

## The hybrid exhibits of the story museum: The child as creative artist and the limits to hands-on participation

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### Abstract

Since the Brooklyn Children's Museum opened in 1899, the concept of the children's museum has evolved internationally as a non-profit public institution focused on informal family-centred education and interactive play environments (Acosta 2000; Allen 2004). The majority of these museums highlight science education; however, over the past decade, a new specialized institution has emerged in the form of the children's story museum that concentrates on children's literature, storytelling, and picture book illustration. These story museums feature childhood artifacts through the curatorial and display conventions of museums and art galleries, in combination with the active play environments and learning stations of science-oriented children's museums. These exhibits also reflect the changing place of the museum as an institution in the age of the 'participatory museum': a movement away from collections towards interactive curatorial practices across physical and digital archives (Simon 2010; Janes 2011). Framed by cross-disciplinary theoretical and methodological approaches from critical children's museology, picture book theory, and children's culture studies, this analysis draws upon selected examples (2014-2018) of curatorial practices, exhibits, and the spatial/ architectural design from *Seven Stories: National Centre for Children's Books* (Newcastle, UK), the Hans Christian Andersen Haus/Tinderbox (Odense, Denmark), and *The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art* (Amherst, MA, USA). These institutions provide distinctive venues to examine the tensions between discourses of museums as institutions that house collections of material artifacts including children's literature texts, discourses of the creative child and 'hands-on' engagement (Ogata 2013); and discourses of critical engagement and participatory museums. While these exhibits affirm idealized representations of childhood to some extent, participatory engagements across old and new media within these spaces have significant potential for critical and subversive dialogue with ideological constructions and representations of gender, race, socio-economic class, mobility and nationalism rooted in the children's literature texts.

**Key words:** children's museums, children's literature, participatory museums

### Introduction

Since the early twentieth century, the children's museum has been evolving across various national and cultural contexts around the world. Children's museums tend to be established as non-profit public institutions focused on informal family-oriented education, interactive play, and immersive environments (Acosta 2000; Allen 2004). The Association of Children's Museums (ACM), a professional society started in 1962, describes children's museums as 'places where children learn through play and exploration in environments designed just for them.'<sup>1</sup> Moreover, these museums are defined as community institutions that prioritize 'unique, face-to-face fun, enlightenment and shared experiences not found in traditional museums or other popular destinations.'<sup>2</sup> As intentionally designed and separated spaces of play and learning, children's museums present significant cultural sites to examine the intersections of

education, entertainment, and policy discourses of twentieth and twenty-first century childhoods in diverse national contexts.

The majority of children's museums are defined as distinct from historical museums of childhood, such as the *Victoria & Albert Museum of Childhood* (London, UK), that house and display collections of historical artifacts such as children's books and toys. However, over the past decade, a new specialized institution has emerged in the form of the children's story museum that concentrates on children's literature, storytelling, and picture book illustration. These story museums feature childhood artifacts through the curatorial and display conventions of museums and art galleries, in combination with the active play environments and learning stations of science-oriented children's museums. Some of these museums and exhibits may focus on a particular author and may be situated in their childhood home or studio. The *Hans Christian Andersen Haus* (Odense, Denmark), dedicated to the life and work of the Danish fairy tale author, is located in Andersen's childhood home. The house museum focused on the author's biographical narrative is paired with a children's museum site next door called *The Tinderbox: Cultural Centre for Children* geared to young visitors with offers of immersion and hands-on engagement with Andersen's fairy tale narratives (Hamer 2018). *The Story Museum* (Oxford, UK), creates thematically focused exhibits with the goal to 'celebrate stor[ies] in all forms and explore their enduring power to teach and delight.'<sup>3</sup> A number of institutions provide exhibits and programs to feature collections of children's literature and/or illustration such as the *Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art* (Amherst, USA) and *Seven Stories: The National Centre for Children's Books* (Newcastle, UK).

