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## *Limited Representation*

A Homology of  
Discriminatory Media Portrayals  
of Little People and African Americans

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*Over the last year, I'd come to understand that deep down in the heart of the fear we normals have for dwarfs is a subliminal intuition that they are the ultimate moral tar baby, sticky with our deepest feelings of fear and justice and truth and beauty, and if you touch them even lightly you might never get loose.*

—Richardson (253)

Popular culture has been inundated with little people in recent decades.<sup>1</sup> From major movies like *Willow* and *Simon Birch* to television comedies such as *Seinfeld* and *Dharma and Greg* and even to a reality program dedicated to their lifestyle—The Learning Channel's *Little People, Big World* (LPBW)—little people have become a prominent part of popular media. Indeed, Betty Adelson claims that there are hundreds of films featuring little people (235) and estimates that 9% of Little People of America (LPA) members are involved in the

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entertainment field (358). As a response to this media trend, we propose to consider the messages that are disseminated in the portrayal of little people.

In this chapter, we argue that mediated portrayals of little people are based on discursive structures of Othering that have been historically applied to media representations of African Americans. Discursive structures, which may be thought of as underlying patterns of language that influence word choice, order, and meaning, inevitably develop out of our use of language to communicate with one another. While these language patterns offer us a shared means of communication, they also organize relationships between people in ways that may empower some groups and disempower others. *Othering*, a term that became widely used after the publication of Edward Said's groundbreaking book *Orientalism*, refers to the ways in which cultural texts—books, films, and various forms of mediated communication—discursively construct groups of people as backward, primitive, savage, degenerate, or otherwise inferior to Western whites. Our observation that similar discursive mechanisms of Othering are at work in the mediated portrayals of both African Americans and little people indicates that these discursive patterns of Othering may be widespread, functioning to marginalize numerous groups of people.

Most of this chapter is spent discussing little people and African Americans, but we want to stress that the discussion is not about little people or African Americans. We use the homology in the media portrayals of the two groups to illustrate that a discursive structure of Othering, which has historically been applied racially, is now being applied to body configuration. But as you read, don't get stuck on race or height: Get stuck on the way language patterns can reinforce a social structure that not only supports racism and heightism but endorses larger categorizes of marginalization and oppression. Being able to identify discursive patterns like these can assist you in discerning mechanisms of marginalization hidden in unexpected places.

Barry Brummett, for example, uncovers a formal pattern of racist Othering in the next chapter of this book. He examines the interactions between rich white New Yorkers and salt-of-the-earth ranchers in *The Horse Whisperer*, observing that the New Yorkers are cast as strangers in the Montana ranch land, marked by the lingering wounds of their violent past, unfamiliarity with the norms of the culture, and an inability to help themselves. While the film does not seem to be about race on the surface, Brummett uses *The Horse Whisperer* to explain that discursive patterns of discrimination can circulate throughout seemingly benign texts, positioning one culture as "normal" and the other as strange or backward.

As you can see, Othering can be accomplished rhetorically through a variety of discursive mechanisms. To determine if little people are Othered and, if so, how they are Othered, we collected and examined a wide variety of films and television programs from the past two decades that include little people. Several

formal patterns in the discursive construction of little people emerged from those texts that have homological partners in the mediated portrayal of African Americans. We will focus on three discursive patterns that collectively Other: fantasy magic, anger and violence, and comic relief. By uncovering the formal structure of Othering that undergirds representations of African Americans and little people, this discussion helps expose mediated patterns of Othering that can be used to marginalize many groups. To set the stage for articulating the homologies of Othering, we will first provide an overview of our critical methodology.

### **Methodology: Homologies of Othering**

The method of homological rhetorical criticism involves uncovering formal patterns among disparate texts or experiences. Because everyone is socialized in a particular society, stable categories are created in our consciousness that help us process and organize information. Although texts or experiences may not appear to be related on the *surface*, there may be *formal* discursive patterns common to them that offer important insight into how persuasion works. Indeed, the three of us had seen many of these films and television shows before conducting this research, but not until we viewed them again as a collection of little person texts did we start to see the formal patterns. And interestingly, the formal patterns we observed echoed stereotypes of African Americans in film and television that other scholars had already uncovered, indicating that these stereotypes are built on a widespread discursive structure.

