

WHY ARE YOU AFRAID OF INDIANS? ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION AND MISREPRESENTATION IN (PORTUGUESE) CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Who hasn't heard the phrase: "You look like an Indian", to express that one is being naughty, or lazy, or violent or... something else, as long as it is negative? I have heard it a lot as a child and even nowadays, as a mother myself, I see/listen to (mis)representations when it comes to referring to First Nations - or indigenous peoples, if you will. In fact, before embarking on my research in Native Canadian literature for children and young adults and especially when I was about to depart to Canada to visit a reserve in Penticton and in Vernon, everyone around me took interest in what I was doing and told me I was crazy, as this seemed to be a dangerous field. In Portugal, songs and books for children still convey the image of the Indian as a merciless warrior who is ready to scalp you and peel your skin off. That is the reason why, after studying Native Canadian literature for children and young adults, I believe it is important to analyse the way that the Indian is still portrayed in Portuguese literature, in particular through a brief reading and discussion of Maria Teresa Maia Gonzalez's *A História dos Brincos de Penas*, a book that is recommended by the Portuguese National Reading Panel. Thus, this study combines postcolonial theory and literary criticism to discuss issues of representation and misrepresentation, ultimately leading us to understand the importance of Bhabha's third space, a space where positive negotiations and renegotiations give rise to hybridity, a space where one does no longer need to be afraid of Indians.

Keywords: Portuguese fiction for children and young adults, First Nations, identity, representation/perception, stereotypes.

I would like to start this essay off explaining the reason behind the choice of this title. Actually, I do not suppose you are afraid of Indians, but I am not so sure of that in regards to Portuguese children, as they grow up exposed to stereotypes that Indians are merciless warriors, lazy, drunk and primitive. Children often listen to adults around them commenting: "What an Indian you are", when they misbehave, and even if that doesn't happen, they are faced with racial biases in advertisements, reality TV shows¹, or simply while watching Canal Panda, a Portuguese cable television channel, which released a DVD, in 2010, where one could find a version of the song "Ten Little Indians", aiming at teaching children how to count to ten and then backwards from ten down to one, both in English and in Portuguese. Even though, obviously, children do not associate this song with the extermination of innocent little Indians – because, by using the "Indian" imagery under the number 10, the song is not only objectifying Native peoples, counting them as if they were apples or balls, but it is also romanticising their genocidal destruction from the time of Columbus arrival in the Americas -, the fact is that children start believing that Indians are heathen savages always carrying tomahawks, bows and arrows, and roaring some guttural war-cry. This proves that the "white" conception of Native peoples "reveals very little about

the indigenes or their cultures. It reveals a great deal about the whites and their cultures”, as Goldie notes (1993: 12).



Figure 1. Peugeot Advertisement (2007).

The cultural fabrication of identity has been a very common practice through history. One example of ‘fabricated identities’ may be said to be the remarkable portraits which Edward S. Curtis took to include in his famous studies on the North American Indian. This photographer believed that the Native peoples were doomed to extinction in the beginnings of the twentieth century and that the only possibility of survival would be through words and pictures. Inspired by the turn-of-the-century perception of the Native individual as the “Noble Savage”, “... he sought to capture the ‘traditional’ Indian. His stated intention was to form ‘a comprehensive and permanent record of all the important tribes ... that still retain to a considerable degree their primitive conditions and traditions’” (Kennedy, 2001: 3). The problem, as Daniel Francis tells us, is that...

If the camera never lies, neither does it tell the whole truth. (...) ... [T]he photographs were carefully posed renderings designed to convey a particular view of the Indian. Curtis equipped his subjects with props (...) and doctored the photographs to eliminate evidence of White culture. He was trying to present Indians as they existed before the White Man came; or, more accurately, as he thought they existed before the White Man came. (...) His photographs were tiny time machines intended to take the viewer back before history began into a romantic world of a technologically primitive people. (...) Only in his photographs might one find the real Indian, which is to say, the Imaginary Indian.

