

Introduction to Racialized Narratives for Children

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C. Richard King,

"Introduction to *Racialized Narratives for Children*"

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Thematic Issue *Racialized Narratives for Children*

Edited by C. Richard King and John Streamas

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/>>

C. Richard KING

Introduction to *Racialized Narratives for Children*

A colleague once remarked, with palpable surprise, upon the difficulties of opening productive dialogues about the place of race and gender in Disney films with college students. She noted a tendency to dispute or even deny such scholarly interpretations as example of politically inspired misreading or worse as bad faith projections that read racism and sexism into entertaining animated films. She attributed this resistance not simply to the power of ideological frames to shape the gaze and produce accounts of race and gender, but also to a sense of what childhood meant to her students. That is, her students pushed back because seeing racism and sexism in children stories ran counter to their frames of reference and because it challenged their experiential and ideological commitments to childhood.

Although lacking the hostility or intensity of the reactions described by my colleague, I have encountered a similar incredulity when speaking with friends and families about my work race and racism in children's culture. On the one hand, I not uncommonly have heard invocations of innocence and appropriate: children are innocent and untainted; they have yet to learn the evils of racism; and race is too complex a subject. On the other hand, I have been reminded regularly of the great progress that has been made around race relations, particularly in the world of children. Tolerance, positive images, and multiculturalism have replaced prejudice, stereotypes, and racism. To be sure, the once popular parable about little black Sambo has fallen out of favor; Warner Brothers and other Hollywood studios no longer make overtly racist and dehumanizing cartoons; books no longer instruct students about "the Ten Little Indians;" and fewer picture books approach cultural Others with a mix of fascination and paternalism. And, yes, one can easily find children's books on the beauty of blackness, internment camps, and the civil rights movement; whites are no longer the only authors or consumers of such narratives; comic books have created proud black, brown, and yellow heroes; animated features celebrate multicultural themes; and schools teach about diversity. Such an exercise in counting pivots around a superficial visibility and breeds a sort of complacent contentment: it feels good but does not require critical reflection about how and why racial and cultural difference enter into and activate narrative for children. Indeed, the contributions to this thematic issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/>> encourage a more complex and contextual reading of children's narratives concerned with the themes of ethnic identity, race relations, diversity, multiculturalism, and racism. While concerned with representation, they do not limit themselves to stereotyping, but following Stuart Hall's endeavor to unpack the signifying practices through which meanings, identities, and ideologies get encoded and decoded in specific contexts. As such, they understand race to be active, a technology, a verb: set in motion, constructed, and used by authors and audiences differentially located in the force fields of the contemporary United States. We dub this uneven making and remaking racial discourse, communities, and experiences racialization, and understand narrative that engage in, interpret, and account for such making and remaking to be racialized narratives.

In childhood, racialization intertwines with socialization. Children, far from protected or free from racial messages and texts, find themselves bombarded with stories that center around race and link it to power. In fact, sociologists Debra van Ausdale and Joe Feagin have found that preschool children have working racial templates built upon by subsequent schooling. Their assessment led them to dub racism, "the First R." Their templates take shape and evolve largely through exposure to stories, some told in class, but most read, watched, and played as their growing participation in the worlds of play and books and popular culture. Henry Giroux has argued that narratives directed at children must be understood as "teaching machines" (84). The challenge for (comparative) cultural studies is to develop tools capable of disassembling these machines and making sense of their lessons in context.

The papers in the present collection take up this challenge by asking a pair of interdependent questions: a) How is (racial) difference made (meaningful)? and b) what difference do such differences make? The answers to these queries vary but cluster around a few key themes. First, each of the contributions seeks to connect signification to structure, placing racialized narratives in context. Here, particularly relevant are those papers that explore tensions emergent around multiculturalism (Fry, Lampert), commercialization (Merskin), and new media (Martin). Second, several of the contributors try to work the contradictions that racialized narratives work to resolve in era marked by continued racial hierarchy but committed to colorblindness (Streamas, Roy, Lampert, King). Third, a number of papers clarify the stabilization of the concept of childhood through racialized narratives (Hasan, Prettol, Zorando), while others disentangle the co-production of race, childhood, and narrative (Streamas).

