



National Identity and the Ideology of Canadian Multicultural Picture Books: Pre-Service Teachers Encountering Representations of Difference

—Ingrid Johnston, Joyce Bainbridge, Jyoti Mangat, and Rochelle Skogen

Since texts written for children and young adults both mirror cultural attitudes and play a part in acculturating young readers, we decided to explore the extent to which contemporary multicultural Canadian picture books may act as sites for interrogating shifting understandings of nationhood and identity. We pursued our investigation by means of a study involving students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. One of the central aims of the study was to consider how these future teachers responded to literary representations of Canadian identity and how they planned to incorporate their understandings of multiculturalism in their future teaching.

One of the central principles of Canadian nationhood is official multiculturalism, which was entrenched through the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988. The act constitutionally recognized the changing face of Canada as a result of immigration

and promoted an attitude of “tolerance and understanding” for all Canada’s peoples. Since then, various critiques have pointed to problems with this vision. One critique suggests that official multiculturalism has rested predominantly on its efforts to create a coherent common narrative of nation that fails to address complex questions of identity. Canada has officially relied on the mythology of “two founding nations” (England and France) as the means of focusing its relationships with its visible minority citizens. Canada is a multicultural country with the rights and privileges of its diverse population entrenched in law. For those citizens outside of the white mainstream, however, Canada remains a country in which much of the power rests in the hands of those of European descent. To quote Henry Giroux, the “mantra of multiculturalism” (98) that is evident in Canada today suggests that Canada’s metanarrative of national progress is one of inclusion

and acceptance of difference. But the earlier national mythology of two founding nations functions as a strongly embedded aspect of the country's historical memory, and authorizes stories that consciously or unconsciously suppress knowledge of difference. This kind of narrative works to develop unity through emphasizing symbolic differences between "ourselves" and "others." A focus on superficial trappings of culture such as foods, "costumes," and heritage celebrations subsumes significant individual differences by perceived distinctions of race, ethnicity, and language that stereotype groups and isolate one group from others.

Theorists in Canada and elsewhere who have concerned themselves with issues of multiculturalism, identity, race and privilege—such as Neil Bissoondath, Himani Bannerji, Homi Bhabha, Henry Giroux, Smaro Kamboureli, and Arun Mukherjee have also expressed dissatisfaction with traditional official notions of multiculturalism and raised related questions of identity. Scholar and author Bharati Mukherjee, for example, complains that:

Canada is a country that officially, and proudly resists cultural fusion. For all its rhetoric about a cultural "mosaic," Canada refuses to renovate its national self-image to include its changing complexion. It is a New World country with Old World concepts of a fixed, exclusivist national

identity. (2)

While Bharati Mukherjee critiques the "grand narrative" of Canada's mythology of two founding nations, the writer Neil Bissoondath critiques the potential fragmentation of self that has resulted from replacing one "grand narrative" with another. He says:

We have, in this country, accepted with little hesitation the psychology of separation. We have, through the practice of multiculturalism, created a kind of psychic apartheid, the "homelands of the mind" Salman Rushdie has warned us about. (156)

Here, Bissoondath warns of the dangers of members of ethnic, linguistic, or cultural communities thinking of themselves as living in imagined homelands that separate them as a group from other Canadians.

In a postmodern understanding, the notion of Canada as a "nation-space," to use Homi Bhabha's term (301), has developed as much in the imagination as in the social realities of official multiculturalism. According to Canadian writer and educator Himani Bannerji, "English/Europeanness, that is, whiteness, emerges as the hegemonic Canadian identity. . . . This ideological Englishness/whiteness is central to the program of multiculturalism. It provides the

content of Canadian culture, the point of departure for 'multiculture'" (110). She asserts that for many Canadian "non-white" immigrants, the discourse of multiculturalism "serves as a culmination for the ideological construction of 'Canada.'" She explains how this discourse places people of colour in a particular situation, where on the one hand they "provide a central part of the distinct pluralist unity of Canadian nationhood" and on the other hand provide the "difference" on which "this centrality is dependent" (96).

As teacher educators who share these critiques of the "grand narrative" of Canadian multiculturalism, we developed a study to explore whether our perspectives on multiculturalism were shared by the prospective teachers in our undergraduate program as they responded to a range of Canadian picture books. In their complex interaction between words and images, picture books can act as cultural texts that may promote a cohesive, harmonious, and exclusionary view of national identity, or serve as a counter-articulation to notions of a homogenous and cohesive sense of nation. The picture book genre, as Perry Nodelman explains, is a paradox:

On the one hand it is seen as children's literature's one truly original contribution to literature in general, a "polyphonic" form which absorbs and uses many codes, styles, and textual devices,

and which frequently pushes at the borders of convention. On the other, it is seen as the province of the young child, and is therefore beneath critical notice. (70)

Picture books, as Nodelman points out, are often dismissed simply as texts for the nursery or the elementary classroom, yet they offer readers of all ages the potential to engage in particular ideologies of culture presented in semiotic terms:

Because we assume that pictures, as iconic signs, do in some significant way actually resemble what they depict, they invite us to see objects as the pictures depict them—to see the actual in terms of the fictional visualization of it. . . . In persuading us that they do represent the actual world in a simple and obvious fashion, picture books are particularly powerful deceivers. (72)

Through their ideological stances, picture-book stories invite readers to take up particular subject positions and to "see" and understand their own subjectivity and the subjectivity of others in specific ways. And, as John Stephens reminds us, "in taking up a position from which the text is most readily intelligible, [readers] are apt to be situated within the frame of the text's ideology" (67). Often this ideological position is one that promotes a culturally

acceptable view of who Canadians think they ought to be. Through both words and pictures, picture books invite readers/viewers to observe themselves reflected in the selected representations of the text. This complex set of intersecting signs, symbols, and forms of cultural representation in picture books encouraged us to develop a study in which we selected forty contemporary Canadian multicultural picture books to introduce into undergraduate pre-service teachers' courses and surveyed student teachers about their responses to the texts and to questions of Canadian identity.

