

WHO ARE WE WHEN NOT RULED BY OTHERS? ENGAGING TEACHERS IN NORTHERN AND NORDIC CONTEXTS IN TEACHING USING DIVERSE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT. At a time when neoliberalism and neoconservatism would compel teachers to focus narrowly on their own contexts, we ask how cross-national conversations can break down boundaries and provide important insights for teaching to social justice. We initiate a conversation between Canada, as a Northern country, and the Nordic countries of Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland on the subject of teaching using “diverse” literature. While one main question revolves around deciding what to call the literature (multicultural? diverse? counter-story? migrant? post-colonial?), a more fundamental one centres on how to critically introduce and respond to its presence in the classroom, especially given national identities formed through Northern / Nordic exceptionalism. Imagology represents one promising direction, as does pedagogy of discomfort.

QUI SOMMES-NOUS LORSQUE NOUS NE SOMMES PAS GOUVERNÉS PAR LES AUTRES ? ENGAGER LES ENSEIGNANTS DES CONTEXTES DU NORD ET NORDIQUES DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT À PARTIR D'UNE LITTÉRATURE JEUNESSE DIVERSIFIÉE

RÉSUMÉ. À une époque où le néolibéralisme et le néoconservatisme incitent les enseignants à se concentrer étroitement sur leurs propres contextes, nous nous demandons comment des échanges transnationaux peuvent offrir des perspectives importantes pour un enseignement orienté vers la justice sociale. Nous amorçons un dialogue entre le Canada, en tant que pays du Nord, et les pays nordiques sur la question de l'enseignement à partir d'une littérature « diversifiée ». Si une question centrale consiste à déterminer comment nommer cette littérature, une question plus fondamentale porte sur la manière d'aborder sa présence en classe de façon critique, particulièrement dans des contextes où les identités nationales se sont construites autour d'un exceptionnalisme nordique/du Nord. L'imagologie et la pédagogie de l'inconfort constituent des pistes prometteuses.

“East of the Sun and West of the Moon” tells of a daughter who was married off to a White Bear in exchange for her family members being relieved from poverty (Asbjørnsen & Moe, 1966). On a visit home, the daughter is advised to look at the being who comes to her bed each night — something that the White Bear has strictly warned her against doing. Looking nevertheless, an old spell is invoked, and the being (in fact, a handsome prince) is forced to go away and marry a witch, but not before the daughter falls deeply in love with him. His new love vows to travel east of the sun and west of the moon to release the prince / bear from the witch’s spell. The story, frequently anthologized, features among local tales collected in the 1830s by Norwegian folklorists Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Engebretsen Moe as they visited farming, fishing, and mining communities in Norway’s mountains and fjords (Daniel, 2015). For a child of 9 years old growing up in the Canadian suburbs (which was the first co-author’s case), this Nordic story of a young girl astride a white bear traversing, alone, a beautiful yet challenging landscape of wind and snow, made a deep and enduring mark. It showed the power of stories to impress receptive readers, here with a Nordic North implicitly understood to also be a Canadian one. Asbjørnsen and Moe’s tales were seminal in creating a storied legacy for Norway, which, having just won independence from Denmark, had been asking itself: “Who exactly are we when we are not ruled by others?” (Daniel, 2015, p. 13) — a question that echoes, but in a different way, across the present article. Our main purpose is to engage two Northern / Nordic contexts in dialogue on re-imagining teacher subjective / social formation through teaching using a growing corpus of contemporary children’s literature that addresses diversity. Desmond Manderson (2003) explains that literature in childhood is “not a source of information *about* social structures of subjectivity in our society. It is the very site of their emergence” (p. 93). As an educational vehicle, children’s literature acts as a double-edged sword: It can be an ideological tool by which particular values, orientations, and understandings are implicitly sedimented, or a means by which readers can construct more open-ended identities. By focusing on the pedagogical implications of contemporary children’s literature from two Northern contexts that share commonalities and across whose borders stories have been exchanged, Canada (as a Northern country) and the Nordic countries (traditionally, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland), we critically reflect on what it means to prepare teachers for diversity in a neoliberal and neoconservative North. Neoliberalism rests on instrumental reasoning and efficiency, putting human capital theory to work so as to translate perceived potentiality into “economic viability” (Pinar, 2023, p. 35), resulting in teachers’ mental and spiritual exhaustion (Phelan & Janzen, 2024).

Neoconservatism, for its part, stokes fears of an imagined “Other” whose existence is construed as inconvenient; inconvenience, as Lauren Berlant (2022) argues, is produced through an affective friction of being in relation with one another, and which can be based on actual encounters or just the thought that an encounter could occur. An attitude of inconvenience is premised on the neoconservative and neoliberal fantasy of a “sovereign” self (p. 3).

