

Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess

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*This article argues that children's self-image is affected by the ways in which they see themselves in texts both verbal and visual, and that fairy tales play an important role in shaping self-image and the belief-system of children. The images found in fairy tales, therefore, have particular importance for children of color in relation to the internalization of White privileging. This article presents a comparative analysis of the Disney version of six classic fairy tales spotlighted in **Disney's Princess: The Essential Guide** against the "classic" source text versions: **Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Snow White, and Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp** from the perspective of ideological/racial basis in the context of the goals of multicultural education. Findings from this analysis support the need for the development of critical literacy skills in children as well as in their teachers and highlight the importance of exposing children to transcultural literature.*

SELF-IMAGE AND THE DISNEYFIED PRINCESS

The precise time that children begin to see themselves in relation to color as a racial marker and formulate ideas of the relative value of belonging to this group or that is debatable. Tatum (1997) suggests that identity formation in children of color in the United States travels a different path from that of children who belong to the dominant culture (i.e., White children). However, some researchers have indicated that children's literature, including picture books (Spitz, 1999; Yeoman, 1999), plays a role—along with other forms of print and electronic media such as television, magazine images, and movie—in providing visual images to children that give them cultural information about themselves, others, and the relative status of group membership. In other words, self-image in children is shaped in some degree by exposure to images found in written texts, illustrations, and films. Moreover, it is clear that children, if they are to develop a positive self-image, need to "see" themselves or their images in texts. Books, therefore, can serve to reinforce or counter negative notions of self-image in children of color. For example, Sims (1983) noted in follow-up research to Larrick's (1995) landmark study, *The All-White World of Children's Books*, that children of color were still underrepresented in books, and that where they were represented, stereotypical and pejorative images of children of color still prevailed.

The fairy tale is one of the longest existing genres of children's literature. Through the ages, children have formed mental images of the princesses and other characters depicted in these tales from their representation in the written text as well as in the illustrations that have often accompanied those texts. Fairy tales, therefore, have an important role to play in shaping the self-image and belief system of children. Zipes (1994) frames six key features in how the fairy tale, originally written for adults, was institutionalized for children:

- (a) The social function of the fairy tale must be didactic and teach a lesson that corroborates the code of civility as it was being developed at that time; (b) it must be short so that children can remember and memorize it and so that both adults and children can repeat it orally. . . ; (c) it must pass the censorship of adults so that it can be easily circulated; (d) it must address social issues such as obligation, sex roles, class differences, power, and decorum so that it will appeal to adults, especially those who publish and publicize the tales; (e) it must be suitable to be used with children in a schooling situation; and (f) it must reinforce a notion of power within the children of the upper classes and suggest ways for them to maintain power. (p. 33)

The sixth framing feature or condition for institutionalization, the relationship between the fairy tale and the internalization of notions of power, enables us to recognize the impact that these tales can have on children of color.

Taxel (1992) argues that there is a "selective tradition in children's literature favoring the perspectives and world view of the dominant social groups" (p. 8) and that these traditions "are among the critical factors shaping our beliefs, world views, and perceptions of ourselves and the society we live in" (p. 13).

In recent times, since the invention of cinema, the visual representation of fairy tale characters has been dominated by the Disney version of these tales. Such is the power of visual representation that children tend to believe that Disney's version of the fairy tale is the real story rather than the "classic" version to which they may or may not have been exposed through school or home. Not only does the Disney version provide visual images for the fairy tale it is depicting, these images and the relative value of group membership associated with the images are then translated into beliefs children hold about status in particular group membership, in relation to notions of good, bad, pretty, and ugly as reflected in the films. Educators, therefore, need to be critical of all texts that are introduced to children—pictorial, film, and literary—and the impact that these texts have on children, particularly in relation to the acculturation and socialization process. However, the challenge presents several complex issues for the scholar and teacher, particularly persons of color, as it does for children, as Yeoman (1999) and Segura-Mora (2003) attest.

