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(En)Countering Social and Environmental Messages in The Rainforest Cafe [sic], Children's Picturebooks, and Other Visual Culture Sites

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Abstract

Our study critically examines social and environmental messages in a range of visual sites educating about rainforest environments. We focus primarily on the Rainforest Cafe, an international series of rainforest-themed edutainment restaurant/stores, whose inherent contradictions between consumption and conservation are quite disturbing when viewed as part of the null curriculum (Hollins, 1996). We then propose an alternate approach to teaching and learning about rainforest environments. This approach teaches students how to deconstruct visual culture environmental messages, such as those in the Rainforest Cafe, fine art, popular films, and children's picturebooks to learn from both accurate and inaccurate images while promoting environmental caring for the rainforest *and* students' own environments through art.

Introduction

Many visual culture environmental images provide messages contradicting what they show/say and what they actually do (Jagodzinke, 2007). On visiting a Rainforest Cafe (the Café, or RFC), a family-oriented retail chain combining dining and shopping in a rainforest-themed environment, we, an art professor (Mira) and her graduate student (Sandrine), noticed this contradiction between “Save the rainforest” signs and the excessively plastic and fiberglass consumer environment.

We decided to investigate different aspects of the Café’s businesses to see how effective they were in achieving the educational goals stated on their website *and* in maintaining ecologically sustainable practices. Research into Rainforest Cafe, Inc. reveals that although the Café provides some educational value and employs some environmentally positive practices, it largely fails to live up to its stated goal “to help educate the public and area schools about the world’s rainforests, threatened and endangered species, and conservation efforts to protect the planet’s fragile ecosystem” (Rainforest Cafe, 2007). Despite this failure, we will show how sites such as the Rainforest Cafe, combined with other visual culture sources, can still have educational value in helping children make meaning from both congruent and incongruent images.

We begin by describing the theoretical and pedagogical perspectives underlying our research as they relate to making meaning from children’s experiences of visual culture and place and provide a brief description of our methodology. We then describe why learning about rainforest environments is important. Next, we describe a visit to a Rainforest Cafe, reporting our empirical observations of the dining experience and the store, as well as information derived from its website. We then broaden our topic to explore some of the many representations of rainforest environments in children’s visual culture before proposing a model for an alternative form of curriculum that embraces “resistant meaning making.” This curriculum draws on these many sources of visual culture to educate children about the social/ecological aspects of rainforest representations and issues while also connecting them with the places where they live.

Theoretical and Pedagogical Perspectives

Our study is contextualized within Baudrillard’s theories of hyperreality and simulacra (1994), eco-justice (Bowers, 1997, 2005) and ecosophy (Guattari, 2000), visual culture (Darts, 2004; Freedman, 2000; Tavin & Anderson, 2003), and place-based education (Blandy & Hoffman, 1993; Graham, 2007; Gruenewald, 2003b; Reisberg, 2008a, 2008b). Baudrillard’s hyperreality addresses artificial constructions of “reality” that can seem more real and more seductive than the “real” thing itself. For example, with Rainforest Cafes or iMax wilderness

movies, why spend time outdoors when nature can be so uncomfortable? Examples of simulacra occur when the thing being represented has no “real” world basis, such as the confusing inclusion of dolphins and panda bears in the simulated rainforest environment of Rainforest Cafes.

Eco-justice and Ecosophy

Both Bowers’ (2001, 2005) work on eco-justice and Guattari’s (2000) on “ecosophy” highlight human/environmental connections, including the discrediting of indigenous knowledge and the relational effects of “resource colonization” (Gedicks, 1993, p. 13). Guattari writes: “Now more than ever, nature cannot be separated from culture; in order to comprehend the interactions between ecosystems, the mechanosphere and the social and individual Universes of reference, we must learn to think transversally” (p. 43).

Guattari’s (2000) work on “ecosophy” rests on the relationship between interiority and exteriority within the interrelated contexts of what he describes as “three ecological registers [–] the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity” (p. 28). He describes the only “true response” to our ecological crisis as necessitating an “authentic political, social, and cultural revolution” that radically shifts attitudes and behaviors toward “both material and immaterial assets” (p. 28). Unlike Bowers, Guattari believes that new technologies could potentially provide solutions if designed and enacted with ecosophical awareness of social and ecological justice. Guattari stresses the importance of delegitimizing the profit-based market as *the* source of value to include social and aesthetic values.

