

Constellations of Identity in Canadian Young Adult Novels

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Résumé: Bien qu'elle ait diversifié sa thématique, la production littéraire récente destinée aux adolescents ne parvient guère à insuffler un renouveau à ses récits. Ce paradoxe s'explique en partie par la permanence d'une vision "coloniale" de l'identité et de l'unité canadiennes, qui tend à imposer un héritage culturel commun, et se perçoit dans l'infrastructure narrative incitant les héros à choisir l'uniformité et à ignorer la pluralité. L'auteur analyse la représentation des personnages et les problèmes d'identité auxquels ils sont confrontés, et conclut que, dans la plupart des cas, les personnages en viendront à opter pour l'idéologie dominante et les schèmes de comportement traditionnels.

Summary: Although Canadian fiction for young adults has broadened its range of themes, they are imperfectly embodied in the narratives told. A colonial approach to issues of identity and unity is demonstrated in the desirability of a common culture and heritage and in the narrative pressure on the characters to choose uniformity over multidimensionality. In this paper I look at the representations of characters, the identity issues which concern them, and the ways in which those issues are resolved. The mutually-exclusive binaries used to analyze groups and the polarized choices that are put to them become their either-or solutions. The hazards are that the standards of achievement and meaning for young people will be geared to suit the prevailing ideology and that their actions fit the established categories of behaviour.

Dead Girls and Skaters

Before the first day, students entering most urban high schools in Canada will have grouped as headbangers, rockers, dead girls, betties or boarders. There are no manuals for entry, participation in, and exit from these groups. Students decide — or are put — where they belong and face the consequences. Learning about the range and quality of the choices available to them is especially important for adolescents as the categories and criteria for belonging to groups are rigid, the implications sweeping and the exits narrow.

Some of the groups within schools are aligned according to ethnicity. The young adults in these groups are often immigrants whose place and status in school is confounded by the paradox of being between cultures. As they move between home and school they find themselves between margin and margin; exposing an inconsistency at school can simultaneously displace the young adult at home. Deciding where and how they belong, or if they belong, is additionally

complex and difficult for these people, and the eventual choices are not always theirs.

Complexities also occur in the area of sexuality. For instance, a young man who is uncertain of his sexual orientation has options available to him ranging from open investigation to denial. One decision can create the space and means by which he can facilitate his thinking or can narrow his options to the point they disenfranchise him. The context of some kinds of choice or decision is broader — more open — than that of others. In the high school scenario above, the members of a group whose mandate is to spend most of their time at the pool hall may find their academic opportunities dwindling. Making choices or decisions which expand or limit, include or exclude, is not restricted to personal options but also occurs at the level of interpersonal relationships, as well as those at institutional, political and national levels. In Canada, for instance, a formal policy of pluralism should translate into cultural communities which are simultaneously inclusive and respectful of difference.

Embracing issues of identity, Canadian writers such as Kevin Major, Tim Wynne-Jones, Monica Hughes, Ferguson Plain, Diana Weiler and Welwyn Wilton Katz, among many others, explore themes from the perspectives of young people, First Nations peoples, immigrants, and refugees. They reveal inaccuracies and imbalances and help to rewrite the terms of historical, cultural, racial, sexual, regional and national relationships in emotionally powerful ways. In this paper I examine three novels for adolescent readers, namely *False Face* and *Out of the Dark* by Welwyn Wilton Katz and *Bad Boy* by Diana Weiler. Such a limited number of books cannot and should not provide any comprehensive expression of national experience. This is especially true of books dealing with Native issues written by non-Native writers. Still, certain patterns assert themselves — one being our continual absorption in considerations of what constitutes a national identity. Even books which do not seem to deal directly with Canadian identity nevertheless deal with the pressure to reconcile dichotomies, to choose one amongst competing identities, paths, parents, or lifestyles.

Fiction as a Mirror of Canadian Realities

Fiction re-enacts the processes involved in identification with and belonging to a group. Initially identifying with the protagonist and the surface signifiers of place, class, race and setting, readers move in and out of the conventions and rhetoric. As they are affected by the fiction, readers are able to recognize a sense of self *other* than their own (Gutteridge 30). In the best possible scenario readers assume new roles and identities, and their sense of the world expands to acknowledge others. Place and other identifying features may also be incorporated into readers' interior landscapes, often through confirming or challenging old formulations. A people's sense of themselves as a nation can in part be achieved by the inward journeying which literature provides. Gutteridge (1973, 30) states that, if the writer belongs to the reader's own culture, or nation, the common elements of the symbol-patterns may be more numerous and recognizable than otherwise. There will be a level of identification which can only be described as *nation-al*. For what is a nation but a collection of othernesses, some of whose elements are mutually felt and understood by its individual members?

