

Essentialism in Children's Literature: The Emergence of Retrogressive Discourses in post- 9/11 Picture Books

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Immediately following the 9/11 attacks, a number of picture books for children were published as a response to the new socio-political context in the United States. This article explores how these books constitute an essentialist discourse whose themes and perspectives can be considered *strategic*. As will be analyzed, they reveal a "natural" positioning that generates a degree of group identification and constructs drastic dichotomies such as *us* versus *them*, by overlooking internal differences, reasserting the values of patriotism and national identity, and fostering the emergence of jingoistic dynamics that bring difference / sameness into play. Such an ethnocentric discourse is problematic because it defines the Self in opposition to the Other, and controversially induces young readers to adopt a one-sided and dogmatic ideology.

Keywords: essentialism; Self / Other; 9/11; children's formation; ideology; dichotomy

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Esencialismo en la literatura infantil: el resurgimiento de discursos retrogresivos en los álbumes ilustrados tras el 11 S

Inmediatamente después de los ataques del 11-S, se publicaron diversos álbumes ilustrados para niños como respuesta al nuevo contexto sociopolítico en los Estados Unidos. Este artículo explora cómo estos libros constituyen un discurso esencialista cuyos temas y perspectivas lo convierten en *estratégico*. A través de su análisis, veremos que estos cuentos reflejan un posicionamiento natural que genera cierto grado de identidad grupal y establece drásticas dicotomías, como por ejemplo *nosotros* frente a *ellos*, al pasar por alto la diversidad interna, reafirmar los valores del patriotismo y la identidad nacional y propiciar el surgimiento de una dinámica separatista que fomenta la distinción entre diferencias y semejanzas. Tal discurso etnocéntrico es problemático, ya que define el Yo en oposición al Otro e induce a los jóvenes lectores a adoptar una complicada ideología dogmática y unilateral.

Palabras clave: esencialismo; yo / otro; 11-S; formación infantil; ideología; dicotomía

When a narrative is constructed, something is left out.
 When an end is defined, other ends are rejected,
 and one may not know what those ends are . . .
 What is left out? Can we know what is left out?
 GAYATRY C. SPIVAK, *The Post-Colonial Critic:
 Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*

After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 (9/11), a series of books for children were published as a response to the new socio-political context in the US that reveal the emergence of an essentialist discourse that favors the division between the Self and the Other, us and them, good and evil. The rearticulation of these old dichotomies not only denotes a closing of cultural borders, which is detrimental for the development of cultural diversity, but also forces American children to negotiate where they stand ideologically, and basically to take sides. As will be demonstrated here, the post 9/11 picture books *On That Day: A Book of Hope for Children* (2001), by Andrea Patel; *There is a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* (2002), by Nancy Carlson; *It's Still a Dog's New York: A Book of Healing* (2001), by Susan L. Roth; and *September 11th, 2001: A Simple Account for Children* (2002), by Nancy Poffenberger, present a shared set of characteristics that establish what constitutes each group's essence and what can be inferred from it. In this paper, I examine how the reaction of the American nation at the time of the attacks reveals a process of essentialist thinking: first, by putting aside local differences in order to forge a sense of homogeneous collective identity; second, by taking a defensive position, preserving its culture and developing itself, and hence its distinctiveness, in opposition to another "frightening" culture; and finally, by reducing to an "essential concept"—and yet still incomplete—the notion of who the "Other" is and what it means, in this case, to be Arab. If as Jo Lampert (2010) highlights, prior to 2001 it was already common to separate and organize identities according to race, ethnicity and nation (I am white, I am Jewish, I am Canadian), after 9/11 the American ideology engaged in an essentializing nationalistic discourse that fostered jingoistic dynamics, constructed drastic boundaries and beliefs, and explicitly brought different / sameness into the picture.

