Dogboys and Lost Things;
or Anchoring a Floating Signifier:
Race and Critical Multiculturalism
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In her 2004 book on multiculturalism, *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms*, Sneja Gunew persistently refers to the term *multiculturalism* as a floating signifier.[1] While this notion of a floating signifier is helpful because it acknowledges different ways in which multiculturalism functions in specific contexts, it may be unhelpful when it floats so much as to lose any signification. While I identify myself as a postmodernist and, therefore, regularly resist universalist terminology, I find myself in a peculiar position of wanting to put limits on the term *multiculturalism*.[2] If multiculturalism can mean anything, then why is it important to analyze children's literature through the lens of multiculturalism, I wonder.

My response to this question stems from Stuart Hall's assertion that with the rise of multiculturalism comes the rise of racism:

> it is worth identifying with one of the most difficult things to comprehend nowadays about this society—the absolute co-incidence of multiculturalism and racism. Far from being the opposite ends of a pole so that one can trade the rise of one against the decline of the other, it seems to be absolutely dead central to society that both multiculturalism and racism are increasing at one and the same time. (48–49)

While Hall speaks about British society, this dynamic is not unique to Britain, if in fact, this claim that multiculturalism and racism are increasing in conjunction with each other is one that can even be supported. Rather, the *link* between race and multiculturalism is what is important for the purposes of this essay. I believe it is crucial to understand how *race* anchors multiculturalism in order to fight against *racism*.

In *Race: the Floating Signifier*, Hall defines race as a sociohistorical or cultural category, not as a biological, category, and I employ his definition in this article. Hall, following Appiah, emphasizes that the idea of race he deconstructs is not an anthropological and biological imperative based on skin, hair, and bone, but is rather a way of reading the body as text, and, in this case, as racialized text. He calls race a discursive category, a system of classifying difference, and he states that race works like a language. Hall believes that one of the most difficult, urgent, and important tasks is "to live with difference without eating the other." What matters to Hall, and what I am engaged with in this essay, is articulating a system of meaning by which difference is made intelligible. I believe that critical multiculturalism, which I define as a version of multiculturalism that is self-reflexive insofar as it examines how race underpins culture within narratives of multiculturalism, can be such a system of meaning, a system which allows one to recognize and to include racial difference into culture rather than to promote a multiculturalism that privileges homogeneity under a rhetoric of multicultural difference.

By reading children's literature via critical multiculturalism I suggest that readers will be able to flesh out ideologies of race that are being advocated and will, in turn, have a better understanding of the racial dynamics from which the literature stems. In the first part of this article, I argue for a critical multiculturalism that acknowledges and makes visible how race forms the foundation of multiculturalism. In the next section, I chart the field of multiculturalism and Australian children's literature and argue for the inclusion of critical multiculturalism as another aspect of this field. In the final part of this paper, I put this theory to work by analyzing Shaun Tan's picture book *The Lost Thing* and Ranulfo's young adult novel *Nirvana's Children*, which, I argue, are cautionary tales that bring to the surface the dangers—of exclusion and erasure, for instance—inherent in a multicultural society that fails to embody racialized others into a society in ways that neither erase difference nor default to a multiculturalism of tolerance.

I. Defining Multiculturalism
The first general usage of the term *multicultural* began in Canada in the late 1950s. The term *multiculturalism* was first used in the Canadian

Preliminary Report of the Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, which was published in 1965, and Australian multiculturalism borrows much from the Canadian version. In broad terms, multiculturalism is put forth as policy in order to recognize officially the diverse ethnic groups living within state borders and to provide support for the cultural differences of these groups (Stratton and Ang 128). Thus, we see governments, including the Australian federal government, using some version of the phrase "united in diversity" in order to call attention to how diverse ethnic groups can still unite under the banner of nationalism.

In his "Introduction: Multicultural Conditions," David Theo Goldberg states, "broadly conceived, multiculturalism is critical of and resistant to the necessarily reductive imperatives of monocultural assimilation" (7), and this definition is one to which I shall return in my analysis of *The Lost Thing*. Many authors, however, are inclined to distinguish between various kinds of multiculturalisms rather than to define it in the singular. Ien Ang, Jacqueline Lo, Jon Stratton, and Ghassan Hage for example, draw attention to the distinction between Australian government-sanctioned policies of multiculturalism and "on-the-streets" or everyday multiculturalism of the people, without universalizing either of these versions. It is useful to have the term *multiculturalism* move between these distinctions because both of these usages attempt to understand and to account for racialized cultural diversity, which is specifically where multiculturalism needs to be mobilized. In multicultural discourse, culture is already anchored to race. In other words, in a racist culture, culture is racialized.

