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Can Rabbits Have Interracial Sex?

Werner Sollors

For those who are pressed for time but dying to find the question settled that the title of my paper promises to address, here is the abstract, so to speak. One answer is, "apparently, yes." And not by marrying goats or horses, either, but just by allying themselves with other rabbits! Another answer is that perhaps they shouldn't – or if they do it anyway, that at least nobody should be told about it. But all of this may become clearer in the course of this paper, which if it had a subtitle, would also promise something like "Garth Williams' *The Rabbits' Wedding* and Racial Integration."¹

It is a paper connected with the theme of founding a family, and with that of certain families as anathema; and the time is (mostly) from the 1950s to the present. I would like to start with a family as anathema of 1989. It is the "family of man" (as it used to be called), or more precisely the family of *fraternité* – now known as siblinghood – represented on the stamp issued by the US Post Office to commemorate the 200th anniversary of one of the three principles of the French Revolution (fig. 1).

There is at first glance nothing much exciting about this stamp which portrays (on the right panel) a matrifocal family with two silvery children. How could such an innocent stamp start a controversy? And yet it did. For example, it was said that the woman's nipple seemed removed from the stamp. Where was the image from anyway? Was the nipple there in the original? The one of the images close to the one by which the stamp was inspired is an allegorical representation of 1792, from the Musée Carnavalet in Paris (fig. 2). Could the action of the US Postmaster General be unmasked as a sign for prudishness? But isn't there another noticeable difference between the two images of brotherhood? Why, yes – the children are more . . . different-looking in the French image than in the US adaptation. The European version of *fraternité* shows one black and one white child; in the

¹ Author and editor gratefully acknowledge permission to reproduce copyright material from Garth Williams' *The Rabbits' Wedding* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958).

great American melting pot they have become metallic-looking twins or clones. Why had the Postmaster General preferred to represent the two children embracing each other as the allegory of “fraternity” in an identical silvery colour rather than follow the original? Voices were raised that there was a race problem in the air. But Ms. Kim Parks of the Postal Service stamp support branch stated reassuringly that the figures were “redrawn in bas-relief to resemble statues, and in silver to stand out against the coloured panels.” She emphasized this aesthetic motivation also by explicitly stating that silver is “not white” and that the change had been undertaken “without any thought of race.” Was there perhaps a problem with indicating colour difference on so small a format? Still, the French post office managed to show one black and one white child on a similar-sized stamp, obviously taken from the same source (fig. 3). Question: Could there be a problem in imagining different colours in the same brotherhood-family?

By now it must have emerged that the approach I have chosen is – just like I take that of the conference to be – “thematic.”² Thereby I assume that aesthetic works are also “about” something – and I am focusing less on form (e.g. the inversion of the French tricolor on the stamp) than on “themes” that may unite texts, images, stamps, or sculptures (fig. 4).³ But how do we know that a work of art is about X and not about Y? Not all works are allegories of the *fraternité* type. So how do we know that a certain work is about, say, family – and not about itself, a tension between metaphor and metonymy, about undecidability, or about any of a thousand other topics than the one we have chosen to be our “theme”? What do we do when we look for “themes” in literature – a process that has been called “theming” by Gerald Prince? Are themes simply self-evident and objectively manifest in texts?

Claude Brémont reminded readers that “there is no ‘in-and-of-itself’ in the theme” (*Return* 58), and even a single uncomplicated sentence can be *absolutely* or *relatively* “about” something, as Menachem Brinker illustrated:

The sentence “the book is on the table” is absolutely about the book, the table, and the fact that the book is on the table. Yet relative to the information received this morning, according to which “if Peter buys the book he will leave it on the table,” the first sentence [...] is also about Peter and about the

² For a more detailed survey of the field, see the collection *The Return of Thematic Criticism*, ed. Werner Sollors (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993). I shall make repeated reference to various parts of it as *Return* without, each time, giving a more detailed citation.

³ The original also inspired Charles Cordier’s *Aimez-vous les uns les autres ou Fraternité* (1867), reproduced in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. IV.1 (dist. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), ill. 159. For the US stamp, see Barth Healey, “Stamp for Bastille Day Reverses the Tricolor,” *New York Times* (June 5, 1989), A4.

fact that he bought the book and left it on the table. By implication it may also be about the fact that Peter keeps his promises, that the book has arrived in Israel, and so on and so forth. (*Return* 31)

If this is true for a simple statement of fact, how much more complicated must it be to say what the theme of a literary work may be? A variety of mixed-up, often unconscious interests may guide the process of theming – for example, aesthetic, logical, statistical, political, moral, genealogical, psychoanalytical, structuralist, nationalistic, or autobiographical motives (Brémond, *Return* 54). Thomas Pavel made a distinction between a text that explicitly makes readers *care* about a theme (lesbianism in Balzac's "Girl with Golden Eyes") and a text that requires a critic's special (even forced) effort to perceive a theme ("lesbianism" in *Twelfth Night*). How do we arrive at such distinctions? For Pavel the Berkeleyan maxim of undeclared thematics is: "For a theme to be perceived is to be." And David Perkins who has so marvellously and convincingly challenged the genre of literary history would seem to agree: "[. . .] with themes we are free. Individual creativity is much more active in writing literary history than most people suppose, and it riots in thematic literary history" (*Return* 120). Could we possibly expect any form of general agreement as to what is explicit, what implicit, in texts? Perhaps the contexts, and, especially, the debates about legitimate and unpredictable contexts, ultimately confer plausibility to what will be considered the themes of a given work; and the contexts surrounding certain themes may be particularly strong in this respect.

