

**Race, Reading, Responsibility:
Survey of African American Literature Community Action Project, Fall 2005**

The children's book *The Story of Little Black Sambo* provides an important example of how literature can reinforce racism. Published in 1900, this picture book was once regarded as a "classic" of 20th century American children's literature. While we would like to think the brand of explicit racism expressed in *Sambo* belongs in our past, the book remains easily accessible to children in the Ithaca community today. Any child browsing the picture books in the Youth Services department at the Tompkins County Public Library might come across it on its floor-level shelf.



Illustration from *The Story of Little Black Sambo*

From its origins in the 19th century slave narratives, the African American literary tradition has been characterized by refutations of stereotypical images like these. Black literature in America tells a story that can be understood as a counter-narrative, an alternate story about black and white people that works against dominant society's biased portrayals. Having learned about the African American writers whose works have played an important part in the political movement for social justice in America, students in the

Fall 2005 Survey of African American Literature class researched the history of this particular book, the images it used, and the effects of racist stereotyping on young children. Then, arguing against Library Director Janet Steiner's contention that *The Story of Little Black Sambo* should be available to Ithaca area children on the grounds of academic freedom, they wrote this essay to convince the library board that the book should be moved to a new location. Dr. Sondra Guttman (course professor) and Dr. Larry Shinagawa (a library board member and the director of the IC Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity) will present this essay to the library board.

The Story of Little Black Sambo, "one of the most beloved and controversial books in children's literature" (*Major Authors* 157), reaffirms the belief that African Americans are docile, inferior, ignorant, and grotesque looking. The names of the characters and the way they are portrayed have a damaging affect on children. Therefore, the two copies of this book currently on the open shelves of the Youth Services room at the Tompkins County Public Library should be moved to the adult section of the library.

The Story of Little Black Sambo, published in 1899 is about a small black boy named Sambo who tricks tigers that want to eat him by bribing them with his gorgeous attire. The tigers each believe that they are the grandest in their new clothes and begin to fight. They chase each other around a tree so fast that they become a pool of melted ghi (an Indian butter). Having vanquished the tigers, Sambo gets his new clothes back and his mother, Black Mumbo, makes pancakes for the entire family (Bader, 1996).



The author of this book, Helen Bannerman, received her L.L.A. degree from St. Andrews University in London. As *The Story of Little Black Sambo* depicts, she was well traveled; Bannerman was born in North Africa, schooled in Scotland and lived in India for thirty years with her husband. Bannerman wrote this book to entertain her children while in India (*Major Authors* 156). Though she was not a professional artist, Bannerman illustrated the book herself. Because *The Story of Little Black Sambo* is set in a fantasy jungle that seems both African and Indian and because it contains elements of Indian, African, and African American cultures, some of the book's supporters have argued that it has a "universal appeal" (Bader 1996). However, regardless of Bannerman's intentions in combining these cultures, this book has had clear negative effects in its portrayal of African Americans. This can be seen directly in Bannerman's recreation of the "Sambo" image.

The purpose of the "Sambo" image was to make minorities seem intellectually inferior. Derived from the imagery of its Western European counterpart, the jester, the Sambo image was used as a tool for humor, but with much more malicious intentions. As Joseph Boskin noted in his book *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester*, "while both initiated and received laughter, the intent of their humor was quite distinct:

the Jester was accorded the beauty of wisdom, Sambo accorded the follies of foolishness” (9). Images like that of the Sambo implicitly argued that African Americans were naturally different and inferior to white Americans and therefore not worthy of equal rights and humane treatment.

When *The Story of Little Black Sambo* was published in the United States, the word “Sambo” was commonly understood as a term of disparagement – the “stereotype of the shuffling, grinning, bowing-and-scraping, no – ‘count darky’” (Bader, 1996). The image is characterized by over-exaggerated features such as large, red, smiling lips, large wide eyes, and wild messy hair.¹ Clothing also played an important role in visibly identifying the Sambo. The following description of what were called “Sambo entertainers” shows how this character permeated American culture at the turn of the 20th century: “On stages, in skits, marches, musicals, in street theatre, circuses, plays, radio shows, and at impromptu gatherings, at least one Sambo figure pranced across the lights before audiences cued to his actions. Dressed half in yellow, half in blue, Sambo mascots paraded before cheering crowds at college football games” (Boskin 11).