Aims of the Study

Our underlying intent in this study was to investigate how pre-service teachers think about issues of Canadian multiculturalism and how their opinions and perspectives will influence their approaches to curriculum and pedagogy as they attempt to meet the diverse needs of their students. With this objective in mind, we introduced elementary and secondary pre-service teachers at the University of Alberta to a range of contemporary Canadian picture books that we saw as offering multiple interpretations of Canadian identity. Pre-service teachers in the elementary route expect to teach students aged five to eleven, and those in the secondary route expect to teach students aged twelve to eighteen. We felt the experience of participating in the study would enable

the pre-service teachers to develop criteria for the thoughtful selection of texts and curriculum materials for culturally diverse school populations. In addition, we hoped the pre-service teachers would gain new insights into their own identities as Canadians and into possibilities for developing relationships with students from backgrounds different from their own.

Participants

For the study, we chose to access five classes of pre-service teachers (a total of 115 students) enrolled in either the third year of a four-year Bachelor of Education program or the first year of an After Degree program. Three classes were in the elementary route of the program and two were in the secondary route. Of the eighty-four pre-service teachers who volunteered to participate in the study, sixty-seven were female and seventeen were male. Sixty-one of the participants were at least second-generation Canadians and twenty-three were first-generation Canadians. Eight identified themselves as having First Nations ancestry. Only six spoke a language other than English as their first language, and all of them spoke fluent English at the time of the survey. The participants consisted mainly of pre-service teachers of white/European descent. This demographic is not surprising, given the lack of ethno-cultural diversity in our Faculty of Education. Carson and Johnston's demographic survey of our pre-service teachers

found that over ninety percent of our student population claimed to be of white/European descent and that the vast majority were born in Canada. As university students who were planning to become teachers, our participants had each taken a minimum of six university credits of English course work (a requirement for their program), but very few had taken additional course work in children's literature or Canadian literature. For both the elementary-route students and the secondary-route English Language Arts students in our study, such course work would be optional for their program requirements.

Methodology

For the study, we selected forty Canadian picture books to present in a workshop format to all five classes of students. The picture books were selected according to the following criteria:

- Published in Canada since 1990
- Set in a variety of regions in Canada
- Written/illustrated by Canadians from a range of ethno-cultural backgrounds
- Offering a range of perspectives on what it means to be Canadian

The selection of books for the workshop was not an easy or simple process. We wanted to present books that represent contemporary life in Canada

rather than a mythic or fairy-tale view of the country. We did not select any books that could be categorized as transcultural (set outside North America), so, for example, none of Tololwa Mollel's books were included in the workshop as most of them are set in Africa. We struggled to balance postmodern works such as Thomas King's *A Coyote Columbus Story* with more traditional stories such as Peter Eyvindson's *Red Parka Mary*. We included bilingual language books such as Tomson Highway's *Caribou Song*, which is written in Cree and English, and Jane Cooper's *Someone Smaller Than Me*, which is in Inuktituk and English. We selected award-winning books as well as books that had received positive reviews in educational journals. Many of the picture books we chose appear on recommended lists for teachers. (The complete list of books used in the workshops is presented in Appendix A.)

We introduced the workshops by reading aloud the picture book *Josepha* by Jim McGugan. We provided an overhead transparency of every illustration. After the reading, we talked about how picture books are a valuable resource for students of all ages. We discussed how text and illustration work together and the benefits of a short text in certain teaching circumstances.

We also provided an historical overview of how Canadian picture books have changed over time, reminding the pre-service teachers that fifty years

ago picture books were seen as being for very young children only, and that few were being published at all in Canada prior to the mid-1970s. We explained that the relatively few Canadian picture books published in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s generally assumed an audience that was mainly white, European, and middle class and that the content reflected this assumption, as did most of the American and British books readily available then to Canadian children. We suggested that in more recently published Canadian picture books, attention is paid to presenting a diversity of perspectives on race, ethnicity, culture, class, and gender.

In small groups, the participants browsed through a random selection of books. We asked them to keep in mind the following questions:

- a) What do these books appear to suggest about what it means to be Canadian?
- b) Would you use these books in your classroom? Why or why not?

