

***The Water Babies* and “Naturalizing” Difference**

Once he passed a great black shining seal, looking exactly like a fat old greasy negro with a grey pate. And Tom, instead of being frightened, said, ‘How d’ye do sir; what a beautiful place the sea is!’ – Charles Kingsley, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby*, 122.

In her book *Upheavals of Thought*, Martha Nussbaum argues that to understand the ethical systems of children, scholars must relinquish dependence on language as evidence. Nussbaum suggests that the core element of emotion as discernment is present in children even before they have grasped a language system, and that wonder at the larger world of people and things, facilitates “a more robust capacity for non-possessive love, and for bringing distant others into their system of goals and plans” (54). Yet, she doesn’t believe that self-interest can be entirely erased, even in children. She argues that “in love and compassion the object must ultimately be seen as a part of the person’s own scheme of ends” (55).

This presentation uses children’s literature’s engagement with the visual to test this and other theories about language and ethics. My particular interest is in the way that the natural environment, as described and/or visualized in imaginative children’s texts, creates cues for ethical behaviors in real landscapes. As with science fiction, utopian fiction, and fantasy fiction for adults, a forced engagement with foreign and unfamiliar spaces through texts can be seen as a mode of escapism, or as a safe space on which to practice emotional responses that will be essential in the child’s lived environment. This presentation will examine children’s literature in light of its arguments about “natural” versus manmade borders and barriers, and the social barriers that either correspond with or contrast with the described landscapes. I will discuss how these writers engage with forms of science that bolstered and facilitated race-based thinking, especially in the Victorian era, but at times to invert the supposedly biological underpinnings of difference in favor of a radical reinvention of the “natural.”