The question of who exactly we are when not ruled by others takes on different meanings depending on who is being asked – those for whom the North is and has ancestrally been home (viz., Indigenous Peoples). Or those migrating to Northern countries (viz., immigrants), as was the case for the second co-author, coming from Jordan with her young children in pursuit of a better life. Both Canada and the Nordic countries are ancestral homes for Indigenous Peoples; they are also places that have attracted migrants – and deliberately cultivated their presence. Historically, Canada was a colonial outpost; people came for reasons that were tied to other countries’ (England’s and France’s) imperialistic ambitions; some came from privileged classes, while others were looking to escape disempowering conditions (Chambers, 2012). The lines tracing Nordic countries to colonial legacies are varied, warranting study of “the Nordic colonial mind” (Palmberg, 2009, p. 35). Settler identity, in short, is a fraught concept in both Canada and the Nordic countries, who both share in a myth of Nordic / Northern exceptionalism; we expand on this shortly.

By bringing into conversation research concerned with engaging with contemporary children’s literature and diversity, we lay the groundwork for further dialogue across Nordic / Northern countries on how pedagogical use of children’s literature can contribute to teachers’ subjective and social reconstruction. We focus on studies conducted over the past 2 decades, roughly between 2005 and 2023, which is when a greater corpus of diverse children’s literature began to be more widely available and/or when conversations about such literature started to intensify. Literature can act as both index as well as site for imaginative engagements with place and identity; it is a field that, as Leerssen (2007) further notes, lends itself to being a “comparative enterprise” (p. 29). There are clearly dangers in reading globally. As Kathy Short (2019) cautions, how can readers (in the absence of knowing a culture more intimately) tell if a children’s story is accurate, authentic to the experiences depicted? She points to texts that become “stand-ins” for a whole culture simply because the book has been promoted globally, having been made available in English. Translation is clearly an issue. As O’Sullivan (2005) points out, “foreign” children’s literature (when translated; only a

comparatively few are) tends to undergo a process of transformation, even of censorship, in being transposed from one language, one context to another, this to render the story more “palatable.” The Nordic / Northern contexts are not the same, even if they share certain histories – and most importantly, certain assumptions about privilege (as we discuss). However, children also need to have the freedom to explore different literatures or literature from diverse perspectives, thinking of the first co-author’s 9-year-old self, as well as the self of the second co-author along with those of her children. As literary scholar Margaret Meek (1992) once wrote, “In stories children discover other complete worlds that let them ask important questions before they are bound by the answers” (p. 174). This is so even if, in children’s literature, readers may often seem to be “brought back to the security of home” (Nikolajeva, 2010, p. 10). However, in certain stories (especially of the kind which are our concern in this article), home can become a place unsettled by readers’ encounters with places and knowledge other-than-home, contributing to subjective formations that “enhance alterity” (Nikolajeva, 2010, p. 11). We turn now to the question of how the two Northern / Nordic contexts might speak across to one another so as to usefully contribute to teaching to (and with) diverse children’s literature in classrooms.

We begin first with theorizing the terms “Northern” and “Nordic” in relation to “Nordic exceptionalism” (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016, p. 2) before delving into each context. We conclude by placing into relation stories from the Canadian and Nordic contexts, thus circling back from another direction to the question of: Who exactly are we when not ruled by others?

I. NORDIC EXCEPTIONALISM

“Join Margaret Atwood on an Arctic expedition like no other.” So reads an Adventure Canada (2023a) quarter-page ad in the main section of *The Globe and Mail*, Canada’s flagship newspaper. The ad sounds as if from a previous era, yet it is the fall of 2023 and the beaming face of a relaxed Margaret Atwood gazes out at the reader with a beckoning (yet contemplative) aspect, her neck tastefully wrapped in a silk scarf featuring the kinds of evergreen trees typical of a Group of Seven painting. Despite greater awareness of the North as a place inhabited by the Inuit, despite the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s work in Canada, and Atwood’s avowed solidarity with Indigenous causes, which included donating her recent Booker Prize winnings to Indspire to support First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students (CBC Books, 2019), and despite her incisive critiques of nation-making literary myths, here Atwood’s face

beams from an ad inviting us to explore the mythical North in her company for 12 days at the double-occupancy cost of 10,000 to 20,000 USD (Adventure Canada, 2023b). What are we to make of this invitation?

We begin with acknowledging that Nature has long been a subject of fascination in Northern countries. Hulan (2002) points to the long-standing conflation of Northern Canada with Canada as North, in which “north” has become synonymous with “mystery and the unknown,” adventure and escape, untamed wilderness, and a frozen and (apparently) “unpeopled” canvas (p. 6). Landscape and nationalism have become further integrally intertwined in the Canadian imagination through the Group of Seven painters’ depiction of Northern landscapes (Pente, 2009). The Nordic countries have also witnessed romanticizations of a Northern landscape, as documented by Zoltán Somhegyi (2017), in writing about the 18th-century creation (in the arts as well as in tourism) of a sublime centred on the Alps. Seen as a “border that divides the Mediterranean landscape” from a Northern one (p. 30), the Northern Alps became invested with a belief in needing to experience the “harsh, intensive, and elemental forces” of a “powerful” Nature (p. 39). As Knut Helle (2003) wryly notes, the Nordic countries are still considered “sparsely populated by European standards,” overdetermined by its geography – “mountains ... glaciers, forests ... moorland, bogs and fens” (p. 6). The same can be said of Canada.

