In this book, Johnston and Mangat consider ways in which particular postcolonial and multicultural literary texts are able to provide a space of cultural mediation for readers from various backgrounds. The studies described in the five chapters of the book explore the spaces of convergence of identity, culture and literature with students and teachers in high school contexts and undergraduates in university settings. In each study, readers are responding to texts that are culturally distant from their own literary and experiential histories. An objective of each study was to consider the nature of the cultural locations of the reader and the text, and the interstitial spaces between these locations. The book interrogates readers’ attempts to negotiate cultural difference in literary contexts and questions how this negotiation requires reading practices traditionally ignored in North American classrooms. The book will offer educators at the secondary and post-secondary levels rich material to draw upon for a rethinking of the school curriculum and will be of interest to scholars of postcolonial and literary studies.

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Reading Practices, Postcolonial Literature, and Cultural Mediation in the Classroom
Reading Practices, Postcolonial Literature, and Cultural Mediation in the Classroom

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DEDICATION

To Dad, Aman, Bin, Rob and the rest of my family for your love and support. And always, of course, to the memory of Mom. Thank you.

Jyoti.

To my grandchildren: Damon, Sebastien, Hana and Jackson. Thank you for reminding me of the important things in life.

Ingrid.
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INTRODUCTION

READING PRACTICES, POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE, AND CULTURAL MEDIATION IN THE CLASSROOM

The post-colonial text persuades us to think through logical categories which may be quite alien to our own. For a text to suggest even as much is to start the long overdue process of dismantling classical orientalism. (Vijay Mishra and Robert Hodge, 1991, p. 382)

The purpose of this book is to consider how postcolonial literary texts are able to provide a space of cultural mediation for readers from various ethnocultural backgrounds. The studies that comprise this book explore the spaces of convergence of identity, culture and literature with students and teachers in high school contexts and undergraduates in university settings. In each study, readers are responding to texts that are culturally distant from their own literary and experiential histories. In such texts, as Steen Larsen and Janos László (1990) explain, “readers must construct for themselves an understanding of the imaginary world with which the text deals” (p. 426). An objective of each study was to consider the nature of the cultural locations of the reader and the text and the “interstitial spaces” between these locations (Bhabha, 1994, p. 36).

Our primary interest here is to interrogate how readers attempt to negotiate cultural difference in literary contexts and how this negotiation requires reading practices often ignored in North American classrooms. Traditional high school reading practices have tended to focus on the New Critical approach of ‘close reading’ of texts, with an almost exclusive concentration on explication of literary elements such as symbolism, metaphor and syntax. Related to this still-entrenched approach to literature is the selected literature itself. A traditional canon of school literature remains within many teaching and learning environments (Bender- Slack, 2010, Johnston, 2003). As bell hooks (1994) explains:

The unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex, and class is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained. To some extent, we all know that whenever we address in the classroom subjects that students are passionate about there is always a possibility of confrontation, forceful expression of ideas, or even conflict. (p. 39)

This reluctance to engage with difficult questions of culture and difference often exists even within schools where teachers have an awareness of the increasing ethnocultural diversity of their school population and a desire to support the need to promote multicultural education. The attention to cultural diversity often takes
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the form of an adherence to static notions of multiculturalism that seek to value
pluralism but take little account of the dynamic and complex nature of cultural
difference. Homi Bhabha (1994) has pointed to distinctions between the two ways
of representing culture. He argues that signifiers of cultural diversity merely
acknowledge a variety of separate and distinct systems of behaviour, values and
attitude, and may entrench ideas that such differences are ‘exotic’ and static.
Cultural difference, he suggests, moves beyond thinking that cultural authority
resides in a series of fixed and unchanging objects and stresses the process by
which we come to know these objects and bring them into being. For Bhabha, the
concept of cultural difference emerges from post-structuralist thinking and
psychoanalysis, and is linked with the radical ambivalence that he sees in all
colonial discourse. This ambivalence, he argues, is evident in any act of cultural
interpretation, which is never static but is always changing and open to further
possible interpretations. As Bhabha (1994) elaborates:

Cultural diversity is an epistemological object—culture as an object of
empirical knowledge—whereas cultural difference is the process of the
enunciation of culture as ‘knowedgeable’, authoritative, adequate to the
construction of systems of cultural identification…. Cultural diversity is the
recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs; held in a time-frame
of relativism it gives rise to liberal notions of multiculturalism…. The
concept of cultural difference focuses on the problem of the ambivalence of
cultural authority. (p. 34)

Multicultural education in its focus on the more outward and static signs of
cultural diversity has become the North American mantra for paying attention to
issues of culture. Laurie Grobman (2007) asserts that

Multicultural texts require new critical attitudes and pedagogical approaches.
Prevailing models of multicultural theory and criticism, crucial as they are,
do not adequately address the issue of difference as it operates in
multicultural literary study and pedagogy. Although existing efforts to
foreground difference do address students’ (and most readers’) tendencies to
universalize multicultural texts by highlighting their cultural elements,
merely recognizing difference is not enough. (p. 32)

Multicultural education initiatives in Canada have focused on the need to
acknowledge the claims of indigenous inhabitants and to make provision for an
increasingly pluralistic immigrant population. In addition, Canada’s initiatives
have been guided by themes of bilingualism and the safeguard of heritage
languages, attempting to reconcile the maintenance of the cultures of the so-called
“Two Founding Nations” of Britain and France, with an added commitment to the
numerous other cultural groups in the country, including the many Aboriginal
cultures. Official policies of multiculturalism, issues of human rights, and antiracist
teaching philosophies have increased teachers’ awareness that changes need to be
made in what and how they teach. Yet these policies have done little to help
English teachers to understand how complex questions of representation are
READING PRACTICES

intertwined with issues of culture, race, gender, and ethnicity or to comprehend what it means to initiate new and transformational reading practices in their schools. As a result, despite “official” policies of multiculturalism that have been mandated at both federal and the provincial levels, changes have largely been ideological rather than structural and schools continue to function largely as assimilationist agencies.

Ato Quayson (2001) argues that in the multicultural classroom context, “even when attention is paid to the realities of race, class and identity, this is carefully managed so as to delink them from lived experience in order to detonate their potential explosiveness” (p. 184). Similarly, Greg Dimitriadis and Cameron McCarthy (2001) consider that, generally, multicultural education in North America has resulted in the creation of a discourse of containment about cultural difference. They point out that

multicultural education has become the new metadiscipline that is most often deployed to address the current eruption of difference and plurality in social life now invading the school. It has become a set of propositions about identity, knowledge, power and change in education, a kind of normal science, which attempts to “discipline” difference rather than be transformed by it. (p. 113)

According to these critics, while multicultural education in North America has succeeded in focusing more attention on questions of culture, it has done so by solidifying culture as an object of study. Students from “non-mainstream” cultures are thereby invited to retain and celebrate their nationalist histories and knowledges, while schools continue to resist the need to address complex issues of power relations, subjugated knowledges and practices. Despite paying lip service to the need for changes in reading practices, high school educators have overwhelmingly resisted any substantial shifts in how they approach literary studies in their classrooms. Most of the well-loved texts that have remained on school reading lists for decades continue to be taught, with little attempt to deconstruct or address issues of race, class, gender that appear in the literature, or to uncover the ideologies of the texts. Often, the introduction of some new multicultural texts is presented as an “add-on” to existing literature and taught as a culture tour of exotic and unknown places. In such classrooms, multicultural education is played out by parading newly represented cultures in what Deborah Britzman et al. (1993) have called “a seamless parade of stable and unitary customs and traditions or in the individuated form of political heroes modeling roles” (p. 189). Knowledge of these cultures, the authors continue, “is presented as if unencumbered by the politics and poetics of representation” (p. 189).

Postcolonialism, in contrast, offers possibilities for educators to challenge such binaries as “here-there,” “white-black,” and “centre-margin” and to move beyond a discourse of cultural containment towards a more radical engagement of difference. The objective here is less to promote debates over polarized entities and more to consider how the aesthetic and the political intersect in the study of literary texts. Reading “in-between” the aesthetic and the political might enable teachers to
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consider the fluid boundaries of culture, race and subjugated knowledges. This form of reading might also avoid over-simplifications about cultural difference and plurality in reading practices. As Dimitriadis and McCarthy (2001) suggest,

Thinking in postcolonial terms about the topic of difference and multiplicity in education means thinking relationally and contextually. It means bringing back into educational discourses all those tensions and contradictions that we tend to suppress as we process experience and history into curricular knowledge. (p. 119)

These tensions and contradictions may erupt as teachers and students encounter historical inequities on the bases of race, class and gender as valid topics of discussion in the English classroom alongside the literary analysis of texts. Teachers’ attention to considerations of historical and material contexts surrounding a text allows for contemporary problems of political, social and cultural domination to enter the classroom debates alongside discussions of literary allusions, foreshadowing, metaphor and metonymy.

