Portrayals of the U.S. in Translated International Children's Literature: A Cosmopolitan Perspective

Sue C. Kimmel  
*Old Dominion University*

Danielle E. Forest  
*The University of Southern Mississippi*

Yonghee Suh  
*Old Dominion University*

Kasey L. Garrison  
*Charles Sturt University*

This study reports on an inductive, qualitative content analysis exploring depictions of the United States and U.S. citizens in translated, international literature for children. The sample included 18 titles recognized with the Batchelder Award or Honor, a recognition given to U.S. publishers who translate and publish outstanding children’s literature with international origins. The study was situated within the framework of cosmopolitanism, a theoretical perspective acknowledging the importance of local values, culture, and traditions while embracing the global and the unfamiliar. Findings revealed depictions of the United States on the local level as a destination, refuge, and glamorized place of diversity. On the global level, the United States was portrayed as a world power with regard to its military, economics, media, and culture. These findings promote perspective taking and critical literacy as they offer a window for U.S. students into how people from other nations perceive their country.

*Key words:* Cosmopolitanism, Translated Literature, Children’s Literature, Batchelder Award, Content Analysis, Global Education

Introduction

As technology and transportation advance opportunities for global exchange, the world’s citizens have more contact with each other today than at any other time in history. International understanding and respect are arguably more critical than ever, especially for children who will become tomorrow’s leaders. Educators have responded to the need for international understanding with a renewed and growing interest in cosmopolitanism. According to David Hansen (2010a), a cosmopolitan perspective means remaining loyal to the local and familiar while embracing the global and unfamiliar. A cosmopolitan citizen is open to learning about other cultures and traditions, yet is rooted in his or her own heritage (Appiah, 2008; Jacobs, 2012; Mitchell, 2003, 2007). A cosmopolitan outlook may be essential in today’s increasingly global society (Gaudelli, 2003; Mitchell & Parker, 2008), and as Benjamin Jacobs (2012) has observed, cosmopolitanism should be of special interest to social studies educators since this discipline “has perhaps the most explicit mandate for developing cross-cultural understanding of all the school subjects” (p. 29).
Despite a renewed interest in cosmopolitanism for promoting global competency (Banks, 1991, p. 142; Merryfield, 2008) within classrooms, school curricula are U.S.-centric providing few glimpses of how the United States is viewed by the rest of the world (Lindaman & Ward, 2004). In an increasingly interconnected world, understanding perceptions of the United States through the eyes of other nations is perhaps more important than at any other time in history. We argue that international, translated children’s literature affords opportunities for viewing American culture as people across the world see it.

In this study, we utilize a lens of cosmopolitanism to examine depictions of the United States in a set of award-winning international, translated children’s books. Since international children’s literature is thought to help young readers understand people different from themselves (Bond, 2006; Martin, Smolen, Oswald & Milam, 2012), we wondered if books with international origins also are useful for showing youth in the U.S. how people across the globe might perceive the United States. The sample includes titles recognized with the Mildred L. Batchelder Award or Honor, a commendation given to translated literature with international origins by the Association of Library Services to Children (ALSC), a division of the American Library Association (ALA). The following research questions guided the study: 1) How are Americans and the United States depicted in Batchelder Award and Honor titles published from 2000-2013? and 2) What messages about the United States are communicated in these titles? Examining depictions of the United States in international children’s literature can provide insight for Kindergarten-grade 12 students into the perceptions of the United States abroad. Given literature may be regarded as a “barometer” (Rossel, 1986, p.51) gauging popular sociopolitical views, Kindergarten-grade 12 students might gain a richer understanding of their position as citizens of the United States as well as global citizens by reading books originating in other countries. Examining Batchelder titles has particular importance since they often are award winning within their countries of origin (Bond, 2006), and presumably, they are widely read. These books serve as windows providing a view of the perceptions people of other nations have about the United States and how they communicate these to their young people.

**Literature Review**

To contextualize our study, we begin by discussing international literature titles that have won the Batchelder Award. Then, we address the ways in which international literature has been used within social studies education. We end our literature review by noting perceptions of the U.S.A. across the globe in order to draw comparisons between our findings and those of other researchers.

**International Literature and the Mildred L. Batchelder Award**

In order to clarify the nature of the titles we examined in this study, we begin with a discussion of terminology. *Global literature* is a comprehensive term celebrating diversity in many forms, such as race and language, and it encompasses literature published in both the United States and worldwide (Hadaway & McKenna, 2007). *International literature* refers to literature published in another country and includes books written in English in countries other than the United States (Liang, Watkins, & Williams, 2013). *Translated literature* is a subset of international literature defined by books published in another country, in another language, and subsequently translated into English and published and marketed in the United States. In our work here, the books we analyzed are both international and translated titles: winners or honorees of the Batchelder Award. Established in 1966 by the ALSC, the Batchelder Award recognizes translated literature. Sometimes, Batchelder books are award-winners in their home
countries; for instance, the 2014 winner *Mister Orange* (Matti, 2013) won the Dutch Silver Slate Pencil award while 2013 winner *My Family for the War* (Voorhoeve, 2012) won Germany’s Buxtehude Bulle prize. The Batchelder Award is unique within the domain of children’s literature awards since it is given to the *publisher* of the translated title and not the *title* itself; it is an award intended “to encourage international exchange of quality children’s books by recognizing United States publishers of such books in translation” (ALSC, 1987, para. 1).

