

# The Trouble with Reader-response Theory when Reading Multicultural Literature:

## A Critique of Dana Fox's and Kathy's Short's *Stories Matter*

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FOLLOWING THE interest in multiculturalism in the 1990s, writers and educators became sensitized to issues surrounding cultural poaching, the practice of Westerners writing about other cultures (Levy, 2000); outsiders writing about alien cultures risk representing cultures inaccurately and stereotyping, and educators taking up these texts in their classrooms risk reinforcing these same stereotypes. Awareness of this issue has encouraged publishers and children's literature award boards to favor authors who are cultural insiders. This trend, however, has led to a backlash among some writers who simply want to tell a good, engaging children's story about another culture. "What is so wrong with writing about another culture?" they ask.

*Stories Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children's Literature* edited by Dana L. Fox and Kathy G. Short (National Council of Teachers of English, 2003) presents the panoply of views on what counts as multicultural children's literature. Written for practitioners, that is, educators, writers, and readers embroiled in this debate, the twenty-two essays in the collection employ testimony and storytelling, textual analyses, literature reviews and classroom observations that serve less to prove a point than to give voice to the multifarious views engaged in this heated and ongoing debate. In serving as a platform for these varied views, the collection does not appear to take a stance. However, the order and selection of the essays make clear the editors' implied

message: cultural authenticity in literature is difficult to define but can be determined through judicious assessment of the accuracy of the text. This seemingly innocuous stance, which persists in discussions on multicultural literature today, assumes that with proper research, anyone can authentically represent a culture. This view privileges a reader’s reception of a text over the political circumstances surrounding the creation, publication, and dissemination of a book. It defines cultural authenticity with the aesthetic considerations of reader response theory over the political considerations inherent in a cultural studies perspective.

As President of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) from 2013-2015, Kathy Short represents an important thinker in the debate over multicultural education and her work with the *English Journal* and at the University of Arizona reflects her commitment to properly incorporating multicultural literature in our classrooms. Shortly after 9/11, the *English Journal*, the NCTE’s journal for high school English teachers, for which Short served as Editor, devoted an entire issue to World Literature curriculum suggestions. Since that May 2002 issue, the *English Journal* has continued its commitment to World Literature running a regular column dedicated to issues in World Literature. Her website “Worlds of Words” includes a book-length manuscript of considerations to note when incorporating world literature in the classroom. Short represents a key figure in the study of multicultural literature for K-12 educators today. Her colleague Dana Fox from Georgia State University is a frequent collaborator.

The collection does not acknowledge that it concerns mainly domestic literature, in this case American literature. Although the authors in *Stories Matter* disagree on what counts as multicultural literature, two of the essays make reference to a definition offered by Cai and Bishop (2003, p. 214) that point out three distinct categories: 1. World literature, “said to include all literature” 2. “Cross-cultural literature” referring to works by one people about another people and crosses cultures and 3. “Parallel-cultural literature”, books written by individuals of the same ethnicity described in the book (p. 144). Although five of the twenty-two authors discuss the issue of writing about *foreign* cultures, the authors in this collection are mainly debating children’s books (grades K-8) about ethnic minority cultures, a fact the book resists acknowledging. This absence is significant, because while it purports to include international literature in its discussion, in fact, it does not. Rather, it conflates international literature with domestic literature, complicating the issue of authenticity.

This book review does not take up the problems associated with the conflation of ethnic American literature and transnational literature. This point has been made by others who have observed that conflating diversity within and diversity without is not only erroneous (Choo, 2013), contributes to inaccurate portrayals of both ethnic minorities and foreigners (Sung and Meyer, 2011; Levy, 2000), and exacerbates the perception of minorities as perpetual foreigners ineligible for citizenship in their home country (Kim, 1982; Smith, 2006). Indeed, Suzanne Choo (2013) in her latest book on cosmopolitan approaches to teaching literature notes that at the 2011 NCTE Conference, sessions continued to conflate global literature and multicultural literature (p.166), attesting to the continued confusion and disagreement over this area.