These questions provided some opportunity for discussion about issues of Canadian identity and the potential role of picture books in elementary- and secondary-school curricula. We thought a discussion of these topics would help to focus the pre-service teachers' interaction with the books and assist them in responding to the survey. In the

written survey, the eighty-four research participants provided demographic information on their family backgrounds and home languages; their responses to the picture books; and their understandings of issues of Canadian identity, representation, and stereotyping in relation to the texts. Follow-up audio-taped conversations with eight of the pre-service teachers explored these issues in more depth. Discussion focused on questions of Canadian-identity formation as represented in the picture books and on participants' own understandings of what it means to be "Canadian." The interviews also explored the significance of these understandings for their own teaching and considered the potential of contemporary Canadian multicultural picture books for teaching and curriculum development in elementary and secondary English Language Arts classes. The interview transcripts, survey results, and notes developed from the taped interviews were analyzed qualitatively for emerging themes.

Findings

A number of themes emerged from the data analysis, some related specifically to issues of multiculturalism and some not. As well as describing the most prevalent attitudes toward multiculturalism, we have chosen to report some of the more subtle yet related issues that helped to shape or limit the students' willingness to use picture books or discuss

multicultural issues in their future classrooms. In what follows, we focus on four of the most salient themes from the study:

- Considering the pedagogy of picture books
- Perceiving myself as “Canadian”
- Imagining the “other”
- Exploring controversial issues in picture books

1. Considering the Pedagogy of Picture Books

It was evident from our survey and from interviews that pre-service teachers in both the elementary and secondary routes of the program appeared to be basically unfamiliar with Canadian children’s literature—a factor that would limit both their own and their future students’ access to Canadian depictions of multiculturalism. They had difficulty naming any Canadian children’s books they had read and were also uncertain about whether particular authors and illustrators were Canadian or not. For example, one respondent listed Jon Scieszka as a Canadian author and another listed Shel Silverstein. Only six Canadian children’s authors/illustrators were named: thirteen students listed Robert Munsch, two listed Thomas King and one each listed Margaret Atwood, Michael Martchenko, Paul Morin and Margriet Ruur. Despite their unfamiliarity with Canadian materials, forty-seven of the forty-eight elementary route pre-service teachers said they planned to use Canadian

literature in their prospective classrooms because they thought it was important. Quotations from the survey illustrate these views:

It’s good to promote Canadian authors and the context of the books would be relevant and the students would be able to relate to the content as well as learn more about the country they live in.

I will more than attempt. I will ensure there are Canadian authors in my class and make sure students are familiar with them.

In general, elementary-route pre-service teachers felt their students would be able to relate to Canadian content more readily than to non-Canadian content and they commented that it was important to select books that were “age appropriate” and “well illustrated” with a “high interest level.” Although some pre-service teachers such as those quoted above showed a certain level of experience and reflection in regard to Canadian materials, overall they did not see a lack of knowledge of Canadian books as a potential disadvantage in teaching. They seemed to believe that Canadian books would be available in schools, and that someone else would be selecting and ordering books for their teaching and for the school library. Certainly in Alberta, this

is an unrealistic expectation as there are few teacher-librarians in schools today.

Participants from the secondary route were English Language Arts minors enrolled in a curriculum and pedagogy course at our university. A number of these pre-service teachers expressed skepticism about the value of picture books for the secondary students they might one day teach. For many of them, this hesitation seemed to be related to their unfamiliarity with any picture books in relation to their teaching. It was clear that very few of them had ever considered picture books as appropriate pedagogical materials in secondary classrooms. For example, one of these pre-service teachers gently reminded the workshop presenter that this was a class of secondary-route students and inquired as to whether the presenter might perhaps be in the wrong classroom. Some of the comments that reflected these participants' perspectives include:

Using picture books might insult the intelligence of some students and have adverse effects on self-esteem.

I won't use picture books. I feel the students will feel extremely patronized by them—no matter how complex the issues they raise.

Our workshop did, however, appear to encourage

some of these pre-service teachers to reconsider the use of picture books in their secondary classrooms. In a number of cases, they saw picture books as primarily appropriate for English as a Second Language learners or for so-called "struggling" readers. Commenting on whether they would use Canadian multicultural picture books in their teaching, two respondents explained:

I didn't even know you could use picture books until this year. It's exciting.

I'm not really sure. I'm still struggling with ways to work it into an academic stream class. Would be very useful in ESL or non-academic streams.

Overall, we found the elementary-route participants in the study had a clearer understanding of the pedagogical value of Canadian picture books compared to the secondary-route students. They took the presence and use of Canadian picture books for granted, but showed a certain naïveté in their expectations regarding the resources that would be available to them upon beginning to teach. They were also relatively uncritical of the content of the books. Very few of them commented on the issues raised by the books or the representations of Canadian identity found in the books.

2. Perceiving Myself as “Canadian”

One of the aims of our study was to consider how pre-service teachers understand notions of Canadian identity, and how these perspectives are illuminated in their responses to contemporary picture books. In response to the question of how they might define Canadian identity many pre-service teachers in both the elementary and secondary routes expressed the view of Canadian identity as “not American”:

I think that Canadian identity . . . is very distinguishable from American identity as we always say we are not American.

The intriguing thing about Canadians is their constant insistence to describe themselves by saying what they are not. To me it seems we are so preoccupied by juxtaposing our identity in sharp contrast with the U.S. or the Brits. This in itself, makes our culture interesting—as we are the “invisible other.”

We compare ourselves to other countries by saying what we’re not rather than what we are. So, you know, we’re not a melting pot like the U.S. We’re not this, we’re not that, but you’re left with—what are you then?