Karin Lesnik-Oberstein observes that the 'ideas and art [created for and about children] produces a narrative of adults' (Lesnik-Oberstein 1994: 13). These story museums feature these narratives of adults through children's literature texts that articulate historically entrenched discourses of gender, race, socio-economic class, mobility and nationalism. These literary representations are often rooted in discourses of childhood innocence (Gubar 2011) that do not reflect the lived experiences of children. These representations often involve racialized representations of innocence (Bernstein 2011) that leave young people of colour absent or marginal within popular and canonical children's literature (Nel 2017; Thomas 2019).

Transmedia texts may offer young people the opportunity for critical or subversive dialogue with the ideological constructions and representations of normative childhoods (Hamer 2015; Hurley 2014). Henry Jenkins (2006) defines a 'transmedia story' as one that 'unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole' (95-96). Digital cultures offer extensions and interruptions of the dominant discourses of identity through fan fiction and video game play (Meyers et al. 2014; Sarmiento 2014; Tosenberger 2008).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the affordances of digital media for critical engagement demand further mobilization particularly in the context of an exhibit. A broad and growing cross-disciplinary research base concentrates on the potential for media in museum education and curatorial practices designed for young people.<sup>5</sup> In the context of this research, many museums incorporate mobile apps to engage with exhibits; however, the offers for co-creation or the critique of an exhibit's content is limited with many apps directed at young children (Hamer 2017; Hateley 2014). Moreover, while a number of critical curatorial movements are in effect in academic museum studies and in the work of museum practitioners (Janes 2011; Golding 2012; Simon 2010), very few of these projects involve young people in their critical practices across media or feature children's museum exhibits in their scholarly studies (Hope 2016; Unrath and Luehrman 2009). Monica Patterson proposes to address this lack of a critical children's museology in her critical curatorial research with children in post-apartheid South Africa (2016). Patterson's work uniquely provides a valuable model for curatorial approaches to visual representations about, for, and by children in tandem with archival material.

Framed by cross-disciplinary theoretical and methodological approaches from critical children's museology, picture book theory, and children's culture studies, this article draws upon selected examples (2014-2018) of curatorial practices, exhibits, and the spatial/ architectural design from *Seven Stories: National Centre for Children's Books* (Newcastle, UK), the *Hans Christian Andersen Haus/Tinderbox* (Odense, Denmark), and *The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art* (Amherst, USA) with a focus on a recent exhibit on picture book author Mo Willems.

The examination reveals the tensions at all levels of the museum design between the function of museums as institutions that house collections of material artifacts including children's literature texts, and the discourses of participation and creativity associated with the young visitors (Ogata 2013). Story museum exhibits have the potential to function as participatory sites for critical engagement with the popular representations of childhood in children's literature and other media texts in museum archives and special collections; however, the participatory museum model is often in conflict with the idealized discourses of the creative child privileged in the children's museum context.

### **Materiality in the museum: Mediated archives and collections of children's books**

The emergence of the story museum as a hybrid institution reflects the changing role of the museum as an institution in the age of the 'participatory museum': a movement away from collections towards interactive curatorial practices across physical and digital archives (Simon 2010; Janes 2011). Elodie A. Roy observes that 'with the internet, traditional sites, or realms, of memory (such as the library or the museum) may be progressively displaced or dislocated, losing their specific traditions of "collection, curation, display and preservation"' (Roy 2015: 149, citing Hartley 2012: 158). These shifts in materiality present a paradoxical situation for children's story museums, particularly those that focus on new participatory modes alongside institutional aims to house, conserve, and celebrate material collections of artifacts such as children's literature. Roy reflects: 'The digitization of information marks an erasure of a certain materiality, and therefore emplacement and material fixity of the archive which can be understood, metaphorically but also literally as a place or a house' (Roy 2015: 149-150).