Postmodern theory questions which elements can be legitimately “mutually felt” and questions readers’ ability to view others. Perspectives determine how and what they view, and the extent to which the alignments of power are exposed. How can readers understand “own culture” or “common elements” so that the effects of racism and sexism are in view? Canadians constitute a highly diverse population which is poorly served by our formalized policy on multiculturalism which perpetrates the white/colour dichotomy. Writing in Canada has been organized around French and English, with only passing recognition of other ethnic groups who make what are called *cultural contributions*. Native writing has been largely disregarded or relegated to the Department of Indian Affairs. A useful document on issues relating to both land and language is the Chamberlin/Brody Report to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples which expresses the need to expose exclusionary practice and maintain contradiction among cultures. I believe this is especially important within young adult literature, for it is here that our Canadianness emerges in powerful ways around the themes of identity, choice and belonging. Are young adult books complicit in silencing others while simultaneously upholding dominant values, or is there an attempt to reveal the complexity and heterogeneity of our culture, to oppose hierarchical organization, and to expose racism and sexism where it occurs?

Imperialistic Fortification and Resistance

Although all fiction mirrors the realities of people’s lives, individual texts mirror the complexities of those lives to greater or lesser degree. Also, fiction not only represents realities, it creates them. Fiction can enable readers to enlarge their vision, but it also confirms and perpetuates, through form as well as content, the inherent ideologies of language and culture. This representation is not static, rather, through its affective features, texts are themselves sites where the *lived relations* of communities occur. In his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said (1993) explores how the English novel in the Golden Age was linked to the building of the British Empire and the ways the *subalterns* resisted domination and misrepresentation through narrative. Said’s premise is that the “novel and empire-building were inextricably linked, in that the novel didn’t simply reflect what was going on, but instead imperialism and the novel somehow fortified each other” (Wachtel 671). In this paper I examine how two Canadian writers for young adults reflect Canadian realities in three novels. Particularly, I examine a pattern of imperialistic fortification discernible in Canadian children’s literature, namely, “the setting up and living out of dichotomies which is an especially pernicious legacy of colonization” (Chamberlin/Brody 14). Binary oppositions are a useful convention for people to make sense of the world, but like all conventions, can enlarge or confine their vision.

Canonical texts can be subverted, styles and genres appropriated, however. Cultural identities are created not just by those who dominate, but through the complex intersections of voices of those who dominate, those who are oppressed or marginalized, and others. Thomas King’s (1992) *A Coyote Columbus Story* for instance, rewrites the story of Columbus from Coyote’s perspective. Fifth House Press in Saskatoon publishes stories written by Native children and adults, among which are Freda Ahenakew’s (1988) *How The Birch Tree Got Its*

Stripes: A Cree Story for Children, *How The Mouse Got Brown Teeth: A Cree Story for Children*, and the translation of a childhood memory in *wanisinwak iskwehisak*, *Two Little Girls Lost in the Bush: A Cree Story for Children*, printed in both Cree and English. Although it is important to identify where and how imperialist tensions persist it is also important to acknowledge the decolonizing efforts of writers, readers and literary presses.

How do Katz and Weiler reflect the processes and concerns described above? Are the complexities and fluidity of choices presented? Although some situations represent a clear distinction between right and wrong or good and evil, in adolescence moral issues increase in complexity and occur at various levels and in various combinations. What are the kinds of choices among which the characters choose? From where comes the pressure to choose? How do the characters choose? Do the characters' self-stated identities oblige them to a group or a polarized position? Do the characters move among a variety of positions or groups? Is resolution desirable, and if so, what is its nature? What is the range of possibility? How well do these books reflect people as multivocal and events as multidimensional, and thus, by implication, how well do they reveal a pluralistic Canada in which diversity is recognized and valued?

One Identity at a Time: Binary Oppositions in Stories

Binary oppositions in language as well as in literature are useful in mediating experience. The comparisons and contrasts people use to make sense of new experiences are often based on extremes; the ways people or events are most different from themselves. These attitudes or positions are mediated through the tensions and emotional conflicts such polarization invites. Not only are the issues presented as binaries, but — here lies the problem — the solutions which the writers prescribe can be dependent upon those binary constructions. Using broad categories to analyze groups or situations can perpetuate superficial either-or solutions which such dichotomies suggest. Instead of coming to understand the complexity of situations readers are encouraged to make stark choices in terms of the dualisms provided. It seems that our colonial mindset makes us feel that we can only be one thing at a time — that is, we can only be white Anglo Saxon, or only black African, or only straight male, or only nice girl. But as a country composed of Native people and immigrants Canada is a contradiction to the idea of a homogenized culture. So why do we insist on homogeneity? Our mosaic is composed of so many variations of cultures and races that it is more helpful to think about other ways in which people can co-exist.

