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Indigenizing Children's Literature

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*In this article the author situates the analysis of two popular children's books in theoretical frameworks emerging from American Indian Studies. Using a new historicist lens, she discusses Anne Rockwell's (1999) Thanksgiving Day and Laura Ingalls Wilder's (1935/1971) Little House on the Prairie and suggests that these books function as obstacles for the understanding of the Other in American and global society.*

**Introduction**

Laura Ingalls Wilder's (1935/1971) *Little House on the Prairie* is one of the most beloved children's books of all time. Another book, equally popular since its first publication, is Anne Rockwell's (1999) *Thanksgiving Day*. Characters presented as American Indians<sup>1</sup> figure prominently throughout each book. Beloved and popular, these books are influential because they are widely shared with young children by teachers, librarians, and parents. In this article, I analyze these two books, situating the analysis in theoretical frameworks emerging from American Indian Studies; discuss ways in which the images they contain of Native people, cultures, and history work to misinform young readers; consider ramifications of an unchecked culture of misrepresentation; and suggest changes that can be implemented in the classroom and in teacher education programs. I call this process indigenizing children's literature.

**Theoretical Framework**

Historically, researchers, in the pursuit of knowledge and tenure, have dehumanized Native peoples by treating them as subjects. In recent decades, Native peoples have pushed back. American Indian Studies programs are increasingly geared towards working with, and for, Native communities. Increasingly, scholars are developing theoretical methodologies centered on the needs and concerns of Native peoples. These include Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) 'decolonizing methodologies,' Sandy Grande's (2004) 'Red pedagogy,' Bryan Brayboy's (2006) 'tribal critical race theory,' Jodi Byrd's (2008) 'Indigenous critical theory,' and Andrea Smith's (2008) 'centering of Native American studies.'

Grande (2004) advances an argument that critical pedagogies that "retain the deep structures of Western thought"<sup>2</sup> (p. 3) may, in praxis, function as homogenizing agents. She argues that to be truly democratic and emancipatory, critical theorists must engage the work of Native scholars and the idea of sovereignty, thereby developing a 'red pedagogy' that will better

serve Native and non-Native citizens of the United States and by extension, the world. In his critique of critical race theory (CRT), Brayboy (2006) argues that for American Indians, colonization—not racism—is endemic in society. He writes: “By colonization, I mean that European American thought, knowledge, and power structures dominate present-day society in the United States” (Brayboy, 2006, p. 430). As such, he writes, Indigenous knowledge is dismissed. That dismissal includes Native stories, which, he argues “...are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being” (Brayboy, 2006, p. 430).

Indigenous critical theory is, as described by Byrd (2008), “a contentious, oppositional discourse that confronts imperialism and colonialism” (para 4). She goes on to say that it is a “diagnostic way of reading and interpreting colonial logics that underpin cultural, intellectual, and political discourses. And it asks that settler, native, and arrivant each acknowledge their own position within empire and then reconceptualize space and history to make visible that which settler colonialism has sought to obscure” (Byrd, 2008, para. 4). In her work, Smith (2008) articulates a methodology she calls ‘Centering Native American Studies’ that differentiates between studying Indians and doing Native studies. She says “Native American Studies is equated with projects that have Native peoples as their object of study rather than as a set of methodological and theoretical approaches that contest academic disciplinary formations with its own frameworks” (Smith, 2008, p. xiii). What might we learn, she argues, if instead of inclusion as a model, we recenter our analyses, working from the perspective of women of color? In other words, researchers should step out of a “pre-established politics or discourse” (Smith, 2008, p. xiii), centering difference as the vantage point from which to view issues.