The three themes we discuss, of magic, violence, and comedy, can be loosely labeled mechanisms of Othering because they mark little people as different from the “normal” or “regular” population by presenting them in particular character stereotypes or categories rather than in a diversity of roles that reflect their actual lifestyles and experiences. As people are socialized in a given society and taught how to organize information or create categories in their consciousness, they will likely be exposed to examples of Othering such as these. Said describes how Western nations have historically Othered people from Asian and Middle Eastern nations (for example, the cover of the most recent edition of *Orientalism* depicts a snake charmer, an example of such stereotyping) but also notes that women, the poor, and the insane have been and continue to be Othered. Instead of seeking to understand people who may be different from us, it is perhaps easier to communicate oversimplified and often inaccurate representations of them.

Many social and cultural stereotypes contribute to the process of Othering, and examples may be seen in numerous everyday encounters. In an incident one of us recalls, for example, students were asked to reveal an interesting fact about themselves on the first day of a group communication class. A student

who was male, African American, and tall stated that he was attending college on an academic scholarship. Although the student explicitly stated that it was an academic scholarship, the instructor asked him what sports team he played for. One of the stable categories in the instructor's mind seems to have been African American male + tall + scholarship = athlete. This ready association likely would not have happened for a white student, perhaps because the instructor has a greater diversity of categories in his mind for white people. The incident is a primary example of the insidious ways that rhetorical homologies of Othering influence the way people organize information and, in turn, perceive people.

Little people, or the physically disabled in general, may also be considered a group that is marginalized through the ways that they are discursively positioned in society. Their needs and ways of life are often not considered primary, and, as such, they are constructed as deviant from the norm. For example, while there may be particular building codes and regulations that require wheelchair access to public spaces, public places are often not physically accessible to everyone, including little people, unless laws require it. Consider that the height of grocery store shelves and ATM buttons may essentially make little people *disabled*, but little people are expected to adapt to the situation, not vice versa.

Rosemarie Thomson explains that bodies marked by visual difference become cultural deviants as they are "defined through representation, and excluded from social power and status" (8). Othering can come with many surface features, but the underlying formal structure organizes various groups of people into inferior positions based on their differences from a normative center (whether that center is discursively positioned as white, masculine, or of average height, or involves another attribute that has become socially powerful). Thomson's work supports our mission to provide a detailed account of the homologies between mediated portrayals of little people and mediated portrayals of African Americans that will help unmask the discursive structures at work in the Othering of both groups. We now take a closer look at the mediated stereotypes.

## Analysis

### FANTASY MAGIC

The first type of Othering we explore in popular culture marks marginalized groups as different because of superhuman powers. Although magical abilities may not seem like a negative attribute, consistently portraying African Americans and little people as magical in television programs and films serves to reinforce whiteness and average height as the invisible centers of normalcy. We will first discuss the magical trend in African American popular culture characters and will then describe formal resemblances in the portrayals of little people.

Heather Hicks in her article titled “Hoodoo Economics: White Men’s Work and Black Men’s Magic in Contemporary American Film” analyzes the spate of recent U.S. films in which African Americans possess magical powers. Hicks explains that what marks the black magical characters in films such as *Ghost*, *Grand Canyon*, *The Green Mile*, *Unbreakable*, and *The Family Man* is that they are not simply magical but that their magic is geared toward saving the white characters playing the leading roles in the films. Similar themes of magical or spiritual powers can be seen in African American characters from *Bruce Almighty*, *Bedazzled*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest*, and the television program *Touched by an Angel*. In all of these examples, the magical African Americans also work to help white characters.

Krin Gabbard observes that African Americans are part of a well-established culture of spirituality but argues that many of these popular culture portrayals pull African Americans out of their own culture, situating them in fantasy prejudice-free worlds and offering redemption to white viewers who can easily feel compassion for the Uncle Tom figure (pars. 17–20; see also Appiah). In another essay, Anthony Appiah further suggests that black characters must have saint-like goodness to counteract the racism white audience members feels toward black characters.

