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The Consequences of Narrative

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The Consequences of Narrative

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The Consequences of Narrative

Kylie Mossbacher

In order to contextualize the following article, I'd like to disclose as much of my positionality as I can articulate. I am a white woman, raised Catholic in a conservative white household where meritocratic ideas of the self-made man and an up-by-the-bootstraps mentality were ideological staples. The United States was, indisputably, the best country in the world, and any dissenter was welcome to pack their bags and head elsewhere. Animals were for eating, movies were for identity-reaffirming entertainment, and there was nothing more to it. Of course, these are positions held in many families and communities across the United States. We are all products of our socialization, and not all people have the opportunity to critically examine and question their upbringings in an academic setting.

I am currently a graduating senior at Humboldt State University. I began as a Wildlife Conservation Biology student, and later became an Environmental Studies major, a transition that saw an intended Bachelor of Science turn into a Bachelor of Arts. As a result, I have familiarity with scientific language, concepts, and modes of thinking, all of which compose a comfort zone that the curriculum within Environmental Studies has frequently disrupted. Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" exercise was assigned in the introductory course to the Environmental Studies program. By this point, I was a third-year student, still happily embroiled in the same ideology I'd tended since adolescence. This particular activity was world shattering, as it was my first explicit introduction to the concept of white privilege.

Though my formal education was fulfilling, my understanding of this subject was deepened through rather more unconventional studies. I'll readily confess I've yet to read works by more classic theorists, Carol Adams, bell hooks, and Barbara Smith among them, though the individuals who have inspired me are no doubt standing on the shoulders of those aforementioned giants. The outlets most accessible to a panic-stricken me were online essays, blogs, and video series. The blogs *This is White Privilege* and *Racism 101* provided me a well organized, testimony-based, and *private* place to engage with my unexplored and highly socialized racism. Anita Sarkeesian's masterfully researched and eloquently presented series, *Tropes vs Women in Video Games*, and the blog *Feminist Disney* first clued me in to the myriad ways in which oppressive frameworks are normalized through mass media, providing much of the inspiration for exploring the topic of this article. This extracurricular work was equal parts freeing and painful.

I am deeply grateful for this transformative discomfort, however, as it elevated a teenaged, insufferably self-assured me to a new plane of introspection, and fostered a recognition of my own complicity in the state of the world. Most importantly, this experience has shown me the immensity of my own ignorance. That I know this about myself makes my only real career aspiration that much trickier to actualize. For the last five years I've known I wanted to be an educator, someone involved in public outreach, and I remain interested in writing and illustrating storybooks about animals. All throughout my undergraduate career I've spent a great deal of time dreaming up environmentally educational stories. Recently, I've begun to appreciate the complexity of these aspirations, and call them very critically into question.

Environmentalism, its accompanying tenets and underlying ideologies, and all of the narratives it inspires were, for many years, held more sacrosanct to me than anything else had ever been. I was a militant vegan, animal rights advocate, and self-proclaimed eco-warrior. I wielded my self-righteous fervor in the most polarizing, homogenizing, culturally insensitive, and downright racist way possible. That none of the latter were my intentions is irrelevant, as, I came to learn, they are immutable products of the institutions of conservation, environmentalism, and the media employed to communicate those paradigms. I have therefore begun the process of exploring how seventeen-year-old me was created, which

sources of environmental media helped shape my budding positionality, and how, through the narratives I will pen, I might avoid transmitting those harmful, unexamined worldviews to subsequent generations. This brings me to my main concern: problems with portrayal and perpetuation. My goal with this article is less to establish a universal causal link between the representation and subsequent treatment of animals, and more to show that portrayal of animals, humans, and the environment in media is both a reflection and a reproduction of the values society already places on them.

