

# Othering and Fear: Cultural Values and Hiro's Race in Thomas & Friends' *Hero of the Rails*

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## Abstract

Television is a significant socialization tool for children to learn about their social worlds. The children's brand, Thomas & Friends, targets preschool audiences with manifest messages about friendship and utility as well as troubling, latent messages about race, ethnicity, and difference. Through critical visual and verbal discursive analyses of the film, *Hero of the Rails*, we expose Thomas & Friends' investment in racial hierarchies despite its broader message of friendship. We identify four ways that Hiro is "othered" in the film: (1) his glamorized description as "strange," (2) his consistently heavily accented voice, (3) his Japanese origin story, and (4) his pigmentation and powerlessness. Using theories of "othering," we argue that the representation of cultural difference to the preschooler audience is fearful and propagates racist discourses of yellow peril and Orientalism.

## Keywords

children's television, race, othering, power, critical discourse analysis

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## Introduction

Have you ever seen a child sitting in front of the television, watching an animated feature? Lacking the critical faculties of an adult, the preschooler is more likely to absorb manifest and latent messages contained in mass media (Pettigrew, Rosenberg, Ferguson, Houghton, & Wood, 2013). The cultural values imbued within the animated film might go undetected to the casual observer, perhaps until a child espouses a disconcerting line from the movie in front of an attentive adult. This experience happened to an author of this study and provides the impetus for closer scrutiny of the popular children's series *Thomas & Friends*.

In this study, we focus on the character, Hiro, who is an older train discovered by Thomas, in the movie *Hero of the Rails* (2009). This film was the first time that a location outside of the United Kingdom is shown, since the stories were first published in the 1940s. It is also the first time Thomas is given his own voice (Strauss, 2009) and is the first feature to be one continuous storyline, not broken up by songs or interstitials (Healy, n.d.). Hiro's difference is communicated throughout the film, from the description of his homeland, to his Asian attributes, and his varied treatment from the central characters. Using theories of "othering," we argue that the representation of cultural difference to the intended audience is fearful and propagates racist discourses of yellow peril and Orientalism through depicting Hiro as menacing and in need of saving by a European (Chow, 1993; Frayling, 2014; Marchetti, 1994).

After presenting a brief overview of our theoretical framework, we analyze the ways othering occurs and is normalized in the film's imagery, narration, and conversations. Despite its commercial popularity, *Thomas & Friends* is an underexplored topic in academic research. Besides situating our research within the larger body of work on children's media, we conclude this essay with practical implications of children's exposure to cartoons that represent cultural difference in unhealthy ways, imbued with fear and othering.

## Othering and Racialization

Othering is the process by which one group reproduces and reinforces distinctions, dominance, and subordination against those without power (Al-Saji, 2010; Johnson et al., 2004; Said, 1978). Othering may occur when one group emphasizes a commonality, while belittling the lack of that commonality in the other. Othering may focus on axes of difference that are based on gender (de Beauvoir, 1949; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996), race (Olaniyan, 1996; Said, 1978), and more. Often part of colonialism, othering contains negative judgments on the value of existing, native populations to provide justification for imperialist regimes to gain control (Said, 1978). Rather than viewing the other as an agent being deserving of the same respect afforded to those in the dominant

group, and instead of examining the institutional barriers that facilitates the other's current position (Johnson et al., 2004), dominant group members may assign blame, unfairly and inaccurately, to the othered individual. Othering may be part of identity formation and may lead to marginalization, particularly when practices of othering involve assigning unfavorable traits to populations different from the dominant group (Joshi, 2006).

An example of othering that belies the social construction of race is racialization, processes of difference often tied to cultural presumptions and physical traits. For example, racialization may occur through clothing, such that veils are marked as Muslim (Al-Saji, 2010) or brown skin color is interpreted as non-Christian (Joshi, 2006). Racialization typically occurs when cultures from under-represented populations are depicted as "exotic" (Vasquez, 2010). Racialization normalizes unfair treatment of the othered group, using the social construction of racial difference built around certain clothing, skin color, prominent accents, and other characteristics as cues for discrimination.

A prominent distribution system for racialization is institutionalized in mass media. Television, movies, books, websites, and other channels for communication spread visual and textual messages about what constitutes racial difference, and consequently, what expectations in treatment should occur based on those racialized presumptions. While adults may possess critical reasoning to observe and overcome systemic biases in mass media representations of race, preschool children are especially vulnerable to the overt and subtle messages in their media diet. Between the ages of 3 and 5, children learn about acceptable behavior through exposure. Practices of othering, then, that target preschoolers should be evaluated even more carefully, during these initial stages of the formation of their attitudes toward different races. Through intentional choices of communicating difference in race that draws upon historically Orientalist and yellow peril discourses, Thomas & Friends situates their depiction of Hiro as fear-instilling against racialized others in vulnerable children viewers (Buckingham, 2002; Frayling, 2014; Hall, 2000; Holland, 2004; Lemish, 2007; Rideout, Vandewater, & Wartell, 2003; Rose, 1984).

