision of changing his habits, the book shows his mother recommending that he eat fruit or cereal instead of a bagel and packing carrot sticks and an apple in his lunchbox (which Eddie tosses). He also has a discussion with his friends after he leaves a dodgeball game because it is too difficult for him to move quickly. Eddie bemoans how slow he is, and tells his friends that if he were thin like them he could run faster. His friend Noah explains that “what’s important is being healthy and in good shape. And you’re definitely not in...
good shape” (p. 22). His friend Ben adds that Eddie is “heavy” and it may be “because of the way you eat” (p. 22). His friends also invite him to run in the park with them. After Eddie’s dream that brought on his decision to eat healthier foods and exercise, his mother expresses her approval of his better choice of breakfast and Eddie exercises with his friends. The book does show a support system for Eddie’s weight loss, but the book also shows Eddie’s new eating habits as self-imposed and he is never shown faltering, either.

The weight loss narrative presented in these two books may have an adverse effect on children who are determined to change their eating habits but find that it is difficult to always steer clear of unhealthy foods. Seeing these characters with seemingly unbreakable willpower once they come to their decision may be discouraging to children who do struggle with keeping away from unhealthy foods and occasionally give in to temptation. They may view themselves as too weak to achieve their goals when they compare themselves to these characters. Maggie’s entirely self-directed and Eddie’s mostly self-directed weight loss can also set a dangerous precedent. Children who are not guided by informed sources may make misinformed decisions, and the diet that they consider healthy may actually be deficient. While childhood obesity is a problem, children can also fall at the other end of the spectrum and suffer from anorexia or bulimia. Without guidance, a well-intentioned eating plan can spiral downward to near starvation.

Jenna is the only child in this category with a full support system around her as she struggles with emotional eating. Her cousin Sarah and her friend Chris give her an outlet to vent her frustrations when her classmates tease her and when she becomes discouraged due to her binges. They serve a role of providing emotional support rather than advice on how Jenna should shape her eating patterns. Jenna’s parents are aware of her emotional eating, and they take her to the doctor to discuss her eating. They also discuss ways that they can help her overcome the problem like cooking healthier foods together and not buying unhealthy snacks. At school, Jenna confides in her French teacher, who also encourages being open with her parents about the way she feels. Jenna also meets with her guidance counselor, and together they create an action plan for Jenna to handle her emotions in ways other than eating.

Jenna does falter and relapses into emotional eating after she has promised herself she would not do it anymore. After this happens, she confides in her friend Chris who suggests she speak to the guidance counselor about it. Her guidance counselor reminds her that “each day is a
new opportunity to make healthy choices about your eating’’ (p. 42), effectively setting Jenna back on the path to healthy eating. She also congratulates Jenna for admitting that she slipped up. The book emphasizes the importance of a support system and shows children that while they may make mistakes on their path to a healthier life, these setbacks should not defeat them completely. It is also the only book in this category that explores the underlying issues overweight children face, such as feeling ashamed after a setback, instead of glossing over the emotional aspect and focusing on the superficial aspects of weight loss. While each child’s situation is different and not all children may have access to the same resources as Jenna, the book encourages children to find at least one adult who can support them and guide them as they try to become healthier.

In each book, the each author’s perceived benefits of embarking on a journey to a healthier lifestyle reveal whether health or beauty or both is the author’s primary motivation to write the book. In *Maggie Goes on a Diet*, the author presents Maggie’s motivation as a desire to excel in sports and avoid teasing. However, other motivations seep into the narrative once Maggie begins her new eating and exercise patterns. On the first morning of her diet, she “imagined how she would look in smaller sized jeans” (p. 12), introducing a physical aspect to Maggie’s transformation. Maggie’s weight loss starts to become more about the end result of being thin and presumably attractive than about her health. Once she begins losing weight, Maggie also makes friends and receives attention from boys. Before she began her weight loss, the book mentions no friends for Maggie, sending the message that physical appearance influences children’s likability. She also gets higher grades, making a link between size and academic performance. The benefits of Maggie’s weight loss also include an entirely new wardrobe, and Maggie “looked like a different person in her brand new dress” (p. 30), implying that Maggie’s physical change overrode everything she used to be before. While she does end up as the star of the soccer team as she initially wanted, this benefit is overshadowed by other changes that seem to purely be the product of her newly thin physique, not her newly acquired good health. Ironically, the book ends saying:

“It is sad that people are judged mainly because of how they look. A pretty cover does not necessarily guarantee a good book. You need to give people a chance and look into their heart. It is only then you will be able to tell the good ones and the bad ones apart” (p. 35).
In its last page, the book tries to instill a message that is not superficial, yet this contradicts everything the book had said up to this point. Maggie was only well-liked and smart once she lost weight, sending the message that children will be indubitably judged by the way they look. This message that beauty is thinness and that only beauty is liked can discourage overweight children from even trying to make friends or excelling at their activities until they lose weight. While teaching children healthy habits is important, it is also important to teach children that life does not begin once you look a certain way or reach a certain weight; they are allowed to enjoy themselves whatever their physical appearance may be.

_Eddie Shapes Up_ parallels the initial motivation found in _Maggie Goes on a Diet_ to avoid teasing and excel in sports. However, the benefits Eddie reaps from his new lifestyle are entirely different from Maggie’s benefits. The pinnacle of Eddie’s success in his weight loss comes when he saves a baby from falling into a lake. The mother had tripped as she walked with the stroller in the park, and the stroller began to roll downhill towards a lake. Eddie ran after the carriage and managed to stop it. As he lost weight, he gained speed as he had hoped for, and he was able to perform a heroic feat.

The fact that Eddie’s most celebrated accomplishment involves saving a child is in stark contrast to the criticism levied on the female protagonists of classic children’s literature, specifically _Anne of Green Gables_. Critics bash Anne for choosing to dedicate her life to raising her children (Trites, 1997; O’Keefe, 2000; Poe, 1997), while Eddie is applauded for dedicating a few moments to a child. If a boy is a hero for the minutes he spent looking after a child, why is a woman not a heroine for the entire life she dedicated to children? This contrast points at a double-standard: men’s small sacrifices are celebrated while women’s much larger sacrifices are not appreciated since they are perceived as a weakness.

The difference between the benefits Maggie and Eddie reaped from their weight loss communicates a difference between the definition of success for men and for women. For Maggie, success came when she was able to change her appearance to fit others’ expectations of her. She became what Pierson and Cohen (2003) caution mothers against pushing their daughters to become: “pretty, thin, and pleasing” (p. 53). According to Pierson and Cohen, the problem with pushing girls to become “pretty, thin, and pleasing” is that this sends the message that their appearance is all that matters. _Maggie Goes on a Diet_ is a problematic book because it sends young girls the message that beauty (thinness) is expected of them and they will only be happy
once they become beautiful (thin). The book spells out this message when after her weight loss Maggie: “… was hoping that her good fortune was going to last. She did not want to return to her less fortunate, boring past. She was so much happier now and was having a blast” (p. 27). This passage also diminishes Maggie’s efforts by attributing her weight loss to “good fortune.” Rather than acknowledging that Maggie had to work hard to lose weight, this passage makes it seem like Maggie’s physique changed due to good luck. This again sets a contrast between Eddie being praised for an accomplishment and Maggie being praised for “good fortune.”

For Eddie, success came when he became the hero of the story. The expectation was not for Eddie to become handsome, but for Eddie to beat the odds and become exceptional. While Maggie’s success was measured by her appearance and her ability to fit in, Eddie’s success was measured by his achievement. The changes to his physique were secondary and they are only mentioned once at the end of the book:

“He certainly wasn’t skinny, but his body looked and felt stronger. His clothes weren’t tight now. He liked the way he looked” (p. 44).

This vague description of Eddie’s body drives home the message that for men appearance should not be the primary concern. Instead, Eddie’s strength is important, and it’s the characteristic related to his achievement, not his looks. On the other hand, in Maggie Goes on a Diet, the author includes the amount of weight that Maggie lost. In four months Maggie lost over thirty pounds, and in ten months Maggie lost 51 pounds. For Maggie, it is important to know how much thinner she became, while for Eddie that is kept ambiguous.

At the beginning of the book, Jenna does show concern for the way she looks. She confides in her cousin that she worries about “how big I am compared to other girls” (p. 8), and when she is teased for being fat she tells her friend Chris “Do you know how hard it is being A BIG FAT PIG in a school full of skinny, pretty girls?” (p. 22). However, as she begins to open up about her emotional eating to her parents and counselor, her main concern becomes curbing her emotional eating. At the end of the book, she writes an email to her cousin about the progress she has made. She is happy that she has begun riding a bicycle, cooking healthy food with her mother, and that she has improved her guitar skills. She has also learned to “catch myself when I start to think bad thoughts about myself. I realized I was doing that A LOT and it was NOT GOOD!” (p. 47). In her final email, there is no mention of weight loss or her size. The purpose of her journey has shifted from changing her appearance to changing her habits and feeling good about herself.
This new purpose is quite different from Maggie’s goals. Jenna’s story sends the message that beauty means loving yourself, and that to love yourself the solution is not changing the physical but dealing with the emotions that lie under the physical, and in Jenna’s case they actually are the reason for her physical appearance. The book only spans a little over a month, too short of a time for any changes in Jenna’s physical appearance to take place, but the end of the book finds Jenna in a happier place and enjoying her favorite activities anyway. While Maggie’s story seemingly sends the message that a happy life cannot start until a change in appearance has taken place, Jenna’s story shows that children can be happy whatever shape they are as long as they have dealt with their emotions. The emphasis is on Jenna’s changing habits, not on Jenna’s changing body.

