

Narrative Politics in Historical Fictions for Children

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**Abstract:** In "Narrative Politics in Historical Fictions for Children," John Streamas points out that narrative theory and ethnic studies need to ask each other basic questions before a reading of race in children's literature can be useful. Is the literature merely a reflection of the experience of adult writers and parents? That is, must we read the literature as nostalgic, reflecting a developmental bias? Or does it engage children on their own contemporary terms? Are children themselves capable of racism, even if only as extensions of adult racial imaginations? Certainly the growing number of children's books written by writers of color promises progress, Streamas writes, but the constraints of Western narrative traditions, especially the centering of individual characters and the decentering of setting, may thwart that progress. Critics who would dodge the trap of essentializing in analyses of adult culture still fall into the trap when discussing children's narratives. Streamas argues that children's culture cannot aim for enlightenment until their stories replace narratives of individual development with narratives of cause and context.

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**John STREAMAS****Narrative Politics in Historical Fictions for Children**

The two narratives by which modern Western culture constructs racism and childhood follow perpendicular and parallel tracks. The more obvious track is the horizontal axis that we can call Transition, an ostensibly neutral process of development by which children grow into adults. On the vertical axis, which we can call Hierarchy, civilization triumphs over savagery, either by its own violent conquest or because savage peoples exterminate themselves. These two tracks seem to be perpendicular, touching only at a point of origin, either the birth of a child or the emergence of a people. But each axis is shadowed -- to coin a racially loaded pun -- by a parallel narrative. Much Social Darwinism constructed a transition from savagery to civilization that was as neutral and natural as a child's growth into adulthood. The child disappears into the adult, and the savage disappears into the civilized European, and both developments are as natural and irreproachable as a caterpillar's disappearing into a moth. But the parallel vertical axis is loaded with morality and ideology. Civilization on this axis must triumph over savagery because it is morally superior. Similarly, the immature child must yield to the mature adult. On this axis, childhood and savagery are closely linked.

Many nineteenth-century thinkers in both Europe and the United States, according to Patrick Brantlinger, came to define history in terms of racial conflict: "for Hegel as for [Charles Hamilton] Smith and [Robert] Knox, entire races -- indeed continents -- lie beyond the pale of world history, their populations doomed to fall by the wayside" (40). Hegel went further, defining Africa as "the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history is enveloped in the dark mantle of night" (qtd. in Brantlinger 40). If we may benignly ascribe children's lacking history merely to their lacking experience, we may not so benignly ascribe dark-skinned peoples' lacking history to a similar lack of experience. Obviously, then, white adults attached no meaning to the experiences of dark-skinned peoples; and, having no meaning, the peoples could have no history. Any notion that dark-skinned peoples might acquire a history through contact with white adults would be dispelled by the colonizers' mission to exterminate or at least subjugate the peoples. At least white children might acquire a history merely by waiting long enough to grow into adulthood. But the very point of books, films, and other aspects of a culture for children is that they must not be allowed merely to wait, that they must be taught. The vehicles of this education have traditionally been stories. If these stories often take the form of fairy tales and fantasies, then such a form is appropriate to the reader lacking in history. It can always entertain, and perhaps a moral can be tacked on to the ending. Fairy tales can become fables and parables. At the very least, however, they can inculcate in children the sense of narrative that is central to acquiring a history. By implication, therefore, dark-skinned "savages," lacking a history but deserving none anyway, must not be allowed their own narrative culture.

If we perceive narratives as accounts of relations among peoples in changeable contexts, then it seems to me that narrative theory has failed to account for racism as a central relationship in history. The main, and easy, explanation for this is narrative theory's formalism. Much structuralist theory seems reducible to mathematical formulas, its elements the worlds created within texts or between texts and readers. But much poststructuralist theory, despite a professed desire to explode such formulas, is equally wedded to a discourse that it aims to level. Meanwhile ethnic studies scholarship has largely stayed away from narrative theory, as if resigned to the idea that it is inescapably formalist and therefore elitist and part of a colonizing project. I argue, however, that ethnic studies must engage narrative as a central component in the work of teaching for justice. An engaged narrative theory must diminish formalism by nudging aside insular discourse and by placing at the center an analysis of unequal social relations.

