# MULTICULTURAL ALBERTA: A LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

**ABSTRACT**

Tamara Palmer Seiler examines three types of Alberta writing: Native literature, literature by immigrant writers and literature written in English by second and subsequent generation minority writers. Through these examples, Palmer argues that public perceptions of Alberta as a "red necked" cultural monolith are inaccurate and suggests the province has a rich cultural history.

**TAMARA PALMER SEILER**

Tamara Palmer Seiler is an Associate Professor in the University of Calgary's Faculty of Communications and Culture and head of the Faculty's Culture division. She has written many articles about immigrant and ethnic experience in Canada, particularly as it has been represented in literature, and on multiculturalism. She has also co-authored articles on Alberta politics and culture, two books on Alberta history and co-edited an anthology of Alberta prose. She is currently President of the Canadian Ethnic Studies Association.

## Introduction

Throughout its l00 year history, Alberta has been the site of ongoing and at times intense negotiation among diverse peoples, and one should not be surprised to discover that the prevailing view of Alberta as mono-cultural is simply not accurate. The province's cultural complexity is apparent in a wide range of contexts, including its literary history. Alberta literature (defined here as *belles lettres* by writers who have lived in the province for substantial periods of time and which attempts to represent life in Alberta) is not simply a minor strand in what might be called the literature of the Anglo-American Diaspora, but rather, it is a multi-vocal reflection of the province's cultural diversity.

## Aboriginal Voices

In Alberta as elsewhere in the Americas, Aboriginal peoples, with their thousands of years in the area and their rich oral traditions, not only created the foundation to its literary history, but also continue to contribute to its contemporary literary culture. One such writer is Emma Lee Warrior. Born in 1941 on the Peigan Reserve near Brockett in southern Alberta, she is the author of a number of poems and short stories, which have appeared in several anthologies of Native literature, as well as in *Canadian Fiction Magazine.* A product of residential schooling, Warrior finds that writing helps her to come to grips with the negative impact of that experience. Like the work of Native writers such as Maria Campbell, Lee Maracle, Thomas King and many others, Warrior's writing can be seen as part of the contemporary renaissance of Native culture whereby Native people – political and social activists, entrepreneurs, artists and writers – have been reclaiming control over their lives. In a remarkable effort toward decolonization, they are resisting in a variety of ways the dominant society's construction of them as the inferior "other" – the image that enabled the historical denigration and destruction of Native cultures.

For example, in her often-anthologized short story, "Compatriots" Warrior offers an incisive, deeply ironic depiction of a contemporary encounter between Native peoples and the dominant Euro-Canadian culture. It is the story of a day in the life of Lucy, a young, pregnant mother living on a reserve in southern Alberta. Here she copes admirably with a variety of problems and frustrations – the irresponsible behaviour of her husband, the alcoholism of her uncle, the challenges of childcare and daily household chores, compounded by sub-standard housing and oppressive summer heat. Warrior adds to this mix the visit of Hilda, a German tourist eager to experience what she imagines to be the life of "real Indians." Too polite and deeply hospitable to refuse her aunt's request to entertain this foreign visitor for a day, Lucy allows Hilda into her world; Hilda, however, is too steeped in images of the "imaginary Indian"[1] to see Lucy and her world with any clarity. Warrior's narrative challenges her readers to recognize the power relations at work in Canadian society, and to deconstruct the stereotypes that perpetuate an engrained and poisonous social hierarchy.

## Immigrant Voices

Fiction written in languages other than English constitutes a small but significant part of Alberta's literature. One important example is the work of Illia (Elias) Kiriak (l888-1955) who wrote in Ukrainian, producing what is arguably the most ambitious and important Canadian book in that language. Originally a trilogy of over 1,100 pages *Syny Zemli* was abridged and translated into English by Michael Luchkovich[2] and published in l959 as *Sons of the Soil.* Kiriak had immigrated to Canada from western

Ukraine in 1906. After spending several years as an itinerant labourer in various parts of Canada and the United States, he settled in Alberta in 1911, becoming one of the first students at a school for "foreigners" opened the following year in Vegreville by the Alberta government. There he trained as a public school teacher, and spent the next quarter century teaching in the largely Ukrainian districts of north central Alberta. During this time he also wrote fiction, publishing a few short stories in several Ukrainian language publications, and writing the first draft of *Syny Zemli.* After retiring in 1937, he decided to publish his trilogy, financing the massive project through subscriptions and sales. Although at just over three hundred pages, *Sons of the Soil* is much shorter than the original Ukrainian text, it nevertheless retains the latter's epic scope as it tells the story of Ukrainian pioneer experience in western Canada.

