

**The 15th International Child and the Book Conference:
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Dimitris Politis
Associate Professor
University of Patras

**Subjectivities and Diversities:
The Issue of Identity in Fiction for Young Children.**

Points of Departure

The discussion about identity is found in the epicenter of interest in the past few decades, because of the transition in forms of social organizing that connected with the recognition of multiplicity and the respect of diversity. The social identity of individuals constitutes a comprehensive concept, as a unique synthesis of all relationships, commitments, etc., but also a dynamic one, as not homogeneous and unstable just like culture (Gonçalves & Carpenter 2013). Besides, the role of subject in configuration of identity is of great importance. Generally, when establishing their identity, subjects are not passive recipients of social and cultural meanings but energetic ones, as they do not accept passively social and cultural meanings, while the need of an inter-cultural discourse of recognition of different (hybrid) identities leads often to oversimplifications (for example, convenient categorizations, such as "we-others", etc.) (Kristeva 1991, Cummins 2001).

Provided that between subjectivity and diversity the issue of identity doesn't seem to be just a search for the self, the selfhood, the present paper examines the versions of identities that are appeared in modern books with cross-cultural orientation, mainly picture books for children. Apparently, literary discourse mediates to activate the individual attitude of readers and to connect them with the social meanings (Omar 2010: 4-16, Schall 2020, Athanases 1998). Therefore, the main aim of this presentation is to investigate how much is taken into account the dynamic character of social identities in the literary books for children and how much it is elected the fact that they are shaped synchronically on the base of specific historical, social, economic or political conditions.

Towards an intercultural handling of identity and diversity

The necessity of formulating an intercultural discourse, in order to recognize the different, often leads to oversimplifications, namely to one-dimensional understanding of how modern multicultural societies are constructed, by degrading the role of the subject, or by reproducing dominant categorizations (Cummins 2001: 1-50, Kristeva 1991). The concept of interculturalism is perceived as the mutual interaction with the cultural "other", it is based on the recognition of cultural pluralism, it recognizes the value of all cultures. The intercultural approach employs culture as the primary interpretive scheme, promoting theoretical assumptions and interpretive schemes adopted by the dominant, "politically correct", multicultural discourse (Smith 2001: 1-21). This fact could maintain the existing power relations but also the ideological dominance of a majority group, which may construct the content of cultural terms and concepts. In addition, formulating an intercultural discourse for recognizing different identities, often leads to oversimplifications, either by degrading the role of the subject or by reproducing dominant categorizations, e.g. "we-others". So, thinking about controlling discrimination and exclusion, without overlooking or underestimating the apparent good intentions of an intercultural handling, seems at least reasonable. The modern intercultural debate attempts to deal with such possibilities. It therefore draws on a critical discourse on multiculturalism and adopts a reflective approach to the construction of identities, claiming the support of the different, and rejecting the choice of assimilation. Obviously, this debate employs culture as a primary interpretive figure and promotes intercultural encounter/communication, while emphasizing cultural differences within the logic of "politics of recognition". According to this approach, individuals are not separated from their socializing framework, but are respected as separate cultural entities that coexist with the entities of others. The intercultural perspective is thus linked to the critical view of collective identities and cultural traditions, while encouraging as necessary the intersubjective construction of the subjectivity and identity of individuals (Sleeter & McLaren 1995, Maniatis 2012). Consequently, concerning the role of Literature, literary representations/discourses, as verbal formations and as ideological products of the conditions of a given era, can activate the individual attitude of the readers, not in conformity with the dominant social discourses, while they may rescue the readers' personal sense of the literary experience

and, finally, to relate them to society and to connect them with the social meanings (Athanases1998: 273-285, Schall 2020).