Despite this disclaimer, there remains a sizeable pool of examples of impacts on real animals following the release of numerous animal-focused media. For this analysis, I will be examining children's media with three topics in mind; environmental misanthropy and the vilification of humans, animals as racist, sexist, or otherwise bigoted avatars, and the observable impacts representation has already had on real animals. Environmentalism has strong misanthropic foundations, a tradition that has unsurprisingly bled into children's media. Humans are either actively villainous or imbued with mythic or godlike status that places them above the other characters. 20th Century Fox's 1992 animated feature *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* provides overt examples of vilification of humanity as pitted against nonhuman "nature". The film is set in Australia, but the main protagonists are all white and speak in varying American dialects. Light-skinned, English-speaking fairies with European features speak reverently of humans, and though they are long thought to be extinct by the fairy culture, the movie's protagonist, Crysta, still fantasizes about the opportunity to meet one. Crysta is quick to learn, however, that humans are not the incredible beings she's dreamt of, and are instead witless, destructive, and lazy, wielding tremendously powerful machinery that will level her beloved rainforest. Hexxus, the flamboyant, queer-coded villain, appears to be pollution personified, and easily manipulates the operators of the tree-harvesting machine into heading a course for FernGully. In his song, entitled *Toxic Love*, Hexxus explicitly states his love for humans, as "greedy human beings will always lend a hand with the destruction of this worthless jungle land. And what a beautiful machine they have provided! To slice a path of doom, with my sweet breath to guide it." Batty, a kooky fruit bat that has escaped an animal testing facility, has an entire ballad dedicated to the treatment he endured at the hands of humans. "They used and abused me," he says, "battered and bruised me, red wires, green wires, stuck 'em right through me! I've been brain-fried, electrified, injected and injectified, vivosectified and fed pesticides!" The only human character the audience interacts with is an entitled American teenager who spends the bulk of the movie making fun of fairies and their culture and failing to contribute much overall to the protection or appreciation of the forest.¹

This is not an unusual mechanic. *Watership Down*, a children's novel written by Richard Adams, and the animated film of the same title, casts humans as sources of danger. While it is true that the protagonists are rabbits and so are skittish and fearful by nature, the humans are only ever shown to be cruel, self-serving, and dismissive of the rabbits' plight. In fact, the initial destruction of the rabbit warren by a construction company is the event that catalyzes the story.² The British television series, and the books that inspired it, *The Animals of Farthing Wood*, begins the same way. The forest a ragtag band of woodland critters inhabits is being destroyed for a development project, and they must undergo a harrowing journey until they arrive at a wildlife refuge called White Deer Park. Along the way, several of the animals are hunted³, run over by semi trucks on the highway⁴, or are poisoned from eating vegetables treated with pesticides⁵ -- all perils presented by the existence of and interactions with humans. In Nickelodeon's *The Wild Thornberrys Movie*⁶ and Disney's *The Rescuer's Down Under*⁷ the central conflicts are poaching, and the villains, therefore, are poachers. The dynamics of poaching could be a fascinating subject for children's media, but the complexity of the subject is not given the space it needs in the work, and exploration of the topic is largely unguided by the narrative. The questions what sort of people poach, why might they poach, who purchases the poached animals, and so forth are not asked and are certainly not answered. Again, the audience is left with the impression that humans are greedy, self-interested, and cruel.

As a child, I consumed all of this media voraciously, and the more I consumed, the more conviction I felt. I distinctly remember watching a nature program covering the ivory trade and elephant poaching, and being moved to the point of tears, overwhelmed by the cruelty and my emerging intolerance for it. A frustrated, six-year-old me grabbed the nearest Crayola marker, scrawled “Stop killing the elephants!!” on a sheet of printer paper, and shoved it in an envelope addressed simply to “Africa”. I was livid, and the messaging that humans were the bringers of exploitation and suffering remained locked in the bedrock of my ideology until well into college. As a wild-eyed, hyper-vigilant, and impassioned college Freshman, I was proudly announcing that anyone who poached deserved to be poached themselves. I was condemning all of China for practices I knew neither the history nor the complex intersectional context of. I was celebrating epidemic diseases, thankful on some level that the sinful, destructive human population would in some way be curbed. I championed birth control and sterilization for similar reasons. That this rhetoric was something I so readily embraced and espoused cannot be blamed entirely on ham-fisted, didactic, or single-minded media, and is more than likely due to a confluence of environmental and epistemological factors. Still, if these programs fanned such misguided flames, it seems prudent to avoid the perpetuation of those underlying principles wherever we can.

