The Influence of Early Childhood Media in Promoting Speciesist Ideologies

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How to cite this article: Tetrault, Simone. 2023. “The Influence of Early Childhood Media in Promoting Speciesist Ideologies”. *Animal Ethics Review* Vol. 3 no. 1: 11–18. https://doi.org/10.31009/aer.2023.v3.i1.03

PHOTO: *Dear Zoo*, by Rod Campbell.

Abstract

While communications and media research has been conducted on the influence of children's literature in shaping the attitudes of children towards various marginalized groups, the specific impact of anthropocentric viewpoints and speciesist ideologies conveyed through imagery and narrative in early childhood literature has been largely overlooked. The goal of this article is to use a critical literacy approach to analyze poignant examples of early childhood literature in the English language canon, and to draw links between the ways in which these media normalize the oppression of non-human animals in similar ways to that of other historically marginalized human groups. The author argues that seemingly innocuous works such as baby board books, picture books, and nursery rhymes, can have a profound impact on shaping the attitudes of children towards non-human animals, and thus, demonstrate a pressing need for more narratives that decenter human characters and interests, emphasize the personhood of non-human animals, and take an anti-speciesist approach towards storytelling in order to work towards dismantling systems of oppression that actively harm non-human animals.

Keywords

Children's literature, early childhood literature, speciesism, anthropocentric, critical literacy, speciesist attitudes

1. Introduction

I wrote to the zoo to send me a pet.
They sent me an… elephant!
He was too big!
I sent him back.

Dear Zoo, by Rod Campbell

From the earliest stages of life, children are exposed to various forms of media including songs, nursery rhymes, pictures, and stories. The ideas, cultural values, and attitudes embedded in the melodies, narratives, and images that children consume "provide impressions and messages that can last a lifetime, and shape how children see and understand themselves, their homes, communities, and world" (Ishizuka and Stephens 2019, 6). The impact of storytelling on early childhood development has long-term implications, not only for the individual children who absorb prevailing cultural narratives through media exposure, but also for individual members of groups that are represented in these stories in various ways, and in particular, for those who are members of underrepresented groups.

As research studies have indicated, by three months of age, children can "categorize and express preference by race"; by the age of three years old, children express holding negative explicit attitudes towards various groups, and "when exposed to racism and prejudice at this age, they tend to embrace and accept it, even though they might not understand the feelings" (Ishizuka and Stephens 2019, 6). Like racism and other forms of prejudice, speciesism is learned, and as scientist and author Marc Bekoff notes in *The Emotional Lives of Animals*: "Many people can show tremendous love and devotion to animals who are their pets, but then, with little forethought, concern, or regret, they may go on to abuse animals in different settings in egregious ways" (Bekoff 2007, 21). Perhaps the origins of this cognitive dissonance can be traced back to human animals' earliest memories and the profound influence of speciesist narratives in early childhood literature. Many scholars have addressed issues surrounding the representation of historically marginalized human groups through a critical literacy approach towards the analysis of media aimed at young children. Similarly, this essay draws upon the current discourse surrounding the impact of representation of underrepresented groups of individuals and thus takes a critical literacy approach in analyzing how speciesism is conveyed in early childhood literature, including nursery rhymes and books, through elements such as language, imagery and characterization. While there are almost certainly numerous examples of early childhood literature that contain speciesist ideologies throughout various cultural contexts worldwide, the scope of this essay will focus only on such themes occurring in English language works. In particular, in order to effectively illustrate not only the pervasiveness but also longevity of speciesist ideology in early childhood literature, this essay will provide a critical literacy approach to an in-depth analysis of a small sample of

specifically English language works that are well known, vary in period of publication, are and representative of a much wider array of early childhood media.

