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Imagined Geography: Strange Places and People in Children's Literature

Emer O'Sullivan[*]

ABSTRACT

Prior to the advent of electronic media, and before travelling became a mass phenomenon, books were the primary means through which children gained a picture of the world at large and gleaned information about far-away places and their inhabitants. The first works of fiction adapted for children, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, inspired two major narrative traditions: adventure stories set in exotic places but told in a realistic mode, and fantastic journeys to invented realms. Systematic representations of foreigners in non-fiction for children start to appear in late 18th-century pictorial encyclopedias, and geography textbooks designed to instruct and amuse with descriptions of places and of the customs of their inhabitants, are popular from the early 19th century on. With an imagological focus on the construction of national and ethnic identities, and with special attention to cultural perspective, this article examines and contrasts representations of imaginary and purportedly real foreign people and places in children's books, from late 18th- and early 19th-century educational and recreational material in which strange places and people are "discovered," through late 19th- and early 20th- century abcedaria and picturebooks which presented these as "known," to contemporary, ludic material which adopts a performative approach towards presenting strange places and people.

KEYWORDS: children's literature, abcedaria, picturebooks, imagology, cultural history

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> ONE winter's evening, as Captain Compass was sitting by the fire-side with his children all round him, little Jack said to him, Papa, pray tell us some stories about what you have seen in your voyages. I have been vastly entertained whilst you were abroad, with Gulliver's Travels, and the adventures of Sinbad the Sailor; and I think, as you have gone round and round the world, you must have met with things as wonderful as they did.—No, my dear, said the Captain, I never met with Lilliputians or Brobdingnagians, I assure you, nor ever saw the black loadstone mountain, or the valley of diamonds; but, to be sure, I have seen a great variety of people, and their different manners and ways of living; and if it will be any entertainment to you, I will tell you some curious particulars of what I observed. (Aikin and Barbauld 22)

In this late 18th-century simulation of a family storytelling scene by John Aikin and Anna Barbauld, little Jack does not see any difference between the geography imagined by Jonathan Swift or that found in the *Arabian Nights*, and the real people and places his sea-faring father might have encountered on his travels. Both exercise an equal fascination over the little "tarry-at-home traveller." And his father, too, recognises the entertainment value of the curious things he can relate to his son. The border between fiction and fact, when it comes to the representation of strange people and places in children's literature, was often as porous as suggested in this late 18th-century account. Daniel Defoe's fake autobiography, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and Jonathan Swift's imaginary travelogue, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), read in various adapted forms by but not written for children, inspired two major narrative traditions: adventure stories set in exotic places but told in a realistic mode, and fantastic journeys to invented realms. Books produced specifically for a child audience only started to emerge on a broader scale in England and northern Europe from the mid-18th century onward. Their rise and development is linked to the development of a bourgeois society, the perception of childhood as a phase of life differing fundamentally from adult existence, a class of parents who could afford to invest in the education of their children, and publishers who identified the new and lucrative market for material for these children.

This article will focus on children's books which depict "strange places and people." The "imagined geography" of my title refers to two interrelated types of material. One is geographies which are literally imagined, topographies and populated locations which are invented in works of fantasy. The other relates to works about purportedly real, existing places and people only strange, or foreign, from the perspective of the author or envisaged readers. However, the descriptions in some works in this second group may, at times, owe just as much to the imagination as those in the first. As has been well documented, images of foreign cultures in literature can be traced back to motifs from travel literature and ethnographies, which in turn copied wholesale from one another; in other words, their sources are heavily intertextual. They wanted to entertain with descriptions of outlandish places and people as well as to inform. In *Inventing Exoticism*, a study of exotic geography and its iconography, Benjamin Schmidt illustrates how early modern Europeans came to see and understand the non-European world through histories, ethnographies, lavishly produced travel narratives as well as paintings and consumer goods which peddled an exotic aesthetic, mixing and matching the wonders of the world in order to "delight" (5). What Schmidt calls the "business of exotica" helped to define "Europe" at the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries.

Poetic conventions and representational schemes have also been identified as sources of images of others. Franz Stanzel's extensive work on these, especially on *Kurze Beschreibung der in Europa Befintlichen Völckern und Ihren Aigenschafften* (*Short Description of the Peoples in Europe and Their Characteristics*), an early 18th-century oil-painted tableau of nationalities of ten costumed male European ethnotypes—each characterized by a list of seventeen categories, such as "habitus" or "preferences," and how they typically find their death according to their national character—has revealed how they were a source of historical ethnographic stereotypes (Stanzel, *Europäer* and Stanzel, *Europäischer Völkerspiegel*). This has led imagologists to emphasise that, when examining the mechanism of national/ethnic "othering" and its underlying self-images, one needs to pay special heed to "the complex links between literary discourse on the one hand and national identity-constructs on the other" (Leerssen, "Rhetoric" 270).

Children's literature partakes in exactly the same kind of intertextual exchange between ethnographies, travel literature and other accounts of

foreign people. It, too, is a mine of intertextual references to traditions of ethnic representations. As literature for the young, written by adults who inscribe in it the dominant norms and values of their specific culture at that specific time, it gives us clear snapshots of constructions of self and other expressed in this medium of intergenerational communication; it is thus highly valuable material for the study of cultural and literary history.