Bowers (2005), on the other hand, sees no solutions in technology, presenting the belief in “technology as savior” as one of the “root metaphors” underlying the current crisis. Bowers focuses on attacking the root metaphors of Enlightenment thinking that are still pervasive today. He is particularly scathing toward critical pedagogy’s emphasis on individual emancipation divorced from environmental contexts and academia’s investment in privileging “expert” knowledge. Other “pre-ecological” root metaphors include progress as linear, inevitable, and good; anthropocentrism; and continued industrial expansion. In contrast, eco-justice root metaphors include locating individuals within an active participatory “ecological system” of social and environmental justice known as “the commons,” an ideal location for culturally/environmentally invaluable sites such as rainforests. These ideas are useful in helping children make meaning from the many sources of visual culture they encounter, particularly those that involve culture, nature, and/or “green washing.”¹

Visual Culture

Visual culture provides a powerful way of looking at how visual forms influence, mediate, and create culture (Darts, 2004; Duncum, 2000; Freedman, 2000; Smith-Shank, 2004). Visual culturists explore the full range of human-made visual artifacts impacting world culture, including fine art, films, books, the Internet, advertising, and indigenous and multicultural art, to look at their inter- or dis/connections and contextualize their meanings. Thus, visual culture explores both the messages implicit within images and how they are constructed (consciously or not) to convey these messages.

Place-Based Art Education

Place-based art education, drawing from the general field of place-based education (Gruenewald, 2003a, 2006; Noddings, 2005; Sobel, 2004), also advocates grounding students' teaching and learning in their lived experiences. It draws on local sources of knowledge to learn from and benefit students' own communities and environments in forms of service learning (Blandy, Congdon & Krug, 1998; Lai & Ball, 2002; Reisberg, 2008c). Gruenewald's (2003b) "critical pedagogy of place" responds to place-based and environmental education's focus on environmental and rural contexts and critical pedagogy's neglect of environmental relationships. Applying Gruenewald's critical pedagogy of place to art education, Graham (2007) writes:

Art education informed by a critical place-based pedagogy emphasizes the activist, restorative possibilities of art making and affirms the need for students to become involved in learning outside the school (p. 379).

However, while we agree that direct engagement with local natural and social worlds is of critical importance, this paper argues for both local *and* global activism supporting jagodzinski's (2007) call for a "transformative and multivalent vision" (p. 352).

Methodology

Our research methodology followed a fairly traditional protocol beginning with gaining IRB approval to conduct interviews with patrons and staff at a Rainforest Cafe. After receiving verbal permission from the manager, we tape recorded interviews with six family groups and three staff. However, our study changed following this visit where we had conducted the interviews. When we called to set up another visit to join one of the educational tours for our study and briefly mentioned the study (we did not provide many details), both Sandrine and I were treated with suspicion and forwarded to someone higher-up. She told us in no-uncertain terms that the manager had no authority to approve the interviews, that we did not have permission to use any of these interviews, and that everything had to go through "corporate."

She also made it clear that we could not join an educational tour unless we organized a group of fifteen participants. It was a somewhat intimidating conversation, and Sandrine and I decided to focus instead on our own experiences and perceptions of the Café's restaurant, store, and website and explore other visual culture sites related to rainforests.

We had already each independently visited a Rainforest Cafe and taken field notes. Then, during the full day we spent together at the Rainforest Cafe, where we conducted the interviews, we had also taken extensive field notes and these became the basis for our study. When we decided to broaden our topic, we also researched fine art, films, and picturebooks that addressed the rainforest. To highlight the particular function of the visual, we decided to provide brief overviews of the sources described above and focus on two picturebooks. These books were chosen for their strong aesthetic values and their social/environmental messages. We used Terry Barrett's conceptual framework for interpreting artwork to make meaning:

SUBJECT MATTER + MEDIUM + CONTEXT = MEANING. . . The critical activities of describing, analyzing, interpreting, judging, and theorizing about works of art are interrelated and interdependent . . . All works of art are in part about the world in which they emerged (Barrett, 2004, p. 738).

Valuing the Rainforest

Park (1992) describes rainforests as “the lungs of the Earth” (p. 100) containing the greatest biodiversity in the world, “absorb[ing] large quantities of solar radiation” (p. 95), and “constrain[ing] global warming triggered by greenhouse gases” (p. 21). According to a *National Geographic* (Wallace, 2007) article, at the current rate of deforestation, the Amazon Rainforest will be reduced by 40 percent in the next two decades, drastically limiting the number of tropical plants used in Western pharmaceuticals. Equally distressing, many indigenous people have been either uprooted or killed, with whole tribes becoming extinct (Plenderleith & Posey, 2002). Citing Ribeiro, Plenderleith and Posey note, “In this century alone at least 87 Indian groups have become extinct solely in Brazil” (p. 58). Apart from the unconscionable human tragedy of this loss, Posey and Plenderleith highlight how shortsighted our lack of care is, stating:

With the extinction of each indigenous group, the world loses millennia of accumulated knowledge about life in and adaptation to tropical ecosystems. This priceless information is forfeited with hardly a blink of the eye: the march of development cannot wait long enough to even find out what it is that it is about to destroy (p. 59).