**Body-accepting.** The aim of Shapesville is helping children accept themselves regardless of their shape. This purpose is clearly communicated at the beginning of the book: “you might even learn a thing or two about liking yourself because you are you!” (p. 3). The book then introduces children to five shapes: Robbie the rectangle, Cindy the circle, Tracy the triangle, Sam the blue square, and Daisy the orange diamond. Preceding each introduction, the text reads “In Shapesville it doesn’t matter what size, shape, or color you are…” (p. 5, 7, 9, 11, 13). The message that all bodies are good bodies is thus reinforced several times throughout the book.

*Shapesville* is the only book that makes a reference to race among the body image books in telling children that it does not matter what “color” they are. It is only a passing reference since shape rather than color is the distinguishing characteristic of the inhabitants of Shapesville. However, the reference is the only validation of racial differences offered in any of the five books.

The shapes’ names are gendered, and the description of each shape confirms that Robbie and Sam are male and Cindy, Tracy, and Daisy are female. Each shape has a special talent and trait: Robbie is an artistic star and he is “great friends with all” (p. 5); Cindy is a movie star, and she has “confidence abound” (p. 7); Tracy is a basketball star and she is “a little bit shy” (p. 9); Sam is a music star and he is “happy inside” (p. 11); and Daisy is an academic star who is “super smart” and “doesn’t fret about her looks, for beauty is in her heart” (p. 13). Some of the talent and trait choices for the female shapes seem to send deliberate messages on gender roles. Tracy is a basketball star, affirming that girls can be athletic as well. While her shyness may be interpreted as a cue that women must compensate for traditionally male-oriented occupations.
with stereotypical female traits, the description goes on to explain that despite her shyness “she likes to be seen with her head held up high” (p. 9), meaning that she does not let the trait hold her back. Daisy the academic star sends the strongest message since the statement that she does not fret about her looks can be interpreted as a call for girls to focus on the pursuit of knowledge rather than on the pursuit of society’s beauty ideal. Both male shapes are shown to have artistic talents. This also presents a broader message of masculinity since it goes beyond the traditional messages that boys excel in sports or in science.

The beauty message in Shapesville is straightforward: we should love our bodies regardless of their appearance. This message is summarized at the end of the book: “Take care of your body, love it, have fun, for we are all unique” (p. 17).

The main message in Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat? is that body image behaviors are learned. It is as much a book for mothers as it is for daughters. The book begins with a girl screaming at her mother “Don’t these pants make me look fat? It looks like I might have eaten the cat?” (p. 5). The girl’s body concerns are not limited to her size; she also complains about her hair being too frizzy, her ears being too big, her mouth too small, her eyes too big, dark, and wide. Her mother diligently reassures her that she is not “ugly or awkward, short weird or fat. Besides, it’s your inside that matters” (p. 8). However, the mother later falls in the same trap of bashing her own appearance, complaining to a friend who has complimented her that her thighs are “gigantic,” her behind “could sink the Titanic,” and she admits that “I count each calorie of everything I have ate, but no matter what I do, I can’t seem to lose weight!” (p. 14).

When her younger daughter overhears these comments, she, too, begins to complains that she has “rolls on our ankles that come out of our shoes” and other nonsensical complaints like arms that are “too long” and button noses that are “just plain wrong” (p. 18). The younger daughter’s complaints reflect how ridiculous and untrue women’s comments about their own bodies can be.

The scenario reflects how women tend to put themselves down out of a strange sense of solidarity, since the mother only begins to complain about her body once she is complimented, and after her complaints end her friend launches her own list of complaints, starting with “Oh my – no! You are curvy and cute, where I’m way too thin. I’m really nothing but bones and skin!” (p. 17). This situation reflects a common performance of gender: a woman receives a compliment from another woman, and she responds by acting self-deprecating. She then offers a
compliment back, and her friend also responds by acting self-deprecating. Women learn this behavior from their interactions with other women. By adulthood women are trained to reject any positive comments about their appearance, which feeds negative body image.

After she witnessed what her own body bashing did to her younger daughter, the mother has an epiphany: women rant “out of habit” but for their daughters “we want no such fate” (p. 20). She realizes that “We need to change this story playing in our head, to one that makes us feel good instead” (p. 22). The mother realizes she needs to change her “negative talk” (p. 24), and the way to do so is to “be more careful about what we do or say, than we are about what we choose to wear each day” (p. 25).

_Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat_? acknowledges the power of mothers’ words when it comes to shaping their daughters’ body image. However, the story ends right after the mother has this epiphany. We do not know if the mother indeed stopped making these comments, or how this decision affected her daughter. The book also places the entire burden of being a positive body image role model on mothers, since the father is entirely absent from the book. The book shows the mother as the only one who helps her daughter get ready for school in the morning and the only one who interacts with her younger daughter during the day, diminishing the role of fathers in children’s lives in general and also in shaping body image behaviors.

**The Illustrations**

The illustrations in _Maggie Goes on a Diet, Eddie Shapes Up, and My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions and Eating_ serve the role of showing children what an acceptable body looks like. In _Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat_?, the illustrations show how skewed perceptions of the body can become when girls and women do not have a positive body image. The characters in _Shapesville_ are not human, so they do not serve as a reference for how bodies are meant to look like. However, despite being shapes the characters in _Shapesville_ do have some gendered characteristics that may inform children’s views on the differences between men and women.

From the cover image, we find the contrast between acceptable and unacceptable bodies in _Maggie Goes on a Diet_. The current Maggie wants to see a much thinner Maggie in the mirror not for any of the health reasons the book introduces later on, but so she can fit into a dress. The message is clear: girls cannot hope to feel good about their bodies until they are able to change
their bodies to fit beauty ideals. Maggie could not find a pretty dress to fit her current body because she is not allowed to be beautiful until she is also thin.

3.1 Holding dress in the mirror.

The contrast between Maggie before and after her weight loss is not limited to a change in her physique or her athletic ability. Before her weight loss, Maggie is shown not only struggling on the soccer field, but also apart from the other players. After Maggie loses weight, she is shown bonding with her teammates.
The soccer field is not the only place where Maggie is isolated before her weight loss. The book shows Maggie as solitary and sad before she lost weight, and teased by her classmates. Her size is also exaggerated by the backpack that appears tiny compared to the size of her body. As Maggie becomes thinner, she seems to be in better proportion with her surroundings, sending the subtle message that the world could not accommodate a larger Maggie. It is not until Maggie is
noticeable thinner that the book shows her surrounded by friends. An even thinner Maggie is shown attracting boys’ attention.

3.4 Sad and alone.

3.5 Happy and surrounded by friends.
The contrast between the sad, lonely Maggie at the beginning of the book and the happy Maggie who attracts more attention the thinner she is sends girls the message that changing their eating habits is not only a way to feel healthier, but that it is necessary to make friends, attract boys, and be happy. In Maggie’s story, the health message could easily be overshadowed by the message that thinness is attractive and a pre-requisite to happiness. Maggie’s transformation also happens over the course of a few pages, which could lead girls to believe that by changing their eating habits they will see quick changes which may not be the case.

Eddie also begins his story as a boy who shies away from playing with other children. However, Eddie is portrayed as having friends even before he loses weight.
Eddie’s body does change from the beginning of the story to the end of the story. However, the purpose of his weight loss never strays from a way to be more active. The final shot of Eddie shows him in a soccer uniform, walking with the friends he has had since before his weight loss.
While Eddie’s body is certainly different at the end of the story than it was at the beginning, his body does not hold him back to the same degree that Maggie’s body seemed to hold her back. Maggie does not have friends before her weight loss, but Eddie does. Neither of them excels at sports at the beginning of their story, but Eddie is not rejected by his athletic peers due to his size to the same extent that Maggie is. Comparing these two books, the message that physical attractiveness is more important for women than for men is present. In Maggie’s case, changing her appearance is what allowed her to make friends and attract the boys’ attention. Eddie has friends before he changes his appearance, and the attention of girls is irrelevant in his story.

In Jenna’s story, Jenna is always shown active and surrounded by other children. She is smiling at a theme park with her cousin, playing guitar with her friend, participating in French club with her classmates, and riding her bicycle.
3.11 At the theme park.

3.12 Playing guitar.

3.13 French club.
These illustrations of Jenna enjoying her life and surrounded by friends before her body has changed contradict the message found in *Maggie Goes on a Diet*. The moral of *Maggie Goes on a Diet* seems to be that a girl cannot really enjoy her life or make friends until she becomes thin; in contrast, *My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions* communicates that size does not matter when it comes to happiness. Girls can give themselves permission to be happy and participate in activities that they enjoy even if they are still working on becoming the healthiest versions of themselves. The book also attempts to debunk the idea that overweight children cannot enjoy physical activity with the image of the hefty Jenna happily riding her bicycle. In contrast, Maggie, like Eddie in *Eddie Shapes Up*, is portrayed as suffering whenever she engages in physical activity before she loses weight.

*My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions* ends with the image of Jenna riding her bicycle. In this illustration, Jenna’s body looks the same as it did at the beginning of the story.
This lack of change sends two messages about embracing a healthier lifestyle: first, that changes, if they occur, will happen gradually over time. Second, that changes to the body are not the purpose of embracing a healthier lifestyle, but rather a side effect. Jenna does not need to look smaller to enjoy a healthy activity like riding her bicycle.

_Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat?_ illustrates how distorted women’s perceptions of their bodies can be. The daughter in the story sees someone completely different in the mirror, and her mother’s mental picture of herself is no better. Her mother’s friend also has a skewed perception of herself, but in her case she sees herself being much scrawnier than she really is, showing that distorted body image can go both ways.
3.17 Distorted imagination.

The book also shows illustrations of girls in a mocking posture that can easily be interpreted as making rude comments about another person. In this taunting posture, the girls are shown with unsightly purple rings around their eyes, which presumably stand in for their malicious attitudes. Later, the girls are shown with their hands around each other in a friendly posture. The rings around their eyes are gone and they seem more radiant. This sequence of illustrations can be interpreted as sending girls the message that we are much more beautiful when we are supportive of one another, and that making fun of each other only has the effect of making us uglier. This message teaches girls that beauty means being kind to one another.

3.18 Mocking posture.
3.19 Being kind.

*Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat?* and *Eddie Shapes Up* are the only two body image books that show characters of other races being involved in the plot. *My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions* shows characters of other races in the illustrations, but they do not participate in the action. In *Eddie Shapes Up*, one of the friends that helps Eddie exercise is an African-American boy, and in *Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat?* one of the girls who learns that being supportive is better than making fun is an African-American girl. However, even these characters that are somewhat involved in the story are interchangeable for any other character of any other race. None of the books make any meaningful attempt to determine how race can affect a child’s body image. The assumption of whiteness is at play in this phenomenon: placing a Caucasian child at the center of the story and ignoring the implications of race seems to be necessary in order for the book to be aimed at a general audience. Placing a child of another race at the center of the story or injecting race into the story in any way might mean that the book will be catalogued as a niche book that is only meant to help children of that particular race address their body image issues.

While *Shapesville* does not feature human characters, the illustrations of the different shapes are sometimes gendered. Physically, three shapes—triangle, circle and diamond—have characteristics that identify them as female. All female shapes have long eyelashes, the triangle and circle have pink cheeks, the circle wears lipstick, and the diamond wears a ponytail. The rectangle has both male and female physical characteristics. The rectangle sports a mustache and
the rectangle’s eyelashes are long and look exactly like those of the female shapes. The square does not have any distinguishing gendered characteristics: the square has no eyelashes or other distinctive gender-identifiable features.

3.20 Shapes.

The shapes presented in Shapesville vary greatly in their appearance: the amount and placement of their arms, legs, and eyes differs from shape to shape. This variation is present within the female shapes and within the male shapes. While this does indicate that there are several acceptable ways to human, the gendered physical variations also communicate the existence of certain ways to be female or male. Since three of the three female shapes have long eyelashes, and two of the three have pink cheeks, and one has bright red lipstick—the mold suggests the importance of make up for girls and women. In contrast, the gendered characteristics of one male shape are ambivalent (the rectangle has long eye lashes and a
mustache) while the other ambiguous (the square). Hence, the male shapes seem less gendered in comparison to the females in the book’s illustrations.

**Text and illustrations**

Viewing the illustrations alongside the text is necessary in order to grasp the significance of all the books in this category. In the books about changing habits, the text contains each child’s motivation to change and what the child changed (and in Jenna’s case the struggles that accompanied the change). The illustrations show how the child’s body progresses as the child’s habits change, and they reveal the author’s idea of what a healthy child’s body and life should look like. In Jenna’s case, a healthy child looks no different from a child with poor eating habits, but the healthy child takes enjoyment in participating in an active lifestyle. In Eddie and Maggie’s stories, a healthy child does look physically different from a child with poor eating habits, and only a healthy child can enjoy physical activity. In Maggie’s case the implications of having the body of an unhealthy child go even further: a child with such a body cannot have friends or be well-liked.

The message found in *Maggie Goes on a Diet* can potentially be damaging to girls. The book places a heavy emphasis on the physical changes Maggie undergoes, not on Maggie’s changing habits. Her newfound popularity is the product of her thin physique, sending the message that a girl cannot hope to have friends and a fulfilling life if she is not thin. This is vastly different from the message in *My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions*, which allows girls at any size to be happy and make friends, and by the end of the book disassociates healthy habits from the pursuit of thinness. Jenna starts the book concerned about being larger than her classmates, but by the end of the book her main concern is understanding the emotions that lead her to overeat and curbing the behavior. Through the entire process her body is unchanged and she is shown surrounded by other children at different stages of her change.

In *Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat?* the text helps us understand why girls feel uncomfortable in their bodies, and the illustrations help us understand the extent to which their body image is skewed. Additionally, the mother’s realization of the power of words is accompanied by images of her daughter bringing girls together and rescuing others from their self-imposed torment over their appearance. This imagery paired with the text sends the message
that the only way to stop this cycle is to realize that we ourselves have the power to stop it by ceasing our negative words, and that we also have the power to spread this behavior to others.

3.21 Rescuing others.

The text in Shapesville communicates that diversity in shapes should be celebrated, and the illustrations show children what this diversity looks like in a fictional world. However, the shapes still display gendered physical characteristics (though they are not related to the shape of their bodies). This seems to contradict the book’s main message to children that they can accept their appearance whatever it is, since it adds the caveat that their appearance must conform to gendered expectations, especially for girls. In the illustrations the square does not have any distinguishing gendered characteristics: he has no eyelashes or other distinctive features. However, since the square is identified as male by the pronoun “he,” we are led to identify this lack of gendered characteristics as male. This can be interpreted as a gendered version of the assumption of whiteness: if there is nothing that indicates otherwise, maleness is implied because maleness is default.
Conclusion

While the books in the body image category can be divided into books that encourage children to change their habits and books that encourage children to love their bodies as they are, the messages within each category vary considerably.

In the first category, *Maggie Goes on a Diet* encourages girls to change their habits so they can play sports, but also so they can change their appearances and gain popularity, *Eddie Shapes Up* encourages boys to change their habits so they can play sports and become the heroes they are meant to be, and *My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions* encourages children to talk about their emotions and find ways to cope with them, which results in changing their unhealthy habits.

The focus on appearance varies from book to book. It is extremely high in Maggie’s case, Eddie is portrayed as being somewhat ambivalent about physical changes but is still presented as changing physically, and in Jenna’s case she initially focuses both on appearance and bad habits, but ultimately her focus shifts entirely away from appearance and onto health. The differing emphasis on appearance is evident both in text and in illustrations, since in Maggie’s case the text mentions how many pounds Maggie has lost while the illustrations show Maggie growing happier as she becomes slimmer; in Eddie’s case he only mentions his changing appearance as a secondary concern and illustrations show him exercising with his friends before he loses weight; and in Jenna’s case she constantly refers to her size at the beginning of the book but gradually stops doing so though illustrations show she still looks the same.

The books also vary in how difficult it was for each child to change their habits. For Maggie it appears to be effortless, and it also seems she is able to change without support from parents or friends. Eddie does not falter in his new eating and exercise routine, either, but his mother and friends lend him support. Jenna has the support of her parents, friends, and teachers, and even with all of this motivation around her she suffers setbacks.

Each book presents a different reason why children should change their habits, and two out of the three books present unrealistic results. While Maggie and Eddie began their stories with a similar motivation to change their habits so they can be better at sports, the books take drastically different directions. For Maggie changing her habits becomes a means to lose weight, become popular, and wear attractive clothes. Her success is measured by her appearance. On the other hand, Eddie’s motivation remains focused on physical activity and any changes to his appearance
are secondary. He also manages to use his newfound fitness to save a baby. These drastically different plots send boys and girls different messages of what is expected of them.

Jenna sends the best message of why children should change their habits and she also presents the most realistic path to health. Jenna starts out concerned for both health and appearance, which is a realistic portrayal of a young girl since girls have learned that appearance is highly valued in society. However, she comes to realize that her habits matter more than her looks, since by the end of the book she is entirely focused on what she is doing to be healthy and not on how she looks. Her struggles are also realistic since it is unlikely that a child will be able to stick to his or her plan perfectly, especially if the child is receiving no help from adults or even from peers. Jenna sends girls the message that it is okay to feel dissatisfied with appearance, but that these concerns are usually a side effect of some deeper emotional issue, and she also sends the message that in the end it is possible to be happy and healthy at any size. Out of these three children, Jenna is the only child who actually resolves her deeper issue, setting the best example for children.

The books that encourage children to love the bodies they have also vary in their messages. Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat? is equally directed at mothers and daughters. The book sends mothers the message that their daughters will copy their negative body image behaviors, namely disparaging their own bodies. The book’s message to daughters is to be a positive force and spread their positive attitudes about their own bodies to their friends. Overall, the book shows both mothers and daughters how illogical their rants about their bodies are by pairing these rants with images of the way the women actually are and the way the women imagine themselves to be due to their negative self-image. The book teaches mothers and daughters to view themselves not through the lens of negative body image but as they actually are and to spread this message. Beauty and kindness are equated since girls are shown in a much more flattering light when they avoid negative comments about each other and treat each other with kindness.

