Five Children’s Texts and a Critique of Canadian Identity
—Heather Snell


Elizabeth A. Galway, in *From Nursery Rhymes to Nationhood: Children’s Literature and the Construction of Canadian Identity*, interrogates the frequently racist and imperial sentiments that permeated early characterizations of Canada. In doing so, Galway cites J. W. Bengough’s 1897 response to Rudyard Kipling’s characterization of Canada in “Our Lady of the Snows”:

The title is pretty, I grant you, And I know you meant to be kind, But I wish you could hit on another Less risky, if you don’t mind. Of course, as implying my “whiteness,” I modestly murmur “It goes,” But I fear few will give that meaning To “Our Lady of the Snows.”
You see, there’s a prevalent notion—
Which does me a grievous wrong—
That my climate is almost Arctic,
And my winters ten months long.
Perhaps that is your idea,
For it’s widespread, goodness knows!
And this phrase will make it more so—
“Our Lady of the Snows.” (149)

The last four lines in the first stanza of Bengough’s “Canada to Kipling” suggest that Kipling’s poem reinscribes a vision of Canada that privileges its Anglo-Saxon inhabitants. Indeed, Kipling’s insistence on reading Canada’s climate through a feminizing and potentially racist lens reveals his own ideological investment in empire. Bengough’s poem refutes the idea that Canada is beset by “winters ten months long” and exposes at least one way in which Canada’s natural environment could be unjustly recruited for the purposes of “whitewashing” Britain’s erstwhile colony. With Bengough, Galway insists that racist and imperial sentiments existed in tension with images of the nation that emphasized diversity. The tension between these two extremes of representation provoked continual shifts in understandings of what it meant to be “Canadian” following Confederation in 1867 (10–11).

A number of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century literatures about Canada struggle “to reconcile the ideology of empire with an increasing awareness of the need for independence” (Galway 10). Yet, literatures ostensibly written for children during this period constitute a particularly rich body of texts through which to explore fluctuations in Canadian identity. Not only did children’s literatures reflect the concerns of the adult society that created them, but they also engendered a space wherein adults could engage fantasies about childhood and national identity (5). The fact that early children’s literatures were a means of instilling patriotic pride in young readers only makes them more valuable for examining early constructions of Canadian identity.

Scholars have nevertheless tended to neglect the role that early Canadian children’s literatures may have played in shaping the nation. While many scholars stress the influential nature of children’s literatures, few consider how these texts might enable more sophisticated understandings of Canada and “Canadianness” (Galway 6). From Nursery Rhymes to Nationhood redresses the conspicuous absence of children’s literatures in studies of Canada by attending to how early literatures for young readers express, undermine, or challenge dominant discourses of Canadian nationalism.

Visions of the nation that rely on aggressive assertions of masculinity, for example, find a correlative in the boys’ adventure stories that were published in Canada throughout the nineteenth century. As with Kipling’s poem, many of these narratives reinforce
the idea that “the wilds of Canada” (Galway 8) existed, paradoxically, as impenetrable yet inviting “playgrounds” for respectably rugged boys. Nineteenth-century stories for girls focus on the domestic, reflecting girls’ wider exclusion from discourses of Canadian nationalism that emphasize male adventure. The gendering of early children’s literatures points to the disparate forms of Canadian citizenship to which children, depending on their gender, were expected to aspire. Boys were encouraged to join the public world of labour and leadership, where they would collaborate with other men to do the “real” work of forging a strong, singular nation; girls were initiated into the private world of domestic labour, where they would raise “good” Canadian citizens (8). Explicit acknowledgement of the roles that girls might play as adventurous nation-builders in their own right emerged, arguably, in the early-twentieth century, with the publication of works such as L. M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* and Muriel Denison’s *Susannah* series (9). Like the actual children who read them, books intended for boys and girls reflect, shape, and reshape dominant national imaginaries.

