

**“I’ve Always Wanted”:
Late Capitalism and an African American Girl in Don Freeman’s *Corduroy***

Through the story of a teddy bear missing a button, Don Freeman’s *Corduroy*, published in 1968, explores the intersection between commodity culture and imaginative play, juxtaposing the luxury of a New York City department store with the home of a working-class child. A longtime visual ethnographer of New York City society and culture, Freeman creates a children’s book that depicts not only the dramatic class stratifications visible in an urban setting, but the difference between the shimmering phantasmagorias of consumerism and the everyday lives of New Yorkers. This paper argues that *Corduroy*’s depiction of these stratifications contemplates commodity culture’s influence on children. Ultimately, however, as this paper will show, the book locates within late capitalism’s supposed omnipresence alternative possibilities for desire and love.

While scholars have examined the role of commodity culture in shaping children’s literature, its distribution, and its reception, they thus far have paid less attention to the way children’s books represent late capitalism. And, indeed, children’s books frequently feature images of poverty and wealth, while rarely attending to how inequalities take shape within broader economic systems. This paper claims that *Corduroy* radically, if quietly, takes on capitalist consumerism, juxtaposing the department store and an everyday home to reveal, not only class disparities, but the gap between material and imagined realities. As *Corduroy* wanders through a surreal department store landscape, he misrecognizes the sights he encounters: an escalator becomes a mountain; a showroom for furniture becomes a palace. These misrecognitions defamiliarize the department store, calling its ontological status into question. The child reader is invited to ask what strange kind of simulacrum a department store represents.

Freeman moreover locates recesses and retreats within consumer culture’s purportedly universal and inescapable influence over individuals of diverse identities. Notably, *Corduroy* features a non-stereotyped African American girl as its hero—a rare occurrence for its time—and takes place amid New York City’s countercurrents of social and political upheaval. Against this backdrop, Lisa’s love for a damaged and unwanted teddy bear plays with—and yet ultimately resists—the overdetermination of consumer desire. Likewise, Freeman refuses to privilege either the department store or the working-class home as the site of reality. Both locations are found worthy of being the place that *Corduroy* has “always wanted” to live.

Therefore, in conversation with the scholarship of J. K. Gibson-Graham, bell hooks, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, this paper argues that Lisa’s desire for *Corduroy* opens up the possibility of spaces where children’s play and other “soft” forms of relation challenge “strong” theories of late capitalism’s omnipresence.