Materiality and Memory: Subversive Child Characters in Children’s Fantasy and the Way They Occupy Space

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The use of material objects is widely recognized as a way of creating, preserving and maintaining collective memory in society. The use of statues, archives and ceremonial objects are all vital in order to anchor societies in their past and thus reinforce what has been deemed significant for their present and future. These methods often leave little room for dissent and for decades’ urban fantasy has used its subversive writing to demonstrate the problems that occur when power structures are left unquestioned. In the work ”’The Past is Below Us’: Urban Fantasy, Urban Archaeology, and the Recovery of Suppressed History” Hadas Elber-Aviram traces the link between archaeology and urban fantasy. She asserts the importance of material objects for both of these fields by arguing that archaeology is often used in urban fantasy as the material evidence to expose a suppressed history of a city.

This paper will consider what Elber-Aviram’s study of urban fantasy could offer young adult fantasy and science fiction by taking into account concepts of childhood and materiality. Through an analysis of Diana Wynne Jones’ novel A Tale of Time City, I will establish the ways in which Time City relies on materiality and memory to maintain power, specifically in terms of how this affects childhood.

Children are often excluded from challenging collective historical memory in the same way they are excluded from the material artifacts that create this memory. Using Robin Bernstein’s concept of ”scriptive things” in Racial Innocence, Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights as well as Laura Shillington and Marie F Murnaghan’s work ”Urban Political Ecologies and Children’s Geographies: Queering Urban Ecologies of Childhood” I will discuss the ways that Jones’ characters challenge historic notions of childhood by the way they interact with the material aspects of Time City. I will demonstrate how the actions of the main character Vivian (from laughing at the ceremonial garb of Sempitern Walker to pointing out the lack of children in Time City) and her time traveling cohorts undermine hegemonic practices and the historical exclusion of children, ultimately changing the materiality of the Time City itself.

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