*From Nursery Rhymes to Nationhood* charts the shifting and often uneven trajectories through which a peculiarly and sometimes troubling “Canadian” identity or identities came into being. Galway organizes her chapters topically rather than chronologically, attending to how geography, regionalism, politics, and encounters with those perceived to be “other” conditioned literary expressions of Canadian identity. Early children’s literatures manifest competing articulations of what it meant to be “Canadian” even as they appear to project the illusion of a stable Canadian identity. The combination of efforts to debunk stereotypes perpetuated by British and American writers and internal conflicts among Canada’s Native, French, and Anglo-Saxon inhabitants made unified and coherent constructions of Canadian identity impossible to sustain. Galway argues that

> The often conflicting portrayal of these [national] characters reflects the ongoing process of negotiating issues of race, language, religion, and culture in post-Confederation Canada. It is perhaps this process of negotiation, of reconciling notions of race and national identity, which most clearly articulates the means by which national identity can be constructed and developed in accordance with changing needs and attitudes. (177)

In other words, the very processes of negotiation that threaten to tear the nation apart make possible the construction of national identities.

Galway’s study provides an excellent starting point for thinking through how contemporary writers and illustrators of children’s literatures in Canada continue to negotiate issues of race, language, religion, and
culture in relation to American, as well as Canadian, discourses about national identity. A case in point is Joe Morse’s reillustration of Ernest L. Thayer’s *Casey at the Bat*, published by Kids Can Press in 2006 as part of the Visions in Poetry series. Thayer’s poem originally appeared under the penname Phin in the *San Francisco Examiner* on 3 June 1888, with the title “Casey at the Bat: A Ballad of the Republic, Sung in the Year 1888.” It narrated the failure of a fictional character to hit home at the game of baseball, but also transformed a “great and glorious poop-out” (Gardner) into an enduring symbol of Americanism. Baseball had already been established in the United States as a national game by 1888. Thayer’s poem, tellingly subtitled “A Ballad of the Republic,” reinforced the idea that baseball somehow embodied what it meant to be “American.” Despite Thayer’s apathy toward the poem, and his reluctance to lay claim to it as the author, “Casey at the Bat” became embedded in American popular culture. Since 1893, when actor De Wolf Hopper recited it at a show for the New York Giants and the Chicago White Stockings in New York, the poem has been performed, recorded, adapted, parodied, and translated numerous times. According to the note on Thayer in the Kids Can Press edition, “Thayer’s poem is a part of the very fabric of American culture, a status that was confirmed in 1996 when the United States Postal Service issued a Casey stamp as part of a series saluting American folk heroes.” As the note on Morse in the same edition affirms, Morse’s vision of “Casey at the Bat” represents a significant departure from preceding reillustrations of the poem published in the United States, the majority of which celebrate baseball as an American sport. Whereas illustrators such as Christopher Bing nostalgically recuperate Casey as a symbol of Americanism for the twenty-first century, Morse takes Casey out of context, deconstructing the poem and its hero as “American” icons.

In Morse’s version of the poem, the home of the Mudville Nine baseball team is the inner city rather than the stadium, a setting that, while recuperating Casey for the twenty-first century, eschews any kind of national situatedness. Unlike Bing’s illustrations, which include reproductions of American baseball memorabilia, Morse’s illustrations do not designate the poem nationally. Morse’s inner city could be almost anywhere in North America. Graffiti, a concrete park, an adjoining freeway, and a plethora of multiracial youths sporting hoodies, blue jeans, jerseys, and baseball caps signal an inner-city context; but the absence of details that would indicate which city Morse is representing leaves readers in the dark. The only detail that might be interpreted as a clue to the location of the Mudville Nine is a television screen in an apartment overlooking the baseball park: on the screen, a parade featuring a victorious Casey waving his arms from the backseat of a convertible passes through what appears to be the same inner-
city neighbourhood figured in the rest of the illustrations, only with the addition of a red-white-and-blue banner in the background. The colours of the banner, like the splashes of red, white, and blue that reappear sporadically in the rest of the illustrations, point to an American context, yet there are problems with a reading of the poem that would place it in the United States.

