

Bishop explains that “the function of multicultural literature is to ensure that students have the opportunity to reflect on it in all its rich diversity, to prompt them to ask questions about who we are now as a society and how we arrived at our present state, and to inspire them to actions that will create and maintain social justice” (1993, p.19). Over the past few weeks I have read, explored, and talked about multicultural literature, with special attention to examples from the Native American culture. The readings and discussions over the last few weeks have challenged me to take a more critical look at multicultural literature, and how this literature can portray “others” in the book world. With my group I was able to discuss stereotypes, accuracy, authenticity, and also challenge my ideas and beliefs as we pushed each other to see the literature through each other’s eyes. Bishop also explains that “supporting multiculturalism forces an individual to engage in a great deal of critical self-reflection” (1993, p.16), and as I navigated through the literature of the past few weeks found myself deeply thinking, and reflecting on the issues of diversity and my beliefs on multicultural literature.

I have come to realize the importance of diversifying the literature in my classroom, and teaching it in ways that doesn’t marginalize others, but instead finds ways to comprehend the diversity of all people and cultures. These last few weeks have helped me to understand how authentic and accurate multicultural literature can help my students have a better understanding of the world, themselves, those different from themselves, see inequities, and gain the knowledge needed to combat those inequities. With my group we actively discussed how we should go about incorporating this literature in our classrooms in ways that doesn’t identify literature about the “others” as multicultural, and literature about white middle-class America as the “norm” (Bishop, 1993, p.3). We concluded that this is not an easy task, but as educators we need to not only share multicultural literature that is high quality, accurate and authentic, we must also make sure we have taken the extra time to research and evaluate the diverse literature that we present to our students.

As the weeks pushed on and I continued my readings, Cai’s literature pushed my thinking on multicultural literature even further. In her article she explains three different views of multicultural education. “The first view holds that multiple+cultures=multiculturalism...the second view focuses on racial and ethnic issues in multicultural literature...the third view maintains that every human being is multicultural and all literature is multicultural” (1998, p.313). There were many parts of each of these definitions that I agree with, and they forced me to really think about what I believe is important in my own definition of multicultural literature. I agree with the fact that race is a very important factor that should be addressed in multicultural literature, but at the same time can see the need for this literature to include gay/lesbians, people with disabilities, gender issues, and disenfranchised religious groups. Harris explains that “multicultural can include race, ethnicity, gender, class, and other elements that denote difference” (1996,p.109). The world we live in is so diverse and I can also see how everyone can find some difference in themselves that makes them included in multicultural literature. As I pushed my thoughts on these definitions I came to realize that I believe that multicultural

literature should exist so that people that are not a part of, or “outside” underrepresented groups can learn about different cultures in an accurate and authentic way.

As I thought about the Native American literature that we read I thought how important it is that the book world share stories about disenfranchised groups of people. I think that if we agree on the third definition that everyone is multicultural, than we are saying that everyone is equal. The statement in Cai’s article that “there is nothing as unequal as the equal treatment of unequals” (1998, p314), has stuck in my head since I read it and my group discussed it. After reading this statement it reshaped my thinking of multicultural literature even further. While I agree that everyone is unique and different, I do not think we can argue the fact that white middle-class America is privileged. If we try to use literature that says that white middle-class America has experienced the same struggles as African Americans, or Native Americans, I think we are perpetuating the cycle that reinforces the privileged in society, while ignoring much of the history and facts about anyone different from white middle-class America. My belief is that multicultural literature should focus on marginalized and underrepresented groups that are not considered the mainstream culture. I believe that using this kind of diverse literature will help work against oppression as different cultures, and their experiences, are explored by children regardless of whether or not they are privileged or marginalized.

As my own personal definition of multicultural literature shaped in my head, and I further discussed with my group, I came to the conclusion that although I believe this literature should represent underrepresented groups of people, all children should read this literature. With my group we discussed Bishop’s ideas that “when students are exposed exclusively to literature in which they see reflections of themselves and their own lives, they are miseducated to view themselves and their lives as “normal”, to interpret their own cultural attitudes and values as “human nature”, and to view other people and other lives as exotic at best, and deviant at worst” (1993, p.4). It is important for the mainstream children in the classroom to see other cultures on the pages of the books they are reading, and not only literature that reinforces the view of themselves as “normal”. At the same time children who represent marginalized groups of people need to see themselves accurately reflected on the pages in this same literature. If we do not take this into consideration as an educator we “are likely to perpetuate the discrimination and oppression that multicultural education is supposed to help eliminate” (Bishop, 1993, p.4). By exposing all students to diverse literature a new world, and hopefully a new way of thinking and understanding will take place in regards to themselves, and to those that are different to them.

