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10.1 Multicultural Literature Reflection

Over the past few weeks I have witnessed my thinking change regarding several issues in literature today. The readings we have done over the past three weeks focusing on issues of truth, multicultural literature, and how I want to run my classroom have helped bring several questions to my mind with a few answers to those questions. In this paper, I will try to outline what I have learned through these readings, as well as how it will impact my future teaching. Most of my reflecting and thoughts have been focused around the Native American culture and the issues that they face due to the fact that our readings focused on this. Having said that, it is very clear to me that several of the topics and questions brought up in the readings as well as group conversations can pertain to any under-represented cultural group.

As I read through the first three introductory articles for this unit I was unaware how much of a foundation was being set for the rest of the material. Bishop's article, *Selecting Literature for a Multicultural Curriculum* and Harris's article, *Continuing Dilemmas, Debates, and Delights in Multicultural Literature* allowed me to come up with a very broad definition of what multicultural literature is. Reading Bishop's article helped me realize, without knowing it at the time that multicultural literature is and should be for everyone. However, that is where my understanding stopped. I found myself a bit confused as to what the proper definition of multicultural literature is. This also came up in our discussion group briefly. What stood out to me in Bishop's article was his statement about these under-represented groups. He says, "Identifying multicultural literature as literature of or about 'The Other'- people other than white middle class citizens of the United States- helps to reinforce and maintain old social patterns by setting up the American white middle class as the norm, and all the others as 'multicultural,' an obvious misuse of the term." (Bishop, 3) This confused me more because, while I agreed with him, I did not know what other groups would be in that category that would not be considered multicultural. Does this mean that books about

gender struggles would not be considered multicultural? I don't know. Bishop seemed to think not. The message I got here was that we should focus on people of color. I also took away the importance of examining books for potential bias in cultures. The only thing I was left wondering was how can you judge bias when the reader might not have enough background information on the subject to begin with? This question was further fueled when I read Violet Harris's article. Then reading Debbie Reese's chapter on how Native Americans are typically portrayed, I knew this topic was going to be a complicated and complex one.

In our first discussion about multicultural literature and *The Faithful Hunter*, by Joseph Bruchac, some of these complex themes came out. We all seemed to be in agreement that this book was a good representation of the Native American culture. We felt like that it supported what we knew about the culture from our previous knowledge as well as some of the issues that Reese brought up in her article. After reading that, it allowed me to read *The Faithful Hunter* with an eye out for things that could be misrepresented. However, I did not find any. In fact, all of my group members went on to discuss how much we enjoyed reading the stories in the book. We commented on how there did not seem to be any representation of Indians as savages or violent people. In fact, it was the opposite.

It was during this conversation that I began to realize that I had my own stereotypes of the Native American culture, similar to those described in Reese's article. The only experiences that I have had, prior to what we did for this class, was those typically described in most commonly known children's literature today. This seemed to be a common theme in our discussions and we continued to come back to the issue of what we are communicating to our students. If we as adults did not realize how misinformed we were, then the message we are sending must be the same to the students we teach. I know that this topic of Native Americans was not something that was at first interesting to me. As I read through all of the books that described the culture, I found myself being more interested. This perspective really hit me hard because I *know* that most of my students feel this way about some reading genre or

topic. This realization helped me to see how important it is for me to intentionally expose students to topics they wouldn't choose for themselves.

To me, the most engaging and eye opening portion of this experience was reading *Darkness Under the Water* by Beth Kanell and then reading the arguments that it caused. Through those two activities, it brought up several really important issues with text, mainly historical fiction. First and foremost, the issue of truth and how it is represented is critical in multicultural literature regardless of the genre the text is described to be. However, during our readings we read several different genres and it seems that more issues come up when a text is deemed to be historical fiction and contains misrepresentations of a culture. This was very clear when reading the debates about *Darkness Under the Water*.

Upon first reading, my entire group came to the consensus that this book was informative about a time in the United States' history that we did not know much about. No one really understood what the Vermont Eugenics Project was, nor that it was almost as bad as what Hitler did during the Holocaust. It was clear that this book was not an informational book about the Abenaki people so we were left with some questions regarding the cultural aspects of their lives. I mentioned this in my post about expecting to learn more because it was a work of historical fiction. However, during the first reading, I felt that I walked away with so much more knowledge than I came into the story with. I actually felt that what I learned was mostly an accurate and a true portrayal of the time period in history. In our group, we discussed how we would want to use this book if we taught upper middle school or high school to illustrate how life was like for Native Americans who were trying to hide who they were because of unfair laws. We thought it would provoke good discussions among students and allow them to compare it to other cultural groups. While I don't think our intentions were far off the mark of good teaching, I was shocked to read the perspectives of Seale and Dow, Reese, Saplin, and Bruchac.

In our original discussion we touched on some important issues that might cause some problems because of stereotypes that are specific to the Native American culture.

These included the relationship between Molly's mother and grandmother, the role of the father, and the need to be "Americanized". Questions came up when thinking about how much of this is true and how are us, as outsiders, to truly know.

