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Article

Citation (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

Kerr, W ORCID logo[ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4280-4392](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4280-4392) (2023)
Water, earth, fire, air: Banal nationalism and Avatar: The Last Airbender.
European Journal of Cultural Studies. pp. 1-16. ISSN 1367-5494

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Water, earth, fire, air: Banal nationalism and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

European Journal of Cultural Studies

1–16

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DOI: 10.1177/13675494231206385

journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**William Kerr** 

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Abstract

This article argues that children's media can be a powerful source for embedding nationalist assumptions from an early age, by looking at *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and its sequel *The Legend of Korra*. In the shows, the world is divided into four discrete nations. Drawing on Billig's concept of banal nationalism, I intend to explore how, despite being critical of nationalism, they nevertheless reinforce and communicate core tenets of national ideology: that nations are the natural way of organising the world. This then leads to wider conclusions about how children's media can communicate and embed these ideas.

Keywords

Banal nationalism, children, media, national identity, nationalism

Water . . . Earth . . . Fire . . . Air . . . Long ago, the four nations lived in harmony. Then, everything changed when the Fire Nation attacked.

Opening narration that introduces each episode

Whatever it be that forms the manners of one generation, the next must imbibe a deeper tincture of the same dye; men being more susceptible of all impressions during infancy, and retaining these impressions as long as they remain in the world.

David Hume (1998) 'Of National Characters'

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Introduction

The question of how people learn, and maintain, national identities is a prevalent one, which has been explored in Michael Billig's *Banal Nationalism* (1995). Banal nationalism essentially refers to the means by which the concepts of the nation, nationality and nationalism are repeated in ways that lodge them in people's consciousness, without being overt or 'hot' (e.g. wartime). Several studies have since expanded on this concept and idea (c.f. a recent collection of essays edited by Skye and Antonsich, 2017), and in particular have focused on the influence of media representations and mediations in 'flagging' the concept of the nation (c.f. Mihelj et al., 2009; Preston and Kerr, 2001; Skey, 2014). Attention has also been paid the way children absorb ideas of nationality and nationhood, through the institutions they interact with such as schools (Millei and Imre, 2021). Relatively little attention, however, has been focused on how children's media could play a role in reproducing and reinforcing children's notions of nationalism and national identity. This is the question that this article proposes to explore.

To do this, I will look primarily at the popular children's TV show *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (hereafter *Avatar*), which ran from 2005 to 2008, with some additional analysis of its sequel *The Legend of Korra* (hereafter *Korra*), which ran from 2012 to 2014. Both series were created by Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino. The show initially aired on the American television network Nickelodeon, to large viewing figures, and critical acclaim, with the Season 2 episode 'City of Walls and Secrets' being nominated for an Emmy in 'Outstanding Animated Programme' (Television Awards, 2007), as well as winning a Peabody Award (2008). The reason for choosing *Avatar* and *Korra*, however, is not just because they are popular, but because they prominently foreground anti-nationalist themes. This makes it a worthwhile case to examine, from a banal nationalism perspective, to see how even in critical media the reinforcements of the idea that nations are a part of 'the natural world' (Billig, 1995: 37) can still be present.

I will first provide a theoretical outline of the concept of banal nationalism, covering the main arguments and debates. Second, I will set out an understanding of how children interact with, and can be influenced by, media texts, adopting an ecological model framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Jordan, 2004). I will then provide a brief overview of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, discussing the main themes as they relate to nationalism. The final section will analyse the show, drawing out key themes and content that banalize nationalism, in order to demonstrate how this could reinforce children's notions of national identity.

Nationalism and banal nationalism

Nations, in Benedict Anderson's evocative phrase, are 'imagined communities'. They are '*imagined*' because the members of even the smallest nation will never know their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, [1983] 2006: 6). The imagined community, however, is limited in that it does not encompass the whole world, but rather the specific nation-state in which the people live (Anderson, [1983] 2006: 7). Anderson conceptualises this form of nationalism as resulting from print capitalism. The printing press

enables the spread of texts, enabling the development and spread of nationalism as it provides a shared grammar that the people of a 'nation' use to identify themselves, and the limits of their 'nation' (Mihelj et al., 2009: 58). This also applies to other forms of media, such as television, where the shared experience of consuming media content helps form the imagined national community (Mihelj et al., 2009).