The impact of textual and visual exposure on the belief system of children has been dramatically demonstrated by Yeoman (1999), who conducted an ethnographic study with children in a 4/5th-grade classroom, ages approximately 9 years to 11 years, in a public urban Canadian school. The children in this study were being taught in class to understand and produce "disruptive stories," defined as stories that "challenge and go beyond conventional and limiting traditional storylines about race, gender, and class through presenting unexpected characterizations, plots, outcomes, or details; for example, feminist fairy tales or stories where the protagonists belong to visible minorities" (Yeoman, 1999, p. 427). It is important to note that the teacher of these children was committed to working for social justice and race and gender equity, and that the reading materials to which she chose to expose her pupils reflected these values. The children's intertextual knowledge, therefore, which Yeoman defines as "use of previous texts [as well as life experience] to make sense of new ones and to give coherence to lived experience" (p. 427), included exposure to disruptive texts as well as exposure to traditional and the dominant and influential Disney film version of classic fairy tales.

Although the findings in this study showed that many of the children were about to begin to think critically about gender issues, the published findings about the children's inability to understand internalized racism were illuminating. Yeoman (1999) read a Cinderella-type tale, San Souci's (1989) *The Talking Eggs*, to the children and asked them to draw the main character, Blanche, who is Black. The children were expected to use their intertextual knowledge of the classic *Cinderella* as well as *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (Steptoe, 1987), another Cinderella-type tale with a Black heroine. Yeoman (1999) reports that the children "almost invariably drew White characters no matter what color they were themselves" (p. 437). Explanations from three of the children illustrate the complexity of the issue under discussion: one child, when pressed, explained that she drew Blanche like Cinderella and not like Mufaro's daughter Nyasha, because ". . . I mostly thought she would get married and live happily ever after" (p. 437). Note, however, that Blanche does not marry in the story. Another child said, "I imagined her dark, but I'm drawing her blonde" (p. 437). When asked why, the child said she did not know. A third child said she "drew her yellow [haired]. . .because. . .she was good, so I wanted to make her pretty" (p. 438).

The implications that most if not all children, including children of color, see "White" as good, living happily ever after, and pretty, are disturbing. One of the most important implications

of this study, however, is the revealed magnitude of the task needed to overcome the pervasive racist value system that children have been exposed to and internalize—a system that is reinforced to a large extent by the culture industry (Zipes, 1997), and in particular through such devices as that of the Disneyfied princess.

The problem of pervasive, internalized privileging of Whiteness has been intensified by the Disney representation of fairy tale princesses which consistently reinforces an ideology of White supremacy. Sometime in 2003, one of the large, nationally known bookstores featured a Christmas book display: Disney's (2003) *Princess: The Essential Guide*. The cover included illustrations of six princesses, all from fairy tales that have appeared in various "classic" collections: Perrault's (2000a, 2000b, 2000c) *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty* (from Mme. Leprince de Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast*); Grimm's (1945) *Snow White*; Hans Christian Anderson's (1981) *Little Mermaid*; and Antoine Galland's princess (named Jasmine by Disney) who enchanted Aladdin in Lang's (1951) *Arabian Nights*. The presentation was visually striking. It was equally striking; however, to realize that for the child of African heritage, not one of these Disneyfied princesses came close to resembling her. The presentation, therefore, provoked the question of the ideological bias of these visual representations.

This article seeks to provide answers to that question, by engaging in a comparison between the source texts for the fairy tale princesses and the Disney film versions in relation to ideological/racial bias. The context for the examination that follows is multicultural education and the pedagogical application of the use of literature as a vehicle of social transformation. The Disney film versions of six classic fairy tales spotlighted in *Princess: The Essential Guide* will, therefore, be examined and contrasted with "classic" source text versions: *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Snow White*, and *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*, in order to determine the extent to which the source texts manifest a contrasting binary color symbolism (White/Black) that is reproduced in the Disney versions and which contributes to children's internalized perceptions of relative symbolic values.

The following questions serve as parameters for the analysis, which will begin with an examination of translations of the source texts, of the Disney film adaptations, before embarking on a discussion of the implications and concluding with proposed solutions: Is the privileging of Whiteness as prevalent in the source texts as it is in Disney? How far do these texts as well as the culture industry (i.e., Disney versions) go to support the notion of White privilege? What are the implications of the representation of the verbal and visual fairy tale princess for children of color?