Edward Said calls for “new alignments” which “provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notion of identity” (1993, xxiv-xxv). Although the novels' representations acknowledge cultural and other differences, the mediation of those differences is often in typically colonial ways. In *False Face*, Katz's character Tom struggles with his biological and spiritual connections to the Indian mosaic and his comparable connections to the white community. The female protagonist, Laney, is caught in a struggle between her neo-Marxist father and materialistic mother. Tom has to choose the White world as the Indian one will not accept him. Laney learns to identify with her father rather than her mother. The way in which characters accomplish their tasks qualifies them as

much as what they represent in a cultural — the story's and/or society's — context. The way the hero of *False Face* learns his lessons qualifies them as much as what they represent in a cultural context. The circuitous route of the plot is created in large part by Tom's attitude toward the events that transpire, and to the people he meets. Both the *how* and the *what* of the story comprise its meaning.

How do the authors present the complexity of choices across racial and cultural lines? In *Bad Boy*, a more complex book than *False Face*, Weiler's characters — A.J. and Tully — must decide their respective representations. Weiler's character A.J. struggles with the concept of *bad boy* in terms of sports and sportsmanship, and in terms of embracing broader definitions of sexuality and friendship. Although sexuality and sports may not strictly be issues of Canadian identity, the pressures to choose (and the method in which choices are made) are consistent with my theme. Also, as Eagleton says, "language and sexuality are political to their roots" (1996, 24). In order to understand how issues of identity and unity are resolved in these novels, I examine how the writers represent their characters, what are the important issues in these characters' lives, and the process by which they resolve their personal and communal conflicts.

False Face

Binary constructions provide the tension and therefore the emotional involvement in *False Face*. Although my discussion is limited to Tom, parallels can be made with Laney's situation. Native on his father's side and White (Katz reinforces the difference, capitalizing both Native and White throughout) on his mother's, Tom is forced after his father's death to move from the Reserve to the very White community of London, Ontario. Not only is Tom's environment dichotomized, so is his outlook on the world. He judges people and events through the contrasts of Native/White. History is ... "a White subject" (15). People are identified within that dichotomy. "She (the curator) was pretty, and young, and White" (50) and further along, "She was an old woman, and White, but she had understood" (63). Said describes how colonizing Europeans justified their colonization in other parts of the world by assuming their own, inherent racial superiority over those they conquered. They thus created "the supremely stubborn thesis that everyone is principally and irreducibly a member of some race or category ... as if each of those had a Platonic idea behind it that guaranteed it as pure and unchanging from the beginning to the end of time" (196). In *False Face* the races are distinguished. Native feelings are distinguished from White feelings. "And now somebody wanted to put it [Tom's artwork] up in a gallery for White people to gawk at. Still, he knew it was good. Pride stirred in him. But it was White pride" (63). Tom's White self is a source of shame to his Indian self; "it made the Indian part of him ashamed" (63). He checks his own behaviour for its quotient of Whiteness and Nativeness, and has strong ideas about what constitutes each. "But if he had been completely Indian, he wouldn't have liked it at all. He would have been too shocked at the idea of displaying the mask even to be tempted" (64). Although Katz raises the interesting idea about traditional Native concepts of what in non-Native terms is called *art*, she stops short of fruitful discussion. Rather she confirms the dichotomy that Natives are private, modest people, quietly rather than showily proud. They do not make their art public.

Although this may initially seem to be virtuous, Perry Nodelman points out that “positive essentializing isn’t all that much different from negative stereotyping. Both deny the possibility of individual growth or change, or of different but equally valid ways of being ... Native American” (1996, 130).

Sometimes Tom is completely Native, “[he] ran, breath sobbing, feet thudding. He was all Indian now, an Iroquois fleeing for his life” (Katz 25). Sometimes he is “half.” “Half an Indian, he corrected himself.” Tom could conceivably be both Indian and White, two things instead of “neither one thing or the other” (18). His task would then be to live in the space the dual heritage provides. Tom’s mother experiences a loss of self as well. Speaking about her experiences on the Reserve she says, “I didn’t belong there ... I never belonged. I was just George Walsh’s White wife. And when he died, I wasn’t anything at all” (48).

Both characters’ ideas of self are determined by lack of racial purity. Tom because he is Metis and Tom’s mother because she lost the blood connection she had through her husband — a tenuous connection at best. Because neither Tom nor his mother meet some unstated criterion of race they are not “anything.” The implication is that in order to belong on the Reserve you must be Indian as defined by the Indians already on the Reserve who are, presumably, pure. There is no sense of maintaining two identities, that of a dual if not a multi-faceted person. Why not?

The text struggles with Tom’s need to choose a home. “Tom went away from the longhouse. The Reserve was a foreign place, and he was a foreigner in it. He walked and walked, and felt no belonging. Go home, he thought. But there was no home. There was only London, and here” (105). Katz presents *place* as a choice Tom must make, one over the other, although neither place is welcoming. At the end of the novel Tom learns to see Londoners as *people* rather than in terms of their skin colour but again, Katz doesn’t express wholeness as multifaceted. She creates another category — that of homogenized “people.” “But they’re not just whites! They’re people too!” (105). This uniformity is reinforced when Tom realizes that Laney and her dad “were so much alike! Their shared appearance was a bond, rooting them so they never had to feel alone” (147). In Katz’s terms, similar physical features such as skin colour or green eyes assures unity.