(Francis, 1992: 41)

Misrepresentations such as the ones presented will prevail, unless children are taught to break down racial barriers from a tender age. As Robles de Melendez & Ostertag remind us,

Evidence from research and from daily life strongly confirms that contrary to what some adults still want to believe, children do see colour and racial differences. Copying the behaviour of those they consider their models, whether parents, relatives, or neighbours, children learn to negatively discriminate against others who are not like them. By the time they enter middle childhood, most children hold racial perceptions of others as truths. Timely action from early childhood teachers becomes the best antidote against perpetuation of misleading interpretations and concepts.

(1997, 137)

Cross-cultural dialogues may undoubtedly help to bring to the fore those differences between cultures and, in turn, challenge the rampant imperialism that has dominated the world, now building bridges of understanding. That is at the core of any definition of Children's Literature, because "[a] basic criterion of good children's literature is that it is free of stereotypes, but stereotypes abound in children's books about American [and other] Indian peoples" (Seale and Slapin, 2006: 67).

The time has come for opening the way to dialogue between both white and Native communities; otherwise, the latter will continue to be wrapped in stereotypes and expected to remain pre-Columbian. There are clear political and cultural differences between those two groups, but the exaggeration of those differences puts all Native readers, and the youngest in particular, in an untenable position, as Monica's heartrending real story depicts:

I really don't like the fake cartoon and illustration in Indian books that are here in the school library. (...) It makes me mad when children make fun of my culture. (...) When the children grow up I don't want them to think that Indians put feathers in their hair and dance around the fire. We don't do that. And I don't think it is right for the kids to look at the silly things they put in those silly books. One day I saw a kid running around with a feather in their hair and putting their hand to their mouths and making weird noises and I cried when that happened. So what I want you to do is put those books away and learn about our real history.

(Seale and Slapin, 2006: 16)

Many books presenting endless layers of stereotypes and prejudices are still easily found on library bookshelves. They portray Aborigines as befeathered savages or noble savages, a portrayal which disturbs the Natives' cultural integrity, damages their personal self-esteem and cements their isolation and marginalisation. Besides, derogatory stereotypes affect not only Aboriginal children, but they impact negatively on *all* children in general, especially those who have no direct contact with Native people – as it happens with the Portuguese – and, thus, further idealise and romanticise that culture. Unless we challenge conventional representations of indigenous peoples, unless we start combatting generalisations about a uniform Aboriginal identity, individuals will continue to pass down falsehoods, such as the ones formerly listed, and that turned into concerns which were verbally shared with me before my departure to Canada, in 2008, when I decided to visit a reserve in Penticton and in Vernon. Even recently, in September, when discussing with my students Saussure's views on the system of language, I could realise that many believe that Native peoples only exist in children's books, because they are now extinct, or that they just communicate in rhythmic sounds instead of words with a meaning behind them, since they are primitive.

The continued emphasis on these images and clichés reinforces cultural thinking and contributes to re-present distorted views of reality. If we, the Portuguese, assume that First Nations are stuck in the past, that they are uneducated, childish, and irresponsible and if we keep associating them with a tendency for debased physical afflictions such as alcoholism and impulsive violence, do we have the moral credibility when we accuse those around us of being influenced by prejudice when they tend to view Portuguese men as macho-paternalistic, always having a moustache, a feature shared by men and women alike?

In our modern world, where rapid social change has become characteristic of all domains in society, cultural, racial, geopolitical, linguistic, gender, sexual, class and religious differences can no longer be ignored. Thus, we must deconstruct erroneous representations of 'the Other' and reconstruct authentic images. As Jonathan Rutherford reminds us, difference, in contempo-

rary cultural identity politics, has become central for us to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of Others or, in other words, for creating spaces of negotiation and mutual understanding within and between cultures. What is more, one's own sense of identity is delineated and embodied in one's dialogical relations with those Others, whether they are singular or multiple, real or imagined, physically present or absent. As he contends, "[i]t is within their polarities of white/black, masculine/feminine, hetero/homosexual, where one term is always dominant and the other subordinate, that our identities are formed. Difference in this case is always perceived as the effect of the other" (Rutherford, 1990: 9-10).

Likewise, Stuart Hall, specialist in Cultural Studies, also calls our attention to the fact that "... identities (...) emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity..." (Hall, 1996: 4). He further extends this insight in arguing that the spectre of the Other is absolutely necessary to define the boundaries of the Self:

Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the 'positive' meaning of any term – and thus its 'identity' – can be constructed.