The phenomenon of magical African American characters has been prevalent enough to be criticized in the popular press and parodied in *The Simpsons* (see Gabbard pars. 1–3). In a *Time* editorial titled “That Old Black Magic,” John Farley comments that, “instead of getting life histories or love interests,” African American characters get magical powers because Hollywood scriptwriters do not know anything about their unique life experiences. He cites films such as *The Legend of Bagger Vance* and *What Dreams May Come* as primary examples. In sum, it seems that the magical African American archetype arises from scriptwriters’ unwillingness to portray blacks’ unique life experiences as well as serves as a method of making African American characters more palatable to a prejudiced audience.

Similar to the exoticism of African Americans in popular culture, little people have often been depicted as magical beings. Adelson describes the ways in which little people have commonly been perceived:

After the initial shock of reverberating emotionally to physical deformity, the normate may impute to this unknown person the mythological wiliness of trolls, the moral blemish of the evil-spirited dwarf, or the childlike asexual cheeriness of Walt Disney’s seven dwarfs—depending on which reference is most familiar. (88)

In spite of the abundance of films with little people, it is rare to find simple love stories or dramatic tales with little people playing a leading role. Rather,

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little people have been traditionally depicted as belonging to a different realm, a world beyond commonplace reality. Beyond the mythological figures in fairy tales and folk stories, little people up to this day often take part in fantasy or science fiction films in which they usually add to the mysterious atmosphere.

The films *The Lord of the Rings*, *Willow*, *Snow White*, and *Baron Munchausen* and the HBO series *Carnival* are fantasy texts that depict little people in ways heavily influenced by traditional legends and folk stories. The plots often take place in a fantasy world filled with bloody struggles between the forces of good and evil. Little people in these films are rarely the main characters and are almost exclusively a part of a larger group of fantastic characters such as witches and wizards, kings and knights, giants and hobbits, trolls and elves. Just like many magical African American characters, the importance of the little people lies not in their special powers but in their ability to help the normal-height character. In the familiar *Snow White*, for example, the dwarfs' significance derives from the shelter and protection they provide Snow White when escaping from the malicious witch. Similarly, the plot of *Willow* revolves around little person Willow's efforts to save the average-height baby Elora Danan from an evil sorceress.

The visible difference between magical little people and people of normative height is intensified in these traditional depictions through special costumes. In *Snow White* and *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, the dwarfs have long beards, hoods, and axes and are generally unkempt. Unusual costumes proliferate in other films, such as in the *Leprechaun* series with the traditional green suit and hat, along with *Bad Santa*, both of which show a little person dressed as an elf. These unusual costumes act as a visual highlight enhancing the perceived difference between little people and those of normative height.

Little people are depicted as otherworldly even in films situated in a "normal" environment. The film *Simon Birch*, for example, is not of the fantasy genre, yet magic creeps in the back door here as well. Short-statured Simon believes that his life has special meaning and insists that God will make him a hero. In spite of many difficulties, Simon indeed rises to greatness by miraculously saving several children. Simon dies by the end of the film, but not before he is made a hero. His spirit and faith, viewers are told, remain after his death.

Another example is the TV series *Twin Peaks* and the subsequent film made by David Lynch. Both are characterized by a scary and perplexing atmosphere—a woman is murdered in a small town, and an FBI agent is called to solve the mystery. A gratuitous little person was added to the ensemble of beautiful women and crazy men. He had no personality and existence of his own but appeared in people's dreams and told riddles. Since the actor playing the little person spoke backward and was edited to play from the back to the beginning, the impression of his words is frightening. As such he symbolizes the movement from the real world to that of dream and fantasy.

The mere presence of little people in many films appears to signify the plot's movement to another dimension. As Thomson claims, visual disability is

usually stripped from any normalizing contexts such that visual difference itself signifies meaning (11). Tito, a little person character in the 1995 film *Living in Oblivion*, comments on the fantastic use of little people in films:

Have you ever had a dream with a dwarf in it? Do you know any one who has had a dream with a dwarf in it? NOOOO! I don't even have dreams with dwarves in them. The only place I've seen dwarves in dreams is in stupid movies like this. "Oh make it weird. Put a dwarf in it."