The Reserve remains a dichotomized place. In a journal response my graduate student Kara Smith writes:

‘Ownership of land’ and ‘identity formation’ are negatively illustrated. The postcolonial notion of ‘who belongs here?’ and ‘who/how does a person own this?’ is very poorly represented in *False Face*. Tom, who is half Mohawk, is excluded from a portion of his land and people due to his other relationships. It’s not Tom who is misrepresented, but the First Nations People. Would one group exclude one member because they are not thoroughbred? Should people be compared with lower life forms like dogs and horses? It bothers me that the character Tom faces this type of criticism from the very people he needs to identify with most, yet this antagonism is not what ticked me off — it was the author’s treatment of the band members. Although there are people in every race who are bigoted and discriminatory, I don’t feel that everyone Tom would have come across on the First Nation’s Reserve would have been that way. In

fact, if a young man is struggling with his spirituality, there are often people there, ready, more-than-ready, to guide him in what needs to be faced. Tom was left with the following impression then: I don't belong here because my mother is White, therefore I am White, and therefore I belong in the White world (whatever that is). I doubt this is the message a First Nations Reserve would convey, speaking from a person's point of view whose husband is Mohawk.

In tandem with language, land is a basis of aboriginal cultures but in Katz's terms is not a place where tensions can exist. Her essentialist view of Native people includes the romantic notion of a Reserve unsullied with such complications as Metis or Whites or the influences of mainstream culture. Yet among positive cultural movements First Nations Reserves also struggle with serious problems, doubts and loss of identity. In creating a distinctly pure (albeit negative) environment, Katz disallows tensions which need to be voiced and thus the challenges to which native Canadians as well as non-native Canadians need to respond. Otherwise we just replace the injurious *colonist* with the good-intentioned *White lady* writer, replace one ideology with another, one power broker with another. Chamberlin/ Brody say that:

the setting up and living out of dichotomies is an especially pernicious legacy of colonization. Primitive or civilized, hunter or farmer, warrior or peacemaker, traditional or progressive, legal or illegal, rural or urban, material or spiritual, young or old, women or men, oral or written, separation or assimilation, nothingness or nationality, aboriginal or non-aboriginal ... these are the categories which are used to analyze aboriginal people, and the choices that are put to them. Take one or the other. Be modern, assimilated ... or primitive, traditional. Many try to move beyond these categories ... but most are caught up in them, and the solutions that are devised — development for the underdeveloped, communication and transportation to the centre for those on the margins, employment for the unemployed, and so forth — reflect this. (14)

As the Report says, the binaries used to analyze groups and the polarized choices that are put to them, also become their either-or solutions. We see this in *False Face* where the polarized viewpoints lead to seemingly inclusive, but ultimately superficial, solutions. "Tears, not red and not black, not White and not Indian. Just tears, from someone who was a person, nothing else" (145). Through the universalizing tears Katz acknowledges different aspects in one person; but she doesn't internalize the differences or acknowledge the tensions that must exist within them: she again resorts to "nothing." If Tom cannot be one thing or the other, then he is nothing. There does not appear to be any way of maintaining contradiction, only of applying inappropriate universals. The tears mark a shifting point and Tom is able to see beyond outward appearances. "There's somebody in there behind those looks" he cried, to Mrs. McIntyre, to all of them, to himself. You don't know who, you never even tried to find out. You just looked and decided, and the real person never had a chance!" (145). Although young readers may appreciate that reconciliation occurs, they will not be able to see how Tom comes to understand this, or how to apply this universal principle to the starkly delineated characters and issues throughout the book. The hazard of superimposing any universal ideal, one geared to suit the established codes of behaviour, is that it does not allow for difference.

In the preface to *The Bush Garden* (Weaver, 1991), a collection of writings about Canadian culture, Northrop Frye distinguishes between the terms unity and identity.

A sense of unity is the opposite, then, of a sense of uniformity. Uniformity, where everyone 'belongs,' uses the same clichés, thinks alike, and behaves alike, produces a society which seems comfortable at first but is totally lacking in human dignity. Real unity tolerates dissent and rejoices in variety of outlook and tradition. (111)

Tom's silenced culture and history of his life on the Reserve lacks in human dignity. The tensions remain unvoiced. Tom is alienated from the Reserve. He does not have the support from First Nations people nor the information he needs. The novel does not suggest how Tom can deal with these submerged tensions or how they might co-exist with other aspects of his life. These intersections are telling. Said observes that "one should not pretend that models for a harmonious world order are ready at hand" (20). Indeed, Heather Scutter (1996, 3) reminds us that "when a concern is articulated for cultural continuity, we always have to ask: on whose behalf? with what exclusions? within what model of cultural integrity? for fear of what change?" Rather than pursuing nationalistic interests we need to spend time studying the productive transactions among societies, groups, and identities.

