

Kenneth J. Odle

Professor Amidon

ENGL 4840

24 October 2009

**Changing Depictions of Assimilation in American
Multicultural Books for Children: A Changing Paradigm**

While assimilation is often a major theme in American multicultural children's literature, it does not get much attention in the research. Perhaps this is due, in part, to changing American attitudes about the nature of assimilation. Whereas the United States was once viewed as a "melting pot" in which unique cultural identities were subsumed into a larger "American" identity, it is increasingly coming to be viewed as a "salad bowl" in which the individual identities which make up the United States remain largely intact and distinct, and yet add to the overall flavor of the salad.

Fifty years ago, Sydney Taylor wrote a series of children's books depicting a Jewish-American family living in New York at the turn of the twentieth century. But while June Cummins explains that within the context of these books, "Jewish customs [are] explained honestly, and frankly, [making] them attractive and positive,' Taylor also depicts "an assimilative process that works, ultimately, to pull her characters slowly away from their traditional roots." In other words, Taylor depicts a family who gradually becomes more and more American by becoming less and less Jewish. As her characters grow and develop, they gradually turn their "attention toward American values and away from Jewish values" (324).

This depiction is largely at odds with current multicultural literature aimed at young people. Although the characters in these books may wish to become more and more American by

giving up their ethnic identities, ultimately, modern texts tend to depict characters who manage to find a balance between assimilating enough to fully participate in American society and culture, while at the same time retaining enough of their cultural heritage that they regard themselves as the product of two different cultures.

Another trend increasingly seen in these texts is that they tend to be written in the first person. Taylor's series are written in the third person, but as Cummins notes, Taylor "makes very clear from the beginning that this is *her* story and that she, as author-narrator, has a place in it" (327). Given that, perhaps Taylor did want to write these books in the first person (although I admit that here I may be making an inference that Cummins would reject), but felt editorial pressure not to, for Cummins does depict how Taylor was pressured by her editor "to make her characters seem more American" (334), and that a first person approach would, through voice, tone, and style, make her characters seem "too" Jewish.

Nevertheless, this is not a problem faced by writers today. Of the six novels under consideration here, five are written in the first person, and although the other one (*American Born Chinese*) is a graphic novel depicting three different narratives, two of the three narratives are in the first person, and by the end of the novel, when all three narratives are combined and resolved, it is the voice of the main character, Jin Wang, that predominates.

Language is an emotive issue in the United States, and it was no less an emotive issue for Taylor. Cummins notes that "Taylor carefully removed traces of Yiddish from Mama's and Papa's mouths" and that an examination of the original manuscript "reveals that in many cases, Taylor changed Yiddish words to their English equivalents or left them out altogether," and on the few occasions in which Mama or Pap speak in Hebrew or Yiddish "these words are always directly related to culturally specific items, such as food or holiday" (337).

Predictably, the books under discussion here do not shy away from foreign terms, although their authors work hard to make their meaning clear. *The Year of the Dog* begins with the character of Dad speaking first English—“Happy New Year!”—and then its (presumably) Chinese equivalent—“Gong xi-gong xi!” (Lin 1), so from the very beginning, readers are aware of the importance the Chinese language plays in the book. Similarly, in *The Circuit*, Jiménez recalls a moment when he was “singing the *corridos* we often heard on the car radio” (19) and although he does not offer a translation, he makes his meaning clear through the context. Yang’s *American Born Chinese* is written entirely in English, but when characters speak in Chinese, their text is set off with angle brackets: “<What is that?> <A toy robot.>” (39).

Names are another important issue in assimilation. When a new baby is born into Taylor’s fictional family, he is given both a Jewish name (Chaim, after his grandfather), and an American one: Charlie, after the blue-eyed, blond-haired gentile friend of the family (Cummins 331). As Cummins notes, the baby is “explicitly linked to the acculturation process. Taylor tacitly approves this assimilation process by presenting it as unproblematic and inevitable” (338). Yet names *are* problematic. Witness young Grace, who experiences confusion over her “American” name and her Chinese name “Pacy” (Lin 28-30), or Juanito in Herrera’s *Downtown Boy*, who gets called “Whinnytoe” (13), “Johnny” (78-9), “Wanitto” (134), and “Wuneddo” (167) before finally choosing what he is to be called.

Conclusion: In short, we are facing a changing model of assimilation in the United States, and the literature aimed at children surrounding this issue is only beginning to catch up to that model. Questions regarding assimilation, such as “how much?” and “in which direction?” are questions that all of our students, whether they are members of a minority or members of the dominant Anglo, English-speaking culture, must face, and we, as teachers, must be prepared to

help them address those questions. As Chiu notes, “[t]o enter the ongoing conversation about multicultural literature—what to read and teach, and how to interpret the reading—is to contribute to a territory fraught with controversy” (182). Yet we must enter into this territory, for young people of all races often explore questions to their lives through the literature they read; it behooves us, and them, to be as familiar with as much literature, and the questions it raises and the solutions it presents, as possible. To do less would be to deprive our students of valid learning opportunities.

Books Cited

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Illus. Ellen Forney. New York: Little Brown, 2007.