Smith’s (2008) words, in particular, have bearing on children’s literature, and specifically, the multicultural category of children’s literature. Central to multicultural literature is the claim that it can provide more children with a mirror that reflects who they are, and provide all children with a window into the cultures of those who are different from themselves. While it has been thrilling to see the body of children’s literature become more inclusive with the works of writers such as Walter Dean Myers (1997) and Virginia Hamilton (1985), Cynthia Leitich Smith (2000) and Joseph Bruchac (2004), Gary Soto (1997) and Pat Mora (1998), Lawrence Yep (2000) and Yoshiko Uchida (1993), it has been difficult to dislodge narratives that misrepresent and marginalize American Indians.<sup>3</sup> The field is more inclusive, but it has yet to shake the deep structures of Western thought (to use Grande’s words) that frame Native as Other. When classic, yet flawed, books remain in circulation, their sheer number(s) can work to dismiss the knowledge, Brayboy (2006) might argue, that is embedded in stories by Native writers. In an effort to apply Smith’s (2008) suggestion of decentering, I turn to points articulated in Mihesuah and Wilson’s (2004) text, *Indigenizing the Academy*. In the following paragraphs, I put forth a model that may illuminate work that must be done to move beyond the superficial inclusivity signified by the addition of books written by writers of color.

In *Indigenizing the Academy*, Mihesuah and Wilson (2004) describe a four-point framework for the process of indigenization. Indigenizing means: 1) “To carve a space where Indigenous values and knowledge are respected; 2) to create an environment that supports research and methodologies useful to Indigenous nation building<sup>4</sup>; 3) to support one another as institutional foundations are shaken; and 4) to compel institutional responsiveness to Indigenous issues, concerns, and communities” (Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004, p. 2). As an activist scholar, I work towards indigenizing children’s literature and by extension, the classrooms in which

children's books are used. Mihesuah and Wilson's (2004) four aspects of indigenization outlined above are the framework I use to explicate my work in children's literature.

First, I wish to carve a space in the field of children's literature, where Indigenous values and knowledge are respected. The lack of respect for Indigenous values and knowledge in the world of children's literature manifests itself in many ways, including appropriation of and failure to cite sources for retellings of Indigenous traditional stories, the use of stereotypes of American Indians, and the tellings of historical events in ways that distort American Indian peoples, cultures, and experiences (Barron, 1981; Byler, 1982; Caldwell, Kaye, and Mitten, 2007; Cata, 1971; Hearne, 1993; LaBonty, 1995; Moore and Hirschfelder, 1982; Taylor and Patterson, 2000).

Carving a space where Indigenous values and knowledge are respected means creating an informed environment within the children's literature arena that supports Indigenous nation building. Creation of that environment means displacing the stereotypes and erroneous ideas that many people "know" about American Indians, and replacing them with accurate information. This countering activity will support Indigenous nation building. An essential component of the defending and building of tribal nations called for by Lakota scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (2005) is having pride in one's identity as a member or citizen of a tribal nation. Personal experience as well as reports of other Native people (Dorris, 1995; Wilson, 2006) indicates that Native children's self esteem is far too often assaulted in their classrooms—unintentionally—when teachers or librarians uncritically share books with images of Indians as primitive savages or with other historical or cultural misinformation. Educational strategies that support Indigenous nation building preclude the uncritical use of children's books with images that are likely to directly or indirectly harm a child's efforts to establish an identity as a Native person. In recent years, the American Psychological Association and the American Sociological Association have issued statements about the harm Native mascot imagery cause to Native children. Though much beloved, these mascots are largely stereotypical in nature.

Letting go of that imagery can be unsettling, which leads to the third point: the need to support others in the field of children's literature as institutional foundations are shaken. This new, informed environment will mean being honest about the place of Indigenous people in American history. My experiences in children's literature and in the mascot issue indicate that displacement of erroneous ideas about Indigenous people does, in fact, shake the foundations of institutions, because it disrupts the dominant narrative of America that allows most people to have positive feelings about the country, its origins, and the ways American Indians are presented in that narrative. That same displacement can challenge the positive self-image of individuals – writers, editors, reviewers, teachers, librarians -- involved in the creation and use of children's books. It can be deeply threatening or scary to admit that a book one has created or embraced is incorrect, disrespectful, or perhaps even harmful. Writers, editors, reviewers, and people who purchase books to share with children are not deliberately racist and should not be charged as such.