In Bannerman’s book, Sambo is clearly portrayed as a very clever little boy who deftly saves himself by outsmarting the tigers. But the name “Sambo” and Bannerman’s illustration of her main character do not reflect this intelligence. In postcards and advertisements from the early 1900’s, black children were often portrayed as animals that had to fend for themselves. Portrayed as raccoons (coons), monkeys, and crows, they were considered to be closer to animals than humans. The Sambo caricature was one of

¹ The online “Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia” at Ferris State University has posted images of several “Sambo” toys, including a “Sambo banjo,” a “Sambo bank,” and, more disturbingly, a “Sambo target toss.”
<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/multimedia/>

the “coon” or “picaninny” caricatures of black children.



At the beginning of Bannerman’s book, Little Black Sambo’s character had no other clothing except his shorts; this supports the picaninny image. Sambo’s ability to speak with the tigers is another characteristic of the picaninny image. Advertisers played a part in capitalizing off these stereotypes of savage Africans and their uncared-for jungle children: “Supposedly humorous soap advertisements played on the futility of attempting to ‘wash an Ethiopian white.’ Such ads were meant to remind white consumers of their standards of civilization and cleanliness through contrast with, allegedly, unkempt ignorant savages” (Manring 89).

Stereotypical characters called ‘Tom,’ ‘coon,’ ‘Mulatto,’ ‘Mammy,’ and ‘Buck’ branch out from the actual Sambo character. Another character from *The Story of Little Black Sambo* was Sambo’s mother, Black Mumbo. Black Mumbo was, essentially, the popular “mammy” character—often portrayed as an old Black woman who held the role of a domestic house slave on southern plantations.



Proud, happy, and ever-present at her master's side, the mammy was used to justify economic discrimination in the United States by suggesting that black women were only capable of performing domestic duties. M.M. Manring conveys this point vividly in the book *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*, which discusses the antebellum roots of the image Bannerman used:

In the antebellum South, ideas about women went in hand with ideas about race. Women and blacks were the foundation on which southern white males built their patriarchal regime Mammy was, thus, the perfect image for antebellum Southerners. As the personification of the ideal slave, and the ideal woman, she was the ideal symbol of the patriarchal tradition. (53-54)

The Story of Little Black Sambo was published just four years after the groundbreaking Supreme Court ruling *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, which made “separate but equal” segregation practices constitutional. At this time, when Jim Crow segregation policies were being institutionalized throughout America and when lynching was at its height, stereotypical images like that of the Sambo and the mammy justified discrimination and made racial violence seem harmless. These images fed the flames of a brooding culture of racism, heralding white superiority while using the supposedly

“inferior” African American as the archetype for incompetence and servitude. In fact, this notion of “natural” African American inferiority was so prevalent that it manifested itself in all facets of American life, right down to our educational system. As historian Joseph Boskin tells us, “In public schools teachers reserved a ‘n---r seat’ for white students, to punish them for stupidity” (11).

While such overt racism does not typically characterize today’s educational system, this book’s effects on children should still be taken into consideration. The presentation of such derogatory images can influence the development of children’s minds.

Library director Janet Steiner answered Dr. Guttman’s initial request to have the book moved with an argument about academic freedom. It is true that this request raises the issue of censorship in public libraries, where academic freedom is valued very highly and where censorship is seen as an infringement on people’s rights. However, the validity of academic freedom as an argument is contingent on the ability of the reader to assess the material being read and to make a decision about its value given prior exposure to other sources, experiences, and academic methods. Children, who lack this prior exposure, do not possess the necessary knowledge to be able to identify the book as having discriminatory images, nor, when they read books, do they look at them in historical context.

