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We Are Not Alone: Finding Family Across a Universe of Differences in *Lilo and Stitch*

In the discussion of literature and media there is a tendency, however unintentional, to overlook stories aimed at children. Despite the wide range of genres in children's fiction, they are often lumped together for the sole reason that they are intended for younger audiences, and as such aren't generally on the radar in discussions of particular genres. Take, for instance, science fiction. While by some it is considered more of a mode or a lens than a distinct genre, at the very least science fiction tropes can be wielded to great effect in children's stories, sometimes in such a way that makes them just as, if not more, impactful than those same tropes in adult science fiction. One such children's science fiction story takes the common tropes of the Other in the form of extraterrestrials and the considerations of creation, and combines them with tropes that are closer to home—life after loss, being unable to connect with peers, and feeling like an outcast in one's own home—to create a heartwarming tale about finding family in the most unlikely of places. Certainly, the latter point is a sentiment expressed by many children's stories, but Disney's *Lilo and Stitch* takes it a step further in a way that makes it effective as both science fiction and children's media. That is, the unique intersection of science fiction and children's media found in *Lilo and Stitch* allows for a juxtaposition of the concepts of Otherness and belonging that demonstrates to children that “different” does not have to mean “alone.”

The use of extraterrestrial Others has been a long-standing tradition of science fiction, a tradition that *Lilo and Stitch* enthusiastically participates in by making Stitch both an alien and a creature of creation. In doing this, Stitch is ostracized from the start—not just by humans, but also from the very alien society that he was created into.

Thus, instead of an antagonistic force sent to Earth with the purpose of conquering humans (as is the case in many classic science fiction stories), Stitch arrives as an outcast and is gradually assimilated into the culture in a reversal of the usual trope. As explained by David Seed in chapter two of his book *Science Fiction: A Very Short Introduction*, “The very term ‘alien’ suggests otherness and difference. The aliens in science fiction are by definition always imagined through reference to familiar human groups, animal species, or machines” (27). Seed goes on to remind readers that the term “alien” did not originally refer to extraterrestrial beings, but rather to other human beings (28). In reminding the readers of this, Seed emphasizes the fact that while many characters in science fiction are not depicted as human—physically, emotionally, culturally—there is an inevitable human quality to them. This subtly guides readers to the quintessential question of science fiction: what does it really mean to be human?

Following that question, David Kirby explores Otherness through a discussion of eugenics and artificially created life in science fiction. While pointing out that much media that features eugenics focuses on perceived biological flaws and striving for evolutionary perfection (84), Kirby also points out that these themes in media often come with a crucial absence of humanity, as with the titular Homunculus, who is regarded as physically and intellectually perfect but is “marred by the absence of a soul... [which]... robs him of his connection to the rest of humanity” (87). If not this specific scenario, then genetically altered humans often come to resemble feral animals, toying with the idea of what, exactly, separates humans from their animal relatives. Though Kirby’s article does not mention Otherness specifically, the divide between human and animal illustrates the concept quite well. There are humans, and

there are not-humans—the non-Others that belong, the Others that don't. Humanity in the media Kirby analyzes is defined more by a certain distance from other animals, whereas Seed expresses a view that compares humanity to itself. In essence, however, they both aim to discern how people have expressed what, if anything, makes humans so human.

This struggle to find that “connection to the rest of humanity” (Kirby 87) is precisely the struggle that the alien creation Experiment 626 (later renamed Stitch) faces throughout *Lilo and Stitch*. Even though, as Seed explains, Otherness is typically described in reference to other groups of humans, the opening scene of *Lilo and Stitch* involves exactly zero humans. Indeed, the aliens of the Galactic Council are so varied and diverse that no two look alike. Yet when Stitch is revealed, the aliens in attendance gasp in shock, and are further appalled by what might be assumed to be alien profanity that Stitch responds with when asked by the Grand Councilwoman if there is any good in him (*Lilo and Stitch* 2:18). Stitch's Otherness in relation to what the audience might view as a collective Other is further emphasized in the way Captain Gantu refers to him, first asking, “What is that monstrosity?” (1:25) upon first seeing Stitch, and then, hardly a minute later, saying, “It is an affront to nature. It must be destroyed!” (2:00) Although the scene is not necessarily within a human frame of reference, the dehumanizing language (referring to Stitch as “it,” as opposed to “he”) and the fearful reactions to merely seeing him establish Stitch as an Other within this alien society. In this self-referential context, Otherness leans more towards Seed's definition.