The church fathers Boethius, Meletius, Athanasius, and Augustine who used the word "species" in its original sense of "external aspect, appearance," and who viewed a horse's colour as an *accidental* quality that does nothing to the horse's essential horsemanship would have been surprised by the modern period.⁴ Now "black" and "white" could serve as such forceful agents that they have had the power to eclipse, or racialize, what they referred to; and the metaphoric significance of colour could be more important than the subject that was ostensibly represented. Just as black and white could be themed *away* in the case of *fraternité*, so an interracial theme could also be

⁴ Boethius, Meletius, Athanasius, and Augustine argue, as the classicist Lloyd A. Thompson summarized their views, that "although a black horse and an *Aethiops* both share the same 'accidental' quality of blackness, the removal of this blackness leaves the horse still a horse, but entirely eliminates the quality of the *Aethiops* from the *Aethiops*, who thereby becomes 'a white man like other men.'" See Lloyd A. Thompson, *Romans and Blacks* (Norman, Oklahoma, and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 77-78. See by contrast, José Antonio Villareal, *Pochos* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959), 123, with the account of a racialized socialization that suggests "a white horse is the best horse there is."

inserted *into* texts that were hardly “absolutely about” this topic. For example, a postcard, probably from the early part of the century, portrayed two cats, a black one in a man’s bathing suit, and a white one in a dress, dancing in the shallow ocean waters on the edge of a beach, and other cats are visible in and near beach tents in the background (fig. 5). The card was titillatingly entitled, “Mixed Bathing.” The cats’ colours and costumes – or, put differently, the way in which they were coded by race and gender – are the only aspects that could conceivably make the subject risqué, while the postcard manufacturers’ heading may also represent an attempt to turn potential tension into humour.⁵ In this instance, we do not know why the manufacturer chose the title he did over such other possibilities as “Cats by the Seaside,” “Wet Quadrille,” “Le Cha(t) Cha(t),” “Hip Cats,” “The New Beach Apparel,” “Family Vacation” (which would make it suitable for this occasion) or “Summer” – not to mention such possibilities as “Composition 18” or (my Macintosh favourite) “Untitled.” In each case, however, it would be the title, a *text*, that would give the central theme to the image: the image would seem to be “about” different things, dependent on the heading it received. For example, if we took the theme to be “family” we might wish to connect the cats in the background and those in the foreground in a generational story, or distinguish a “clan” from an incipient “nuclear family” and so forth. In any event, the postcard was not, as far as I know, enmeshed in a theming controversy such as the one that emerged in the Alabama Public Library system that will shortly take us to (or at least, near) the subject the title of my paper has promised.

In the last years of legalized racial segregation in the United States animal fables that were applied to the human situation seem to have flourished, as is evidenced, for example, by Zora Neale Hurston’s little-studied conservative essays of the period in which she denounced the fight for legal desegregation, with her rejection of the supposedly integrationist fable of mules running after a white mare (fig. 6), as a communist plot for interracial marriage.⁶ Hurston’s “Court Order Can’t Make Races Mix” was an open letter, published on August 11, 1955 in the *Orlando Sentinel*, an anti-integrationist daily with a circulation of approximately 100,000 at the time,

⁵ The card was reproduced in *Katzen lassen grüßen: Ein Postkarten-Bilderbuch . . . aus der Sammlung Stefan Moses* (Hamburg: Rasch und Röhrig, 1989), n.p.

⁶ Hurston’s essay in *The American Legion Magazine* (June 1951): 14-15, 55-60, is a startling contribution which features photographs of communists like Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Howard Fast that resemble most-wanted posters. See also my essay “Of Mules and Mares in a Land of Difference; or, Quadrupeds All?,” *American Quarterly* 42.2 (June 1990): 167-190.

published in the Florida city that was destined to become the home of Disney World.⁷ It is written flippantly in a way Hurston herself calls "thinking out loud;" and the centre of it is taken by an amplification of what Hurston, the author of *Mules and Men* (1935), calls "the doctrine of the white mare." She explains:

Those familiar with the habits of mules are aware that any mule, if not restrained, will automatically follow a white mare. Dishonest mule-traders made money out of this knowledge in the old days. Lead a white mare along a country road and slyly open the gate and the mules in the lot would run out and follow this mare. This [Supreme Court] ruling [of *Brown v. Board of Education*] being conceived and brought forth in a sly political medium with eyes on [the election of] '56, and brought forth in the same spirit and for the same purpose. It is clear that they have taken the old notion to heart and acted upon it. It is a cunning opening of the barnyard gate with the white mare ambling past. We are expected to hasten pell-mell after her.

The story was illustrated, apparently by the *Orlando Sentinel*, with a little cartoon depicting a white mare with a question mark over her head and a sign reading "desegregation" while across the fence a black mule is thinking "I just want my own pasture improved." Hurston goes back to the story later in the essay and confesses that, personally, she is "not persuaded and elevated by the white mare technique." The worst periods in the quick history she drafts are "the days of the never-to-be-sufficiently-deplored Reconstruction" (when the belief that Negroes want nothing more than to associate with whites was also current) and the New Deal (when only the "stubborn South and the Midwest kept this nation from being dragged farther to the left than it was"). She seems to consider seriously that the desegregation decision was only a trial balloon and precedent designed to keep Southerners busy while more serious attacks on the political system could be launched: "what if it is contemplated to do away with the two-party system and arrive at Govt. by decree?" What she senses behind such deceptive manoeuvering is Communism. Hurston, in 1955, specifically warns the readers of attempting integration at a time

when the nation is exerting itself to shake off the evils of Communist penetration. It is to be recalled that Moscow, being made aware of this folk belief, made it the main plank in their campaign to win the American Negro

⁷ Quoted from a microfilm copy provided by R.B. Murray in the Orange County Library System.

from the 1920s on. It was the come-on stuff. Join the party and get yourself a white wife or husband.

