

Agency, Belonging, Citizenship

The ABCs of Nation-Building in Contemporary Canadian Texts for Adolescents

A few years ago, on the first day of a 200-level undergraduate course at the University of Winnipeg on “Canadian Children’s Literature and Cultures,” I introduced the topic with a pedagogical strategy designed to prompt my students to consider some of their assumptions about texts for children, their audience, their cultural production, and the ideological function they serve. First were fill-in-the-blank statements borrowed from Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer’s book *The Pleasures of Children’s Literature* (2003) about the perceived distinctions between children and adults as well as between texts for children and texts for adults: “Children’s books are, or should be, _____.” “Children are, or should be, _____” (79). To these I added a few follow-up questions: “What is (or should be) a *Canadian* text for children?” “How is Canadian children’s literature different from literature set elsewhere?” And finally, “Who is a Canadian?”

Many of my students expressed their inability to confirm whether the authors they remembered from their childhoods were Canadian or not. They had a clear sense that Canadian texts for children should be set in Canada and reflect Canadian values, but they weren’t always able to articulate precisely what those values were or how they might differ from those of the United States or elsewhere. To my last question, on the other hand, the responses were overwhelmingly consistent: anyone who lives in Canada and who self-identifies as a Canadian is a Canadian—period. A few of my students acknowledged their awareness of some of the ways in which hierarchies of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, language, nationality,

and location might trouble or at least add to the complexity of the term “Canadian” to encompass all citizens of the nation. Overall, however, the sentiments expressed in my students’ responses implied a particular view of Canada as a liberal and diverse nation-state, one that has been encoded into the dominant ideology of multiculturalism, which guarantees equal rights, responsibilities, and privileges to all its citizens. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act outlines some of the measures used to ensure the promotion of multiculturalism within an officially bilingual nation-state: it includes policies that

- (a) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage;
- (b) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity and that it provides an invaluable resource in the shaping of Canada’s future;
- (c) promote the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist them in the elimination of any barrier to that participation[.]

It may seem unnecessary to quote so extensively from the Multiculturalism Act more than two decades after its initial formulation in 1985, but I do so because of a curious discrepancy between what it states and the vision my students expressed of the country in which they live. While my students, most of whom were born around the time the policy took effect, implied an active support of multiculturalism as an ideal that ensures equal rights and responsibilities for all Canadian citizens, they showed no awareness of possible “barrier[s]” that the Act explicitly acknowledges and seeks to overturn. Such a gap is even more revealing in light of Neil Bissoondath’s comments about the Multiculturalism Act’s “lack of long-term consideration,” which he discusses at length in *Selling Illusions* (2002):

The act, activist in spirit, magnanimous in accommodation, curiously excludes any ultimate vision of the kind of society it wishes to create. It never addresses the question of the nature of a multicultural society, what such a society is and—beyond a kind of vague notion of respect for human differences—what it means for the nation at large and the individuals who compose it. Definitions and implications are conspicuously absent. . . . Even years later, the act—a cornerstone of bipartisan, federal social policy—shows signs of a certain haste. (39)

While Bissoondath questions the Act’s ambiguity about the nature of the ideal multicultural society it envisions for the future, what struck me about

my students' comments was that they recognized this ideal as their present reality. And yet, in the discussions that ensued throughout the term about the links between literary texts and the dominant cultural and social values that they reproduce or challenge, we kept encountering texts that focused on characters experiencing the very kinds of discriminatory practices that violate the legal rights guaranteed by this Act. My decision to include such texts was not motivated by a desire to ruin the sense of equality and justice that they perceived under the banner of multiculturalism, but I did want them to read texts that would put pressure on some of their assumptions about such an ideal. Even in my other courses that year, in which I included Canadian texts for young people whenever I could, were narratives that seemed to challenge this ideal in ways that echo Bissoondath's comments.

