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SASSY COWS AND MAGICAL JUJU:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF RACE AND ETHNICITY ON  
THREE NICKTOONS PROGRAMS

A Thesis in

Media Studies

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis critiques programming on the children's media channel Nicktoons for patterns of racial representation -- including the presence of stereotyping -- in characters. As research has shown that representation of ethnicity may be especially influential to children viewers, and that there are precedents for problematic racial representations in popular media, including children's media, the continued examination of patterns of racial-ethnic group member representation and stereotyping in character depictions has significant implications. Utilizing textual analysis, three Nicktoons' programs are examined for racialized constructions of characters, including constructions with hegemonic and ethnocentric implications. The thesis argues that three programs, *Back at the Barnyard*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and *Tak and the Power of JuJu* problematically construct analogies of African Americans, Asians, and native peoples, respectively. The constructions in these Nicktoons programs typically "other" these groups when contrasted to dominant white culture -- or at least the animated stand-ins for dominant white culture -- and imply cultural hierarchies in which white culture is superior and/or the norm. The thesis concludes by summarizing its main findings and discussing the implications of such portrayals in an era of expanding programming for children.



Chapter 6. MAGICAL JUJU: <i>TAK AND THE POWER OF JUJU AND</i>	
THE INFANTILIZED NATIVE - - - - -	79
Introduction - - - - -	79
Tiki Huts and Bongo Drums: Visual and Non-Verbal Cues - - -	81
The “Disgraced”: Vocabulary and Dialogic Issues - - - -	84
“Juju Solves Problems”: Character Relationships and the Role of Magic -	88
Conclusion - - - - -	90
Chapter 7. CONCLUSIONS - - - - -	92
Overview - - - - -	92
Further Conclusions - - - - -	94
Suggestions for Future Research - - - - -	97
References - - - - -	99

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## Chapter 1

### Introducing the Issue

This thesis assumes that it is important and necessary to study racial representations in children's television. The issues associated with racial-ethnic group member visibility necessitate an undertaking of this sort. A large element of the above assumption is the nature of this particular audience, as will be developed later; children *do* learn from media, and *do* cognitively process the messaging they consume. The issue of race is also key, however. So, of all the issues involved with children's television, why race, and why now?

Looking at statistics from the 2010 U.S. Census, 72.4% of Americans self-identify with the racial ethnic group "white". Concurrently, 12.6% identified as "African American", 16.3% Hispanic, 4.8% "Asian", and .9% "American Indian." Over 1/4th of Americans, then, identify as people of color. The immediacy and availability of these numbers alone should warrant corresponding rates of television diversity. Why then has previous research found that, "The 'social reality' typically shown on broadcast television is not representative; it is a prism concentrating certain images and eliminating others rather than being a mirror of the social world in North America" (Huston & Wright, p. 57, as cited from Huston et al., 1992). Brown-Graves concurs with this, arguing that "the social world of television is predominantly European American, middle class, and male regardless of the type of programming examined" (1996, p. 63); this has special significance for your audiences, because "For children, exposure to members of diverse groups interacting can influence their feelings about working and playing with others" (Brown-Graves, p. 80). In this way, lack of diversity has shown itself as a serious programming issue and conscious ethical dilemma in children's television.

Even assuming racial representation exists in contemporary children's television, it may in fact be marginalized: grouped into specific genres and character types, or riddled with stereotypical portrayals and tropes. Sherryl Brown-Graves argues that "Visible racial-ethnic groups are not only underrepresented in the social world of television, but they are segregated by the type of show and portrayed in limited roles" (Brown-Graves, p. 69). Does programming, then, offer child audiences diverse and visible portrayals of various ethnic and cultural groups, or are they limited systematically in such ways as Brown-Graves notes?

Perhaps most meaningful in this thesis is her latter point: the way in which race and ethnicity is constructed is significant, despite how the totality of portrayals may (or may not) reflect a statistical reality. With children's programming, the use of animation may be especially significant in terms of racialized portrayals. Cartoons are populated by symbolic representations of people and are especially vulnerable to stereotypical presentations because of their utilization of exaggerated qualities in visual animation. Given their animated nature, the medium is capable of visually presenting a plethora of racial-ethnic categories; no casting is required. But on the other hand, race and ethnicity may be portrayed in a variety of ways, including names of characters, visual styles, vocal patterns and body movements/behaviors. What sort of racialized characters appear in children's television animation? How might children's television perpetuate, or challenge, traditional mediated images of race and ethnicity? What might be the hegemonic, or counter-hegemonic, implications of racial images in children's television?

This thesis will critique programming on the children's media channel, Nicktoons, for patterns of racial representation -- and therefore the potential for stereotyping -- in characters. As research has shown that representation of ethnicity may be especially influential to



children viewers (Brown-Graves, 1999), examining patterns of racial-ethnic group member representation and stereotyping in character depictions has significant implications.

### **Choosing the Channel**

To address such issues, race and ethnicity on popular animated programming on the cable network Nicktoons will be examined. Nicktoons is both a sister channel and subsidiary of the children's programming behemoth Nickelodeon, which itself is both a major cable television network but also a licensing brand (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Sandler, 2004; Simensky, 2004). Debuting in 2002, Nicktoons' slogan emphasizes the popularity and style of its programming: "Big Stars, Animated". Created from the commercial success, appeal and popularity of cartoon programming on Nickelodeon, Nicktoons has maintained a consistent presence in children's television since its inception (Simensky, 2004). Nickelodeon's then-executive VP manager Cyma Zarghami was quoted by the industry trade journal *Variety* in 2003 as saying, "The goal of this new channel is to create a home for the next generation of animation, a laboratory of new talent and animation styles" (Oei, 2003). That Nicktoons is part of the larger Nickelodeon brand expands the newer network's industrial significance as well as the potential for brand loyalty among younger viewers. Favoring contextual analysis of this site of analysis and the corporate umbrella under which it operates, the thesis will examine Nicktoons as being historically interconnected with the branding techniques and message construction of Nickelodeon. In critically evaluating both Nicktoons programming and the Nickelodeon brand, this thesis will shed light on the practices that permeate children's cultural artifacts and frame racially significant material to be offered as entertainment to large child audiences.

Recognizing the potential of children to learn from the media they consume, it is important to understand that “mass-produced images fill our daily lives and condition our most intimate perceptions and desires,” transmitting dominant forms of public pedagogy (Giroux, p. 2). Giroux went on to argue that “Media culture defines childhood, national identity, history, beauty, truth, and individual agency” (p. 2). Nickelodeon and Nicktoons, with their intertwined messages and stylistic themes, produce an alarming amount of the media available to children. The messages they construct and offer to audiences reflect the underlying themes of media as part of public pedagogy:

Culture, especially media culture, has become the primary educational force in regulating the meanings, values, and tastes that legitimate certain subject positions- what it means to claim an identity such as male, female, white, black, gay, straight, citizen, or noncitizen (Giroux, p. 2).

Animated children’s content has historically been presented as an “exemplary” form of entertainment, one that can “stimulate the imagination, protect innocence, and create a healthy sense of adventure, all of which is assumed to be “good” for kids” (Giroux, p. 91). Studies of this medium show animation both “operates on many registers” and acts as a “teaching machine” for children (Giroux, p. 91). Though much critical analysis has typically been focused on Disney content and influence, the principle behind such studies can be applied to the animation available on Nicktoons given their similar cultural visibility, reputation for quality, and the claims of producing empowering material for children.

## Methodology

A majority of Nicktoons' shows report mainly white, primarily male-centric casts; *Jimmy Neutron*, *Planet Sheen*, *Fan Boy and Chum Chum*, *Fairly Odd Parents*, and *Danny Phantom* combined have 5 non-white characters consistently incorporated into their plotlines. The collective amount of airtime these programs receive is upwards of 8 hours per day (Nicktoons Schedule, 2012). The marginalization of minorities in children's programming is illustrated when the majority of programs on a children's channel like Nicktoons fail to provide racially or ethnically diverse content (Luther, Lepre, & Clark, 2012).

However, three programs especially stand out as having characters who display characteristics of people of color and/or offer portrayals of non-Western culture. Focusing on Nicktoons' racial-ethnic representation, the tendencies of these three cartoon shows from their lineup are textually analyzed. Each of the programs was chosen for their potential for racial and ethnic representation. *Back at the Barnyard*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and *Tak and the Power of Juju* feature either overtly non-white characters, or "ethnicized" non-human characters with the qualities of different non-white ethnic groups. The degree to which the ethnicity of characters are represented -- either metaphorically or explicitly -- is examined, with issues including the potential linkages to previously established stereotypes, the relationship of non-white characters to white (or "whitened") characters, and the degree to which ethnicity in these programs are celebrated or contained in particular ways.

*Back at the Barnyard*, a spinoff of the Paramount/Nickelodeon animated theatrical film *Barnyard*, is a computer-animated series about a cast of farm animals who have the ability to think critically, speak, and interact not only with each other but also with humans. Plotlines continually deal with the animals' abilities to outsmart the humans around them and

thus maintain their cover as innocuous farm residents. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* centers on Aang, an “Avatar” who acts as the “voice of the planet”, utilizing his element-bending abilities to help unite separate warring tribes and bring peace to the world. In his quest to master the elements Aang and his friends journey across his world, encountering many different types of people and bending abilities. *Tak and the Power of Jujus*, based on a popular video game, is a CG animated series about the primitive Pupununu tribe. The Pupununus struggle with their magical counterparts, the Jujus. Normally incapable of magical abilities, one member, Tak, is the Pupununu exception and can access powers usually reserved for the Jujus. Several episodes from each program were chosen for analysis; the episodes chosen were not random, but rather ones in which racialized and ethnicized characters or themes were especially prominent.

This thesis, using textual analysis, argues that *Back at the Barnyard*, *Avatar*, and *Tak* problematically construct analogies of African Americans, Asians, and native peoples, respectively. As will be detailed in later chapters, the constructions in these Nicktoons programs typically “other” these groups when contrasted to dominant white culture -- or at least the animated stand-ins for dominant white culture -- and imply cultural hierarchies in which white culture is superior and/or the norm.

### **Objects of Study**

Borrowing terminology from existing research, the term “racial-ethnic group member” can be considered the “sociological or socially constructed sense of five color groupings, despite the fact that from the biological perspective humans represent a single race, the human race” (Brown-Graves, p. 61-62). The fluidity of the cartoon medium

potentially allows for diverse presentations of racial-ethnic group members. Unfortunately, the cartoons on *Nicktoons*' do not always offer such inclusive depictions.

Analyzing *Back at the Barnyard*, *Avatar*, and *Tak* for their potential for racial and ethnic representation allows this thesis to distinctly consider several issues surrounding racial representation in children's television media. Specifically, *Back at the Barnyard* looks at gendered stereotyping of African American females via anthropomorphized animals, *Avatar* considers the othering of non-Western cultures through tropes of Orientalism, and *Tak* demonstrates the celebration of Whiteness and western perspectives, the latter of which seems especially illustrative of traditional displays of "othered" natives and Native Americans. The problems of crafting (and stereotyping) race, assimilation and infantilization of non-Western cultures and of portraying ethnic diversity and showing the "other" will be evaluated through analysis of these Nicktoons' programs.

Gail Dines and Jean Humez in their critical media reader, *Gender, Race and Class in Media* (2011), define "stereotypes" in media as "reductive, much repeated social imagery" (p. 631). Characters can display stereotypes through demeanor, dialogue, physical appearance, tropisms, perception of and by others on the show, and role within plotlines. Textual analysis therefore helps catalog such characteristics in particular texts as characters are thoroughly examined for their propensities toward specific stereotyped tropes.

Stereotyping has a strong ideological component: "The use of stereotypes is evidence of the lack of respect afforded visible racial-ethnic groups on television" (Brown-Graves, p. 71). Stereotypes can reinforce particularly hegemonic ideas: "(a) racism is not a problem in our society; (b) regardless of race or ethnicity, the American dream is accessible to all Americans; (c) society is basically functioning well" (Brown-Graves, p. 74-75).

Stereotypes do not have to be literally human, but can also be illustrated in the anthropomorphized behaviors of animated animal characters. We have seen this at least as far back as the 1941 film *Dumbo*, which offers crudely racialized, if benevolent, crows (Booker, 2010). In this thesis, stereotyping in sentient animal characters is illustrated in *Back at the Barnyard*. Exemplifying common racial-ethnic stereotypes, *Back at the Barnyard's* content will be analyzed to consider how a character, in this case the female cow Bessy, can be tied to specific and prescribed racial or ethnic roles and how an animal character can be “ethnicized” within children’s cartoon programming.

Set in a fictional world that has strong Asian undercurrents, *Avatar* will be textually analyzed to consider how tropes of Orientalism, an analytical category from Edward Said, may influence children’s animation. The characters on *Avatar* adhere to “Asian” identity, with further ethnic distinction encompassed in their tribes particular “element bending” abilities. Textual analysis of *Avatar* reveals the “othering” of non-Western characters to the point of celebrating Whiteness and western perspectives via the characters most strongly associated with whiteness and the West in the program. *Avatar's* content reflects a traditional portrayal of the Orient as in a “position of both outsider and incorporated weak partner to the West” (Said, p. 208).

Considering the perpetuation of contrasting stereotypes in the form of the “native” is important to studies of race and representation. Infiltrating popular culture, media images of “native” range from “certain primitive nobility and simple dignity” to “cheating, cunning, savagery and barbarism” (Dines & Humez, p. 84). Luther, Lepre and Clark (2012) posit that though some attempts have been made to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of native peoples, most media “have tended to falter and inadvertently reinforce the blatant

stereotypes” (p. 34). *Tak and the Power of Juju* offers diversity in the sense that its cast does not fit a common or well-known ethnic or cultural group, but nevertheless is illustrated of native or indigenous people. This analysis considers how Tak and his world reflect mainstream media’s tendencies to infantilizing indigenous populations, relegating them to stereotypical roles grounded in ethnocentric sentiment.

### **Contributing to the Corpus of Literature**

This thesis will be grounded in previous studies on representation in media generally, as well as in children’s media specifically, and studies on how such representations may affect young audiences. Evaluating existing works on stereotyping and audience identification with on-screen characters demonstrates the significance and influences of media from a broader sociological perspective. Authors such as Benshoff and Griffin (*American on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies*, 2009), Miller (*Ethnic Images in American Film and Television*, 1978), Luther, Lepre and Clark (*Diversity in U.S. Mass Media*, 2012), Said (*Orientalism*, 1994) and Dines and Humez (*Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, 2011) have delved into this area, producing textual analysis of race in visual media. More specifically, examinations of race in children’s media also contribute to this thesis. Banet-Weiser (*Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*, 2007), Hendershot (*Nickelodeon Nation*, 2004), King, Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo (*Animating Difference: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Films for Children*, 2010), Bramlett-Solomon (*Looking at Race in Children’s Television*, 2008), and Wasko (*Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*, 2001) offer

analyses of representation in children's television and film and serve both as information for previous characteristics of racial representations and as models for this thesis.

Although the project itself is not in the media effects tradition, research on how media might affect viewers also will contribute to this project, especially to highlight the stakes involved with children's entertainment. Looking at sociological constructs like children's cognitive learning ability and media effects studies on child audiences' ability to learn from media messaging helps to round out and validate this research. Existing research emphasizes established relationships between children's media consumption and corresponding cognitive formations. In-line with Greenberg and Mastro (2008), the thesis will review works to "understand linkages between the media and children's development of ideas about race" (74). Sherryl Brown-Graves (1996) relayed the importance of such studies with her conclusion, "exposure to presentations of visible racial-ethnic groups can affect children's attitudes towards those groups" (80), including for both viewers in those ethnic groups as well as viewers not self-identifying in those groups. This work helps to further such studies with a contemporary textual analysis of children's television programming.

While these three programs on Nicktoons collectively offer overall racial-ethnic diversity, the context and content of the programming are evaluated to examine the presence of hegemonic and/or counter-hegemonic messages. Do the examined Nicktoons programs perpetuate or circumvent the problems associated with presenting racially irresponsible messages to children? Nicktoons provides children with identifiably white, African American, Asian, and Native or Indigenous characters. Merely providing example of a particular racial-ethnic group member is not enough to guarantee that that character contributes positively, holistically or respectfully to the opinion formation of the child



viewer. In line with existing research, Nicktoons' programs perpetuate particular kinds of messages about race to viewers proven susceptible to media messaging.

The catalyst for this thesis lies in producing a contemporary analysis of a popular site of practice in children's television media. In looking at current children's programming on Nicktoons this thesis aims to continue work on racial representation on children's television and update such work by examining a niche cable channel, but one also part of a larger children's media empire. The issues associated with racial-ethnic group member visibility necessitate an undertaking of this nature; children *do* learn from media, and *do* cognitively process the messaging they consume. Typing these propensities to the programming on the popular network Nicktoons' is integral to critiquing media and, perhaps, producing the types of media that can teach audiences appropriate, valuable lessons about out-group racial-ethnic group members.

Previewing the organization of this thesis, the work will be divided into seven chapters. Chapter Two examines the corpus of work, providing justification for study and the tenants of existing research. Work reviewed includes children's ability to learn from media (Greenberg & Mastro, 2008; Corsaro, 2005, Brown-Graves, 1999, 1996; Bandura 1986; Dorr 1986), examples of race in media (Grant, 1994), and children's media praxes specifically (Banet-Weiser, 2007; MacBeth, 1996). Chapter Three explores the interconnectedness between Nickelodeon and Nicktoons. The purpose of this chapter is to establish the historical and notable branding tendencies and techniques of the two channels (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Sandler, 2004; Simensky, 2004). In this chapter Nicktoons will be tied to Nickelodeon as a media entity that has significant market and branding power, but also industrial incentives that may encourage certain messages about race and ethnicity. The historical context that

allowed for Nicktoons to become a site of practice will be evaluated to ground this channel as obligating textual analysis. Chapter Three will detail the methodology for this thesis as well as offer overviews of the programs evaluated and charts of the analyzed episodes.