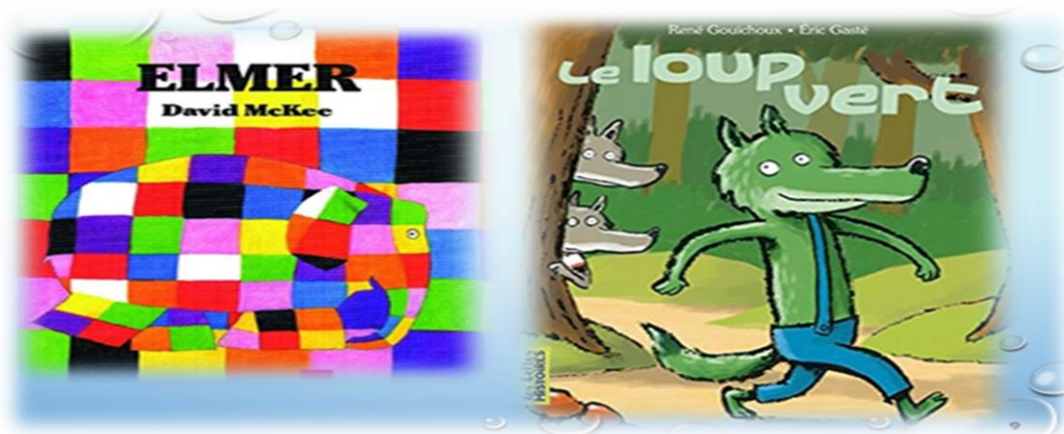
Exploring the intercultural dimensions of Literature

The exploration of the intercultural dimensions of literary texts concerns mainly with the dynamic and multidimensional nature of social identities, which are taken into account in literary books for children and adolescents, while considering the possibility that these texts may have been formed simultaneously on the basis of specific historical, social, economic and political conditions. Therefore, such an exploration would lead us to highlight every literary text as a totality, a set consisting of cultural experiences, ideological differences and social references. This will help us a lot to understand the dynamic formation process of individual and social identities, as well as the transition from the intercultural management of otherness to the dialectical construction of subjectivity. Besides, literary texts react to the systems of thought they have chosen to incorporate into their repertoire, in other words they reorganize social and cultural norms, offering their readers alternative aspects of real life that they could not otherwise experience (Iser 1978: 72-73). In this way literary texts are expanded by a variety of expressions and could promote the principles of an intercultural dialogue through the development of a critical attitude towards the familiar cultures but also to others, through the cultivation of acceptance attitudes towards the various cultural manifestations, through the formation of collective identities as an effect of creative interaction and not as a result of exclusions (Athanases1998).

Consciously or unconsciously, following the manifestations of the modern intercultural processes, the authors of literary texts for children and adolescents sometimes adopt a stereotypical reproduction of "politically correct" practices of recognizing otherness, while other times they go beyond them dialectically through the inter-subjective dynamics and perspectives of their fiction. However, most of the literary texts directed at children promote the development of treatment of acceptance of the other, they promote cultural pluralism, and they encourage the critical control of stereotypes. Many of them, nevertheless, are consumed in superficial descriptions of the different, or seem

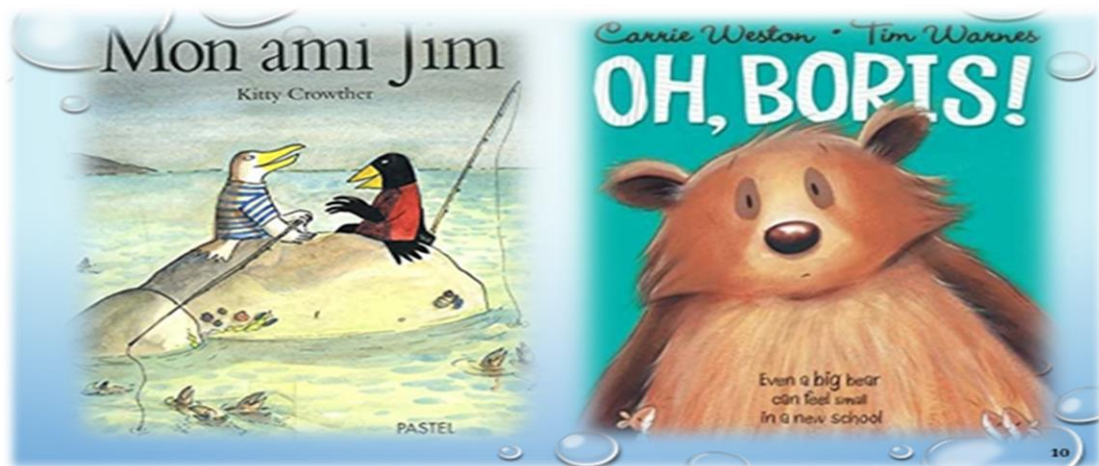
to be content by showing a fair-weather tolerance and not acceptance. The examples in each case are many and varied, so the relevant references/mentions will be absolutely indicative.