I am not alone in having held these views. A quick scroll through the Facebook feeds of Jeff Corwin’s⁸ and the National Wildlife Federation Action Fund’s⁹ pages yield a hefty crop of misanthropic comments. While it is widely acknowledged that online comment sections are cesspools of pettiness, reactionary rhetoric, and high emotion, I’d also posit that it is in these places people can be at their most honest, and so analysis of the ideas presented here may not be misplaced. It could be that these adults were brought up on much of the same discourses that created me. Occasionally I’ll overhear fellow artists and aspiring authors say things like “Well, if career option ‘x’ doesn’t work out, I can always just do children’s books,” a sentiment that has always caused me concern. It is critical, to remember that children, in addition to being their own multidimensional people, are adults-in-training, and may well go on to hold positions of power where their decisions will have great reach and even greater impact. These choices will be informed by the lessons and concepts they have internalized from any number of sources, and I would count early exposure to ideas in children’s media among those sources. Some of those children may grow to head big non-governmental conservation organizations, or hold high rank within the Environmental Protection Agency, the United States National Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, the National Parks Service, or the Department of Fish and Wildlife, among others.

Vilification of humans has likely fed into the Western idea that the “correct” kind of nature is an unpeopled wilderness, where, as the Wilderness Act of 1964 states, “the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain”. Not only is this definition of “nature” and “wilderness” socially constructed, it may well prove to be detrimental for ecosystems and biotic communities that have coevolved with humans over millennia, as the territories occupied by the Yurok and other tribes have. Another truly appalling consequence of this false separation of humans from nature is fortress conservation. Fortress conservation, in a nutshell, is where indigenous groups or others who have occupied a territory for several generations, if not millennia, are, often, forcefully relocated and thrust into poverty, prevented from accessing the resources that enabled a subsistence-based lifestyle. Needless to say, the perpetuation of the humans versus nature narrative cannot continue, with stakes such as these.

Equally as problematic, animals can be used as exaggerated and usually racist avatars for human identities. Disney and its associated companies are the most eminent provider of children’s entertainment, and so provide many of the examples that I will explore. Because the Disney Empire has spanned decades and has seen many directors and creative contributors, it is perhaps not as redundant or single-sourced as it might seem. Tito, a Chihuahua voiced by Cheech Marin in Disney’s *Oliver and Com-*

pany¹⁰, is the main source of comic relief throughout the movie. His accent is overdramatized for humorous effect, and his “full” name (Ignacio Alonzo Julio Frederico de Tito) is rattled off as a hyperbolic joke toward the end of the film. Tito’s area of expertise is hotwiring cars. His diminutive stature is juxtaposed with an exaggerated machismo stereotypically associated with Latino men, saying things like “All right, that does it, Frankie, man! You insulted my pride, that means death!” Being the only character that’s even halfway trying to represent Latinos, he is subject to a tokenism and essentialism that mischaracterizes all Latinos through these microaggressions. *The Little Mermaid*¹¹ has a moment in the popular song “Under the Sea” where Sebastian, a crab given another exaggerated accent, says “the blackfish she sings disco” right as the scene cuts to a fish that does not exist in nature. Designed to have enormous pink lips and heavily shadowed eyelids, wearing a low-cut, sparkling dress and having oil-black scales, this entire caricature is unmistakably hearkening back to blackface, a hideously racist form of makeup application used to mock and exaggerate Black facial features. *Dumbo*¹² has three crows, the leader of whom is actually named Jim Crow, dressed up and behaving in the fashion typical of racist minstrel shows. The characters are clearly poor and uneducated, utilizing slang and African American Vernacular English in a way meant to incite laughter from presumed white audiences. Perhaps most offensively, the birds are all voiced by white actors.