This illustration of the televised parade, for instance, is framed as a fantasy that exposes the false idealism of nationalism and its penchant for patriotic display. Immediately preceding the page on which the television is figured are the lines, “And now the air is shattered / By the force of Casey’s blow.” These lines lead readers unfamiliar with the poem to expect a victory. Morse’s separation of the lines of the poem on different pages, a strategy that mimics the suspense generated by oral recitations of the poem, further encourages readers to expect that Casey’s blow will be successful. Moreover, Casey’s seemingly inevitable success is reinforced on the succeeding page, when the next lines of the poem, emanating in the form of a bubble from a spectator at the parade figured on the television screen, announces:

Oh, somewhere in this favored land
The sun is shining bright;
The band is playing somewhere,
And somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing,
And little children shout.

Safely contained within the borders of the television screen, the announcement and its accompanying illustration can be read as a fantasy when the young narrator of the text informs readers one page later:
Oh, somewhere in this favored land
The sun is shining bright;
The band is playing somewhere,
And somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing,
And little children shout;
later, “But there is no joy in Mudville— / Mighty Casey has struck out.” The illustration features a dejected Casey whom the narrator, having lost interest, is now abandoning. The poem ends, not with a parade down an American street, but with Thayer’s original “poop-out” intact. The only form in which the poem can occur in the United States is fantasy. The poem cannot symbolize “America,” because the processes of negotiation that contribute to the formation of national identities make the assertion of one stable identity impossible. Attempts to make such an assertion will, like Casey, inevitably fail to “hit home.” The irony in this case is that the ambiguity in the poem itself regarding the ethnicity of its characters enables Morse to recast it as one that better acknowledges cultural diversity. Since African Americans had been officially banned from the major leagues three decades earlier, nineteenth-century readers in the United States would have assumed that Thayer’s players were “white.” The subsequent sublimation of the work as an enduring symbol of Americanism, then, amounts to a disavowal of multiculturalism and attendant histories of racism and exclusion. Bing’s illustrations attempt to redress this disavowal with its incorporation of an old newspaper clipping about “the exclusion of Negro players from the game of baseball.” But Morse goes further by downplaying Casey’s status as American and by dubbing his predecessor a “hoodoo” instead of a “lulu.” Even if the television accurately represents the origins of the Mudville Nine, the designation of these origins is literally shoved into a corner of the room and ignored. The resident of the apartment is too busy enjoying the ball game from his balcony to watch American television. For the characters of Morse’s version, the trials and tribulations of everyday reality trump idealistic images of America. Morse himself hails from Toronto, a city whose residents struggle to negotiate their identities in relation to the images of the United States that dominate their television screens.

Identities in Canada are influenced by local contexts as much as they are by larger discourses of Canadian and American nationalism. As with stereotypical images of Canada and more realistic depictions of the nation, they often exist in tension with one another. Galway does not neglect this dialectic in her study, which also considers how local expressions of identity conflicted with dominant discourses of nationalism throughout the nineteenth century. From Nursery Rhymes to Nationhood foregrounds how regional articulations of identity both clashed with and influenced dominant, centralist discourses that attempted to project a unified image of the nation. It was through processes of negotiation, with respect to regional as well as racial, linguistic, religious, and cultural borders, that Canadian national identities formed.

Morse lives and writes in Toronto, yet the ambiguous images in Casey at the Bat make room
for identifications on the part of readers in places other than Ontario. The inner city in this case could be Toronto, or it could be Winnipeg or Los Angeles. The only detail that does not seem to “fit” any context is the game of baseball itself. Basketball is normally the game most associated with stereotypical images of the North American inner city. The replacement of basketball with baseball, in conjunction with Morse’s subtle deconstruction of Thayer’s poem as essentially “American,” provoke considerations of inner-city stereotypes while also evoking the genealogy of the poem. Morse’s Casey does more than reflect on processes of negotiation; it incorporates traces of the various transformations undergone by the poem. In this sense, the illustrations are self-reflexive and might be read as a restaging of Morse’s attempt to reconcile his own Canada-inflected identity with a poem that has come to connote “Americanness.” Whether personal or political, Morse’s strategy proves significant in the face of increasing globalization and American cultural imperialism, both of which can have the effect of flattening differences. His text suggests that the work of reillustrating, reimagining, and recasting classic American works of literature in Canada is part and parcel of attempts to negotiate what Walter Mignolo refers to as “local and global designs.”