Michael Billig's concept of 'banal nationalism' expands on the imagined community idea, as it in essence grounds the way in which people's national identities, and sense of a nation, is maintained (Billig, 1995). One of Billig's main targets, within the space of social science but also more widely, is the assumption of 'methodological nationalism' (Skey, 2009: 333–334). Methodological nationalism, effectively, sees society and the nation as being equivalent units (Chernilo, 2006). This is problematic, as it treats the nation as being a 'natural' unit, and a natural part of the world, despite its recent formation (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002: 304–305). For social science, this hinders analysis and also leads to the perpetuation of nationalism as an ideology. But Billig's (1995) primary motivation is to understand how nationalism, particularly within Western nations, can be disguised by appearing 'banal'.

Billig argues that, in Western nations, nationalism is seen as a characteristic of others: a far-right movement, a separatist struggle and so on. It is seen as something that is 'politically charged' and draws on people's emotions, often inciting violence and exclusionary politics (1995: 44). This is what Billig terms 'hot' nationalism. For Billig, however, nationalism encompasses not just these hot moments but also has a banal, everyday aspect. Nationalism is 'the ideology by which the world of nations come to seem the natural world – as if there could not possibly be a world without nations' (Billig, 1995: 37). By understanding nationalism only in its hot variety, and locating that in others, we can forget our own nationalism (Billig, 1995: 38), reinforcing the 'naturalness' of nations.

Despite the overt forgetting of nationalism, it is constantly 'flagged' in a way that reminds people of their nationality. Routine words, phrases and images that take the world of nations for granted are a constant in daily life (Billig, 1995: 93). Billig (1995) points to the rhetoric of politicians and the media, who regularly use phrases of 'we' and 'our' in making addresses to the public and in making depictions of the nation, in the knowledge that the public will know where the limits of 'we' and 'our' fall (pp. 95–99). This is further reinforced by Mihelj et al. (2009), who noted how newsreaders and news presentations will use similar rhetoric and depictions to convey and capture the sense of the nation to the people, in a similarly banal way.

But this goes beyond just flagging the individual nation to the members of the nation: It is also about conveying the naturalness of nationhood and of a world of nations (Billig, 1995: 84). As Billig (2009) puts it 'nationalism assumes that particular nations take their place within the international world of nation-states' (p. 349). He points to how recognition of nation status is often contingent on the international community (Billig, 1995: 85). As an example, we can look at the case of Meiji Japan, where Japanese elites invested significant effort into adopting Western political structures and some cultural stylings in order to prove their 'nation' status to the Western powers (Kerr, 2021: Ch. 7). In the modern world, there is also the United Nations which, while an international organisation committed to universal aims, nonetheless centres the division of the world into discrete nations (Billig, 2017; Ichijo, 2017: 309). In this sense, nationalism is what Siniša

Malešević (2006) has dubbed an ‘operative ideology’: an ideology that fits into the routine aspects of everyday life and fills out people’s social lives, less overtly than with ‘normative ideologies’, which provide actual beliefs, values and so on (p. 84).

Skey (2009) has offered some criticisms of Billig’s (1995) thesis. Of interest for this article is the critique of how the media is treated. Skey (2009: 335–336) points out first that Billig’s argument relies on an assumption that the media address a coherent national public, which might not always be the case as regional editions of newspapers might take different perspectives from the national ones. Second, the argument takes a ‘top-down’ approach and doesn’t consider how the public may interpret or engage with messages differently to what was intended by the media producers (Skey, 2009: 336–337). Some later critiques have argued that the distinction between hot and banal nationalism is unhelpful. Rather it should be regarded as a spectrum, which helps clarify how hot nationalism is made possible by banal nationalism, and, in a sense, is a feeling that can be ‘activated’ (Skey and Antonsich, 2017: 3–4). These arguments do not demonstrate that Billig’s thesis is false (c.f. Billig, 2009 for his response), but they do point to a greater complexity that needs to be considered, by developing the original argument.

Building on these critiques, Skey (2014) draws on the work and terminology of Madianou (2005) to argue that it is important to look at the mediation of nations, understood as how particular nations, but also the world of nations, is constructed across different media. Effectively, different forms of media, such as digital media, television, the Internet and so on in different ways portray aspects of national life that not only reinforce the idea that people live within a particular nation and have a particular national identity, but also reinforce the existence of a world of nations, and present it as the natural order of the world (Skey, 2014: 6). These processes then ‘normalize a particular view of the world, so that they are neither remarked upon nor seen as remarkable’ (Skey, 2014: 15).