The digitization of children's literature archives offers new modes for presentation, access and engagement to archival collections for young visitors. For example, the remediation of older forms of young people's texts such as movable books from the eighteenth and nineteenth century draw on the affordances of new media to invite hands-on engagement with tactile qualities of the print texts. In their study of remediation in relation to new media, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin discuss the various ways in which each newly developed medium tends to reintroduce and integrate elements of old media (Bolter and Gruman 1999). Picture book apps may be viewed as remediated forms of the print picture book that involve a 'refashioning' of the materiality and multiple modes of the picture book and a re-articulation of the discursive content of the print picture book texts (Hamer 2017). Just as the app design refashioned the print picture book, the design of a children's book exhibit that draws upon both material objects and mediated platforms, raises new questions around the children's book as a material object. Story museum exhibits often negotiate the materiality of children's books through the architectural design of the museum and spatial design of exhibits, the use and display of print texts in the exhibits as art objects, and the use of other remediated forms that invite visitors to engage with the print texts as material objects (such as a touch screen or mobile app).

The *Eric Carle Museum of the Picture Book*, or 'the Carle', negotiates the materiality of children's picture books specifically. The architectural design of the museum exemplifies a remediation of the artistic style of picture book artist and museum co-founder Eric Carle. Designed by the firm of Norton Juster (an architect, scholar and the author of the children's novel *The Phantom Tollbooth*) on the grounds of Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, the architectural design of this museum visually alludes to the aesthetic design and lightness of Carle's illustrations such as those in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969). As visitors enter the building into the main lobby and hallway, they physically enter a remediation of the white space and vivid collage colour blocks of Carle's picture book pages. Earl Pope, one of the designers, describes his vision for the building in the museum catalogue as 'dignified, serene and elevating for both children and adults, while treating the art with respect' (Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art 2003). This vision articulates the aim of the co-founders Eric and Bobbie Carle, to legitimize the picture book as an art form and promote picture book illustrators as fine artists worthy of an art gallery or museum. Perry Nodelman's recent article, 'Touching Art: The Art Museum as Picture Book and the Picture Book as Art', explores the distinctive experiences of engagement with art in picture books and art in museums:

Picture books invite an intimate experience of contact and connection. A touching experience. But museum art is untouchable, and not just because of the harmful effect of skin oils on oil paint. It also has something to do with the specialness of the art - its existence as something unique and therefore somehow sacred, demanding our admiration and even our awe (Nodelman 2018: 9).

The remediation of Carle's picture book art into an awe-inspiring architectural space (and the immersive experience of entering that space), complicates this distinction between how readers engage with picture books as material objects, and how young visitors at art museums are taught to look at fine art in those institutional spaces. Beyond the architectural experience, the picture book images displayed as fine art print follows the more conventional rules of art museums. The artwork is framed, hung, and displayed on gallery walls with small captions that indicate artist and publication information rather than the narrative contexts of sequential images in a picture book. Moreover, the viewers cannot touch or interact with the images in the same way they approach images in a print picture book. Opportunities for hands-on experiences with books and artistic creation characteristic of children's museums are carefully allotted to disciplined spaces within the exhibit, as well as a separate art studio away from the exhibits.

William Moebius contrasts the ways one may view art in an art gallery as opposed to the ways of looking and holding in relation to a picture book: 'Our phenomenological experience of the picture book as a work of art is already located within a zone of proximity much smaller than we normally accord a painting' (Moebius 2017: 42). He discusses 'six degrees of closeness, beginning with the circumstances of our approach to the picture book, our tour through its openings as visitors in a kind of museum of double-page spreads within which the "no touching" rule is permanently suspended' (Moebius 2017: 30). The display of picture book art as isolated fine art prints also removes the picture book art from its contextual visual/verbal dynamic in the print text; it dislocates the images from their intended use and meaning, often as part of a sequential narrative. Moreover, as Alberto Manguel observes, '[o]f all the shapes that books have acquired through the ages the most popular have been those that allowed the book to be held comfortably in the reader's hand' (Manguel 1986: 128). This act of holding and touching children's books as material objects with consequential physical wear plays an ambivalent role in exhibits that display isolated visual images from picture books as art objects.

