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Unsuccessful concordance: Little Black Sambo and the failure of textual recuperation

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UNSUCCESSFUL CONCORDANCE: *LITTLE BLACK SAMBO* AND THE
FAILURE OF TEXTUAL RECUPERATION

Thesis

Submitted to

The School of Arts & Sciences of the

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The Degree

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By

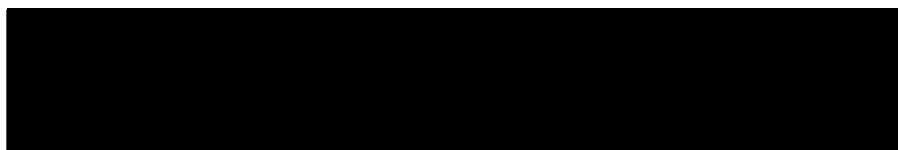
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UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

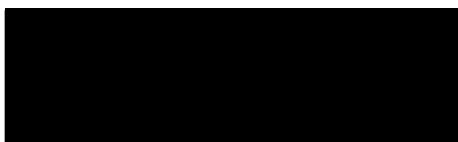
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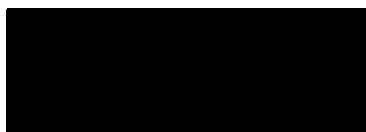
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ABSTRACT

UNSUCCESSFUL CONCORDANCE: *LITTLE BLACK SAMBO* AND THE FAILURE OF TEXTUAL RECUPERATION

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Little Black Sambo (LBS) is a controversial children's book that was first published in 1899, and was written by a white, British woman named Helen Bannerman. The text and illustrations of *LBS* were criticized in the mid nineteenth hundreds and beyond as being overtly racist and stereotypical of African people. Since the book's publication, modified versions of the text have been published in an attempt to save the text for various reasons. Using ideological criticism, this thesis examines four of the most recent *LBS* versions, and questions whether or not the racist, stereotypical, colonialist, and imperialist ideologies of the original version are still present in the recent, modified versions. This thesis also sheds light on the problems with recuperating flawed texts such *LBS*, and the unavoidable conflicts that arise between black writers and white writers who modify flawed texts for different reasons. The scholarship of Stuart Hall and Celeste Condit offers a terminological framework around which this thesis is based. Stuart Hall asserts that people define those who are different from them as "others." This term is used in the thesis to show how each of the authors separate Little Black Sambo from what they consider to be the norm. Celeste

Condit discusses a term called “social concord,” which refers to compromises made in society that are claimed to be the best that can be negotiated due to the given situation. Analysis suggests that the modified versions maintain similar ideologies to the original text, just in more subtle ways. The characters in the new versions are still defined as “the others,” and consequently, the modified versions fail to create successful social concord.

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INTRODUCTION

The story of *Little Black Sambo* has been scrutinized and criticized as a racist children's book since its initial publication in 1889. Helen Bannerman, a Scottish woman whose husband was away serving in the British Army as a doctor, wrote the text to amuse her young daughters on a long train ride through India (Franceschelli Afterword). In response to the encouragement of a friend, Bannerman found an illustrator for her text and sought to get her story published. The text, which quickly gained popularity in England and America for the next half century, was later deemed a racist work due to its inclusion of the highly derogatory term, "sambo," which has been used throughout history to refer to African males as indolent by nature. The correlating illustrations to Bannerman's tale were seen as equally offensive as the title itself; the illustrations depicted exaggerated, highly unflattering pictorials of African lips, noses, and hair, and a very simplistic and stereotypical view of African family life.

Despite the controversial nature of the book, "there were at least twenty-seven different English-language versions published between 1905 and 1953," and the book was translated into many languages, including "French, Spanish, Dutch, German, Hebrew, and Arabic" (Yuill 3). The book quickly became an American favorite, and it was "recommended by the American Library

Association," the "Horn Book," and "The Association for Childhood Education," from the early to mid 1900s (Yuill 3). What is interesting about the controversial *Sambo*, as the story name is often abbreviated, is that it is *still* in the children's sections of libraries across the country and the globe. Despite the controversy surrounding the first version, "20,000 copies of the *original* version of *Little Black Sambo* are still sold each year," and the book has never been out of publication (Bates 129, emphasis added). The story also certainly has a place in the American children's literature canon, as it is mentioned in the current *Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* and included in *The 20th Century Children's Book Treasury*. Although many American libraries have eliminated the original Bannerman version due to the controversy surrounding the term "sambo" and the clearly racist illustrations, dozens of modified versions of the story sit on library shelves around the country under titles such as *Sam and the Tigers*, *The Boy and the Tigers*, *The Story of Little Babaji*, and *Pancakes for Supper!* .

While many articles and book reviews have been written about the controversy surrounding the text (Bates, Rochman, and Lukehart to name a few), none thoroughly examines why the *Sambo* text was revised, rewritten, or reillustrated in the first place. Additionally, none of the existing articles and book reviews compare the different modified versions of the story and question whether or not the accommodations that have been made to the text demonstrate a change in the ideologies that shape the text or a change in the stereotypes that the original book perpetuates.

In this thesis, I will examine why people modify flawed texts such as *Sambo*, and I will argue that the *Little Black Sambo* text should not have been continuously modified and should not continue to be redistributed due to the painful legacy that the new versions of the book keep alive. This thesis will shed light on the problems with reconstructing flawed texts that reflect a painful past; in authors' attempts to save the positive elements of flawed texts, they also often preserve the negative elements such as racism, colonialism, and imperialism. Analysis of four of the modified versions of *Sambo* will suggest that although the new versions reduce some stereotypes, they reinforce and perpetuate new stereotypes that are equally as problematic as the original ones.

The modification of these texts also illuminates the long enduring struggle between white authors who wish to keep flawed texts alive, and black writers and illustrators who want the books to either disappear or be thoroughly revamped. In recent years, "accommodations" or "modifications" have been made in many areas by powerful groups as a sort of "compromise" to appease the less powerful groups, as discussed by Celeste Condit in "Hegemony in a Mass-mediated Society: Concordance about Reproductive Technologies" (210). This thesis argues that the *Little Black Sambo* revisions are an attempt at creating "social concord," which is the "active or passive acceptance of a given social policy" as the "best that can be negotiated under the given conditions" (Condit 210). The authors and illustrators of these new versions hope to get their books accepted and bought by the masses; they modify their texts in a careful manner, yet the

texts often still subtly maintain, whether the modifiers know it or not, the original values and ideologies that made the original version problematic.

