

## **Forging a space for dialogue and negotiation in modern picture books by Melanie Florence**

Susana Amante

Susana Amante holds a degree in Portuguese and English, and a Master's Degree and PhD in English Philology. She is an associate professor at the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu. She has been teaching several course units in the fields of Portuguese and English Studies in Higher Education since 2003. Her research areas of interest are literatures and cultures (especially of English-speaking countries); gender studies; children's literature; didactics of languages; languages and entrepreneurship, and translation studies.

### **Abstract:**

*Canadian children's literature has a relatively short history, which is not surprising because Canadian literature itself is a recent and problematic category, struggling for a definition and identity of its own. The lack of national homogeneity is reflected in both CanLit and its counterpart for children, and rather than being a weakness, the multitude of voices that inhabit the Canadian territory has become its essence and strength. Lately, we have noticed a growing interest and market demand for picture books by Indigenous voices. Melanie Florence is one such voice, and she honours her past by bringing to the fore the inescapable dark weight of collective tragedies such as the residential school system and the disappearance and murder of Aboriginal women and girls, a hidden national crisis. In this article, we aim at getting to know and help readers discover *Missing Nimâmâ and Stolen Words* by this new picture book writer, who is speaking up and voicing First Nations' concerns, bringing back memories, but also forging a space for dialogue and negotiation, a space where text and illustration are combined and provide a harmonious whole. In this space, difference and binarisms do not result in dualism, but in highly synergistic relationships.*

### **1. Introductory framing: Drawing Canadian identity by drawing upon Indigenous voices in picture books**

“In Canada, the publishing of Indigenous authors' picture books has grown over the past decade.” (Stagg Peterson and Robinson, 2020, p. 2)

Canada is a relatively new country whose quest for identity began when it officially became a country in 1867, with the British North America Act (BNA). In fact, Canada has dwelled mostly on its diversity to the point of this ethos of multiculturalism having become reflected in a number of legal documents, namely in the 1982 Constitution, an amendment of

the 1867 Constitution Act, which granted Canada full constitutional independence and incorporated the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, enshrining the protection and rights of all Canadian citizens, no matter their origin.<sup>1</sup> As Kymlicka (2003, p. 375) points out, “Canadians tell each other that accommodating diversity is an important part of Canadian history, and a defining feature of the country.”

If this lack of an ancient common national identity has had its implications in defining nationhood, it has also made it difficult to trace a recognizable Canadian metanarrative. Rather than assuming homogeneity, Canada has felt the need to embrace the fixture of cultural diversity as its metanarrative, imagining the “mosaic” as its distinctive symbol. Canadian literature is a labyrinth with many routes of continually revealing meanings; it is a labyrinth of identities whose walls return many and diversified echoes that are not trapped or lost, because there are multiple entrances, and all the experiences, all the stories, converge in the centrepiece of Canadian culture and literature. According to Nodelman (2008, pp. 295-296), “the Canadian nation is unlike others (...) because it is in the process of being imagined, in dispute and under construction (...). Its style is the ongoing development of a style.” This all becomes even more disputable if, rather than assuming Canada as a new country, erasing Indigeneity in those lands for innumerable generations, we take into consideration Indigenous voices, resilience and experiences.

In such a country, where its formation and the existence of a Canadian literature are questioned, the place of children’s literature is as difficult to determine as that of its mature counterpart, as Egoff (1976, p. 209) claims: “The problems of Canadian children’s literature have been those of its parent literature. The two cannot be separated.” Later, she emphasizes its existence and nature, arguing that “The most important single fact, then, that must be understood about children’s literature is that it *is* literature, another branch of the parent stem” (Egoff, 1981, p. 2) that needs adaptation due to its intended audience.

Whatever the nationality, children and young adults learn about who they are, as opposed to the Other, and figure out a sense of belonging or get to know distant lands and cultures through the narratives they read. When it comes to Canadian children and adults, these concerns and themes become even more prevalent “and are reflected in the literary techniques, plot, character, symbolism, structure, fairy-tale elements, etc. that [Canadian writers] employ,” as John Sorfleet (2003, p. 223) explains. This is really important because we cannot forget that, paired together with an entertaining and aesthetic component, children’s literature is also educational and instructional, with a didactic mission and possibilities. Harde (2016, p. 7) reminds us that:

The power and promise of literature for young people lies in its ability to both instruct and delight its audience by teaching them histories (and her-stories), enabling them to hear voices that are too often silenced, entertaining them, and allowing them to find their way to understanding even the most complex situations.

