Cocoabsent?

Representations of Race and Boyhood in Infant and Toddler Media

Heather Moore Roberson

Abstract: The hit streaming series *Cocomelon* has become a household name for many families with infants, toddlers, and kids at heart. *Cocomelon* introduces our youngest population(s) to a Western world that privileges flawed and utopian post-racial perspectives. I contend that the show presents a perspective on race and identity that glorifies color-blindness and ignores racial differences that would educate children about the complexity and beauty of diversity. This commentary imagines a Black infant and toddler boyhood in children's media that prioritizes race, culture, and identity and recommends other children's programs that invest in culturally diverse representations of childhood.

Keywords: Black boyhood, critical race theory, childhood studies, infant and toddler media

As a childhood studies scholar, teacher, and mother of two Black boys, I have questioned the ways that popular media educates my children outside formal classroom settings. Recently, one piece of children's media that has captivated my youngest son's attention is *Cocomelon*. This popular animated series tells the stories of one family as they follow their children to various community-based sites while engaging with other humans and animal species in their neighborhood. The catchy songs with hypnotic melodies have transformed how families teach their children in an inherently virtual world. Furthermore, in a public that is dominated by instant gratification, this series functions as an accessible, pedagogical tool for young children who are continuously exploring their worlds. Specifically, the series' protagonist, JJ, describes his daily adventures with his family and friends, including the mastery of common nursery rhymes, the value of opposites, and how to participate in conversations with adults and children alike. JJ is a human-presenting cartoon character who is the youngest child in a nuclear family. At Mellon Patch Academy (JJ's school), we meet JJ's class-

mates and teacher, who are all white-presenting except for JJ's close friend, Cody. JJ's interactions with other toddlers, specifically inside the school setting, create a one-dimensional presentation of race as toddlers enter the ranks of "boyhood."

Cocomelon was the brainchild of a filmmaker and children's content developer who wanted to create "short animated videos to entertain their sons" (Zoellner 2020). The series uses a popular 3D animation style for characters who sing, dance, and play alongside catchy nursery rhymes (Tenbarge 2020). The audience is introduced to the main character, JJ, a toddler who learns from his parents, siblings, friends, and classmates about how to be respectful and responsible. JJ learns everything from how to survive a slight cold and how to prepare for bedtime to how to save money inside his piggy bank. To date, the series is the second most-viewed YouTube channel, with 82 billion views and 136 million subscribers, and it is currently on its fifth season on Netflix (Heritage 2020).[1] Although *Cocomelon* is widely acclaimed by parents and families for its overall entertainment value, a diverse discussion of race and identity in this series remains absent. Within the first three seasons of *Cocomelon*, in particular, the series presents a monotonous homogenization of race and gender, showcases diversity in "whiteness," and tokenizes the series' sole Black boy character.

Using scholarship from the areas of children's media, educational studies, and critical race theory, I contend that *Cocomelon*'s construction of boyhood reproduces homogenous images of boyhood for the youngest and most vulnerable audiences. While most media is engineered for individuals who can convey opinions and share knowledge through both the written and spoken word, *Cocomelon*'s decision to prioritize white voices shepherds our youngest population into a Western world that privileges flawed and utopian post-racial perspectives. Within critical race theory, scholars assert that storytelling is essential to disrupting white supremacy and unproductive conversations about race, identity, and culture. But inside the *Cocomelon* series, JJ is presented as "majoritarian," or within a set of stories that "generate from a legacy of racial privilege … stories which racial privilege seems natural" (Solórzano and Yosso 2002: 28). Overall, I consider: In what ways do I indoctrinate my Black infant son and share direct messages to him about race, belonging, and boyhood within the confines of *Cocomelon*'s utopia?