## Children's Media

Children's media are, in many ways, about the relationship between adults and children (Buckingham, 2002; Rose, 1984). Children's media are largely produced *for* children rather than *by* them (Buckingham, 2002). Thus, the messages in children's media inform us about adults' perspectives on the world and appropriate social behavior, and these are messages designed for children to become socialized accordingly. Children's media reflect adults' "fantasies or desires" more than children's inclinations because these media "represent adult constructions, both of childhood and (by implication) of adulthood itself" (Buckingham, 2002, p. 6).

Earlier research has underscored the significance of television as a socialization tool for children to gain knowledge, absorb values, learn beliefs, and appropriate culture (Singer & Singer, 2001; Tobin, 2000). Children are active participants in the television viewing experience, which helps them construct a sense of social reality and “define their own place within” it (Lemish, 2007, p. 101). They incorporate messages from the world around them, including those from media, to make sense of the world. Children are “sensitive to the underlying themes in the messages that society gives them” (Sugarman, 2007, p. 1, as cited in Wilton, 2015). But, when the media representations they consume reproduce racist, sexist, and other problematic stereotypes, and children believe those representations to be accurate, “then the potential for cultural change is diminished” (Ward, 2002, p. 5). As a major content producer in the world of children’s media, Disney has been much studied and critiqued for its representations of various cultural groups. Notions of individualism and essentialism dominate many Disney films, which result in stereotypical representations of race and gender (Booker, 2009). For example, when depicting a story about a Chinese heroine, Mulan, Disney infuses the story with notions of individualism and minimizes the collectivist messages of the myth (Ward, 2002). By consistently privileging one cultural worldview over another, Disney’s messages disadvantage those who do not abide by Disney’s worldview. In a critique of *Pocahontas*, Buescher and Ono (1996) argue that turning the story of Pocahontas and the slaughter of Native Americans into a sweet love story serves to reduce racial domination as harmless. Disney’s retelling of this story in their 1995 film is ultimately a colonial narrative retold through neocolonial rhetoric (Buescher & Ono, 1996). By ignoring the violence and long-lasting effects of colonialism, and the racial domination therein, Disney adds to the disadvantaging of an already marginalized group. Although Thomas & Friends has been overlooked as a site for the (re-)production of racism, their depiction of Hiro, like those found in Disney, contributes to the reinforcement of racist portrayals of non-White others.

Children today grow up in heavily mediated environments and the impacts of this exposure especially for very young children are evolving. As of 2003, most American children, aged 0 to 6, grow up in households where the television is a “near-constant presence,” with 65% of 0- to 6-year-olds living in homes in which the television is on half the time or more, regardless if anyone is watching, and 36% living in households in which the television is on “always” or “most of the time” (Rideout et al., 2003). By 2013, Common Sense Media reported that, while television remains the dominant media platform, American children are increasingly engaging with mobile devices like smart phones and tablets as well (Common Sense Research, 2013). Three quarters of American children have access to mobile devices, 38% of children under 2 years have used a mobile device to engage with media content, and 17% of them use these devices daily (Common Sense Research, 2013). The American Academy of Pediatrics revised

its recommendations in October 2015, acknowledging that “‘screen time’ is becoming simply ‘time’” (Brown, Shifrin, & Hill, 2015). A key recommendation across all these forms of media is that content quality matters: “The quality of content is more important than the platform or time spent with media” (Brown et al., 2015). In light of these findings and recommendations, it is crucial that we critically evaluate the messages that children are exposed to in our increasingly mediated lives.

Parents, caregivers, scholars, educators, and other stakeholders must consider the overt and hidden messages that children are exposed to via television programs and evaluate whether these are messages that we want them to encounter. Like other kinds of communication, children’s media carry a variety of manifest and latent messages—messages that indicate behaviors, beliefs, and values that adults want children to learn and adopt. In the Thomas & Friends stories, manifest messages include concepts like friendship maintenance and problem solving. The brand’s website claims that children’s “friendship” with Thomas can help them “begin to understand important life lessons about problem solving and their emotions” (HIT Entertainment, 2015b). However, some latent messages in the stories raise troubling questions about other lessons children may be learning concurrently. Latent messages about the observation, treatment, acknowledgement, and valuation of social difference are of particular concern in a number of the Thomas & Friends storylines. The crucial intersection of analysis in this study occurs when children are exposed to Thomas & Friends’ messages about the unfamiliar, which we argue has been treated with fear and racism.