Shapesville sends the message that all shapes are acceptable. Though the message appears simple at first, illustrations of non-human shapes that are feminized or masculinized by their traits complicate the matter. The message that appearance does not matter loses power since clearly it does matter for women to look feminine while for men appearing masculine is not as significant.
Race as an issue is entirely absent from the books with human characters. Though some diversity is present in the illustrations, all main characters are white and the fact that the way children perceive their bodies may be affected by their race is never mentioned. I view this as a manifestation of the assumption of whiteness: the books are considered general audience books since the main characters are white and race is never discussed.
CHAPTER IV: PARENTS’ ROLES

When I was about 6 years old, my father’s doctor ordered him to see a nutritionist because his cholesterol was incredibly high. The nutritionist informed him that Coke and cheese puffs were not the breakfast of champions, and that fried green plantains should not be his go-to side dish. The nutritionist gave him a healthy meal plan, and the entire family ate by the meal plan for a few months until his cholesterol had returned to a healthy level.

This was the first time I realized that the food you eat matters. I loved fried green plantains, but now that I knew they had made my father sick I viewed them with suspicion and I did not eat another one until I was in college. My parents had explained to me that some foods are unhealthy, but they did not explain that if we enjoy these foods we can eat them in moderation. As I grew older I realized this on my own, but my early traumatic experience surrounding fried green plantains still kept me away from them for years.

The fact that children learn their eating and body image behaviors primarily from their parents is the premise of parenting books regarding body image issues. The media is often vilified as the source of eating disorders and skewed body image, but these books argue that while the media can have an effect on these issues it is parents who wield the most power over their children’s body image. These books counsel parents to model the eating and body image behaviors they would like to see in their children. The books also advise parents on which eating and body image behaviors they should want to see in their children.

I chose to read four parenting books that deal with body image due to their similar themes and their publication within the past decade: You’d Be So Pretty If... Teaching our daughters to love their bodies – even when we don’t love our own (Chadwick, 2009), 101 Ways to Help Your Daughter Love Her Body (Richardson & Rehr, 2001), ‘You have to have to say I’m pretty, you’re my mother: ’How to Help Your Daughter Learn to Love Her Body and Herself (Pierson & Cohen, 2003), and Good Girls Don’t Get Fat: How Weight Obsession Is Messing Up Our Girls and How We Can Help Them Thrive Despite It (Silverman & Santorelli, 2010). While books about parenting in general can be either unisex or geared specifically at boys or girls, parenting books about body image seem to deal exclusively with girls. Across these books, I have found three common themes: girls’ changing relationships with their parents and their bodies; mothers’ roles in their daughters’ body image struggles; and fathers’ roles in their daughters’ body image struggles. The books describe how interactions between daughters, mothers, and fathers shape
daughters’ body image. However, all three of these roles are not seen as equally influential in the process.

Each book outlines the negative behaviors that daughters, mothers, or fathers may display, and then offers advice on how to reform these behaviors. These behavior assumptions are underlain with gendered expectations of the ways daughters, mothers, and father act. Each character’s behavior can be seen as a performance of their femininity or masculinity. The books do aim to change the initial negative performances into ones more conducive to positive body image, but their division of parents’ roles in shaping their daughters’ body image into mothers’ and fathers’ roles points to enduring gendered performances, as does the exclusion of sons from the books altogether.

My goals for this chapter are to determine how parents are advised to deal with body image issues in their children, and how this advice is underlain by messages of gender and race. I will begin this chapter with a description of the aforementioned parenting books. Afterwards, I will discuss the performances of daughters, mothers, and fathers present in these books. In this analysis, I will discuss the advice parents receive as well as the gendered assumptions implicit in this advice. Additionally, I will discuss the assumptions of whiteness in these books.

**The Texts**

The four parenting books I chose explicitly deal with body image issues in daughters, especially adolescent daughters. The books are similar in the three themes I mentioned previously, and also in their inspiration: all four were written by women with daughters, and all four wrote these books in reaction to their children.

Dara Chadwick, author of *You’d Be So Pretty If... Teaching our daughters to love their bodies – even when we don’t love our own*, sees women as being “a link in a chain” (p. 21); her grandmother shaped her mother’s body image, who in turn shaped her own body image. All three women were unhappy with their bodies because each predecessor had modeled a negative body image. Chadwick is determined that the next link in the chain, her daughter Faith, will receive a more positive example and will grow up comfortable with her body. In the book’s introduction, Chadwick writes about how her experience writing a column for *Shape* magazine that chronicled her year-long weight loss inspired her to write the book. She lost 26 pounds through good nutrition, exercise, and counseling to deal with her body image issues. However, throughout the process Chadwick worried that Faith would internalize the message that women
must change their bodies to feel good about themselves, and that pounds are a way to measure a woman’s worth. Chadwick references her year writing the column for *Shape* in the book and how she turned several moments in the process into teachable moments about healthy lifestyles, positive body image, and media images for her daughter. Her book advises mothers to model good body image and to counter the message that women are worth more when they weigh less.

*101 Ways to Help Your Daughter Love Her Body* divides its advice into a list of 101 topics. Richardson and Rehr began writing the book together because since they both have daughters they worried about the effect media images had on girls’ self-esteem. According to the authors, girls have no safe haven since media images follow them from outdoor billboards to advertisements in their own homes. However, their commitment to the book increased when Rehr’s daughter Danielle was diagnosed with an aggressive form of leukemia. Rehr was motivated to continue writing even through her daughter’s illness because: “in helping [girls] love their bodies, we also helped them maintain their spirits” (p. xviii). The 101 tips begin from the moment girls are born and span to their adolescence.

Pierson and Cohen drew from Pierson’s difficult experiences with her teenage daughter, Phoebe, to write *‘You have to have to say I’m pretty, you’re my mother: ’ How to Help Your Daughter Learn to Love Her Body and Herself* (the authors do not mention whether Cohen has a daughter herself). At 14, Phoebe began to engage in dangerous eating habits, “alternately throwing up in her school bathroom and starving herself at home” and “insisting on having two scales in her bathroom and memorizing the calorie count of every morsel of food” (p. 1). Aside from seeking professional help, Pierson immersed herself in researching body image issues, but she was disappointed that the literature dealt with understanding these issues rather than addressing them. Her aim in this book is to give parents practical advice on what they can do when their daughters exhibit a negative body image and dangerous behavior, with examples of “good” and “bad” conversations relating to this topic throughout the book.

Silverman, author of *Good Girls Don’t Get Fat: How Weight Obsession Is Messing Up Our Girls and How We Can Help Them Thrive Despite It*, realized that body image issues can arise before girls are even walking when a woman approached her and her five-month-old daughter, Tallie, and said: “‘Look at those fat thighs! Me, oh my! Enjoy it now, honey. It’s the only time fat is cute” (p. 1). Silverman was taken aback by the comment; while the woman meant no harm, she was implying that fat was bad and that fat was only acceptable for a brief
window in life. Silverman’s book addresses all of the areas in life where girls find similar messages that fat is bad and girls should be “good” and thin. At the end of each chapter, Silverman lists a few questions meant to measure girls’ “BIQ” or “Body Image Quotient.” These questions are meant to be answered by parents and the results are tallied at the end of the book.

**Common Themes**

*Girls’ changing relationships with their bodies and parents.* According to Silverman, sometime between birth and puberty girls internalize the message that in order to be “good” they need to be thin. While remaining thin may not be difficult during childhood, weight gain is a normal part of puberty since this is a time of growth and maturing. However, girls are prone to view this weight gain as negative since they have grown up believing that to gain weight is to get fat, and to get fat is to be “bad.” Silverman views these feelings surrounding normal weight gain as the source of girls’ issues with food, eating, and body image during adolescence: “Clearly, there’s a disconnect between the truth of a girl’s body and the fantasy of the perfect body making its home inside a girl’s head” (p. 14). Richardson and Rehr also acknowledge that “the loss of her girlish body” can cause an adolescent girl “grief,” which is a combination of “anger, sadness, grief, guilt, and fear, as well as feelings of confusion or disorientation” (p. 95). Additionally, girls may be afraid during puberty because they worry that they will inherit physical traits that the family often laments.

A girls’ relationship with her body can be the cause of a complicated or strained relationship with her parents. According to Chadwick, at the onset of puberty “girls … get anxious about how their bodies compare to those of their friends and even their siblings. Physical attractiveness takes on a whole new importance” (p. 37). Girls feel the pressure to be attractive even as they have no control over the changes happening to their bodies, and this pressure can be magnified by parents who act alarmed by their daughter’s weight gain. Chadwick warns “If [parents] treat weight gain at puberty as something that must be avoided or carefully controlled … the hurt [parents] create is something that can’t always be undone” (p. 38).

It seems that adolescence is a time when girls internalize the message that to perform womanhood necessarily involves performing beauty. By this point, they have also formed an image of what “beauty” means, and they are extremely conscious of the ways in which they do not fit this image, and also of the ways in which their peers fit the mold. Pierson and Cohen summarize girls’ body concerns succinctly: “Your daughter doesn’t care about being fit; she
cares about not being fat” (p. 132). In other words, during adolescence girls are more concerned with appearance than with health. They will work to mold themselves into “beautiful” (skinny) women, even if this goal conflicts with growing into a healthy woman. As we will see when we discuss mothers’ and fathers’ roles in forming their daughters’ body image, the authors consider that much of what a girl considers “beautiful” is learned from her parents, and so their parents’ criticism can leave deep scars in adolescent girls.

