

# From Rhyme to Rights: Children's Poetry and Minoritized Voices in Francophone Canada

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## Abstract

This article explores a corpus of Francophone children's poetry published in Western Canada between 1985 and 2008, analyzing how these texts construct cultural identity through poetic form, territorial inscription, and ideological layering. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from children's literature studies (Nières-Chevrel, Prince, Van der Linden), minority discourse theory (Paré, Cardinal), and cultural poetics, the article proposes the concept of a poetics of vulnerable cohabitation as a key to understanding the dual literary and communal function of these works. These poems, whether didactic, lyrical, or playful, are not merely texts to be read, but cultural acts situated within a fragile sociolinguistic ecology. In this ecology, French-language poetry for children performs the work of symbolic anchoring, fostering collective memory and identity through repetition, rhythm, and place-based imagery. Such poetic performativity aligns with Butler's (1997) theory of language as a constitutive act, where utterances do not merely reflect reality but actively shape identities and relations. The analysis highlights how this literature both reflects and resists the pedagogical, ideological, and aesthetic pressures of minority life. Particular attention is paid to the works of David Bouchard and André Duhaime, whose writings exemplify tensions between heritage and hybridity, between performativity and introspection. By foregrounding the poetic, the communal, and the precarious, this article invites renewed scholarly attention to the underestimated literary and cultural significance of minority Francophone children's poetry in Canada.

**Keywords:** Francophone children's literature; minority poetics; vulnerable cohabitation; cultural identity; Canadian Prairies; pedagogical ideology

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## 1. Introduction

In the literary landscapes of Francophone Canada, Western provinces often occupy a peripheral position, both geographically and symbolically. Yet, since the founding of *Les Éditions du Blé* in 1974, the Canadian Prairies have generated a unique and vibrant body of literature that deserves critical attention, particularly when it comes to literature for children. Among these underexplored territories lies a small but significant corpus of Francophone poetry for young readers, written and published in minority settings across Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. While children's literature has long been studied as a vehicle for language learning, moral development, or cultural preservation, its poetic subgenre remains especially overlooked, perhaps due to its brevity, hybrid nature, or supposed didacticism. However, when examined through the lenses of ideology and identity formation, children's poetry reveals itself as a powerful instrument of cultural transmission and symbolic negotiation, particularly in minority settings.

This article seeks to explore how Francophone children's poetry produced in Western Canada since the 1980s engages in both ideological inscription and identity-building. As Isabelle Nières-Chevrel and Nathalie Prince have argued, children's literature is never ideologically neutral: it exists within a triangular dynamic involving adult authors, child readers, and a pedagogical or cultural horizon that informs its creation. Recent work in critical childhood studies, particularly that of Spyrou (2018), underscores how children must be understood as active meaning-makers who interpret texts within complex social and cultural frames. In the case of minority Francophone communities, this dynamic becomes more complex, infused with the challenges of linguistic survival, territorial marginality, and collective memory. Drawing on François Paré's theory of *l'exiguïté*, literary writing under conditions of cultural and spatial constraint, we argue that the poetry written for young readers in these regions operates not merely as entertainment or language practice, but as a coded discourse of survival, belonging, and ideological positioning.

Our corpus includes works by six key figures: Jacqueline Barral, Pierre Mathieu, René Ammann, Gilles Cop, André Duhaime, and David Bouchard. Their poems, published between 1985 and 2008, span a wide range of forms, from traditional rhyming verse to haiku, from abécédaires to narrative poems addressing themes such as birth, nature, and Métis identity. These texts reflect varying degrees of ideological intention, ranging from Christian allegory (in the works of Cop and Mathieu) to ecological awareness and cultural affirmation (notably in Bouchard's *Si tu n'es pas de la prairie*). Some poems convey overt moral or religious lessons; others foster linguistic play or awaken a sense of place. Yet what binds these texts together is their shared production within a minority-language context, where French is not dominant and literature often assumes a compensatory or

performative function. This resonates with arguments from critical sociolinguistics, which highlight how speakers in minoritized contexts creatively rework dominant norms through localized, resistant language practices (Pennycook, 2010).

As a conceptual lens, this study introduces the notion of a poetics of vulnerable cohabitation, a framework for interpreting how these poetic texts do not merely transmit cultural values but actively stage the coexistence of voices, traditions, and identities under fragile conditions. This cohabitation is “vulnerable” because it emerges from a precarious sociolinguistic ecology and accommodates ambiguity, hybridity, and pedagogical tension rather than suppressing them. It reflects a literary ethic where the poem becomes not only a space of transmission, but a shared dwelling, where contradiction is not resolved but sustained.