Banal nationalism, therefore, provides a useful tool for considering how nations are portrayed and naturalised through the media, paying attention to how different forms of media may communicate this information. Children’s media, as will be examined through *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra*, can also play a role in this communication and naturalisation, even while being overtly critical of nationalism.

Before moving on to the textual analysis, however, it will be worthwhile to look at research on how children are influenced by media. To do this, in the next section, we will look at a set of studies on whether the media can influence children, as well as outlining the ecological approach to understanding media influence, which provides the context for thinking about how children’s media can impact on a child’s understanding of the world.

Children and the media

There have been a number of studies relating to the question of how children are influenced by the media. Many of these have been concentrated on questions of violence and pro-social content; however, the jury is very much still out on whether there is any influence with different studies providing different responses (Kennedy, 2021: 257–258).

Wider than this, the results of direct influences are also somewhat unclear. Hayes and Tantleff-Dunn (2010) found no evidence that watching appearance-related media influenced young girls' body image, though they did note that one-third would change some aspect of their appearance, which might indicate a wider saturation environment that occludes with the specific piece of media that was consumed. In his review of the literature, Steyer (2014) found that a lack of exposure to progressive gender representation could have a negative impact on children's beliefs on gender equality. Moreover, being exposed to progressive gender representation positively influences children's beliefs. Looking into fashion choices, Boden (2006) found that consumption of popular culture had an influence on how children engaged with their social identities, though she acknowledged that children are 'complex consumers' who could 'critically evaluate the cultural images that bombard them' (p. 297).

Boden's point is a reminder that we should be wary about assuming that there is a straightforward transmission of information from the media and the interpretation that a child has of it. In Stuart Hall's terms (1973), media are encoded with particular messages; however, the way in which a person decodes those messages can either form an alignment with the intended reading, an oppositional reading or some combination of both. It is not, in this case, clear that we should assume children are any less capable of being critical about the content they consume, or of reading messages differently. For example, villains in earlier children's cartoons were often coded in particular ways, either queer coded in dress and manner or racialised. However, this could lead to a child identifying with the villains, rather than perceiving them as inherently bad, as they recognise themselves in them (c.f. Wong, 2016).

This is also true in the case of nationalism itself. In Sharon Stephens' (1997) words 'young people [are] social actors in their own right' (quoted in Hart, 2002: 43). This is borne out in the study by Jason Hart (2002), where children in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan characterise their national identity differently to their parents. While their parents invite the children to see themselves as Palestinians, and the generation that will return to the homeland, the children take in aspects of the Jordanian identity and construct more fluid understandings of their own identity.

However, the constructions that Hart (2002) notes are still done within the frame of a national identity, which should serve as a reminder of nationalism's power to present itself as 'natural'. This can be seen in Zembylas' (2010) study of Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot children's understanding of racism and nationalism, as a result of their interactions with one another. Zembylas (2010: 325) found that, for example, the Greek-Cypriot children would almost exclusively refer to the Turkish-Cypriot children as 'the Turks' as opposed to 'Cypriots'. The institutional setting, and the cultural surrounding of nationalism, that the children find themselves in presents and reinforces the ideas of nationalism and boundaries of identity.

Children, within various limits of parental authority, have their own agency in what they watch and how they engage with it. However, that agency still exists within a particular structure (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2003). A way of conceptualising this, and how the media influence can still occur through reinforcement, is through the ecological approach (Jordan, 2004; Scarpa and Trickett, 2022). The ecological approach focuses on the context of children's lives, situating it within microsystems, exosystems

and macrosystems (Jordan, 2004: 196–197). Microsystems are the everyday encounters that children have in their lives, which shape their understanding, such as family life, school life and so on; whereas, macrosystems are the surrounding culture, such as nationalism, that creates the context that governs the institutions and microsystems in which children live their lives. An example of how this works with nationalism can be found in schools. Schools are a microsystem that children live through, informed by the macrosystem context of nationalism. Schools have an implicit nationalism through teaching the history of the particular nation in which the children happen to live, or worldwide history with an emphasis on different nations and their existence. The microsystem, therefore, imparts information from the macrosystem that influences children's learning and understanding. Children's media would form another microsystem, contained within the ecological environment, through which children make sense of the world around them.