A number of writers for young people in Canada are taking up this task of creatively reinterpreting classic American texts. Sharon McCartney’s The Love Song of Laura Ingalls Wilder, based on Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House books (1932–71), provides a compelling example. In contrast to Morse’s Casey, which retains the masculine posturing associated with baseball, McCartney poetically recasts Wilder’s supposedly “authentic” representations of her family’s life on the frontier with a panoply of “Little House” objects and inward-looking characters to comment on how dominant discourses of American nationalism, like their counterparts in Canada, effectively marginalized women and Native peoples. If, as Holly Blackford points out, “the centerpiece of [Wilder’s Little House in the Big Woods, the first novel in the Little House series] remains ‘men’s tales told in Pa’s voice’” (151), then it is women’s tales told in their own voices and in those of the props that support Wilder’s ambivalent reproduction of American frontier myths that take centre stage in McCartney’s text. As the Little House books subtly but also inadequately illustrate, such myths necessitated the silence of women, whose efforts to domesticate the wilderness threatened the idealistic notions of male pioneering that had become so much a part of American nationalist discourse by the time Wilder started work on the series:

The novel Big Woods attempts to do for children what Thoreau attempted to do for a newly industrializing region—display the thesis that the simple pre-industrial life in nature is both truly
independent and a model of the good life, a myth that Thoreau, too, juxtaposes with technology, when he observes and enjoys the sound of a train running through the woods. This life allows for certain pleasures but not those of women’s social pretensions. (Blackford 171)

McCartney’s text explores precisely how women’s social pretensions, reflected in their daily efforts to keep house, not only supported male pioneering but also played an important role in establishing a “civilized” realm from which Natives could be excluded.

The Love Song of Laura Ingalls Wilder consists of several poems, the juxtaposition of which speaks volumes about McCartney’s imaginative deconstruction of Wilder’s oftentimes romantic representations of settler life on the American frontier in the 1880s. McCartney fragments the Little House books, enabling articulations of the “unsaid” that permeate the Ingalls’s fictionalized movements westward. In its poetic fragmentation of Wilder’s original work, and in its focus on Little House props and characters, the text highlights the constructedness of the representations in the books and, correlativey, their participation in larger discourses of American nationalism. The seemingly innocuous objects scattered throughout the little houses are props insofar as they support Wilder’s desire to project a triumphant image of her family’s life on the frontier, but they also, as McCartney’s text demonstrates, express the contradictions that characterize myths of male pioneering.

The delicate China Shepherdess that adorns the shelves and mantels of every little house, for example, symbolizes a domestic bulwark against the threat posed from outside, namely wolves, “Indians,” and the untamed wilderness itself. At the same time,
however, the China Shepherdess symbolizes the impediments this bulwark represents for Pa’s pursuit of the simple, pre-industrial life in nature: “A barricade, / a stockade that’s unbreachable, cornering me. Drawing / a bead on my heart” (McCartney 90). Like Ma, whose importation of the urban “East” and accompanying accoutrements of “civilization” to the frontier represents an attempt to compensate for what she has had to leave behind to follow Pa on his pioneering adventure, the China Shepherdess does not belong in the wilderness but in “the gabled storefronts / of Calumet Avenue”: “I was / rolled in quilts, face-down among soulless cups and / saucers, traversing Wisconsin, Dakota, the Verdigris, / in unsprung wagons with scathing cutlery to grace / the what-not of a jerry-built shanty, a signifier of / the eastern city I came from, of fashion, vanities” (19). The settlement of the China Shepherdess on the Ingalls’s mantelpiece confirms the successful establishment and inescapability of “civilization.” No matter how far westward he moves the family, Pa cannot escape Ma’s social pretensions.

Women’s discursive exclusion from myths of male pioneering is made nowhere more explicit in McCartney’s text than in the poem entitled “Pa’s Penis”: “Pioneer, each night under the nine-patch, / I explore the territories, seek out the gap, / the mountain pass that opens with a sigh . . . (36). Here, male pioneering is displaced onto Pa’s sexual organ, whose desire is “made manifest, destiny” (37). The imperatives of territorial expansion, expressed most succinctly in the American nationalist phrase “manifest destiny” (infamously employed by John O’Sullivan in 1845 to justify colonialism), are associated with a feminized landscape capable of being penetrated by the male pioneer. The only “barricade” to Pa’s “feral” push west is the bulwark of domesticity the China Shepherdess and, by extension, Ma, represents. Within the terms established by the discourse to which Pa subscribes, Ma is an emasculating force that prevents him from “courting the unknown” (90). Yet, Ma’s efforts to bring “civilization” to the frontier enable Pa to distinguish himself and his family from the “savage” Native other, on whose land he settles illegally.