Kiriak had been part of the massive first migration of approximately 170,000 Ukrainians to Canada between 1891 and 1914, and his novel depicts the experiences of these settlers, most of them from the provinces of Galicia and Bukovyna in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Restless in their home provinces due to a shortage of land, generally poor economic prospects and a degree of political and social tension, these migrants (mostly peasants) fit well into Canada's nation-building project of settling the west with farmers. The colony established east of Edmonton in l892 by two Galician peasants, Ivan Pylypiw and Vasyl Eleniak – the first Ukrainian settlement in the country – became a magnet for additional Ukrainian immigrants. Although immigration promoters such as Clifford Sifton (Minister of the Interior between 1896 and 1905) extolled the virtues of these "men in sheepskin coats" and their "stalwart" wives, many other members of the dominant society were considerably less enthusiastic, regarding them as dangerously "foreign" to Anglo-Canadian institutions and social practices. Thus, the first wave of immigrants (as well, to some degree as those that followed them) had to cope not only with the hardships of pioneering, but also with the effects of prejudice and discrimination. The appearance of *Sons of the Soil* in 1959 had the effect of asserting the importance of Ukrainians in the settlement of western Canada, and thus of highlighting the value and legitimacy of a group that was relegated to second-class status until well after the Second World War.

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### "Second Generation" Voices

Rudy Wiebe is one of Alberta's foremost writers, a giant figure, both in terms of his contribution to the province's literary life and of his characteristic approach to fiction. The award-winning author of numerous works, Wiebe also nurtured two generations of creative writers during his lengthy career as a professor of English at the University of Alberta. Born the youngest of seven children in a small Mennonite community near Fairholme, Saskatchewan in 1934, Wiebe moved with his family to Coaldale, Alberta when he was twelve. He attended high school there and later studied at the University of Alberta, where he received an MA in creative writing. This in itself was a remarkable achievement since his first language is German; he did not learn English until he attended school. His first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962) tells the story of a young man's coming of age amidst contradiction and hypocrisy in a small Mennonite farming community. Despite the considerable controversy this novel generated within Mennonite circles, Wiebe continued to depict Mennonite experience in his next two novels, *First and Vital Candle* (1966) and *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970). These early fictions explored the themes and modes that would define his later work. In the first two, he highlighted the moral dilemmas inherent in attempting to live a pacifist Christian life in a world shaped by various kinds of violence and profound injustice. He also focused on relations between European settler culture and Native peoples, a theme he explored in subsequent fictions.

Wiebe's fascination with historical content and epic form is particularly apparent in his novels, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), which evokes the life of the great Cree Chief, and *The Scorched Wood People* (1977), which offers a sympathetic depiction of Louis Riel. Although not focused on Mennonite experience, Wiebe's perspective in these works continues to be that of one who views the Anglo-Canadian establishment from the outside. Nevertheless, these works marked Wiebe's recognition as a major Canadian writer, albeit western and ethnic.

Another award winning writer with a strong connection to Alberta is Joy Kowaga. Much of her work, including her second book of poetry, *A Choice of Dreams* (1974), her first novel, *Obasan* (1981), *Naomi's Road,* an adaptation of *Obasan* for children (1986) and *Itsuka,* a sequel to *Obasan* (1992) explores the Japanese-Canadian experience. Her writing is noteworthy for its literary artistry and its political power. Born in Vancouver in 1935, Kogawa (like other Japanese-Canadians) was interned during the Second World War. One of the darkest moments in Canadian history, the "relocation" of thousands of Japanese Canadians in 1942 was the culmination

of a long history in Canada of racism directed at Asians, the majority of whom settled in British Columbia.