The Siamese cat from *The Aristocats*¹³ was given buckteeth, squinting eyes, a yellow-tinted coat, and a guh-hyucking accent without ‘l’ sounds. The cat plays a piano using two pairs of chopsticks while rattling off the names of Chinese cities and cuisines in a singsong voice. These examples are overt, and, seeing as they all come from time periods when racism was more pronounced, the obvious bigotry of these depictions can be easily avoided by the contemporary author. However, present-day racism is more insidious as it is reinforced and obscured by a dominant culture that likes to think of itself as “post-racial” and “colorblind”. There remains no shortage of examples here, however, as this subtextual racism is evident even in Disney’s 2016 animated film, *Zootopia*.¹⁴ The focus of the movie is the challenge of stereotypes, and while that was successful on some basic level, there were also moments that remained true to the Disney formula. Presumably in response to the rising tide of social awareness sweeping across youth culture in the United States, the makers of the movie made choices that are undeniably attempting to invoke conversations of racial sensitivity. However, as *Zootopia* evidences, animals, particularly animals of different species, can make poor and certainly imperfect analogues for humans and human social conversations. In a moment clearly meant to parallel the reclamation of the “n-word” within black communities, the rabbit character, Judy Hopps, must explain to a well-intentioned colleague that it is okay for one rabbit to call another rabbit cute, but it is offensive for any other species to do so. And later, a fox touches and plays with a sheep’s wool without her permission, marveling at the texture of it. Judy must chastise him, saying that “[he] can’t just touch a sheep’s wool!” This is a direct and indisputable allusion to conversations around bodily autonomy, ownership, and privilege that surround the uninvited touching of black women’s hair. These instances, played as light moments of comedy, seem trivialized in such a context, and, by my evaluation, fail to incite the important conversations that need to be had about racial and cultural sensitivity. It will take deeper levels of thought and study to identify and purge the more problematic, underlying, and structurally racist connotations from my writing and my depictions. Though I am doing my best, I am hardly free from any number of passively absorbed, deeply ingrained, and toxic conceptualizations of animals, people, places, or ideas, and it will take training to recognize those transgressions when they rear their ugly heads.

I also want to focus on the observable impacts certain media releases and general cultural perceptions have had on real populations of animals. My analyses will primarily pertain to the views and perceptions held by dominant cultures of Western Europe, North America, and Australia. There are examples of adverse effects on animal populations in other countries and cultures, particularly where

animals are associated with bad luck, but I, not belonging to nor derived from those cultures, do not feel I have analytical jurisdiction over those cases. It is important to bear in mind that there is a longstanding heritage to human relationships with animals, a heritage that has had the 200,000 years of modern *Homo sapien* coexistence to form. So while Peter Benchley, author of the now world-renowned *Jaws*¹⁵, was indeed the individual to pen the novel that spawned the summer blockbuster, he was building off one facet of an established and ancient human-predator relationship. According to Juliet Eilperin, in her book *Demon Fish*, Peter Benchley “unwittingly did more to instill the intense fear and hatred of sharks than anyone else in the twentieth century”.¹⁶ While Benchley’s book, as Eilperin puts it, is more “cerebral” than the drama and sensationalism of the film, it did characterize the titular shark as though its actions were deliberate, “mak[ing] [it into] a mass murderer and suggest[ing] a sort of conscious strategy on the shark’s part that doesn’t exist in real life.”¹⁷ Because this characterization was so suggestive, the shark became an enemy, an adversary, an opponent, something to be bested and conquered, something against which “man” must prove his dominion. While it is true that sharks have long held the collective fascination of the human species, and have, across many cultures, had strong ties to masculinity and the performance of it, at no point prior to the mid-twentieth century had these relationships been so rapidly commercialized. University of Florida’s George Burgess, a shark biologist, says “the movie initiated a precipitous decline in U.S. shark populations, as thousands of fishers set out to catch trophy sharks after seeing *Jaws*.”¹⁸ Eilperin interviewed several trophy fishing operators, one of whom is Mark “the Shark” Quartiano. Quartiano, who prides himself on killing “at least 100,000 sharks over the course of his career”¹⁹, speaks candidly, revealing that his average customer is “a guy all pumped up, a big-game guy, kind of macho... Usually, it’s guys wanting to kill something.”²⁰ The braggadocio, the blood thirst, the overt appeal to conventional masculinity and its links to dominance are blatant marketing tools for any number of shark-fishing tournaments held along the East Coast of the United States. Jack Donlon, a tournament organizer, struggled to secure enrollment and attendance at his tournaments until, in 2007, he launched the “Are You Man Enough? Shark Challenge” tournament.²¹ The event enjoyed tremendous success, and he never looked back. *Jaws*, it can be reasonably said, glamorized the conquest and defeat of a formidable, ancient predator defined, simultaneously, as soulless, possessable object, calculating, vengeful enemy, and disposable affirmation of human identities.

