

**“The Foreign Children Have Not Failed Us”: Immigration, Americanization, and Mapping
Intergenerational Dialogue in the New York Public Library, 1907-1910**

In Gabrielle Owen’s re-reading of Jacqueline Rose’s claim about the “impossible relation between adult and child,” she turns to queer theory and “fleeting exchange[s]” to find “real” children hidden beneath identity politics and adult contestation (261). In this paper, I examine the monthly records of the New York Public Library Harlem Branch children’s librarians from 1907-1910 to explore the fluid relationships between these librarians and those marginalized children in their care. Librarians had long argued that libraries could provide a civic function in the United States; as various Progressive Era educational and political institutions called for Americanization policies to assimilate a burgeoning immigrant population, the Harlem librarians, who were primarily white and middle-class, believed that libraries were a social and cultural equalizer because they offered the possibility for Harlem’s diverse population to educate themselves. According to their records, immigrant children took them up on this promise, showing up in droves to access the library materials. To encourage repeat attendance, the Harlem librarians--under the guidance of renowned librarian Anne Carroll Moore--worked hard to draw in “foreign” children and their families by creating an open, inviting space and providing non-English language materials. While they did their best to adjust to the children’s needs, these interactions could produce shifting, divisive allegiances between family and community. In part, these conflicts stemmed from the librarians’ limited definition of what “American” looked like--they included Irish, Jewish, and African-American children under the label “foreign” when collating their numbers--and particularly because the books they advocated, like Bannerman’s *Little Black Sambo* and Harris’ *Uncle Remus*, conflated “American” with Anglo-Saxon values. Following Marah Gubar’s “kinship model,” I use a combination of archival materials and literary analysis to argue that, while the Harlem librarians’ literary recommendations often contested assimilative Americanization models, the library space became a site of negotiation between white, middle-class librarians and the oft-impooverished immigrants and minority children (and families) that they worked with on a daily basis. Subsequently, my paper proposes that we must ground our analysis of the “real” child and “real children” in their historical realities.