The cynical remark beautifully reveals the absurd in the extent to which little people function as a signal of oddity in popular culture. The old association of little people with treasures and magic as well as their connection to mythical creatures such as dragons, kings, and wizards enable directors to plant them in new settings, relying on the fact that they bring the exotic and otherworldly atmosphere with them wherever they go. They consequently spice up the odd atmosphere by functioning as a sign of Otherness.

The association of African Americans and little people with magical realms of existence has become so commonplace that we may rarely acknowledge the negativity of the stereotype. Nonwhites and people of below-average height have been Otherved by being associated with magic and sometimes also with service to whites and people of normative height. While it might be entertaining and easy for directors to have a fixed type of character symbolizing different realms of being, it is also disturbing. The discursive structure underlying the fantastical imagery of many African American and little people characters in popular culture can be seen as a mechanism of control by dominant groups. By casting African Americans and little people as different and unusual, a normative center is thereby created as the point from which everyone else deviates. Those who occupy that normative center (i.e., whites and/or people of normative height) benefit by being perceived as average, or ordinary, and can wield much power as the "universal" representatives of a given culture (see, for example, Nakayama and Krizek 102).

## ANGER AND VIOLENCE

Perhaps the most egregious stereotype is the one connected to racial Darwinism. George Frederickson reports that arguments from pro-slavery and pro-lynching forces of the 19th and early 20th centuries operated on the stereotype that African Americans had an inherently violent nature (275). African American characters in popular culture today are commonly depicted as violent or angry, thus directly reinforcing the savage stereotype that historically functioned as a rhetorical justification for white patriarchy. Donald Bogle claims that the violent African American film character originated with *The Birth of a Nation*, although the controversy provoked by D. W. Griffith's film temporarily discouraged similar mediated portrayals (13–16). It was not until the blaxploitation films

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of the 1970s that a version of the savage African American form rose again (Bogle 13–16). Robin Means Coleman observes that African Americans continue to be limited to playing the roles of “pimps, drug dealers, gun-toting gang members, rapists, or murderers” (9). On the contrary, she notes, white characters are often seen as “without dysfunction” (Coleman 196).

Brummett describes the formal foundations of the angry and violent stereotype when he uncovers the “white liberal myth of racial history” in *The Horse Whisperer*. Brummett explains part of the myth as follows: “[P]eople of color bear scars of a lost innocence, an original Edenic happiness that was destroyed in horrible injury and violence. People of color are thus understood to be sullen, resentful, and hurting” (79). The portrayal of African Americans as angry and resentful is similar to contemporary mediated portrayals of little people. Little people in the media are frequently cast as ill-mannered and rude with angry dispositions. They are not social and outgoing but instead are demanding and overbearing to close friends and strangers alike. Little people have quick tempers and are set to combust at the slightest affront. In spite of their small stature, their caustic personalities often result in violent confrontations with larger than average-sized people.

The similar casting of African Americans and little people as angry and violent is fundamental to discursively constructing a savage Other, thus creating distance between what is normal and dominant and what is different and, therefore, inferior. Uncontrolled anger and unprovoked violence are socially deviant behaviors that reflect a primitive and savage personality, thereby subjugating African Americans and little people to the bottom of a hierarchy that rewards rationality and temperance. Overt violence allows for clear boundaries and distinctions to be drawn between exoticized little people and people of normative height. To support this claim, this section analyzes several prominent mediated portrayals of little people, beginning with *Seinfeld*'s Mickey Abbott.

Mickey exemplifies several of the stereotypes in mediated portrayals of little people. First, he is sullen and resentful. He treats most individuals with contempt, even Kramer and his friends, George, Jerry, and Elaine. George is the first object of Mickey's anger and violence after George offers some politically incorrect advice in Mickey's first appearance on the show (“The Stand In”). Mickey complains of the difficulties he is having as a stand-in for a rapidly growing child actor, to which George suggests, “Can't you just switch with another midget?” Mickey is clearly angered by George's use of the term “midget,” a word akin to a racial slur in the little person community (Noel par. 5). He slowly approaches George with his index finger extended and gets in George's face, saying emphatically, “It's 'little people'! Got that?” Kramer, who knows Mickey's knack for losing his temper, restrains him.