Because my concern here is racism and children's culture, I wish to demonstrate the need for an engaged narrative criticism with two troublesome scenes from the modern history of American child-

hood. The first dates from the early twentieth century. Worried that the nation's children were im- properly modernizing partly because they had lost touch with a rugged pioneer past, educators and activists formed clubs and organizations such as the Boy Scouts, the Camp Fire Girls, and the Wood- craft Indians. Philip J. Deloria, in his book *Playing Indian*, analyzes this new culture and his text bears quoting at length:

The connections between Indians and children already had a long history, the two being paired rhetorically as natu- ral, simple, naïve, preliterate, and devoid of self-consciousness. It was no accident that romantic literature often referred to Indians as children of nature and that they were denoted as childlike wards in their political relations with the U.S. government. Children, in turn, could be conceptualized as noble savages with equal ease. In 1904, the psychologist G. Stanley Hall endowed this conflation with scientific rigor, viewing the Indian-child connection through the lens of evolutionary biology. In his influential book *Adolescence*, Hall linked the stages of childhood development with the progressive evolution of human society from savagery to civilization. (106-07)

Deloria provides a 1903 photograph showing a group of white boys "playing Indian," dressed in feath- ered headdresses, buckskin, and blankets as they stand in a Connecticut woods. Ernest Thompson Seton, later one of the founders of the Boy Scouts of America, called this group of boys the "Sinaway Tribe;" and, borrowing the theme of Seton's mission, Deloria writes in the caption, "As developmental savages, children slipped easily into the primitivism that so often marked the path to a better kind of modernity" (97).

The other scene I wish to examine is discussed in Wendy Kozol's essay on the photographic record of the wartime incarceration of Japanese Americans. Kozol argues persuasively that official, govern- ment-commissioned photographs not only reproduce "the government's gaze" but also construct "proud, strong people refusing to be depicted as victims," though this agency itself is saddled with its own hegemonic position as it mistakenly suggests that internees formed a unified community (246). Near the end of her essay she shows two photographs from the Gila River camp in Arizona -- signifi- cantly placed, although Kozol does not acknowledge this, on Indian reservation land -- in which Japa- nese American children participating in a 1942 harvest festival dress in blackface. In one image, at least five blackfaced boys and girls in "rustic" clothes stroll down a path between barracks. In the oth- er, at least sixteen boys and girls reenact a slave auction. Few histories of Japanese Americans show these photographs or acknowledge this event. Among questions registering shock and disbelief Kozol asks for whom these children were "blacking up" and "what does agency mean for these children in burnt cork?" (242) After noting that many critics would regard these images as depicting moments of resistance, Kozol argues that "there are dangers of appropriating white racist codes for subversive purposes because they also reproduce hierarchies of color in the United States. In other words, is this another example of asserting the privilege of not being black? ... Thus even resistant moments that use this particular strategy cannot escape the hegemonic structures embedded in this historically rac- ist practice" (243-44). In his commentary on Kozol's essay, Patrick Brantlinger recapitulates the mes- sage of all government photographs of internees that is, he says, dramatized in the blackface images: "We, interned Japanese Americans, are just the same as other Americans, even though we are differ- ent ... or *because* we are different: Americanness as a coerced unity of unacknowledged difference" (256).