The overwhelming events of 9/11 made the United States reverse its role, at least momentarily, from the mighty first world country to a vulnerable country under attack. The US became the target and the sufferer (Chomsky 2001; Chouliaraki 2004). It is significant that this was the first time this had happened since the war of 1812, when its colonies were attacked but not the national territory itself. As Lilie Chouliaraki puts it in "Watching 11 September: The Politics of Pity" (2004), "the 'centre' and only contemporary superpower entered the space-time of dangerous living" (186). Likewise, psychiatrist Michael Brodsky affirms that the attacks greatly affected the American national sense of identity. He comments that Americans had "been protected by two oceans, and largely immune from the kind of terrorism that many people all over the world have long experienced. And that engendered in [them] a strong collective sense of invulnerability. That was shattered

on 9/11" (qtd. in Mozes 2011). Furthermore, Chouliaraki claims that the sociopolitical impact of the attack was directly related not only to the sense of its proximity but also to how television mediated the event. She argues that images and language triggered a reaction in the American spectator that produced in turn visual as well as verbal meaning-making: "What are we to feel when watching the planes crashing into the Twin Towers? What are we to do when watching fire brigades and medical, police and municipal forces rushing to help victims just after the towers' collapse? How are we to respond when confronted with President Bush's promise to 'hunt down those folks who committed this act'?" (2004, 186). There is no doubt that the combination of the disturbing images, Bush's message and the spectator's emotional involvement brought to audiences a new sensibility. However, still more important is how they cultivated specific political predispositions to action that are underpinned by colonial structures and meaning. It is at this point that the articulation of moral stances, inherent to human beings, came into play and consequently, and due to the governmental mediation of the event, spectators felt prompted to consider hegemonic political projects such as the "war against terror" in a positive light.

According to Peter Hunt, "literature not only responds to changes in social and political climates, but also contributes to the changes" (2001, 5). As children step into and move through story worlds, they build bridges between their personal experiences and the literature they read, and thus, stories become a lens through which they can better understand their world. In the same way, books construct social relationships and promote concepts, ideas and identities that respond to what adults believe children should know and value. As Peter Hollindale puts it, "In an age which desires to propagate imperialist sentiments, children will be an army of incipient colonizing pioneers. In an age which wishes to abolish differences between sexes, races and classes the reader is a composite 'child' which is willing to be anti-sexist, anti-racist and anti-classist" (1991, 9).

The ideological effect of the collapse of the Twin Towers fuelled a spontaneous tendency in the US to think, talk and act as if Americans were a natural category by explicitly attributing or tacitly implying one essence to themselves and, consequently, another different essence to the outgroup. Through an analysis of this corpus of fiction and non-fiction picture books about 9/11, we can observe how immediately following the attacks, the predominant discourses, themes and ideology implicit in those texts reflect what could be referred to as "strategic essentialism." Although this term, coined by postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak (1987), has been used in the past to refer to subordinate or marginalized groups, I find it serves to define the US political and social aftermath found in the content of the 9/11 books selected. In this context, one may read Spivak as suggesting that the *strategic* runs alongside the pragmatic, because according to her, essentialism has little to do with theory, it rather serves as a definition of a certain political practice (Eide 2010). Thus, although there is no doubt that Americans' predominant perspective and outlook on the world cannot be associated with the idea of a subaltern consciousness, it is possible to perceive their *strategic* attempt to act together in response to their temporary vulnerability immediately after the terrorist attacks.

Strategic essentialism in this sense entails that all American citizens, while being highly differentiated internally, engage in an essentializing and to some extent a standardizing of their public image. As Elizabeth Eide explains, this contributes to “advancing their group identity in a simplified, collectivized way to achieve certain objectives” (2010, 76). The purpose at the time was to strengthen the bonds between the group’s members as well as to enable the group to appear to be an entity with a reason to exist, an ideology, an agenda and a series of distinguishing attributes.

Whether the picture books that will be analyzed portray stories of recovery, heroism, individual accomplishment or community resolve, or whether they aim to help young readers cope with their fears of terrorism, defuse difficult emotions or bring hope to their lives, it is possible to find examples of how these texts are used to reassert values of national identity, patriotism, superficial unity and notions of cultural and political hegemony. With this line of thought, the questions I wish to raise are straightforward: How do 9/11 children’s books contribute to the process of “educating” young readers about themselves, others, and the world in which we live? How is the notion of inclusion and acceptance of difference presented? To what extent do these books offer children the capacity to make evaluations and establish categories of their own without being manipulated by the words and ideology behind them?

Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan refer to ideology as the “process of cultural signification and personal formation that cannot be summed up merely as ‘ruling ideas.’ It also consists of training in certain practices or certain modes of self-identification” (1998, 237). Following this approach, the cultural practices that these books encourage reveal that essentialist thinking is the invisible hand that enhances the standing, power and social value of the group. They connote the construction of dichotomies based on particular stereotypes in which some kind of essence is regarded as part of the unchangeable reality and the natural order of things. Also, if we extend these considerations to the possibilities and constraints that these texts offer for identity formation, it is significant that readers do not passively contemplate their own identity and that of Others; instead they often feel persuaded to be part of the dominant group by their desire of social belonging and the self-esteem attached to this (Wagner et al. 2009, 369).

The four picture books selected for this study were published within the same year or the year after 9/11 and they all represent a response to the events. The first three belong to what Paula T. Connolly (2008) calls “the 9/11 canon of children’s literature,” and have already received considerable attention. These are: *On That Day: A Book of Hope for Children*; *There is a Big, Beautiful World Out There!*; and *It’s Still a Dog’s New York: A Book of Healing*. In addition, I examine a nonfiction text: *September 11th, 2001: A Simple Account for Children*. As will be further discussed, this is a peculiar picture book that has been included because its strongly subjective narration comes across as being just as fictional as the rest of the texts. My aim is to analyze each of them in order to discuss the aforementioned points on essentialism from the perspective that children’s literature is first and foremost a social practice that contributes to the child’s development and

perception of the world. In this regard, picture books are particularly meaningful because they include a double form of representation through both words and images, and the overall impact of the work is achieved by the interaction of the two expressive means (Nikolajeva 2006). Such representations, as Bakhtin reminds us, are not illustrative of simply the individual writers' ideas, but of a specific political sociocultural period and a collective way of thinking (Todorov 1984).

To begin with the analysis, it is significant that all four books include some kind of explicit reference to the fact that they were written in a time of sorrow and as a reaction to the terrorist attacks. The authors' perspectives can thus be regarded as the result of a specific social and natural positioning, one to which many Americans can relate and which in turn generates a degree of group identification, that is, a certain notion of essence. According to Walter Wolfgang, "neither the term 'natural' nor the term 'essence' can be thought of independent of the other; being natural implies having an essence by necessity in the eyes of the perceiver" (2009, 377). In such a case, naturalizing this essence signals that the group is an entity, a unit that sets itself apart from others and that displays uniformity and a sense of homogeneity, something all these picture books do. At the end of *On That Day: A Book of Hope for Children*, Andrea Patel includes an author's note in which she explains how on September 11th the world stopped making sense to her. It is likely that as an American citizen she had always heard about war and terrorism taking place in faraway countries but not in her homeland. Likewise, it stands to reason that, as is the case with many other Americans, her perspective of the world coincides with the US being its center, and the powerful and dominant force that brings international hegemony. Hence, while her suffering and her puzzlement are completely understandable, her way of thinking and her reaction reflect what we could call a mainstream white American mentality, by which she assumes that her beliefs are held by everyone and takes as "normal" the US position of privilege in the world, revealing what can be considered a colonial mindset (Gabriel 2000; Apple 2002).

Similarly, while the content of *There is a Big, Beautiful World Out There!*, by Nancy Carlson, does not include any reference to 9/11, the author does state at the end that she wrote it on September 12, 2001. Along with this, on the same page, is an illustration with an American flag hanging at half-mast. The text was therefore written at a time of distress and mourning, and its story seems intended to help children overcome the fears that the attacks presumably produced. In the same vein, *It's Still a Dog's New York: A Book of Healing*, by Susan L. Roth, aims, as the title says, to heal and comfort. Two dogs, Pepper and Rover, embody the struggle of many Americans coming to terms with their feelings of grief and anger, and with post 9/11 trauma. Finally, Nancy Poffenberger, at the beginning of *September 11th, 2001: A Simple Account for Children*, presents a note in which she justifies how "as a former Elementary School Teacher, a mother of four, a grandmother of four and President of a publishing company, [she] felt a real calling to write and publish a book about the events of September 11th, 2001 for young children in elementary school grades" (2).