Social and Environmental Destruction and Resistance

Gedicks (1993) describes how Yanomami Indians, the largest remaining unacculturated tribe in the Amazon, are facing extinction due to mercury effluent from the mining of valuable metals and the introduction of diseases such as TB, flu, and malaria. Julian Burger² writes about Yanomami suffering from the imposition of a disastrous economy; “alien social values,” destruction of sacred sites; food and water supplies, “cultural disintegration,” physical, mental and emotional damage, and sometimes death (cited in Gedicks, p. 38).

Other causes of rainforest habitat and indigenous peoples’ destruction include logging, rubber harvesting, cattle ranching, and soybean, sugar, and tropical fruit farming. In addition, the international oil industry has destroyed over 12 million acres of rainforest (Gedicks, 1993).³ Fortunately, indigenous people are fighting back against resource colonialism by organizing activist groups, such as the Confederation of Indian Nations of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE), the International Alliance of the Indigenous Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests, and indigenous people working with non-indigenous allies such as the Rainforest Action Network (Development Gateway Foundation, n.d.; Gedicks, 1993, Rainforest Action Network, 2008; The Ogiek People, 2008).⁴

These are just a few of the many reasons why rainforest education is important. In addition, as evidenced by the success of the Rainforest Cafe, rainforest or jungle-themed films and picture books, and tropical stuffed animals, children are fascinated by rainforests and the animals that live there.

The Servicescape of the Rainforest Cafe

Marketing researchers Rosenbaum and Wong (2007) look at constructed environments within a “servicescape” context (Bitner, 1992), i.e. how elements in a space designed for consumption cause physiological, emotional, and cognitive responses. Rosenbaum and Wong note that even though this space might be appealing, it “may not always be a socially responsible servicescape” (p.161), creating an “ersatz” effect that can damage or replace the culture and environment being depicted. Beardsley (2000) echoes this, writing: “[I]nstead of being outside enjoying nature, we’re at the mall buying products that express our love of nature” (p.3). We learn in servicescapes such as the Rainforest Cafe that it is fine to consume, so long as a portion of the profits actually do something good through “feel good” consumerism (Beardsley, 2000; Rosenbaum & Wong, 2007).

For Baudrillard (1994), the boundary between reality and virtual reality is blurred. For him, Disneyland is a world that wants to be “childish . . . in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the ‘real’ world, and to conceal the fact that true childishness is everywhere”

(p. 13). Not surprisingly, Rainforest Cafes are featured in Disney theme parks around the world. Of course, Rainforest Cafes are not real tropical rainforests, there is no real rainforest ecosystem, and no real life besides humans eating, shopping, and serving (besides the tropical fish in the impressive aquariums). When Giroux (1997) writes, “Disney’s theme parks offer an invitation to adventure, a respite from the drudgery of work, and an opportunity to escape from the alienation of daily life” (p. 5), this description could easily apply to a Rainforest Cafe experience.

Visiting the Rainforest Cafe

Our Safari Adventure

After following a trail of painted animal paw prints to the restaurant area, we waited in line for a “safari guide”/host to seat us. We were already primed for a receptive experience. In describing the ambience of the restaurant, a good word might be “excess.” Overhead a dense plastic mélange of vines, flowers, and plants simulates a dark rainforest canopy. The Café is ingeniously designed, taking advantage of sophisticated animatronic design and lighting and sound technology to create a “magical” immersive environment. A gorilla beats his chest, a languid and slightly worse for wear jaguar swooshes her tail, an elephant raises her head. There is a wall of live tropical fish, providing another level of entertainment. Each Café is slightly different, and one of the Café’s we visited incongruously featured dolphins and a panda bear without any explanations. The bathroom doors were labeled “King of the Jungle” and “Queen of the Nile,” although what the Egyptian Nile has to do with rainforests was beyond us.

We sat near a giant mushroom underneath a round changing skyscape. Periodically, we heard loud thunder, and the “sky” lit up with lightning. In calmer moments, we watched shooting stars. There was a cacophony of sounds including birds, monkeys, gorillas, elephants, thunder, and the sounds of a waterfall. There was also the noise of numerous diners, many of whom were celebrating their birthdays. Birthday cakes were a delicious looking dessert called “Volcano,” featuring a volcano-shaped chocolate ice cream concoction with a sparkler firework coming out of the top which was accompanied by the wait staff/“safari guides” singing their own peppy version of a birthday song. These birthday events provided a delight-filled spectacle all around, reminiscent of Guy Debord’s ideas in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967/2006). As in many American restaurants, our food portions were excessive, leading to waste in both our own meals and those of many of the other patrons that we saw. However, the food was delicious and came quickly.