This analysis will utilize ideological criticism to demonstrate that the controlling ideologies of the *Sambo* texts have not changed over time; the hegemonic ideologies are less overt in the revised versions, but they are nonetheless present and powerful. The original story is so wrought with stereotypes and caricaturing that it is nearly impossible for a new author to successfully modify the original story without altering it so entirely that it is a different tale altogether. The modified versions of this particular book are problematic because they are read to impressionable children who often carry what they learn in childhood with them for many years. In order to understand the problems with the modified versions, it is important to first understand how *Sambo* came to be such a popular (and later problematic) text.

SAMBO'S RISE TO POPULARITY

The original text was published and gained popularity immediately in England and later in the United States. The book became so popular that an outright fascination with *Little Black Sambo* was born, and the character was given his own cartoon, restaurant, dolls, figurines, and records, all of course adorned with his name. In the years following the story's original release, "it would be published to great success in numerous editions, not only the original with Helen Bannerman's images, but also many new and pirated versions with illustrations that clearly reflected a particular American racism" (Franceschelli Afterword).

After the book's initial publication, it quickly became widely known as just *Sambo*, a term referring to a common stereotype of "the typical plantation slave...docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing...his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration" (Bates 129). The inclusion of the word "sambo" is extremely racist and stereotypical, because "sambo could not but evoke the most negative images to African-Americans" (Franceschelli Afterword). Terms such as "sambo" give a name or title to the generalizations that exist regarding a group of people. The term "was used as early as the 18th Century in the Caribbean to

refer to those of mixed race who were three-quarters black, and by the middle of the 19th Century had acquired the pejorative meaning of a lazy African male” (Franceschelli Afterword). The term was widely recognized and perceived by African people as highly offensive in the United States, particularly following the publication and distribution of Bannerman’s book in the early to mid 1900s. “Sambo” was considered a racial slur by African Americans at the time, who thought the term suggested that African people were lethargic people with black faces like the characters in *Little Black Sambo*.

When one considers the context in which *Sambo* was written and distributed, it is not surprising that the book became so popular. Readers connected with the *Sambo* text because it subtly enforces western, colonialist ideologies that most readers at the time unconsciously supported. The concept of hegemony is important to the *Sambo* text and its modified versions because Helen Bannerman clearly represented the ruling group when she wrote the text. The term “hegemony” can be defined as a form of power that seems to be natural and often goes unquestioned because it is commanded by the ruling group, and often has been for many years (Condit). As a Scottish woman living at the turn of the twentieth century, Bannerman represented an imperialist nation that wanted to spread its control to other countries. Bannerman even wrote her text as she took a train ride through India, a country that the British controlled during the time period in which she lived and wrote. The colonialist values imbedded in the book allowed Bannerman’s text to resonate with her white readers in America and Britain. Rather than writing about people of her own

race, Bannerman chose to write about African people despite knowing little about them. Through catchy dialogue and bright illustrations, Bannerman shared her white, colonialist, British perspective with the world in order to promote her conception of African people.

The book also gained popularity in the late 1800s and early 1900s because white people used black people for entertainment purposes at their own expense. For many people, the *Little Black Sambo* books and cartoons were pure entertainment, born out of a fascination with the "otherness" of black people. Stuart Hall discusses the idea of "otherness," which he says allows individuals to divide the normal from the abnormal in order to discard or minimize those who are "different." Individuals who are different are often seen in binaries, for example, good or bad, or normal or strange (Hall 229). In many ways, *Sambo* gained popularity because the book painted the picture that Africans were strange people who were different in defining ways from whites. The book focused upon the blackness of *Sambo* and his family members who carried on strange affairs in the African jungle.

The "otherness" of Africans in the *Sambo* book reminded many people of the "otherness" of Africans as portrayed in the "black-face minstrel shows" that were widely viewed in America in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Yuill 9). These shows were so popular in the 1800s that "minstrel companies were forced to give morning concerts and 'three-a-day-shows' in order to satisfy the theatre-going public" (Yuill 9). *Sambo*, like the minstrel shows, offered people an opportunity to ogle at minorities and not feel ashamed of what they were doing. Both the books

and the shows made light of African people in an ostensible way that allowed whites to enjoy staring at “the other” and poking fun at them. Like *Sambo*, the minstrel shows portrayed African people in an exaggerated way and were clearly created by white people for their own entertainment. “Sambo” was a name commonly given to one foolish character in the minstrel shows (Yuill 16). This link demonstrates the clear connection between the book and the minstrel shows; entertainment at the expense of African people was common during this time period and accepted by the ruling class. The “Sambo” in the minstrel shows was either a regular character who was the “butt of all jokes” or the ventriloquist’s “little black, red-lipped dummy” (Yuill 21). Sambo was never a flattering label, despite the fact that Bannerman claimed she innocently bestowed the name upon her title character.

Like Little Black Sambo, the “Sambo” of the minstrel shows was popular “due to an acceptance of racism and a fascination with the distorted images of blacks presented by the entertainment industry” (Yuill 9). Another character that emerged was the Hottentot Venus, an originally fictional woman who became a main 19th century representation of black females (Gilman). The Hottentot Venus came to represent the “essence of the black” women in London in the early 1800s (Gilman 206). Her physical features were exaggerated in drawings, and a real woman named Sarah Bartmann was even put on display as if she were the manifestation of the Hottentot Venus. White people came in droves to gape at her “physiognomy,” which included “her skin color,” her “genitalia,” and her “protruding buttocks” (Gilman 213). This focus on the physicality of blacks was

common in this time period. By focusing on the external, physical differences between blacks and whites, whites were able to maintain societal dominance by visually projecting that they were the normal people while blacks were the strange people.