The term “cultural authenticity,” arguably the centerpiece of the book, is even more contentious. In their introduction, the editors maintain that cultural authenticity comprises “one of the key issues under debate” (p. 5). Despite this strong opening stance,

most of the authors in the collection agree that “cultural authenticity” constitutes a kind of literary “passing” to use Henry Louis Gates’ term, an aesthetic sleight of hand, not rooted in the identity of the author but in the truthfulness of the story itself. In fact, “all writers are ‘cultural impersonators’,” Gates reminds us (141). Even among those writers who point out the problematic politics involved in telling the stories of a historically disenfranchised, silenced peoples, the authors in this collection agree that “authenticity” has to do with accuracy in representation. True to the title of the collection, it is the story that matters, nothing else. As a result, the bulk of the essays concern the difficulty and complexity in representing cultures accurately, a view that belittles the politics of dominant cultures writing minority stories. To be sure, these views are included. Jacqueline Woodson, W. Nikola Lisa, Thelma Seto, Violet Harris, Mingshui Cai, Zhihui Fang, Danling Fu, Linda Leonard Lamme, Judi Moreillon all point out the politics inherent in writing another’s stories, but their demands fall by the wayside as the collection hones in on textual critiques of inaccurate, insensitive minority representations. Taking a cultural studies perspective, Woodson, Lisa, Seto, Harris, Cai, Fang, Fu, Lamme, and Moreillon, are not asking for sensitive or realistic portrayals. They are arguing that individuals of a given culture write their own stories. Their concerns are political, not aesthetic.

Published shortly after 9/11, when the U.S. experienced a resurgence of interest in world literature (Smith, 2011), the debate over cultural authenticity reflected in *Stories Matter* nevertheless remains relevant today as classroom teachers across the country continue to read the work of cultural outsiders as representative of a certain culture. This book review attempts to make sense of the various positions by pointing out the reader-response and cultural studies lens from which they emerge.

After two introductions framing the issues discussed above, Part II of the collection shares the testimonies of various children’s book writers and illustrators. Beginning with Jacqueline Woodson’s stance that “we want the chance to tell our own stories” (p.33), in this section, Caucasian writers argue that they have a right to write what they want. Caucasian-American writer Judy Moreillon writes about her experience researching and reluctantly writing a well-received book about the Tohona O-odham Indian tribe. Kathryn Lasky points out that cultural outsiders can write good, authentic stories just as a bad stories can be written by insiders. If only minorities can write minority stories, she argues, then should all writers only write autobiographies? Not profiteering or racist in their motivations, these writers point out the honest struggles they face in justifying their work. If they want to write a book about another culture, if their intentions are honorable, if they research their subject thoroughly, why shouldn’t they be able to write a book about another culture? The chapter ends with an essay by Thelma Seto entitled “Multiculturalism is not Halloween” which takes the strong stance that writing as an outsider represents a form of “cultural theft” (p.93), a way of controlling the images of others (p.94), and a form of cultural imperialism (p.95). By relating their ethnicities, home life, and occupations, these authors acknowledge the importance of the identities in informing their perceptions.

In Parts III, IV, and V, academics mainly from departments of Education in the U.S., offer textual analyses, literature reviews, classroom observations, and interviews of teachers to dispassionately break down the arguments presented in Part II. The eminent Henry Louis Gates Jr. offers a short history of children’s books praised for their

authenticity even though some were found to be written by highly racist individuals. The identity of the author does not matter in multicultural children’s literature, Gates finds. Agreeing with Gates, Joel Taxel acknowledges the need for writers to be “careful” when crossing boundaries but applauds the debate for encouraging writers to be more culturally sensitive. “It [cultural sensitivity] is good,” Taxel asserts, “because it now forces writers to be more careful...and that is not a bad thing” (p.152). In arguing that anyone can write multicultural literature, these authors disregard the identity of the author and the political circumstances in which books are written. If you can fool the reader, they conclude, it’s authentic, a myopic and problematic view, which disregards the politics involved in the creation and dissemination of a text.