On Earth, however, the idea of Otherness regarding Stitch moves more towards Kirby's discussion of humanity. Although most humans acknowledge that Stitch doesn't

look quite like a dog, they call him a dog anyway, with the employee at the dog shelter even saying that Stitch is, “A dog, I think” (26:30). Here, Stitch is not distanced because he is an artificially created monster bent on destruction for the sake of destruction, but because he is relegated to the position of “animal.” The first person who expects more human-like (or rather, less destructive) behavior from Stitch is not Lilo, but Cobra Bubbles. It sounds absurd that anyone should expect a dog to be a “model citizen” as Cobra Bubbles does (42:11), but when at the end he’s revealed to be a former CIA agent who is familiar with the existence of aliens, the audience can guess that he might have suspected that Stitch was an alien all along, one capable of “human” behavior. In any event, current evolutionary theory suggests that animals are relatives of humans, and so despite being an alien creation, Stitch is interestingly brought closer to a sense of humanity by being seen as an animal. Indeed, it’s not until he’s in the position of “the family dog” that he has a chance to consider what his purpose in life is beyond destroying things.

As previously mentioned, Stitch’s progression from Other to belonging is an interesting reversal of the usual trope of the antagonistic Other in science fiction. Rather than an invading alien bent on conquering humanity, Stitch is the one who is assimilated into human society through kindness and patience, becoming less antagonistic in the process. Given that the concept of Otherness is used to explore aspects of human identity, according to Seed, Stitch’s ability to learn and grow is a very human thing. This suggests, then, that Stitch’s growth reflects not only his own ability to grow, but the ability of all humans to grow regardless of their birth. Even more important is the fact that Stitch was able to grow because he was given an opportunity to do so, regardless

of the intention of those who gave him that chance. Although Stitch begins the story violent and mean and is believed to be unable to change because he was created rather than birthed, he nonetheless learns kindness and ultimately learns where he belongs. In spite of his differences, Stitch does not end up alone.

Crucially, however, the Other is not found only in extraterrestrial beings, but in humans as well. The Otherness found in Lilo demonstrates that it's not always the way one is born that is Othering, but rather the society and circumstances that one exists in that shuns one to the sidelines. There are three key factors in Lilo's life that are foremost in isolating her from children her age. First is the recent trauma of having lost both of her parents; second, the resulting nontraditional family structure she has with her sister; third and finally, is the fact that Lilo is a native Hawaiian in a postcolonial society. Michael Ungar is particularly supportive of the idea that environmental factors are a significant influence on the lives of children, discussing in his article, "Resilience, Trauma, Context, and Culture" how a child's environment is one of the most important aspects in their recovery after trauma. Specifically, he cites four factors as being essential to "positive development under stress... navigation, negotiation, resources (opportunity), and meaning" (256). In particular, Ungar asserts that these factors need to be culturally relevant in order to contribute to good resilience.

Since these factors must be culturally relevant, however, it is understandable then that Lilo has a hard time coping, since the concept of *ohana*, or family, is a highly important value to Lilo, and the structure of her family has changed dramatically. Suzanne Bunkers discusses the image of nontraditional family structures in children's literature at length, suggesting that the increase in the visibility of nontraditional family

structures in children's literature is a healthy development. She describes the wide variety of children's literature that depicts nontraditional family structures: families with divorced parents, single parent families, families with multiple, unrelated caretakers for children, and even families where a grandmother or a parent's sibling is the primary caretaker of a child. In stories that depict death in the family, however, it is rarely the parents that die. Rather, it is grandparents, aunts, or uncles. Not mentioned at all are stories in which an adult sibling becomes the sole guardian of a younger sibling, making *Lilo and Stitch* a unique and valuable addition to the collection of stories depicting nontraditional families.