Support, as I conceptualize it, begins with the understanding that writers, illustrators, teachers, librarians, parents, editors, and reviewers are citizens of a society that has socialized them into holding very narrow views of American Indians. Supporting them requires presenting persuasive, well-reasoned critiques of problematic books, and supplying Indigenous perspectives and factual information without accusation and judgment. Conversely, individuals who already bring these issues to attention in their work or in their teaching are also in need of support. Supporting them means listening, with an open mind, to their words. And last, support must also

take the form of encouraging American Indian authors and illustrators by using and recommending their books. Such use sends a signal to the institutions that provide us with children's books, which leads to the final point.

Together, we must compel institutions that publish, review, and purchase children's literature to be responsive to Indigenous issues, concerns, and communities. Institutions don't necessarily do things on their own; in fact, as Frederick Douglass said, "Power concedes nothing without a demand" (as cited in Zinn, 2003, p. 183). Publishing houses, review journals, booksellers and libraries are all involved in the creation and consumption of children's literature. To change what happens during the processes of publication, review, and purchase of children's literature requires commitments to action on the part of parents, educators, and their allies. That action can include purchasing well-written books by and about American Indians that are set in the present day, and books that accurately portray the past without dehumanizing anyone. Among those who have been working to bring about responsiveness to Indigenous perspectives are Oyate<sup>5</sup> and the American Indian Library Association, both of which point readers to well-written books they deem accurate.

### **An Indigenized Analysis of Two Influential Books**

Centered in Indigenous critical theory, I use a new historicist lens in my analyses of Anne Rockwell's (1999) *Thanksgiving Day* and Laura Ingalls Wilder's (1935/1971) *Little House on the Prairie*. As described by Parker (2008), interpreting books with a new historicist lens means not accepting commonly held "facts" as fact. It means seeking alternative perspectives on a given fact. For example, many books tell children that Columbus discovered America. A simple statement, it is taken as fact in schools and other institutions. Parker notes however, "From another perspective, in 1492, the name AMERICA did not even exist, and what Columbus did is no discovery if discovery means being the first person to find something" (p. 221). Parker goes on to say, "Calling him a discoverer of America prevents us from seeing him as an invader and conqueror, or, as a brutally genocidal invader and conqueror" (p. 221). My analysis includes asking questions such as, how does the portrayal of Native peoples and events in this book compare to accounts of Native people of that time? To address this question, it is necessary to read the works of scholars who, as Hoxie (1996) states, have "developed a more sophisticated method for presenting Indian experiences from an Indian perspective" (p. vii).

My selection of these two books for this article is not random. Thanksgiving is a national holiday in the United States. There are many old and new children's books about the holiday. From 2000 to 2008, 69 works of fiction with "Thanksgiving" in the title were published.<sup>6</sup> In October of 2007 I visited a local library to examine their holdings of Thanksgiving books in the children's section of the library. Of the 18 titles available, seven recount what is regarded as "The First Thanksgiving" during which Pilgrims and Indians came together to share a feast. Among those seven were Rockwell's (1999) *Thanksgiving Day*, of which several copies signify its popularity. I consequently began an analysis of this book as representative of books with the Pilgrim/Indian theme. Similarly, the best-selling status of *Little House on the Prairie* is the primary reason for its selection in this study. As of December 2001, *Publisher's Weekly* reported it to be the twelfth best-selling children's paperback of all time, with sales numbering at 6,172,525 copies (Turvey, 2001).

#### ***Anne Rockwell's Thanksgiving Day***

Picture books combine words with illustrations to tell a story and are usually read aloud while children view the illustrations. The subject of Anne Rockwell's (1999) picture book is Thanksgiving, an American holiday that functions like a traditional story because it is a story about America's origins. Rockwell's daughter, Lizzy, drew the illustrations for this popular book. The community where I live consists of two small cities with a combined population of about 100,000. Each city has its own public library. Between the two, there are 14 copies of Rockwell's book. Saying the book is great for preschoolers, Townsend-Hudson (1999), the reviewer at *Booklist*, deemed Rockwell's research excellent. Calling it unbiased, the reviewer (unsigned) at *Kirkus* (1999) says it is a stellar example of how two disparate groups achieved a mutual goal of survival.