2. Speciesist Narratives in Early Childhood Literature

Through joyful melodies like “Old MacDonald Had a Farm,” charming nursery rhymes like “Bah, Bah, a Black Sheep,” comical cartoons like Bugs Bunny, and beautifully illustrated stories like *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt*, bigotry is often made to seem benign. Many popular works of early childhood literature, including stories by Dr. Seuss and board books like *Dear Zoo*, normalize violence against non-human animals and label individuals as “zoo animals,” “farm animals,” or “pets,” and therefore, set the speciesist expectation that certain non-human animals are meant to be held in various forms of captivity. Yet as scholar and activist Carrie P. Freeman so clearly identifies, humans engage in the oppression of non-human animals when they “kidnap/steal them from their free life, family, and home; keep them captive for profit; hunt them for sport, recreation, and non-sustenance food” and more (Freeman 2016, 2). Troublingly, many of these oppressive practices are represented in sanitized narratives throughout early childhood literature, and furthermore, the imagery used in many children’s stories normalizes the use of cages and deceptively characterizes non-human animals imprisoned in zoos and on farms as not only healthy, but also happy and thriving, even consenting. A deeper analysis of several of these works will serve to more clearly illustrate the pervasiveness of speciesism in early childhood media in English language literature.

In Rod Campbell’s best-selling board book *Dear Zoo: A Lift-The-Flap-Book*, the narrator, presumably a young child, writes to the zoo asking for a pet. As the story progresses, the child receives a number of animals who have been shipped in colorful crates, labeled with postal carrier instructions. Yet none of the non-human animals seem to satisfy the criteria of the human narrator. Through the use of playful repetition, the story’s audience learns that the elephant is “too big,” the giraffe, “too tall,” the lion, “too fierce,” the camel “too grumpy,” the snake “too scary,” the monkey, “too naughty,” the frog “too jumpy” (Campbell 1986). In this book published for human infants, the natural physical features and behaviors of non-human animals are characterized as problematic from the perspective of the human seeking a “pet.” There is no consideration for the needs and desires of the non-human animals arriving from the zoo. They are packed and shipped back and forth in crates on the whims of the narrator, promoting the speciesist idea that non-human animals, like other products in a capitalist system, should be considered insofar as their value to the consumer is concerned. Notably, the human narrator is not characterized negatively in any way.

The story’s ending, “So they thought very hard, and sent me a...puppy! He was perfect! I kept him” (Campbell 1986), ultimately establishes the hierarchy of the human narrator’s desires and needs over those of the non-human animals throughout. *Dear Zoo*, through its simple language, use of repetition, and imagery, proliferates a speciesist narrative that legitimates non-human animal captivity for the purpose of fulfilling human desires.

Another work of early childhood literature that promotes an anthropocentric point of view is the popular nursery rhyme “Bah, Bah, a Black Sheep.” The earliest printing of the poem can be found in *Tommy Thumb’s Pretty Songbook* published circa 1744. In this publication, the nursery rhyme, accompanied by the depiction of a white woman in a pointed hat pulling a black sheep by a leash tied around their neck, reads: “Bah, Bah, a black Sheep / Have you any Wool / Yes merry have I, / Three Bags full, / One for my Master / One for my Dame / One for my little Boy / That lives in the lane” (Tommy Thumb’s Pretty Songbook 1744). On the surface, the appeal of this poem to young children is straightforward; the short and simple rhyming couplets, written in mostly single-syllable words, are easy for toddlers to memorize and repeat. Yet some historians suggest that the origins of “Bah, Bah, a Black Sheep” are a more mature allegory, referring to the plight of medieval farmers who were subject to a heavy tax imposed by King Edward I in the thirteenth century. In this allegorical reading, the “master” represents the king, the “dame” represents the church, and the “little boy” represents the farmer, each of whom were entitled to one third of the cost of a sack of wool under the medieval wool tax (Burton-Hill 2015). According to David Nibert, “the underlying motivation for the oppression of humans and other animals was the material gain it produced for powerful elite males” (Nibert, 2016, 76), a point which is clearly illustrated through the allegorical reading of “Bah, Bah, a Black Sheep.”