Postcolonialism also challenges any easy understandings of the aftermath of empire and the colonial encounter as it exposes the problematics of literary production within the economies of the international marketplace, and brings to light what Deepika Bahri (1997) has termed “the functional economy and orientation of the postcolonial text” (p. 285). These issues, she claims, “are at least as important for pedagogy as they are for postcolonial theory” (p. 285). Teachers discussing a postcolonial text in the classroom might show how postcolonial writers are striving to write back against the centre. At the same time, they could begin to analyze with their students how and why such authors are writing in the former colonizers’ language, being marketed for, and read by Western academia and rewarded by international literary prizes from the West. As Bahri (1997) explains:

The postcolonial intersects with the complex functioning of the educational institution within a larger context: the world, the text, the critic…and the teacher and students…. That these sets are also dynamic rather than static makes it the more difficult to discern their boundaries. (p. 281)

Such complex intersections might also include deconstructing literary texts that have achieved particular canonical status within Western schools in an effort to understand how such texts have been normalized in the classroom and read in particular ways. In addition, one could introduce texts that students and teachers might not have traditionally engaged with in classroom settings in order to understand how traditional reading and teaching practices can be challenged by the texts themselves.

In this book, we focus predominantly on postcolonial texts and postcolonial reading practices while acknowledging the slipperiness of distinctions between texts that can be considered ‘postcolonial’ and those that would fall into the category of ‘multicultural.’ All the case studies discussed in this book explore the engagement of readers with postcolonial and multicultural literary texts with an appeal for adolescent readers. We understand these texts to include a range of literary genres that overtly or implicitly address issues of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, class,
READING PRACTICES

nationality, sexual orientation, power and marginalization. We work from the premise that both multicultural and postcolonial texts may take up historical perspectives, challenge notions of normativity, or critique understandings of so-called “authentic identities”. The discourse of multiculturalism, however, is often framed in terms of liberal humanist perspectives which celebrate tolerance, understanding, plurality and diversity. In contrast, postcolonial discourses address specific historical colonial legacies and the tensions that emerge from cultural difference. Postcolonial literatures, which encompass a huge variety of international writing, attempt to challenge the dominant literary and cultural discourses of the west and to critique the discursive and material legacies of colonization.

Based on our experiences as classroom teachers, university teacher educators and researchers interested in questions of literature, pedagogy and identity, we have come to understand that in reading, both meaning and identity can only be produced through a dialogic process that is both ambivalent and active. Here, we draw on the work of Homi Bhabha (1994) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), who advance theories of meaning and identity production that depend on dynamic interactions between individuals and texts. For these theorists, it is the areas between reader and text, individual and culture, where significant understanding can take place. Investigating the relationship between cultural identity and the ways in which it affects one’s reading of culturally diverse texts offers glimpses into this space of the convergence and interrogation of identity, culture and literature. While Bhabha and Bakhtin both underpin their ideas in different ways, both reflect on the significance of liminal spaces in which readers negotiate their engagement with texts.

Bhabha (1994), in *The Location of Culture*, highlights the concept of a Third Space in the process of interpretation:

> The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot ‘in itself’ be conscious. (p. 36)

This negotiation of meaning, according to Bhabha, is often unconscious, encompassing all the cultural signifiers and discourses resonant in the text read through particular and personal frames of reference.

Bakhtin also sees reading as a negotiation that takes place between a reader, a text and a larger cultural milieu. In his view, readers are “social subjects whose ‘personal responses’ are the result of their unique history of experiences in the world as literate, social beings” (Dressman, 2004, p. 48). For Bakhtin, language is always dialogic and always emerges within a social context. Erin Manning (2003) explains further that:

> Dialogy conceives knowing as the effort of understanding ‘the active reception of the speech of the other’ (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 113). By critically combining time, space, and alterity, Bakhtin places the content of cultural
expression into a context from whence a cultural manifestation cannot be definitively located solely in aesthetic terms, but must, rather, be reencountered within a social and political setting. (p. 13-14)

The following chapters are framed by these understandings of liminality and dialogy articulated by Bhabha and Bakhtin. They are also informed by the work of theorists and educators who share these perspectives and are concerned about emerging challenges and complex issues raised by literature, culture and pedagogy. In addition, each of the chapters is directly informed by the research we have conducted with high school teachers, students and undergraduate pre-service teachers. These studies highlight possibilities for readers to engage with literary texts that are culturally distant from their own experiences in a range of social and pedagogical contexts.

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

Chapter One: “Reading Myself, Reading the Other: Adolescents Interrogating a Postcolonial Text” discusses a study in which 10 high school students were asked to read a short story, “The Management of Grief,” by the Indian-born American author, Bharati Mukherjee. The story alludes to the 1985 terrorist bombing of Air India Flight 182 but, in effect, it interrogates the inadequacies of official policies of multiculturalism and pluralism in coping with a domestic tragedy that is “fundamentally an immigration tragedy with terrorist overtones” (Blaise & Mukherjee, 1987, p. ix). The focus of this chapter is on the responses of the students to questions of representation and stereotyping, particularly in relation to the one white character in the text. We discuss the responses of the students from European backgrounds to the culturally specific references in the story and the concerns expressed by students of East Indian backgrounds about how the story positions them in the eyes of their classmates. Ultimately, this study reinforces the value that culturally proximate reading has for students, especially for those who are unaccustomed to seeing their experiences reflected in school literature. This study also emphasizes the potential richness of a reading that repositions, as Other, students who are accustomed to seeing themselves reflected in the cultural mainstream.

Chapter Two: “Truth or Lie: Students Reading the Indeterminacies of an Aboriginal Auto/Biographical Text” explores responses of a class of grade 11 (16 year-old) students to reading Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman (1998), a collaborative telling of Yvonne Johnson’s life experiences mediated by her co-author, Rudy Wiebe. Our discussion focuses on the following aspects of students’ responses: their discomfort with and questioning of the ‘truth’ of the story as narrated by the two authors; their attempts to understand the circular structure of ‘a traditional tribal narrative’ (Gunn Allen, 1986, p. 79) with non-linear time sequencing and a shifting sense of space in depicting the crime scenes; and, their efforts to position themselves within the cultural and political dimensions of a narrative from which they felt culturally dislocated but morally implicated.
We also explore the particular pedagogical challenges and possibilities that *Stolen Life* presents as a “teaching text.” The classroom teacher wanted to “defamiliarize” her high school students’ preconceptions surrounding Aboriginal peoples in their community by asking them to read a non-fiction work that remained faithful to an oral storytelling tradition and opened up the tensions between stereotypes and an individual’s experience.

**Chapter Three:** “Telling Too Much: Cultural Translation in African Novels for Adolescent Readers” explores the responses of adolescent readers in a high school classroom to reading the first chapters of three African novels. One young adult novel, Nancy Farmer’s *A Girl Named Disaster* (1996) offers a culturally mediated text that consciously explicates “Shona culture” for adolescent Western readers. In contrast, Buchi Emecheta in *The Bride Price* (1976) and Richard Rive in ‘Buckingham Palace’: *District Six* (1986) write from within the cultural experiences they describe and take for granted that readers will bring their own understandings to the texts. Adolescent readers in this study did not perceive themselves as culturally alienated from the Emecheta and Rive texts. Rather than feeling themselves as dislocated readers of unfamiliar cultural texts, they saw these excerpts as sites of cultural exploration and learning. Our study suggests that students are not necessarily alienated when they read cross-cultural texts in which they may not be the intended audience and they prefer not to have every cultural reference “translated” for them. Students indicated that they had found themselves resisting the explicit didacticism they encountered in Farmer’s text that was consciously mediated for Western audiences.

These adolescent readers demonstrated an awareness of how authorial voice both obscures and illuminates questions of culture and “authenticity”. Although the students were relatively inexperienced readers, they nevertheless were able to articulate the ambiguities and tensions in how the themes of the books can be undermined or reinforced by the cultural markers implicit in their writing.