McCartney highlights Wilder’s elision of Pa’s displacement of the Osage people. In “Soldat du Chêne, the Osage Leader Who Helps to Disband the War Camp,” the characterization of the Osage Leader as “noble savage” in the original Little House books is revealed to be nothing more than a racist caricature. “I’ve surveyed / their streets,” explains the Osage leader, “Independence, Muskogee, spoken / their language, seen how they celebrate / their dust and fences, nascent cities / clotting the vistas” (47). Reversing the gaze privileged in the original work, the Osage Leader surveys “their streets,” noting how Ingalls and other settlers celebrate (American) Independence behind “dust and fences” while appropriating Native languages. In keeping with the China Shepherdess,
the settlers’ domestic bulwarks resemble “nascent cities / clotting the vistas.” For the Osage leader, the Ingalls are a barricade to the continuance of “the old life”: “Our future turned to trash, offal, / poisonous innards. Hungry dogs / on the peripheries” (47). Ma’s social pretensions may appear to contradict myths of male pioneering, but the Osage leader recognizes that her housework contributes to the displacement of his people. After all, the “squat constructions of sod or logs” “steam [. . .] on the horizon like corpses . . .” (46).

As for Ma, the part of herself the China Shepherdess represents must, like the green delaine dress that “speaks out” a few pages later, be laid away and largely forgotten in the name of duty. She, too, is frustrated and, as with the props of civilization with which she decorates the little house, remains precariously “settled” on the frontier: “I try to cultivate an aura / of elegance, decorum. But to be well-bred / means to be in hand. Not blind-sided. Not / bushwacked, not weeping over the well cover / so no one will see” (10). Ma’s determination to be well-bred evokes Eastern values, but it also provides a link to “Pa’s Penis,” which is prefaced with a telling line by the Fleshtones: “Get on your pony and ride.”

McCartney’s text provides a corrective, perhaps, to Wilder’s original, especially in its address to young readers. The rather idealistic images of pioneering proffered by the Little House books arguably reinforce more than critique American discourses of nationalism. In its creative deconstruction of Wilder’s series, *The
Love Song of Laura Ingalls Wilder invites a rethinking of nationalist discourse and the use of children’s literature “as a means of strengthening national unity” (Galway 5). McCartney’s poems disrupt Wilder’s linear narration of national growth across the Little House series, suggesting that contemporary texts for children might cultivate critical awareness about the dangers of nationalist discourse and attendant exclusions of women and other marginalized “others.”

Wilder’s romantic representations of rural labour and industry on the frontier have given way to texts that invite children to think critically, not just about the dangers of nationalist discourse, but also about their relationship to a wilderness that is fast disappearing. Whereas the Little House series appeals to a desire for an imperialist relationship with nature, more recent Canadian texts for children tend to emphasize a connection to the natural environment now imperilled as a result of rapid urban growth and human over-involvement in ecological processes.

In Tiffany Stone’s Floyd the Flamingo and His Flock of Friends, spring is a season that triggers allergies, animals are advised to “beware of humans!” (29), and the presence of radioactive cats demonstrates the dangers of nuclear technology:

I’m a radioactive cat.
Don’t really know how I got like that.
I look ordinary in every way
if you see me during the day.
But if we meet at night, you’ll know.
It’s me! My eyes,
    they glow,
    they glow! (58)
Stone's light-hearted rhyme belies the seriousness of her subject; at the same time, however, the ordinariness of the cat's appearance suggests that the effects of nuclear technology are largely invisible and thereby doubly threatening. How do you know when you're petting a radioactive cat?