COLOR SYMBOLISM IN WRITTEN SOURCE TEXTS

Generally speaking, there is little evidence in the written source texts, with some exceptions, such as *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Little Mermaid*, of White privileging and/or of a binary color symbolism that associates white with goodness and black with evil. Even in texts that evidence some of this color symbolism, the relative symbolism may be, to some extent at least, a function of the translation. For example, in *Snow White* (Brothers Grimm, 1945), translated by Lucas, Crane, and Edwards, the poisonous apple is described as "beautiful to look upon, being white with red cheeks, so that anyone who should see it must long for it" (p. 173). In another version (*Grimm's Fairy Tales*, 1949) based on a translation by Taylor, the apple is described as simply "so very nice" (p. 143). Snow White, of course, is consistently described as having "skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood, and hair as black as ebony" (Grimm Brothers, 1945, 1949, 1963). Other evidence of color symbolism in this tale includes descriptions of the furnishings of the seven dwarfs: their little table was covered with a "white cloth" (*Household Stories*, p. 215) and their beds covered with "clean white quilts" (*Household Stories*, p. 215). The whiteness of Snow White's skin, as well as the "whiteness" attributed to the seven dwarfs' furnishings, suggests an equation of "white" with goodness. On the other hand, there is no corresponding evidence that equates black with evil. One of the core qualities possessed by Snow White is her

beauty. Her “white” skin, therefore, her “red” lips, as well as her “black” hair are all symbolic markers of beauty.

In Perrault’s *The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods*, translated by Johnson (2000c), only once is whiteness evidenced in the text: after Sleeping Beauty is in her state of rest, her skin is referred to as [still] “white and beautiful” (p. 13). Cinderella, in this same collection, shows no explicit evidence of a binary color symbolism. This is also true of *Beauty and the Beast*, included in the same collection but based on Mme. Leprince de Beaumont’s text. It is, however, Woodard’s adaptation of Hans Christian Anderson’s (1981) *The Little Mermaid* that evidences the greatest degree of binary color symbolism. This adaptation clearly privileges whiteness and, in particular, White human beings. The nameless Little Mermaid is described as having “beautiful white arms” (p. 35), “eyes as blue as the deepest sea,” (p. 6); and, after she is transformed into a human, she is described as possessing “the prettiest little white legs a girl could wish for” (p. 9). Throughout the text, white is used to symbolize beauty and goodness: the Little Mermaid loved the statue of the handsome boy which is “carved out of clear white stone” (p. 20); and when she danced, she “lifted her beautiful white arms” (p. 35). This tale, however, also privileges White humans, because the Little Mermaid is willing to give up everything to obtain “an immortal soul” (p. 37) that only humans possess and the only humans in this text are White: “I would gladly give all the hundreds of years I have to live if I could only be a human being for one day and afterwards have a share in the heavenly kingdom (p. 24).” On the other hand, black in this text is equated with evil or danger: a little “black dog” (p. 12) barks ferociously at one of the Mermaid’s sisters; and the evil Sea Witch has “black blood” (p. 32) in her breast.

Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp (Lang, 1951) diverges from the other tales in relation to the documented provenance. This group of tales is reliably considered not to have originated in the Western world. Rather, they are thought to have been brought to the Western world in the eighteenth century and were translated from Arabic into French by Antoine Galland. The version of this tale examined in this study is an English translation edition by Lang (1951), specifically adapted for children. The princess of this tale is described with only one reference to her physical appearance: “she [was] so beautiful that Aladdin fell in love with her at first sight” (p. 206). The tale takes place primarily in China with a short segment in Africa. None of the major characters is described in relation to skin color. There is, however, one significant reference to color in the text: the sultan demands that Aladdin send him, “forty basins of gold brimful of jewels, carried by forty Black slaves, led by as many White ones” (p. 210). It is significant that although this reference depicts both Blacks and Whites as slaves, it clearly places White slaves in a position of relatively higher status.

Many of the pictorial texts that accompany these written fairy tale texts use black and white line drawings, and where color illustrations are used, the characters are typically illustrated as White. This fact, however, should not be read as sinister, since these tales, with the exception of *Aladdin*, are all in fact European fairy tales and it is logical that European characters should be represented graphically as White.

