

## **Black Monstrosity in the Illustrations of Lindsaybyrne's *Ten Little Niggers***

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### **Abstract**

The children's picture book *Ten Little Niggers* released by British publishers LindsayByrne transforms the notion of monsters and monstrosity in children's literature to highlight an entire racial group. The picture image of these notions combined with the massive influence of picture books on young readers solidify the stereotypical savagery of black people as fact. However, the American publisher The McLoughlin Brothers presents the main characters of the picture book as minstrel characters (albeit, still damaging and stereotypical) instead of savages, which begs the question, why would publishers of similar texts interpret the illustrations so differently? Perhaps the political existence of each country is an indication. While the United States had recently terminated the institution of slavery before the book's 1875 publication, the UK maintained its colonial power over countries with black inhabitants. Therefore, LindsayByrne's *Ten Little Niggers* serves an ideological justification of British colonization through its illustrations of blacks as monsters.

**Keywords:** *Ten Little Niggers*, illustrations, picture book, colonization, monsters, savage

While many countries might measure time in centuries and decades, the historical chronology of the United States hinges on its Civil War: ante-bellum and post-bellum. Intimate details of this country shifted in response to the outcome of the War. Economics changed, the correctional system shifted, and plans were drafted in order to reunite the seceded states to the rest of the country. Before the Civil War, the enslavement of blacks required notions of docility, obedience, and trust. However, these notions would be repurposed to justify the extreme violence and discrimination against black bodies that followed the War during Reconstruction, especially in the South. As historian George Frederickson notes in the film *Ethnic Notions*:

Those who wanted to re-establish firm white control, who wanted to maintain white supremacy by any means possible, used the argument that what had happened, was that blacks no longer under the benign or beneficent or kindly guidance of whites were reverting to savagery.

In post-bellum literature, including in children's literature, a shift from the subservient Sambo caricature to the Black Brute stereotype would be used to sensationalize and thus subvert the freedom of slaves throughout the country.

The British Empire's colonization of lands occupied by people of color (and, in many cases, its enslavement and sale of the indigenous populations) mirrored America's institution of slavery in that it relied heavily on the dehumanization of those peoples, including Africans. The UK, similar to the US, used popular culture to promote justifications of colonialism, often repurposing American genres and specific texts. For example, while minstrel shows began in the United States (mostly staged performances in which entertainers performed in blackface), they later gained popularity in the United Kingdom. Similarly, the negative characterizations of black people in children's literature made their way across the pond. Particularly, the minstrel song turned counting song *Ten Little Niggers*, in the form of a picture book for children, became a worldwide sensation.

To fully understand how picture books indoctrinate racism, we can turn to the research of Perry Nodelman, who argues that the pictures in these books are there "because children ... need or are at least greatly benefited by [the illustrations'] presence. Without pictures, people think children cannot make much sense of the words" (12). With this notion in mind, the illustrations in the various editions of *Ten Little Niggers* were clearly meant to teach children what a "nigger" looks like. The American versions, published by the McLoughlin Brothers of New York, represent dark-skinned men in gentlemen's clothing. The later British version, published by Lindsaybyrne, seeks to deepen the visual definition of a "nigger" by stripping the black characters of both clothes and dignity. In this article, I argue that while the lyrics of the original minstrel song and counting rhyme show ignorance of black life, and highlight the notion that violence against blacks is deserved, the illustrations in the Lindsaybyrne edition take this one step farther to transform the so-called humor of minstrel black buffoonery into complete savagery and monstrosity. This children's picture book serves as an ideological justification for British colonialism.

Although it is widely believed that Frank J. Green wrote the minstrel song "Ten Little Niggers" as an adaptation of Septimus Winner's counting rhyme "Ten Little Injuns," some

scholars believe Green's version to be the original (White, 1974, 5-6). Regardless of origin, the popularity of the song is undeniable. The McLoughlin Brothers Publishers first advertised *Ten Little Niggers* in its 1875 catalog as part of its series, Aunt Louisa's Big Picture Books. And just like the song, recreations of the picture book spread quickly overseas. However, while the title and the sentiments of the book remained similar in both America and the UK, the illustrations changed drastically.

Although there are many variations of the song's lyrics and the picture book's text, all variations note the loss of one boy followed by another. And while the 1875 McLoughlin edition and the later, undated Lindsaybyrne version are very different from each other, they share similar aspects. In both books, for example, characters are eaten by a sea creature (in one it is a red herring, in the other an octopus), have runs-in with the legal system, choke while eating, and are burned to ashes in the sun. Of course, such brutal deaths might terrify any reader; however, the illustrations paired with the text create a complete horror story.