Those who are deemed as "the other" are often trivialized in texts and in the media to "the signifiers of their physical difference" (Hall 249). This "reductionism" is evident in the case of the Hottentot Venus and in *Sambo* (Hall). The viewer or reader is invited to ogle at the strangeness of the characters through specific elements of their being such as their culture, their clothing, their vernacular, their eating habits, their body parts, etc. This woman was reduced to her physical parts, as if her physicality was the sole essence of her being. People of the ruling class sought to define the differences between Africans and whites by creating characters such as the Hottentot Venus. And their efforts worked; the Hottentot Venus became "the central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century" (Gilman 216). Anything that made her different from white people was focused upon. Her differences were deemed as strange signs of otherness that made her seem somehow racially inferior.

Such distorted images of Africans at this time were extremely widespread and accepted, which caused characters like the Hottentot Venus, *Sambo* from the minstrel shows, and Little Black *Sambo* to emerge and become icons. By conveying Africans in the way they wanted to, whites were able to control how African people were perceived. These icons served as caricatures and stereotypical representations of African people, whether what they represented

was true or not of the majority of Africans. Characters such as the Hottentot Venus and Little Black Sambo allowed whites to see Africans in a “uniform” and “homogenous” way, as if there is a certain mold to which all African people, the “others,” conform (Gilman 204). The conceptions of African people, enforced by caricatures created by white people, became widely accepted and unchallenged in the western world around 1900.

The original “Little Black Sambo” story clearly perpetuates the ideologies of the ruling group. Bannerman’s original text is clearly colonial in nature, reflecting her white, western, perspective. Her text was written at “the height of English imperialism by a woman who was an active participant in the English expansion...” (Susina 238). Bannerman sought to civilize the young and primitive Sambo in numerous ways, such as dressing him up in fine clothes. Bannerman was a colonialist and other colonialists, some unknowingly and some knowingly, appreciated the author’s values and ideologies that are evident in her book. One author contends that “the primary role of literature is the production of cultural representations” and “it should be impossible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism was England’s primary social mission” (Susina 240). Readers of the original version cannot help but recognize the influence of imperialism on Bannerman and on her text. Bannerman’s inclusion of popular ideologies of her time period allowed her book to become extremely popular. Because she focused on stereotypical representations of Africans as “the other,” and purported colonialist ideologies, her book was irresistible to likeminded readers. Analysis of the original text and

illustrations will reveal the fundamental problems with the book that made it so controversial. It is these same flaws in the original text that make current recreations so complicated.

ANALYSIS OF THE ORIGINAL *LITTLE BLACK SAMBO* STORY

The original *Little Black Sambo* story relates the journey of a young boy, Little Black Sambo, who outwits a group of hungry and proud tigers in the forest by offering them his colorful clothing. Rather than eating Sambo, the tigers end up in a fight of pride with each other that is so aggressive that they turn to butter. In turn, Sambo's family is able to use the butter for a delicious pancake feast, to the credit of Little Black Sambo. The story begins with an introduction to "a little black boy, and his name was Little Black Sambo" (Bannerman 1). On the first page alone, Bannerman reiterates twice that Sambo is little and black. The repetition of the term "sambo" and the word "black" effectively conveys the title character as "the other" immediately on page one of the text. The blackness of Sambo is also focused upon in the illustrations, as they portray him as having the darkest skin color imaginable. The protagonist is instantly labeled by a stereotypical term, and he is also immediately reduced to his skin color, as if the color of his skin is *the* defining characteristic that makes him who he is.

Next, the reader is introduced to Sambo's family: "And his Mother was called Black Mumbo. And his father was called Black Jumbo" (Bannerman 2). The repetition of the characters' titles and their rhyming nature makes them unforgettable, especially to young children who were and are the usual readers

of this text. Adult readers may be familiar with the term “mumbo jumbo,” which is an ancient African term that refers to black magic or voodoo powers (Reed). By naming Sambo's parents Mumbo and Jumbo, Bannerman suggested to her readers that they were strange people who may have been involved with black magic or other strange practices. Today, the term still maintains a negative denotation as it refers to nonsensical chatter.

The characters are given disparaging nicknames or titles rather than typical first names that encourage the reader to think of them not as individual characters, but as stereotypes, or generalized representations of Africans. As seen in Figure 1, Black Mumbo appears in her checkered outfit and cloth cap and proceeds to sew Sambo a coat and trousers. In the original illustrations, Mumbo is an overweight woman with an immense body and large, jet black face. Immediately, the main characters are reduced to “a few simplified characteristics” that are “fixed in Nature” (Hall 249, 266). Her protruding facial features, large frame, and stern expressions make her appear intimidating to the reader. Black Mumbo is immediately stereotyped as a mammy, “the prototypical house-servant...usually big, fat, bossy, and cantankerous....” as she controls the household (Hall 251). She is excited about dressing Sambo up and about the butter that he brings home with which she can cook. Mumbo fulfills the mammy role as she makes the feast for the family and then proceeds to eat twenty-seven pancakes.



Figure 1. Original illustration of Black Mumbo.

The father, Black Jumbo, is depicted as rather useless as his only role in the story involves him going to the bazaar to buy Sambo an umbrella and shoes and taking the butter home to Mumbo to cook dinner with. Jumbo's passive role in his family suggests that Mumbo, the mammy of the household, controls the happenings of the home. At the dinner, Jumbo eats an amazing fifty-five pancakes, which conveys his voracious appetite despite having done little work in the story. He is depicted as the stereotypical "coon," a "good for nothing" black man who just meanders lazily about with little to do (Hall 251). Readers of the original text may have been familiar with the term "jumbo" from 19th century entertainment productions: "Jumbo had long been a circus term, and in 1847, a minstrel role called 'Jumbo Jim' was performed" (Yuill 22). It is not surprising that Bannerman has Jumbo go to a bazaar to buy a few items for Sambo. Jumbo is portrayed in a silly and clown-like manner in the story, which is fitting considering the appellation that is bestowed upon him. At the end of the story, stereotyping continues when Black Jumbo comes upon the scene, remarking, "Oh! What

lovely melted butter! I'll take that home to Black Mumbo for her to cook with" (Bannerman 12). Again, Black Jumbo is portrayed as a useless "coon" who merely happens upon the scene and then takes the butter home to his wife.