Barbara Wyn Klunder's *Other Goose: Recycled Rhymes for Our Fragile Times* is much more explicit about the dangers of human over-involvement in ecological processes. Little Bo-Peep is “liable to clone” (10), “Hickory, Dickory, Dock” is a countdown to nuclear “meltdown” (30), Humpty Dumpty is responsible for polluting a lake, “Little Boy Blue” warns that “[w]hat goes into the ground / Comes out in the corn” (12), the continued relevance of the rhyme “Rock-a-Bye Baby” is threatened by the logging industry, and, as with Stone's rhymes, the natural environment triggers allergies. The world described here is one in which children's relationships with nature are severely constrained.

Such texts nevertheless continue a longstanding tradition of associating children with the “primitive” and the “natural,” concepts whose renewed emergence in the seventeenth century corroborated colonialism to justify irresponsible cultivations of land and the dispossession of native peoples. Jo-Ann Wallace's thesis that “it is an idea of ‘the child’ which makes thinkable both nineteenth-century English colonialist imperialism and many twentieth-century forms of resistance to imperialism” (171) is relevant here. According to ideologies dominant throughout the British colonial period, children and native peoples alike needed to be subjected to control, discipline, and regulation in order to be transformed into “civilized” subjects. Children's texts were crucial to the colonialist project because they aimed to produce builders and caretakers of empire.
Karin Lesnik-Oberstein points out that, today, the “child, through its identification with the natural, and with the fulfillment of its own future as the adult it must become, has been increasingly assigned the role of the agent of its own environmental redemption” (213). Read within this context, Stone’s and Klunder’s texts insinuate that, in becoming aware of their increasing disconnection from nature, children themselves might actively seek to preserve the environment from the human forces that threaten to destroy it. Technology is often represented as the most destructive force of all in both “green” and science-fiction texts for children, inspiring critics such as Perry Nodelman to remark on the “closed-mindedness” of authors who pit technology against a virginal nature that presumably exists somewhere outside the modern city (288). Negative representations of technology doubtless risk reproducing the old and decidedly imperialist association between children and the natural world.

Sheree Fitch and Yayo’s *If I Had a Million Onions*, however, is uniquely optimistic about the potential for nature and technology to coexist. The illustration that prefaces this book of poems features a set of traffic lights attached to the leg of some creature that may or may not be human. The image is ambiguous, remarkable for how it fuses the organic and the inorganic. Another of the illustrations figures the outline of a snake filled with cars, an image that similarly represents the compatibility of the natural and the technological. No nightmares about technology exist here; rather, absurd imaginaries that present the ubiquity of nature amid the trappings of modern life. Some of the poems themselves narrate equally absurd hybridizations of human and natural worlds. At one point, the speaker expresses a desire to grace bare trees with “long / long / long / long / john / underwear!” and, in one of the most explicitly political moments in the book, dares to
imagine a world where there is “Food for everyone!” (33, 47). This last poem may not engage with nature, but it does at once identify problems with the environment in which Canadian children grow up and suggest that they themselves might actively work to change it.

For all that, the author’s apparent attempts to spark critical thinking in young readers are entirely in keeping with Galway’s assertion that children’s texts about Canada may aim to produce “good” citizens. One might argue that texts such as *If I Had a Million Onions* encourage an acceptance of, rather than a challenge to, the status quo. The very title of the text, premised on a “what if,” may suggest that Utopia is something that should remain securely within the realm of the fantastic rather than being thought of as something all might work toward with the hope of making the world a better place. These “as if” imagining may accordingly suggest that all this hyperbole seeks merely to entertain young readers. Yet, the engagement with nonsense in the form and content of Fitch’s verse holds out some promise, for what this engagement potentially signifies is a refusal of the master narratives that often underpin condescending attitudes toward children. If nothing else, Fitch and Yayo’s, as well as Morse’s, McCartney’s, Stone’s, and Klunder’s, work manifests the persistence of texts for children that remain open to ongoing negotiations of national identities and related registers of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Galway rightly concludes her study of early children’s literature with the observation that “Canada’s national identity remains one fraught with complexities, contradictions, and uncertainties and the decades following Confederation sowed the seeds of some of these tensions” (178). The tensions that helped to shape early identities in Canada continue to characterize children’s literatures in the twenty-first century even as these literatures engender new and exciting tensions and, in turn, oftentimes disorienting indeterminacies.
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