As the epigraph to this article above indicates, in recent years, there has been a considerable increase in the number of picture books by First Nations, Métis and Inuit authors, mostly because of the growth in Canadian Aboriginal publishing houses, such as Theytus Books Press and Pemmican Publications, both founded in 1980, Fifth House and others, but also general Canadian publishers that began encouraging and promoting Indigenous voices.<sup>2</sup> In the past, as Doris Seale points out in her introduction to *A Broken Flute* (2006), non-Aboriginal authors and illustrators of books for children unconsciously reproduced stereotypes and misconceptions regarding the lives of Indigenous peoples. Stagg Peterson and Robinson (2020, p. 3) also alluded to it, referring to the fact that “... books published about Indigenous peoples have been written and illustrated, as well as formatted and marketed, from a non-Indigenous perspective.”

Therefore, authentic books that accurately and respectfully represent the cultures and experiences of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples have become of utmost value (Amante 2014a, Amante 2014b, Amante 2016). Equally important has been the creation of schools and organizations, such as the En’owkin International School of Writing, an accredited post-secondary centre affiliated with the University of Victoria, but managed and operated exclusively by and for Aboriginal individuals. These were some of the actual agents and real mechanisms that have responded to, retaliated against and dispelled the generalizations, stereotypes and misrepresentations that have entrapped Indigenous peoples in categories that impact negatively on Aboriginal communities themselves, but also on all the other people that only know fabricated stories and do not have the opportunity to actually get acquainted with reality and different experiences from the Indigenous’ own perspectives. In Stagg Peterson and Robinson’s words (2020, p. 1), “Indigenous authors, illustrators, and publishers challenge Eurocentric notions of contemporary and historical Indigenous worldviews, experiences, and values, as well as relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada.”

This is the reason why writers such as Tomson Highway, George Littlechild, Michael Kusugak, William Kent Monkman, C. J. Taylor, Jeannette Armstrong and Melanie Florence, among so many other Indigenous authors that write for children, need to speak up, to empower and inspire Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children alike, celebrating one’s difference and uniqueness, mapping one’s own path in this labyrinth of life, without generating feelings of

exclusion. In Saltman's words (2003, p. 26), "[t]hese retellers worked to preserve their cultural heritage and sustain the oral tradition, reshaping tales in an authentic aboriginal voice, often from elders' memories."

Being European scholars and aware of the vast number of books conveying ethnocentric assumptions and biases, namely in Portugal, we cannot help but attempt to provide a holistic view to identify and promote opportunities for forging a space for dialogue, and we feel strongly compelled to give voice to the award-winning writer Melanie Florence, who, through her *Missing Nimâmâ* (2015) and *Stolen Words* (2017), speaks up and helps her readers develop an appreciation and respect for diversity, as well as love of reading and fondness for the arts and culture.

Therefore, after this section, which provides a background upon which the two picture books by Melanie Florence will be analysed, special attention will be paid to this author of mixed ancestry and the illustrators of her children's books, also focusing on the dialogic verbal and non-verbal semiotic modes that contribute to establishing an engagement between the story being told and the child-reader. Afterwards, we will be guided while walking through the labyrinth of identity and memory in *Missing Nimâmâ* and *Stolen Words*, and we will follow the narrators that will tell us about "a work of fiction" based on "the true story of the hundreds of missing and murdered Indigenous women of Canada" (2015, p. 29) and another inspired by the author's grandfather and by the many victims of residential schools, whose painful experience impacts on the present and on the legacy left for future generations. Finally, the last section offers conclusions and highlights the communicative potential that is fostered by the in-between spaces that emerge between cultures and by the intersemiosis of text and imagery in these two picture books, while giving us wings to fly high, beyond the gates of imagination, escaping the labyrinth of the self to care for the Other.

## **2. Melanie Florence and her picture books' illustrators**

As children we relate to our picture books in a holistic fashion, merging sensations of the eye and of the ear (for first we are read to), which marries the image and the sound of the words.

(Nikolajeva and Scott, 2011, p. 29)

A picture book for children is, above all, a visual experience intended to stimulate the imagination and engage the mind of its viewers and listeners. Although the power of children's literature has often been underestimated as a minor, insignificant genre, that does not even attain

the status of literature, because it is considered paraliterature, infraliterature or subliterature (Soriano 1975), caught in the cycle of canonical exclusion, the fact is that, as Haba-Osca et al. (2018, p. 80) claim, it is nowadays "... accepted as an art object or product of an aesthetic nature but one with commercial and economic dimensions too" that has the potential "to teach children to read competently, to enjoy reading, and to delve into culture", sparking the interest of many researchers from multidisciplinary fields.