**Chapter Four:** “Outside the Comfort Zone: Developing Postcolonial Reading Practices in the English Classroom” offers reflections on two collaborative research studies in which pre-service and practicing teachers read and discussed postcolonial texts suitable for adolescent readers in their classrooms. These included literary works by Rosario Ferré (1994), Ha Jin (2000), Naguib Mahfouz (1994), V.S. Naipaul (1992) and Jhumpa Lahiri (1999). In addition to selected literary texts, the teachers explored the potential and limitations of postcolonial and multicultural rhetoric, curricula and activities for their own teaching. This chapter focuses both on the discomforts that emerged between teachers’ professed beliefs and their classroom practices, and on the possibilities for collaboratively developing postcolonial reading practices.

It is clear from these studies that even when the impetus for curricular change is strongly felt by practicing and beginning teachers, there needs to be long-term support for these changes to effectively challenge the entrenched canon of Western literature in Canadian schools today.

**Chapter Five:** “National Identity and the Ideology of Canadian Multicultural Picture Books: Pre-service Teachers Encountering Representations of Difference,”
co-authored with Joyce Bainbridge and Rochelle Skogen, explores the responses and understandings of pre-service English language arts teachers at one Alberta university to a range of contemporary Canadian picture books. Our study found that most of these 40 student teachers had little experience reading picture books that offer a variety of representations and portrayals of Canada’s diversity, and had not considered the potential for the use of such picture books in their classrooms. In our chapter we explore the following major themes that emerged from these participants’ responses to the texts: considering the pedagogy of picture books; perceiving oneself as ‘Canadian’; imagining the ‘Other’; and exploring controversial issues in picture books. We concluded that for these pre-service teachers, encounters with difference, even in seemingly simple literary texts, can be fraught with tensions related to notions of identity, disability, culture, race, gender and sexuality.

Following the five chapters, a brief “Afterwords” offers reflections on further possibilities for ways to mediate difference in print and media texts for contemporary school students and for literature teachers.

REFERENCES


CHAPTER 1

SPACES OF IMPACT: ADOLESCENTS
INTERROGATING A STORY OF THE AIR INDIA BOMBING

To enter into the postcolonial world is to see cultural relations at a global level, to understand the complexities of the histories and power relations which operate across continents. (Sherry Simon and Paul St-Pierre, 2000, p. 13)

“The Management of Grief,” a short story by Bharati Mukherjee (1988), was published as part of the collection The Middleman and Other Stories. These stories epitomize North America’s new “middlemen,” the “not-quites” who must negotiate “between two modes of knowledge” (p. 189). The story we are discussing here concerns the effects of the 1985 Air India bombing by Sikh terrorists on Toronto’s Indian community and specifically on the central character and narrator, Mrs. Shaila Bhave, who loses her husband and two sons in the crash. The narrator appears to be coping well with the tragedy and is asked by a government social worker, Judith Templeton, “to help as an intermediary—or, in official Ontario Ministry of Citizenship terms, a ‘cultural interpreter’—between the bereaved immigrant communities and the social service agencies” (Bowen, 1997, p. 48).

In this chapter, we explore the spatial, cultural and temporal disruptions that resonate from the story and the real life events surrounding the Air India plane crash. We ground our discussion in a study that explored the responses of ten high school readers, five Indo-Canadian and five Euro-Canadian students, who read the story fifteen years after the actual event. We consider how the story and the event function as spaces of impact in the context of Canada’s official multiculturalism, exposing and revealing the disruptions between public policy and the lived realities of Canada’s diasporic peoples.

The story is about a very specific event in Canadian culture; but it may also be about an event specific to a Canadian culture. In The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy, Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee (1987) tell us that they “saw it then, and see it now, as fundamentally an immigration tragedy with terrorist overtones” (p. ix). Mukherjee (1997) explains that

in 1985 a terrorist bomb, planted in an Air-India jet on Canadian soil, blew up after leaving Montreal, killing 329 passengers, most of whom were Canadians of Indian origin. The prime minister of Canada at the time, Brian Mulroney, phoned the prime minister of India to offer Canada’s condolences for India’s loss. (para. 13)
Despite the fact that this bombing was Canada’s largest mass murder, this attitude that the tragedy constituted an “Indian problem” persisted in Canada until well into the twenty-first century. Ironically, the human impact of the crash resonated more deeply in Ireland, the literal space of impact, than it did in Canada. Only since a criminal trial revealed the extent of the incompetence of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in investigating the alleged perpetrators have public attitudes changed significantly. The trial judge delivered a verdict of not guilty based on the evidence presented, but he also made it clear that this evidence and the investigation were deeply flawed. As a result of public outrage, an official inquiry was set in place to review the process of the investigation. Increased media coverage, the events of September 11, 2001, the political commitment of surviving family members, changing notions of who counts as “Canadian” and genuine anger at systemic injustices surrounding the tragedy have reignited interest in the Air India bombing.

THE TEXT

However fascinating the real life events surrounding the tragedy itself, Mukherjee makes it clear that in “The Management of Grief” she does not intend to “[reduce] art to sociological statement,” (Chen and Goudie, 1997, para. 22) explaining that “no fine fiction, no good literature, is anchored in verisimilitude. Fiction must be metaphor. It is not transcription of real life but it’s a distillation and pitching at a higher intensification of life” (para. 36). What Mukherjee does distill in this story are her perspectives on official Canadian multiculturalism, against which she has “spoken so vociferously” (para. 56). Mukherjee spent fifteen years in Canada; then in the early 1980s, dissatisfied with her experiences with Canadian multiculturalism, she and her family moved to the United States. Mukherjee (1997) explains that Canadian official rhetoric designated me as one of the ‘visible minority’ who, even though I spoke the Canadian languages of English and French, was straining ‘the absorptive capacity’ of Canada. Canadians of color were routinely treated as ‘not real’ Canadians. (para. 8)

Given Mukherjee’s strong views on ethnicity in Canada, it is interesting to consider her perceived status as an “ethnic writer” in North America. Her resistance to this designation raises questions similar to those posed by Wil M. Verhoven (1996) when he asks, “What exactly makes ‘ethnic writing’ ethnic? Is there such a thing as ‘ethnic writing’? If so, to what extent can an ‘ethnic’ writer be expected to write ‘ethnically’? (p. 100)

If such questions might be asked about writing, might not the same questions be raised about reading? Is there such a thing as ‘ethnic reading’? If so, to what extent can an ‘ethnic’ reader be expected to read ‘ethnically’? Since we were most interested in the personal responses of students to the story and the ways in which they came to an interpretation of the text’s meaning for themselves, these questions provided a useful starting point for thinking about questions of literature, response and culture. In much the same way that Shaila, the story’s protagonist, acts as a
“cultural translator” between various members of Toronto’s Indian community and the government of Ontario, readers of the story act as translators between the culture of the story and their own cultural background.

THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

In this small case study, the ten students interviewed about their responses to reading “The Management of Grief” were grade eleven and twelve students who attended two different high schools (situated in one school district) located in “Marysville,” Alberta. We chose five students of European heritage and five of Indian heritage; all of the students, with the exception of one of the European-Canadian boys, were raised in Marysville. The students, four boys and six girls, were all strong readers and were enrolled in International Baccalaureate programs or Advanced Placement English. In addition to being academically successful, each of these students was heavily involved in extracurricular activities within his or her school community, including students' council, leadership, sports and fine arts. Ultimately, we hoped to select students with similar academic backgrounds with the significant variable being that of cultural background.

Finding five students of East Indian background in Marysville was somewhat difficult, since, as one of the interviewees commented, "Marysville is so not culturally diverse." However, with the help of teachers at two local high schools, we were able to locate five volunteers. While these Indo-Canadian students shared much in common, they also presented a number of interesting differences. All were raised in Marysville and were strong, highly social students; however, their backgrounds, while all "Indian" to some extent, were also quite diverse.

The students of European background proved to be no less diverse than their Indo-Canadian counterparts. These students were also raised in Marysville (with the exception of Alex, who, between the ages of ten and sixteen, lived in England). Again, these students were academically motivated and socially active in their schools. When we asked the student volunteers to tell us about their cultural backgrounds, none of the students of European heritage provided any information on religious affiliations, while each participant of Indian background included reference to religion in relation to culture. The pseudonyms chosen for the students involved in this study reflect their real names to the extent that, especially for the Indo-Canadian students, we have attempted to maintain a connection to their specific cultural heritages. For example, Theresa's real name is Christian rather than Hindu and we have maintained that distinction here.

