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Children's literature in a global age: transnational and local identities

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Abstract: This essay explores the concept of transnationalism, defining this term in relation both to the lived experience of transnational subjects, and to transnational texts for children. It argues that rhetorics of globalization have over-emphasized the impact and significance of global cultural and economic flows, although the production of children's books is to some extent shaped by the internationalization of publishing houses and markets. The concept of transnationalism provides a way of thinking about how children's texts address and are informed by diverse, complex influences, sometimes from a variety of cultures and languages. Transnationalism is not a new phenomenon but is visible in colonial texts which are shaped both by the particular, local ideologies of colonial nations, and also by the common concerns and interests of such nations. The essay draws on two contemporary texts to illustrate the workings of transnationalism: the film Howl's Moving Castle, and Shaun Tan's picture book The Arrival. It concludes by considering the concept of transnational literacy as a way of approaching scholarship and teaching in children's literature.

Keywords: *culture, ethnicity, children's publishing, postcolonialism, politics, migration, diaspora*

In 1894 Ethel Turner wrote her novel *Seven little Australians*, a pivotal Australian work which promoted a vision of an Australian childhood. The novel focuses on a central protagonist, Judy, a wilful and determined girl who resists the authority of her father and seeks freedom and agency rather than undergoing the socialization expected of a young lady who might eventually become a suitable wife and mother. Similar figures occur in other colonial children's literatures, including the Canadian novel *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), by L.M. Montgomery, and Esther Glen's *Six little New Zealanders* (1917).

These Australian, Canadian and New Zealand novels from the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth are, I argue, transnational texts, promoting a shared vision of femininity in colonial settings. While terms such as “multicultural”, “transnational”, “global” and “diasporic” have been coined over the last few decades and are used across academic disciplines, many of the experiences, processes and tensions encapsulated in these words are not new. What *is* different in the modern world is the reach of mass media, the rapid accessibility of texts, images and products beyond their places of production, and the increased mobility of modern populations. Despite these contrasts, our ancestors travelled the seas, formed relationships with people from other places and developed identities based on their negotiations between and across cultures. In doing so they engaged in transcultural experiences just as surely as we do, so that contemporary cultures and texts do not have a monopoly in regard to the production of complex forms of personal and communal identity.

The three colonial texts which I have identified have in common girl protagonists – Judy, Anne, Ngaire – who struggle with the constraints placed on them. They live in colonial cultures which have been heavily influenced by Britishness, and their resistance is represented in terms of a departure from the practices and values of the Old World. The three protagonists are strikingly alike physically: all are described as hyperactive and thin, with uncontrollable hair (in Anne’s case, moreover, red hair, which is her particular trial). These texts gesture toward the New Women who struggled for women’s rights in the early twentieth century, gaining the right to vote and to stand for election.

The colonial cultures of Australia, New Zealand and Canada were much more attuned to each other than to the imperial centre. The three texts thus share a transnational consciousness that embodies a tension between dual identification as British and colonial. Graham Huggan has written that “the ‘postcoloniality’ of national literatures such as Australia’s is always effectively *transnational*, either derived from an apprehension of internal fracture..., or from a multiplied awareness of the nation’s various engagements with other nations, and with the wider world” (Huggan 2007, viii). While they share a cluster of views and values with other colonial societies, these novels are also local and particular in their treatment of identity and place. *Seven little Australians* is set in the outer suburbs of Sydney, on a sprawling property which evokes what Australians refer to as “the bush”, the remote outback which defined national identity in the 1890s when the novel was written (despite the fact that

most Australians have always occupied urban settings). Montgomery's Canadian setting is a small rural community on Prince Edward Island, depicting the archetypal Canadian girl as a country-dweller in line with Canadian mythologies of strong, resilient people living close to the natural world. The New Zealand setting in *Six little New Zealanders* (Glen's answer to *Seven little Australians*) is that of a South Island sheep station, a location which accords with New Zealand mythologies of settlers carving out a living in harsh, beautiful country. The three books are thus strikingly alike in their visions of colonial identities, differentiating themselves from the urbanized and industrialized metropolitan centre of Britain, while claiming powerful associations with the landscapes of the New World.