The public campaign that was launched to uproot Japanese Canadians from British Columbia (on the grounds that they were saboteurs) is, by now, well known. Perhaps less well known is that the federal government also established a farm labor program for placing Japanese-Canadian families in Alberta and Manitoba. The Japanese who were relocated to Alberta as sugar beet labourers, were treated as virtual slaves and forced to live in converted grain bins and chicken coops. Joy Kogawa was among those who experienced these shocking disruptions and degradations as a child. The nature and effect of that experience is the subject she explores in *Obasan.*

When it appeared in 1981, *Obasan* was one of several texts, such as Ken Adachi's *The Enemy that Never Was: A History of the Japanese Canadians* (1976) and Ann Sunahara's *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians During the Second World War* (1981) that were "breaking the silence" about the internment – both among Japanese Canadians themselves, and in the larger Canadian society. Such texts, along with a well-organized campaign waged by activists, helped to force the Canadian government to offer an official apology and financial redress to Japanese Canadians in 1988.

Based in part on letters written to her brother during the Second World War by Japanese-Canadian journalist, Muriel Kitagawa, *Obasan* is a highly innovative text. It combines fiction with non-fiction, newspaper accounts and letters with the haunting and poetic voice of Kogawa's fictional narrator, Naomi. At the heart of Kogawa's novel is an exploration of language itself, its power to hide as well as reveal truth, to imprison as well as liberate.

A younger generation of minority writers in Alberta has also taken up this theme. Among them is Calgary native Cheryl Foggo, who has developed a well-deserved reputation as a versatile writer, having worked as a journalist and a screenwriter as well as a writer of non-fiction, poetry, juvenile fiction and young adult fiction. Her first major work, *Pourin' Down Rain* was published in 1990. Since then, she has published two additional books, *One Thing that's True* (1997) and *I Have Been in Danger* (2001). With *Pourin' Down Rain,* Foggo broke new ground in the world of Alberta writing. Working in a form and a style easily accessible to an audience of all ages, she told a story that had been previously untold: what it was like to grow up Black n the 1960s and 1970s in the predominantly white society of Calgary.

Part reminiscence and part family history, *Pourin' Down Rain* begins with the author's recollection of how her large extended family would often gather for a meal in Calgary's Chinatown. Her assumption that the reason people stared at them was that they were "important and beautiful people" sets the stage for the chapters that follow. The characters we meet – from the sincere and sensitive narrator to various members of her family – are indeed memorable and beautiful people whose dignity and self assurance in the face of racism – from the polite and systemic to the blatantly ugly – earn our respect, just as their engaging humanity, complete with a variety of foibles earns our affection. Foggo draws on her own experiences and those of her family in Alberta and in Saskatchewan to tell the story of the immigration of Black Americans to the Canadian West. She also chronicles the coming-of-age of a young girl who becomes increasingly aware of her Black identity in a period of growing unrest as the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the decolonizing struggles in Asia and Africa heightened awareness of racial inequality and fueled Black pride. While Foggo's narrative offers a social critique, it also and perhaps even primarily celebrates friends, community, and most of all of family, and the essential havens these various kinds of love can provide to a young person struggling to define herself in a confusing and sometimes dangerous world.

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## Conclusion

It seems clear, then, that Alberta literature has been written from many perspectives, not just one, and that it is best understood as a multivocal representation of Alberta's diverse society. That this is the case may well surprise those both within and outside Alberta who think of this province in terms of the simplistic stereotypes that often pass as representative. Moreover, this literature offers educators a rich resource, not only for increasing students' literary sophistication, but also for expanding their ability to empathize with a wide range of characters and thereby to expand their sense of the people who live in the 'imagined community' of the Canadian nation.

### Endnotes

1 See Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian, The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture.* Vancouver: Arsenal Press, 1992.

2 Michael Luchkovich was a noteworthy figure in his own right. A member of the United Farmers of Alberta, he was elected as a Member of Parliament in 1926, the first Ukrainian-Canadian to hold such an office.