This allusion to a Communist conspiracy to foment interracial marriages probably found some resonance in the McCarthyist period to which Hurston here explicitly alludes. And she concludes the essay with the statement: "That old white mare business can go racking on down the road for all I care."

Hurston had used the white mare fable also in "Why the Negro Won't Buy Communism" (1951) and told readers of the *American Legion Magazine* that Communists, in order to "mount their world rule on Black American backs," had taken for a blueprint "an ancient and long-discarded folk piece. The analogy of the 'white mare.' It got to be said during the Reconstruction that the highest ambition of every Negro man was to have a white woman." She concluded the parable with the interpretation that analogies are dangerous, since it is "possible, and even probable that we might not be mules" though "the reds evidently thought so." Hurston also found in what she bluntly terms the party's "'pig-meat' crusade" – when Harlem "swarmed with party-sent white women" – an explanation for the frequency of mixed couples in party councils and suspected that it was by "such whoopdedoo" that the Lincoln Brigade was "recruited to go to Spain in a vain attempt to place the Russian Bear at Gibraltar" (57). Hurston's essays of the 1950s suggest the strength of the opposition to interracial plotlines, even among modern, widely celebrated and taught writers.

A more popular animal fable was Walt Disney's animated film *The Fox and the Hound*, and though it was released only in 1981 it still evokes the ambience of a quarter of a century earlier. It is also a work that resonates for Faulkner readers with a description from *Flags in the Dust* that has a strong undertone of human allegory:

No two of them looked alike, and none of them looked like any other living creature – neither fox nor hound, partaking of both, yet neither; and despite their soft infancy there was about them something monstrous and contradictory and obscene, here a fox's keen, cruel muzzle between the melting, sad eyes of a hound and its mild ears, there limp ears tried valiantly to stand erect and failed ignobly in flopping points; and limp, brief tails brushed over with a faint golden fuzz like the inside of chestnut burrs. As regards color, they ranged from reddish brown through an indiscriminate brindle to pure ticked beneath a faint dun cast, and one of them had, feature

for feature, old General's face in comical miniature, even to his expression of sad and dignified disillusion.⁸

For the critic Gene Bluestein this was a thinly veiled comment on an interracial family. By contrast, Disney made the fable of integration center on the friendship of two males (perhaps the studio was familiar with Leslie Fiedler's well-known thesis in *Love and Death in the American Novel*), the little fox Tod (who receives cow milk from the farmer's wife that adopts him), and the little hound Copper. The effect is that the "natural boundaries" of which Pearl Bailey as Owl sings remain intact, in other words the "species" – now in the modern sense of essentially different kind – remain separate even though their representatives may befriend each other at a tender age.

When you're the best of friends,
 Having so much fun together.
 You're not even aware
 You're such a funny pair
 You're the best of friends
 Life's a happy game
 You could clown around forever
 Neither one of you sees
 Your natural boundaries.
 Life's one happy game.
 If only the world wouldn't get in the way
 If only *people*⁹ would just let you play
 They say that you'll both be fools
 You're breaking all the rules
 They can't understand
 the magic of your wanderings [?].
 When you're the best of friends....
 Oh I hope, I hope it never ends,
 For you're the best of friends.

The video cassette box identifies as the themes of *The Fox and the Hound* "such timeless values as love, courage, and respect for life." The utopia of fox and hound is that they do manage to overcome their instinctual animosity and don't hunt and kill each other, hound even rescues fox at the dramatic

⁸ First published under the title *Sartoris*, 327. Cited in Gene Bluestein, "Faulkner and Miscegenation," *Arizona Quarterly* 43.2 (Summer 1987): 154.

⁹ Such "people" are embodied in the cartoon as the cracker farmer who looks like Huck Finn's Pa.

climax – but they both end up happily, each in his own separate intraspecies alliance or set. They can “clown around” but they must also recognize that they would make “a funny pair.” Growing up means recognizing that life is not just a game, that there are “natural boundaries.” They are the best of “friends forever,” but they are not the same “family.” If Faulkner’s fox and hound could be themed as “melting pot,” then Disney’s version might be read as “pluralism.”

Characteristic of the mood of the period of desegregation was the small crisis generated by a children’s book published in 1958. It was written and illustrated by Garth Williams (who may be best known for his visual work in E. B. White’s novel *Charlotte’s Web*), and the book was entitled *The Rabbits’ Wedding* (fig. 7). It is the story of two little rabbits who live in a forest, and happily play with each other, hopping, skipping, and jumping around. Their happiness is only interrupted by one of the rabbits’ recurring moods of pensiveness, brought on by his wish that he could always be with the other one. The other rabbit says that if he really wishes that, she will be his forever; then they pick flowers together and put them in each other’s ears. They get married in a wedding circle of all the other rabbits, and the animals of the forest come to watch the wedding dance. The married rabbits live happily ever after. The book was pitched for an audience of three- to seven-year-olds (though the author later lowered the targeted age group to two to five years), and the well-balanced *New York Times* reviewer felt that children would hug the book tightly “if only for the bold pictures of frisky, fluffy bunnies romping in the forest. The tale of this bashful suitor and his lady fair, however, is too low-keyed for many readings.” And the *Christian Science Monitor* praised the “misty, dreamy brush” that has “painted the two little rabbits [...] with all the soft, defenseless charm of babyhood” and applauded the “brief text, kept simple and happy” and the “heart-stealing water-color illustrations” that “are spread generously over giant pages.”¹⁰

The Rabbits’ Wedding seems thematically unrelated to the topic of race. Yet the brief reference to “lady fair” contains the important clue: as in the case of Hurston’s mules and mares and that of the cat postcard, it was the *colour* of the animals that suggested the context of human difference: on the cover of the book, one rabbit (the male one, too) was black, the other one white (and, yes, it was a female one – it was 1958).