Child Development, Early Childhood Education, and Children's Media for (Black) Boys

For decades, there have been several debates about the usefulness of children's media in child development, identifying "intelligence," and the acquisition of language. This scholarship has considered the impact and usefulness of media across a variety of sources, including television programs, digital versatile disks (DVDs), and various internet platforms that have been widely accessible to different families. During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, in particular, there was a proliferation of media resources with the proven ability to increase a child's intelligence, even as a toddler. Specifically, the 1997 release of the Baby Einstein series was touted as the "most remarkable marketing phenomen[on] in recent history" (DeLoache et al. 2010: 1570). In fact, the Baby Einstein series grew with increasing popularity, as there was a demand for media that increased infant and toddler vocabulary through video using techniques backed by scientific evidence.

By the twenty-first century, other forms of media were carrying on the Baby Einstein legacy. For instance, the company Infant Learning created the Your Baby Can Learn series, complete with DVDs, flash cards, and early learning guides for infants and toddlers. In short, parents argued that their young children were able to read more words by the time they began their formal education (Lipka 2014). However, this more contemporary series experienced the same fate as the Baby Einstein videos. Specifically, "consumers were peppered with infomercials and Internet Ads claiming that parents and caregivers who used the system could have kids reading such books as the Harry Potter series by the time they were 3 or 4" (ibid.). While media like Baby Einstein and Your Baby Can Learn were popular, researchers found that most toddlers experienced a video deficit effect, whereby children under 2.5–3 years old are less likely to learn from people on a television screen (Rickert, Robb, and Smith 2011). Put differently, there is a "negative correlation between vocabulary size and television exposure," as children are less likely to learn from figures on screen (DeLoache et al. 2010: 1571). Although contestation regarding children's media during early childhood development still remains, visual media continues to be a primary source of education, leisure, and storytelling for infants and toddlers.

Despite scholarly and parental debates about the usefulness of children's media in child development, various examples of children's media grew in popularity as different mediums presented new stories for consumption. In the late twentieth century, media was largely consumed in the

private domain using video home systems (VHS), compact disc read-only memory (CD-ROM), film, and television. At the same time, animated films made by Walt Disney Studios became a household name and a recognizable brand that procured and repurposed creative and colorful stories for children and families. By the twenty-first century, other films and television series had captured the public eye. For instance, in 2006, the Walt Disney Company purchased Pixar, which is known for its cutting-edge, computer-generated animation (Al-Jbouri and Pomerantz 2020). Pixar films have grown significantly in popularity and are well known for their portrayal of boyhood(s). Specifically, "Pixar has built a reputation for in-depth storytelling about friendship, loyalty, bravery, and male bonding … these films are positioned as important contemporary texts for representing masculinities" (ibid.: 44). In contrast, the original Blue's Clues series, for instance, changed the face of interactive storytelling, using an investigative plot that was accessible to young audiences (Troseth, Russo, and Strouse 2016). Similarly, the British phenomenon of Peppa Pig made a huge splash on American television as children followed the five-minute stories of a family of pigs with a communicable British accent (Kokla 2021). Contemporarily, there is room to analyze the types of stories that are told through the internet and streaming platforms like Netflix. While content delivery may have shifted, many of the popular stories that infant and toddler boys of color consume promote a one-dimensional analysis of boyhood that actively ignores race, identity, and culture.

While scholarship on literacy and children's media continues to expand with the ubiquity of children's film and television, there are limited scholarly discussions about children's media, race, and boyhood. It is important to consider children's engagement with media, especially given the "dramatic increase in communication technologies that are available to the public" (Hofferth 2010: 1598). Scholarship on boyhood, for instance, both historicizes the term and largely differentiates itself from contemporary definitions of girlhood. Boyhood is "often overlooked" and boys are largely "invisible" until they transition to manhood (Barnett 2015). In Diederick Janssen's (2015) article that introduced readers to the newly named Boyhood Studies journal (formally known as Thymos: Journal of Boyhood Studies), he explained that two of the limitations in the field of boyhood studies were its limited location within the field of education and its discussion of the plight of boys from a Western European perspective. Scholarship on Black boys, on the other hand, provides an interesting contrast to one-dimensional approaches to boyhood studies. Within the fields of read-

