

The Girls and the Others:
Racialized Anthropomorphism in the First Season of *The Powerpuff Girls*

The Powerpuff Girls (1998) chronicles the lives of three kindergarten-aged girls who are conceived in a laboratory by a scientist, Professor Utonium,¹ out of “sugar, spice, and everything nice” and an accidental spill of “Chemical X.” With these elements, Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup are given their superpowers to “fight the forces of evil” (*The Powerpuff Girls*). As protectors of Townsville, the city in which they reside, each episode² shows the girls battling with various villains who usually have an evil plan to bring chaos to Townsville. *The Powerpuff Girls* has often been considered a “girl power” text, which feminist media scholar Rebecca Hains refers to as, “our culture’s dominant, mainstream form of feminism” (92). Developed out of Third Wave Feminism, girl power is seen as “positive and empowering” and “takes the position that empowered women and girls can, in fact, play with femininity, wear makeup and seek glamour, and still be feminist” (98). With the successes of such shows as *Xena* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Hains notes, “children’s [90s] television producers created new shows for girls, often featuring super strong, powerful girl heroes” (92), “despite the fact that [girls] are members of two groups culturally constructed as lacking power: females and children” (100). In an interview with *The New Times Los Angeles*, *Powerpuff Girls* creator Craig McCracken speaks about girl power as “a kind of new feminism that’s starting to rise up that isn’t about denouncing things that are girlish. It’s about embracing going shopping and buying shoes and wanting to be cute” (qtd. in Hains, 100). McCracken understands that one of the main objectives of girl power is to encourage girls to participate as active consumers of products, something that Hains says “water[s] down” the sense empowerment in girl power and fails to “threaten the status quo” (106). Despite this critique, McCracken sees the *Powerpuff Girls* as girl power symbols that convey a “new strength” (qtd. in Hains, 100). If the creator of the series is unaware that the type of feminism his characters represent is rooted in less progressive messages, one must be critical of how girl power functions in the series as a whole.

Throughout the years, *The Powerpuff Girls* has acquired a breadth of scholarship praising its girl power prose; however, despite this praise they have also been very critical of its failure to engage with intersectional feminism and portrayal of minority characters as villains. Media scholar Evie Kendall critiques the series’ use of girl power, stating it is “seen to be restricted to the white and suburban middle-class, thus failing to engage” with “racial and social diversity” and criticizes the use of “non-white characters” as villains (245). Similarly, Haines states, “[o]nly our heroines and little girls who look like them are invited to be part of the girl power clique” (“The Problematics of Reclaiming the Girlish,” 30). Furthermore, children’s media scholar Ewan Kirkland sees “[t]he show’s celebration of its main characters not only as female and young, but

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1. The girls refer to him as “Professor” and it is understood that he is their “father” of sorts, although it is never explicitly stated in this season.
2. Each episode consists of two 11-minute segments. I refer to the individual segments as singular episodes.

also as white, straight and middle-class, impacts on the construction of the villains the girls face” (“The Politics of Powerpuff,” 18). It should be noted that these scholars state clearly the *problems* with the show’s racist and classist representation of the villains, but they do not discuss at great length the *reasons* for that representation, which I seek to prove is in the way the series prioritizes a white, middle-class, patriarchal society as dominant and normal. An example of the series’ association with this society can be seen in the girls’ creation story that is told at the beginning of each episode. Whereas Kendall reads the girls’ conception by their male creator, Professor Utonium, as empowering because it “yields three distinct and powerful female creations” (240), I see it as something quite insidious as the series’ omnipotent narrator, whose disembodied voice presides over Townsville and serves as a “check” on the girl’s maintenance of the city, is the voice who recounts that story. This repeated opening through the narrator, who is voiced by a white male,³ and conception by Professor Utonium, who is also a white male and “constitutes a figure of patriarchal scientific authority” (Kirkland 252), reveals the series’ underlying messages about a society in which white male patriarchy is the norm. Furthermore, the girls’ fight against “the forces of evil” is a fight to maintain a white, middle-class, patriarchal society, or as I refer to it, a “Townsvillian” society, established by Professor Utonium and the narrator.