*The Art and Whimsy of Mo Willems* exhibit attempts to balance a remediated and immersive experience of picture books, with an awe-inspiring design that indicates the cultural value of picture book art. The exhibit was first curated by the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in 2013-2014, followed by various touring reiterations including the New York Historical Society in 2016 and *The Pigeon Comes to Pittsburgh: A Mo Willems exhibit* at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh (2018). The gallery space of this exhibit visually imitates the colour palette and simple lines of Willems's graphic design while simultaneously de-emphasizing the comedy and the anarchic humour of the texts. In the exhibit guide, Willems's artistic design is described as 'a distilling down to the bare minimum—less is more—and this is a key tenet of Willem's art whatever the story' (Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art 2013: 11). The result is immersion in the aesthetic shell of the picture book art; an uncluttered and heavily regulated space that remediates the visual design of the picture books but lacks the anarchic tone of the original works. The exhibit design functions to cultivate a mood of quiet seriousness and cultural appreciation for Willems as an artist.

While Mo Willems's award-winning picture book *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (2003) opens with a direct invitation by the narrator to its readers to interact and even participate within the narrative of the text, this invitation has shifted in the designed format of the exhibit. Willems's picture book opens with a bus driver speaking directly to the reader—'Hi! I'm the bus driver, Listen, I've got to leave for a little while so can you watch things for me until I get back? Thanks. Oh, and remember: Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!' (Willems 2003). The pigeon enters from stage left and speaks conspiratorially to the implied young reader, 'I thought he'd never leave. Hey! Can I drive the bus? PLEEEASE. I'LL be your best friend' (Willems 2003). The pigeon continues to beg the implied reader to get their way until they break out into a full tantrum, visually depicted with enormous lettering and the hyperbolic size of the pigeon's one grotesque eye.

The appeal of this picture book functions on multiple levels as it gives agency and disciplinary authority to the implied child reader while also imitating the undisciplined performance of a young child who is pushing behavioural rules using coercion and hyperbolic comedy. The playfulness of the pigeon simultaneously gestures towards anarchic play while ultimately containing little realistic danger, accident or violence. In the Carle exhibit, the bus, bus stops, pigeon, and bus driver are sustained as visual linkages to the Willems's books; however, the visitor's movements and behaviour are regulated by the audio guide and bus stop directions, with very small steps between displays to hear about Willems's artistic process. Rather than the anarchic figure of the pigeon inviting the child reader to both take on the authoritative control and/or allow for anarchic play, the young visitors must obediently follow the voice of Willems himself through the physical space of the exhibit.

### Discourses of the child as creative artist and 'hands-on' engagement

This celebration of the children's book illustrator as creative artist exemplifies the hybrid nature of the story museum as an institution, merging together the idealization of the creative child's sensory and exploratory play with the celebration of children's literature texts as art objects. In the introduction to *Designing the Creative Child: Playthings and Places in Midcentury America*, Amy F. Ogata observes that 'awe at the child's apparently innate creativity has its roots in the romantic era, and has not only persisted but also expanded in our own age. Indeed, authentic creativity has become an unquestioned "truth" about children and childhood' (Ogata 2013: ix). She refers to the work of German Educator Friedrich Froebel's nineteenth century model of creativity as a key influence on the early twentieth century development of the children's museum with 'the acquisition of knowledge through an individual's self-discovery through observation and sensory engagement' (Ogata 2013: xiii). This nineteenth century discourse of the idealized creative child who learns through observation, hands-on interaction and sensory engagement is promoted at all levels of design, curriculum and institutional policy for these story museums. *Artist to Artist: 23 Major Illustrators Talk to Children about Their Art* (2007), a book produced by the Carle founders and staff, opens with a note to implied young readers and museum visitors: 'Dear young artist' (Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art 2007). Nick Clark, the first museum director goes on to invite this 'young artist' to the museum's art studio:

Every minute the museum is open, the studio is open. We want this experience to enable you to express your own creativity and imagination, so important to everything you do...As the famous artist Pablo Picasso said, 'Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.' (Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art 2007: 98)

The Romantic vision of the innate creativity of the child who is socialized out of his raw imagination and creativity as an adult (given further cultural capital with a quotation from Picasso), underscores all of the museum discourse from this museum-produced promotional text to the educational programming in the art studio. Pedagogical models employed in museum's art studio include the Reggio Emilia model of education. This approach promotes child-directed learning, personal connections, and experiential exploration through art. The Reggio Emilia preschool environments use natural lighting and open design classrooms to encourage learning (Cadwell 1997). The physical environment of the art studio at the Carle reflects these key elements. The art studio also draws upon 'Visual Thinking Strategies' that focus on child-lead open-ended questions for group learning around visual images in picture books (Yenawine 2013). A book for teachers produced by Megan Lambert in conjunction with the Carle, emphasizes storytime practices at the museum that highlight book design elements (including the endpapers, gutters, and the size of the material text). These critical strategies emphasize visual images and design choices with a child-centric approach that follows personal connections and intuitive responses of young people to start discussions about design (Lambert 2015). Notably, this discourse of childhood creativity is strongly linked to racialized discourses of childhood innocence (Bernstein 2011) whereby young people of colour are considered less innocent and thus, hands-on interactivity and other acts of creativity or sensory engagement may be perceived or assumed to be sexualized or undisciplined. These intersecting discourses

are underscored by assumptions about socio-economic class, race, sexuality, mobility, and gender that are implemented by adults to condone and value 'acceptable' forms of creativity, self-discovery, artistic creations, and sensory engagement over others.

Comparatively, the 2016 website description of the Art Studio at The Tinderbox connects Hans Christian Andersen's creativity with the hands-on activities offered at the children's cultural centre: 'Hans Christian Andersen drew, painted and made paper cuttings with as much enthusiasm as he wrote. In the Art Studio you find activities and materials related to his creativity and to the fairytale unfolded in the Fairytale Land' (cited in Hamer 2018: 438). In the case of Andersen, while these activities present hands-on creative activities, they also function to cultivate 'a quasi-mythic narrative of Andersen as a creative genius/fairy-tale author from modest origins and a celebration of the geographic site of his birth itself underlined by Danish nationalism' (Hamer 2018: 436). While young people are invited to be intuitive and in touch with their innate child-like creativity, their work is often structured by the material objects and stories around the adult artists.

In the Carle's Mo Willems's exhibit, the artist/author himself becomes the voice of the audio guide, leading the young visitor and displacing the child reader's agency and invitations for disruptions offered by many of his picture books. Mo Willems, in an interview to promote the exhibit's opening in New York, remarks:

The last thing in the exhibit is a blank wall so that kids can make a drawing and say that they had a drawing in a real museum... It's oxymoronic. I want to establish that the work that I do is not easy. That I spend a lot of time with it. That it is actually art. But I also want it to seem like it is easy. That you can do it yourself.<sup>6</sup>

Willems wishes to engage with the discourse of the child as creative artist, but he also wants young people to view his art as something you need to spend time working on and honing over an artistic career. Willems's identity as an award-winning, white, cis-male, heterosexual, middle-aged, adult artist (who lives in New England) functions to validate his artwork as a celebrated illustrator that fits easily into the canon of English-language children's literature. The diversity of his quirky and anarchic artistic characters in his picture books invite the identification of diverse readers with different kinds of engagement with the texts and creative process, but the choice of Willems as the central focus of the exhibit shifts these invitations in the picture books. Notably, more recent exhibits by the Carle have featured picture book illustrators who are people of colour and most recently, the exhibit *All: A Look into LGBTQ Representation in Picture Books* (2018-2019), exemplifies a response to critiques by children's literature scholars and activists that demand more diverse representation in children's literature publishing as well as critical interventions to the curation of children's book exhibits.