COLOR SYMBOLISM IN THE DISNEY VERSIONS

The Disney film versions of these same texts reveal indisputable evidence of White privileging and a binary color symbolism that associates white with goodness and black with evil. The reign of the Disney fairy tale princess began with the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, and since then Disney productions have become the dominant source of children’s intertextual knowledge of fairy tales, particularly in relation to visual and imaginary images. However, Disney’s productions of the fairy tales not only deviate a great deal from the source texts in relation to plot and characterization, they also manifest rampant use of the symbolism of white for goodness and black for evil or danger. The princesses (and princes) are overwhelmingly White, several with either blonde hair or blue eyes when the hair is not blonde. The exceptions are Snow White, “whose hair had to be black as ebony,” and Jasmine from *Aladdin* (Disney Films,

1992), who is tan- or olive-skinned with voluminous black hair. Moreover, just as the literary fairy tale texts of the 18th century excluded “common people” (Zipes, 1993, p. 13), so too, the Disneyfied versions, spanning a period of more than seven decades since the appearance of Snow White of these same texts, exaggerate the whiteness of the both primary and secondary characters, and thus subtly promote an ideology of White supremacy.

The black and white color symbolism in these Disney film versions is pervasive and powerful. For example, *Snow White* (Disney, 1937) features a wicked queen dressed in black who lives in a black castle that has black rats, a dangerous black forest containing black bats, and black owls. Moreover, the wicked Queen has a black crow-like bird perched on a human skull. In the end, the film implies that the wicked queen is devoured (off screen) by black vultures. Even the poisonous apple turns black to symbolize what lies within before turning red again. On the other hand, Snow White is surrounded by white birds; the Prince appears in a white horse; Snow White is laid to rest (when presumed dead) on white flowers holding a bouquet of white flowers before the Prince returns to rescue her and they ride off on his white horse toward the his white castle. It is interesting to note that Snow White’s complexion in the film is darker than that of the wicked stepmother. It is clear, therefore, that whiteness is not simply a color but a symbolic marker of goodness.

In Disney’s *Cinderella* (1950), the color symbolism operates in both explicit and implicit or subtle ways. The “good” Cinderella is blonde and blue-eyed. Her “bad” stepsisters and mother are visibly darker in complexion than Cinderella who is visibly White. The prince lives in a white castle that has white birds at the window. His father has white hair, which signals not only age, but a child-like innocence and goodness as well. Cinderella’s fairy godmother also has white hair. The godmother turns brown, low-status, mice into white human beings and animals: white horses, white coachman, and white doorman. Moreover, she transforms a pumpkin into a white coach. The prince, although black-haired, which is a marker of virility, is clad in a white jacket. His father dreams of grandchildren, represented specifically as a blonde-haired boy and girl even though his son is black-haired. The coding of black and dark hues is subtle in this film. The wicked stepmother’s cherished pet is a black cat named “Lucifer.”

Interestingly, although Cinderella acts as a benevolent mistress to all the other creatures in the film, she can find no good characteristics in Lucifer, and even complains: “There must be something good about him.” The brown mice, in their behavior and demeanor, are reminiscent of the “good plantation slaves” featured in some of Hollywood’s most racist films. They are taken care of by the good Cinderella (presumably they cannot take care of themselves), and grateful to be of service, and are willingly being transformed into something other than themselves for her benefit.

Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), or *Princess Aurora*, opens with a deviation from the stereotypical symbolism of black as evil. In an early scene, knights are dressed in black on white horses (with one exception of a black knight on a black horse). The faces of the knights are never revealed. In this case, black suggests the anonymity and mystery that surround the knights, while the white horses indicate the goodness of their charge. *Sleeping Beauty*’s father also has black hair, which signals qualities of virility, seriousness, and steadfastness that most often are not found in characters that have white hair. King Stephan, however, is married to a blonde, which represents the highest standard of beauty and grace. *Sleeping Beauty* is also blonde and blue-eyed. White birds appear on-screen and fly upwards as one of the fairy godmothers, Fauna, bestows the gift of song on her at the celebration of her birth. The prince is tawny-haired and lives in a castle around which white birds are flying. The wicked stepmother, Maleficent, bears the title of “Mistress of all evil.” She is dressed in black and has a black crow-like bird as a companion. She is also accompanied by dark hunch-backed creatures and dark warthogs that do her evil bidding.