Chapters Four, Five and Six each engages one of the programs. Chapter Four focuses on Bessy from *Back at the Barnyard* that is representative of a specific racial group. Under consideration are the visual appearance, dialogue and vocal patterns, relationships with other characters, and role within the series. This evaluation a character to a specific and prescribed racial role to determine how an animal characters can be “ethnicized” within children’s cartoon programming. In its analysis of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, Chapter Five considers the framing of Asian-like cultures. Practices of Orientalizing characters will be examined in context of *Avatar’s* main “whitened” characters to the more ethnicized peripheral and villainous characters. Finally, Chapter Six deals with *Tak and the Power of Jujū’s* depiction of a “primitive” ethnicity, critiquing messages about the inferiority and incompetence of non-traditional cultures. The infantilization and assimilation of non-Western groups will be concurrently considered here.

Chapter Seven will summarize the main points from the analysis chapters of the thesis and reflect on the prognosis for children’s television media. The chapter engages with the implications of this study’s findings for racial representation on children’s television.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

Media studies work, even when just focusing on television, is immense. Researchers have examined topics focusing on political economy, to content trends and complexities, to the ways audiences cognitively process media.

This thesis is grounded in existing studies that look at representation in media generally and also at representation in children's media specifically. Reviewing this scholarship offers insight into previous tropes of racial representations. A goal of this thesis is to demonstrate the significance and importance of media from a broader sociological perspective, including considering how such representations may be influenced by the context of corporate-based children's television, and what they may mean for children's understandings. For the latter, work that examines how television may influence children's understandings will also be considered. A review of this particular work will begin the chapter.

#### Taught by TV

In *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*, Sarah Banet-Weiser sought to understand the cultural and marketing frameworks that represent children as active consumer citizens, the large infrastructure that has been created around children television, and the incentives for watching increased amounts of television that such efforts encourage (2007). She acknowledges that skyrocketing rates of viewership for the "under 18" demographic illustrate trends of significant exposure to TV and that therefore have the potential to

influence an entire generation of viewers. The advent of child-centric television channels has increased the amount of time per day children spend watching TV (Banet-Weiser, 2007). Banet-Weiser's research on the influence of Nickelodeon supplements more general studies about amounts of television viewing and how such viewing may affect individuals' perceptions of the world. Researchers' conservative estimates reveal that children spend 2-3 hours per day watching television (MacBeth, 1996). U.S. children spend more time per year watching television than they do in school.

Children learn from the television media they consume (Greenberg & Mastro, 2008; Van Evra, 1998; MacBeth, 1996). MacBeth (1996) found that, "TV does have some effects that have been shown to be measurable on average, over and above the many other influences on its viewers and despite their individual differences" (p. 3). Although there is incongruity among researchers as to the level of this effect, it is recognized that "information acquired from mass media can teach and reinforce ideas about the social world" (Greenberg & Mastro, 2008).

Children in fact may be more influenced by television than older audiences. The idea of children's vulnerability is both generalizable and readily recognized; much legal policy reflects the belief that children are a special population in need of stricter supervision or monitoring. Embodying this, the Children's Television Act of 1990 was implemented to establish restrictions on television produced for child audiences. Legislation here monitors and controls the amount of "commercial time" allowed during children's programs and implemented "broad requirements for airing educational content" (McAllister & Giglio, 2005, p. 31). Judith Van Evra argues that children are in the process of forming lasting attitudes, beliefs and opinions about the world (1998). Van Evra's research discerned that

children watching age-appropriate content paid attention to and comprehended the programming (as cited in Wright, St. Peters, & Huston, 1990). Similarly, Corsaro (2011) described childhood as a progression, where children “strive to interpret or make sense of their culture and participate in it” (p. 8). Children can craft lifelong attitudes and ideologies by using the information they acquire. MacBeth (1996) found that expansive consumption of television increases the likelihood that the information ascertained from its messaging will serve a pivotal role in cognitive formation.

The effects of television content about race and ethnicity seems especially important given their implications for how young people view themselves and others based on racial categories. How, then, might we understand how children might be affected by television’s lessons about race and ethnicity?

### **Perspectives on the Effects of Race and Ethnicity in Media Content**

Research has demonstrated children’s ability to perceive examples of race and ethnicity in media (Berry & Kernan, 1982; Greenberg & Mastro, 2008). Summarizing Brown & Bigler’s (2005) research, Greenberg & Mastro (2008) reported that by age 5, children are “knowledgeable about the concrete features of racial stereotypes, including observable, visible features such as body type, skin color and attire” (p. 75). Given this information, it seems highly unlikely that children would be unaware of racial depictions in the programming they watch.

Studying children’s perception of race and ethnicity in media can raise issues about exposing child audiences to blatantly inappropriate content. To understand this issue Brown and Bigler (2005) looked at child audiences’ patterns of discrimination recognition. Their

study outlined the cognitive theories, situational cues, and individual differences among children that can help them distinguish race and gender. Proposing a model of how children cognitively process discrimination, the two found the ability to sort oneself and others into categories of race and gender is an early-emerging skill (2005, p. 537). Work on discrimination recognition can be applied to studies on children's ability to perceive examples of race and ethnicity in television media. Utilizing the research of Fagot and Leinbach (1991), Katz and Kofkin (1997), Aboud (1988), Madge (1976), and Alejandro-Wright (1985), Brown and Bigler outlined the following ages as critical to the trajectory of children discerning racial discrepancies:

**By First Birthday:** Children can visually discriminate between prototypical (both adult and child) members of racial and gender groups.

**By Age 4:** Most children can correctly label their own and others' gender.

**By Age 6:** Children can label their own and others' race based on physical characteristics.

**By Age 10:** Children's initial knowledge of racial categories is expanded to include sociobiological qualities.

Adapting existing studies to a media-based setting, Greenberg and Mastro indicated children could distinguish examples of race and ethnicity in television content: "In terms of race-based outcomes, children begin to make reference to surface-level stereotypes associated with race and ethnicity between the ages of 6 and 8" (Greenberg and Mastro, 2008: 77, as cited from McKown & Weinstein, 2003). Nicktoons' audience, which considers its' key demographic to be kids 6-11 (Pulse, Viacom Investor Newsletter, 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter, 2012) is clearly capable of discerning characters' presentations of race and ethnicity.

Cultivation Theory may also help explain the ways in which children “construct a world view based on media exposure” (Greenberg & Mastro, p. 78). George Gerbner and Larry Gross’ (2002) cultivation theory approach argues for consistent themes in media (especially television) messages and how long-term exposure to television may influence views of people and of the world generally. This is also true for “messages about racial and ethnic groups” (Greenberg & Mastro, p. 78). In line with this theoretical approach, children who consistently watch television could begin to make assumptions about visible racial-ethnic groups assuming a consistency of on-screen portrayals of characters in those groups, including a consistent absence of such groups. If groups do not appear on television, long-term viewing may cultivate the belief that members of those groups also are non-visible in society. According to Brown-Graves (1999), such formed assumptions could affect both viewers in those rarely portrayed racial groups and viewers in the majority race:

In the case of same-race viewers whose group is rarely shown, it is hypothesized that invisibility might create feelings of low self-esteem. For other-race viewers it is assumed that lack of inclusion of an out-group would lead to the mentality of “out of sight, out of mind” (p. 712).

Given the heavy television viewing of many young children, cultivation theory places a premium on the types of messages received by children, fostering the need for closer evaluation of what types of content are currently available to that demographic.

Another popular theoretical model that helps explain the cognitive process behind interpreting media messages is Social Cognitive Theory. Developed by Albert Bandura, this process is especially helpful in explaining children’s selection of role models and social construction of reality (Bandura, 2001). Applying social cognitive theory to media

messaging, children form opinions about “normal” actions for members of racial-ethnic groups based on their observations of on-screen characters. Appropriate presentations of race and ethnicity are important as they affect child audiences’ perceptions about what types of actions are “normal” for racial and ethnic groups.

According to social cognitive theorists “media messages may constitute a form of social instruction for children, imparting information regarding how to think about, act around, and treat others in society” (Greenberg & Mastro, p. 76, as cited from Bandura, 2001). Social cognitive theory posits that watching particular versions of television may lead the viewer to imitate TV’s content (Brown-Graves, 1999). Children exposed to media that do not offer positive out-group relationship examples may use television as a model when forming relationships with their peers, especially when television content rewards certain types of behavior (that is, desirable characters act in those ways). This may include how television models ways of speaking as a member of a group, and ways of speaking *to* a member of a group. On the other hand, content that inadequately represents entire populations excludes vast amounts of children from being able to find an in-group character with which to identify and model. Sherryl Brown-Graves reported, “Television treats visible racial-ethnic groups in a perverse way, paying attention to them when it does not matter and failing to shine the spotlight on them when it is important” (1996, p. 71). These learning theories demonstrate the role of children’s media including representations (or lack thereof) of diverse races and ethnicities; in this way child audiences will be able to form positive or negative opinions about out-group members with help from the guiding social influence of the television they consume.



Summarizing these theoretical approaches to learning, two key factors are shown to incite children's cognitive processing of TV content: consistency of messaging, and exposure to television media. Studies argue that "Exposure to presentations of visible racial-ethnic groups can affect children's attitudes towards those groups" (Brown-Graves, 1996, p. 80). It has already been revealed that children receive ample exposure to media and especially television, thus negating the need for further argument of this aspect of social learning. The content of children's programming should be examined to reveal the types of messages allocated to children.

Research about how children may be affected by media -- including racially relevant media -- may be comforting in a world of educational television. However, Dorr found the most television devised for children was not put together with their express well being in mind. In fact, she said, "...some of it is decidedly aggressive, sexist, ageist, racist, consumption-oriented, sexy, inane, or moronic. Little of what children watch is truly uplifting, visionary, educational, or informative" (p. 82). Given Huston and Wright's (1996) conclusion that, "the effects [of media messages] depend on the nature of the programming" (p. 54), Dorr's findings are cause for concern. And this is especially true of media content in which racial lessons are taught.

### **Racial/Ethnic Representations in Media**

Analyses of racial and ethnic representations in broadcasting reveal the range, thematic consistency, and ideological implications of content available to television viewers. Television's often-problematic presentation of racial and ethnic group members underscores the importance of racial discourse in popular culture (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009). Critical

media analyst Jennifer Esposito argues, “We must continually critique and examine representations of racialized bodies, especially those bodies already marginalized within the system of racial hierarchies” (p. 95). Though much current media content features more diverse race and ethnicity-conscious than that of the past (Dines & Humez, 2011), many critical media scholars acknowledge even modern media’s inadequate representations of the social world. Often, this inadequacy comes in the form of denial: the invisibility of racial differences (and therefore privileges and oppressions). We see this in primetime television. A popular program such as *Friends* presents a mostly white world, and when people of color do appear, they are stripped of any ethnic identity (Chidester, 2008).

The same basic denial of racial difference also characterizes much children’s programming. For example, looking at children’s television content Sarah Banet-Weiser considered the “consumption of race” on *Nickelodeon*. Finding that “race thus functions as an ambivalent category” (p. 144), Banet-Weiser examined the inconsistency that currently permeates children’s television’s presentations of race and ethnicity. Race, she found, is seldom mentioned on *Nickelodeon* though it is clearly interwoven in the style and thematic elements of programs; this is particularly exemplified with the “urban” tropes of *Nickelodeon’s Hey Arnold* (1996-2004) and the “Latina” infusion on *Dora the Explorer* (2000-Present). Banet-Weiser revealed how programs commoditize and generalize race as “a trope that is urban and cool” (p. 145), essentially ignoring the political references associated with racial categorization. The danger of such presentations lie in the fact that the offered content proclaims racial difference as no longer salient in the U.S. These messages belie the actuality of media’s proclaimed “diversity” by making light of a still prevalent and problematic issue, that of appropriate racial and ethnic presentation (Banet-Weiser, 2004).

Other research confirms the ideological tendencies of race in children's media. Noting that "the social world of television is predominantly European American, middle class, and male regardless of the type of programming examined" (1996, p. 63), Brown-Graves addresses the "whitewashing" of contemporary television. Limited inclusions of racial and ethnic groups would, according to Brown-Graves, "offer support for negative perceptions of members of visible racial/ethnic groups on television" (Brown-Graves, p. 710) and lead children to believe underrepresented groups have a relative lack of power and importance in larger society (1999). Luther, Lepre and Clark (2012) found the presence of Native American characters on children's television negligible and often these characters were "lost in the background among a group of children" (p. 46).

Entertainment media is a source of knowledge. It conveys messages to audiences and offers a lens through which to view the world. Themes and images of racial minorities adhere to a larger hegemony in media making, allowing "entertainment media to become a tool for racial oppression" (Larson, p. 13). But the ignoring of race is not the only ideological message about race from the media. The use of stereotyping and specific racial or ethnicized character construction encourages audiences to similarly construct specific and sometimes inappropriate views of out-group racial or ethnic members.

### **The Real Message**

Keeping in mind the affective tendencies of television messaging and the ability of children to learn through media consumption, it is important to discuss the types of messages media typically offered about marginalized racial and ethnic group members. In their comprehensive *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the*

*Movies*, Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin discuss the “concept of whiteness” that marks American cinema’s representation of race and ethnicity. In fact “the very structure of classical Hollywood narrative form encourages all spectators, regardless of their actual color, to identify with white protagonists” (Benshoff & Griffin, p. 52). The nature of media representation, especially visual media in which characters are shown, means that all characters are ethnicized and racially marked. Coinciding with Benshoff and Griffin’s (2009) research, unmarked main characters are frequently given assumed features of whiteness. Concurrently, racialized characters are more clearly “marked” than others and more explicitly ethnicized. Although this creates diversity in media and influences audiences to notice other ethnicities, at the same time this also signals non-white characters as being ontologically and innately different from white characters.

While American media’s capacity to realistically portray varied races and ethnicities has increased, the two maintain “whiteness is still the unspoken ideal in American movies” (p. 76). Critiquing the state of American media, Benshoff and Griffin feel that media which transcends traditional racial or ethnic categories owes its existence to industry’s attempt at increasing economic profit rather than media makers’ desire to appropriately portray formerly discriminated against populations. Considering the profit potential behind transcending racial and ethnic categorization, one would expect more American media to highlight various races and ethnicities rather than marginalize or stereotype groups.

Looking at historical media portrayals of African Americans, Native Americans, Asians and Asian Americans, Benshoff and Griffin revealed that those groups that could more easily assimilate into the dominant white American ideals faced the least amount of stereotyping in American cinema. Non-white racial and ethnic group members have often

been subjected to unfavorable and inappropriate media representation (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009). Several common media tropes are characters like “Uncle Tom”, “Mammy”, “Tragic Mulatto” and “Black Buck” for African Americans; the “good native”, “bloodthirsty savage” or “noble Red Man” for Native Americans; and “model minorities”, “Orientalists”, or karate-wielding Kung Fu masters for Asian and Asian American characters (Luther, Lepre & Clark, 2012; Dines & Humez, 2011; Benshoff & Griffin, 2009). These stereotyped depictions are “overgeneralized physical, emotional, and intellectual characteristics” (Merskin, 1998, p. 333). None of these stereotypes accurately portrays the complex cultural and ethnic distinctions of their supposed model; nor are examinations of categories of racialized oppression typically engaged.

Even more recently, media have framed non-white races and ethnicities by typecasting groups into specific, categorized roles. Building from the profitability of the “black and white buddy film” (*48 Hours*, 1982; *Lethal Weapon*, 1987) black characters are typically cast into comedic “clown” roles, like “Cleveland Brown” in *Family Guy* and its spinoff *The Cleveland Brown Show* (2012), or athletic roles such as “Troy Barnes” in NBC’s *Community* (2012). The overall number of Asian and Asian American characters appearing on television is still considerably low, causing special concern about “insensitive comments and hurtful stereotypes that continue to be published in mass media” (Luther, Lepre & Clark, p. 150). When Asian or Asian American characters are depicted on television it is usually in a supporting role like “Kimball Cho” from *The Mentalist* (2008), as an “intelligent geek” like “Hiro” in *Heroes*, as overly motivated and compulsive like “Christine Yang” in *Grey’s Anatomy*, or as fighting-oriented like “Detective Chin Ho Kelly” in CBS’s reincarnated

*Hawaii Five-O*. Native Americans are drastically underrepresented in television media, with exceptions such as the past programs *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* and *Northern Exposure*.

Portrayals of non-native races add yet another ideological dimension. Edward Said's Orientalism characterizes the portrayal of non-Western cultures in Western civilization. Utilizing humanistic critical review, Said defines Orientalism as a "system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire" (p. 202-203). In his seminal work Said relates the discussion of the Orient and Orientalism as a constant comparison between the West (Occident) and non-West (Orient). Orientalism, according to Said, is most visible through the lens of Western representation and discourse (p. 22).

Considering the lenses through which the Orient is portrayed in Western society, Said demonstrated the clearly politicized nature of defining a cultural multiplicity primarily as the "other". Reflecting this, the "yellow peril" and "red scare" stereotyped in American media expressed the capitalistic tensions between American workers and new Asian immigrants, and political tensions between Western democracy and perceived Eastern Communism, respectively (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009). Media's stereotyped portrayal of "yellow peril" in the 1950s morphed into observations on the "red scare" of later generations. Media stereotyping created a lasting image of Asian populations as intrinsically untrustworthy, propagating a legacy of mystical arts and governmentally brainwashed populations.

Said's critique reveals that when the West speaks from a point of authority over the Orient, Western civilization is assumed as superior and judges its counterpart as more primitive while overtly ignoring the multiplicities, longevity and history of an immense geographical region (p. 95, 113-117). Said showed how Western messages about Oriental

culture demarcate social and political difference while ignoring the thousands of years of relative prosperity enjoyed by “Oriental” regions. Said’s work necessitates critical review of both the archetypal Eastern character and the indigenous native figure produced in modern media.