The most common response to the question of

Canadian identity centred on the liberal humanist notion of Canada’s diversity and a tolerance for plurality. These responses evoked the rhetoric of official multiculturalism:

It means being part of a country where cultural diversity reigns.

It means to feel safe and comfortable and proud to be Chinese. Canadian identity means openness, friendliness and being compassionate to others.

Similarly, when asked about how Canadian identity was represented in the picture books, these students offered a view of cultural harmony emerging from some reckoning and reconciliation with the past:

Canadian identity [in the picture books] is about years of change, of growth, of conflict, of rebuilding, that now we all exist together in harmony, no matter how imperfect.

It’s about diversity, welcoming, understanding. Differences are an asset.

Canadian identity [in the books] is coming from diverse places, cultures, influences, and ways of life, all in one country. Native populations are heavily represented.

Other responses focused on descriptors and symbols that the pre-service teachers felt represented Canadian identity. These responses were generally brief and often fairly superficial in regard to questions of Canadian identity:

Canadian identity as represented in the books dealt a lot with multiculturalism and nature. Such things as mountains, brown bears, oceans, trees and a wide variety of cultures.

Canadian identity revolves around nature—snow, ice, prairies, Northern Lights, and stereotypical activities i.e. hockey, building snowmen.

Some of the picture books resonated with certain participants and reminded them of their own childhoods. Comments from the interviews include:

When we were in class I almost stole this book [Allan Monk's *A Big City ABC*]. It's such a good book. It was a book that totally rung home for me because like the first page, A, is for the Art Gallery of Ontario. You kind of go through the book and I was like totally remembering my childhood.

[Michael Ulmer's] *M is for Maple*, like the Canadian Alphabet is a really good book in terms of covering Canada east to west, north to south,

you know . . . it sort of goes through everything.

I really enjoyed this *Two Pairs of Shoes* book [by Esther Sanderson] because it's about a little girl that might feel caught in the middle of a First Nations community with a moccasin and . . . I feel like, you know, at the end she's realized that one isn't better than the other but they're both very, very important to her. And I think that portrays a message.

Many of the pre-service teachers' responses were stereotypical and reflected notions of a "benign" plurality, while other responses relied upon notions of Canada as a just and equitable society, invoking the rhetoric of state-sanctioned multiculturalism. For many participants, the picture books evoked emotional rather than political responses. The books triggered memories of childhood events and places, and the students demonstrated pride in their Canadian identity. Many of the participants, however, appeared to be unable or unwilling to engage at a critical or reflective level in discussion of what it means to be Canadian in a broader sense. We can only surmise from the responses (many of them very brief) that they had not been challenged previously to reflect on their understandings of Canadian identity either in school or in their university coursework. If there are problems with official multiculturalism,

these students did not express their awareness of it.

3. Imagining the “Other”

A major purpose of the workshop was to introduce pre-service English Language Arts teachers to a range of multicultural Canadian picture books for consideration in their own teaching. Nevertheless, to our surprise, the multicultural nature of the picture books used in the study evoked some resistance from a few participants:

As a white, middle-class girl, I felt incredibly under-represented by the literature in the workshop. While I totally appreciate diversity (you can never get too much of it) it is easy to marginalize who we are not concentrating on.

I didn’t find that many of them [the picture books] would relate to mainstream society.

I didn’t find anything I could really relate to [in the books]. I’m from a very nuclear family and grew up in Vancouver.

When asked about how they imagined being Canadian might feel different for immigrants than for those born here, the overwhelming response fell in line with the notion of what we call “the myth of the grateful immigrant,” with some racist overtones:

I take for granted our identity whereas it is celebrated much more by people who have immigrated. People who are immigrating are usually coming from something worse so they appreciate much more what they find here.

We know nothing else. They have experienced crappier countries.

Yes. Those who immigrate here have a greater appreciation for Canada—however they should learn how to drive before getting a licence!!!

The notion of “immigrant as problem” was expressed by some participants in relation to their student-teaching placements. One student commented:

I did my [field experience] at an inner city school. It was very, you know, lower social status . . . a lot of ethnic diversity, so multiculturalism was sort of a norm, versus I had a friend who taught in [a more affluent neighborhood] and listening to her experiences versus mine, I’m like, “You’re crazy. You have it so good you don’t even know it.”

There was also a prevailing belief that immigrants to Canada are more appreciative and patriotic than Canadians born here. According to the participants, the latter are more likely to take their citizenship for

granted. One of the pre-service teachers said:

My mother left Greece during the Second World War. My mom's 68 and her idea of what is Canadian identity versus my idea growing up here my entire life is sort of a very different thing in terms of . . . oh this is hard. But sort of right versus privileges like, what I think is a right versus what she would probably think is a privilege.

There was a taken-for-granted notion, reflective of the official rhetoric, that Canada is a multicultural country and that "diversity" is a "good thing." But the survey and interview data suggested that most participants had not thought deeply about their own location in this context, nor were they reflective about the fact that immigrants come to Canada in many different circumstances, not all of them traumatic. Many participants appeared to conflate immigrants with refugees. These attitudes, we suggest, unconsciously reveal some simplistic categorizations that may emerge from official understandings of multiculturalism in relation to questions of migration and citizenship.