The Store

The store was a frightening example of consumer capitalism run amok. It featured animal gift cards; stuffed plastic and rubber animals; activity books; clothing; and a large assortment of other rainforest and non-rainforest related merchandise, such as stuffed polar bears. Many of the products were made from non-recyclable plastic, further challenging the Café's conservation goals. In the midst of the store was a huge animatronic tree called Tracy Tree, which, given the context, bizarrely repeated, "reduce, reuse, recycle" among other messages. In another restaurant, Tracy's statement was followed by a recording of Bob Marley singing, "Stand up for your Rights." Clearly, anyone wanting to actually learn something meaningful about rainforest conservation, outside of a classroom excursion, nearby school visit, or organized fifteen-person educational program, would find it very difficult.

The Website

The Rainforest Cafe website promotes its various enterprises with eight "cute" rainforest cartoon characters that constitute important aspects of the Café's "brand" identity and are featured in much of their merchandise. Most web pages provide small pieces of information about rainforest animals, but apart from noting their conservation education goals, they do not describe conservation activities or why conservation is needed (Rainforest Cafe Inc., 2007).

We discovered two downloadable children's activity books. One cover featured Rainforest Cafe brand/mascot animals happily performing in a circus, while the other showed Bamba the gorilla working out with weights in a "Rainforest Cafe Physical Activity Book." Neither of the activity books contained any information about rainforests or conservation, while the featuring of circuses as a "fun" place for animals is counter to research in eco-feminism (Cataldi, 2002), animal rights (Frank, 2004), and animal care (Gupta & Chakraborty, 2004).

Off-Site Research

In our off-site research, we discovered educational and environmentally positive practices including their free local school visits and in-house educational tours, donations of a portion of the money from their animatronic crocodile wishing pools to rainforest preservation groups, and their grant-giving organization, "Friends of the Future Foundation." Beardsley (2000) also notes, "in 1997, the corporation reportedly spent \$175,000 per unit on outreach programs" (p. 4). In addition, RFC uses only simulated coral in their aquariums to conserve natural coral reefs, cook line-caught fish, and avoid purchasing beef from deforested areas whenever possible. The Cafés also employ trained staff to care for their live fish. Furthermore, in 1999, Rainforest Cafe, Inc. was the first chain restaurant to serve shade-grown coffee, thus helping to preserve existing canopies and the wildlife therein (Beardsley, 2000). The Café recycles its bottles, cans, and paper products and uses recycled paper napkins. However,

despite these activities, RFC is still supporting the corporations desire to maximize social responsibility while increasing shareholder wealth – two positions that appear to be mutually exclusive.⁵

Trying to Make Sense of the Rainforest Cafe

Rainforest Cafes provide an exciting and confusing example of excessive capitalist consumption. They create a seductive narrative of adventure and excitement within a tightly scripted hyperreality. As an ecologically-themed edutainment center with a supposed environmental mission, they squander many of their educational opportunities. For example, there were no signs providing information about the many animals or the canopy in the Café, although there were signs for the live tropical fish. There was a mishmash of rainforest and non-rainforest animals without explanation, while indigenous rainforest people remained non-existent in any of the Café's various rainforest representations.⁶ Indicators of the disconnection between Rainforest Cafes' goal of public education and what they actually provide for most of their patrons were numerous, including the children's largely non-environmental activity sheets on their website and in their restaurant, the lack of explicit educational (or activist) materials beyond a few interesting facts, or the general lack of information about what conservation actually means and how they participate in it. The cute anthropomorphic Rainforest Cafe "brand" animals on their website, menus, and other literature, the plastic (and fiberglass) construction of the Café, and the many plastic rainforest-themed products⁷ create a vision of the natural world totally at odds with any kind of rainforest reality or conservation ethic.

Beardsley (2000) writes that with "the increasingly pervasive commercial trend that views and uses nature as a sales gimmick or marketing strategy, often through the production of replicas or simulations . . . whether we see it or not, commodity culture is reconstructing nature" (2000, p.1-2). Thus, it is implied by the Café's various visual sources that participating in massive consumption holds no social or environmental repercussions.