The McLoughlin Brothers' versions of *Ten Little Niggers* never deviated from the typical representations of black minstrelsy. The first publication mimicked the classic Zip Coon caricature, "a preposterous, citified dandy" wearing "bright loud exaggerated clothes" (Lemons 102). The cover displays ten black figures with distinct red lips whose skin is literally black cross-hatching (Fig. 1.1). All of them seem identical, dressed in socks with green and white horizontal stripes paired with red and white vertically striped pants. One plays the banjo in front of a tropical background. An 1894 edition adds a Jim Crow caricature. While all ten boys are the same, this later book cover shows them in play clothes, including rolled up jeans, shorts, and bare feet. Half of them play in a pile of hay while the others sit on a brick wall watching and laughing.

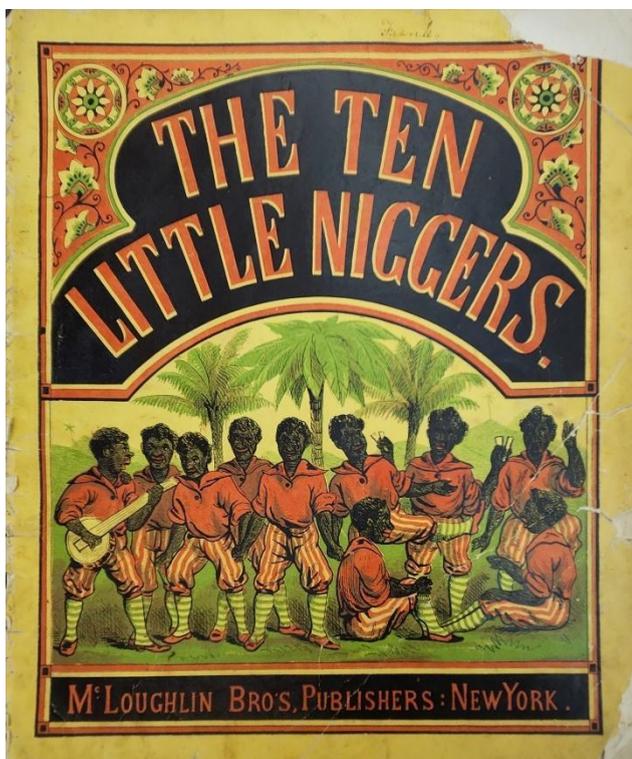


Fig. 1.1 *The Ten Little Niggers*. New York: McLoughlin Bro's., 1875. Held at Rare Book Division at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

On the one hand, because the picture book is predated by the minstrel song, the depiction of minstrelsy in the illustrations makes sense. However, there is a nuanced tension in these pictures between blacks and the notion of white civility. The minstrel costuming of the characters transforms the notion of black civility into a joke in the eyes of a white audience and suggests that the mere attempt to achieve white civility inevitably ends in black demise, as the rhyme demonstrates. Because children are less able to interpret or understand irony, this nuance might be lost on them. The British publication removes that possibility by depicting the characters explicitly as savages, emphasizing their lack of any civility whatsoever. The American version of the book highlights blacks after white intervention; after all, the very notion of post-bellum America historicizes the capture, transportation, enslavement, and subsequent freeing of slaves. Lindsaybyrne's interpretation, on the other hand, demonstrates a perceived *need* to intervene in the lives of blacks. Although Britain had sworn off slavery in 1807, much earlier than America, and although many white Americans in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were still bemoaning the loss of this financially beneficial institution, Britain at the time commanded a massive overseas Empire that still needed to justify its colonization of peoples of color.

