

# Deconstructing Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory: Race, Labor, and the Changing Depictions of the Oompa-Loompas

Chryl Corbin

Mentor: Leigh Raiford, Ph.D.  
Department of African American Studies

## Abstract

*In his 1964 book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* Roald Dahl depicts the iconic Oompa-Loompas as African Pygmy people. Yet, in 1971 Mel Stuart's film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* the Oompa-Loompas are portrayed as little people with orange skin and green hair. In Dahl's 1973 revision of this text he depicts the Oompa-Loompas as white. Finally, in the film *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) Tim Burton portrays the Oompa-Loompas as little brown skin people. This research traces the changing depictions of the Oompa-Loompas throughout the written and film text of the *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* narrative while questioning the power dynamics between Willy Wonka and the Oompa-Loompas characters. This study moves beyond a traditional film analysis by comparing and cross analyzing the narratives from the films to the original written texts and places them within their political and historical context. What is revealed is that the political and historical context in which these texts were produced not only affects the narrative but also the visual depictions of the Oompa-Loompas.*

## Introduction

In 1964 British author, Roald Dahl, published the first *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* book in which the Oompa-Loompas are depicted as black Pygmy people from Africa. Yet, in 1971 Mel Stuart's film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* the Oompa-Loompas are portrayed as little people with orange skin and green hair. In Dahl's 1973 revision he depicts the Oompa-Loompas as white. Finally, in the film *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) Tim Burton portrays the Oompa-Loompas as brown skin people. What was the impetus for changing the racial depictions of the Oompa-Loompas? This research traces the trajectory of the changing depictions of the Oompa-Loompas throughout the written and film texts of the *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* narratives (1964, 1971, 1973, and 2005). Further this study questions the power dynamics between Willy Wonka, owner, and the Oompa-Loompas, worker, characters.

## Theoretical Discussion

Globalization occurred in three phases, according to Thomas Friedman, which connected the world through the process of accumulating wealth by countries, companies, and then by individuals. Globalization also changed the nature of labor. Between 1492 and 1800, Globalization 1.0 occurs with "the dynamic force [being] countries globalizing for resources and imperial conquest" producing chattel slavery and colonization (Friedman 2005). Globalization 2.0 is "spearheaded by companies globalizing for markets and labor" between 1800 and 2000 which produced the wage laborer in factories (Friedman 2005). Globalization 3.0 begins in 2000 "flattening the playing field...the dynamic force is individuals and small groups globalizing" through the internet creating information technology laborers (Friedman 2005).

Karl Marx articulated in his concept of alienated labor that labor “not only creates goods; it also produces itself and the worker as a *commodity*” (Marx & Engels 2008). “The object produced by labor,” in this case chocolate, “now stands opposed to it as an alien being, as a power *independent* of the producer,” the worker (Marx & Engels 2008). Within this economic model of capitalism, workers become replaceable and exchangeable. This justifies why Wonka fires his local workers due to suspicion of recipe theft and replaces them with the foreign Oompa-Loompas workforce. In so doing chocolate as product remains at the hierarchical apex of commodity within the factory.

Slavery and capitalism coexisted making modern capitalism possible, according to Eric Williams. “The New World could not have been supplied in quantities adequate to permit large-scale production” without slavery (Williams 1994). For slavery to be possible people had to be “maintained in subjection...by systematic degradation and by deliberate efforts to suppress [their] intelligence” (Williams 1994). The Oompa-Loompas intelligence of the outside world is suppressed by the chained gates of the factory placed there by Wonka. They are not paid with a fungible wage, money, like Wonka’s former workers but in cocoa beans. Further, only within the framework of slavery could Wonka pass his wealth, the factory, and the Oompa-Loompas to his successor Charlie.

Hamida Bosmajian recognizes the power dynamic between Wonka and Oompa-Loompas to be a “master-slave relation” calling it “sweet” with Wonka as beneficiary (Bosmajian, 1985), while Clare Bradford roots the 1973 text within the history and politics of the UK in the 1960s as a reaction to Third World immigration. By placing this narrative within the decolonization process Bradford identifies the power dynamic between Wonka and the Oompa-Loompas as one between the colonizer and the colonized.