Out of the Dark

Out of the Dark is one of Katz's more recent novels, and I include it here to highlight some of the ways it confirms patterns in *False Face*. The book deserves consideration. The interwoven Viking/contemporary stories reflect each other dramatically and the accident unfolds powerfully, creating tension throughout the book. Like *False Face* however, it deals with identity and belonging in an unsatisfactory way. Ben Elliott loses a parent (a mother this time) and with his father and brother moves to what was once his father's home, Newfoundland. In some way this novel reverses the plot of *False Face*. Ben returns to his father's home, feels he doesn't belong, and learns that he does. In the meantime however, Ben imagines himself to be Tor, the Viking shipbuilder who comes to colonize the Skraeling natives of Newfoundland.

The dichotomies noted on the back cover include "the lines between past and present, fantasy and reality." More interesting are those between Newfoundlanders and non-Newfoundlanders, between Vikings and Skraelings, and between belonging and not belonging. During the course of the novel Ben is reconciled with the place and the people but again, the nature of that reconciliation is problematic. "Those boys (Newfoundlanders) lived here before us, see? Just like the Skraelings, when the Vikings came. And the Skraelings didn't like the Vikings, and those boys didn't like us" (18). Ben says this early on and this polarization confounds him throughout the story. Inherent in the dichotomy of Native/Newcomer is the assumption of colonization: there are reasons the Skraelings do not like the Vikings. New people colonize. The boys to whom Ben refers maintain a rigid code of identity to be sure, but unlike the Skraelings they welcome Ben. It is Ben the colonizer, to pursue the logic, who feels vulnerable to the Natives.

But conflating feelings of vulnerability (Ben's), and the vulnerability of indigenous groups confronted by colonizers negate past and present harm to Native people. Colonial models of history have to be challenged rather than assumed as Katz assumes the centrality of the colonizer surrounded by a smorgasbord of stereotypes of indigenous people ranging from exotic to semi-illiterate. The question of historical representation must not be left to the positive images doled out by those in power but be centred on the nature of the power relations among groups.

The native Newfoundlanders are identified most obviously by their language: "'Well, what *we* does — here in Ship Cove, see — is fish.' His [Keith's] voice was so casual it was a mockery. 'Or we hunts. *Outside* things, get me? We leaves books to the tourists'" (36). The expressions and syntax are different from that of the Ottawa boys'. Capturing the rhythms and peculiarities of language contributes to a sense of culture, but Katz's picture is incomplete. Although she represents some of the people some of the time, she suggests she represents all of the people all of the time. As Nodelman says,

Both (positive essentializing and negative stereotyping) create serious problems for people like my own children, whose parents belong to different ethnic groups and who therefore must be perceived by essentialists as somehow incomplete or fragmented rather than as the whole individual beings they are. (130)

But it is not just Katz's all-encompassing generalization which troubles. Rather than create interesting diversity, the differences divide people into "you and us" as in the following dialogue between Melissa, a Newfoundlander, and Ben.

'You says it funny,' Melissa said. 'Saint An-tho-ny.'
'How do *you* say it?'
'*Snantny's*,' she said. 'It's our town. Who knows better how to say it? Us or you?' (91)

Katz also maintains her earlier stance that half and half do not equal two halves or one whole, rather, they equal "alien." "Ben and Keith were outsiders, though. Dad couldn't see that. He said they were half Newfoundlanders, but no one here would notice it. Anyway, Ben didn't feel as if he was half a Newfoundlander. He felt like somebody who'd landed on an alien planet" (27).

At the end of the novel, dramatically, in less than three pages, Ben learns to be part of the community to which his blood ties him. By flinging the axe into the lake Ben denies murder as a solution to his problems. This security allows him to imaginatively relive his passive role in his mother's murder which he can now see not as the action of a weak person, but that of somebody who chooses not to kill others. This releases him from the friends/enemies dichotomy and frees him to accept the boys' friendship, but it forces him to make polarized choices. Not just friendship over hatred, but gardening books over Norse mythology, his father's ideas over his own, Newfoundland over Ottawa, belonging over not belonging. Even his house he now sees as painted in "sunrise" rather than in "ugly" colours (179, 31). "Belonging" depends on assimilation rather than respect for difference.

This is not to argue that these changes are either good or bad for Ben, but that Ben makes these wholesale changes in one paragraph, one thought process. He embraces his father's heritage without reflection, after one hundred and seventy-five pages of reflection on why he should not do so. Unquestioning uniformity is as problematic here as it is in *False Face*.

Bad Boy

Unlike the stereotypically polarized viewpoints of *False Face* and *Out of the Dark*, *Bad Boy* attempts to present a subject *with* its contradictions, and voices those in heretical tones. A.J. struggles with his inherited Italian traditions of respect for elders, with traditional concepts of team sports, friendship, and with homosexuality. None of these topics is necessarily Canadian but they are cultural and suggest concepts of community of which sexuality, sports and issues of violence are a part. Said (1993, xxv) states that "all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic." Although Said defines racial and national communities here, those particular communities are themselves mosaics which include considerations of gender and sexual preference.

