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# Monkey See, Monkey Do: How Academia Turned Curious George Into a Racial Commentary

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MONKEY SEE, MONKEY DO: HOW ACADEMIA TURNED *CURIOUS GEORGE*  
INTO A RACIAL COMMENTARY

A Thesis Presented

by

Matthew J. Roper

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

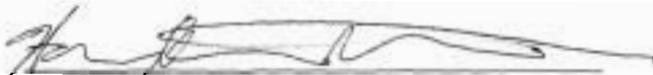
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for the Degree of Master of Arts  
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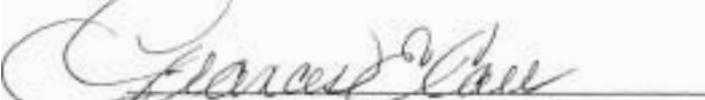
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## ABSTRACT

Academics have raised questions concerning racial imaging in the popular children's book *Curious George*. Many of these scholars utilize symbolism to warn readers of hidden messages in the book that negatively affect black children. One of the most prominent images includes the capture of an African monkey by a white man, which academics believe reflects American slave history. These arguments, however, fail to address three important issues this research project emphasizes to properly re-interpret an image. First, one must properly outline a historically racist image such as the American Sambo in order to determine who created the image, what messages are being portrayed by it, and why these messages are important to the image's creator and audience. Following the outline of a racial image, the next step is to view the rise and fall of another popular children's book in order to determine how society interprets books over time. The rise in popularity to the outright banning of Helen Bannerman's *The Story of Little Black Sambo* in the twentieth century fits this requirement because an extensive academic and social archive detailing the book's racial debate exists in newspaper articles, editorials, and academic journals. Lastly, this project examines personal and business correspondence of *Curious George*'s authors, Margret and Hans Rey, and re-interprets the *Curious George* stories as a mirror of the Reys' immigration history.

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## Introduction

I was first introduced to the idea that children's literature contained racial images during my senior year of high school in Manchester, New Hampshire. My enthusiastic but somewhat eccentric social studies teacher, Mrs. O'Gorksi, told our class that the story of *Curious George* was not about a monkey from Africa, brought to the United States by a white man over the ocean by boat, but George's capture and adventures symbolized the struggle of black American slavery and that this symbolism made the book intrinsically racist.<sup>1</sup> Since then I have discovered that literary symbolism is not so easily explained, especially when one seeks to investigate the historical context of the creation, dissemination, and reception of specific literary texts. Pictures on a page can have different meanings at different times.

Is *Curious George* a text containing racial images more specifically, is George a racial image? Was the text interpreted as racial or racist at the time it was created or published, or did it become such over time? In addition, who or what group first questioned these images? To answer these questions it is important to historicize this text. How does *Curious George* compare to other American children's literature texts, or other cultural texts both visual and written, and what can such comparisons tell us about popular racial images past and present? George's story can be historicized by placing the creation and reception of the text in the history of American slavery and American race relations. Slavery, which included the middle passage and the transfer of African slaves across the ocean by boat, left an indelible mark on American culture and society. Racial

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<sup>1</sup> I created this sentence to directly compare George's travel from Africa to the United States to the Middle Passage. Slave traders captured Africans and brought them to the United States via boat similar to George's experience with the Man in the Yellow Hat.

and racist images of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century are rooted in this earlier historical era, even as they were changed and adapted to new racial contexts and relationships. One prominent example of this is the image of *Little Black Sambo* (1899), which evolved from a written text without an American context to a visual text that became deeply embedded in American popular culture. Is *Curious George* similar to *Little Black Sambo*? These questions have led me to explore the history of *Curious George* and to examine its transformation from its initial publication in 1941 to 1997, when scholar June Cummins wrote an article that interpreted George as a black slave operating within a colonial context.<sup>2</sup> I argue that George's story does not represent a fully historicized racial image equally as powerful as Sambo because unlike Sambo who authors created to promote black inferiority, George lacks the intended racial message required for its categorization as a racial image.

The first chapter of this thesis draws on the work of historians and other scholars to establish a historiography for exploring the creation of racial images. Historian George Fredrickson's *The Black Image in the White Mind* (1972) and historian Joseph Boskin's *Sambo: The Rise and Fall of an American Jester* (1986) are two of the seminal texts in this field. Fredrickson's book analyzes the development of eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century racial theory as a means to contextualize and examine how whites regarded blacks in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Fredrickson's analysis focuses specifically on the ideas of white elites and intellectuals and he argues that their perceptions resulted

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<sup>2</sup> Only a few academics have written on the subject of race in *Curious George*, but I find Cummins's argument to be the best developed. In addition, her remarks are clearly important to modern interpretations of *Curious George* particularly during the release of the 2005 movie, a theme explored in chapter five. June Cummins, "The Resisting Monkey: Curious George, Slave Captivity Narratives, and the Postcolonial Condition" *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 28 (1 January 1997): 69-83.

<sup>3</sup> George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny 1817-1914*. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972): xi.

from a belief that blacks could not be assimilated and would thus remain aliens to “American” society. Joseph Boskin furthered Fredrickson’s work by shifting the focus to popular culture and analyzing the specific widespread and popular racial image of Sambo in advertisements, newspaper articles, and drawings. Boskin argued that Sambo was a culturally constructed racial image that was intended to show the inability of blacks to conform to white society.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of these books to this thesis lies in the framework Fredrickson and Boskin use in establishing and identifying a racial image. Their framework relies on three important elements to analyze images: authorship, audience and a communicated and comprehensible message between the two. Each element must be presented in a text to properly contextualize an image within its historical time period and geographic setting. Frederickson and Boskin define the author as an individual or group that created or crafted a racial stereotype or assisted in the design and continuation of a stereotype through their creations, which might include illustrations or new works of literature that carry on the same themes or images. The message created by the author is communicated to society by various cultural means. However, once released into culture, the message is no longer controlled by the author and can instead be transformed by society. Therefore, the original message and society’s reception can differ. In order to properly classify a stereotype according to Boskin and Fredrickson’s methods, one must examine the author’s biographical information for clues regarding their intention. Boskin argues that whites created the Sambo image to advocate black inferiority and white supremacy and to

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: Rise & Demise of an American Jester*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986): 12.

justify the lower status of blacks in American society.<sup>5</sup>

The second chapter of this thesis builds on Fredrickson's and Boskin's work by examining other scholarly work about Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo (LBS)*. I focus on *Little Black Sambo* because it is an important cultural text which has generated extensive public and academic discussions about whether or not it is a racial text. More importantly, the questions and arguments raised in scholarly articles about *LBS* provide a template for approaching *Curious George* as both are children's books. Victorian literary specialists Laura C. Berry and J.S. Bratton and historian John MacKenzie have argued that children's literature represented society and beliefs held by both the author and audience. Berry argues that Victorian culture created a "child character" in order to facilitate discussions on children's role in British society. In so doing, she argues the child character is a representation of that character's society.<sup>6</sup> Bratton and MacKenzie take a similar stance to Berry, but while Berry focuses on the book's character, Bratton and MacKenzie contend the book's authors convey their own moral messages and social attitudes to specifically aged, gendered, and social class children in an attempt to teach social beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Bratton and MacKenzie explore the world of nineteenth-century novelist George Alfred (G.A.) Henty to show how personal experiences influenced the process of writing. While MacKenzie argues these books were representative of broader imperialist

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<sup>5</sup> This theme was common in both Fredrickson's and Boskin's books, but Boskin makes a point to specifically state it. Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: Rise & Demise of an American Jester*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986): 5.

<sup>6</sup> Laura C. Berry, *The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999): 2.

<sup>7</sup> J.S. Bratton, *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction* (New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books Totowa: 1989): 20. MacKenzie stated that imperialism shaped the British world view. This created racial subtexts and manipulated British literature, newspaper articles, and other media. See John MacKenzie *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion. 1880-1960* (Manchester, U.K.; Dover, N.H: Manchester University Press, c1984): 1-2.

culture, Bratton argues they primarily represent Henty's personal racist ideology and not the British population's racist ideology.<sup>8</sup>

Literary scholars Elizabeth Hay and Phyllis Yuill outlined authorial bias and heavily influenced my analysis of *Curious George* due to their reliance on biographical and publication histories to highlight specific events hidden in Bannerman's writing. Yuill's work was sponsored and published by the Council on Interracial Books for Children in 1976 as a response to debates concerning *LBS*'s racial identity. Yuill focused on the development and publication history of *LBS* in the United States and blamed *LBS*'s racial debates on Bannerman's insensitivities. Yuill uses Bannerman's biography to show Bannerman was introduced to the Sambo stereotype prior to naming the character and understood the name's meaning.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Hay's work outlined Bannerman's life in India and Britain, but used it to show how Bannerman's experiences influenced her books. Hay argued that Bannerman was never introduced to the American Sambo and was thus ignorant to the terminology. Instead, the book became a racist symbol through society's reception of Sambo's name and illustrative changes made by publishers to darken the character in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

The third chapter is a biographical history of *Curious George*'s authors, Hans (1898-1977) and Margret Rey (1906-1996) drafted from the Reys' personal and professional archives in Hattiesburg, Mississippi and Boston, Massachusetts.<sup>11</sup> In 1924,

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<sup>8</sup> MacKenzie, 210-211.

<sup>9</sup> Phyllis Yuill, *Little Black Sambo : A Closer Look : A History of Helen Bannerman's The Story of Little Black Sambo and its Popularity/Controversy in the United States*. (New York: Racism and Sexism Resource Center for Educators, c1976): 17.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Hay, *Sambo Sahib: The Story of Little Black Sambo and Helen Bannerman*. (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1981): 25.

<sup>11</sup> Following Margret Rey's death, the Rey archives were separated. The personal archives are located at the de Grummond Library at University of Southern Mississippi while the business archives are located at the

Hans emigrated from Germany to Brazil and Margret followed in 1935, meeting Hans in Rio de Janeiro. They married and moved to Paris as part of an extended honeymoon in 1936. The Reys lived the next four years in Paris until they moved to the United States to escape Nazi expansion into France.

While living in France, the Reys began publishing children's stories. Their 1939 book, *Rafi et les 9 Singes*, introduced a monkey named Fifi who later became known as George.<sup>12</sup> Over the course of thirty years, the Reys published seven *Curious George* books, which were translated into eight languages and sold more than five million copies by 1970. This chapter uses letters and correspondence between the Reys and their American publisher Houghton Mifflin as well as other Rey publications to show why they chose to write children's literature. This chapter also places the Reys and their work in the framework of 1930 racial politics.<sup>13</sup>

The first scholarly article to question racial themes in *Curious George* was William Moebius's 1985 "L'Enfant Terrible Comes of Age."<sup>14</sup> Although Moebius's article only focuses attention on similarities between George's capture and the capture of African slaves, it was a cornerstone for June Cummins's 1997 "The Resisting Monkey: *Curious George*, Slave Captivity Narratives, and the Postcolonial Condition." Cummins expanded Moebius's initial arguments of pictorial and historical similarities between George's plight and slavery and categorized it under a broader imperialist message. She

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Houghton Library at Harvard University.

<sup>12</sup> de Grummond Children's Library "Early Life" *H. A. and Margret Rey Collection*, Tuesday, 28 March 2006, 07:12:13 CST <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~degrum/html/collectionhl/Curious%20George/earlylife.shtml> (March 14, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Hans Rey, "Personal Bibliography" *Houghton Mifflin Company. Rey, H. A. (Hans Augusto), 1898-. Correspondence, 1948-1971*. (Boston, MA; Houghton Library Archives, Harvard University. ND).