Later in the same episode, Mickey displays his violent nature by verbally and physically assaulting Kramer on two separate occasions. The first incident takes



place in Jerry's apartment, where gangly Kramer and short-statured Mickey get locked in a World Wrestling Entertainment-style stalemate. Jerry finally has to break it up and remind the two to behave themselves. The episode ends in the same way, with Mickey letting out a primal scream and again tackling Kramer as he is seated on a stool. The two fall to the floor as the credits roll.

In another episode ("The Burning"), Mickey and Kramer are hired to act out the symptoms of various diseases to help medical students practice diagnosing illnesses. Mickey's angry and violent personality is displayed again in this episode after Kramer acts out Mickey's coveted cirrhosis of the liver before Mickey gets the chance. Mickey yells, "Hey, that's my cirrhosis! He's stealing my cirrhosis!" Mickey rushes Kramer, throws him from the examination table to the floor and says, "You wanna be sick? I'll make you sick!" The scene ends with Kramer in a headlock while Mickey chokes him. From these scenes, the audience can see how Mickey handles conflict. He is easily offended, quick to anger, and prone to aggressive behavior. Furthermore, the extreme height differential between Kramer and Mickey exaggerates the irrationality of his violent nature.

*The Lord of the Rings* trilogy also features a little person portrayal that is consistent with Mickey's angry and violent personality. In these films, humans, elves, hobbits, orcs, dwarves, and all sorts of creatures come together in a battle over a powerful yet cursed ring. Even among this host of odd characters, Gimli the dwarf is the one who comes across as ill-mannered, rude, and overly aggressive (in both the Tolkien books and the Peter Jackson films), further reinforcing the fundamental nature of discursive Othering. Gimli is physically short, stumpy, and hairy. He is gruff and blunt and shows a penchant for verbal and physical confrontations. Not only is Gimli's weapon of choice—the battle axe—the most barbaric of all the character's weapons, he is the most eager to use it. Gimli has a combative relationship with most others, even those in his own fellowship. When the fellowship is first brought together and their quest is explained in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Gimli is the catalyst for an explosive argument when he says, "I'll be dead before I see the ring in the hands of an elf!"

Despite the overall violence in *The Lord of the Rings*, Gimli still comes across as the most violent and bloodthirsty of all the fellowship. In his introductory scene, the cursed ring is displayed, and Gimli quickly draws his battle axe and ineffectively attempts to smash it. He has a simple solution to the problem. Later in the first film, Gimli and the rest of the fellowship come upon the massacred remains of Gimli's cousin and fellow dwarfs. When it is clear that the enemy orcs are coming to attack the fellowship, Gimli looks forward to exacting violent revenge. His excitement for killing orcs overflows as he stands upon a grave and shouts, "Let them come! There is still one dwarf in Mordor who draws blood!"

Mini-Me of the *Austin Powers* films also clearly reflects a homological connection with angry African American portrayals and the deeper form of Othering.

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Verne Troyer gained considerable recognition as a little person actor playing Mini-Me, a clone one-eighth the size of Austin Powers's archenemy, Dr. Evil. Mini-Me's violent nature situates him fittingly within Dr. Evil's cadre of deadly assassins. Not only is Mini-Me angry and violent like Mickey and Gimli, but he is savage and animalistic. These related traits of violence and animalism illustrate that he has been marked with an inner penchant for violence, a form of biological determinism. Mini-Me's violent nature is displayed in two prominent physical confrontations with Austin Powers in *The Spy Who Shagged Me* and *Goldmember*. The audience is able to see Mini-Me compensate for his size through his zest for violence. In both of these fights, the much smaller Mini-Me is able to pummel Austin Powers before Austin is ultimately able to gain control.

Even among Dr. Evil's odd team of assassins, Mini-Me's animalistic nature makes him stand out. Mini-Me is indeed violent, but with it comes an unrestrained, animalistic savagery that makes his penchant for violence seem instinctual or interconnected with his small size. In his first scene of *The Spy Who Shagged Me*, he is reprimanded by Dr. Evil for trying to gnaw on a pet cat. Later in the same scene, Mini-Me lunges to attack Dr. Evil's son but is thwarted by Dr. Evil's assistant, who sprays him in the face with a water bottle—just like a pet owner would do to a misbehaving cat. The cat connection is seen again after Mini-Me gets caught in the rafters of the secret hideout; Dr. Evil suggests putting a bell on him. Mini-Me also displays dog-like habits: He is known as a “biter” by Dr. Evil's other henchmen and has to be kept on a leash at times. Austin Powers and Dr. Evil's son make the animal connection clearer: Austin says, “He's so small. He's like a dog or something,” while Scott says, “He's like a vicious little Chihuahua thing” (*The Spy*).