Table 1. Students of Indian Heritage

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Table 2. Students of European Heritage

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Only one of these ten students, Meena, had any real awareness of the 1985 Air India bombing, and this surprised us somewhat. We had assumed that, despite the fact that most of these students would have been only two or three years old at the time, the Indo-Canadian students, in particular, would still know something about this event. However, the majority had only the vaguest recollection of the tragedy until we provided them with some background. Interestingly, in the years since this study was conducted, the coverage in the media of the legal events surrounding this case has been significant. In 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper called an inquiry into the investigation of the bombing, which was marred by a variety of errors and incompetency on the part of various law enforcement agencies. In 2010, Prime Minister Harper formally issued an apology to the families of the victims as a result of the “damning indictment” as expressed in the final report of the inquiry. At the time of our study, despite the fact that most did not have any background knowledge about the disaster, all the students in the study expressed interest in reading “The Management of Grief” and, in their interviews, commented particularly on characterization, cultural context, setting and language use in the story. Our analysis of audio-recorded interviews with students focuses particularly on contrasting cultural viewpoints of the story as expressed by the Indo-Canadian students and the Euro-Canadian students.

JUDITH TEMPLETON: “THE ICON OF WHITE”

In “The Management of Grief,” Judith Templeton is “an appointee of the provincial government,” whose “mandate is bigger” than multiculturalism (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 182). She arrives within days of the bombing to elicit the help of the narrator, Mrs. Shaila Bhave, in negotiating “the complications of culture, language, and customs” that are associated with the tragedy (p. 183). By way of explanation, Judith Templeton explains to Mrs. Bhave that:

There are hundreds of people in Metro [Toronto] directly affected, like you, and some of them speak no English. There are some widows who’ve never handled money or gone on a bus, and there are old parents who still haven’t eaten or gone outside of their bedrooms. Some houses and apartments have been looted. Some wives are still hysterical. Some husbands are in shock and profound depression. We want to help, but our hands are tied in so many ways. We have to distribute money to some people, and there are legal documents—these things can be done. We have interpreters, but we don’t always have the human touch, or maybe the right human touch. We don’t
want to make mistakes, Mrs. Bhave, and that’s why we’d like to ask you to
help us.’ (p. 183)

The students’ responses to this character, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed government
social worker, were quite clearly split along cultural lines. The Indo-Canadian
students generally found Judith to be quite unsympathetic. Meena begins her
comments by saying sarcastically:

- It seemed like she was, oh, ‘the kind Canadian lady just trying to help out
everyone.’ She said all the…government wants to do is give these people
money and they’re too stubborn to accept it. I don’t really agree with that very
much because they’re portraying her in a way like the government is just being
so…kind of…being so nice to people but actually a lot of bigotry went along
with this bombing. There was a lot of racism surrounding it…the way the Indian
community was portrayed on the news and stuff wasn’t very respectful.

This dissatisfaction with the character of the “kind Canadian lady” is expressed
more emotionally in Theresa’s comment:

- It made me cry…it wasn’t so much that it was about death…like that was sad,
but this is going to sound strange…but you know [Judith] and how she’s not
necessarily racist, but she’s so almost like, ignorant of culture and other
peoples’ culture…I don’t know, but I’ve never encountered racism directly, but
you still kind of feel it. I don’t know, but that just kind of hit.

Simi articulates a sense of ambivalence about the dissonance between the
character’s motives and the reality of her methods:

- [The story] made it seem like [Judith] was so good…made it seem like she was
only trying to help, but she didn’t really know anything about the situation. I
didn’t really know what to think of her.

The two Indo-Canadian boys, Raj and Salim, both echoed Meena and Simi with
their observations:

- Raj: At first I thought she was a nice person and just trying to help, but after
reading what that old couple said…you don’t want help from other people, you
support your family…and how she kept persisting on them to do it [sign the
power of attorney papers], I kind of started getting mad. Like, let them live their
life the way they want. I don’t think it’s her place to go in to somebody and say
you have to sign this to make your life better. How does she know it will make
their life better and not worse?

- Salim: She tried to help them, but she didn’t respect their need for closure, I
guess, their own way to grieve. It was like she wanted to pay them off or
something… It’s like she’s using [Shaila’s] nationality.

These students appear to be unwilling to excuse Judith’s ignorance in the name of
her benevolence despite acknowledging the difficulty of her task.
In contrast, many of the Euro-Canadian students, even while recognizing her problematic status within the story, appeared to empathize with Judith’s predicament. Joanne comments:

- She had good intentions I think…she was trying hard to do in her mind what would be the best for these people, but I think that the cultural differences were just so great that she didn’t do a very good job of it at all. She insulted her [Shaila] when [Shaila] got out of the car and walked away and…she totally couldn’t connect with the old lady and the old man. Like nothing she could say…like they were on two different wavelengths. Right, so, she was nice and…I kind of empathized with her…’cause she tried so hard but she just couldn’t connect at all.

And Alex, despite observing that Judith “totally represented cultural ignorance,” went on to reveal a more personal response to Judith’s actions:

- I’m sure her heart was in the right place…what she was doing was trying to make these people’s lives better, but she didn’t ever try to step out of her own little viewpoint and realize that there might be other viewpoints around…If you look at all the major colonial instances in history it’s always been the colonizer coming in and saying ‘these people are wrong. We have to educate them, we have to conform them to what’s good.’ She obviously was [doing] that but I don’t think it was intended…I can possibly understand how that would happen. I’m sure I’ve been guilty of it lots, too. I’m sure I offended hundreds of people in my old school because of my own viewpoints and how I don’t really think about stuff.

Mary’s response indicates a genuine confusion about Shaila’s motives towards the end of the story. She says,

- I don’t know why Shaila got so mad at her. Judith just seemed like she wanted to help. I can understand how she might have been pushing that old couple too hard, but I don’t know why Shaila would have gotten out of the car. That lady was just trying to help.

Even Kristine and Colin, with their own interesting relationships with multiculturalism in Canada, responded with some measures of empathy toward Judith:

- Kristine: I can understand why, being white, she would want someone of that cultural background to help.
- Colin: I still see Judith as being representative of white people. And I think it’s fair because she’s really well meaning, but she’s totally off base.

Most of the students of European heritage responded to the ambiguity of Judith’s position within the story. Even without any significant historical context other than that provided by the story itself, they recognized that, despite her good intentions, Judith’s assumptions about Shaila and the Sikh couple were inappropriate. Judith appears to be unaware that it is insensitive to ask Shaila, as a
Hindu woman whose husband and two daughters were victims of the “Sikh bomb,” to help an elderly Sikh couple who have lost their own grown sons in the same terrorist act. Shaila cautions Judith by saying:

‘They are Sikh. They will not open up to a Hindu woman.’ And what I want to add is, as much as I try not to, I stiffen now at the sight of beards and turbans. I remember a time when we all trusted each other in this new country, it was only the new country we worried about. (p. 193)

Judith is oblivious to the nuances of culture and religion, which left our Euro-Canadian students with the following perceptions:

- Joanne: She thought her way was the only way that was going to get things resolved, so she could have been more open to different possibilities. Obviously, if it wasn’t working she should have tried different things.
- Alex: Like she didn’t ever try to say ‘why don’t these people want it? What’s going on in their minds, what makes them click that way?’ Instead, she was like, they’re obviously wrong…She doesn’t perceive the difference between Hindu and Sikh. She’s like, ‘here, you’re that type. Talk to them for me because I’m not that type. I’m not your kind.’
- Kristine: I thought it was a horrible thing to do…when Judith asks Shaila to help with the Sikh people, I thought that was really insensitive because she just lost her whole family in that plane crash. And she never even thought enough to realize that just because they’re from the same country…there are different cultures. Shaila even told her, ‘they’re not going to talk to me. I can’t help them.’ And she couldn’t understand that.
- Colin: I kind of have to see Judith as the icon of white…that’s how white people treat everybody. And that’s as good as at it gets. It gets a lot worse, but that’s as good as it gets…and that’s the way white Western people go somewhere to help out the ‘savages’ and when they want to be nice about it then that’s how they treat them. If they don’t want to be nice about it, it’s something else. They’re very condescending, as though getting along for thousands of years must have just been a fluke. So, if that’s the intent, then it was a fair representation, if Judith was that.