Does corporate caring come a distant second behind maximizing profits for Rainforest Cafe, Inc., indicating a lack of heart in truly "walking the talk"? More cynically, could the Café's conservation education aspect simply be a marketing ploy? Limiting real education efforts to a self-organized fifteen-person minimum ensures a healthy group size for dining and purchasing products, while nearby classroom visits could easily serve as an effective promotional tool. When Beardsley (2000) describes the money spent on outreach programs, how much of that goes to the management costs of the program and/or serves as a healthy tax deduction?

Rainforest Cafe, Inc. is owned by Landry Restaurants. According to their 2005 Annual Report (Landry Restaurants Inc., 2006), their net income was \$44,815,036 with their total assets

listed at \$1,612,587,813. RFC restaurants brought in \$46 million in profits alone. It certainly appears that Rainforest Cafe, Inc. could afford to put a little more substance into their educational efforts for the general public.⁸

Rainforest Cafes present a distorted utopian version of an air-conditioned, fun-filled rainforest as an “ersatz” educational community of shoppers and diners, in contrast to the dystopic reality of rainforests that are under siege. Nevertheless, the Cafés do present interesting educational opportunities to create an alternate curriculum that creatively and critically explores and responds to social and environmental issues in world rainforests as well as in children’s local environments.

Learning Outside the Official Curriculum

Children’s experiences of Disney, Rainforest Cafes, films, picturebooks, and other visual culture sites constitute part of an unconscious or null curriculum outside of the official curriculum (Hollins, 1996). Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) call this kind of learning “cultural pedagogy” while others (Duncum, 2000; Freedman, 2003; Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight, 2007; Tavin & Hausman, 2004) describe it as experiencing “visual culture.” Giroux (1997, 2007) and Tavin and Anderson (2003) critique Disney films for presenting a normalized and reifying view of the world that is sanitized, seductive, and powerful in shaping children’s identities and belief systems. Disney also provides a dissonant pedagogy of mixed-messages in “multicultural” films that include “minoritarian” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) people in ways that reinscribe racist and sexist ideologies (Giroux, 1999, 2007; Tavin & Anderson, 2003). Giroux (2007) states:

Children's culture is a sphere where entertainment, advocacy, and pleasure meet to construct conceptions of what it means to be a child occupying a combination of gender, racial, and class positions in society through which one defines oneself in relation to a myriad of others (n.p.).

Like Giroux’s and Tavin and Anderson’s criticisms of Disney’s animated films, this study seeks to “move beyond treating . . . [the Rainforest Cafe and other visual culture sources] as transparent entertainment in order to question the messages behind . . . [them]” (Giroux, 1997, p. 54).

Rainforest Representations in Visual Culture

jagodzinski (2007) states: “We do not have the luxury not to introduce ecological issues into the visual arts curriculum” (p. 357). Consequently, we wish to highlight how diverse visual sources can provide opportunities to create an alternative form of curriculum embracing

resistant meaning making. This curriculum critically investigates the many mixed messages from different sources of visual culture while promoting environmental stewardship in both rainforests *and* students' home communities. Thus, even if sources of information are factually incorrect or biased, they provide excellent opportunities to teach students how to recognize inaccuracy and bias. Furthermore, this approach encourages alternative discourses to the individualistic message of "reduce, re-use, and recycle," that the Café simplistically promotes, to include larger global contexts and issues of corporate accountability while challenging normalizing racist images or the omission of indigenous people in other rainforest-themed visual culture.

We begin by exploring images (or the absence of images) in particular fine art, indigenous art, films and picturebook examples to support a model of resistant meaning-making for art educators to use in their teaching. This model draws from a wide range of visual culture that can also include sources such as online community sites, video games and advertising, etc., which because of space and time limitations we are unable to include.

Rainforests in Fine Art and Indigenous Art

Western artists have long been fascinated by rainforests as "exotic" or "primitive" settings. Notable examples during the Enlightenment include Gauguin's paintings of women in Tahiti and Rousseau's Jungle series. Willinsky (1998) describes how Enlightenment artists idealized or denigrated non-Anglo-Europeans as "others," leading to their marginalization and justification for the appropriation of their lands, resources, and people. More recently, artists, such as Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gomez Peña, Fiona Hall, Enrique Chagoya, and Fred Wilson, have challenged these representations with their own postmodern take on colonialism, while indigenous rainforest people's art, such as handwoven Chunga Masks from Wounaan Nation women in the Darien Province rainforests of Panama, molas made by Kuna People in San Blas, Panama, and aboriginal artwork from northern rainforest areas of Australia,⁹ can also deepen rainforest explorations in art education.