To understand how “the forces of evil” are portrayed in *The Powerpuff Girls*, it is important to understand how animation, in general, has represented “evil” characters. Byrne and McQuillan notice that animators of children’s animated films design “evil” characters that look and sound like ethnic minorities through “anthropomorphism” (96). Additionally, King et al. see that children’s animated films use “racialized anthropomorphism” to inscribe human-like qualities such as “accent, “place of residence,” “mannerisms,” “behavior,” and “jewelry” (40) to animal and other non-human characters. Through these qualities regarded as “highly racialized signifiers,” the characters are seen and heard as “white ‘humans,’ black ‘humans,’ Asian ‘humans,’ or Latino ‘humans’” (37). Namely, these signifiers represent characters who contribute to stereotypical messages about race and class, and when it comes to analyzing racialized anthropomorphism in media, a reading must address race and class intersectionally rather than separately. Furthermore, animation characters that are seen as racially anthropomorphized are racialized because of their class and classed because of their race. While there is an existing scholarly dialogue in examining stereotyped representations of minority characters in children’s animated film, there is little research on these representations in children’s animated television. With *The Powerpuff Girls*, this paper seeks to add to that developing amount of scholarship by considering the representation of “evil” villains in the series through racialized anthropomorphism.

Though *The Powerpuff Girls* is a series that seems to be about girl power, Professor Utonium and the omnipotent narrator are two white male figures who stand as the real power of the series and the girls’ fight against “the forces of evil.” “‘Evil,’ [in *The Powerpuff Girls*]” as Kirkland states, “is projected onto minority and marginalized groups” (254). The series explicitly engages in racialized anthropomorphism featuring many villains who are non-white, non-human,

3. White voice actor Tom Kenny voices the narrator, among other characters in the series (powerpuffgirls.wikia.com).

and possess stereotypically ethnic accents.⁴ Additionally, these villains are excluded from the middle-class spaces of Townsville. Each episode features a villain and their evil plan to gain control over Townsville by attempting to overthrow the Townsvillian society maintained by the series' white male figures. Focusing on a few key episodes in the first season of the series, I argue that through racialized anthropomorphism the villains are represented as race and class Others who are excluded from Townsvillian society; in addition, the series manipulates girl power in a way that prioritizes the influences of Professor Utonium and the narrator who hold authority over the girls' and the series' treatment of the villains. As mentioned earlier, a reading of racialized anthropomorphism must address race and class intersectionally and my reading of the villains in this series seeks to do such. In *The Powerpuff Girls*, dominant, white, patriarchal forces take authority over an empowering movement for girls and women to exert prejudices on groups from low-class and ethnic minority backgrounds, revealing the series as a non-feminist text.

Racialized Anthropomorphism in *The Powerpuff Girls*

Mojo Jojo (see Fig. 1; referred to later as “Mojo”) is a green-faced, mad scientist, monkey “with narrow eyes and thin lips, whose costume incorporates a flowing cape and turban” combines “caricatures of African, Asian and Middle Eastern races and cultures with a notable, if unplaceable, foreign accent” (Kirkland 255-56) that associates him as a racial Other and a disruption to Townsvillian society.



Fig. 1. “Monkey See, Monkey Doo.” Mojo Jojo with the Anubis Head. Screenshot from *Hulu*. *The Powerpuff Girls*, season 1, episode 1, Cartoon Network, 18 Nov. 1998, reproduced on *Hulu*, 16 Dec. 2008, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/1006862#i0,p0,d0>.

In his inaugural episode, the narrator introduces Townsville as a quiet, peaceful city, “a city that sleeps,” but that notices that “someone in Townsville is not asleep” (“Monkey See, Monkey

4. Some villains are voiced by actors of color who exaggerate their voices to create stereotypical portrayals and some are voiced by white actors who take on a foreign sounding accent. For instance, the notorious supervillain, Mojo Jojo is voiced by a white voice actor, Roger Jackson, who draws his influences for Mojo’s voice from the Japanese animation series, *Speed Racer* (Fritz, “Animated Shorts”). In “Buttercrush,” Lil’ Aurtto is voiced by Argentinian actor, Carlos Alazraqui and is later voiced by Tom Kenny who voices the character in the same stereotypical style that Alazraqui does (powerpuffgirls.wikia.com).