Because Deloria and Kozol are mainly concerned with issues of representation, identity, and au- thenticity, their focus on children is necessarily brief and cursory. Here, I will center the children and childhood as I consider the disturbing images. Are these children merely pawns of their parents, ex- tensions of an adult racist imagination? Clearly they are performing racist acts -- Kozol says so and Deloria strongly implies it. But both authors also carefully withhold a claim that the children are them- selves racist. To what extent then are these children authors of their performance, and to what extent are they actors or even mere characters in their parents' stories? One distinction must be stressed. Deloria never claims any resistance in the white children's "playing Indian," although Kozol does as- cribe at least a possibility of resistance to the Japanese American children's blackface. But are the in-

ternee children any likelier to author their own resistance than they are to author the racist aspects of their blackface? Kozol never claims that the children themselves are either racist or oppositional, implying that they may be no more responsible for the resistance in their performance than for the racism. But this leaves open a possibility that age, or generation, may matter at least as much as race in understanding the children's own roles in their cross-racial performances. Significantly, Deloria writes, "As the nineteenth and twentieth centuries unfolded, increasing numbers of Indians participated in white people's Indian play, assisting, confirming, co-opting, challenging, and legitimating the performative tradition of aboriginal American identity" (8). In other words, for modern Indians social relations often became a fluid and unstable mix of assimilation and resistance. But the instability in performance might, at least partly, be ascribed to the first word in Deloria's title: *playing*. And playing is an activity we associate with children. I would like to propose for generational politics what Kozol and Deloria have done for cross-racial performance. These children are performing not only race but also adulthood. And to some extent at least -- in the case of the Sinaway Tribe, to a very great extent, under the direction of Seton -- these performances were suggested and scripted by adults. This is what compounds the discomfort we feel when viewing the pictures.

Books and films for children are the creations of adults, and therefore any theory of narrative for children must first acknowledge that these adults are performing childhood. This is very different from white children's playing Indian and from Japanese American children's wearing blackface, however, as these adult creators have experienced childhood. Still, we might suggest legitimately that, when a sixty-year-old novelist writes a book for an audience of eight- to twelve-year-old readers, he or she is performing an act of nostalgia. And when the central conflict in the novel is racism, then the author is crossing backward in time and outward in social relations. I suggest that books and films for children, when their subject is racism, risk the violation of both narrative axes by which modern Western culture constructs childhood and racism. And when their narrative achievement joins the goals of ethnic studies scholarship -- that is, when they tell good stories on the way to social justice -- then they successfully obliterate the constructions of Transition and Hierarchy.

Racist nations produce racist cultures. To root out the racisms, we need to ask basic questions. In her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes that, to indigenous peoples, Western methods of research are fraught with racism and imperialism: "The word itself, 'research,' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful" (1). The simple nature of our inquiries is made necessary by the fact that so little study has been devoted to children's culture and racism, but it is made desirable by our interest in keeping our research clear of the complicity in colonization against which Smith warns. We are concerned here with narratives, and a basic question we ask is whether any aspect of Western methods of storytelling is racist. E.M. Forster reduced the distinction between story and plot to the difference between "The king died, and then the queen died" and "The king died, and then the queen died of grief" (qtd. in Prince 72). Theorists debate this distinction, but the more crucial question goes unasked. Why must kings and queens serve as substitutes for generic fictive people? The standards of the literary criticisms that, in the United States, we were taught in high school and college are the standards established by privileged European modernists. If we are poor, women, or people of color, our stories and our criticism may share much with theirs but surely differ in important ways too. We need to examine those differences.

Children's literature should provide a good test of the politics of storytelling. This is not to say that social issues do not exist inside the stories of books for children. But, at least in Western literature, these issues are more often part of setting rather than plot -- they are the social backdrop against which individuals solve problems. For example, in Yoshiko Uchida's *The Bracelet*, a Japanese American girl is separated from her white friend by the wartime incarceration of her racial community; and yet, even after she loses a bracelet meant to symbolize their relationship, she discovers that true friend-