In this film, black and white are also coded with religious notions of good and evil. The prince is armed by the good fairies with “weapons of righteousness”—virtue and truth—to triumph over evil, “all the powers of hell” claimed by Maleficent. The good fairies empower Prince Phillip’s sword so that “evil may die and good endure.” The prince carries a shield with a

cross, reminiscent of the symbol of crusaders. In the end, evil, in the person of Maleficent, is liquefied into a black puddle.

In Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) the overwhelmingly White world of fairy tales is magnified and exaggerated by the inclusion of a cast of characters not present in the source text. Early in the film we learn that the Beast, once a prince, has been punished for his selfishness, because he offended a blonde enchantress who was at the time disguised as an old woman. For this perceived offense, she turned him into a big brown beast. Beauty, a tawny-haired, devoted daughter, is coveted by the only black-haired, yet white male in the film. It is this male, Gaston, who instigates and leads (riding a black horse) a mob to storm the castle presumably to kill the big brown beast who dared to have won the affections of the woman he (Gaston) wanted. The mob scene evokes memories of lynch mobs of the South in the United States.

In other instances in the film, black is used to imply danger and evil: when Belle's father is lost in the woods, a black creature flashes across the screen just before a tree explodes with black bats; black dragon-like statues are shown inside and outside the Beast's castle. When Belle tries to escape, she is surrounded by gray and black wolves. In the end, white triumphs over black, implying that good triumphs over evil: the big brown Beast becomes a blue-eyed, white, tawny-haired prince and all the black statues turn white.

Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) features seven Mermaid princesses, all White. The Little Mermaid, red-haired and blue-eyed, falls for a black-haired, blue-eyed White human prince. The only major character of color in this film is Sebastian, who is clearly, by his accent and behavior, Caribbean. He serves as trusted servant to Ariel's father, King Triton, and as an indulgent nanny figure to the king's princess daughters, in particular Ariel. It is interesting to note that this name echoes that of the character from Shakespeare's (2004) *The Tempest*, a male creature who occupies the interstitial social and cultural space between the European master, Prospero, and the indigenous savage/slave Caliban. The Shakespearean parallelism is not developed, however, in the film. Sebastian's low status is reminiscent of that of Shakespeare's Caliban, underlined by the depiction that he has no life of his own and longs only to see Ariel happy, even if this means sacrificing his own life. The film opens with the characteristic white birds, which point to Ariel's goodness. Ariel also has a good-spirited white duck as a playmate. The evil Sea Witch, Ursula, has blue-black skin and a black body throughout most of the film. While she is not obviously black, like Sebastian, the nuances of her speech and movement are more stereotypically Black. Ursula also has an army of black eels that she uses to spy on and sabotage Ariel.

Aladdin (Disney, 1992), the only one of Disney's Princess tales that is not derived from a European tale (although it is understood that the cultural or geographical "origin" of any fairy tale is almost impossible to determine), is set in the Arabian city of Akkubar. It is clear, however, that Arab culture is not portrayed positively in this film. On the other hand, black and white are used in uncharacteristic ways, compared to the films discussed previously. Both Aladdin and Jasmine have black hair. Aside from indicating their Arab identity, blackness in this instance is also associated with the exotic (non-European-ness). In fact, Jasmine physically could very easily be an "exotic" version of a Barbie doll—with her cinched waist, voluptuous bosom, long hair, and flawless features. In one scene, a rich would-be suitor of Jasmine, riding a white horse, uses a whip on hungry children. In this case, the white horse seems to signify the man's wealth.

Although all the characters have tan or olive color skin, the usual coding of white for good and black for evil is still evidenced in the film. For example, the evil Javar, a deceitful advisor of the Sultan and enemy of Aladdin, is introduced as "a dark man [who] awaits a dark purpose." He is dressed in black throughout the film, rides a black horse, and even his parrot (which changes colors in the film) is initially shown as black to indicate his badness. The "Cave of Wonders," home of the magic lamp, is guarded by a black panther. In one scene, Jasmine opens a white gate and several white birds fly toward the sky; this is clearly a good omen and a sign of Jasmine's goodness. When the Genie transforms Aladdin into a prince, Prince Ali is clad in white from head to toe.