While “Bah, Bah, a Black Sheep” may have political origins and meanings tied to inequities experienced by English farmers in the medieval economy, the poem, in both its original form and more modern versions, has speciesist implications that reinforce anthropocentric ideas about non-human animals and their purpose, and thus, as a popular nursery rhyme today, continues to indoctrinate young children into accepting non-human animal exploitation as normal. For instance, by giving voice to the individual sheep who affirms that their wool is intended for their master, their Dame, and the little boy who lives in the lane (an order which simultaneously reinforces the patriarchal gender hierarchy), the sheep who narrates the poem is self-characterized as complicit in not only their own exploitation, but also the anthropocentric view that their wool is primarily a commodity meant for human use rather than a natural physical adaptation meant to keep the sheep warm in cold weather. Thus, as children learn and repeat the lines of “Bah, Bah, a Black Sheep,” the nursery rhyme normalizes the exploitation of individual sheep for their wool, and furthermore, perpetuates the misleading idea that non-human animals in captivity are consenting to this exploitation.

If I Ran the Zoo, written by Dr. Seuss in 1950, is no less innocuous a story for children. The book begins with a young boy, Gerald McGrew, visiting a zoo and envisioning himself transforming the institution into something much grander. In this vision, the Gerald begins by opening all of the cages and pens that confine the non-human animals in captivity. Yet this first act of liberation is not an altruistic act; he immediately reveals that his plan to reform the zoo consists of replacing all of the “lions and tigers and that kind of stuff” with “beasts of a much more un-usual kind,” in order to, from his perspective, improve its modernity (Seuss 1950). In the ensuing narrative, it becomes plain that Gerald’s motivation is to gain attention, success, and acclaim through the acquisition of “beasts” whose captivity he can profit from.

"Problematic illustrations and texts throughout Seuss' collection portray the colonization of various underrepresented communities and their voice as a "fun" and "light hearted" conquest" (Ishizuka and Stephens 2019, 31) and the characterization of not only underrepresented human communities, but also non-human animals in *If I Ran the Zoo* is no exception. Much of the story of *If I Ran the Zoo* focuses on Gerald's journey and willingness to go where "no others can get to" in order to hunt and capture the rarest non-human animals from their natural habitats in environments that are described as harsh or distant: "His animals all have such very odd faces. I'll bet he must hunt them in rather odd places!" (Seuss 1950). The other humans Gerald encounters in these "odd places" are depicted in ways that perpetuate racist stereotypes about Asian and African people in order to further exoticize the non-human animals he is hunting. For instance, in what appears to be an unspecified location in Asia, the boy enlists the aid of three "helpers who all wear their eyes with a slant" (Seuss 1950). These "helpers" smile with eyes that appear to be closed as they support the weight of a grinning non-human animal in a bamboo cage on their heads, while marching in step with their hands in a prayer-like position. Throughout the story, "[t]he virtual silence behind every character of color" as well as that of the non-human animals depicted, "reveals implications about how White supremacy dominates the power behind whose voice is heard and whose isn't. Furthermore, the lack of specification of the ethnicity or nationality of characters wearing turbans, conical hats, or even of Black characters," as well as the characteristics of non-human individuals and their environments, "reveals the complex ways in which Seuss marginalizes and silences these communities" (Ishizuka and Stephens 2019, 29). Moreover, when Gerald envisions himself back at his zoo, all of the visitors who "flock" to visit are depicted as white, thus reinforcing the established exoticism of both the non-human animals and the various peoples the boy encountered in "faraway" places and evoking the "long history of people of color, such as Sarah Baartman, being placed on display in zoos for the entertainment of White people" (Ishizuka and Stephens 2019, 17).