While the word “Nordic” is reserved now for the Nordic countries, Quebec geographer Louis-Édmond Hamelin was among the first to popularize the term “nordicity,” a phenomenon or quality that he claimed to be able to ascertain based on “empirical” criteria such as latitude and temperature – as well as people (Hulan, 2002, p. 4). In keeping with European (French) philosopher Hippolyte Taine who had mapped out a “cultural geometry” based on “three defining parameters: *race*, *milieu* and *moment*” (Leerssen, 2007, p. 19), Hamelin intrapolated (human) characteristics into nordicity, namely, courage, strength, and an ability to survive in rugged circumstances – all of which were further yoked to masculinity (p. 12). Likewise, R. G. Haliburton, a lawyer and anthropologist active within the Montreal Literary Club, cultivated a group called “Men of the North,” which claimed close ties among race (White), land, and nation (p. 7). It has also been observed that scholars in the Nordic countries were complicit in producing the pseudoscientific systems used to justify the racist ideologies and practices underlying imperialism and colonialism. The Swedish race biologists “were considered leading in their field” (Palmberg, 2009, p. 45), extending

classification work first undertaken in the 1700s by Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016).

Nordic exceptionalism rests on a belief in the Nordic countries as bystanders: peripheral actors in colonialism and imperialism. Based on this myth, the Nordic countries have further promoted themselves as “peace-loving” and beneficent; in short, as good global citizens (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016, p. 2), a self-image which Canada also shares. Sociologists Delhey and Newton (2005) were among the first to tie the Nordic countries to the idea of Nordic exceptionalism (p. 320), “exceptional” given the high degree of social trust among its citizens; Canada was also located among their survey’s top six candidates (p. 315). As Nyysönen (2013) has pointed out, “the image of [the Nordic country as] a colonizer of the Sami does not fit” (p. 117); nor, as Paulette Regan (2010) has observed, do Canada’s genocidal policies vis-à-vis Indigenous Peoples comply with its reputation as peacemaker.

The myth of Nordic exceptionalism masks the less-than-benign role played by the colonizer / settler in the formation of a nation and the kinds of stories a nation tells about itself. While Canadian curriculum scholar Cynthia Chambers (2012) acknowledges that her relatives were poor and disenfranchised, “Irish peasants on my mother’s side, landless Scots on my father’s side” (p. 23), the Canadian North, she notes, was a place where they could freely reimagine themselves; she points out how expatriates “didn’t ask each other where they came from or why they’d come” (p. 25). They bought into the “immigration fairy tale” of “sweet promises of progress and adventure”; they didn’t inquire into who the land belonged to (p. 30). Indeed, just as the British had used acts of enclosure to drive a landless working class off land originally shared in common, settlers assumed that the nation’s land was there for the taking. Canada was marketed as an empty, white space on which explorers then settlers “inscribed a series of ‘firsts’” (Edwards & Saltman, 2010, p. 50).

In the Nordic countries, histories and patterns of settlement are complex, with Denmark (along with Sweden and Norway) taking the lead in ruling over and colonizing others (Sawyer, 2003); activities that, traceable in part to a Viking past, are still uncannily evoked in the shadow of a Viking king’s runic stone visible on the reverse page of the Danish passport (Blaagaard, 2009). Each Nordic country, even if not directly involved in having colonies, has been a beneficiary of colonialism and its legacies, whether through mercantilism, the slave trade, the World Bank, or missionary activities (Palmberg, 2009). The Nordic countries have also been complicit

in the erosion of hunting-gathering territories of the Sami (Kjeldstadli, 2012).

As Michael Rothberg (2019) makes clear, the settler is an implicated subject. An *implicated subject* is someone who genealogically and/or structurally benefits from systems of oppression, ones originating in the past but whose effects continue into the present. Slavery is one of the most obvious examples; however, there are several other forms of exclusion, many of which are linked to the legacies of imperialism and colonialism, which have used coercion and violence to subject one people to another, or to secure more privileges and benefits (land, titles, social standing, education, etc.). Genealogical implication, Rothberg explains, is intimate but diffuse; it can be traced through family lines, however the consequences (across generations) exceed individual life spans. Structural implication is the opposite – diffuse yet intimate – because it affects many more indiscriminately, but the benefits are enjoyed daily: “my very subjectivity as a social being derives from the impersonal structures that surround and support me” (p. 79). The notion of White settler as implicated subject is a post-war invention, even if events were set in motion before 1945. Todd Shepard (2006), for instance, points to the moment at which France, perceiving that it would lose its struggle with Algeria, this during the 1960s, turned to inventing a (French) myth of decolonization. France (specifically Charles de Gaulle) stopped claiming that Algeria was part of France, that Algerians were French citizens, and conversely embraced the decolonization of Algeria as a narrative of progress; why haven’t you done the same, de Gaulle asked the then prime minister of the United Kingdom, whereupon, “embarrassed, ... the British pushed most of their remaining colonies towards independence” (p. 7). With this push came an eliding of the need to scrutinize their own conduct as nations: racist attitudes and policies tied to imperialism and colonialism. Nordic exceptionalism was likewise touted as a “good news” story in which Canada and the Nordic countries tried to align themselves with a progressive narrative. Such myths stand in the way of unsettling the implicated subject.