ing and literacy, "African American boys require reading instruction that puts at the forefront their personal and cultural identities and leads them to critically examine their lives" (Simmons and Feathers 2017: 61). And if we consider the current sociohistorical moment, many conversations about race and boyhood have been considered alongside contemporary social justice movements. The proliferation of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and other grassroots civic organizations in the wake of state-sanctioned police violence has caused many people to have more open and honest dialogues with Black boys about their identities (McCain 2021). Early conversations about race and identity with Black boys can help prepare this group for their futures as Black men.

The field of Black masculinity studies may be a space to consider discussions about children's media and race. But many conversations about intra-racial identities within Black communities are often limited to "maladaptive and transgressive sub-groups," which reinforces one-dimensional analyses of Black men and boys (Howard 2012: 98). Undoubtedly through "gender scripting," Black adolescent boys learn about their identities through popular media consumption (ibid.: 97). While there is a growing body of literature on Black adolescent boys, there is also scholarly space to explore how hegemonic and Black masculinity discourses influence children's media and their explicit descriptions of Black boyhoods.

Critical Race Theory and the Post-Racial, Color-Blind Prominence of *Cocomelon*

Critical race theory (CRT) offers a renewed perspective of children's media and the stories we tell Black infant and toddler boys. CRT was created by academics, students, and activists in the 1970s in response to the lack of progress made by various precedents from the Civil Rights era (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). It is defined as an academic and intellectual space that investigates the "relationship between race, racism, and power" (ibid.: 2). Although the field has origins within law schools and among legal scholars, the theory is now embraced across a variety of academic disciplines, including education, history, gender studies, and political science. Contemporarily, CRT has become so popular that it is the subject of many contested debates in K-12 educational settings and on various social media platforms, as Western right-wing politicians and their supporters argue that CRT should not be part of the educational curricula.

Storytelling (or counternarratives, as they are often categorized in CRT) has become a notable way for scholars to describe the realities of racial hierarchies and a space to discuss their daily engagement with racism in everyday life. One of the main tenets of CRT is that racism is "ordinary" and that conversations about race are founded upon a color-blind falsehood that equality has been attained for all people (Delgado and Stefancic 2001: 7). In essence, "storytelling is a valuable technique in CRT scholarship to communicate the lived realities of those on the margins, [and] particularly how race frames these experiences" (Hauber-Ozer et al. 2021: 4). Many of the stories that are disseminated and critiqued within the field of CRT are from adults. In this commentary, I consider the ways that *Cocomelon*'s stories are embedded in a one-dimensional, post-racial framework for infants and toddlers, especially boys and boys of color.

On the one hand, *Cocomelon* lacks diverse representations of gender and boyhood. While boys and girls are rigidly defined by gender constructs, there are no explicit descriptions of the differences between them. And in a mixed-gender classroom space, there are limited to no conversations about boyhood or how to survive boyhood on the pathway to adolescence. When the audience is first introduced to JJ's school in Season 1, viewers are shown JJ's colorful classroom, with a variety of toys and other educational materials. And throughout the series, the viewer can see a bright "Boys" and "Girls" bathroom for a total of five students inside Ms. Appleberry's classroom. On the one hand, this media treatment of gender is intriguing because it does not limit boys and girls to certain behaviors, projects, school subjects, or even extracurricular excursions based upon their gender. For instance, in the song titled "JJ's New Bed," the whole family bands together to help JJ assemble the new addition to his room. Yoyo, JJ's only sister, helps place screws in the bed frame. Although she struggles to complete her task, she is not placed in a marginal position because of her gender; instead, she is an active part of the family project and seems eager to help her younger brother. In part, moments like these symbolize that children should not be restricted by limiting and stereotypical gendered constructs.