To ground our analysis, we bring together several theoretical strands that rarely converge but illuminate one another when applied to children’s poetry in minority settings. From children’s literature studies, we draw on the work of Nières-Chevrel, Prince, Van der Linden, Boutevin, and Escarpit. Their research helps us discern the subtle balance between poetic play and didactic impulse, between the ludic and the moralistic dimensions that shape texts for young readers. Cultural theory and minority studies offer a complementary lens: Paré’s *Les littératures de l’exiguïté* (1992) repositions marginal writing as a site of intimate spatial negotiation; Michon’s reflections on publishing history shed light on the circulation of these works (1999); and Cardinal’s analyses of intellectual engagement in minority contexts invite us to read these poems not just as aesthetic artefacts but as acts of cultural stewardship (1997). Added to this are recent insights into media hybridity and orality (Letourneux, 2009), which help situate children’s poetry within broader ecosystems of performance and communal inscription.

Our approach moves fluidly between close reading and contextual inquiry. We examine how individual poems resonate within their socio-political and editorial landscapes, paying attention to the frictions between what the adult author intends and what the child reader might receive. Three questions guide our analysis: how do these texts embed ideological content, whether religious, moral, or political, often beneath seemingly playful surfaces? How do they inscribe place and identity, weaving prairie landscapes, seasonal rhythms, and Indigenous or Métis references into shared cultural memory? And finally, how do they navigate the genre’s own fault lines: are they primarily poetic, pedagogical, propagandistic, or do they invent new spaces that resist such binaries?

These questions structure the three central sections of this article. The first traces ideological undercurrents, following them through diction, imagery, and paratexts. The second examines territorial and cultural inscriptions, attentive to how local geographies and histories are reimagined for child audiences. The third confronts the genre’s hybrid status, asking whether children’s poetry in minority contexts can subvert normative expectations or whether it reinforces communal orthodoxies.

Ultimately, our aim is to reposition this corpus within both literary and cultural histories. Children’s poetry has long suffered a kind of double invisibility: marginalized by literary studies, which often privilege adult works, and by minority cultures themselves, which tend to valorize fiction or memoir as vehicles of identity. Yet these poems, modest in scale and often ephemeral in publication, carry profound stakes. They articulate communal anxieties about linguistic survival, transmit symbolic continuities, and invite children into a world where language, place, and belonging remain contested but vividly alive.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Children’s literature has always occupied a liminal space, torn between its literary ambitions and its pedagogical duties. It is written for children rather than by them, which immediately creates an asymmetry between the adult who authors the text and the child who receives it. Isabelle Nières-Chevrel notes that this imbalance shapes the genre’s pedagogical and institutional frameworks, positioning children’s books at the intersection of care, control, and creativity (Nières-Chevrel, 2009, p. 13, my translation). Nathalie Prince deepens this reflection by describing children’s literature as “a grand book of paradoxes”: a field whose very name reveals its reader and whose identity remains “floating, if not elusive” (Prince, 2021, p. 212, my translation). The genre is both playful and didactic, poetic and normative, a hybridity that permeates every level of form and content. Denise Escarpit urges scholars to look beyond canonical publishing narratives. The history of children’s literature, he argues, has too often been relegated to the margins, dismissed as sub-literature or reduced to utilitarian purposes, even though it encompasses a remarkable diversity of forms, from popular novels to comics and juvenile periodicals (2008, p. 5). These perspectives illuminate the tensions we find in Francophone children’s poetry from Western Canada: texts that must enchant and instruct, transmit cultural memory, and carry identity work far beyond what literary criticism has traditionally acknowledged.

Within this broader category, poetry for children represents an even more peculiar niche. It hovers between orality and textuality, between the intimacy of lullabies and the performative energy of playground chants. Sophie Van der Linden’s research on picturebooks helps us grasp this hybridity: she describes how such works refuse rigid hierarchies between word and image, instead producing “crossed expressions” where text and visuals overlap, echo, or even contradict each other (Van der Linden, 2008, p. 58, my translation). This insight applies equally to children’s poetry, which often invites performance as much as comprehension. From nursery rhymes to haiku,

abécédaires to nonsense verse, these poems cultivate rhythm, brevity, and repetition—qualities that enhance memorability and heighten ideological and emotional resonance.