As I read through the novels by Bruchac and Kanell these last few weeks they had a very personal connection for me. My father and his side of the family is Native American; I am Native American. While my family didn’t have to “hide in plain sight”, my grandpapa and great grandpapa did move to a reservation in Oklahoma in order to keep their cultural identities and ways of life. I remember my school always asking for my grandpapa to come to my school and speak, “dress-up”, and perform rituals. I remember thinking how strange it was that they thought he was dressing up or performing? For me I never saw it as that; instead I knew the tradition and

representation that the music and clothing stood for, and what it meant to him and the Cherokee people. This was one of my first introductions to the idea of “others” and how powerful stereotypes, labels, and the socialization of our experiences can be for the way thoughts are shaped. It was through the eyes of other children at my school that I first saw my grandpapa in a “generic Indian motif that includes feathered headdresses, fringed buckskin clothing, tipis, war dances, pipes, and buffalo hunting” (Reese, 2000, p.159). While some of these aspects did reflect the Cherokee culture, I never thought of them as the defining aspects of my grandpapa, and remember telling my parents I didn’t want him to come to my school ever again because they weren’t portraying my grandfather in a positive way. He was exotic and different with his “black skin and dark hair” (Reese, 2000, p.159), and someone they wanted to “dress-up”, perform a rain dance and help the children make “dream-catchers”.

As I have dived into the literature this week and reflect on my own experiences I do not think my school, teachers or classmates meant to perpetuate these stereotypes, or make my grandpapa out to be so “different” and exotic from the “norm” of the school. I think this was there attempt to celebrate a culture that wasn’t mainstream, to even do a whole unit on Native Americans and bring in a “real life Native American”. I believe it is very important that as an educator we realize the impact these types of scenarios and celebrations have on stereotypes of cultures, and making a clearly identifiable “other”, and a sense of superiority over already oppressed people. We were able to discuss this in my group and the importance of moving beyond designating a specific unit about “the other” into the curriculum. A unit on Native Americans over Thanksgiving, or a month of African American literature during Black History Month is not enough and only seems to further define those groups as the “other” while the “norm” is taught the rest of the year. The readings and discussions with my group have helped reiterate to me how important I believe it is to find a way to integrate “otherness” throughout the entire school year, and not solely in a day or month celebration.

Moving into Bruchac’s novels *The Faithful Hunter*, *The Dark Pond*, *Hidden Roots* and *Bowman’s Store*, I found myself transported back into a world that I grew up in. While my experiences were not the same as the Abenaki people, I could relate to the love of nature that Bruchac seemed to effortlessly represent through the words in his books. I grew up listening to stories of how an “Indian Summer” came to be, how maple syrup became a sap instead of syrup, as Bruchac explains in *The Faithful Hunter*. Each of the stories in *The Faithful Hunter* seemed to involve the natural world and teach the importance of respecting the land. I could also relate to Armie in *The Dark Pond* as he got teased for helping the ants and telling the other children “you gotta stop’ cause you’re hurting them” (Bruchac, 2004, p.2). I use to get teased because I would save worms out of puddles after it rained, and made my own insect hospital where the wings of insects could dry out, and they could stay safe until they were able to fly away. This was not strange or different to me, nature was a way of life, and respecting all life and being in tune with nature was something that I knew since a child.

I really enjoyed the way in which Bruchac made this connection in his novels, and did so in a subtle way that didn't directly state and stereotype that Native Americans are nature lovers. Instead through his characters experiences he was able to accurately depict the importance of nature for the Abenaki people. He reiterated this point in *The Dark Pond* that while nature should be respected, according to Armie it is not necessary to worship it and be a "tree hugger". Armie explains that "you just have to respect the natural world and remember that you're part of it. We're supposed to appreciate the forest, and a lot of times we're supposed to be using the trees for food and shelter and firewood. Of course you thank them for all that. Thanking the trees, that just makes sense. Hugging them is what is sort of dumb." For Sonny in *Hidden Roots*, his uncle taught him how to appreciate and respect the land. He learned to "understand how important it was to be quiet when you were out in the woods, to use your ears when most folks are flapping their jaws" (Bruchac, 2004, p.18). In Kanell's novel *Darkness Under the Water*, Molly was able to hear, smell and feel the river, and this river almost seemed to become a character of its own throughout this novel. All the characters in these novels had a positive, respectful, deep connection to nature that I thought was a great example of how an author's words can deliver the authenticity of how important nature is for the Abenaki.