Award criteria specifically note that winning titles “should not be unduly ‘Americanized.’ The book’s reader should be able to sense that the book came from another country” (ALSC, 1987, Criteria 2.C).

The Batchelder Award has been critiqued for the limited number of countries and languages of origin represented in winning titles. Analyses of Batchelder books, given since the award’s conception in 1966, show a strong preponderance of Western European origins and languages as well as settings (Garrison & Kimmel, 2014; Lo & Leahy, 1997; Nist, 1988). Africa, Asia, and South America are underrepresented in terms of origin, language, and setting. This is not a phenomenon of the Batchelders alone; other international books published in the United States also tend to come from Western European nations. A study by Maureen White and Ruth Cox (2004) including a broader sample of U.S. published, translated literature for children noted similar findings in terms of the homogeneity of settings and languages of origin. Despite the shortcomings of the Batchelder titles, they may represent the best of translated titles available to readers in the U.S., which makes them significant given that few translated books make their way to bookshelves in this country (Stan, 1999).

**Use of Global and International Literature in Social Studies Classrooms**

Various scholars support the use of global, international, and (sometimes) translated literature in Kindergarten-grade 12 classrooms to promote curricular areas like social studies (McCall, 2010; Smolen & Martin, 2011). Supporting the premise that the social studies curriculum presents a non-global curriculum highlighting U.S. history, economics and geography, scholars argue that international literature can serve as a means for promoting cultural understanding and respect (Bond, 2006; Crocco, 2006; Jacobs, 2012; Lucas, 2009; Martin et al., 2012; Wasta, 2010). Some maintain literature written by people in other countries enriches the social studies curriculum and provides global perspectives on the topics such as place (Wasta, 2010), human rights (Lucas, 2009) and peace (Sunal, Kelley, & Sunal, 2012) among others. Similarly, Jacobs (2012) reviewed three children’s books selected by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and Children’s Book Council *Notable Social Studies Books for Young People 2012* and claimed such literature allows students to: 1) learn where they are in a local context, 2) appreciate a broader and global context, and 3) gain a better understanding of themselves from someone else’s perspectives. These social studies educators and researchers collectively argue that literature in translation, in particular, offers unique opportunities for cosmopolitan-minded educators because it provides access to global settings and characters in a language that is familiar and local. When the settings and characters are familiar and local (as in some Batchelder titles that are set in the U.S.A.), they have been refracted through the lens of another culture’s language and literature. Such books offer readers the chance to read about themselves, their localities, and their own culture as they were presented in literature written and published abroad.

Though informative, the existing research on global literature in social studies also directs our attention to the images of the United States in this literature. Our thorough search of
the literature found only one article (Stahl, 1985) that discussed portrayals of the United States in international children’s literature suggesting this is an extremely under represented research area. While various authors promote international literature as a lens for readers in the U.S. to encounter other cultures and settings, we were unable to locate any that examined international literature for reflections of the U.S.A. through the eyes of others. One exception, J. D. Stahl, relied on a study published in German for his discussion of images of the U.S. in German literature for children finding a fascination with American Indians and stories of the Wild West. Margaret Crocco (2006) adequately notes, global literature could also carry some stereotypes and biases in representing its own cultures and others particularly in fictional accounts. This means it is necessary to look at how books from different regions and countries represent the cultures of the United States as well as other cultures if we want to use them in classrooms.

**Images of the United States in a Global Age**

While a thorough review of the professional literature revealed few studies analyzing portrayals of the U.S.A. in translated international literature, researchers examining depictions of the nation in international textbooks suggest divergent perceptions. In their book, *History Lessons: How Textbooks around the World Portray the U.S. History*, Dana Lindaman and Kyle Ward (2004) presented translated excerpts from international textbooks on key events in U.S. history such as Viking exploration of the New World, Westward expansion, slavery, World War I, and World War II among others. These authors offer snapshots of how different countries represent such topics, by presenting perspectives from the countries heavily involved with and affected by the United States. Examples include: British, French, Canadian, and German perspectives on the American Revolution; Mexican perspectives on the Mexican War; and Chinese and Japanese perspectives on issues around Asian immigration to the U.S.A. These authors suggest the images of the U.S.A. presented in international textbooks are complex, perhaps depending on cultural, political and economic relationships of the U.S.A. with the country in which the textbook originated. A representation of the U.S.A. in South Korean history textbooks for the middle and secondary grades was also considered (An & Suh, 2013). These authors found images of the U.S.A. are predominantly positive as “a world leader in democracy and peace” (An & Suh, 2013, p. 57) although in some topics, contradictory images were identified. Those included: the U.S. forcefully requesting Japan to open the door to U.S. trade; the U.S. roles in interfering with the Vietnam War; and the impacts of European exploration and westward expansion on Native Americans.