Seven little Australians most explicitly articulates the differences between British and colonial childhoods. This is how Ethel Turner describes her seven little Australians at the beginning of the novel:

If you imagine you are going to read of model children, with perhaps a naughtily inclined one to point a moral, you had better lay down the book immediately Not one of the seven is really good, for the excellent reason that Australian children never are. (Turner 1894, 11)

In this half-playful, half-serious account of Australian childhood Turner points to a series of comparisons between Britain and the colonies. These contrasts are present also, though in less explicit forms, in *Anne of Green Gables* and *Six little New Zealanders*. It is thus the case that early transnational texts portray New World childhoods in strikingly similar ways, which are distinguished in these texts from British childhoods. The comparisons the texts make between British and transnational childhoods can be summarized as follows:

| British childhood | Transnational (colonial) childhood |
|-------------------------------|---|
| "Model" children are the norm | "Model" children unusual |
| Naughtiness an exception | Naughtiness normal |
| Regimented and controlled | Relatively free from constraints |
| Children respect authority | Children resist authority |

Of course, these comparisons are deeply ideological and pertain to a stage in the development of the national identities of Australia,

Canada and New Zealand where nationhood was defined in relation to its difference from the metropolitan centre. They are fed by national mythologies which produce social and cultural cohesion. The three texts are thus both local and transnational; both grounded in places, histories and cultures, and also expressive of the broader connections between and among national literatures.

The term “transnational” refers to duality in the lives of individuals and groups and to textual manifestations of this duality. Transnational identities are formed when individuals and groups negotiate between and across cultures and languages. My own experience is symptomatic of such negotiations. I grew up in New Zealand, moving to Australia in order to take up doctoral studies. As a child I read New Zealand, Australian, Canadian and British children’s literature, feeling myself to have more in common with Australian and Canadian characters than with protagonists from British texts. When I moved to Australia I found that sharing a common language with Australians meant, on one hand, that I could interpret Australian practices and language. On the other hand, my gradual acquisition of an Australian accent and vocabulary meant that I was rarely recognized as a non-Australian and that my difference was invisible. Now that I have lived in Australia for as long as I lived in New Zealand I feel myself to be somewhere in between. When I hear Australians joke about New Zealanders (a common source of entertainment for Australians) I feel defensive. When I return to New Zealand I realize that my imaginings of my birth country are out of date, that it has changed in ways which seem sudden to me because I have not been part of the gradual change one experiences while living in a country.

Geography is a crucial determinant of how transnationalism operates. Both New Zealand and Australia are island nations, New Zealand far smaller than Australia. Never in their histories has one country invaded the other. The two countries have a testy, joking relationship; they watch each other closely, like neighbours who are not quite friends. They comprehend each other because of what they have in common; they are often taken by surprise when they apprehend their differences from each other. My experience of having a foot in two national cultures is very common across nation states; but it is also qualitatively different from varieties of transnationalism such as those formed in the Nordic region, where boundaries between nations have historically shifted during periods of colonization and conflict. Another feature which distinguishes Nordic from Antipodean transnationalism is the admirably multilingual

nature of the Nordic region, where in addition to their official language many people speak one or more other languages. In comparison, only 80% of Australians speak one or more language other than English. Multilingualism is at once a complication and a great advantage, since to learn languages is to learn cultures, modes of thought and world views.

Transnational textuality discloses the doubleness of transnational identities and lived experience. The colonial texts which I discussed earlier comprise one instance of such doubleness; the most extreme forms of transnationalism appear in cinematic production and consumption. In their discussion of what they term "minor literature", Felix Deleuze and Gilles Guattari pose the question: "How many people live today in a language that is not their own?" (1986, 19). They argue that the work of Franz Kafka belongs to the category of minor literature, because Kafka wrote in German as a member of the Jewish community of Prague. Minor literature, they say, "doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 16). The concept of transnationalism is somewhat similar to Deleuze and Guattari's treatment of minor literature but includes the experience and textuality of those who write in "minor languages". Such writers may, for instance, work within a minor language while embodying in their work transnational negotiations with other languages and cultures.

Just as transnationalism is not new, so globalization is not a new phenomenon. Although theories of globalization have become prominent only since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, globalizing impulses are evident from ancient times, since powerful civilizations have always sought to impose their cultural and economic practices on others. Thus, the reach of the Roman Empire across Europe and the Mediterranean from the first to the fifth centuries left behind long-term influences on language, religion, architecture, philosophy, law, and the government of nations around the world. The age of European imperialism can also be seen as a form of globalization which sought to transplant European cultures, values and practices through colonial expansion.

