

Johnson states, "The ability to see other cultures and life experiences is important in developing children's perspective, insight, and possibilities as they progress to becoming citizens of the world. (p.305)" As we entered this module I knew things would get interesting especially if all of our group members were going to participate honestly in the discussions. Whenever the topic turns to culture, especially dominant versus marginalized, conversations can go downhill very quickly. In an educational domain although some educators realize that these conversations should take place many prefer to avoid the subject completely to avoid any possible tension or misinterpretations. The term itself "multicultural" is difficult to define and some can struggle with the different definitions or use of the word.

As I began to read the selected chapters in our text it was good to clear up a few definitions, for example the difference between historical fiction and realistic fiction, as well as the perspective of multicultural literature. To be honest I did not realize that multicultural literature included differences in family structure, social diversity (to an extent), and exceptionalities including physical, mental or behavioral challenges. This is where I begin to become impatient when we as a society feel the need to have a category for everything. *Why can't a book be a book, a story someone has decided to write?* Being a Latina and realizing that I too am an *underrepresented* group in my mind anytime I heard the term multi-cultural I associated the meaning to be: anything not of European or "White" descent. As I began to reflect on my own narrow definition

however I realized that of course European cultures would also have to fit in to this definition because they too fit into the multiple categories defined in our text, the difference however being that for all of our history this group has been the dominant culture. Therefore this group of people has had a history of their stories being represented in our books and texts for a much longer period of time. Even while I was in school I never came across a young Latina (o) being the protagonist or even the friend of the protagonist in a book.

While reading the articles by Bishop, Harris and Reese there were several things that struck me about the movement toward multicultural education. In Bishop's Article, "Selecting Literature for a Multicultural Curriculum" Sonia Nieto is quoted, her definition of multicultural education states, "Multicultural education is a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education *for all students...*Multicultural education *permeates the curriculum...*Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and *focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action* as the basis for social change, multicultural education furthers the democratic principles of social justice. (p.2)" As I can recall, the most multicultural we get in our schools is Black History Month in February and the few classrooms that invite children to bring in foods of their culture during special celebrations, thus the "touristy" effect that researchers speak about. Bishop goes on to say, "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 others as "multicultural," an obvious misuse of the term. I too agree that this is a misuse of the term, and therefore struggle when we have to read "multicultural

literature” that is literature that is different than what is in our classrooms already. *Why the need for the separation?*

The article goes on to discuss the benefits of a multicultural education, recurring themes, topics, and motifs in a group’s literature, however, can offer insights into aspects of culture that seem to have a particular significance to members of the group (Bishop, p.5). However, there is a problem, within these underrepresented groups there is a significant shortage in the amount of writers that write stories about these different cultures. A large portion of what passes for multicultural literature is folktales from within and without the United States, related to people of color...Few fictional books portray contemporary lives of Latinos, American Indians, or Asian Americans (Bishop, p.7). This adds to the problem, not only when trying to build libraries that include books that represent other cultures, but when non-native people decide to write books based on other cultures. Special care and consideration must be taken to portray accurate information and avoid stereotypes that can come across not only as insensitive but racist as well.

The focus of this module was the Native culture, and naturally background knowledge comes into play, mine was essentially none. I mean most people that have gone through the educational system in this country know that Native American people were here before Columbus, that their lands were taken away they were killed by diseases and hunted down until they almost became an extinct population. I knew that there were different Native American tribes such as the Cherokee, Iroquois, and Apache. I also knew that Native American people had the distinct characteristic to be attuned to nature. As I read Debbie Reese’s article “Native Americans in Children’s

Literature,” I learned many new things specifically regarding the stereotypical view of the Indian as a savage, yet “Scalping was actually introduced to Native Americans by Europeans who were paid 40 pounds for the scalp of an Indian male....It was believed that this would help clear the land of Native people (p.156).” It was interesting to read the view of the general public regarding Indians, “Native people are warriors who lived in the Wild West during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or are impoverished Natives living on reservations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (p.159).” While reading this article and reflecting on my own knowledge base I would have to unfortunately agree with this assessment. Which then makes it all the more vital that more stories and books be written about these groups of people as well as other minority groups.

This article stresses the importance of having these stories be told by Native people as “their writings will accurately reflect the tribe they write about. A Native person who has grown up and/or lived in the context of tribal society knows that Indians are just “people” and are less likely to portray Natives as heroic or mystical individuals (Reese, p.159.)” There is great concern that when a non-Native chooses to write about Native people their portrayals are not accurate and can include the stereotypical images of the Indians presented in movies, books and toys. There is also a concern that there are not enough picture books or informational books that show other aspects of the lives of Native American people (Reese, p. 163). Of particular interest was the discovery of the English that “Native American women were on a more equal footing with men than was the case in England (Reese, p. 164).” This lead for the image of the Native American women to take three forms according to Reese, the hard working beast of burden, the helpful squaw, or the Indian Princess (p.164). Reese takes issue with the

portrayal of Disney's *Pocahontas* as the Euro-centric way of viewing the woman as the princess and goes on to suggest that she is viewed in a positive light because she "benefitted English Colonists (p.165)."