Studies exploring international students’ perceptions about the United States also provide glimpses of how people in other countries view this particular country and what they know about the nation. Interviewing and surveying junior high school students in Norway, Jack Zevin (2003) found they viewed the United States as the wealthiest, strongest, and most populous among Norway, the United States, and Russia. Secondary and first year college students in Finland were surveyed on their knowledge of U.S. geography and society (Raento & Hottola, 2005). Respondents knew the most about popular culture and the entertainment industry with 98% knowing that Hollywood was the capital of the American film industry and knowing where to find it on a map of the United States (Raenot & Hottola, 2005). They identified, also, Las Vegas as a popular gambling destination. The images and perceptions Chinese students have built of the United States were examined (Zhao, Zhou, & Huang, 2008). Three images prevailed in their findings: The U.S. as a superpower with a strong economy, the U.S. as a military power, and the technological achievements of the United States. It was noted that students view the
U.S.A. as a “world police.” As such, they resented U.S. hegemony in world affairs and interference with domestic affairs of other countries such as China.

A recent poll on global images of the United States (Pew Research Project, 2013) also found that young people around the world admire the United States for the soft powers of science, technology, movies, music, and television by people in Africa and Latin America. Ways of doing business, ideas about democracy and the spread of U.S. ideas and customs were also admired (Pew Research Project, 2013). In sum, studies of how the U.S.A. is presented in international textbooks and how youth in other countries perceive the nation suggest it is admired for its strength, wealth, technological advancement, and popular culture. Though the United States is admired, it is simultaneously resented for its hegemony in international affairs and its oppression of minority ethnic and racial groups.

Conceptual Framework

We used cosmopolitanism as a lens to articulate our rationales for the study and to guide the data analysis. Cosmopolitanism is not a new idea (Nussbaum, 1996); interest in this perspective has grown across disciplines in recent years, including in education (Hansen, 2010a). According to Jacobs (2012), taking a cosmopolitan perspective means:

. . . embracing a broader horizon of outlook and concern for global humanity (i.e., relationships between people and understanding the needs of others) and global ecology (i.e., relationships between people and the environment), while simultaneously remaining rooted in one’s local culture, heritage, and mores, and valuing what they may contribute to global understanding. (p. 28)

Cosmopolitanism is viewed also as “living at the interface of the local and the global” (Harper & Dunkerly, 2009, p. 57), while it is discussed by David Hansen (2010b) as “the capacity to fuse reflective openness to the new with reflective loyalty to the known” (p. 153). Cosmopolitanism is an orientation in which one’s feet are planted to the ground of the local and familiar while the heart and mind remain open to the global and the new.

We argue international literature enables American readers to see themselves in the eyes of others around the world. Cosmopolitan educators contend such introspection into one’s position in global society is critical to developing a cosmopolitan viewpoint. According to Hansen’s notion of “cosmopolitanism on the ground” (p. 4), “a cosmopolitan orientation features an interest in learning from other traditions, a process that may mean illuminating one’s way in the world by their insights as well as by one’s own (emphasis added)” (p. 19). A cosmopolitan perspective includes assuming a critical perspective of one’s own culture that would include seeing one’s country and culture as others see it. It is this critical perspective that we bring to our present work: an analysis of how the U.S. is perceived in international, translated children’s literature.

Method

The findings from this study emerged from our previous research studying culture in the 39 Batchelder titles published since 2000 (Forest, Kimmel, & Garrison, 2013; Forest, Garrison, & Kimmel, 2015; Garrison, Forest, & Kimmel, 2014). We examined cultural constructs or identities such as gender, nationality, race, religion, social class, etc. While reading and coding the Batchelder books for these projects, we observed a number of references to the U.S.A. and American culture. This observation intrigued us. We wondered, “What do international books reveal about how the United States is perceived in other countries? What can youth learn about
the U.S.A. from reading these books?” These questions motivated us to undertake the present study.

**Data Sources**
While all 39 Batchelder Award and Honor books published since 2001-2014 were read and exhaustively coded for all codes, only titles referencing the U.S.A. ($n = 18$) were included in this study (see Table 1). Full citations appear in Appendix A.