In the words of the social scientist Anthony Moran, globalization can be thought of as "the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life" (Moran 2005, 7). Huggan points out that globalization works through "four linked processes: deregulation, diversification, individualisation and 'informationisation'" (Huggan 2009, 2). These

processes are not new, but build on the reorganization of economies, cultures and politics which has occurred since the nineteenth century. Moran insists, however, that the effects of globalization are not as universal or homogenizing as they are often claimed to be; rather, “the feeling or sense of being part of a global reality [...] is experienced differently in different places” (Moran 2005, 17).

This sceptical view of globalization has gained traction since the global financial crisis. The economist Michael Veseth, for instance, points out that this crisis came about largely because financial organizations such as banks and national economies placed too much faith in global capital flows, ignoring the fact that higher returns come with higher risk and that sensible controls should be imposed to reduce risk. Like Moran, Veseth believes that the power of globalization has been greatly exaggerated in economics as well as in politics and culture, and he uses the term “globaloney” to describe his critique of the stories that have been told about globalization. Examples of globaloney, he says, are claims that global capitalism has triumphed, that we now live in a borderless world, and that in the new post-national order the modern nation-state is irrelevant. All of these claims are greatly exaggerated and do not represent the experience of people in the modern world in any uniform way. For instance, it is clear that in many parts of the world the power of the nation state is even stronger than previously. As I will show in the next section of this essay, children’s literature is subject to the effects of globalization. However, it is not the case that these effects spell the end of local or national literatures; and I argue that we need more nuanced ways of investigating the ways in which children’s texts manifest transnational interests and features.

Children’s literature and globalization

The effects of deregulation, diversification, individualization and “informationization” identified by Huggan can readily be mapped onto recent and contemporary trends in the production of children’s texts, which is inescapably implicated in the capitalist enterprise and is subject to the internationalization of trade and markets, expressed in the global reach of corporations and the development of multinational publishing companies. This global reach imprints itself spatially (as in the spread of the Harry Potter books throughout the world) and often seems to triumph over the local, as global products take market share from locally-produced goods. Thus, the marketing strategies deployed to sell, for example, the Harry Potter books in

many languages and locations are apt to crowd out children's books produced locally. This is especially the case in nations where publishing for children is a relatively new industry, such as Singapore, where imported books flood the market (Miyake, 2006, 11), and Indonesia, where publishing for children is dominated by translations of Western books such as the works of Enid Blyton (Miyake, 2006, 11). In India, books in English were central to processes of colonization and the dominance of English is maintained in the fact that a high proportion (fifty percent) of all Indian children's books are published in English, although only seven percent of child readers speak English. In comparison, relatively few books are published in Indian languages (Khorana, 2006, 282-5).

Book publishing has responded to the "new" realities of globalization by becoming an information industry, with business organized not so much around the manufacture of goods, but rather around the generation of rights for sale. Many publishing companies now cash in on the ambitions of parents for their children in a global world, producing informational materials in the form of book products and computer packages. This tendency is particularly evident in countries which do not have a long history of children's literature production. For instance, in large children's literature bookshops in China, Japan, Singapore or Taiwan more than half the floor-space is devoted to products intended for parents who want their children to improve their spelling, mathematics, geography or general knowledge. These products cater to high-density populations where places in universities and other institutions are highly competitive, so that parents want the best possible opportunities for their children.

Processes of individualization are evident in children's publishing through the emphasis (or over-emphasis) on particular authors or series. Thus, J.K. Rowling has been produced as a global celebrity, and is accorded adulation out of all proportion to the quality of her writing. Celebrities are treated as universal experts in global economies, and their opinions and ideas carry meaning far beyond their professional expertise. Stephenie Meyer, the author of the *Twilight* series, is treated as an authority on all matters pertaining to vampires, Goths and young people. Many authors, including M.T. Anderson, Stephenie Meyer, Jane Yolen and Eric Carle, use websites and online communication in order to produce themselves as celebrities, using many of the narrative strategies which they deploy in fiction.

Yet counter-developments are also visible. In many countries governments and arts organizations continue to provide support for

national literatures and particularly for children's literature. Even new economies increasingly support children's publishing; for instance in Taiwan the federal government now provides funding to local publishing companies to support the publication of children's texts written by Taiwanese authors; and in China, despite its highly-regulated system of publication for the young, novels for young adults are now starting to emerge which deal with the contemporary realities of the lives of young people. The reassertion of the local in publishing for children is also achieved by thousands of independent, often small-scale publishing houses which produce children's texts in local languages. These include indigenous publishers in countries where European languages were imposed on autochthonous populations.