The three family members then gorge on the pancakes which Black Mumbo has prepared, which reflects another commonly held stereotype that African people enjoy eating lots of food in an excessive and gluttonous manner. The family sits down to a meal of literally hundreds of pancakes, on which they feast in an "uncivilized" manner. From the opening moments of the book until the last page, Sambo and his family are portrayed as primitive, uncouth people who do not fit in with the author's idea of normalcy according to her western, colonialist viewpoint. In reducing her characters to insignificant elements of their existence, such as their eating habits, clothing, skin color, and facial features, Bannerman conveys Sambo and his family as "the others."

Sambo is illustrated as a "thick-lipped, fuzzy-haired boy with bulging eyeballs" (Franceschelli Afterword). The original illustrations of Sambo and his family are undoubtedly exaggerated. Sambo, as pictured in Figures 2, is portrayed as having an immense head of hair, a dark black face, large, bulbous eyes, and a goofy smile. In many ways, the characters are reduced to their parts and their vestments, including their prominent eyes, lips, hair, and colorful clothes due to these pictures. In the story, Sambo does not become impressive until his parents cloak him in lovely African garb. At this moment, the narrator asks, "And then wasn't Little Black Sambo grand?" (Bannerman 4). Readers cannot help but notice the "exaggerated caricature of a 'native child,'" cloaked in

brightly colored African clothing and singled out as “the other” (Franceschelli Afterword).



Figure 2. Original illustration of Sambo.

The dressing of Sambo is one of the key moments of the story that reflects Bannerman's western ideologies. Sambo goes from a naked and uncivilized boy to an impressive child once he is adorned with fine garments. Bannerman's text

promotes the idea that African people are grand only if they are dressed in a bright and festive way; through Bannerman's story and pictures, she reaffirmed the existing stereotype that Africans adore brightly colored clothing. And, partly because of the book, "...Negros abhorred the bright colors Sambo loved, mostly because they feared wearing them would conjure Sambo-like stereotypes" (Bates 129). Bannerman's attempt to fancily dress up Sambo demonstrates her desire to impose her white values on her black characters. The author sought to civilize Sambo in the way that she saw fit.

Bannerman's focus on Sambo's clothing is often criticized as a reductionistic tool: "One of the main arguments of white chauvinists who wish to prove that Negroes are uncultured and tasteless is the untruth that they have an indiscriminate and primitive love for bright-colored clothes" (Yuill 24).

Interestingly, Little Black Sambo ultimately loses all his clothes to the cruel jungle; the young boy is left naked, but alive, thanks to his idea to give his clothes to the tigers and then to let them battle each other rather than himself. By the story's end, Sambo is again without his clothing. He is in a naked and uncivilized state once he is without his brightly colored garments. He has tamed the tigers of the jungle at the expense of his own clothing that originally made him so grand. The set up of Bannerman's story makes it impossible for readers to see the main character in a positive way. If Sambo is naked, he is seen as primitive; if he is clothed in brightly colored African garbs, he is seen as stereotypical. Bannerman includes no scene that allows the reader to see the main character as a typical boy, rather than a primitivistic, stereotypical African boy.

In Bannerman's text, she clearly maintains colonialist values; her attempt to civilize Little Black Sambo by cloaking him in fine garments demonstrates Bannerman's colonialist leanings. Sambo is initially conveyed as primitive, and then not so primitive once he is dressed in fine clothes. He then appears like a well dressed, civilized young man after appearing naked in the opening scenes of the book. In these moments of the book, Bannerman suggests that Sambo "ought to be civilized into European habits and customs and that such natives were culturally inferior to the English" (Susina 241). She clearly purports the "ideology of colonialism" which "argued for the survival of the fittest, seeing Europeans as superior both physically and morally to Africans or Asians and thus justified to rule over them" (Susina 241). Bannerman's dressing of Sambo suggests that her readers should try to change people who are "others" or who are different into a more acceptable and desirable modified version that fits the qualifications set forth by the western world. Through such moments in the text, the author demonstrated that alteration of "others" is what should be done. Bannerman purported the idea that westerners should attempt to mold other people into their conception of normalcy, rather than accept them for who they are.

In summary, Bannerman portrayed her main character as a "sambo" and his parents as servants of their primitive household. For most, the stereotypical illustrations and the term "sambo" are the most offensive elements of the original story, but many elements of the story can be noted as offensive in some manner. Bannerman's portrayal of Sambo's parents as a "coon" and "mammy" is highly

problematic, as is her desire to dress and civilize the main character. Although Little Black Sambo does have one fine moment, when he triumphs over the tigers, "it was ultimately impossible to reconcile the story with the outrageously racist images—either Bannerman's (no matter how naively drawn), or the far more racist others which followed" (Franceschelli Afterword). Even Sambo's triumph over the tigers depicts him as a trickster who uses deception to save himself. Bannerman illustrated her original text with exaggerated caricatures of African people; their lips, hair, noses, and other facial features were the obvious focus of the original illustrations. She made the other focus of her story the bright clothes that native Africans wore. In multiple ways, Bannerman reduced her characters to trivial elements, including body parts and pieces of clothing. Even the pancake feast held by Sambo, Mumbo, and Jumbo is stereotypical. The three main characters are conveyed as gluttonous people who are so uncouth that they proceed to eat hundreds of pancakes. Considering the clear flaws and painful history of the original text and illustrations, what can be gained by revamping and revisiting *Sambo* and spreading the story and its history to a new generation of readers a century later?

WHY PEOPLE MODIFY TEXTS AND WHY MODIFYING SAMBO IS PROBLEMATIC

Texts may be modified for a variety of reasons that are often complex. Often, texts are modified because they are seen as flawed in some way. Later writers seek to correct or eliminate the flaws to create a new text in which only the positive elements of the text are saved and passed on, while the negative elements go into hiding in the original pages of an old book. In the case of dated literature about African people, often African writers and illustrators wish to recuperate books because they wish to "reclaim" literature that is about their people; they want to take control of the modifications so that the texts no longer demean and stereotype, but rather, convey African people in a positive light. In other cases, people alter flawed texts because they consciously or unconsciously wish to preserve the original ideologies, values, and history of a text; many times, the only way to get the text accepted by the masses is to diminish the hurtful and stereotypical elements of the original text.