In comparison to the offers of engagement at the exhibit, the picture book app *Don't Let the Pigeon Run This App* (2013), an adaptation of Mo Willems's picture book series, offers the reader more open and creative potential as a co-author and co-protagonist. One feature of the app gives the reader(s) the option to audio-record their voices and ideas at different points in the story, suggesting character names and actions to substitute for the original selections. Erica Hateley describes the collaborative invitation to be a co-creator in picture book apps:

Of course, the mechanics of interactivity are such that readers are only able to 'make happen' what has been programmed to happen. Nonetheless, there is a feeling of contributing to the forward movement of the narrative, and certain features extend the reader's identification with the protagonist (Hateley 2017: 9)

In comparison, the Willems exhibit does not extend or expand narratives using technological means, giving visitors the potential to move the narrative forward or engage with the curated material in a critical or meaningful way. A number of iPads offer engagement but they are physically locked to the walls as part of the exhibit. A video of Mo Willems in his art studio and an early animated film are among the offers of cross-media engagement with the iPads. Visitors are encouraged to take photos and tweet about their experiences on social media.

Beyond the invitations to contribute through social media and art work at the conclusion of the exhibit, a quiet reading area is situated within a two-dimensional theatrical version of the pigeon's bus in the centre of the gallery space. Within the bus reading nook, a selection

of Willems's extensive children's publications are made available to read alone or quietly with others. A number of storytimes with Willems's himself were programmed at the Carle and the New York Historical Society as an interactive experience. The final offer to engage in an immersive space occurs at the conclusion of the exhibit in the gift shop. The commercial space of the 'Museum Store' at the *New York Historical Society* included a replica of the laundromat in Willems's *Knuffle Bunny* series. Atop the washing machines, visitors can peruse material objects for purchase including: stuffed toys of Willems's signature characters (i.e. the Pigeon, Knufflebunny, Elephant and Piggy), picture books, children's clothing, and other tie-in merchandise at a \$30 USD price point on average. This merchandise often focuses on character branding raises continued questions around socio-economic class, race, mobility and access through the sale of branded merchandise in museum settings in general (Cummins 2011; Hamer 2017). This final offer for hands-on engagement with the exhibit is through consumption. The invitation for hands-on engagement is removed from the curatorial spaces of the gallery while sustaining the visual design of the previous exhibit spaces. Instead the materiality of the print picture books has been remediated into the form of tie-in merchandise.

### Critical engagement and participatory museums

The limitations of hands-on engagement in children's museums for the curation of children's literature may be revealed through models of critical participation in museum spaces. Both Nina Simon (2010) and Graham Black (2012) explore the ways that twenty-first century museums can involve dialogue and civic engagement. As observed by Simon, there is a need for these institutions to redefine themselves as public spaces or evolve in order to continue to be relevant through 'inviting people to actively engage as cultural participants, not passive consumers' (Simon 2010: ii). Simon's concept of the 'participatory museum' posits active engagement as linked closely to citizenship practices (2010). The scholar-practitioner movements of 'queering the museum' (Mills 2013; Robert 2012; Sanders 2008) and 'decolonizing [the] museum' (Lonetree 2012) extend this goal of active engagement with intentional practices of critical dialogue. This work addresses and challenges the museum's normative cultural representations including sexism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia, white privilege, racism, and settler colonialism. While narrative-oriented strategies have been employed in museum education for young people (Bedford 2014; Frykman 2009), recent critical museology movements use digital platforms for cultural critique of dominant discourses with curatorial interventions such as the queer digital storytelling project at the Museum of History and Industry in Seattle (Robert 2012).