As already noted, children’s literature is a main site for subjective and social formation, beginning in early childhood. The Nordic countries have enjoyed a long and illustrious history of producing classic children’s literature, like Danish storyteller Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy and folk tales, or Finnish author Tove Jansson’s beloved Moomin characters. Then there is Swedish author Astrid Lindgren’s inimitable Pippi Longstocking, who lived alone, but imagined her long-lost father as “king of the natives” in a far-flung country on the African continent (Vuorela, 2009, p. 24). A

popular landmark in Nordic literature remains Selma Lagerlöf's *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, written by a former teacher and originally commissioned as a Swedish elementary school reader in 1901 to teach children about their own geographical and cultural surroundings – surroundings that did not feature any “foreign” elements (Sundmark, 2008, p. 18). The Nordic nations actually enjoy a strong reputation for producing children's literature that explores the edges of what may be deemed socially acceptable, as when *Sinna Mann* (2003; by Norwegian writer Gro Dahle and artist Svein Nyhus) became a highly animated topic of conversation at the 22nd Biennial Congress of the International Research Society for Children's Literature (IRSCCL) in 2015, held at the University of Worcester, at which Teresa (one of this article's co-authors) was in attendance. Dialogue, begun in the one session, reverberated across others concerning a picturebook that depicted domestic violence from the point of view of a young child. *Sinna mann* means “angry man.” When asked about the controversy stirred by the story, author Nyhus said the book, intended to portray the experience of a child who witnesses violence, was made in response to a family therapist's request for literature that could serve as a “conversation piece” in his talks with children and their parents (Salisbury & Styles, 2012, p. 117). The Nordic countries, though, have struggled to produce a children's literature that contends with the others in their midst (Pesonen, 2020).

The history of Canadian children's literature, for its part, is marked by the colonial legacies of Canada's national formation, carrying the values and prejudices of a mainly British cadre of authors. The image of Canada for young readers has been “shaped by narratives that emphasized geographic and cultural Otherness – a place of ice and snow, dark and dangerous wooded forests, infinite prairie expanses, and towering mountains, populated by mysterious, savage, and primitive peoples and dangerous wild animals” (Edwards & Saltman, 2010, p. 17). All the while, Canada has struggled to define itself as a nation distinct from its rather large neighbour to the south, and one way in which this was accomplished was to emphasize precisely those stereotypical features in the list just quoted; at the top was the Indigenized Other. Canadian literature for children is historically full of stories that trade on images and content loosely mapping onto First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples, with several cardinal authors making such representations their bread and butter; Elizabeth Cleaver (of White settler heritage) was one, an illustrator initially promoted by Canadian publisher William Toyes to brandish what became a widely-used elementary textbook, *The Wind Has Wings* (1968). It was literary critic Sheila Egoff who, in speaking with Toyes, noted that the

Canadian picturebook industry was languishing, and that Aboriginal picturebooks would help set the Canadian market apart. Both promoted Cleaver's work as the voice and image of stories claiming to be from the Gitksan, an Indigenous People of British Columbia (Edwards & Saltman, 2010). The story of Canadian children's literature is largely one of appropriation and misappropriation of an Indigenous Other. Interest on the part of publishing companies in children's literature actually written by Indigenous and immigrant authors did not start to take hold until the 1990s, when a chapter on a more contemporary Canadian children's literature opened. As for immigrant author-illustrators, one of the first to become popular was William Kurelek, originally from Ukraine, whose *A Prairie Boy's Winter* (1973) and *A Prairie Boy's Summer* (1975) were a form of "visual autobiography" depicting the harsh beauty of daily life on a Manitoba dairy farm during the years of the Great Depression (Edwards & Saltman, 2010, p. 84). The books found global distribution and were translated into six languages, four of them being Nordic: Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, and Finnish.

Children's literature has thus been an important site of national as well as subjective formation. We look next at how diverse contemporary children's literature has evolved – first in the Nordic countries, then in Canada – and implications for teaching and teachers.

II. ENGAGING WITH DIVERSE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, and Denmark, now fully independent states, have had a long and fractious history with one another over centuries, marked by fluctuating borders, contested territories, and periods of dominating and/or being dominated (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016). The greatest influx of foreign migrants occurred after the 1960s, provoking discussion on the impact of immigration on local communities as well as national identity. Migration also prompted a creative explosion of adult narratives crafted by second (and third) generation authors (Kongslien, 2007). In their editorial to a special issue on diversity in Nordic children's literature, Kokkola and Van den Bossche (2020a) identify *diversity* as among the latest in a series of terms that highlights one group as "normal," while categorizing everyone else as "other." *Multicultural*, they suggest, belongs there as well. The problem Kokkola and Van den Bossche (2020a) have with both terms lies in the way they implicitly reinforce a hierarchical relationship; any conceptualization of literature in terms of equity, diversity, and inclusion, they maintain, is pursued by "markedness" (race, culture, class, gender, ability, etc.), thus

implicitly reinforcing an unmarked category of a White / normal norm (p. 4). They also raise the “colonial amnesia” that has pervaded Nordic children’s literature, thinking especially of Sami and Roma minorities (Hvenegård-Lassen & Maurer, 2012, as cited in Kokkola & Van den Bossche, 2020a, p. 9). While abiding by the term “diversity,” they take care to place it in relation with “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1989): the inflection of plural and diverse identities within a given person, each identity carrying its own “power valence” (Kokkola & Van den Bossche, 2020a, p. 5).