Wolves have been subject to similar phenomena, though perhaps to a more vitriolic extent, as humans and wolves are both terrestrial species with similar taste in game, and have had more cause to directly encounter one another. With wolves, the hatred and disregard runs deep. Barry Holstun Lopez explores the human-wolf relationship at length in his book, *Of Wolves and Men*, detailing the many ways in which resentment toward wolves was fostered and executed, particularly in the imaginations and cultures of Western Europe and its colonial descendants. In the twentieth century, the country waged a war of extirpation on wolves. According to Lopez, “wolf killing goes much beyond predator control. ... A lot of people didn’t just kill wolves, they tortured them. They set wolves on fire and tore their jaws out and cut their Achilles tendons and turned dogs loose on them. ... In the twentieth century people pulled up alongside wolves in airplanes and snowmobiles and blew them apart with shotguns for sport. In Minnesota in the 1970s people choked Eastern timber wolves to death in snares to show their contempt for the animal’s designation as an endangered species”.²² Apart from the many pragmatic reasons that exist for killing wolves- scientific data collection, population management, economic gain, protection of private property- Lopez asserts that “killing wolves has to do with fear based on superstition”.²³ Lopez posits that “the hatred [of wolves] has religious roots: the wolf was the Devil in disguise”.²⁴ The Bible is perhaps the most well distributed, widely-read, carefully scrutinized, and influential work in existence. During that era of rapid colonization, extirpation, and genocide of the Americas, most if not all of the colonizers were gripped by the idea that they were enacting God’s will, hence the concept of Manifest Destiny. Taming the “wilderness” by converting it into “fertile fields” was God’s work, and the

wolf, being emblematic of all that is frightful and challenging about the wild, was incompatible with that objective. Again, Lopez maintains, “as civilized man matured and came to measure his own progress by his subjugation of the wilderness... the act of killing wolves became a symbolic act, a way to lash out at that enormous, inchoate obstacle: wilderness. Man demonstrated his own prodigious strength as well as his allegiance to God by killing wolves.”²⁵ Cultural fear and hatred toward wolves was represented and reproduced clearly in the stories told of them and the roles they held within folklore. Wolves became the now canonical werewolf, the antagonists in our most beloved and most reprinted children’s stories (*Little Red Riding Hood*, *Three Little Pigs*, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*), and remain shadowy, nefarious figures in even more contemporary works. It is true, however, that there is a reverence, awe, and mysticism surrounding wolves, an opinion that has been gaining traction among particularly the youth of the United States. The release of Universal Picture’s *Balto*, Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, Bones Studio’s *Wolf’s Rain*, Studio Ghibli’s *Princess Mononoke*, among others, have popularized wolves and created a space in which the mystique, power, and character of wolves is celebrated rather than scorned. This diverging perception of wolves, fueled and perpetuated by different stories, is complicating the discourse over current management strategies, and it will be interesting to see how the stories we tell of wolves evolve to both respond to and shape public perception.