The four authors thus coincide in their sorrow and their attempt to create a common arena in which they, and all those who feel as they do, might express and share their distress and help others to overcome those difficult moments. This “natural” reaction is a first step towards essentializing a group’s attributes. In this way, as Wagner highlights, describing the reaction of the members of a group as “natural” can justify “a host of symbolic and behavioural consequences” (2009, 377), especially the creation of the group’s own discourse and discrimination against outsiders. In Poffenberger’s case, for instance, it is symptomatic that although in her “author’s note” she emphasizes her attempt “to keep the concepts simple yet be honest in portraying the facts, stressing our patriotism over assault” (2), it is the patriotic discourse that clearly predominates throughout the text.

Furthermore, even though the main goal in nonfiction is to inform and instruct the young reader (Moss 2003), one finds that Poffenberger’s “simple account” is not in fact so simple, and that her attempt to “be honest” results in a rather biased interpretation of the events, one that does not just inform but that may lead the young reader to adopt a similar ideology. Indeed, as Hollindale explains, it is exactly those values taken for granted by the writer, and which reflect the writer’s integration in a society that unthinkingly accepts them, that carry much potency with children (1991, 13). Poffenberger’s patriotic narrative not only conveys the previously discussed idea of social and natural positioning that favors the construction of a group’s essence, but it also represents what Apple refers to as “conservative modernization,” a populist discourse supported by the American right that comes to the fore in times of crisis. In Apple’s words, this conservative modernization is “a social / pedagogic project to change [Americans’] common sense, to radically transform [Americans’] assumptions about what are ‘appropriate’ values, the role of religion in public affairs, gender and sexuality, ‘race,’ and a host of other crucial areas” (2002, 1767).

To continue this line of discussion, it is worth noting that *On That Day: A Book of Hope for Children*, as Patel states, “became [her] attempt to make sense of the world at a *simpler* level” (2001; emphasis added). These words, as we will see, establish one of the keys for discussion of the text. The author starts by presenting a description of the world in very simple terms: “The world is blue. / The world is green. . . . The world is very big, and really round, and pretty peaceful” (1-2). These initial sentences along with their syntax and the illustration of two circles—one, yellow / orange, and a second smaller one green / white / purple—are examples of what some critics have considered to be a return to modernist standards after 9/11 (Giroux 2002; Apple 2002; Lampert 2010). The pursuit of order and neatness, the impulse to search for “truth” and clarity, and the notion of a simpler world in which binaries such as good and evil and right and wrong are clearly identified illustrate an outlook that represents a total clash with postmodernism and the resurgence of modernist absolutes. Furthermore, as Connolly claims, Patel’s perspective “not only avoids any specificity of context but its assumption of a ‘pretty peaceful world’ posits a fictionalized hegemony that is inaccurate to the actuality of many children’s lives” (2008, 290). In this way, although the idea of such a hegemonic world is reinforced later by the image of several human beings of different skin colors holding hands, this in fact can be

read as one of the strategies of essentialism which is used to foster a sense of superficial collective identity for the group that reinforces the dichotomy of "us" against "them."

As Lampert comments, Patel's use of the personal pronouns "we" and "you" throughout the book establishes the reading positions through which readers can relate to the text (2010, 53). The author's question on page six, "Is there anything *we* can do to make the world *right* again?," aligns *us* with the notion of goodness in contrast with the idea of cruelty depicted on the previous page: "But sometimes bad things happen because people [*them*] act in mean ways" (5). Through these lines, we see how the child's agency is addressed. S/he has the opportunity to fix what *others* have done *wrong*. Likewise, the sentence on the next page, "*You* can help by sharing" (8), is another example of how the reader is driven to get involved in the reading and, moreover, summoned to perform his / her Self in particular ways. It is to be expected that children will prefer to be identified with the good "us" and not the evil "them," thereby adopting an attitude and becoming aware of the existence of such a dichotomy, thus requiring them to establish where they want to position themselves and why.