In addition, *Lilo and Stitch* also depicts life after a loss. It is referred to very subtly, but at the same time realistically in the sense that Lilo and her sister Nani are at the point where they are adjusting to their new life without their parents—healing, but not quite healed. It's a messy and uncertain life that they have, not at all idyllic. Margaret P. Esmonde analyzes such depictions in other children's media, on the basis that a more straightforward depiction of death is more satisfying to the child audience than depictions that avoid the issue and the questions surrounding it. In particular, stories that treat death as a delicate issue to be avoided and heavily padded if it has to be mentioned at all are described as “bibliotherapy or ‘mediocre, soap operatic’ sermons” (70). Esmonde does go on to argue that books that tackle the idea of an afterlife are the ones that are most satisfying, and in this *Lilo and Stitch* falls short. However, the stories that Esmonde analyzes often involve depictions of death itself, while *Lilo and Stitch* depicts the lives of those who live on. Her argument is nonetheless valuable and relevant in that she asserts that “the subject of death [should be dealt with]

honestly... [without] disguising the pain of the survivors” (70). In this, *Lilo and Stitch* can be said to fit the bill.

Although the pain of Lilo’s loss is not illustrated in fits of weeping, it is still clearly evident that she is grappling for a sense of normalcy in light of the loss of her parents. Given that tragedy also drastically alters the support system she had—that is, her parents have died, and her sister Nani must work in order to remain Lilo’s legal guardian and so is unable to provide adequate emotional support—Lilo’s ability to navigate, negotiate, and find meaning in the trauma she has experienced, as laid out by Ungar, is thus severely limited, so she is left only with resources/opportunity. This opportunity presents itself in the fact that she is able to roam the island freely, allowing her to come up with her own method of coping. It is this method that we see Lilo engaging in when she is first introduced, feeding a peanut butter sandwich to a fish named Pudge, which is important to her and must be done weekly because, “Pudge controls the weather” (*Lilo and Stitch* 13:11). This can initially be brushed off as a “weird kid thing,” but later in the movie is revealed to have deeper implications when Lilo explains to Stitch, regarding her parents, “It was rainy, and they went for a drive” (53:53). With her environment offering little support, based on the factors suggested by Ungar, Lilo has connected the death of her parents to a fish that can supposedly control the weather. The likely thought process is that if she appeases this fish with a weekly offering of a sandwich, she can prevent something like this from happening again, thus giving her the sense of control that was lost along with her parents. Unfortunately for Lilo, this coping mechanism that she’s come up with for herself is often brushed off as weird, or as Myrtle Edmonds puts it, “crazy” (13:15), thus distancing her from her peers.

Were it not for the sudden absence of half of her family, however, Lilo might be better equipped to handle such a loss, given how important the idea of family is to her. The Hawaiian concept of *ohana* is first brought up by Lilo herself when Nani threatens to eject Stitch from the household, but even earlier than this the importance of family to her is demonstrated when she asks Nani, “We’re a broken family, aren’t we?” (21:49) It’s reflective of the steadfast ideas of family that Lilo has held up until now. Prior to the death of her parents, Lilo existed in a very traditional family setting (it is important to note that this image of the “traditional” family structure is reflective of Western/American standards): a mother, a father, and an older sister. Now all she has left is her sister. In the context of the situation, Lilo’s sentiment is not necessarily wrong. There is a gaping hole of support that had once been filled by their parents, leaving Nani to scramble for work where she can get it (abandoning what life she might have been starting for herself) in order to maintain legal guardianship of her sister, which leaves Lilo without the adult support she needs in order to heal. Thus, they’re not only trying to heal from the loss, but they are also adjusting to a radically new family dynamic. It is an adjustment that Lilo is likely not prepared for. Although she exists in a fictional world, it is nonetheless representative of our own world in many ways, and so, like many real children, Lilo may not be familiar with how nontraditional family structures work. She herself says to Nani, “I like you better as a sister than a mom” (22:07), implying that she is somewhat resistant to the fact that Nani has stepped into a maternal role. Although the audience does not get a chance to see the family structures of Lilo’s peers, we can conclude nonetheless that Lilo’s grappling with this new and unfamiliar family dynamic