Colin’s somewhat cautious suggestion that perhaps Judith symbolically functions as the personification of Canadian official multiculturalism echoes Mukherjee’s (1988) assertion that “Canada is a country officially hostile to the concept of assimilation…[it is] a comfortable but unwelcoming environment” (p. 1). In response to Judith, the official government representative, each participant in the study recognized, however cloaked by “niceness,” the element of hypocrisy that Mukherjee clearly feels is an element of contemporary Canadian society.

CULTURAL PROXIMITY AND DISTANCE

One of our original research questions was whether readers who share a “cultural proximity” to a text read a literary work significantly differently than those who are more “culturally distant” from the same text (Larsen and László, 1990, p. 428).
We began each interview by asking the student volunteer to discuss his or her general response to the story. Their answers to this request provide some insight into questions of proximity and distance. Here, responses were split along cultural lines: the Indo-Canadian students were personally and emotionally engaged by the cultural specificity of the story. Their responses focussed on the appreciation of their unaccustomed positioning as “insiders” to the culture of the story. In contrast, the Euro-Canadian students generally regarded the culturally specific details with a detached “outsiders” curiosity, and most of these students began their initial commentary on the story by referring to elements they did not understand or about which they had questions. Simi’s reaction is somewhat illustrative of the other students of Indian heritage. She says,

- I don’t know if it was just me, but it was so weird for me to read this story because I think that I would have such a different opinion of this story than someone else. I think that someone from here who had lived here all their life that had no connection with Indian roots, no matter what culture they were, if they read this story, I don’t think it would hit them the way it hit me. Because I can relate to it. I’m like, what if that was my family that was on that plane and nobody cared? Like, I can relate. Whereas someone from here would be like no, my family wouldn’t be going to India on an Air India flight.

Another student, Salim, revealed that he “liked how [he] could relate to stuff more...[he] knew what she was talking about, like the words she uses.” While all of the Indo-Canadian students suggested that they felt close to the text because of a variety of cultural resonances—partly due to Mukherjee’s use of Hindi words throughout—some did express reservations about the possibility that the story could be taken as “representative” of “the Indo-Canadian experience.” Mukherjee herself has explored this troublesome prospect, clarifying that

- We’re very, very different kinds of Indians. Simply because of skin color and South Asian ancestry, the non-South Asian is likely to lump us together...as a writer, my job is to open up, to discover and say ‘we are all individuals.’ In fiction we are writing about individuals; none of them is meant to be a crude spokesperson for whole groups, whether those groups are based on gender or race or class. (Chen and Goudie, 1996, para. 12)

Interestingly, none of the Euro-Canadian students we interviewed identified this potential for seeing a character as “a crude spokesperson” as an issue of concern. Their initial responses to the story were somewhat removed and intellectualised, in contrast to the more personal reactions of the Indo-Canadian students. For example, Alex responded that he thought the story “was more like an examination, in terms of exploring cultures, lifestyles, and ways of thinking.” Mary, in an unconscious affirmation of Simi’s suggestion that a non-Indian reader might not relate to the “culture” surrounding an Air India flight, said: “I thought it was weird that there were so many connected people on the same flight.” With these revelations and their somewhat “anthropological” initial approach to the story, it is fair to say that the “culturally distant” Euro-Canadian students did, in fact, read
“The Management of Grief” significantly differently than their Indo-Canadian counterparts.

We draw on the work of Larsen and Seilman (1988) to reflect on how the development of an understanding and appreciation of a literary text depends partly on readers’ application of specific knowledge drawn from personally experienced, autobiographical memories. These evocations may be consciously mobilized during the process of reading. Thus, the concept of “personal resonance,” defined as “pieces of self-knowledge activated by cues from the text,” relates to the reader’s personal knowledge and history in the creation of meaning (p. 417). The evocation of such responses signifies that “some personal concerns are becoming involved” and suggests that the reader is able to appreciate the literature by forming a more personal and deeper understanding of it (p. 418). These resonances imply a negotiation of meaning reminiscent of Bhabha’s ‘Third space’ in which some level of appreciation and understanding beyond the literal occurs. It is therefore not too surprising that the students of Indo-Canadian heritage could draw upon their own backgrounds in ways that the students of Euro-Canadian heritage could not. Larsen and László (1990) explain,

Readers must construct for themselves an understanding of the imaginary world with which the text deals…however, [this explanation] seems insufficient to account for the fact that different readers, even with similar cultural background and present circumstances, may react very differently to a given work—and that the same person may react differently at different times. (p. 426-427)

In order to account for these individual and varied reading experiences, Larsen and László go on to suggest that

To understand a text about a universe of discourse…highly specific to a certain culture and historical period, the reader has to call upon his or her knowledge and experiences with that kind of cultural and historical setting…[and]—culturally proximate readers—will thus be reminded of more concrete events, and in particular, of a larger proportion of personally experienced events than readers who are unfamiliar with the setting and events of the story (culturally distant readers). (p. 428)

These “remindings vary in their degree of personal relevance” and are related to the resonance a reader might feel while engaging with a text (p. 428). These notions of proximity and distance did seem to be at work for the participants in our study. When asked if there were aspects of the story that they found difficult to identify with, all of the Euro-Canadian students referred to the tension Shaila, a Hindu, experiences at the end of the story when she and Judith Templeton visit the Sikh couple. These students were aware that they were missing details about the interaction between the characters, but they were unable to construct a satisfactory explanation from the contextual information embedded within the text. None of these students was aware of the religious conflicts that plagued India in the 1980s and which made their way to Canada via Air India Flight 182. The responses of the
Euro-Canadian students to this question suggests that their historical and cultural distance from the event being described denied them access to any possible ‘remindings’ to help them construct a personally relevant response to this aspect of the story.

In contrast, none of the Indo-Canadian students in the study mentioned this religious conflict as an obstacle to their understanding of the story. This lack of notice suggests that perhaps, regardless of their current cultural reality, these ‘culturally proximate’ readers were able to call upon a variety of ‘reminded events’ in constructing their responses to this aspect of the text. Larsen and Lásló (1990) state that “two categories of reminded events can be distinguished, representing very different degrees of personal relevance: (1) events experienced personally by the individual; and (2) events reported to the individual by others” (p. 428). Given that all of the Indo-Canadian students involved in this study were raised in the same suburban community, and that none of them revealed any instances of inter-faith conflict, it is possible that the varying “degrees of personal relevance” they experienced when they read “The Management of Grief” came about as a result of ‘reminded events’ they had experienced vicariously through others in the community.

None of the Indo-Canadian participants offered any details from the story that they found difficult to identify with, except that Salim “thought it was weird that Shaila took Valium. Indian people don’t usually take medications like that.” This somewhat offhand comment about “medications like that” did provide some insight, however, into the effect on readers of cultural information embedded within a text. Salim’s cultural proximity to the text allowed him to voice his perceptions on a particular cultural view regarding mental health and his insight into the actual success of Shaila’s ‘grief management.’ With his observation, Salim revealed that, indeed, Shaila was not managing her grief very effectively by Indian standards. This question of the impact of taken-for-granted cultural information embedded within a text was especially appropriate for gaining an understanding of the Indo-Canadian students’ responses. It also supported the notion that while the Euro-Canadian students did miss several of the nuances within the story, they were nevertheless able to engage in a “good enough” reading of the text (Mackey, 1996, p. 91).

When we asked what they thought about Mukherjee’s use of Hindi words throughout the story, the Indo-Canadian students revealed that they felt that their readings were enriched by the fact that they could understand the other language of the text. The Euro-Canadian students, however, did not appear to feel especially ‘dislocated’ by this same language use. They all explained that they were able to figure out that the Hindi words Mukherjee used related to food, music or religion, and they were satisfied with that knowledge. The notion of a “good enough” reading of a culturally distant text is significant for teachers who teach literature from other cultures; in the encounter with difference there is a space to honour the diverse readings of a text offered by our students and to recognize that the culturally proximate reader does not provide a ‘definitive’ understanding of a work. Reed Way Dasenbrock (1992) reminds us that “[t]he informed position is
Thus far, our discussion of cultural proximity and distance to a text has implied that those readers who are culturally ‘closer’ to a text will experience a more informed reading than those who are more distant. For example, the Indo-Canadian readers of “The Management of Grief” were able to identify with many of the various cultural and linguistic references embedded within the story, while the Euro-Canadian students were not. However, perhaps Meena’s and Simi’s readings reveal how proximity to a text might act as a kind of obstacle to a reader’s engagement with the story. These two girls appeared to read with a double consciousness: on the one hand, they appreciated the story for its links with parts of their identities not regularly affirmed by the mainstream culture; on the other hand, their proximity to the culture of the story caused them to read with a heightened awareness of how this culture was presented in the text. They were concerned with stereotyping and the perceptions of India by ‘other’ readers and this may have, in some ways, distanced them from the text. In contrast, the Euro-Canadian students, with their distance from the story, were able to read less ‘sensitively.’ By being removed from the culture on display, these students were able to be observers and to ask questions that would clarify their understandings of the story. This shifting of what it means to be the ‘Other’ reader provided the Euro-Canadian students with new perspectives on commonly held conceptions of centre and periphery. As members of the cultural mainstream in Canada, most of these Euro-Canadian students had rarely read literature from cultural heritages outside of their own.

