



Reading Whiteness in Dear Canada and I Am Canada: Historical Fiction of a Multicultural Nation

—Andrea Zerebeski

Matas, Carol. *Footsteps in the Snow: The Red River Diary of Isobel Scott, Rupert's Land, 1815*. Toronto: Scholastic, 2002. 208 pp. \$14.99 hc. ISBN 978-0-439-98835-3. Print. Dear Canada.

Trottier, Maxine. *Blood upon Our Land: The North West Resistance Diary of Josephine Bouvier, Batoche, District of Saskatchewan, 1885*. Toronto: Scholastic, 2009. 224 pp. \$14.99 hc. ISBN 978-0-545-99905-2. Print. Dear Canada.

Trottier, Maxine. *The Death of My Country: The Plains of Abraham Diary of Geneviève Aubuchon, Quebec, New France, 1759*. Toronto: Scholastic, 2005. 216 pp. \$14.99 hc. ISBN 978-0-439-96762-4. Print. Dear Canada.

Trottier, Maxine. *Storm the Fortress: The Siege of Quebec; William Jenkins, New France, 1759*. Toronto: Scholastic, 2013. 184 pp. \$14.99 hc. ISBN 978-1-443-10007-6. Print. I Am Canada.

My family's first introduction to the Dear Canada series occurred in one of the large chain bookstores, and my daughter, Ana, was hooked; written as diaries by fictional young female protagonists, the books with their irregularly sized pages and silky bookmarks are made to feel old and beautiful to the touch. This historical fiction series is published by Scholastic Canada and geared toward girls between the ages of eight and twelve. Because hearing from and about women changes the way we understand history, the idea of my daughter learning about Canadian

history from the perspective of young women appealed to me. As we looked through the Dear Canada shelf and Ana recognized herself in the fair-skinned, locket-sized faces that stared back at us from the spines of the books, I became aware of the multitude of *white* faces among the portraits of the books: racial hierarchies also shape the way our colonial nation remembers. I left the store that day curious about the construction within the series of Canada's history and wondering whose stories were being told.

In *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature*, Clare Bradford writes that “there is no such thing as an innocent text, [and] all texts are informed by ideologies,” including texts written for children (14). To this Charlie Peters adds, in a chapter on the Dear Canada series, “There is considerable evidence that the volumes in the series are texts of Canada’s dominant culture” (111–12). As such, the historical fiction of the Dear Canada series expresses and shapes the racial consciousness of the nation. Multiculturalism, both as an official policy of Canada and as a fundamental aspect of Canadian identity (O’Connell 539; McGarry 123), is an ideological perspective that shapes the ways that race and ethnicity are conceptualized throughout Canada, informing everything from formal policy and educational programming to informal interactions and the production of children’s literature (O’Connell 539). Anne O’Connell observes that a formulation of “diversity” as an aspect of Canada’s history and contemporary identity is a central part of Canada’s multicultural policy through the Canadian Multiculturalism Act: typically welcomed in urban spaces as a fundamental aspect of a “civilized” society (537) and as a remembrance of settler history through a “frontier narrative” often celebrated in rural areas are two seemingly contradictory elements that work together to support multiculturalism in Canada (538). Officially, multicultural ideology in Canada

promotes cultural diversity and racial tolerance, but she argues that, by naming the British and the French as “founding” nations of Canada, the “legal framework” of multiculturalism—Canada’s Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism—positions Aboriginal peoples alongside “racialized immigrants” as cultures “external to the nation,” institutionalizing a hegemony of whiteness (539). Whiteness, an invisible and frequently “absent racial category and dominant social norm,” is “connected to institutionalized power and privileges that benefit white [people]” (Rogers and Mosley 466). One of the ways that white settler naturalization occurs in Canada is through the way that history is told through story. The “frontier narrative,” comprised of stories that portray settlers as adventurers arriving to civilize and tame a wild, empty land, is as much a part of multicultural Canada as the concepts of diversity and tolerance (O’Connell 538). The settlers that feature in these stories are celebrated figures in our national remembering, a history that “remains at serious odds with Indigenous histories and contemporary Native politics” (O’Connell 540). By placing white British and French settlers at the centre of the story of this land, multiculturalism systemically supports racial inequality and a notion of history that ignores the costs of colonialism on indigenous peoples, making invisible the ways that white settler people have benefitted and benefit still from colonial violence against Aboriginal cultures.