Of course, the everyday "on-the-streets" version of multiculturalism is very different from the Disneyland version of friendship and tolerance that hegemonic constructions of multiculturalism present. In his book *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Ghassan Hage argues that multiculturalism in Australia works only as a model in which the White nationalist controls the racialized other. In other words, as long as the so-called ethnic other obeys the rules of the non-racialized status quo, then multiculturalism works. Hage demonstrates how tolerance fades when there is a perceived danger of the racialized other changing the fabric of (White) Australian life and identity.

In this paper, I shall demonstrate how critical multiculturalism exposes these workings of everyday multiculturalism as they are represented in Shaun Tan's *The Lost Thing* and Runulfo Concon's *Nirvana's Children*.

It is important to acknowledge that multiculturalism was named and sanctioned by the government in response to diverse groups of immigrants entering Australia, and, therefore, does not, in the first instance, include Indigenous peoples, who generally and rightly resist being categorized under this term.[3] Multiculturalism was not created to acknowledge the diverse First Nations within nation-state borders. Indeed, with the collapse of immigration and Indigenous affairs into a single portfolio in Australia, namely the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA), both migrants and Aboriginal peoples are in danger of being homogenized under the middle term of the portfolio, *multicultural*.[4] Multiculturalism needs to be revised, so that it does not subsume radically diverse groups under a single heading in order to deny services and benefits to everyone who is of non-Anglo-Celtic background.[5] This stance does not aim to dismiss Indigenous peoples' very real concerns about becoming another "ethnic minority"; instead, I suggest that the underlying category of multiculturalism needs to shift from ethnicity to race.

I want to return here to the discussion with which I opened this paper in order to anchor more firmly the floating signifier *multiculturalism* to the floating signifier *race*. In Chapter Two of *Haunted Nations* titled "Colonial hauntings: the colonial seeds of multiculturalism," Gunew claims in at least four places that multiculturalism serves as a floating signifier: multiculturalism is now "a kind of floating signifier which gains both meaning and strategic capabilities only in a specific context" (28); "there *is no inherent content* in such floating signifiers as 'postcolonialism' or 'multiculturalism' (34 emphasis mine); "these floating signifiers ('multicultural', 'Australian' etc.) *are attached to implicit assumptions* concerning the nature of European modernity and civilization" (35 emphasis mine); and "While both multiculturalism and postcolonialism have indeed been recognized as floating signifiers, there is necessary work to be done in looking at their interactions and mutual exclusions in settler colonies" (39). I would like to reiterate my argument here by stating that

I do not disagree with the notion of multiculturalism as a floating signifier, but I do want to go further with this claim in order to clarify what I believe needs to be acknowledged within this concept.

I do, however, disagree with Gunew's statement that "there is no inherent content in such floating signifiers as 'multicultural.'" I would like to interrogate Gunew's distinction, as well as the potential contradiction between her claims that while there "is no inherent content" in the floating signifier *multiculturalism*, it is "attached to implicit assumptions." I contend that the concept of race is both inherent content, and one of the implicit assumptions located in the term *multicultural*. The content inherent in multiculturalism contains a narrative about living united in a nation-state within which resides peoples of many races. The implicit assumptions attached to multiculturalism—assumptions about European modernity and civilization, which Gunew does not clarify—stand for a progress and history that claims one must leave behind a past in order to move into a new developed future, a future in which all people respect each other's differences. Gunew does claim that multiculturalism needs to be more proactive against racism, and it is this point that merges with my thesis: in order for multiculturalism to be more proactive against racism, critics need to be attentive to how race supports multiculturalism. Gunew comes close to this conclusion by way of postcolonialism. She states, "colonialism, as the mechanism of postcolonialism, structures multiculturalism [which] tends to be reserved for what are perceived (implicitly and explicitly) as racialized interactions within the boundaries of nation states" (37). Interestingly, her discussion about multiculturalism as a floating signifier takes place around this claim. The "inherent content," the "implicit assumptions," and the perceived structures of multiculturalism, are, I argue, precisely these "racialized interactions."