**Table 1**
**Batchelder Titles Referencing the United States**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Batchelder Title</th>
<th>Award Year &amp; Status</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Original Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Mister Orange</em></td>
<td>2014 Award</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>My Family for the War</em></td>
<td>2013 Award</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>German</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>My Family for the War</em></td>
<td>2013 Award</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>German</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Game for Swallows</em></td>
<td>2013 Honor</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Son of a Gun</em></td>
<td>2013 Honor</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Soldier Bear</em></td>
<td>2012 Award</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Lily Pond</em></td>
<td>2012 Honor</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nothing</em></td>
<td>2011 Honor</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Danish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Faraway Island</em></td>
<td>2010 Award</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Brave Story</em></td>
<td>2008 Award</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nicholas and the Gang</em></td>
<td>2008 Honor</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nicholas</em></td>
<td>2006 Honor</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>When I Was a Soldier</em></td>
<td>2006 Honor</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Run, Boy, Run</em></td>
<td>2004 Award</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>Hebrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Man Who Went to the Far Side of the Moon</em></td>
<td>2004 Award</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Thief Lord</em></td>
<td>2003 Award</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Germany</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

Our prior research utilized the inductive approach to qualitative content analysis, a method in which themes are determined from the meaning of the text and an a priori coding frame is not utilized (Berg, 2001). Since we studied cultural constructs and identities, we labeled all explicit and implicit references to the constructs we were investigating. In the previous work, references to the U.S.A. were coded originally under the cultural constructs of “nationality” or “immigration.” The following passage coded as “immigration,” made an explicit reference to the United States: “About two years before I was born, Benjamin Becker, a man from Bremen came to our village. He told the people about a better life in America” (Gündisch, 2001, p. 3). As we noted more of these, we began labeling passages as “America” in addition to other cultural constructs where appropriate. This passage was coded as “America” and made an implicit reference to U.S. culture with its reference to Coca-Cola: “Some Coke, some vodka, the boys dancing like drunken ducks, the girls getting depressed: you sweat, your make-up runs, you go to the toilet to put another layer on, but who for? Who for?” (Zenatti, 2005, p. 16). For the purpose of the present study, we isolated all of the coded passages from the books that referred to the U.S.A. or U.S. culture, including those originally labeled as “nationality” or “immigration.” All passages like these subsequently were compiled and thematically analyzed for the present study.

All references to the United States were coded line by line by all four members of our research team. Of each line, we asked, “What does this reference to America mean? Is it a reference to an American person, product, or group of people? Are characters discussing America as a destination? Or are they concerned with American actions abroad?” Sometimes, references to America were related to the plot of the book, particularly regarding immigration. Other references were small and not related to the content, plot, or theme of the book but offered a glimpse at the ways American culture had been integrated into the setting (the quote from When I Was a Soldier in the preceding paragraph is an example). The initial codes we labeled as a team were compiled into categories such as technology, entertainment, or the U.S.A. as superpower, and these categories were combined into two overall themes aligned with a cosmopolitan framework: global, or the U.S. abroad, and local, or the U.S.A. as a destination and home for the world’s diaspora. In local images, we saw some of the world's peoples relocating or desiring to relocate to the U.S.A. In the global images, we saw the dispersion of U.S. products, culture, and entertainment as well as political and military engagements.
Findings

Findings are presented in two sections that correspond with the local or global aspects of cosmopolitanism (see Table 2).

Table 2
The United States in Batchelder Titles: Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local</th>
<th>Economic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Destination for Immigrants</td>
<td>“I don’t want to wait until we have nothing to gnaw on. I see only one way out: immigration” (Gündisch, 2001, p. 7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe refuge</td>
<td>“A country where they’ll be safe, and where no one will persecute them for being Jewish” (Thor, 2011, p. 139).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers</td>
<td>“Fortunately I knew some people who could help me come to New York. Here I’m free to make whatever I want”’” (Matti, 2013, pp. 122-23).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of Diversity</th>
<th>Equality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everyone was equal and the butcher served the customers by the order they came into the store, and not by their nationality (Gündisch, 2001, p. 15).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Language & assimilation | “He had a strong accent, as though he had not been living in America for very long” (Matti, 2013, p. 33). |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Romanticism</th>
<th>Abundance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everything in America is huge. We’ll live in a house with lots and lots of rooms and a big garden” (Thor, 2009, loc. 757-762).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Luring workers | But Benjamin Becker hadn't bewitched the people by playing the flute; he had bewitched them with his stories of the wonderful life in Youngstown or Pittsburgh, and with his immigrant songs (Gündisch, 2001, p. 24). |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global</th>
<th>Military</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World Power</td>
<td>“You haven't heard?” the man exalted. &quot;Great Britain is saved, ladies! The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor! The USA has declared war!” (Voorhoeve, 2012, iBooks version, p. 320).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Avoiding intervention | “How come they sat offshore and waited when the shooting started? How come we have to go through |
another war? Why didn’t the ship send Marines in to stop the killing?” (de Graaf, 2012, p. 58).

Relief  I thought at first they were doctors from America because they are talking in English. I can’t understand what they are saying. All I know in English are sentences that I remember from the beginning of the Aladdin story, which I learned in school two years ago (Carmi, 2000, p. 21).

Soft Powers  Entertainment  You’ve got this a bit wrong. I’m not Donald Duck, and this isn’t Disneyland, I tell them keeping my dignity (Zenatti, 2005, pp. 209-210).

Products  "Yes. So did those trucks and the cans of Spam that you'll eat until you're sick of it. It's all from America" (Orlev, 2003, loc. 2106).