## Thomas & Friends Brand

As part of our analysis, it is necessary to situate this popular children’s media brand historically and culturally. Thomas & Friends has its roots in the Reverend W. Awdry book series, *Railway Series*, which was first published in 1943 in the United Kingdom. When Awdry’s son, Christopher, fell sick with measles, Awdry created stories about talking trains to entertain him. The clergyman wrote down the stories, adding illustrations, and his wife encouraged him to show the stories to a publisher. He wrote 26 books, and his son eventually added 14 more (Sherwood, 2010).

Thomas is an anthropomorphized blue steam locomotive on the fictional island of Sodor (Carrington & Denscombe, 1987). The stories focus on the adventures of Thomas and his friends, who are also anthropomorphized trains, cars, trucks, and cranes on the island. Britt Allcroft, a British television and film writer, director, and producer, turned the books into a successful television series in the United Kingdom and later in the United States. The first television episode aired in the United Kingdom in 1984. Allcroft sold her company, The Britt Allcroft Company, to HIT Entertainment (now a subsidiary of

Mattel) in 2002, making them the current owners of the Thomas brand (Sherwood, 2010).

HIT Entertainment is a preschool entertainment company associated with other popular brands, including Barney the Dinosaur, Angelina Ballerina, and Bob the Builder. The Thomas & Friends brand largely centers on the television shows and films but also entails video games, mobile applications, books, clothing, toys, and other merchandise, as well as two (with one under construction) amusement parks worldwide (Sherwood, 2010).

The television series airs in more than 185 territories and in more than 30 languages. In the United States, children can watch the show on the Public Broadcasting Service and the cable network, Sprout. Thomas & Friends television shows and movies are also available for streaming on Netflix and for streaming and purchase on Amazon Prime. The Thomas & Friends website has more than 7 million page views per month in the United Kingdom and almost 12 million page views per month in the United States (HIT Entertainment, 2015a). Thomas & Friends is a powerhouse brand with global reach in the world of children's entertainment.

Although viewpoints on gender, race, class, and other social differences have changed over the past 80 years, the cultural values imbued in Thomas & Friends have remained constant since its inception (Wilton, 2015). Some have critiqued the show for its lack of female trains (Swinford & Rudgard, 2013), while others focus on latent messages that class differences are to be respected and unquestioned. Indeed, Thomas and his friends "jockey for positions just below that of the bullying aristocrat Sir Topham Hatt [the man who runs the railway on Sodor] but never seek to rise to his level" (Roake, 2011). Working together, supporting the community, and "being really useful" (the oft-repeated mantra cited by Thomas and his friends) are the brand's key messages. However, when these beliefs are "combined with an unquestioning, uncritical, and fearful approach to authority," they become problematic, raising "questions about the characteristics of good citizens" conveyed in the shows and to its young audience (Wilton, 2015).

To these critiques, we add our analyses of the social hierarchy built around race that is demonstrated in *Hero of the Rails*. Building upon previous literature about the ways that children's media encourage behavior deemed socially acceptable, we draw attention to how social difference regarding race is depicted. It is important to evaluate the messages sent to children through these media about what to expect in adulthood. More specifically, in the case of *Hero of the Rails* (2009), we discover problematic latent messages toward social difference embedded in the film, which raises questions about adults' understanding of who is considered the "other," how to interact with and manage the "other," and what we intend to teach children about such encounters. Our work is among the first to critique Thomas and his friends in scholarly literature, particularly their relationship to racialized difference vis-à-vis Hiro.

## Data and Methods

Building upon the coauthor's past work (Pasztor & Korn, 2015), we have conducted a critical reading of the movie, *Hero of the Rails* (2009), informed by critical visual and verbal discursive analyses. We examined how Hiro was introduced, referenced, portrayed, illustrated, voiced, omitted, and characterized. Critical discourse analysts interrogate the sociocultural meanings within and implied by media to call attention to issues of power and justice inherent in popular depictions of society. Critical discourse analyses focus on language, sound, images, and speakers concurrently to examine the complex, constructed representations and relationships among these elements as artifacts of social change (Caldas-Coulthard, 2007; Fairclough, 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2008). Traditionally, the show's episodes used narration (including famous White male narrators like Ringo Starr, George Carlin, and Alec Baldwin) that also voiced the characters' dialogue, much like a parent might do while reading to a child. In 2009, rather than relying upon narrators, Thomas and the other characters received their own voices for the first time, as well as computer-generated imagery animation in the Public Broadcasting Service special, *Hero of the Rails*. This film also marked the first time that a location outside of the main setting of Sodor was featured, presenting a prime opportunity to study difference in origin (Strauss, 2009).