Children’s television is not free of racial and national stereotypes. The visibility of varied racial and ethnic group members increases television’s ability to “create, maintain, or modify stereotypes and prejudices in children and youth” (Brown-Graves, 1999, p. 709). A 1993 examination of animated programs on ABC, CBS, and NBC networks found that “three of twenty programs featured minority characters” (Luther, Lepre & Clark, p. 67). Studying trends of representation in media, Brown-Graves (1999) found “African American children are more likely than European American children to be associated with a sports-related or musical (rap or hip-hop) theme rather than with a learning or creative one” (Seiter, 1995; as cited from Brown-Graves, p. 710). Asian American and Native Americans did not fare much better as they were rarely present at all. If a character of that racial or ethnic distinction did appear, according to Brown-Graves it was typically in a group setting or with a distorted or stereotypical role. While some of these discrepancies have been resolved with the advent of child-specific channeling and niche cable networks there is a distinct reality to the fact that television is not being utilized to its fullest educational potential.

Studying racist portrayals in Disney’s animated media, Henry Giroux (2010) shows how racism is often defined not only the absence of race but more specifically by the presence of stereotyping. Considering representations of black women in media, one archetype role comes as the “mammy” character, a woman historically introduced as an “overweight caretaker of White people” (Benshoff & Griffin, p. 411). Temperamentally, this

character demonstrated passive restraint and compassion toward her charges, like “Mammy” in *Gone with the Wind*. However, the “mammy” could be seen utilizing angry, or “sassy,” determination, as shown by the housekeeper character in the movie cartoon *Tom and Jerry*. Stereotypes of black women have not seen a complete break from their mammy roots; modern stereotyped depictions of African American females commonly feature them as having a dynamic attitude that is reminiscent of the more historically aggressive mammy figures. More recent African American women caregiver portrayals may incorporate a more aggressive picture of African American femininity, but there is nevertheless a decided interconnectedness between that role and this traditional mammy archetype.

Disney has a notorious past of inappropriate animated presentations, from *Dumbo*’s racialized crows to *Song of the South*’s romanticized views of the Reconstruction era (both 1946) to *The Lion King*’s “Scar” (1998) and “Hyena Trio” and *Mulan*’s “Mushu” (1998). These characters feature distinctive vocal inflections, dialogue styles, coloring, and demeanors that segregate them as representing specific racial or ethnic groups and often-unflattering essential characteristics of these groups. While the overt racism of *Dumbo*’s crows is no longer duplicated, Disney clearly incorporates racially coded representations and language into its more recently produced animated features. As example, consider *Aladdin*’s titular character; he presents himself with white features as he heroically rescues his love interest from the restrictive Islamic gender codes indicative of Orientalism. Presentations such as these are complexly problematic. Their danger lies deeper than simply offering inaccurate views of racial and ethnic groups as these messages “suggest that social problems such as the history of racism, the genocide of Native Americans, the prevalence of sexism, and democracy in crisis are simply willed by the laws of nature” (Giroux, p. 112). Critical



analysis of animation illustrates its underlying messages on topics like race, racial hierarchies, and inter-racial/ethnic character relationships.

Stereotyping in children's media is not limited to human characters, as the above Disney examples illustrate. The fantasy of animation allows producers to "ascribe intention, consciousness and emotion to living and inanimate objects alike" (Wasko, 2001, p. 113). As Wasko argues, Disney's tendency to anthropomorphize and stereotype animated animal characters dates back to 1933's *The Three Little Pigs* in which the villain, a wolf, adopts the disguise of a Jewish peddler and demarcates the serious anti-Semitism present in Disney's studio at the time (Wasko, p. 139). Similarly, the crows in Disney's *Dumbo* (1949) parallel that era's stereotypical black Amos and Andy characters (Wasko, 140). The crows' appearance was the first time in which characters racially marked as black were major players in Disney animation (Byrne & McQuillan, p. 95). By ascribing human traits to animals, *Dumbo's* crows "inhabit a set of codes that are readily recognizable as performances of blackness" that fit 1940s white audience expectations of how "black" characters should perform (Byrne & McQuillan, p. 95-96).

Anthropomorphizing animals is not unique to "Classic Disney". Wasko reports that modern animation introduced during an "era of multiculturalism" should be critiqued over racial representation (140). In *Deconstructing Disney*, Byrne and McQuillan (1999) do just that. Byrne and McQuillan look at humanistic portrayals of, and racial prescriptions applied to, otherwise non-racial, animal characters. Especially prevalent to this thesis is their work concerning *The Lion King* (1994). According to Byrne and McQuillan, *The Lion King* "reproduce[s] stereotypes about black Americans that should be out of place in the revisionist Disney corpus of the mid-1990s" (100). Further analysis of the cast of

characters revealed the film to both “signal its participation in the new political agendas around race and yet to continue to produce racial signifiers first used in *Dumbo*, despite the presence of Goldberg’s voice” (Byrne & McQuillan, 100).

As “Stereotypic presentations do not force the viewer to confront the contradictions that may exist in real life” (Brown-Graves, p. 74), these types of media messages complicate children’s perceptions of out-group members. Television’s representation of diversity has been studied to the conclusion that “White children, especially those living in rural settings, use television as a primary source of information to learn about different racial/ethnic groups” (Greenberg, 1972; Greenberg & Brand, 1994; Lichter & Lichter, 1988; as cited from Brown-Graves, 1999, p. 715). The prominence of animated media generates a significant problem as its appeal to audiences in their formative years can help craft lasting messages formed from content’s racialized portrayals (Wasko, 139).

## **Conclusion**

Obviously, television content is important. Children interpret TV’s messages in varied and multifaceted ways, but ultimately the media they consume may affect their perceptions of themselves and others. Brown-Graves argues that “For children, exposure to members of diverse groups interacting can influence their feelings about working and playing with others” (1996, p. 80). In an ideal and educationally privileged world, media should work toward decreased stigmatization of minority groups. But we cannot assume that racial issues in media, including children’s media, are always progressive. Contemporary media needs to be closely evaluated for the range (or lack thereof) of racialized or ethnicized meaning. The policy of “denying racism by confining it to history rather than looking at its contemporary

manifestations” (Larson, p. 21) is neither responsible nor appropriate to relay to child audiences.

Television media routinely reflects how “Under white patriarchal capitalism, ideas about race and ethnicity are constructed and circulated in ways that tend to keep white privilege and power in place” (Benshoff & Griffin, p. 51). Researchers like Brown-Graves (1999), Benshoff & Griffin (2009), Luther, Lepre & Clark (2012) and Dines & Humez (2011) have all relayed that although television has the capacity to influence and affect its viewers positively, the availability of content that portrays racial and ethnic groups in derogatory or ideologically problematic manners contradicts the realities of victimized populations and may offer troubling scripts for both in-group and out-group attitudes. In Benshoff and Griffin’s terms, “The struggle for equal representation on America’s movie screens will continue to parallel the struggle for equal representation in the boardroom, studio lots, and creative guilds of Hollywood” (p. 100).

How might the industrial context of children’s media be a factor in the kind of content such media tend to produce? Chapter 3 will consider the economics of children’s television, especially the popular network Nickelodeon. Going over the evolution of Nickelodeon and Nicktoons, Chapter 3 delves into the means by which a separate, all-cartoon spin-off channel came into fruition. In operating under a cohesive corporate umbrella Nickelodeon has managed to disseminate messages about race to millions of child viewers. The issues discussed in this chapter will be called into play with the reality of growing an all-cartoon channel under a larger corporate brand, and constructing messages in content so as to relate a specific ideology to audiences. Also discussed is the methodology of the study and synopses of evaluated programs.

## Chapter 3

### Branding Nicktoons

#### Introduction

If you looked at your TV guide in 2001 you wouldn't have seen a channel devoted 24/7 to children's cartoon programming. Cartoon Network was (and is) mostly animation, but offers mature-themed programming in its "Adult Swim" late-night schedule. Likely the closest thing you could find was on Nickelodeon, arguably one of the most popular and influential producers of children's content (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Sandler, 2004). That cable channel featured a several hours-long block of animation called "nicktoons". One year later that "animation block" grew; it became "Nicktoons", a cable network entity unto itself comprised of over twenty-two hundred hours of animated programming targeted at children ages 6-12 (Simensky, 2004). Creating a separate channel to suit the needs of certain consumers exemplifies, for at least one scholar, how Nickelodeon, owned by the media conglomerate Viacom, "represent[s] a notable example of the positive dimensions of corporate branding on cable television" (Sandler, p.45).

With 61.2 million domestic subscribers and 41,913 "Likes" on Facebook as of summer 2012 it is easy to recognize Nicktoons' growing fan-base (Viacom Investor Relations, 2012). The channel committed their second-best fiscal quarter to the books in 2012 and increased their audience by 3.7 million subscribers in a single year. With ties to Nickelodeon, of which Nicktoons is both a sister channel and subsidiary, Nicktoons benefits from the cable network's status as "#1 rated basic cable network for 16 consecutive years" (Viacom Investor Relations, 2012). Nickelodeon and Nicktoons combined also have 14

million unique monthly visitors to their websites, [www.nick.com](http://www.nick.com) and [www.nicktoons.com](http://www.nicktoons.com) (Viacom Pulse Newsletter, 2012).

This critical evaluation of Nicktoons considers its interconnectedness with Nickelodeon as well as the messages perpetuated by both channels. The connection and similarities of Nicktoons and Nickelodeon are illustrated through their branding techniques and message construction. As the self-proclaimed “#1 entertainment brand for kids” (Viacom Investor Relations, 2012), Nickelodeon and Nicktoons are responsible for a considerable amount of the media children consume. Contextual analysis of Nicktoons and the corporate umbrella under which it operates reveals the similar ideologies shared by Nicktoons and Nickelodeon. This cohesive branding and message construction expands Nicktoons’ influence into the broader realm of Nickelodeon’s audience, greatly increasing both the scope and the effect of its programs.

After reviewing the corporate context of Nicktoons, this second half of this chapter will explain the main methods used by the thesis.

### **Growing Nicktoons**

Viacom, Inc. is the owner and operator of both Nickelodeon and Nicktoons; branding its separately operated channels with one corporate ideology has helped Viacom achieve impressive levels of success and profit (Bettig & Hall, 2012). The interdependency of Nicktoons, Nickelodeon and Viacom ensures cohesion and consistency for produced media.

Viacom is owned by National Amusements, one of the major players and top five media conglomerates in the world (Bettig and Hall, 2012). Operating within the parameters of National Amusements, Viacom is by no means a small subsidiary; the corporation grosses

over \$4 billion annually (3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter Earnings Press Release, 2012). With approximately 160 media networks reaching 700 million global subscribers (Pulse Investor Newsletter, 2012), the range of Viacom's influence is both widespread and pervasive; Viacom controls 210 channels that are cablecast in 37 languages (Viacom Investor Relations, 2012). Their holdings include: BET, Comedy Central, Vh1, MTV, MTV2, CMT, LOGO, Spike, TV Land, Nickelodeon, Nick Jr., Nick at Nite, TeenNick, and Nicktoons (Pulse Investor Newsletter, 2012). In addition to cable, Viacom's proprietaries include three international box office production companies: Paramount Pictures, MTV Films, and Nickelodeon Films (Pulse Investor Newsletter, 2012). With its strategies of both horizontal integration (owning multiple cable channels) and vertical integration (owning production and distribution outlets), Viacom is a media conglomerate capable of branding a constructed and consistent corporate image across multiple platforms.

Viacom as a corporation and Nicktoons as its subsidiary cable network have contributed to the growth in popularity of children's cartoon media. Looking specifically at how and why Nicktoons developed as a network and how the ideological construction of this entity clearly falls under the larger umbrella of Viacom International Inc. first requires consideration of the beginnings of Nickelodeon. From here the history and propagation of Nicktoons itself can be examined.

The advent of cable programming brought about new challenges for advertisers that hoped to capitalize on this "passive" child demographic. Segmentation of the child audience led networks to focus their brands in hopes of reaching specific sections of the demographic. For instance, PBS offered educational, noncommercial content for children that appealed to adults' desires of substantiated programming (Mittell, 2009). Disney tends to target girls.

Nickelodeon emerged in the 1980s, offering an (at first) ad-free mix of traditional Saturday morning fare and PBS' educational content. However despite the initial lack of commercials, Nickelodeon quickly recognized the profit potential of "kid-ness" and began incorporating advertisements, arguing that "a commercial environment and a profit motive does not affect the network's primary concern in terms of "respecting" kids and treating them as particular kinds of active agents" (Banet-Weiser, p. 50). But in this case audience agency is characterized as commercially safe empowerment, advertising champions individual choice among brand alternatives, for example; viewers are rarely if ever shown that agency can mean opting out of the commercial system. Programming and advertising may portray choices such as a girl to play a traditionally male-centric sport, for example, but not a character organizing a protest against advertising or commercialism in sports.

Later, with their heavy kids-versus-adults branding Nicktoons identified itself as a bit more irreverent than PBS or Disney. Viacom intoned the corporate ideology of Nickelodeon to be one with a "kid-first" mentality. According to Mittell, Nickelodeon

Focused on child heroes and poking gentle fun at adults, while assuring parents of its "pro-social" programming with less violence and commercialism than network cartoons (p. 384).

Viacom recognized the importance of appealing to both children and adults. This provided an excellent platform for advertisers and allowed Viacom to expand and nuance their media content. In 2011, Nickelodeon's major advertising came from family-friendly companies such as Mattel, General Mills, Hasbro, Fox Filmed Entertainment, Spin Masters, Buena Vista, Microgames of America, Burger King and Kellogg, running 12 minutes of advertisements per hour on weekdays (Special Report, Broadcasting & Cable, 2011).

Geraldine Laybourne became the VP executive manager of Nickelodeon in 1989. Laybourne championed “nicktoons,” an all-cartoon scheduling block, with the goal of distinguishing Nickelodeon from the “cookie cutter process” animation offered on other channels (Simensky, 2004). Rather than create shows that were only infinitesimally different than existing animation, Nickelodeon execs argued, at least publicly, that “higher quality programming would not only serve kids, but it would also have staying power” (Hendershot, p. 9). Nickelodeon turned its attention to creating unique and original cartoon shows (Hendershot, 2004). This is exemplified by their major brand franchises, all of which are original Nickelodeon productions. As of 2012, the top Nick programs are: *SpongeBob Squarepants*, *iCarly*, and *Legend of Korra* (a spin-off of the hit *Avatar: The Last Airbender*) (Pulse Investor Newsletter, 2012). The goal of Nickelodeon remains the production of content aimed towards a target audience: children. This target audience is not limited to the United States. Nickelodeon has become a transnational presence by “carving out a unique place for itself in the world of children’s programming” with its “rhetoric of child-centeredness... and vision of *quality* children’s programming” (Lustyik, p. 7).

Nickelodeon’s successful marketing and unique differentiation from other children’s media producers generated enormous profits, culminating in the creation of an entire channel devoted specifically to audience demands for cartoon programming (Bettig & Hall, 2012); the channel “Nicktoons” emerged.

### **Producing Parallels**

Nickelodeon and Nicktoons’ success came from their market leverage as well as their emphasis on research and new content development and integration. Executives at



Nickelodeon utilized the input of their audiences to create shows that appealed to children based on focus groups results (Simensky, 2004). Constructing a brand identity of “Us versus Them” (kids versus authority), the channels positioned themselves as understanding kids, being for kids, and giving kids what they wanted to see (Simensky, 2004). Nickelodeon and Nicktoons offer a cohesive and specialized brand of content geared directly toward children.

However, productive efficiencies are still exploited. Using largely a production-line assembly model, Viacom is known for the outsourcing of its material and systematic approach to scheduling (Bettig & Hall, 2012). Despite operating on separate television channels, Nicktoons and Nickelodeon employ many “cross-over” workers who produce media content for both Nickelodeon and Nicktoons. This became apparent to me while working on Nickelodeon’s game show *BrainSurge* (produced in conjunction with Stone & Co. Productions, L.A.). *BrainSurge*’s lead animation artists were additionally employed by Nickelodeon and worked on the cartoon program *The Fairly OddParents*. Being owned and operated by the larger corporate entity of Viacom allows Nickelodeon and Nicktoons to pool talent, employing periphery employees under both companies to ensure the needs of each program are appropriately met while keeping the program in budget and operating in compliance with the production schedule. To further illustrate the connection between the two channels, one of Nicktoons’ quoted company goals is to regale audiences with cartoons that largely reflect the *Nickelodeon* brand and can be easily tied to the *Nickelodeon* name (Frankel, 2009). Having employees work for multiple shows (regardless of the channel they air on) helps ensure the overall cohesiveness of the Nickelodeon platform.

In an article in the trade magazine *Variety*, Nickelodeon’s executive VP was interviewed on the extensive overhaul given to the Nickelodeon brand in 2009. It was

revealed that Nicktoons' association with the Nickelodeon name (and concurrent Viacom identity) was a priority for their parent company Viacom, and that all programs on Nicktoons needed to be clearly associated with their sister network (Frankel, 2009). Creating brand-coherent programs is economically logical as Nicktoons and Nickelodeon average over 150 million subscribers combined (accounting for crossover subscriptions) (2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter Pulse Investor News Letter, 2012). Similarities amongst shows increase the likelihood that subscribers to Nicktoons will like the programming on Nickelodeon, and vice-versa. Considering both channels are owned and operated by the same parent corporation, competition for audiences does not factor into the larger equation of Viacom's total profitability.

Paralleling content across Nicktoons and Nickelodeon encourages mass appeal for Viacom's subsidiaries. Assuming a consistent but also polysemic brand identity cultivates more potential for audience member loyalty to the brand and increases the overall popularity and content dispersion of the channels (Bettig & Hall, 2012). Prioritizing similarity between Nickelodeon and Nicktoons has resulted in two channels with similar vibes and themes (Frankel, 2009). This has increased both the overall availability and the popularity of Nicktoons. In essence, tying Nicktoons' programming style to that of existing media conglomerate Nickelodeon has encouraged the ability of the new channel to prosper and reach a multiplicity of potential audience members. The fewer true differences there are between the two channels, the more likely children will be receptive to each. That programming can be "repurposed" between the two networks also cuts down on production costs, as the two networks sometimes air the same programs (albeit at different time slots). While cross-promotion and airing does occur, it is important to note that Nicktoons plays to a

slightly younger demographic than that targeted by Nickelodeon, so not every show can be found on each channel. However, the younger viewers of Nicktoons, Viacom hopes, may “graduate” to the older tween programming of Nickelodeon.