(ibidem: 4-5)

The concept of difference is seen with suspicion by many academics², because it surely is multifaceted and interlaced with contradictions, but, on the other hand, it raises interesting questions and possibilities for social change and equity in our contemporary world. Jean Baker-Miller's words express this fear with which the term has been regarded, because of the value judgement attached to it:

our society and other societies are unable to encompass difference, indeed, to value and cherish difference as the source of hope and growth for all of us. Difference comes to mean "better" and "worse". (...) We all have a long history of learning to fear difference. (...) This fear of difference springs from the dominant – subordinate tradition in which difference means deficiency – and deficiency is the organizing principle. As subordinates we are told that we are deficient (...). Then, the alleged deficiencies are used against us. (...) Everyone becomes terrified of difference because it means deficiency.

(Baker-Miller, 1986: 136-7)

Actually, difference can be viewed as negative and exclusionary, but also as something positive and empowering. Several postcolonial scholars, such as Homi Bhabha (1994) and the already mentioned Stuart Hall (1996), employ the term in a political sense, avoiding its pejorative tone. Bhabha believes that, in a world where diversity and pluralism are felt so acutely, "... it is actually very difficult, even impossible and counterproductive, to try and fit together different forms of culture and to pretend that they can easily coexist" (Bhabha, 1994: 209). Therefore, he continues, "... we really do need the notion of a politics which is based on unequal, uneven, multiple and potentially antagonist, political identities (ibidem: 208). The underlying tensions sur-

rounding those differences are smoothed – and sometimes resolved – in what he terms a “third space”, where cultural hybridity is constructed through negotiation, enabling other positions to emerge.

Within the realm of social action and social change, postmodernists/structuralists advocate that we must first recognise that there are multiple axes of difference that shape everyday life across all social, cultural, economic and political boundaries, such as the ones based upon race, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, religious beliefs, language and dis/ability. Only then can we all unite in order to struggle for common interests, because it is this recognition of difference and the practice of differentiation that form the basis of solidarity.

That is also the message that Jeannette Armstrong, an Okanagan Indian, lives by and that tries to relay to her audience. As a torch that lights our eyes and directs them towards the recognition and appreciation of the cultural authenticities that are often hidden behind ourselves and the others, her philosophy of life, and consequently her fiction, embraces the urgent need to learn to live with difference:

We need to understand one another if we're going to survive as different peoples in this world and start combating [*sic*] things like racism and classism and sexism. (...) If we can connect (...) between people, between individuals, between sexes, races, or classes, that's what's gonna make the difference and bring about the healing we human beings have to have to bring us closer, to work together, and live together, care for and love one another, and look at change passing onto the next generation. (...) To touch and understand one another is to bridge our differences, and that makes me feel really good, happy, and clean in knowing that I've connected.

(Armstrong qtd. by Williamson, 1993: 22, 25-26)

The problem arises, however, when one realises that children's literature is still dominated by a white, middle-class majority, which tends to educate the child reader into adopting the beliefs, behaviours and traditions of the dominant culture, leaving out other ethnic backgrounds.

Bearing this in mind, we may ask, together with Cynthia Leitich Smith, ““Is there any place in children's books for writing that reflects Native idiosyncrasies? Or rather, if diversity of voice matters at all, does it only apply to diversity that appeals to the mainstream audience?”” (Bradford, 2007: 46). Recently, First Nations' literature for young readers has grown to be a substantial field, but we must ponder: has it been representing the values of the visible minority being written about, or the ones of the dominant culture? As Doris Seale points out in her introduction to *A Broken Flute*, “[s]ince the 1980s, non-Native authors and illustrators of books for children have turned increasingly to Indian literatures, lives and histories as sources of material for their efforts” (2006: 4), but, according to this Santee Dakota and Cree educator, “the works in question are inaccurate, inauthentic, patronizing, full of lies, and altogether a huge insult to the people out of whose lives so much money is being made” (Seale and Slapin, 2006: 4).

Assertions such as this one urge us to reconsider the importance of breaking away from the domination of Eurocentric constructs, at a time when the non-Native writer continues to maintain control over literary representations of Native life.