All we can do is speculate. My group had quite a dynamic and in-depth conversation about the role of historical fiction text. Is its purpose to inform and teach about a period in time or to simply entertain while mixing bits of history into the story? I posed the question, "How much of historical fiction needs to be based in fact and how much can be the fiction part?" After discussing this, I am not sure that we ever came to the conclusion. What I found interesting was that this conversation came up before we began to read the debate and argument over this particular book. This issue with historical fiction came up again after reading Saplin's letter to Beth Kanell and then reading Beth's response. It was very evident that she did her research and talked in depth about this period in time with actual members of the Abenaki tribe. What transpired into her book, however, were mistakes and mis-information that my group determined was not intentional.

This brings up another huge issue. Is it OK for authors to write historical fiction about another culture they are not members of? Again, this was a question that we really didn't find a concrete answer for. To me, it seems that the potential for misrepresentation and incorrect information is too great for this task. However, I also do not think it is fair to limit authors to only writing about their own culture. It is a simple freedom of speech to be able to write what you feel. Who then, holds the responsibility for making sure the information is accurate? I felt that Beth Kanell took steps in the right direction with her research, even asking Joseph Bruchac, someone who was familiar with his Native American roots, his opinion. Yes, she made some mistakes and took some liberties with her story, but did she ever claim to be telling the exact historical representation? I do not think so. I guess the issue lies in the reader's expectations for the book they are reading. To me, if a book is listed under the historical fiction genre, I expect to learn facts that are true and accurate in relation to that specific period in time.

A member of my group brought up a great point when they asked if *Darkness Under the Water* was categorized as a realistic fiction rather than historical fiction, would there have been as many issues? I am not sure. I think that members of that culture (ones that wrote the articles we read) would probably still have had an issue, but perhaps myself as a reader, would have taken the information with a grain of salt? Reading *The Dark Pond*, by Joseph Bruchac, I did not seem to have any questions about misrepresentation of culture. There were obvious parts that connected with the Native American culture, and even specific references to it. Knowing what I know now about Bruchac, I wonder if the ability to accurately represent a culture, no matter what type of genre you are writing, just comes naturally when you are a member of that particular culture. I have to say that it probably does play a bit of a role. Had I not known that he was a member of a tribe, would I have questioned the work of realistic fiction? I am not sure.

In our discussions about the debate over *Darkness Under the Water*, the issue of accurately representing information and who's story it is to tell came up frequently. We all felt that because the book was deemed a historical fiction, it should have had accurate information in it. We discussed how many of us felt disappointed and almost embarrassed because we had thought we learned several things that were true. While I don't think anyone would disagree that Beth Kanell's book helped peak our interest in this period in time, did it provide an accurate representation of the culture she was writing about? Not according to those who are members of the culture. This to me is a huge issue. I understand that historical fiction is still a work of fiction. Our textbook, *The Joy of Children's Literature* says, "Historical fiction brings historical facts and imagination. We can never experience the lives of the people and events of the past, but we can come as close as possible through historical fiction. Authors craft historical fiction by weaving together pieces of factual information and filling in the gaps of available information with imagination." (p. 206) This statement makes it clear that *Darkness Under the Water* was not meant to be an informative piece of non-fiction. An issue that our group had though is the fact that some of the information that was

presented was not correct. If historical fiction is a blending of truth and imagination, is there a proper balance that must be considered? How far can the imagination go before it is no longer considered historical? Is the reader's purpose to read simply for entertainment? If so, will they be able to distinguish between the parts that are facts and the parts that are not? These are still huge questions and concerns that I have. Without knowing the truth behind something, I cannot be a fair or accurate judge of any type of literature. Like Joseph Bruchac said in his response letter to Beth, "the cultural insider usually has a big head start and it takes a long time and a lot of close listening for an outsider to catch up."

What was really evident to me during these readings was the answer to a question I asked earlier in this paper. Does being a member of a particular culture help create a natural authentic representation of the culture? I think it does. Look at *Hidden Roots* by Joseph Bruchac. He chose to write about a similar topic during a time period about 20 years later than *Darkness Under the Water*. One in which he lived and was familiar with. It was very clear to the reader that what was coming across in this book was authentic and very well researched. The only question I had was about the main character and his knowledge of his Indian roots. It did not seem believable to me that a child growing up with an "uncle" who knew so much about nature and had such stereotypes about Indians. As I began to think on this further, I wonder how much of this was done on purpose. Bruchac said that his purpose for writing is to get people to understand more about this period in our history. I can see how some people would connect with Sonny's unawareness and misconceptions of Native Americans, as I had some of the same thoughts. Having said this, our entire group felt that this book offered some deeper insights to the Abenaki culture and left us with a greater sense of what life was like for them. Perhaps this is the true purpose of historical fiction.