When asked which aspects of the text they found most compelling, all of the participants in this study revealed that they were most affected by interactions between characters and the varying ways in which they dealt with their grief. Regardless of their cultural background, the participants in this study were most deeply affected by the female characters who had lost family in the air disaster. Judith Templeton also evoked strong responses from each of the readers, regardless of whether they viewed her with sympathy or scorn.

The students were also empathetic to the scope of the tragedy and the possibility of losing one’s entire family in one catastrophic event. All of the students empathized with Shaila’s grief and almost all of the students saw the conclusion of the story as optimistic. The story ends a number of months following the bombing with Shaila walking in Toronto. She explains:

> I heard the voices of my family one last time. Your time has come, they said. Go, be brave. I do not know where this voyage I have begun will end. I do not know which direction I will take. I dropped the package on a park bench and started walking. (p. 197)

All of the students stated that they were pleased rather than frustrated by the indeterminate ending of the story.

A number of more individual and even less generalizable revelations occurred during the interview process. One such moment happened when we asked Salim,
one of the Indo-Canadian students, whether there were details in the story with which he particularly identified. He replied, “Yeah, the Stanley Cup. When we get together in my family we all watch hockey.” Such moments serve as a reminder of the unexpected and often unarticulated interactions between culture and text for individual readers. We were also reminded that discussions of specific reading experiences often reveal only a fraction of what is happening in those moments of engagement between the reader and the text and then between the reader and the researcher.

For teachers who choose to introduce literature that may be more culturally proximate to some students than to others, these study findings serve to remind us that while cultural proximity does make a significant difference in how students negotiate their way through a text, their readings will remain individual and particular. This study also reinforces the value of introducing diverse texts, not only to students who might be culturally proximate to the literature they study, but also to students who, in Dasenbrock’s terms might be ‘uninformed readers’ of multicultural literature. In a similar vein, we were reminded that while we might choose to teach ‘ethnic writing’ in our classes, there may not be such a thing as ‘ethnic reading.’

How authors and readers create meaning is necessarily different. Authors create a text by distilling their influences and choices in order to construct the work that they have conceived. Readers, however, approach a text with all of their experiences, influences and “remindings,” which include, but are not limited to, cultural background. To assume that an individual reader will respond to a particular text based solely on his or her ethnicity is to limit the reading experience. An author who chooses to write ‘ethnically’ does so largely by craft; for a reader to do the same is quite a different matter. Readers will engage with any number and combination of elements in a text and these connections are unpredictable. The cultural markers chosen by an author are accepted as significant or glossed over as mere detail according to who we are and the “remindings” we bring to the text.

Literature teachers in North America have more opportunities now for cross-cultural teaching than they did in the past: new literatures in English and in translation, combined with the increasing ethnic diversity of schools, provide spaces for the interrogation of identity and its constructed-ness. Through literature, students, regardless of their positioning in relation to the cultural mainstream, can be encouraged to investigate many of the taken-for-granted assumptions about culture and ethnicity that accompany current notions of Western multiculturalism.

The value of diverse literature for creating a sense of inclusiveness for minority students is clear; however, the presence of the Other in literature, as well as in real life, provides students who are part of the cultural mainstream with an opportunity to negotiate their own understandings of culture and identity. Our study reinforces the value that culturally proximate reading has for students, especially for those who are unaccustomed to seeing their experiences reflected in school literature. Reading a range of texts allows students from a variety of backgrounds to feel ‘proximate’ to some texts and ‘distant’ from others. By shifting the centre of cultural proximity through choice of literature, students are afforded the
opportunity to experience multiple reading stances in relation to a text. Students may experience potential richness of a reading that repositions them as Other, particularly those who are accustomed to seeing themselves reflected in the cultural mainstream. These students, when they leave the confines and security of home, will find themselves exploring sites of negotiation and interrogation, and perhaps their exposure to literature from other cultures can “transform [their] sense of what it means to live, to be, in other times and different spaces….” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 256).

REFERENCES

CHAPTER 2

TRUTH OR LIE: STUDENTS READING THE INDETERMINACIES OF AN ABORIGINAL AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL TEXT

Another thing is that, as the Elders tell me, all that you have experienced you must learn from, and the people who live the hardest lives can have the greatest understandings and teachings to give others. So learn well, for the sake of others. (Wiebe & Johnson, 1998, p. 439)

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we explore questions of voice, veracity and subalternity in relation to Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson’s text *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman*. In particular, we consider how adolescent readers take up these issues as they respond to their readings of the text in a high school classroom context.

Published in 1998, this award-winning controversial Canadian text deals with the imprisonment of Yvonne Johnson, a Cree woman convicted of murder. The book, mediated by the voice of Rudy Wiebe, a well-known Canadian literary figure, delves into Johnson’s traumatic childhood and the circumstances leading up to the murder. The text unflinchingly addresses the social context within which Yvonne Johnson grew up, one marked by racism, poverty, addiction, violence, and sexual abuse, all of which constitute the dominant stereotypes of Aboriginal life in Canada.

The book, a graphic portrayal of abuse, alcoholism, violence, and injustice, is nevertheless infused with hope and spirituality. Johnson, while in prison, asked Wiebe to write her story because she was impressed by his account of her great-great-grandfather Big Bear in Wiebe’s book, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1995). Wiebe drew material for *Stolen Life* from newspaper and court records, conversations with Johnson’s father and other family members, her own writings, and in-person interviews with Yvonne. As Wiebe explains, “this book is based on what Yvonne Johnson holds to be her own truths about the life she has lived” (Wiebe and Johnson, 1998, p. xi). The result is a graphic and evocative telling of her life and journey. According to Ervin Beck (2001), her willingness to take responsibility for her life’s journey makes the telling especially poignant:

All of the negative Indian stereotypes are present in her biography: alcoholism, drug abuse, welfare dependency, homelessness, sexual promiscuity, [and] physical and sexual abuse, including incest. She refrains
from self-pity, taking full responsibility for her life. Elements of social protest are nevertheless important in the book, as one sees Yvonne victimized by both white society and her own family and friends. (p. 868)

Despite its harrowing nature, Johnson’s life story is suffused with spiritualism and reconciliation, culminating in her newly discovered Cree identity and the spiritual awareness that it includes:

I was in the Shaking Tent ceremony and I was told that my life was hard, and it would remain so. I was told to keep seeking, I was told you do not give your pain to the spirit world, you must give your pain away. Does that mean share it somehow? I do not know how to do this. I ponder how to give birth to myself, in a spiritual sense. (Wiebe and Johnson, 1998, p. 438)

At first glance, Stolen Life appears to be a co-authored biography of Yvonne Johnson following in the tradition of sensational life stories told with the help of a “professional” writer. However, it is immediately evident in this text that the relationship between the two authors is far more complex than that of subject and scribe. One of the central issues of the text is that of voice. Throughout her life, Johnson was silenced by a series of circumstances: her cleft palate that kept her silent as a child, the unspeakable cycle of physical and sexual abuse, and her inability to make herself heard in her own defense after the murder for which she was convicted. Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman, with Wiebe’s mediation and the weight of his reputation, allows Yvonne Johnson’s voice to be heard for the first time.