is just another factor that sets her apart from her peers, as none of them would have the answers she might be looking for and are therefore unable to relate to her struggle.

If Lilo's peers are unable to relate to the problem of adjusting to a new family dynamic, then they are doubly unable to relate to the loss of parents. The death of Lilo and Nani's parents is never directly referred to in the movie, but it is made very evident all the same. The first instance of this is when the social worker, Cobra Bubbles, asks Nani (who we know at this point in the movie to be Lilo's sister), "Are you the guardian in question?" (16:47). Throughout Cobra Bubbles' visit, it is made evident that he is assessing Nani's capability to properly care for her younger sister and thus remain her legal guardian. This, the audience knows, would not be necessary if the parents were not absent for some reason or other. The closest anyone gets to mentioning this loss directly is Lilo, who only gets so close because she's explaining to Stitch why her family has changed. Based on the article she wrote, it might seem contradictory to say that Esmonde would approve of *Lilo and Stitch's* handling of the topic of death. In fact, she quotes Jane Abramson, "the best books involving death reveal an author's personal vision of life" (70). While at first glance it seems that *Lilo and Stitch* dances around the topic in such a way as to never mention it, the fact that it is not specifically named is in fact a direct reflection of life. The focus in *Lilo and Stitch* is not the death itself—it's only relevant inasmuch as it affects Lilo. Certainly, it affects her tremendously, but the primary focus is on life after loss. It requires a tremendous amount of healing and adjustment, which takes not only time but mental and emotional energy—mental and emotional energy that therefore cannot be dedicated to fostering positive relationships with her peers, much as she tries. The bottom line is that because Lilo is in a transitory

state of life, the sum of the factors that contribute to that transition drive a wedge between her and everyone around her.

The final factor that distances Lilo from people around her, however, has nothing to do with the death of her parents. Rather, it has to do with the fact that she is a native Hawaiian in a postcolonial society. In the final version, this factor is so subtle as to be easily missed by those who aren't looking for it, but the indications are there. At its earliest, it is apparent in the fact that the leader of the group of girls that ostracizes Lilo is a white girl; the rest follow her lead and opinion regarding Lilo. It is then reiterated while Nani is looking for a new job, and one of the people she talks to tells her they can't hire her because "tourist season [is] ending" (43:30), demonstrating the heavy dependence of the local economy on tourism, which is a typical feature of postcolonial societies. One of the most striking pieces of evidence though is a scene that was cut late in production. That is, the scene was fully penciled with keyframes and in-betweens, and most of the characters are voiced by their respective voice actors, which shows that this scene persisted late into the production process. The scene is titled, "Model Citizen: Mayhem at the Beach," and involves Lilo tricking tourists into thinking that a tsunami was coming after being insulted and belittled multiple times. One tourist brazenly asks Lilo if she speaks English (0:11), and another points at Lilo and says, as if Lilo is unable to hear her, "Oh, look! A real native!" (0:37). It is undoubtedly clear that the implications of these things are not lost on Lilo, young as she is. After the tourists run in terror and chaos from Lilo's fake tsunami warning, Cobra Bubbles is there with a questioning expression, to which Lilo replies, "If you lived here you'd understand" (1:44). Even without this scene, it's apparent that Lilo is, on some level, aware of the colonial

gaze and seeks to reverse it through her hobby of taking unflattering pictures of tourists as if they were props to be admired rather than actual people. In any event, the mere fact that she is a native Hawaiian is in itself an isolating factor, which is doubly so considering that this is Lilo's home.

