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Cultural Authenticity and Debates in Modern Multicultural Literature

Multicultural literature as a genre has a history in the United States that is both complex and, at times, painful as well. It is complex because the term itself is not easily defined and encompasses a wide array of writings, stories, and accounts that focus on “the others” in American society. It is painful because of the subject matter: clear examples of marginalization and discrimination that have been the norm for so long. It is also painful in part because this type of literature has either been historically underrepresented or misrepresented. However, clear examples of a shift in thinking about multicultural literature have begun to emerge, and even as cultural insensitivity or sheer ignorance is still prevalent, several writers and scholars have begun to surface with more culturally authentic writings that appeal to a wider audience. Thus, educators and readers alike should be mindful of what constitutes genuine multicultural literature when selecting a book to read or share with others.

To begin, the history of multicultural literature is quite complicated and represents several broad shifts in thinking based on prevalent ideas in American society in reference to the time period. Rudine Sims Bishop, in her essay entitled “Selecting Literature for a Multicultural Curriculum,” explains that multicultural literature has historically included literature about “The Other”-people other than white middle class citizens of the United States- and helps reinforce old social patterns by setting up the American white middle

class as the norm (Bishop 3). As such, the very concept of multicultural literature as a genre is inherently problematic, as it suggests that a certain group is “the other” within American society, which implies a strong sense of not belonging. Additionally, Violet Harris, in her “Continuing Dilemmas, Debates and Delights in Multicultural Literature” further complicates this idea of multiculturalism with her examination of the words “minority,” and “non-white”, which she states imply a sense of historical marginalization (Harris 109). Harris also explains the opportunity for a revolution in multicultural literature was apparent in the late 1980s. Yet, according to Harris, the process of teachers growing to accept multicultural literature has been slow in occurring, as many teachers feel there is no merit in multicultural literature (Harris 108). As such, these authors explain a fundamental problem with multicultural literature stems from both how it is framed as a type of writing and how educators view it. Changes in attitudes and opinions have been slow to occur, and require a fundamental shift in thinking on the part of the reader or interpreter of literature. As such, several writers and scholars have been working to bring about significant change in this genre, but such dramatic shifts have taken time and are slow to develop.

A specific area that merits closer examination is literature pertaining to Native American populations, an ethnic group that has been marginalized and discriminated against for centuries as a result of European colonization of the American continents. Debbie Reese's “Native Americans in Children’s Literature” explores several facets of Native American literature and further develops this idea that literature regarding this group has been, for many years, largely inaccurate and based on several negative stereotypes. Reese explains that many issues have historically been raised with Native American literature, such as the false notion that there is one homogenous group of Indians

and that Native Americans are typically depicted as savages that raid forts and attack white settlers (Reese 158). Typically, these false notions have arisen because most Native American stories of the past were written by non-Natives, which is why the author argues that more stories and books actually written by Native Americans need to be published (Reese 159). These negative stereotypes regarding Native Americans have largely been indoctrinated into students from an early age, leading many young students to construct a false sense of identity for Native Americans, one that many current authors are working to overcome. Historically, these stereotypes have developed an altogether unflattering image of Native Americans that almost completely ignores the rich cultural heritage and intricate diversity of Native American culture.

The issue of stereotyping is worth exploring in greater depth as well, as Reese explains the essential problems that it raises. Particularly, Harris warns against stereotypical texts, in that they very often trivialize broad issues of race and ethnicity. Concurrently, Bishop states that books that are insensitive or deal with unflattering stereotypes should be avoided, but they can offer an opportunity for critical analysis. As such, the issue of negative stereotyping has played a major role in the development of multicultural literature in that many modern authors have worked diligently to thoughtfully and skillfully overturn many preconceived notions that have been prevalent in the past.

The complex issues raised by multicultural literature and the controversies surrounding it as a genre, especially as it pertains to the often marginalized Native American ethnic group, can be seen quite prominently in Beth Kanell's 2008 book *The Darkness Under the Water*, a young adult novel in which the protagonist, a teenage girl of

mixed Abenaki Indian and French Canadian ancestry, struggles with confronting the complex nature of her identity while growing up in the hostile environment of 1930s Vermont, a time period in which the state was occupied with the controversial Vermont Eugenics Survey, a plan to systematically rid the area of non-white inhabitants of mixed ancestry. Although the novel raises some interesting points about identity and heritage, it has been criticized and lambasted for trivializing and cheapening the sensitive nature of this grim episode of American history. For example, a particularly gruesome scene of the book depicts the protagonist's mother delivering a stillborn child while state nurses assist and, the reader is meant to assume, also sterilize her in the process. Beverly Slapin's online review of the book, for example, systematically dismantles the historical inaccuracies that the novel presents and several other reviews, including a particularly scathing piece written by Doris Seale and Judy Dow, explains that the book's afterword, written by Kanell, says the Abenaki people are finally being accepted, which is simply not true, and they still face many problems to this day. They also end by firmly asserting that Kanell's book both sensationalizes and trivializes the deep wounds caused by this survey.