To consider how the centrality of the conflict between French and English settlers and the frontier narrative work to naturalize whiteness in Canadian history, I will examine four books in this review, three by award-winning Metis author Maxine Trottier and one by Carol Matas, also a prolific, award-winning author. Focusing on the 1759 British attack of French-held Quebec City, Trottier's recent release for the I Am Canada¹ series, *Storm the Fortress: The Siege of Quebec; William Jenkins, New France, 1759*, returns to the historical event she took up in her 2004 volume in the Dear Canada series, *The Death of My Country: The Plains of Abraham Diary of Geneviève Aubuchon, Quebec, New France, 1759*. Both titles reveal how whiteness became the norm and Aboriginal peoples were marginalized in early Canada. Turning to the frontier narrative, I will look to Matas's *Footsteps in the Snow: The Red River Diary of Isobel Scott, Rupert's Land, 1815* as a means of considering the interaction between the racial hierarchies established by settler peoples. I will conclude by turning again to Trottier, this time to her *Blood upon Our Land: The North West Resistance Diary of Josephine Bouvier, Batoche, District of Saskatchewan, 1885*, which contrasts Matas's story of settlement on the so-called frontier through the perspective of a Metis girl whose people are struggling to retain sovereignty of their ancestral lands.

Both *Storm the Fortress*, voiced by diarist William Jenkins, and *The Death of My Country*, voiced by

Geneviève Aubuchon, portray what is remembered as an important colonial battle in early Canadian history, the Plains of Abraham. William is a young sailor getting his start on the *HMS Pembroke*, an English naval ship, whereas Geneviève is Abenaki by birth but raised French. Reading both diaries provides a snapshot of the conflict from several positions, focused on the conflict between French and English settlers. The war is the circumstantial catalyst that forces both protagonists to make decisions about their identity and about who they want to be.

William's primary internal conflict is related to the development of a moral compass and relational ethics. Showing compassion early on when he defends a dog from a bully (15) and bravery when he rescues a friend from a fire (19), William continues throughout the narrative to encounter situations where his choices define his character. His decisions appear straightforward in comparison to the complex existence of Blue Sam, who is readers' primary source of information on the Abenaki culture in this book. Taken as a young boy by the Abenaki, he is "marked with blue designs. . . . Tattoos" (16) and has become "one of them, more Indian than white" (63). When Blue Sam abandons ship, William reflects: "Blue Sam was a deserter. If captured by the British he would be executed. If he returned to the Abenaki, he would be an outcast in the white world" (102–03). It is the white world that is the centre of this book: William's



Geneviève's internal struggle to reconcile these two worlds is problematized by societal inequality and racism.



quest to make the decisions of an honourable man occurs within the framework of the Christian virtues held by the French and the British, and the battle that is highlighted through his records is the colonial conflict between the British and French for power.

In *The Death of My Country*, Trottier establishes a dichotomy between the French and the Abenaki in Geneviève's first diary entry. Geneviève was given the name Miguen at birth but, since her mother's death, has lived the French life of her adoptive family, despite the urging of her brother, Chegual, that she follow his lead and return to traditional Abenaki life. As war looms in Quebec City, Geneviève does battle with herself, confiding to her diary her confusion about where she fits (36). When she looks in the mirror, "it is not a white face or even a French one" that she sees, but rather "an Abenaki face" (21), and she is "disturbed" that she does not feel at home in the encampment where Abenaki warriors and their family stay, making her "wonder who [she] is" (52). Yet, when Geneviève is given a gift of clothing from an Abenaki woman at the encampment, she feels "strange" and "wonderful" while wearing it, as if she has "returned to another time" (63). Geneviève's internal struggle to reconcile these two worlds is problematized by societal inequality and racism. Called a "stupid *indienne*" by the French surgeon she assists, Geneviève is enraged by the way the words come "from his lips as though he were spitting out something distasteful," and the experience stays with her (67–68). The restrictions placed upon Abenaki warriors underline the racial hierarchy further; although they fight alongside the French as allies against the English, all Abenaki "are required to return to their encampment at night" (29). While they may fight together, the Abenaki are considered inferior by the French. When