Framed by these international scholar-practitioner movements, recent projects by Canadian scholars have emerged that focus on human rights, post-conflict memory and trauma, and engagement with 'difficult knowledge' within museums and heritage sites (Failler 2015; Failler et al. 2015; Lehrer 2013; Lehrer and Butler 2016; Patterson 2016). Museum exhibits have become distinctive venues for public awareness and critical engagement with children's literature both for young people and adults, but only limited academic work has focused on these sites. Participatory exhibits at children's story museums have potential as sites for critical engagement with popular representations of childhood in children's literature and other media texts. These models of participation are often in conflict with idealized discourses of the creative child that often underlie hands-on engagements in the children's museum context. On the Association of Children's Museums website, children's museums are defined as institutions where: 'Children are valued citizens with the right to developmentally appropriate and high-quality learning experiences'<sup>7</sup>. However, this conceptualization of citizenship for children only gives young people the right to certain kinds of adult-condoned learning experiences that may not include the critical participation envisioned by these museum activist movements.

Popular representations in children's literature, media, and museum exhibits in the North American context often frame childhood in idealized narratives, and do not necessarily represent the lived experiences of children or give opportunities to actively critique these normative narratives. Children's literature scholars examine representations of race in children's literature (Ishizuka and Stephens 2019; Martin 2004; Thomas 2019), postcolonialism (Bradford 2017), queer approaches to fairy tale (Hurley 2014), and Indigenous graphic narratives of childhood trauma (Wolf 2014; 2016); however, these issues are not generally addressed in a critical

manner in the majority of children's book exhibits and generally not as part of children's story museum exhibits. Scholar and activist Debbie Reese published a productive series of blog posts on her website *American Indians in Children's Literature* in March 2019 that specifically critiqued the children's book exhibit (and its companion catalog), *The ABC of It: Why Children's Books Matter* by Leonard Marcus. This exhibit first opened at the New York Public Library, and more recently at the University of Minnesota's Elmer L. Anderson Library and the Kerlan Collection curated by Lisa Von Drasek. Unlike the Eric Carle exhibits, this children's book exhibit is geared towards an audience of primarily adults (although the New York Library's exhibit involved interactive features that may have been intentionally produced for younger visitors). Reese examines the catalog in detail and calls out omissions, misrepresentations, and absences in the exhibit. She directly challenges to the curators about their omission of racist representations in the featured collection (such as Lucy Sprague Mitchell's *Here and Now*), and avoidance of critical examinations of racism for well-known children's authors such as Baum and Seuss. In Reese's words:

It seems like *The ABC of It* -- the physical exhibit and the book (catalog) of it -- are in that 'warm fuzzy' space that is very white and best characterized as nostalgia.

Why did Marcus avoid telling us that [Theodor Seuss] Geisel did racist work? And that [Lucy Sprague] Mitchell created racist stories?

Obviously, THAT is not the point of the exhibit.

So, what IS the point?<sup>8</sup>

Reese's critique usefully highlights a gap between critical work in children's literature scholarship and the curatorial decisions made in the planning of children's book exhibits. This is doubly true for those exhibits that prioritize creative hands-on engagement and immersive experiences of the story worlds over critical engagement with the discursive representations. Many of these exhibits intentionally dislocate the creative artist like a mythic figure from a particular time period and cultural ideologies.

### **The limits to hands-on participation**

*Mystery, Magic, and Midnight Feasts: The Many Adventures of Enid Blyton* (2013-2014), an exhibit focused on popular series fiction writer Enid Blyton at Seven Stories: National Centre for Children's Books (Newcastle, UK), featured an extensive collection of rare books and other artifacts dating back to the 1930s. The exhibit primarily offered a combination of engaging immersive environments such as clubhouses and other locations from her adventure series books (i.e. *The Famous Five* and *The Secret Seven*), a tactile sensory garden (Blyton was apparently an avid gardener), and brightly coloured Toyland playscapes alongside the display of rare editions, letters, and other collectibles. A selection of questions were posed to young visitors on touch screens and printed captions throughout the exhibit. Visitors were guided through the exhibit with printed and digital interactive maps of the exhibit directing them through various story worlds, texts, and artifacts with questions, trivia, and information about Blyton's creative process.<sup>9</sup> Some of these questions engage with Blyton's role as a successful female writer in the century while others ask young visitors to reflect on the stereotypical and sexist representations of gender in her series books. That said, any critique or issues of race or socio-economic class are side-stepped or absent. Similar to the absences around Seuss and Baum in *The ABC of It* exhibit, public debate around the racist representation of the Golliwog character in Blyton's books since the 1960s and 1970s are omitted or deemphasized in the exhibit. These public debates and calls for censorship and revision of Blyton's books are only alluded to once in the whole exhibition with the inclusion of one news clipping posted on a wall of news clippings about Blyton at the conclusion of exhibit. Thus, the immersive and interactive spaces of the exhibit cultivate creative play that functions to omit or sidestep difficult issues in national and literary histories. The curatorial decisions echo David Buckingham's observations in relation to publicity material produced for BBC children's programming (2005): 'the BBC still