Nordic children’s literature scholars have found it useful to consult the American context. Danish scholar Nadia Mansour and African American teacher-librarian Michelle Martin (2020) offer insights into what American and Danish children’s literature can gain from each other. Martin traces the United States’ longstanding history with minoritized Indigenous populations and immigrants: those already there, those who arrived voluntarily, and those brought forcibly through chattel slavery. Only gradually has American children’s literature embraced ethnic and cultural diversity, Martin maintains; the process has taken decades and is ongoing. Mansour’s research in the Danish context builds on James Banks’ work in American multiculturalism, along with Cai and Bishop’s analysis of multicultural literature. Kokkola and Van den Bossche (2020b) suggest that, different from the American context, which they characterize by an “us” and “them” binary (p. 2), the Nordic context is more inclined towards coalitions, which is an interesting thought to which we return later. Because multiculturalism emerged in the United States from the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Banks, 2007), multicultural literature has become associated with amplifying the voices of minorities (Cai & Bishop, 1994). Banks (2007) famously argued against treating multiculturalism as an “add-on” to the curriculum (p. 255). Rather, he emphasized, multiculturalism must permeate the curriculum to be truly effective. In Denmark, reservations persist regarding the “multicultural” in multicultural literature, a conversation simultaneously happening in adult and children’s literature. When studying books authored by individuals from minority backgrounds or narratives about migrants, some researchers of adult literature have preferred to employ *indvandrerlitteratur* (“migrant literature”), *indvandrerforfatter* (“migrant author”; Bech Albertsen, 2013), or *migrationslitteratur* (“migration literature”; Frank, 2012, as cited in Mansour & Martin, 2020, p. 12), this even though, as Natia Gokieli (2017) points out, immigrant literature is essentially “a euphemism for non-white literature” (p. 269).

As Mansour and Martin (2020) discuss, Cai and Bishop (who divided multicultural literature into world literature, cross-cultural literature, and literature from parallel cultures) favoured the use of parallel cultures in selecting literature for the classroom because these represent stories written by authors who are considered to be insiders to a certain lived reality. Mansour and Martin consider, too, Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) seminal work on mirrors and windows, which introduced the salience of audience along with authorship, asking: Was the story one in which the reader (e.g., if Black) could see themselves? Was it one that could serve for an outsider as a window to someone else's reality? The question of authenticity of authorship is a more openly debated one in the Nordic context, where there is concern with minority insiders being depicted in an invariably positive light, which might neglect internal conflicts and differences in perspectives. Additionally, prioritizing such literature might unintentionally assert dominance of certain cultures and insiders over others. This issue also surfaces in the Canadian studies, as we shall see.

Mansour chooses to ground her work in children's literature by emphasizing "literary characteristics and content ... not whether the text is regarded as an authentic representation of the minority reader" (Mansour & Martin, 2020, p. 13). Echoing that point is Christopher Myers' (2014) observation, as a Black children's author and illustrator in the United States, that characters in books by minority authors should not be consigned to an

apartheid of literature ... limited to the townships of occasional historical books that concern themselves with the legacies of civil rights and slavery but are never given a pass card to traverse the lands of adventure, curiosity, imagination or personal growth. (p. 1)

While much research literature in the scholarly Nordic context has focused to date on discussion of literary works, certain Nordic studies are emerging that have migrated this question to the classroom.

We begin with the work of Åse Marie Ommundsen et al. (2022), who encourage teachers to use "challenging" picturebooks (p. 1). *Challenging picturebooks* include books "that pose challenging questions or address challenging topics" (p. 7), that is, "learning new things, or seeing things in a new light" (Sundmark & Olsson Jers, 2021, as cited in Ommundsen et al., p. 9). In research conducted at a primary school in Oslo, Ommundsen et al. (2023) selected the picturebook *Når kaniner blir reddet* (*When Rabbits Get Scared*) to use with 10-year-old children; though not directly focused on the Other, it treated a situation productive of migrants – namely, war. This Swedish picturebook was considered challenging by the researchers

and teacher because it dug into the harsh realities of conflict and impacts of traumatic experiences. As Ommundsen et al. (2023) explain, this theme has been practically non-existent in Nordic children's literature, at least until 2007. In light of Russia's war with Ukraine, the issue has acquired a new urgency. The researchers, working in collaboration with the teacher, aimed to help foster children's critical and emotional literacy. The children connected with the main character, Noah – a young boy growing up in a war zone with his mother and toy rabbit. By emotionally deconstructing Noah's fear, the children empathetically envisioned what it felt like to be in his vulnerable position.

