Multicultural literature for children and young adults.

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Abstract
In the selection of multicultural literature for children and young adults, educators and researchers focus on two main controversial issues—authority and authenticity—that the authors portray in their writing. What type of author can accurately portray realistic pictures of minority cultures in multicultural literature for young adults? Must it be written by a member of that particular ethnic group? Does it become something different if it is written by an outsider of the group?

Key words: cross-cultural education, emerging literacy, language arts, multicultural education.

My work, as a novelist, a biographer, and a creator and compiler of stories, has been to portray the essence of a people who are a parallel culture community in America. (Virginia Hamilton 1995)

Multicultural literature is hard to define since it includes the literary writing of groups of people from different races, colors, values, and cultures. It is often labeled as literature of minority cultures that “emphasizes respect for the different historical perspectives and cultures in human society” (Madigan 1993, 169). Multicultural literature, according to Cai (2002, 7), “involves diversity and inclusion, but, more importantly, it also involves power structure and struggle. Its goal is not just to understand, accept, and appreciate cultural differences, but also to ultimately transform the existing social order in order to ensure greater voice and authority to the marginalized cultures and to achieve social equality and justice among all.”
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Multicultural literature for young adult readers includes and focuses on the cultures of people from non-mainstream cultural background. In addition, multicultural education is about the learners from various socio-cultural backgrounds. In its most authentic form, it is an area of literature that focuses on the realities of various cultures (Lindgren 1991; Rochman 1993).

In the selection of such literature, educators and researchers have focused on two main controversial issues—authority and authenticity—that the authors portray in writing (Nilsson 2005; Athanases 2006; Louie 2006; Wilfong 2007). Educators believe that the authentic literature or books include only those written by a member of an ethnic group about that ethnic group, its cultural traditions, and its people, whereas authority refers to the role of authors who represent multicultural literacy or have control of the plot and characters in writing authentic literature (Aoki 1992; Mikkelsen 1998).

Who can accurately portray the realistic pictures of minority cultures in multicultural literature for young adults? Must it be written by a member of that particular ethnic group? Does it become something different if it is written by an outsider of the group?

Insider or Outsider?

Authors and critics of multicultural literature are locked in an ongoing debate about whether it should be written by a member of the ethnic group or can be written by an outsider. Some believe that authors of the particular ethnic or cultural group depict details of the ethnic group, its cultural traditions, and its people the most authentically and qualitatively in literature for young adults (Johnson and Smith 1993; Nilsson 2005), while others oppose this view (Fox 1991; Bishop 1992; Cai 2002; Hinton 2006). However, those who oppose this view qualify it by saying that if authors come from other social and cultural groups, they must have either sufficient knowledge or a wide range of research to create accurate portrayals of a cultural group.

Literary creation depends on the imagination and experience of authors rather than whether the author comes from a particular group. The realities reflected in multicultural literature are culturally specific realities experienced by ethnic groups (Cai 2002). Ethnic literature represents unique cultural experiences of an ethnic group. For instance, Asian American literature is the literature that reflects the experiences of Asian American people; African American literature reflects the experience of African American people. Ethnic literature is, therefore, culturally specific. To create authenticity in multicultural literature for young adults, culture and cultural values of ethnic groups become the major criteria. “Departing from the reality of ethnic culture,” as Cai (38) put it, “leads to nothing but misinterpretation or distortion of reality in multicultural literature.” To be authentic, the writers need to reflect on the cultural perspectives of the people about whom they are writing, and make readers from inside that culture believe that they “know what’s going on” (Bishop 1992, 38).