Girls’ relationships with their parents also change during puberty because this stage coincides with the time when girls begin separating from their parents and shaping into independent individuals (Pierson & Cohen). Parents are counseled to maintain a strong relationship with their daughters through puberty but at the same time to “understand where your body ends and hers begins” (Richardson & Rehr, p. 23). Parents who are controlling of their daughters during this stage risk facing their daughters’ resistance and rebellion, which may involve unhealthy eating behaviors. Parents who remain too close to their daughters and completely impede the separation process give rise to feelings of anger and guilt in their daughters, since their daughters feel the contradictory urges to remain extremely attached and to separate (Pierson & Cohen).

However, gauging how much space daughters need can be tricky since, as Pierson and Cohen describe it, “separation doesn’t mean severing. You need to stay connected” (p. 39). In this stage in their lives, girls should be allowed to begin some of the conversations in order to retain a connection while growing into their own beings. According to Pierson and Cohen, letting daughters feel that their opinions matter will ensure that they keep listening to their parents since they feel that their parents listen to them. Additionally, Rehr and Richardson see value in parents admitting that they can learn from their daughters, and they recommend that parents allow their daughters to teach them how to perform physical activities that they have not mastered themselves. The book mentions the example of a mother allowing her daughter to teach her how to punch.

While the books encourage parents to let their daughters take some of the initiative when it comes to talking about body image, their role in shaping their own body image is not considered as prominent as their parents’. Out of the three roles outlined in these parenting books, the role of the daughter is the least active in shaping adolescent girls’ body image. This seems odd at first: how can a girl have the least active role in shaping her own body image? The books paint girls as
passive vessels that are influenced by their peers, the media, their fathers, but above all their mothers. Even in passages that describe girls’ experiences, the main focus is placed on how parents, especially mothers, should respond to these experiences in order to cultivate a positive body image. For instance, Chadwick cites the example of fifteen-year-old girl, Tammy, who is the largest in her group of friends. Rather than exploring how this makes Tammy feel or what Tammy does to cope with this situation, Chadwick focuses on Tammy’s mother, Abby. Chadwick describes how Abby sets a good example for her daughter by displaying healthy eating behaviors, and how this sends Tammy the message that “it’s OK to treat herself” (p. 51).

In this scenario, Chadwick identifies two separate sources that shape Tammy’s body image: her friends’ bodies and her mothers’ eating behaviors, both external sources.

This depiction of girls as blank slates for their parents to paint on and protect from noxious influences is a characteristic of our current era of guilt-ridden parenting. As I will discuss in the next section dealing with mother’s roles, contemporary parents feel the need to tread very lightly when it comes to discussing appearance and health issues with their children, since they feel the need to balance between seeming overbearing and seeming aloof. If a mother worries about her daughter’s health, she worries that by saying something she will offend her daughter and irrevocably damage their relationship, but she also worries that by saying nothing the problem will never stop escalating. This view of parenting places little agency in children, assuming they will not change unless an external force prompts them. However, from my own experience of embracing my natural hair when I was surrounded by messages that devalued my natural hair, I disagree with this view. Children are capable of change that comes from within. Giddens’ (1991) structuration theory allows for both external and internal influence to form identity. While he does recognize the influence of norms on identity, he counsels against holding norms as the only influence on identity. Instead, identity is the product of the interaction of norms and our own independent choices.

Pairing the construct of the daughter who has little power over her body image with the daughter who is growing more independent and separating from her parents seems contradictory. If girls are truly passive in the formation of their body image, how can that passivity be reconciled with their push for independence and growing into their own person? The fact that the daughter role can lack dimension is only acknowledged by Pierson and Cohen, who only add this disclaimer since Pierson’s daughter Phoebe was annoyed at the portrayal. In the introduction,
Pierson and Cohen write that they “feel strongly that we have captured both the spirit and essence of these girls without misrepresenting them, but the nature of a book like this is to universalize, generalize, and make some assumptions” (p. 9).

According to this disclaimer, the daughter may not seem like a dynamic character because she is meant as a stand-in for all daughters. After all, the true audience of these books is the parents. Parents’ performances in these books are more revealing of constructions of “male” and “female” since the authors outline the behaviors that parents should display, while the daughters in these books often display the behaviors that parents should curb, meaning they are not acceptable performances.

The authors’ portrayals of daughters reveal three assumptions about gender. First, most teenage girls use beauty and their pursuit of beauty as their primary vehicles to perform femininity. Second, the pursuit of beauty should be rejected as an essential part of performing femininity to be replaced with self-confidence and health. Third, teenage girls are not strong enough to free themselves from negative performances of gender and embrace positive performances on their own. The second and third assumptions set the basis for parents’ roles in shaping their daughters’ body image.

Mothers’ roles. Mothers are considered highly important in the formation of their daughters’ body image in all four books. As Silverman says it: “If words were power, a mother’s words rule supreme” (p. 39). And not only her words; a mother’s actions are also extremely influential. Pierson and Cohen plainly state that a mother’s words and behavior are the most powerful influence on her daughter: “You matter most to your daughter because you, by your words and actions, can best help her become a woman who is capable of loving herself and others” (p. 65).

Chadwick illustrates how body image issues are passed down from mother to daughter through her personal experiences with her mother. As a woman in her twenties, Chadwick remembers helping her mother shop for an outfit to wear at her brother’s wedding. Chadwick talked her into buying a purple suit that Chadwick found flattering, but her mother, who felt large and exposed, would not believe any of the compliments Chadwick gave her because she lived by the slogan “If you think you’re fat, you are” (p. 17). Chadwick’s mother always felt fat and hid her body under oversized clothing. Years later when Chadwick was a mother herself, she went shopping with her daughter, Faith, for an outfit to wear to a conference. Chadwick tried on a
black pantsuit that Faith thought looked flattering, but Chadwick could not bring herself to buy it “because my body didn’t look the way I wanted it to look” (p. 15). After they left the store, Chadwick realized she had mirrored her mother’s behavior. Furthermore, if she continued exhibiting the same attitude about her body, Faith would also grow up to mirror her behavior.

Mothers must model positive body image in order for their daughters to develop positive body image. For Richardson and Rehr, modeling positive body image gives daughters “permission” (p.17) to love their bodies. Mothers are urged to stop making negative comments about their own bodies since “if [mothers] are to help [our daughters] feel peaceful about their bodies, we must model for them our own self-affirmation” (p. 18). This includes suppressing negative comments about the aging process, since girls need to learn to love and care for their bodies at all stages in life. Additionally, Richardson and Rehr encourage mothers to take time to rest and relax, since seeing their mothers endlessly tire themselves for the benefit of others may lead girls to believe that being a woman is a life of “endless servitude” (p. 26). Silverman noted that even when mothers are not critical of their daughters’ bodies, their self-criticism can still hurt their daughters’ self-esteem. She cited the example of Lily, a girl who felt badly about herself each time her mother would look at herself in the mirror and say she needed to lose weight because Lily was larger than her mother. Since her thinner mother said she needed to lose weight, Lily reasoned that this meant she was fat as well. Pierson and Cohen also view mothers as role models when it comes to eating, noting that daughters who see their mothers count every calorie are bound to repeat the behavior. They counsel mothers to avoid sending the message that some foods are “bad” and that eating them is shameful; this message is transmitted through the food choices mothers make. Instead, Pierson and Cohen instruct mothers to send the message that food and eating should be enjoyed by letting their daughters see them enjoy both healthy foods and treats.

The ways mothers speak about and treat their bodies also convey messages of what it means to be a woman, as was already evidenced by Richardson and Rehr’s concern that girls may grow up to view womanhood as equivalent to servitude if their mothers did not teach them to make time for relaxation. Pierson and Cohen caution mothers from sending the message that women must be “pretty, thin, and pleasing” (p. 53); mothers risk sending this message when their judgments of themselves, of other women, and even of their daughters are highly focused on
appearance. Similarly, Chadwick warns that mothers who fixate on appearance send the message that for women “the whole package of ‘who we are’ doesn’t matter” (3p. 6).

The authors acknowledge that a mother’s positive messages about body image and eating can be negated by contradictory messages girls receive from the media. But while the media is outside of a mother’s control, the authors still prescribe the role of teaching media literacy to mothers. Richardson and Rehr suggest a combination of teaching daughters to view advertisements and other media content critically and limiting exposure to fashion magazines, television, and Internet. According to Richardson and Rehr, fashion magazines are “filled with images that underscore the message that women’s bodies exist for the entertainment and profit of others” (p. 77) and “giving your daughter unlimited [Internet] access would be akin to taking her to a city with which she is unfamiliar and telling her to find her way back home” (p. 80). Pierson and Cohen remind mothers that “you can’t change what the media are saying, but you can change your own message” (p. 60). Rather than letting daughters think that products can remedy their problems, mothers must instill realistic expectations in their daughters. For instance, teaching daughters that while perfume can smell wonderful and be enjoyable to wear, it will not automatically make her feel happy or sexy as the advertisement seems to promise. For Chadwick, the key to is teaching girls to be “media smart,” meaning they “develop their own filter through which they can run what they see and hear, before they start thinking about how they measure up to those models and celebrities” (p. 101). Mothers must teach their daughters that the media is an altered reality, not a role model. Girls must learn that everything they see in the media cannot be taken at face value; instead, they need to evaluate the messages and decide what is real and what is altered.