Mini-Me's portrayal goes beyond the absurd in the *Austin Powers* films to reflect a deeper homological connection to traditional African American portrayals. Mini-Me's angry and violent nature seems animalistic and instinctual, illustrating that he has been marked with the biological determinism that has also plagued African American media portrayals. Easy laughs come from Mini-Me's absurdly violent outbursts, but beneath the amusement lies a form of Othering.

This violent pattern is prevalent in large roles like those in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Austin Powers* as well as in the smaller portrayals of mostly nonviolent films. *Elf*, a film starring Will Ferrell as Buddy the Elf, is a Christmas comedy much different from *Austin Powers* and *The Lord of the Rings*, but it does feature a little person who is consistent with these personality traits. The little person Miles Finch appears to assist Buddy's father, a book publisher, with an idea for a new book. Miles abruptly enters the meeting room and says in a harsh tone, “All right, let's do this.” There are no greetings or pleasantries exchanged as Miles takes a seat at the head of the table and demands his money up front. Once his money is secured, Miles begins to explain a potential storyline, but Buddy interrupts him. In an innocent tone, Buddy asks Miles if Santa knows

that he is not in his workshop. Miles says, "You better wipe that smile off your face before I come over there and smack it off." Miles then climbs on the table and delivers a two-footed dropkick to Buddy's chest. He then twists Buddy's arm and flips him back onto the table before Buddy is put in a headlock and spun to the floor. Like Kramer of *Seinfeld* and the orcs in *The Lord of the Rings*, Buddy is extremely tall. The absurdity of a little person physically dominating larger opponents shows their zeal for violence. Not only do they have quick tempers and angry dispositions but their enjoyment of violence is emphasized.

The consistency across genres is illuminating. It does not seem to matter whether the portrayal is in a sitcom, a science fiction film, or comedy, the angry and violent little person stereotype is widespread. Little people are seen as the exoticized Other, to be feared not only because they are rude but also because they are especially skilled in physical confrontations.

#### COMIC ENTERTAINMENT

Another African American stereotype that has circulated throughout the media for decades is that of the minstrel. A content analysis of 2003 primetime television revealed that African American characters are unusually concentrated in sitcoms as opposed to dramatic programs: 56% of African American characters were in comedic roles contrasted with 34% of whites and 26% of Hispanics (Signorielli, Horry, and Carlton). Toni Morrison opines that the Africanist presence in the United States has inspired literary themes that attempt to deal with "the collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation" (38). Coleman opines that comedic roles often utilize "negative, stereotypical characterizations of Blackness to promote humor" (8). By occupying a position as object of white amusement (Gray 75), comedically framed African Americans may function to alleviate white angst about racial tensions and power dynamics (Watts and Orbe 18).

African American minstrel stereotypes can be seen as homologous to the little person jester. Adelson reports that the Tang dynasty of China used little people as jugglers and actors for its palace entertainment, a trend that continued through the Middle Ages (144). While the stereotypical, brightly costumed jester image of little people has become rather rare, the exploitation of little people as an entertainment form has continued, varying in severity from relegating little people to comic roles to the physically dangerous practice of little person tossing. The relegation of little people to comedic roles and entertainment spectacles functions as a strategy of containment of difference. Comedic roles trivialize their personhood and help reinforce the unmarked power of normative height bodies.<sup>2</sup>

Many little people in the texts we examined occupy comedic roles, with their bodies used to create humorous scenes. For example, Simon Birch is often the object of laughter. His birth was easy—his mother only had to sneeze and

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baby Simon unexpectedly popped out. Simon is ogled while in the hospital nursery, laughed at by the townspeople who mockingly call him a mouse, is picked up and passed around by his giggling Sunday school class, and is forced to play the baby Jesus in the Christmas play since he is “the only one who fits in the manger.” Seinfeld character Mickey Abbott also finds himself limited to entertainment jobs, which provide comic fodder for the show: He works as the stand-in for a child actor on a soap opera and plays a department store elf at Christmas. The studio audience laughs when Mickey tells of the jobs he has taken. They respond raucously after Mickey’s boast, “I stood in for Punky Brewster when all of you was [*sic*] nothing.”