From *Elmer the Patchwork Elephant* by David McKee (even from its first edition in 1968 until all those who have followed until today) to *Le loup vert* by René Gouichoux (2007) diversity leads subjects to experience an "underestimated" identity and, in fact, in a rather painful way.

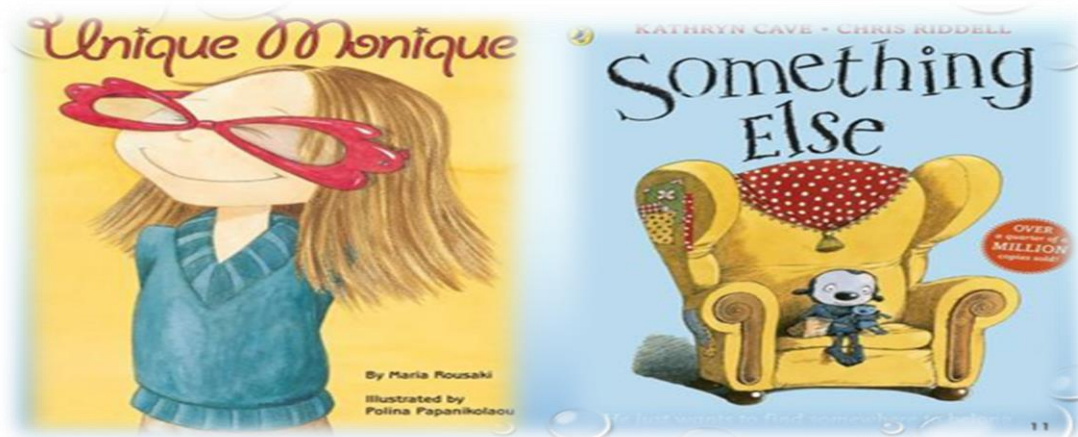


Elmer is not an ordinary elephant; he is just a colourful one who challenges himself and feels the need to look like others. The whole fictional narrative is a reflective view of an identity, which is not challenged by others but by oneself. It does not require any of Elmer to adhere to dominant social discourses. The artificial, albeit temporary, reproduction of a stereotypical cultural interpretive scheme ("us-others") soon leads to its deconstruction, enticing elephants and readers to the joy of diversity and of subjectivity.

Unlike the colorful Elmer, Raoul, the green wolf (Gouichoux, 2008), denies his color, not because he does not like himself but because it is not accepted by the gray wolves of his herd. Seeking recognition, the green-haired Raul reproduces dominant categorizations and submits to the logic of a majority group that wants all wolves to be gray. Instead of demanding his equal presence, he will adopt the angle of view of reality imposed on him by others. He even asks for the help of an apprentice fairy, to change color, while he will try different things, in order to be accepted. Raoul, in the end, denies his homogenization and leads to a deeper self-consciousness, forming a more critical, and revisionist view of the construction of his identity.