II. Multiculturalism and Race

In 1994, Jon Stratton and Ien Ang published their article "Multicultural Imagined Communities: Cultural Difference and National Identity in Australia and the USA." They end their article with a discussion of the crucial part that the category of race plays in discussions of multiculturalism. They state,

in Australia multiculturalism has thrived through an eclipse of
race into the more flexible concept of ethnicity. In both cases
then, the discourse of race exposes the fact that the idea of
an unfractured and unified national imagined community is
an impossible fiction. . . . the category of race should be seen
as the symbolic marker of unabsorbable cultural difference,
the range of heterogeneous cultural differences which cannot
be harmonised into multiculturalism's conservative vision of
unity-in-diversity. To seize on multiculturalism's more radical
potential is to give up the ideal of national unity itself without
doing away with the promise of a flexible, porous, and open-
ended national culture. (155–56)

My argument pivots on this idea of a radical critical multiculturalism
but takes this idea in a different direction; instead of focusing on the
notion of an "open-ended national culture," I highlight the necessity of
a racial turn in the discourses of multiculturalism, a turn that does not
turn away from the ways in which race should visibly and vocally inform
multiculturalism.

This need for a racial turn has been expressed recently in at least two
places. In *Overland* 179 (Winter 2005), Tseen Khoo and Som Sengmany
review the "Dialogues Across Cultures" conference held in Melbourne
11–14 November 2004. They articulate the slippage between culture
and race when they say, "It is in this climate of alleged equality for all,
and the promotion of multicultural (multiracial?) societies as a 'natural'
good, that the boundaries of 'nation,' already ill-fitting, become ever
more stretched and split" (58). While this bracketing of race may be a
nod towards how race informs culture, in addition, I read it as an ac-
knowledgement of the need to racialize multiculturalism. Later in the
review, they speak to the difficult negotiations that happen between
Aboriginal and migrant communities. They draw upon Ann Curthoys's
metaphor of the 'uneasy conversation' to characterize the relationship
between Aboriginal and migrant communities.

The second place in which this racial turn has been articulated is at
a one-day symposium "Locating Asian-Australian Cultures," which

took place at Monash University in Melbourne on June 28, 2005. In the symposium's key-note address, Jacqueline Lo contextualized Asian-Australian Studies by talking about how multiculturalism informs the area of Asian-Australian Studies. Employing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's terminology, Lo discussed the need to employ race as "strategic essentialism" within discourses of multiculturalism. She argued that the sublimation of race in multiculturalism does not allow critics and writers to deal with racism, which is a point that brings my argument back to Stuart Hall's claim that with the rise of multiculturalism comes a rise of racism.

III. Multiculturalism and Children's Literature

Over the past fifteen years, critics working in the field of Australian Children's Literature have developed arguments about the connections between multiculturalism and children's literature. In "Advocating Multiculturalism: Migrants in Australian Children's Literature after 1972," John Stephens argues that Australian Children's Literature shifted towards an ideology of multiculturalism in keeping with the educational and political ethos of the 1970s in Australia (180). Stephens claims that the version of multiculturalism present in Australian books written for children during this time promotes an "acceptance of difference and heterogeneity" (180) but does not offer a radical examination of multiculturalism *per se*. He attributes this lack of radical engagement with multicultural issues to three factors: most authors are members of the Anglo-Celtic Australian majority, most narratives are focalized through this majority voice, and themes of migration and culture are subordinated to themes of personal development. One of the ways in which multiculturalism is represented is that the cultural minority enriches and engages with the majority group with little representation of minority groups engaging with each other (181).

Stephens returns to the topic of multiculturalism and Children's Literature in his article "Multiculturalism in Recent Australian Children's Fiction: (Re-)constructing Selves Through Personal and National Histories." He suggests that Australian Children's Literature has responded to multiculturalism by representing "inexplicit expressions of nostalgia"

on the one hand, and by promoting a multicultural ideology on the other hand (1). This article deals primarily with the second trend and argues that in novels for children explicitly depicting so-called multicultural issues "the construction of a character's individual subjectivity is . . . inextricable from the character's sense of cultural affiliation and intercultural positioning. As a consequence, development of a personal identity functions as an analogy for a national development of multicultural awareness and agency" (4). This analogy, however, results in an uncritical promotion of a multicultural ideology that advocates for an engagement with cultural difference—without acknowledging any of the potential difficulties of this encounter—in order to promote the growth of the self beyond her/his own cultural limitations (17).