In this article, I will examine representations of foreign places and people produced in books specifically for children since the late 18th century. The focus is on illustrated material and picturebooks by European authors; the approach is informed by imagology, or image studies, a branch of study which addresses the cultural construction and literary representation of national characters (see Beller and Leerssen).[1] I will trace, in the following three sections, how the representations developed and changed in accordance with ideas about what adults thought children should be told or taught about their own and other cultures:

1. Discovering strange places and people in late 18th- and early 19th-century educational and recreational material
2. Knowing strange places and people in late 19th- and early 20th-century abcedaria and picturebooks
3. Playing with strange places and people in late 20th- and early 21st-century abcedaria and picturebooks.

I. Discovering strange places and people in late 18th- and early 19th-century educational and recreational material

The first pictorial encyclopedia for children, the 12-volume *Bilderbuch für Kinder* (1792-1830), issued by the polymath German publisher and patron of the arts Friedrich Johann Justin Bertuch, contains, amongst other things, one of the first systematic representations of foreigners for young readers. The aim of this educational work of the Enlightenment was to present all the knowledge of the era to children, and the 1185 coloured plates and 6000 engravings with which it is illustrated are still regarded as an authoritative source for the cultural history of the late 18th century. It contains short articles

[1] See O'Sullivan, "Imagology," for an account of what the disciplines of imagology and children's literature research can gain from each other.

on 14 different themes from natural history, geography and ethnography with entries on "Menschen und Trachten" ("People and Costumes") featuring pictures of groups marked primarily by the specific clothing shown in the images and by descriptions of their "manners and customs," as was common in publications of the time about foreign nations (see, for example, *St. Julien, the emigrant; or, Europe depicted: exhibiting the costumes, and describing the manners and customs of the various nations* or *The little traveller, or, A sketch of the various nations of the world. Representing the costumes, and describing the manners and peculiarities of the inhabitants* [Steerwell]). Following the categorisation of Joachim Friedrich Blumenbach, one of the founders of physical anthropology, Bertuch introduces his readers to the five races of mankind: the Caucasians, the Mongols, the Ethiopians, the Americans and the Malasians. In line with the current ethnocentricity is written of the Caucasians: "man nimmt an, daß diese Rasse in geistiger Hinsicht den anderen bedeutend voraus sei" ("it is assumed that, in terms of intellectual ability, this race is significantly superior to the others").[2]

A particularly rich documentation of the knowledge about the world and its people as presented to children in infant schools in Britain and Ireland from the 1830s, is the prints produced by the publisher William Darton Jr. for the Rudiment Box, an innovative educational aid he devised which held prints pasted on rolls of linen viewed by pupils through glass-panelled doors.[3] The map of the "Climates of the Earth" divides the world into four groups, the "Artic Circle," the "Northern temperate countries," the "Hot Countries . . . near the Equinoctical line," and the "Southern countries," which are "more or less temperate like the North" (Rudiment Box). It follows contemporary climate theory, a pseudo-science which believed that climate effected physical appearance and character (the northerners and southerners were determined to be extreme and opposed, the inhabitants of the so-called temperate zone were considered intelligent and balanced), and provides descriptive texts which assigns characteristics to the respective inhabitants:

[2] Bertuch did not however take this—as many did—to justify empire or slavery, which he denounced as inhuman.

[3] Jill Shefrin provides an extensive and richly documented account of teaching aids produced by the Dartons. The geographical prints for the Rudiment Box, especially the print "Costumes of Nations" are discussed in detail in O'Sullivan, "Picturing."

> The inhabitants of the Northern temperate countries are described in the most flattering terms for possessing seven virtues: "Industry, ingenuity, enterprise, learning, science, religious feeling, cleanliness." The rest of the world's inhabitants are characterized in terms of their display or lack of these virtues according to the process of ethnic stereotyping by which any in-group maintains a favorable self-image by defensively projecting traits and features regarded as undesirable onto others. (O'Sullivan, "Picturing")

As they impart a view of the world, school geography texts such as these reflect contemporary values and prevailing norms; they are not only part of the geographical and educational arena but also of the wider political and social discourses of the time (Maddrell 81).

On the hand-coloured print "Costumes of Nations" for the Rudiment Box (see Fig. 1), 12 captioned images represent "nations," not in the sense of "nation states," but in that of culturally homogeneous groups of people: Arabians, Highlanders, Turks, Spaniards, Italians, Dutch, Portuguese, English, Swiss, Chinese, Laplanders and French. Foregrounded is a couple, in most cases an adult male and female in traditional, often iconic costume (kilt on the Highlander, turban on the Arabian). The only couples wearing contemporary 1830s fashion are the English and the French. Pastimes or activities associated with their country can be seen in some images: bagpipe playing (Scotland), cheese-making (Switzerland), smoking a hookah (Turkey). Background elements such as palms, architecture or icy mountains are roughly sketched. The question of selection presents itself: why these nations rather than others? What the viewer is offered is

> a mixture of the familiar (English), with the mildly exotic (Europeans) and the very exotic (Arabians, Turks, Chinese and Laplanders). The Europeans represent countries on the common itinerary of the Grand Tour undertaken by upper-class young British men in the 18th and early 19th centuries, which exposed them to the cultural legacy of classical antiquity and to the polite society of the European continent. (O'Sullivan, "Picturing")

Fig. 1. “Costumes of Nations for Infant Schools” from The Rudiment Box. London: Darton and Son, [c. 1834]. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Church of Ireland College of Education archives.