My objective in this paper is to explore some of the ways in which discourses of agency, belonging, and citizenship—the ABCs of nation-building alluded to in my title—are staged in a handful of Canadian literary texts for adolescents published in the last twenty-five years. While countless texts published for young people in Canada portray national ideals alongside the story of a central protagonist's growth from relative immaturity to relative maturity, the ones that form this discussion were chosen because they tell a particular story, or counterstory, about the official policies of multiculturalism quoted above: Beatrice Culleton's *April Raintree* (1984), Marlene Nourbese Philip's *Harriet's Daughter* (1988), Deborah Ellis's *Parvana's Journey* (2002), Glen Huser's *Stitches* (2003), and Martine Leavitt's *Heck Superhero* (2004).¹ All of these novels narrate a version of modern adolescence—the “transition stage between childhood and adulthood,” to borrow from the Australian critic Robyn McCallum (3)—that depicts young characters striving to negotiate the social and ideological pressures of the cultural spaces they inhabit. They depict young people who struggle with poverty and family dissolution, and who are marginalized by such oppressive discourses such as racism, sexism, patriarchy, homophobia. These narratives draw on the conventions of the young adult problem novel, a subgenre of adolescent realistic fiction that not only advocates a clear solution to a clearly identified social problem (such as peer pressure and divorce) but offers resolutions that according to Kirk Fuoss “usually suggest that the protagonist is only beginning to come to terms with the problem and that a difficult period of adjustment and/or recovery still lies ahead”(161). As it has been theorized by critics in Canada, Australia, and the U.S., the narrative structure of the young adult problem novel, particularly the ending, encodes an attempt to

manipulate an imagined audience of adolescent readers who are targetted as requiring the ideological and moral guidance of the text.²

However, the texts that form this discussion do not quite reinforce such guidance. Their plot resolutions refuse to settle the “problem” of these oppressive discourses, and they trouble both the conventions of the young adult problem novel and the vision of an idealized, multicultural Canada. These texts overlap to an extent with the pattern that Roberta Seelinger Trites finds in American texts for adolescents and labels “novels of social hope,” which “share a romantic faith in the ability of youth to improve the future” by casting “uncorrupted youth with reform agendas” in starring roles (“Hope, Despair, and Reform” 3-4, 13). The distinctive feature of these Canadian novels, however, is that while their protagonists retain hope at the end of each narrative, this hope does not necessarily lead to concrete social change. Given the importance of the *resolution* in adolescent fiction as the purveyor of the text’s final ideological standpoint, such open endings prompt me to consider what version of Canada is encoded in these texts for young people, not only in terms of granting a voice to all citizens of the nation but also in terms of how the future of the nation is imagined. Because they break from resolutionary conventions, texts that avoid singular ideological stances and clear narrative closure necessitate a different kind of reading contract with adolescent readers. Given such deferrals of narrative closure, readers are invited to ponder for themselves the implications of such deferrals.

For example, in both Leavitt’s *Heck Superhero* and Ellis’s *Parvana’s Journey*, a coincidental happy ending implicitly signals a failure in the protagonists’ quests to find their missing mothers from whom they were separated by external forces beyond their control, and they are unable to rebuild a fractured family unit. For both Heck and Parvana, the quest to reclaim the mother (and thus the family) is primarily motivated by gendered fantasies. Heck relies on the narrative conventions of comic books to imagine himself as a superhero (in terms of both the visual drawings and the psychological adoption of such a gendered persona) in order to distract himself from the hunger and homelessness caused by the eviction that followed his mother’s disappearance. In Ellis’s book, the second title in her Breadwinner trilogy set in Afghanistan but aimed at Canadian readers, Parvana is forced to dress as a boy in order to gain some of the liberties that are denied to her under the Taliban, a faceless and incomprehensible system of oppression that prompts her to express her confusion and anxiety in a series of letters that can never

be mailed. As young adolescents negotiating a world that has failed them, both Heck and Parvana discover through hardship that they can be resourceful and self-sufficient without their mothers, even though their quest to restore their natural roles as dependent children would make them renounce that self-sufficiency, and thus become relatively *less* mature. The fact that both Heck and Parvana reach the point of despair shortly before their miraculous reunions with their missing mothers adds to the ambivalence of each resolution, as revealed in Parvana's penultimate letter to Shauzia, written in a camp for internal refugees who are being considered for exile in Canada, figured in the text as a land of refuge: "*Everywhere I go, I look for my mother. . . . I'm not even going to hope that I'll find her. Hope is a waste of time*" (178; italics in original). After spending the bulk of the narrative trying to locate his mother without asking for help, Heck admits defeat to his best friend: "I've tried everything, Spence, but I just can't find her. I've got to tell . . . somebody, I guess" (119; ellipsis in original).