The situational and environmental factors that "other" Lilo, while not being common in science fiction (in which Otherness is often an internal trait rather than an exterior process), are still valuable aspects to include. Unlike Stitch, who is an alien creation bent on destruction, Lilo is a human girl trying to live her life the best she can while hindered by outside factors that she has no control over. Stitch's growth was largely internal, and his life arguably changed more drastically than Lilo's, as the aforementioned circumstances that have isolated her from those around her have not changed by the end of the movie. Her parents are still dead, her family is still, as Stitch explains, "little and broken" (1:15:07), and no one thing can change the nature of a postcolonial society overnight. The difference is that now Lilo has exactly what she asked for when Stitch crash-landed on Earth: a friend who wouldn't run away or leave her behind. Both Stitch and Lilo are Others, but in dramatically different ways, so that it's clear to all audiences, young and old, that there's no one way to be different, and that none of those ways will doom anyone to permanent loneliness.

Having established both Stitch and Lilo as Others, the movie goes on to demonstrate that their respective experiences as outcasts align in such a way as to fulfill certain needs for each other. Stitch, who never belonged anywhere and struggles with his supposed lack of a greater purpose, comes to believe that the thing that will make him feel complete is belonging to a family. Lilo, meanwhile, once had a happy and

whole family, and now needs a new sense of normalcy, to be reassured that although her parents are gone there are still those who will stay. Relevant to this is Malisa Kurtz's multifaceted discussion regarding the intersection of postcolonial theory and science fiction. Kurtz asserts that, in typical depictions of the Other in science fiction, "the relationship between self and other [is] primarily antagonistic" (39). In regards to the two books she analyzes that she felt to be representative of postcolonial science fiction, Kurtz argues, "*Air and Zoo City* intersect with postcolonialism... by exploring how ethical encounters might be fostered through affective connections with others; and... by considering how these ethical encounters simultaneously nurture social transformation" (38). In accordance with Seed's idea of the concept of Otherness being a mode of exploring human identity, Kurtz's argument adds that instead of the harsh Other/not-Other opposition that may reveal the more unflattering aspects of humanity, the Other in postcolonial science fiction can instead encourage characters to learn more about themselves and, in the process, grow. In addition to this, Kurtz emphasizes "the ways in which one is inevitably affected by external relationships, affirming the positivity and productivity of difference," (42) which, in the context of her argument, articulates how encountering that which is different from the self is an opportunity for growth.

Based on the ideas previously set forth by Kirby, however, it would seem that some characters are incapable of growth. The Homunculus he describes in his article, as a creature of creation, is regarded as perfect in every way except for the absence of a soul, the implication being that this is something that cannot be obtained or created artificially, thus leaving the creation permanently flawed in spite of the pursuit for perfection. *Lilo and Stitch* makes a crucial contradiction to this idea by making Stitch