Within children's literature, picture books, in particular, provide young readers with an opportunity to explore meanings that are not explicitly conveyed in the verbal text but are rather constructed by the reader who imagines hidden details concealed beyond the words. On this matter, Peter Hunt (2005, p. 8) argues: "Of course, the experience of a book starts before – and goes beyond – the words or the pictures on the page."

The interplay between text and illustration opens up a space for readers to fill in; it creates space in the narrative for them to negotiate their own interpretation of what is communicated verbally and non-verbally. There are layers of meaning that may be discerned from careful examination of places, specific objects and the way they relate to each other, characters and their representation; there are nuances waiting for the readers' eyes to notice; there are paths in the labyrinth to follow, adventures to be pursued, worlds to be revealed, as Oittinen (2008, p. 13) argues:

... illustrations (...) show the time and place where the story is situated. They also show the looks and the relations of the characters in the story. As a whole, illustrations give all kinds of hints to the reader. Sometimes the text in words does not give this kind of information, and yet it can be found in the pictures...

Thus, we may say that the verbal and non-verbal semiotic modes are interwoven and mutually interdependent. Picture books are sometimes called "twice-told tales", as suggested by Vandergrift, quoted by Agosto (1999, p. 267), precisely because of the two mediums telling the story: the written text and the illustrations.

Broadly speaking, all the paratextual elements are instrumental in facilitating the reader's identification with the characters, the narrator of the story or the emotions they evoke and this, in turn, leads to greater enjoyment and affective impact. This is what characterizes contemporary picture books:

Today's picturebook is defined by its particular use of sequential imagery, usually in tandem with a small number of words, to convey meaning. In contrast to the illustrated book, where pictures enhance, decorate, and

amplify, in the picturebook the visual text will often carry much of the narrative responsibility. In most cases, the meaning emerges through the interplay of word and image, neither of which would make sense when experienced independently of the other. (Salisbury and Styles, 2012, p. 7)

Illustrators are artists that work hand in hand with an author's writing. They are visual storytellers that add a little magic to the ideas skilfully crafted by a wordsmith, but does this mean that there is no space for the illustrator's own personal aesthetic and interpretation of the written words if, as mentioned, that is allowed to the reader, as previously mentioned? Should illustrators be allowed to take artistic liberties with the story, or should they stick to the written text? On this matter, Jaczminski (2009, p. 7) believes that "... illustrators have to decide if, how far, and in which way they should follow or deny their textual referent. While some reproduce the text faithfully, others tend to paraphrase it freely or to dismiss it completely." When attempting to be as faithful to the text as possible, mirroring the atmosphere of a given time, place, situation, or the nature, looks or emotions of a character, it is impossible not to infuse at least a little of the illustrator's worldviews and experiences into the artwork. In Allen's words (1996, p. 152) "the illustrations also reflect the ideologies, experience and background of the illustrators. Images tell more about the feelings and ideas of the artist or illustrator than about the lives or perspectives of the subject they represent."

Although the assertion above might not be completely true, the main point here put forward is that illustrators are readers that interpret and translate the written language into their own personal visual language. As Amante et al. (2019) claim, illustrators are, in a way, translators, because they are given a source text that they translate into pictures.

The two picture books by Melanie Florence that will be examined below are brilliantly translated into pages of carefully balanced ingredients that deliver flavour to the stories. Melanie Florence is an acclaimed Canadian writer of Cree and Scottish heritage, who, according to Brenna, Dionne and Tavares (2021, p. 170), is described as "... a new picture book writer who is making waves across the industry wherever she turns." Despite being the recipient of numerous awards for her picture books, as listed in the following section, she also writes novels for young adults (e.g., *Rez Runaway*, 2016a, and *Just Lucky*, 2019), focusing on the complex realities faced by the Indigenous youngsters of today, and she is the author of an educational resource entitled *Righting Canada's Wrongs* (2016b), which documents "the history of residential schools (...) for students in virtually any grade within the school system".<sup>3</sup>

Melanie Florence is committed to teaching the truth about past and present events in First Nations communities to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers. Brenna, Dionne and

Tavares explain (2021, p. 170) that “[a]s a child, she was very close with her grandfather, a relationship that would later inspire her to write about Indigenous people.” The dramatic history of residential schools is one of the topics that she addressed differently depending on her audiences. *Stolen Words* (2017) is directed at children, and the painful memories of the residential school system are voiced by a victim in his interaction with his granddaughter, a seven-year-old Indigenous girl, as well as tackled by an omniscient, heterodiegetic narrator. The illustrations by Gabrielle Grimmard contribute to the whole atmosphere of loss and remembrance. Grimmard’s use of watercolours, gouache and oil, combined with a touch of wooden pencil for the details, infuses the pages with sorrow, but also hope and, ultimately, healing. This illustrator, who studied fine arts and then art education, compares her works with poetry. Her drawings are full of movement, just like a poem with rhythm, and she claims she “love[s] being able to translate through drawing the world in which [she] want[s] to live,”<sup>4</sup> which is in line with the reasoning above that illustrators are translators. Grimmard has illustrated a great number of books since the birth of her first son in 2001, and she has been nominated for several awards.