Weiler's work updates the notion of *bad boy* through its qualities of a "masculine romance ... [as] constituted by two concepts; competitiveness or gamesmanship, and normative heterosexuality" (Harker 24-25). This "literary subgenre" typically presents young males who are "naughty" enough not to be considered good boys but who keep the scope of their activities within the realm of what is acceptable in male-defined society (22-23). It is in keeping with a "massive effort by adults to *colonize* children: to make them believe that they ideally ought to be the way adults would like them to be ... and to downplay the significance of all the aspects of their selves that inevitably don't fit the adult roles" (Nodelman 41). And so the book is resolved in terms of the "masculine romance" with A.J. as a machismo liberal hero; in the silence around Tully's homosexuality; and, says Nodelman in a response to Harker's review, in the conceptions of homosexuality. He states:

For all of Harker's insistence that *Bad Boy* is opening up new ways of thinking about being male, its main characteristic is its structure of oppositions and counterpoints and, therefore, its adherence to the basic structures of patriarchal thinking: the division of everything in the world we perceive into binary oppositions. In this novel, homosexuality is understood to be exactly opposite to heterosexuality in every way imaginable. (40)

Nodelman is only partly correct. Weiler confirms and challenges stereotypes. Regarding the former, I agree with Nodelman that Weiler's notions about masculinity are "a lot more conventional ... and therefore, I'm afraid, a lot less healthy" (34). For example, Weiler presents sexual arousal as the result of physical aggression. "Weiler presents without disapproving comment that sadistic advances of Tully's sexual partner Derek ... as normal homosexual activity" (37). She characterizes homosexuality strictly as a sexual rather than loving relationship; that homosexuals engage in casual, frequent sexual acts; and that they enjoy sadistic sex acts. However, Weiler challenges the notion that homosexuality can

be cured like a disease and most importantly she discusses the topic, bringing forward her particular point of view through her characters (123). Within a society which silences discussion of homosexuality, raising it as an issue for young people challenges adults' "colonizing" efforts.

I also disagree that its "structure of oppositions and counterpoints" equal "its adherence to the basic structures of patriarchal thinking." Although *Bad Boy* is dependent upon binary oppositions, the binaries are challenged by other binaries, allowing a broader play of values and perspectives. They are mediated in the way Said suggests so that the intersections of our ideas and daily lives is laid clear, and so that we see the struggles and power relations inherent in aspects of society. Readers cross those intersections with A.J. as they travel the course of the book with him. His task is not just to choose among opposing values but to learn *how* to choose. As I discussed above binary constructions can be used for patriarchal purposes and they can also be used to elucidate the way readers can grow in their understanding of the complexities of issues and situations.

Bad Boy goes beyond conventional issues in adolescent literature and posits those issues within bold dichotomies. Weiler challenges the entrenched dichotomy of the *bad boy* genre in literature by creating its polar opposite, the *gay boy*. "She attacks the consensus of masculinity that informs the genre at its most critical point of vulnerability" (Harker 29). Weiler also challenges the notion of the acceptability of violence in sports by contrasting that glamorous world with the personally degrading cost of being the *goon*. Weiler creates a complex picture of the struggles and conflicts that being part of the hockey team entail. Notably, these are issues which are acceptable within a particular masculine context, the one in which A.J. can prove himself as a valuable player on the Moosejaw Cyclones hockey team.

This *male* world is where A.J. feels comfortable testing the boundaries of being a bad boy. By trying on different roles within the team (goon, rebel, team player, jock), A.J. discovers how he feels, and how he wants to be identified. Part of this work lies in his relationships with both men and women as they are defined within his world. Harker notes that "Weiler signals the reader that A.J., eyeing 'Pink Satin,' in the opening pages of the novel, is to be viewed as the appropriate hero" of this "masculine romance" (24-25). The challenge which disrupts this assured lifestyle is delivered by Tully, A.J.'s best friend. Although Tully participates skillfully in the masculine world by dating the prettiest girl at school, driving a hot red car, playing hockey and flaunting a flamboyant personality, he is not what he seems to be. A.J. discovers that Tully is gay. "I think the big bad defense just had his perspective widened," says Derek, Tully's lover (73). The limitations of the "pervasive masculine text" of the locker room, school and home become clear. A.J. is ill prepared to contemplate his friend's homosexuality.

However, A.J. *tries on* homosexuality in much the same way he tries on ways of being on the team. He plows through a range of emotions and actions, old and intensely new ones, including: fleeing the gay hangout where he finds Tully; hanging out with macho team members; fearing association with Tully; rationalizing that Tully must be confused; questioning his own sexuality; and by expressing his rage through brute force. He dedicates himself to reinstating his

macho *Bad Boy* image by being the fiercest player on the team as well as attempting a date rape of Summer (99, 170). He also pleads with Tully:

Oh, Tul. If you could just get over it. Back on track. You've gotten out of other things. One mistake doesn't have to screw up your whole life. I'd never bring it up. I swear to God. And I'd be the friend I'm supposed to be. If you could just get over it. (113)

None of his attempts satisfy, but each one brings him closer to restoring order to his world. A critical moment occurs when Tully confronts A.J. about his sexually aggressive behaviour towards Summer. The boys fight, and A.J.'s intense emotional pain forces him to let go of his weak defences and share with Tully the questions he has about his own sexuality. Emotional risk is not part of the "Mustang society" to which the boys have subscribed.