While the book’s title refers to the journey of a “Cree woman,” the text also clearly recounts the journey of a ‘white man.’ The challenge for Rudy Wiebe is to find a way to use his power and position in an ethical and compassionate manner as he extends his previous literary concerns with Native Canadian history to a contemporary, living subject. Wiebe’s own voice is immediately evident in the text. The opening sentence reads

To begin a story, someone in some way must break a particular silence. On Wednesday, 18 November 1992, in Edmonton, Alberta, I received an envelope from Box 515, Kingston, Ontario. Inside, folded into quarters, was a long sheet of paper typed from top to bottom, edge to edge, solid with words on both sides. It began:

Howdy Howdy stranger

My name is Yvonne Johnson. I am currently an inmate at the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario… (p. 3)

This beginning establishes the partnership of the two authors. Johnson’s voice is given primacy throughout her reflections on her journey without discounting or erasing Wiebe’s own presence as mediator and ‘first author.’
Rather than identifying the text as a traditional, co-written autobiography, we prefer to describe *Stolen Life* as a ‘biotext,’ a term employed by Canadian writer George Bowering to describe a genre that mediates notions of autobiography and textuality. Joanne Saul (2001) describes biotexts as those works in which “the idea of the subject is performative and in process” (p. 260). She elaborates:

‘Biotext’ captures the tension at work between the thematic content and the linguistic and formal aspects of the texts, between the fragments of a life being lived, the "bio" (with its emphasis on the self, the family, origins, and genealogy), and the "text," the site where these various aspects are in the process of being articulated in writing. Rather than admitting a gap between self and text, ‘biotext’ foregrounds the writer's efforts to articulate him or her self through the writing process. The text itself comes to life. (p. 260)

In *Stolen Life*, textuality is emphasized through the interplay of voices and questions around the contingency of “truth” as presented in the book. Multiple voices are deployed throughout the text. The story, constructed through the shared authorship of Wiebe and Johnson, includes excerpts from court proceedings, interviews with Johnson’s friends and associates, and correspondence between Johnson and her family. Questions around the “true” circumstances of the murder for which Johnson is convicted are explored and challenged through multiple and sometimes conflicting tellings of the events. These ideas around textuality, voice and “truth” converge in the text and are foregrounded in Wiebe’s ‘Prefatory Note’ concerning his mediation of Johnson’s story:

She has a natural gift of language, which at any moment will follow a detail and will widen into incident, story, often humour. This was at first sometimes confusing, even disorienting, until I recognized that her thinking was often circular, revolving around a given subject, and her writing almost oral in the sense that I had to catch the tone of her inflection to understand exactly how the incidents she was remembering connected; where the expanding images or even parables with which she tried to explain herself were leading. (Wiebe and Johnson, 1998, p. xi)

*Stolen Life*, with its dual authorship, deviates from Bowering’s (1988) specific description of a single authored “biotext.” However, Bowering conceived of a text in which the author undergoes a transformative experience in the act of writing his or her biography, presumably for public consumption. In *Stolen Life*, Johnson’s private journal writing is the catalyst for her transformative process, and these journals are the basis of her writerly relationship with Wiebe. As an advocate and mediator of Johnson’s story, Wiebe purposefully steps back from being the focus of the story line. This mediation, on the one hand, acknowledges Wiebe’s position, power and privilege in Canadian literary circles; on the other hand, without this collaboration, Johnson’s journals would have remained private and it is unlikely, as a marginalized woman, that her voice and struggle would have been heard.
Linda Anderson (2001) suggests that while traditionally the author of an autobiography implicitly declares that the author and the protagonist are the same, not all subjects are necessarily believed in the same way and not all authors have the “same legal status” (p. 3). She argues that sincerity itself already implies a masculine subject and that “insofar as autobiography has been seen as promoting a view of the subject as universal, it has also underpinned the centrality of masculine—and... Western and middle class—modes of subjectivity” (p. 3). It is interesting, then, to consider to what extent Wiebe’s mediation of Johnson’s voice undermines or reinforces the ‘sincerity’ of her story and how much Johnson is the object and not the subject of her own story.

THE VOICE OF THE SUBALTERN

Johnson’s marginalization as a Cree woman, as a member of an abusive family and as a child with a physical disability, position her as a subaltern figure. She was literally silenced by her cleft palate and her history of family sexual abuse. However, her intervention in her own silencing through the act of contacting Wiebe interrupts the stereotypical story of oppression and tragedy. Johnson’s actions partially support the notion that, as Julia Swindells (1995) claims, “autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual” (p. 7). In Johnson’s case, her ability to speak is enabled by two distinct events: first, the intervention of a white male judge who ‘sentenced’ her to surgery for her cleft palate, and second, the mediation of a white male voice as co-author.

Ervin Beck (2001) suggests that Wiebe is a contemporary writer who provides a positive answer to the question raised by Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) essay, ”Can the Subaltern Speak?” In Beck’s view, Stolen Life responds to Spivak’s question with a ‘yes’ because “Wiebe brilliantly demonstrates how it is indeed possible for an author to enable a ‘subaltern’ to ‘speak’” (p. 861). Beck’s position, however, constitutes a simplistic response to a complex issue. His comments fail to acknowledge, as Spivak (1999) does, that “when a line of communication is established between a member of subaltern groups and the circuits of citizenship or institutionality, the subaltern has been inserted into the long road to hegemony” (p. 310). While Johnson is able to tell her story privately in her prison notebooks, she can only be heard publicly through the intervention of an influential white male writer. Spivak (1988) reminds us that for the subaltern to be heard there needs to be a transaction between speaker and listener and, as a result, Johnson’s “subaltern talk” in her prison notebooks “does not achieve the dialogic level of utterance” until it is mediated by Wiebe’s presence (Landry and MacLean, 1996, p.5). For Johnson as for Wiebe, literature is a political act and needs an audience to be effective.

Stolen Life is undeniably a political book. The text takes a stance that attempts to provide viewpoints on Johnson’s history of abuse and murder with an intentional political agenda. Predominantly, the book creates a much-needed space for Johnson’s voice to be heard. Quayson (2001) argues that, “the issue to be
addressed in relation to the intersection of the aesthetic and political domains is the
degree to which specific configurations of such intersections actually serve to
confirm existing schemata rather than defamiliarizing them and delivering us into a
view beyond them” (p. 94). Johnson and Wiebe, in their deliberately graphic and
painful depiction of Johnson’s life, offer every terrible stereotype of a marginalized
Aboriginal female experience. However, this very act of foregrounding the
“victim” stereotype opens up a space for discussion, reflection and possible
intervention:

[A] to the degree to which literary and aesthetic discourse imagines any
possibility of intervention in the social formation, it has to defamiliarize
existing categories even as it holds them up to view. This is in order that a
double or even redoubled vision takes place. The first is one in which the
contours of existing categories are recognized, and the second, simultaneous
with the first, is one in which these categories are discomposed and seen as
constructions that we can reach beyond….It is only in this way that the
intersection between the aesthetic and the political can be said to be fruitful
for a liberatory politics. (p. 94-95)

Stolen Life itself performs these very categories discussed by Quayson: the story of
Johnson’s life recognizes the stereotypes of Natives in Canadian society; yet, by
particularizing the circumstances and emotions behind her journey towards self-
reconciliation, the book provides a context for moving beyond the dominant
hegemonic discourse around Aboriginal life.

Questions surrounding the intersections of the aesthetic and the political might
fruitfully be considered in the context of readers’ responses to Stolen Life. Here we
take up these questions of voice, veracity and subalternity in relation to the voices
of high school readers who read Stolen Life as part of their Grade 11 International
Baccalaureate English curriculum.

TEACHING STOLEN LIFE

Traditionally, high school Canadian English language arts teachers have tended to
select ‘safe’ texts for their students to read and study. These are texts that form part
of the canonized school curriculum, sometimes officially sanctioned by provincial
curriculum developers, and other times unofficially acknowledged by teachers and
the community as ‘acceptable’ for school reading. While there is a wide spectrum
of texts being taught in today’s classrooms, generally these books do not challenge
mainstream notions of race, gender and class. Little attention is paid to questions of
colonization, power and marginalization. Often the texts are set in the past, and
usually published over 40 years ago (Altmann et al, 1998). Even those books that
were controversial when they were first published, such as Salinger’s Catcher in
the Rye and Golding’s Lord of the Flies, are now considered classics and accepted
as valuable reading material for adolescents. As Eaglestone (2000) points out,
teachers often teach the texts they are familiar with and those that are readily
available in school bookrooms:
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In English at all levels, the same canonical texts come up again and again, year after year. A person who studied English and has become a teacher often teaches the texts she or he was taught, in part because she or he was taught that these texts were the most important. (p. 44)

Although very few contemporary texts by non-mainstream writers find their way into the high school curriculum, occasionally teachers do bring in texts outside this sanctioned canon. Often, these books are ones that have engaged teachers with their narrative power and insight. Susan, the English department head at a large multicultural Western Canadian high school read *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998) in the context of a teachers’ reading group we coordinated at our University. She was struck by the possibilities this text might offer for her own teaching. She explains that her decision to teach this controversial book emerged from her desire to pursue issues of postcolonialism and “otherness” as they play out closer to “home” and to make a difference in how her students understood the lives of Native Canadians. She describes her intents as follows:

Reading *Stolen Life* myself profoundly changed the image I had of the Native people that I saw downtown. The book offers powerful and direct insight into the inner secrets of their lives. My students in this International Baccalaureate class are privileged, both by their intellect and their opportunities. I hoped that by reading *Stolen Life* the students would gain insight and understanding into the lives of those less fortunate than themselves. I also hoped the book might perhaps make a difference in their lives and encourage them to show compassion in similar ways to the judge who “sentenced” Yvonne to having her mouth fixed. I felt that it was something they needed to know about, as they will very likely be in positions of power and influence in their lives.