4. Exploring Controversial Issues in Picture Books

The pre-service teachers were aware of potential controversies that could arise in classrooms in relation to their selection of texts. In our study, a number

of them indicated a reluctance to teach picture books that depict various aspects of diversity in case these books created controversy among students or parents. One of the major differences between the elementary-route pre-service teachers and their secondary-route counterparts emerged through this issue of dealing with controversial subjects. Many of the elementary pre-service teachers were deeply concerned to avoid controversial books in elementary classrooms. Their definition of "controversial" appeared to include any materials that presented non-mainstream points of view. One participant said of George Littlechild's *This Land is My Land*:

It's too much . . . the Red Horse Boarding Schools, treatment of Natives. I don't know if you would call it controversial but it's sort of a matter of fact. If I had it my way, if I wasn't under scrutiny of parents or principals or administrators I would probably go ahead and teach it.

Others expressed particular discomfort with the issue of sexuality presented in *Asha's Mums*, commenting:

Asha's Mums—the lesbian one. About the girl with two moms . . . if I was teaching in, you know, the gay village in Toronto, sure why not. But if I'm teaching at Peace River. . . . Yeah, no. I tell you I

ain't going to bring this up.

Our understanding of multicultural and diverse picture books includes those that raise issues of so-called non-mainstream cultures as well as those presenting ethnic diversity. Rosamund Elwin and Michele Paulse's *Asha's Mums*, for example, features non-white protagonists, but the reason we selected the book for use in the workshop was that the dominant issue is same-sex parenting. Likewise, we selected the book, Nan Gregory's *How Smudge Came*, because of its sensitive portrayal of a woman with Down's syndrome. Both texts present readers with perspectives on identities outside the mainstream. It appeared that books such as these created some discomfort for a number of the elementary-route pre-service teachers in our study.

In general, the participants shied away from anything they perceived as controversial, unless it was sanctioned by the Alberta Program of Studies. One person said:

If [an issue] comes up then I'll address it through literature. I don't see the need if it's not in the curriculum. Well, "families" is, and "culture" yes, but certainly not in my first few years of teaching. I don't plan on stirring the pot. It's like we were talking about death. I mean I'm not going to bring that up either. I mean families, life cycles,

grandparents. I'm not going to bring it up unless, say, there is a child who does bring it up and there's some feelings.

Student teachers appear to be very aware of some real problems in the current educational and political climate and they recognize that introducing controversial materials into elementary classrooms can be fraught with difficulty for a beginning teacher. The current climate does in fact create a "censorship-in-advance" that could be seen as anti-educational. In contrast, some of our secondary-route participants were more prepared to take risks regarding issues of culture and representation in books. In fact, one of the secondary-route pre-service teachers chose to incorporate picture books into her high school teaching practicum as a means of introducing controversial topics to her teenage students. She explained her decision to use picture books to deal with sensitive issues in the following terms:

I think when you look at controversial issues such as maybe that *Asha's Mums*, how is that child really different than me? I think that's not harmful for kids to think about that. But I can understand the point where parents could get very upset. But issues about differences within our own country, about different beliefs and understandings, I don't see that as controversial.

Both elementary and secondary-route participants were apprehensive about responding to sensitive issues in their classrooms, especially as student teachers and beginning teachers; however, the majority of the elementary-route participants expressed a desire to avoid controversy and saw many of the picture books in our workshop as controversial. We realize that pre-service teachers often hear in education classes about avoiding lawsuits and about the perceived power parents can have in influencing a teacher's educational decision-making. As a result, their fears may not simply be on account of their own private timidity. The secondary-route pre-service teachers seemed to accept that controversial issues would be part of their lives as teachers in English Language Arts. Many of these research participants saw the picture books in our workshop as a means of addressing sensitive issues in a somewhat non-threatening manner.

While the elementary-route pre-service teachers were able to see the merit of bringing these multicultural picture books into their teaching, many of the secondary-route participants remained skeptical of their value for adolescent readers. For many pre-service teachers, using picture books in the secondary classroom is outside the scope of their own experience as students and, consequently, as teachers. For these participants, the picture books we brought to them in our workshop presented two

challenges: one in the form itself and the other in the content. For those participants who were more comfortable with the genre of picture books, the perceived challenges for their teaching were the controversial nature of some of the books in raising issues of race, class, power, and sexual orientation, and having to deal with the "difficult knowledge" of exclusion and marginalization with their students in school.

Reflecting on Questions of Curriculum, Knowledge, and Identity

Pre-service teachers in our teacher education programs appear to have had few curricular opportunities to question a white-settler view of Canadian identity or to interrogate stereotypes of Canada's immigrant and Aboriginal peoples in the texts they read. Many of our students had not encountered a pedagogical repertoire outside mainstream notions of identity. Most seem to have had little experience reading contemporary Canadian picture books at all, let alone ones that offer a variety of representations and portrayals of Canada's multicultural and Aboriginal realities. They had also not considered the potential for such picture books in their English Language Arts classrooms. One of the goals of our workshop was to introduce these pre-service teachers to Canadian multicultural picture books that they might use in their own teaching, and for

all the participants, the workshops did succeed in introducing them to Canadian picture books they had not previously encountered.