### **Constructed Content**

In an interview with *Broadcasting and Cable*, Nickelodeon’s executive VP manager Cyma Zarghami discussed five growth goals, including an expansion of the brand, “supercharge key franchises,” and being a leader in animation. “Every decision, every investment, everything we've done for the past few years serves at least one of these,” Zarghami claimed (Weprin, 2010). Zarghami’s statement reinforces Nickelodeon’s status as a “powerful site for constructing media citizenship,” even if that construction also includes media consumption, licensing fandom, and desirable audience behavior (Banet-Weiser, 2007). Both networks, then, serve these functions. The similarities exhibited between Nickelodeon and Nicktoons is not to be taken lightly; the channels form a multiplatform brand reaching more than 214 million households, 24 hours a day (Viacom Investor Relations, 2012).

Nicktoons targets a young demographic with tailored content designed to incorporate audiences into lifetime loyalty to the Nickelodeon brand. Their slogan “Big Stars... Animated” – indicative of the “supercharge key franchises” goal -- is reflected through the channel’s programming. With major brands like *Fairly OddParents*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *Planet Sheen*, and *Wild Grinders*, Nicktoons saw an 11% increase in viewership by its key demographic from 2010-2011 (Pulse Investor Newsletter, 2012). Though they feature the same group of advertisers as Nickelodeon, only Nicktoons can boast that 51% of

its viewership comes from the target demographics of adults 18-49 *and* kids 2-11 (Special Report, Broadcasting & Cable, 2011, citing Nielsen 2011 data).

Crossover advertising directly fuels the consumption-based revenue of Nickelodeon; the profit of this conglomerate is primarily generated by advertisers and licensing deals/sales. As discussed by McAllister and Giglio (2005), the role of advertising and licensing in children's media creates a culture in which children are inundated with the idea that "you should buy/watch this as part of being a kid" (p. 42). Programming dependent upon the revenue of marketing and advertising must appeal to a wide range of children to secure as much purchasing power as possible. By creatively incorporating particular messages and styles of content into their programming Nickelodeon and Nicktoons generate a cohesive theme and encourage viewers to subscribe to long-term consumption of the multi-channeled Nickelodeon platform and their concurrent advertisers.

Nick gears their content to "hook" audiences and cultivate this loyalty. Messages reinforcing the brand identity mirror dissemination patterns set by formal education (Mittell, 2009). Themes of "empowerment" and letting "kids be kids" are introduced repeatedly in problem-solving or direct participation formats within the content. Nickelodeon's producers incorporate formal education's techniques into their shows to "engage youth and make them feel stimulated by the programs, whether they are explicitly educational or not" (Mittell, p. 386).

The promotional patterns and marketing arc of Nickelodeon and Nicktoons are not unique. The scope and availability of Viacom's Nickelodeon channels rival Disney's multinational influence; as of this writing, Nickelodeon has 100.1 million channel

subscribers while Disney has 99.5 million subscribers (Viacom Investor Report, 2012; Disney Investor Newsletter, 2012).

Nicktoons' ties to Nickelodeon offer this thesis the unique opportunity to study contemporary animated media that replicates the ideology of a large corporate entity while being produced to appeal to a niche market. Their recognized multi-channel platform ensures that themes apparent on Nicktoons can be concurrently found on Nickelodeon. Nicktoons' overwhelming reflection of the larger Nickelodeon brand strengthens the validity of an in-depth evaluation of this particular channel. As a part of the larger conglomerate (Viacom) and brand (Nickelodeon), programming on Nicktoons is framed by these connections and also given additional visibility. We can expect, then, to see themes of empowerment and individuality throughout Nicktoons shows, even as such themes might be also commodified by the surrounding advertising and licensing messages.

Themes of empowerment – as long as commercially safe – also characterize Nickelodeon's stance toward diversity. As Banet-Weiser argues, Nickelodeon publicly embraces the value of racial diversity, and many of its programs offer sympathetic and empowered non-white characters. However, she also notes that the tendency is to use such characters in a stereotypical way to connote the “hip” and “urban.” Another variation is to create “pan-ethnic” characters who have variances in skin color but without markers – or the socio-cultural realities – of a specific ethnicity (2007, pp. 160-161).

However, as this thesis will argue, on Nicktoons we sometimes see demonstrative versions of historical racial tropes, even if, as Banet-Weiser alludes, these tropes may be found in “good” characters who are meant to be viewed favorably.

## Methods

This thesis critically analyzes three of Nicktoons' programs: *Back at the Barnyard*, *Tak and the Power of Juju*, and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Chosen for their unique representations of distinct racial/ethnic groups, the shows offer concrete examples of the racial constructions in animated programs, constructions that often will plug into existing racial stereotypes.

A systematic procedure was followed to tease out the racial messages of the three programs. The episodes were accessed through DVR recordings of the Nicktoons cable television network, full-episode streaming from [www.nicktoons.com](http://www.nicktoons.com), or through Nickelodeon Films DVD release of an entire season (this occurred for Season 1 of *Tak and the Power of Juju*). After viewing assorted episodes of all three shows, seven episodes from each program were selected for close textual analysis. Using a combination of previous viewings, titles and episode descriptions provided by the network, the data set was narrowed down to episodes that clearly featured racialized characters. Before selecting individual episodes I determined which characters from the series I felt most demonstratively displayed racialized identity. I was able to determine this based on my initial screening of the shows. The characters selected were: "Bessy" from *Back at the Barnyard*, "Aang" from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and "Tak" from *Tak and the Power of Juju*, looking at the role of the "mammy" or black female, Orientalism and Asian identity, and indigenous native respectively. Episodes featuring these characters were thus selected. The seven episode texts for each program was deemed sufficient to understand the racial components of the programs given that children's animated programming routinely relies on repetition and familiarity, and very rarely if ever introduces new dimensions to their characters. When characters seem

to learn lessons in an episode, they nearly always return to their assumed personality and role in the show at the beginning of the next episode. Confirming this, a recognition of this trend occurred after analyzing 3-4 episodes of each show; at that point I continued analysis to 7 episodes to ascertain if the exhibitions I witnessed were congruent throughout the series. As a final check on interpretations, also used to supplement the seven-episode data set was Nicktoons' promotional content about each show, as well as the channel's website, [www.nicktoons.com](http://www.nicktoons.com), which offers in-depth character, show, and episode descriptions.

Multiple viewings of each episode were required to enhance note taking from the programs and to ensure nothing pertinent or noteworthy was missed. To gather data for the textual analysis I watched an episode through fully without pausing, taking brief notes about the general theme, content, and placement/role of characters. After this initial viewing, I immediately re-watched the program pausing as necessary to take additional notes on character interaction and movement, as well as to transcribe important dialogue. The narrative elements I was most concerned with were the dialogue and vocal patterns of the studied characters, the visual and oratory cues surrounding the studied characters, the ways those characters interacted with others, and the relationships of the cast in general and where Bessy, Aang and Tak fit into that schema as well as the plotlines in general.

The following sub-sections provide the premise under which each show operates as well as basic distribution information about the show. Also included are tables offering information about each evaluated episode.

### ***Back at the Barnyard***

*Back at the Barnyard* is an Emmy Award-winning (for both “Best Children’s Series” and “Writing”) program and consistent component of Nicktoons’ daily 2012 lineup. *B.a.B.* is a computer animated series about a cast of farm animals who have the ability to think critically, speak, and interact not only with each other but also with humans. The main character, Otis the cow, is fun loving and the leader of the animal community. Other regular characters include Bessy the cow (a focus of the analysis, as the next chapter will reveal), Pip the mouse and Freddy the ferret. Plotlines continually deal with the animals’ abilities to outsmart the humans around them and thus maintain their cover as innocuous farm residents. Each episode features a new and distinct dilemma that requires innovative problem-solving methods to be resolved. *Back at the Barnyard* was chosen for its racialized, anthropomorphized and –this thesis will argue -- stereotypical characters.

New episodes of *Back at the Barnyard* were produced between September 1, 2007 and November 12, 2011, for a total new-episode run of 2 seasons. Season 3 is slated to begin sometime in late 2012 (IMDb, *Back at the Barnyard*, 2012). There are a combined 57 episodes of *Back at the Barnyard*, each running 24 minutes. Episodes are sometimes broken down into two separate storylines with each running for approximately 12 minutes.

The following table displays each of the seven evaluated episodes’ title, season/episode number, original airdate and premise.



Table One: Back at the Barnyard episodes

Episode Title	Season/ Episode Number	Original Airdate	Premise
The Good The Bad and The Snotty/Escape from the Barnyard	S1/E1	Sept. 29, 2007	The animals call the farmer away so they can celebrate Otis' birthday but their plan is ruined when Snotty boy comes in to "babysit" the farm/The animals escape the farm in a hot air balloon when they think the farmer plans to eat them
Hypno-A-Go- Go/Fowl Play	S1/E5	Nov. 1, 2007	After hypnotizing his friends Otis accidentally hypnotizes himself and tries to destroy the farmer/Bessy plays judge in this law and order parody
Home Sweet Hole/Otis' Mom	S1/E14	May 24, 2008	Otis destroys Pip's home forcing him to relocate to a beehive/Otis discovers Bessy is his long-lost mother
Some Like it Snotty	S1/E21	Oct. 24, 2008	Otis poses as a human girl and ends up dating Snotty Boy, much to the chagrin of Bessy and Abby.
Get Bessy/A Beautiful Freddy	S2/E17	Jan. 2, 2010	The animals are curious about what Bessy does while she's away so they conspire to spy on her/Freddy gains intelligence after he is struck by lightning and enters a trivia show to try to win \$1 million for the farm
Treasure Hunt	S2/E21	Sept. 12, 2011	A group of Canadian crows gives the animals a fake treasure map to lure them away from the farm's cornfields.
Hickory Dickory Donkey/Clone demonium	S2/E20	Sept. 18, 2011	Bessy tries to break up a date between a donkey and Pip and the other animals suspect her of being in love with him/An evil scientist makes mini-clones of the animals and threatens to sell them

***Avatar: The Last Airbender***

*Avatar: The Last Airbender* is a highly acclaimed animated series produced from 2005-2008 by Nickelodeon Animation Studios. The series won “Annie” awards in 2006 (“Best Storyboarding in an Animated Production”), 2007 (“Best Directing in an Animated Television Production”), and 2009 (“Best Animated Television Production Produced for Children”), as well as an Emmy Award in 2007 (“Outstanding Individual Achievement in Animation”), a Kids’ Choice Award in 2008 (“Favorite Cartoon”) and the “Golden Reel Award” from the Motion Picture Sound Editors in 2009 (IMDb, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, 2012). The show is often featured in marathon-sessions on Nicktoons, where the entire 61-episode series is shown over the course of several days. Additionally, random episodes of *Avatar* are routinely incorporated in Nicktoons lineup. Regular episodes run approximately 24 minutes while the season finales can last as long as 93 minutes per episode (season finales are typically broken up in 24-minute segments when aired on television).

*Avatar* centers on the character Aang, an “Avatar” who acts as the “voice of the planet”, utilizing his element-bending abilities to help unite separate warring tribes and bring peace to the world. In his quest to master the elements, Aang journeys across his world encountering many different types of people and bending abilities. Aang and his friends, siblings Sokka and Katara, travel through the nations of Water, Earth and Fire respectively to help villagers solve problems rising from their subjugation to the governing Fire Nation. As the Avatar, Aang is the “Chosen One”; his mission in life is to help restore peace to the world in every possible way. Plotlines typically deal with Aang’s trials and tribulations as he is forced to grow up quickly, learn from his mistakes, and eventually take on the cruel dictator

and Fire Lord. Though each episode features a distinct problem and resolution, there are several overarching themes and issues found in the series. This serialized plotline helps create an animated series with the possibility for maturing characters.

*Avatar* was chosen for its prescription as a multicultural, diverse program. Though the show centers on an Asian cast, textual analysis can help determine the presence of westernized conceptions about Asian identity. Analysis of *Avatar* will argue that the program illustrates the hegemonic incorporation of minorities into Nicktoons' program lineup and its overriding themes of Orientalism.

The following table displays each of the seven evaluated episodes' title, season/episode number, original airdate and premise.

Table Two: Avatar: The Last Airbender episodes

Episode Title	Season/ Episode Number	Original Airdate	Premise
The Boy in the Iceberg	S1/E1	Feb. 21, 2005	Siblings Katara and Sokka make a startling discovery while fishing not far from their South Pole home. They find a boy and his pet flying Bison frozen in an iceberg and remarkably still alive.
The Fortune Teller	S1/E14	Sept. 23, 2005	Aang, Sokka and Katara travel to a village renowned for its' fortuneteller, a woman that has been correctly "predicting" the future of the village for 20 years.
The Avatar State	S2/E1	March 17, 2006	Aang, Sokka and Katara meet an Earth Kingdom General who wants to use Aang's Avatar State to defeat the Fire Nation. Also, The daughter of the Fire Lord plots to destroy her brother so she can take over his mission of killing the Avatar.
City of Walls and Secrets	S2/E14	Sept. 26, 2006	The group arrives in Ba Sing Se to inform the Earth King about the Fire Lord's only weakness. However Joo Dee, a henchwoman of the Dai Li, Ba Sing Se's secret police, constantly hinders them. Meeting with the head of the Dai Li the group learns that mention of the war is prohibited within the city's walls.
The Headband	S3/E2	Sept. 28, 2007	Aang and his friends steal clothing as disguises while traveling in the Fire Nation. Aang is confused for a boy skipping class and sent to a Fire Nation school where he learns the "Fire Nation pledge of loyalty" and discovers the Fire Nation's wartime propaganda.
The Painted Lady	S3/E3	Oct. 5, 2007	When the gang comes across a sick and starving fishing village Katara decides to help. Disguising herself as "The Painted Lady", a legendary local hero, she steals food from the Fire Nation Army and destroys a factory to stop the Army from polluting the water.
The Puppetmaster	S3/E8	Nov. 9, 2007	When the group befriends an innkeeper named Hama they learn that she is a water bender from Sokka and Katara's tribe who was kidnapped years ago. She is enacting her

			revenge on the locals by blood-bending them into submission. Initially Katara becomes her student and learns the dark art from her before using it against Hama to stop her.
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### ***Tak and the Power of Juju***

*Tak and the Power of Juju* was Nickelodeon's first all-CGI animated series. Despite its short-lived new episode production (from 2007-2008) *Tak* managed to secure a 2009 Daytime Emmy for "Outstanding Achievement in Sound Editing". The show is based on a popular action-adventure video game of the same name. *Tak* demonstrates the selling power and crossover potential of animated media and has been incorporated into both Nicktoons' and Nickelodeon's lineups. The program was produced in-house by Nickelodeon Animation Studios (IMDb, *Tak and the Power of Juju*, 2007). Each episode features two, eleven-minute storylines. There are 26 total episodes of *Tak*.

*Tak and the Power of Juju* focuses on its titular character, Tak, a member of the primitive Pupununu tribe. The Pupununus struggle with their odd magical counterparts, the Jujus. Normally incapable of magical abilities, Tak is the Pupununu exception and can access powers usually reserved for the Jujus. Instead of using his powers for good, Tak is described by Nicktoons as an "impulsive kid whose main interest is goofing off with his friends" (www.nicktoons.com). Different members of the Pupununu and Jujus are introduced in each episode while recurring characters like "The Chief" and "Jeera" occupy more permanent roles in the series. Unfortunately for Tak, his powers often do more damage than help and plotlines typically show Tak trying to fix a self-inflicted problem.

*Tak and the Power of Juju* is interesting as a racial case study in that its cast does not fit a common or well-known ethnic or cultural group. Textual analysis focuses on Nicktoons'

presentation of messages about the mystique of non-traditional cultures and the “indigenous native”. The infantilization and assimilation of non-Western groups will be highlighted themes in the analysis.

The following table displays each of the seven evaluated episodes’ title, season/episode number, original airdate and premise.

Table Three: Tak and the Power of Juju episodes

Episode Title	Season/ Episode Number	Original Airdate	Premise
Woodiefest/ Loser	S1/E1	Aug. 31, 2007	Tak is charged with saving the Pupununu village from the attacking giant Woodies/Lok is kicked out of the village after Tak exposes his lies. Later Tak helps Lok restore his place within the Pupununu tribe
A Shaman's Shaman/The Gift	S1/E2	Sept. 8, 2007	Tak and Jibolba face competition for the role of village Shaman/Tak and Jeera go to the Juju realm to find a gift for Jibolba
The Three Chiefs/ The Party	S1/E3	Sept. 15, 2007	The chiefs of the greatest tribes in the land visit the Pupununu, prompting Chief to highlight Tak's magical Juju abilities to show off/Tak enlists Party Juju to help throw a party celebrating the Pupununu's recent streak of good luck
The Beast/To Zaria With Love	S1/E4	Sept. 29, 2007	A repulsive Juju is kicked out of his realm for not fitting in and Tak tries to help him assimilate into the Pupununu village/Psychic Juju predicts that Tak is destined to marry the next leader of the Pupununu people; Zaria
Girls Only/Secession	S1/E13	Oct. 19, 2008	Tak turns himself into a girl so he can take part in the girls-only gatherings/Tak, Jeera and Keeko leave the Pupununu village to live in the Juju realm
Giant Chief/Shrink A Dink	S1/E24	Nov. 15, 2008	Tak brings a giant statue of the chief to life without realizing the consequences this will have on the real chief/Phobia Juju visits the Pupununu making all the villagers face their greatest fears; Tak is forced to confront the giant "grongo snake"
New Pet/Tak's Monster	S1/E26	Nov. 29, 2008	Tak and Jeera find a cute creature in the jungle and decide to keep it as a pet, despite Jibolba's prediction that it could bring trouble to the village/When Tak has nightmares about a monster he tries to remove it from his dreams, inadvertently setting it loose to terrorize the village

Nicktoons prescribes “good” characters with historically negative racial stereotypes. Chapters 4-6 textually analyze this trend as it occurs in the Nicktoons’ programs *Back at the Barnyard*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and *Tak and the Power of Juju*. Considering the stereotyping of the character “Bessy”, the next chapter focuses on the portrayal of this animated cow as an anthropomorphized loud, black female.