<sup>14</sup> See William Moebius, "L'Enfant Terrible Comes of Age," *Notebooks in Cultural Analysis vol. 2*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985): 32-50.

argues that black children would negatively identify George with slavery and this makes the *Curious George* story racist. Cummins ignored the Reys' biographical history altogether and did not examine their motivations or the publication history of their book. I disagree with Cummins's argument that *Curious George* is a racist image. Drawing on the insights of Fredrickson and Boskin I argue that the Reys did not set out to create a racial image with *Curious George*. Rather the story of *Curious George* became a victim of a larger ongoing racial debate that questions hidden messages in children's literature.

The final chapter of this thesis examines the responses by scholars, educators, and the public to both *Little Black Sambo* and *Curious George*. During the early- and mid-twentieth century, state educational boards, including the Tennessee Department of Education, recommended *Little Black Sambo* to all young children. The influential professional children's book reviewer Charlotte Huck also recommended the book until 1968. In 1937, Augusta Baker, a librarian, became one of the first individuals to question *Little Black Sambo* and particularly objected to the name. Ten years later, another librarian named Elizabeth Bacon also objected to *Little Black Sambo*, arguing it contained negative black stereotypes. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that a larger attack against the book began. Magazine and public awareness groups conducted and published interviews with black individuals that described negative experiences with the reading of *Little Black Sambo* in the classroom.<sup>15</sup> However, some individuals defended the book. In 1971, literary specialist Selma Lanes suggested *Little Black Sambo* was a wholesome book filled with adventure that children would enjoy.<sup>16</sup> Within a year, a public debate erupted in London's *The Times* as public groups, including Teachers

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<sup>15</sup> Yuill, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Selma G. Lanes, *Down the Rabbit Hole* (New York: Atheneum, 1971): 160.

Against Racism (TAR), feuded with *Little Black Sambo*'s publishers Chatto and Windus about their plans to republish Bannerman's series. TAR claimed the book included racial themes that should prevent its republication. The publishers responded by arguing that TAR wanted to censor the books. The feud climaxed when *The Times* republished a letter from Helen Bannerman's son, Robert Bannerman, who explained that the character was based on their family's life in India and that Helen did not intend to insult anyone. Instead, she wanted to create a book children would enjoy.<sup>17</sup> The publisher, Chatto and Windus, republished the book.

Similar to *Little Black Sambo*, academics raised questions of racial themes in *Curious George*. William Moebius and June Cummins drew parallels between George's stories with slave experiences, specifically a slave narrative by Olaudah Equiano. Cummins compares the feelings of George and Equiano in regards to their capture and transportation across the ocean. Cummins notes that both Equiano and George experienced emotions of anxiety and curiosity. Relying heavily on Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey*, Cummins argues that George's curiosity led to acts of mischief that should be viewed as acts of resistance against the Man in the Yellow Hat. Cummins examined a number of these acts of resistance in the *Curious George* series and also argues that black children negatively associate themselves with George's slave attributes. Neither Moebius nor Cummins emphasize Hans or Margret Rey's biography in their articles and instead focus on interpreting the story itself and lack important evidence needed to properly contextualizing the stories.

This thesis intends to enter the *Curious George* racial debate by analyzing Hans'

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<sup>17</sup> Hay, 174.

and Margret Reys' biographies to contextualize *Curious George*. Fredrickson's and Boskin's work on racial imaging outline a brief historiography of racial study that utilizes this approach. These historians analyzed white groups in order to determine the purpose of the racial images and particularly why these groups created the images. Yuill's and Hay's work on *Little Black Sambo* further show the importance of the author's biography to contextualize the children's book. Both show how a reader's interpretation of Bannerman's life changes their understanding of *Little Black Sambo*'s setting and story. These books also outline a public debate that can be used in determining the widespread appeal of the debate's arguments namely whether or not society considered the book racist. By utilizing these arguments outlined by Fredrickson, Boskin, Yuill, and Hay that emphasize the author's biography, this thesis will show how *Curious George* can actually be re-imagined as a story of immigration and assimilation and not as a racist image.

# Chapter 1:

## 1.1 Creating a Foundation: Historiography of Racial Images

Racial images help broaden the understanding of a social group within a specified time period. George Fredrickson and Joseph Boskin are two historians who use racial images to study the groups who created them. Fredrickson identifies and focuses on white intellectuals as the creator of black stereotypes while Boskin researches the importance and widespread popularity of the Sambo image in popular culture. Both historians place these images in their historical context to analyze the images' messages to explain white beliefs. Similar to Fredrickson's attention to explain white intellectuals through black images, Boskin uses Sambo's creators to identify racial issues of the time period.

Fredrickson's book is a study on the development of racial theory and ideology created by whites about the presence of millions of blacks in the United States.<sup>18</sup> Fredrickson's study also shows the impact of politics and culture on these images. The most obvious example of this change would be the impact of the Civil War. Prior to the war, whites constantly depicted blacks in bondage and as inferior. Following the war, these depictions continued to focus on weakness and to enforce racial segregation. These images of black inferiority, in addition to physical violence incurred against blacks, denied blacks full participation in American society and acted as an outlet for whites to express their social anxieties.<sup>19</sup> Whites manipulated and created aspects of African history and science to buttress their claims of black inferiority. Based on the

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<sup>18</sup> George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972): xi.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

notion of an African failure to create civilization, depictions of blacks in books and newspapers linked blacks to monkeys, savages, and the wilderness in general. The black character became representative of uncivilized society and blacks were generalized as savage beasts that could never conform or contribute to the United States. In addition, a fictitious and loyal black character named Sambo was developed to justify slavery.<sup>20</sup>

The Sambo racial image is important in American popular culture because the image developed with social changes. Joseph Boskin writes that although Fredrickson argued whites created black images to forestall an egalitarian biracial society, Boskin believes Fredrickson neither examined Sambo's "extensive role" in American society nor sought to explain Sambo's significance. Boskin argues Sambo's creation was intended to subordinate blacks and its continued evolution throughout American history as a means to identify American racism.<sup>21</sup>

## **1.2: The Evolution of Sambo in Early American History**

In the United States specifically, Sambo was a cultural phenomenon. Sambo appeared in newspapers, magazines, books, and was used to describe boxers, television and movie characters, and black society in general. Between the initial settlement of Jamestown in 1607 and 1940, Sambo was a contradictory cultural representation that existed as an aggressive and feared savage while simultaneously maintaining docile, friendly and weak characteristics. Boskin argues that the first American use of Sambo's name dates back to the 1619 settlement of Jamestown. Eleven of the first African groups to arrive in Jamestown were known to have had Spanish-derived baptismal names

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 54-55.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: Rise & Demise of an American Jester*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986): 16.

Anthony, Frances, Fernando, Madelina, Bastiaen, Paulo, and Isabella.<sup>22</sup> The English settlers attempted to gain control and authority over the Africans and the Spanish names were replaced by English appellations: Juan became John, Maria became Mary, etc. Some academics believe Sambo derived from the name 'Sam', which had traditionally been used in English popular culture and was carried to American society. The more likely possibility is that Sambo was taken from the Hispanic word 'zambo', a sixteenth-century term that refers to a person who is bowlegged or knock-kneed. Boskin also claims the term 'zambo' was racially contextual and the name's literal definitions revealed it was used for racial categorization. In Latin American societies, 'zambo' was used to denote a light-skinned person of mixed ancestry.<sup>23</sup> Boskin also notes that zambo was a type of monkey and the description of light-skinned groups as 'zambo' was intended as an insult.<sup>24</sup>

Who was Sambo? Similar to the linguistic definition, Sambo's general character was not rigidly defined. Whites gave Sambo attributes to insult blacks. Generally, Sambo's characteristics were dependent on the messages being portrayed. Prior to the Civil War, Americans viewed ex-slaves as murderous and lazy brutes who threatened the United States. Sambo often reflected the white attempt to control and protect society from free blacks.<sup>25</sup> Whites depicted Sambo as a contented slave who enjoyed singing, laughing, and making jokes but this character was used to justify the inferior social status of blacks. His dependence on his master was similar to a child's dependency on his

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>25</sup> George Fredrickson "White Images of Black Slaves (Is What We See in Others Sometimes a Reflection of What We Find in Ourselves?)" *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997) 40.

parents. He was lazy, irresponsible, and prone to lying and stealing.<sup>26</sup> Sambo needed a white master to look after him because if Sambo was released or freed he would revert back to savagery.<sup>27</sup>

This childish and uncivilized Sambo was popular during the 1840's and 1850's as whites attempted to justify black inferiority with scientific explanations. Dr. Samuel George Morton of Philadelphia published a study on Indian, African, and European skulls and argued the similar skull shapes and sizes suggested all races held equal intellectual abilities. Although not directly related to skull sizes, white Americans also concluded that blacks must be inferior to whites because blacks failed to create civilizations in Africa that compare to American and European societies.<sup>28</sup> This inferiority was also used to justify slavery as whites believed slavery was needed to guide and teach blacks how to live in American society. Sambo therefore became a representation of this slave status.<sup>29</sup> Fredrickson cites Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* portrayal of a devious Sambo who was seen as very lively, voluble, and full of tricks and grimace.<sup>30</sup> Although the purpose of this novel was to discredit the institution of slavery, Sambo's character was commonly understood and identifiable by its readers as a slave. Stowe's use of a Sambo as one of Simon Legree's overseers suggests Stowe expects her reader to identify with Sambo's symbolic role in the novel.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Some whites believed free blacks were naturally uncivilized, violent, and savage. These whites believed they could capture and civilize blacks by training them to be slaves. Ibid. 43.

<sup>28</sup> Fredrickson, *The Black Image*: 74-75

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>30</sup> Sambo was portrayed as a happy go-lucky character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Sambo did not have a major role in the book. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: Proctor & Worthington, 1852).

Following the Civil War, the Sambo stereotype shifted with the perception of blacks in the United States. Fredrickson noted one cause was the role of black soldiers in the North during the Civil War and this political shift regarding race impacted Sambo.

But it would be a mistake to assume that the old stereotype of the docile and inferior ‘Sambo’ was now replaced by a radically new image of self-reliant and intelligent blacks in uniform. The Sambo image, rather than being abolished with slavery, was merely modified. The traditional view of innate Negro docility had actually been reinforced in the early stages of the war by the failure of the slaves to engage in massive rebellion once their masters had gone off to fight the Yankees.<sup>31</sup>

With the abolition of slavery, the messages being portrayed by the Sambo image needed to change. The Sambo character evolved into a comical and staged character and Americans were introduced to the comical Sambo character in *Harper’s* magazine or musical blackface entertainers in theaters.<sup>32</sup> As Sambo’s popularity grew, so did his impact on popular culture.

### **1.3 Sambo Invades American Popular Culture**

The Sambo image was not limited only to the written media. During the 1890’s and 1900’s, the performance of white “black-face” characters based on black stereotypes in minstrel shows became prevalent throughout the United States. White actors used these performances to mock and reinforce black stereotypes of lazy, immoral, uneducated, and irresponsible.<sup>33</sup> Sociologist Kenneth Lynn stated that minstrel shows were originally a “white imitation of a black imitation of a contented slave” that intended

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 169.

<sup>32</sup> Boskin, 108.