Challenging picturebooks that engage with others / the Other remain scarce, though, leading Mansour to wonder how a Danish Public School Law that requires teachers to consider students' experiences could succeed in the absence of the availability of such literature to teachers (Mansour & Martin, 2020). Ommundsen (2011) has shared that concern, pointing out that Norway (the geographical location from which she writes) remains a “monocultural country” – White and Christian – with migration mainly to its capital city, Oslo. However, she mused, if “multicultural Norway is limited to Oslo,” Norwegian childhoods will also be limited, this in an increasingly global world (p. 37). The critical consensus is: Children need access to challenging picturebooks.

III. ENGAGING WITH DIVERSE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

As Leerssen (2007) points out, “it is in the field of imaginary and poetical literature that national stereotypes are first and most effectively formulated, perpetuated and disseminated” (p. 26), even as their incidence might be expected to be fewer in contemporary literature. We highlight findings that disclose affinities with or differences from the Nordic context appearing in three connected Canadian research projects that studied teachers' responses and uses of contemporary diverse literature, between 2006 and 2019, across six provinces: Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. (Thanks is due to SSHRC [Social Sciences Humanities Research Council] for their gracious support of these projects.) Researchers had been elementary or secondary teachers themselves and were now teacher-educators. Much as with the Nordic context, wrestling with terminology became part of the evolution of the research.

The first study (2006–2009), which was the only one to work with pre-service teachers, gathered a then growing corpus of contemporary

Canadian picturebooks published since 1990, set within diverse Canadian locations (rural and urban), and written by authors of diverse backgrounds, especially by minority authors (Johnston & Bainbridge, 2013). Over 75 contemporary books were compiled, then used in education classes; each site probed pre-service teacher perceptions of Canadian identity (drawing on surveys, workshops, and focus groups and/or interviews). The researchers found a rural / urban divide in the teachers' perceptions – which was unsurprising. In metropolitan centres, diversity was embraced more, while smaller, rural places were characterized by religious homogeneity, with even one change in that configuration deemed highly contentious. Pre-service teachers, whose position in the classroom is subject to others' scrutiny and approval, judged texts according to the level of risk they posed. While certain texts were welcomed as essential resources because they spoke to the students that pre-service teachers were encountering in their classrooms, and therefore helped them reach out to those students, other texts were sedulously avoided. Attitudes of discomfort were apparent with any literature that unsettled teachers' sense of what it meant to be Canadian, that identity resting on the "Great White North," which sat beside "a somewhat superior attitude of tolerance towards diversity" (Johnston & Bainbridge, 2013, p. 176) – namely, White exceptionalism at work.

The next research project (2010–2014) focused on teachers already teaching in classrooms. The book base was broadened to include novels and graphic novels, with the focus still maintained on Canadian literature, because certain changes in the landscape had happened in the intervening years. While Canada had adopted multiculturalism as official government policy in 1971, it was not until 2008 that then prime minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, apologized for the state's residential school policy, acknowledging the great harm it had done to Indigenous Peoples; soon after, a Royal Commission Inquiry on Residential Schools was created. While the word "genocide" would not be used until 2022 (Olareswaju, 2023), the landscape had begun to visibly change, including recognition that Canada's multiculturalism consisted mostly of "unreflective gestures": "What is absent from current articulations of multiculturalism is the profound potential of multiple and dynamic knowledges to mutually and substantively transform the national space" (Saldana, 2000, as cited in Burke et al., 2017, p. 5). The term "multicultural literature" was provisionally retained in the project, but the emphasis shifted towards "social justice literature," literature which could be harnessed to a pedagogical intention to address issues of equity through social action. Teaching using children's and young adult literature by immigrants,

minorities, and Indigenous people was considered as a form of social action, on the grounds that “[a] literacy education that focuses on social justice educates both the heads and hearts of students and helps them to become thoughtful, committed and active citizens” (Banks, 2003, as cited in Burke et al., 2017, p. 2).

Teacher inquiry groups were created, within and across schools and school districts, for teachers to discuss the literature and how it could be pedagogically approached. The inquiry groups proved to be a major source of learning for teachers as well as researchers. While the riskiness of teaching with certain texts in certain settings remained a “hot spot,” teachers were more willing to travel outside of their comfort zones with the support of the inquiry group. The longitudinal study design also made it possible to develop pedagogies, which was important; few to no curricular resources for teaching to such literature existed. Given the longitudinal nature of the research, teachers were also afforded time and space to critically reflect on their own histories in relation to the subject or to the literature. Memory work became an integral part of the research. Teachers’ identities – and where their identities were mostly White settler of European ancestry – became an important site for critical reflection on their motivations, histories, and intentions with respect to the content and use of the social justice literature. One direction in which this reflection moved was through having teachers interrogate their touchstone texts and responses (Strong-Wilson et al., 2014; Strong-Wilson, Yoder, & Phipps, 2014; Yoder & Strong-Wilson, 2017).