## Chapter 4

### **Crafting Race: *Back at the Barnyard* and Anthropomorphized African American Stereotypes**

#### **Introduction**

*Back at the Barnyard* anthropomorphizes animated animal characters. From talking cows to emotional roosters, this program shows animals speaking rationally, building relationships, and utilizing critical thinking skills. Offering animal characters with human qualities, *Back at the Barnyard*'s content is concurrently susceptible to invasive stereotyping that can undermine the core lessons of the program.

As noted in Chapter 2, there is a history of talking animal characters in cartoons and such characters, as human analogues, embody culturally constructed human characteristics such as gender and race. In fact some media conglomerates have found “the tricky issue of representing race” exclusively negotiated through anthropomorphism (Byrne & McQuillan, p. 96). Racialized characteristics perhaps become less obvious – and therefore less offensive and risky – when evoked by cartoon animals rather than human characters. Focusing on one notable though peripheral character, “Bessy”, this textual analysis coherently examines the ways in which non-human animated characters, even in a post-millennial era, can propagate a racial stereotype.

The main object of this analysis is the character “Bessy”. Bessy is described by Nicktoons as:

A sassy, smart-mouthed cow, Bessy is often the voice of reason...in a rude and obnoxious way...to Otis's hair-brained ideas. One of the smartest members of the barnyard, she usually gets what she wants by acting nicely for two

seconds. Which is about 3 seconds longer than she ever wants to act nicely (www.nicktoons.com, 2012)!

As signified by the physical appearance and prescribed intentions of Bessy, her character can be interpreted as a loud, black female. Bessy sashays through the program with behaviors and characteristics that viewers may recognize from previous and existing media stereotypes of this group. In *Animating Differences*, King et al. discussed the blatant anthropomorphization in children's animation as unfailingly racializing non-human characters since "characters are not simply transformed into some generic "human"... rather they are inscribed, for example, as white "humans", black "humans", Asian "humans", or Latino "humans" (p. 37). Textual analysis of Bessy reveals the extent to which she is anthropomorphized as a black female.

Since her characteristics are clearly coded Bessy is also an example of how "Stereotypic presentations do not force the viewer to confront the contradictions that may exist in real life" (Graves, p. 74). No acknowledgment on the multiplicity of African American females is induced with this content as Bessy is the only such coded character and neatly fits into a prescribed television role and encourages audiences to interpret her only as such. Furthering the inquiry, this thesis considers the visual and non-verbal cues associated with Bessy, her dialogue and vocal patterns, relationships with other characters, and role in the series and plotlines of *Back at the Barnyard*.

### **A Hoof on Her Hip: Visual and Non-Verbal Cues**

Focusing first on Bessy's obvious visual and vocal characteristics, she has a wide nose, loud and smart-alecky demeanor, and is colored brown. These characteristics are in contrast with the other female cow character, Abby, whose smaller nose, vocal patterns, and

color scheme is more evoking of whiteness. As will be developed in the next section, Bessy is voiced by the African American actress and comedienne Wanda Sikes, known for her irreverence and distinctive voice, but also for playing the loyal, if outspoken, best friend to the white title character on the CBS sitcom *The New Adventures of Old Christine*. Bessy is also the only animal in the barn wearing a large, yellow livestock ear tag, which can be taken as gaudy jewelry, but is also a marker for livestock identification and therefore signifies owned property.

Viewers are first introduced to Bessie and the other characters in “The Good, the Bad, and the Snotty,” the first part of the two-segment pilot episode of *Back at the Barnyard*. As the opening credits role out, scenes of a passionate group discussion fill the screen: the animals, Otis in particular (their male leader, coded with a seemingly white vocal pattern), are planning Otis’ birthday party. Standing just to the periphery of the circle (and not immediately visible) is Bessy, the object of this analysis. While all the other animals enthusiastically support Otis’ plan by nodding their heads and verbally agreeing with him, Bessy remains sassy and irreverent by saying, “Hold up. You got rid of the only man standing between us and a sesame seed bun so we could celebrate the day *you* came into the world?” With her hoof on her hip, a scowl on her face and a mean word on her tongue, it is clear Bessy is full of attitude and is a bit apart from the others in the group, most of whom seem to be coded as “non-ethnic” (or, therefore, white). Her light brown coloring, protruding full lips and large, glinting earring/tag undeniably mark her as different than, or “other” from, her cohorts.

Later elements in that first episode emphasize Bessy’s physical difference and racialized characteristics. The plot unfolds that Snotty Boy, the unpleasant neighbor boy, is

watching the animals that day. Being tormented by Snotty Boy, the animals are sprayed with water and glued together into a large ball. When momentum takes over and they begin to roll, eventually crashing into a tree, Otis assumes a position of authority and asks everyone if they are all right. While the other characters mumble their assent Bessy is vocal and angry, shouting, “Do I *look* like I’m alright? Do you not see a chicken glued to my butt?” At this point a close-up of Bessy’s behind appears. Occupying the entire screen, Bessy’s posterior is exaggerated in size. Accentuating the personification of a curvaceous body type (one typically associated with African American females) Bessy is anthropomorphized into a sassy, curvy and demanding black female character; her figure is no longer that of a cow. The attitude of Bessy culminates with her slapping the “chicken glued to her butt” with her tail while looking back at the perceived camera in an expression of disgust.

Bessy’s character propagates the atypical dialogue of the stereotypical black female character with an attitude. At one point during that first episode, Bessy walks toward the group and berates her cohort by literally screaming at them “Hey, Leonardo de Dum Dum.” Moving toward the group from her position outside the barn, Bessy exhibits her status as an outsider who is not privy to the private conversations of her peers. As she struts toward them (replete with tail wagging from side to side, something not shown in the other cows’ movements) she leans in to Otis, the object of her name-calling, eventually coming to rest with her arms crossed, eyes half closed in an irritated squint, and ears flared. Bessy is differentiated from the other characters by these exaggerated, and ethnicized, types of body language. Not only do the other characters rarely get mad, no other animal visibly struts, crosses their arms, shakes their head in disdain, or maneuvers their tail like Bessy. She

clearly occupies a different place in the barnyard. Her visible body language cues align with traditional tropes of an engendered African American character.

Playing off the stereotype of the loud black female, other episodes code Bessy as full of attitude and one who almost never agrees with the rest of the characters. In “Hypno-A-Go-Go/Fowl Play” the animals are faced with the dilemma of Otis being hypnotized into a mad scientist. Bessy physically distances herself from the “think tank” and offers no thoughts on how to snap Otis from his trance. Her “solution” is to dismiss everyone else’s opinions and ideas about how to solve the problem by shooting withering stares that stop speakers mid-sentence; when Pig offers a particularly far-fetched solution Bessy puts her hands on her hips, cocks one eyebrow, and stares at him until he stops speaking. Bessy’s physical displays of disdain contrast with the show’s typical cooperative and supportive group-based problem solving. Her only care is that her opinion is heard; the resolution of the problem and feelings of her friends are of no concern to her.

Analyzing Bessy’s non-verbal communication, everything she does is over-the-top and borderline obnoxious. When the gang listens to Otis’ recount of his date with Snotty Boy in “Some Like it Snotty”, Bessy stands in the back of the group, arms folded over her chest. Each character responds to the ridiculousness of Otis’ story by exhibiting some of the exaggerated reactions typical to children’s animation. Bessy tops the cake with bulging eyes, a leaned-in stance, open mouth, flared ears and nostrils, and spread out arms. Aside from being the most over-the-top character in the group, Bessy is the epitome of the exaggerated black-faced minstrel figure wrought throughout early animation.

*Back at the Barnyard* offers clear indicators that Bessy is a loud, black female. Her appearance and actions resonate with Luther et al.’s description of the “mammy” as a “loud,

argumentative, usually large, black woman” (p. 58). The visual and non-verbal cues associated with Bessy corroborate her classification as a loud, black female. Such blatant exhibitions of common media tropes illustrate the problem of animation as “caricaturing as a tactic of representation will have to continuously grapple with whether certain characteristics, racial and otherwise, have been taken ‘too far’” (Barker, p. 483).

### **Loud and Sassy: Dialogue and Vocal Patterns**

Bessy’s dialogue and vocal patterns corroborate her image as a loud, black female. She is overtly rude, inconsiderate and overbearing when speaking to others. Fitting the tropes of an argumentative black woman Bessy consistently voices her own opinion even if this means drowning out the words of others, as happens in “Hypno-A-Go-Go/Fowl Play”. Acting as judge in a *Law and Order* parody, Bessy immediately proclaims that Freddy (the accused) is guilty. She relishes in her position as judge, smirking as she verbally commands attention by screaming that she “can tell he did it by his beady little ferret eyes!” Bessy encourages wild speculation in her courtroom “as long as it is goin’ to make him look guilty!” When the courtroom erupts into confusion and noise Bessy calls the crowd to order by persistently banging her gavel and shouting, “Guilty! I’m gettin’ tired of sayin’ this; guilty!”

The inflection in Bessy’s speaking voice is one recognizable as a “black” American accent. Discussing anthropomorphized animated animals, King et al. revealed accents, mannerisms and behaviors to be “highly racialized signifiers” (*Animating Difference*, p. 40). Bessy’s routine dropping off of consonants replicate past representations of African Americans on film in that her dialect is clearly distinguishable and, despite Nicktoons’

description of Bessy as “one of the smartest,” speaks to a general lack of education (Luther et al., 2012) or, perhaps a “street smarts” that is in clear contrast with whiteness. The clear distinction between “white” and “black” American accents on *Back at the Barnyard* is brought to light in “Hypno-A-Go-Go/Fowl Play” when Otis hypnotizes Bessy to believe she is a perky high school cheerleader. Wanda Sykes, the voice actor for Bessy’s character, does not voice Bessy’s perky high school cheerleader form. Instead, Maria Bamford, the voice actor of character “Mrs. Beady,” vocalized Bessy’s hypnotized state. Ms. Bamford is a white female; as mentioned earlier, Sykes is an African American woman with a distinct vocal pattern.

Though Bessy is capable of intelligent conversation most of her speech centers on derogatory one-liners. Other characters comment on this. In “Get Bessy/A Beautiful Freddy” Otis points this out saying, “Hey did you guys ever notice that Bessy just insults us then walks off somewhere?” A montage of Bessy from previous episodes follows his proclamation and the next two minutes of screen time are occupied by Bessy yelling things like “Moron,” “Crazy stupid,” “Loser,” and “Your mother!” at her fellow barnyard animals. Fitting with her “loud” persona, Bessy typically “barks” these insults at high volume and always intends to be heard. Such outbursts can be interpreted as the formulaic comedic relief typical of sidekicks in animation (Wasko, p. 115).

Examples of Bessy’s dialogue point to her signified race as that of African American. “Some Like it Snotty”’s “Hole up rump roast, check the fine prin’. It’s ladies night, only girls get in fo’ free!” and “Hickory Dickory Donkey/Clonedemonium”’s “Wait, the rat’s gotta date? Good luck with that Casa-no-chance. (Laughing darkly to herself) Casa-no-chance. These are great. I gotta start writin’ these down!” imply that Bessy, though innately sarcastic

and possessing considerable wit, is lazy and grammatically incorrect with her vocal inflections. These patterns are key signifiers of race and further Bessy's connection to her prescribed stereotyped role.

### ***Smother of the Year: Relationships with Other Characters***

Bessy is connected with the other characters of *Back at the Barnyard* to varying degrees. Maintaining consistency with her position as an outsider in the group, Bessy primarily interacts with others only to insult or berate them. She is rarely included in-group activities and spends much of her time barging in on the conversations and relations of others. When Bessy's character is given a chance to develop relationships she does so in very particular ways that keep with the prescriptions of her racial stereotype.

One particular episode, "Otis' Mom", evokes another dimension to Bessy that develops her connection to historical portrayals of African American Women. It is revealed in this episode that Otis, whom Bessy had previously disliked and treated with disrespect and aggression, may actually be her long-lost son. It is one of the few times in the series Bessy is shown without her usual sarcasm and retorts. Bessy's entire persona lightens upon hearing that Otis could be her child. She is jubilant, leaning affectionately toward him while batting her eyes and hugging him. This is the first time in the series Bessy affectionately embraces any member of the barnyard. Later in the episode Bessy pinches Otis' cheek gushing, "That's right, Otis is my big handsome snookie-ookum."

Throughout the course of the episode Bessy reacts to Otis as though he is still a child, and she his mother. Though intending to be nurturing and kind Bessy ends up irritating Otis (who fruitlessly tries to explain that he is old enough to care for himself). The opening credits



show Bessy standing over a bib-wearing emasculated Otis. She has a stern look on her face, a cocked hip and a spoon in her hoof. The intention is clear: she is trying to spoon-feed the clearly grown-up Otis. She also bathes him in the “tubby-tub,” monitors his time with friends, and encourages him to apologize for pulling pranks on others by pulling Otis by the ear and insisting he “march right in there and apologize to Mrs. Beady.” In short, Bessy is acting the role of “mammy” in Luther et al.’s prescription, “a substitute mother for an impetuous charge” (p. 61). She becomes the caregiver for the main, white character in the episode and, according to the historical prescriptions of this role, acts with compassion and relative restraint. However, given Bessy’s abrasive personality, it is not surprising that later in the episode Bessy abuses that sympathy. Much like her preceding mammy stereotyped models, she eventually turns all the animals against her, as she is an overbearing and overcompensating mother figure to Otis. Coinciding with the modern version of the mammy role, Bessy again morphs into her more typical demeanor of an angry, black female.

“Hickory Dickory Donkey/Clonedemonium” reverts Bessy to her more traditional typecasting as aggressive. Pip, *Back at the Barnyard*’s other non-white coded character, is a victim of unrequited love; he routinely tries to get Bessy to fall for him by bringing her flowers (“Home Sweet Hole/Otis’ Mom”), volunteering to marry her (“Home Sweet Hole/Otis’ Mom”), or standing up for her when others accuse her of being mean (“Treasure Hunt”). After being repeatedly rebuffed by Bessy, Pip decides to try his luck with another woman. When Bessy hears of Pip’s date she demonstrates the classic signs of jealousy associated with an ex-girlfriend and plots to crash his romantic evening. Showing up at the restaurant where Pip is headed, Bessy invites herself to his table and tags along to dinner and a movie, even asking the other woman to “fill out a 30 page background check”. Though this

stalking behavior is unusual for Bessy, the jealous-natured, temperamental woman role fits perfectly with the stereotype she personifies.

In another Bessy-centric episode, “Get Bessy”, the barnyard animals begin to question what Bessy does with her time and where she goes. After tailing Bessy for several hours the gang determines, based on Bessy’s suspicious activities, that she must be a burglar. Coming to a negative (rather than positive) assumption about Bessy’s behavior is one more example of the “othering” of Bessy’s character within the *Back at the Barnyard* plot. In a twisted turn of events the barn animals decide to “intervene in her thieving ways” (Abby) and help their “friend” right her wrongs. Though the gang is wrong about how Bessy is spending her time, this episode offers a rare moment of togetherness not usually enjoyed by Bessy. She is completely included in the group and appears accepted, even admitting “Their brains are small and confused but I guess they had my best interests at heart.” The momentary love Bessy feels for the other animals quickly subsides though and she is back to calling them all “morons” by the end of the scene.

While being coded a loud, black female does not necessarily dictate the extent to which a character can experience relationships, it does affect the types of relationships that will develop. Bessy’s character employs significant racial tropes when developing bonds with others. From the mammy, to the aggressive and jealous ex-girlfriend, to the finally socially accepted black woman, the fluid medium of animation allows Bessy to demonstrate a range of relationships while still maintaining her racial status.

### **On the Periphery: Bessy's Role at the Barnyard**

Within the barnyard there is a clear hierarchy of popularity. Topping this list is Otis, the white, male image of hegemony. Assorted sidekick-type characters occupy the next few spots, and then, there is Bessy. At the bottom of the popularity totem pole it is hard not to notice the slights on Bessy's character. In each evaluated episode there is at least one instance where Bessy is eclipsed by an inanimate object or partially cut out from a screen shot. In "Some Like It Snotty" the entire cast is pictured reading the daily newspaper but unlike the other animals, Bessy is shown off to the side, partially eclipsed by a burlap farm bag. Similarly, toward the end of "Treasure Hunt" the gang hastily returns to the barnyard to check on their corn. Bessy is shown running behind the other characters and is cut from the screen because of her inability to keep pace. She is not typically shown at the forefront of the screen or closest to the action. This type of screen omission does not happen with any other character.

Bessy's role on the periphery of the group is challenged by her attempts at inclusion, as occurs in "Treasure Hunt". Bessy is initially shown hiding in the shadows, spying on crows that are trying to steal the farms' supply of corn. The music that plays against her spying scene is ominous and dark, not the typical upbeat tunes of *Back at the Barnyard*. Peering through the slats in her stall the only obvious part of Bessy is the whites of her eyes; she fully blends in to the background. Though Bessy is part of the cast she is alienated and faded into the background.

Later in "Treasure Hunt" Bessy "makes herself useful" (Abby) to Abby by providing a means of transportation with which to follow the boys on the treasure hunt, thus ensuring her involvement in the rest of that episode's exploits. Bessy is normally excluded from group

activities, as happens in “The Good, the Bad, and the Snotty/Escape from the Barnyard”. In that episode Bessy’s status as an outsider is confirmed, as she isn’t allowed to enter the “escape hot air balloon”. While all the other main characters manage to get aboard, Bessy is left clinging on to the side, eventually falling back in to the barn with the sheep (characters who do not speak).