The macrosphere forms a particular discursive environment, through which people learn frames and language for engaging with the world around them (Hall, 1992: 201–203; Miller, 1990). The nation-state, nationalism and national identity are core components of the surrounding culture, with most elements simply taken for granted and treated as being there (Billig, 1995). While children have agency to engage with the media, that media intersects with a macrosystem that provides a framework and structure of what is 'normal', which is shaped by institutional and cultural contexts. And, as Millei and Imre (2021) point out, children are surrounded by a lot of institutional cues, in the microsystems of family life and school life, which primes them to think about nations and nation-states as being normal aspects of life. Consequently, the manner in which the messages in a piece of media might be 'decoded' (Hall, 1973) will be influenced to some degree by the frameworks and concepts that have been gleaned from surrounding culture.

As has been discussed above, *Avatar* and *Korra* are both overtly anti-nationalist. But there is a tension within the work, between its different significations and meanings (Derrida, [1978] 2005: 358–359). It is a tension that can be productively understood and engaged with through the concept of banal nationalism. Because though overtly anti-nationalist, the shows are primarily critical of the 'hot' variety – the more extreme manifestations characterised by the pursuit of conquest, supremacy and imperialism. But there is an underlying banal nationalism, which treats the existence of nations as a given, assuming that cultures have their own peoples and peoples have their own nations. This banal nationalism remains implicit throughout the shows.

The next section will now provide a brief overview of *Avatar* and *Korra*, setting out the main details of the plot and world, and pointing to the overt anti-nationalist and progressive, in the sense of promoting values around acceptance and understanding, themes that are layered through the shows.

Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra

Avatar: The Last Airbender and *The Legend of Korra* were created by Mike DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, with both initially broadcast on Nickelodeon. *Avatar* was pitched primarily towards a younger demographic: 8–12 years, while *Korra* was targeted at a slightly older audience in the 13–15-year range. The series draws on numerous

inspirations, primarily from South Asian and East Asian mythology and culture, as well as the stylings and genre conventions of Anime. It combines this with more Western, and particularly American, story-telling conventions and culture (Clark, 2007). For instance, despite the East Asian influence, the show uses the Western four elemental system of fire, water, earth and air, as opposed to the East Asian five elemental system of fire, water, wood, metal and earth.

The show was a critical and commercial success, with the finale drawing an audience of 5.6 million people in the United States (Clark, 2018). The series has since been released on Netflix and, surprisingly for a show that is 15 years old, continues to be among the most watched shows on the platform among Netflix's worldwide audience (Katz, 2022). The popularity of the show is attested by the fact that Netflix is planning on making a live-action adaptation, following on from the failed movie adaptation (Thomas, 2023), and DiMartino and Konietzko are releasing new animated films set in the *Avatar* world (Finnighan, 2023). So, though intended for an American audience initially, the show has found popularity around the world.

Avatar takes place in a world divided between four nations: the Fire Nation, the Northern and Southern Water Tribes, the Air Nomads and the Earth Kingdom. Each of these nations possesses people who are capable of 'bending': they can manipulate the element their nation is associated with, with the visual imagery drawing on martial art styles (e.g. Waterbending resembles Tai Chi). Benders are only capable of manipulating the element of their associated nation, with the sole exception being the Avatar, a person who is reincarnated into a different nation once a generation and is capable of manipulating all four elements. The Avatar keeps harmony within the world and the four nations.

One hundred years before the story begins, the Air Nomads are wiped out by the Fire Nation as they attempt to conquer the world. Aang, the new Avatar and titular last Airbender, escapes but is frozen in ice until he is eventually found by two siblings from the Water Tribe, Katara (a Waterbender) and Sokka (a non-bender). From there, Aang sets out with Katara and Sokka on his quest to become the Avatar and save the world, journeying across the four nations and learning the different forms of bending. Along the way, they pick up new companions, Toph Beifong (an Earthbender) and [spoiler alert] Zuko (a Firebender), who instruct Aang in the different arts of bending to oppose Fire Lord Ozai. The sequel, *Korra*, takes place 70 years after *Avatar* and centres on the new Avatar, Korra, and her efforts to keep peace, largely within the newly created United Republic of Nations.

The shows are both progressive in themes, portraying multicultural characters working together, as well as prominently featuring disabled characters who are active participants in the story (Toph, for instance, is blind). In a famous example, *The Legend of Korra* featured, albeit briefly and subtly, one of the first representations of an LGBTQ relationship between major characters on children's television, between Korra and her friend Asami (Dong, 2020). The usual themes of children's media are present across both shows: being true to oneself, integrity, the power of friendship and so on. But the show was also unafraid of addressing more 'adult' themes.