Intercultural oriented Literature often leads to oversimplifications, when coexistence in a multicultural society is presented as the easiest thing, or to an embellishment of otherness, when the "other" is always good or has excellent abilities that help him to integrate and be accepted. The result is usually that such text or picture fictions are literally trapped in superficial, rather "useful", practices of recognition. Boris the bear in the picture book *Oh, Boris!* by Carrie Weston (2008) is not initially accepted into an animal school because of its size, but joins the classroom after heroically defending his classmates against a gang of rats. The transformation of the social group for rather utilitarian reasons is based on the utilitarian tolerance of the different and not on its acceptance. Even the classical book, *Mon Ami Jim* by Kitty Crowther (1996), which is widely acclaimed for its intercultural perspective, does not escapes such a management of otherness. However, just as a Boris bear will always remain bulky until it becomes huge, so a blackbird will never mutate into a seagull, even if it magically reads stories to illiterate seagulls! The intercultural perspective depends on the process of meeting and interacting but also respecting / accepting different entities. Any other approach seems to merely reproduce the inequality and asymmetry that (exists) in intercultural encounters.



Unique Monique by Maria Rousakis (2008 in USA, 2001 in Greece) highlights, in our view, the essence of a modern intercultural handling: the subject actively participates in the process of building her identity and is not a passive recipient of social meanings. Monique (named “Melpo” in Greek edition) claims to the end its diversity as a free individual choice with the risk of becoming graphic. Thus, it opposes with humor and imagination any attempt to assimilate it by dominant discourses or to conform to stereotypes, she opposes traditions and categorizations like those imposed by the school institution. Her reflection on a socially defined identity leads her to a dialectical-conflicting construction of her subjectivity, offering us an almost model of managing otherness.

On the contrary, *Something Else* by Kathryn Cave (1994), subject to the collective stereotype, denies from the beginning the individual and the idiosyncratic. The strange creature does everything to look like the others. It renounces the imposition of its different entity and it is excluded. Reproducing the rejection it experienced, it denies a visitor named “Something”. When it finally accepts it back, it has realized its own “otherness”. It turns out, thus, that contact with the “other” is a necessary condition for the formation of identity, it is in essence a contact with the “self”. However, “Something Else” will unite its otherness with that of “Something”, so that they can now experience isolation in a peculiar, rather “autistic” context: we, the different together, and the “normal” ones elsewhere!

In the above books, which are addressed mainly to children, where an interactive narrative mood is evident, the subjects of reading have the

opportunity to appropriate unfamiliar experiences and to experience their "precious" division, that is, the questioning of themselves and their own previous experiences. By critically controlling the construction of their own identity, they are led to a deeper self-consciousness, repositioned and reformed, since the construction of meaning allows them to discover an inner world that they were unaware of and a reality that was never theirs (Iser 1978: 74, 167, 212-213, 225, 230). If they perceive the importance of fictional representation for themselves, these subjects will be able to go beyond dominant social and cultural stereotypes, thus formatting a new subjectivity, expanded and based on an intercultural consciousness.

As for Conclusion

Regardless of the effectiveness of the intercultural handling of otherness and the dialectical structure of the subjectivity they propose, almost all literary books of intercultural content dealing with identity can offer their readers opportunities for "cultural literacy" (Davis 2014). In the best case they are pushed to discover or control the ideological ground of a fictional narrative, while at worst case they are content with practices of superficial recognition of diversity or reproduction of dominant categorizations and stereotypes.

With the intention of representation and the power of experience, literary discourse, as a particular cultural association and as a sub-cultural practice, can be the basis for the reproduction or deconstruction of the dominant stereotypes about the "self" and the "other", offering to children, to readers, a cultural experience (Newman-Phillips 1995, Kirsch & Duarte 2020). This is most evident in the realm of Children's Literature, because it is precisely the act of narration that is usually carried out through bipolar categorizations (e.g. good and bad, themselves and different, etc.) (Garcia Ochoa & McDonald 2020). The final outcome of this negotiation, this handling, namely the acceptance or rejection of collectively determined representations, is a consequence of the dialectical relationship between literary text and reader, while it suggests that the ideological functions of the text (Hollindale 1992) must be open to identity, namely to subjectivity and diversity.

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