¹⁰ George A. Woods, “Pictures for Fun, Fact and Fancy,” *New York Times Book Review* (8 June, 1958): 42; also cited in “The Rabbit Wedding,” *New York Times* (24 May 1959): IV: 2. Rod Nordell, “Pictures to Read,” *Christian Science Monitor* (8 May, 1958): 15.

In the world of the 1950s US South, divided by the issue of racial integration, this was sufficient evidence to invite readings of the book as a contribution to interracial literature, readings that turned the book virtually into a manual for founding a family where there should be no family ties, where there were “natural boundaries.” The presence of the categories black/male and white/female helped to override the species difference between the book’s subjects and its readers, and *The Rabbits’ Wedding* could thus be themed as *really* about an interracial marriage, an alliance that, at the time of the book’s publication, was still illegal in more than half of the United States, among them all Southern states, many of which had provisions in their constitutions prohibiting what was called (since 1863) “miscegenation.” The book also appeared three years after the Virginia Supreme Court, in *Naim v. Naim*, had sustained the miscegenation statute and ruled that the state’s legislative purpose was “to preserve the racial integrity of its citizens” and to prevent “the corruption of blood,” “the obliteration of racial pride,” and the creation of “a mongrel breed of citizens.”¹¹ *The Rabbits’ Wedding* became controversial 29 years after the state of Mississippi had enacted a criminal statute that made punishable the “publishing, printing, or circulating any literature in favor of or urging interracial marriage or social equality.”¹² And it also was published 29 years before the state of Mississippi found enough votes in the State House to overrule the Constitutional provision.¹³

Once it was themed “interracially,” pictures and text of a children’s book could appear different from what they seemed, not harmless and joyful but positively dangerous; the representation of the hopping, romping characters could now be deemed taboo, and the images of their physical closeness suggestive of the corruption of (more than rabbit) blood and hence inappropriate for children. An Alabama Citizens’ Council (despite its post-revolutionary name promising a fraternity of *citoyens*, it was an association limited to white male members) used its organ, the weekly *Montgomery Home News*, for a sharp, front-page critique of the book for promoting integration, spelling out its fears and its method of theming in the headline:

¹¹ 197 Va. 80, 87 S.E. 2d 749.

¹² Charles S. Mangum, Jr., *The Legal Status of the Negro*, 237, referring to *Mississippi Code Ann. par. 1103 [1930]*.

¹³ On 4 December 1987, the Mississippi Secretary of State proclaimed that section 263 of the 1890 Constitution, prohibiting interracial marriage is deleted, based upon House Concurrent Resolution # 13 and ratification by the electorate on 3 November 1987 (*Mississippi Code* 1990, 198).

“What’s Good Enough for Rabbits Should Do for Mere Humans.”¹⁴ The book was thus thought not just to *represent* a certain course of action but to “*recommend*” it to human readers. It could not be taken as a “family values” role model that taught the young ones to associate continuous physical pleasure with the “clean” institution of a collectively sanctioned heterosexual marriage; it also could not reassure segregationists that the rabbits were – unlike Faulkner’s fox and hound – clearly of the same *species*. The rabbits’ colour difference overruled all other considerations. The columnist Henry Balch followed the Alabama Citizens’ Council and, in an exhortative piece entitled “Hush Puppies,” condemned *The Rabbits’ Wedding* in the *Orlando Sentinel* – the same paper that had carried Hurston’s white-mare attack on integration four years earlier – as “propaganda” for mixing races and as the “most amazing evidence of brainwashing:”

As soon as you pick up the book and open its pages you realize these rabbits are integrated.

One of the techniques of brainwashing is conditioning minds to accept what the brainwashers want accepted.

Where better to start than with youngsters in the formative years in the South?¹⁵

Balch presented a full quotation of the text of the book as self-evident support of his contention. His phrasing suggests the danger that the very term “integrated” must have contained. The fear of brainwashing (a word that had become popular during the Korean War and that appeared, for example, in Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun*) made the children’s book look as if it were part of a plot of weakening the defensive potential of the next generation. In “Rabbit Story Called Brazen,” a reader’s forum in the *Orlando Sentinel*, three critical respondents to Balch’s column picked up the term “brainwashing.” The opening letter by E. R. Ensey was strongly supportive of Balch and expressed the opinion that without editorials recommending segregation “the road will be wide open to mongrelization

¹⁴ Cited in “‘Rabbits Wedding’ Banned: Black Bunny Marries White,” *Atlanta Constitution* (22 May 1959): 12.