Little people characters often make jokes about their stature. Cracking jokes can be seen as a way for little people to gain acceptance by providing entertainment. Simon Birch amuses his friend Joe with various one-liners throughout the film. As the two dive into a cold lake, Joe remarks, “My balls just turned into marbles,” to which Simon replies, “My balls just turned into BBs.” Little people also appear in a few episodes of *Dharma and Greg*, providing one-liners for the comedy show. When Greg expresses surprise that Kim (a little person) is an oral surgeon, she quips, “You give your patients enough nitrous, they let you stand on their chest!” This line draws audible laughter from the actors and audience. Perhaps one of the most famous examples of a little person comedian is the now deceased Howard Stern sidekick and member of the “Wack Pack,” Hank the Angry Drunken Dwarf. His official Web page explains that Hank quickly became a common figure on Stern’s morning show because “Howard was amazed by how drunk Hank was as he told him a bunch of jokes and got more and more loaded.”

Pigeonholing little people in comedic roles may have psychological effects on little people and the public’s perception of them, but other forms of little person entertainment present more immediate and harmful physical effects. “Dwarf” tossing and “midget” wrestling have sparked much controversy and evoked strong responses from the LPA. Adelson recounts that little person tossing began in an Australian nightclub in the mid-1980s (363). The practice faced strong resistance in Europe but did catch on in a few American cities. The LPA took legal measures against little person tossing due to the physical risks it posed to participants and to the fear that the practice would increase the acceptance of physical aggression toward little people (Adelson 319, 364). Little person tossing is currently banned in New York, Florida, and France (Adelson 364).

The practice unfortunately continues in movies, most recently in the first two installments of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, although it is not included in the original Tolkien books upon which the movies are based. Gimli takes a stand against dwarf tossing in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, though it means risking his life by jumping over a large chasm. In the second installment, *The Two Towers*, Gimli asks Aragorn to throw him into battle so that he may help defend a vital bridge. Being thrown or “tossed” is clearly shameful to Gimli and he

makes Aragorn promise not to tell his elf friend about the incident. In the LPA newsletter from September 2005, Vice President of Public Relations Dan Okenfuss reports educating a “Lord of the Rings Club” about the dangers of dwarf tossing after they incorporated a “toss the dwarf” game (using a Gimli doll, thankfully) into their Middle Earth festival.

Little people wrestling (commonly labeled with the offensive phrase “midget” wrestling) is still legal and seems to have gained in popularity recently. A team of little people wrestlers had prominent roles in the 2006 movie *Nacho Libre*. Also in 2006, a little person wrestler named Little Bastard made his World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) debut. The WWE has taken even stronger steps to capitalize on the perceived popularity of little person wrestling, beginning a “Juniors Division” in the Friday Night Smackdown. WWE network executive Palmer Canon explains on the WWE Web site, “The Juniors Division will be comprised of world-class athletes at or below 5 feet tall. Midgets, dwarves, the little people; they’re all welcome.” Aside from the offensive use of the word “midget,” which many people liken to a racial slur, the wrestling spectacle has been criticized by the LPA because it is “thoroughly degrading and puts little people out there as a sideshow and entertainment” (Dan Okenfuss quoted in Noel par. 10).

Just as African Americans are often relegated to comic roles in film and television, little people are often stereotyped into entertainment roles—from comic fodder to wrestlers. Positioning little people as a form of comic entertainment rhetorically constructs them as objects, not subjects, thereby potentially diminishing their personhood and discouraging others from treating them respectfully. Comic mockery has been a method of emasculating various groups throughout history, and this discriminatory mechanism also seems to be at work in the portrayal of little people.