<sup>33</sup> Jacqueline Jones “Back to the Future with *The Bell Curve: Jim Crow, Slavery and G*” *Critical White Studies*. ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997): 179-180.

to help bring whites to terms with the problems of slavery.<sup>34</sup> These minstrel shows often showed the simple and homely “plantation nigger” mockingly denigrating the “bombastic pretensions of the (urban) dandy.” This urban dandy, Tambo, represented the extension of Sambo into the urbanizing world. Unlike Sambo, Tambo was an assimilated black who attempted to participate in white society while Sambo was his uneducated and typically rural counterpart.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the widespread popularity of white black-faced actors, some blacks, including comic-actor Lincoln Perry, often represented Sambo on stage. As a child, Perry loved traveling carnivals and the minstrel shows of the 1900’s. During the 1920’s and the advent of talking-movies, Perry became one of Hollywood’s first black superstars because Hollywood demanded performers whose singing and dancing talents were suited to the new technology. Perry portrayed the hugely popular character Stepin Fetchit, a sleepy-eyed, whining-drawl, shiftless-dancing black. Perry was considered a comic genius for his performance. Early twenty-first century Americans view the Stepin Fetchit character as a negative Sambo representation because of its negative representation of blacks.<sup>36</sup>

As Lincoln Perry was dancing on the big screen, the Sambo image found its way onto postcards. This “postcard buffoon” depicted Sambo with downturned bright red lips, white eyes like oblong saucers, and hair braided in ribbons. His large feet were noticeable and his hands were often hidden behind his back. In the 1930’s, Sambo was

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted from Jan Nederveen Pieterse *White on Black: Images of African and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press: 1992) 132.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted from Pieterse, 134.

<sup>36</sup> John Strausbaugh “Books of the Times: How a Black Entertainer’s Shuffle Actually Blazed a Trail” *New York Times*, December 7, 2005 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/07/books/07stra.html>).

physically depicted with a round face, white teeth, and a short rounded body and was characterized as a friendly, quick witted and voluble servant in movies. He was also a coward and often pictured with chattering teeth and body shakes. If scared, Sambo would twitch and swoosh his feet.<sup>37</sup>

Sports publications were not immune from presenting the Sambo stereotypes. Jack Johnson and Joe Louis, two professional boxers whose careers stretched from 1897 to 1928 and 1934 to 1951 respectively, often fell victim to sport publication racism. During their careers, they were depicted in articles and cartoons with the Sambo stereotype despite having exceptional boxing careers. Cartoonists depicted Johnson and Louis as black buffoons. “The lips were widened and rendered a rosy red; teeth sparkled with glistening whiteness; hair was nappy, short and frazzled; faces were glossy, atop bodies that were either shortened and rounded, or lengthened to approximate the monkey or ape.”<sup>38</sup> Despite their athleticism, Louis and Johnson were often portrayed as lazy, shiftless, and rural.<sup>39</sup> Sketches of the boxers reflected big lipped, gapped tooth, large eyed Sambo masks and watermelon eating. The watermelon focused the reader’s attention to the exaggerated physical traits by displaying or mirroring a cheek to cheek goofy smile. Many authors and illustrators used this technique to negatively represent blacks.

Despite these negative Sambo depictions, some advertisements sought to urbanize Louis as Tambo by linking him to “white” culture. In a Semmon cigar advertisement, Joe Louis was photographed leaning back in a chair wearing a loud colored suit with spats

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<sup>37</sup> Boskin, 5-7

<sup>38</sup> William H. Wiggins, Jr. “Boxing’s Sambo Twins: Racial Stereotypes in Jack Johnson and Joe Louis Newspaper Cartoons, 1908-1938” *Journal of Sports History*. vol. 15, no. 3 (1988): 242.

<sup>39</sup> Wiggins, 243.

and a black high hat. Louis was puffing a cigar whose ashes read “Semmon.” This depiction of the suit conveyed two messages. First, the suit was intended to link Louis with the city, since boxing was considered an urban sport. Second, it represented Louis’s adoption of American culture and “whiteness.”

Between 1934 and 1938, dozens of cartoons depicted Louis and Johnson as stupid or lethargic. One article stated an Irish opponent hoped to “outsmart and out-box the slow-thinking Louis.” Cartoonists portrayed Johnson and Louis as runaway slaves and by giving them insulting nicknames. Louis was referred to as “The Dark Gent in the Woodpile” while Johnson was “Nigger in the Woodpile.”<sup>40</sup> These drawings continued until 1938 when Louis was set to fight the champion of Nazi Germany, Max Schmeling. In *The Evansville Courier* on June 22, 1938, a cartoon represented Louis as lighter skinned than his previous drawings and he lost most of his Sambo characteristics. He lost his bulgy teeth and wide smile. After defeating Schmeling, Louis became a hero and American cartoonists radically refashioned their depictions of him.<sup>41</sup> Louis and Johnson showed that newspaper portrayals of black changed to reflect popular perceptions but the Sambo character was widespread in books, movies, and television. W. Hinkle’s *Funniest Darkey Stories* (1931) and O.M. Morris’s *150 Latest Jokes* (1940) featured two wide-lipped black men called “Amouse and Andre.” The radio broadcast “Amos ‘N Andy” used black-buffoonery characters voiced by whites. The series enhanced this buffoonery by using grammatically flawed and distorted words and phrases. The characters were uneducated or ‘un-edu-mac-a-ted’ by their own terms. Other word changes included

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<sup>40</sup> Wiggins, 247-248.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 247.

“graduated” and “catastrophe” which were transformed into “granulated” and “a cats who’s-is-free.”<sup>42</sup>

“Amos ‘N Andy’s” blacking-up of the characters shows the popularity of the Sambo stereotype in entertainment.<sup>43</sup> The characters in “Amos ‘N Andy” were ignorant of politics and historic events. In one instance, a character declared a “senator at large” meant “a fat senator-a large fat senator” and that the fourth of the July was merely a free day because it was “so hot dat ev’body said dey would take a day off.”<sup>44</sup> The characters were often good-natured and happy-go-lucky but their ignorance and lazy attitudes and lack of employment highlight the negative.<sup>45</sup> Sambo was able to converse about politics or relevant matters as long as he stayed within his defined character but he generally undermined serious topics with crude humor.<sup>46</sup> During the 1930’s, audiences were treated to polished and insensitive shows including *The Chain Gain Minstrel*. In this show, six incarcerated blacks crudely joked about serious topics. The characters often joked about themselves.

**Inter:** It appears to me that you are quite a wisecracker

**Bozo:** No, sah, boss. If I’d been a wise cracker, I’d nevah got ketched safe-crackin’. Trouble am with safe-crackin’ ‘tain safe ‘nough crackin’ safes

**Inter:** What are you thinking of, Mr. Eggnog, that makes you so blue?

**Egnog:** Lawsy! Is I lookin’ blue? If I isn’t black, I’s sho’ colordblind.<sup>47</sup>

Although this represents a serious situation, the viewer might find it humorous. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his article “The ‘Blackness of Blackness’: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey,” states: “Signifying seems to be a Negro term [...] It certainly

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<sup>42</sup> Boskin, 166-167

<sup>43</sup> “Blacking up” is a term used to describe white masquerading of blacks. See Boskin 170.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 170.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 171.

<sup>46</sup> Boskin, 73.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 87-88.

refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo [...] It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk about a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation."<sup>48</sup> Although Gates's argument specifically detailed a black character, he broadly argues that signified language holds a double meaning. Regarding Sambo specifically, whites regarded the stereotype as an outlet to express personal feelings, fears, and doubts regarding blacks. But that was not how blacks recognized the message: the Sambo image stood as an insult. In *The Chain Gang Minstrel*, Bozo is a black imprisoned for breaking into a safe but he is comfortable joking about his predicament. This example becomes significant depending on how his character and situation are perceived by the audience. Gates adds to Fredrickson's and Boskin's methods of reading literary racial imagery by showing interpretive differences between readers' and the authors' messages. This concept becomes important when analyzing race in *Little Black Sambo* because as *LBS* evolved into an American classic, academics and readers questioned the story's changing character illustrations and even the author's knowledge of racial debates in order to ultimately label *Little Black Sambo* as racist literature.

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<sup>48</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr. "The 'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey" *Critical Inquiry* (June 1983): 689.

## Chapter 2:

### 2.1: Historical Imaging: Authorship as Contextualization

In 1899, Helen Bannerman, a British colonist living in India, wrote *Little Black Sambo (LBS)*. The book contained small drawings of a dark-skinned child and depicted an adventurous life filled with dangers, humor, and family. Parents, educators, and other authors found the book so influential that they recommended it to young children. Justin Schiller, an American bookseller and antiquarian, wrote that *LBS* was a revolutionary-style picture book that appealed to children because it pictured animals and its small size fit comfortably into the hands of a small child. In 1974, Schiller credited Bannerman's style with influencing Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.<sup>49</sup>

Following its publication, *LBS* enjoyed immense popularity throughout Britain and in the United States. In the late 1960's, however, racial debates about the book erupted in both countries. Critics of Bannerman's book included Phyllis Yuill, who cited *Sambo's* racially charged history and namesake as evidence of *LBS's* and thus Bannerman's racism. Bannerman's supporters, particularly Elizabeth Hay, explained she never intended to create a racist character. Instead, these supporters blamed society and Bannerman's publicists for re-crafting *LBS* to reflect society's racist attitudes by re-illustrating Bannerman's pictures using common black stereotypes.

Helen Bannerman's work was influenced largely by two factors: Victorianism and imperialism. The interpretations of Bannerman's books determine its categorization. According to J.S. Bratton and Laura C. Berry, Victorian literature conveyed a moral

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<sup>49</sup> Justin Schiller, "The Story of Little Black Sambo," *The Book Collector* (Autumn 1974): 381-382. Quoted from Yuill: 7.

message in its books. Books and novels portrayed child characters as a representation of social progress within Britain. All books responded very closely to nineteenth-century British issues and the child character was used to represent the social problems, such as those caused by industrialization.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast to Berry and Bratton, historian John MacKenzie argues that British identity focused on the Empire's periphery.<sup>51</sup> MacKenzie defines imperialist literature as narratives and books that portrayed or sought to justify the expansion of British superiority over other civilizations. MacKenzie agreed that morality was central to Victorian culture but imperialism effectively changed British perceptions of both British society and their world. Historian Andrew Thompson helps make sense of the differences between Victorian and imperialist categorization by arguing that terms like 'empire' and 'imperialism' "were like empty boxes that were continuously being filled up and emptied of their meanings" and imperialism was never properly contextualized in British politics.<sup>52</sup> Despite this, juvenile literature, theaters, cinema, and publishers' list of recommended reading material often included imperial themes because they were highly profitable and extremely popular.<sup>53</sup>

## **2.2 *LBS*: Literature as Social Expression**

*The Story of Little Black Sambo* fits into this discussion of Victorian and imperialist literature because it was written during the period that is debated by Bratton, Berry, and MacKenzie. *LBS* contains imperial influences that can be identified through

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<sup>50</sup> Laura C. Berry, *The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999): 2.

<sup>51</sup> MacKenzie, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew S. Thompson "The Language of Imperialism and the Meanings of Empire: Imperial Discourse in British Politics, 1895-1914" *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol 36, No 2, Twentieth-Century British Studies. (April 1997): 147.

<sup>53</sup> MacKenzie, 3.

the author's biography. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland on February 25, 1863, Bannerman lived on Madeira, a Portuguese island off the coast of West Africa, from the age of two to ten.<sup>54</sup> Her father was a minister for the Free Church of Scotland and she read popular books that contained moral messages including *Der Struwwelpeter*.<sup>55</sup> By 1899, she married Will Bannerman and moved to India. Bannerman split her time between the cities of Madras and Kodaikanal and was often separated from her children or husband. To escape the summer heat, the kids vacationed in the hills of Kodaikanal while her husband continued to work in Madras. Bannerman often left her children with their Ayah (nanny) to be with her husband.