In Europe, "images of Africa [. . .] tended to be highly stereotypical, defining the continent as a place of monsters, savagery, and darkness" (Loftsdóttir 191). The illustrations of the Lindsaybyrne publication demonstrate exactly that. The cover sets the tone (Fig. 1.2). There is a prominent black figure who is seemingly playing with ten smaller characters. This large figure wears a green jacket with a red and white striped collar and red, green, and white plaid pants. He appears to have shaving cream atop his head, with one of the little ones shaving him. He has white socks and brown shoes with large feet, a bit unproportioned to the rest of his body. He has gapped teeth and red lips, and his white eyes do not bug out as much as the eyes on the smaller figures. He holds a large banjo in his hand while these figures crawl over him. Although the picture quality makes it difficult to determine, one of the little figures, as mentioned, appears to be shaving his head. Another hangs on to his shoulder. A third hangs onto his other arm, while two others straddle his forearm, appearing to ride it. The last on this side seems to be playing peek-a-boo. At his foot, one of these little figures holds something in his hand that is difficult to identify. Another, at the base of the banjo, wears a dunce cap. One seems to be simultaneously playing the banjo and climbing it. Another leans from the banjo's neck while holding what seems to be a horn (or perhaps a megaphone). The final one is at the bottom next to the larger man's foot with what appears to be a tambourine. Because the book is called *Ten Little Niggers*, these smaller figures on the

cover are clearly the ones referenced in the title, while the main figure exists outside the story. His face is quite jovial while the ten climbing over him seem impishly menacing.

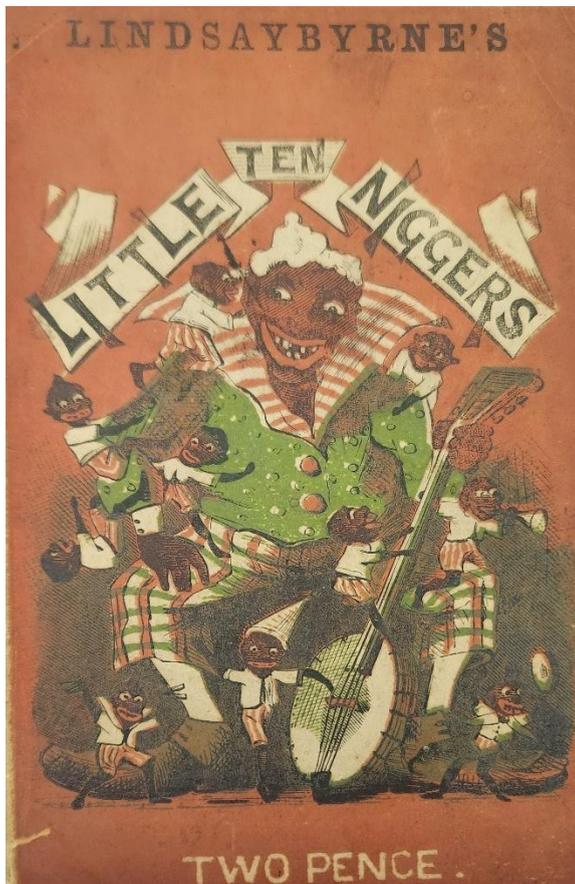


Fig. 1.2 *Ten Little Niggers*. London: Lindsaybyrne, 18--. Held at Rare Book Division at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Although the characters on the Lindsaybyrne cover resemble the minstrel characters in the earlier McLoughlin versions, the illustrations inside are drastically different and continue transforming page after page. While the text calls the characters “nigger men,” the images initially show them as child- or baby-like, despite this adult designation. They all seem to have diapers on, either to reinforce this notion or to highlight the notion of savagery. In the first illustration within the book, the characters’ hair is woolly. The image is a line-drawing or an etching in black and white scale, and so the characters’ faces are the blackest things on the page while their lips are the whitest. Some characters have bugged-out eyes. One of the ten is fully tipped over in a tube of brine so that we only see feet and legs hanging out. One looks over the tub in amusement and great interest but without intention to help. Another in a nearby tub looks mortified. One seems to be dancing, either in celebration or out of concern for the overturned character.

The depictions of the “nigger men” change dramatically on the next page. Here their mouths are drawn with circular white Os as if gasping in surprise or yelling in animalistic ways (Fig. 1.3). The text claims that “a pig takes one [of the characters] to Putney.” The character on the pig seems to be riding it as if he has done so before, only facing the wrong direction, gripping and apparently tugging the pig’s tail. The image suggests that the pig’s jolting to Putney will lead to the character’s demise. The hair of the characters is quite different in this image than in the one on the previous page. Two characters have four to seven thick strands standing straight up on their heads, while the one on the pig’s back has hair like a black cloud ironically blowing in the opposite direction from the direction the pig is running in.