Children develop a sense of who they are and where they come from an early age, therefore it is of vital importance that if they are to understand themselves as well as those around them, they must be exposed to literature that depicts all people. It is easier for children to cope with childhood when they see that there are characters in their books that either look like them, sound like them, or have gone through similar situations as them, which is why this article stresses the importance of having Native authors write their own stories. This view can also be applied to any underrepresented group. Reese and others believe that true representations can only be depicted by people that are native to their own cultures. I am not sure that I necessarily agree with this, I believe that if a writer is serious about their craft and is willing to invest time to research than they too can be successful in writing a book that accurately depicts a culture other than their own.

In the Native American culture Joseph Bruchac is a well respected storyteller, author, and writer among other things. He is considered to be an incredibly credible author as he is not only Abenaki, but continuously "seeks the wisdom of Native American elders and teachers, and, through the Greenfield Review Press, provides a way for their Native American writers to polish their craft...(Reese, p. 170)." Reese goes on to say, "All of Bruchac's books are recommended as sources with accurate information from a Native American perspective...Bruchac cautions teachers to avoid books that suffer from what he calls "The Dances with Wolves Syndrome," in which all

Indians are noble, and all white people are bad (p.170). This is the flip side of the coin, in order to show the *good* of one culture one does not have to put it up against the *bad* of another culture. It is essential to show each culture for what it is without putting another culture in a negative light. This is where things get interesting the majority of teachers are middle class white women therefore if these women are going to properly educate an ever increasing multicultural population they have to be educated on the different cultures that may be in their classrooms. This does not mean however that this teacher is now expected to be an expert on cultures. What it does mean is that the teacher now has a responsibility to the students she is teaching to incorporate the knowledge these children bring into the classroom and thus share with others so that all can learn. Fundamentally I believe this is what multicultural education is all about, the acceptance and willingness to learn from others for the benefit of all.

As I began reading the books I still did not know what I was in for, I knew that of course they were about Native American people but I was not too sure what to expect. *The Dark Pond* was an interesting book and I began to see that I was correct in thinking that Native Americans were attuned to nature. After reading *The Darkness under the Water* however I began to question why water seemed to be such a dark theme in these two books. After having the conversations with my teammate's one led me to ponder that perhaps it is because with any body of water we only see the surface and do not really know what is beneath that surface until we explore it. I thought it was an interesting metaphor because like people, we see the outside but do not know what is in the inside until we learn about them. This ties in with the concept of multicultural

education because for so long we have been so quick to judge and decide what is better and what is right, that we never get to know other cultures.

After reading *The Faithful Hunter* and *Hidden Roots* it was clear that the story of the Native American people is one that does not get any justice in our education system or as an American culture. I saw parallels in *The Faithful Hunter* with Christianity for example where the caring creator Gluskabe only wants what is best for his people, just like God in Christianity, this however becomes a sensitive topic in the education realm because we are not supposed to teach our children in public schools about any religion. This in my opinion is unfortunate because so many cultures are deeply embedded in their religion and we can learn so much from those stories as well. Of the few religions I have researched there are actually more parallels than differences overall.

Another theme embedded in these books was the need to restore balance to an individual. The author's note on page 135 in *Hidden Roots*: "The traditional Abenaki belief is that we will all eventually be repaid for our actions, good or bad. If those actions have been bad and we are fortunate, that repayment will result not just in punishment, but also in the restoration of balance." From an outsiders perspective it may seem that Sonny's mother was too quick to forgive Jake, however with this explanation it helps us see why she does this. This is another insight into this culture that because of stereotypes is probably not well known. After reading these books in particular we see that Native Americans are "regular" people. I will have to admit that the pictures in *Bowman's Store* also surprised me and helped me. I did not expect Bruchac and his family to essentially look like "White" people. I was so surprised to see what they looked like that it actually made me feel even more disgusted with the Vermont

Eugenics Project. Fundamentally these projects were for people that were considered to be beneath the dominant culture, fueled by misconceptions and racism, however these stunts are usually against people that obviously look different than the dominant culture and in this case it was not true. Without having done research I do not know what Abenaki's from the 1920's and 1930's looked like, but by looking at Bruchac's family pictures it did not appear to have been the case with his particular family. I was so glad to see these pictures because I had such a great connection personally. Most people, if they can even picture a Dominican person, assume that we are very dark skinned almost black, we are after all from an island, right? However what most people do not know is that the island was conquered by many different cultures and thus we come in all shades and sizes there is not a typical "Dominican" look.