ship endures anyway, rising above all barriers such as wars and racism. The individuals matter here. Nations and institutions are merely part of the setting. This point needs stressing. Forster's classic distinction between story and plot effectively distinguishes chronology from causality. Some critics argue that books for children make this progression, from simple recitations of events to plots in which events have causes and consequences. Gerald Prince defines setting as the "spatiotemporal circumstances in which the events of a narrative occur," but he adds that setting may be "consistent ... or inconsistent, vague or precise," orderly or disorderly -- that is, potentially unstable, part of a plot's tension or even a cause of tension (86-87). Certainly wars and racism and poverty are part of the spatiotemporal circumstances in which events occur, but they are unstable elements of a setting whose progress and outcomes are usually beyond the control of the children who are protagonists of books for children. When in fairy tales trees dance and houses speak, these elements of setting abandon their function within setting and become characters, actors in the plot. More often, though, elements of setting in children's books resemble those elements that, in Prince's definition, are "irrelevant" -- Prince encases this word in quotation marks -- to plot development, parts of a setting that "is presented simply because it is there" (87). That is, in much of the literature for children, setting is neutral, orderly, either unchanging or predictably changing. And when the issues that nations, communities, and institutions create and engage -- wars, racism, poverty -- are part of the setting in children's books, they are reduced to the scale of the individual child protagonist. It is then up to the child to act upon the issues in her relationships with other individuals. In the world of most children's books, the personal is not only political. It is everything. The political disappears into the personal, and the sadness or joy that young readers feel upon reaching the ends of books exists on a personal level of identification and verification. Thus Herbert Kohl reports in his famous essay on the children's book *Babar* that, when he defined colonialism for a group of third-graders, described the costume worn by the hunter who kills the elephant Babar's mother as the attire of a colonist, and provided a history of French colonialism in Africa, then the children's reaction to the book changed radically (21). The fact that they could change is important, a self-contained rejoinder to those who would claim that children need to be sheltered from such harsh realities as racism and colonialism. Kohl implies that children can handle the truth.

A further point needs to be made about whether children are ready to read or view stories about racism. The very claim that they should be sheltered betrays an assumption that they *can* be sheltered. But this is a sign of privilege. All over the world, millions of children suffer malnutrition, systematic sexual abuse, racism, and other oppressions. They are living the harsh realities that privileged parents wish to withhold from their privileged children. These realities remain, long after the child-victims grow and even if they attain some privilege as adults. One of the most harrowing books I know is *Unforgettable Fire*, a collection of pictures drawn or painted in the 1970s by survivors of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima. Although not catalogued as a book for children, many of the images were created by survivors who were children at the time of the bomb. In the caption of a panel of drawings, a survivor writes, "A crowd of people were running along the street car track. All were wounded. There was a man with his skin trailing; another man was breathing faintly, all blood-stained; a third man had blood spurting out of his head ... The sky was red with flames. It was burning as if scorching heaven" (Japan 44). The survivor was fourteen years old when he experienced the bomb. He and his five-year-old sister could not choose to be sheltered. More important, the overwhelming horror conveyed by both the pictures and the captions of all survivors is a narrative of communal -- not just individual -- suffering. When we create stories for children that aim to tell truths about racism, we cannot afford to allow the social to disappear into the personal.

At this point I wish to discuss the issue of representation and the changes wrought by 1960s social movements. Writing in the 1990s, Herbert Kohl claimed "there is a whole new literature for children that has emerged over the past twenty-five years; one that is built upon a sensitivity to bias and a vision of equality that was thoroughly absent in almost all the books written for children in the past"

(28). Writing in the 1980s in the introduction to a collection called *How Much Truth Do We Tell the Children?*, Betty Bacon laments an absence of books about labor and class but still takes hope in the observation that "in the last twenty-five years, through widespread popular struggle," an ideology of the dominant has "come to be widely questioned where racism and sexism are concerned" (3). And certainly few would claim to see in the twenty-first century U.S. the conspicuous and pervasive problem that Donnarae MacCann sees in postbellum children's books: "Legal emancipation was neutralized in public consciousness by racist tale-telling. And the other institutions that impinged upon children's lives -- schools, churches, libraries, the press -- joined in promoting the notion of race hierarchies" (xv).