On the other hand, the absence of stories about boyhood winnows out narratives shared by boys about the realities of their existence. JJ, his older brother, and toddlers inside his classroom are never given the opportunity to discuss pathways to boyhood or adolescence. The title of boyhood is virtually ignored throughout the series. And if white boys are not provided an opportunity to discuss the fullness of their identities as infants and toddlers, then it is clear that Black infant and toddler boys will not be afforded an

opportunity to discuss the complexities of their identities related to race. If *Cocomelon* physically defines children as boys and girls inside the classroom setting, then why can the series not spend more time discussing their cultural backgrounds as part of the Mellon Patch Academy and the larger *Cocomelon* universe?

Although the series fails to discuss the complexities of race and identity among the children at Mellon Patch Academy, it does promote a diversity of whiteness, evident in the different white characters who are part of the program. JJ, the series' main character, is the youngest of three children. But even inside the school, the viewer is shown several white children in Ms. Appleberry's small classroom. Presumably, the class is 50 percent white and 50 percent students of color. However, while I can assume that three of the children are nonwhite, their so-called nonwhite identities are established in direct opposition to their white classmates. It is not unusual for a children's series (or Western media in general) to focus on white perspectives. Since America operates within a fictitious post-racial society, it is clear that "whiteness is deeply interconnected with color blindness," which treats conversations about race and racism as a "historical artifact" (Ullucci and Battey 2011: 1199, 1196). In the first three seasons, the audience is exposed to familial and educational experiences with white communities that showcase a range of possibilities for children. In fact, when JJ is outside of the school locale, he never interacts with any other children of color except his Black classmate, Cody. Unfortunately, the neighborhood pets and animals in JJ's community receive more detailed and thoughtful representation than the characters of color. In a more realistic setting, JJ would have the opportunity to meet different people from all walks of life. The absence of racial diversity in *Cocomelon* presents challenges for the only kids of color in the series.

Cody, *Cocomelon*'s only Black toddler boy at the Mellon Patch Academy, is a tokenized caricature of Black boy exceptionalism. On JJ's first day of school, Cody greets him with a smile and welcomes him to Ms. Appleberry's classroom. The two develop a close relationship early on in the series and even go on playdates together with their fathers. But Cody's identity as a Black boy is largely ignored, as there are limited to no conversations about race or Blackness throughout the series. The audience sees brief glimpses of Cody's family and meets his mother, a doctor, who educates the preschoolers about their health and bodies. And during selected lessons inside Ms. Appleberry's classroom, Cody's aspirations and interests reinforce an outsider status. For instance, during "The Dinosaur Song," Cody dresses up as a tyrannosaurus and chases some of his classmates around the room. While

all of the students have the opportunity to act as dinosaurs, only Cody is seen chasing white students. Furthermore, during a lesson on future careers, Cody shares his desire to become an astronaut. While the career selection is admirable, all of Cody's classmates discuss their plans to acquire positions that are localized on Earth. Cody's aspiration to become an astronaut is a reflection of the invisibility of race in *Cocomelon*—of course Cody would aspire to a career that places him largely outside of the earthly realm. His invisibility would not require people to consider the role of race in children's media and child development. Black infant and toddler girls are also noticeably missing from *Cocomelon*.

Cocomelon's lack of a true treatment of race and identity is a small example of a larger phenomenon that is found across many forms of popular children's media. However, I argue that it is the responsibility of children's media to depict a world that is diverse and realistic (in the midst of fiction, realistic storytelling, and nursery rhymes). If schools and other social organizations that informally educate youth are an active part of child development, children's media is a small microcosm of society that must reflect the realities of all children (including children of color). The types of stories and narratives that become commonplace in the minds of children recreate and reinforce larger societal messages about race and identity. According to senior creative executive director of *Cocomelon* Meghan Sheridan, the series' stories certainly capture the attention of younger audiences. Specifically, "we make sure that the stories look and feel like they are from a child's perspective" (Davis and Sheridan 2021). Interestingly enough, the creators of this blockbuster children's series are committed to subjects that are child-sensitive: "Our goal is really to make the world itself a safe, friendly, wholesome and engaging place to be" (ibid.). Presumably, there is an intentional elimination of topics that do not allow children to remain in the safety and innocence of childhood. But what happens when the world is only temporarily friendly to Black infant and toddler boys, until they transition into adolescence and manhood? Why do children's shows not acknowledge the ways that Black boys are not granted the same secure access to childhood as their white peers?