In the case of *Little Black Sambo*, the text has probably been modified for all of the aforementioned reasons. Some of the writers sought to save the positive elements of the story such as Sambo triumphing over the tigers. Many writers read the original book as children and wished to preserve what they see

as a classic story. African writers tried to “reclaim” a story about their own people in an attempt to rewrite the painful history of the text. And certainly, others writers wished to preserve the underlying ideologies, values, and history of the original book because they support, either knowingly or unknowingly, the ideas of the ruling majority group. The reasons that people modify flawed texts are often multifaceted, and may not even be entirely known to the modifier.

The recuperation of the *Sambo* text brings to light a continuing conflict had by writers and illustrators who wish to leave books like *Sambo* to a bygone era when racism was rampant and accepted, while at the same time recognizing that the books and their legacy will never completely be erased and should, therefore, at least be revised. For African Americans, rewriting flawed texts began “Almost as soon as blacks could write, it seems, [and] they set out to redefine—against already received racist stereotypes—who and what a black person was...” (Gates 131). For more than one hundred years, blacks have set out to create a “New Negro” to create a fresh image of people of their race, not reminiscent of “plantation fictions, blackface minstrelsy, vaudeville, [and] racist pseudonyms...” (Gates 136). However, in this attempt by black writers to create new images of people of their race, they often created idealized caricatures that were or are unrealistic or not representative of most black people.

Overall, black writers wished to literally “restructure the *race’s* image of *itself*” by revisiting and revamping texts such as *Sambo* that included racist stereotypes (Gates 140). Because *Sambo* is still being revised today by African American writers, it is apparent that these writers are still trying to rehabilitate the

text and the ideas and images it puts forth to its current readers. African writers struggle with revisiting a text that was hurtful for so many years, yet they feel that they must modify the text in a non-racist and non-stereotypical fashion. These African writers cannot simply let the text fade into the past because white writers continue to modify *Little Black Sambo* and keep forms of the book in circulation.

It is for many complex reasons that *Sambo* is still alive in countless forms (records, new books, dolls, restaurants, etc.). The problem with the *Sambo* text is that it is difficult to separate the story from the racist and stereotypical views maintained by Bannerman. To many, "The history of *Little Black Sambo* negates its otherwise useful features" because the book forces people to relive *Sambo's* hurtful past (Bates 130). The history of the book makes modifying the text particularly difficult because the history can never be totally separated from any version of *Sambo*. Any positive elements of the first text that can be salvaged still may serve as reminders to readers of a bygone era in which racism was rampant and white supremacy reigned. While the first text does include an African boy as the protagonist who triumphs in a difficult situation, the racism of the original is also kept alive through the new versions because they are extensions of the original.

As far back as the 1940s, African Americans began to speak out against the "objectionable themes, stereotyped illustrations, degrading names, and exaggerated dialect" in *Sambo* (Yuill 3). The damage done by this text cannot be measured but can be best understood when one considers how individuals felt about having the text in their lives. One African American woman remembers

"the very painful experience of hearing that story read by a teacher in my school...I remember how some of my classmates would refer to me as Black Sambo after hearing the story...the book can only be used as an example of how to destroy a child" (Yuill 22). These moments were hurtful for black children who were forced to sit through *Sambo* readings in school feeling singled out and stereotyped. This event demonstrates the impact that the single reading of a text can have on impressionable children who believe that what they read is the truth. Even though this black woman has no discernable similarities to the characters in Bannerman's story besides her race, she becomes Bannerman's characters simply because of the color of her skin that is so focused upon in the book.

In these instances, the negative impact of the book on young children outweighs any positive attributes that the book may have. Another man recalls, "I sat through *Little Black Sambo*. And since I was the only black face in the room, I became Little Black Sambo" (Yuill 22). The experience of this man demonstrates how Sambo was more than just a character. Sambo became a representation of who African people were, whether the conveyance had any truth or not. Consequently, white children assumed that Little Black Sambo was an indication of how all black people actually were. The painful legacy created by this single text is disturbing and far reaching because of the widespread popularity of the text across the globe. Because *Sambo* is a children's book, it may be picked up in a library or a school by a young person who does not understand the implications of the term "sambo" or the implications of noting a person's skin color over other, more defining attributes. The original book and

the modifications are dangerous because they are in the hands of the most impressionable people: small children.

Sambo also negatively affected and affects white children who were or are given the idea by the *Sambo* text that African people are simply a "type" of primitive people who can be seen as amusing, goofy, and strange: "*Sambo* marked the model stereotyped caricature of Negroes to white children for generations. The devastating effect of this story has without question cast a long ugly shadow on the developing minds of white children by giving them a model caricature that demeans and ridicules black children." (Yuill 19). *Sambo* became more than a character. He became a "model caricature" that represented who African people were, what they wore, how they associated with one another, how they talked, how they looked, and what sort of lives they were living. The negative effects of *Sambo* on both black and white children demonstrate the flaws of the original book and why the book should not be redistributed to bookstores and libraries.

Despite the negative attributes of *Sambo* and all the viable reasons not to modify this text, the book prevailed and began to morph into a more "acceptable" text for all of the reasons previously discussed (Yuill 13). In 1958, records with read-along books relating the "Little Black Sambo" story were sold and renamed "Little Brave Sambo." Although "black" was taken from the title line, the stereotypical term "sambo" still remained. The 1990s and early 2000s saw a vast rebirth and a reinvention of the story. In an effort to discern whether or not the new versions successfully eliminate the stereotyping and racism that is present in

the original book, careful analysis is necessary. Analysis will reveal whether the modified versions are successful at creating social concordance and some of the problems with attempting to recuperate flawed texts that are imbedded with racism and stereotyping.