## Conclusions

So where do we go from here? It is important to ask what types of portrayals of little people are positive, encouraging people to understand the unique features of their lives but still not marking them as exotic Others. Gray warns of the dangers of assimilationist portrayals of African Americans that marginalize “social and cultural difference in the interest of shared and universal similarity” (85). Clearly, universal similarity only strengthens the positioning of already dominant groups as the norm, the center from which everyone else deviates (see, for example, Dyer; Nakayama and Krizek). Such portrayals make already marginalized groups feel not just different but inferior, and we do not wish for little people to be portrayed as such.

Adelson remarks that more positive television roles (not just fantasy or bizarre characters) began to be available to little people beginning in the 1980s but that little people are still very limited with regard to the range of roles they

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are offered. She suggests that media portrayals of little people would be improved if there were more roles that “illuminate the inner experiences of a dwarf” (235). We believe that The Learning Channel’s reality-based program *Little People, Big World (LPBW)* represents a step in that direction. *LPBW*, which premiered in the spring of 2006, documents the lives of the Roloff family. Parents Matt and Amy are little people, and they have four children, one of whom (Zach) is also a little person. The opening of the program includes a voice-over by Matt and Amy that provides insight into their lives:

*Matt:* When you’re only 4-foot tall you’re feeling like you’re living in a world that wasn’t made for you.

*Amy:* We have to face obstacles and challenges just to live an ordinary life.

*Matt:* So we’re making our own life on our 34-acre farm here in Oregon.

*Matt:* One thing I wish people would understand about little people is . . .

*Amy:* We can pretty much do what everyone else does, but just in a different way.

Throughout *LPBW* many unique experiences are discussed. The family attends LPA conferences, and Matt and son Zach take a trip to visit little people who are successful in a variety of careers. But in addition to the emphasis on the uniqueness of being little people, *LPBW* also shows Zach and his siblings going through the motions of any regular childhood. Zach and brother Jeremy get their driving permits, go to dances, and play on soccer teams.

Some critics have found fault with *LPBW*, arguing that viewers may treat the Roloffs as spectacle (see, for example, Kennedy). Indeed, we acknowledge that there can be no one perfect portrayal of little people. Media representation of little people, like that of African Americans, should portray a diversity of experiences and a diversity of character types. Unfortunately, that is not the current state of affairs, and both groups continue to be Othered through a multitude of stereotypical media portrayals that cast them as magical, prone to anger, and comic entertainment.

The homology in the portrayal of African Americans and little people demonstrates that discursive mechanisms of Othering may work to marginalize various groups of people, not just on the basis of race but on body shape, gender, or other attributes. Popular culture is a significant vehicle for propagating discrimination by exploiting our human, symbol-using tendency to build patterns and categories in our consciousness. These discursive patterns of Othering perpetuate hierarchal distinctions, functioning as a significant stratifying force in the United States.

The intent of this discussion is not to encourage readers to boycott the deluge of *Seinfeld* reruns shown each evening or to change the channel when *The Lord of the Rings* is shown. There are larger and more important implications that can be drawn from these findings. One goal of this chapter is to encourage

readers to recognize how popular media can be a site of struggle, because it often creates hierarchies that marginalize and oppress while masquerading as harmless entertainment. Another goal is to empower readers to recognize the ways that formal patterns may contribute to the Othering of many groups, beyond little people and African Americans. Given just the three mechanisms of Othering discussed here—fantasy magic, violence, and comedy—is it not also possible that the elderly, athletes, and overweight people are Othered through similar patterns? Perhaps it may be helpful to consider the plethora of graying wizards in popular culture, all of the teen movies that depict the school sports star as a big bully, or the many television shows in which the main character has an overweight, comic sidekick. Uncovering a homology between the representation of little people and African Americans makes it possible to discern a rather stable formal image of Otherness, indicating that discrimination is fundamentally based on discursive structures rather than on the color of one's skin or other physical attributes. Understanding these discursive structures and the ways that differences are communicated helps us recognize a new form of marginalization that stretches beyond race and size and calls attention to new ways to understand and respond to our rhetorical world.

## Notes

1. We have chosen to use the term “little people” instead of dwarfs because it seems to be the most preferred phrase in their own community.
2. There has been much disagreement in the little person community as to the effect entertainment roles have on the way in which the rest of society perceives little people. It is important to note that we do not aim to condemn little person actors who choose such employment but intend only to explore trends in their representation.