*Little Black Sambo* was written during one of Helen's trips to visit her husband. Helen was lonely and wrote *LBS* for her children to enjoy while she was away. She wrote *LBS* in a single sitting during her train ride between Kodaikanal and Madras and illustrated it after she arrived.<sup>56</sup> The story entails a dark boy who was given new shoes, a new shirt, new pants, and a new green umbrella from his parents. While adventuring among the wilderness, Sambo ran into four tigers. The tigers threatened to eat Sambo unless he gave each an article of clothing. Once Sambo had given his clothes, the four tigers argued which article of clothing was better so they put the clothing on the ground and ran around a tree biting each other's tail. Sambo further enraged the tigers by stealing back his clothes causing the tigers to run faster around the tree until they turned into butter. Sambo's father, Jumbo, found the butter and took it home for his wife,

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<sup>54</sup> "Bannerman, Helen" *Something about the Authors*. ed. Anne Commire, vol 19. (Detroit: Gale Research: 1986) 12.

<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Hay points out that Bannerman's family owned this book as she grew up. It contains ten short stories that demonstrate the disastrous consequences of misbehavior by children.

<sup>56</sup> Hay believes it was a single setting because the unity of the book shows "uninterrupted concentration" Elizabeth Hay, *Sambo Sahib: The Story of Little Black Sambo and Helen Bannerman* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1981): 25.

Mumbo. Mumbo used this butter to cook pancakes for the family. Jumbo ate 55 pancakes, Mumbo 27, and, depending on which edition of *Little Black Sambo*, Sambo ate 169 or 196 pancakes.<sup>57</sup>

Bannerman never defines the setting in her book and its setting has become a large focus for Bannerman's critics and supporters because the setting would define whether Bannerman attempted to define an environment and thus people she had knowledge of (India) or whether she attempted to create an exotic setting (Africa) for her children's enjoyment. Yuill's statement declaring *LBS* takes place in India is based on two arguments. First, Yuill argues that tigers were native to India and do not live in Africa. Second, Bannerman used the native Indian term "ghi", which is an Indian term for "clarified butter." Hay's counter-argument stated that the book took place in Africa in order to make it foreign and exotic to her children and explained Bannerman used tigers despite knowing they were native to India because she had always been fascinated with them. Hay also suggested that Bannerman used "ghi" instead of 'clarified butter' because her kids better understood the term.<sup>58</sup>

A separate racial issue in *LBS* is Sambo's darkening color. Hay contends that the darkening of Sambo was the result of Bannerman losing the copyright of her book to her publishers. In the United States, the publishers initially recreated her depictions but often darkened the images to boost sales. Yuill argued that Sambo's character was darkened due to three factors: Bannerman's misunderstanding of Africans; her inability to differentiate between Africans and Indians; and memories of her youth regarding her

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<sup>57</sup> Helen Bannerman, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1900).

<sup>58</sup> Hay's argument that Bannerman was fascinated with tigers has merit. While younger, Banner wrote a short story regarding a tiger. In the story, a cat was fed an Indian root and hoped it would change the cat into a tiger. Instead, the cat died and obviously never changed. Hay 28-29.

experiences and interaction with natives on Madeira.<sup>59</sup> In other words, Yuill suggests Bannerman was guilty of creating a dark character based on preconceived racist notions and inadequate experiences. Hay ultimately contradicts her overall African-setting argument by attempting to counter Yuill on this point. Hay argues that Bannerman was aware of the differences between Indians and Africans and that she would not have mixed people and settings despite already doing so with tigers and the using the Indian term “ghi” in Africa. In 1996, illustrator Fred Marcellino re-created *LBS* in *The Story of Little Babaji* and buttresses Yuill’s position of an Indian setting in his opening introduction by re-naming the characters with “authentic Indian names: Babaji, Mamaji, and Papaji.”<sup>60</sup> Marcellino’s detailed illustrations depict an Indian setting.

Despite Hay’s lack of evidence to support her African-setting argument, she is extremely successful creating a Bannerman biography that displays biographical influences on Bannerman’s writing including *The Story of Little Black Quibba* and *Pat and the Spider*. In 1903, Bannerman wrote *The Story of Little Black Quibba*. This book was about a child helping nurse her sick mother back to health and reflected Bannerman’s recent surgical removal of a liver abscess that had been caused by dysentery. Bannerman intended the story to help her children cope with her recovery.<sup>61</sup> In 1905, Bannerman released *Pat and the Spider*, a book based on Bannerman’s frustration with her picky son, Pat. Bannerman portrayed Pat in “hideous caricatures” as a means to vent her frustration with him and it shows the impact of Bannerman’s sense of humor in writing. After being

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<sup>59</sup> Phyllis Yuill, *Little Black Sambo : A Closer Look : A History of Helen Bannerman’s The Story of Little Black Sambo and its Popularity/Controversy in the United States* (New York: Racism and Sexism Resource Center for Educators, c1976): 17.

<sup>60</sup> Helen Bannerman, *The Story of Little Babaji illustrated by Fred Marcellino* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996).

<sup>61</sup> Hay, 39.

pressured to write another Sambo book by her publishers, Bannerman wrote *Sambo and the Twins* (1936). According to Hay, Bannerman created *Sambo and the Twins* to deal with the separation between her and her children. Sambo allowed Bannerman to reflect on her feelings as a mother, a wife, and a British colonist in India.<sup>62</sup>

MacKenzie argues that imperialism affected all aspects of British life and as such Bannerman's book must therefore contain an imperialist message but a December 2, 1899 review of *LBS* in *The Spectator* specifically disassociated *LBS* from imperialist literature and recommended *LBS* to others. In a letter to her son Robert, Bannerman stated that "What [sic] this pictures represents? It is not anything that I have ever seen, but still it is meant to set forth a fact, and the fact is this, that my little black books are going to be used to teach wee children to read. Only I have made one mistake, for I have taken Little Black Sambo as the teacher, and he is not really one of the ones that is going to be used."<sup>63</sup> Bannerman stated that *LBS* was intended to teach children to read. MacKenzie implied that early imperialist literature was set in exotic locations to add adventure and Bannerman's book did just that.<sup>64</sup> Sambo therefore became a representation of Indian or African culture and society.

Due to the loss of Bannerman's copyright, multiple versions of *Little Black Sambo* were released throughout the world, including in the United States.<sup>65</sup> MacKenzie, Branton, and Berry argue that societal views including racism are reflected in children's literature. Particularly in the United States *LBS* underwent an extreme illustrative

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<sup>62</sup> Hay, 149.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>64</sup> John MacKenzie *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion 1880-1960* (Manchester, U.K.; Manchester University Press, c1984): 1-2.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 2.

makeover that represented an extreme racist attitude. *Little Black Sambo*'s illustrations in the first publication in 1900 were "copied as exactly as possible." Sambo's facial features reflected the book's colorful theme and were detailed. Sambo's face was light brown with small white and brown eyes. By 1927, however, Sambo's illustrations had drastically changed.<sup>66</sup> The 1927 American edition illustrated Sambo as charcoal black with huge white eyes and tiny black pupils. These images included bushy hair, bright red lips, and giant mouths that were similar to Boskin's description of the American Sambo.<sup>67</sup> Other editions and even cartoons left no doubt that *LBS* contained racial messages as the setting shifted from India to Africa or an even an American plantation as an obvious illustrative callback to slavery.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Helen Bannerman *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (New York: Frederick A Stokes Company, 1900): III-IV.

<sup>67</sup> Bannerman, Helen, *Little Black Sambo* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1927).

<sup>68</sup> Hay notes that various publications change the settings and even include Sambo living on a plantation, Hay, 161. In 1935, U.B. Iwerks actually created a cartoon version of "Little Black Sambo" that depicted Sambo living in a plantation as well. See *Johnny Legend Presents: The Complete Weird Cartoons*: (2004).

## Chapter 3:

### 3.1: Biographical and Publication History of Margret Rey, Hans Rey, and *Curious George*

Hans Augusto Rey was born in 1898 in Hamburg, Germany.<sup>69</sup> During the First World War, he was a German infantryman who fought in both France and Russia.<sup>70</sup> From 1919 to 1923, he studied philosophy and psychology at the Universities of Hamburg and Munich and illustrated circus posters.<sup>71</sup> It was during this time period that Hans met his future wife Margret Elisabeth Waldstein, who was also born in Hamburg in 1906. At the time of this meeting, Hans was dating Margret's older sister and he caught his first glimpse of Margret sliding down the stairway banister.<sup>72</sup> In 1924, high inflation forced Hans to leave Germany and immigrate to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil where he sold bathtubs as a business executive for an import/export firm owned by Margret's brother. Margret remained in Germany working for a British advertising agency and photographer until 1935 when she also moved to Rio de Janeiro. Upon arriving, Margret reacquainted herself with Hans and persuaded him to leave her brother's firm to form the first advertising agency in Rio. They married on August 16, 1935.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Hans arrived in the United States during World War II and Houghton Mifflin initially tried to market Hans as a Brazilian author. Augusto may have been an altered middle name used by Hans and Houghton Mifflin to make Hans seem more Brazilian and less German.

<sup>70</sup> Hans Rey, "Personal Bibliography" *Houghton Mifflin Company. Rey, H. A. (Hans Augusto), 1898-. Correspondence, 1948-1971.* (Boston, MA; Houghton Library Archives, Harvard University. ND).

<sup>71</sup> Margret Rey, "Autobiographical Pamphlet" *H.A. & Margret Rey Papers DG0812* (Hattiesburg, MS; de Grummond Children's Library Archive, University of Southern Mississippi, N.D.).

<sup>72</sup> de Grummond Children's Library "Early Life" *H. A. and Margret Rey Collection*, Tuesday, 28 March 2006, 07:12:13 CST <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~degrum/html/collectionhl/Curious%20George/earlylife.shtml> (March 14, 2007).

<sup>73</sup> de Grummond Children's Library, "Advertising Art" Last updated Tuesday, 28-Mar-2006 07:12:13 CST, <http://www.lib.usm.edu/~degrum/html/collectionhl/Curious%20George/advertisingart.shtml> (March 15, 2007).

From 1936 until 1940, Margret and Hans lived in Paris and worked as writers and illustrators of children's books. They published ten books with various publication companies including Gallimard, Hachette, and Chatto & Windus and wrote their first English title *Zebrology* (1937). The Reys' most successful and influential French book, *Rafi et les 9 Singes*, was published in 1939 after a Gallimard editor saw one of Hans's drawings of a giraffe in a French periodical and suggested Hans write a book using it as one of the characters. *Raffy and the Nine Monkeys*, a British edition, was also published in 1939 by Chatto & Windus. In the American editions Rafi's name was changed to Cecil G.<sup>74</sup>

The French reception to *Rafi* was very positive. French children particularly loved the antics of a monkey named "Fifi" and begged for more stories. Fifi's name was changed to George and Hans and Margaret finished the first *Curious George* manuscript in June 1940. Following the manuscript's completion in June 1940, the Reys attempted to flee France from an approaching German army but were arrested and interrogated by French police on suspicions of spying. An interrogator discovered and read the *Curious George* manuscript, hoping to uncover evidence linking the Reys to the Germans but he was instead amused by George's antics. The investigator reasoned that spies could not author such an innocent and entertaining story and released the Reys. Hans and Margret fled Paris on bicycles just hours before the Nazis entered the city. They arrived at the French-Spanish border, sold their bikes, and went by train to Lisbon. From Lisbon, the Reys traveled to Rio de Janeiro and finally arrived in New York City in October 1940. Hans and Margret quickly found Houghton Mifflin to publish *Curious George*.

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<sup>74</sup> The 'G' represents Giraffe.