Contrast is an important criterion for selection, as the basic principle of such representations lies in the idea of cultural difference rather than similarity, in the "presupposition that a nation is most itself in those aspects wherein it is most unlike the others" (Leerssen, "National Identity"). As Leerssen writes, this restricts identity "to particularism and exoticism." Cultural difference rather than identity is the principle underlining abcedaria and illustrated compendia of foreign nations. Seemingly unique characteristics are used as a type of visual shorthand: camel for the Arabians, hookah for the Turks, tea-drinking for the Chinese.

Foreigners displayed in exotic clothing and with peculiar manners populate what would today be called "edutainment" for children in the late 18th and early 19th century, geography books which present "information" about foreign countries in a form designed to amuse the young readers. Other peoples are often compared with the English (or the French or the German, depending on where the book originated) in terms of their inferiority. In his introduction to *Scenes in Europe, for the Amusement and Instruction of Little Tarry-At-Home Travellers*, the Rev. Isaac Taylor extols it as a medium through which his young readers will be able to realise their good fortune to have been born English without the inconvenience of having to leave their native soil:

> We live in England, the better for us,
> Those who have seen other countries can tell;
> Many a nation is dreadfully worse;
> None can "old England for ever" excel.
> You shall soon know what great travellers see,
> Safe by the table all snug as you sit; . . . . (v)

If his readers had to visit the countries he is going to describe, they would "want to come back, with a hop step and skip," he tells them (vii).

In *The Costume, Manners, and Peculiarities, of Different Inhabitants of the Globe, calculated to instruct and amuse The Little Folks of All Countries*, sixteen nations are presented in a hand-coloured wood engraving of a male and female representative of each with a verse below introducing and commenting on their costumes and customs. The book is premised on the clear notion that the British way of being and of doing things is best, and that foreign cultures are looked upon with bemusement. The text tells the young

readers that the Dutchman smokes like a chimney while his wife wears a "great tea-table thing of a hat," the haughty and proud Spaniard seldom smiles and is quick to anger and draw his rapier, the appearance of the Hungarian frightens children, and the South American Indians wear so many feathers that one might think they grow their own. Not enticed by the food prepared for the Laplander by his wife, the final verse in the book ends with the sentiment that its author has no wish to roam but "would prefer to dine at home; / Old English fare for ever" (*The costume* 16). Much of what is presented is "wholly imaginary" (Grenby), and the book comes over as a vehicle for cultural imperialism, justifying empire and missionising, for instance when it says of the East Indian "O! that Britannia's God his word may send / To men like these, and bid their errors end" (6). But it is presented as an entertaining book which pedals the exotic with glee:

> From the point of view of its contemporary readers, it was a book which could be presented as educational, but which was really designed to offer the thrill of the new, the decorative, and the outlandish to its readers, not to mention the pleasure to be derived from its high-quality woodcuts and the light-hearted verses themselves. (Grenby)

Books like these not only satisfied the interest in things exotic and foreign, representations of foreign people also served as examples which children might learn from or possibly emulate. The countless occurrences of Laps, disproportionate to their actual number, surely owes something to the fact that they fascinated Europeans from milder climates, and their hardiness in the face of the brutally cold climate of Lapland offers a welcome opportunity to show children in more luxurious climatic (and social) circumstances how well off they are, so as to offer an example of conduct which should be copied. Foreigners present models of sanctioned and non-sanctioned behaviour for young readers—to show how they should or should not conduct themselves. This can be seen, for instance, in descriptions of China. Even if authors criticise some aspects of Chinese culture (such as foot-binding), one aspect is regularly mentioned which authors patently want their young readers to emulate: filial duty and respect for one's elders. Fig. 2 shows a picture containing the stock iconic elements in visual representations of the Chinese at that time, pagodas, china tea equipment and a mandarin in flowing robes

Fig. 2. “Chinese” from *The Costume, Manners, and Peculiarities, of different Inhabitants of the Globe, calculated to instruct and amuse The Little Folks of all Countries*. London: John Harris, 1821. 8.

with long moustache and beard, his surcoat decorated with a large embroidered mandarin square.[4] The end of the verse which starts with the Eurocentric "So these are Chinese! O what comical creatures / At least they appear so to me" (*The costume* 8) combines the elements of mandarin wear with the idea of filial obedience. One of two fictitious voices in dialogue in the verse wonders out loud about the emblem on the square, and receives the following answer:

> That bird is a stork, Sir; of filial duty
> The emblem most striking and fine;
> And filial obedience Chinese think a beauty,
> Which I hope may be yours and mine. (8)

This virtue is prised even more in the compendium *A Peep at the World, and a Picture of Some of its Inhabitants* where we read: "Chinese children are very obedient to their parents, and respectful to their elders and superiors" (5). The traditional elements denoting Chinese had obviously become so hackneyed by 1901, that they could be casually combined in a verse about the "Chinaboy" Li so as to suggest a causality between good behaviour and tea-drinking:

> His father is a Mandarin
> His father's name is Loo Too Sin.
> They put no sugar in his tea,
> Yet he is as good as good can be. (Mayer and Crosland 11)

Late 18th- and early 19th-century accounts of "people of all nations" reflect an early ethnology that "linked elements of classification such as race, colour, and origin to temperament, character, and types" (David 53) and employed stock and iconic images which occur and re-occur with intertextual regularity in children's recreational and educational material. This kind of material was an important source for the various schemata, particularly national attributes, acquired at an early stage in the socialization and educational processes during the 18th and 19th centuries. It is likely that these representations of strange people in strange places intended to teach young readers and pupils at

[4] Cf. Chen for an extensive study of the representation of China in children's fiction (excluding picturebooks) from 1851 to 1911.

that time and to give them an idea of where they belonged in the greater scale of things, but we will never know whether the children who were presented with the material believed that members of other nations were actually like that or whether they found the figures as fantastic as anything out of *The Arabian Nights*.

II. Knowing strange places and people in late 19th- and early-20th century abcedaria and picturebooks

As a genre, abcedaria or ABC books were initially designed both to teach children how to read and to impart religious instruction. They soon became secularised, and over time also lost their primary function as a teaching device. When advances in printing technology from the mid-19th century onward meant that quality picturebooks could be produced for a mass market at relatively reasonable prices, ABCs became increasingly addressed to young readers who already knew their alphabet. Abcedaria on a huge range of themes—birds, flowers, names, ships, railways and so on—flourished in the Victorian era and, to introduce children to the people of the world around them, ABCs of nations, like *The Alphabet of Nations ABC, Picture Alphabet of Nations of the World* or *Alphabet of all Nations*.

Little People: An Alphabet (Mayer and Crosland) is one such abcedaria of nations. It is a classical linear ABC book with verses and pictures which, inspired by the idea of completion and classification, strives to order the world into the 26 slots provided by the Latin-based English alphabet. The arbitrariness of this project, based on the linguistic sign, is clear when it is borne in mind that not all alphabets have the same number of letters—the Irish only has 18 while the Georgian has 41. Karin Coats has identified this type of traditional alphabet book with its letter to word correspondence as reinforcing, from a Lacanian perspective, "the view of an authoritative masculine view of language. Every child becomes a little Adam, naming and consequently mastering and enlarging the world. In this view, language is merely referential" (90). The concomitant problems of presenting the world in 26 entries is obvious: since there are many more than 26 countries clamouring for inclusion, on what basis does an author select the "chosen" ones; how does the author decide, for instance, which should be privileged, when several countries begin with the same letter—Spain, Scotland, Sweden, Switzerland—while there are none, in English, which begin with others, for

instance "Q"? This book finds a partial solution in extending the scope of the identity-defining adjectives of some of the "Little People" to include not only countries (China), but also sub-continents (Arabia), cities (Valencia—thus smuggling in Spain under a letter other than "S"), ethnic groups (Boers) and religions (Quakeress). While with that last entry the authors found a solution to the "Q" problem, the other two most difficult letters to fill, "X" and "Y" are simply omitted, and the book skips from "W" to "Z," finishing with a fantasy person, "Zany," a kind of jester or clown, and with the author expressing his relief that they are through:

> He'll joke with you in sun or show'r,
> And keep you laughing by the hour.
> Some zanies are a trifle mad:
> Now we have finished—and I'm glad. (Mayer and Crosland 94)

Some later compendia of nations are more relaxed about the alphabet, *Babies of all Nations* (Byron and Petherick), offers more than one country for different letters (Africa, America; Canada, China; India, Italy, Ireland). This book will be looked at in more detail now as a particularly rewarding example when examining the question of cultural perspective.

The introductory verse by May Byron runs as follows:

> Wherever you go, the whole world round,
> There are dear little babies to be found,
> Round and sweet as sugar-plums,
> Kicking their toes, and sucking their thumbs.
> One will laugh, and one will coo,
> And one will fidget the whole day through.
> One is as quiet as quiet can be:
> But they all are jolly—just come and see! (Byron and Petherick n. pag.)

This verse implies that there is no real difference between babies from all the countries of the world. Its title "The Babies of <u>other</u> Lands" (my emphasis), unlike that of the actual book, *Babies of <u>all</u> Nations* (my emphasis), indicates a specific perspective or strategy, that of "othering." So, although it proclaims that babies are all the same, it actually focuses on

difference. The book, with lush, full-page colour pictures by Rosa C. Petherick, is a compendium of visual and verbal national and cultural topoi.[5] The Dutch baby is presented as follows:

> Here she is, all clean and neat,
> With her wooden shoes clacking (a)long the street,
> Walking quite nicely for such a tot,
> And carrying home her tulip-pot.
> The little Dutch baby has been afloat
> On the long canal, in a painted boat.
> She has seen the cows by the poplar trees,
> And the little farms where they make Dutch cheese.
> She has seen a lot of windmills tall,
> So many, she never could tell you all. (Byron and Petherick n. pag.)