Another recurring theme throughout *If I Ran the Zoo* is the importance of constantly striving for something new in enterprise. In response to the question, "When do you suppose this young fellow will stop?" Gerald contends that he has no intention of doing so (Seuss 1950). Gerald's capitalistic drive is clearly illustrated by his assertion that, despite its costliness, the "Bad-Animal-Catching-Machine" is an excellent investment because it allows him to catch non-human animals, who would otherwise have the means to defend themselves, without experiencing any harm himself. In fact, it is Gerald's inexhaustible drive and utter disregard for the well-being of non-human animals that leads the visitors at the end of the story to finally say, "WOW!" and ponder "What this zoo must be worth!" (Seuss 1950) and in so doing, justify and uphold the speciesist attitudes that have fueled non-human animal exploitation throughout the narrative of *If I Ran the Zoo*.

Although *Dear Zoo*, "Bah, Bah, a Black Sheep," and *If I Ran the Zoo* are not recent works within early childhood literature, they are representative of a long history of stories that promote anthropocentric hierarchies and thus illustrate the prominence of dominant speciesist narratives that remain entrenched in children's media; *Dear Zoo* was republished in January of 2022 as a 40th Anniversary Special

Edition, "Bah, Bah, a Black Sheep" is still found on lists of the most popular English nursery rhymes ("Top Ten Nursery Rhymes" 2009), and the work of Dr. Seuss is ubiquitous within the English canon of children's literature. Works of early childhood literature including *Dear Zoo*, "Bah, Bah, a Black Sheep," and *If I Ran the Zoo* mirror Bekoff's observation about society at large, in which "[h]uman interests almost always trump animal interests" (Bekoff 2007, 21). What is particularly troubling about these characterizations is that "A long history of research shows that text accompanied with imagery, such as books with pictures, shapes children's racial attitudes" (Ishizuka and Stephens 2019, 6), and it is possible that further research into media portrayals of non-human animals would reveal similar influence on children's attitudes. Furthermore, early childhood media "communicate about power, race, and gender, who should receive privileges, and who has been or continues to be oppressed" (Ishizuka and Stephens 2019, 9). In other words, seemingly innocuous nursery rhymes, board books, and songs can use narrative and imagery to effectively establish, promote, and normalize oppressive social systems, thus creating lasting effects on a child's ethical understandings of how other beings should be treated, and consequently, their future attitudes and behaviors towards members of individuals in various marginalized groups.

3. Conclusion

In 2021, Dr. Seuss Enterprises released a statement announcing that the licensing and publication of several Dr. Seuss books, including *If I Ran the Zoo*, would be discontinued. While the company stated, "[t]hese books portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong," the issue of non-human animal characterization was not addressed (Gross 2021). The removal of overtly harmful speciesist narratives and prejudiced representations of non-human animals from the canon of early childhood media is certainly an important step in advocating for the fair and ethical treatment of non-human animals. However, as with other institutionalized systems of oppression, it is equally important to continue to take a critical approach to improving the narratives around underrepresented and historically marginalized groups of individuals, and in particular, non-human animals whose stories are not being told. Anti-speciesist early childhood media must focus on establishing the personhood of non-human animals, telling stories about non-human animals as individuals with needs and desires, and de-centering human animals in inter-species narratives.

In a society that is "socially engineered to accept, if not to embrace, not only speciesism and racism, but sexism, classism, ableism, ageism, and other injurious ideologies–belief systems created to buttress an oppressive social order" (Nibert, 2016, 80), a critical literacy approach to early childhood media is vital to dismantling the narratives that not only promote, but also legitimize, and even romanticize non-human animal oppression and exploitation. Further communications and media studies research on the role of early childhood media in shaping speciesist attitudes in children could delve into media from additional cultural contexts and in other languages, broader studies of additional forms of children's media such as films, TV, Youtube, and social media, or measurable impacts of speciesist ideologies and

anthropocentric viewpoints on not only attitudes, but also individual's actions towards nonhuman animals.

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