*Thanksgiving Day* opens with an African American boy telling his parents that, in school, he learned why they celebrate Thanksgiving, and why turkey, corn bread, and cranberry sauce are eaten on Thanksgiving Day. Next is a double-page spread of the teacher reading a picture book called "The First Thanksgiving" aloud to her class. Illustrations show children sitting at her feet, suggesting this is a pre-school or early elementary classroom. Behind her is a wooden rack with four puppets: a Pilgrim man, a Pilgrim woman, an Indian man, and a turkey. The next double-paged spread is an illustration of two pages from the "The First Thanksgiving" book the teacher is reading. Her fingers are shown holding the book open. On the left is a wordless page that shows a Wampanoag family; facing it on the right side is a Pilgrim family. Beneath the illustration, the text reads: "We learned about the Wampanoag people who were already in this land, and the Pilgrims who came across the sea from England" (Rockwell, 1999, np.). On the next double-paged spread, the children in the classroom are gathered around an art table making hats, caps and feathered headbands.

Over the next pages, the left side of each double-paged spread includes text and an illustration that shows a child in costume performing the information shown on the right-side of the page, which is a full-page illustration of a page from "The First Thanksgiving." For example, the text on the left of the first of this series of double-paged spreads reads: "After the story, we put on a play. I went first. I was the ship called the *Mayflower*. I told how I was thankful that I tossed and rolled and tossed and rolled some more, but didn't sink in the big waves far out at sea" (Rockwell, 1999, np.) The illustration on the left is of the African American boy who narrates the story. Holding a large paper ship in front of his body, his left leg is extended, suggesting the motion of a ship being tossed at sea. The facing page shows the *Mayflower* at sea, being tossed in the waves.

On the next page is Evan, playing "a Wampanoag named Samoset" (Rockwell, 1999, np). The next three pages are about the Pilgrims landing on Plymouth Rock in 1620 (the child actor has her foot on a prop that has the year written on it) and chopping trees down to build homes. Next, Pablo plays the part of Squanto, who is shown harvesting corn. The book continues with Sam, playing the part of a Pilgrim, who is thankful that Squanto taught him how to hunt turkeys; Michiko, playing the part of a Pilgrim, saying "Michiko was thankful that she and all the other Pilgrims were greeted kindly by the Wampanoag people who shared their land with them" (np.); Kate, playing the part of an Indian, saying "Kate was thankful that her new neighbors were peaceful Pilgrims looking for a new land to live in, and not mean people looking for someone to fight with" (np.) and Jessica, playing the part of a Pilgrim, saying "Jessica was thankful that the beautiful land of Massachusetts had enough good things for everyone" (np); and Eveline, playing

the part of Chief Massasoit, saying “She told how the Wampanoag and Pilgrim people shared their harvest feast one autumn day”(np.).

The children in this story are a multi-ethnic cast. Their ethnic heritage is signaled by name of the character, illustration, or both. The narrator, Charlie, is shown to be African American. Pablo is a Latino name; Pablo is a dark-haired, dark-skinned boy. Michiko is Asian in name and illustration; Eveline has dark skin. Her dreadlocks suggest she is African American. Fair-skinned blonde, brown, or red-haired Evan, Sarah, Nicholas, Sam, Kate, and Jessica and the teacher are presumably White.

Rockwell’s (1999) story includes names well-known to most Americans: Squanto, Samoset, and Massasoit. Through Kate’s words (Kate is an Indian who is thankful the new neighbors are peaceful Pilgrims, not mean people looking for a fight), Rockwell gestures towards a more complex history than the one she presents in her book. Who might those mean people have been?

By 1620 Native nations in the east and northeast had been trading and fighting with Europeans, who in many instances, kidnapped Native people, taking them to Europe to be sold as slaves. The mean people may have been members of John Smith’s expedition. First arriving on the coast in 1607, Smith returned to England in 1614, leaving a ship behind under the command of a man named Thomas Hunt, who, after Smith left, kidnapped Squanto and twenty-seven other Wampanoags. He sailed to Spain where he began selling them as slaves. Some, including Squanto, were rescued from slavery by priests who sought to Christianize them. During Squanto’s absence, his village at Patuxet and other Wampanoag villages were devastated by hostile English and French expeditions and by diseases they carried. The villages were consequently abandoned. On his return home in the spring of 1619 as a member of an English expedition, Squanto found the Pokanoket Wampanoags, under the leadership of Massasoit, intensely hostile towards the English. Choosing to live with the English, Squanto helped smooth hostilities between the English and Pokanokets but clashes continued, and in the spring of 1620 Squanto was captured and turned over to Massasoit.