Rhetorics of globalization tend to foreground notions of the global village where the world's children are assumed to enjoy uniform access to products and texts. The global village is, however, differentially available to children and young people depending upon their material circumstances. The "travelling-culture" phenomenon, for instance, may apply to the many children and young people who travel internationally as their parents' occupations take them to different countries. However, many young people from war-torn countries become refugees, seeking safety and shelter in countries far from their homelands. It may be true, then, that modern people are mobile; but such mobility is experienced in a range of ways, depending on the extent to which individuals and groups exercise choice over their mobility, and the political and cultural influences which cause them to travel.

Transnationalism and children's texts

In the light of the exaggerated and excessive claims made for globalization, the term "transnationalism" is potentially more useful for enabling investigation into how children's texts work across and between cultures. The most obviously transnational mode of textuality is the field of film and animation. Films can be transnational "not only in terms of financing, production and the composition of their cast and crew, but also in terms of the reach of their distribution, exhibition and reception" (Song Hwee Lim 2007, 39). This style of transnational film production is exemplified by the animated film *Howl's moving castle*, which is based on a novel by the British author Diana Wynne Jones, and was produced by the Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki, who also developed the screenplay. The film was voiced

by two completely different casts, one for the Japanese version and the other for the English version, which incorporated the voices of British and American actors.

But the transnationalism of the film goes much deeper than the mix of national origins and affiliations represented in its production and reception. Miyazaki's style of representation and his narrative strategies constantly negotiate across cultures. The influence of *manga* and *anime* is particularly obvious in Miyazaki's flexible deployment of perspective, which directs viewers' eyes toward particular figures or scenes. Nevertheless, as Dani Cavallaro notes, Miyazaki's works 'do not follow either uncritically or uniformly the Japanese comic-book aesthetics' (2006, 10) or the representational style of *anime*. His treatment of the protagonist Sophie combines British traditions of illustration with the Japanese emphasis on cuteness (*kawaii*), exemplified by Sophie's large eyes and fragile appearance, so that she appears to occupy a space somewhere between a Japanese schoolgirl and Mary Poppins. At times Miyazaki draws upon American cartoon traditions and early Disney animations to introduce fantasy figures evocative of American pop culture. He depicts the natural world in a style redolent of the long tradition of *ukoyo*, the genre of Japanese landscape painting which presents a 'floating world' remote from the material universe, but these idealized settings are disrupted by his introduction of images of Zeppelin-like aircraft from the First World War, which shower destruction on the pristine countryside and bring fear and horror to its inhabitants. Many commentators have observed that Miyazaki's depictions of the destruction of civilians by aircraft in *Howl's moving castle* reflect his disgust with the Iraq war. However, the impersonal machinery of war is countered by representations of romantic outcomes which point at the same time to the power of love and to the fictionality of romance. Negotiating across Japanese, European and American traditions and cultural references, Miyazaki produces images and narratives whose transnationalism both caters to Japanese viewers and provides an entrée to the film's international markets.

Shaun Tan's *The arrival* (2006) is a remarkable transnational picture book/graphic novel, reflective of Tan's experience as a transnational subject: his father is of Chinese ancestry and migrated to Australia from Malaysia. Tan grew up in Western Australia, one of few Chinese students at his school, and as a child was constantly asked "Where are you from?", a question citizens of many countries ask when they encounter someone who is visibly different. Many of

Tan's picture books and his short stories address questions of displacement and the everyday experiences of migrants.

The arrival is a wordless text set in an unidentified place and time and involving a male protagonist who leaves his wife and child in their impoverished town in order to escape oppression and persecution. He travels to a strange country where everything is unfamiliar to him: language, customs, food, flora and fauna. He is befriended by other people who are themselves immigrants, and they tell him their stories of displacement and arrival, which are framed within the primary narrative. At last his wife and daughter arrive and the family is reunited. The narrative ends with the daughter providing guidance to a young woman, a new arrival who is lost in the strange land which is now home to the man and his family.