So what greater lesson can be gleaned from the flaws presented in *The Darkness Under the Water*? Chiefly, the book raises important questions about cultural authenticity. The question of whether or not a writer can write about a cultural group that they are not a part of is a complex issue, and Bishop generally states that a writer writing about a cultural group that they are not a part of runs the risk of making mistakes or sacrificing authenticity. Harris concurs with this point, and also explains that although we all share the same basic experience as Americans, it can be difficult for someone not in a parallel culture group to skillfully and artistically capture the complex emotion and pain that deals with

racial or cultural struggles for justice. Thus, the less a connection an author has with a particular culture group, the greater the chance the author will present a story that is either culturally insensitive or worse, blatantly offensive. This is the essential problem with Kanell's novel. Her lack of knowledge about Abenaki culture (which is further seen in her failure to have the initial draft of the book cross-referenced with actual Abenaki Indians or those who had thoroughly researched the Vermont Eugenics Survey, including Seale, Down, and Slapin) demonstrates a crucial setback in the development of multicultural literature. In many estimations, the novel's protagonist, Molly, presents an unflattering view of those with Abenaki heritage in that she is trying to assimilate into mainstream white culture. In addition, the book also contains an unflatteringly stereotypical character in Henry Laporte, the protagonist's main love interest and a full-blooded Abenaki Indian who teaches Molly, among other things, how to commune with nature. Simply put, *The Darkness Under the Water* exhibits a prime example of a failure to develop a culturally respectful novel that both educates and informs people of a particularly challenging sociopolitical issue.

Given these extraordinarily divisive issues raised by cultural authenticity and the inherent problem of stereotyping due to a basic lack of knowledge, Reese argues that more stories and books actually written by Native Americans need to be published. Essentially, this is where a book such as Joseph Bruchac's *Hidden Roots* (written in 2004) becomes a critically important text in the positive development of multicultural literature as a genre. Bruchac's book represents a foil of sorts to *The Darkness Under the Water*, in that many of the flaws of the latter are strengths of the former. For example, a crucial issue that many had with Kanell's book was that the author herself was not of Abenaki heritage and, as such, the novel came off as less than genuine. Bruchac, on the other hand, has strong ties to

Abenaki culture as his family ancestry can trace its origins to early Abenaki Native Americans. This is especially seen in his autobiographical memoir, *Bowman's Store: A Journey to Myself*, in which he recounts vignettes from his childhood in which he learned about elements of Abenaki culture from being raised by his Abenaki grandfather.

Several of these vignettes from *Bowman's Store* parallel story elements from *Hidden Roots*, suggesting that the author drew on his own experiences to craft this novel, further highlighting the importance of cultural authenticity. At one point in *Hidden Roots*, for example, the protagonist's Uncle Louis (later revealed to be his grandfather) takes him to the top of a mountain for a traditional Abenaki experience. Similarly, In *Bowman's Store*, Bruchac recounts several times in which his grandfather took him into the woods to teach him about how to interact with nature in a respectful way. Additionally, *Hidden Roots* deals with the painful aftermath of the Vermont Eugenics Survey and the devastating consequences it had on families. Bruchac himself knew of this pain from an early age, in that his grandfather was often not forthcoming about his ethnic heritage, for fear of dangerous repercussions. As such, Bruchac himself was aware of the pain of being a part of a marginalized ethnic group in a way that Kanell only speculated about and, as such, her book only glosses over some of the deep and painful ramifications of this shameful American historical moment. Examples such as these give the reader a sense that the fictitious story that Bruchac presents in *Hidden Roots* is nonetheless based on real experiences of the author and that the author himself is indeed in an authoritative position to write about such culturally sensitive subject matter.

Thus, as modern educators and scholars search for the best literature to provide students with an accurate portrayal of a particular cultural issue with a broad societal

impact, they must be certain to frame the book with the concept of cultural authenticity in mind. As stated previously, although it is not absolutely necessary for an author to have a firsthand knowledge of an ethnic culture group, the writer runs the risk of being culturally insensitive when not directly linked with a cultural group. The juxtaposition of *Hidden Roots* with *The Darkness Under the Water* is a prime example of some of the most dangerous problems that can come from a lack of cultural authenticity. Mindfulness and awareness, then, are key tools that readers and educators must use when presenting multicultural literature. A growing body of literature exists that is both historically accurate and culturally sensitive, and readers should be mindful of the authenticity of a novel when making a selection.

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