One of the clearest indicators of the privileging of Western or White culture in this film is the noticeable absence of positive representations of Eastern or Arabian cultural currency. In one scene, where Jasmine is threatened with having her hand chopped off for giving an apple to a hungry child, this Arabian society is represented as being an unjust and unfair society. In another, the moral quality of the society is reflected in the appearance of scantily-clad dancing women. Most tellingly, there is the scene where Aladdin asks Jasmine to call him Al, as the genie does throughout the film, superimposing a Euro-American cultural practice that renders the character ridiculous as an Arab.

ROLE OF TEACHERS AS CULTURAL WORKERS

DeVaney (2001) argues that film and television are vehicles that not only serve as visual texts, but as teachers as well. Therefore, it is critical for all teachers who are committed to social justice, one of the primary goals of multicultural education, to be aware of the deleterious impact of White privileging and/or of a binary color symbolism that associates white with goodness and black with evil in children's popular visual texts. Like Yeoman (1999), other teachers have observed that the association by children of "white" skin color with positive self-images and dark skin color with negative self-images (the darker the more negative) crosses ethnic and cultural divides. Segura-Mora (2003), for example, reported his experiences teaching Latino children in a kindergarten class as follows: ". . .The darkest child in my class [reports] '[M]y mom is giving me pills to turn me white. . .because I don't like my color. . .I don't like to be dark. . .'" (p. 139). Segura-Mora decided to use this incident in his classroom as a teachable moment and in doing so uncovered the fact that kindergarten children demonstrated feelings of "social worthlessness" associated with being dark-skinned in this society. It is unlikely that the children would have openly confronted or expressed these feelings had the teacher not used the classroom and the discussion of books as a mechanism to approach this challenging and difficult subject. Segura-Mora also points to the responsibility of teachers as "cultural workers" to be proactive in addressing this issue:

As teachers, we are cultural workers, whether we are aware of it or not. If teachers don't question the culture and values being promoted in the classroom, they socialize their students to accept the uneven power relation of our society along lines of race, gender, and ability. Teachers can and should challenge white supremacist values and instead promote values of self-love. (p. 139)

In order for teachers to act as cultural workers, they must be trained to do so in teacher preparation programs. In Harris (1992), Rudine Sims Bishop states that "multicultural literature is one of the most powerful components of a multicultural education curriculum" (p. 40). Therefore, the choice of books that are read and discussed in this country's schools is of critical importance, and that of course includes fairy tales. It needs to be stressed as well that those who select books for children, whether they are parents or teachers, are affected by the same phenomenon that affects children. African American scholars and other scholars of color comment on how difficult it is to escape the reality of their own childhoods that included a love of books and access, unfortunately, to children's literature that included only White children as characters. Rereading these same texts critically can result in insights that one did not have as a child. Tatum (1997), for example, discussed how she spotted the sexism in one of her best-loved childhood "chapter books" when reading to her son. She used this as an opportunity to teach her son about sexism. According to Tatum, it is important for children to develop the skills to spot racism, sexism, and classism in literature because they will be "better able to resist the negative impact of oppressive messages when we see them coming than when they are invisible to us" (p. 47).

The complexity of this issue has been further underlined by my examination of children's books set in Africa. One such book, *Boundless Grace* (Hoffman, 1995), has as protagonist an African American girl whose father is African and lives in the Gambia. The girl, Grace, goes to Africa to visit her father and her siblings by her father's second wife. In this story, Grace has some resentment against her stepmother, and since, we are told, "Grace knew lots of stories about

wicked stepmothers—Cinderella, Snow White, Hansel and Gretel” (Hoffman, unnumbered pages), she decided to share with her African brother and sister her repertoire of fairy tales. The narrator informs us: “She told them all the stories she knew—*Beauty and the Beast*, Rapunzel, Rumpelstiltskin” (Hoffman, unnumbered pages). This patently innocent statement reveals the irony of the self-image of this young American Grace all of whose stories were fairy tales and who did not or could not tell a single story that featured a hero or heroine of color. Grace was not in any of these stories; “all the stories that she knew,” she passed onto her siblings who also were excluded from the stories. It is ironic that even a text apparently intended to counteract the problem of the lack of children’s texts for Blacks unconsciously betrays how deep-rooted the problem is. Grace’s comment only serves to indicate the extent to which we internalize the subtle messages in the literature we are exposed to as children.