Doo”). The scene cuts to that “someone,” Mojo, at the Townsville Museum stealing the prized Anubian Jewels and the Anubis Head, known Egyptian symbols referring to the “[c]anine god of cemeteries and embalming” (George Hart 25). He uses these items to conjure “the curse of the Anubis Head” to turn the town into dogs and “make the human race bow down to [him]” (“Monkey See, Monkey Doo”). As Mojo blasts the townspeople with the Anubis Head, they become generic dogs with no apparent racial features that convey their whiteness, marking them as racial Others. Mojo’s curse of Otherness overthrows Townsville’s white patriarchal society because it positions him, an ethnically ambiguous monkey, as the racial superior. Even though Mojo overthrows Townsvillian society by turning the citizens into racial Others, Professor Utonium, who is turned into a dog, maintains markers of white masculinity, maintaining his white fur and pipe (see Fig. 2a). These markers represent the whiteness the Powerpuff Girls were made to maintain; therefore, the girls must fight to restore Townsvillian society.

Once Mojo changes the whole world into dogs he declares himself “the true master of the world” (“Monkey See, Monkey Doo”). The Powerpuff Girls, too, are turned into “powerpups,” baring their respected hair colors—Blossom, red; Bubbles, blonde; Buttercup, black—as their new “race” (see Fig. 2b). However, unlike the Professor Utonium, they do not hold any markers of whiteness and they even lose their superpowers, clearly prioritizing white maleness over girl power as the authority of the series.



Fig. 2a (left). Professor Utonium as a dog. Fig. 2b (right). The “powerpups.” Screenshots from *Hulu. The Powerpuff Girls*, season 1, episode 1, Cartoon Network, 18 Nov. 1998, reproduced on *Hulu*, 16 Dec. 2008, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/1006862#i0,p0,d0>.

The girls defeat Mojo and his minions and break the curse, changing everyone in the world back to humans; Mojo is reOthered by the curse unto him. He is last seen on a leash in the backyard of the Powerpuff home (see Fig. 3) as the girls beg Professor Utonium to keep him, to which he says, “Girls, it’s a big responsibility keeping an evil villain in the house. You’ve got to feed him, water him, take him for walks, keep him from causing mayhem and chaos. And chewing the furniture” (“Monkey See, Monkey Doo”).



Fig. 3. Mojo Jojo as a Powerpuff pet. Screenshot from *Hulu. The Powerpuff Girls*, season 1, episode 1, Cartoon Network, 18 Nov. 1998, reproduced on *Hulu*, 16 Dec. 2008, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/1006862#i0,p0,d0>.

With Mojo being the series' most notorious supervillain, this ending seeks to infantilize his villainy as something that is entertaining to the Utonium family. A sense of normalcy is maintained by Professor Utonium having control over Mojo and what the girls do with him. Townsvillian society is thus upheld in the professor's ability to hold authority over the girls and their treatment of the villains. In the concluding seconds of the episode, we hear the narrator say his salutation that is repeated in every episode, "And once again the day is saved thanks to the Powerpuff Girls" ("Monkey See, Monkey Doo"). This repeated ending restates the Townsvillian society that the Powerpuff Girls continually restore—one in which white men are in charge. In this episode, Mojo, a racially anthropomorphized villain, tries to overthrow Townsvillian society but is defeated by the forces of "good" as seen in the *Powerpuff Girls*.