Similarly, although in Carlson's *There is a Big, Beautiful World Out There!* the story's basic message, as the title reads, is positive, it too reinforces conflicting meanings and stereotypes about what or who is to be feared. In fact, the illustrations are so garish and crude that they actually convey the sense that things such as bugs, clowns and people who look different are scary and intimidating. How then does the text contribute to the formation of the young reader? A significant question to consider is whether the book achieves the goal of reducing the fears it identifies or, on the contrary, simply creates new ones.

The book begins with the line, "There's lots to be scared of, that's for sure" (1). From here, the author presents a list of things that might be frightening for children in order to later reassess them and finally convey the message that you cannot remain "hiding under your covers" (14) in your bed, that "there is a big, beautiful world out there" (29). The problem, however, is that among the things that Carlson identifies as scary is a picture of a group of individuals with a line underneath that says, "people who look different from you" (12). In this way, Lampert points out, "the text suggests that there is something 'natural' about the fear you might have about other 'people who look different' from 'us'" (2010, 50). Here, like in *On That Day*, we find an essentialist discourse that is establishing the binary Self and Other, *us* versus *them*, but most importantly, one that implies that fear of Others is normal. According to Susan Gelman (2005), children develop an early cognitive bias and they are more susceptible to stereotyping if they are led to believe that certain characteristics are fixed and part of human nature. In this case, if the Other is related with being *different* and this difference entails a threat or a fear, they are likely to regard it with prejudice. Moreover, another problem about this picture book is that the points about fearing Others are so unsettling that apart from producing alarm, or still worse, an attitude of intolerance, they actually prevail as the central message of the book. Finally, it is not without significance that the main character in the story is a white girl. For this reason, it

is white children who are the intended target readers of this book and also who are most likely to relate to the “you” that is addressed in the texts and illustrations. In contrast to this, the Other is portrayed as non-white. Therefore, although in the illustrations of the final pages there is a slight hint at the inclusion of people of different ethnicities, they stand to the sides of the pictures. The characters in the center are the white children, whereas the non-white remain at the margins.

Putting two and two together, if in this picture book the Other is portrayed as those who look “different” and “non-white,” and in *On That day* the Other is portrayed as evil, the overall discourse that these readings advocate is the shaping of a Self whose essence is categorized for what it is not, that is, in contrast to the so-called Other who is stigmatized and seen as a threatening outsider. Based on Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, this type of discourse constitutes a process of Othering that leads to the construction of certain kinds of knowledge, and this knowledge in turn not only reinforces the very power that has produced it, but also assumes that the dominant culture is “normal” in relation to those which are not. Said’s book *Orientalism* (1978) notes how from the eighteenth century onward the Western colonizing powers constructed an image of the Oriental as weak, untrustworthy, passive, feminine, in the process of establishing Western identity as strong, trustworthy, active, masculine, among other characteristics. In Said’s words, Orientalism is a Western style of thought, “a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly a different (or alternative and novel) world; it is, above all, a discourse that is . . . produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power [political, intellectual, cultural and moral]” (1978, 12).

Significantly, this right and this authority that the West self-proclaims to otherize is an act of essentialization *per se*. If we foster the belief, as indeed happened, that all terrorists are Arabs, and all Arab people have the same appearance and all of them are Muslim, it becomes easier for Americans to target them and to define themselves by what they are not. In this way, as David Palumbo-Liu highlights, although President Bush urged Americans to remember that “Arab Americans are Americans, too, and that this [was] a war against terrorism, not Islam, the bombing and invasion of Afghanistan, with all its ‘collateral damage,’ [made] such distinctions hard to maintain” (2002, 118). In actual fact, it is known that in the wake of 9/11, as Michael Apple observes, “there were a multitude of instances throughout the nation of people who look Arab being threatened and harassed on the street, in schools, and in their places of business” (2002, 1762).