The overdetermined verse—this is an excerpt from a total of five stanzas—does not fail to omit any of the stock items then, and many still today, commonly associated with the Netherlands: clogs, tulips, houseboats, canals, cows, cheese, windmills, most of which also feature in the accompanying picture. In the foreground is the little Dutch girl clutching a tulip pot and wearing traditional milkmaid dress with hat and clogs. In the background are boats on the water, a windmill, and a traditional Dutch farmhouse away from which the girl's mother is walking, also in traditional dress, balancing pails of *milk* on her shoulders with a milkmaid's yoke. The verse had mentioned that the mother, trying to mind her daughter, is a good way behind as "the pails of milk are heavy; and, too, / Mothers get tired,—we know they do" (n. pag.).

The picture of the Italian baby also features a hard-working mother in the background, doing the laundry in the river. But lying happily in a basket in the foreground is the Italian baby who of "all the dear folks, / Rosy as apples, or yellow as yolks, / Or black as coal" (n. pag.) is the happiest. And the reason:

[5] This book is also briefly discussed, albeit without illustrations, in O'Sullivan ("S is for Spaniard").

Fig. 3. “Italian Baby” from May Byron and Rosa C. Petherick. *Babies of all Nations*. New York, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909. N. pag. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University.

> For Italian babies, the whole day long,
> Have nothing but sunshine and laughter and song
> They do as they like, for that is the rule:
> They are never scolded; they don't go to school. (n. pag.)

In following verses, it is told that they "are not bothered with hats or boots" (n. pag.), but play about in the open air and eat fruit all day. The baby personifies, in other words, *dolce far niente* (carefree idleness, literally "sweet doing nothing") a common topos associated with Italy. On the picture (Fig. 3),[6] a striking composition with bold outlines and simple colours which follows the "poster" style made popular by John Hassall (see Daniels), we see the happy Italian baby with dark curly hair, lying in a basket of laundry, one outstretched, plump arm reaching for a butterfly, the other holding a lemon.

About the Irish baby is said "Although / She's thin and poor and has little to eat, / Her temper's mild and her smiles are sweet" (n. pag.). In her hunger, we find an echo of the Great Famine in her country only half a century previously, and the reference to it and to Irish poverty are defused by the baby's sweet smiles. The picture contains the proverbial pig in the kitchen—a stock image of Irish domestic living habits in England. But the good-natured Irish baby does not mind at all, indeed, she enjoys playing with them:

> The pigs and hens live close beside her,
> It's a pity her cabin is not made wider.
> It's rather a crowd, small folk and big,
> And the clucking hens and the grunting pig;
> But baby thinks them the best of friends.
> The greater part of her time she spends
> Trying to teach the piggy-wig tricks,
> And playing hide-and-seek with the chicks. (n. pag.)

The overall winner of the competition between the *Babies of all Nations* is clearly the English baby:

[6] The figures from Byron and Petherick are reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library. The classmark of the book in the library is 1909.10.111.

Fig. 4. “English Baby” from May Byron and Rosa C. Petherick. *Babies of all Nations*. New York, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909. N. pag.
Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University.

> Of all the babies, brown, (and) black and yellow,—well I think,
> The English one is prettiest,—the English one is pink,—
> Just pink and white like apple-bloom. Her hair is all one curl:
> Her mother says there never was a dearer little girl. (n. pag.)

The lavish illustration (Fig. 4) of the girl, again in poster style with simple colours and clearly defined outlines, shows the blonde English baby not just with the most beautiful appearance—the apple-bloom complexion and "lips as red as roses" (n. pag.) mentioned in the verses. The strategic background of snow, for England somewhat untypical, highlights these features against the various textures of expensive, warm clothing she is wearing, a luxurious muff made of thick golden fur and a wide green woollen coat with matching large-rimmed bonnet, trimmed with feathers. There are two toys in the picture: in her arms, a doll as opulently dressed as she is, and at her feet a toy bulldog, symbol of the English nation and, even though it is a toy, lending power and status to its owner. No hard-working mother is apparent in the background in this picture, and indeed it can be assumed that even the "job" of dressing the English girl was not done by her parent but by a nanny.

This picture and its accompanying verses make it very clear from whose cultural perspective *Babies of all Nations* is written. Although the opening text proclaimed sameness, the book celebrates difference: cultural difference manifested in the climates and the icons associated with the various nations, but also social difference in terms of property, status and class. Compared to the English baby, all the others are less privileged, poorer, their parents have to work (harder) and they have to make do with elements from their natural surroundings for toys. While her toys are manufactured ones, they have to be satisfied with what their environment provides: a tulip pot, a lemon and a pig. Even the Canadian babies "make themselves playthings out of ice, and toys out of lumps of snow" (n. pag.). Despite this seeming lack of material comfort, these children are said and shown to be more than happy with their lot. And this happiness which transcends class, status, and nationality is what makes all the children the "same" from the perspective of the book.