Like "Monkey See, Monkey Doo," through racialized anthropomorphism, the Boogie Man from "Boogie Frights" and his multicultural crew are represented as threats to Townsvillian society. The Boogie Man, a "blue black"⁵ monster (Steele 60), and his multi-colored monster friends embody, as Paul Wells states "the black idiom" that "works as a mechanism by which white animators and audiences can rehearse their fears and play out scenarios which are supposedly outside WASP (white, anglo-saxon, protestant) society" (217). In using elements of the blaxploitation genre which negatively represents black people as pimps and gangsters (Maynard), this episode further reveals how racialized anthropomorphism portrays the villains as racial Others as well as the power Professor Utonium and the narrator have as authoritative voices over the girls' maintenance of the Townsvillian society. The episode begins at the Utonium household, where Buttercup tells her sisters a story about the Boogie Man which terrifies Bubbles, who earlier revealed that she was afraid of the dark. In an effort to encourage his creations, Professor Utonium tells the girls, "If you can just face your fears, then I know you can find the courage to beat *them*" ("Boogie Frights," emphasis added). Buttercup's story incites the fear of the Other as seen in the Boogie Man and the darkness that surrounds him. This fear of darkness is both literal and metaphorical, being the fear of "dark" spaces and of "dark" people,

5. According to Catherine Steele in her study of the animated series *Proud Family*, she notices how a group of characters with dark blue skin are conveyed as threatening and ugly, referencing the colorist pejorative phrase "blue black" (60). In *The Powerpuff Girls*, an element of the Boogie Man's blackness is seen in his "blue black" skin.

but Professor Utonium, standing in as the voice of white patriarchy encourages the girls to beat “them,” which is referring to the ethnic monsters the girls will face in the episode.

As the girls go to sleep, the narrator notices a “crazy beat” happening under their bed. The beat he hears is disco music which, as Bruce Schulman states, is a genre of music pioneered by black and Latino communities that “challenges [both] racism and pluralism, discrimination and diversity” and “threatened suburban white boys who found it too feminine, too gay, too black” (74). The fact that this episode uses music that is associated with black, Latino, and gay communities speaks to how the monsters featured are outside of the racial and sexual norms of Townsville. The camera pulls into a laboratory where the Boogie Man is working on his device for his master plan, a disco ball. Once, he finishes his last touches, he signals his sidekick, Jerome to “get this party started” (“Boogie Frights”). The scene then cuts to a den filled with the indistinguishable chatter of multicolored monsters as Jerome tells the “freaks” and “disasters” to “chill the frag out” and prepare for the entrance of their “master” (“Boogie Frights”). The Boogiemaster comes out to address his “creatures of darkness,” saying:

Too long have we been at the mercy of light. Night lights, street lights, hall lights with the door cracked and deeper still: the sun...But, your Boogiemaster has just completed step one of my grandmaster plan that will ensure an end to this problem once and for all. So prepare to hit the streets, ‘cause we are gonna party all night long! (“Boogie Frights”).

This monologue expresses the same sentiment of “the white noose surrounding the increasingly black and Latino central cities” that many minority communities felt during the disco era (Schulman 73). The Boogie Man’s speech is about countering the oppression Professor Utonium’s articulates with “the light” standing in for “the Man,” or the oppressive force that blaxploitation characters fought against (Maynard). Much like these characters, the Boogie Man and his gang only want freedom and visibility; however, this freedom and visibility is shown by Professor Utonium and the narrator as threatening to the citizens of Townsville.

When the Boogie Man cuts Townsville’s main electrical power unit, the narrator notes, “they’ve cut off all *power* to Townsville” (emphasis added, “Boogie Frights”). The narrator not only indicates that Townsville’s electrical power been cut, but so has its social power as seen when the Boogie Man’s crew come from under children’s beds and invade neighborhoods, all while disco music underscores the terror they evoke on the townspeople (see Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. “Boogie Frights.” The Boogie Man and his disco crew. Photo from *Youtube*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aN7rmv5z3Mk>.