Moving past my own personal connections to these stories, I also thought about them in many different aspects over the last few weeks in regards to accurately and authentically portraying a group of people through the words of a book. In *The Joy of Children's Literature*, Johnson explains that "Authors craft historical fiction by weaving together pieces of factual information and filling in the gaps of available information with imagination" (2012, p.206). As I read Bruchac's historical fiction *Hidden Roots*, I was given insights into the Abenaki culture and people. He was able to weave historical elements of the Abenaki as he presented facts about the parts of their history. In *Hidden Roots* he explains elements of the Vermont Eugenics Project and how it affected the Abenaki people as Uncle Louis shows Sonny the note from the doctors, and explains to him "they done what they done because it was the law and because she was Indian. Just like me" (2004,p.113). Throughout this novel we learn how the Abenaki had to "hide in plain sight" because of what was taking place during this time period, and that "while the characters are fictitious, the events are all real" (Bruchac, 2004 p.137).

I began to think how many times children's and even adults knowledge is based on what they read and the information provided to them through text. Johnson explains that "Good historical fiction provides us with an opportunity to connect with people and events in the past, and in doing so, it helps us consider both the present and the future" (2012, p.206). My first question was how do we know what constitutes "good historical fiction", and how do we know if it accurately and realistically reflects a group of people and what they have experienced? As I read the novel *Darkness Under the Water* by Beth Kanell, I have to admit that I took her inaccuracies for truths. I didn't know much about the Vermont Eugenics Project and found myself learning information about this time period by Kanell's inaccurate historical depiction of this group of people. As the members of my group addressed these stereotypes and

misconceptions straight away, it took our discussions and further literature by Seale, Dow, and Slapin for me to notice how dangerous it can be when a disenfranchised group is inaccurately portrayed. Bishop explains that multicultural literature should “help correct misconceptions and eliminate stereotyped thinking and if it is to help readers gain insight into and appreciation for the social groups reflected in the literature, then the literature ought to reflect accurately those groups and their cultures” (1993, p.16).

This again lead to me wonder how do we know what is true, how can I determine what is accurate and authentic. While I read *Darkness Under the Water* I was very engaged in the book, and it evoked a lot of emotion in me. Kanell explains that she spoke with people from the Abenaki culture, researched this time period and even had a recommendation from Joseph Bruchac on the back of her novel, someone who is a well-respected, trusted Native American author. In *The Strands of Historical Fiction* Kanell explains her love of Vermont, and how she wanted to “address the impact of the Vermont Eugenics Project on the presence and self-descriptions of Abenkai people in the Northeast Kingdom.” She continues to explain in this article that she saw her own “children grow as insiders in a place where I was expected always to be an outsider by background, but eventually an insider by choice.” All of these things made me believe that the words in her book would accurately represent, and give a truthful account of this horrific time period and what the Abenaki people lived through. It was very eye opening to me to read the negative reviews and backlash that this novel created. I feel as if her heart was in the right place with her reasons for writing this book, but she fell short when she tried to tie her own personal experiences and connections to this time period and part of history. She was not an “insider” and was not able to depict the Abenaki culture and what they truly experienced during this time period accurately and authentically.

Seale, Dow, and Slapin gave a critical review of this novel in which they claimed that Kanell’s book was full of historical inaccuracies, stereotypes, and aspects that are inconsistent with their culture. On Debbie Reese’s blog she states that “Doris and Judy, as Abenaki women living in Vermont, are historians who have lived experience of their families having been hunted down by the eugenicist. One can’t get too much more involved in a book’s subject matter than this” (Reese). The critics continued to explain that “*Darkness Under the Water* is neither historically accurate nor culturally authentic” (Seale and Dow). While Kanell attempted to create a novel that presented factual information about this time period and culture, she left too much to her own imagination and the reader’s imagination for it to accurately reflect the Abenaki people. As these last few weeks have led me to think about truths, I wondered if an “outsider” can tell the story of a group of people. As Kanell’s non-Native imagination seemed to make up too many cultural inaccuracies and representations that were harmful, and hurtful to the Abenaki people, I wonder if it is possible for someone who is not an “insider” to these people to accurately and authentically tell their stories.

I discussed this with my group and again it was a topic that we agreed would be extremely difficult to accomplish. Bruchac explains that “It takes years, decades, to know

enough to be able to write and talk with some authority about even one story from one culture", as he responds to Kanell's novel and the harsh reviews of it. This reiterates to me that it is extremely difficult for authors to write about a culture they are not a part of, because of the amount of time it will take to be considered an insider, and someone who can accurately portray the culture. In *Hidden Roots*, Bruchac seemed to be able to explain this horrific time period for the Abenaki people in a much more simple, and factual way than took place in Kanell's novel.