the British have nearly taken Quebec City, Geneviève agrees to leave the city with Chequal and she changes into her Abenaki clothing, vowing that “her future is with Chequal” and presumably, living an Abenaki life (101). When their departure is delayed because of the fighting, Geneviève puts her Abenaki clothes away, feeling “as though [she has] put a piece of [herself] away with them” (107). Near the end of the diary, she is encouraged to “remember the people from whom [she] came” (161), a statement that implores her to acknowledge the importance of her Abenaki roots as she lives in the French world. These words seem to allow Geneviève to strike a mental balance that puts to rest any remaining identity conflict she has. Her turnaround decision regarding her identity is rapid, unconvincingly so, but the result is that she embraces a French life.

Throughout this book, Abenaki culture is represented as lacking sophistication. Geneviève refers to the clothing she was wearing when she arrived in Quebec City (35) and the “way in which the people live” at the encampment as simple (52). The non-warrior Abenaki are represented as poor, sick, plain people who are the victims of frequent massacre. Geneviève writes of her brother’s pride in being Abenaki (20), but the book makes no case for why, so that readers may admire Chequal’s resolve but are given no insight into the life of the Abenaki to understand it. The result is that Chequal is not a

compelling character and appears in the romanticized stereotype of the Indian warrior. Overall, the life of the Abenaki is overshadowed by the life of the French.

Whether it is William’s role in the battle of the Plains of Abraham or Geneviève’s, what emerges as the central marker of identity, be it personal or national, is whiteness. Geneviève’s diary entry sets French life up as the unacknowledged norm. For Geneviève, in the end, the dichotomy between French and Abenaki cultures appears mostly as a one-sided comparison in which the white European life wins her over. Readers may not question this choice, since there is little compelling exposition of Abenaki culture to convince readers that she might choose otherwise. Similarly, despite their alliance with the French and their role in the conflict, the Abenaki are not portrayed in any detail in William’s diary. In addition, when William negotiates in his mind Blue Sam’s social standing in relationship to how he expects Sam would be accepted in white society, whiteness is always his invisible norm. Together, *Storm the Fortress* and *The Death of My Country* can be read as texts that support a multicultural vision of Canada. By marking the central colonial struggle as one between the English and the French, just as the legal framework of multiculturalism does, the dominance of white Canada emerges.

As Elizabeth Furniss notes, frontier narratives celebrate “the discovery of the empty land, the arrival of settlers, and the establishment of colonial society”

(55; qtd. in O'Connell 540). They are an integral aspect of settler naturalization because stories of tenacity, hard work, and hard-won survival legitimate the place of settlers as indigenous to the Canadian landscape. In *Footsteps in the Snow*, Matas utilizes the frontier narrative to expose the racial hierarchies these narratives often disguise by positioning diarist Isobel Scott in relationship to Aboriginal cultures in a way that makes racial hierarchies plain. Isobel, a white Scottish settler, is quickly recognized by readers as racist. Her family's adventure across the ocean to Rupert's Land is plagued by grief when Isobel's mother dies unexpectedly. Once their long journey has ended and they have reached The Forks, they learn that an attack on the settlement has made it impossible for them to spend the winter there, and so they journey again, this time to find food. They must rely upon the Cree, people that Isobel regards as "savages," for their survival.

The reliance of settlers on Aboriginal peoples for the basics of life and survival—food, knowledge of waterways for safe travel, and appropriate clothing for the elements—is evident throughout this book, as is their perceived superiority over the people who inhabit the world to which they have immigrated already. For example, when Isobel must make a trade for moccasins, she approaches a young Cree woman, White Loon, and remembers that "she had a nice face, round with black eyes and a big smile. For a moment I forgot that she was a savage, for she seemed a girl

just like myself" (46–47). White Loon agrees to trade Isobel the materials she needs to make moccasins for her family and to teach her how to make them in the evenings. As they are thanking one another at the end of their trade, Isobel laughs at White Loon's English; when White Loon is upset by this, Isobel writes, "I reminded myself that the savages are probably like children and must be treated kindly" (47). White Loon is the one with the knowledge, yet Isobel refers to her and her people as "children." Isobel's use of the word "savage" and her beliefs about the Aboriginal people she encounters are a reflection of the racist beliefs of the time.