At nearly 60 minutes long, *Hero of the Rails* (2009) is a movie whose title refers to Thomas as the savior of the character, Hiro. For our study, both authors watched the entire movie with enough repetition to conduct in-depth critical analyses of the visual and verbal discourses, paying special attention to the latent and manifest messages and markers about Hiro and racialized difference contained in imagery, narration, and dialogue among the characters (Bach, 2007; Lynn & Lea, 2005; Wolfenstein, 2002). We situate our method in line with existing criticism that assesses direct and indirect messages by mass media to an uninformed audience susceptible to their influence for impression formation and opinion judgment, particularly around the production of the socially distant "other" (Caldas-Coulthard, 2007; Goldstein, 2007). We examine this particular movie content targeting preschoolers to understand how cultural difference is communicated and what reactions to othering are portrayed as socially acceptable to address how the cinematic construction of the other as "alien" aids in the perpetuation and propagation of racism (Flores, 2014 in Alexander et al. 2014). As Greenberg (2002) has found in previous research, the importance of cartoons may be overlooked, but cartoons seize and reinforce common sense through their visual discourse. The visual and the verbal represent social language (Albers, 2011): characters' facial, body, and spoken expressions in reaction to Hiro instruct the viewer. Movies inform our cultural awareness, providing cues into how to detect and interpret social difference between the dominant and the other (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001). Examining the visual and verbal discourses contained within *Hero of the Rails* allows us to focus on obvious and subtle cues

about racialized difference embedded within the movie (Anderson, 1997). Through critical discourse analyses, we expose Thomas & Friends' investment in racial hierarchies despite its broader message of friendship.

### **Hero of the Rails Synopsis**

*Hero of the Rails* (2009) tells the story of Thomas meeting a train named Hiro. There are three key characters: Thomas, Hiro, and Spencer. Thomas is the young, blue train at the center of the series. His youth is communicated through physical characteristics in his face and the sound of his voice. He is sometimes mischievous but is generally good-hearted. Hiro is an old engine from another land; he is broken down and has been abandoned in a deserted area of Sodor. Spencer is a large, fast, silver engine with a deep, booming voice whose primary job is to transport the Duke and Duchess of Boxford. He is usually only on Sodor when the Duke and Duchess are there, and he tends to bully the Sodor engines. Unlike most of the Sodor engines whose faces are flat, Spencer's face is angled such that he literally has to look down on the other engines.

Early in the film, Spencer teases Thomas about being small and weak and challenges Thomas to a race while carrying heavy loads. During the race, Thomas' brakes fail, and he crashes through an old track, leading him to discover Hiro. After their initial introductions, Hiro tells his origin story about being brought over from another island "a long, long way away." He was one of the first trains on Sodor and was dubbed the "Master of the Railway" both in his homeland and on Sodor. Through overuse, Hiro broke down. While waiting for parts to arrive, which never came, he hid, leading him to be forgotten. Thomas' first reaction is to tell Sir Topham Hatt, but Hiro protests out of fear of being "scrapped" (i.e., destroyed) because Hiro is broken and not "really useful." Thomas then agrees not to tell Sir Topham Hatt and decides that he will save Hiro by collecting the parts himself to fix Hiro.

The film revolves around Thomas collecting parts and avoiding Spencer's suspicious and prying eyes. Eventually, Thomas tells his friends about Hiro, and they then also help to collect parts for Hiro. Before the last part can be installed, Spencer comes too close to finding Hiro. Out of fear of discovery, Thomas forces Hiro to "chuff" (i.e., run) away. Spencer chases them, but the high speed causes Hiro's hodgepodge of parts to fly off him as they race, and he breaks down again. Soon after, Thomas reluctantly and fearfully tells Sir Topham Hatt about Hiro. Sir Topham Hatt remembers the famous "Master of the Railway" and orders Thomas to take Hiro to the Steamworks (i.e., the repair yard) to be fixed. At the very end, Hiro decides to return to his homeland because he is homesick, and the film ends with a bon voyage celebration for Hiro.