Like the two books discussed above, *It’s Still a Dog’s New York: A Book of Healing*, by Susan L. Roth, once again presents an essentialist perspective and the construction of the us / them dichotomy as a natural reaction to the attacks. Through the portrayal of Pepper and Rover, the two dog protagonists, there is an emphasis in this case on the trauma that haunted many New Yorkers as an inescapable side effect of the tragedy. The term trauma here must be understood, according to Cathy Caruth, “as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (1996, 3). Throughout the story, Pepper is described as what

Ross Chambers refers to as a “melancholic character for whom mourning cannot really be complete for the reason that trauma is never over” (qtd. in Gutorov 2011, 5). “‘Those two towers are still in my head’ . . . ‘plain as day!’” (22), says Pepper dolefully. The process of “healing,” which is the purpose of the book as its subtitle states, begins then through Rover’s words to his friend that reassert their identity as New Yorkers and highlight those landmarks of the city that make it distinctive, such as the Empire State Building, Central Park, the Metropolitan Museum, etc. It is through their conversation, then, that a discourse of reconstruction takes place, in which the characters’ personalities and ideology reflect Spivak’s concept of strategic essentialism.

As we read, we see how in the interaction between Pepper and Rover, the role of the former echoes the figure of a subordinate subject who feels defeated and overwhelmed by the attacks. By contrast, Rover represents the self-confidence and spirit of those who maintain their principles no matter what. “Remember, we’re still dogs. NOT underdogs. TOP DOGS!” (20), he says to Pepper with courage. Here the use of “underdogs” can be read literally or figuratively, but it is the latter that can be associated with the idea of being submissive to or oppressed by a superior or threatening force in a postcolonial context that triggered Spivak’s original use of the terminology “strategic” essentialism. In fact, she refers in particular to the subsequent nonconformist reaction of subjugated people, in this case personified by Rover and his subversive attitude and determination to find a way to reverse the circumstances:

‘We can roar like the lions against the horrible things that happened. We can roar like lions for peace!’

‘We can roar loud enough for the WHOLE WORLD to hear!’ said Pepper. (16)

This attempt to reassert themselves constitutes a search for agency and a call to come together as Americans to take a strategic position. In addition, the use of the pronoun “we” evokes pride and emphasizes their sense of unity. For Lampert, in this extract, “Americans are compelled to behave in a manner that is both caring and forceful, powerful and peaceful. . . . This contradictory response, making the use of force to appear gentle was strategic after 9/11. It differentiated the actions of Americans from the action of terrorists who were forceful, but, presumably, not so caring” (2010, 104).

Differentiation here again becomes a key factor to create an American collective identity in opposition to the “Other.” And although “it is a difficult task to demand such a strong response (that would make the WHOLE WORLD take notice) and still be perceived as peace-loving” (Lampert 2010, 104), the anger and sense of patriotism of many Americans demanded just such a response at the time. As a matter of fact, as Richard Flynn comments, “the Bush-mandated resurgence of patriotism provided a way of acting as if one were acting to support ‘America’s New War’” (2005, 6).

Moreover, we also see how in order to build a collective identity, the author hints at the idea of dogs and cats coming together as friends:

'If we see sad dogs and cats we could try to cheer them up,' said Rover.

'We never talk to cats,' said Pepper.

'At a time like this, maybe we should,' said Rover. (8)

Here the dogs' empathy for cats fosters an ideal image of living in a homogeneous nation in which all Americans embrace diversity, and no distinctions are made with regard to place of birth, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. However, figuratively speaking, it is not clear who dogs and cats stand for and what they represent individually. If dogs, for example, symbolized mainstream white loyal and caring Americans, who would the cats be? Finally, it is also meaningful how in order to construct an ideal image of the city the author omits any references to issues of crime, homelessness or the racial tensions that appear regularly on the news as an integral part of the life of the city.

Finally, with regards to Poffenberger's nonfiction picture book *September 11th, 2001: A Simple Account for Children*, it is necessary to remark how the author starts by highlighting that September 11, 2001 is a historical date that "many of us will remember well" (3). While her initial use of the pronoun "us" already serves the purpose of indicating that there exists a binary (us / them), it does not clarify whether that "us" refers to only "adults," only "Americans," or whether it actually refers to "writer" and "reader" together. For that reason, in the next line, Poffenberger makes sure that she involves the reader by directly addressing him / her: "If you lived in New York City, Washington, D.C. or the state of Pennsylvania, you certainly will never forget that day" (3). At this point, even if the reader does not live in any of those places, the author has already created the sense that there are many people like her, who feel as she does. They make a group.