Over the next twenty years, the Reys published six more *Curious George* adventures including *Curious George Takes a Job* (1947), *Curious George Rides a Bike* (1952), *Curious George Gets a Medal* (1957), *Curious George Flies a Kite* (1958), *Curious George Learns the Alphabet* (1963), and *Curious George Goes to the Hospital* (1966). In each adventure, George's mischief unintentionally created problems but his good nature and sometimes his captor and mentor from the first book the Man in the Yellow Hat help fix these problems. In *Curious George Learns the Alphabet*, the Man in the Yellow Hat teaches George to read and write. After teaching George much of the alphabet, the Man in Yellow Hat gives George a note asking for one dozen donuts from the baker. George, using his new found knowledge, believes both he and the Man in the Yellow Hat would prefer more donuts and changes the note so they can receive ten dozen.<sup>75</sup>

### **3.2 Lifestyles of the Newly Rich and Famous**

The Reys' publication success with Houghton Mifflin was astounding. In 1958, Hans was listed on sixteen percent of all juvenile books sold with 83,627. This total did not include 3,827 copies of *Katy No Pockets?* or several thousand printings of *Stars*. Houghton Mifflin was aware of the Reys' overall success and had a love/hate relationship with the Reys. On the one hand, Houghton Mifflin enjoyed the immense success the Reys brought them but Margret's stern business behavior created a rocky relationship between the publishers and the authors. Houghton Mifflin employees feared that the Reys would demand higher royalties and an employee commented in a memo, "Let's for

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<sup>75</sup> Margret and H.A. Rey, *Curious George Learns the Alphabet* in *The Complete Adventures of Curious George*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 2005): 334-335.

heaven's sake not tell Rey" about the sales because the employees already spent plenty of time arguing with Margret over royalty payments.<sup>76</sup>

The Reys continued to work closely with Houghton Mifflin personnel including editor Arthur Clark and particularly with their personal contact Austin Olney, because they feared losing creative control over *Curious George* or being taken advantage of by Houghton Mifflin. When Houghton Mifflin released the reader *Come Along* which included *Curious George*, the Reys contacted Olney outlining their concern over illustrative changes *Come Along's* author made. Olney forwarded the letter to Clark who tried to alleviate the Reys' anxiety by indirectly apologizing for the oversight.

Mr. Olney has told me of your not unreasonable desire to have your own illustrations illustrating your story of Curious George which appears in our reader, COME ALONG. At the time this was brought out, I'm very sure that Mr. Nardin, our elementary editor, didn't realize that it would be possible for him to have you illustrate the story or to adapt your original illustrations to our format.

Clark went on to promise that Houghton Mifflin would contact the Reys if Houghton Mifflin wished to include any of their books in future readers.<sup>77</sup>

The Reys' struggles with Houghton Mifflin stemmed largely over who controlled *Curious George's* distribution and to what audience the Reys wished to expose *Curious George*. *Curious George* merchandise, television shows, books, and other media had to

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<sup>76</sup> Austin Olney, "Business Correspondence to Ben." *Houghton Mifflin Company. Rey, H. A. (Hans Augusto), 1898-. Correspondence, 1948-1971.* (Boston, MA; Houghton Library Archives, Harvard University, February 20, 1959). Various Houghton Mifflin employees wrote on this note but did not sign their last name including "Mary" who made the remark concerning time spent talking with the Reys. Letters between Austin and Hans were written in this same joking manner. In a letter dated November 15, 1968, Austin wrote "Dear Roy, I mean Ray, I mean Rey" in a reference to a joke Hans had written on November 12, 1968.

<sup>77</sup> Another example of the Reys fighting Houghton Mifflin involved how *Curious George's* illustrations were printed. Hans was initially upset that Houghton Mifflin stopped using water color ink and instead used an oil-based one. Hans Rey, "Business Correspondence to Austin Olney." *Houghton Mifflin Company. Rey, H. A. (Hans Augusto), 1898-. Correspondence, 1948-1971.* (Boston, MA; Houghton Library Archives, Harvard University, ND).

first receive the Reys' approval. The Reys firmly believed that *Curious George* was *their* creation and one mode of checking their control was Margret's continued upkeep of detailed royalty records to make sure the publishers did not try selling unauthorized copies of the books. In one instance, Margret was informed of an unauthorized sale of *Curious George* at a bookstore in Pennsylvania and she quickly phoned Olney to demand an explanation. Olney relayed the request to Morris Goldberger, another Houghton Mifflin employee, specifically questioning why the book was listed at twenty-five cents so that he could "set the Reys' minds at rest."<sup>78</sup> Houghton Mifflin soon located the bookstore and had the books removed.

In 1960, the Reys went on a nationwide book tour that brought them to schools and bookstores. Hans wrote to Olney that the trip was extremely rewarding: "One thing we found out for sure; the kids out there know and love CURIOUS GEORGE, even better than we do ourselves." Hans suggested that American sales were still increasing and interest in the series was spreading worldwide.<sup>79</sup> From the United States to Japan, Britain, and the Middle East, *Curious George* was read the world over. The books were translated into eight foreign languages, including Japanese and Finnish, and George's name was often changed to appeal to new societies and prevent literary insults. In Britain, George's name was changed to Zozo in order to not offend the reigning King George. In Sweden, George was renamed Nicke Nygiken, which translates as "Curious Nick." In Denmark, George was called Peter Pedal because the first George book

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<sup>78</sup> Austin Olney. "Business Correspondence to Morris Goldberger." *Houghton Mifflin Company. Rey, H. A. (Hans Augusto), 1898-. Correspondence, 1948-1971.* (Boston, MA; Houghton Library Archives, Harvard University. April 1, 1969).

<sup>79</sup> Hans Rey, "Business Correspondence to Austin Olney" *Houghton Mifflin Company. Rey, H. A. (Hans Augusto), 1898-. Correspondence, 1948-1971.* (Boston, MA; Houghton Library Archives, Harvard University. May 26, 1960).

published in Denmark was *Curious George Rides a Bike*. The Danish publisher stuck with this name to link it with the rest of the series.<sup>80</sup> By 1970, *Curious George* publications sold 5,232,862 in the United States and 1,069,500 worldwide suggesting its widespread approval.<sup>81</sup>

During the 1960's, Hans's interests shifted away from writing and illustrating children's literature and he instead focused on current political issues. He frequently wrote letters to newspaper editors against the use of animal fur for clothing and on US dependency on fossil fuels. He was also extremely outspoken against the Vietnam War.<sup>82</sup> In March 1966, Hans wrote to the editor of the *Boston Globe* sardonically arguing it would be cheaper for the United States to purchase and relocate each pro-Western Vietnamese family to a residence on the French Riviera than fund America's involvement in Vietnam. By 1968, Hans expressed his frustration with the war in Vietnam in a letter to Austin. "Many thanks for your letters of 8-23- it's good to know that you are back in the good – or at least partially good – U.S.A..."<sup>83</sup> In 1970, Hans asked Houghton Mifflin to help organize an antiwar campaign. Hans illustrated an antiwar poster and hoped it would inspire others to condemn the U.S. involvement in Vietnam.<sup>84</sup> Although writing

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<sup>80</sup> Austin Olney, "Business Correspondence to George Wieser" *Houghton Mifflin Company. Rey, H. A. (Hans Augusto), 1898-. Correspondence, 1948-1971.* (Boston, MA: Houghton Library Archives, Harvard University) January 26, 1960.

<sup>81</sup> These figures were prepared by Hans himself. The United States figures were written in his letter to Austin on July 10, 1970 while the world figures were from a second letter to Austin dated July 23, 1970.

<sup>82</sup> In a December 1967 letter to the Editor of the *New York Times*, Hans applauded an article that attacked the wearing of fur but criticized the *NY Times'* continued publication of fur endorsing advertisements. On January 7, 1974, a letter to the Editor of *The New Hampshire Times* written by Hans stated the US needs to develop wind power as a cleaner alternative to fossil fuels. See *H.A. & Margret Rey Papers DG0812* (Hattiesburg, MS; de Grummond Children's Library Archive, University of Southern Mississippi): Box 218. Folder 8.

<sup>83</sup> Hans Rey "Personal Correspondence to Austin Olney" *Rey, H. A. (Hans Augusto), 1898-. Correspondence, 1948-1971.* (Boston, MA; Houghton Library Archives, Harvard University. August 26, 1968)

<sup>84</sup> "Our author, H.A. Rey, who is very widely known for his CURIOUS GEORGE books, is hoping to

was still important to Margret and Hans during this time period, she and Hans never collaboratively wrote another *Curious George* book.

### **3.3 Immigration, Assimilation, and Identity**

Race relations during the period of the 1920's and 1930's suggested whites had little understanding of the social disparity that existed between whites and blacks, and European immigrants and Americans. White Americans feared both blacks and immigrants to the extent it became a major social issue that included race riots and lynchings. White intellectuals attempted to form theories to explain the inferiority and supposed failure of these groups to assimilate into American culture. Hans and Margret Rey fit into this discussion because as Jewish immigrants they lacked national identity. Their stories, which also lacked definitive character identity and nationality, become representative of their own life and not any specific society.

Robert Park, an influential popular early- and mid- twentieth century sociologists, explained the disparity between the races in the United States by arguing the biological superiority of Western-Europeans would ultimately force the assimilation of other cultures but the process was slow, "often painful, (and) not always complete."<sup>85</sup> Park argued that these groups would continue to copy white culture but could never fully incorporate into it.<sup>86</sup> Blacks were particularly interesting to Park because he believed

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promote an original sort of antiwar campaign which is described in some detail in the attached Xerox." Austin Olney, "Business Correspondence to Boston Publishers Action Committee" *Rey, H. A. (Hans Augusto), 1898-. Correspondence, 1948-1971.* (Boston, MA; Houghton Library Archives, Harvard University, July 24, 1970).

<sup>85</sup> Robert E. Park, "The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro." *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 4, no 2. (April 1919): 111.

<sup>86</sup> One example Park uses to show this adoption of culture is the role of religion on slave plantations. Park states that "on the whole, the plantation Negro's religion was a faithful copy of the white man's" but he suggest it was not complete. Although Park is wrong to the point of laughter, his views show how widespread this negative perception on black culture was by whites. *Ibid* 123.

they were the race most resistant to white culture. Although he argued blacks were actively attempting to incorporate parts of white culture into their own, Park believed blacks failed to fully assimilate because of their inferior social status.<sup>87</sup> In a 1925 review of *The Negro from Africa to America*, Park wrote:

The black man in America has had a romantic history. There is no such stuff for literature and for poetry in the experience of any people in America as there is in the life, past and present, of the black man. He has been a slave; he is now free, and has the legal status of a citizen. One thing that makes the career interesting is the fact that he is, as Ray Stannard Baker once described him, 'the man farthest down,' the man most removed from the understanding and sympathy of the larger world in which he lives. This man farthest down is now engaged in a mortal struggle to attain actuality.<sup>88</sup>

Park sought to explain why blacks were always seeking equality and were unable to attain it in the United States but Park instead justified the lower social status of blacks. Park plainly wrote that white culture was superior to black culture and by not assimilating into the superior white culture, blacks must be inferior. In particular, Park believed American and European cultures were superior to Native American or African cultures.

Margret and Hans actually show how incorrect Park's hierarchy of culture was to overall immigration. As immigrants to Brazil, France, and finally the United States, Park's argument suggests the Reys would adopt their new cultures once they arrived. As a matter of fact, the Reys did adopt these cultures but they did not do so because of cultural superiority but rather the politics of the day. Their history as German-Jewish immigrants reflects the struggle for identity and assimilation experienced by European and African immigrants and their struggle can be most notably viewed by their adoption

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 115 and 118.