But why are our pre-service teachers unaware of Canadian books in the first place? One reason is that they have likely read very few Canadian books in their own kindergarten to grade twelve school experiences. In 2002, the Writers' Trust of Canada surveyed the English-language Canadian literature taught in Canadian high schools. Findings from the study indicated that most book selections made by teachers were based on the availability of texts (books the school already owns), acceptability (provincial guidelines, community standards, and the interests of students), and the agreed consensus of the school's English department. When Jean Baird reported on the study, she maintained that there are opposing "camps" in regard to the legitimacy of teaching Canadian literature in schools. She characterized the two camps as follows:

One group believes that teaching Canadian literature is part of a good education and "good citizenship"—we must be the "only country in the world that doesn't teach its own literature in its schools." There are others who maintain that the nationality of the author is not important; "Nationalism and nationalist agenda and the cultural value of literature are mutually

exclusive." (3)


Baird concluded that Canadian high school teachers need better access to material about Canadian literature, that there is limited knowledge about Canadian writers and the Canadian publishing scene even among teachers who are supportive of Canadian literature, and that there is significant competition from American and British literature.

Elementary teachers in Alberta also appear to be largely unaware of Canadian children's literature. In a survey conducted by Joyce Bainbridge, Mike Carbonaro and Nicole Green, elementary teachers provided many reasons for not using Canadian children's literature in their classrooms. Among those reasons were the perceived high cost of Canadian books (as compared to the mostly American books available through book clubs); difficulty in finding information about Canadian books; the lack of trained teacher-librarians in the schools; and a lack of time to access professional resources such as book reviews, relevant websites, or professional journals. Teachers were heavily dependent on locally provided in-services and booklists and on the teacher support material provided by textbook publishers (for example, reading series).

The pre-service teachers in our study are not alone in failing to recognize the importance of Canadian books in the lives of young Canadians. Canadian

society itself is complicit in this failure. The federal government continues to provide relatively low levels of funding and support to the literary arts and the publishing industry as compared to just a few years ago. Departments of Education and teacher education institutions largely ignore Canadian publications. Many Canadian bookstores mainly stock American materials. Adults purchasing books for children are not likely to know Canadian titles and authors. In addition, they are much more likely to buy books (usually American) in supermarkets than they are from bookstores.

Daniel Hade and Jacqueline Edmondson add to the discussion by noting that “commercialization has brought popular culture texts and products into children’s book publishing, possibly compromising the potential for books that reflectively engage children” (135). Emphasis is increasingly placed on books that will sell—and sell a wide range of related products (for example, the Harry Potter line of movies, toys, costumes, pencils, lunchboxes, etc.). Few independent publishing companies now exist worldwide. Canada is fortunate in having perhaps five or six such companies publishing children’s materials, a situation that is uncommon in many countries. Hade and Edmondson point out,



Provincial programs of study, particularly at the kindergarten to grade nine levels, do not reflect strong Canadian content.

however, that Scholastic, having bought out many smaller companies, is now the largest publisher and distributor of children’s books in the world and has a presence in virtually every school in North America.

Because it is to Scholastic Canada’s advantage to publish some Canadian material, the company does have a Canadian publishing program, including the “Dear Canada” series.

The majority of our pre-service teachers are also unlikely to have much exposure to Canadian picture books (or to Canadian literature in general) in their Bachelor of Education program. There is no mandatory children’s literature course for elementary-route pre-service teachers, even for those with a minor in English Language Arts. Reading and literacy courses may introduce a small number of children’s books, but these are not likely to be Canadian. Secondary-route pre-service teachers may take an optional course in Canadian literature as one of their prerequisites to enter the Faculty. Those majoring in English Language Arts are required to take one course in Canadian literature during their program, and this course could range from a course on Canadian poetry to one on the short story or the novel. For the secondary-route English Language Arts minors in our study, there is currently no mandatory

course on Canadian literature.

Provincial programs of study, particularly at the kindergarten to grade nine levels, do not reflect strong Canadian content. The Alberta Program of Study for English Language Arts has many more Canadian books in its illustrative examples than it did even five years ago, but it is still largely dependent on American books. From grades ten to twelve, a proportion of Canadian content is required at each grade level, but a majority of Alberta high school teachers still favour the canon of largely American and British texts which they are familiar with, and most are unfamiliar with Canadian picture books and their potential for teaching. It is hardly surprising, then, that the pre-service teachers in our study had little experience or familiarity with Canadian picture books and had not considered their value for the classroom prior to our workshop.

A second goal of this study was to explore students' responses to questions of identity and difference related to issues of representation in these Canadian picture books. While participants were generally quick to support liberal humanist notions of "diversity" and "tolerance," some resistances emerged when their own identities seemed challenged or when they failed to see themselves represented in the texts or, indeed, as the focus of the workshop. This resistance points to the prevalent notion that whiteness remains the norm in Canada

today and, as we suggested in our introduction, that being "white" is a norm that allows others to be acceptably different. Deborah Britzman reminds us that "learning to teach means coming to terms with particular orientations toward knowledge, power and identity" (33). For some students, interrogating their own identities might potentially mean coming to terms with a power differential of which they are the beneficiaries. Again we look to Britzman for insights into "the homogenization of difference" that is part of the discourse of teacher education:

Value is set on treating everyone the same and this value works against the idea of differential treatment to redress past and present constraints. At the same time, teachers are also supposed to "shed" their own social casings and personal preferences in order to uphold the discourse of objectivity that beckons individuals as if they could leave behind the social meanings they already embody. This particular brand of 'fairness' requires teachers to . . . encounter each student and each other as if they were unraced, unclassed, and ungendered. . . . To refuse the effects of such meanings does not banish them from the lived world of the classroom, or from the subjective world of teachers and students. (234)

In our study, we see this refusal to acknowledge

difference emerge in participants' desire to homogenize the "other" as "the grateful immigrant" or "the happy multicultural." Many of the picture books supported such a view with their representations of a harmonious cross-cultural Canada. Our study questions elicited personal responses that suggested a certain comfort level with notions of "cultural diversity" but a discomfort with the more challenging concepts of "cultural difference" that appeared to challenge students' own sense of self.