The endpapers of the book show what appear to be rows of passport photographs, many of them marked by simulated creases and the signs of damage. The people represented in these pictures come from many races, classes, ethnicities and religions, encoded in clothing, hairstyles, skin colour. They look out of the page seriously, tentatively, even fearfully. None of them smiles; the very formality of the page's arrangement emphasizes the ways in which individuals' narratives, emotions and sufferings are afforded no space in bureaucratic systems where migrants and refugees must pass the tests of documentation and scrutiny before they are admitted into the ranks of citizens.

While the book's stories of migrants and refugees has no verbal text, it is suffused with language and foregrounds the destabilization experienced by those who cannot make sense of the signs and the words of a new country. The opening page introduces this dilemma by presenting the book's title and the author's name in a script which is like and unlike other languages. Readers are thus drawn into the process of seeking, like the protagonist, to make sense of these signs. Around the margins of the page are tattered documents, each of which represents a human seeking to establish identity in the only way available to modern citizens. These stained fragments of paper, so significant to the future of individuals, are all that stand between individuals and the oblivion and despair of refugee camps or prisons. In this way the narrative, even before we meet the protagonist, positions readers to search for meaning in a world whose symbolic systems are strange to them.

The images in *The arrival* draw upon histories of migration and resettlement, often using old images as a source. For instance, for

the shipboard scene in which he shows the protagonist on board the boat which carries him to his unknown destination, he uses an iconic Australian painting, Tom Roberts's "Coming South" as his model; but whereas Roberts shows a scene where middle-class passengers travel from Europe to Australia, Tan has transmuted the image to personalize the processes and strains of migration. The protagonist sits on the deck next to his luggage, and his position in this crowded space discloses his isolation. Most of the other passengers are seated in groups. The space next to the protagonist speaks of the absence of those he loves, his wife and daughter.

Other images used by Tan come from the repository of photographs held at Ellis Island in New York, including a scene of people standing on the deck as they approach the harbour. The gigantic figures which welcome them refer to the Statue of Liberty, viewed by immigrants reaching New York. But Tan uses strategies of defamiliarization to point to the fact that this setting is both like Ellis Island and not Ellis Island. The figure on the left holds a marsupial-like creature, reminiscent of Australian native animals, while the scene evokes other cityscapes and harbours. This montage of images has a powerfully transnational effect in that it reminds readers of what refugees and immigrants have in common – fears, hopes and loss – but also the particularities of their experience, signaled through the diversity of images and references (figure 1).

In another instance of defamiliarization, Tan draws upon comic-like formats which represent bureaucratic processes. The migrant is shown as the object of the scrutiny of those in charge: we see his unease as he stands before the official, who has the power to accept or not accept his documentation. Mysterious signs are affixed to his clothing; the close-up image of his mouth shows the depersonalizing effect of the medical examination, which reduces him to a body part. He is expected to decipher signs which he cannot understand. In many picture book narratives readers understand what a protagonist does not; in this book, readers are positioned to share the protagonist's confusion. In this sequence, Tan points to the problematic aspects of state surveillance and how the nation state treats its others as objects, depersonalizes them and distinguishes them from the officials, who occupy safe and settled positions and who are in command of knowledge and power. Like other nations, Australia has had a sad history of failing to welcome its others, and in this book Tan evokes both recent and historical events (figure 2).

One of the most appealing aspects of *The arrival* is Tan's invention of strange creatures, somewhere between animal and cyborg. One in particular, a small white creature with a wide mouth, flickering