Mothers are given the most active role in the formation of their daughters’ body image. Mothers’ choices and comments are said to be internalized and emulated by their daughters, from the foods mothers choose to eat to the ways mothers speak about their own bodies. The pressure that this huge responsibility places on mothers is summarized in an interview Silverman conducted with a mother of three, Grace:

“As a mom, there are just so many rules that I need to follow so I don’t screw up my child. Don’t get fat, but don’t get upset if you gain a few pounds. Eat healthy, but not all the time – you have to treat yourself! Teach your children to love exercise, but don’t say too much – they might think you’re saying they’re fat. Give me a break. I
could be perfect, and I’d still mess up. After all, it’s always Mom’s fault anyway” (p. 44).

The expectation that mothers should adjust all their habits and silence all of their insecurities for the sake of their children is seen as unrealistic by Silverman’s interviewee. This reaction is also tinged with resentment at the idea that mothers have complete power over the way their children turn out and that any imperfections in a child can be traced back to the mother. While none of the books explicitly blame and reprimand mothers’ for their behavior, the books all champion the idea that a girl’s body image is the result of her mother’s body image; mothers who have not been the embodiment of confidence are bound to feel guilty. Silverman directs a section of her book to mothers who realize they have “messed up” (p. 65) after reading her advice, counseling them on how to “get wise and help your daughter thrive” (p. 66). While Silverman does mention that mistakes are normal, this section suggests that they are only excusable before mothers read the book and realized the impact their behavior has.

According to these parenting books, a mother must perform confidence and health for her daughter at all times; this is the only way to ensure that daughters will grow up to perform confidence and health as well. However, this performance seems to come at the cost of mothers’ feelings; the books suggest that mothers’ feelings of insecurity about their bodies are not valid or worthy of expressing. Furthermore, the books only counsel mothers to smother these feelings; there is no advice for mothers to actually resolve their feelings. This sends the message that only young girls’ feelings about their bodies matter; they should be listened to and sorted out. Apparently for mothers it is too late to resolve these feelings, and the best they can do is to prevent these feelings from arising in their daughters. Paradoxically, mothers are counseled to care for their bodies while at the same time ignoring their feelings. This can be taken as a performance of self-denial: mothers silence their own worries and lose the chance of resolving them to avoid passing them on to their daughters.

**Fathers’ roles.** If a mother’s influence is presented as a sort of be-all, end-all when it comes to structuring her daughter’s body image, it would seem that there is no room for any other influence. However, the authors do ascribe fathers a role in shaping their daughters’ body image, albeit a smaller one. Each book dedicates one chapter to fathers’ roles, though Pierson and Cohen as well as Chadwick still address the mothers instead of the fathers in these chapters.
These authors assume that a mother will read the chapter and then relay the advice to their husbands.

All books present the family as a married heterosexual couple, with only brief sections who acknowledge the possibility of divorce. In this traditional conception of the nuclear family, the importance of fathers’ lies in the fact that they are the first men with whom girls develop a meaningful relationship. According to Pierson and Cohen, “[a girl’s] experience of feeling loved and valued by a man begins with her relationship with her father” (p. 105). A mother’s actions can mold a girl’s behavior, but a father’s behavior molds the way a girl will come to expect men to treat her and view her. For instance, Richardson and Rehr advise fathers to avoid criticizing women’s bodies. Though these critiques are not directed specifically at daughters, the fact that her father is criticizing another woman will lead her to believe that it is normal for men to dislike certain physical traits in women. This in turn sends a “women-as-objects” (p. 41) message and makes girls feel anxious about their own bodies. Chadwick explains that when fathers make comments about other women’s bodies, whether positive or negative, their daughters “are listening and silently measuring themselves against what they hear” (p. 158). She also cautions fathers to avoid any negative comments regarding their daughters’ bodies even in the form of teasing, since many girls are too sensitive to tolerate these jokes.

However, at the other end of the spectrum Silverman warns fathers that they should avoid praising their daughters exclusively for their appearance. She draws from her own experience to explain the effects of these comments. As a child, her father always complimented her on her appearance, and Silverman internalized the message that she needed to put her energies into grooming rather than studying because “that was [her] asset: cute, not smart” (p. 74). Likewise, Pierson and Cohen criticize fathers who “overstimulate” their daughters’ sexuality by doting on their daughters when they “[act] seductively and flirt with him” (p. 116). This sends girls the message that men are to be manipulated through feminine behavior.

Chadwick and Pierson and Cohen portray fathers as heavily reliant on mothers’ guidance when it comes to dealing with their teenage daughters. Chadwick says fathers can act “dopey” (p. 156) and use jokes to connect with their daughters without realizing that their comments can hurt their daughters’ feelings. For example, Chadwick spoke to a woman who began to feel self-conscious after her father called her “Crisco,” meaning “fat in a can” (p. 156). It is up to mothers to “help the man in our daughter’s life understand that jokes and seemingly benign comments
about her body or appearance can hurt her” (p. 157). If mothers observe this behavior, “you absolutely have to step in” (p. 159). Pierson and Cohen also describe fathers as likely to “give up” (p. 110) on their daughters once they begin having trouble connecting due to her newly-developed sensitivities about her body. Mothers “are caught in the middle” (p. 111) and must defuse the tension and “help [their husbands] understand the basic dynamics of adolescence and fatherhood” (p. 112).

All of the books indicate that a father’s role in shaping his daughter’s body image is important but fraught with tension. Silverman and Richardson and Rehr assume fathers as the readers of their chapter with advice for fathers, but Chadwick and Pierson and Cohen assume mothers as readers who will then relay the advice to the father. The latter authors are perpetuating the idea that mothers know best when it comes to their children. Rather than describing fathers who have the ability to sort through the turmoil of adolescence, Chadwick and Pierson and Cohen describe fathers who cannot manage to connect with their children on their own. I find the portrayal of fathers as “dopey” or distant as problematic since it seems to paint the issues of body image and proper childrearing as strictly a feminine domain. While the authors concede that fathers influence their daughters, they rely on the mother as the mediating figure to ensure that the father’s influence is positive.

**Race**

None of these parenting books state that they are aimed specifically at Caucasian families, and none qualify their advice as being tailored to a specific ethnic group. However, three out of the four books do not explore the impact that race can have on girls’ body image at all; only Richardson and Rehr briefly mention race in their advice. Richardson and Rehr mention biracial families and adopted children of a different race from their parents, noting that girls tend to “view their mothers as the epitome of beauty” (p. 108), so being physically different from their mothers can lead them to feel inadequate. Richardson and Rehr also point out that body image issues are usually painted as a “white girl” problem, when in reality girls of all races can feel insecure. However, the authors do not offer advice specifically targeted at bi-racial girls and girls who are not Caucasian; presumably they mention the issue so that parents will apply the general advice given throughout the book rather than feel their daughters are exempt from these problems.
But can general advice be sufficient when the issue is complicated by other factors? All of these books presume that body image issues are mainly concentrated from the neck down. The fact that authors have written entire books on the significance of hair in African American women’s lives, that the issue is even explored in children’s books, and that a comedian was compelled to produce a documentary solely on the topic indicates that body image is not only a neck-down issue for African American women. For parents of African American girls, a parenting book on body image that makes no reference to hair is incomplete.

In her analysis of passing, Rottenberg (2008) discusses the “assumption of whiteness” (p. 38). Rottenberg explains that passing was possible because in a society that privileges whiteness, anyone who possesses any superficial resemblance to whiteness will be considered white. The parenting books I read seem to be geared at no race in particular, but I feel that they carry a sort of “assumption of whiteness” as well. The authors wrote their advice for what they considered to be a general audience and assumed that the advice would be useful to parents of all races. Based on my observation of the volume of information available on African American women and their relationship with their hair, the “general” advice for a “general” audience in these parenting books carries two implications. First, that “general” is equated with white, while other races are considered to be a “niche.” This classification normalizes whiteness and “others” the rest. Second, messages directed at the “general” audience can be used by the “niche” audience, but messages directed at the “niche” audience are not useful to the “general” audience so they are not included.

The fact that “general” equates with white is evidenced by my Amazon search for parenting books. The search term “parenting books” results in titles like *Screamfree Parenting*, *Parenting with Love and Logic*, and *Parenting from the Inside Out*. None of titles suggest that these books are geared at a specific race. A search for “black parenting books” also generates relevant results, with books like *The Black Parenting Book: Caring for Our Children in the First Five Years; Teaching, Parenting, and Mentoring Successful Black Males*, and *I’m Chocolate, You’re Vanilla: Raising Healthy Black and Biracial Children in a Race-Conscious World*. All of these books proclaim who they are geared towards in their titles, and the last book even hints at why it’s necessary to craft advice specifically for members of a particular race: because we live in a race-conscious world. However, searching for the term “white parenting books” only results in generic titles similar to the first category; the books are pulled because their authors’ last
names are White. It seems that the prefix “white” is unnecessary because whiteness is assumed unless another race is explicitly named.

Why is it only black, bi-racial, or otherwise “non-white” children who are presumed to need guidance as they navigate our “race-conscious” world? The absence of race in “general” parenting books perpetuates the idea that race is only performed and significant when the performers are not white. In other words, whiteness is perceived as the norm, and it is assumed that the “other” can identify with and learn from the norm while the norm cannot identify with or learn from the “other.”

Conclusion

According to the parenting books I read, adolescence is a sensitive time for daughters, and they will imitate the body image behaviors they see at home. For mothers, this means modeling self-confidence and health through words and actions. Mothers should not disparage their own bodies, and they should lead by example, teaching their daughters a positive relationship with food and their bodies by enacting the behaviors they wish to see in their daughters. Fathers must realize the impact that their words can have on their daughters since they are the first significant men in their daughters’ lives; daughters will come to expect to be treated and viewed the way that their fathers treat and view them and women in general.