<sup>88</sup> Robert E. Park., "Review: The Negro from Africa to America" *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 31, no. 2 (Sept. 1925): 259.

of local languages. While living in Brazil and France, the Reys predominantly wrote daily notes in German instead of Portuguese or French. Following Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, the Reys began writing personal notes in French. Upon their immediate arrival into the United States, the Reys' wrote entirely in English. The Reys' constant changes in writing style show their attempts to initially identify themselves as German in Brazil and in France and finally their attempts to disassociate themselves with the Germans and assimilate in the United States. As German-Jews, the Reys' identity became linked to Nazi expansion. As Jews, they were ostracized from German society but as German born, the Reys were ostracized from both French and American populations. Despite fact the Reys' lived in Paris for four years prior to the Nazi invasion and the Reys' personal hatred of the Nazi philosophy, the French police arrested them on suspicion of spying. The arrest showed that the French always considered the Reys outsiders. Upon the Reys' signing with Houghton Mifflin, the publishers attempted to prevent any connection between the Reys and the Nazis by introducing Hans as a Brazilian citizen who had traveled to Paris and fled the Nazis at various author conventions.<sup>89</sup>

The Reys' struggle to identify and adapt to culture also becomes symbolic to George's cultural adaptation. George, an African monkey who is actively trying to understand and participate in society, represents the Reys' struggle to assimilate. The Man in the Yellow Hat becomes their teacher, leader, and guide to understanding the new culture. This relationship is viewed in *Curious George Takes A Job* when George is offered a contract by a movie studio to act in a film adaptation of his first adventure.

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<sup>89</sup> *Publishers Weekly*, New York January 2, 1942 in *H.A. & Margret Rey Papers DG0812* (Hattiesburg, MS; de Grummond Children's Library Archive, University of Southern Mississippi.): Box 1, Folder 10.

George has no concept of contracts and copyrights and the Man in the Yellow Hat accompanies and watches George to ensure George's interests were protected.<sup>90</sup>

Despite the Reys' political consciousness and immigration history, the Reys and *Curious George* have been attacked as racially insensitive. William Moebius opened this debate in 1985 by suggesting *Curious George* could be re-interpreted as a slave narrative. June Cummins popularized Moebius's arguments twelve years later and aspects of her arguments concerning racial representation in *Curious George* have trickled into academic conferences and culture but *Curious George*'s worldwide popularity suggests it does not hold the same stigmas experienced by *LBS*. In fact, the authors were fully aware and sympathetic to racial issues and the images and story of *Curious George* were instead *given* race by these academics.

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<sup>90</sup> Hans Rey, *Curious George Takes a Job*, 97-99.

## Chapter 4

### Section 4.1: The Racial Evolution of *Little Black Sambo*

The text [...] is not fixed in any determinate sense; in one sense, it consists of the dynamic and indeterminate relationship between truth on one hand and understanding on the other.<sup>91</sup>

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. wrote that literary interpretations are culturally constructed. The analysis of stories, characters, and images change over a period of time, which means so too can the image's meaning change. Therefore, the only way to accurately define an image is to put it in context. The racial debates surrounding *Little Black Sambo* and *Curious George* can be used to analyze whether the interpretations changed over a period of time or if the arguments became socially accepted.

As noted in previous chapters, Yuill and Baker outlined the racial debate that developed around *Little Black Sambo*. Yuill noted that the public debate against *LBS* began in 1937 following a publication by librarian Augusta Baker. Baker questioned Bannerman's name choice for Sambo but state governments ignored her arguments and recommended black children read the book.<sup>92</sup> In 1935 and again in 1941, the Tennessee State Department of Education published a list of recommended books, *The Negro: A Selected List for School Libraries of Books by or about the Negro in Africa and America*. This list contained selections of the best books and novels for children and young people, including *Little Black Sambo*. Following the collaboration of white and black literary scholars and educators, the state intended to teach black children the state's understandings of black culture. The Tennessee Department of Education believed the

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<sup>91</sup> Gates, 25.

<sup>92</sup> Yuill, 18.

list would provide a foundation for black children to acquire “a knowledge and respect for the achievements of the members of their own race.” They also hoped it would give whites an appreciation and respect for the black race.<sup>93</sup> Although the creators of this list argued it was a fair representation of black and white authors, the list largely represented white writers; only fifteen of the fifty authors recommended for elementary students were black. The Department acknowledged this by stating that most black authors wrote stories that were either too sordid or too realistic for children causing many parents and teachers to reject them. The black authors who were recommended held distinguished reputations and advocated the importance of black history. The list included Arna Bontemps (*Golden Slippers, You Can't Pet a Possum, and Sad-Faced Boy*), Marion Cuthbert (*We Sing America*), H.A. Whiting (*Negro Art, Music, and Rhyme*) and Carter Godwood Woodson (*Negro Makers of History*). Bontemps's *Golden Slippers* was a compilation of short poems on black life and white-black race relations.<sup>94</sup> Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* was included on the list simply because it was “a classic story [...] known the world over.”<sup>95</sup>

Despite the Tennessee Department of Education's promotion of *Little Black Sambo*, librarians raised questions concerning the book's content. Following Augusta Baker's example, Elizabeth M. Bacon took issue with both Sambo's enormous appetite for pancakes and his objectionable name. Bacon acknowledged Bannerman used

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<sup>93</sup> Tennessee State Department of Education, *The Negro: A Selected List for School Libraries of Books by or about the Negro in Africa and America*. (Nashville, TN: 1941): 3.

<sup>94</sup> Bontemps's book was most likely picked by the Tennessee Department of Education because they were able to recognize a message that was similar to their own views. The book was categorized into different sections including 'Waking Up,' 'Play Time,' 'Hard Work,' and 'Brown Boy and Girl.' Excluding the occasional reference to 'Negroes' and the fact it was placed in the Tennessee list because of its contribution to race, the book seems to lack racial differentiation. Arna Bontemps, *Golden Slippers: An Anthology of Negro Poetry for Young Readers*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1941).

<sup>95</sup> Tennessee Department of Education: 13.

Sambo's exaggerated pancake consumption as a device intended to amuse children but Bacon questioned the need for it. The exaggeration, according to Bacon, was similar to newspaper characterizations of Joe Louis because it acted to reinforce the false and negative stereotypes of black appetites that already existed amongst whites.<sup>96</sup> Bacon also claimed this book caused white children to identify all blacks with Sambo. In a phone call to the Council of Interracial Books for Children in the 1960's, one individual described an incident he experienced as a child in the 1940's following a reading of *LBS* by his teacher to the class. According to this person, the book became a source of torment as students associated his darker skin color with Sambo's illustrations and called him "Black Sambo," a term he associated to be as derogative as "nigger."<sup>97</sup> By the late 1960s, this racial debate expanded from academia into culture. In 1968, the magazine *Ebony* published an editorial from Ernie W. Chambers, a black militant who testified in front of the Kerner Commission about riots and unrest by blacks during the late 1960's. In his op-ed, Chambers specifically cited his hatred for the children's book because he viewed the illustrations, the story line, and Sambo's name to be an offensive attempt by white "cracker teachers" to put blacks in their "place" of submissiveness. Chambers believed whites used *Little Black Sambo* to show the inferiority of black culture because "not even the tigers wanted Sambo's clothes." The use of the storybook in the classroom also made white children identify blacks as the derogatory character. "I sat through *LBS*. And since I was the only black face in the room, I became *LBS*."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth M. Bacon, "Worker" (March 16, 1947) in Yuill.

<sup>97</sup> Yuill, 22.

<sup>98</sup> Ernie W. Chambers, "We have Marched, We have Cried, We have Prayed," *Ebony*, April 1968: 35

Some academics resisted this growing attack against *LBS* and continued recommending it to young children. In 1968, Charlotte Huck, a renowned children's literary expert who published a list of recommended children's books since 1955, described *LBS* as a fantasy where "one absurd incident after another occurs" thus leaving the child reader fully satisfied with the story.<sup>99</sup> Selma Lanes, a writer and frequent children's literature reviewer, took up this debate in her 1971 book, *Down the Rabbit Hole*. Lanes acknowledged that Little Black Sambo's character name was racially insensitive but *Little Black Sambo* did not represent a "white-supremacist attitude" or racially demeaning dialect or behavior exhibited by black-face minstrel shows or Stepin Fetchit but instead Sambo's quick wit in stressful situations "would be the envy of many a diplomat today."<sup>100</sup> Lanes attributed Sambo's widespread popularity in the United States to the evolution of Sambo's darkened illustrations but argued these illustrations represented white desires for racial equality and not black inferiority as others contended. "Sambo was taken to everyone's heart precisely because he allowed [white Americans] to acknowledge what we knew inside but avoided confronting: that black people were human beings just like us."<sup>101</sup> Lanes attempted to argue that society forced whites to distance themselves from blacks and the white popularization of the Sambo stereotype actually allowed them to relate to black humanity. But Lanes' analysis was naïve: her arguments completely ignored centuries of racial insults, race riots, and lynching.

During this same period, a public debate questioning *Little Black Sambo's* racial imagery erupted in London's *The Times*. The debate began on March 31, 1972 when the

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<sup>99</sup> Charlotte S. Huck and Doris Young Kuhn, *Children's Literature in the Elementary School* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc.: New York 1968): 76.

<sup>100</sup> Selma G. Lanes, *Down the Rabbit Hole* (New York: Atheneum, 1971): 160.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 161-162.

group Teachers Against Racism (TAR) wrote a letter to the Chairman of Chatto and Windus, a publishing house that was preparing to release a new boxed edition of Bannerman's books. In the letter, the group protested the book claiming it depicted a negative portrayal of blacks. Ian Parsons, the Chairman of Chatto and Windus, stated TAR's argument was an attempt to censor the publication of Bannerman's humorous and entertaining children's books. TAR next sent an open letter to Brian Alderson, the children's books editor of *The Times*, hoping he would write an editorial against *LBS*. Instead, Alderson's article, "Banning Bannerman," argued that Sambo was not racist image but a positive example for blacks.<sup>102</sup> TAR continued writing letters to *The Times*, stating they were trying to prevent Bannerman's "dangerous" books from fostering the type of race tension and separatism that existed in the United States.<sup>103</sup> Helen Bannerman's son, Robert, wrote to *The Times* arguing that Sambo was a representation of Helen's children. Robert compared Sambo's similar clothing to what he wore in India and noted Sambo's safe return home with his clothes intact following Sambo's encounters with the tigers.<sup>104</sup> Elizabeth Hay agreed with Robert's analysis because she argued *LBS*'s illustrations did not deny black humanity. Instead, Bannerman created Sambo as a representation of her feelings and experiences and that by portraying Sambo as witty and independent, Bannerman showed a common humanity shared by both whites and blacks.<sup>105</sup> Following this London debate, the public discussion of *LBS*'s race continued through the eighties and nineties. In 1989, Japan banned *LBS* and only allowed

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<sup>102</sup> Hay outlines this debate in *Sambo Sahib*, 165-167. Brian Alderson's letter can be found in "Banning Bannerman" *The London Times* April 12, 1972

<sup>103</sup> Hay, 168.

<sup>104</sup> Robert Bannerman. "Letter to the Editor," *The Times*. 1 May 1972.

<sup>105</sup> Hay, 174.

it to return to shelves in 2005.<sup>106</sup> Between 1990 and 2000, the American Library Association listed *LBS* among the most frequently challenged books in the United States.<sup>107</sup>

#### 4.2 The Naughty Little Monkey

The first article to suggest *Curious George* contained racial themes was William Moebius's 1985 "L'Enfant Terrible Comes of Age." In this article, Moebius recalled a reading of *Curious George* and his realization that George's adventures made him uncomfortable as he identified George's capture and struggles to slavery. Moebius compared *Curious George* to slavery as a justification to reinterpret many children's books. In "The Resisting Monkey: *Curious George*, Slave Captivity Narratives, and the Postcolonial Condition," June Cummins furthered Moebius's initial arguments by focusing on two specific issues. Firstly, Cummins analyzed the parallels between George's story with the justification of imperialism and slavery. Secondly, Cummins argued that *Curious George* romanticized the institution of slavery and therefore it is a negative influence to black children.