ANALYSIS OF *SAM AND THE TIGERS*

Sam and the Tigers was published in 1996 by an African American male named Julius Lester. While the author is a black man, and he certainly did not and does not want to promote stereotypes or terminology that is hurtful toward black people, he may still be unconsciously doing so. Because Bannerman's values are so imbedded in the original book, it is difficult to retain the gist of the original story without maintaining some of the offensive elements of the original text. Because Bannerman's book was problematic due to its text, characters, characters' names, setting, dialogue and illustrations, it is nearly impossible to reconstruct or reclaim her book without changing it altogether. Consequently, the idea of "otherness" is still overtly present in this modified version, whether the writer and illustrator realized it or not.

This modified version is set in a fictional place called "Sam-sam-sa-mara" and renames all three main characters "Sam" (Lester 1). By relocating all the characters to this fictional place, the author is able to keep the setting nondescript so as to not upset readers who did not approve of the African jungle setting of the original book. The new setting suggests that minorities should all be put together in one place, away from the society. The African characters are not part of a typical setting and normal society. Rather, they are set away in this fictional land in which everyone is named "Sam." Even the city name itself,

"Sam-sam-sa-mara" is a clear reference to the "sambo" term that is included in the original book. The author keeps the association between African people and "sambo" alive by including various "sam" words and references throughout this modified version. This effort to keep alive the hurtful elements of the original text demonstrates a move by the author to keep the hegemonic ideologies of Bannerman in place.

In naming all the characters "Sam," the author of this version suggests to the reader that all African people are one and the same, and can, therefore, all be called the same name. While the characters are not called "sambos," the reader cannot help but notice that, again, "Sam" is merely a shortened form of "sambo." Anyone who is familiar with the original story and the controversy that surrounded it notices that "sam" is a clear abbreviation of a racially charged term that stereotyped African people for decades. This alteration of "sambo" is a move by the author to soften the text and character names so that they will be deemed acceptable by the majority of American readers. The problem with this softening is that the idea of "sambo" is still kept in circulation.

The photos of the three main characters, located on the first page of the book, showcase three attractive African people; the pictures do not exaggerate the lips, hair, or any other feature of the characters as was done in the original version. The alteration of the original pictures was obviously a necessity if the author and illustrator wanted their version to be accepted by the ruling group. The original text showcased illustrations that depicted exaggerated stereotypes of African people's facial features and vibrant clothing. Aside from the title of the

original, the illustrations were the second most criticized element; so, it is not surprising that this modified version includes attractive pictures of African people. Despite the changed appearances of these characters, their name and town still depict them as "the others" who belong in a far off place.

While the illustrations are less stereotypical than the original pictures, the altered text is highly stereotypical of African vernacular. For example, one line reads, "Don't you be talking back to your mama like that" (Lester 3). This contemporary interpretation of dialect is problematic because it is notably exaggerated and because it may suggest to a young reader that all African people speak in this way. The dialogue in the book suggests that African Americans all speak in a manner that markedly deviates from standard American English. The focus on African vernacular serves as a reductionistic tool to trivialize these characters to one element of their being, their speech. Just as the illustrations served as reductionistic tools in the original version, dialect serves as a reductionistic tool in this version.

ANALYSIS OF THE STORY OF LITTLE BABAJI

The Story of Little Babaji, one of the modified versions of the 2000s, takes place in India and renames the characters: Sambo becomes Babaji, Mumbo becomes Mamaji, and Jumbo becomes Papaji. While these names do sound Indian to many readers, they are really just Americanized creations of what Indian people might be named. These fictionalized, catchy names resonate with young American readers to whom the author, a white man, is trying to sell his books. Like the author of *Sam and the Tigers*, this author has recast the setting. While this version leaves the original story essentially unchanged, it alters the setting from Africa to India and recasts the characters' appearances and names to reflect the culture of India. What is the difference between this version and the original? The characters have new names and the setting has been altered, but the story is otherwise left unchanged. Now it is not Africans who are being trivialized and stereotyped, but Indians. This revision of the original text suggests that original book is acceptable, overall, as long as the characters are not African and the setting is not Africa. The modifier obviously believed that the other elements of the story, such as the stereotypical and racist suggestions, were satisfactory because he left them in the story.

In this version, the characters are portrayed to look “phenotypically Indian in a stylized way” (Bates 130). The main character is again reduced to the one thing that defines him as “the other”: his turban. This version continuously pictures the characters sporting immense turbans and brightly colored clothing throughout, as if these are the most important elements of their identities. As in the original version, this version reduces characters to trivial elements of their existence. The original Sambo was reduced to his black skin, his colorful clothing, and his large lips, eyes, and hair. This new Sambo, renamed Babaji, is reduced to his bright clothes and his large turban.

The setting is recast as if this change will make all of the other problems of the original *Sambo* text disappear. The setting of this version is a nondescript, far off land of the Orient where exotic things happen, like a young boy taming tigers with his clothing. Why is India a preferable setting to Africa? Why is it acceptable to American readers that the story is set in a jungle in India but not a jungle in Africa? Perhaps people in today’s society are simply more accepting of generalizations made about Indian people than African people, and so the authors of the text recast the setting to appease readers through social concordance. White modifiers obviously believed that setting their story in the African jungle might make them appear racist to some readers. Also, there is a certain exoticism that is often associated with people living in the Orient, which is a fictional place that is often dreamed of and misconstrued by Westerners who have never traveled to the Far East (Said). By placing the story somewhere in

India, the author of this modified version attracts readers who have a romanticized view of where "others" live.

This version again demonstrates that elements of the story can be changed, such as the characters names and the setting, but problematic elements from the original text still are evident. This author, as a white man, obviously felt that he had to change the race of the characters, their names, and their homeland, in order to get his book accepted by American readers. And the author was successful because his book is on the shelves at large public libraries. However, his version still stereotypes and reduces its characters, which is problematic for impressionable readers.