In "Cultural Solipsism, National Identities and the Discourse of Multiculturalism in Australian Picture Books," Robyn McCallum denotes the 1970s as a turning point for the development of Australian picture books. She marks three main shifts that begin in the 1970s: the move towards equal signification between visual and verbal text; the move towards texts that represent Australian nationalism; and, in the 1980s and 1990s, a move towards representing Australian society as multicultural (103). This multiculturalism fluctuates, however, between token representation via an Anglo-Celtic perspective and a seemingly realistic representation that normalizes multiculturalism as a part of everyday life (110). Through a reading of *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek* (1973), McCallum examines how subjectivity is formed in relation to an other and argues that *Bunyip* suggests that this subjectivity can only be realized when the other is like oneself, which suggests an ideology of homogeneity at odds with the heterogeneity of multiculturalism (113).

In "Continuity, Fissure, or Dysfunction? From Settler Society to Multicultural Society in Australian Fiction," Stephens revisits his earlier arguments about how children's literature represents a movement from settler to multicultural society and argues that this transition "was not the smooth continuity imagined in the early 1990s" (56). In this article, he argues that an ideology of multiculturalism is fractured and critiqued by narratives of social alienation and dysfunction. He analyzes two young adult narratives published in the late 1990s, *Secrets of Walden*

Rising and *Idiot Pride*, and demonstrates how these two novels depict an emerging multiculturalism and offer a critique of the fiction that represents multiculturalism as a static and fully-formed entity (68).

In "Messages from the Inside?: Multiculturalism in Contemporary Australian Children's Literature," Sharyn Pearce summarizes Stephens's earlier work as outlining two stages of multicultural progression in writing for children, which she claims still hold, and offers a third stage. According to Pearce, Australian multiculturalism has been represented in children's literature as inherent to Australian society historically, as a move from intercultural to multicultural subjectivity, and as background to the foregrounded plot. In other words, Pearce's third stage of multicultural representation is a multiculturalism that is "incidental rather than pivotal" to both plot and character development (245), which she encapsulates by stating, "*ethnicity is not a marker of cultural difference, but an accepted part of Australian life*" (246 italics in original).

My purpose for outlining the above arguments is to situate my analysis of *The Lost Thing* and *Nirvana's Children* within these discussions about multiculturalism and to offer, yet another, stage to this multicultural progression. This fourth stage, I argue, is a stage of critical multiculturalism, one that can be read as the radical examination of multiculturalism to which Stephens (1990) alludes. In this fourth stage, texts can be read as scrutinizing and criticizing Australian multiculturalism, revealing that ethnicity and race *are* markers of cultural difference, *even though* they may be part of Australian life. Readers are positioned to see how characters that are marked as racially different are alienated because they are viewed by other characters as "not like me" and therefore not Australian. Although the prevailing ideology of multiculturalism purports an acceptance of difference, reading these two texts via critical multiculturalism reveals that this ideology is really business as usual and this business is the creation of a homogenous Australian culture.

IV. *The Lost Thing*
One might argue that Shaun Tan's picture book *The Lost Thing* is a story about any marginalized subject who is rendered invisible. I suggest, however, that the lost thing itself can be fruitfully read as a racialized

9

subject who challenges and makes visible some of the ways in which people and institutions cannot embody the racialized other into the unified (read homogenized) body politic. The basic narrative of the book is that a young boy, whose primary pastime is collecting and categorizing bottle caps, finds the so-called lost thing on the beach "a few summers ago" (n.p.) The boy reads the lost thing as lost, or as other, because its huge, red, tentacled machine-body is visually unlike any other being known to the boy. After trying, without success, to determine to whom the lost thing belongs, the boy takes the lost thing to his artist friend Pete's place, who explains that some things do not "'belong to anyone'" but are "'just plain lost'" (n.p.). From Pete's place, the boy brings the lost thing home, but the boy's parents do not see the lost thing until the boy brings their attention to it. After hiding the lost thing in the back shed, the boy sees an advertisement in the paper from the Federal Department of Odds and Ends, which advertises "pigeon holes" to file away "Objects Without Names," Troublesome Artifacts of Unknown Origin," and "Things That Just Don't Belong" (n.p.). The boy takes the lost thing into the city and attempts to find a place for the lost thing via bureaucratic channels. A custodian redirects the boy and the lost thing away from this bureaucratic place of "forgetting, leaving behind, smoothing over" and towards Utopia (n.p.). The boy leaves the lost thing in this Utopia and returns to his dystopic world of symmetry, uniformity, classification, and straight lines.[6]

The text announces its engagement with discourses of race before the story begins, although one might argue that the story neither begins nor ends, but performs itself from front cover to back cover. I shall rephrase then: the text announces its engagement with race before the boy begins telling his story about finding the lost thing. The inside front and back covers depict a collection of seventy-seven bottle caps spaced equidistant in eleven by seven rows. The sepia-toned background contains sketches of scenes from the book, so the visual text is basically outlined on the opening and closing pages of the book. Each bottle cap is unique insofar as the top of each bottle cap is decorated with an image, a mathematical equation, a word or some words, and other excerpts presumably from engineering and physics textbooks.