Several books on ethnic literature have been banned, or highly censored, owing to their misrepresentations of a specific culture. Lack of understanding of another culture not only leads to misrepresentation of the culture but also creates difficult situations. It biases one group in society against another group, violates the integrity of a culture, and defeats
the purpose of multicultural literature. Thus, it is that a debate rages concerning who can write authentic multicultural literature for children and young adults—the insider or the outsider? Of course, none can write it if they do not have the understanding and experience that produces cultural authenticity. As all genres of literature have various ways to evaluate literary excellence, some critics opine that multicultural literature should not demand cultural accuracy and authenticity in writing (Taxel 1986). Cai (2002) believed that those who think only insiders can write valid literature about ethnic experience hold a determinist view of the relationship between the author’s ethnicity and his or her creation of authentic multicultural literature. According to a determinist view, Cai (39) wrote: “[T]he reality of ethnic culture is inaccessible to any outsiders even if they have plenty of direct and indirect experiences of that culture.” Likewise, Jacqueline Woodson (1998, 36) found that this question was mostly posed by whites to authors of color, and argued for changing the question to examine “why others would want to try to tell my story.”

Giving the example of The Education of Little Tree, by Forrest Carter (1976), as the best book by an outsider and accepted as culturally authentic by insiders, Gates (1991, 26) declared: “No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world.” This true story is about a five-year-old boy with no name, who is adopted by his Cherokee grandparents after the death of his mother. He likes to go to their cabin in the Tennessee mountains. Grandma names him Little Tree, and he is gently taught and nurtured in the way of the Cherokee.

During his formative years, he learns to respect nature and trust his instincts. He also discovers more about the unpredictable and worrisome ways of white men, especially politicians and businessmen. His distrust of whites becomes all the more extreme when he is forced to go to boarding school where whites use cruelty and punishment to assimilate him into their culture. The people he admires most, his grandparents and their friend Willow Tree, rescue him from the boarding school to continue his Cherokee upbringing. The sensitivity with which the descriptions are written shows that even the outsider can write culturally authentic multicultural literature.

On the contrary, it is argued that the outsiders sometimes overestimate the power of imagination to cross cultural gaps. Sims (1984) claimed that white authors fail to accurately reflect black experience because they have not been socialized into the ways of living, believing, and valuing that are unique to the perspective of that ethnic culture. An example of the difficulty for the authors of the outside group to reflect the reality of an ethnic culture and to grasp the perspective is The Happy Funeral (Bunting 1982). The story reflects the Chinese belief that a person who lives a happy and long life is considered to have good luck when dying. However, the Chinese concept of seeking consolation from the longevity of the deceased cannot be literally translated into “happy funeral,” so this misnomer shows that the author does not yet fully understand the Chinese perspective, culture, beliefs, and language.

To create the most appealing and convincing stories of indigenous cultural knowledge for young adult readers, the authors are expected to come from that particular cultural group. These authors are able to describe the human differences using a native voice and
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to accurately portray the culture and community. Woodson (1998) asserted that those who are members of a particular community need to speak for themselves. She contended that “subject position really is everything” (37). It is important to recognize the diversity among Native American writers by showing to which tribe a writer belongs. For instance, a Cherokee cannot accurately portray Pueblo culture. Marlinda White-Kaulaity (2006, 9) wrote that when “[insiders] speak eloquently, creatively, intelligently and honestly … many young people in the language art[s] classroom can be their audience.” This suggests that to accurately tell a story in multicultural literature for young adults, the writer most frequently should come from within the group about which he or she is writing.

Without the cultural identity and experiences, writers’ stories may perpetuate bias or misinterpret cultural practices, traditions, or even ways of relating. Stereotypes and negative images are found in many books, most often written by those from outside the culture. For White-Kaulaity (2006, 10), some plots contain odd and unexplainable sequences and concepts and many descriptions reveal “the authors’ inaccurate understandings and images of native people.” Authors within a group want to depict their work in convincing and authentic ways. On the other hand, authors from within the culture frequently explain events and cultural practices in ways that are believable and bring the culture to life. For example, Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida, the first young adult novel by Victor Martinez (1996), who is Chicano, brought to life the coming-of-age experiences of an adolescent Chicano boy. Its appealing description of that culture, lifestyle, and the many complexities inherent to growing up in that culture, are portrayed accurately through the experiences and life of 14-year-old Manny Hernandez. Martinez could create such a believable character, complete with the consequent emotions and actions, because he is a member of the culture.