In November, the Mayflower arrived at Patuxet (site of Squanto’s home village) and established Plymouth Colony there. Over the coming months, disease and lack of food reduced the colony’s population by half. In March of the following year (1621), Massasoit sent a visiting Abenaki man, Samoset, to check up on the colonists, and a few days later, he sent Squanto, who had a better command of the English language. Squanto taught them how to use fish as a fertilizer and helped them form treaty alliances with the two Wampanoag tribes: the Pokanokets and the Nemaskets. He lived with the English at Plymouth, but the Nemaskets, not trusting him, seized him. Rescued by Plymouth soldiers, he then began forming alliances with Wampanoag villages farther away, and with Massachusetts Indians north of Plymouth, thereby losing standing and trust of Massasoit and the Pokanokets. Trying to re-establish relations with Massasoit, the English invited one of his men into Plymouth. Squanto conspired to undermine Massasoit, and the Pokanokets, by telling Wampanoag’s that he—not Massasoit—had the ear of the colony leaders. Found out, Squanto lost all standing, and died soon thereafter (Debo, 1970; Jennings, 1993; Salisbury, 1982).

Reading *Thanksgiving Day* in light of this history demonstrates the errors and large gaps in Rockwell’s (1999) telling. Missing from her account is the hard winter during which many colonists died. She goes right from the landing to friendly relationships. Rockwell says Samoset was Wampanoag, but he was Abenaki. This seemingly minor error is likely to go unrecognized by educators and children steeped in the dominant narrative of Thanksgiving, but it leaves out

important aspects of Native history and intertribal relationships and supports an “Indians are all the same” ideology. She portrays Squanto as a helpful man, but in reality, his life story is far more tragic and complicated. Finally, by characterizing the land as “plenty,” she begins the process of teaching young children the principle of Manifest Destiny: there was a lot of land, enough for everyone, and it was acceptable - even right - for the Europeans to take it. From an Indigenous critical perspective, the story she tells is disingenuous, allowing Rockwell (1999) to give us a story of harmony that is not accurate. Consequently, the reviews of the book published in *Booklist* and *Kirkus* are also not accurate.

***Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House on the Prairie***

Historical fiction is generally used to refer to stories that contain historical facts. Its value is that it helps readers experience the past. Huck, Hepler, Hickman and Kiefer (1997) write that, through historical fiction, a child can “enter into the conflicts, the suffering, the joys, and the despair of those who lived before us” (p. 514). First published in 1935, the *Little House* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder has never gone out of print. Fans can get *Little House on the Prairie* in hardcover or paperback, audio or video. It is available in “Large Print” and in board book format for toddlers. It has been translated into at least 40 different languages. An internet search using “*Little House on the Prairie*” and “k12” (the default domain name for schools) returns over 14,000 pages filled with lesson plans and activities centered on the book.

*Little House on the Prairie* is set in 1868. The protagonist in the story is Laura, a little girl whose Pa has decided to move the family west to Indian country, where pastures stretch “much farther than a man could see, and there were no settlers. Only Indians lived there” (Wilder, 1935/1971, p. 2). As they travel, Laura notes again and again how vast and empty the land is. After months of travel, Pa finally selects a location for their home and starts building. Based on the author’s life (Huck, Hepler, Hickman and Kiefer, 1997), the story conveys a pioneer spirit that perseveres in the face of bad weather, frightening animals, and Indians.