ANALYSIS OF *THE BOY AND THE TIGERS*

The Boy and the Tigers was published in 2004 as part of the Little Golden Book series. The modifier of *The Boy and the Tigers* is a white woman of Italian descent who illustrates in England, Italy, and the United States. The illustrator's drawings in this book are problematic because they stereotype and reduce in much the same way as the original drawings. The illustrator's decision to modify the setting and the characters is a clear move to create social concord, while still keeping in place the racially charged and stereotypical ideologies of the original book. Despite the modifier's attempt at concordance, she fails due to her inclusion of problematic elements of the original book.

The story seems to take place in India, and the main character is renamed Little Rajani. Little Rajani is a turban sporting Indian boy who begins and ends the story in just his turban and underwear. Like the original Sambo, Little Rajani's initial nakedness shows him in a primitive and uncivilized state. Then, once Rajani is cloaked in fine garments, he suddenly becomes a daring trickster of a boy who defeats tigers in the forest. However, by the time the story ends and Little Rajani is naked again, he seems to have lost the power that his clothes gave him. Like in the previous version, there is a constant focus on the boy's ubiquitous turban, which seems to overtake every picture in the book. The

pictures of Little Rajani in just his turban and underwear are quite ridiculous, and the reader is invited to laugh at the illustration; Little Rajani's turban is literally the same size as his entire body and its immenseness seems to swallow the small character. Like the last version, the main character in *The Boy and the Tigers* is reduced to one element of his appearance: his turban. This over exaggeration of the size of his turban leaves a lasting impression on the reader, and a caricature of what an Indian person looks like is imprinted in the reader's mind.

This version is flawed for many of the same reasons that the original text is flawed. The caricature created by the turban sporting Little Rajani may be more acceptable to many American readers, but that does not change the fact a caricature of Indian person has been created and will be perpetuated because people are reading this version. The illustrations serve to reduce, trivialize, and stereotype, and the far off setting in a fictional place conveys the main characters as "others" who should be relegated to a foreign land.

ANALYSIS OF THE MODIFIED *THE STORY OF LITTLE BLACK SAMBO*

The 2003 version that is on the most library shelves is still called *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. This version is perhaps the most perplexing, because the illustrator is a black man who certainly would not wish to reinvigorate the sambo stereotype that defamed African Americans for decades. Yet, he seems to have done exactly that in memory of a deceased family member who loved the *Little Black Sambo* story for many years. This version leaves the title and the original text of story unchanged, but alters the original illustrations, replacing them with pictures of a handsome young African boy tricking the tigers in the colorful African jungle. The pictures are vibrant and effectively draw readers, young and old, to the book. However, despite the new pictures, "the name in the title and on every page has long been considered an insult and continues to be associated with gross racist caricature. It's hard to get past that" (Rochman 1070). This most popular version leaves in place the disturbing inclusion of the word "black" and the term "sambo." The author has changed the illustrations, so a compromise has been made, and he can then include the offensive terms and still have his text accepted by many American readers.

The setting in this version remains the African jungle like in the original story. The setting is vividly portrayed through the illustrations, which show the untamed and now handsome Sambo bounding through the colorful growth of the jungle. The problem with the jungle setting is that it depicts Sambo as a sort of uncivilized, wild young man who spends his days taming tigers. Sambo seems to be one with the jungle and the animals, as if he belongs there; surrounded by an array of bright colors and a host of exotic animals, Sambo leaps through the thick undergrowth of the jungle as the bright sun shines down upon him. This portrayal of an African character, named Sambo, is obviously racist and hurtful because it relegates him to the wilderness as if he is an uncivilized being.

In this version, the attempt at compromise to create social concord becomes evident; the racist terms and "otherness" of Sambo remain in the text, but the racist pictures are removed. So, visually, the book is appealing; the reader is drawn to pick up the colorful book and does not recognize the hurtful elements of the story until he or she begins to read the story. This text sits on library shelves despite the inclusion of all the controversial elements of the original book except the illustrations. This version is deemed acceptable, perhaps because modern American readers no longer remember that "sambo" was a term of repression and hate toward African people for many years or because they do remember and wish to keep the term in circulation. Despite the fact that white American readers may not recognize the implications of such a term and such a text, many black Americans have not forgotten and lament that yet another form of *Sambo* is back in libraries.

IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

If the original story reflects the hegemonic ideologies of Bannerman and creates a stereotypical view of an African boy and his family, do the modified versions also reflect the values of the ruling class? *The 20th Century Children's Book Treasury* calls *The Story of Little Babaji* a "happy transformation" that is "more in tune with social mores today" (Schulman 293). The key word in their remark is "more." While the "accommodated" or "modified" versions do minimize the stereotypes and racist pictorials, they still reflect some of the ideologies and values of the ruling white class that Bannerman represented. This statement demonstrates that those who hold the power to influence the children's literature canon value the ideologies of the hegemony.

The 20th Century Children's Book Treasury praises the modifications of *Little Black Sambo*, even going so far as to include one modified version, *The Story of Little Babaji*, in their own anthology. With all of the of the children's literature in the world, why does this anthology and *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* insist upon including a modification of *Sambo* and praising the modification as a "happy transformation?" Perhaps even the compilers of the most noted children's anthologies are unaware that they cannot let go of hegemonic ideologies that have been reflected in the *Little Black Sambo* stories

for over a century. The *Children's Book Treasury* continues to praise their version of *Sambo* as a successful attempt at "social concord," despite the version's problematic elements.

The original *Little Black Sambo* story and history continue to live on in the anthologies and through the modified versions. Two of the four modified versions discussed include information about the original text and the original controversy in the front or back sleeve of the text because, ultimately, "any story must assume life in the context of its history and culture" (Franceschelli Afterword). So, even if the parent or child reading the book does not know about the racist origins of the story, he or she finds out about the original story due the inclusion of this information in the book sleeves. Even *The 20th Century Children's Book Treasury* warns that "books of an earlier age can offend and hurt," so the *Little Black Sambo* text included in their anthology is modified (Schulman vii). The anthology states that the new version is "a triumph in finding an authentic way to preserve the best of a long-time favorite story" (Schulman vii).