Isobel's diary also charts the transformation of her perceptions of superiority. Near its end, evidence of her turn of mind is evident when she writes, "I am impressed by these so-called savages. Did I say savages? It seems that I can no longer look at them that way" (148). Later on, she adds, "it seems that my fears about becoming like the savages has [*sic*] completely disappeared. Because they are not savages at all, but good people who have different ways than us" (152). Witnessing Isobel's shift in attitude about the Cree enables readers to see the racism that informed the framework of Canada. Isobel's message is one that would be familiar to Canadian children and educators; it is the message of multiculturalism, that through exposure to difference, Isobel's life is enriched. Isobel's change of heart does not require her to interrogate

her own whiteness, however. Rather, it supports a multiculturalism that “celebrates white liberal tolerance of and benevolence towards Indigenous peoples,” all the while ignoring the “traumas of white settlement” (O’Connell 540). Racism does not mesh well with dominant ideas of a diverse Canada. It is easy to name individual behaviours or situations as examples of racism, but it is more difficult to recognize the pervasiveness and normality of racism in our society’s institutions or in the day-to-day practices of our lives (Andersen 69). While Matas’s book underscores specific instances of racism, it does not address its systemic nature.

Trottier’s *Blood upon Our Land* is a stark contrast to Matas’s title, in that the diarist here is a Metis girl named Josephine. Through her telling of settlement history from a Metis perspective, Josephine exposes the injustices of what the frontier narrative ignores. Her fictional family’s experiences are mixed with real historical figures such as Gabriel Dumont and Louis Riel in the community of Batoche in the months leading up to the North West Resistance of 1885. This conflict is referred to in Canadian classrooms frequently as the “North-West *Rebellion*,” and the Metis that fought are branded as rebels against a “peaceful government” (Livesey 63). Josephine’s diary details key parts of her family’s history even prior to her birth, including how her grandparents and parents were forced off their land by a government that refused

to acknowledge their claim to it and parcelled it out for settlers instead. Josephine’s diary becomes an alternative history; for example, while the government insists that land should be parcelled in squares, this practice is, according to her grandfather, “unnatural. A farm should stretch right on down to the river in a long strip” (22). Readers are called upon to empathize with Josephine’s family and to admire the stand her brother and father make against the government, viewing them not as rebels but as resisters pushing back against an unjust power, struggling to hold onto the land to which their lives are linked fundamentally. In *Blood upon Our Land*, the elevated treatment that settlers experienced at the cost of the Metis and First Nations peoples is revealed in the dispossession of lands; thus, the book reveals how racism is enacted by the government at a systemic level.

Josephine’s writing ability is a source of pride for her family. Her grandfather, Moushoom, urges her to write so that their stories are not lost: “He insisted that I must pass on my stories in these pages, since if stories were not told, they would surely disappear. ‘And if the stories do disappear,’ he said, ‘so might our language and Métis way of life, for all are connected’” (3). For Moushoom, stories are a means of situating identity. Even as Josephine contemplates being called “half-breed” (45), her connection to story fills her with a certainty about who she is, underscoring Moushoom’s point:

In our family, only Moushoom is half of one people and half of another, his mother having been Cree and his father a *Kanaya* from Québec. And what about me? Mama's great-grandmother was of the Sarcee people. Is one of my ears then Kanayaen and the other Cree, and if so, which is which? . . . I am certainly not half of one thing and half of another. . . . One thing I do know. I may be made up of many things, but I am entirely Métis. (45)

Josephine not only understands who she is but feels proud about what it means to be Metis.