## **Manifest Message: The Utility of Friendship**

Included within the manifest messages of the film is the social construction of friendship. Early in the film, in reaction to Spencer's insults about Thomas' strength and calling him a "tiny, toy, tank engine," the other Sodor engines defend Thomas' abilities, saying things like, "Thomas is *not* a toy," "he's a really useful engine," and "he's very strong." Key in their defense of Thomas is the emphasis on his utility because being "a really useful engine" is the metric that Sir Topham Hatt uses to judge all engines. After Spencer presents the challenge and leaves, Thomas worries that he will lose the contest. Percy chimes in to support Thomas when he says, "You're the number one engine on Sodor, and you'll show Spencer that Sodor engines are more special than he is. I know that because you're my best friend!" From the description and behavior of Spencer shown in the movie, it does appear that Spencer is a faster engine than Thomas. Nevertheless, Percy's pep talk helps Thomas believe in himself. When the contest begins the next morning, Thomas' friends are there to support him. The version of friendship presented in these early exchanges is that friends support and defend one another, particularly during a conflict. However, the fact is that Thomas is smaller, weaker, and younger than Spencer. While it is positive that Thomas' friends defend him, it is troubling that they encourage Thomas to participate in an activity that could (and does) endanger him.

Messages about friendship and helping others appear numerous times during interactions with Hiro as well. When Thomas and Hiro first meet, the narrator asserts that Hiro is Thomas' "new" friend multiple times. After the narrator establishes that a friendship exists between Thomas and Hiro, Thomas enters into a role as savior of Hiro, not questioning the context that led to Hiro's current condition or offering to bring Hiro surreptitiously to the Steamworks for aid. As part of the savior process, Thomas enrolls his friends, and when he introduces Percy to Hiro, he declares, "This is my best friend, Percy." Hiro responds by lauding Thomas to Percy, "You have a very special best friend. I think that's because you are special too." Percy asks Hiro if he has best friends, and Hiro responds that they are at home. But later, while waiting for parts, Hiro suddenly declares Thomas to be his "best friend." Hiro never expresses anger or sadness that he was forgotten; rather, all of his emotions are centered upon gratitude to his savior, Thomas. Hiro's adulation of Thomas crests at the movie's end when he has been repaired: "You have been very kind, Thomas. The best friend I have ever had." Thomas, as Hiro's savior, trumps all of the other friends Hiro previously had in his home island. In these interactions, young viewers receive manifest messages that friends help each other, treat each other with kindness, and may be elevated to "best" status above other friends, depending on how helpful (or useful) that friend is.

## Latent Messages

Despite these positive messages about friendship, there are concerning messages about how to treat outsiders, particularly those from different ethnic groups. Certainly, Spencer's bullying is problematic, and he is punished at the end of the film. However, he is not punished for bullying; he is punished for not being useful. But, Spencer is a member of the dominant group, which we discern based on his accent and primary job of transporting the Duke and Duchess of Boxford. Hiro is clearly different, and this difference is communicated in a number of ways. We have identified at least four ways that Hiro is "othered" in the film: (1) his glamorized description as "strange," (2) his consistently heavily accented voice, (3) his Japanese origin story, and (4) his pigmentation and powerlessness. Through these processes of othering, fear about Hiro and his symbolism as Asian, which is conflated with Japanese in this movie, is promoted. This fear is necessary to create race-based, ethnic-specific discourse about British cultural distance and superiority to Japan (Hinton, 2014).

### *Othering as Explicitly "Strange"*

The power of media is evident in how media sets the dominant population as natural, normal, and even positive, while the different population is othered as odd, fearful, and disdainful (Frayling, 2014; Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, & Wise, 2006; Marchetti, 1994). The viewer's first encounter with Hiro involves Thomas. The context for the place of their initial meeting is described as a "strange" part of Sodor, which sets up fear toward Hiro. The choice to focus on racialized difference as terror is crucial in setting Hiro up as foreign in the colonialist logic of Euro-Americans having authority over Asian (Chow, 1993; Marchetti, 1994). "Strange" is repeated in the actual description of Hiro himself, as the narrator states that Thomas had "never met an engine as old and as strange" as Hiro. Moreover, before the audience sees Hiro, we hear his voice in the distance saying, "Hello?" adding to the mystery surrounding him at this initial meeting. While the narrator explains that Thomas feels scared when he first sees Hiro, there is no mention of Hiro's feelings upon encountering Thomas. When Hiro gives a "little, frightened smile" that makes him look "kind and gentle," Thomas feels less scared. After Hiro speaks a little more, Thomas is described as being frozen from both fear and wonder. The narrator explains that Thomas "couldn't take his eyes off this extraordinary engine." The emphasis on Hiro as strange and extraordinary follows a long mass media tradition of othering individuals of color through exoticism (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Cavallero, 2010; Vasquez, 2010). Reflecting Western imagined geographies of the dominant and the different, Thomas represents the normal, and Hiro is othered through his connection to a "strange" physical and symbolic space that is unlike (the rest of) Sodor (Staszak, 2014).