Each bottle cap has a reference inside the book, and one of these caps in particular both utters and refers to racialized discourses in the body of the book. The text in its entirety has been fragmented to fit on the top of one bottle cap, so the quotation that appears reads,

  onsidering
  y be *like*, it is
  e words *like* and
  ing *dissimilar*,
  visibly unlike,
  On the (n.p.)

This truncated quotation italicizes and therein highlights a central theme in the book: the negotiation between sameness and visible difference. The ambiguity of the quotation also suggests that to be similar, to be like, is to be liked and to be dissimilar is to be visibly different and unlike, or unliked.

While visible difference does not necessarily point towards racial difference at this point, the reference becomes more clear as one progresses through the text due to the sheer accumulation of signifiers that signify race. On the publication information page, the title of the book is constructed as a version of a passport with the word "LOST" formed out of fingerprints and overlaid with a stamp from Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, which claims that the traveller departed from Perth, Australia. On every page from here onwards—except for the two pages on which the boy and the lost thing encounter the monoliths of bureaucracy, which I argue leave no space for different voices—there are pieces of paper in the collaged background that contain fragments of Chinese characters, which I read as a counter-hegemonic utterances that speak alongside the visual and written text to provide another level of racialized discourse.[7]

The lost thing first appears on a beachscape stretching along the base of what may once have been escarpment but which now most resembles the side of a large ship on top of which sits the city. It is unclear whether the lost thing has emerged off the ship that is the escarpment or from the water towards which it faces. That the boy "finds" the lost thing on the

beach situates the encounter as one between centre and margin, between host and migrant. Given Australia's history of asylum seekers arriving by boat on the shores (if they are lucky), it is not a stretch to read the beached position of the lost thing as a migrant newly-arrived to this place. That the boy characterizes the lost thing as having "a really weird look about it . . ." and "looking out of place" strengthens the connection between the lost thing as a visible minority in a place not its own (n.p.).