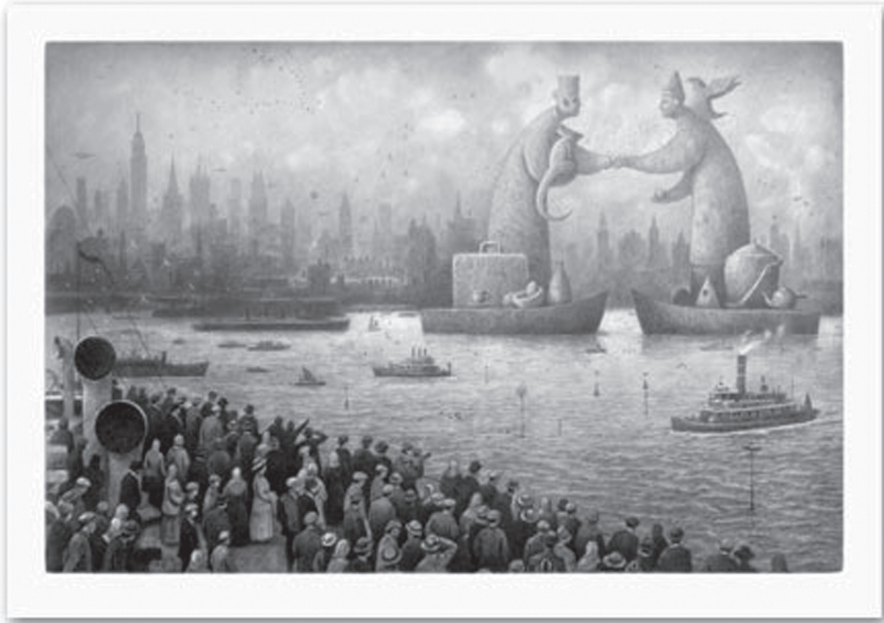


Figure 1 © Shaun Tan *The arrival*. Images reproduced with permission from *The arrival* by Shaun Tan, Lothian Children's Books, an imprint of Hachette Australia, 2006.

tongue and long tail, takes to following the protagonist around and hiding in unexpected places. The protagonist's first response is one of fear and alarm; but readers are positioned as observers of their encounter, suggesting a modulation from fear to uncertainty as the creature looks at him, its raised tail suggesting friendliness but its flickering tongue danger. The development of the relationship between the protagonist and the creature is emblematic of the slow processes whereby the other becomes a trusted friend. By the end of the book, after the protagonist has been reunited with his wife and daughter, the creature is a treasured family member and accompanies the man's daughter when she helps a new migrant to find her way in the strange country. This final image, which places the child at the centre of a negotiation between self and other, shows a solitary migrant beginning the process of settlement. The girl, herself once a stranger, has developed the understanding and empathy to place herself in the place of the woman and the capacity to reach out in help.

Conclusion

Because transnational texts combine and blend elements from different cultures, they resist unitary readings which fail to take these



Figure 2 © Shaun Tan *The arrival*. Images reproduced with permission from *The arrival* by Shaun Tan, Lothian Children's Books, an imprint of Hachette Australia, 2006.

diverse elements into account. Thus, they invite complex styles of reading which acknowledge the positionality of readers. The post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak was the first scholar to call for the cultivation of "transnational literacy", proposing this concept in her essay "Teaching for the times", where she draws upon the liberatory agendas of Paolo Freire and the Subaltern Studies collective, a group of South Asian scholars who foreground the knowledge and perspectives of peoples dispossessed or subjugated by colonialism, social inequality and discrimination. Spivak invites her readers to "re-think our agency" (Spivak 1992, 6) as Western scholars, arguing that we should be ready to unsettle our habitual ways of thinking and reading by taking on the perspectives of others. This is not as

easy as it seems, because we are often too close to our own preconceptions and assumptions to be conscious of how they colour our values and modes of thought.

Applied to *Howl's moving castle*, Spivak's approach requires that viewers should be conscious of the assumptions they bring to this film – that is, their positions as subjects shaped by particular histories. The “Japaneseness” of *Howl's moving castle* can be understood only through careful research into the traditions which have shaped Miyazaki's approach to film-making, but this does not imply that outsiders to Japanese culture can unproblematically understand these traditions and their manifestations in the film. Rather, as Spivak says, readers approaching texts produced outside their cultural contexts should recognize that they “hear a different *kind* of voice” (Spivak 1992, 19). Transnational literacy would alert us to the politics of textuality – who is powerful, who is not. Such consciousness of the intersections of power and knowledge is pertinent in particular when readers approach minority texts, which are commonly produced by people marginal to mainstream cultures. In such cases, the challenge that we “re-think our agency” calls on us to avoid judging or interpreting minority texts in the light of our own cultural assumptions and knowledges. And this posture of respectful acknowledgement of difference relies, in turn, on our willingness to critically scrutinise our own histories of selfhood and scholarship and their influence on how we understand the “other.”

Biographical information: Clare Bradford is Professor of Literary Studies at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. She has published more than fifty essays and book chapters on children's literature. Her books include Reading race: aboriginality in Australian children's literature (2001), which won both the Children's Literature Association Book Award and the International research society for children's literature award; Unsettling narratives: postcolonial readings of children's literature (2007); and New world orders in contemporary children's literature: utopian transformations (2009) (with Mallan, Stephens and McCallum). In 2009 she was awarded the first International Trudeau fellowship. She is President of the International research society for children's literature. Contact: clare.bradford@deakin.edu.au

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