In this way the reader can redefine along with A.J. notions of friendship as they are constituted in the binaries of the dominant "masculine romance" at the beginning of the book, to greater complexity and emotional intimacy at the end. Unlike Tom, A.J. is not forced to choose between mutually exclusive binaries. Rather, he experiences a variety of options in a variety of ways: that is, physically, cognitively, emotionally and sexually. Readers may not be as clear about A.J.'s final choice as they are about Tom's in *False Face*, but may have greater confidence in A.J.'s ability to deal with whatever life has to offer him as a "resilient human being" (191). A.J. learns that as human beings we have little control over the external events of our lives. What we do control is our responses to those events. As in fairy tales, the hero is rewarded for his/her right response, which in A.J.'s case, is kindness and attentiveness to uncles and girlfriends alike.

It takes time for A.J. to incorporate his expanded view of friendship into his world view and there are tensions. He must spend time with his father, his father's girlfriend June, with Summer, by himself and apart from Tully. But the issue is out in the open, at least among A.J., Tully and Summer. The greater silence in this book around homosexuality in a society which finds it unacceptable is problematic and although perhaps understandable in this particular novel, silence and its concomitant denial remains a colonial response to homosexuality. Although Weiler might have rescued one male from the rigid definition of what it means to be male, the rest of the hockey team, the coach, parents, the entire society, remain. In effect, our Canadian society. How then do the books I have discussed elucidate the forms Canadian issues take and point to their mediation and resolution?

One of the elements of Katz and Weiler's romantic fiction is the good/evil binary between which the heroes must struggle. These stories are not, however, just contents to be examined for the cultural or sociological values they contain. Rather, each writer constructs the relationship between content (the struggle between good and evil), and form (binary constructions), and each does it differently. Katz privileges the form so that the pseudo-realistic content of her story is subservient to its binary structure. At the end of their respective stories, Tom lives on one side of the Native/White binary, and Ben claims the Newfoundlander side of the Native/Other dichotomy. In *Bad Boy*, Weiler plays within the binary constructions, and posits one against the other. She sets up

unconventional dichotomies. At the end of the story A.J. does not embrace any one position and the story is his journey into deeper exploration of the familiar terrain of the male communities of sports and of relationships within families and among friends. The unfamiliar terrain he navigates includes a foray into the homosexual community, into his new strong feelings, and into broadening his concepts of sportsmanship and friendship. He understands something more of the multidimensionality of life, of the options available to him, and his own responses. Despite the book's main characteristic of oppositions and counterpoints the binary oppositions in A.J.'s life do not result in his unwavering "adherence to the basic structures of patriarchal thinking: the division of everything in the world we perceive into binary oppositions" (Nodelman 40). At the end of the story A.J. still strikes a macho pose but he is not limited to that one posture.

These connections between form and content can be described as a character *walking his talk*. There is a continuity between who the hero is and what he does. A.J.'s exploratory attitude toward the events that transpire and the people with whom he interacts results in a plot that shifts back and forth, never settling on a permanent position. Both the *how* and the *what* of *Bad Boy* comprises its meaning.

Contextualizing the Theory

This paper suggests that postmodern theories can achieve the desired readings of texts, and should inform the texts themselves. I remain convinced of the need to sustain the tensions within issues, but how and when the necessary dialogue must occur I am not so certain. The novels' characters remind me of the passion which young people have for their peer communities, as well as the passion some adults have for theirs, such as those in the hockey scene described in *Bad Boy*. However superficial a social group may appear, its roots can run deeply into the shared fantasies that form the basis of its culture, and where its members find common ground.

The answer to my initial question — whether Canadian books for young adults convincingly mirror Canadian realities — must be yes as well as no. Although it may not be what reflective adults wish for Tom, his need to be absolutely clear about whether he is Indian or White is realistic and believable. His need to identify and to be immediately identifiable in what appears to be the most superficial of ways may provide him the footing to do more meaningful work. Adolescents' needs for conformity and security may at times outweigh their need to make forays into the murkier world of postmodern values where "the world itself is just a ceaseless play of difference and non-identity, and whatever most brutally squashes all this is what is most reprehensible" (Eagleton 32). Tom, Ben and A.J. struggle differently with the tension between uniformity and difference and the *desirable* indeterminate quality of A.J.'s experience does not reflect all Canadian realities. For the adolescent characters of these novels the postmodern valuing of difference is not a particularly desirable or neutral conversation, but brings into stark conflict the security of belonging versus the fear of being alienated. For adolescents as for all people there are times when being different and thus valuing difference in others is a viable option; there are other times when it is not. This does not mean that novels should perpetuate black and white or blanket solutions to what always will be hugely complex issues, but

neither should the theory lest it become a simplistic prescription. Eagleton questions postmodern values when presented as “a truth we would grasp if only we could shuck off our homogenizing concepts and levelling meta-languages.” He asks whether we are “not landed back in some version of the naturalistic fallacy, which holds that there is a way of getting from the way things are to the way we should live, leaping from description to prescription?” (Eagleton 32).