   Tan more explicitly signals the book's engagement with and representation of discourses of homogeneity with the inclusion of a sign in the bottom right corner of this image, whose heading reads, "HOMOGENEOUS EQUATIONS" (n.p.). The sign, however, only exemplifies what is obvious in the rest of the painting. The rectangular-shaped people on the beach stand alone with only their shadows for company, and the rectangles repeat themselves in lampposts, signs, and buildings, so people are barely distinct as human forms. This flattened, sepia-toned landscape is a homogeneous equation wherein people = buildings = signs = lampposts in both shape and colour, except for the bright red lost thing, whose rounded bulk and brightness stand out and catch the boy's eye.
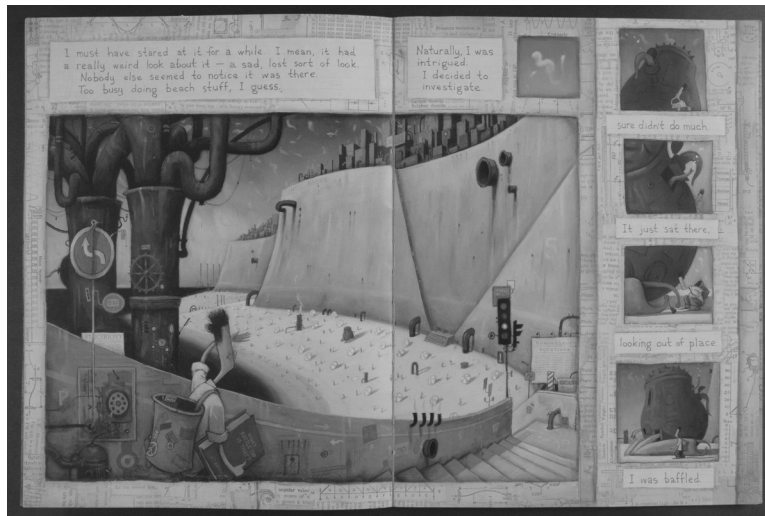
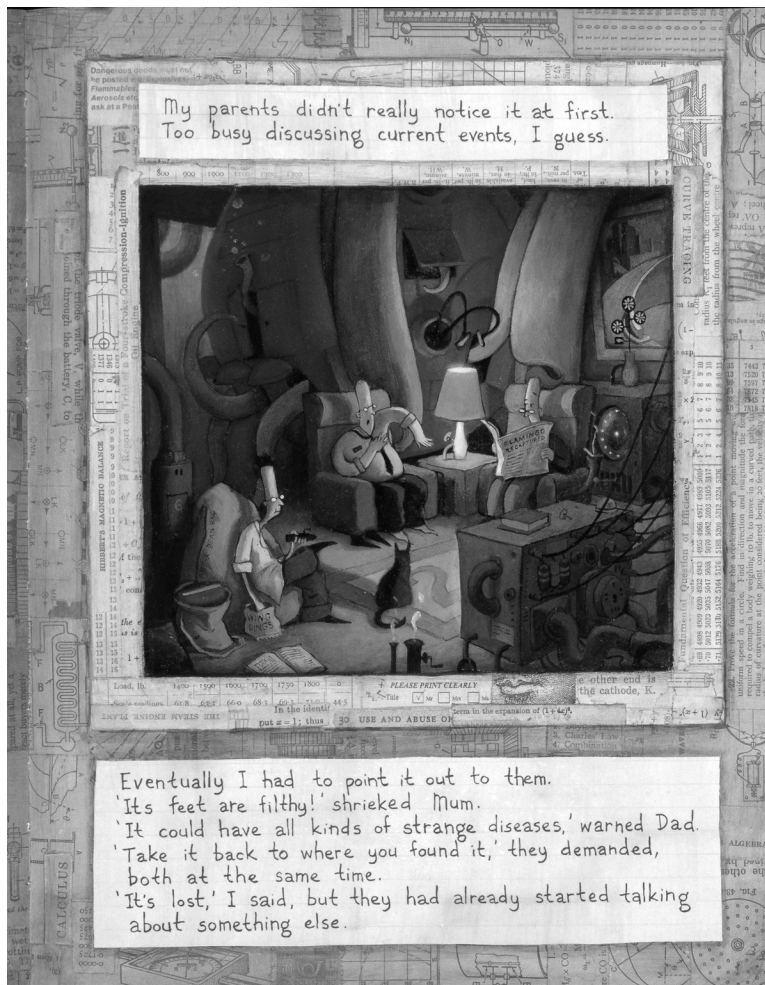*Shaun Tan. 'Beach Scene'* The Lost Thing. *Reprinted with permission.*

On the following page, "MISCELLANEOUS DIFFERENTIATION" replaces homogeneity—indicated explicitly by one of the underlying collage clippings—which occurs once the boy starts talking through gestures and playing with the lost thing. This replacement of a homogeneity of distance by a differentiation of proximity characterizes a move from stranger to guest, from alien other to potential friend, which is made explicit by the boy's statement, "It was quite friendly though, once I started talking to it" (n.p.). To push this idea even further, I suggest that this move from homogeneity to differentiation is an analogy that signifies a move from a monocultural to a multicultural imperative, to recall Goldberg's conception of multiculturalism. It is also significant that the boy is the only person who seems to notice the lost thing, which demonstrates the extent to which mainstream ideology operates to erase, or at least not to see, radical difference. The story as a whole is the child narrator's recollection of a time when he could still see and identify difference and not reject someone on the basis of this difference.

The extent to which the child has been raised in this environment that does not acknowledge difference becomes even more apparent when the boy brings the lost thing home. The boy's narrative states, "My parents didn't really notice it at first," but the accompanying visual text shows the lost thing squished and bulging into the lounge room where the boy and his parents gather (n.p.). To the reader, it is impossible not to see the lost thing, which exemplifies the extent to which the parents have internalized the inability to see difference. When the boy does finally point the lost thing out to his parents, his mother shrieks, "Its feet are filthy!" and his father warns, "It could have all kinds of strange diseases" (n.p.). The parents' utterances clarify how the body is the site of difference. Furthermore, the next words, which they utter together, "Take it back to where you found it" expresses their control over the lost thing's body (n.p.). The parents look at the lost thing and express fear that it will infest their home, but they do not express any doubts about their rights to send it back.

The Lost Thing is firmly situated within a fourth stage of multicultural children's literature because it critically engages with multiculturalism by demonstrating how the narrator internalizes mainstream ideologies

of race and multiculturalism, which subsume race under the signifier "culture" in order render invisible those beings whose physical markers cannot be absorbed as cultural difference, to restate Ang and Stratton's argument. This process of internalizing ideologies of race happens via public and private discourses, including how the city and the family are

Shaun Tan. 'Lost Thing in Lounge Room' The Lost Thing. *Reprinted with permission*

constructed and function. In effect, the boy cannot exist or conceive of an outside to this ideology, even when it opens to him in the shape of an alternative utopian space. Tan, however, warns against this limited way of seeing and understanding one's surroundings by constructing a text that makes it impossible for the reader to engage with it in only one way.