While the two books attempted to explain the same story of the Abenaki culture and their experience with the eugenics project in Vermont, Bruchac's novel seems to explain the details of the culture and time period in a more accurate and authentic way. Bruchac was able to tell his story in a much more authentic way because his roots are with this culture; he is an "insider".

While Kanell attempted to do this, she lacked the knowledge and research about the Abenaki people and culture to tell their story, due to the fact that she is an "outsider". Bruchac's inside voice allows him to plainly and specifically explain the eugenics project and how it affected the Abenaki people, while Kanell was only able to touch on these ideas and perceptions because she didn't directly live through them. She could only imagine what the Abenaki people experienced so she left this same imagination for her readers.

Through my group discussions I realized how difficult it is for an "outsider" to tell the truths of a culture and group of people they are not a part of. Even when the best intentions are at heart, which I believe was the case with Kanell, she still presented information in a biased and stereotypical way that marginalized the Abenaki and didn't address their culture accurately. She was thought of as a "white women trying to rescue Native history", arrogant and using her "white privilege" as she tried to tell stories that weren't hers to tell (Seale and Dow). Issues of power are clearly thought of when thinking about this topic, and Cai helps explain this as she states "multiculturalism is about diversity and inclusion, but what is more important, it is also about power structures and struggle" (1998, p.313). Can a white, non-Native woman ever really know enough about this topic to be able to explain it accurately and authentically, or is it more an issue of trust between oppressed people and privileged people? Bishop explains that "people who see themselves as members of oppressed groups are not always willing to trust people whom they identify as members of the oppressing group to tell their stories" (1993, p.16). Kanell will always be white, she will never be an "insider" in the Native American culture, and I am unsure if she will ever be able to truly understand the power structures and struggles that relate to this culture, and also gain the trust of the people of this culture to tell their stories.

The Abenaki people went through a horrific period of time where they had to "hide in plain sight" and weren't able to be themselves on the "outside", only on the "inside". In *Bowman's Store*, Bruchac explains that the Abenaki "could fight...they could flee...or they could become invisible". He further explains that even when they made their Abenaki heritage invisible "they would still hold the secret histories in their hearts" (2001, p.43). As Bruchac is part of the Abenaki culture, and *Bowman's Store* is his autobiography, these stories are his tell and the Abenaki culture seems very receptive to the way in which he does so. It seems to me

that the story of the Abenaki people is still hidden, and possibly because they do not want to tell it. In the afterword of Bruchac's autobiography *Bowman's Store* he explains how his family did not want to tell him more about his Indian heritage, but "whenever I met other Indians, especially older people, all I had to do was show them I was ready to listen and they would start talking" (2001, p.315). This really made me think that maybe the Abenaki don't want to hide their story, but just want to make sure it is passed on to people who care enough to really listen to what they have to say, and what they have experienced? I am still undecided about if I believe an "outsider" can tell an "insiders" story, but after the last few weeks do believe that whether it is an insider, or an outsider telling a cultures story, I believe the most important aspects are that the stories are accurate, authentic, and represent the factual truths of the culture they are depicting.

This idea of whether an "outsider" can write about another culture and group of people made me think about myself as an educator, and how this is something I will experience as I attempt to explain and teach about cultures other than my own. When I select multicultural literature for my students to read I have so much to think about, and research to do, to make sure I understand all the viewpoints the literature does, or does not represent. Even when I do all of this I will still face the fact that I am trying to teach about cultures and time periods that are not my own, and where I am an "outsider" trying to teach about an "insider". I will use the *Oyate guidelines How to Tell The Difference: A Guide and Oyate Criteria for Evaluating Books*, and also research other websites that can help educate myself on how to know if the multicultural literature I select to use in my classroom is accurate and authentic. Stereotypes and biased opinions are what so many people base their knowledge of "others" on, and I need to be aware of this so I don't perpetuate the cycle through the literature and discussions that take place in my classroom.

I want to incorporate "a diverse and balanced collection" of multicultural literature in my classroom so "that no one book will bear the burden of being the only experience a child has with literature about a so-called minority group" (Bishop, 1993, p.18). I work in a classroom that is made up of 17 children, from 14 different countries and cultures. I am so happy that these last three weeks have re-opened my eyes, and given me new sets of eyes to think about multicultural literature more critically. My ideas on diversity and multiculturalism have been challenged, justified and reshaped over the last few weeks. While I have moved to a place where I am reflecting, questioning, and examining the literature I read and use in my classroom, I hope to model a behavior where my students can learn to appreciate diversity, and see how they are related to it, even if it is not their own culture. As I integrate, incorporate, acknowledge and affirm all the differences that multicultural literature teach us about, I hope to inspire my students and empower them to gain new perspectives on not only themselves, but also new understandings about those they are different from.

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