From here, she narrates the account of how four planes attacked these three places. "When the second hit happened, the United States realized some group or groups were trying to hurt and scare us" (6). Let us observe how the use of "us" has now expanded to include the whole country. On the other hand, she has completed the binary us / them by referring to some *other* "group or groups" that do evil actions—the antagonist group. "The name of the people who do this are called 'Terrorists'" (6), she continues, and the word "terrorist" appears in bold letters and in a bigger font. Here it is necessary to draw our attention to two relevant points: First, the author's tone begins to lack objectivity and builds up tension by emphasizing what she herself thinks is more striking, in this case the word "terrorists" and the fact that many people died (mentioned twice on the same page). Second, the undefined but essential reference to the figure of the terrorists provides the "difference" on which the opposition of her group (us) is dependent. It becomes evident therefore, as Roderick McGillis states, that "difference and sameness always are mutually constitutive" (2000, 9). Poffenberger bolsters a sense of commonality to create the fiction of two unitary and homogeneous groups that defined themselves by their being opposed to each other. What she writes, then, is not just an account of the events but a report of the experience of her group being attacked in which she reinforces their identity, culture and values, seeking ultimately to position the child reader as well.

The actual confrontation between the two groups is portrayed on the next page, where several violent scenes are evoked when describing what happened to the fourth plane, which crashed in Pennsylvania. This time the word “terrorists” appears three times and in each case how they were overcome by the people of America is (over)emphasized.

We learned that there were some very brave people on that plane /
 who were able to stop ‘the Terrorists’ from flying the plane /
 . . . they decided to go after ‘the Terrorists’
 . . . the people on that plane prevented ‘the Terrorists’ from hurting any /
 more people in Washington, D.C. (8)

The use of verbs such as “were able to stop,” “decided to go after” and “prevented” connote that the agency of these “very brave” passengers was crucial to defeat “the Terrorists.” Not only are they considered heroes but there is pride in their actions. They died but they fought against those aberrant Others, seems to be the message for the young reader and even a lesson to follow, especially when later the author includes a characterization of the terrorists.

[They] are groups of people around the world who /
 do not like the way we live or the freedoms we have. /
 They do not like the idea that we have many religions in America. /
 They also think we are too rich and that we have too strong a military. /
 These people want to take over the world. (10)

The populist notes in this extract are crucial because, as Apple points out, “hegemonic alliances can only succeed when they connect with the elements of the ‘good sense’ of the people” (2001, 1766). It is of note that the US is thought of as an inclusive accepting nation where all religions and cultures are of equal merit. Likewise, it is emphasized that it is the freedom and lifestyle of Americans that is under threat, leaving unquestioned the side effects of US global, economic, political and cultural policies. On this note, Poffenberger’s text reveals what Apple argues is the scant knowledge of the American public about “the United States’s complicity in supporting and arming dictatorial regimes,” and the lack of “a developed and nuanced understanding of U.S. domination of the world economy, of the negative effects of globalization, of the environmental effects of its wasteful energy policies and practices, and so much more” (2002, 1761).

Certainly, among the explanations that Poffenberger lists for the terrorists’ attacks, there is no factual information about the realities of the terrorists’ lives and beliefs nor an attempt to consider their possible reasons for carrying out the acts, but simply an effective mobilization of anger and patriotic fervor. Last of all, of significance is the author’s approach to terrorism and the manner in which she turns the whole complex issue into a war against the United States, as if terrorism had never taken place before anywhere else in

the world. This approach, as Lampert observes, was common after 2001, when “America claimed terrorism as its own” (2010, 4). The US considered itself the principal victim of terrorism and made it its own crusade. Finally, in the last pages of the book the narrative becomes more of a symbolic call to reaffirm national unity and American values:

People All Over The Country /
 became patriotic and wanted to show how much they loved our country. /
 Many homes and businesses put up a flag, /
 People sang songs such as ‘God Bless America’ (14)

These lines are intended to prompt readers to act in similar patriotic ways. Patriotism arises as an essential means for healing and, most importantly, for fighting terrorism. On the very last page, the author then closes with a statement reminiscent of the American declaration of independence. It reads,