¹⁵ “Hush Puppies,” *Orlando Sentinel* (18 May 1959): 8-B, partly cited in “The Rabbit Wedding,” *New York Times* (24 May 1959): IV: 2 and in “Of Rabbits & Races,” *Time* (1 June 1959): 19.

and none of us can fight back." And to some of the critical letters the editor added comments such as, "Thanks for your opinion and for Mr. Balch's." ¹⁶

The peril was all the more momentous since Balch saw the book in the children's section of one of the Florida Public Libraries in Orlando where the dangerous work had been checked out so many times since its arrival that a waitlist had been opened for those other young clients who were still interested in reading the book. The segregationist Alabama State Senator E. O. Eddins of Marengo County continued Balch's attack on the book with a focus on public libraries and declared aggressively that "this book and many others should be taken off the shelves and burned," specifying that he meant books "of the same nature" (presumably integrationist) and those that "are communistic."¹⁷ The Cold War line-up of all things that could be called "dirty," integrationism, communism, and sex — that was also noticeable in Hurston — suggests a perhaps sexually motivated fear of the ideology the representatives of which Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* had portrayed as "Brotherhood" a few years earlier.

The Rabbits' Wedding was thus publicly themed as a dangerous text promoting racial integration, and the fact that it did not represent humans at all could make it seem all the more subversive for spreading its illegal message surreptitiously — and to minors, too, who moreover would have access to it through taxpayer-financed public libraries. As we have already seen, it is very difficult to say with any degree of certainty that a given text is not, at least *relatively*, about a particular theme, and the Southern context simply suggested that this was one way in which the book would be read by many others, now that it had been read as an interracial marriage tale — anathema! — by anti-integrationists. Looked at in legal terms, this theming made it possible to regard the book as an incitement to minors to break the law (and not just a law). As *Time* magazine put it: "Indeed, by the very fact of having bought copies of *The Rabbits' Wedding* [. . .], the Alabama library service had become 'contro-versial.'"¹⁸ This situation put political pressure on the Alabama library system, and Emily Wheelock Reed, the director of the State Public Library Service (which provided books for local libraries), was personally questioned by the Demopolis Senator Eddins, to whom she also had to make budget requests in the legislature. She now risked losing

¹⁶ "Rabbit Story Called Brazen," *Orlando Sentinel* (25 May 1959), A-9, published a few days after the story had made the *New York Times*; two of the three redirected the charge against the columnist.

¹⁷ Cited in "The Rabbits' Wedding' Should Be Burned," *Birmingham Post-Herald* (23 May 1959): 1.

¹⁸ "Of Rabbits & Races," *Time* (1 June 1959): 19.

fiscal appropriations for her Library system. Pointing out that the book had not been banned by any court of law and that it had been "purchased on the basis of favorable reviews," she came up with the Solomonic decision of neither leaving *The Rabbits' Wedding* in the agency's normal open shelves nor taking it completely out of circulation, but putting it on a special, closed shelf "for works on integration or those considered scatological."¹⁹ I imagine this shelf relatively high up in the libraries' bookcases, out of reach of children, for sure. The effect was that local librarians were permitted to take *The Rabbits' Wedding* to their branches only upon special request. (Libraries that already had their own copies of the book were not affected and could keep them on the shelves, high or low). In the line of fire for the possible accusation of making available dangerous literature, Reed had chosen the diplomatic course of not prohibiting "circulating the book to anyone, but then again [. . .] not peddling it." She acknowledged that she had been under indirect pressure and that her action was taken "in view of the troubled times in which we live." She accompanied her directive with a tart statement: "We were surprised that such a motive (integration) could be read into what appears to be a simple animal story using black and white illustrations to differentiate characters."²⁰ Yet her disclaimer notwithstanding, Reed's action had the effect of further sanctioning the interracial theming of *The Rabbits' Wedding*. This was so much the case that Alabama legislators who privately opposed the restriction, or even ridiculed it, "declined to be quoted by name because they said their position might be misconstrued as pro-integration" if they criticized in the press Reed's measure or Eddins' theming of the book.²¹ The thematic interpretation of the Citizens' Council had surely prevailed if public opposition to the restricted access to a children's book about rabbits – surely a curtailment of the citizens' liberty – could become associated with the offense of promoting racial integration.

All of this brought national attention to the case and generated a broad, often overtly humorous coverage of the relatively minor near-suppression. The *New York Times* reported the scandal under the title "Children's Book Stirs Alabama: White Rabbit Weds Black Rabbit," and *Time* opened its

¹⁹ "Of Rabbits & Races," *Time* (1 June 1959): 19.

²⁰ "'Rabbits Wedding' Banned: Black Bunny Marries White," *Atlanta Constitution* (22 May 1959): 12. In "White Rabbit Married Black One – Book Banned From Open Shelves," *Birmingham Post-Herald* (22 May 1959): 26, Reed is quoted as saying, "we have not lost our integrity" and defending her decision to "stop peddling the book" by referring to the charge of the *Montgomery Home News* that Williams' book was "promoting integration."

²¹ *Birmingham Post-Herald* (23 May 1959): 1. See also "'Rabbit' Book Burning Urged," *Orlando Sentinel* (23 May 1959): 3-A.

article “Of Rabbits & Races” – that was placed under the general heading “THE SOUTH” – with excerpts from the book and the statement: “It seems incredible that any sober adult could scent in this fuzzy cottontale for children the overtones of Karl Marx or even of Martin Luther King.” *Time* also ironically captioned the reproduction of a part of the cover illustration of the book, with an allusion to Balch, “Anyone can see they’re integrated.”²² And some readers similarly went for the humour in the situation. Picking up on the communist theme, one reader of the *Orlando Sentinel* suggested ironically that *The Rabbits’ Wedding* could be made safe for children with the help of crayons: “color each white rabbit yellow and each black rabbit green – thus leaving no tinge of red.” Another reader wrote sarcastically that Balch should also worry about such children’s classics as *Black Beauty*, in which “many fair skinned horses [...] want to nuzzle up to that black horse,” or *Heidi*, in which, this reader claimed, there “is a brown goat that gets a yen for a white goat,” and that Balch should therefore form a “committee of one to ferret out all this diabolical trash and to see that from now on the only literature allowed in our public library is about 100pct. white animals who wouldn’t spit on the best part of a darker one.” Finally, a letter writer invoked a children’s book about a marmalade-coloured cat “named of all things, Orlando,” that celebrates his wedding *anniversary* with his white wife.²³ The book’s author Garth Williams also commented on what *Time* called “the nonsense of it all:” and like Reed, he invoked and defended colour differentiation as an aesthetic principle, free of human, racial, or political referentiality:

The Rabbits’ Wedding has no political significance. I was completely unaware that animals with white fur, such as white polar bears and white dogs and white rabbits, were considered blood relations of white human beings. I was only aware that a white horse next to a black horse looks very picturesque – and my rabbits were inspired by early Chinese paintings of black and white horses in misty landscapes.

It was written for children from two to five [the newly lowered age] who will understand it perfectly. It was not written for adults, who will not

²² *New York Times* (22 May 1959): 29; *Time* (1 June 1959): 19. See also Morton Zabel in Doris Y. Wilkinson, *Black Male/White Female: Perspectives on Interracial Marriage and Courtship* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1975), 123.

²³ Rita Levy, “All About Rabbits” (Letter), *Orlando Sentinel* (25 May 1959): 9-A.

understand it because it is only about a soft furry love and has no hidden message of hate.²⁴

Without directly invoking the early Christian thinkers and Church fathers, Garth Williams echoed their argument that colour was an “accidental” and not an “essential” quality.

This episode in the cultural history of racial segregation reads like a version of “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” in which our “normal,” common-sense perception of rabbit reality is restored through the voice of an honest child that is still free of adult scheming. In a letter to the *Orlando Sentinel* the high school senior Mason D. Kelsey made a similar point when he asked: “How could a child read into this story the problems of our sick society which the child has never run up against?”²⁵ “Any similarity with living colours is purely accidental and the result of a biased adult imagination,” we might paraphrase this line of argument. We may, however, be merely laughing off the problem of theming which is not settled even in this easy-seeming case.

For, upon closer scrutiny, we must admit that there is no safe intellectual ground on which we could offer a *principled* objection to a reading of *The Rabbits’ Wedding* as an allegory for a human story. Obviously, animal stories have been read for a very long time, from Aesop’s fables to Uncle Remus’s Brer Rabbit, as allegories for human tales. Rabbits especially have inspired Hugh Hefner to visualize heterosexual relations as the encounter of fully clad men and the species of so-called “bunnies” that *Playboy* magazine has celebrated since December 1953. And for a long time, a well-known piece of American folk wisdom has suggested (I am paraphrasing here) that it is desirable to be like rabbits in the act on which the continued existence of “family” has always rested. If the short text of the book – cited by both sides (*New York Times* and *Orlando Sentinel*) as if it were a self-evident exhibit – has often been seen as proof *against* the segregationists’ reading, it also contains clues *for* it (fig. 8):

Two little rabbits, a white rabbit and a black rabbit, lived in a large forest
[. . .]

They loved to spend all day playing together.

“Let’s play Hop Skip And Jump Me,” said the little white rabbit.

²⁴ The press release has been reconstructed here from the excerpts published in the *New York Times* (22 May 1959): 29, *Time* (1 June 1959): 19, and the *Orlando Sentinel* (23 May 1959): 3-.

²⁵ *Orlando Sentinel* (25 May, 1959): 9-A.

"Oh, let's!" said the little black rabbit, and with a hop, skip, and a jump, he sailed right over the little white rabbit's back. [. . .]

After a while the little black rabbit stopped eating and sat down and looked very sad.

"What's the matter?" asked the little white rabbit. [. . .]

"I wish you were all mine!" said the little black rabbit.

This scene is repeated in variations: the black rabbit looks sad, and when the white rabbit asks him why, the black rabbit speaks of his wish to be with the white rabbit "forever and always." And so, the white rabbit gives her consent; and the scene that gives the book its title follows:

All the other little rabbits came out to see how happy they both were, and they danced in a wedding circle around the little black rabbit and the little white rabbit.

The other animals of the forest came to watch the wedding dance and they too danced all night in the moonlight.

And so the two little rabbits were wed and lived together happily in the big forest, eating dandelions, playing *Jump The Daisies, Run Through The Clover and Find The Acorn* all day long.

And the little black rabbit never looked sad again.

"Hop Skip and Jump Me" could be read as an affirmative answer to the question I have here posed, or as the rabbits' failure to recognize "natural boundaries" or seeing that they "make a funny pair." The text might be said, in Pavel's sense, to make readers "care about" the boundary that the book's context was so strongly bent on upholding.

Garth Williams' rabbits that accompany his text are also quite explicitly anthropomorphic, they talk, decorate themselves with dandelions, and get married, with a big wedding party. They would seem to resemble human beings more than Chinese horses, even though the water-colour inspiration is noticeable in Williams' style. More than that, the little black rabbit is repeatedly saddened by the thought (the reasons for which are not explained in the text, but make sense in the context of *Brown v. Board of Education*) that he might not always be with the white rabbit. Interestingly, a similar worry does not seem to cloud the white rabbit's *joie de vivre*, though she is ready to marry the black one if that will only dispel his sadness. The missing motivation within the text may be precisely what inspires the referential theming to click in. Theming "race" thus may have gone for an absence, a lacuna in the tale – that it filled. Was the Citizens' Council reading for the gap? Also, by contrast with Garth Williams' *Rabbits' Wedding*, his roughly

contemporary, similar-looking rabbits in *Baby Farm Animals* (1959) and his illustrations for Margaret Wise Brown's *Home for a Bunny* (1961) do not show another black-white contrast in the bunny section of the animal kingdom.