In Florence’s *Missing Nimâmâ* (2015), the reader notices the author’s concern now with another tragic issue, still unresolved: this book is a tribute to all the Indigenous women of Canada that are victims of violence and crime to the point of going missing or being murdered. It addresses this sensitive and critical subject, emphasizing the deep ties between a Cree child and – this time not a grandfather – her grandmother, and it is an invitation to the communities to be alert, as well as a cry for help. The writer’s bonds with her family and roots are easy to recognize, as observed by Brenna, Dionne and Tavares (2021, p. 171): “With such a strong connection to her grandfather, it’s understandable that both these picture books deal with strong intergenerational themes.”

The narrative is complemented beautifully with François Thisdale’s illustrations, perfectly capturing the blending of highly realistic digital imagery and drawings, and paintings documenting the girl’s transition into adulthood. In his own words, “My style is to combine real images with my imagination, to come up with my concepts...” (Thisdale qtd. by Dunn, n.d, p. 84). To mark his style, in this picture book, he makes use of Cree syllabics within the illustrations, which are placed in a subtle, almost imperceptible, way on the coloured page, even if the narrator is there to guide the readers from the beginning, as we will explain below. Chaput (2018/19, p. 49) also directs our view and draws our attention to “... Thisdale’s dream-like illustrations where an attentive reader can discover various words written in Cree syllabics...”

François Thisdale lives in Quebec, Canada, but he has illustrated a large number of books in many different countries since 1987, the year when he received a fine arts degree. He has an impressive collection of distinctions and prizes to his credit. *Missing Nimâmâ* is one such accolade in his long list of outstanding achievements and, in this next section, we will take a closer look at it.

### 3. *Missing Nimâmâ* (2015)

Right from the beginning, in what we might term a glossary, we are carefully guided by the gentle voice of the narrator that invites us to “... look closely at the artwork and watch for [the] words in the Cree language” (Florence, 2015, p. 1).<sup>5</sup> The six Cree terms presented together with a pronunciation guide and translated into English are then embedded in the artwork, not to exclude the readers, but to make them all feel included: the new generations that have proudly been learning Cree in an attempt to revitalize and restore their ancestral language and identity; the generations that lost their ability to speak or write their native tongue because they had been forced to learn and use the settler language while attending residential schools, and all the other First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and non-Indigenous peoples whose language is not Cree. But this picture book is inclusive not just because of its readership. It is also a children’s book that establishes a bridge between past and future, one that is well articulated in the relationship between young and old generations and that helps us understand and cope with our mortality, a common human experience that connects diverse people, no matter their different nationalities, languages, backgrounds, ages, genders, religions, political views, and social conditions.

In fact, the topics of death, loss, grief, and mourning are difficult to address, but, as Brenna, Dionne and Tavares (2021, p. 171) remind us, “... Melanie does not pursue easy, facile subject matter. (...) [S]he does believe that young people should not be sheltered from difficult stories if they are presented properly.” That is exactly what *Missing Nimâmâ* does, because it provides the young reader with a cathartic process that is therapeutic and instructive, teaching them, just like some other children’s books, that comfort is possible even in times of suffering and uncertainty (McGillis 1996). Florence explains it clearly when she says ““You have to be sensitive to the age of the readers but not talk down to them. Stories about difficult subjects are important because it shows kids that they’re not alone in their experience. That whatever they’re feeling is okay”” (Florence qtd. by Brenna, Dionne and Tavares, 2021, p. 171).