tends to hark back to the past, invoking (or indeed re-inventing) tradition-and in the process, playing to parents' nostalgia for the television of their own childhoods' (2005: 479). However, much like the uncritical celebration of canonical British children's literature on television, this exhibit's cultivation of national mythologies highlights the dangers of nostalgia around British nationhood before World War Two that promote racist ideologies and do not acknowledge British immigration and colonial histories. In this case creative offers for hands-on engagement with Blyton's characters and other story elements overshadow the potential for critical questioning of the museum's collection.

As observed by Simon in *The Participatory Museum*, there is a need for museums to redefine themselves as public spaces or evolve into an audience-centred institution in order to continue to be relevant (Simon 2010). Thus, there is still a lot of work to be done by curators and scholars to explore what queering or decolonizing the museum might look like in the children's story museum context. Story museum exhibits have the potential to function as participatory sites for critical engagement with children's literature, but this aim is in conflict with the idealized discourses of the creative child and the historical role of curatorial practices in relation to collections and archives. Drawing upon theoretical and methodological frames from critical museology and the field of children's media cultures, future research by activists, scholars, and curators must extend the work of critical participation and interventions in the children's story museum context.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> 'About Children's Museums,' Association of Children's Museums 2019. <https://findchildrensmuseum.org/about/>, accessed 1 July 2019.
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- <sup>3</sup> 'About Us,' *The Story Museum* 2019. [www.storymuseum.org.uk](http://www.storymuseum.org.uk), accessed 1 July 2019.
- <sup>4</sup> Aja Romano, 'J.K. Rowling's take on Hermione being black has been a long time coming.' *The Daily Dot*. Accessed 21 December 2015.
- <sup>5</sup> Existing research on children's museums is primarily situated within the field of museum education with a focus on interactive learning in science museums (e.g. Allen 2004; Blud 1990; Henderson and Atencio 2007; Mayfield 2005; Piscitelli and Anderson 2001), and 'hands-on' art education for children in art museums and galleries (e.g. Unrath and Luehrman 2009). Art and architecture historians have traced the history of designed spaces for young people including children's museums (Ogata 2013). In literacy and art education research, museums have been conceptualized as 'third spaces' between home and school for the acquisition of out-of-school literacies through the use of artifacts and media (Pahl and Kelly 2005). A range of cross-disciplinary research base concentrates on the role of media in museum education and curatorial practices designed for young people (Aarvanitis 2010; Chan and Cope 2015; Henning 2006; Light et. al 2016; Murnaghan and McCreary 2016; Nancarrow 2016; Pallud 2016; Ruberg 2015; Roussou 2004). There is also a body of work on collaborative museum projects with young people for urban revitalization and outreach (Dockett et. al 2011; Colbert 2011), and examples of young people as co-curators or collaborators are often related to projects in urban planning, geography, and social sciences (Cahill 2007; Driskell 2017).
- <sup>6</sup> *Storymakers on location with Mo Willems* 2016, Video interview. <https://kidlit.tv/2016/03/storymakers-location-mo-willems/>, accessed 2 July 2019
- <sup>7</sup> About the Association for Children's Museums,' Association of Children's Museums 2019. <https://www.childrensmuseums.org/about/about-acm> , accessed 1 July 2019.

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