As the crew is about to “blow this joint,” seeing that the sun is about to rise, the Boogie Man initiates the final step of his grandmaster plan and launches a giant disco ball into space,

eclipsing the sun (“Boogie Frights”). With the “light” gone from Townsville, Townsvillian society has been overthrown, this causes the narrator to exclaim, “Now morning will never come to Townsville and these nocturnal nightmares will be free to hunt the darkness forever!” (“Boogie Frights”). To the narrator, these multicultural “freaks” are taking over the city with their Otherness and their disco music. When the Powerpuff Girls try to defeat them, their super strength is no match for the large group of these ethnic monsters: “There’s too many of *them*. We can’t take *them* all” (emphasis added, “Boogie Frights”). Seeing the disco ball as their source of power, the girls fly up into space to destroy it, while the Boogie Man follows them in his white limousine. A laser battle ensues, causing Blossom and Buttercup to be thrown off course and leaving Bubbles to fend for herself. While the Boogie Man continues to fire lasers at Bubbles, she remembers Professor Utonium’s words about finding the courage to beat “them.” With encouragement from these words she dodges the Boogie Man and helps her sisters destroy the disco ball. As light begins to flood Townsville once again, the narrator says, “The sun is free to shine on Townsville again. Sorry nightmares, party’s over” (“Boogie Frights”). The monsters melt into black beings that evaporate in the light as soft angelic music accompanies this scene. Here, the connection to disco music’s association with ethnic minorities and the Boogie Man and his crew is made explicit in the destroying of the disco ball which kills the disco music in this episode.⁶ As the narrator indicates that social order is restored, it is made apparent that ethnic minorities are not welcome in Townsville. Like “Monkey See, Monkey Doo,” this episode reveals how the white male voices of the series, manifested in Professor Utonium and the narrator, utilize the Powerpuff Girls to oppress Townsville’s racially anthropomorphized villains.

Class and Citizenship

The Powerpuff Girls establishes an us/them, or more aptly, a citizen/foreigner dichotomy that seeks to convey the villain’s “evilness.” Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman discusses such dichotomies as an establishment of social order and power between the dominant and opposite group: “[t]he second member is but *the other* of the first, the opposite (degraded, suppressed, exiled) side of the first and its creation...stranger the other of the native...‘them’ the other of ‘us’” (14). With *The Powerpuff Girls* being an animated television series in which the target audience is girls, one must be critical of how and why these dichotomies are formed in the context of the series and what messages can be drawn from them. In *Animating Difference*, King et al. propose that animated films, particularly those by Disney and Pixar, “teach very specific messages regarding clear-cut dichotomies such as good and evil” (35). In associating the good/evil dichotomy with racialized anthropomorphism, these scholars reveal how a character’s “place of residence,” for example, functions as a “racialized signifier,” (37) in which race and class are interrelated; such an interrelation can be seen in the villains of *The Powerpuff Girls*.

6. This moment expresses the “Disco sucks” sentiment, Schulman explains, that white communities possessed against the ethnically drive disco scene that “occasionally resulted in ugly racial incidents” (73). I read the destroying of the disco ball similar to the July 1979 Disco Demolition Nite at Comiskey Park in which “a mountain of disco records [were] piled up on the stadium floor” and “thousands of white teenagers flooded onto the field” to “kill” disco (Schulman 73-74). I argue that the girls recreate this moment by using their laser powers to destroy the disco ball.

Therefore, racialized anthropomorphism must additionally be examined for its portrayal of the villains as racial *and* class Others.

The series establishes a citizen/foreigner dichotomy to represent the villains as class Others by a) socially excluding the villains from the suburban neighborhoods of Townsville—for instance, Mojo lives at his lair on Volcano Mountain, a secluded area in the middle of the city, and the Boogie Man and his friends live in Townsville’s sewer—and b) Professor Utonium and the narrator, the figures of the white, middle-class, patriarchal society the girls must maintain, highlight the racial and class Otherness the villains represent. For example, in “Monkey See, Monkey Doo,” Mojo’s curse of Otherness not only evokes the horror of being made into a racial Other, but also the horror of having no markers of class: namely, social and economic authority are non-existent when the townspeople are turned into dogs. When Mojo turns both the professor and the narrator into dogs, these figures are only able to communicate through barking. When the curse is reversed, Professor Utonium and the narrator are both human again, and more importantly, they have regained their voice and social authority over the girls. Similarly, we come to know the terror of the Boogie Man and his multiethnic disco crew flooding into Townsville’s predominately white, middle class neighborhoods by the professor encouraging the girls to defeat “them” and the narrator referring to the monsters as “freaks” and “nightmares.” By representing the villains as class and racial Others through a citizen/foreigner dichotomy, Professor Utonium and the narrator solidify their positions a patriarchal power.