*Missing Nimâmâ* is about Kateri’s growth into adulthood, tracing her individual path while her missing mother, Aiyana Cardinal, *in absentia* witnesses her daughter turn “into a

beautiful, kind, wonderful woman” (p. 26). We hear the voice of these two characters as the narrative evolves and this polyphony is consistent with the page that closes the book, entitled “Many Voices”. As an afterword, we are told that, despite the fictionality of the characters, they vividly bring to life the true story of “... too many families like theirs, waiting for a mother, sister, daughter, or aunt who will never come home” (p. 29). The voices of many others join this appeal calling for urgent support to meet aboriginal women’s needs, instead of simply “ignoring the sociological phenomenon of missing and murdered Indigenous women” (ibidem) and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau himself announced the launch of a national inquiry in 2015<sup>6</sup> and recently, in June 2021, emphasized “the implementation of the National Action Plan in response to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls’ Calls for Justice.”<sup>7</sup>

In a poignant opening scene, we get to know Kateri, a young child in braids, dreaming about happy times when her mother was close to her, and her grandmother sparked her imagination with “trickster stories around the fire” (p. 2), to learn that, upon her awakening, she will have to accept the grim reality of loss: “Leaning against a mother, her *nimâmâ* that she will lose all over again. When she wakes” (ibidem). This universal subject matter of death that everyone can relate to is approached from the Cree culture’s specific context, where “[e]ating bannock” is evocative of authentic, traditional, and safe times. The tone is also noticeably unique in its use of Cree words that permeate the text, as mentioned earlier, and in the illustrations by François Thisdale, who captures the mood of the story and explores visual imagery and symbols “... gorgeously incorporate[ing] multimedia layerings to provide stunning complex scenes and spreads” (Brenna, Dionne and Tavares, 2021, p. 170).

Just as illustration and text rely on each other, so do the alternating voices of mother and child narrate this compelling and realistic story, giving more depth for the reader who connects with the characters’ pain. The mother’s point of view appears in an italicized font to show that she does not take an active, participant stance in this story. She is just an observer that accompanies and celebrates her daughter’s milestones, ensuring her wellbeing from a distance. Kateri never gives up her hope of one day finding her lost *nimâmâ*, her mother who had been reluctantly taken from “home. Taken from (...) family. Taken from [her] daughter” (p. 4), but she can count on her grandmother’s support, and she is comforted by her faith in a future that inspires her to accomplish her tasks and goals. In her own words, “I can’t wait for tomorrow to come” (p. 5).

Future and past are bound in present times when Kateri realizes that she is the reflection of her mother: she looks like her and she loves to cook, speaks Cree, listens to trickster stories

and dances just like her (p. 10). The physical and spiritual world are also interconnected, as is darkness and light. The gloomy, shadowy night, bringing blurry silhouettes and terrifying both the girl and her mother, is brightened by nôhkom's voice: "Shhhh, kamâmakos. I'm, here." (p. 12).

Kamâmakos, a term of endearment used to refer to Kateri, meaning butterfly, is a repeated image throughout the story, representing the connection between these two worlds and two generations. It is a symbol of the immortal soul and of metamorphosis, as Cooper (2009, pp. 27-28) defines this entry in *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*: "The soul; immortality. As changing from the mundane caterpillar, through the state of dissolution, to the celestial winged creature, it is rebirth, resurrection." Thus, it is not surprising to feel nimâmâ's lingering presence (p. 13), while Kateri is transformed from a caterpillar to a "... beautiful (...) breathtaking young woman" (p. 20) about to get married and, later, to give birth, closing the circle.

The circle is indeed closed on page 26, where we are given a glimpse of the whole story, one that starts with "Once upon a time..." and ends with the unsettling realization that her mother was gone, even if Kateri, constantly "hoping against hope", had nevertheless been aware of it for some time. As we hear Kateri's mother whispering that "It's not the ending we dreamed of" (p. 27), we learn that she is totally at peace with the situation, as she completely accepted that "... it will be happy enough..." (p. 28).

This book was the winner of the TD Canadian Children's Literature Award in 2016, the 2017 Forest of Reading Golden Oak Award and a finalist for the 2017 First Nation Communities READ Award, as we read on the official website of the author.<sup>8</sup>

#### **4. *Stolen Words* (2017)**

Melanie Florence's second picture book, *Stolen Words*, shares with *Missing Nimâmâ* the fact that it walks through the labyrinth of memory, telling the story of an unnamed girl, aged seven (p. 4), who bonds with her grandfather as she helps him confront the regrets brought about by the assimilative practices (Robbins 2017) of residential schools. In turn, he shares his feelings and experiences, mostly sad ones: experiences of loss, as he expresses that he, together with other children, "... lost [their] words a long time ago" (p. 6) and, just like Aiyana Cardinal, they were taken "[a]way from home. (...) Away from [their] mothers who cried for [them]" (p. 7), but, this time, by missionaries and nuns, "dressed in black" (Ibidem), who stole the First Nations' languages, cultures and identity from them. The goal was to "kill the Indian in the child," as Landertinger (2021, p. 138) reminds us, or in her words, "[i]ts prime objective was

breaking the ties between Indigenous children and their parents, families, communities, cultures, and their land” (2021, p. 139). For that purpose, they were subjected to extreme deprivation and numerous punishments, “... until [Indigenous children] sounded like them” (p. 9).