There is much to say about Wilder’s (1935/1971) repeated description of the land as empty, but I will foreground the analysis on the ways she characterizes Indians. Through the characters of Laura and Pa, Wilder makes remarks that suggest a sympathetic attitude toward Native peoples and the ways they were treated. However, the predominant characterization of Native peoples is of the primitive savage. The chapter titled “Indians in the House” exemplifies this viewpoint. In this chapter, two Indian men have come into the house while Pa is away. Laura, terrified and in hiding, is peering at them, and notices a bad smell. “Around their waists each of the Indians wore a leather thong and the furry skin of a small animal hung down in front. The fur was striped black and white, and now Laura knew what made that smell. The skins were fresh skunk skins”(Wilder, 1935/1971, p. 125). After they left the house, Laura said to Ma, “They smell awful” (p. 142) to which Ma replied “That was the skunk skins they wore” (p. 143). When Pa returned that evening, Ma told him they wanted her to make cornbread for them (which she did), and that they took his tobacco. Pa replied that she was right to do as they asked, and then he said, “Whew! What a smell” (p. 143). Ma told him the Indians wore fresh skunk skins, and “that was all they wore” (p. 144). Pa replied, “Must have been thick while they were here” (p. 144).

As the text demonstrates, Laura, Ma, and Pa are all repulsed by the smell of skunk musk. The Indian men are not. The subtext is that these men are different from Laura and her family. Their sense of smell is not like theirs. In the natural world, animals know that skunks smell

unbearably bad, and will avoid them, but apparently these two “Indians” do not. The image of Indian men wearing fresh skunk pelts is plausible only if the men aren’t really human; only if the reader thinks them to be ignorant or animalistic, and only if we believe that they do not know how to skin a skunk without puncturing the glands that hold the musk. With this episode, Wilder tells us these Indians are less-than-human and that they less-developed skills at trapping and preparing pelts than Pa does (in several places in the story, Pa is trapping animals and tanning hides). In short, she tells us, they are primitive.

In this episode, Wilder’s (1935/1971) characterizations of Indians obscure their lives as members of civilized, self-governing societies. At that moment in history (1868), about 800 treaties had been negotiated between leaders of Native nations and representatives of the United States government.<sup>7</sup> Treating with Native nations goes as far back as 1778. Two years after declaring their independence from England, the American government signed its first treaty with a tribal nation. President Washington negotiated the first treaty. Both parties to the treaty were militarily powerful and economically dependent on each other. Deloria (1984) writes that this treaty was significant “because it established an important precedent. Indian nations were to be dealt with as sovereign entities on an equal footing with the United States. Agreements were to be reached bilaterally, with each side given an opportunity to guest terms and provisions” (p. 101). This information presents Indian people in sharp contrast to the way that Wilder presents them. As diplomats, they were far from the primitive creatures Wilder portrays.

These primitive Indians are not the only ones Wilder (1935/1971) includes in her story. Later on in the book is a chapter titled “The Tall Indian.” He came into the house, unbidden, and squatted by the fire. Pa joined him, they are and smoked their pipes, and the Indian tried to speak to Pa. Not knowing the language, Pa said “No speak” (Wilder, 1935/1971, p. 229). When he left, Pa said the man was Osage and was speaking French. Pa goes on to say “That Indian was perfectly friendly” (p. 229).

Winter passed, spring began, and Indians gathered in the creek bottoms near the Little House. Pa told Mr. Scott that at least a half dozen tribes were gathering to prepare for their spring buffalo hunt, but as the story continues, it became clear they are gathering for talks, angry at the white settlers. One night, the Tall Indian rode by the Little House, headed for the bottoms. Over the next few days and nights, the family was terrified by the ‘war cry’ and drumming they heard. Pa stayed up nights, his gun ready, watching out for his family. One morning Laura awakens, the sun was shining, and Pa was sitting on the doorstep watching Indians leave. Some went west, and others went south. Later, Pa learned that the Tall Indian was named Soldet du Chene, and that he had rushed to the Indian camp, where he argued day and night with the Indians who had decided to “kill the white people who had come into the Indian country” (Wilder, 1935/1971, p. 300). He argued “till all the other Osages agreed with him” (p. 300). Then, Pa says, du Chene “...stood up and told the other tribes that if they started to massacre us, the Osages would fight them” (p. 300). The other tribes “did not dare fight Soldat du Chene and all his Osages” (p. 300), so they left. A few days later, the Osages leave, too, riding “...over the western edge of the world” (p. 311).