Not all harms arise from negative portrayal. On several occasions, we can love animals to death just as effectively as we do when we hate them. Pixar’s 2003 *Finding Nemo*²⁶, directed by Andrew Stanton, buoyed demand for clownfish in households across the United States. Scientific American’s Sujata Gupta states that “the demand for tropical fish soared in 2004, when *Finding Nemo* prompted a buying frenzy,”²⁷ and James Prosek of National Geographic reports that “Vince Rado of Oceans, Reefs, and Aquariums (ORA), a hobby-fish hatchery and wholesaler ... [saw his] sales ... jump by 25%. ... Rado says he sells some 300,000 clownfish a year.”²⁸ While it is true that Rado breeds his fish, many aquarium species are collected from the wild using destructive methods. In another National Geographic article, Jane J. Lee writes that “some fisheries are really well-managed... But the Philippines and Indonesia- which together account for about 86 percent of the fish imported into the U.S. have some of the more poorly managed fisheries.”²⁹ Sodium cyanide is the method of choice in these areas, as it stuns the fish and allows collectors to easily scoop them up. However, use of this toxin is contributing to coral bleaching, which kills the reef and renders it unsuitable habitat for many marine species.³⁰ This, despite the fact the film was explicitly about how, perhaps, inappropriate it is to keep fish in aquariums. A study from the University of Bristol found that popularity of dog breeds follows a ten-year trend following the release of popular movies featuring certain breeds. According to the Daily Mail, “the 1943 blockbuster *Lassie* triggered a 40 percent increase of Collie registrations ... over the following two years.”³¹ More astounding still was the 100-fold spike in Old English Sheepdog registrations following the 1959 release of Disney’s *The Shaggy Dog*. Dalmatian registration after Disney’s *101 Dalmatians* in 1985 skyrocketed from 6,880 to 36,714. When Disney was gearing up to release its live-action *101 Dalmatians* in 1996, Dalmatian rescuers were bracing themselves for an influx of eventually unwanted pups. The Independent interviewed Phyllis Piper, founder of the Dalmatian Rescue Service, who expressed her anxieties over the then-upcoming film. “We had quite a lot of extra rescue work after the release of the first film,” she said, “We’re very worried this time, especially as they’ve chosen to use live puppies. The release of the cartoon video ... has already created extra demand for puppies.”³² The Humane Society of the United States has found that 25% of dogs in shelters are purebred³³, indicating that someone at some point paid a hefty sum to own them. With 1.2 million dogs being euthanized annually³⁴, it is likely that some of the surrendered pooches killed were the impulse-purchases of parents succumbing to their children’s wishes after they enjoyed a family film featuring the breed. These last few case studies have an important commonality; they are consumer-oriented, consumer-driven problems.

As artists, writers, producers of media, we have little control over how our audiences will perceive, commune with, and behave following exposure to our work. Like Peter Benchley, who was bewildered at the worldwide response to *Jaws*, we may wind up creating culture-shifting products whose reach and longevity may well outlast us. It might be that, despite our efforts, as in Andrew Stanton's case, to *discourage* a certain practice, we'll instead fertilize the market for it. Many of today's examples have been cast in a negative light, for I felt that was the angle from which they've been viewed the least. However, it cannot be said that those works of film, art, and literature did not have their accomplishments. Prosek concludes his National Geographic entry by saying that "although the movie may have harmed native populations [of tropical fish], Stanton's colorful little character also created a new group of nature lovers, eager to preserve clownfish and their reef homes."³⁵ Can I truthfully say I'd care about nature as deeply today were I not raised on informative and engrossing *National Geographic* and PBS programs, beautifully animated and masterfully told Disney films, and riveting, well-crafted books like *Watership Down*, *Kylie's Song*, *Verdi*, *Stellaluna*, and *Chickens Aren't the Only Ones*? I think not. That these works have profound flaws does not condemn them, and that they inspired some positive change does not absolve them. It is crucial to create, and to create fearlessly and joyfully; the only thing I would ask, as a takeaway from this article, is that we never create carelessly.

About the Author

Kylie will continue researching environmental and conservation narratives and will translate these ideas into accessible children's media. Kylie would like to thank Dr. Sarah Ray, Dr. Janelle Adsit, Dr. Nikola Hobbel, and Dr. Brandice Guerra for their help with her premier children's story, for which she received an ideaFest grant. Readers can contact her about this article and her research at bitbybit.dabblestudio@gmail.com

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