Genocide is explicitly addressed in the Season One episode of *Avatar*, 'The Southern Air Temple', where Aang returns to his home and finds it long in ruins with his friends wiped out by the Fire Nation. The Season Two episode 'Tales of Ba Sing Se' follows

Uncle Iroh (Zuko's uncle) as he spends time at his son's graveside, who died as a result of an attack Iroh ordered on the city years before the plot begins (Clark, 2018). The possible consequences of extreme nationalism, therefore, are shown explicitly, with Fire Lord Ozai represented as a nationalist and imperialist, interested in conquest while using propaganda to claim that the Fire Nation 'wants to spread their civilisation and share their greatness with the world' (Zuko – 'Day of the Black Sun Part 2'). This is revisited in *Korra's* final season, where the Earthbender Kuvira is similarly depicted. Following the assassination of the Earth Kingdom ruler, the Kingdom falls apart into a set of states that Kuvira reconquers and reunites into a new Earth Empire. However, she also sees the United Republic of Nations as being 'stolen' territory and seeks to reconquer it as well. That nationalist impulse is, thus, connected with the military and imperialist impulse.

The Season Three episode 'The Headband' provides one of the more direct critiques of nationalism in its everyday form, and in a way that would be familiar to the initial target audience of American children. In the episode, Aang and the crew sneak into the Fire Nation. In order to lie low they dress as Fire Nation citizens and, through a mix-up, Aang is enrolled at a Fire Nation school. While there we see the effects of nationalism on the Fire Nation children, they don't dance, something that's baffling to Aang who remembers the Fire Nation as having very strong dancing customs; the music is formalised and self-expression is frowned upon; and, in a ritual that many American children would take delight in seeing mocked, the school children all have to pledge their allegiance to the picture of the Fire Lord Ozai each morning, in a reflection of the 'pledge of allegiance' that children in the United States normally perform to the flag (Billig, 1995: 50).

There is a possible crossover here as well, as the portrait of the leader, or a symbol of them, being present in classrooms as a way of promoting national identity is common: In Imperial Japan, the portrait of the Emperor was placed in schools and houses, so the Emperor was a symbolic presence in people's everyday life (Gluck, 1985: 78–81). Similarly, until the end of World War II, schoolchildren in Japan would also recite the Imperial Rescript of Education, which contained a pledge to the Emperor as his subjects and a promise to improve the nation through their education (Tipton, 2002: 64–65).

The progressive themes are also promoted through the multiculturalism of the characters. The heroes are made up of one representative from each nation, Air (Aang), Water (Katara), Earth (Toph) and Fire (Zuko), with Katara's brother Sokka forming a component as a non-bender. Each of the benders in the group is responsible for teaching Aang the different bending powers. The message is clear: Mutual understanding and reaching across cultures make one stronger rather than weaker. It is, again, placed in contrast to the monoculture of the Fire Nation that Ozai seeks to impose across the world. The 13th episode of Season 3, 'The Firebending Masters', critiques this aspect of monoculture. Zuko attempts to teach Aang Firebending, in the way in which he was taught: by drawing on his anger. However, this attempt fails as Zuko loses his own Firebending power and Aang struggles to draw on his anger. Together, however, they discover the original practice of Firebending which does not stem from anger and destruction, but rather from desire and life-giving properties (as from the fire of the sun). Therein lies another critique of nationalist ambitions: its erosion of different understandings and culture in favour of a singular 'national' narrative which, as per Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012), may in fact be an 'invented tradition' of much more recent origin.

With this said, the primary examples of critique are examples of hot nationalism: of what happens when extremism takes over, or nationalism is corrupted with imperialism. The notion of the naturalness of nations is not itself challenged and while national rituals are critiqued, such as in ‘The Headband’, it is framed as being part of an ‘extreme’ nationalism. The critique focuses on how extreme nationalism radicalises banal rituals, rather than on the manner in which banal rituals can promote and make extreme nationalism possible.

In spite of the critiques, then, the show is nevertheless underpinned by a banal nationalist framing. In the final section, I will analyse key imageries, themes and ideas present in both shows, which illustrate how banal nationalism functions through the texts, and how this may, therefore, influence children’s understanding and acceptance of nationalism, when combined with the surrounding institutional environment.

The banal nationalism of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

How does banal nationalism come through in *Avatar* and *Korra*? This section will be devoted to demonstrating and showing this through analysis. The analysis is divided around three core themes, looking at how territory features in the show; the national coding, particularly through clothing styles; and finally the way in which the core component, bending, itself can show banal nationalism.