The third study (2015–2019) turned a corner by more explicitly engaging with postcolonial texts, which are a form of counter-story that talks back to the centre from the periphery. The teacher inquiry group structure was maintained; however, the literature base was again broadened, this time to include literature from or about Canada as well as literature (available in English) from other countries on the subject of resisting colonial rule or any hegemonic orthodoxies.

The third study resulted in a much more coherent approach to teaching to social justice using literary texts, this via “pedagogies of discomfort” (Boler, 1999, p. 175; modified in our project to the plural: “pedagogies of discomfort” – Balzer et al., 2023, p. 5), which proved to be a useful lens through which to address the challenges of teaching to “difficult knowledge[s]” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 766). Megan Boler, once a secondary teacher herself, teaching Holocaust texts like Spiegelman’s *Maus*, focused her theory on disrupting “cherished beliefs,” that is, “self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others” (Boler, 1999,

p. 177). She worked in collaboration with educational scholar Michael Zembylas, whose scholarship focuses on the intersection of emotion with historical traumas in teaching and learning (e.g., Boler & Zembylas, 2003). *Pedagogies of discomfort* engage feelings and emotions in relation to the critical consciousness of history; in other words, they address the often volatile and vulnerable nexus around which responses to counter- and post-colonial texts hover. Work within the project became a curricular project of subjective and social construction (Pinar, 2023) – of teachers’ pedagogically working through of difficult subject matter by “*confront[ing]* [emphasis added] moments of discomfort” provoked by reading and discussing the literature with the researchers, other teachers, and students (Balzer et al., 2023, p. 3).

Tensions between Indigenous literatures and migrant / newcomer stories (a concern similar to that anticipated in the Nordic context) were beginning to test teachers’ and students’ abilities to know how to navigate between competing counter-stories; this became the focus of elementary teachers’ inquiry in one of the Alberta sites, and conversations increasingly turned towards seeking out stories that could begin dialogues focused on “good relations” between marginalized peoples (Wiltse et al., 2023, p. 52). Confronting the forms of empathy that would lead to more deeply felt yet complicated testimonial responses became the focus of two Alberta secondary teachers’ working through response with their secondary students around a novel depicting abuse and trauma ensuing from Indian residential schooling (McBean & Piazza, 2023). The Quebec and Ontario studies emphasized the importance of keeping students talking, especially when the talk became challenging (Strong-Wilson & Huang, 2023; Tilley & Redmond, 2023). Strong-Wilson and Huang (2023) brought out the importance of encouraging students to think aloud as a way to process thinking, of building on others’ ideas, and working through contentious ideas. The teachers’ pedagogical working through of difficult subject matter had the effect of deepening classroom engagement with the counter-stories (Strong-Wilson, 2021).

IV. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The Canadian and Nordic contexts are most alike in being Northern countries – countries that, besides sharing similar geographical features and remoteness, have inherited an attitude of Northern / Nordic exceptionalism. It is this learned attitude that needs to be wrestled with as part of the work of making available a diversity of perspectives: perspectives considered both on their own account (viz., parallel literature and counter-stories), this to redress their previous silencing and exclusion from the

public domain, as well as counter-stories acting in coalition with one another. The term “coalition” is a highly felicitous one on the part of Kokkola and Van den Bossche (2020b, p.2), and echoes Michael Rothberg’s (2009) of “solidarity” (p. 132). Counter-memories and counter-stories ought not to be in competition with one another (as they have been with the dominant, hegemonic narrative); rather, they should act in collaboration to bring out shared concerns. Conversely, discussions in the Nordic context have re-opened a question deemed virtually closed in the American and Canadian contexts with respect to authenticity of literature: How central to the conversation is the identity of the author? Much might be said here with respect to honouring voices and redressing inequalities. Whereas the term “counter-stories” emphasizes issues of power and subversion of power, “migrant literature” (or “refugee literature,” which has been used in the Canadian context; Wiltse et al., 2023) marks stories according to their origins as, arguably, “Indigenous literature” also does. However, how does intersectionality complicate this question in vitally important ways? Conversations in the Nordic context around terminology hold strong possibilities for complicating identities that are increasingly cosmopolitan, complex, and intersectional.