The narration and character dialogue in this first interaction suggest to viewers that fear is an appropriate first response to people who seem different. This fear is rooted in cinematic depictions of Asians termed the “yellow peril” in which racist responses of European terror and dread in reaction to alien cultures as menacing and portentous are justified as rational (Chow, 1993; Frayling, 2014; Marchetti, 1994). Thomas’ first words to Hiro are an introduction, but this is quickly followed by the questions: “Why are you here? Where have you been?” After they talk a little more, Thomas declares that he wants to help Hiro, his “sad, new friend”, and feels very proud of himself when he develops a plan to achieve this goal. In movies, yellow peril and Orientalist discourses conjoin in their construction of the authority of the Euro-American West over the Asian East (Said, 1978). Fear and fantasy are co-occurring in Thomas & Friends’ depiction of Hiro in terms of a cartoon embodiment of Japan as a train of failure in need of saving by Europeans. Orientalist and yellow peril narratives cast the Asian, after passing the suspicious judgment of a European, in need of rescuing by that European, who is the only source of guidance for the Asian (Marchetti, 1994). This film propagates that yellow peril discourse by depicting Hiro as helpless and Thomas as savior. Thomas’ initial questions, while asked with an innocent tone, demand that Hiro explain and justify his presence. In this interaction, Hiro’s race and national identity are conflated, interrogated, and policed by Thomas in ways that evoke how Britain and the United States have constructed national identity around immigration (Carter, Green, & Halpern, 1996). Thomas’ confrontation with Hiro symbolizes how movies help to define dominant and minority memberships as tied to distinctly national and cultural selves (Mercer, 1994): Hiro’s identity is marginalized, while Thomas’ identity is centralized. The questions Thomas asks are reminiscent of controversial laws in some areas of the United States, such as Arizona’s SB 1070 (i.e., “show your papers”) law targeting immigrants and New York City’s “stop-and-frisk” law allowing law enforcement to stop and frisk pedestrians based on “reasonable suspicion.”

By contrast, the film’s introduction of Spencer is markedly different than Hiro’s. Granted, Spencer is a returning character that the Sodor engines already know and dislike. Similar to Hiro, Spencer is an outsider, but as mentioned earlier, his accent and connection to nobility mark him as being similar to the Sodor engines. The film opens with the engines going about their days when suddenly a silver train speeds past each of them causing them to shake in its wake. Later, the trains discuss the speeding train, trying to discern who it was when they realize it was Spencer. The film cuts to Spencer pulling into the station where he proclaims, “Hello Sodor! What do you know? I’m here for the summer.” Spencer explains that he will be on Sodor for the summer to complete “a very important job” helping to build a summerhouse for the Duke and Duchess. After he leaves, the Sodor trains grumble about having to endure Spencer for so long.

Based on Spencer's aggressive behavior on the tracks and his pretentiousness, it is understandable that they do not like him. Spencer may physically look down on the other engines because of his facial structure, but he also looks down on them based on their lower social position in the hierarchy of Sodor society. Spencer serves a duke and duchess, one of the highest ranks of nobility in English society, while the Sodor engines serve a mere railway manager. Spencer is an outsider, but he is not *othered* in the way that Hiro is. In fact, Spencer sees himself as being of higher status, as a more powerful member within the already dominant group. The Sodor engines may complain about Spencer, but they do not question his position in the social hierarchy. He is annoying, but he is not *strange* or *exotic* to Thomas and his friends.

In the context of this film, Thomas & Friends' preschool aged fans are exposed to these mediated reproductions and reinforcement of dominance and difference from a very young age. Despite the friendship that Thomas and Hiro quickly develop, Hiro is racialized in the way that he is set apart from Thomas and the other Sodor engines as *strange*, exotic, and even *extraordinary* (Vasquez, 2010). Hiro is only accepted after he explains himself to the dominant group member. In this first interaction, then, Hiro is immediately constructed as "other" and Thomas' reactions of (a) fear and (b) demanding an explanation may be teaching young audiences that such race-based responses should be imitated when encountering racialized difference in their own lives.

### *Othering as Accented Voice*

Hiro's othering moves from the narrator descriptions, to the visible and audible traits built into making him appear different. While the narrator alerts the viewer that a fearful character is emerging, a voice with a distinctively Asian accent is heard. Set apart from the American and British accents of the narrator and other characters, Hiro's accent defines his difference. His Asian accent is strong, persistent, and consistent throughout the film. The choice to bestow such a significant accent on Hiro perpetuates the belief of Asians and Asian Americans as the "forever immigrant" (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007) and models to children that discrimination and interrogation in terms of differential treatment based on accented English is acceptable. Consequential to the choice to give Hiro such a strong accent is the teaching to discriminate based on English-speaking issues; exposure to cartoons, like this one, is part of how children are taught to perpetuate racism. It is possible to have an engine come from another place without an accent native to the home country, just as this Asian American author born in the United States does not speak English with a Thai accent, but with an Alabamian one (Korn, 2015a). But Thomas & Friends do not treat racial diversity as normal, expected, or positive; in *Hero of the Rails*, racial difference arouses suspicions and incites fear and must be accompanied by a distinctively Asian accent. When Hiro speaks, his sound is immediately marked as abnormal

to the ways that everyone else speaks on the entire island. What's remarkable is not that Hiro's voice sounds so different, but that all of the other engine accents seem so similar to one another. Aligned with American mass media representations of Asians, Hiro's voice connotes his foreign and outsider status (Davé, 2005).