Territory

First and most obvious is that the four territories are identified as *nations*. Although the Fire Nation is the only one given the title of nation, with the others taking the titles Water Tribes, Earth Kingdom and the Air Nomads, the characters refer to four nations throughout, and nation is used interchangeably with the other titles. Most prominently, Katara’s opening narration at the start of every episode identifies them as ‘the four nations’. Despite the differences in titles they each feature attributes that are identifiable with nation-states: the Southern and Northern Water Tribes, for example, are both seen as identifiable territories and are also identified homogeneously as nations, despite being on other sides of the globe. Similarly, the Earth Kingdom is made up of different states, but there is one ruler across the whole territory with a homogeneous culture.

The link between territory and nation is further reinforced by the Avatar cycle. In the episode ‘The Southern Air Temple’, Aang, Katara and Sokka travel to the titular Air Temple, as that is where Aang grew up, with Aang hoping that he can encounter some surviving Air Benders to help him. There, they enter a chamber devoted to the Avatar within the Temple, and the group sees all of the Avatars in the cycle laid out as statues, with the statues circling high into the top of the chamber. In explaining how the Avatar cycle works, Katara says ‘when the Avatar dies he’s reincarnated into the next nation in the cycle’. This, subtly, indicates that the nations are something timeless: They are discrete and identifiable, so much so that the spirit knows where to reincarnate in the cycle, but also immutable. There will always be the four nations to reincarnate into, and there has always been into the past. In the same episode, we see Katara attempting to cheer Sokka up by highlighting that they will be the first ‘outsiders’ to ever enter an Air Temple.

Coupled with the identification of the Air Nomads as a nation, this provides a reinforcement of national territories being bounded areas, with insiders and outsiders that can be maintained. In general, the national territories are also clearly split off by the geography of the world.

A complication to this is provided in *Korra*, where there is a new city-state created that is unaffiliated with any of the nations, known as the United Republic of Nations. The name is a clear reference to the United Nations, but it also comes with the same issue. The name reinforces the notion that these are separate, discrete nations that maintain that discreteness even after being ‘united’, similar to how the United Nations reinforces this in real life (Ichijo, 2017). And when the heroes launch an attack on the Fire Nation, in the Season Three episodes ‘Day of the Black Sun Part 1 & 2’, they keep to their own groups as units. As Sokka and Katara’s father addresses the troops, they are clearly divided into Water Tribe groups and Earth Kingdom groups, identified through the colour coding of their costumes. Each group also keeps its own national symbol, with no unified symbol being used for the attack squad. A character in the assault, the Boulder, also speaks of ‘fighting for our Kingdom’, specifically referencing the Earth Kingdom in the way someone would say they are fighting for their nation.

The imagery, and language, around territory is thus part of the familiar language and imagery used in everyday life to refer to nations, reinforcing that sense of naturalness.

National coding

There are further patterns of identification within the show where each nation is represented by specific codes associated with their respective groups: the Fire Nation predominantly wears black and red; Water Tribes predominantly blue; Earth Kingdom predominantly green and beige; Air Nomads predominantly yellow and orange. Each ‘nation’ in the show also exhibits stereotypical characteristics. For example, the Fire Nation is portrayed as passionate and quick to anger; the Earth Kingdom denizens are stoical.

This is a common pattern within media entertainment. As Stuart Hall (1973) argues, these stereotypes and codes are constructed to convey implicit meanings that can then be decoded by the audience. They serve as a way of conveying messages and offering simple identification labels. A similar use of codes can be seen in other genres as well. For instance, within the old Western genre, white hats are often associated with the ‘good guys’ and black hats with the ‘bad guys’. Similarly, within fantasy and science-fiction, colours like red are often used to denote ‘evil’ forces, while blue represents the ‘good’ forces. Examples include Sting and Glamdring glowing blue in *The Lord of the Rings* and the Witch King’s sword glowing red; or in *Star Wars* where the initial lightsaber colours are also coded in this way.

These are, evidently, part of the function of a children’s show. The colour coding and type characteristics exist as common-sense identifying labels so that the audience can quickly identify who is who and to which group they belong, and it is an easy shorthand way of keeping track of who is who and what their abilities are.

But intent is one thing, the meaning and message conveyed may be another. Skey’s (2009: 335–336) point that intended nationalist messages in a piece of media may not be

interpreted that way by the audience, should be borne in mind. But similarly, an anti-nationalist message may not be interpreted that way.