Technology  

Ideas  Martin Luther King’s I Have a Dream speech (Zenatti, 2005, p. 37)

Local: The United States as Place

Treatments of the United States as a destination, perceptions of the United States as a place, and perceptions of American people or the American way of life within U.S. territory were considered local because, for American readers, they provide reflections of how others view their country. These portrayals often focused on the United States as a destination for immigrants, a country composed of diverse people, and a place often romanticized.

United States as a destination and refuge. The United States often was described as a desirable place to settle, particularly for immigrants fleeing religious persecution or seeking better economic opportunities. How I Became an American (Gündisch, 2001) and Mister Orange (Matti, 2013) were books centered on the immigrant experience. Families and individuals, in these books, came to the United States for economic reasons. Johann, the protagonist in How I Became an American (Gündisch, 2001) who is later dubbed Johnny, recalls his father telling his mother about the decision to move the family from Romania: “I don’t want to wait until we have nothing to gnaw on. I see only one way out: immigration” (Gündisch, 2001, p. 7). In Mister Orange (Matti, 2013), the title character is an artist based on the real painter Piet Mondrian; Mr. Orange talks to Linus, his young friend, about coming to the United States for artistic freedom. In The Lily Pond (Thor, 2011), Stephie and Nellie Steiner are Jewish sisters who leave their Austrian homes and parents to join foster families in Sweden during World War II. They envision the United States as a refuge or as, “a country where they’ll be safe, and where no one will persecute them for being Jewish” (Thor, 2011, p. 139).
Although characters viewed the United States as a safe haven, numerous barriers to entering the country were identified. Characters needed money or a family member, often a cousin or distant relative, with money to make the journey. In *How I Became an American* (Gündisch, 2001), people were turned away at Ellis Island because they were ill or poor. Often characters spoke about needing to have a family member or friend to sponsor them. Mr. Orange recalls, “Fortunately I knew some people who could help me come to New York. Here I'm free to make whatever I want” (Matti, 2013, pp. 122-23). Jurek, a Polish youth in *Run, Boy, Run* (Orlev, 2003), is offered adoption and a home in the United States by an affluent Jewish man who happened to be in New York when World War II broke out.

**United States as a place of diversity and assimilation.** Due to immigration, the United States was described as a place of great diversity in nationalities, languages, and religion. In *How I Became an American* (Gündisch, 2001), there are numerous references to the variety of nationalities and languages present in the United States. Few famous Americans are mentioned by name in this set of books, and two of them are African Americans: Jesse Owens in *My Family for the War* (Voorhoeve, 2012) and Martin Luther King, Jr. in *When I was a Soldier* (Zenatti, 2005).

Assimilation is a strong concern in the immigration stories, and learning the English language is given special emphasis in this regard. Characters wait to come to the United States study English in order to fit in. Immigrants are marked by their accents as this quote from *Mister Orange* exemplifies, “he had a strong accent, as though he had not been living in America for very long” (Matti, 2013, p. 33). The young narrator in *How I Became an American* (Gündisch, 2001) also relates, “In America, you really have to speak English well, if you want to get ahead” (p. 11). Re-education of immigrants and particularly English language instruction was seen as a way to “integrate the newcomers” (p. 119).

**United States as a glamorized place.** The United States often was romanticized and portrayed as a land of abundance and great wealth. Stephe, in *A Faraway Island* (Thor, 2009), tells her young sister Nellie, “everything in America is huge. We’ll live in a house with lots and lots of rooms and a big garden. A real garden with tall trees, lindens and chestnuts. Almost a park. Not at all like here” (Thor, 2009, loc. 757-762). The United States is described as a place of abundance and wealth where “everyone can eat butter when they want to” (*How I Became an American*, Gündisch, 2001, p. 112). It is further depicted as a place with “restaurants, stores all lit up, street merchants, sidewalk cafes and, above all, the best ‘merry creams’ in the world” (*A Game for Swallows*, Abirached, 2012, p. 109). For young women, America represented other social freedoms as well. Johann considers his sister’s new life as a woman in America where “[she] no longer had to hoe potatoes or corn; [she] had nice clothes and a little money and [she] could marry when [she] chose” (Gündisch, 2001, p. 15).

Conversely, *How I Became an American* (Gündisch, 2001) also addresses the darker side of the immigrant experience as laborers (including children) perform jobs that are undesirable and even unsafe. Here the promise of America as a land of opportunity is described as a way to lure immigrants:

Mama thought that the rat-catcher must have been someone like Benjamin Becker - someone who could lure people away to foreign lands. But Benjamin Becker hadn’t bewitched the people by playing the flute; he had bewitched them with his stories of the wonderful life in Youngstown or Pittsburgh, and with his immigrant songs. (Gündisch, 2001, p. 24)
Though many titles glamorize the United States, *How I Became an American*, with its theme of unfulfilled American dreams, countered the glamorous image with a more realistic portrayal of early 20th century American life.