Cummins began her scrutiny of *Curious George* with George's capture by the Man in the Yellow Hat and George's forced relocation to America. Cummins compared George's capture and travel to the United States to experiences described in the slave narrative by Olaudah Equiano.<sup>108</sup> Equiano described his emotions as being stuck

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<sup>106</sup> Roy Mustang, "'Little Black Sambo' Flies Off Shelves" *Japantoday.com* July 1, 2005, <http://japantoday.com/news/jp/e/tools/print.asp?content=book&id=217>, (November 13, 2006.)

<sup>107</sup> The ALA released a list of 100 books between 1990 and 2000 that were actively being banned from public libraries and schools. The list admits its findings are not completely accurate, "Research suggests that for each challenge reported there are as many as four or five which go unreported" but Bannerman's book was listed at 90. ALA "The 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990–2000" Updated 2006, <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/bbwlinks/100mostfrequently.htm>, (March 4, 2007).

<sup>108</sup> See *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1987). This

between “horror and wonder,” which Cummins explained was similar to George’s feelings of sadness and curiosity.<sup>109</sup> George’s actions do not support these emotions, however, as George freely chooses to help strangers in his new society while Equiano predominantly asks questions does not help others. In *Curious George Rides a Bike*, George actually gets a job as a newspaper boy because he wants to help a young boy deliver his papers.<sup>110</sup> In *Curious George Flies a Kite*, George learns to fish from a local fisherman and even builds his own fishing rod with a mop to imitate him.<sup>111</sup> George’s actions do not suggest he is sad but rather shows he wants to participate in his new life. In contrast, Equiano often asks questions about his new situation but chooses not to help those who captured him. While on the slave boat sailing to America, Equiano asks the ship’s crew where they are from, how the boat works, and other questions but does not actively try to use his knowledge to help the crew because he lacks free will to give it.<sup>112</sup> Unlike George, if Equiano does not help the crew he gets beaten.<sup>113</sup>

Cummins’s assumption that George represents an African slave is bolstered by her citation of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *Signifying Monkey*, which Cummins uses to re-interpret George’s actions and mischievous behavior as acts of resistance and rebellion against the Man in the Yellow Hat. In the *Signifying Monkey*, Gates described a small African monkey that uses intelligence and wit to create and/or solve problems with larger animals. Any “play on words, any speech that draws attention to words as words, any

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collection contains numerous narratives including Equiano, Fredrick Douglas, and Mary Prince.

<sup>109</sup> June Cummins, “The Resisting Monkey: *Curious George*, Slave Captivity Narratives, and the Postcolonial Condition” *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*. vol. 28 (1 January 1997).

<sup>110</sup> Margret and Hans Rey, *Curious George* in *Complete Adventures of Curious George*: 114.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 241

<sup>112</sup> Olaudah Equiano, “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African” in Gates, *Classic Slave Narratives*: 65.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

tripping up of a listener through language is signifying” but unlike the *Signifying Monkey*, George does not speak in his adventures.<sup>114</sup> Instead, Cummins suggests, George’s ingenuity to get out of problematic situations parallels the Signifying Monkey’s character. In his first adventure, George mistakenly calls the fire department, which rushes to George’s building to fight a fire. George is thrown in jail for making a false call and he eventually escapes after tricking the guard.<sup>115</sup> Cummins’s argument states that George resisted his incarceration simply by escaping the prison.

George’s escapades also act to signify resistance in the broader imperial context Cummins seeks to explore.<sup>116</sup> Cummins argues George’s lack of language to shows his subjugation. In *Cecil G.*, George has the ability to speak and his refusal to do so in the United States becomes a constant reminder of how little power he wields in the Man in the Yellow Hat’s world.<sup>117</sup> Cummins also argues that George’s mischief acts as a sign of rebellion against his captor and compares his painting of an African forest on an apartment’s wall as George’s desire to return to the jungle. By painting his native African scene and creating a comfortable geographic picture, George rejects his imprisonment but Cummins’ example infers George’s emotional attachments to the painting when no evidence or motivation exists to confirm it.<sup>118</sup>

A second issue Cummins contends involves the relationship between the reader and his/her race in identifying with the George character. Cummins argued that both

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<sup>114</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 70.

<sup>115</sup> Margret and Hans Rey, *Curious George* in *Complete Adventures of Curious George*: 38-40.

<sup>116</sup> Cummins argues that “imperialism” is defined as one culture that is made forcibly submissive to another. The forced enslavement of George by the Man in the Yellow Hat is then argued to express this imperial relationship. See Anne McClintock *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* for more information.

<sup>117</sup> Cummins, 74.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

white and black children identify with George because of his small size and his entertaining adventures, but the child's race determined their identification with the Man in the Yellow Hat. According to Cummins, white children expected to grow up to become the Man in the Yellow Hat while in contrast, black children identified, sympathized, and understood George's plight from Africa because of black history's connection to slavery and prevents them from identifying with the Man in the Yellow Hat.<sup>119</sup>

Although aspects of Moebius' and Cummins' work regarding race in *Curious George* has entered into some academic debates, the continued success and growth of the *Curious George* franchise suggests American culture has not fully embraced it. In February 2002, the Modern Language Association sponsored a panel entitled "Sex with Aliens" in which Marie Lathers, a specialist in French literature, commented on the connection between *Curious George*, Africa, the colonial past, and race itself using examples from Cummins' work.<sup>120</sup> Similar to how Moebius used *Curious George*'s story to analyze other children's stories, Lathers used George's plight as an introduction into other issues including gender issues in movies. In 2006, the *Curious George* movie adaptation included a change in George's capture because, as director Matthew O'Callaghan stated, the Man in the Yellow Hat "basically steals George" and the studio wanted to stay clear of racial and political debates.<sup>121</sup> The Man in the Yellow Hat no

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>120</sup> Dr. Marie Lathers, Ph D. kindly sent me a copy of her talk. Lathers argues that images and characters represent more than pictures/stories but contain hidden themes. Reference to her talk by a student attendee can be found at: Christopher Chow, "MLA Features Bizarre Panel, Calls for Campus Censorship.," ([http://www.academia.org/campus\\_reports/2002/february\\_2002\\_4.html](http://www.academia.org/campus_reports/2002/february_2002_4.html)) Last viewed March 19, 2007.

<sup>121</sup> Kyle Munson "Does Monkey Tale Speak of Slavery?" DesMoinesRegister.com February, 10, 2006, <http://desmoinesregister.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060210/LIFE01/602100343/1039/LIFE..> (April 24).

longer trapped George underneath his hat but instead, George followed the Man in the Yellow Hat back to his boat and unknowingly stowed away until they reached America.

Another mode to measure the impact of Cummins' argument is through the use of Wikipedia, a popular and controversial on-line encyclopedia. It must be noted that Wikipedia is not a reliable source for factual information but it is a representation *and* cultural staple in the United States. Wikipedia acts as a collaborative editorial that is peer written, peer reviewed, and can be edited if a point is found to be incorrect, disagreeable, or wrong. Thousands of readers and members of Wikipedia's professional staff read and review these articles each day. In order for an article to exist unedited for *multiple* days, months, and even a year, the article must be accepted by the Wikipedia community. In April 2007, the Wikipedia article "*Curious George*" contained a section highlighting the *Curious George* racial debate. The Wikipedia page's authors made arguments strikingly similar to Cummins [Figure 1] despite not citing Cummins' work.<sup>122</sup> The existence of this section suggested segments of society agree that George represents slavery. By September 2007, this section had been erased and replaced with a broader segment entitled "Kidnapping?" that largely ignored the racial questions previously raised. [Figure 2]

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<sup>122</sup> Due to daily changes in Wikipedia's articles, I have included multiple screen-shots, marked Figure 1 and Figure 2. Between April 24, 2007 and October 23, 2007, Wikipedia viewers removed the subsection of the article that emphasized racial interpretations and replaced it with "Kidnapping". "*Curious George*" [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curious\\_George](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curious_George) (Viewed March 19, 2007, April 24, 2007, and October 23, 2007). The sources listed on the site are jokes. The first source contains information on the Reys, while the second source links to an internet forum. [1] Barnes and Noble, "Meet the Writers: H.A. and Margret Rey," <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/writers/writerdetails.asp?cid=968100> and [2] "Animated News," <http://www.animated-news.com/archives/00000892.html>. The Wikipedia users did not properly cite these sources and "Animated News" is a forum and not a publication.

### 4.3 Knowing the Reader: Age, Gender, (and Race?)

Throughout the twentieth century, few books contained black characters and in the *Curious George* books themselves, few black characters were portrayed. The first character of color to be drawn in the series did not occur until the third book, *Curious George Learns to Ride a Bike*, and was merely a circus audience bystander who sat next to the Man in the Yellow Hat and did not engage with the reader or George.<sup>123</sup> The next two representations occurred in the Rey's final *Curious George* book, *Curious George Goes to the Hospital*, where one black character is depicted as a nurse and the other as a sick child. George again had no interaction with these characters.

The absence of black characters in children's literature was not limited only to *Curious George* but was common throughout American publications. Sociologists Bernice A. Pescosolido, Elizabeth Grauerholz, and Melissa A. Milkie created a study that measured the portrayal of black characters in selected children's literature between 1937 and 1993. Their study focused on Caldecott Award books, a random sampling from the *Children's Catalog*, and *Little Golden Books*.<sup>124</sup> Over the course of the 1930's and 1940's, these sociologists saw a decrease of black characters in these books. This trend continued until the mid 1960's but these character depictions rarely included interactions between whites and blacks or even between black adults themselves.<sup>125</sup> In her 1968

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<sup>123</sup> Hans and Margret Rey, *Curious George Takes a Job* in *The Complete Adventures of Curious George* (Houghton Mifflin: Boston: 2005): 147.

<sup>124</sup> The Caldecott Award is awarded to the most prestigious and influential children's book of the year. The *Children's Catalog* is a broad compilation of books that Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie consider a mainstream amongst librarians who purchase books for the libraries. *A Little Golden Book* is described a popular series that remained a "standard" in children's literature. Bernice A. Pescosolido, Elizabeth Grauerholz, and Melissa A. Milkie "Culture and Conflict: The Portrayal of Blacks in U.S. Children's Picture Books through the Mid- and Late-Twentieth Century." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 62 (June 1997): 446.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, 443.

edition, Charlotte Huck's book on elementary literature listed gender and age as factors that affect the reader's interpretation and comprehension of a story and excluded race as a determinate.<sup>126</sup>

This omission of minority characters in literature directly led to the creation of political groups dedicated to eliminating racial prejudice in books. One example was The Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC), the group that published Phyllis Yuill's pamphlet on *Little Black Sambo*. Formed as a direct outgrowth to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the group was "appalled by the racist and sexist treatment of African Americans" in children's books and textbooks available throughout the South. The group promoted racially diverse children's literature and demanded changes in reading lists to better reflect a multi-cultural society.<sup>127</sup> The CIBC also reviewed books and promoted specific authors to ensure diversity and promote positive images of all races and sexes in literature.<sup>128</sup> Cummins's emphasis on reader interpretation is an expansion of the CIBC's promotion of positive images because Cummins believed black children identified *Curious George* with slavery. In 1993, Patricia Turner made similar arguments to Cummins regarding the creation and use of cultural black images in her scholarly study *Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and their Influence on Culture*. Turner claimed that literature, videos, and toys affect a child's sense of identify.<sup>129</sup> Robert Entmen, a professor of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University, and Andrew Rojecki, Associate Professor of Communication at

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<sup>126</sup> Charlotte S. Huck, and Doris Young Kuhn, *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc.: New York 1968): 28-29.