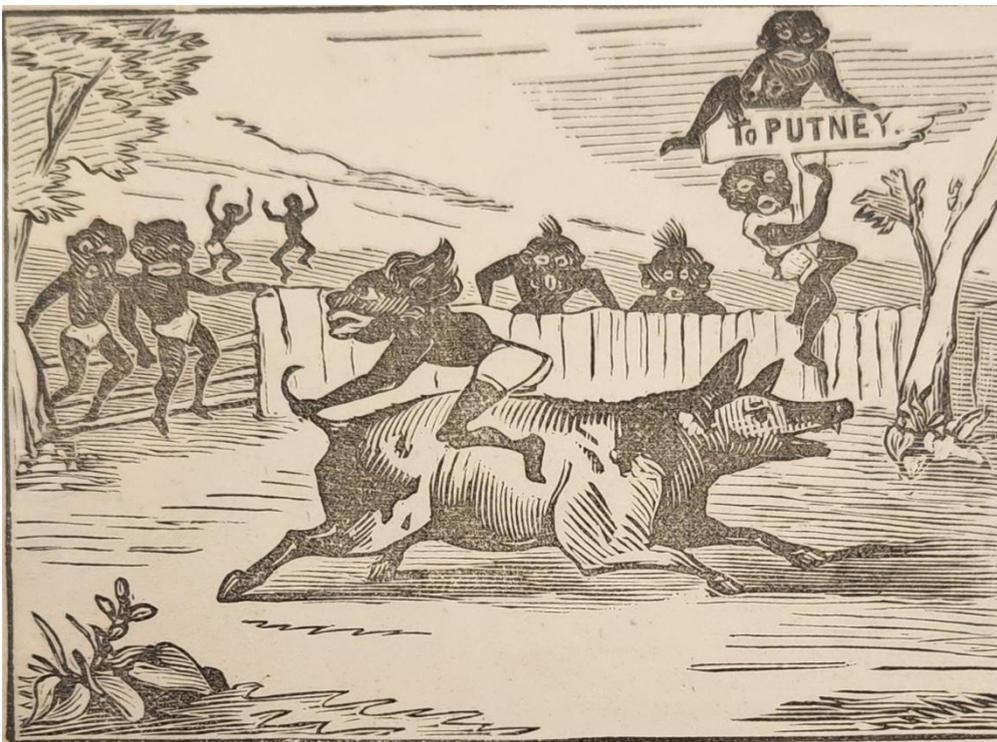


Fig. 1.3 *Ten Little Niggers*. London: Lindsaybyrne, 18--. Held at Rare Book Division at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

The next illustration (Fig. 1.4) again differs greatly from the previous two in that the characters are larger and naked, and many appear like animals. This scene depicts the seven “nigger men” who remain when one is eaten by an octopus. All of the characters seem to delight in the water. Interestingly, the sun is watching with interest on its face, and the octopus, while killing a character, seems friendly and cuddly and perhaps even scared of the characters’ invasion of his home. The character on the far right is positioned like a

silverback gorilla, poised on knuckles. The shape of his head also informs this notion. One character is head down in the water while his bare bottom and heels are all that we can see of him. The character being eaten by the octopus is in a similar position except that his head is in the octopus's mouth.



Fig. 1.4 *Ten Little Niggers*. London: Lindsaybyrne, 18--. Held at Rare Book Division at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

The remaining images in the picture book change yet again, showing flattened features as if in an attempt to remove humanity from the characters. Arms and legs are elongated, the woolly hair of the previous pages gives way to baldness. The movement of the characters becomes geometric in contrast to natural human movement. And the violence and trauma of the characters' destinies is captured more clearly than their facial characteristics. When a character breaks his neck after falling from stilts, the angles of his

neck, torso, and limbs are quite impossible and grotesque (Fig. 1.5). Both arms are extended in the opposite direction of his head, fingers outstretched in every direction. In another illustration, the character chokes on Irish stew as if he literally is incapable of stomaching British culture (Fig. 1.6). Instead of simply showing a mouth agape, the image shows the character with an entire bone lodged in his throat and protruding out. The other two characters look on in astonishment, falling back in their seats, strangely balanced on their posteriors, one of them with legs and arms outstretched parallel to each other. Notably, the characters sit at a prepared table in what appears to be a formal dining room with a grandfather clock. Again, there is a clear juxtaposition of their presence with civilized society. It is almost as if the characters have morphed from less dignified humans into glorified stick figures.