Yet the relative absence of a politicized criticism of children's culture, three decades after the emergence of popular "kiddie lit" courses in departments of English, suggests that progress is less real than hoped for. Thus, when the editors of the new *Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* ascribe progress to 1960s social movements, they are probably more correct when they claim that contemporary children's literature has "moved beyond its white, Christian cast to reflect the diverse origins and experiences of its audience" than when they claim that this progress has "led to changes in the content" (Zipes, Lissa, Vallone, Hunt, Avery xxix). That is, more writers of color have entered the field, but this does not necessarily translate into changes in content. If these writers of color persist in subsuming the social to the personal, causation to chronology, then the only real progress -- quantitatively better representation -- will be slight. Again, simple questions may be appropriate. Can we sensibly discuss racism in children's literature if we continue to regard it as a problem peculiar to adulthood? Can children commit racism? If so, then are adult writers and filmmakers faithfully depicting children's racist behavior? If not, then how can these writers and filmmakers truthfully depict adult racism to children? Also, writers of color must determine their generational politics. Is childhood merely a developmental step toward adulthood?

Beverly Lyon Clark argues that critics, especially feminist critics, have wrongly adopted the developmental narrative: "feminist theorizing has rarely recognized, let alone addressed, the position of the child. We are so adult centered that the only child we adults can see is ourselves; we do not recognize what it means to attend to children's perspectives" (7). She takes critic Barbara Johnson to task for claiming that, although writers who have not experienced motherhood may have difficulty in writing about it, they should have less difficulty writing about the childhood that they have all experienced: "Social critics would not assume that someone who has left the working class still has an uncomplicated appreciation of what it means to be of the working class; similarly with a transsexual's appreciation of what it means to be female, or male; or the appreciation of someone who passes for white of what it means to be black. Yet Johnson can still assume that anyone who was once a child requires no 'elaboration' of what it means to be in the 'discursive position ... of child' -- not recognizing that, as children's author Avi notes, 'it is impossible to be a child once one becomes an adult.' Johnson is ... using children as stepping-stones" (Clark 9-10). The corollary of this kind of essentializing is that only children can write good children's books. But there is another, even more troublesome point that Clark misses. Readers of children's books may be children; but, even if they are adults, they have passed through childhood and have a memory of it. The same cannot be true of readers in the other contexts in Clark's complaint. The transsexual writer, the formerly working-class writer, and the writer who is racially passing cannot assume that their readers share their experiences. Further, Clark assumes that the developmental narrative necessarily devalues childhood. Thus, although she may correctly claim that developmentalism is appropriately suited to a white middle class that prizes individualism and competition, she assumes less persuasively that US-American writers of color have not adopted this model. This latter claim is inconsistent with her initial observation that, "since its inception," children's literature has been "primarily middle class and white" (xiii). If the books remain white and middle class, and yet if writers of color are now writing many of them, then obviously these writers of color are not changing the content of the books as radically as the Norton editors claim. Part of this may be

attributable to an aspect of 1960s counterculture: a belief that peace-loving adults could return to the very prelapsarian innocence and bliss that, according to the counterculture, defined childhood. And a part, too, must be attributable to the politics of mainstream publishing. But perhaps the biggest problem is that, regardless of the racial politics of writers of color, their generational politics might well have assimilated the developmental, chronological narrative (the developmental model pervades the other end of life too, in white middle-class constructions of old age; but, then, there is no field of literature called "Old Persons' Books").

In conclusion, the problem with the developmental model is not that it assigns -- like social Darwinist scientific racism -- escalating value to the process of growing and "maturing" but that, rather, it fails to analyze causes. The fact that college students even today too often report that they were taught little of the history of racism is an indictment not only of schools' history curricula but also, and perhaps more seriously, of their cultural curriculum. History courses still teach names and dates, but literature courses teach stories which still have a potential to share communal concerns and analyze causes.

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