Rainforests in Film

Design artists and author/illustrators have played a powerful role in the visioning of colonizing sites, such as Disney's film depictions of "minorities" (Giroux, 1997, 2007; Tavin & Anderson, 2003) and Rainforest Cafe simulacra of rainforests that lack indigenous people. Some choice films for deconstructing colonizing images and messages about jungle/rainforest life include *George of the Jungle* (Devlin, Hoberman, Avnet, & Kerner, 2000), *Pirates of the Caribbean - The Curse of the Black Pearl* (Bruckheimer, 2003), *The Lion King* (Hahn, 2003), and *Fern Gully* (Rosen, Dowd, Cox, Faiman, & Harper, 2005). Apart from *Fern Gully*, all of these films unconsciously reinscribe racist ideologies and ignore environmental issues.

Rainforests in Picturebooks

Ken and Sylvia Marantz were pioneers in art education, arguing for the inclusion of picturebooks as aesthetic art objects within the art education curriculum (see K. Marantz, 1963, 1977, 1994; S. Marantz, 1992; S. Marantz & K. Marantz, 2005). In many ways they paved the way for visual culture studies to legitimate broadening perceptions of art beyond the traditional canon of fine artists. Following in Marantz's footsteps, although not specifically in the field of art education, authors such as Nodelman (1988), Nodelman and Reimer (2003), Nikolejeva and Scott (2006), and Schwarcz and Schwarcz (1991) also deconstruct the interrelationships between text and image to highlight what the images show that the words don't tell. Other authors, such as Baghban (2007), Dobrin & Kidd (2004), Platt (2004), Reisberg (2008a, 2008b), and Reisberg, Brander, and Gruenewald (2006) focus on the use of particular multicultural picturebooks as a gentle and authentic means of accessibly addressing critical concerns in non-didactic ways.

This article draws on each of these approaches to picturebooks, which we will elucidate in the following analysis of two picturebooks that take place in the rainforest. Using Barrett's (2004) framework, we will be paying particular attention to the function of the visual in these analyses.

Amazon Diary: Alex Winter's Diary

While *Amazon Diary* (Talbot & Greenberg, 1996) includes lively text, the mixed media, full double-page images (spreads) dominate. Barrett's (2004) "SUBJECT MATTER + MEDIUM + CONTEXT = MEANING" takes a holistic approach to analyzing visuals to make meaning. In this case, how does the use of watercolors and mixed media impact/reflect the subject matter and context?

Here the subject matter is about young Alex Winters, the son of Anglo-American anthropologists looking for the "lost" Yanomami tribe, whose plane crashes en-route to visit his parents in the Amazon. The story is told in the form of a diary, enabling the use of first person narrative and various mixed media materials, such as photographs of zip-lock bags containing plane tickets from O'Hare airport, United States and Venezuelan paper currency, paint brushes and pens; feathers, sticks, and Polaroid photographs of Yanomami people and the environment, all collaged onto beautifully executed watercolor paintings supposedly created by Alex in his diary. The text is "handwritten" in a slightly childish font supporting the conceit of the diary format in an imaginative and fairly convincing way. The use of these media makes a fairly convincing case that the book is a copy of a journal made by a talented child.

The context is a children's picturebook written and illustrated by two Anglo-Americans and most likely edited, art directed, designed, and published by Anglo-Americans wishing to bring attention to the plight of Yanomami Indians. A second important context is the need for the publisher and content creators to make a profit within the paradigm of late 20th century American publishing. All of these factors influence how the book looks and reads. For example, the women's breasts are either cropped in the photos or covered with collaged feathers or painted beads. According to anthropologist Charito Ushiñahua (2008), "As with most Amazonian natives, traditionally the Yanomami do not wear any clothes with the men supporting their member with a string-like belt" (n.p), leading us to wonder if the author/illustrators requested that the Yanomami people wear loin cloths for the book's American audience?

The book is very informative, showing and telling how the Yanomami people live as seen through the eyes of a European-American who has an outsider perspective until he begins to engage with the culture and becomes more of an insider. Images such as the beautiful diagrammatic rendering of the "shapono" (the village) immediately show how the shapono is collectively structured with little privacy and much community in familial pods within a larger enclosed circular structure that is open in the center where big fires burn and children play. The aerial view shows the rainforest, the nearby snaking river complete with a recently killed alligator, the garden, canoes, and people sleeping in hammocks within the structure. This description does not do the image justice, nor does it convey the complexity within this seemingly simple but very sophisticated image.

Animal Poems of the Iguazú (Alarcón, 2008)

Animal poems shares the same goals of rainforest conservation and respect/caring for its indigenous people as *Amazon Diary*. However, it differs¹⁰ in providing information on the introduction and "afterword" pages about Francisco X. Alarcón's, the Chicano author's research visits to the Iguazú waterfalls in northeastern Argentina. Francisco notes that the animals and plants are endangered, describing the need for a "green corridor" that would protect 1,400,000 hectares of continuous rainforest and expresses the hope that his poems will motivate readers to "take action to protect the wild animals and plants of the Iguazú area and the entire world" (p. 3). Contact information is provided for the Argentinian National Parks administration and the "tri-national conservation project of the Paranaense rainforest" on the final page (p. 32).

