Veracini, Lorenzo (2001). Book review: 'Reading race: Aboriginality in Australian Children's Literature' by Clare Bradford


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Clare Bradford has identified a strategic site of discursive production connected with notions of ‘indigeneity’ - a location particularly promising for comparative considerations, although her book is concerned only with Australian children’s literature. In dealing with representations of Aboriginal peoples in a specific and sensitive literary context, she reveals the tensions between the different ideologies of race and their evolution - tensions that have never ceased to operate despite the paradigmatic shifts of recent decades. It is these shifts - shifts that involve representations of Aboriginal peoples but also include the transformation of a literary genre such as children’s books - that constitute the main subject of her narrative.

The links between constructions of childhood and adolescence and images of ‘savagery’ and ‘civilisation’ have always been present in the ‘Australian mind’. The notion of the adolescent as a growing up citizen - still ‘uncivilised’ by definition - and patronising accepted wisdom of Aboriginality as characterised by hopeless and ‘childlike’ exposure to corrupting influences continually resounded each other in both intellectual and popular productions and have remained resilient in public perceptions despite academic challenges. Yet, in the case of children’s literature, Bradford shows these notions as having found a common ground. In this respect, the actuality of the book is particularly forceful: because it identifies a discursive continuity that has survived to this day and because this resilience may be significant in the analysis of the impasse the processes of Aboriginal inclusion into wider understandings of Australian society are encountering.

At a time when successful youth movement in the Anglophonic world such as the Boy Scouts of America were intensively producing and reworking perceptions of American-Indian lore for their educative purposes, the situation in Australia was characterised by a tendency toward exclusion from sight and memory. When Aborigines were mentioned, it was in a stereotyped way, a way that could easily be reduced to a docile and passive acceptance of colonisation. While this standardisation and exclusion is not surprising - especially in the context of children’s literature, and considering the ‘great Australian silence’ that characterised the handling of Aborigines until the late 1960s - the ways in which representations of Aboriginality are displayed becomes in Bradford’s analysis entangled with constructions of white identity and Australianness.

Children’s literature emerges as a privileged point of view for the comparative analysis of the discursive practices of settler societies. While Australia’s repertoire of images about race and adolescence is largely shared with the rest of the Anglophonic world, the Australian case displays an exceptional stress on Aboriginal passivity. Bradford’s introductory comments on the differences between constructions of Maori and Aborigines exemplify the structural difference in what could be called the psyche of the two dominions - differences that have remained. The author, herself a New Zealander growing up before the comprehensive intellectual shifts that begun at the end of the 1960s, recalls her impressions as a child: ‘These books taught me that Australia was a more interesting and a more dangerous place than New Zealand, and that Australian children routinely faced
perils unknown to me in damp, green, safe Taranaki: perils such as bushfire, floods, venomous snakes, kidnappings, cattle-duffing and being lost in the bush. Billabong’s Black Billy was an anomalous figure, for his docility seemed to differentiate him from the Maori men I saw about the country town where I attended school. It was impossible to imagine these tough, tattooed men putting up with the jibes and insults at which Black Billy merely grinned' (1).

Reading Race is a contribution that draws from many fields and contributes to each of them: postcolonial studies, Aboriginal studies, literary and cultural studies and historiography. In dealing with ideas of childhood and adolescence in Australia, Reading Race faces a problem strangely neglected by the previous historical literature (see Jan Kociumbas’ chapter in the 1988 People’s History of Australia), yet the results of Bradford’s analysis are especially compelling because Reading Race manages to deal with both old and recent texts, both popular fiction and school texts and because, in doing so, manages to explode the myth of a strong discontinuity between ‘colonial’ times and more modern, culturally respectful understandings. It is the continuity in discursive production - a continuity that involves Aboriginal as well as white writers - and the argument against a neat, ameliorist line that becomes the most distinguishing theme of the book. It is the constant and still unresolved process of renegotiation of an acceptable form of ‘Aboriginality’ that concludes Bradford’s narrative.

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