Adolescents may find growth and maturation difficult, but it may be just as true that the multidimensions of their cultural experience is far less problematic for them than for those of an older generation. A friend told me recently that one of his daughter’s friends is Hungarian and does a Hungarian bottle dance at the Hungarian pavilion at Folkklarama — along with Vietnamese and Wasp children whose parents have also decided for some reason that it’s a good idea for them to learn Hungarian folk dancing. Meanwhile, another of his daughter’s friends, whose dark complexion she inherited from her Mexican mother, might look a little out of place doing Scottish dances at the Scottish pavilion that represents half her heritage. And so it goes. My friend says he suspects urban Canadian kids of today are further ahead in their acceptance of all this than the representatives of earlier generations who run the Folkklarama pavilions and write the novels.

Conclusion: Keep Talking

Although literature and language do perpetuate stereotypes and do force false conclusions, their structures are in themselves not bad or wrong. As creators of our symbolic systems we must use and interpret them in ways that reflect, in form and content, what we believe and value. Through comparison and contrast we come to know both others and ourselves, but the quality of our reflection on these differences will determine the depth of our understanding. Writers and readers must move beyond superficial black-or-white categorization, must reflect deeply on the subjects contained within dichotomies and make finer and finer distinctions among them. They must live with the inherent tensions, seeking ways of incorporating the complexity of identities into their thinking and writing. Only this need to investigate but also to maintain contradiction can defy the “entrenchment of existing dichotomies and disputes” in the educational system but also in larger systems (Chamberlin/Brody 3).

The Report raises this issue in terms of aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples in Canada, saying:

Many of these issues cannot — indeed must not — be resolved. They represent contradictions and paradoxes and problems that lie at the heart of history, and also of relations between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples in Canada. These tensions, or more positively, the dialogues they generate — need to be sustained. (3)

Rachel Uyarasuk illustrates how a Canadian can recast an identity which includes contradictions and tensions. I met Rachel a number of years ago at an Elders’ Conference held at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. She had only been south once before, for treatment for tuberculosis in Hamilton, Ontario. A number of Rachel’s grandchildren study at Trent, and at Rachel’s presentations

her granddaughter translated both the questions audience members asked, and the answers Rachel gave.

Rachel is an Inuit woman now in her 90s. The mother of ten children, Rachel was probably born in a *qamaq* (sod house) in the NWT in the winter of 1914. When asked about her Shamanistic tradition at the conference, Rachel said that her people gave up the traditional religion when they converted to Christianity. She was a small girl when the Anglican missionaries arrived in the NWT. Rachel's concern whether she is *saved* identifies her, albeit negatively, as a Christian. So it was particularly amazing on the last evening of the conference to witness Rachel sing the Shaman's *Welcoming Song* at the beginning of the Inuit games in which her grandchildren participated. This traditional song from her forfeited culture, sung in Inuktituk, is one which Rachel would have heard as a young girl but which her grandchildren taught her to sing for herself at age 90!

Rachel is a richly diverse Canadian. What does Rachel call herself (Rachel is surely not her birth name)?

How is she defined by others? What is Canadian about Rachel — racial origin? language? religion? if so, which one? Her centuries old Shamanistic tradition, or the relatively newly arrived at Christianity? Although Rachel adheres to patriarchy in some aspects of her life, she transcends it in others. In at least one dramatic example, Rachel moves beyond the limits of the categories which define but which do not contain her. Happily, like Rachel Uyarasuk, and unlike Tom in *False Face*, many aboriginal people know that they do not have to make choices between being "traditional" or "assimilated." "They know that they always have been and still are somebody living somewhere" (Brody/ Chamberlin 14).

The issues mapped within these books and the way they are negotiated are relevant for Canadians. How do we fare in resolving the tensions inherent in our complexities? On the one extreme are "identity politics" which, according to Said, become "separatist politics with the people in them retreating into their own enclaves" (Wachtel 671). We know this well in Canada, where separatist politics force the nation into mutually exclusive cultural and regional definitions. We have seen that literature can also model retreat into "enclaves" which result in a "kind of vacuum where there should be exchange, dialogue, and communication — in short a human presence" (Wachtel 670). An antidote is literature which provides the cultural space to have human discussions about the things which are important to people. Novels which develop ambiguous relationships among the binaries they imply seem to be more useful in providing a forum for exchange and communication regarding Canadian questions about identity.

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