The historical and political antagonisms and ideologies expressed by western thought connects to the history and politics in which the *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* narratives are reproduced and produces the visual manifestations expressed in the written and film texts. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam articulate that the “intellectually debilitating effects of the Eurocentric legacy is indispensable for comprehending not only contemporary media but even contemporary subjectives” (Shohat & Stam 2000). When “Eurocentrism is naturalized as ‘common sense,’” it goes unnoticed and becomes hegemonic (Shohat & Stam 2000).

Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony not only expresses the struggle between colonization/hegemony and decolonization/counter-hegemony within society but also articulates “how ideological meaning is an object of struggle.” The context and the content of these texts act as dual sites of struggle within the colonization and decolonization process (Stuken & Cartwright 2009). It is within this lens and ideology of the master-colonizer that the power dynamic forms between Wonka, factory owner, and the Oompa-Loompa workforce.

## Methodology

This content analysis examines the changing depictions of the Oompa-Loompas within each written and film text (1964, 1971, 1973, 2005). The individual texts are placed within their historical and political context, the UK in 1964 and the US in 1971, 1973, and 2005, using primary and secondary sources to contextualize the narratives. The narratives are analyzed chronologically using a matrix of traditional film theory, narrative theory, and incorporating semiotics. Film theory illuminates how power is expressed cinematically, narrative theory focuses on how the story changes across time and from text to text, and semiotics aids in uncovering the signs and symbols to identify how the visual and textual manifestations within these texts connects to their historical

and political context.

This study concentrates on two sections within the Charlie and the Chocolate Factory narratives; 1) Grandpa Joe's story of the rise of Wonka's chocolate factory and the layoff of the local work population; 2) The origin tale of the Oompa-Loompas as told by Willy Wonka. Grandpa Joe's narrative highlights the labor issues while Wonka's origin tale of the Oompa-Loompas conveys the power dynamics between Wonka and the Oompa-Loompas. It must be acknowledged that the Oompa-Loompas do not articulate their own story.

### Presentation of Data

#### Black Oompa-Loompas - Roald Dahl's 1964 Book



*Dahl, Roald. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory  
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1964.*

In 1964, British author, Roald Dahl published the first edition of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* in which the factory workers, the

Oompa-Loompas, are depicted as African Pygmy people. As a cultural product, this text connects to the politics and the history of the United Kingdom during its time of publication. The displacement of the British workforce within the narrative directly relates to the labor anxieties expressed in the UK during the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, these anxieties extend to the fall of the British empire, its economic loss as a world power at the end of WWII, and the rise of Third World nations. The 1964 narrative of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* can be understood as a site of societal struggle as the UK contends with the decolonization process.

The British Nationality Act of 1948 opened the labor market and British citizenship to the New Commonwealth, “men and women from the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent who came to sell their labour power for a wage in British factories” (Miles & Phizacklea 1984). Upon arrival to Britain they were perceived as usurpers of rightfully white British jobs. They were immediately understood as inferior, separate from the white race, and questionably human. This was connected to over 500 years of historical understandings and political realities that identified these racialized bodies as among the servant class within the British empire, during its colonization process, and within its earlier slave trade.

Grandpa Joe’s story of the rise and the closing of Wonka’s factory connects to the white UK workers who perceived the threat of losing their jobs to the immigrating populations. Wonka fires his entire workforce and restarts his chocolate manufacturing with a new hidden workforce, the Oompa-Loompas. This translates to personal strife for Charlie Bucket’s family as they are denied employment at Wonka’s factory.