The position of the English baby in relation to the others is evident on the frontispiece (see Fig. 5), a picture of a blonde girl similar to the English "baby," here without her winter clothes, holding in her hands a book called *Babies of all Nations*, the very book we are reading. At her feet are doll "babies" who can be identified from the illustrations of the book—to the right

Fig. 5. Frontispiece from May Byron and Rosa C. Petherick. *Babies of all Nations*. New York, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909. N. pag. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University.

a Dutch "baby," beside her a Turkish "baby" and another one, naked except for a necklace. Carelessly resting against the child's left foot is a German "baby" in swaddling. The issue of toys, present in many of the verses, is made thematic on a different level here. The implication is that the babies of all nations are nothing but playthings for bourgeois English children, for whom they are presented here in an exoticised and (social) romanticised manner. *Babies of all Nations* presents an image of a "self-confident, rich, white, beautiful, and privileged English child; a powerful image with which to establish and maintain English selfhood" (O'Sullivan, "S is for Spaniard" 345). It is an appropriate representation in picturebook form of what Menno Spiering has called "the impact of imperialism on the English self-image" (148).

Images of foreign nations are never innocent—especially not in a child's picturebook. That is what *Babies of all Nations* reveals. The images ultimately tell more about the observer than the observed. Here, young English readers are presented with a colourful version of a diverse world which repeatedly serves to show that the absolutely best and privileged culture to belong to is theirs. The accounts underscore how blessed they are to be English while, at the same time, implying that they do not need to have a bad conscience about those less fortunate, as they are all perfectly happy.

III. Playing with strange places and people in late 20th- and early 21st-century abcedaria, picturebooks and imaginary atlases

The texts we have looked at so far assumed that the world and people of other nations were knowable, and they presented other cultures in such a way that they could be slotted into pre-defined contexts. This system of representation of world knowledge for children is contested in books which have structural similarities to the ones just discussed, but a very different philosophy of identity and difference and attitude towards representation. In line with the general post-modern scepticism towards the totalising nature of grand narratives, children's literature started to contest these models of world knowledge. In many modern ABC books a change can be observed, a development away from a traditional, epistemological model in which language is a way of knowing reality, to a more performative, ontological model in which it is recognized "as a vehicle for actively constructing this reality" (Coats 88).

*My Cat Likes to Hide in Boxe*s (Sutton and Dodd) is one such performative book which presents a humorous take on national character in the form of cats from different countries whose activities rhyme with the name of their country of origin: "The cat from Norway / got stuck in the doorway" or "The cat from Greece / Joined the police" and "The cat from Spain / Flew an aeroplane" (n. pag.). This book plays games with "the arbitrariness of the phonetic sign: the sound of the name of the country determines the activity" (O'Sullivan, "S is for Spaniard" 345f.). *Away from Home* (Lobel) is a truly performative travel abcedaria set on a theatre stage where the setting, costume and actions change according to whatever European city is being represented.[7] Each of the pictures is accompanied by a sentence with a boy's name, an activity and the name of the city, all alliterative: "Bernard ballooned in Barcelona," "Paul painted in Paris." This makes the reader wonder which came first, the city, the activity, or the boy. Here too we have arbitrariness, in this case of the graphic sign; neither of these two books attempt to make any meaningful connection between nationality and place or pursuit, they refuse to take the question of fixed cultural identity seriously, it is all simply a game.

The firmly culture-specific perspective found in 19th- and early 20th-century children's books is undermined in these playful treatments. An even more radical but no less ludic approach can be found in my final and most extensive example of an imagined geography. François Place's *Atlas des géographes d'Orbae* is a collection of stories and maps of 26 invented countries which appeared in three volumes. Their titles: *Du pays des Amazones aux îles Indigo* (1986), *Du pays de Jade à l'île Quinookta* (1988), and *De la rivière Rouge au pays des Zizotls* (2000) indicate the determining principle: A-I; J-Q and R-Z, it is an elaborate ABC book. Each letter in the Atlas is the initial of the name of a country, and the physical shape of the country is that of the letter; the Atlas is thus an ABC of calligram maps.[8] Place creates an entire new cosmos and takes the reader on an alphabetical voyage of discovery. The fiction behind the *Atlas* is that it is all that survives

[7] See O'Sullivan ("S is for Spaniard") for a more extensive account.

[8] Place started out illustrating non-fiction about explorers and navigators before deciding to write and illustrate his own books: "Now I do a sort of pseudo-documentary drawing which, although fairly accurate, is liberated from that type of restrictions" (Andrieux and Lorant-Jolly 10). The seeds of the *Atlas* can be found in the glossary to one of these, for which he created 26 ornate initials that look like little maps (Meunier 3).

of the now extinct cartographers of the great island of Orbae, who recorded what travellers and explorers reported to them after they returned from strange lands, cities, bays, deserts, mountains and islands.