It is reasonable to assert that the perceptions of all children are likely to be impacted by texts, written or visual, which evidence White privileging and a binary color symbolism that associates white with goodness and black with evil. And when the texts eliminate children of color entirely, the message of the relative unimportance of these children is clear. Harris (1992) notes Rudine Sims Bishop, who comments on the significance for all children of seeing themselves in the text:

If literature is a mirror that reflects human life, then all children who read or are read to need to see themselves reflected as part of humanity. If they are not, or if their reflections are distorted and ridiculous, there is danger that they will absorb negative messages about themselves and people like them. Those who see only themselves or who exposed to errors and misrepresentations are miseducated into a false sense of superiority, and the harm is doubly done. (p. 43)

It is clear, therefore, that seeing themselves depicted positively in texts, written as well as visual, is critical to the formation of positive self-image in all children. While the absence of people of color in fairy tales may not be intentional or sinister in either the source text illustrations or the dominant Disney versions, the damaging effects of the preponderance of the almost all-White world of the fairy tales, and in particular of the fairy tale princess, should not be underestimated.

IDENTITY FORMATION STRATEGIES FOR CHILDREN OF COLOR

Tatum (1997), in her book *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* suggests that the “Who am I?” question is answered to a large extent by who the world says I am. Therefore, some critical questions for children of color in the context of the role fairy tales may play in the identity formation of children would be: How am I represented in the images in the tales? What do these fairy tales tell me about me and about others? If I am not in the picture at all, what does this mean? Other questions related to the socialization and acculturation processes are also warranted: Does every little girl who hears a fairy tale long to be a princess and perhaps ultimately a queen? Is this longing essentially an act of the socialization of females in this society? And assuming that both questions can be answered affirmatively, given the popularity of the notion of princess, as evidenced in the popularity of items such as Disney’s *Princess: Essential Guide* (2003), what impact does it have on the little girl of color who never sees a reflection of herself in the portrayals of princesses? A discussion, however, of the implications of the extent that fairy tales serve to indoctrinate boys and girls to accepted male and female roles is beyond the scope of this article.

The importance and power of the pictorial text and the messages conveyed by the pictorial text to children of color are integral aspects of this discussion. Joshua (2002) reports that before the 1980s there were no fairy tales that featured African American children. Since that time, Joshua reports,

“new classics” have emerged that attempt to infuse the literary cannon with new classic stories [including fairy tales] that feature children of color, [that] allow children of color to see themselves portrayed positively and beautifully in classic literature, and [that] allow European American children and parents to become acquainted

with children of color through story, thus learning tolerance and respect for children of diverse backgrounds, and enhance the self-esteem of children of color through seeing themselves portrayed positively in the literature. (p. 128)

The question then arises, how do we best assist children in spotting racism, sexism, and classism in literature and, in doing so, weaken the negative impact of a literature that is laced with White privileging and/or with a binary color symbolism that associates white with goodness and black with evil? As far as possible effective strategies are concerned, one of the first developments that needs to take place is that of developing critical literacy skills. Critical literacy would involve helping children to read the word and in the context of the words (Freire, 2000). Thus, "critical literacy is reflective and reflexive: Language use and education are social practices used to critically study all social practices" (Shor, 1999, p. 10). In this vein, therefore, teachers and children would ask what world view is advanced by the texts and should these views be accepted. These critical literacy skills especially need to be developed in teachers, in PK-12 schools as well as in higher education. Teachers who are responsible for developing literacy in children need in turn to teach children critical literacy skills. These skills will involve being able to "disrupt and revise" both the written and visual text.