James C. Greenlaw, discussing Ellis's fiction in the context of global education, praises the larger trilogy for "its power not to indoctrinate but to educate Canadian adolescents and adults about the way hope, love, and courage figure in the lives of children who are faced with overwhelming challenges. . . . By sharing vicariously in Parvana's and Shauzia's struggles, Canadian adolescents may also learn about the importance of thinking critically about injustices in their world" (46, 45). And yet, the pleasures evoked by the respective reunions of mother and child require that readers overlook the ambivalence implied by both texts' resolutions, which arguably reward their protagonists by providing them with precisely what they both *gave up* looking for. In the final pages of *Heck Superhero*, Heck's fragile and unstable mother—described earlier in the narrative as "so small, so breakable" (42-43)—vows to become a better parent after a switch in medication, but readers looking for a "satisfying" resolution to the protagonist's quest would need to ignore the fact that the text does not depict the practical ways she will do so. Instead, despite the story's focus on the quest to restore the biological family, the narrative's final moments depict Heck confiding in and physically embracing a male teacher who has befriended him, shortly after bumping into his mother in a hospital. Ultimately, both Heck and Parvana end the story *less* mature than when they began. The immediate "problem" of locating missing mothers has technically been resolved; however, the continuing problem of how the protagonists might gain agency and belonging in an unsafe world remains unresolved.

Given that these quests for agency and home remain unsuccessful or incomplete, I am interested in considering how these open-ended texts construct adolescence for young readers in Canada. Such a concern is especially apt in the case of *Parvana's Journey*, a story that is preceded by two maps of the Middle East: these maps suggest that the text is written for an audience of readers in Canada who do not even know where Afghanistan is located, let alone how to place Parvana's struggle for survival in any context.³ Reading these two books for the first time, I questioned the respective endings for their apparent failure to resolve adequately the struggles depicted throughout the narratives—survival, homelessness, hunger, war. But as the larger pattern of supposedly faulty endings began to emerge, I began to wonder if perhaps these texts were deploying a different kind of narrative strategy to call into question the very feasibility of neatly “solving” problems of identity and belonging, making me reconsider the purpose of endings in literature for adolescents. In *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature* (2002), Maria Nikolajeva makes the distinction between the structural closure of the plot and the psychological closure of the protagonist's personal conflicts, stressing that the two “may stand in discrepancy to each other”: “The superficial plot is concluded; the ‘human’ plot is left open-ended” (168). This kind of psychological open ending is what Nikolajeva terms *aperture*, which signals “an indeterminacy concerning both what has actually happened and what might still happen to a character,” allowing for “an infinite bifurcation of interpretations” that invites readers “to contemplate further” (168-69).

In asking the question of what version of Canadian adolescence is staged in these two texts, the notion of aperture seems especially apt given their apparent inability to bridge the gap between the fantasy of a Canadian nation comprised of equally autonomous citizens and narratives that do not neatly resolve oppression and inequality. The conclusion of Culleton's *April Raintree* likewise appeared incomplete in my first reading for this reason. The bulk of the novel depicts its eponymous protagonist struggling to find a place for herself as a Métis woman in a social world that perceives “white” and “Native” as a binary opposition, a world that excludes her for having mixed ancestry: “It would be better to be full-blooded Indian or full-blooded Caucasian. But being a half-breed, well, there's just nothing there” (125). After years of viewing all forms of Métis and Aboriginal cultures as negative, April finally embraces the notion of “my people” (184) after her sister's suicide and the discovery of an infant nephew. However, because she has never been able to pinpoint in practical terms what it means to be Métis, to

bridge the gap between two apparently homogenous and mutually exclusive cultures, the text is unable to articulate what exactly she ends up embracing. The “superficial plot,” to use Nikolajeva’s terminology, closes at this point, but the aperture of the ending suggests, in my view, the difficulties inherent in attempting to “solve” or “resolve” the challenges of pinpointing a static and definite Métis identity. Helen Hoy discusses the “provisional” identity (285) that April embraces at the end of *In Search of April Raintree*, this novel’s predecessor:

April ultimately treats identity as verb not noun, as action not condition, as performative not inherent—and as communal not individual. Her final claim to have accepted her identity has less to do with some essence she discovers in herself (or other Métis or Native people) than with her mobilization of the relations, historic and present, in which she finds herself. She begins to deploy positively connections she has hitherto resisted. Her speaking of the words ‘MY PEOPLE, OUR PEOPLE’ . . . enacts a political affiliation, an involvement with others in the hopeful shaping of the future. (286)⁴

In light of Nikolajeva’s suggestion that such aperture invites readers to reflect further on the gaps and silences embedded in the resolution, it would seem to me that the open ending of this text invites readers to ponder the irresolvability of locating a finite Métis identity, rather than a failure to resolve the quest of the protagonist. The text explicitly identifies the ideal Canadian nation that is supposedly guaranteed by the Multiculturalism Act, but ongoing discourses of racism become the barrier that prevents April and Cheryl from obtaining that idealized citizenship. Obtaining that ideal is deferred precisely because the theory and the practice of a harmoniously multicultural nation-state are unbridgeable—not to mention because this apparent “ideal” is imposed by the very norms that continue to oppress Aboriginal and Métis citizens.

The remaining texts that form this discussion likewise centre on the negotiated relationship between individual citizen and imagined community, and they both feature adolescent protagonists who openly challenge the boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality imposed by their families and their communities. Moreover, as in *April Raintree*, both stories are told by first-person narrators who articulate their own feelings of powerlessness (even though these “authentic” teenage voices are created by adult authors writing within the conventions of adolescent fiction). Marlene Nourbese Philip’s *Harriet’s Daughter* tells the story of Margaret Cruickshank, a Toronto-born fourteen-year-old of West Indian ancestry who uses the language of slavery to persistently question social and familial oppression (105). Resisting the

rigid structures imposed by her father, who sees assertive speech as unlady-like, and by her mother, who has internalized her husband's patriarchal thinking, Margaret temporarily finds empowerment in the Underground Railway Game, an elaborate revisionist staging of the journey toward freedom in which white and black children can participate as either slaves or slave-owners. As a consequence of her rebellion, Margaret's father punishes her by making her his slave, claiming that she has "*too much freedom*" (90; emphasis mine). In the absence of a single male role model who does not enforce patriarchal thinking, the text depicts a form of patriarchy that is largely irredeemable. Instead, Margaret invests her energy in her close friendship with Zulma, a bond that is democratic, egalitarian, and emotionally satisfying. The novel culminates in Margaret's success in reuniting Zulma with her grandmother and in her temporary escape from her family when she joins Zulma on her trip to Tobago. When I taught this novel in a first-year introductory course to literary studies, my students and I had some difficulty with the complexity of the ending: Margaret's dream of living harmoniously with Zulma on a self-contained island is juxtaposed with the final line, in which Zulma's grandmother tells them to hurry up because "your uncle Herbert [is] waiting" outside (150). On the one hand, this final moment subtly undercuts the dream of a women's-only utopia with the implicit reminder that such a utopia is ultimately unattainable and must be repressed. On the other hand, by providing this contrast, the text signals the ways that such a utopia is attractive and necessary without presuming to intimate that it can be achieved so easily. The abrupt ending—or non-ending—signals in my view the reminder that ceaseless effort needs to follow the beginnings of feminist consciousness, even if the desired goal is always out of reach.⁵

Finally, in Glen Huser's *Stitches*, the story of Travis's persecution as a gender-atypical adolescent likewise reaches an ambivalent conclusion, given that he chooses to leave the small community that contains fellow citizens who reject him. Travis is compelling because he refuses to be swayed by the opinions of male authority figures around him, men who respond to his interests in sewing and fashion with distaste, homophobic name-calling, and, in the case of three classmates who bully him, a violence combined with the language of sexual assault.⁶ And yet Travis's sense of "difference" remains unnamed; his mother responds to his insistence that he is "more different" than most people with the correction that he is "more special" (109). Despite the implied shift from negative to positive connotations in his