Cultural genocide is well depicted, by Gabrielle Grimard, in black and grey colours, against a whitish background, where a black bird that resembles a raven is formed out of the children’s words that are forced to fly into a cage and remain there, locked (pp. 9-10). Grimard contrasts the vivid colours and close-ups of the present day and the traumatic recollection and reminiscences of a dark past, not only at the residential school, but earlier when women wave goodbye to the departing children (p. 7).

The girl, representing the new generation, helps her grandfather relearn his language and, with it, regain his identity and self-respect. She tries hard to heal him by reconnecting this survivor with his past and culture, and “the dream catcher that she had made for her room” (p. 13), and that is the leitmotif of this quest at the beginning when she asks her nimosôm for the translation of the word ‘grandfather’ into Cree, is now handed to him, as an offering. Her grandfather needs it, more than her, to accomplish its mission of “catch[ing] the bad dreams in the webbing and only allow the good dreams to funnel through the central gap” (Shawanda, 2021, p. 41). He needs it to feel protected against bad memories that pop up in his mind leaving his face weathered, but he also cherishes the book that his granddaughter takes from the school’s library and whose cover reveals the title: “Introduction to Cree” (p. 16). As he opens the book and turns its pages, the Cree words release the black birds that had been caged and that now form a perfect circle, in the shape of the dream catcher his nôsisim had given him.

The symbolism of the dream catcher, of the ravens that represent the wisdom and metamorphosis of a trickster-like figure, and the use of a “restrictive set of Cree words” (Schillo and Turin, 2019, p. 166), especially at the end of the narrative, restores intergenerational bonds and, just like the book discussed above, calls for a liminal space of negotiation, conceived by Bhabha, between opposing points of view.

*Stolen Words* was an award-winning and acclaimed picture book, having won the Ruth and Sylvia Schwartz Children’s Book Award, being shortlisted for the Marilyn Baillie Picture Book Award, and given a starred review by *Kirkus*.<sup>9</sup>

## **5. Escaping the labyrinth and flying on the wings of imagination, looking towards the future**

Throughout this study, we have been using a figurative labyrinth to discuss the disputable point that Canada is a new country and to allow for other pathways that weave in a circle around a central point: the importance of the journey provided by Melanie Florence, which is the whole experience of reading and forging a space for dialogue, negotiation and intercomprehension. A labyrinth is “[a] highly complex symbol; (...) an open path...” that may be “multicursal (...) confusing and puzzling (...), requiring knowledge of the key or solution to the problem. The symbolism of the labyrinth is variously suggested as the return to the Centre; Paradise regained; attaining realization after ordeals, trials and testing...” (Cooper, 2009, p. 92). If the answer to the question “What is Canadian literature?” is, as mentioned, a complex and nuanced one that implies preoccupation with identity, on the one hand, it is also the multi-layered dynamics that converges to the core but retaining the flavour of plurality. After all, as Nozedar (2008, p. 129) puts it, “[t]he most significant symbolism of the labyrinth is that of the journey of the soul to its center and then back toward the outside once more (...). The center (...) represents the womb, and to reach (...) [it] is initiation and enlightenment.” Canadian literature is the centre, it is what unites the nation, it is the singular expression in the plurality of voices that can be heard in this mosaic.

Canadian literature for children and young adults shares the same concerns as its parent literature, which means that it also celebrates diversity, while promoting a sense of belonging and unity.

The two picture books analysed in this article are one of the open paths in the labyrinth of imagination, where one gains wings and flies in the memories of our – if the reader is Aboriginal-Canadian – or someone else’s ancestors that are close to us or live on the other side of the world. The beauty of Canadian books for children and young adults by First Nations, Métis and Inuit authors resides in deep connections that are a combination of apparently irreconcilable attributes, elements or worldviews. The same could be said of the illustrations, for instance Thisdale’s use of mixed media, blending hand-drawn and digital elements.

The binary categorization of structures governing the world and that sets “us” apart from “them”, i.e., identity vs alterity, centre vs periphery, good vs evil, adults vs children, spirituality vs materialism, literature vs orature, verbal vs non-verbal communication, text vs picture, black vs white, among so many other boundaries that seem impossible to subvert or transgress, gives way to a dialogical relationship in the two books discussed. The “either/or” dualism is set aside to allow for the “both/and” logic and integrate an “Other” set of options, which affirm life and its relationships.