In the collection's opening paper, "Narrative Politics in Historical Fictions for Children" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/2>> John Streamas grapples with the relationships between racialization and narrative. His reflections highlight how cultural conventions and prevailing forms of emplotment work to perpetuate difference and hierarchy. He argues for novel narrative forms that turn away from individualism and development and embrace cause and context. On this foundation, in "A Critical Discourse Analysis of Representation of Asian Indian Folk Tales in US-American Children's Literature" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/3>>, Sudnesha Roy offers an analysis of representations of Indian in children's picture books, detailing both the imagery central to imagining the subcontinent and their pedagogic importance. Through a close reading of titles, illustrations and text, she unpacks the fundamental features of Orientalism in this genre. Far from sterile stereotypes, such representations, she finds, highlight the ways in which India remains an object of imperial fascination and a counterweight to the modern West. Whereas Roy traces how narratives directed at children reiterate established difference, Wafaa Hasan, in "The Politics of Childhood in Ellis's *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/4>> outlines the ways in which such stories construct childhood and literature. Examining the controversy sparked in Canada over Deborah Ellis's *Three Wishes*, she outlines the limits and possibilities of children's literature. In Ellis's work she reads an effort to rework the homogeneous content, authorial authority, and the "child" as a subject position. Throughout, Hasan reminds readers of the political nature of narratives for children, something the genre consistently works to hide from its consumers. Next, in "The Ambiguous Nature of Multiculturalism in Two Picture Books about 9/11" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/5>> Jo Lampert also directs attention to the cultural politics of children's narratives that take up race and cultural difference. Specifically, she explores the rearticulation of multiculturalism in the wake of the attacks of 11 September 2001, highlighting the tensions as the discourse of diversity work to advocate racial tolerance and global harmony, while advancing the singular virtue of white America. Moving from the War on Terror to the American West, in "Polly Bemis, Pedagogy, and Multiculturalism in the Classroom" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/6>> Katy Fry turns to another set of national narratives and an arguably more prominent site of multiculturalism, the classroom. Comparing popular and pedagogic narratives about Chinese immigrant Polly Bemis, she offers an account of the ways multiculturalism works to simplify and celebrate, obscuring the complexities and inequalities associated with race and racism in U.S. history. Andy Prettol unpacks narratives about another historical figure, Helen Keller, in "Racism, Disable-ism, and Heterosexism in the Making of Helen Keller" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/7>>. His analysis is noteworthy for its attention to the intersections of race, ability, sexuality, and gender. In common with Hasan and Streamas, Prettol elaborates the ways in which narratives produce and position specific social subjects and in turn teases out its implications for accounts of difference.

Turning to animated film, J. Zornado argues in his "Children's Film as Social Practice" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/8>> for iconological readings of narratives of difference

directed at children. Through an analysis of *Monsters, Inc* (2001), he directs attention the manner in which even seemingly critical texts work to reproduce dominant relations. In particular, he finds that popular narratives for children naturalize their objectification and exploitation, even as they interpolate and educate their audiences. Animated film also centers C. Richard King's paper "Natives, Nostalgia, and Nature in Children's Popular Film Narratives, and *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/9>>. Based on his reading of *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*, King analyses the interplay of nature and natives in (nostalgic) narratives for children and details its uses of race, gender, civilization, and wildness. He argues that despite its critical edge, the film reinscribes troubling connections between the environment and Indianness, while allowing viewers to escape accountability through individualism and longing. Debra L. Merskin's "Race and Gender Representations in Advertising in Cable Cartoon Programming" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/10>> is an analysis of the brief narratives of commercials to examine what children learn about racial, ethnic, and gender identity. Studying the advertisements on the Turner Cartoon Network, Merskin documents the patterns of representation and then offers an assessment of its implications for forms of identification. In the end, she argues that the archive of images examined do not instruct children but nurture racial and sexual stereotypes throughout their lives. Although much of the literature and this thematic issue offer rather grim assessments of racialized narratives for children, in "Children's Video Games as Interactive Racialization" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/11>> Cathlena Martin offers an alternative reading. Specifically, she argues for the presence of positive female minority leads in children's video games. Displaying an awareness of the complex terrain of the issues at hand, she ably weaves together an intersectional analysis of this emergent, interactive medium.

Compiled by Marie Drews, the volume includes "A Bibliography of Work on Racial Narratives for Children" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss2/12>>, an overview of recent work focusing on racial(ized) narratives for children. Following the objectives of this thematic issue of the journal, the contributors seek to provide a rounded perspective on the various genres and emergent media directed at young people. Last but not least, we appreciate the opportunity offered by *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, Purdue University's peer-reviewed journal published in new media, to present work on a socially relevant topic available in open access to a global readership, scholars as well as the general public.

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