In attempting to refute the "human" reading, Reed had to speak about "a simple animal story" (as if that excluded the possibility of a complex human allegory), and Garth Williams and Reed offered the explanation that black and white were used merely to differentiate characters, following a Chinese tradition. *Time*'s glibly cosmopolitan ridiculing, and the author's attempt to make absurd the human theming of the book drew on the impact of invoking animal varieties (horse, dog, and rabbit) and features ("fuzzy" or "fur") in order to build up contrasts between human : animal, adult : child, and hate : love – all of which actually ended up as an oblique critique of segregation in the same breath as any political motive and significance were denied. Better to have the "soft furry love" of this "cottontale" (an effective pun, as it alludes to Beatrix Potter's famous *Peter Rabbit* and unites storytelling and animal feature) than the hard segregationist logic of columnists and politicians that makes "whites" out of polar bears, dogs, and rabbits. It may thus have been the "fit" between ideology and representation that permitted liberals to laugh at the segregationists' paranoia. In fact, we could generalize that the segregationists' "unmasking" of the children's book also revealed their desire to read rabbits' tales for interracial sex. This very desire to see interracial sex in any rabbit patch was obviously connected with the fear of any representation of it – for it would "brainwash" readers, weakening the young citizens' defenses. Hence representation was logically the same as advocacy, and therefore had to be stopped. This was the core of segregationist fear that resulted also in such institutions as exclusive beaches (and that the cat postcard perhaps also obliquely criticized).

In his book *Race Orthodoxy in the South* (1914) Thomas Pearce Bailey, a Professor of Psychology and the Dean of the Department of Education at the University of Mississippi, expressed his belief that one reaches "the real *crux* of the question" when one asks: "may not all the equalities be ultimately based on potential social equality²⁶, and that in turn on intermarriage?"

²⁶ This is, of course, the telling code word that qualifies the ideal of *fraternité*. "Social equality" is the term Ellison's innocent young protagonist in *Invisible Man* articulates by mistake, and the concept that the Mississippi legislature prohibited citizens to propagate. As Gunnar Myrdal explained in *An American Dilemma* (New York: Harper, 1944), 586, "the very lack of precision allows the notion of 'no social equality' to rationalize the rather illogical and wavering system of color caste in America." He also stated that the doctrine of "no social equality" was understood as a precaution to hinder miscegenation and particularly

Bailey was therefore discouraged to discover that "even the high-souled Tennyson, in 'Locksley Hall,' draws a picture of the reckless, disappointed youth who has an impulse to wed a dusky maiden and rear a dusky brood." Simply by representing this theme, Tennyson seems to have made the task of Bailey's educational programme more difficult.

It is just because primary race feeling is *not* deeply based in human instinct, whereas the mating instinct is so based, that a secondary racial feeling, race-pride, comes in from a more developed reflective consciousness to minimize the natural instinct for amalgamation.

Bailey is honest enough not to claim a "race instinct"²⁷ but, on the contrary, a mating instinct that knows no racial boundaries. And Tennyson's poem of 1842 does, indeed – in its uncut version²⁸ – contain the lines spoken by the lover who, spurned by his cousin Amy, dreams of an escape from the West of technology and book-learning to an Oriental island paradise:

There methinks would be enjoyment more than in this march of mind,
In the steamship, in the railway, in the thoughts that shake mankind.

There the passions cramped no longer shall have scope and breathing space;
I will take some savage woman, she shall rear my dusky race.

Iron jointed, supple-sinew'd, they shall dive, and they shall run,
Catch the wild goat by the hair, and hurl their lances in the sun;

Whistle back the parrot's call, and leap the rainbows of the brooks,
Not with blinded eyesight poring over miserable books – (697-698).

Bailey disapproved of these lines in Tennyson's poem, and they reminded the educator of the need to curb certain instincts – implicitly, by restricting access to certain, racially discouraging works of literature. Otherwise, readers were likely to forget "natural boundaries" in their mating instinct.

intermarriage" (58) and mentioned that the Communist Party was exceptional in giving Negroes full social equality (508). See the perceptive discussion by Milton Mayer, "The Issue is Miscegenation," in *White Racism: Its History, Pathology, and Practice*, eds. Barry Schwartz and Robert Disch (New York: Dell, 1970), 207-217.

²⁷ This is unlike, for example, Henry W. Grady, who claimed an "ineradicable and positive" instinct "that will keep the races apart" in his attack on George Washington Cable, "In Plain Black and White," *Century* 29.7 (1885): 909-917; here 912.

²⁸ *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longman, 1969), 688-699. *Selections from Tennyson* (London: Leopold B. Hill, n.d.), however, omits all the lines cited above from its only slightly abridged rendition of "Locksley Hall."

But back to the debate about *The Rabbits' Wedding*. The liberals, by playing literal readers, emphasized the difference between humans and rabbits, and did everything they could to make the segregationist position appear silly. Ingeniously, while denying that animals should ever be mistaken for human beings, they actually scored points against racial segregation as a system that may logically lead to the "banning" – of children's books. Needless to say, the slightly exaggerated story of the "ban" appears to have had a wide circulation in the North.