I am pleased that the books delegate a role to both parents when it comes to raising their daughters, but the books still perpetuate certain gender stereotypes. Mothers are expected to deny their own feelings for their daughters’ benefit. A mother may harbor genuine, unresolved body image issues, but she is expected to silence these feelings and perform self-confidence anyway so her daughter can grow confident. The books do not advise mothers on ways they can overcome their insecurities; they are only advised to hide these insecurities from their daughters. Chadwick describes how she overcame her body image issues working with a therapist while she wrote her column for Shape; it did not hurt that she also had a nutritionist and a personal trainer at her disposition to work on her health. She was able to truly resolve her body image issues as she began performing self-confidence for her daughter, but most mothers do not have these luxuries. Their performances of self-confidence are paired with a performance of self-denial, since their own feelings are sacrificed for their daughters’ sakes. These parenting books need to take a step further in their recommendations to mothers and also counsel them on how to resolve

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1 As I briefly mentioned earlier, the books also mainly present married heterosexual couples as parents.
their body image issues, either through advice offered in the book or by pointing mothers to additional resources that can help them deal with their feelings.

While fathers have a role in cultivating their daughters’ body image, it is not as extensive as a mother’s role. A father’s main effect does not lie in the ways the father treats and speaks about his body; it is in the way he speaks about women’s bodies, including his daughter’s. Fathers who are critical of women will instill insecurity in their daughters for two reasons: because she will measure herself against her father’s comments, and because she will expect men to be constantly looking at her with a critical eye. However, fathers are portrayed as being oblivious of the effect their words can have on their daughters. Chadwick and Pierson and Cohen do not even speak directly to fathers in their chapters that deal with a father’s influence, and instead address these chapters at mothers so they can help fathers along the way. Portraying fathers as heavily reliant on mothers perpetuates the stereotype that fathers are not as involved or as efficient at parenting as mothers.

Race is barely mentioned in these books, a trend which I view as normalizing whiteness. Based on my Amazon search for parenting books, “general” parenting books seem to be the same as “white” parenting books, while parenting books directed at African Americans are labeled as such in their titles. As a result, “general” parenting books are likely to be read by parents of all races, while only African American parents are likely to read those that contain the words “African American” or “black” in the title. This trend “others” parents who are not white since it is assumed that advice for white parents can be useful to all parents, while advice for African American parents has no value for parents of other races.

I find the overall advice offered in the books useful and logical: children are influenced by their parents, so naturally parents should strive to be a positive influence. However, I find some assumptions of gender and race problematic: promoting self-denial in mothers, portraying fathers as less efficient parents than mothers, and normalizing whiteness.
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The media firestorm of parents and health professionals angered over *Maggie Goes on a Diet* has since died down, but the debate rages on in the book’s Amazon.com reviews. Parents’ opinions range from “Maggie is a great role model for children and adults of all ages” to “This is the message we are sending our girls? If you are skinny….you are now perfect, popular and will get friends” (Amazon.com). Evidently, parents are concerned about the beauty messages their children receive.

I’ll begin my conclusion by summarizing my findings from each chapter, followed by a comparison of the two categories of children’s books I read and then a comparison of the children’s books and the parenting books. After this meta-analysis, I will make recommendations for selecting picture books for children then I’ll offer my suggestions for future children’s books, future parenting books and future academic studies before offering a closing statement.

**Summary of Findings**

**Chapter II.** I discussed children’s books dealing with ethnic hair and I concluded that these authors presented a unified message: natural ethnic hair is beautiful because it represents heritage and because it allows girls to play freely. These overarching messages of beauty also contained messages of race and gender. These books tell African-American girls that when they value their natural hair, they value their racial background. Choosing natural hair also allows them to be active and in control of their actions since it will move with them, sending the message that beauty should not cost women their ability to do as they please.

These books were also marked by the absence of male characters. African-American boys and fathers were not presented as part of the framework of appreciating ethnic hair and heritage. They are invisible in these books, suggesting that the authors assume that sharing the beauty and heritage of ethnic hair is a women’s issue, and that only mothers will read these stories exclusively to their daughters. Aside from alienating boys who may need to be assured that their natural hair should be embraced, these stories are alienating fathers as important figures in their children’s lives since it is assumed that they are absent.

**Chapter III.** I discussed children’s books about body image, and in this case the authors did not present a unified message. Three of the body image books encouraged children to change their habits, but even within this similar subcategory messages of beauty differed. One of these three books, *Maggie Goes on a Diet*, sends a particularly problematic message: that only
“beautiful” girls can be happy, and that to be “beautiful” means to be thin. *My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions and Eating* sends a much more uplifting message: that beauty is wellness. Jenna does change her eating habits, but only after she has addressed the deeper emotional issues that cause her to overeat, and it is this new commitment to her health that makes Jenna feel happy and good about herself, not any physical aspect. Though emotional eating is hinted in *Maggie Goes on a Diet*, the book never shows Maggie resolving any internal issues. *Eddie Shapes Up* sends the message that for boys, losing weight and becoming healthier has nothing to do with beauty. Eddie is never concerned about the way he looks, he is concerned with his physical abilities.

The remaining two books do encourage children to embrace their bodies without changing any of their habits, but their messages of beauty still differ. In *Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat?*, girls are told that they will not be able to see their beauty until they banish their negative talk. The book also emphasizes that grown women suffer from this problem as well. *Shapesville* seeks to tell children that all shapes are beautiful, and furthermore that appearance is not as important as a person’s skills and personality, but the gendered illustrations of the female shapes somewhat undercuts the book’s overall message.

The books’ messages of gender also vary. The plot in *Maggie Goes on a Diet* and *Eddie Shapes Up* parallel each other closely, and comparing these books reveals that boys and girls receive very different messages. *Maggie Goes on a Diet* emphasizes the importance of appearance while *Eddie Shapes Up* emphasizes the importance of accomplishments. On the other hand, *My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions and Eating* tells girls that happiness does not need to wait until their weight has changed, while Maggie and Eddie were not truly happy until changes in their physique had already happened. *Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat?* sends girls the message that they should not obsess about their appearance since it is this obsession that stops them from appreciating their beauty, which truly shines when they are kind to other girls. The gender messages in *Shapesville* are twofold: first, that boys and girls both have special skills that do not need to follow traditional gender divisions, and second that regardless of shape and talent, girls must still be feminine in their appearance.

None of the books about body image addressed race or the fact that body image issues may vary by race. This omission points to the assumption of whiteness at play, meaning that the
authors assume that children of all races can benefit from these body image books if the main character is a Caucasian child and any mention of race is absent from the book.

**Chapter IV.** I found that parenting books suggest that mothers have the biggest influence in shaping their daughters’ body image. Mothers who constantly criticize their own bodies will raise daughters who will feel uncomfortable in their bodies and continue the cycle of criticism. Fathers also affect their daughters’ body image but to a lesser degree. Girls view their fathers as an example of the way they should expect men to treat them, and fathers who constantly criticize women’s bodies (whether it be other women or their daughters directly) will raise daughters who will expect men to scrutinize and criticize them, which in turn will make them feel uncomfortable in their bodies. However, fathers’ attitudes about their own bodies and how these attitudes can affect their daughters are not mentioned in the books.

Like the body image books for children, the parenting books also fall prey to the assumption of whiteness. Race is rarely mentioned as a factor that could affect children’s body image. These books that ignore race are presented as “general” parenting books; parenting books aimed specifically at Africa-American parents exist, but no parenting books aimed solely at Caucasian parents exist. This confirms that African-Americans are considered a niche while books aimed at Caucasians double as “general” parenting books.

**Ethnic Hair Books vs. Body Image Books**

While ethnic hair books present a unified message that children should appreciate their natural hair, body image books are split in their message. Two of the body image books do make a case for children embracing their bodies without changing anything about their appearance or their behavior, but three of the books advocate for children to change their behavior, and in two of these cases a change in appearance is marked as one of the desired consequences of changing their behavior.

The different subject matter accounts for part of this difference. While hair does not affect health and can therefore be accepted as it is with no problem, unhealthy eating habits and lack of exercise do negatively impact health. The health aspect in the body image books accounts for changes in behavior, but it does not account for an emphasis on appearance. To me this is the main difference between the ethnic hair books and the message in one particular body image book, *Maggie Goes on a Diet*: the ethnic hair books find beauty in the children’s appearance from the start, but in the latter book beauty cannot be achieved until their appearance changes.
*Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat?* varies the most from the ethnic hair books in its portrayal of the mother. In *Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat*, the mother is not the perfect role model from the start; indeed, this mother is portrayed as a grown woman with unresolved body image issues whose closest friend also has unresolved body image issues. In contrast, in ethnic hair books, mothers are guiding figures who teach their children about loving their hair through their words and through example by sporting natural hair themselves. The mother in *Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat?* needs guidance herself since she engages in some of the same negative behaviors as her daughter. However, this portrayal of a grown woman with her own body image issues is a realistic one, and the book is aimed at soliciting a change in behavior in both mothers and daughters.

The ethnic hair books link ethnic hair to spirituality, either subtly through their illustrations or directly through the text. Natural hair lifts girls closer to their heritage and their religion. The body image books do not make this connection, instead presenting weight as a burden that keeps children solidly on the ground. The body image books could have connected the care of the body to spirituality, but instead they present weight as a mundane issue that can hold children back instead of lifting them up.