An innocent colour coding, intended merely to separate out certain groups from others, could play into messaging about nationalism. That is, it is possible to imagine that, combined with the various everyday forms of nationalism that children encounter through institutional settings (school, social media, other forms of media, etc.), these points could combine to suggest that national stereotypes and distinctiveness are indeed embedded and natural parts of the world, building into Billig's (2009: 349) argument that nations are part of an international set of nation-states, thus reinforcing the naturalness of nationhood itself.

Bending and ethnic nationalism

Another example of this is shown in bending. Benders are capable of manipulating their distinct elements, but they are limited to bending only the element associated with their nation. This is not a result of a lack of learning or training, but rather an inherent trait based on national affiliation. Throughout the show, there is no instance of a character from one nation learning to bend another element; they are only capable of mastering the bending style associated with their nation. This point is worth highlighting as, in 'The Firebending Masters', it is revealed that people first learned to bend through being taught by sacred animals: dragons in the Firebender's case, badgermoles for the Earthbenders and so on. But despite this being a cultural implication, of learning from someone else, it is still the case that someone from, for instance, the Water Tribes could not learn Firebending from a dragon. They are, seemingly, at a biological level incapable of it. But that biology is itself tied to a particular national identity.

This is further reinforced in *The Legend of Korra* where we have characters who come from mixed ethnic backgrounds. However, the mixed children are not capable of choosing which form of bending they want to learn, but rather are capable of learning only one, which is effectively biologically inscribed in them. Of Aang and Katara's children, for example, Tenzin is an Airbender, Kya a Waterbender and Bumi a non-bender (though a later plot arc does see him gain Airbending powers along with some other non-benders). This is similarly reinforced through the brothers Mako and Bolin, who are a Firebender and an Earthbender, respectively. In these cases, the same colour coding as discussed above comes into effect, with Tenzin and Kya wearing predominantly yellow and blue, respectively, and Mako and Bolin being colour-coded with red and green, respectively, creating the association between the character and their 'true' nation.

An example of the show demonstrating a banal link between a bending type and the nation is given in the Season Two *Avatar* episode 'City of Walls and Secrets'. Here Zuko and Uncle Iroh are in hiding, pretending to be refugees in the Earth Kingdom capital Ba Sing Se. Jet, a non-bending character from Season One, sees Iroh heating up tea with his Firebending abilities and becomes obsessed with rooting them out. What's important here is that there is an automatic link between being a Firebender and being of the Fire Nation. Jet explicitly claims that the 'Fire Nation is trying to silence me' and protests 'they're Fire Nation' when being pulled away. The suggestion is that a Firebender can be nothing else: They could not be an Earth Kingdom citizen, who is capable of Firebending.

This is implicitly accepted in the show, when the notion is rejected by others without a recognition that a Firebender could be a non-Fire Nation person. And while Zuko and Iroh are technically refugees, having fled the Fire Nation, neither of them changes their identity.

This highlights an undercurrent of ethnic nationalism in how bending is conceived. That is, there is a definite link between a nationality and the bending power that is contained within the blood. Ethnic nationalism, in general, sees nations as representing particular cultural, linguistic and sometimes racial communities, in contrast with civic nationalism which usually places allegiance to the nation as a result of people believing in the values that it represents (Hearn, 2005: 89–90).

Ethnic nationalism is often characterised as the ‘bad’ nationalism, with an emphasis on blood, soil and purity (Billig, 1995: 46). There are, of course, complications in this. Ethnicity itself is a sociologically tricky concept: It is sometimes used interchangeably with race, even though it is nominally a distinct concept (Malešević, 2004: 1). There is also a tendency to reify ethnicity, even when using it in the sense of a shared culture among a group, and treat it as a homogeneous and unchanging formation, even though culture is always subject to changes both internally and externally (Malešević, 2004: 2). Civic and ethnic nationalism are also not as distinct as often claimed. Civic nations contain some kind of ethnic component within them: Even civic nations will, for instance, grant nationality status on the basis of place of birth and parental lineage, and can have cultural components to their criteria in the forms of nationality tests (Hearn, 2005: 90–91; Brubaker, 2004a). As Billig (1995: 46–48) argues, separating these two out into good and bad nationalism can lead to a mistaken understanding of how nationalism operates.