With this same “culturally authentic” children’s book in mind, several essays point out the many potential pitfalls in representing a culture accurately. In their textual analyses of multicultural children’s books, Mo and Shen, Yenka-Agbaw, Noll, Barrera and Quinoa, and Cai point out the negative or inaccurate portrayals of Chinese, West Africans and Native Americans, misused Spanish terms, and the difficulty even among insiders to accurately write about a culture, whose mores change over time. In assessing whether books make the grade as culturally authentic, these writers encourage educators to take a close look at their text selections and ask: “Is the...culture evaluated from the perspective of [its] values?...Does the author recognize the diversity...Are ....dialects respectfully portrayed?...Does the literature portray realistic roles?” (p.185), a dizzying list of questions to ensure political correctness. While such questions are intended as helpful guidelines to cultural sensitivity, the questions are potentially confusing if individual classroom teachers are themselves cultural outsiders without a sensitivity to what “authentic” representations might look like.

Individual classroom teachers, several authors point out, also bring their own ingrained cultural stereotypes to the classroom. In classroom observations, Fang, Fu, and Lamme, and Dudley-Marley show how racist perspectives can infiltrate classroom practices among even the most well-intentioned teachers. Fang, Fu, and Lamme point out the Orientalizing, imperialist classroom practices inherent when teachers emphasize culture—for example, dress or food—over the storyline. And Dudley-Marley, in one of the most memorable essays of the collection, explores the racist baggage he himself brings to the classroom in selecting literature expressly for his minority students. His situation begs the question: why should we privilege readers’ response to texts, if readers themselves have little sensitivity to the cultures they’re reading about?

In being written for practitioners in education, the collection excuses itself from rigorous scholarship that might make it inaccessible to a wider audience. Gates’ essay does not include a bibliography though he rattles off a long list of titles. A thick description of classroom demographics and procedures is missing from teacher interviews and classroom observations. And when a Native student exclaims, “the way you tell it is just like how it is” (p.74), the reader is led to believe this suffices as confirmation of cultural authenticity.

Most importantly, none of the essays included an in-depth exploration of the theoretical underpinning of the editors or authors, which becomes important when we see that the collection espouses a reader-response approach to literature. The textual analyses offered in Parts III and IV all point out the ways in which writers can either get it right by winning awards and critical acclaim or getting it very wrong by missing one or two key

details of cultural accuracy that insiders would notice. According to this approach (Murfin and Ray, 1998), “literature exists meaningfully [only] in the mind of the reader” (p. 9); texts gain meaning only when they come in contact with the reader. According to this approach, a reader’s response trumps considerations of the material circumstances of the publication of the book. So while several writers (Woodson, Moreillon, Seto, and Harris) acknowledge the politics at play in dominant cultures writing the stories of minorities, the book’s emphasis on culturally accurate portrayals suggest that accuracy in research is more important than author identity.

A cultural studies or critical theory lens, in contrast, asks us to understand not just the reader’s response but the “matters of power and cultural politics” underlying the production of culture (Barker, 2000). Cultural Studies would ask us to take into account the identity of the writer, the circumstances of the writing, specifically “who owns and controls cultural production; who the distribution and mechanisms of cultural products; [and] the consequences of patterns of ownership and control for contours of the cultural landscape” (Barker, 2000, 9). A cultural studies perspective asks us to understand not only the individual reader responses, which may vary (p. 219), but also the material circumstances and power dynamics allowing the creation and distribution of the text. Cultural studies, for example, would seek to understand why, among books published in 2001 about African or African American history, less than half of these were by black authors or illustrators (Horning, Kruse, & Schliesman, as cited in Short, 2003, p. 28). They would prioritize this material reality over any interpretation of the text and would acknowledge that this imbalance signals an inequity that could be righted by reading the multicultural books by insiders. While this view is certainly represented in the collection, as the book progresses, the essays focus almost exclusively on issues of accurate representation, drowning out the earlier cultural studies perspectives. A clearer articulation of the authors’ framework throughout the collection would have helped to clarify the various positions; indeed, some authors including Moreillon, Harris, and Fang, Fu, and Lamme hedge, at times taking up a cultural studies perspective and at other times taking up a reader-response perspective within the same essay.