The *Atlas* is an encyclopedic account of imagined, spatially and temporally indeterminate places resonating with references to ethnographies and to the history of cartography.[9] The names of the places include Latin terms ("Orbae," "Ultima"), purely invented names with suggestive connotations ("Baïlabaïkal"), descriptive ones like the Land of the Red River,[10] and a few refer to characters from a tradition outside the work like the Land of the Amazons or Land of Giants. The accounts of the countries in which natural phenomena, the arts (especially storytelling and music) and spirituality feature largely, present invented mythologies and histories which tell of family structures, traditions, conflicts and catastrophes. They are usually accompanied by three full-paged watercolour illustrations and one or two double spreads of a written and sketched traveller's diary with carefully-labelled minute drawings of flora, fauna, inhabitants, customs, rituals and the like of each invented country. The imaginary ethnographies have their analogies with known regions, with narrative elements and characters ("The Jade Emperor" from Taoist theology, for instance) and visual styles conjuring up associations with Mongolian, Chinese, Japanese, African, Native American and other cultures; each is situated in the discursive context of known histories of discovery,[11] colonisation and missionisation. As Place said in a video interview on the 20th anniversary of its publication, the places are fictional, but all have diffuse connections with the known world (Casterman). The 26 maps of the *Atlas* not only present a cosmology in the form of an alphabet book but offer, as the geographer Christophe Meunier writes in his morphological and functional analysis of the maps, a "historical account of cartography from the post-Columbian codices to the ordinance survey map of the nineteenth century. They use a same cartographic vocabulary" (1).

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[9] Meunier traces quotations and references to the history of cartography in Place's maps.

[10] These names are the ones which, in translation, can disrupt the alphabetical principle of the book; the "Isle de Frison" in French, becomes, in the English translation "The Land of Shivers," even though it occurs between the "E" and the "G" countries, and the illustration of the country is "F" shaped (Place, *A Voyage of Discovery* 79). The German translation, on the other hand, manages well with "Frösteln" (Place, *Phantastische Reisen*).

[11] A miniature picture of an explorer named John Macselkirk (108) echoes the late 17th-century Scottish seafarer Alexander Selkirk, on whose story Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was based.

Two examples will show how the hieroglyphs in what M. Barjolle and É. Barjolle have called "une rêverie graphique sur les lettres" (122), a fanciful graphic musing on letters, give form, name and a history to a place. The first is "Le pays de Baïlabaïkal" (see Fig. 6). The Land of Baïlabaïkal is introduced, in the English translation, as having

> two eyes to contemplate the sky: these are its twin lakes. One is filled with clear water, but the other is of salt water and often swollen by terrible storms. The surface of the first one is never disturbed by even the slightest breath of wind. Between the two lakes there are reed beds where the two waters flow together and where people of the villages assemble. (Place, *A Voyage of Discovery* 25)

Here, the two almost homonymous parts of the name Baïlabaïkal are reflected in the bi-circular geometry (M. Barjolle and É. Barjolle) of the capital letter B which in the calligram map become twin lakes with clear and salt water. The story told is of a boy, "Three Hearts of Stone," who becomes a shaman because he was born with the rare sign of the lakes in his differently-coloured eyes: one was light and calm, the other dark and full of anger. His destiny was to "bring opposites together and to preserve the fragile equilibrium between the human world and the animal one" (29). The motif of the different twins recurs in the end when, as a very old man, he meets his nemesis in a mysterious, hooded stranger dressed in black and bearing a book which the shaman is aware had "terrible powers" because it was as disparate as his own shaman coat, a garment inhabited by the spirits of the fish, birds and animals whose skins were fused to make it. The stranger comes from a different tradition, a different system of knowledge than the shaman's. "Three Hearts of Stone" initially resists the missionary until the man removes his hood to reveal that he, too, has differently-coloured eyes. It is their destiny, although seemingly opposite, to unite the traditions from which they come. The shaman retires but not before removing his spiritual coat and saying to his successor: "if you want to teach my people, you must first don this coat" (37). The graphic reverie on the form of the letter "B" thus encompasses the core history of the country.

Of the most wondrous and mysterious "îles Indigo" (see Fig. 7), is written:

Le pays de Baïlabaïkal

Fig. 6 "Le pays de Baïlabaïkal" from François Place. *Du pays des Amazones aux îles Indigo: Atlas des géographes d'Orbae*. Paris: Casterman, 1996. 25 © CASTERMAN S.A

Les îles Indigo

Fig 7 "Les îles Indigo" from François Place. *Du pays des Amazones aux îles Indigo: Atlas des géographes d'Orbae*. Paris: Casterman, 1996. 127 © CASTERMAN S.A

> The inhabitants of the Indigo Isles are said to have discovered the blueness of distance. After the rainy season, hundreds of flowery paths stretch from the Great Isle to the Sacred Isle, which is so difficult to reach that no man has ever trodden its paths. (Place, *A Voyage of Discovery* 127).

The Sacred Isle is the dot on the "I" of the Great Isle, never to be connected with its minim or downstroke; its story is told to the young Dutch merchant Cornelius by an innkeeper from Orbae. They are "islands" on a flat plain separated by water during the rainy season and by very high grass in the dry season. Nobody from the Great Isle has ever been to the Sacred Isle. Believing that the spirits of the dead find their final rest there, the people from the Great Isle set out to bring the ashes of their deceased to the Sacred Isle in a funeral carriage pulled by buffaloes, but as it is so far away, the buffalos collapse before reaching their destination. That location is then taken as the final resting place for the deceased so that the winds may carry their souls to the Sacred Isle. Something about the colour of the clouds over that Isle mesmerises people, and the innkeeper tells stories about explorers who lost their minds, turned blind, or almost died in their attempt to attain the elusive paradisiacal island. At the end of the story, Cornelius decides to set off on a journey to discover the elusive Indigo Isles for himself.[12]

The stories in Place's *Atlas* are told from varying perspectives, sometimes that of an outsider or foreigner, sometimes of an indigenous, although the boundaries between these positions may blur; some stories juxtapose different perspectives within a story such as when, in "Le pays des Houngalïls," a medicine man is fascinated by the hunting customs of the natives, while a kidnapped Princess finds their ways barbaric. Although some stories contain fantastic elements, it is never heroic fantasy, a form which Place has says "irritates" him because "it associates psychological and moral characteristics with morphological ones which lead one to the idea that there can be 'subhuman' 'superhuman' and a 'normal' humanity" (Andrieux and Lorant-Jolly 9). The heroism in his work is enacted by ordinary human beings.