All of the books geared at African-American girls discuss solely hair and do not mention the shape of their bodies, while the body image books focus solely on the bodies of Caucasian children. This perception that hair is a “black girl issue” and body image is a “white girl issue” was evident from my literature review since numerous books have been written about the relationship between African-American women and their hair, and studies have been conducted to confirm that body shape is a bigger concern among Caucasian women. However, compartmentalizing these issues as problems that only affect girls of a certain race can lead girls who do not fit neatly in their category to feel isolated since they do not see their problem being addressed. I am not African-American, but my childhood and teen years were filled with hair issues. As I mentioned earlier I felt alone in my journey to embrace my hair until that fateful episode of *The Tyra Show* that featured African-American girls who struggled with their hair. I identified so much with those girls even though we were not of the same race, and I wished that I had known I was not alone much sooner. Treating hair as a “black girl issue” and body shape as a “white girl issue” isolates young girls who have the “wrong” problem for their race, when what they probably need and want the most is for someone to tell them that their feelings are valid.


**Children’s Books vs. Parenting Books**

The parenting books I read all believe that parents, especially mothers, greatly influence their children’s body image, but the children’s books I read vary in their portrayal of parental influence.

The heavy influence described by the parenting books is present in all ethnic hair books. In the ethnic hair books, mothers are invariably shown exerting a positive influence in their daughters’ body image. Mothers are shown transmitting the importance of natural hair to their children by styling their hair and explaining why natural hair should be valued.

Certain body image books also show parents having a significant influence on their children’s body image, but this influence is not always positive. The negative influence that parents, particularly mothers, can have in their daughters’ body image is evident in *Do These Pants Make Me Look Fat?* The mother here is shown criticizing her own body and realizing that she is the reason why her daughter has a negative self-image. The mother will presumably change her behavior since she has realized the effect it has on her daughter, but we never learn why the mother spoke negatively of herself or what she will do to improve her own body image. This situation reflects the advice in the parenting books: mothers are told that they should put a stop to their negative comments, but the books never address the feelings that lead these women to make such comments or how to resolve these feelings. This suggests that mothers can only raise happy daughters if they suppress their own feelings, and furthermore that it is expected that they suppress their feelings for the child’s benefit.

*My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions and Eating* shows parents being both negative and positive influences on their child. At first, Jenna’s parents bring junk food into the house and ignore the fact that Jenna tends to overeat. However, as Jenna opens up to her parents about her feelings, they stop buying junk food and help her find healthy meals.

The strong influence suggested by the parenting books is negated in *Eddie Shapes Up*. This story shows a mother who seems to have no effect on her son’s behavior. She encourages Eddie to eat a healthy breakfast and she packs healthy lunches for him, but Eddie carries on with his unhealthy behaviors anyway. Since the parenting books I read all dealt with raising daughters, Eddie falls out of their realm, and seemingly he also falls outside the realm of his mother’s influence. His friends have a bigger role in his transformation, since it is his friends who have a serious conversation about fitness with him and who help him exercise once he decides he wants
to be healthier. His mother expresses her approval when Eddie asks for healthier meals, but she had no say in getting him to be healthier. She could only stand back and wait for Eddie to make the decision himself. This is entirely different from the way parenting books portray daughters, since in these books the authors suggest that girls’ body image is completely malleable and dependent on mothers’ behaviors. In Eddie’s case, it seems that whether his mother was a star athlete or a couch potato would have had no effect on him.

Fathers are given a secondary role in parenting books, since most of the advice is directed at mothers. Likewise, fathers and their effect on their children’s body image are diminished in the children’s books. Fathers are completely absent from all but two of the children’s books I read. The only ethnic hair book that contained a father was *Cornrows*, and the father only made a brief appearance at the end of the book, after the mother and grandmother had already braided the children’s hair and explained the importance of natural hair. His only role is complimenting the children on their new hairstyle. In *My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions and Eating*, Jenna’s father is more involved in helping Jenna overcome her emotional eating. Both he and Jenna’s mother discuss the problem with her, join her on her doctor’s appointment, and help her find ways she can eat healthier food. They also shoulder the blame for Jenna’s overeating junk food equally, saying they must both make a commitment to only buying healthy food even though they each enjoy certain types of junk food.

**Selecting Children’s Books**

Children cannot be shielded from the media forever, and reading books that affirm bodies that do not fit the media’s beauty ideal can help teach media literacy. However, parents and teachers must screen the books they read to children to ensure that they are books that can help children feel happy in their own skin by stressing the importance of health over appearance. *Maggie Goes on a Diet* is a prime example of a book that was possibly written with the best intentions but should not be read to children. While the author intended to write a positive book that would help girls be healthier, the book holds an entirely different message of the importance of physical appearance when it comes to friendship and happiness. Still, other books that tell children to embrace their natural traits or to care for their bodies such as the ethnic hair books or *My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions and Eating* can serve as a good initiation into media literacy and loving their bodies.
**Future Children’s Books**

Children’s books are showing a promising new trend of including boys and fathers in the conversation. Body image issues can no longer be treated as a “woman’s issue;” we cannot be solely concerned about young girls’ body image and we cannot expect mothers to shoulder the majority of the burden when it comes to raising children with positive body image. *Eddie Shapes Up*, the first body image children’s book geared at boys, is a step in the right direction, as is the involved father in *My Big Fat Secret: How Jenna Takes Control of Her Emotions and Eating* who shows that body image concerns are no longer solely a mother’s problem. More body image books should be geared at boys, and fathers should be further incorporated in this genre so children are more aware that they can seek help from either parent. Additionally, fathers should be incorporated in ethnic hair books to show young girls that both of their parents admire and value their natural hair.

Future books in the genre, directed at either boys or girls, should avoid presenting children who receive no adult guidance on their new eating patterns. In addition, I’d recommend avoiding presenting children who lose weight too fast or who seem to encounter no obstacles in changing their lifestyle. Parents need to be visible so that children realize that they should always consult an adult before changing their diet since embarking on a self-imposed diet may result in deficient nutrition. Obstacles also need to be visible so children do not feel discouraged when they run into obstacles in their own lifestyle change. It is unlikely that a child will always be able to resist the temptation of a snack, so children need to realize that a slip up does not mean defeat.

**Future Parenting Books**

Body image parenting books show no indication of further incorporating fathers into their advice. A single chapter that includes advice to fathers is not enough. Assuming that the mother is still the reader in the one chapter directed at fathers further diminishes the role of fathers. These books relegate fathers to the role of secondary parents rather than recognizing fathers as an equally important figure in their children’s lives. They do not expect as much involvement from fathers as from mothers. Additionally, these parenting books assume the family model of a married man and woman, barely referring to divorced parents or single parents, and ignoring same-sex parents completely. Directing most advice to mothers further alienates the books from a household led by a single father or two fathers.
Future parenting books need to include fathers as much as they include mothers. In my opinion, we cannot expect men to want to be more involved in their children’s lives if women constantly doubt their abilities to relate to their children and continue to treat them like second-string parents. For fathers to be as involved in their children’s lives as mothers, we should make this level of involvement an expectation, not an exception. Parenting books should communicate this expectation that fathers will be highly involved in their children’s lives through their advice. Rather than treating fathers as the “dopey” parent who needs help from the mother, these books should treat the father as the mother’s equal in parenting. Additionally, this would make these books more helpful for fathers who are the only parent in the household.

Future Academic Studies

Further studies should focus on finding ways to involve men and boys in the body image conversation. Scholars should analyze what it means for young men to suffer from body image issues through analyzing books such as Boys’ Bodies (Adolescent Cultures, School & Society), Looking Good: Male Body Image in Modern America, and The Adonis Complex: How to Identify, Treat and Prevent Body Obsession in Men and Boys. Scholars should also analyze parenting books geared at fathers, such as New Father Book: What Every New Father Needs to Know to Be a Good Dad and The Next Generation of Dads - A book about Fathers, Mentors and Male Role Models to understand the perceived role of father in their children’s lives and how this role can be expanded to include dealing with body image issues.

Final Words

Overall, I see positive messages in the ethnic hair books and most of the body image books I read. These books’ emphasis on being active and playing freely instead of fussing about appearance is an excellent message that can counteract the message that girls receive from other media that appearance is tantamount. Just as society moved away from the “horizontal heroine” and the notion of sacrifice as a feminine ideal, society can move away from beauty’s harmful grip and raise girls who can love their bodies even if they do not match the beauty ideal. However, the current focus is almost entirely on girls’ body image and how their mothers can help them. The focus should be shifted to children’s body image and how their parents can help them.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sully Moreno was born in Panama City, Republic of Panama on April 22, 1989. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree in Media/Communication Studies and International Affairs from Florida State University in August 2010, graduating Summa Cum Laude. She plans to pursue a career in marketing, and in preparation has completed internships at several local advertising agencies: Kidd Group, The Zimmerman Agency, and Onyx Group. Throughout her graduate studies, she has enjoyed helping students overcome their fears of public speaking as a teaching assistant for Fundamentals of Speech and helping students appreciate cultural diversity as a mentor for undergraduates taking Hispanic Marketing Communication. Her main research interests are gender studies and multicultural marketing. She will obtain her Master of Arts degree in Media and Communication Studies on April 28, 2012, along with a certificate in multicultural marketing.