V. *Nirvana's Children*

Both *Nirvana's Children* and *The Lost Thing* criticize the family home as a site of alienation where racist ideology is manifested. In *Nirvana's Children* this ideology is presented via a discourse of "polite" multiculturalism, but the narrator's scathing unspoken responses demonstrate to the reader the extent of the discourse's racist subnarrative, which cast the racial other into the role of ethnic curiosity. As with *The Lost Thing*, *Nirvana's Children* demonstrates Stephens's argument that narratives of social alienation and dysfunction fracture narratives unified around multicultural issues, but I argue that the representation of multicultural issues in both these texts goes further than fracturing multiculturalism; they offer a critique of multiculturalism.

Unlike in *The Lost Thing* where the racialized other does not speak (the lost thing made "a small sad noise" and "an approving sort of noise" only), in *Nirvana's Children*, the narrative is focalized through Napoleon Taal, who rants, in street-talk and abbreviations, more than he speaks. On the first page of the novel, Napoleon informs the reader of his age (15), his ethnicity ("born in the Philippines & transported to Oz"), his family situation (nuclear: mother, father, brother, sister), and immediately launches into his first diatribe against adults in general and teachers in particular, who are training students to become adults: "I hate Adults. Adults are evil, cruel, hypocritical, shallow, boring, braindead, fat, ugly, money-effing, nauseating fascist oink-oinks! . . . [who] worship power, play the game, kiss arse, backstab, consume, DESTROY" (3). Indeed, section one of the novel is entitled "Dogboy," a name that his girlfriend Sammie calls him throughout the remaining sections of the novel as an expression of love, because Napoleon initially believed that his dog was his mother because "Mum = love + caring + guidance + affection + protection. Thus, dog = Mum" (4). By the end of section one, readers

understand the extent to which Napoleon is estranged from his mother and beaten by his father, which leads him to run away from home.

In addition to demonstrating Stephens's argument, *Nirvana's Children* also can be read via Pearce's argument that a third stage of multiculturalism represented in children's literature is a multiculturalism that is incidental rather than pivotal. That Napoleon was born in the Philippines, that he has a Korean friend named Song, that his friend Gazza has a Chinese girlfriend, that he lives on the street with a diverse group of children—whose names are "like a United Nations rollcall" (57)—including Tracey, an Australian Aborigine, and Soo, who is South Korean, that an Italian baker gives him a free apple turnover, that he tries to join an Indian family for dinner, all can be read as a representation of multicultural Sydney, while the main plot and characterization focuses on a general critique of a world adults have created and how children are the hope for a better future.

To read *Nirvana's Children* only for a multiculturalism fractured by dysfunction or as a backdrop would be to miss the novel's criticism of how everyday multiculturalism is performed and specifically performed within the family home, which constructs racial difference as a difference that places the object of its interpellation as outsider. The most overt expression of this critique takes place when Napoleon has dinner with Christine (his sometimes ex-girlfriend) and her family. I shall quote this rather lengthy passage in its entirety in order to show Napoleon's internal and external dialogue, which demonstrates the extent to which he internalises and anticipates ideologies around racial difference in this Australian multicultural society. Christine is "a sweet young resplendent blonde Aussie. Her home is a . . . typical Aussie home—boring, bland, & the booze bar enshrined in the corner" (14). When he goes there for dinner they

> have Aussie food, bland roast beef with bland vegies. Where's the rice? Where's the soy sauce? No wonder Australians are white. They're so devoid of spice & oomph. I sit quietly & wait for ethnic questions about my country & stuff. To remind me that I'm not Aussie & they are. It finally comes.

'I suppose,' sez the Cow, 'that your meals are very different from ours?'

Yep, we're cannibals, we eat human beings like you.

Yep, our meals have actually got taste & flavour in them.

'Yes, we have our Filipino dishes. But we eat Western half the time. Except we always have rice with our roasts.'

'I've never tasted Filipino food,' she moos, then munches on some greens. 'You should bring some over some day.'

'Yes, sure.' I'll bring boiled missionary.