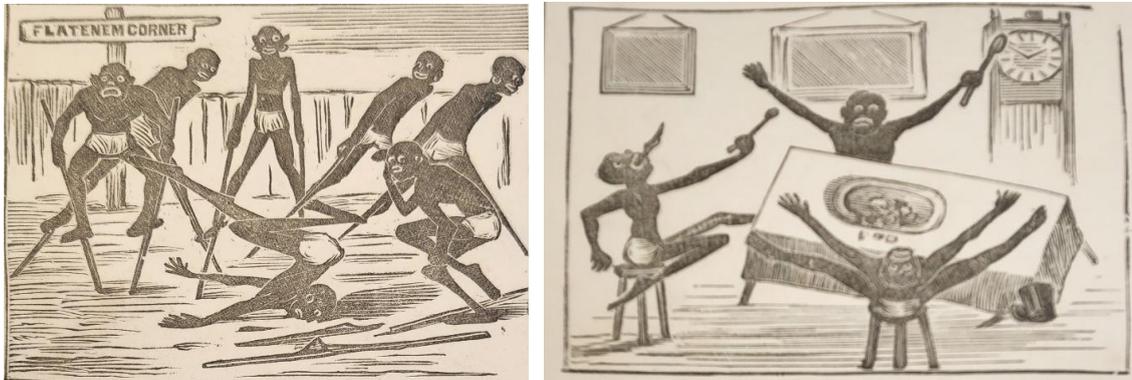


Fig. 1.5 and Fig. 1.6 *Ten Little Niggers*. London: Lindsaybyrne, 18--. Held at Rare Book Division at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

The final illustration in the Lindsaybyrne book depicts the last of the ten little figures walking “To Nowhere,” according to a road sign in the top left corner. However, a gravestone beneath says “0 miles,” suggesting that death is near. He has a sack against his back with items like a tea kettle and a broom and a walking stick. He seems determined to get away from the deaths and the accidents of the previous pages, but the sign and the gravestone suggest that he does not have far to go before inevitably encountering a fate similar to that of his comrades.

In the introduction, I note Perry Nodelman’s research into how illustrations function in children’s books. In regards to *Ten Little Niggers*, the illustrations serve to show a “nigger” to a child reader. As Nodelman notes, “Once a picture is present ... the word is

there in order to be associated with the object it represents” (12). He continues by comparing picture books to dictionaries, “except that many words that account for and explain one word in the definitions there are replaced by a picture” (13). Additionally, Nodelman argues that picture books are attempts to reduce complicated concepts to simpler ones, so that young readers might come to an understanding parallel to that of their elders.

Monsters in picture books are not uncommon, and they hold significant purpose for the development of children. In general, children’s picture books with monsters “mirror coping strategies preferred by young children, in particular positive pretence, where threats are minimised or eliminated by mentally changing or altering perception of them” (Maynes 1). However, the orchestrated fear created in *Ten Little Niggers* functions differently. In a sense, one might argue that the very things that cause the demise of the characters are also points of fear for children (being swallowed by a water creature, dying in one’s sleep, choking to death, etc.). But when we pull back and note the grotesque illustrations of the characters, we find that the characters are monsters in and of themselves, intended to drum up a fear in young readers that is quite apart from the characters’ demise. First, the book suggests that these deaths are rooted in the inability of black people to adopt the civil behaviour that the child reader is likely accustomed to. Therefore, these types of deaths are reserved for people other than themselves. The child’s fear of death is trumped by the larger societal fear of losing control of people of color, which in the context of British imperialism means their replacement of the people in power.

In many ways, manipulation is implicit in scary picture books for children, insofar as adults create the concept, text, and illustrations. The monsters represented in these books are reflections of the adults who created them and, consequently, reflect adult fears. In this case, a fear of black people is made manifest in the form of monstrosity. Even if general fears already exist within the child, we know that “typical childhood fears may be innate survival mechanisms to help them avoid physical dangers, but response is also learnt from children’s experiences in the ‘real’ world through a variety of sources, including the views of parents and carers who will have their own set of fears conveyed through their parenting style” (Maynes 2).

In Lindsaybyrne’s *Ten Little Niggers*, notions of black monstrosity do not belong originally with the child reading the book, but rather with the adult creators and the leanings of society as a whole. Insofar as racism is something that is taught, these books indoctrinate an understanding of black people that justifies the policy and politics of society. In America, the McLoughlin Brother’s publication passed on established ideas of the inability of black

people post-slavery to assimilate into white society. Lindsaybyrne's version extends these ideas into visualizations of monstrous, inhumane people who require the control of other people outside of themselves. The representation of black people in this way creates a fear within children that promises a continuation of British colonization and imperial policy, because after all, who would allow a monster to control its own destiny?

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