### *Othering as Sonically and Visually Japanese*

The danger inherent in broadcasting stereotypes through commercialized representations of Asians was foretold nearly 40 years ago (Wong, 1978): the endurance of those stereotypes spread by media institutions appears in Hiro today. In terms of introducing Hiro as "Asian" and a different race from the other trains, Thomas & Friends upholds the history of cinematic depictions relying upon stereotypes of Japan (which is conflated with Asia generally in this movie) to communicate to the viewer that the race is different, strange, and exotic (Marchetti, 1994).

While audiences may presume that Hiro is an outsider based on his distinctive accent, the elaborate visuals and sounds surrounding Hiro's origin story confirm his outsider position. The origin story has two parts: Hiro's life in his unnamed country of origin and his arrival on Sodor. Hiro begins by explaining that he "came here a long, long time ago from another island" and he was "one of the first steam engines" on Sodor. Then the film transitions to animation resembling ukiyo-e style artwork, suggesting that Hiro is from Japan. There are seven ukiyo-e styled scenes that appear in a montage. They include visual markers that connect Hiro specifically to Japan, such as snowcapped mountains, pagoda-style architecture, cherry blossoms, bonsai trees, paper lanterns, and a man and woman wearing kimonos. Moreover, just as Hiro starts to tell his story, there is a brief and subtle sound of an instrument that resembles the tonkori, a traditional Japanese string instrument. When explaining how he ended up on Sodor, Hiro states that "he came in a very big ship" and that the journey "lasted many days" and he sailed "many seas." Although Thomas & Friends borrow Japanese artwork, geography, flora, dress, buildings, and instruments, *Hero of the Rails* never explicitly references Hiro as Japanese. The latent message is that these constructions of the Asian "other" are different substantively from Sodor. The visual and sonic depictions of Hiro's home country draw from Orientalist conceptions that the West is mainstream, while Japan is symbolic of the strange (Roberts, 2011; Said, 1978).

As Hiro narrates his origin story, the visual discourse deepens in symbolism to represent Hiro's country of origin as old, simple, and unrefined by modern standards. The second part of his story, arriving on Sodor, includes a sudden shift in visual and sonic style to black and white animation with the faint sound of an old film reel, complimenting the animation itself whose screen edges become frayed to appear like a reel of 16 millimeter film. Hiro is first shown

lifted by a crane off the ship and lowered onto a dock where four humans stand and watch, before he rides away on his own wheels on the railroad tracks. The visual contrast between the two parts of Hiro's story is striking. The imagery surrounding Hiro's homeland is colorful and integrated with nature, characterizations of Japan that have been typified as "feminine" and "alluring" (Dobson & Hook, 2003). In contrast, on Sodor, the color palette comprised harsh tones of black and white, punctuated by large cranes and giant ships, to represent industrial development. The Anglo-Japanese relationship reflects a social hierarchy of England as the stronger, masculine political center and Japan as the Far East at the fringes, catching up to England's modern empire through mimicking its navy ships, housing architecture, and postal service (Dobson & Hook, 2003; Popham, 2013). Animation contrasting Hiro's old and new home shows Sodor as the natural progression from an agricultural society focused on values of harmony, to a modern society centered upon values of instrumentality (Lee, 2004). The depiction of the move from an undesirable, unrefined Japan to the superior, innovative Britain reflects English attitudes toward Japan developed over the past 400 years of shared history as two islands governed by monarchies (Popham, 2013). Hiro's new homeland is not just different; it is depicted as a preferred Western cultural product (Eguchi, 2013), better for him due to Britain's modernity and industrialization, consistent with tropes of colonialism and imperialism (Emery, 1997; Wilton, 2015); ironically, during the 1980s and 1990s, Japan's own pursuit of modernity signaled a shift toward Westernization (Sekimoto, 2014). No questions are raised about who has moved (enslaved) Hiro from his home or whether he contributed in the decision-making process to migrate. Moreover, the problem that Hiro faces as a broken train whose absence is overlooked is tied to his ethnic origin as Japanese: portraying Hiro as deficient places the blame on Hiro for his helpless situation (Hinton, 2014; Mercer, 1994). Rather than questioning Sir Topham Hatt's culpability in contributing to Hiro's decayed state, Hiro is victimized. He is marked as other through visual and verbal narratives that leave aside issues of agency, power, and control. The young audience member is exposed to Hiro as an othered engine from a homeland different from and inferior to Sodor.