I believe that one of the most insightful reads that I had over the past week was Mingshui Cai's article, "Multiple Definitions of Multicultural Literature: Is the Debate Really Just "Ivory Tower" Bickering?" The article attempts to discuss the issues with multicultural education and multicultural literature. The definitions vary so greatly from "books by an about people of color, at the opposite end, it is all inclusive – "all literature is multicultural (p.312)." Cai states that "this view (the latter) is inconsistent with the fundamental assumptions of multiculturalism (p. 313). He goes on to say, "a definition of multicultural literature should therefore draw a demarcation line between the literature of the dominant mainstream culture and that of the marginalized cultures (p.313)." This is where I and other members of my group threw our hands up. In my opinion this is the problem, for so long we have all been separated by our cultures and to simply be willingly to continue to put barriers up I believe only makes the problem worse. As our



nation continually becomes more diverse there will come a time where all the numbers will get closer when it comes to “the other” therefore I believe it is time to start either embracing a true multicultural attitude (inclusion of all) or remove all the labels. I believe that it is important to learn about other cultures and about the history of other people, what I do not agree with however is the need to have these books in a separate section. I believe that the message will still be “today we are going to talk about someone/something that is different,” especially if the students see that the teacher has to physically go to a different section of their library to pick the book out, or that these books are kept in different bins in their classrooms. The visual cue is immense and will cause someone of that culture to feel once again marginalized.

Cai quotes Bishop in her article stating, “This is not an attempt to exclude other groups from the body of multicultural literature. It is to call attention to the voices that have been traditionally omitted from the canon...the part of the picture that needs most to be filled in (p.314).” This might be the intent by keeping the literature separate, however why is there a need to have *Black History Month*? *Why can't Black History or any history be discussed during any time of year?* I believe that our history is made up of so many different cultures that have affected who we are today that all literature can be used as vital components in our curriculums. I think that for example author's craft in Language Arts could become so much more interesting to students when a teacher has the “know how” to pull from different authors in demonstrating a strategy. How much more fascinating could History be if books from different perspectives can be read to accentuate a lesson from most or all of the cultures involved in the particular time being studied. Even Mathematics, knowing where our number system came from, knowing

how the calendars were established, all of these things came from different cultures and most people do not know these things. If the goal of multicultural education is to “fill in the pictures” then separating everything is not the way to do it. All of the cultures in the world today have contributed to what we are living today, it is only when we decide to embrace that fact that we can truly begin to properly educate our students.

Cai continues, “Multicultural literature is still a much needed separate category of literature, for its existence poses a challenge to the domination of all-White literature p.316).” I believe that calling for this separation as a challenge further separates and goes against what the end result should be. Cai’s call for a challenge is almost an “us against them” battle cry that will be a disservice to education and comprehension of other cultures. This article was written in 1998, I wonder if Cai still feels this way about multicultural literature or if his thoughts have changed or evolved on the topic. I also wonder where he would place children that are American born but have parents that come from other countries, would these children in his opinion be “the other” as well.

Overall this week was a journey into a topic that is not often enough talked about or reflected upon. I think that all of the debates, opinions, myths and facts that are out there regarding other cultures are magnificent things to talk about. I also believe that when people of other cultures decide to talk and write about their cultures it serves to inform others, it serves to debunk stereotypes and make us truly think of our society as a whole. I think people need to put aside the political correctness of our time and truly engage in these conversations, feelings will come to the surface, questions will arise, and tempers may actually flare, but it is only when we are ready to “put the cards on the table” that we can really learn.

Mixsy, this is a very good piece. I really appreciate how you've thought through these issues, with all their complexity, and formulated some clear ideas and stances of your own. You reach a very thoughtful conclusion about the uses of many kinds of "multicultural" literature. Great use of the literature and the professional readings to help articulate and support your positions. I agree that in an ideal world, we wouldn't need to make multicultural lit an explicit object of study, but we're so far from that! Many students in this class found they had a lot to learn about multicultural lit and the issues that surround it, and that even as graduate students they'd never really thought deeply about these concerns. So I think that's why Harris, Bishop, Reese, Cai and all the rest are adamant about focusing explicitly on marginalized groups rather than simply saying "it's all literature." And, of course they want this literature to show up in "mainstream" literature as well--it's not a replacement for making this part of an everyday classroom; rather, it's a way to call attention to literature that can then be part of the curriculum in multiple areas and ways. 50/50