**Global: The United States Abroad**

Next, we consider the global influences, or the influences of the United States on an international level. We first consider the United States as a world power; followed by a consideration of soft powers, such as technology and entertainment that affect other nations. We conclude our findings by noting the ways in which the United States is interconnected with countries across the globe.

**United States as world power.** The United States was frequently described as a world power engaged in military actions around the world. In *Mister Orange* (Matti, 2013), Linus and his older brother Albie read comic books depicting Superman fighting alongside American soldiers in combat against the Nazis. In *My Family for the War* (Voorhoeve, 2012), Amanda, an Englishwoman, and others celebrate when the United States joins the Allies in World War II: "You haven't heard?" the man exalted. "Great Britain is saved, ladies! The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor! The USA has declared war!" (Voorhoeve, 2012, iBooks version, p. 320). *Son of a Gun* (de Graaf, 2012), a 2013 Batchelder Honor, is set in Liberia in the 1990s, a time of great conflict in that nation. The presence of American warships off the Liberian coast is noted with frustration as the ships do not become involved in the conflict devastating Liberia. A character questions, “How come they sat offshore and waited when the shooting started? How come we have to go through another war? Why didn’t the ship send Marines in to stop the killing?” (de Graaf, 2012, p. 58). As this passage illustrates, there is disappointment when Americans do not exercise their military might to become involved in Liberian affairs. At other times, the United States is a source of food or medical relief. In *Run, Boy, Run* (Orlev, 2003), another novel set during World War II, a soldier offers Jurek, the protagonist, cheese and Spam® which have been sent from the United States. In *Samir and Yonatan* (Carmi, 2000), set in Israel in contemporary times, American doctors perform surgery to correct young Samir’s leg. There are a few mentions of Americans sending their sons abroad to fight; for instance, in *Mister Orange* (Matti, 2013), Linus’s older brother Albie enlists in the military and heads off to Europe. In *My Family for the War* (Voorhoeve, 2012), characters are disappointed with the United States and its initial reluctance to enter World War II, yet they rejoice later when Americans join the fighting. *Soldier Bear* (Tak, 2012) refers to the United States and Britain as occupying parts of Italy during World War II. These examples illustrate the global reach and influence of the United States.

**The United States and soft powers.** In addition to military power, the United States often was depicted as a source of technology, products, entertainment, and ideas or know-how in the world. Books with contemporary settings such as *When I Was a Soldier* (Zenatti, 2005) and *Samir and Yonatan* (Carmi, 2000) include references to American movies and television series. Valerie, a character in *When I Was a Soldier* (Zenatti, 2005) mentions several Hollywood movies along with Donald Duck and Disneyland. Nicholas and his father attend a movie about “cowboys knocking each other out and shooting their guns!” in *Nicholas and the Gang* (Goscinny, 2007, p. 113). Along with popular shows and movies, the world watched the trip to the moon on television sets in *The Man Who Went to the Far Side of the Moon* (Schoffert, 2003), and radio broadcasts from the United States during the Holocaust included “The author Thomas Mann, who gave radio addresses for German BBC listeners from his Californian exile”
(Voorhoeve, 2012, p. 349). Music was also referenced; Mr. Orange, the artist, is inspired by American boogie-woogie to create one of his famous paintings (Matti, 2013).

North American products such as Spam®, Coke®, and Marlboro® were given cameo references depicting the spread of American products abroad. The technological know-how of the United States often was transported across borders. In Brave Story (Miyabe, 2007), a character whose uncle worked for a computer company is transferred to the United States from Japan. United States medical doctors and technology are at work in an Israeli hospital in Samir and Yonatan (Carmi, 2001), while the technology of the U.S. lunar mission is highlighted in The Man Who Went to the Far Side of the Moon (Schyffert, 2003).

American ideals are found around the world as illustrated by the desire to immigrate to a place of greater religious, artistic, and economic freedom as depicted in many of the historical fiction titles. Valerie, who lives in Israel, describes how her school’s exams include a question about Martin Luther King, Jr.’s I Have a Dream Speech (Zenatti, 2005). Mr. Orange is another admirer of the United States, particularly the progressive, forward-thinking attitudes of Americans. He calls New York “‘the city of the future’”(Matti, 2013, p. 77).

The United States and an interconnected planet. Our presentation of these findings sets up a dichotomy of import-export where the United States is considered as both a destination for people from around the world along with their languages, religions, art, and culture and a source of technology, ideas, and culture around the world. We found these borders were themselves very fluid and suggestive of a much more interconnected world. Numerous characters across the books in this set had family members who lived in the United States including parents and grandparents. One example is Benedicte in A Book of Coupons, who has a “grandpa in America, who spent his life sticking Green Stamps in a book” (Morgenstern, 2001, p. 10).