Though Bessy lives on the periphery of the group’s activities she is still clearly able to demonstrate the tropes of her prescribed racially stereotyped identity. Bessy is an instigator, a troublemaker and a gossip. In “The Good, the Bad, and the Snotty/Escape from the Barnyard” Bessy manufactures rumors about the episode’s antagonist. “You know what I heard? I heard he ate an entire village down in Mexico!” This is said in a conspiratorial manner and Bessy leans forward as though she is letting the rest of the barn in on a secret. After divulging her “secret” she leans back, apparently satisfied to be the center of such salacious gossip. Her rumormongering is successful; the next time the farmer is introduced it is by Pip’s excited and frightened exclamation, “Here comes the carnivore” followed by a thunder crack and lightening bolt. The body language and intent of Bessy help clarify her racial coding as they call to mind contemporary portrayals of black women as divas and gossips such as “Madea” in Tyler Perry’s *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005) (Benshoff & Griffin, p. 97).

Bessy’s persistent exclusion from group activities and “outsider” status imply that she is a nominal member of the group. She is not readily included in excursions but rather has to make room for herself like in “Treasure Hunt”, invite herself along as with “Hickory Dickory Donkey/Clonedemonium”, or find a specific duty that she can fulfill for the group, for instance, as Otis’ mom in “Home Sweet Hole/Otis’ Mom”. Though Bessy is involved in the

everyday workings of the barnyard she has a markedly different role than the rest of the animals. While they all congregate together and enjoy standing invitations to each episodes adventures, Bessy is clearly not afforded the same level of involvement.

## **Conclusion**

This analysis has offered ways through which Bessy is constructed as a character clearly marked by the racial signifiers of a loud, black female. Textual analysis shows how visual and non-verbal cues such as the sound effects of stomping, “shh-ing” someone, and flinging or throwing an object or other animal can create racially coded images for audiences. The noticeable difference in Bessy’s vocal inflections as opposed to those of her cohorts helps corroborate the idea that Bessy is not like the rest of the barnyard animals. She is an outsider and as such she is to be kept at arms length, distant from the rest of the group.

Bessy’s overwhelming attitude and problems with assimilation into the group are common media tropes in representing black characters (Luther et al., 2012; Benshoff & Griffin, 2009). Her cow form does not hinder audiences’ ability to denote her race and gender. Bessy’s overt anthropomorphization means she walks on only her hind legs and sashays in the manner of a curvaceous woman. When she is standing her hip is cocked to the side; these are indicators of a specific kind of human movement and do not match the physicality of a typical animated cow.

The development of relationships between Bessy and other barnyard animals shows the evolution of her stereotyped role. Barker (2010) discussed the nuancing of black representation in animation as working toward breaking stereotyped perceptions. The attempts to resist and transform Black stereotypes, said Barker, include the characters

“integration with White values, the inversion of negative for positive interpretations of blackness, avoidance, and direct confrontation and interrogation of stereotypes” (p. 48). But we do not see such interventions in *Bessy*, even at a basic level that would be appropriate for children’s entertainment.

Instead, *Bessy* is the manifestation of a stereotypical role. She offers a contemporary animated representation of blackness that corroborates existing analysis on popular children’s racial representations (Barker, 2010, King et al., *Animated Representations of Blackness*, 2010; King et al. *Animating Difference*, 2010). Her character is dependent on familiar racialized and racist tropes, doing little to confront the stereotypical image of the black woman. In her case, we see child-friendly elements of the “sassy” mammy character from classic Hollywood film, the racialized other, and even the more contemporary “Angry Black Women” found in a variety of contemporary media, perhaps most pointedly in reality television (Tyree, 2011). Animation that is based on caricaturing as a tactic of representation will have to continuously grapple with whether certain characteristics, racial and otherwise, have been taken “too far” (Barker, p. 483).

As explained in Chapter 2 this thesis posits that stereotyping has the potential to affect and influence audiences. The overwhelming appeal of animation to young viewers makes this topic especially concerning since these audience members are in their formative years. This chapter focused on African American stereotypes, but there are other ethnicities that are problematically framed by media. Continuing with the themes of stereotyping and textual analysis, Chapter 5 looks to the depictions of Orientalism in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Noticing themes of Western thought and the “whitening” of characters, Chapter 5 furthers this thesis by offering analysis of another common American media stereotyped role.

## Chapter 5

### *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and Orientalism

#### Introduction

*Avatar: The Last Airbender* is set in a fictitious and mystical Asian world, one where “element bending” is rampant and peace and prosperity is contingent upon the actions of a twelve-year-old boy. Although not technically set in Asia, the program evokes an Orientalist exoticism by using several Asian tropes throughout the series, including Asian-evoking names, clothing, fighting styles and an anime-style of animation. Created by two American producers at Nickelodeon Animation Studio in Studio City, L.A. (IMDb, *Avatar*, 2012), the Asian-influenced animation in *Avatar* demonstrates ways in which the “Oriental is *contained* and *represented* by dominating frameworks” (Said, p. 40). This textual analysis argues that a distinguishable white, hegemonic viewpoint can be detected within the stereotypical representations in *Avatar*. This animated cartoon offers the opportunity to examine a contemporary portrayal of Asian identity that furthers Western hegemony through ideologically charged constructions of Eastern cultures.

Western media habitually portray Asian identities as a singular unit, ignoring the complexities and multicultural diversity of that region. Stereotyping this heterogeneous population under one particular label masks the broad range of linguistic and ethnic backgrounds represented by the term “Asian” (Luther et al., p. 131). Limited, Westernized representations of Asian populations have roots in Western fears of Eastern cultures and people that materialized with Western colonization of the East (Luther et al., 2012; Benshoff & Griffin, 2010; Said, 1994). Racial myths and representations from that period have “found a new home in the form of modern media representations” (Luther et al., p. 131). Despite

offering four culturally distinct character types, the constructions in *Avatar* fall prey to patterns of stereotyping that were first perpetuated during the colonization of the East, and have ties to the general process of “orientalism” discussed in Chapter 2. Western hegemony is reinforced when other populations are shown in a negative, inaccurate or demeaning way, including Asian cultures.

*Avatar*'s main plotline centers on Aang's development of his Avatar bending powers; he is the only person capable of learning to bend all four elements of water, air, earth, and fire. Learning these talents, much like learning karate or jujutsu, cannot be accomplished alone. Aang seeks out the best teachers of each nation to learn from. His end goal is to fight the evil Fire Lord and restore peace to his war-torn world.

Developing Aang's abilities and searching for element-bending masters allows the characters to travel from tiny towns to big cities. The changeable settings and cast of this series offer a unique set of data with a multiplicity of contemporary portrayals of Asian culture. The continuously revolving cast of *Avatar* should ideally present diverse representations. Since so much is transient about and in the series there should be no need to adhere to prescribed stereotyping or hegemonic structure. Instead, the characters encountered by the main characters are often familiar Asian caricatures. The stereotypes propagating the fantasy realm of *Avatar* vary from the “model minority”, to “sexless male”, to “yellow peril” to “warrior”, and beyond. Contrasting to these series of portrayals are the main characters themselves, whose own Asian heritage is mitigated through a “whitening” process. The introduction of “whiteness” into main characters purported Asian in origin is perhaps best illustrated by the 1970's television program *Kung Fu*, which cast the white actor David Carradine as a martial arts master wandering in the West, this program, though, continued a



tradition from classical Hollywood of white actors portraying Asian characters (Iwamura, 2011).

Analyzing the visual and non-verbal cues, dialogue and vocal patterns, relationships of characters, and main characters Aang, Sokka, and Katara's roles within the world of *Avatar*, this textual analysis examines the overwhelming presence of Western viewpoints that present themselves in this animated series.

### **“Whitening” Heroes and “Othering” Others: Visual and Non-Verbal Cues**

*Avatar* presents racially stereotypical material by lessening and exaggerating the Asian qualities of characters based on their roles within the series. Creating a situation where “Asian” qualities are defined by their comparison to “White American” qualities, *Avatar* consistently whitens lead characters while ethnicizing the low-intelligence villagers and evil characters. Though all characters are identifiably “Asian” there is variation in skin tone, posture, eye shape, ear prominence and hairstyles. These offer subtle differences that create levels of ethnicity or “Asian-ness” in characters.

Lead characters Aang, Sokka and Katara are all whitened versions of the Asian population. The white skin tone and steel-grey rounded eyes of Aang belie his Asian identity (although he is slight in stature, perhaps unlike a typical Western hero). Similarly Katara and Sokka both feature round shaped blue eyes and wavy brown-black hair (Katara's hair is decidedly lighter brown in color); none of these traits are inherently animated Asian features. Aang, Sokka and Katara display signs of Western cultivation: each have straight white teeth, are well groomed, and have clean skin and clothing; the two male characters are clean-shaven. This is in contrast to the background or episode-specific characters they encounter.

The village populations in *Avatar* as well as periphery characters like “Aunt Woo” in “The Fortune Teller”, “Joo Dee” in “City of Walls and Secrets” and “Hama” in “The Puppetmaster” have more overt Asian characteristics. With straight, shiny black hair, oval-shaped brown eyes, small noses, and prominent ears, these characters have clear racial significations. “Joo Dee” in “City of Walls and Secrets” is the archetype of an Asian animated woman; she has shiny, reflective blue-black hair, oval shaped dark brown eyes, a small nose, thin eyebrows, and she wears a full-length kimono, ornate hair clip that resembles chopsticks, and slippers rather than shoes. Depictions of villagers often show people missing teeth, like “Doc” in “The Painted Lady”, or children and adults with dirty or torn clothing as in “City of Walls and Secrets” and “The Painted Lady”. Racial representations in the Fire Nation (the “bad guys” of *Avatar*) feature straight, shiny black hair, oval-shaped brown eyes, small noses and pale off-white or yellow tinged skin, all of which are typical physical features of Asian identifying populations. Adult males in both the villages and the Fire Nation are commonly portrayed with long thin mustaches and small goatees in the “Fu Manchu” style popularized by early film representations of Asian men (Luther, Lepre & Clark, p. 133).

The clothing of Aang, Sokka and Katara differs from that of their village and Fire Nation counterparts. While most men in the series wear full-length traditional kimonos, Aang is outfitted in a kimono-style high collared shirt, trouser pants and high socks. Sokka wears a short kimono jacket, pants and boots. Katara does wear the kimono featured on most women in *Avatar* with the significant difference being color; Katara’s kimono is blue and without ornamentation or design while the village women primarily wear shades of purple, pink or yellow with flower and lace patterns along the front, again a stronger visual indicator of

Asian influences. Additionally, Katara wears no makeup and her hairstyle is a simple braid despite the fact that most women characters in the program sport more stereotypically elaborate updos and makeup.

Non-verbal images help distinguish certain characters as more stereotypically Asian than others. The fighting-centric plot of *Avatar* necessitates that much of the characters' time is spent practicing their "bending" and fighting techniques. However, when portrayed, the hobbies and habits of Aang, Sokka and Katara are much less traditionally Asian than the others. They joke with each other about fishing abilities in "The Fortune Teller", bet on the outcome of arguments in "The Painted Lady", and have rather normal sibling spats in "The Boy in the Iceberg". Aang, Sokka, and Katara are portrayed as typical Western youth and do not exhibit any identifying Asian habits or hobbies. The images associated with villagers and the Fire Nation include playing Mah Jong in "The Boy in the Iceberg", telling/receiving fortunes in "The Fortune Teller", and making and brewing tea in "City of Walls and Secrets". The habits and hobbies of the villagers and Fire Nation therefore conform to traditional media symbols of "Asian" essentialism. That some of these are mystical -- such as fortunetelling -- creates an image of the Orient as "lacking European progress in the sciences, arts, and commerce" (Said, p. 206). Admittedly, the *Avatar* world is a magic one -- this itself also speaks to the connection of Orientalism and mysticism -- but the general (Orientalist) population in the program also engages in "common" primitive practices not engaged in by the more non-Orientalist main heroes.

Regardless of the clear delineation of some characters as more whitened than others, no character is able to completely escape stereotypical presentation. This pattern befalls many modern portrayals of Asian characters as Luther, Lepre and Clark (2012) revealed that

modern writers typically lapse into stereotypical representation of Asian identity despite the prominence of the character (p. 142). The anime-style of *Avatar* encourages over-the-top expressionism, included as an element of comedic relief. This is concurrent across the cast of characters as Aang, Sokka and Katara fall prey to the same depictions of improper social behavior as their periphery-character counterparts. Displays of messy eating (“The Fortune Teller”), manipulating bending abilities out of anger or exasperation (“The Avatar State”, “The Headband”, “The Puppetmaster”), or running away from a difficult problem or situation (“The Boy in the Iceberg”, “The Headband”) are common tropes within the *Avatar* series. Though these displays could also be classified as characteristics of youth, the details in the scenes signify the main character’s orientalism. For instance, in the messy eating of “The Fortune Teller,” Sokka picks up chopsticks, glances at them, then grunts and throws them to the ground before digging in to his plate with his hands. Later, Sokka picks his chopsticks back up and pokes his pet with them when the monkey reaches for Sokka’s food. The scene highlights chopsticks, a clearly non-Western utensil, as the main eating tool and propagates the trope of Asians having poor table manners. While out-of-control expressions corroborate the larger theme of Western hegemony perpetuated by stereotypical depictions of Asians, implying that Asian peoples lack the required self-restraint to act in socially acceptable ways “supports the argument that the ideal situation is to have Whites remain at the top of the social hierarchy” (Luther, Lepre & Clark, p. 146).

### **Accented Speech, Dialogue, and Levels of Perception**

Stereotypical portrayals of speech and vocal inflection in *Avatar* corroborate patterns of Western superiority with a direct comparison of traits. Coding the three main protagonists

with white American vocal attributes encourages the idea that white American attributes are desirable traits. Concurrently, coding characters that are periphery figures, unintelligent, and evil with an Asian identity matches traditional media stereotypes rooted in anti-Asian sentiment (Luther, Lepre & Clark, p. 147).

Despite the situation of *Avatar* within an Asian-influenced world only some characters employ accented speech. Most of the voice actors are Caucasian, including for all three main characters, although before his death the noted Japanese-born actor Mako voiced a secondary character (a retired general of the Fire Nation). The grammatically perfect English of Aang, Sokka, and Katara is not unique to those characters, though it is noticeably a trait of the intelligent, “good” characters within the series. Aang, Sokka, and Katara correctly pronounce vocabulary and never drop the endings of their words. They converse in insightful and intelligent ways on a variety of topics, as shown in “The Painted Lady” when the group tries to help a pollution-ridden fishing village. Posing as a legendary spirit, Katara delivers food and medicine to the ailing villagers. The conversation transpires as the group witnesses the villagers’ joy over “being saved”:

“Can you believe how much an entire village can be affected by one lady, I mean spirit?” -Katara

“Well, I hope she returns every night. Otherwise, this place would go right back to the way it was.” -Sokka

“Why would you say that? Look how much better off these people are.” -  
Katara

“Yes, now. But without her they wouldn’t be able to fend for themselves.” -  
Sokka

Sokka touches upon the fact that the villagers must take responsibility for their own lives and futures. This level of perception is completely anathema to the villagers in the *Avatar* series as they are often depicted desolately waiting for someone else (i.e. the Avatar) to come resolve their problems for them.

The three main characters rarely speak in slang; if this occurs it is for comedic relief and signifies, if anything, an American-teen style of talking, as in “The Headband” when Aang refers to a villager as “my good hotman”. Later, Aang clues the gang in on how to talk in the Fire Nation saying, “I used to visit my friend here... so everybody stay cool and follow my lead. Or as they say in the Fire Nation, ‘stay flamin’”.

The villagers, Fire Nation and periphery characters often lack the ability to clearly communicate their intentions and motives. Classic Hollywood cinema traditionally scripted Asian characters to “speak in broken English and make cryptic quips that suggested both the sayings of Chinese philosopher Confucius and the silly predictions of fortune cookies” (Benshoff & Griffin, p. 127). Exemplifying this trope is the periphery character “Uncle Iroh,” an elder who, speaking with a heavy accent, produces short lines of generalized wisdom or observations that belie his intelligence with intentional ambiguity, like “Life happens wherever you are, whether you make it or not” and “This tea is nothing more than hot leaf juice” (“City of Walls and Secrets”).

While the dialogue of the villagers and periphery characters is fairly innocuous, “The Headband” demonstrates the stereotype of “yellow peril” -- sprinkled with hints to communist China -- with its propagandized “Fire Nation Oath” and concurrent school lessons. Mistaken for a schoolboy while traveling through the Fire Nation, Aang is enrolled in a Fire Nation school. While there he learns that the students are being fed propagandized

messages about the war and that they are made to recite an oath proclaiming their fealty to the Fire Lord at the start of each day. With lines like “My life I give to my country. With my hands I fight for Fire Lord Ozi, and his forefathers before him. With my mind I seek ways to better my country,” interpreting the Fire Nation as a dangerous Communist regime is almost unavoidable. Aang is unfamiliar with the Oath and fakes his way through it, making up words and continuing to speak long after the other children are finished. Furthering his coding as “white,” Aang resolves the plot of “The Headband” by organizing a dance party for his classmates, a very Western thing to do considering the stilted speech and manners of his Fire Nation classmates; this Westernized resolution will be further analyzed in the next section. Aang’s coding as “white” exploits the stereotypical portrayal of the Fire Nation School as it allows him to expose its bigotry thereby “hegemonically asserting that white patriarchal capitalist culture is a cure for racism and not a cause” (Benshoff & Griffin, p. 131).

The Asian stereotypes in *Avatar* serve to make “more rigid the sense of difference between the European and Asiatic parts of the world” (Said, p. 204). In keeping with traditional media portrayals of Asian identity many characters in this animated series speak with accents, offer vague or unhelpful advice, and demonstrate a lack of perception about their problems. This type of stereotyping simplifies and essentializes Asian identities.

### **Heroes “Saving” Orientals: Role Within the Series**

From the opening dialogue in the Pilot Episode *The Boy in the Iceberg*, the role of Aang, Sokka, and Katara has always been clear. Narrated by Katara an opening monologue reveals how the Avatar maintained balance between four separate realms of Air, Water,

Earth, and Fire. The Avatar, Aang, is the only person with the ability to master all four elements, resolve the war initiated by the Fire Nation, and restore the world to peace. With the help of Sokka and Katara, Aang travels throughout his world helping villagers overcome the hardships of war. In this way, the blue-eyed, light-skinned hero and his similarly characterized friends save the more primitive peoples from the likewise Orientalized villains.