For white students to see past individual acts of racism and to recognize racism at an institutional and societal level, they must be able to recognize whiteness as a race and to decentralize their own experiences (Rogers and Mosley 465). In the preface to indigenous studies scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson's *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*, Karen Brodtkin summarizes Moreton-Robinson's theory that "intersubjectivity"—"the ability to examine an issue from a number of perspectives"—can be developed and, moreover, that it occurs through white exposure to indigenous perspectives; this process decentres whiteness by bringing Aboriginal experiences to the

forefront, allowing white people to see "themselves and Indigenous people through Indigenous eyes" (xii). *Blood upon Our Land* is an example of a text that voices Aboriginal experiences and ways of knowing and being in the world that often are unfamiliar to white students. This exposure creates the opportunity for young readers to see their own positions in race.

Karen McGarry suggests that Canadians are fond of thinking about their country as a cultural mosaic in which racism is "a thing of the past," and the absence or erasure of Aboriginal stories and experiences in history helps to enable this viewpoint (124). In relation to the Dear Canada series, for parents and educators, discussion about race and racism may arise most often out of what—or who—is missing. The first discussion my daughter Ana and I had about Dear Canada in the big chain bookstore was about the faces that we did *not* see on the book spines. My daughter's interaction with Dear Canada in the bookstore that day affirmed her as a girl and as a part of Canada, but more particularly as a *white* girl in a multicultural nation. Ana was right—the Dear Canada books are attractive, and generally they support the multicultural perception of the central position of white settler readers in Canadian history.

Note

¹ Scholastic's I Am Canada historical fiction series for boys had its first publication in 2010, nine years after the first Dear Canada title was introduced. It currently includes eleven books whose first-person style narrates the adventures of boys during moments deemed relevant by the publisher to Canadian history.

These books have less variation in their historical backdrops than the Dear Canada books do, as most of the events depicted, with few exceptions—such as Yee's *Blood and Iron: Building the Railway* and Brewster's *Deadly Voyage: RMS Titanic*—are wars or battles.

Works Cited

- Andersen, Chris. "Critical Indigenous Studies in the Classroom: Exploring 'the Local' Using Primary Evidence." *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies* 5.1 (2012): 67–78. Web. 10 June 2015.
- Bradford, Claire. *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2007. Print.
- Brewster, Hugh. *Deadly Voyage: RMS Titanic; Jamie Laidlaw, Crossing the Atlantic, 1912*. Toronto: Scholastic, 2011. Print. I Am Canada.
- Brodkin, Karen. Preface. *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*. St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2000. xi–xiii. Print.
- Furniss, Elizabeth. *The Burden of History: Colonialism and the Frontier Myth in a Rural Canadian Community*. Vancouver: UBC P, 1999. Print.
- Livesey, Robert. *The Rebels*. North York: Stoddart, 2000. Print.
- McGarry, Karen. "Destabilizing Whiteness and Challenging the Myth of Canadian Multiculturalism: The Couple in the Cage and Educulturalism." *Undoing Whiteness in the Classroom: Critical Educultural Teaching Approaches for Social Justice Activism*. Ed. Virginia Lea and Jean Sims. New York: Lang, 2008. 119–35. eBook.
- O'Connell, Anne. "An Exploration of Redneck Whiteness in Multicultural Canada." *Social Politics* 17.4 (2010): 536–63. *Project Muse*. Web. 10 June 2015.
- peters, charlie. "Girls, Animals, Fear, and the Iterative Force of the National Pack: Reading the Dear Canada Series." *Seriality and Texts for Young People: The Compulsion to Repeat*. Ed. Mavis Reimer et al. New York: Palgrave, 2014. 111–28. Print.
- Rogers, Rebecca, and Melissa Mosley. "Racial Literacy in a Second-Grade Classroom: Critical Race Theory, Whiteness Studies, and Literacy Research." *Reading Research Quarterly* 41.4 (2006): 462–95. Print.
- Yee, Paul. *Blood and Iron: Building the Railway; Lee Heen-gwong, British Columbia, 1882*. Toronto: Scholastic, 2010. Print. I Am Canada.

Andrea Zerebeski lives in the same small Alberta city in which she grew up, working alongside parents with young children as she raises her own two kids. Her research interests include children's literature and how it might be utilized in early childhood environments to influence the construction of race, particularly how Aboriginal literature written for children may allow white caregivers to recognize whiteness as race. She is completing the second year of an M.A. at the University of Alberta in the faculty of Native Studies.