While the book briefly mentions the Guaraní people of the area in the introduction, and in some of the poems, and respectfully portrays them wordlessly in some of the images, it is the animals who are given voice, "following in the Amerindian oral tradition" (jacket flap). We wonder why the book omits the danger to the Guaraní people and their way of life (Weisman,

& Tolan, 1992). Was it omitted to keep the tone lighter for children by just focusing on the animals? The book describes the many tourists in helicopters who visit the park from the point of view of annoyed nesting birds who see the helicopters as giant mosquitoes and dismiss the tourists for not being able to fly on their own. On the opposite page, ants see humans “like giant ants . . . holding digital cameras / taking lots of photos / of each other / ignoring the great and tiny wonders / all around them” (p. 21). The artist, Maya Christina Gonzalez, foregrounds large realistically rendered ants, painting them individualistically, while the people/tourists are faceless silhouettes on a bridge in the background. Maya uses cut paper painted with acrylics and skillfully integrates fairly realistic animals and some realistic vegetation with stylized and at times abstracted backgrounds to create a form of visual poetry. She layers the cut paper reflecting the different layers of the rainforest. This method makes the art playful, accessible, and metaphoric. At times the images evoke Matisse’s or Eric Carle’s paper cut-outs, or glyphs from Meso-American codices, and other times they evoke her own exquisite ancient meets contemporary, indigenous meets Western, form of art making as seen in the four other eco-social books Maya co-created with the same Francisco.¹¹

Another page shows and tells of a guided group trip on a motorized rubber boat that I imagine the author took; that “beats by far / any amusement park / attraction” (p. 24). On the following spread, a capuchin monkey critically watches the tourists laughing riotously in their life jackets and slickers. The monkey comments on the weirdness of “monkeys” who dress up and ride on rubber boats, perhaps to draw attention to the complicity of tourists in the environmental degradation of the area.¹²

Invisible Indigenous People

Other rainforest-themed children’s picturebooks of interest include: *The Vanishing Rainforest* (Platt, 2004), *A Walk in the Rainforest* (Pratt, 1992), *The Invisible Hunters* (Rohmer, Chow, & Vidaure, 1987), “*Slowly, Slowly, Slowly*” said the Sloth (Carle, 2002), *Adventures of Riley: Amazon River Rescue* (Lumry & Hurwitz, 2004), *The Great Kapok Tree: A Tale of the Amazon Rain Forest* (Cherry, 2000), and *The Shaman's Apprentice: A Tale of the Amazon Rain Forest* (Cherry & Plotkin, 1998). These books all address rainforest themes; however, of these books, only *Invisible Hunters*, the only children’s picturebook that we have been able to find by an indigenous rainforest author, and *The Shaman's Apprentice* include indigenous people in any meaningful way.

Seeing rainforest/jungle representations in *Rainforest Cafes*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Jungle Book*, and most of the picturebooks, the viewer might never know that indigenous people have lived for millennia in harmony with rainforest ecologies and are now being displaced and sometimes killed for resource exploitation (Thornberry, 2002). Obviously, the effect of rainforest exploitation on indigenous people, animals, and the earth requires sensitive

sharing. Consequently, the judicious and gentle combination of children's picturebooks with other visual culture sources can help create openings for teachers to engage their students in deeper age-appropriate conversations.

A Model for Resistant Meaning-Making in Art Education

Our model centers on a series of questions that involve deconstructing images from a wide range of visual culture sources related to a theme (in this case, the rainforest). The goal is to show the interrelationships and pervasiveness of mixed messages in visual culture and to construct or reconstruct images that resist surface interpretations to create a form of meaning-making that counters or resists dominant ideologies.

Utilizing compare and contrast strategies, students can critically learn about and respond to rainforest *and* local environment issues. These strategies could begin with deep explorations of some of the different forms of visual culture asking questions such as: How have indigenous people historically been portrayed in fine art and popular culture and what effect did such portrayals have? How are indigenous people currently portrayed (or not)? What effects might these representations have on children? Are there contradictions between what is shown and known (or researched)? How would the message in this image be different if it was done in the opposite colors or using different media? How do the visual elements influence how we feel? In other words, exploring "SUBJECT MATTER + MEDIUM + CONTEXT = MEANING" (Barrett, 2004, p. 738).