Within the Oompa-Loompa origin tale Wonka roots his benevolent reasonings for containing a black population of 3000 men, women, and

children within his factory walls as a humanitarian effort. Using the positive good theory Wonka situates the Oompa-Loompa extraction as a way to prevent their starvation and receive their free labor. The positive good theory argument was also made by John C. Calhoun who suggested that “slaveholders educated, supported, and managed their slaves,” as a civilizing cause in return for their labor creating a positive good for both the master and slave (Halabur 2006). It also can be understood that the Oompa Loompas were coerced into living in perpetual servitude, to prevent starvation.

The fact that Wonka “smuggled” the Oompa-Loompas out of Africa in crates and into this factory speaks to its illegality and takes on the characteristic of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade (Dahl 1964). Moreover, Veruca Salt demands that her father buy her an Oompa-Loompa and none of the golden ticket holders questions the selling and buying of a human being. This text as a site of the colonization process depicts the UK within its former glory as the British Empire. The New Commonwealth citizens, the Oompa-Loompas, are by positioned back into their place as servants and slaves within the confinements of the factory and by extension “Great Britain, workshop of the world” (Miles & Phizacklea 1984).

Orange Oompa-Loompas - Mel Stuart's 1971 Film



*Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory. Directed by Mel Stuart. 1971. Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Family Entertainment, 2001. DVD.*

The US was in a post Civil Rights political climate when American Director, Mel Stuart, released *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* in 1971, the first cinematic adaptation of Dahl's 1964 novel. To combat the depictions of slavery connected to the black Oompa-Loompas in the 1964 text and in response to flak from the NAACP, discussions occurred between African American actors and the film's production team to change the Oompa-Loompas (Higgins 1971) (Stuart & Young 2002). The gains that were won in the Civil Rights Movement included a new understanding of Black Power which translated to economic power. As theaters became integrated African Americans became a capitalist venture for Hollywood in which derogatory depictions of blacks also meant a loss in revenue. This was the major consideration for changing the Oompa-Loompas from their original depictions as black Pygmy people from Africa.

The iconic depiction and the one that resonates most in the US are little people with orange skin and green hair. Their transformation hides two physical characteristics that express the black phenotype, thus the fantastical transition of black to orange skin and from black curly hair to straight green hair. This act of obscuring race allowed the master-slave narrative within the content of this narrative to stay intact while the power dynamic between Wonka and the Oompa-Loompas remains unchanged.

The divergence from Dahl's 1964 text obscures the labor struggle expressed between the British and the New Commonwealth citizens. What is expressed in the *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) film is the struggle to keep the essence of this mater-slave narrative while removing all racial antagonisms. The major change from the 1964 written text to its 1971 cinematic adaptation occurs within the Oompa-Loompa origin tale.

There are subtle but significant changes within the Oompa-Loompa tale specifically in language. Instead of being "imported" in "crates with holes" as printed in the 1964 text, in the 1971 film the Oompa-Loompas are "transported" (Dahl 1964) (Stuart 1971). This changes the perception of how the Oompa-Loompas got to the factory, from an object of commodity as associated in the use of the word *imported*. This is in contrast to the use of the word *transported* which expresses their humanity through the act of travel and not being packed into crates like merchandise.

The Oompa-Loompa's place of origin undergoes a significant change. Africa in the 1964 publication, is replaced by the fictional Loompaland. Although the switch from African to Loompaland removes the racial association with blackness it also obscures the narrative of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade. Loompaland, "what a terrible country it is.

nothing but desolate wastes and fierce beasts” according to Wonka (Stuart 1971). The wording *nothing but*, expresses a lack within the Oompa-Loompa homeland. It is not only *nothing* but something even worse, Africa.

### White Oompa-Loompas - Roald Dahl's 1973 Book



*Roald Dahl, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*  
73 New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1973.

Dahl's relationship as the primary screenwriter in the American 1971 cinematic production influenced the 1973 revision of his written text. Dahl buckled to the public criticism and changed the Oompa-Loompas and their literary illustrations from black to white (Sturrock 2010). The narrative, its stratifications, Wonka's rise and closing of the factory, and the origin tale stay consistent with the 1964 text, again with subtle changes. Consistent with the 1971 film, Africa is changed to Loompa-land.