Authority of Authors

The ethnic authors of young adult literature have the authority to represent, interpret, and portray the lives of their particular group better than someone from outside that ethnicity (Johnson 1990; Wilfong 2007). Project Equal (Johnson and Smith 1993) found that stories told from an “insider’s perspectives” (48) accurately reflect the lives of fictional characters in the given social group. Johnson (1990) stated that literature written by and about African Americans better represents real-life happenings of the characters. Further, characters, setting, and themes are more authentically presented by authors of multicultural literature who have the cultural backgrounds of the characters. (Nilsson 2005). Wilfong considered the elements of fiction, such as characters, settings, and themes, as rubrics to assess appropriate multicultural young adult literature for a class from the insider/outsider authors. As an example of an authentic book from an insider, Wilfong described Summer on Wheels (Soto 1999; Hispanic), which details the six-day bicycle trip by Hector and best friend, Mando, from Los Angeles to the Santa Monica beach. In this fiction, portrayal of characters, the Mexican and Mexican American communities, and other observations of characters are accurate, making the work authentic.

White-Kaulaity (2006) focused on authorship for selecting and evaluating multicultural literature for children and suggested asking questions such as the following: Who is the author? What is the author’s native background and affiliation? From which native community is the author speaking? She believed that native writers present a much richer and more
accurate story than any other writer could, and that they are less likely to use stereotypes. Biographies or online blogs of the authors are helpful resources for educators and readers to explore more about the multicultural backgrounds and experiences of the authors. “The more rooted people are in their own community, the more likely their work will lead there,” White-Kaulaity (14) asserted. When authors write beyond their own communities and cultural norms, the portrait of “nativeness” becomes translated in various forms.

An example that came across negatively, according to Sherman Alexie (2006), is The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams (Nasdijj 2001). Alexie declared that the novel “was not only borderline plagiarism, but also failed to mention specific tribal members, clans, ceremonies and locations, all of which are vital concepts of cultural identity” (72). This hints that authors from outside of the cultural group should have reliable background information and make professional and ethical decisions about other cultures when writing multicultural or cross-cultural literature.

If a member of an ethnic group has to make a great effort to develop the group’s special sense of reality, a nonmember, who is unfamiliar with the ethnic culture, must make double efforts to understand that sense. There is no denying that imagination is a creative power, but imagination is not the master of reality. Moreover, it can be limited by reality. In multicultural literature, the author’s imagination and cultural differences put constraints on his or her literary choices. An author writing about the birth and death rituals in Nepalese ethnic tribes, which are totally different from Kenyan, for instance, must work within the restraints of cultural conventions and represent the facts and customs of the birth and death authentically. “Even insider artists sometimes misrepresent cultural facts,” Cai (2002, 43) wrote, “perhaps because they are negligent or have not done the necessary research.” In How My Parents Learned to Eat, award-winning author Ina R. Friedman (1984) depicted a Japanese girl in a school uniform publicly dating an American sailor, who was also in uniform. This event is taken as a sensational scandal during that time because that did not represent the local norms of the particular culture. Similarly Amy Tan, a well-known Chinese American author, also presented inaccurate cultural information in her novels, The Kitchen God’s Wife (2006) and The Joy Luck Club (1988), which are stories about Chinese history from an insider’s perspective. These inaccuracies are minor, as in the misinterpretation of some Chinese words (Cai 2002).

Some authors believe that they devise only common human experiences to help them write about other cultures. Salisbury (1998, 8) focused on humanity to access the culture of others:

Does one have to be Hawaiian to know and love an island, an ocean, the jungles and valley, the hearts and minds of dogs, the sun, the surf, the sands? Does one have to be Hawaiian to write about how rich all the natural life feels? No.

Does one have to be Japanese to know and write about how it feels to lose someone you love? To be mistrusted and mistreated? To be removed? No.