Canadian academic Erin Manning reminds us that identity, as the basis for national unity, "relies on a simplified notion of culture that ignores the

disjunctions and contradictions within historical and social (trans)formations" (62). Neither identity, subject formation, nor culture can exist in an ahistorical political realm, but each is always subject to transformation and renegotiation. Encounters with difference, even in seemingly simple texts such as picture books, challenge readers to come face to face with their own socially constructed subject positions and their fears and uncertainties of otherness. Such encounters in the context of teacher education classrooms have the potential to enable pre-service teachers to develop a new sense of awareness of who they are as Canadians, as learners, and as teachers.

Works Cited

- Baird, Jean. *English Language Canadian Literature in High Schools*. Toronto: Writers' Trust of Canada, 2002. 23 Jan 2006 <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/publications_e/research/di127234254927656250.htm>.
- Bannerji, Himani. *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars', 2000.
- Bissoondath, Neil. *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*. Toronto: Penguin, 1994.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Britzman, Deborah. *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2003.
- Carson, Terry, and Ingrid Johnston. "The Difficulty with Difference in Teacher Education: Toward a Pedagogy of Compassion." *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 46.1 (2000): 75–83.
- Cooper, Jane. *Someone Smaller Than Me*. Trans. Charlie Lucassie. Illus. A. Padlo. Iqaluit, Nunavut: Baffin Divisional Board of Education, 1993.
- Elwin, Rosamund, and Michele Paulese. *Asha's Mums*. Illus. Dawn Lee. Toronto: Women's, 1990.
- Eyvindson, Peter. *Red Parka*. Mary. Illus. Rhian Brynjolson. Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1996.
- Giroux, Henry, ed. *Postmodernism, Feminism and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Educational Boundaries*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1991.
- Gregory, Nan. *How Smudge Came*. Illus. R. Lightburn. Red Deer, AB: Red Deer College P, 1995.
- Hade, Daniel, and Jacqueline Edmondson. "Children's Book

- Publishing in Neo-Liberal Times." *Language Arts* 81 (2003): 135–43.
- Highway, Tomson. *Caribou Song*. Illus. Brian Deines. Songs of the North Wind 1. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2001.
- Kamboureli, Smaro. *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- King, Thomas. *A Coyote Columbus Story*. Illus. William Kent Monkman. Toronto: Groundwood, 1992.
- Littlechild, George. *This Land Is My Land*. San Francisco: Children's Book, 1993.
- Manning, Erin. *Ephemeral Territories: Representing Nation, Home, and Identity in Canada*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003.
- McGugan, Jim. *Joseph: A Prairie Boy's Story*. Illus. Murray Kimber. Red Deer, AB: Red Deer College P, 1994.
- Moak, Allan. *A Big City ABC*. 1984. Toronto: Tundra, 2002.
- Mukherjee, Arun. *Postcolonialism: My Living*. Toronto: Tsar, 1998.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. "American Dreamer." *MotherJones*. Jan.–Feb. 1997. 18 Oct 2006 <<http://www.motherjones.com/commentary/columns/1997/01/mukherjee-2.html>>.
- Nodelman, Perry. "Decoding the Images: Illustration and Picture Books." *Understanding Children's Literature*. Ed. Peter Hunt. New York: Routledge, 1999. 69–80.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1989–1991*. London: Granta, 1992.
- Sanderson, Esther. *Two Pairs of Shoes*. Illus. David Beyer. Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1990.
- Stephens, John. *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*. London: Longman, 1992.
- Ulmer, Michael. *M is for Maple: A Canadian Alphabet*. Illus. Melanie Rose. Chelsea, MI: Sleeping Bear, 2001.

Appendix A: Canadian Multicultural Picture Books Presented in the Workshops

- Bainbridge, Joyce, Carbonaro, Mike, and Green, Nicole. Canadian Children's Literature: An Alberta Survey. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 51.4 (2005): 311–327.
- Barber-Starkey, Joe. *Jason's New Dugout Canoe*. Illus. Paul Montpellier. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 2000.
- Bouchard, David. *If You're Not From the Prairie*. Illus. Henry Ripplinger. Vancouver: Raincoast & Summer Wild, 1993.
- Brownridge, William Roy. *The Moccasin Goalie*. Illus. Paul Montpellier. Victoria, BC: Orca, 1995.
- Cooper, Jane. *Someone Smaller Than Me*. Trans. Charlie Lucassie. Illus. A. Padlo. Iqaluit, Nunavut: Baffin Divisional Board of Education, 1993.
- Elwin, Rosamund, and Michele Paulse. *Asha's Mums*. Illus. Dawn Lee. Toronto: Women's, 1990.
- Eyvindson, Peter. *Red Parka Mary*. Illus. Rhian Brynjolson. Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1996.
- Fitch, Sheree. *No Two Snowflakes*. Illus. Janet Wilson. Victoria, BC: Orca, 2001.
- Gilmore, Rachna. *A Gift for Gita*. Illus. Alice Priestley. Toronto: Second Story, 1998.