In Portugal, specifically, writers tend to view indigenous cultures through the lens of their own cultural experience, which is not surprising because, as Egoff argues: “Total objectivity is, of course, unattainable in any field, and in children's literature, where so much recent work has caused impassioned controversy, (...) biases must really show” (Egoff, 1981: xiv).

And they do show, for example, in Maria Teresa Maia Gonzalez's *A História dos Brincos de Penas*³, a book recommended by the Portuguese National Reading Panel to be studied in the third year of primary school. In this book, the readers get to know a little Indian, Índia Pé-Chato⁴, belonging to the tribe of the Índios Sempre-em-Pé⁵, who tells the story of how Índio Pé-de-Atleta⁶ witnesses six coloured feathers falling right in front of his nose while walking across the Planície da Águia Tonta⁷. Then, the story revolves around the search for their owner and their meaning, till we ultimately understand that, in spite of everyone's opinion on the matter, they are the narrator's sorrow⁸. Besides the fact that the story has a moral purpose – the idea that, after all, you can do something useful with everything, even with one's sorrow that may be transformed into feather earrings – and hence the proverbial phrase that ends the book: “If life gives you a sour lemon, add water and sugar to it and make lemonade” (my translation) – and even though it has a humorous vein that causes laughter and attracts children, the prevalent stereotypes cannot go unnoticed and unquestioned, such as the ones that follow:

Right-Foot, the medicine man, dipped his finger in mercurochrome and drew two stripes on his face. (...) At a certain point in time, he stood up and presented his special dance for meetings, to the sound of a song (...). [I]t was a song about the best way to make a magic drink, containing beetle gums, lizard eyelashes and bison nails, with much chilli, cactus sap and *piquette*. A drink to cheer up the shyest adults during the tribe's late evenings.

(Gonzalez, 2006: 18, my translation)⁹

... The first to express his opinion was the Indian Goat-Foot, who had already been arrested for horse-stealing from a neighbour tribe.

(ibidem: 19, my translation)¹⁰

... Firm-Foot was chubby and strong like a warrior, being fearless as well. She was an expert in body combat and she never turned her back on a fight.

(ibidem: 22, my translation)¹¹

... Foot-after-foot, the laziest Indian in the tribe, arrived afterwards, very late, because he had fallen asleep.

(ibidem: 24, my translation)¹²

Dirty-Foot always slept outdoors and hated taking a shower, only doing so on the Chief's birthday. His clothes hadn't been washed in a long time either and they were full of stains of all kinds. (...) However, no one could drag him towards the riverbank to make him dive into the water or, at least, wash his feet.

(ibidem: 25, my translation)¹³

Ostrich was your grandmother – yelled the Indian Light-Foot (...) who always wore a necklace with a medal that he had won in the previous competition against the Blockhead, the Hands-Wide-Open (Freegivers) and the Nose-Up-in-the-Air neighbour tribes.

(ibidem: 26, my translation)¹⁴

These are but a few of the many misrepresentations a child can find in this book. According to the quotations, Indians drink weird alcoholic beverages and get drunk; they are thieves, warriors ready to start a fight, lazy, irresponsible and filthy, among other negative traits.

It is true that the book makes an effort not to mythologise the Indians as a race belonging to the past; so, it challenges the myth of the vanishing race and it brings the comic characters into our present times by making reference to Coca-Cola bottle caps, empty chewing gum blister packs and Uncle Scrooge, but all that with a derogatory connotation – eg.: people stumble on modern items, since the old West is not what it used to be because of the so-called progress, so we are told; and Indians like Uncle Scrooge because they identify with this stingy duck. What is more, the book does not depict a realistic view of Native peoples, when it gives the readers the idea that Indians still live in tipis, that they wear fringed buckskin clothing, plaits, feathers, headbands and war bonnets, on a daily basis.

To conclude, stereotypes such as the ones mentioned must be deconstructed as false and biases must be undermined to give way to harmony and synergistic partnership. The Portuguese must be aware that Native peoples are alive, vibrant and whole; that they're not stuck in the past; that they are not alike; that they have different backgrounds and so their writing differs in techniques and approaches, but they also "have much in common. (...) Although each Native writer is an individual with a special and unique voice, virtually all of these writers are alike in their over-all worldview and face similar problems" (Bruchac, 1996: xv), but after all, aren't we all alike? Don't we face similar problems?