To me, the full realization of how well *Hidden Roots* did to communicate truth was during my reading of *Bowman's Store*. Before reading, I knew that this book was an autobiography of Joseph Bruchac's life and already had my interest due to the readings we had been doing. I found so many similarities in Joseph's life to that of Sonny's in

Hidden Roots. It was very evident that the information was not made up or misinterpreted for that book. It got me thinking about other cultures and books. Does every author go through this process and write works of historical fiction that are so closely related to their life stories? My guess would be many get their inspiration from life events but not all. I also started to think about how this would impact my future decisions in my classroom.

I knew that Hidden Roots was a good portrayal of the Abenaki culture because of the reviews I read about Bruchac as a cultural insider as well as other traditional literature about the culture, and his autobiography. The Darkness Under the Water debate helped to focus my attention on to looking for these stereotypes. I had built a huge folder of background knowledge on the subject, which helped me interpret and look closely at the text I was reading. Does this happen in my classroom when my 4th grade students read historical fiction text? I sadly answer no. It doesn't. Now, I am not exactly certain what kinds of background knowledge that each student brings to a text, but I know it is not as in depth as what we did over the past few weeks. I also have come to realize how important it is to have some knowledge in order to be able to spot out potential issues of truth in multicultural works.

This brings me to what to do in my classroom. A common theme that continued to come up in our discussions was, "How do I know what is accurate and what is not?" Every teacher, including myself, wants to provide our students with as much knowledge and facts about the struggles of many Americans as we can. I have to admit that prior to this class, I had never really given a thought to how a culture can be misrepresented. I have intentionally tried to fill my classroom library with books about a wide variety of people and cultures. I want my students to have an understanding that there are more than just people like themselves in the world. Luckily, my school is very diverse and it does not take much for students to realize how similar people from different cultures really are. However, I know it is important for students to be able to recognize themselves in the books they read. It is how students can construct meaning of how they see themselves and their self worth. Bishop says that, "students who do not see

any reflections of themselves or who see only distorted or comical ones come to understand that they have little value in society in general and in school in particular.” (Pg. 4) This quote stood out to me and is something that I do not want any of my students to feel. However, I am not 100% certain that the books that I have intentionally put on my shelves to address this are good representations of the cultures they describe. These past few weeks really have left me with the desire to make sure that my students understand that there is the possibility that what they read might not be completely true and they should be reading with that in mind.

While learning about a new culture was fascinating to me, I really found that the last article, *Cai’s Multiple Definitions of Multicultural Literature: Is the Debate Really Just “Ivory Tower” Bickering?* that we read helped pull everything together for me. It helped to answer what multicultural literature really is. I had a good foundation from reading the three articles in the beginning of this process, but still was unsure of exactly how to represent this in my classroom. In fact, I am still not totally sure. Should I have a basket set out labeled Multicultural Literature? Should we set aside a separate unit for us to explore these complicated topics? Who’s story should I focus on? How much should we read? These are just some of my questions and I am not sure if there are any right or wrong answers here. Before reading Cai’s article, I was looking for one clear answer or definition of multicultural literature. Now I realize that it is so much more than just the definition.

The thing that stood out the most to me in Cai’s article was the issue of informing and empowering. I realize that maybe it is impossible to truly define what multicultural literature is, but I also realize that it is important for children as well as adults to understand and be exposed to the issues and struggles that different cultures have experienced. I liked how Cai took this one step further and explained that we need to empower students to think critically and analytically about the issues. He says that, “we need activities that adopt an issue driven approach and thought-provoking books that challenge children to think about the issues that they may face.” To me, this is the biggest challenge and thing I want to take away from the readings. I want to take simple

exposure and teaching about different cultures and help my kids develop a real appreciation and understanding for diversity. Then build on it to empower my students to take action to challenge the social norms that still exist today. This starts by helping the kids make connections to stories that are about cultures different and unfamiliar to themselves. This is what I need to strive to do more of in my classroom, rather than just have a lot of “multiple+cultural” books in my classroom library.

I also realized though this week’s work how important my job, as an educator is to help get books of this nature into my student’s hands. Like my first opinions about reading “Native American books” my students have similar opinions about different cultures. I want to make a better effort into getting a wider variety of books into their hands- ones they would not choose to read on their own. Cai says, “Teachers and librarians need to help children find these books and get engaged with them.” (Pg. 321) This is what I want to do! He also goes on to say on page 321, “Some students of the mainstream culture may find it hard to engage in multicultural literature because it reflects experiences different from theirs. Educators are obliged to help them find ways into it.” This quote was a wake up call to me. If I do not expose my students to these books, it is highly unlikely they will find interest in them on their own.

Even after these past few weeks, I still am left with questions. How does an outsider know if what they are reading is true? How much information on a culture or subject must one obtain before they can accurately write about it? How much imagination can be put into historical fiction before it becomes more about the story and less about representing truth? Regardless of the answers, I believe that the bigger point is what us teachers do with the students in terms of teaching about these issues and recognizing that they exist in the literature we read. In the future, I want to start reading all books through the lens of multicultural literature. I want to have discussions with my children about whose story is being told and whose might be getting misrepresented. It is only through these conversations that we can start to build the foundation for a generation that will challenge the injustices that several cultures still face today.