Well then what does one have to be? Human. That’s all. Just human.
Authenticity of the Cultural Experiences

Creating a multicultural world is a very difficult and time-consuming task for an author. Accessing the experience of other cultures is not easy. Even common human experience, as Salisbury supported, is not enough: “To write well, to write responsibly, the author must always be sensitive, walking as it were in the shoes of others, seeing the world through different eyes” (Cai 2002, 45). In her article, “Who Can Tell My Story?,” African American author Jacqueline Woodson (1998) also emphasized the importance of experiences—those common and human, as well as those culturally specific. As an example, Woodson discussed the difficulty for an outsider in understanding black English. To understand her grandmother’s language, she said, one did not need to be part of her family, but one did need to have been part of her family’s experience of that culture. In other words, to understand another culture, one needs at least indirect experience of that culture. For Woodson, being “inside the house” of a culture is crucial. She believed that “those who write about the tears and the laughter and the language in my grandmother’s house have first sat down at the table with us and dipped the bread of their own experience into our stew” (Woodson 1998, 38).

A good example of a book written by an “outsider” author who makes earnest efforts to get inside a culture is *Shabani* (Staples 1989). To write about desert people in Pakistan, Staples studied their language, researched their culture, mingled with them as much as she could, and was able to identify with them because she had lived in several Asian countries for about 12 years. As she put it, to write about another culture, a writer should not only be a better observer and listener, but also be more empathetic in order to “be under somebody else’s skin” (Finazzo 1997, 98). In short, the outsiders must make similar painstaking efforts to take on another culture’s perspective before they write about that culture.

Exemplifying such empathy, according to Noll (2003), is Joann Mazzio’s (1993) *Leaving Eldorado*. Mazzio consulted books, diaries, oral histories, periodicals, and other resources to enrich the story with accuracy and authenticity. If authors continue to believe that they can fly across cultural gaps on the wings of imagination, what Salisbury (1998) predicts may be inevitable: “The great writers and illustrators for children of parallel cultures will, on the whole, come from members of those cultures” (13).

By giving this artistic freedom to the authors, some critics believe good authors can draw “culturally specific” pictures in young adult literature. Kathryn Lasky (2003, 89) claimed:

*I would agree with the first statement—great stories are told from the inside out, but great artists, even those not of a particular culture, can indeed find the real voice. They can go inside out, even if they have not been there before. That is the whole meaning of being a great artist.*

For Lasky, the issue that certain stories may be written only by the insider is “ridiculous,” “dangerous,” and “a literary version of ethnic cleansing” (88). Past studies have shown the issue of representation in multicultural literature in which the stories...
of minorities are written by European American authors for an outsider’s perspective (Fang, Fu, and Lamme 2003). In their study of 90 books depicting Chinese and Chinese Americans, two-thirds were by authors of non-Chinese heritage in which multicultural authenticity was not well represented.

**Becoming Good Cultural Messengers**

Summing up, authors of multicultural literature for children are acting as cultural messengers, but they may unconsciously impose their own cultural beliefs and values on the culture they try to recreate, exhibit, and locate in any fictional texts. To introduce and transform a culture when one comes from another culture is a very challenging task; thus, it is good to be an author from within a particular group. If an author is an outsider, she or he should have studied and researched, and ideally lived in, the other culture before developing a fictional text. It is acceptable to provide authority to the authors from outside of the community to research and present an accurate portrayal of the culture (Louie 2006). In order to give authentic representation of an ethnic culture, an author must make the effort to enter the world of that culture, which cannot be entered simply on the wings of imagination, no matter how imaginative the author is. Insiders who want to write about their own ethnic cultures have great advantages over outsiders, but they also need to observe and learn. An ethnic group’s perspective is not inherited through genes, but acquired through direct and indirect experiences. Any writer, whether within or without the group, requires sufficient knowledge of the subject matter through experience or genuine research of the other culture, his or her imagination, and superb artistic skills as a writer.

**References**


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Appendix. Children’s and Young Adult’s Literature Cited