When Wilder (1935/1971) introduces the Osage man, he is characterized as friendly and wears more clothes than the ones that entered the house wearing skunk skins. He speaks French.<sup>8</sup> He and other Osages will fight the other Indians, allying themselves with the white settlers. This Osage man stands in stark contrast to the Indians who came into the house clad in skunk skins. In short, when Wilder *does* portray Indians as friendly and as diplomats, it is in service of the white settlers, not other Indians.

### Conclusion

The two books analyzed above are classic and popular books. I presented them in the order they are most likely to be used with children. To reiterate, the setting for *Thanksgiving Day* is a preschool or kindergarten, suggesting that is the age group it is meant for. *Little House on the Prairie* is a chapter book most commonly used in third or fourth grade classrooms. Both include characters who are typically characterized as within the multicultural designation. Library of Congress subject fields for both books do not include “Indians of North America” and, to my knowledge, neither book is included on lists of multicultural books such as “50 Multicultural Books Every Child Should Read.”<sup>9</sup> Yet, both include significant Native content, and, directly and indirectly, children are learning something about American Indians when they read these books. As demonstrated in the analyses above, what they learn is highly problematic. With books like these, children “learn” that Indians welcomed and helped the Europeans; they “learn” that Indians were primitive peoples, and, that friendly Indians are those that fight with whites, against other Indians, but who, in the end, willingly leave their lands for whites.

Pedagogically, the portrayals of American Indians in these books are not suitable. As educators, our responsibility is not to the writers of these books, or to the warm associations we may have of them. Our responsibility is to the children we are charged with educating. As educators, we have at least two choices: avoid the books, or, approach them critically, teaching children how to deconstruct the information provided in the books. Teaching them uncritically is not an educationally sound choice.

Books like those on the “50 Multicultural Books” list mentioned earlier, accurately depict American Indians in historical and contemporary settings, but, I contend, in order for them to circulate in society in the ways that *Thanksgiving Day* and *Little House on the Prairie* do, the latter have to be set aside. We can laud books we categorize as “multicultural” but shouldn’t we more aggressively challenge classic and popular books that inaccurately portray American Indians? For the most part, we do not say “Stop! Look at how these well-loved books give us misinformation about American Indians!” Instead, we defend them in a myriad of ways. Sometimes, we say they’re just fiction and, in fiction, anything goes. Sometimes, we say that young children should not be presented with the harsh reality of this country’s early days, but, what ‘young children’ are we talking about? The lives of many families from minority populations are ones that experience prejudice and discrimination on a daily basis. People commonly defend savage depictions of Indians with “that’s what the people of that time thought about them” but I suggest that is a claim that needs interrogation. What did Wilder (1935/1971) know about American Indians? She knew enough, apparently, to portray an Osage that speaks French, so why does she choose to, predominantly, portray Indians as primitive savages to be feared? Interestingly, Wilder (1978) says she did not include all the stories in her books, because some stories are not fit for children. She refers specifically to the Benders, a family who owned a tavern and who were, it turns out, serial killers. Referring in several places to an Indian massacre is ‘fit for children’ but white serial killers are not.<sup>10</sup> Nearly 70 years separate the publication of *Little House on the Prairie* and *Thanksgiving Day*. The latter does not portray primitive Indians; instead, we see helpful, friendly Indians. Friendly, but incorrect. Is that any better?

At this point, I turn to a larger context: world conflict. In *Thanksgiving Day*, we foster an uncritical narrative of the birth of what came to be called the United States of America, a land of freedom and democracy. In *Little House on the Prairie*, we tacitly agree that Indians were

primitive and we maintain an idea that the Other is savage, to be feared. As I write, the United States is at war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Newspaper accounts from Iraq tell us that American soldiers, surrounded by Iraqis, felt they “were like Custer.”<sup>11</sup> Or, as Christian Broadcast Network reporter Paul Strand said in 2003, just after the American invasion of Iraq, when Pat Robertson asked him where he was reporting from “...there’s fighting in all of the cities that we’ve been through. So, I guess if this were the Old West, I’d say there are Injuns ahead of us, Injuns behind us, and Injuns on both sides, too, so we really don’t want to give the enemy any hints about where we are” (quoted by Yellowbird, 2004). Is it possible that the uncritical use of books like *Thanksgiving Day* and *Little House on the Prairie* play a role in creating the conditions for conflicts like the Iraq war?