With his pseudo-documentary style, Place aims to "combine the freshness of a child's vision with the demand for evidence and the eye for

[12] Cornelius' story is one of two travel narratives about the Orbae universe which Place wrote after the *Atlas* (Place, *Le secret d'orbæ*).

corroborating detail which we normally associate with grown-up experience" (Powling); he breaks down boundaries, in postmodern fashion, between documentary and invention, anthropology and narrative, history and geography, maps and drawings, textual narratives and picturebooks, and books for children and for adults.[13] Although Place chose alphabetic containment for his work, instead of making letters stand for given names of countries, and making the world fit into an alphabet, as in the Victorian ABCs, he has created new worlds inspired by its characters and has allowed their form to dictate the narratives. It is a performative rather than a constative alphabet written with a decidedly ludic approach: "What great fun it is to take the reader into a fictive world and then take him so far into this world that it seems real" (qtd. in Lalani 23).

With his *Atlas* Place, the cartographer of possible worlds, has created an encyclopedia of an imaginary world. Monika Schmitz-Emans coined this term to denote texts which develop entire imaginary universes in lexica and other encyclopedic formats suggesting scientific representation. It is a hybrid form which presents discourse on scientific knowledge in the discursive mode of play. Schmitz-Emans discusses these encyclopedias of imaginary worlds in the context of recent discussions of poetologies of knowledge with their special interest in the post-modern de-differentiation between fact and fiction, because such fakes and experimental forms of representation question the constructed nature of the representation of knowledge itself as well as the forms in which it is represented. These literary forms, therefore, serve as a corrective to and reflection on established systems and discourses of knowledge.

Most of the stories in Place's *Atlas* contain elements which leave readers puzzled and with the sense that these cultures can never be fully understood or explained. Place presents a vast diversity of cultures, and plays with our knowledge of the given world, but also with the notion that the world can be fully knowable. He has said that to talk about the history of voyages "means going back to a fantasized place, full of marvels. Marvels in every sense of the word: dangerous, worrying but very beautiful nevertheless" (Andrieux and Lorant-Jolly 14). Place generates texts and illustrations which are literally marvellous and, rather than giving an exhaustive and comprehensible account of the countries in his cosmography, he leaves his readers with a sense of

[13] The *Atlas* is recommended for children from the age of 5.

mystery about the wonder of different cultures. By refusing to provide a unifying, normative perspective or gaze, Place's perspective on the world is informed by empathy and sympathetic curiosity rather than voyeurism and exoticisation. One of his themes is the fragility of the world and the damage that has been and can be wreaked on cultures perceived as "exotic". This was the subject of his *Les derniers géants* (The Last Giants), in which a 19th-century English explorer "discovers" a realm of nine peaceful giants, amongst whom he lives for ten months. His subsequent ethnographic documentation revealing the whereabouts of his friends ultimately leads to the end of their civilization.

Place's *Atlas* is an enterprise of ethical discovery. The term "'voyage' of ethical discovery" (Vallone 189) was used by Lynne Vallone to refer to the way a late 18th-century text for children fostered their ability to imagine other cultural perspectives. The text she was referring to, Aikin and Barbauld's "Traveller's Wonders," is the source of the opening quote in this article. When the young son asks his father for tales of his travels and does not see any difference between them and the imagined geography of Swift or the *Arabian Nights*, the father answers his request with descriptions of an extraordinary people whose way of life, diet, habits and clothing seem most remarkable and strange indeed:

> Some of them ate fish that had been hung up in smoke till they were quite dry and hard; . . . the richer had a whiter kind of cake, which they were fond of daubing over with a greasy matter that was the product of a large animal among them. . . . The strangest custom that I believe prevails in any nation I found here, which was, that some take a mighty pleasure in filling their mouths full of stinking smoke; and others, in thrusting a nasty powder up their nostrils. . . . The language of this nation seems very harsh and unintelligible to a foreigner, yet they converse among one another with great ease and quickness." (Aikin and Barbauld 25, 27, 30-31)[14]

When one of his children finally realises that this exotic place is none other than their own country, England, the father explains his reason for the story:

[14] Part of this passage is quoted in a different context in O'Sullivan ("Picturing").

"I meant to show you, that a foreigner might easily represent everything as equally strange and wonderful among us, as we could do with respect to his country" (31). This is an unusually early corrective to the established systems and discourses of knowledge at that time, and reveals that instances of de-differentiation between fact and fiction, typically regarded a post-modern feature, were employed more than 300 years ago to show children that strange people and places might not be so strange after all.

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