Educators can then assist students to compare and contrast visual culture images and messages of the rainforest (or any other issue) with their local environment asking questions, such as – how is this similar or different from where we live in terms of our local cultures and environment? How have local indigenous people been portrayed? And, how can we facilitate the process of what Gruenewald (2003b) calls "decolonization and reinhabitation" a process of rectifying the destructive effects of colonialism on people and places?

Visual explorations could include drawing trips to a Rainforest Cafe with critical explorations of the restaurant, store, and website combined with field trips to a local natural site. These drawings could be used to create students' own local conservation websites connecting global and local issues. Students could create rainforest and local cultural/environmental utopian and dystopian diptychs, murals, or installations; explore the pros and cons of anthropomorphizing animals, such as those in the Café's visuals; or create local animal cartoons promoting conservation. They could also make art cards, movies, and websites calling on corporations to stop exploiting environments; highlight the connections between capitalism's hyper-consumption and environmental degradation; and engage in "inquiry-based learning" in their

own environments. In addition, they could research environmental groups who work with rainforest preservation and social justice issues and local conservation groups to see how they can get involved, make carved tagua nut¹³ jewelry to fundraise for these organizations, and, most importantly, go outside to draw, create environmental art, and become engaged with art activist conservation efforts both locally and globally.

By reading/viewing/deconstructing/responding to some of the many rainforest/jungle-themed visual culture sources noted in this article and forging connections between local and global contexts, students can utilize the cognitive, aesthetic, and emotive domains of the arts to engage in the decolonization and reinhabitation of their immediate and larger world to become democratically empowered citizens. By engaging in satisfying art making activities, students can develop awareness of a range of social and environmental issues while experientially making meaning from some of the many mixed-messages in their visual culture.

Notes

¹ Green washing is a term used to denote the attachment of an environmentally positive looking veneer on something that isn't. For example, bottled water often shows environmentally pristine scenes on its labels and advertising while it is actually doing great harm to the environment.

² At the time of publication, Julian Burger was the research director of London's Anti-Slavery Society (Geddicks, 1993).

³ According to Geddicks (1993), "almost half of the Amazon crude end[s] up in the United States" (p. 35).

⁴ In addition, rainforest conservation efforts are further complicated by some native peoples' complicity in rainforest destruction due to their need for economic survival within the existing system (Hammer, 2007).

⁵ It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a critique of the inherent conundrum of promoting conservation within a consumer capitalist paradigm. Instead, we acknowledge that this is the paradigm in which we live, and work toward changing it.

⁶ Exhibiting stories and images by indigenous rainforest people with direct contact information for indigenous activist groups in Rainforest Cafes could go a long way to actually help the Café engage patrons in true conservation education and provide benefit to tribal

members by getting their real stories out into the world and compensating them for their images and stories.

⁷ In fact, plastics derive from oil/petroleum, which as noted is one of the leading causes of rainforest destruction.

⁸ For example, Rainforest Cafe Inc. could become more effective in its educational and conservation goals by providing each restaurant table with information sheets about rainforests with direct contact information for different indigenous rights and conservation groups. Signage could be artfully created for the exhibits, and Tracy Tree could provide more congruent and practical information beyond “reduce, reuse, recycle.” Even the crocodile wishing pool could do better than simply having a sign stating, “Rainforest Cafe Wishing Pond. Portions of donations go to Friends of the Future Foundation and Saving the Rainforest” by providing information about what their “Friends of the Future Foundation” grant-giving organization has actually funded. Finally, Rainforest Cafes could re-source their own products to manufacturers who use biodegradable or recyclable materials.

⁹ Of interest in terms of indigenous art, “Rainforest Aboriginal Heritage” (2007) describes how indigenous rainforest people in North Australia are now actively taking steps to prevent cultural infringements from derivative, inauthentic work produced for tourists.

¹⁰ However, *Amazon Diary* may have also attempted to include research and activist information on its now defunct website. The URL is provided on the final page of the book.

¹¹ See Reisberg (2008c) for a research film and article about the artist and her work titled “Maya Gonzalez: Portrait of the artist as a radical children’s book illustrator”, which also includes information about the four other eco-social books that she co-created with Francisco.

¹² Weisman and Tolan (1992) describe the effects of tourism as thousands of acres of semi-tropical woodlands, including Guaraní villages, are torched to make way for tourist hotels and reservoirs.

¹³ Tagua nuts are tropical seeds that look remarkable like ivory, are relatively easy to carve for small sculptures or jewelry because they have no grain, are inexpensive, and are held in high esteem because they are ecologically friendly, cruelty free, and help sustain indigenous rainforest people who grow and harvest the seeds.

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