This dynamic is not just the premise of the series, but is enacted in individual episodes. In “The Fortune Teller” Aang, Sokka and Katara come across a village that relies on its resident fortuneteller to predict the future. The main plotline focuses on the village’s location next to an active volcano. “Aunt Woo” the fortuneteller has predicted the volcano would not erupt for another year, despite obvious geographical signs to the contrary. Introducing the theme of Oriental mysticism, the episode revolves around the stereotype of the Orient as eccentric or backward, needing “Western attention, reconstruction or even redemption” (Said, p. 206). As the episode unfolds, Aang, Sokka and Katara are forced to trick Aunt Woo into predicting a volcanic eruption; so great are the villagers belief in Aunt Woo that they will not listen to reason or scientific fact from the three main characters. The Orientalist villagers -- and thus, perhaps, Asian cultures -- are unable to help themselves, and unwilling to partake in modern technology and science-based evaluations. The whitened characters Aang, Sokka, and Katara, in contrast, represent the benefits of Western hegemony as they save the day by attending to villagers too obtuse to help themselves.

“The City of Walls and Secrets” offers a more sinister portrayal of Orientalism. While touring the city of Ba Sing Se, Aang, Sokka, and Katara notice the overwhelming presence of a sect of secret police called the Dai Li. Acting under the orders of their evil commander the Dai Li have been brainwashing Ba Sing Se’s people; the population doesn’t realize their



kingdom is in the midst of massive 100-year war. While in Ba Sing Se -- a city that evokes The Great Wall of China -- Aang, Sokka, and Katara try to explain the severity of the war to those around them, only to be halted at every opportunity by a henchwoman of the Dai Li named "Joo Dee". As the episode progresses the Dai Li become exceptionally hostile to the main characters and eventually kidnap and torture them for refusing to silence their messages about the war. "The City of Walls and Secrets" offers a view of reasonable protagonists being hounded and punished by a secret police force for trying to educate others and do the right thing. While this message is harmful in itself, it is more important to recognize the coding of those protagonists as white compared to the Asian coding of the antagonists. Messages in this episode reinforce stereotypes that Asian populations are totalitarian and untrustworthy (Benshoff & Griffin, p. 133). Only with Western intervention and influence can such societies be redeemed.

One of the most potentially damaging stereotypes perpetuated within the *Avatar* series is that of the evil "Fu Manchu" (and the female equivalent, Fu Manchu's daughter Fah lo Suee), a variation of "yellow peril" character from the early twentieth century. "The Puppetmaster"'s dark plot clearly offers this portrayal in the character "Hama". Hama is a water bender who was kidnapped from her tribe during the early years of the war. After being brutally tortured by her kidnappers she succumbs to the dark art of blood-bending, escapes, and moves to a small Fire Nation village to exact revenge against the nation that ruined her life. Years of oppression and torture turned Hama into an evil woman, one who is willing to go to any length to hurt and kill her perceived enemies. Despite the fact that the villagers she lives near had nothing to do with Hama's kidnapping or torture, she manipulates the blood inside their bodies, causing them immeasurable and agonizing pain. Shown as

ruthless and sadistic, Hama embodies the “yellow peril” image of the Asian population (Luther, Lepre & Clark, p. 135). The climax of “The Puppetmaster” shows Katara fighting Hama with water bending, refusing to be seduced by the powers of the dark art of blood-bending. Depicting the whitened main characters as being above or better than the evil arts is just one more way *Avatar* creates the illusion of Western dominance. Obviously what Hama is doing is evil and wrong. Aang, Sokka, and Katara recognize this without question and stop Hama without falling prey to her devious influences.

In all of the above episodes as well as the series arc generally, the role of Aang, Sokka, and Katara is that of saviors. They continually help distressed villagers, right the wrongs of the Fire Nation, and act as authority figures offering wisdom and guidance to others. Appearing almost as mainstreamed “model minorities” because of their place in a clearly Asian world, Aang, Sokka, and Katara act as the perpetrators and disseminators of a higher, more Westernized democratic way of life. This is apparent even in the trivial pursuits of the three heroes, as in “The Headband” where Aang introduces his Fire Nation classmates to dancing, something they had never been encouraged to do before. At first unwilling to participate, the Fire Nation schoolchildren eventually warm up to the idea of dancing, saying, “This is incredible. It’s like all my inhibitions just disappeared.” Aang, Sokka, and Katara continually reinforce their whitened and more Westernized roles by exposing other characters to new, “better” things. Their whitened coding allows the entire series to be presented as multicultural while in fact it is just another example of white hegemony. Aang, Sokka, and Katara the protagonists *are* the whitest characters in *Avatar*; they save the day while giving audiences positive messages about Western dominance and limiting and often negative stereotypes of Asian populations.

## Conclusion

Portraying the main heroic characters as whitened versions of Asian identity and stupid, marginalized, mystical or evil characters as clearly “Asian” perpetuates harmful and negative perceptions about Asian populations and is a long-standing variation on Orientalism. The dichotomy between the main characters and the villagers, periphery characters, and Fire Nation becomes apparent with analysis of appearance, vocal patterns, and role within the series. The coding of these leading characters as white convolutes the multicultural image of *Avatar* as it is morphed into a show featuring white protagonists.

Stereotypical depictions of Asian populations propagate circumscribed and hegemonic messages about that population. Ignoring the complexities and diversity of the Eastern hemisphere, Western hegemony asserts itself necessary to the Orient’s evolution (Said, 1994). Whitening Aang, Sokka, and Katara allows *Avatar* to present Western hegemonic messages and structure to “Asian” characters. Displays of Western dominance in *Avatar* are realized through the coding of some characters as whiter than others, ignoring the potential of this stereotyping to create both individual harm and broader social harm.

Negative stereotypes of Asian identity are rampant in contemporary media. The storied history of anti-Asian sentiment and Orientalist viewpoints in Western culture present themselves in media representations of this type of character. Dichotomizing the Occident and the Orient, *Avatar* is just one more example of the West’s exhibitions of dominance over its Eastern counterpart. The real harm in these portrayals lies in the messages it sends to audiences, as there is no clear demonstration of Asian excellence (or often even competence) within *Avatar*, despite its acclaim as a multicultural and diverse program.

Manipulating themes of hegemonic displays of Western dominance, Chapter 6 analyzes a contemporary portrayal of indigenous populations in *Tak and the Power of Jujū*. Analysis of this series draws upon the presented issues of *Avatar* in that its Westernized elements selectively ethnicizes characters. Paralleling themes of Western hegemony presented here, the textual consideration of *Tak* shows how stereotypical depictions can create negative images about non-Western peoples.

## Chapter 6

### **Magical Juju: *Tak and the Power of Juju* and the Infantilized Indigenous**

#### **Native**

##### **Introduction**

In the comedy animation series *Tak and the Power of Juju*, Nicktoons presents indigenous natives as a primitive and mystical other acting outside the bounds of civilized society. *Tak and the Power of Juju* clearly frames and constructs the non-traditional culture of the Pupununu tribe through the use of magic as their main method of problem solving, effectively infantilizing them. Textual analysis reveals how *Tak* presents stereotypes that are classically tied to the “native” character including characters that are “uncivilized” and “noble savages” (Luther, Lepre & Clark, p. 40). The “noble savage” stereotype, although arguably more positive than the “violent savage” version of early Hollywood westerns, nevertheless is ideological: connotations of the noble savage include silence (or voiceless), a primitive connection with nature (thus, apart from modernity), and childlike (Davis, 2010). Specific enduring portrayals range from the silent sidekicks like Tonto or Marilyn from the 1980’s television program *Northern Exposure*, to the goofy comic relief of Star Wars’ Jar-Jar Binks (the latter clearly ethnicized in his manner of speech and general social cluelessness). Examining work on both Native American and “primitive” peoples mediated images, the overlapping rhetoric of those groups is profound and grounded in ethnocentric sentiment.

Animated media have historically simplified and decontextualized native populations. Ethnocentricity has propagated specific stereotyping of indigenous populations (Benshoff & Griffin, p. 103), including children’s entertainment. One of the most conspicuous offenders, a Disney studio representative admitted that *Peter Pan*’s (1953) Native American characters

were caricatures of the American Indian (Wasko, p. 140). That studio's animated film *Pocahontas* (1995) featured historically inaccurate details and depicted the indigenous population of Jamestown as savages, effectively "legitimizing colonialism and racism" (Wasko, p. 142). Meanwhile, Pocahontas herself is thin, long-legged, high cheekboned with flowing hair, and has a special relationship with nature -- a racoon and a hummingbird are her friends -- the latter characteristic plugging into both traditional Disney tropes and Native American mediated images. Despite public declarations from filmmakers about addressing racial stereotypes, critics felt "Disney's Pocahontas is, once again, a parable of assimilation" (Edgerton & Jackson, "Don't Know Much About History", para. 4). Similar dynamics present themselves in the contemporary animation of *Tak and the Power of Juju*, especially in the form of an infantilized and irrationally superstitious indigenous people.

Infantilized presentations in *Tak and the Power of Juju* encourage audiences to stereotype indigenous populations. Set in a "fantastical jungle world," *Tak and the Power of Juju*'s exotic and dangerous wildlife and jungle location corroborate the trope that natives "maintain purer instincts about nature and the world around them" (Benshoff & Griffin, p. 103-4). The mediated habitat of indigenous populations, such as those set in Africa, is typically "a place apart, an inhuman setting marked by violence, abject suffering, backwardness and chaos" (King et al., p. 57). Mysticism, incorporated as a problem-solving tactic, negates the need for characters in *Tak* to evolve beyond that of their "noble savage" role. The visual and non-verbal cues, dialogue and vocal patterns, and relationships and roles of the characters in *Tak* offer audiences a stereotype-ridden consideration of indigenous populations.

### **Tiki Huts and Bongo Drums: Visual and Non-Verbal Cues**

*Tak and the Power of Juju* depicts a primitive, native, and clearly non-Western population. From the general immodesty of the characters' dress to their body types to their social and cultural practices, this series' visual images represent a non-traditional culture as stereotypically primal and uncivilized.

Media images showing indigenous populations as “foreign or exotic” to the norms and trappings of Western civilization have helped legitimate and naturalize notions of otherness and inferiority about these populations (Benshoff & Griffin, p. 106). Reinforcing the idea that non-Western societies are backwards and uncivilized, the characters on *Tak* dress in caveman-era clothing and jewelry. Tak, wearing only a mini purple loincloth, leather belt and anklet, lacks the protection -- and connotations of civilization -- of a shirt and shoes. Typical clothing for male Pupununu is a loincloth or leaf skirt; tribeswomen coordinate their loincloths with bandeaus that barely cover their chests. True to their indigenous and primitive construction the Pupununu are adorned with bone ear and nose rings, feather headdresses, face paint, and tribal tattoos. The outfits of the Pupununu foster signify the lack of modernity and modesty and reiterate the trope of natives in “leathered and feathered roles” (Luther, Lepre & Clark, p. 40).

In addition to their clothing and accessories, the Pupununu are marked with specific physical attributes that distinguish them as primitive. Their protruding foreheads, pronounced brow lines, connected eyebrows, missing teeth (similar to the signifiers of Orientalism in the previous chapter), and enlarged hands and feet encourage their coding as essentialized “others” existing outside the parameters of more evolved White American features. Tak's sidekick Keeko is especially Neanderthal, with a prominent “unibrow” and protruding belly

being defining features. “Innate” features like skin tone, skull shape, and musculature have been used to definitively separate native people from white populations (Benshoff & Griffin, p. 105). In this way, by giving the indigenous Pupununu caveman-like physical features, Nicktoons presents messages that this population is less developed than, and therefore inferior to, typical Western populations. This is overtly demonstrated when Jeera is turned into a monkey lemur in “New Pet/Tak’s Monster”, evoking physical connections to the animalistic. Exaggerating and ethnicizing the Pupununu furthers their stereotyped role of a less advanced society.

The hobbies and habits of the Pupununu establish their lack of technological advancement and modern interests. Shown as prodigious builders, the ability of the tribe to produce longstanding monuments is negligible; removing a single twig can easily destroy any structure they construct. In “A Shaman’s Shaman/The Gift” the tribe builds a sprawling three-story temple in tribute to Traylock, a visiting Shaman. When it is revealed that Traylock is a fraud, Jeera (Tak’s friend), thanks the “Pupununu technology” that built the structure, as its incompetence allows her to flick a single twig and collapse the entire temple. Similarly the grass-roofed bamboo and twine tiki huts that the villagers live in are often shown as being destroyed by falling rocks (“Woodiefest/Loser”, “Giant Chief/Shrink A Dink”), wind or natural forces (“The Three Chiefs/The Party”), or magical creatures and spells gone awry (“A Shaman’s Shaman/The Gift”, “The Beast/To Zaria With Love”, “New Pet/Tak’s Monster”). The lack of permanence and stability of structures made by the Pupununu belies their ability to produce viable and safe dwellings. Consistent portrayals of Pupununu technology as inferior and easily destroyable helps cultivate the stereotype that native and indigenous populations do not understand basic physics and are childlike/inferior



to Western civilizations. Historically, these types of messages have been used to portray the native as one “ill-equipped to handle progress” (Luther, Lepre & Clark, p. 37).

Perhaps the best example of the visual and non-verbal primitive qualities ascribed to *Tak*'s characters occurs in “The Three Chiefs/The Party”. When Chief finds out that his friends (chiefs from other native villages) are coming to visit, the Pupununu prepare a celebration. Adorning themselves with extra face-paint and especially animalistic loincloths, the tribe is dressed to impress. Later in the episode a giant party is thrown to celebrate the Pupununu's recent stroke of good luck. Fittingly the music at the celebration is an incessant bongo drumbeat accompanied only by a wooden flute that plays throughout the course of the entire episode and underscores all on-screen activity as especially primitive. On-screen images include Tak swinging through the jungle on vines, the shaman Jibolba performing an elaborate tribal dance, and Chief gorging himself at the buffet, eating to the point of extreme discomfort and obesity. Tribal dance hopping and earthy chanting are also shown in the episode “Woodiefest/Loser”.

Exaggerating and highlighting the primal exoticism of *Tak*'s characters sends the message that this population is different and estranged from modern civilization in all aspects of their life. They do not dress or celebrate according to Western traditions and social norms, and often this difference is used as a humor device -- something to be laughed at (such as Jeera's quick destruction of the shoddy temple or Chief's overeating at a ritual feast). Rather than offering a unique look at a different culture, Nicktoons' presentations in *Tak* demonstrate being “different” as being inferior. This is consistent with stereotypical portrayals of natives, as they have been consistently constructed to generate exotic appeal for white audiences (Benshoff & Griffin, p. 107). Solidifying this message of inherent inferiority

-- an essential characteristic that is even rooted in their life ambitions -- characters shrug their shoulders and walk off screen at the end of the episode the Pupununu reveal that they neither reached a happy ending nor learned a valuable lesson in “The Three Chiefs/The Party”, and do not really care about it.

Dress code, sound effects, physical features, lack of technology, and cultural practices displayed by the Pupununu villagers in *Tak and the Power of Juju* create a clear image of their inferiority to more civilized society. Consistent messaging that this type of population is inferior to others reinforces stereotypes about and the hierarchical place of the actual populations they may be assumed to analogize. Moving away from basic visual messaging and non-verbal cues, the dialogue and vocal patterns on *Tak* can also be textually analyzed to reveal the further infantilization of the indigenous native in the program.

### **The “Disgraced”: Vocabulary and Dialogic Issues**

Utilizing a specific and particularly inarticulate realm of dialogue, members of the Pupununu on *Tak and the Power of Juju* differ in their ability to effectively communicate with others. Luther, Lepre and Clark (2012) explain that the combination of “baby talk” and “foreigner talk” produces the vocal inflections and dialogic patterns commonly associated with native characters (p. 37). Continuing the stereotype of the native or indigenous figure, *Tak*’s dialogue presents the image of the native as having an inferior and childlike vocabulary.

Many episodes’ problems arise because of miscommunication amongst the tribes people, brought about by them not understanding the meaning of a word. Although the use of misunderstanding as a plot device is a long convention of television comedy, this

convention ideologically converges with portrayals of the Pupununu as especially prone to misunderstanding and symbolic confusion.

In “Woodiefest/Loser”, Lok the village warrior tells dozens of heroic stories to the Pupununu. Tak, who knows Lok never actually did the things he is telling the villagers, sets a giant boulder on the group hoping to expose Lok for the fake that he is. As the Pupununu cheer Lok on by yelling “It’s just like your story Lok except not so full of words” (Chief) and “Destroy the molten enemy Lok! Cruuuusssshhhh! Slaughteeeeerrrr! Ahhhhh!” (Slog), the range of their vocabulary is shown. Eventually Lok has to admit that he cannot stop the boulder and save the Pupununu, forcing Tak to step in with his magical Juju and remove the oncoming rock from their path. Lok’s lies force the Chief to kick him out of the village as he has “disgraced them all” to which Lok replies, “What does disgraced mean?” After the Chief explains that “It means you’re outta here!” Lok retreats to the jungle alone, sure that “disgraced” is synonymous with dying in the wilderness. Tak and Jeera spend the rest of “Woodiefest/Loser” trying to convince Lok he has gotten the vernacular wrong and that he only needs to prove his worth in order to regain Pupununu membership.