### *Otherring as Pigmented and Powerless*

After Hiro is repaired at the end of the film, viewers see a new rendition of Hiro. Thomas and his friends gather at the Steamworks where Hiro emerges from a dark, steamy tunnel, returning us to the sense of wonder and mystery surrounding him from the beginning of the film. The other engines' eyes widen, and they gasp, as Hiro appears. Hiro's changes are startling and explicit. For the first time in this movie, Hiro is black with gold trim and a red underbelly. His whistle is deeper and softer than the Sodor engines' more high-pitched whistles. Moreover, most of the Sodor steam engines are blue, green, and red, making Hiro stand out

as especially unique, given his mostly black and gold coloring. Hiro's new physical coloring becomes part of his racial composition: "race . . . privileges ocular-centrism" and "operates based on optically-perceived skin color; race is presumed to manifest in skin pigmentation" (Korn, 2015b; Rottenberg, 2003).

Finally, Hiro reveals that he misses his homeland, and so Thomas convinces Sir Topham Hatt to send Hiro back. Again, the message that Hiro's voice must be mediated through Thomas is shown, as it takes the power of Thomas' affirmation, besides Hiro's acknowledgment, that he would like to spend the rest of his life in the land that houses his actual friends, for Hiro to be allowed to return to his homeland. He may not leave on his own accord; like those in Asian countries colonized by imperial rule (Emery, 1997; Said, 1978), Hiro must receive permission from Sir Topham Hatt to travel outside of Sodor, even though Hiro is older, was forgotten earlier by Sir Topham Hatt and his colleagues, and Hiro nearly dies in providing labor for Sir Topham Hatt's company. The latent message contained herein is that those that are othered have boundaries for their agency that regulate difference within society and that are policed by those in the dominant population (Vats & Nishime, 2013). Just as Thomas was depicted as empowered to interrogate Hiro upon meeting him, Sir Topham Hatt is depicted as the one in control of Hiro's fate, not Hiro himself.

Another implication of Hiro's departure is that Thomas & Friends return to a racially homogeneous group, reflecting the normalized state that those privileged to be part of the dominant population often enjoy by virtue of their recognizable and recognized membership in the majority (Lipsitz, 2006). The movie concludes with a restoration of the Euro-American hegemony, while allowing the only visible reminder of racial diversity to depart. By allowing the issue of racial diversity to go away, literally and figuratively, the movie affirms the belief that unexamined issues of prejudice are problems only when the "other" is present visibly, which normalizes dominant discourse while erasing minority discourse (Gilroy, 1982). The end state of racial homogeneity in Thomas & Friends represents the racialized privilege of the dominant population that persists from the legacy of the yellow peril (Matthews, 1964).

## Implications and Conclusions

Surprisingly, little academic press has paid attention to Thomas & Friends, even though its commercial success has instructed generations of children about values related to utility and difference. The program's target audience of preschoolers reaches a particularly vulnerable population exposed to lessons about confronting those in different situations from the ones featured as part of the dominant population of the characters in the program. In the film, *Hero of the Rails* (2009), we observed manifest messages about friendship and latent messages about the acknowledgment and treatment of social difference, which also raises questions about adults' understanding of how to manage the "other" and

what we intend to teach children about such encounters. Specifically, through visual and verbal discursive analyses, we identified several ways that Hiro is “othered” in the film: his description as “strange,” his voice as accented, his origin story as Japanese, his physicality as pigmented, and his status as powerless. Just as important as the aforementioned ways that Hiro is othered, the context that enables the process of othering to be accepted as normal is problematic. Due to their heavy exposure and use of media, preschoolers are a susceptible audience for these challenging manifest and latent messages of *Hero of the Rails* and *Thomas & Friends*.

As scholar-activists, we have an obligation to raise scholarly and public awareness about the perpetuation of fear and racism entailed within cartoons and animated films targeting preschool minds. Rather than presenting racialized others as helpless and incomplete without the dominant population’s assistance, *Hero of the Rails* (2009) could have introduced its first character outside of Sodor with storylines that emphasized Hiro’s agency, showing how differences are not defective, but constructive. Celebrating Hiro as a character of worth throughout his portrayal in the movie would have made Hiro the real hero of the rails instead of Thomas, a different and better lesson worth sharing with the world’s future cohort of multicultural leaders.

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