While the United States was a destination for travelers from around the world, Americans traveled also. In The Thief Lord (Funke, 2002), two German brothers who ran away to Venice, Italy, at first assume someone is American because he talks funny. They expect to encounter Americans in Venice. Son of A Gun (de Graaf, 2012) reminds us that former American slaves settled in that country:

That’s the funny thing about Liberia. We come from different tribes, but five percent of the population is descended from ex-slaves who came back to Africa from America and the Caribbean. And those people don’t look like anything at all, not even West African. They might have the high cheekbones of a Somali, or the nose of an Ethiopian (de Graaf, 2012, p. 64)

Perhaps no book captures the sense of a global and interconnected family as much as The Man Who Went to the Far Side of the Moon (Schyffert, 2003) translated from Swedish in which the American Astronaut Michael Collins looks back at the planet Earth and does not see borders; he only sees home (Schyffert, 2003).

Discussion

Our goal was to analyze depictions of the United States and Americans in a set of translated, international children’s literature. Our analysis was grounded in the lens of cosmopolitanism, which encourages taking a critical perspective of one’s own culture bounded within national and cultural boundaries. What does this set of award-winning books with international origins reveal about the United States and how it is perceived, and what can we, as Americans, learn from this? Our analysis revealed the Batchelder books portrayed the United
States as a destination for those seeking safety and freedom, a country of cultural diversity as well as assimilation, and as a romanticized, glamorized land of wealth and abundance. Characters, additionally, viewed the United States as a world power and admired it for its *soft powers*, which included the entertainment and technological industries, and American ideals.

Some of the depictions of the United States in the books parallel perceptions that school-aged children in other countries have about America. In *The Man Who Went to the Far Side of the Moon* (Schyffert, 2003), the world marvels at the technological achievement of the United States; Zhao et al.’s (2008) findings revealed Chinese students in their study were proud of the U.S. space program, particularly the moon landing. In the books, the country was perceived as a world power; Zevin’s (2003) participants viewed the nation as strong, while Zhao et al. (2008) found America was perceived as a military force, sometimes a dominant and hegemonic one. The Batchelder titles depicted characters admiring American soft powers like the ideals of freedom and democracy as well as popular culture like movies and television. Students in Raeonto and Hottola’s (2005) study cited American media as an important source of their knowledge of the United States, which suggests student engagement with American film and television. The parallels between our findings and perceptions of the international students in these studies suggests images of the U.S.A. as 1) a strong military power, 2) a land of democracy, 3) a source of popular culture, and 4) a birthplace of technological innovation might be common viewpoints across the globe.

It should be noted that unflattering images of the United States were uncommon in the Batchelder titles although we collected and coded all references to this particular nation in our analysis. Several factors may account for this finding. First, a majority of Batchelder winners published since the late 1990s originate from Western Europe (Garrison & Kimmel, 2014), countries that are political allies of the U.S.A. Presumably, books originating from nations allied with the United States are more likely to include positive images of the nation than books originating from nations that are not allies. Second, it is possible that a selective tradition was at work when the titles in our sample were chosen as award winners. A selective tradition in literature occurs when “certain meanings and practices are selected for emphasis and certain other meanings and practices are negative or excluded” (Williams, 1977, p. 115). Texts representing particular ideologies and values are selected at the expense of texts not representing any particular perspective. It is possible that the U.S. publishers who selected these books for translation to English and publication in the U.S. unconsciously (or consciously) chose titles with positive views of their home country and overlooked titles with negative views. The Batchelder Award committee, likewise, may have selected winners for the same reason; as Miller (1998) has observed that selection of award-winning books is subject to an individual’s beliefs and interests. A selective tradition, in which only books featuring positive aspects of the U.S. are selected for the Batchelder Award, may operate on two levels: 1) when international books are chosen for translation and publication by U.S. publishers and 2) when international books are selected as award winners by an ALSC committee. Although we advocate for using Batchelder titles in social studies classrooms, we recognize their limitations in terms of providing a balanced perspective of the U.S.A.

To some degree, Batchelder books permit us to assume another culture’s perspective about our country and view ourselves as the world does. As U.S. citizens, we have our own perceptions of our country, which have been cultivated from direct knowledge and experiences, yet, by reading Batchelder titles, we are offered an alternative perspective of our nation. As
scholars like Ciardiello (2012), Gehlbach (2011), and Wolk (2003) have noted, perspective taking is an important component of social studies education (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Brooks, 2011; Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Camicia & Saavedra, 2009). Assuming multiple perspectives has been suggested as a means of promoting critical literacy skills (Baildon & Damico, 2011; Spector & Jones, 2009; Wolk, 2003) in Kindergarten-grade 12 classrooms, which can promote deeper understanding (Spector & Jones, 2009), inquiry skills (Baildon & Damico, 2011) and “questioning habits of mind” (Wolk, 2003, p. 102). Reading Batchelder titles in Kindergarten-grade 12 classrooms and considering the perspectives they present about the United States in light of our own knowledge of U.S. citizens could potentially support both perspective taking and critical literacy.