Misconstruing an event by confusing its symbolism and terminology happens in “A Shaman’s Shaman/The Gift”, and “Giant Chief/Shrink A Dink”. In “Giant Chief/Shrink A Dink” the Chief views smoke rising from Mount Anger (which is actually a volcano). In response he alerts his people that they “must make offerings to calm his [Mount Anger’s] fury”. Instructing them to build a monument to the angry mountain and “do the dance of blissful containment”, the Pupununu clearly demonstrate their lack of scientific and geological knowledge. Meanwhile, Tak brings a giant statue of Chief to life with his Juju powers. When the statue runs around the jungle and throws boulders into the air the real

Chief and Pupununu misread the resulting tremors as signs of “angriness from the mountain”, or volcanic activity from Mount Anger. Tak and the Giant Chief appear in the village just in time, as the Pupununu are about to sacrifice Lok to appease the angry mountain. While the rest of the village rejoices their apparent salvations, Chief begins to see signs of actual volcanism. His limited vocabulary renders him incapable of warning his tribe, as all he can say is “How is the smoke coming from it now?” Thankfully another villager’s exaggerated screaming alerts the rest of the Pupununu and they are able to take refuge in a cave in the nick of time. “Giant Chief/Shrink a Dink” demonstrates the stereotype that indigenous populations are prone to hysteria and sacrifice as means of appeasing their angry gods. Miscommunication brought about by the limited linguistic sophistication and vocabulary common to media representations of the indigenous proved life threatening in this episode and placed the Pupununu within the stereotypically primitive realm of being not particularly skilled or intelligent (Luther, Lepre & Clark, p. 43). Despite differing plotlines the episode “A Shaman’s Shaman/The Gift” can be clearly interpreted to offer similar themes about the Pupununu and stereotypical portrayals of non-Western peoples.

Within *Tak* the issue of misinterpreting a verbal message is also highlighted in “The Beast/To Zaria with Love”, with a magical twist thrown in. Psychic Juju, one of the magical beings known as Jujus, speaking in an affected though accent-free voice, tells Tak and Jibolba “One day you [Tak] will become rrrrruler of the entire Pupununu village! This will come to pass when you marry the future Chief of the Pupununu!” When Psychic Juju vanishes, Jibolba rushes off to visit the Chief and relay the news that Tak is destined to marry his daughter Zaria. Neither Tak nor Zaria is keen on the match and they react accordingly, alternately screaming about their fate, “But... I-HAVE-TO-MARRY- Z-Z-Z-

Zaaaaarriiaaaa!” (Tak) and scheming to dissolve the union, “I’ll just tell Father we’re not getting married. He always gives me what I want.” (Zaria). As the plotline of “The Beast/To Zaria with Love” evolves, Tak, Zaria and Jeera decide to disguise themselves as Physic Juju and tell the Pupununu that the proclamation was false. Obviously harebrained, their scheme fails but the resulting fight summons the actual Psychic Juju to the village leading him to explain, “I never said you would marry Zaria. *I* said you would marry the next Chief of the Pupununu!” This episode does double ideological duty by confirming the stereotype of native populations as both prone to misinterpretation and to the “superstitious and mystical” (Luther, Lepre & Clark, p. 45); the latter of course is a premise of the program generally. The Pupununu clearly rely on the proclamations of the godlike (and articulate) Jujus and were resigned to the fate of a marriage between Tak and Zaria. Showing characters on *Tak and the Power of Juju* as mystical and resigned to their fate -- even as they wrongly guess the meaning of the signs of their fate -- plays into the stereotypical depictions common to media representation of native and indigenous populations.

The dialogue in *Tak* codes characters as structurally incapable of appropriate, meaningful and conventional conversation. From misinterpreting the meaning of a word to not understanding the proclamations of their godlike figure, *Tak* is rampant with examples of how native populations have inferior and childlike vocal skills. The types of problems that arise from the miscommunication of the Pupununu are specific to their cultural group; their lack of vocabulary is presented as part of their uneducated state and is not a problem that would typically be encountered in a civilized society. Messages presented in the episodes of *Tak and the Power of Juju* lead audiences to the conclusion that if *Tak*’s characters were capable of more meaningful speech they would be able to avoid many of their misfortunes.

Nicktoons infantilizes the characters in this show by equipping them with childlike vocabulary and dialogue skills that overtly hinder them when trying to communicate with others.

### **“Juju Solves Problems”: Character Relationships and the Role of Magic**

Characterizing the stereotype that native and indigenous populations are “noble savages” who are more in-tune to nature and mysticism (Luther, Lepre & Clark, 2012; Benschhoff & Griffin, 2010), *Tak and the Power of Juju* features magic as a concrete, if comically flawed, method of problem resolution. Tak’s position as the only Pupununu with magical abilities renders him authority in the village but his actions in manipulating his Juju abilities demonstrate impulsiveness and immaturity. Highlighting two episodes where Juju magic both creates and solves problems for Tak, the following textual analysis explicates the ways in which this series furthers its constructions of native populations as inferior to Western civilization.

“Girls Only/Secession” infantilizes natives as people who both abuse their agency and lack the cognitive perceptions of more civilized populations by being easily fooled by the superficial trappings offered by magic. In “Girls Only/Secession” Tak turns himself female so he can be included in meetings of an all-girls club. The motive behind his extreme transformation, albeit simple, is a creepy abuse of his power; all he wants is to know what goes on in the cave where the girls meet.

Tak, now Takita, tricks everyone with his feminine disguise. Even Jeera and Keeko, his two best friends, neither determine his true identity nor wonder about the real Tak’s whereabouts. The mysticism and exoticism in this episode drive audiences to the conclusion

that the natives in *Tak and the Power of Juju* lack perceptiveness. Takita's actions and vocal inflection obviously mirror those common to Tak and the only physical characteristics that change are the addition of a bandeau top and blonde hair. Here, then, the program's native and indigenous people are easily tricked.

Once again using his powers for selfish or even infantile reasons, Tak in "New Pet/Tak's Monster" utilizes magic to create for himself a more peaceful night's rest. Despite Jeera's advice to "Quit being such a wimp," about his nightmares, Tak decides to use his staff to zap a monster, named Binky, from his dreams. In a rare moment of reflection Keeko declares that this is probably not a good plan since "isn't it a bad idea to point that thing at your brain?" Unfortunately Keeko's status as village idiot belies his insight and Tak continues unabated, knocking himself into a coma with his spell and releasing "Binky", the nightmare monster into the village.

With Tak out of commission, the villagers are portrayed as helpless before the monster, who has an enthusiasm for games. Rather than attempting to capture or divert the monster given the creature's quirks, the Pupununu simply run and scream every time he appears. So complete is their reliance on Juju magic to solve problems that Keeko goes as far as to ask, "What exactly do we do if we run into Binky [the monster]?" Showing the Pupununu as resigned to their fate as monster bait makes them appear simplistic and underdeveloped. Depicting natives as unable to help themselves fosters the impression of them as immature, intellectually deficient, and needing help; therefore without agency over their lives. Utilizing magic as both a stereotyped trope and problem solving mechanism allows *Tak* to create an infantilized image of the indigenous native. The mystique and magic in *Tak and the Power of Juju* was utilized as a tool to further stereotype indigenous

populations. Representing natives as lacking the ability to adequately resolve problems and thus need Western intervention, *Tak*'s corroboration of this trope is especially harmful as it has historical foundation in the discrimination and maltreatment of countless indigenous populations.

## **Conclusion**

The textual analysis of this chapter highlighted trends of presentation that parallel historical depictions of native figures, and Native American figures in particular. Almost never shown in animated form except in stereotypical roles as periphery characters, Nicktoons was afforded the opportunity to challenge traditional media portrayals of natives with *Tak and the Power of Jujū*.

The characters in *Tak* can be viewed as depictions of moderns in primitive clothing insofar as they sometimes act like modern citizens in saying, “dude” or “spoiling” their daughters. Though such tropes would be unlikely for primitive populations, they are used to show *Tak*'s audiences that they themselves are not entirely dissimilar to the Pupununu. Offering moderns in primitive clothing allows stereotypes, such as that of the noble savage, to project through characters' words and actions. Characters in *Tak* differ in their levels of prescription to traditional stereotypes. This nuances the cast of *Tak* a bit, encourages identification with characters by integrating the trope of “innate nobility,” while still allowing the program to use other stereotypical roles commonly associated with the native or indigenous character.

Offered as inferior to civilized society in terms of dress, physical features, vocabulary and dialogue, the Pupununu do not encourage empathic or serious consideration of their non-



traditional culture in anything other than stereotypical and dismissive terms. Given the lack of other representations of such groups on television, the infantilization of indigenous and native populations is of significant concern.

Historically, indigenous populations have been presented in media in very particular ways. The textual analysis of *Tak and the Power of Juju* argues for a ridiculing construction of such peoples offered to children. Children who watch this show are encouraged to consider native or indigenous populations in an ideological way and they likely have no other exposure to this type of culture to potentially contradict the opinions they form via *Tak*'s content. The infantilization and ethnicizing of the indigenous in *Tak* represent “another space in which Europeans and Americans have elaborate fantasies about savagery, wildness, and the state of nature” (King, et al., p. 57).

While the overt stereotyping in *Tak and the Power of Juju* is concerning, it at least offers some consideration that non-traditional cultures do exist. Just as *Pocahontas*' representation of Native Americans “reflects the efforts of White Americans trying to come to terms with their own historical actions” (Luther, Lepre & Clark, p. 41), *Tak* demonstrates a subtle shift in the types of ethnicities presented to children. Future programming should build off the mistakes of *Tak* by featuring indigenous people in more diverse and complex ways; a diverse, multicultural blend that is not inferior, only different in their choice to live outside the norms of Western civilization.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusions

#### Overview

This thesis began by combining several literatures, including work reviewing racial representation in film and television as well as more specifically in children's media, work on how children might be affected by television, and the political economy of Nickelodeon. Citing the fact that children are informed by the media they consume, this thesis examined several textual practices on three racially distinct programs from the cable channel Nicktoons. Looking at such characteristics as racially anthropomorphized animal characters, "whitened" characters that reinforce hegemonic structures, and "othered" native or indigenous characters, these programs on Nicktoons often reproduced common media tropes and race -- stereotyped and ideologically problematic tropes -- within their animated content.

Nicktoons' connection to the larger brand Nickelodeon not only encourages a similar economic logic of licensing-based children's entertainment -- such as programs based on video games and films -- but also increases the likelihood that similar stereotypical portrayals will be circulated on both cable channels and other subsidiary media such as DVDs or the Internet. Patterns of producing paralleled content, employing crossover content to air on both channels, and encouraging lifetime brand loyalty between the two channels furthers the propensity of audiences being exposed to stereotypical presentations. Revealing the historic interconnectedness of the Viacom corporate structure and the Nickelodeon branding strategy helped underscore the importance of contemporary textual analysis of Nicktoons animated programs.

Discussing anthropomorphized animals, textual analysis of *Back at the Barnyard* reaffirmed animation's ability to racialize characters, even when those characters are not human. Chapter Four argued that the character "Bessy" embodied a common media stereotype: her demeanor, appearance, and even relationships were that of a loud, angry, black female. Her brown color and wide nose (compared to the other female cow), as well as the fact that a recognizable and stylized African American actress voiced the character, clearly signal a particular ethnicity. Although done for comedic effect, she would often loudly and rudely belittle other characters, and typical was not a part of the larger group. That no other characters on *Back at the Barnyard* was explicitly coded as African American gives even more weight to the "pedagogical" lessons about that racial group taught by the show. Bessy stands alone as the only demonstration of how a black female should/does act.

Textual analysis of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* showed a clear distinction between the portrayals of "whitened" heroic characters and the ethnicized secondary or antagonist characters. The content of this program reproduced patterns of "othering" Asian characters in ways that flowed with Western hegemony. Villagers and the villainous were more explicitly Asian in appearance, and the mini-societies encountered by the heroes in *Avatar* were argued to be analogs for Westernized views of oppressive Asian cultures and practices. Visual and non-verbal cues including physical characteristics and attire, accented speech and language patterns, and character relationships belied the distinction of *Avatar* as a presentation of the multiplicity of Asian cultures, but instead indicates a reliance on stereotyped Orientalist portrayals.

*Tak and the Power of Jujū* presents for children images of a non-traditional ethnic group. Given the relative lack of indigenous and native figures in children's television this

series had perhaps the most to offer audiences in terms of disassembling stereotypes. Textual analysis of *Tak* however found the program reiterated historical tropes about native populations. Portraying Tak and his cohorts as stereotypically infantilized, easily fooled and incompetent reinforces the idea that this type of population is inferior to more traditional and Western societies.

The presence of stereotyped roles in the evaluated content indicates that in at least these programs Nicktoons perpetuates traditional mediated images of race and ethnicity. The three specific stereotypes that present themselves in the programs of Nicktoons give audiences particular and hegemonic messages about those racial/ethnic group members. Other stereotypic presentations of race not found in this particular study, such as the archetype of an African-American athlete or Asian American nerd, may reinforce images that are not necessarily negative -- African American strength or Asian intellectual superiority, respectively -- but still emphasize a limited range of ethnic representation. Studies on these types of characters could round out research in this field.

### **Further Conclusions**

Given these findings, there is the potential for real harm in offering children stereotypical messages about out-group ethnicities and races. Children interpret TV's messages in varied and multifaceted ways, but as the cited research in Chapter Two argues, ultimately the media they consume may affect their perceptions of themselves and others. Arguing for the importance of children's cultural artifacts—including media – Giroux advocated that such artifacts “garner as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles, values, and ideals as more traditional sites of learning, such as public schools,

religious institutions, and the family” (p. 91). The omnipresence and affective quality media assumes in the lives of children necessitates critical review of its content and messages.

Throughout this textual analysis there was a clear trend in presenting white characteristics as racially and ethnically superior. Offering Bessy as a loud, angry black woman undermined her ability to solve problems or interact with others in the barnyard in appropriate ways. Similarly, Aang, Sokka, and Katara were routinely whitened so as to distinguish their superiority from the rest of the more stereotypically Asian characters in *Avatar*. Within *Tak and the Power of Juju* characters were shown in a comically negative light, as being unable to resolve problems or exhibit proper methods of communication. These patterns of presenting white hegemony mirror existing media trends where “ideas about race and ethnicity are constructed in ways that tend to keep white privilege and power in place” (Benshoff & Griffin, p. 51).

Nicktoons’ connection to the Nickelodeon brand and the emphasis on children’s empowerment would seem to enhance their potential as a “diverse” entity within the children’s market. But perhaps Nicktoons is still influenced by the same economic and cultural pressures that have perpetuated problematic racialized images in previous media, children-targeted or otherwise. Banet-Weiser argued that to appeal to vast audiences “‘difference’ needs to be managed in a particular way so that racial and cultural hierarchies remain intact” (p. 177). This textual analysis of Nicktoons programming demonstrated trends of maintaining racial hierarchies by subsuming non-white characters to inferior plot positions. Additionally, highlighting traits of whiteness in heroic non-white characters meant their accomplishments would be concurrent with Westernized hegemonic presentation. These

examples show that these Nicktoons programs clearly perpetuate traditional mediated images of race and ethnicity.

Nicktoons falls within the realm of commercial entertainment. Nickelodeon and Nicktoons marketing strategy allows the channel to “maintain its ideological stance and commitment to being a network for kids, but at the same time it indicates that the network does not have to be ‘about race’ - race is simply something that ‘happens’ in a kids’ world” (Banet-Weiser, p. 170). This stance is profit-driven and a position that garners a large audience share for both cable channels. And, of course, for all three programs, there can be “plausible deniability” that these programs are about race: on the surface, one program is about farm animals, while the other two are about make-believe lands. The programs are a way to convey comforting notions about race (to the white majority viewers and advertisers) while not pointedly being about race.

Regardless, profit potential should not be the main concern when determining what content should be included in a line-up. Clearly, television has the potential to teach child audiences, the idea that race is something that “happens” in a kid’s world belittles the intelligence of Nickelodeon’s audience by assuming them incapable of interpreting and repeating in real life the stereotypes presented to them on television. Commercial television offers engaging and entertaining media to child audiences. If such channels were to retain these practices while also incorporating more thoughtful and appropriate exhibitions of race and ethnicity the landscape of children’s television, and the concurrent thoughts about race and ethnicity formed from messages garnered there, could be drastically different.

Critique of stereotyping encourages conversation about the loss of individualized understanding of other people (Pickering, 2001). Examining the “fine line that divides

warranted generalization about differences and unwarranted depictions of the differences of other people or other cultures” (Pickering, p. 16) can help reveal the potential for positive utilization of stereotyped roles. Given the overabundance of stereotypical depictions and encroaching prominence of children’s media, stereotyped roles could be reversed to highlight good traits or qualities about people generally, as well as the range of diversity in minority as well as majority groups. Animation, given the use of visuals, accentuates trends and tropes of populations; why shouldn’t those exaggerated qualities be *good, diverse, and counter-stereotypical* qualities that speak to the benefits of people generally and reinforce pro-social messaging for child viewers?

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Future research is critical in this area. It is impossible to overstress the importance of finding appropriate and diverse ways to present out-group races and ethnicities to children. Children’s perception of race and ethnicity in media emphasizes the necessity of research and criticism about available content. The generalizability of this thesis creates space where future research can more concretely evaluate contemporary media praxes as well as the markets and audience such presentations affect.

Existing criticism of animated films have offered critical insights as to what types of content is available to children; however the omnipresence of television animation warrants itself as a deserving object of analysis. Contemporary research on cable television programming could potentially reveal further trends of stereotypical animated portrayals. The merging of massive media conglomerates to create lifetime brand loyalty (as is the case with Nickelodeon and its sister channels) should be studied in light of television’s affective

capabilities, given the medium's ability to influence child consumers. New children's oriented cable networks -- like Disney XD, The Hub, and Teen Nick -- are seemingly added every year. More research on cable providers could also help further understand the changing industrial and technological contexts of cable with hopes of educating both parents and children about the types of content available on these channels as opposed to education-centric channels.

More traditional media effects research could help establish clearer patterns on the effect of presenting stereotyped racial and ethnic characters to children. Obviously, such studies would have to consider the potential harm in subjecting children to stereotyped material. However the current state of animated media, riddled with stereotypical portrayals and themes of Western hegemony, is not offering children an objective lens through which to view the world.

This thesis took steps to provide a contemporary textual analysis of a popular children's media channel. Understanding the scope and availability of media, studies like this one help us to understand what types of content are being offered to children and how the messages they receive can form lasting impressions about race and ethnicity. While the potential for this type of work is endless, the pressure to understand children's relationship with media seems especially pertinent given the growing prevalence and influence of television content.



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