<sup>127</sup> Beryle Banfield, "Commitment to Change: The Council on Interracial Books for Children and the World of Children's Books." *African American Review*. vol. 43, no. 1. (1998): 17.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, 20-22.

<sup>129</sup> Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and their Influence on Culture*. (Anchor Books, New York: 1994): 105.

the University of Chicago, argued these cultural constructs transmitted explicit and implicit racial cultural messages, assumptions, and anxieties that reinforce racial attitudes.<sup>130</sup> Entmen and Rojecki did not specifically write on *Curious George* but suggested books contained racial images and any interpretations reflected the culture's racial attitudes.

#### 4.4 Spotting the Reys' Racial Attitudes

Hans and Margret Rey were consciously aware of racial debates and they created their books to entertain children and promote racial understanding. In 1945, Margret authored the book *Spotty*, a story of a young spotted rabbit named Spotty who realizes he is treated different than his white brothers and sister. One day, Spotty's family left him home while they attended a party at his Aunt's house because Spotty's grandfather would have been upset to see Spotty's spots. Spotty was very upset and comically used spot removal to assimilate but he left home in search of similar looking rabbits when the spot remover failed. Spotty found a spotted family but realized they had the same problems as his own; this family had a child who was completely white! The next day, Spotty returned to his parents and learned physical appearances did not matter.<sup>131</sup> *Spotty* is unique because it attacks racial prejudice. In the story, both families of rabbits were the same. Both fathers smoked a pipe, brothers and sisters played, and the families ate together in friendship. Color did not matter. *The New York Times* wrote that *Spotty* was "a rather heavy-handed fable of tolerance for the picture-book age about a young

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<sup>130</sup> Robert Entmen and Andrew Rojecki. *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*. (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2000): 4.

<sup>131</sup> Rey, Margret. *Spotty*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1945) : n.p.

rabbit.”<sup>132</sup> Margret even received a letter from the Anti-Defamation League complimenting her work.<sup>133</sup>

When asked to explain his influences on writing, Hans stated “I believe I know what children like. I know what *I* liked as a child, and I don’t do any book that I as a child, *wouldn’t* have liked.” *Curious George’s* society was very similar to the Reys’ society. Police officers, circus performers, doctors, and nurses in the Reys’ world dressed similar to George’s friends. Despite the use of blacks as only secondary characters, the Reys showed blacks and whites sitting and working together.<sup>134</sup> Is this an imperialist message that attempts to forgive the horrible institution of slavery instead of aiding children in the process of growing up? No, the Man in the Yellow Hat’s society ignored the segregation that was common in the United States instead promoting a racially inclusive Western society.

Cummins’ second argument regarding the ability for *Curious George’s* young readership to associate the story to real issues, specifically slavery, also lacks evidence. Cummins relies heavily on inference and symbolism in the story and does not bolster her claims with any interviews or first-hand accounts. Charlotte Huck’s arguments actually contradict Cummins’ belief that black children cannot identify with the Man in the Yellow Hat because children do not identify beyond their understanding of the world. Huck contends that authors use stories involving animals who frequently act like small children and face the same problems as their child readers to mirror and connect the

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<sup>132</sup> *New York Times* (Jan 6, 1946) in *H.A. & Margret Rey Papers DG0812* (Hattiesburg, MS; de Grummond Children’s Library Archive, University of Southern Mississippi): Box 29, Folder 17.

<sup>133</sup> J. Peter Brunswick “Business Correspondence To Mrs. Margaret Rey” (New York): March 12, 1952 in *H.A. & Margret Rey Papers DG0812* (Hattiesburg, MS; de Grummond Children’s Library Archive, University of Southern Mississippi): Box 29, Folder 16.

<sup>134</sup> Quoted from *Junior Authors* in “Rey, Hans (H.A.)” *Something about the Authors*. vol 69 ed. Anne Commire. (Gale Research Detroit: Company Book Tower: 1987): 175.

children to the stories. Children ultimately get caught up in the story and have troubles separating *Curious George*'s story from their own perceptions.<sup>135</sup> Margret Rey echoed Huck and stated that “among children we seem to be known best as the parents of *Curious George*, the little monkey hero of some of our books. ‘I thought you were monkeys too,’ said a little boy who had been eager to meet us, disappointment written all over his face.”<sup>136</sup> This child assumed a monkey wrote the books because the books focused on a monkey.

Despite claims by Cummins and Moebius that suggest *Curious George* contains racial imaging, there is little direct evidence to support their conclusions. Cummins and Moebius make an interesting argument comparing George's capture and voyage over the ocean to slavery and the slave trade but limit their analysis to the story itself. In so doing, they fail to explore two of the most profound influences needed to properly interpret the *Curious George* series: the authors' biographies and social debates. George Fredrickson's and Joseph Boskin's analysis of the black image and Sambo relied heavily on the images' creators in order to explain the images' purpose. Phyllis Yuill and Elizabeth Hay debated Bannerman's biography amongst other evidence to contextualize *Little Black Sambo*'s setting and character identity. The biographical mapping of Hans and Margret Reys' life similar to how Fredrickson and Boskin analyzed racist images to highlight the Reys' racial sensitivities allows for the re-interpretation of *Curious George* into a story about assimilation and immigration.

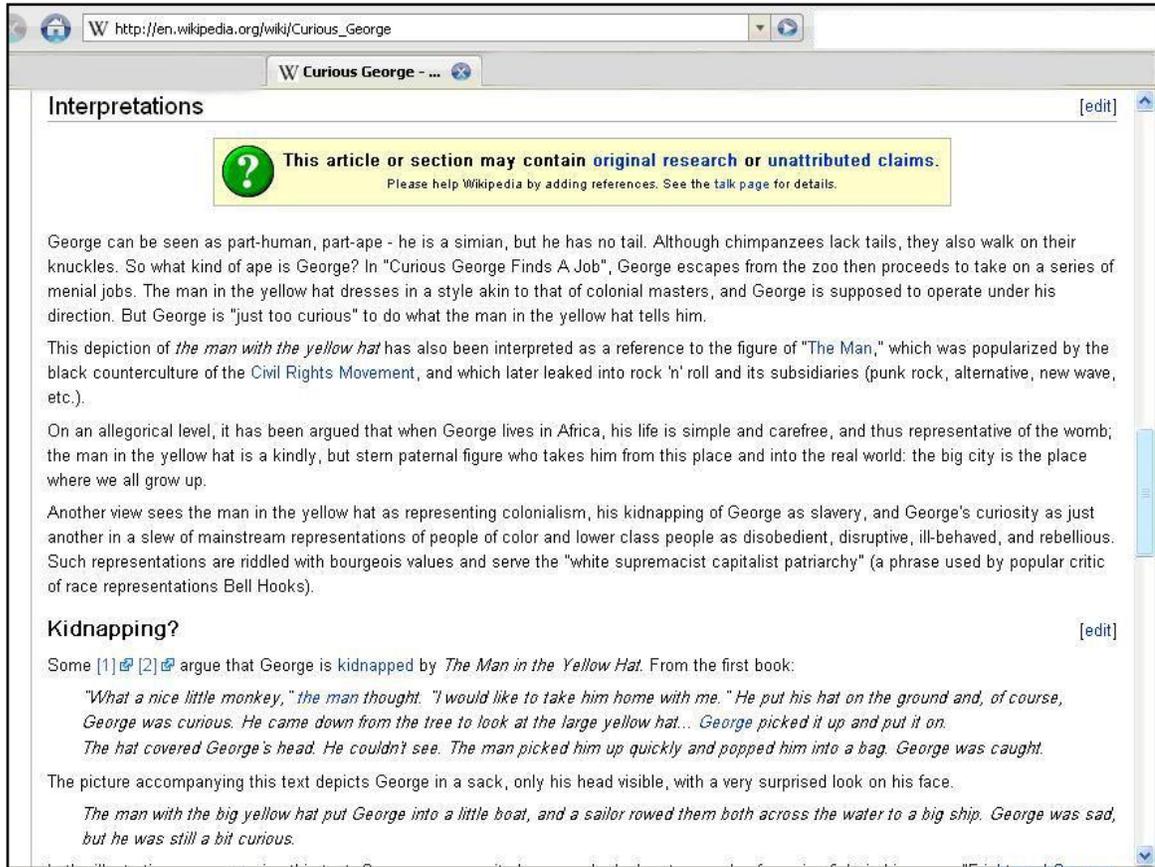
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<sup>135</sup> Charlotte S. Huck, Susan Hepler, and Janet Hickman., *Children's Literature in the Elementary School, Fourth Edition*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, inc.: 1987): 229.

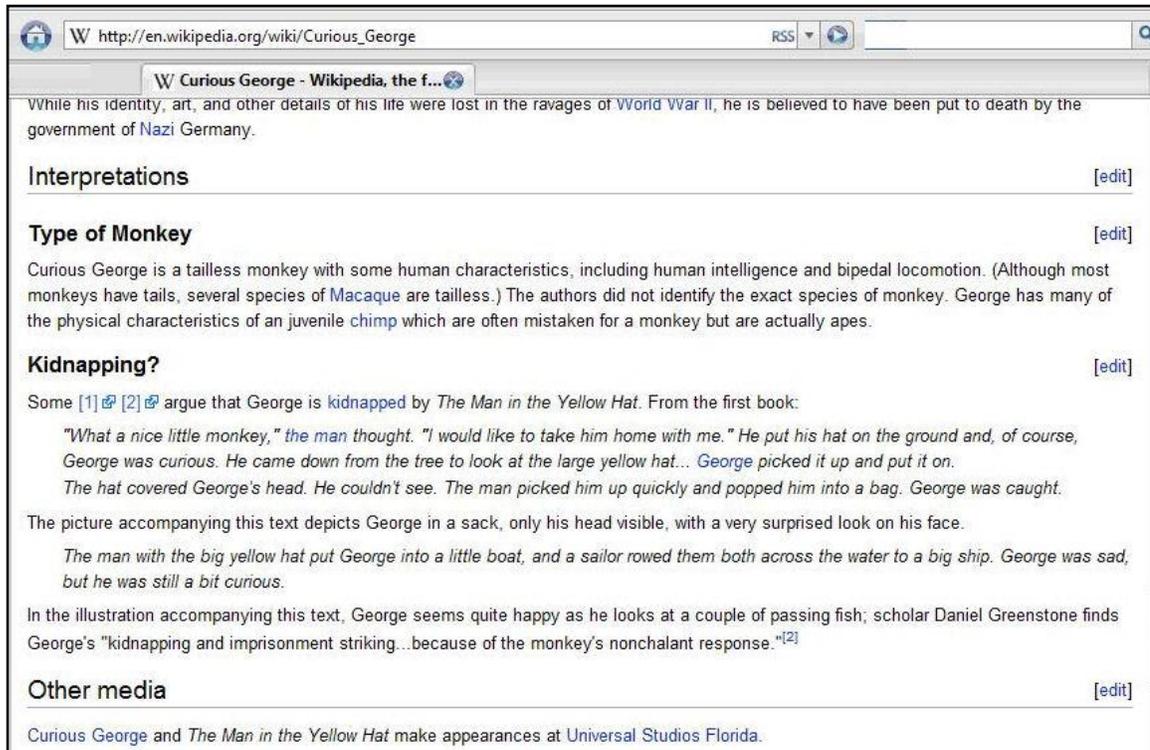
<sup>136</sup> “Rey, Margret” *Something about the Authors*. vol 26 ed. Anne Commire (Gale Research Detroit: Company Book Tower: 1982):166.

# Figures

**Figure 1 (March 19, 2007 and April 24, 2007):**



**Figure 2 (October 23, 2007):**



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