The People in the United States /
 all pulled together and stopped arguing over politics. / . . .
 The people of the United States wanted to say they love and /
 appreciate the freedoms they have here and that they are lucky /
 to be able to make the many choices they do each day. (16)

As we can see, Poffenberger’s “account for children” ends on a reaffirming note. Her final words endorse the foundations of the United States and bring courage and reassurance to the young American readers. However, such a perspective on the events reflects more the author’s own desire than the real facts. She concentrates on the beliefs and culture of the majority group in the US (middle-class, white and Anglo-Saxon) and leaves absent other ethnicities and perspectives.

In sum, there is serious doubt that the patriotic and conservative discourse in this book might possibly display the accuracy and objectivity to be expected from a nonfiction text. Moreover, as shown earlier, the account is distinctly essentialist for all the key reasons: overlooking the inner socio-cultural and political differences within the US, exaggerating the idea of a homogeneous national identity, fostering a direct and violent confrontation with the notion of a faceless Other, encouraging the centralism of the US in the world and finally, supporting the right of Americans to maintain their politics and way of life in spite of the negative consequences it may cause to other countries.

In conclusion, these texts demonstrate how children’s literature has the power to influence young readers’ perspectives, especially in a case such as this, in which there is a strong appeal to child readers that allows for little alternative reading. Moving through the story of a picture book involves connecting pieces of the story and weaving together the various narrative strands. Fiction and nonfiction books constitute an essential source to open young minds and to help understand how and why people live as they do. For this

reason, as Hollindale claims, "our priority in the world of children's books should not be to promote ideology but to understand it, and find ways of helping others to understand it, including children themselves" (1991, 10). Books therefore must enable young readers to critique what they read and not force meaning upon them. Nevertheless, the 9/11 corpus of picture books discussed in this article does not offer children the capacity to make their own choices. Young readers are led and induced to identify themselves with the figure of the Self and to adopt the writer's perspective.

As I have shown, the four books selected reassert American cultural values, national identity and beliefs in direct opposition to the notion of an ambiguous evil Other who is non-white and is directly related with terrorism, and implicitly with the Arab world. Although these books were written in the wake of the attacks and are in theory intended to help American children cope with their fears and bring hope to their lives, we can observe that strategic essentialism is instilled in their pages, as they convey more significance than is explicitly stated in their subtitles or back covers. These books constitute an essentialist discourse that reveals the endorsement of jingoistic and differentiating dynamics that foster the division between the Self and the Other, us and them, good and evil, right and wrong, superior and inferior, civilized and savage. This approach is highly controversial because, apart from establishing strong stereotypical impressions, it involves the reader emotionally, internalizing the idea that the United States is the center of the world. Such an ideology clashes with the principles of multicultural literature, which aims to reflect not just the portrayal of single ethnic groups or insight into distinct cultures, but people from multiple cultures and ethnicities interacting with one another in various capacities (Steiner 2008, 88). In fact, the discourse in these picture books presents the opposite scenario: there is no cultural interaction and no chance of developing the global understanding and humility needed for world cooperation instead of world conflict.

Andrea Patel, Nancy Carlson, Susan L. Roth and Nancy Poffenberger have written stories that inform the child of the authors' own concern with adult society at the very point where mainstream Americans' hegemonic views and reality come into conflict. This perspective is problematic because, as Americans, the authors believe their approach is the right one and they support the dominant position of the US in opposition to any force or culture that may threaten it. However, as Roberta Seelinger Trites (2001) explains and makes us reflect upon, the hijackers who perpetrated the extremist acts of terrorism on September 11 also believed themselves to be right. It was their prejudiced ideas and the singleness of their purpose that led to an act of inhumanity: "That these terrorists believed in the rightness of a single set of choices indicates that they have not been trained to respect [other cultures and other values]. And throughout the ages, that is one function literature has provided its readers" (2001, 114). Children's literature might not be the only tool available to raise young readers' consciousness, but it definitely plays a crucial part towards their understanding that to be fully engaged with a way of thinking and living is not to be fully opposed to other ways of thinking and living.

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