The 1973 text was published at the height of the Anti-Vietnam movement and in the wake of the Free Speech Movement on college cam-

puses which emerged from, connected to, and arrived on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement. The administration at the University of California, Berkeley began the push to change its universities into knowledge factories (Kitchell 2002). This swift move towards the commodification of higher education is expressed in the 1963 speech delivered by Dr. Clark Kerr, President of the University of California who called for the expanding of national service by increasing the numbers of the college educated. The goal was to transition its students into the government and business sectors upon graduation (Kitchell 2002).

White, middle-class, and educated young adults rejected the idea of participating in this knowledge factory. This generation broke away from their parents and the previous generations understanding of their place in society and became a counter-culture, Hippies. What erupted from the white-middle class was the understanding that they too were oppressed by a system constructed by white-conservatism much like their black counterparts during the Civil Rights Movement. Hippie culture forged new ways outside of the knowledge factory, outside of the military industrial complex, and outside of the capitalist system.

The long wavy hair and beard now worn by the 1973 Oompa-Loompas are symbolic of the counter-culture who rejected the coiffed hair and ways of the early generations. The Oompa-Loompas now reflected the 1970s counter-culture and are placed into service, positioned within, and reconnected to the chocolate factory as metaphor for the knowledge factory, capitalism, and conservative ideology. As the stratification stays consistent within the texts narratives from 1964 and 1971, the 1973 Hippie Oompa-Loompas become the next slaves within the factory.

Brown Oompa-Loompas - Tim Burton's 2005 Film



*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Directed by Tim Burton. 2005. Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures, 2005. DVD.*

In 2005 US film director Tim Burton released *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the second cinematic adaptation of Dahl's novel. The depiction of the Oompa-Loompas is manifested as one brown miniature male who is multiplied through computer generated images to create Wonka's 3000 person workforce. By adhering closely to the original written texts of 1964 and 1973, the 2005 cinematic narrative reveals itself as an American anxiety tale within the context of globalization and the emergence of the internet in 2000. When fiberoptic lines were constructed globally the internet allowed India to become a major contributor and

resource of labor (Friedman 2005). For US corporations and small firms this was the perfect combination of high skilled labor without the physical presence of the racialized immigrant body.

The 2005 Oompa-Loompas, like their prior depiction in Dahl's 1964 text can also be explained as connected to white anxiety and labor. In the case on the 2005 film, instead of the people immigrating as expressed in the 1964 text the jobs are migrating due to outsourcing. The emergence of information technology is the new factory and the next evolution of the knowledge factory. This is also the first depiction of Oompa-Loompas with technology, they are now depicted as Indians and are connected to the usurping of American jobs through outsourcing made possible by the world wide web.

Labor strife is revisited in the 2005 film and Grandpa Joe is a former employee of Wonka's who was laid off when the factory closed. The family's impoverished state is now the direct result of the closing of the factory unlike the prior texts. Although Charlie's father is present and working, he too is soon laid off and is replaced by a machine which also connects Charlie's poverty to the presence of Wonka's factory.

Within both written texts the Oompa-Loompas reject the clothing offered to them by Wonka and instead wear their traditional deerskins for men, leaves for women, and children are nude (Dahl 1964) (Dahl 1973). In the 2005 version the Oompa-Loompas are branded by the "WW" of Willy Wonka. The branding of the Oompa-Loompas works to not only remove the Oompa-Loompas narrative of resistance in the 1964 and 1973 texts, but fully mark them as property.

## Discussion/Conclusion

The historical and political context in which these texts are produced, 1964, 1971, 1973, and 2005, are directly linked to the changing depictions of the Oompa-Loompas within the content of these texts. As an anxiety tale originating from the white dominant-culture, the narratives of these texts act as sites of struggle between the colonization and the decolonization process in the expression of ideology. These narratives also stand in as a case study which uncovers the effects and implications of textual whitewashing.