The Batchelder titles depict Americans as others. Perhaps understanding how we (as Americans) are depicted as the other in international literature can help us better understand how we perceive people and cultures different from our own. While most portrayals of the United States in the Batchelder titles were positive, they do not fully capture the complexities of American life. Though characters in the Batchelder titles viewed the nation as a land of freedom, in reality, many of its citizens still struggle for their rights. The Civil Rights movement is not in the far past, and today’s marginalized groups continue to advocate for greater freedoms (e.g., current debates over marriage equality). Realizing the disparity between the image promoted in these U.S. centered books as a land of freedom and the reality of the nation as a land where freedom is elusive for some people, might prompt young people to question how well our own views of other countries align with reality. If people of other cultures simplify life in the United States, in what ways are U.S. perspectives of people in other nations distorted or oversimplified? This is an important question if today’s students are to become truly cosmopolitan and critical citizens.

Children in the United States learn about the world through textbooks and television and children around the world learn about the country through similar venues. Speaking about global literature, Stan (1999) said, “Encountering a country through the perspective of a character who lives there creates a personal relationship with a place not possible through a textbook or television encounter” (p. 168). International literature provides not only new perspectives but new relationships as books lead readers into the hearts and minds of characters that live in other places. Literature allows us to see the world through the eyes of the other. The books featured in this study were originally written and read in other languages. They provide us with a different perspective on our own history and culture. We see the immigration experience through the critical eyes of Johann in How I Became an American (Gündisch, 2001) and the artistic spirit of Mister Orange (Matti, 2013). As American ships sit off the coast of Liberia, we understand the anguish of a war-torn country (Son of a Gun, de Graaf, 2012). This personal experience of the other provides the kinds of understandings needed for a more cosmopolitan frame where both the local and the global are close and personal.

Conclusions

As noted previously, the Batchelder titles we examined in this study offer a somewhat limited perspective on how the United States is perceived in international children’s literature due to their homogeneity in language and country of origin as well as the possibility of a selective tradition in their selection as award winners. We do not claim the portrayals of the country, we noted here are representative of other international children’s books. This study, however, is significant for several reasons. First, it is one of the only studies we know analyzing
U.S. depiction in international children’s literature. Perhaps sharing our work will encourage other researchers to examine what international titles can reveal about how the United States is perceived abroad and increase our understanding on this matter. A body of such research could help its citizens gauge how other countries view them and their culture. Ultimately, the findings from this work have potential to make their way into social studies classrooms, where students can read international literature and interrogate the perceptions of America and its international role. Reading international books that offer images of the U.S.A. could afford opportunities for students to engage in perspective-taking (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Brooks, 2011; Endacott & Brooks, 2013), a critical skill in an increasingly global society. While this is a worthy goal, additional research is needed to identify a variety of international texts that could meet this purpose.

Our study calls attention to a set of books that can be used by both teachers and teacher educators to not only examine images of the United States projected by other countries, but a set of books that may be of special interest to social studies educators more generally. In our experiences sharing our work about the Batchelder, we have found that many educators are unaware of this award. Not only do Batchelder books represent award-winning international, translated literature for children, they offer also unique perspectives on world history and events. Many titles assume different points-of-view on World War II: *Mister Orange* (Matti, 2013) shows how an immigrant family in the U.S. experiences the war on the home front, *My Family for the War* (Voorhoeve, 2012) presents the perspective of a Jewish girl relocated to England on a *kindertransport*, while *Run, Boy, Run* (Orlev, 2003) highlights a Jewish orphan’s survival story. Such stories provide rich opportunities for enhancing content instruction in the social studies.

We have analyzed the U.S. portrayal in translated, international children’s literature, an under-researched topic with particular implications for social studies education’s emphasis on promoting international understanding. These findings and conclusions are limited to the Batchelder Award-winning titles that were the focus of the study and cannot be generalized without a further, more comprehensive study. We hope our study, and future research like it, will help teachers and teacher educators in the social studies identify texts that can move students forward on the journey toward becoming cosmopolitan-oriented citizens of the world. In particular, we argue for the consideration of translated, international literature as an area worthy of consideration by social studies educators and researchers.

**References**


**Web-Based References**


**Appendix A**

Children’s Literature in Sample


**Author Bios**

**Sue C. Kimmel** is an Assistant Professor in Library Science at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. She earned her PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her research interests include multiple literacies and the socio-cultural impacts of children’s literature. Email: skimmel@odu.edu

**Danielle E. Forest** is an Assistant Professor of Elementary Education and Literacy at The University of Southern Mississippi, where she teaches literacy methods courses. She earned a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from Old Dominion University in 2014. Her research interests include critical literacy and diversity in children’s literature.

**Yonghee Suh** is an Assistant Professor of Social Studies/History Education in the Darden College of Education at Old Dominion University. She earned her PhD in Curriculum, Instruction and Educational Policy from Michigan State University. She researches how teachers engage students in reading and discussing a variety of historical representations as historical evidence, including images, films, literature, first-hand accounts, or textbooks.

**Kasey Garrison** is a lecturer of Teacher Librarianship at Charles Sturt University in New South Wales, Australia. Kasey earned her PhD in Education with a focus on Curriculum and Instruction from Old Dominion University in 2012. Her research interests focus on diversity within children’s and young adult literature.