So, you must not be afraid of Indians! You wouldn't be, if, as a child, you had read books that attempt to reverse a Eurocentric look upon Native peoples. You would not be afraid of Indians, because you would know that...

children's books keep alive a sense of nationality, but they also keep alive a sense of humanity. They describe their native land lovingly, but they also describe faraway lands where unknown brothers live. They understand the essential quality of their own race; but each of them is a messenger that goes beyond mountains and rivers, beyond the seas, to the very ends of the world in search for new friendships.

(Egoff, 1967: 262-3)

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¹ As an example, even though the reality show 'America's Next Top Model' does not suit the interests of children, it may have an influence on adults, who, in turn, pass stereotypes on to younger generations. In its 18th cycle, Mariah Watchman, a Native contestant from Oregon, was much criticised for not acting Native American enough, when she was asked to embody Pocahontas on the first episode's photo shoot.

² On May, 28 2008 I participated in a Graduate Student Symposium at the University Paul Valéry, in Montpellier, France, where some academics expressed feelings of discomfort regarding the word difference in the title of the dissertation I was working on at the time and suggested that diversity should be used instead. The term difference, from my point of view, is more inclusive of all the dimensions that I was discussing and that I also want to discuss here. Furthermore, as Bhabha argues, it is the concept of difference, and not of diversity, that is the basis for post-colonial critique (2006: 155), because it is a discursive construct, resulting from relations of power that produce deep social anxieties and impacts. If we do not confuse it with the concept of deviance/deficit/inferiority, it may perfectly lose its negative connotation. Being different does mean to be distinct, dissimilar, or unlike someone else, but the recognition of such difference(s) should help us to understand what is within the alien Others in a positive way.

³ *The story of the feather earrings.*

⁴ Indian Flatfoot.

⁵ Tumbler Indians, or Foot-Standing Indians to keep it faithful to the intent of the writer, which was to play with the word “Foot”, connecting it to Native peoples, perhaps due to an association with Bigfoot, a legendary creature also known as sasquatch that, according to stories of indigenous populations, inhabits forests in North America.

⁶ Indian Athlete’s Foot. We are left with the question as to whether the author just meant to associate this character with an athlete or rather with a contagious skin infection (*tinea pedis*).

⁷ Silly Eagle Plain.

⁸ In Portuguese, Feather and Sorrow are homonyms, so the writer plays with the word’s double meaning.

⁹ Original version: “... Pé-Direito, o curandeiro, mergulhou um dedo em mercurocromo e fez dois riscos na cara. (...) A certa altura, levantou-se e apresentou a sua dança especial para reuniões, ao som de uma cantiga (...). [T]ratava-se de uma canção sobre a melhor maneira de fazer uma bebida mágica, à base de gengivas de escaravelho, pestanas de lagartixa e unhas de bisonte, com muito piripiri, seiva de cacto e água-pé. Uma bebida para animar os adultos mais tímidos nos serões da tribo” (Gonzalez, 2006: 18).

¹⁰ Original version: “O primeiro que ali deu a sua opinião foi o índio Pé-de-Cabra, que já tinha estado preso por roubar cavalos à tribo vizinha” (ibidem: 19).

¹¹ Original version: “Pé-Firme era rechonchuda e forte como um guerreiro, sendo igualmente destemida. Era perita em luta corpo a corpo e nunca virava costas a uma briga” (ibidem: 22).

¹² Original version: “... Chegou então, muito atrasado, Pé-ante-pé, o índio mais preguiçoso da tribo, que se deixara dormir” (ibidem: 24).

¹³ Original version: “... Pé-Sujo dormia sempre ao relento e odiava tomar banho, só o fazendo no dia de aniversário do Chefe. As suas roupas também não eram lavadas há muito tempo e estavam cheias de nódoas de toda a espécie. (...) Porém, ninguém conseguia arrastá-lo até à beira do rio para o fazer mergulhar na água ou, pelo menos, lavar os pés” (ibidem: 25).

¹⁴ Original version: “Avestruz era a tua avó – gritou-lhe o índio Pé-Leve (...) que usava sempre ao peito o colar com a medalha que ganhara na última competição contra as tribos vizinhas dos Cabeças-Duras, Mãos-Largas e Narizes-Empinados” (ibidem: 26).