Emerging from this discussion is the continued salience of the image, especially as viewed in relation to an underlying and continuing Nordic exceptionalism (an ideology kept in play, too, through the fears engendered by neoliberalism and neoconservatism). One theoretical approach that holds great promise in this regard is *imagology*, which is a dynamic field being explored by Nordic and European researchers that analyzes how characters are culturally constructed and represented in literature (Leerson, 2007; O’Sullivan & Immel, 2017). This literary approach brings us back to teachers and students by asking: Who is the observer? O’Sullivan and Immel (2017) emphasize how images “reveal as much or more about those who are seeing or doing the representing (the spectants) as about those seen or represented (the spectated)” (p. 10). As Silke Meyer also advocates: “From the very beginning of our lives, we have to train our eyes so that we reverse the image projected onto our retina by external stimuli” (O’Sullivan & Immel, 2017, p. 29). To yield results in classrooms, such work, though, needs to be done with teachers, as the Canadian studies show. In using counter-stories and teaching to diversity, addressing that reversal necessities the teacher confronting themselves as implicated subjects – the persons whose actions or inactions, actually, historically, or ancestrally, have placed them in a position of unequal power relative to others (Rothberg, 2019). Through experiencing pedagogies of discomfort and encountering challenging stories, teachers

can arrive at deeper, contextualized engagements with their own implication – here, Nordic / Northern exceptionalism and settler identity – and thus responsibility. Indeed, recent updates to the pedagogy of discomfort call for a contextual approach. Zembylas (2023), drawing on Berlant’s work (quoted in the beginning of the current article), explains: “The pedagogical question, then, is: Under what affective conditions is it possible to build infrastructures of discomfort-as-inconvenience that increase the possibilities of individual (or social) transformation?” (p. 202). It is a question, Zembylas specifies, that needs to consider how “feelings of discomfort take on different nuances and trajectories in various contexts” (p. 203). The problem is how to best “nurture” such unsettling feelings “without ending the conversation” before it has begun (p. 203). Discussion of images in children’s contemporary literature in Northern / Nordic contexts (and across the two contexts) can provide a powerful avenue for subjective and social reconstruction (Pinar, 2023).

Drawing on images in picturebooks – a language that can potentially also travel across contexts – may intensify a sense of alterity, thus enhancing critical thinking as well as heightening empathy. When aligned with a contextualized pedagogy of discomfort, narratives can become a means to dive deeper into ethical terrain tied to implication. For instance, books with telling images hold out the possibility of breaking preconceived ideas – including with respect to nationhood. For example, images from contemporary Indigenous picturebooks like those illustrated by Julie Flett, a talented and renowned Cree / Métis artist and storyteller in the Canadian context, though not yet translated into any of the Nordic languages, would be a promising place from which to begin, as would be the picturebooks and graphic novels of Cree / Métis artist and storyteller David Robertson. Such stories and their images would challenge prevailing limited and limiting depictions of Indigenous Peoples in the Northern (Canadian) and Nordic contexts.

Still another possibility lies in wordless texts. We conclude with two which tell stories of migration – one written by Vietnamese-Canadian author Thao Lam (2020), called *The Paper Boat: A Refugee Story*, that illustrates the long journey made from Vietnam to Canada, like the one she herself made to Canada as a refugee, this at the age of 3. The other book, written by Finnish author Sanna Peilliccioni (2018), is called *Meidän piti lähteä [We Had to Leave]* and depicts a child’s migration to a snowy place from an undisclosed location, which Pesonen (2020) speculates is likely Syria. *The Paper Boat* illustrates a family escaping war-torn Vietnam to seek refuge in a boat bound for Canada. The picturebook depicts a colony of ants spreading on a dinner table within a Vietnamese household. A little girl is

seen, standing amongst adults who are gathered around the same dinner table – but no one eats. Armored tanks suddenly approach, prompting the family – and the ants – to immediately depart. The mother and daughter are portrayed as travelling through a jungle of darkness and fear, only to be guided to a body of water by the ants. Using a paper boat crafted by the mother, the ants board their own journey through severe weather and hostile conditions – a parallel narrative for the difficulties endured by the refugee families. The ending depicts an apartment complex in a busy city inhabited by racially diverse residents; the Vietnamese family, and the ants, are seen settling in at their dinner table. From the Finnish context, Pelliccioni's *Meidän piti lähteä* [*We Had to Leave*] illustrates a family of three fleeing violence and navigating a stormy ocean in a small boat towards a new life, the falling snow symbolizing the challenges of a new beginning and the hope of one. Reflecting on the book, Pesonen (2020) notes that emphasized is the “forced ... departure” (p. 5). Both wordless picturebooks portray the disruption of a peaceful life before the onset of war. Narratives in which “the journey has gained emblematic status” are not unproblematic, of course; “warm reception” in the host society does not invariably follow, nor does “happy closure,” as Vassiliki Vassiloudi (2019, p. 38-39) wryly comments in her critical review of refugee literature for children. However, large bodies of water, sea or ocean, even as they represent fear, darkness, and anxiety, thus reinforcing the notion of Other (Pesonen, 2020), also point towards conduits and passageways. Swedish children's literature scholar Maria Nikolajeva (2010) suggests that child protagonists can play a central role in helping the reader discern vital details – here, the parallel movement / migration of the ants, who are likewise seeking sanctuary, a place to land. Wordless picturebooks can provide valuable opportunities for starting conversations within and across Nordic and Northern contexts, conversations that encourage teachers and their students to recognize the lives of others in their midst even as discussion of the stories calls for critically engaging with readers' own subjective and social investments and implications in the kinds of narratives and myths that get told and taught. The question of who we are when not ruled by others is fundamentally a question about subjective and social reconstruction, one best approached in the classroom through unsettling subjects.

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