Looking towards the future implies this discourse on Third Space, a space for dialogue, negotiation, encounters with cultural diversity, accompanied by...

... the ‘assimilation of contraries’ and creating that occult instability which presages powerful cultural changes. (...) it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the ‘people’. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves. (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 38-39)

As discussed earlier in this study, the labyrinth walker, whether a child or an adult reader, whether of Indigenous or non-Indigenous descent, is invited to discover contemporary Canadian picture books through *Missing Nimâmâ* and *Stolen Words*. At the same time, and in particular, this reader is allowed to de-centre the colonial nation state and, by getting to know these books, re-centre Indigenous voices, their resilience and experiences. This is accomplished, for instance, when the narrative of Canada as a new country is questioned and the reader learns that, for innumerable generations, there has been an attempt to erase Indigeneity in those lands: “They took our words and locked them away, punished us until we forgot them, until we sounded like” (pp. 9-10) the newcomers. The many paths of the labyrinth can also be found in the dual communicative modes of text and image in the picture book format, which are combined to provide a harmonious whole. These modern picture books by Melanie Florence are a great example of literature that can be read across the world, because the differences and binarisms do not result in dualism, but in highly synergistic relationships.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For further information, cf. <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cp-pm/just/06.html>

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <https://guides.library.ubc.ca/indigenouspublishers/publishers> for further information about Indigenous publishers, distributors and news media.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. <https://etfovoice.ca/feature/resources-thinking-about-truth-and-reconciliation>

<sup>4</sup> <sup>1</sup> <http://gabriellegrimard.com/index.php/en/bio-biblio>

<sup>5</sup> *Missing Nimâmâ* is not paginated, but the page number is added for easier reference, considering the glossary as its first page. All further references to this book will appear in the body of the text with nothing but the page number. The same will be applied to *Stolen Words* in its due section.

<sup>6</sup> For further information, cf. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/08/canada-40m-inquiry-violence-indigenous-women-justin-trudeau>

<sup>7</sup> To read the Statement by the Prime Minister on National Indigenous History Month, cf.

<https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/statements/2021/06/01/statement-prime-minister-national-indigenous-history-month>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.melanieflorence.com/my-story>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.melanieflorence.com/my-story>

#### Works cited

Agosto, D. 1999. “One and Inseparable: Interdependent Storytelling in Picture Books.” In: *Children’s Literature in Education*, 30(4), pp. 267-281.

- Allen, A. 1996. "‘I don’t want to read this:’ Students’ Responses to Illustrations of Black Characters in Children’s Picture Books." In: Brathwaite, K. and C. James (eds.). *Educating African Canadians*. Toronto, ON: James Lorimer & Company Ltd. Publishers, pp. 147-166.
- Amante, S. 2014a. "‘Much of what we learn about Indians, we learn as children’: Counter-images to biased and distorted perceptions of First Nations in Native Canadian Juvenile Literature." In: Sepsi, E., J. Nagy, M. Vassányi, J. Kenyeres and contributors (eds.). *Indigenous Perspectives of North America: A Collection of Studies*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 132-142.
- Amante, S. 2014b. "Why are you afraid of Indians? Issues of representation and misrepresentation in Portuguese children’s literature." In: *Humanities and Social Sciences Review* (HSSR) 03, 02, pp. 327-335.
- Amante, S. 2016. *Embracing one’s difference through selected Native CanLit for Children*. Saarbrücken: Omniscryptum/LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Amante, S., Delplancq, V., Lopes, A. and Relvas, S. 2019. "Tradução e Re-IMAG[EM]Inação como *Locus* e Foco Central em *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*". In: *Revista de Estudos Anglo-Portugueses/Journal of Anglo-Portuguese Studies*, 28, pp. 191- 227.
- Bhabha, H. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Brenna, B., Dionne, R. and Tavares, T. 2021. *Contemporary Canadian Picture Books: A Critical Review for Educators, Librarians, Families, Researchers & Writers*. Leiden: Brill.
- Chaput, L. 2018/19. "Kids don’t have it in them to turn away: A Story that Needs to be Told." In: Prairie Books NOW | fall/winter 2018/19, pp. 48-49. Available at <https://prairiebooksnow.ca/pdf/PBN-73.pdf>.
- Dunn, B., n.d. "Masterworks: François Thisdale". In: *Applied Arts Magazine*, pp. 82-85. Available at [https://www.thisdale.com/ap\\_arts\\_ft.pdf](https://www.thisdale.com/ap_arts_ft.pdf).
- Cooper, J. C. 2009. *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*. London, U.K.: Thames & Hudson.
- Egoff, S. 1976. "Children’s Literature." In: Klinck, C.F. et al. (eds.). *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, Vol. 3, 2nd ed. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, pp. 204-11.
- Egoff, S. 1981. *Thursday’s Child: Trends and Patterns in Contemporary Children’s Literature*. Chicago: American Library Association.
- Florence, M. 2015. *Missing Nimâmâ* (illust. François Thisdale). Richmond Hill, ON: Clockwise Press.
- Florence, M. 2016a. *Rez Runaway* (SideStreets). Toronto, ON: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers.
- Florence, M. 2016b. *Righting Canada’s Wrongs: Residential Schools, The Devastating Impact on Canada’s Indigenous Peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Findings and Calls for Action*. Toronto, ON: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers.
- Florence, M. 2017. *Stolen Words* (illust. Gabrielle Grimard). Toronto, ON: Second Story Press.
- Florence, M. 2019. *Just Lucky*. Toronto, ON: Second Story Press.
- Haba-Osca, J., Ambròs, A. and Osca-Lluch, J. 2018. "Scientific production in children’s literature through the Web of Science." In: *Language Teaching and Educational Research*, 1(1), pp. 78-93.
- Harde, R. 2016. "Putting First Nations Texts at the Center." In: *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 54(1), pp. 4-9.
- Hunt, P. 2005. "Introduction: the expanding world of Children’s Literature Studies." In: Hunt, P. (ed.). *Understanding Children’s Literature*, 2nd ed. London, U.K.: Routledge, pp. 1-14.