Toward a Culturally Relevant Children's Media

Although discussions about race and identity are not prioritized in popular children's media, we can imagine a future where children of color can learn

about their cultural identities on screen while they learn other fundamental educational values. In their current form, contemporary children's media series like *Cocomelon* fail to thoroughly engage with diverse audiences. Although there are characters of color in the series, there is limited discussion about cultural diversity, race, and identity for infants and toddlers. Additionally, the primary characters are presented to the audience sans gender; while the viewers can surmise the genders of the children, there is no mention of boyhood. The (partial) elimination of gender constructs could be transformative for children's media, but the series provides no commentary or instructions on boyhood for infants and toddlers. How then should Black infant and toddler boys engage in a hierarchical society that privileges whiteness and cis boyhood while simultaneously tokenizing their experiences?

This project on Black infant and toddler boyhood is appealing to me due to my research interests in childhood studies and my own experiences as a mother of two Black boys. When my son smiles during the introduction to *Cocomelon*, I wonder why he is interested in a program in which he does not see himself, his interests, or his culture reflected back to him on screen. There are other series that incorporate meaningful conversations about race and identity for infants and toddlers. For instance, early childhood educator Monica Sutton has created the YouTube series *Circle Time*,[2] which utilizes a direct engagement model popularized by children's media like *Blue's Clues* to teach preschoolers about numbers, the weather, the alphabet, and other foundational aspects of early learning. Ms. Monica's Circle Time has grown in popularity among many families and is especially popular within communities of color, as a Black teacher is at the forefront of this daily YouTube series. Another YouTube series, *Gracie's Corner,* teaches Black children by using culturally and historically relevant texts. Created by Javoris Hollingsworth, Arlene Gordon-Hollingsworth, inside Gracie's Corner, children are introduced to historically Black colleges and universities and to arts programs that are characteristic of these spaces of higher education, while simultaneously learning about days of the week, brushing their teeth, and how to count to one hundred. These examples show the possibilities of children's media when race and identity are not rendered invisible. Instead, race and identity are centralized as children learn using visual imagery. These texts and others help me to imagine a world where my sons can embrace and accept the fullness of their Blackness and disrupt larger notions of a post-racial world where discussions about race and racism are muted.

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Heather Moore Roberson, PhD is Dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and an Associate Professor of Community and Justice Studies and Black Studies at Allegheny College. Overall, her research explores the intersections of race, education, and Black identity. Additionally, she has published several book chapters on race and civic engagement, Black boys in film and television, and the impact of #BlackLivesMatter on teaching and learning. Email: hroberson@allegheny.edu

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Media

Astley, Neville. 2004–present. *Peppa Pig*. UK.
Kessler, Todd. 1996–present. *Blue's Clues*. USA.
Sutton, Monica. 2020–present. *Circle Time.* USA
Treasure Studio. 2006–present. *Cocomelon*. USA.
2020–present. *Gracie's Corner*. USA.

Notes

1. See the *CocoMelon* YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbCmjCuTUZos6Inko4u57UQ (Access Date 20 Aug 2022).
2. Also known as Circle Time with Ms. Monica: https://www.youtube.com/c/MonicaJSutton (Access Date 20 Aug 2022).
3. See Gracie's Story: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCR6V1rDswh9U4q1kGsuA8LA (Access Date 20 Aug 2022).

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