Moreover, as Zipes (1997) has noted, if we are to make any impact on altering the domination and control of the culture industry, the industry that promotes and reinforces patriarchy and racism, and maintains the status quo, the best chance we have is through its "Achilles heel" (p. 128). According to Zipes, the "Achilles' heel of the capitalist system," which by the way supports the culture industry of which Disney is a part, "is located in the acculturation process" (p. 128), that is, the acculturation and socialization of children. It is clear, therefore, that effective change is needed in the early education and socialization of children. It is also critical to note, however, that the subtle messages imbedded in the written and visual texts of fairy tales has been internalized by scholars and parents alike. Therefore, in order for us to be effective in teaching others to read critically, we must, as Fisher and Silber (2000) urge, "free ourselves from the delicious fictions that have held us captive in subtle and penetrating ways" (p. 133). Selecting texts that are broader in scope than the traditional canon, particularly "disruptive texts" (Yeoman, 1999, p. 427), is critical. Once we have freed ourselves, we need to teach children or support children being taught to understand and produce disruptive texts, including fairy tales. Early education and ongoing informed educational intervention are needed.

Two examples of published disruptive fairy tales are Shearer's (1990) *Snow White* that sets the tale in Africa with Snow White as an African princess, and *Cinderella and the Glass Slipper* (Shearer, 1992), by the same author, where Cinderella is illustrated as a beautiful African American. Joshua (2002) notes, however, that literature featuring children of color positively compared to literature that positively features Euro-Americans is still scarce. As a solution, she advocates for transcultural literature, defined as "literature that accurately and favorable depicts all people and is read across and by all cultural groups" (p. 130). To promote transcultural literature we need the skills to read differently and to see differently. Notwithstanding the limitations, strategies such as teaching children to understand and create "disruptive" stories and transcultural literature, and infusing the curriculum with "retold classics" as well as continuing with classics, are promising.

Furthermore, information on alternatives to the classic canon of fairy tales needs to be widely disseminated. It would be futile and counterproductive to suggest a rejection of classic fairy tales. In my view, more reading of the classic tales and less exposure to Disney would be salutary, but is highly unlikely to occur. Even well-meaning parents, even some fairy tale scholars among them (Zipes, 1997), cannot fight their children's desire to watch Disney films. What I advocate, therefore, is providing alternatives, such as John Steptoe's *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (Steptoe, 1987), San Souci's *Talking Eggs* (1989), Virginia Hamilton's *Her Stories!* (1995), Faith Ringgold's (1999) *The Invisible Princess*, and the retelling and revising of classics such as *Snow White* (Shearer, 1990), and *Cinderella* (Shearer, 1992), which illustrates all the characters as characters of color. There are also Cinderella-type tales set in many places around

the globe, including Zimbabwe, the Philippines, Appalachia, Korea, Turkey, Cambodia, Hawaii, the Caribbean, and Egypt. In addition, translations and exposure to literature and fairy tales from other parts of the world, such as Veronique Tadjo's (2000) *Mamy Wata and the Monster*, are needed. This expanding body of literature choices may be considered as transcultural literature.

Another strategy is related to what is widely believed to be the origin of fairy tales—the folk tale (Tatar, 1999; Zipes, 1993). Including folk tales from a variety of cultures and countries is consistent with the promotion of transcultural literature. There have been recent attempts to make folk tales from other countries, such as *Nelson Mandela's Favorite Fairy Tales* (2002), more accessible. However, attempts like these have not been without criticism. One area of criticism is centered on the contamination process that could be involved depending on the person or persons who collected and possibly altered the folk tales, perhaps to fit an internalized preconception. It is legitimate to speculate on how much may be lost or altered in translation. And since the folk tales are in fact cultural agency, the question arises regarding the extent to which this agency is diminished or tainted by an “outsider” who collected and translated the tales. Obviously, a full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this article.

How might this discussion about children of color and the fairy tale princess end if the strategies proposed in this article were adopted? Writers would retell classic tales, people of color would be seen inside picture books, school libraries would feature collections of fairy tales that reflect every student, and parents and teachers would possess critical literacy skills and in turn would teach these skills to children. And because of all of these wonderful transformations in the world of children's literature, in particular fairy tales, all children of color would see themselves reflected in the literature, and thus, no doubt, “live happily ever after.”

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