Also worth considering is the ways that American Indian history and imagery is used in struggles abroad. A prime example is the January 2007 protest at the Huwwara checkpoint in Nablus in the northern part of the West Bank, in which Palestinians carried signs that said “The Indian wars are not over, Mrs. Rice... We are still here, too.” Photographs of the protest show them wearing fringed shirts and feathered headdresses.<sup>12</sup>

We all have work to do. Writers must read more history, and they must use sources more critically. The same is true for editors, book reviewers, and librarians and teachers who publish, select and use their books. As people involved in teacher education, I wonder what might happen if we revisit how we think about American Indians. What if we require all our students in colleges of education to spend an entire semester doing critical analysis of books like *Little House on the Prairie* and the ways we think and teach about American Indians? Might that lead teachers to abandon problematic texts, seeking ones that tell stories of settlers and American Indians in more balanced ways?

The task is not easy. There is and will be great resistance. In November of 2007, a teacher wrote to me, angry at my critique of a book she enjoys. She said “I suppose you don’t like Santa Claus, or the Tooth Fairy, or the Easter Bunny either.” In her mind, and in too many minds, Native people are creatures of fantasy, occupying the same space as Santa, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny. That attitude has to change. Schools of Education should not graduate teachers who think that way. We must, in short, indigenize children’s literature.

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**Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> American Indian and Native American are terms commonly used to refer to the Indigenous people of the United States. In recent years, the term Indigenous is coming into greater use. All three have distinct histories and arguments in support of their use. I prefer American Indian because that term has legal standing within U.S. law but will also use Native and Indigenous in this article.

<sup>2</sup> One of her examples of a Western structure is “human beings as separate from and superior to the rest of nature” (p. 3).

<sup>3</sup> Each of the writers listed have written more than one book. For lists of their books, visit these websites: Walter Dean Myers at <http://www.walterdeanmyers.net>, Virginia Hamilton at <http://www.virginiahamilton.com/>, Cynthia Leitich Smith at <http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com/>, Joseph Bruchac at <http://www.josephbruchac.com/>, Gary Soto at <http://www.garysoto.com/>, Pat Mora at <http://www.patmora.com/>, Laurence Yep at [http://www.childrenslit.com/childrenslit/mai\\_yep\\_laurence.html](http://www.childrenslit.com/childrenslit/mai_yep_laurence.html), and Linda Sue Park at <http://www.lspark.com/books.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Indigenous nation building, as I conceptualize it, does not have as its end-goal a separatist or secessionist agenda. Rather, it means to affirm the indigenous identity of Native children, instilling a sense of well-being and pride in identity as a Native person.

<sup>5</sup> Established in 1990, Oyate is a non-profit Native organization that works towards the accurate portrayal of American Indians through evaluation of children’s and young adult literature and curricula and through educational formats such as workshops. Their website address is <http://www.oyate.org>.

<sup>6</sup> I arrived at this figure by doing a search of the Comprehensive Children’s Literature Database using “Thanksgiving” as the search term, limiting the search to titles in fiction. Analysis of the titles retrieved is necessary to determine the degree to which the books are about Pilgrims and Indians. In 2007, I examined titles in a local library. Of 18 titles I was able to read, seven were about the “First Thanksgiving.” My overview of the books is located here: <http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/2007/11/thanksgiving-picture-books-thanksgiving.html>

<sup>7</sup> A comprehensive digitized list with full text of treaties, arranged by tribe, can be seen here: <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/Toc.htm>

<sup>8</sup> The French and Osage engaged in fur trade as far back as the 1670s.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, “50 Multicultural Books Every Child Should Read” developed by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

<sup>10</sup> Wilder’s reference to the Bender’s have been challenged. While there was, in fact, a Bender family, the Wilder’s had already left the area before the Bender’s were exposed as serial killers. See “Selective Omissions” here: <http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/2008/07/selective-omissions-or-what-laura.html> for further discussion.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/04/14/sprj.irq.pows/index.html>

<sup>12</sup> See the International Middle East Media Center webpage: <http://www.imemc.org/article/46551>