C. Denise Johnson explains in “Early Childhood Research and Practice,” that as “children encounter new experiences, existing memory structures in the brain or schema are reshaped, impacting the linguistic, cognitive, social, and emotional development of children over time.” Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese, in their article, “Examining

Multicultural Picture Books for the Early Childhood Classroom: Possibilities and Pitfalls,” reinforce the idea of literature as having a significant impact on children. They postulate that, “In general, literature is said to provide characters and events with which children can identify and through which they can consider their actions, beliefs, and emotions.” If this holds true, reading literature, such as *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, can have a long-lasting negative effect.

The documented response of adults who had the book read to them as children exhibits the effects of exposure to the images contained in *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. The following is a letter to the Council of Interracial Books for Children:

I was the only Black child in the school at the time (1946 or 1947 in West Port, CT). I remember classmates would refer to me as Black Sambo after hearing the story (they were too sophisticated to say n-----) and how for the first time I didn't want to go to school ever! (Yuill 22).

Research studies, along with Yuill, show that the repeated verbal abuse during childhood would leave some level of mental scarring and have a negative effect on the adult psyche.

According to Yuill, there are two prevalent effects of these stories in integrated study sessions:

- 1) Children identify with the exaggerated image of Sambo: The crudely drawn caricature has a severely negative effect on the self-image of the child who identifies with Sambo as both an image and a name.

- 2) Children adopt a distorted sense of reality, believing that one group is superior to another due to racial differences.

If these images continued to affect children negatively up to and through the mid-20th century, why would their effect be measurably different today?

The Tompkins County Public Library, among other libraries, often leaves children's reading choices to the parents. The library believes that it is the parents' responsibility to regulate what their children read. This, however, is not a realistic option for protecting children from the negative effects of *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. Often, it is not the parent who brings the child to the library; many times it will be a teacher who is also looking after other students as well, or it will be a babysitter who does not feel that it is their place to tell a child what to read or not to read. There is also the possibility that the parent or guardian does not know the historical context and/or racial implications of the book.

It is also important to examine the policy of parental responsibility. Library check-out policies allow children to have their own library cards at the age of three, and that age will soon be lowered to two after the Tompkins County Public Library changes the software that it uses. Because of this policy, a child would be permitted to check out a book without the parent's knowledge. A library is an important part of a community; thus, its policies should reflect a responsibility to its patrons. If a parent is to be responsibly active in deciding what a child may or may not read, then the library's policy should help the parent to do so.

The Tompkins County Public Library stresses a commitment to academic freedom, but some of its actions contradict this commitment. The library does not allow

children under the age of eight to use the Internet without a parent present; however it keeps an overtly racist book on its shelves at the fingertips of children ages two to seven. One can argue that one is more dangerous than the other, but that does not exclude the fact that *The Story of Little Black Sambo* poses a serious problem, as the information above suggests. The library has taken steps to protect children from what they might find on the Internet; shouldn't they take similar steps to protect children from what is on their shelves?

The library clearly has some responsibility to regulate what children read, and they clearly feel the need to fulfill that responsibility on some levels. The children's area is supposed to be a safe haven for children; it separates innocuous books from potentially more mature book selections. If libraries didn't feel it was ethical to remove books from certain areas because of their content, there would be no children's section. If damaging books are kept within reach without any explanation or clarification, children will never know that what they are seeing, reading, and internalizing is wrong.

The library's arguments for parental responsibility, and more importantly, academic freedom, are problematic. The ideal of academic freedom is indeed a great one, however we must consider to whom it applies, and what its ramifications can be on those who are too young to legitimately participate in it. Many psychologists consider racism a sickness. By leaving these racist images at the fingertips of young, unknowing children we are allowing a seed to be planted that could continue to develop into a harmful tree, bearing the fruits of racist stereotypes and feelings of race-based inferiority. *The Story of Little Black Sambo* presents a history that cannot, and some argue, should

not be erased, but for children unable to fully comprehend what has been left to them, it presents a dilemma that can be easily solved.

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