With this taken into consideration, there is still a point to be made about how these concepts can emerge in *Avatar* and *Korra* and help to reinforce the sense of the naturalness of nations. In this consideration, we can look at Rogers Brubaker’s (2004b) words:

Ethnicity, race and nation should be conceptualized not as substances or things or entities or organisms or collective individuals – as the imagery of discrete, concrete, tangible bounded, and enduring ‘groups’ encourages us to do – but rather in relational, processual, dynamic, eventful and disaggregated terms. (p. 11)

What Brubaker is pointing to here is the problem, within social science, of treating groups as definite and defined entities, the problem of what he calls ‘groupism’. The flaw of this is it can lead to seeing groups as more bounded and stable than they actually are, and thus lose sight of the way in which they are mutable, co-influencing and changeable. What is notable, though, is the notion of the nation as a fixed entity in space and time which is an important component of nationalist ideology. So the groupism dynamic that Brubaker identifies can lead back into the notion of methodological nationalism and so reinforce the notion that there are discrete peoples who should fit together and the nation is the most natural form of organisation to facilitate that.

What is true for social science, in this instance, works similarly with regard to *Avatar* and *Korra*. By showing only that there is a link between the particular nation, and the particular bending type, with no possibilities of crossing over or of learning and/or obtaining another type of bending, it reinforces the impression of this being a natural

formulation. It is something given in the blood, which is allied with a particular national identity.

This is not an overt message in the show. Again, both shows are primarily critical of nationalism and extremism and where both can lead. But, as Billig (1995) pointed to, drawing a hard distinction between civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism, between nationalism as an extreme force and natural way of organising states, ignores how one can bleed into the other. Banal nationalism sustains nationalism as a whole and makes the hot versions possible, more plausible and, in some cases, even acceptable. In this case, it reinforces the idea that there is something innate that connects a person to their nationality and that can't be overridden.

The points made show how banal nationalism operates through *Avatar* and *Korra*. Implicitly, what they show is that nations are natural ways of organising the world. On its own, this won't necessarily communicate to children the idea that nations are natural. But children are surrounded by banal flagging in their everyday lives, as we all are, that says that nations are natural (Millei and Imre, 2021). When placed in this context, there will be a particular discursive frame for understanding and engaging with the media. While critiques of hot nationalism receive attention and discussion, the subtler aspects of banal nationalism often go unnoticed.

Consequently, we can get a feedback loop operating between the macrosystems and the microsystems, in the ecological model sense. The child may see a fantasy setting that divides people in particular nations, just as how the real world is divided. This lends support to the idea that it is natural for people to be divided into discrete nations. So while there will be recognition that extreme nationalism is wrong, the notion that nations are natural will also slip through unnoticed, helping to reproduce the ideology.

Conclusion

This article has argued that children's media is a vital way of understanding how and why nationalist ideology permeates into social imaginations. To that end, it made critical use of Michael Billig's (1995) concept of 'banal nationalism' to explore how a children's cartoon, in this case *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and its sequel *The Legend of Korra* might instil a nationalist ideology in children. It argued that despite the overtly critical messages conveyed in the shows, the division of the world into nation-states and the presence of coded identifiers may subtly reinforce the belief in the naturalness of nations.

It is important to note that this critique is not aimed at discrediting the shows. They are admirable in promoting tolerance and understanding of other cultures and are openly critical of extremism in nationalism and imperialism. They were pioneers in featuring a lesbian relationship between two main characters, paving the way for other shows such as *Steven Universe* and *The Owl House* (Clark, 2018; Dong, 2020). However, this is what makes them an interesting choice to analyse: even within a progressive, socially conscious entertainment that is critical of nationalism, you find the reinforcement of nationalist ideology.

For this reason, it is valuable to consider the ways in which children's entertainment, of all stripes and beyond, can communicate notions of nationhood. After all, if adults can

be pulled to nationalist movements and have their understanding influenced by movies (c.f. Edensor, 1997), there is no reason why children cannot.

Critiquing nationhood itself is not impossible. Recognising the unnatural nature of it explicitly is a step in that direction. The final season of *Korra* points towards this with the explicit ‘creation’, or ‘recreation’, of a nation, through Kuvira’s conquering of the broken up states of the Earth Kingdom. More depictions like this, developed further, may help break the sense of reinforcement which the naturalness of nation-states in the real world get from the world of entertainment. As the quote from Hume cautions, ideas that stick in childhood can often stick all the stronger, particularly if everywhere, even a favourite cartoon, says that this is the way the world is and should be.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the participants at the ASEN 2022 Conference and anonymous referees whose comments helped shape and improve this paper; and to Nini Kerr whose feedback improved and clarified the argument.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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