Since this book is outside the received canon of school literature and because of the violent and sexual nature of its content, it was necessary for the school’s administrators and parents of students in the class to support Susan’s decision to teach *Stolen Life*. It was with this support that Susan taught the book to her students in a grade 11 International Baccalaureate class. The class, consisting of students from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds, were asked to write journal responses for each chapter of the book. These journal responses formed the basis for regular classroom discussions. As researchers, we had permission to observe several of these classes and to read students’ journal entries.

RESPONDING TO VOICE, VERACITY AND SUBALTERNITY IN THE TEXT

In their journals and class discussions, many of the students’ responses focused on comments around how Yvonne’s story is told and on the veracity of the text. During class discussions we observed a range of responses to Yvonne’s situation and experiences, with some students strongly empathetic and others skeptical about Yvonne’s motives for writing the book.
Some students in the class, mainly female, responded to the text with empathy for Yvonne’s situation and actions. One young woman commented: “Yvonne needs to pour her heart out and let out her feelings. She tells us her story in bits and shows how her past affects her present.” Another explained,

- By having her serve as narrator for segments of the novel, it helps to create a mutual trust with the reader of the authenticity of the unfolding events…[B]y going through Yvonne’s childhood, her experiences, the reader feels obliged and loyal to her.

Students such as these seemed willing to accept and to trust Johnson’s version of her story and to appreciate the elliptical style of her narration. While acknowledging that this style of writing was outside her expectations of an autobiographical narrative, one female student observed: “Human memory works like this.”

A number of male students were far more skeptical about Yvonne’s experiences as described in the book, commenting that she was “full of self-pity” and that she had an ulterior motive in writing the book, that is, to justify her actions without taking responsibility. They were more likely to believe Wiebe’s “telling” of her story than Johnson’s. One boy, for example, commented: “Rudy gives us facts which are less biased. Yvonne gives us memories which are biased.” Another considered that “Rudy’s version of events was more cut and dried” and that “Rudy provided the structure and Yvonne provided the emotion.”

A range of responses from empathy to skepticism about Johnson’s story was evident in students’ written journal entries. In class discussions, those students who believed in the sincerity of Johnson’s narrative faced interruptions and challenges when other students suggested that *Stolen Life* was about “self-pity” and that Yvonne Johnson simply “blames others for her problems.”

Evident within these student readers’ responses are tensions around issues of voice and subalternity. The difficulty that students seemed to be experiencing revolved around their struggle to articulate the extent to which Johnson both “represents” and “resists” voicelessness. As a subaltern figure, Yvonne Johnson is not fully able to take up her own story in her own voice. However, with her collaboration with Rudy Wiebe, Johnson interrupts this expectation and the book challenges these student readers to interrogate their previously held notions about voice and agency.

Many students appeared to accept their teacher’s hope that they would gain new understandings of how Native peoples are positioned outside mainstream society. The majority of the students in the class agreed that reading *Stolen Life* allowed them access to perspectives and life experiences they would not otherwise have. One student considered, “It’s important to read books that don’t relate to you…you need to learn about the world.” Another student wrote, “I can’t identify with the environment…out there…but books like this educate us.”

Although students thought that the treatment of Natives in Canada was “the point of the book” many of them recognized that *Stolen Life* offers only one perspective into Aboriginal life. For example one student said, “It presents the
worst of the culture. Others do achieve success.” Another commented, “This was the first book I read about this. I cannot judge because I have no cross-reference. The book offers insight into Yvonne’s life only and this may be a biased opinion of Native culture.”

While recognizing the limited perspective the book offers, these student readers inadvertently establish Yvonne as a subaltern figure. They recognize the stereotypes regarding Aboriginal peoples in Canada, and feel uneasy about them. In general, though, their encounters with Aboriginal peoples appear to be limited to superficial, often vicarious experiences. Yvonne Johnson becomes, in a sense, a constructed icon of Aboriginal womanhood. Readers of Stolen Life are faced with a figure that is more multi-faceted than the stereotypes they expect, yet one that still represents commonly held views about Native people.

However, despite the challenges students faced in their understandings of the ‘other’ in the figure of Yvonne Johnson, it is unclear to what extent these same readers were able to similarly challenge their own positioning in relation to the text. They seemed to attribute the difficulties Johnson encounters to societal factors and historical contingencies in which they have no stake or involvement. One student, for example, commented in his journal:

- As a typical middle-class teenager, I found it difficult at times to abandon my perception that ‘only such events can happen to terrible people anywhere but here.’….It’s a sad reminder that justice in a democracy is ¼ truth and ¾ mind games.

While this student seemed to see Johnson’s situation as a breakdown of democratic principles of justice and fairness, another student attributed Johnson’s circumstances to imperialism and colonization:

- My belief about the First Nations people who cause problems in society is that it is the result of past imperialism by European nations, most notably Britain. First Nations people do not have a true motherland anymore as a result of colonization of First Nations lands by British people. Obviously, the majority of First Nations people are just like other people of any nationality, so they are mostly very decent people. The lack of an actual land makes some Aboriginal people, who do not coexist very well with other people in society, simply try to survive.

Positioning Yvonne Johnson as a victim of historical and social injustices allows students to bring a liberal humanist perspective to their readings of Stolen Life without struggling with their own relatively privileged positions in society. By consistently viewing Johnson as a subaltern figure, these student readers are able to maintain a certain detachment from the notion of themselves as direct beneficiaries of the status quo. Pirie (1997) reminds us of the difficulties teachers encounter in encouraging reading that draws on our “personal platforms” of “histories and values” (p. 44) He explains:

To be aware of ourselves as readers, we must acknowledge these personal platforms. That does not mean surrendering to subjectivity. Once we
recognize how our values shape our readings, we are in a position to criticize those values, measure them against the values of others, guard against our prejudices, and celebrate or revise our values as appropriate. To engage students in this kind of thinking means inviting them to position themselves in relation to the values in the text, so that they are ultimately not merely reading the text, but also reading the world and reading themselves. (p. 44)

As a “subaltern text,” *Stolen Life* offers opportunities to engage in the kind of reading Pirie suggests. From our observations, reading *Stolen Life* did encourage some students to interrogate their own privilege, while others appeared not to accept this invitation to reconsider their own positionings. These students preferred, instead, to read Yvonne as an ‘other’ with whom they had no ethical relation. The teacher, Susan, was aware of these conflicting responses. She recognized the risks of asking students to read about “the pain of what we do to each other as human beings” when it is close to home rather than separated by time or place, as with most of the “classic” literature students are required to read in English classes. She recognized that as a ‘reading text,’ *Stolen Life* presents significant difficulties, particularly for readers from non-Aboriginal backgrounds. In this regard, Cynthia Sugars (2001), in her review of Helen Hoy’s *How Should I Read These?*, suggests that one of the challenges a teacher might experience in a mainstream classroom is how these texts are “often unconsciously interpreted to be about "me", the non-Native reader”. The teacher in our study recognized this risk and also knew that her efforts to confront her students with “difficult knowledge” would be met with acceptance by some and resistance by many. These were risks she was prepared to take in her desire to defamiliarize her students’ preconceptions surrounding Aboriginal peoples in their community. As a ‘teaching text,’ *Stolen Life* presents specific pedagogical challenges that need to be considered. Susan, the classroom teacher, had certain political and aesthetic intents in introducing the book to her students, some of which were achieved and others frustrated.

**REFERENCES**


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NOTE
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