But are the new versions a triumph, and if they are, for whom? Do they erase the stereotypes and racism perpetuated by the original version, or do they merely minimize the stereotypes and racism in order to keep dominant ideologies in circulation? Why is the new version the anthology includes an "authentic" way to preserve a flawed text? While *Sambo* is a long time favorite to some, it represents a cruel past to others. Clearly, the writers of the anthology are attempting to address this tension and this hurtful past by stating that they have

found a version that successfully preserves only the positive elements of the story that make it a favorite. However, the version that the anthology includes is a version modified by a white author who includes stereotypical titles of Indian people for his characters who don immense turbans that overtake every illustration of them. The writers of the anthology seem to support the white perspective that the original book can be neatly and authentically salvaged and “preserved” if certain elements are changed.

Despite the anthology’s claim that a happy transformation has occurred, analysis suggests otherwise. The four modified versions accommodate different elements of the original *Little Black Sambo* story. Of the four altered versions, three of them remove “black” and “sambo” from the title line. Only one, the most popular version of the text, keeps the original title which includes the words “black” and “sambo.” Of the four versions, three leave the original Bannerman text in place. And, of the four versions, all four alter the original pictures of the first publication. Despite some positive changes, such as getting rid of the original illustrations, these modified versions still have some serious pitfalls. By leaving in place negative elements of the original book, such as reductionism, stereotyping, and racism, the modifiers continue to project these ideologies to their readers under the guise of “new and improved” versions.

Analysis of four of the modified versions shows that stereotyping and reductionism still occur in all of the modified versions, although in more subtle ways than the original text. While these books are amusing to some, they are amusing at the expense of other people. The entertaining aspect of the books

does not outweigh the fact that the books perpetuate racism, stereotyping, and the conveyance of black people and Indian people as "others" who should be outcast from society. While a definite shift in race and locale has occurred in the two versions that recast the story to India, the racist values that underlie the original book have not been altered. The modifiers simply stretch their racist notions to a new country and to a new people. Overall, all four of the new versions seem to perpetuate stereotypes and "reduce" the characters in some way as previously discussed. So, despite modifications to the original book, all four new books that attempt to create "social concord" still perpetuate many of the same ideologies and stereotypes as the original, just in slightly new ways.

The disturbing part about these books is that children's literature is particularly powerful because children are impressionable; most adults remember and are affected by the literature they are exposed to as children. The *Sambo* books are hurtful to black children because they encourage people to look at them as "the other." Additionally, white children are negatively impacted by the books: "A white child's sense of reality is severely affected when he or she is encouraged, by a book, to feel superior to people from a different racial group" (Yuill 33). As a person who was exposed to the *Little Brave Sambo* records myself, I still remember all the words and the rhythm of the record some twenty years later. The repetition in the book and on the record makes it hard for people to forget the *Sambo* story. The lyrics to the song still ring in my head: "Little brave Sambo. Little Brave Sambo. Dressed in the prettiest clothes." I

remember that "Little Brave Sambo" offered me, a child growing up in a small, all-white Midwest farm town, my first exposure to an African child and family.

"*Little Black Sambo* perseveres in print and in the memories of adults who encountered the tale as children" (Lukehart 87). The perseverance of this text in the minds of individuals who read the book as children demonstrates the power that a single book of this nature can yield. Because of the memorable nature of the tale, *Little Black Sambo* persists in modern, western society and is still widely accepted because the ideologies of the book are still maintained by members of the ruling group. If the ruling group wishes to maintain their power, their values, and their ideologies, what better way to assert their power than by speaking directly to the youngest members of society: children. Many parents may not even want their children to read the *Sambo* books. But, parents may have little say as to whether or not their children read the books because their child may innocently pick up any of the versions at his or her school or public library and read the book.

Some parents, on the other hand, introduce their children to the *Sambo* books because they read the original version as children and loved it. While many young children are not familiar with the original *Sambo* stories, most adults are. The modified version called *Little Black Sambo* even "feels much more directed to adult readers who may have been traumatized by the racist implications in the earlier tellings of the Sambo story" (Bates 131). While young children may not know the history of the story, "their adult readers smile in appreciation" (Bates 131). It is important to note that because *Little Black Sambo*

is a children's story, "Sambo was only too often the first black child" that whites were exposed to in the 20th century (Franceschelli Afterword).

So, today, in the 21st century, a small child may read the modified versions and be exposed to, for the first time, an African American boy or an Indian boy. This child, like a child in the 20th century, will be exposed to a stereotypical perspective of an African boy speaking in an exaggerated vernacular or an Indian boy wearing nothing but underwear and an immense, white turban that is the same size as his body. This child may read the most popular, current version of the text and see the words "black" twice on the first page and the word "sambo" once. Ultimately, "Sambo" is a hurtful text, a text that is particularly hurtful to children who may be deemed as the "the other" after a *Sambo* version is read:

The argument has been offered, children don't know or care about the background of a name. They only listen to the story. But it has been proved—and experienced—that if a story of this type is used in an integrated story hour or classroom, there is a certain amount of discomfort and even, yet, inferiority feeling—for a black child when white classmates look at him and giggle, later teasing him by calling him Sambo. No matter how entertaining a book may be, one group of children should never be entertained at the expense of another group's feelings. (Yuill 23)

While *Little Black Sambo* may seem like *just* a book to some people, the effects of the text can be long lasting in a negative and hurtful way. Because the

modified versions maintain many of the same negative attributes as the original text, they fail to achieve social concord.

Overall, is moderation, accommodation, and concord enough in this situation? No. Have the ideologies really changed? No. Are these texts still reflective of hegemonic views? Yes. Should these books have been modified in the first place? No. The story of "Little Black Sambo" labels blacks and Indians as "the other," people who are different because of their appearance, their language, and/or their clothing. The modified versions are just that, modified. They are altered in some respects but the underlying ideologies and hints of the original story remain. Whether the hints of the original story remain in the front or back cover, in the title, in the words, in the dialogue, in the reductionism of the characters, in the illustrations, or in the mind of the parents who read the original stories as a child, the modified versions exist as a disappointing attempt at social concord. The modified versions pass on the ideologies of a woman who represented imperialistic values and sought to alter people who did not fit her idea of normal. The modified versions allow the painful history of the original book to live on, and to be passed on to a new generation of children.

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