It probably would have constituted a breach of faith, but it certainly would have made the segregationists seem less ridiculous, if their opponents had spelled out and conceded the potential for human dimensions of the book. While the journalists seem to have been firm on this point, citizens who wrote letters were more open. Thus Jane Merchant in "An Explanation," her letter to the *Orlando Sentinel*, made a remarkable move in this direction when she wittily gave "segregation-minded mommies" the following advice: "you can safely read The Little White Rabbit and [The] Little Black Rabbit to the kiddies because first you explain all little bunnies are pink and harmless when born. Then they grow hair, white, black, brown just like blonde little Suzie or dark-haired little Bobbie!" Merchant thus connected the discussion of *The Rabbits' Wedding* with the debate about the origins of racial difference.²⁹

In this controversy there also does not seem to have been a single ardent segregationist who would have supported the circulation of literature representing intermarriage (whether as an animal allegory or in human form) on the principle of Free Speech. And there was no criticism of the notion that the representation of certain themes *eo ipso* constituted a "promoting," or "recommending," of what was represented. All of these may be the effects of a politicized discussion; and there is little need to replicate it now. Instead, we might draw the conclusion from the incident that it is hard to predict in which contexts themes will be discovered in texts that are not overtly (though they may be at least "relatively" if perhaps not "absolutely") "about" these themes.³⁰ It is also interesting that one obvious theming – that the book's colour differentiation was imitative of the outerwear favoured by human bridegrooms (black) and brides (white) on their wedding days – was not mentioned in the debate. In the case of *The Rabbits' Wedding*, a book which has stayed in print from its first publication to the writing of these pages, one

²⁹ *Orlando Sentinel* (25 May, 1959): 9-A.

³⁰ It would be interesting to compare *The Rabbits' Wedding* with the film *Guess Who Is Coming to Dinner* (1967) in order to reflect on the difference.

could identify such themes as love and marriage, the animal kingdom, or sadness and happiness, but it would be hard to categorically *exclude* the interracial theme on the grounds that this is simply an animal tale, and that “animals with white fur” cannot be “blood relations of white humans.”

This is not to say that theming is a random process. The method of using an absurdly chosen theme in order to mark the limits of theming also is a good one – though it was more convincing on ideological than on intellectual grounds in this case. Nilli Diengott once took the effective example of Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro,” “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough” as a poem that may *not* be said to be about the maxim that we should drink milk regularly. More modestly, Erwin Panofsky observed that the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel can be understood better if we recognize that Michelangelo represents the Fall and not a “déjeuner sur l’herbe.”³¹ Yet the social pressure exerted by the milk industry on the interpretation of imagism, (or by Manet scholars on the iconography of Renaissance art), is undoubtedly less forceful than the political context that has surrounded the interracial theme, and repeatedly denied its legitimacy and its very existence. One could, of course, also imagine a situation in which Pound could symbolize milk-drinking: for example, in a hypothetical society that banned both Pound’s poetry and lactic nutrition, a resistance movement might be provoked to use “In a Station of the Metro” as a toast-in-code before surreptitiously defiant social milk-drinking. (Though not popular at present, politically motivated milk-drinking rituals did take place in the French Revolution, when right on the ruins of the Bastille a statue much like the figure on the stamp (fig. 3) provided nourishment from her breast, thus creating among the diverse drinkers a sense of citizenship as siblinghood, of *fraternité*).³² Yet even if we invoked this context it might be

³¹ Nilli Diengott, “Thematics: Generating or Theming a Text?,” *Orbis Litterarum* 43 (1988): 95-107; Panofsky in Ekkehard Kaemmerling, ed., *Ikonographie und Ikonologie: Theorien, Entwicklung, Probleme* (Köln: DuMont, 1991), 188.

³² See Marc Shell, *Children of the Earth: Literature, Politics, and Nationhood* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1993), 142-143, for historical examples of revolutionary milk-drinking rituals designed to create a sense of siblinghood: “During the decade of the 1790s – when medical ideologists debated whether children who drank milk from extrafamilial nurse-mothers thereby became essentially bastards, and whether children who drank the milk of extraspecies animals thereby became essentially animals – the idea of national regeneration through common lactation, already a theme in American politics, was literalized at national milk-drinking rituals like the ‘Festival of the Unity and Indivisibility of the Republic’ (an elaborate ceremony of August 10, 1793, orchestrated by Robespierre’s associate, the painter Jacques-Louis David). A commemorative medal struck for the festival, entitled ‘Régénération française’ [. . .] depicts milk or water spilling from the breasts of a statuesque alma mater, raised on the ruins of the Bastille and inscribed ‘Ce sont tous mes enfants’ (They are all my children).”

hard to argue that Pound's poem was actually "about" the maxim that we should drink milk regularly, though in our hypothetical situation a person reciting "In a Station of the Metro" might be charged with "urging" his audience to drink milk. Absurdly random public theming is by no means uncommon. The German march *Alte Kameraden*, for example, considered so inherently militaristic that it was banned in Germany both after World War I and World War II, became, according to Reginald Rudorf, the club song of the Finnish amateur photographers, apparently because the word "Kameraden" (comrades) was mistranslated as "camera men." In the United States, the entertaining song of a Northern Yankee minstrel show was rethemed as a serious tune that became something close to a sectional anthem, "Dixie."³³

Still, the process of theming is negotiated by debate and, in order to be justifiable, the result should probably also appear plausible *in the work* and not just in the power generated by public contexts, be they advanced by governments, citizens, ideologues, legislators, journalists, librarians, or literary critics. Theming is thus most convincing if the work at hand is plausibly shown to make the reader "care about" that theme. Random theming may lead to tyranny.

³³ See Hans Nathan, "Dixie," *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, eds. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1052.

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