- Gregory, Nan. *How Smudge Came*. Illus. Ron Lightburn. Red Deer, AB: Red Deer College P, 1995.
- Harrison, Troon. *Courage to Fly*. Illus. Zhong-Yang Huang. Red Deer, AB: Red Deer, 2002.
- Highway, Tomson. *Caribou Song*. Illus. Brian Deines. Songs of the North Wind 1. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2001.
- . *Dragonfly Kites*. Illus. Brian Deines. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2002.
- Jennings, Sharon. *Into My Mother's Arms*. Illus. Ruth Ohi. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2000.
- King, Thomas. *A Coyote Columbus Story*. Illus. William Kent Monkman. Toronto: Groundwood, 1992.
- Klassen, Dale. *I Love to Play Hockey*. Illus. Rhian Brynjolson. Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1994.
- Kusugak, Michael. *Northern Lights: The Soccer Trails*. Illus. Vladyana Krykorka. Toronto: Annick, 1993.
- Lawson, Julie. *Emma and the Silk Train*. Illus. Paul Mombourquette. Toronto: Kids Can, 1997.
- Little, Jean, and Maggie De Vries. *Once Upon a Golden Apple*. Illus. Phoebe Gilman. Toronto: Penguin, 1991.
- Littlechild, George. *This Land is My Land*. San Francisco: Children's Book, 1993.
- Loewen, Iris. *My Kokum Called Today*. Illus. Gloria Miller. Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1993.
- Major, Kevin. *Eh? to Zed*. Illus. Alan Daniel. Red Deer: Red Deer, 2000.
- McGugan, Jim. *Joseph: A Prairie Boy's Story*. Illus. Murray Kimber. Red Deer, AB: Red Deer College P, 1994.
- Moak, Allan. *A Big City ABC*. 1984. Toronto: Tundra, 2002.
- Morck, Irene. *Tiger's New Cowboy Boots*. Illus. Georgia Graham. Red Deer, AB: Red Deer College P, 1996.
- Munsch, Robert. *Up, Up, Down*. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Markham, ON: Scholastic, 2001.
- Ningeok, Annie, Enoksik Ejetsiak, and Mike Ipeelee. *Hituaqattaqt*. NWT: Kitikmeot Board of Education and the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, 1995.
- Pawagi, Manjusha. *The Girl Who Hated Books*. Illus. Leanne Franson. Toronto: Second Story, 1998.
- Ruurs, Margriet. *A Mountain Alphabet*. Illus. Andrew Kiss. Toronto: Tundra, 2000.
- Sanderson, Esther. *Two Pairs of Shoes*. Illus David Beyer. Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1990.
- Skrypuch, Marsha Forchuk. *Silver Threads*. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Toronto: Penguin, 1996.
- Spalding, Andrea. *It's Raining, It's Pouring*. Illus. Leslie Elizabeth Watts. Victoria, BC: Orca, 2001.
- . *Me and Mr. Mah*. Illus. Janet Wilson. Victoria, BC: Orca, 1999.
- Trottier, Maxine. *Flags*. Illus. Paul Morin. Toronto: Stoddart Kids, 1999.
- Truss, Jan and Nancy Mackenzie. *Peter's Moccasins*. Illus. Philip Spink. Edmonton: Reidmore, 1990.
- Ulmer, Michael. *M is for Maple: A Canadian Alphabet*. Illus. Melanie Rose. Chelsea, MI: Sleeping Bear, 2001.
- Van Camp, Richard. *A Man Called Raven*. Illus. George Littlechild. San Francisco: Children's Book, 1997.
- . *What's the Most Beautiful Thing You Know About Horses?* Illus. George Littlechild. San Francisco: Children's Book, 1998.
- Waboose, Jan Bourdeau. *Sky Sisters*. Illus. Brian Deines. Toronto: Kids Can, 2000.
- Ye, Ting-xing. *Share the Sky*. Illus. Suzane Langlois. Toronto: Annick, 1999.
- Yee, Paul. *Ghost Train*. Illus. Harvey Chan. Vancouver: Groundwood, 1996.

Ingrid Johnston is a professor in the Department of Secondary Education and Associate Dean of Research and Graduate Studies in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. Her research and teaching interests focus on postcolonial literary theories and pedagogies, English education, adolescent literature, and questions of cultural difference and teacher education.

Joyce Bainbridge is a professor in the department of Elementary Education and Associate Dean (Academic) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. She conducts research into the role of Canadian children's literature in Canada's schools and classrooms.

Jyoti Mangat is a PhD student in the Departments of English and Secondary Education at the University of Alberta. Her area of research is postcolonial literature and multicultural education.

Rochelle Skogen is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Education, Campus Saint-Jean, University of Alberta. She conducts research in the areas of French Immersion education and second language education.