Arnold Spirit decides that if he is to survive, he must leave his reservation and attend an all-white school at which the only other Indian is the school's mascot. He faces prejudice from the students at Reardan, who don't realize that their jokes are racist, and yet manages to find friends and support there. He also faces prejudice from other Indians on the reservation, who think he is trying to be "white."

Alexie's first book for young people, this book combines delightful illustrations and straightforward prose, and presents an authentic voice for young American Indians. While some may be shocked at Alexie's frank discussion of certain issues (masturbation, child abuse, alcoholism), his book nevertheless manages to strike a positive, optimistic attitude toward overcoming both personal and cultural difficulties.

Herrera, Juan Felipe. *Downtown Boy*. New York: Scholastic, 2005.

Eleven-year-old Juanito Palomares faces many difficulties in this novel as he transitions between rural Chicano life in 1958 California and urban Chicano life. He faces prejudice and misunderstanding, not just from his fellow classmates and teachers, but also from members of his own family.

Written as a series of poems, Herrera manages to accurately depict the struggles involved in trying to straddle two cultures while never actually being a fully entitled member of either. While depicting the difficulties of being Chicano in a largely Anglo world, Herrera also manages to address the fractures in Chicano life as well, whether those fractures are based on locality

(urban vs. rural, life in the United States vs. life in México), familial life (Juanito's father is often mysteriously absent for weeks on end), or economic.

Jiménez, Francisco. *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*. Albuquerque: New Mexico Press, 1997.

In this memoir, Jiménez, writing through his young persona as “Panchito,” describes the life of an illegal immigrant working up and down the fields of California and at the same time attempting to get an education, while struggling with both his limited English language skills and the itinerant nature of his family. The first of three books in a series depicting the author's struggles to establish himself in the United States, this book honestly and accurately portrays the difficulties that many immigrants have in adapting to life in the United States.

Largely episodic in nature, and written in a straightforward manner that makes it highly approachable, this book deals with many themes that young people are intimately concerned about: a lack of family security, abject poverty, and the quest to achieve an education and to better one's lot. Brushes with *la migra* (Immigration) add a sense of suspense that young readers will find compelling.

Jiménez, Francisco. *Breaking Through*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

A sequel to *The Circuit*, this book portrays the struggles of Panchito and his family to achieve the “American dream” and to succeed in their new homeland. While not as heart-rending as the first text, this book is an honest look at a teenaged boy struggling to fit into American society while maintaining those elements of his culture that he deems essential to his identity.

Although the deportation issue has largely been sidelined in this sequel to *The Circuit*,

many of the themes evoked in this book will resonate with young readers. Pancho must still work long hours to support his family while at the same time attempting to get an education. It is interesting to note that the prejudice he faces comes not so much from the outside world, but from his own father, who feels that Pancho's attempt to get an education and lead an intellectual life are a slap in the face to his own way of earning a living through physical labor.

Levithan, David. *Boy Meets Boy*. New York: Knopf, 2003.

In this utopian novel, Paul finds love and heartbreak in a community which is openly accepting of his homosexuality. At the same time, he must help his friend Tony survive in a community and family which rejects his orientation as sinful. Although the utopian nature of this book makes it easy to dismiss Paul's quest for true love, Levithan's delicate touch makes this book difficult to dismiss.

This will be a difficult novel for many, because of its positive depiction of homosexual youth. While it may, to some degree, stereotype certain aspects of the gay experience, it also explores ways in which the chasms between various degrees of acceptance can be bridged. For example, the parents of Paul's friend Tony disapprove of Tony's homosexuality, while Paul himself disapproves of his friend Joni's latest boyfriend.

Lin, Grace. *The Year of the Dog*. New York: Little Brown, 2005.

Middle-school-aged Grace (aka Pacy) finds adventure, heartbreak, and encouragement as she makes her way through the "year of the dog," an allusion to the Chinese zodiac. Along the way she makes friends and enemies both with members of the dominant Anglo culture, and also within the Chinese-American (or Taiwanese-American) community. Ultimately, she accepts

herself as a member of both cultures, making use of the best that each culture has to offer her.

Written from an insider's perspective, this book tackles many aspects of assimilation that young Anglo readers may not even be aware of. However, the straightforward storytelling, combined with a few simple and charming line drawings, make this a highly approachable book, one that is sure to resonate with them.

Yang, Gene Luen. *American Born Chinese*. New York: First Second, 2006.

This graphic novel tells three intertwined tales, one of the Monkey King, who seeks to dominate, another of Danny, who seeks to forget his foreign roots, and that of Jin, who wants to catch the girl of his dreams. Through carefully-drawn sequences, and an even more careful attention to narrative, all three tales are ultimately intertwined, allowing young Jin to find his place in American culture.

Though readers may initially be thrown by the three different narratives presented in the book, Lang does an excellent job at the end of tying them together by the book's end. Focusing primarily on problems of identity, he makes use of contemporary reality while infusing his storyline with elements of Chinese mythology, making his work attractive to those readers who are attracted to supernatural themes and motifs.

Works Cited

- Chiu, Monica. "The Cultural Production of Asian American Young Adults in the Novels of Marie G. Lee, An Na, and Doris Jones Yang." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 30 (2006) 168-184.
- Cummins, June. "Becoming an 'All-of-a-Kind' American: Sydney Taylor and the Strategies of Assimilation." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 27 (2003) 324-343.