Conclusion

When the white male creator of the series, Craig McCracken, set out to create a show that would empower girls, he produced a show that represented villains as ethnic minorities through racialized anthropomorphism. The series known as *The Powerpuff Girls* was rooted in these negative representations of villain characters that can be traced back to its origins as “Whoopass Stew.” McCracken first developed the idea of *The Powerpuff Girls* as a student at California Institute of the Arts, saying that he wanted to create a different kind of superhero story: “I had happened to draw these three little girls, and I thought, ‘Oh, wait, this is a cool thing—little cute girls in this really tough environment.’ That contrast was really nice to me” (*theavclub.com*). Thus, a three and a half minute short film called “Whoopass Stew” was produced and it featured Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup as the Whoopass Girls. The film introduces the same conception story as *The Powerpuff Girls*, with the presence of Professor Utonium and the narrator, but instead of Chemical X, a can of Whoopass gives the girls their powers to “fight the forces of evil” (“Whoopass Stew”). In the short film, the girls battle with two racially anthropomorphized groups who represent ethnic groups, the Gangreen Gang, who is mentioned in this paper, and the Amoeba Boys. In replacing McCracken’s “cute” with “white” and “tough” with “ethnic,” explains the short film’s use of racialized anthropomorphism as a way to represent the villains as Others; what is portrayed in “Whoopass Stew” is magnified in *The Powerpuff Girls*.

The Powerpuff Girls is regarded as a show about girl power, but it is Professor Utonium and the narrator—two white male figures—who hold true power over the girls’ and the series’ treatment of the villains. However, creator Craig McCracken is the one who places these white male figures in power; thus, manipulating girl power to convey a white, middle-class, patriarchal society as the authority over a movement that is supposed to empower girls (and women, by extension). McCracken is able to use girl power as a way to exert his own prejudices about

ethnic minority groups, seen in the villains; moreover, he explores his own anxieties about ethnic masculinity, as most of the villains are male. By representing male characters as racial and class Others, he is able to communicate to the audience examples in which a white, middle-class, patriarchal society as dominant and normal. This conclusion about the dominance and normalcy of a white, middle-class, patriarchal society should not be possible to make in this girl power text, but with the series' abundant male influences, messages about white male power are recognizable. The series' intended audience—girls—may not pick up on these messages and may receive girl power as white male power. Additionally, while the series is regarded as feminist, it fails to engage with an intersectional feminism that seeks to inspire *all* girls.

With the 2016 reboot of the series including many of the same villains from the original, this paper maintains its relevance in popular culture. As Amy Zimmerman, notes in the title of her article about that “The Powerpuff Girls Are Back—and Just as Feminist as Ever,” one should be skeptical of how girl power and feminism is seemingly represented by the two white male creators of the reboot, Bob Boyle and Nick Jennings, even though they claim to be progressive in the way they're handling the creative process. With the recent introduction of a black Powerpuff girl named Bliss in the second season of the reboot, the show has been criticized for contributing to negative stereotypes about black women and girls as angry and hyper-sexual (Izetta Nicole). It seems that the lack of intersection feminism and blatant racism *The Powerpuff Girls* as a series has been created upon continues even to a character that is supposed to be one of the girls. In the case of the original series, what McCracken conveys as “empowering” through girl power is that which places white, middle-class, patriarchal values to the forefront. In a series that captivated a generation in the 1990s, *The Powerpuff Girls* represents flawed portrayals of ethnic minorities under the guise of girl power, associating the series with less empowering and less progressive non-feminist messages.

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