physically and intellectually perfect, albeit for the purposes of destruction. In the opening scene, Jumba (Stitch's creator) proudly lists off Stitch's many amazing attributes, "He is bulletproof, fireproof, and can think faster than supercomputer. He can see in the dark, and move objects 3,000 times his size" (1:39). Later, Jumba elaborates on Stitch's destruction-inclined program, saying, "He will be irresistibly drawn to large cities, where he will back up sewers, reverse street signs, and steal everyone's left shoe" (29:51). In short, Stitch is a perfect monster. However, once Stitch reaches the point where there is nothing left to destroy, Jumba remarks that he, "never gave [Stitch] a greater purpose" (39:44). This so-called "greater purpose" is supposedly the one thing that Stitch lacks as a living being, the one thing, like the soul of the Homunculus, that cannot be artificially created or obtained. In spite of this, Stitch manages to grow thanks to an external relationship with someone who is different from him—that is, his relationship with Lilo. Were it not for Lilo setting her heart on adopting the "weird dog" at the shelter and immediately considering him family, Stitch might have never had the opportunity to wear himself out in a stable environment (relative to the one from which he has come) and subsequently consider what more there might be for him aside from causing wreckage. Indeed, it was because of Lilo's steadfast attitude towards the concepts of family and belonging that Stitch began to believe that this was what he was missing. Lilo's invocation of *ohana* is what keeps Stitch in the household when Nani was about to throw him out—in Stitch's short life, he has never known anything but rejection. Lilo also shows remarkable patience and understanding regarding Stitch's behavior when she says, "I know... why you wreck things, and push me" (54:10). For all that she disapproves of his destructive behavior, she treats him with unconditional love in the

belief that, like herself, he is lashing out due to pain, and is determined to give him the support that she herself wants. By the end of the movie, Stitch is capable of polite manners, and cares deeply for those he has come to consider his family, using his incredible strength in order to protect instead of destroy. Borrowing Kurtz's sentiment regarding characters she has analyzed, it can be said in this way that Lilo loved this version of Stitch into existence (42).

Meanwhile, Stitch's role in Lilo's life has a more subtle, but no less significant effect. In making a wish on Stitch's crash-landing ship (having mistaken it for a fallen star), Lilo says, "I need someone to be my friend, someone who won't run away" (23:44). This defines what she wants and connects to the fact that all the girls from her dance class ran away from her the moment she looked away. It also, however, defines what she needs, which is someone who won't leave her behind, a crucial aspect to the concept of *ohana*. Later, at the animal shelter, Nani tells the employee, "We're looking for something that can defend itself. Something that won't die" (25:11). This particular specification could be passed off as a need for new pet owners who may be prone to making mistakes, but given that Nani overheard what it was that Lilo wanted, it's likely that there is more to the sentiment. That is, when people die, the ones who live might inevitably feel left behind, a feeling which Lilo struggles with tremendously. Indeed, later, when Stitch leaves to go find his "real" family, Lilo tells him, "I'll remember you, though. I remember everyone that leaves" (54:54), which touches upon the other part of *ohana*: that nobody is forgotten. Lilo may hold true to never forgetting those who leave, but this inevitably means that she is left behind. She was, in a sense, left behind when her parents died; she is left behind by Nani, who must find work and leaves Lilo alone at

home; she is left behind by her peers that she can't seem to connect with. Even Stitch leaves, but the key difference is that he comes back, not once, but twice. The first time is under the mistaken belief that staying with Lilo will protect him from Jumba. But when he returns to Lilo the second time, rescuing her from Captain Gantu, he tells her in no uncertain terms, "Nobody gets left behind" (1:13:06). In this way, Stitch is precisely what Lilo needs, proving to her, multiple times in multiple ways, that she will no longer be left behind.

What this tells the audience overall is that nobody is limited by the circumstances of their birth, that anyone can change, given the opportunity, and that we are never as alone as we think we are. In short, despite what other science fiction stories may tout, the concepts of Otherness and belonging are not at all incompatible. It may be easy, however, to brush off the movie as a whole as inconsequential, given that it's aimed at children and may therefore be considered somehow inherently less complex or meaningful. Not only is this sentiment wrong, but it's also insulting to children who, although they may not be able to articulate the specific themes and connections throughout the movie, are able to comprehend its messages on an emotional level. Additionally, this sentiment diminishes the very real lived experiences of children, some of whom may have also experienced the loss of one or both parents, who may have difficulty making friends for one reason or another, who may even recognize and relate to the experience of living in a postcolonial society. Such children do exist, and although an indestructible alien may not crash-land near their home and become part of their family, they do deserve to be reassured that in this whole wide world, even in this entire universe, they are not alone.

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