- Jaczminski, D. 2009. "Liberating the Strange Fish." In: Meyer, M. (ed.). *Word & Image in Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, pp. 1-19.
- Kymlicka, W. 2003. "Being Canadian." In: *Government and Opposition*, 38(3), pp. 357–385.
- Landertinger, L. 2021. "Settler Colonialism and the Canadian Child Welfare System." In: Schields, C. and D. Herzog (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism*. Oxon & New York: Routledge, pp. 136-144.
- McGillis, R. 1996. *The Nimble Reader: Literary Theory and Children's Literature*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Nodelman, P. 2008. *The hidden adult: defining children's literature*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Nozedar, A. 2008. *The Element Encyclopedia of Secret Signs and Symbols: the Ultimate A-Z Guide from Alchemy to the Zodiac*. London, U.K.: Harper Element.
- Nikolajeva, M. and Scott, C. 2011. *How Picturebooks Work*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Oittinen, R. 2008, "Audiences and Influences: Multisensory Translations of Picturebooks." In: Davies, M.G. and R. Oittinen (eds.). *Whose Story? Translating the Verbal and the Visual in Literature for Young Readers*. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 3-16.
- Robbins, S. 2017. *Learning Legacies: Archive to Action through Women's Cross-Cultural Teaching*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Salisbury, M. and Styles, M. 2012. *Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling*. London: Laurence King Publishing.
- Saltman, J. 2003. "Canadian Children's Literature at the Millennium." In: Hudson, A. and S.-A. Cooper (eds.). *Windows and Words: A Look at Canadian Children's Literature in English*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, pp. 23-34.
- Seale, D. and Slapin, B. (eds.). 2006. *A Broken Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children* (Contemporary Native American Communities). Berkeley: Oyate.
- Shawanda, A. 2020. "Baawaajige: Exploring Dreams as Academic References." In: *Turtle Island Journal of Indigenous Health*, 1(1), pp. 37-47.
- Sorfleet, J.R. 2003. "The Nature of Canadian Children's Literature: A Commentary." In: Hudson, A. and S.-A. Cooper (eds.). *Windows and Words: A Look at Canadian Children's Literature in English*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, pp. 219-225.
- Soriano, M. 1975. *Guide de Littérature pour la Jeunesse*. Paris: Hachette.
- Stagg Peterson, S. and Robinson, R.B. 2020. "Rights of Indigenous Children: Reading Children's Literature through an Indigenous Knowledge Lens." In: *Education Sciences*, 10(10): 281, pp. 1-14.
- Schillo, J. and Turin, M. 2019. "Cree Language Use in Contemporary Children's Literature." In: *Book 2.0, Intellect Ltd*, 9 (1-2), pp. 163-170.

*Susana Amante*  
*School of Technology and Management*  
*Polytechnic Institute of Viseu*  
*Av. Cidade Politécnica,*  
*3504-510 Viseu*  
*Portugal*  
[susanamante@estgv.ipv.pt](mailto:susanamante@estgv.ipv.pt)