The Bull butts in with his facts. 'Filipino food would be influenced by Spanish cuisine, wouldn't it? The Philippines was a Spanish Colony for five hundred years. So I would gather that it would have a lot of tomato-based foods.'

'Yes.'

'Paella, for instance. They have that in the Philippines.'

'Yes.' Zzzzzzzzz.

I've had enough of this. I pull out a zapper & zap him & the cow. Now I can eat my bland meal in peace. I dollop their blood on the food to give it some taste. Yummy just like tomato sauce. (21)

Napoleon's criticism of typical Australians, their homes, and their food, immediately establishes that he does not self-identify as an Australian, even as he anticipates questions about his ethnic background, which will make obvious that he is not like them. One can read this denial of himself as an Australian via his anticipation of the questions to come: he has obviously heard the questions before and has been interpellated by them. That he has internalized yet resists ideologies around race, which separate (White) Australians from ethnic others, manifests itself as sarcastic rhetoric in which he dismisses Australianness, even as he is attracted to it in the figure of Christine. The questions themselves and Napoleon's silent and spoken responses reveal the racial bias within the ethnic designation, which goes back to the etymological root of *ethnic* meaning the heathen in the nation (*OED*). On the surface, questions about food may seem innocent and polite, but Napoleon's responses

demonstrate how his body is being read as a racialized text, complete with the assumptions, spoken as facts, about history and savagery made by the "non-ethnic" inquisitors. To Christine's parents, it is not out of order, in fact it is their right, to make assumptions and to ask questions about Napoleon's cultural practices, which are always already anchored to their reading of him as racialized other.

VI. Conclusion

The Lost Thing and *Nirvana's Children* are examples of a fourth stage of multicultural children's literature, which I call a stage of critical multiculturalism. Both these narratives speak back to and warn against a "unity in diversity" version of multiculturalism that works only as long as radical difference, and especially racial difference, can be transformed into or controlled by the figure of the (White) nationalist. Within studies of children's multicultural literature and multicultural literature generally, I believe that it is imperative to acknowledge how race anchors multiculturalism in order to shift discourses of multiculturalism from cultural difference to racial difference and therein to work against racism. If multiculturalism is to work as a system for analyzing, in this case, children's literature in Australia, in order to challenge and to critique a hegemonic multiculturalism that seeks to homogenize peoples residing within Australian borders (and when it fails to exclude them from being recognised as Australian), then critics must put to work critical multiculturalism as a reading and writing strategy in order to examine and to contest how race anchors culture in multicultural discourses in their current manifestations.

Notes

1 I presented an early version of this article to the English Departments at the University of Calgary and the University of Winnipeg in July 2005; I thank my colleagues who attended these talks for their generous support and helpful suggestions.

2 This impulse originated because I wanted to have limits for my current ARC-funded research project "Building Cultural Citizenry: Multiculturalism and Children's Literature," which I am working on with Dr. Clare Bradford and Dr. Wenche Ommundsen.

3 In Canada and Australia at least, many Indigenous peoples do not want Indigenous issues to be subsumed under the category of multiculturalism because multiculturalism is largely understood to be concerned with migrant issues. See Stratton and Ang. In his introduction to the special issue of *Continuum* titled "Critical Multiculturalism" in which Stratton and Ang's article appears, O'Regan states, "The inclusion of indigenous issues under the multicultural rubric is one reason for calling the issue 'Critical Multiculturalism' rather than simply 'multiculturalism'" (1).

4 In the time between writing this article and having it go to press, the Australian federal government has shifted DIMIA to DIMA, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, and most recently to DIAC, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Indigenous Affairs are now in the newly-formed Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs portfolio. While an examination of these shifts is beyond the scope of this paper, I shall most certainly conduct this analysis in my future work.

5 In "Not Just Another Multicultural Story," Stratton analyzes a process by which some British migrants self-ethnicize in order to assert that British culture is distinct from Australian culture and should, therefore, be treated like other migrant groups in Australia.

6 See Dudek for a reading of *The Lost Thing* as a critical dystopia.

7 Each page, except for the one page that represents the newspaper advertisements and the two pages that represent Utopia, uses as the background a collage of "Dad's old physics and engineering textbooks" and other objects, such as stamps and passport fragments, which is overlaid with the visual painted text and the narrator's hand-written text. Each page, then, contains three texts: the narrator's story unfolds in sentences printed on lined notebook paper seemingly cut and pasted on top of the background collage; the collage of physics and engineering texts underlie and supplement the paintings especially; and the paintings themselves are richly-textured, detailed depictions of a machinistic, industrialized city-scape.

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