A cultural studies framework also acknowledges that writing is “never a neutral or objective phenomenon but a matter of positionality” (Barker, 2000, p. 5), another point which the essays in this collection ignore. By glossing over the issue of positionality, the authors in this collection suggest that as academics, they are not embroiled in the identity politics that the children’s books authors and illustrators in Part II admit to. But a close examination of the identities and perspectives of the authors (based on the descriptions they offer in their essays, their biographies, and their surnames) shows that African, Hispanic, and particularly Asian-American writers tended to highlight the dangers of “cross cultural” literature. Table 1, which lists the authors, their ethnic and professional identities, and their views, illustrates the extent to which each writer’s positionality determined their perspective. With the exception of three ethnic American writers (Henry Louis Gates Jr., Marc Aronson and Susan Guevara), ethnic minority writers expressed the view that it is difficult and sometimes wrong for outsiders to write the stories of insiders. Caucasian-American writers proved more varied in their view, with some, most notably Lasky and Rochman, strongly defending their right to write about any culture with other Caucasian-Americans, such as W. Nikola-Lisa and Curt Dudley-Marling, pointing out

their own unintended racisms. Even in the debate on this issue, we find that *author identity matters*.

That the children’s books authors and illustrators featured in Part II felt compelled (or were asked) to divulge their ethnicity, while the academics in the later chapters did not, highlights the fact that the artists and illustrators acknowledged that their race and positionality—indeed, their stake in the debate—played a role in their views while academics, for the most part, did not feel the need to disclose their ethnicity, presumably believing themselves to be objective. The negation of these identities points to an omission in the discussion that gets to the heart of the debate, if we are to understand this debate from a cultural studies perspective.

This collection of fervently written essays reflects what happened after the Culture Wars ended, and what happened is this: Caucasian-American writers continue to write about the experiences of ethnic minorities against intense criticism from publishers and readers while minority writers continue to fight to have their voices heard. While the multicultural movement represented a liberal push to include the voices of under-represented cultures in publishing and school curriculum, the publication and classroom selection surrounding “multicultural literature” remains highly charged with minorities continuing to compete with whites to tell their stories.

Revisiting these same issues in later publications (2011, 2012), Short acknowledges that it does matter that only a small fraction (2-3%) of translated book are written by cultural insiders. Momentarily taking up a cultural studies perspective, she writes that it matters “who defines us” (Short, 2012, p. 14). In the same breath, however, she writes that “outsiders to a culture can tell an authentic story through relationships and research”, thereby prioritizing the authenticity of the story over the writer’s identity. Even while she writes that a world of stories dominated by outsider perspectives is problematic, it is problematic, she maintains, because “it leads to misconceptions and absences or significant perspectives”. This view—that the reader’s response matters more than the reality of authorial authenticity—defines cultural authenticity as cultural accuracy, not the same concern for the an author or publisher with a more political bent. True to the title of this collection, this view privileges chimera over reality, fiction over non-fiction.

Yes, anyone can write about anyone else. However, the battle over who gets their stories published and read in schools continues. The debate in this collection, a debate which continues today, attests to the contested space multicultural children’s literature remains.

As a final note, while this collection claims to be about “children’s literature” and indeed most of the authors center their discussion around elementary (K-8) titles, the writers occasionally mention high school selections, begging the question, what is “children’s literature”? Where does high school reading belong in this discussion? And how does this discussion change when making selections for a survey course on world literature? That the book leaves these questions unanswered presents a dangerous opening for misinterpretation with educators potentially concluding that if anyone can write multicultural children’s literature, then anyone can write all forms of multicultural literature.

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