I define textual whitewashing as the deliberate concealment of race or racial antagonisms within texts, written and/or visual, to obscure white supremacist depictions, ideologies, and narratives. Textual whitewashing allows for; (1) the removing of antagonisms based on race; (2) white privileges to go unchecked and unnoticed; and (3) the rewriting of textual histories to obscure racial nuances and power dynamics within the original un-sanitized text. The textual whitewashing of the 1971, 1973, and 2005 narratives in written and visual forms has allowed for this master-slave narrative to continue. The deliberate removal of the black Oompa-Loompas and the substitution of the orange, to white, to brown Oompa-Loompas has obscured this master-slave narrative and has removed the antagonisms based on race. The story of the New Commonwealth citizens and their connection to colonization and slavery has been removed. This has allowed for white privileges to go unchecked and unnoticed. Wonka is not understood for the master figure that he is but a patriarchal figure likened to a paternal one. The 1971, 1973, and 2005 narratives has added to obscuring the original 1964 text removing the racial nuances and power dynamics making them almost unrecognizable.

Wonka remains consistently white and in power. In the 1964 text the New Commonwealth citizens are shrunk to child-size. Childlike in body and thus childlike in mind, justifying why the Oompa-Loompas must be cared for and supervised by Wonka and eventually Charlie. Wonka towers over the Oompa-Loompas and dominates them in size while also conveying power through clothing as it connects to the British empire. His top hat is a signifier of a crown, British royalty, it is a sign of wealth and ultimately connotes power. Wonka's cane stands in as a scepter in which Wonka wields power through symbolic attire. The juxtaposition of the powerful and the powerless is between the tall well dressed civilized English Wonka and the Oompa-Loompas, a tribe of tiny, almost naked, savages.

The textual whitewashing of the *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* 1964 text also prevents audience interpellation and recognition of the master-slave narrative. Constructed through a master-colonizer gaze readers, viewers, people of color, Third World citizens, and people who share a similar existence of exploitation as the Oompa-Loompas are unable to recognize their own similar plight and connection to the Oompa-Loompas. The audience is realigned with Willy Wonka and his ideologies. This broken interpellation works as a propagandistic force on behalf of the dominant class to continue dominating ideology through media. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is more than just a children's story.

### Works Cited

*Berkeley in the Sixties*. Directed by Mark Kitchell. 1990. San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 2002. DVD.

Bosmajian, Hamida. "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and Other Excremental Visions." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 9, (1985): 36-49.

Bradford, Clare. "The End of Empire? Colonial and Postcolonial Journeys in Children's Books." *Children's Literature* 29, (2001): 196-218.

*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Directed by Tim Burton. 2005. Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures, 2005. DVD.

Dahl, Roald. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1964.

Dahl, Roald. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1973.

Friedman, Thomas L. "It's a Flat World After All (2005)." In *The Globalization and Development Reader: Perspectives on Development and Global Change*. Edited by Timmons Roberts and Amy Bellone Hite, 247-255. Malden: Blackwell, 2008.

Halabur Jr., James. "Calhoun, John Caldwell (1882-1850)" *Encyclopedia of American Civil Liberties Vol 1-4*. edited by Paul Finkelman, 214. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Higgins, Chester. "People Are Talking About." *Jet Magazine*, November 1971.

Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. "Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848) and Alienated Labor (1844)." In *The Globalization and Development Reader: Perspectives on Development and Global Change*. edited by Timmons Roberts and Amy Bellone Hite, 25-34. Malden: Blackwell, 2008.

Miles, Robert and Annie Phizacklea. *White man's country: Racism in British politics*. London: Pluto Press, 1984.

Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Stuart, Mel and Josh Young. *Pure Imagination: The Making of Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. New York: LA Weekly Books 2002.

Sturken, Marita and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Sturrock, Donald. *Storyteller The Authorized Biography of Roald Dahl*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010.

Williams, Eric. *Capitalism & Slavery*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1994.

*Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Directed by Mel Stuart. 1971. Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Family Entertainment, 2001. DVD.