mother's corrective, Travis's different identity remains undefined, and this adds to the complexity of the resolution: he relocates to the city after a nearly fatal act of violence and attends an alternative high school where "no one seems to mind how different you are" (196). Because "difference" ultimately remains an abstract concept (as does the norm against which difference is measured), it remains unclear precisely what kind of agency sixteen-year-old Travis gains by leaving: he *does* find a place within the nation where he can be himself (whatever the identity refers to), but the fact that his tiny apartment is located in an impoverished neighbourhood hardly guarantees that acts of violence could never recur. It is likewise debatable what kind of utopian world he has joined if individual differences are glossed over by abstract word-choices. In many ways, the utopian world staged in the city mirrors a version of multicultural citizenship that values "difference" in the abstract but refuses to name or acknowledge concrete differences between actual individuals. As well, the incompleteness of this resolution extends to the supporting characters, given that the abusive relationship between Travis's aunt and uncle is left hanging: not only does Uncle Mike disappear from the text, but Travis does not intervene in the oppression of others, an assurance that such oppression will likely continue after he leaves.

In staging a version of Canada that clearly articulates the ideal world that the protagonists yearn for but defers the possibility of making that ideal world a concrete reality, these recent Canadian texts for adolescents unsettle the fantasy of equality perpetuated by official multiculturalism. By focusing primarily on a protagonist's oppression, and ending at the moment when newfound freedom appears to be achieved, these texts signal that the quest for agency, belonging, and citizenship is always an ongoing project. At the same time, the deferral of resolutions to such problems signals the need for further reflection and action before productive social change can be achieved. As well, the final moments of these five narratives draw attention to the impossibility of closure by shifting the setting to transitional spaces—the airport, the refugee camp, the hospital, a friend's home, a new apartment in the city—which stage a version of Canada that is likewise in transition as a utopian nation that can never be fully realized. By refusing to satisfy completely the protagonists' desires to belong, these texts encode the nation as a temporary space in a state of reconstruction. The fantasy of a harmonious nation embraced by my students is a clear ideal, but these Canadian texts for adolescents demonstrate how difficult it is to achieve this harmony in practice.

NOTES

An earlier version of this article was given as a keynote paper at the International Symposium on Adolescent Literature at Ningbo University in Ningbo, China, in May 2007. My thanks to Roderick McGillis, Mavis Reimer, and my children's literature students at the University of Winnipeg in 2006-2007. I gratefully acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a postdoctoral fellowship that helped make the completion of this paper possible.

- 1 It is worth noting that four of these texts are recipients of major awards, indicating the cultural capital that they have gained in Canada and elsewhere. *Harriet's Daughter* won the 1988 Casa de las Americas Prize. *Stitches* was the recipient of the Governor General's Award for Children's Literature—Text in 2003, whereas *Parvana's Journey* and *Heck Superhero* were shortlisted for that award in 2002 and 2004, respectively.
- 2 For more on the ideological function of texts for young people, see Desai; McCallum; Stephens; Reimer and Rusnak; Totaro; Trites, *Disturbing*; and Walter.
- 3 Ellis's text is followed by an "Author's Note" which begins as follows: "Afghanistan is a small country in central Asia" (195). If the book assumes that its audience needs to be provided such basic knowledge *after* the novel's conclusion, it is unclear how it expects readers to follow the narrative that precedes it.
- 4 Consider, too, Janice Acoose's observation that, "With its protagonists seduced by popular terms like 'Native' and 'Halfbreed,' and confused by colloquial metaphors such as 'mixed-blood' and 'part-Indian,' the text does not successfully illustrate the Métis cultural identity" (228).
- 5 See Cynthia James's persuasive article, which argues that the adolescent Margaret also performs a transition between Canada, her present home, and the West Indies, her ancestral home. See also Zwicker.
- 6 "I felt that somehow I'd left my body and hovered high up there, watching the scene below. . . . How long does the boy lie there before he pulls his clothing back into place? As he struggles to his feet, before he can get up completely, he is sick. Like a dog, he kicks leaves and twigs over the mess" (102). Later, Travis takes a bath in an attempt to remove the feeling of "Shon's hands unable to leave my body" (104), which is reminiscent of April's attempts, while bathing, to rid herself of the smell of the "dirty, stinking bodies" of the men who sexually assaulted her (119).

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