Christine Boutevin's doctoral work on illustrated poetry books sharpens this point by showing how poetic form functions doubly: it offers a space for aesthetic play and creative deviation while simultaneously carrying normative expectations shaped by both text and image. The encounter between poem and illustration, she argues, generates a "double reading" in which children navigate meaning not only cognitively but also sensorially and affectively (Boutevin, 2014, p. 369, my translation). This dual mode of engagement reframes poetic form as anything but neutral: it becomes an active participant in cultural and identity work. In the Western Canadian corpus, sonic textures and rhythmic cadences invite communal reading, with poems meant to be spoken, sung, or enacted, transforming them into acts of belonging and cultural affirmation.

François Paré's notion of *littératures de l'exiguïté* extends this reflection to minority literatures, describing how works born of marginal spaces operate under a "rhetoric of survival": they must create aesthetically and defend culturally. In such contexts, literature is more than expression; it is a political and symbolic battleground. Jacques Michon's historical studies of Canadian publishing (1999) show how this dynamic shaped French-language children's literature in Canada, especially in the early twentieth century when Catholic publishers infused books with moral and religious imperatives. Even in contemporary works, subtle traces of this heritage persist in the language of care, moral choice, and cultural perseverance.

This is particularly true in minority contexts like Francophone Western Canada, where writing in French is never just linguistic; it is an act of cultural resistance and self-definition. As Linda Cardinal observes, to write in French in a predominantly English-speaking environment is to engage in a deliberate act of identity-making (1997). For children's literature, this entails a double movement: grounding narratives in the tangible realities of prairie life, with its seasons, geographies, and Métis and Indigenous presences, while also connecting young readers to a broader Francophone tradition. Robert Viau observes that Francophone children's books in minority settings are less about fantasy and more about anchorage, concerned above all with place, identity, and cultural endurance (1988). In poetry, this anchorage often emerges through symbolic landscapes such as prairie winds, harvest cycles, and community rituals, which become poetic topographies that affirm belonging through rhythm and repetition.

Taken together, these frameworks reveal children's poetry in Western Canada as more than a quaint literary byway. It is a hybrid form that binds pedagogy to poetics, oral performance to cultural memory, and everyday landscapes to enduring questions of survival and identity.

### 3. Corpus Presentation

The corpus examined in this study spans more than two decades, from 1985 to 2008, and brings together twenty-three poetry titles by six authors central to Francophone literary production in Western Canada: Jacqueline Barral, René Ammann, Gilles Cop, André Duhaime, Pierre Mathieu, and David Bouchard. Their works differ widely in tone and editorial ambition yet share a common thread: writing for young readers in a minority language. All were published by regional presses, notably Les Éditions du Blé and Les Éditions des Plaines, which have historically placed children's literature at the heart of their cultural mandate.

This period corresponds to a relatively stable and productive phase in Prairie publishing, following the establishment of Francophone institutions in the 1970s and reinforced by constitutional recognition of French-language education in the 1980s and 1990s (notably Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms). Many of the poems were conceived with classrooms in mind, often accompanied by guides, teacher's notes, or activity kits. Their themes reflect evolving cultural discourses: early titles such as Barral's *Solévent* (1985) or Mathieu's *ABC poétique* (1987) draw on classical poetic forms with religious or moral undertones, whereas later works like Bouchard's *Si tu n'es pas de la prairie* (2007) and *Un Cantique autochtone* (2008) integrate Métis and Indigenous perspectives into more inclusive frameworks.

The authors' profiles reveal distinct poetic sensibilities. Barral's lyrical and whimsical poems target very young readers and blend seasonal imagery with gentle social critique. Ammann, an educator, crafts playful yet pedagogically structured collections like *Joue, carcajou* (1995) and *L'horloge champêtre* (2004). Cop's bilingual *Si Dieu était une pomme* (1992) offers theological allegory in minimalist form, while Duhaime adapts haiku to the rhythms of Prairie life in his seasonal albums. Mathieu, the most prolific, produces abécédaires and thematic collections that mix poetic play with linguistic exercises, from animals to holidays. Bouchard, perhaps the most widely known, brings Métis and Indigenous heritage into richly illustrated and often bilingual albums such as *Nokum: Ma voix et mon cœur*, weaving memory, landscape, and ancestry into poetic narrative.

Materially, these books are striking. Most are illustrated, either with painterly art (as in Bouchard's collaborations with Henry Ripplinger) or cartoon-like drawings, and many adopt a large-format layout designed for shared reading. Abécédaires dominate the corpus, underscoring its pedagogical function, while paratextual elements such as vocabulary lists, pronunciation guides and activity suggestions anchor the texts in school settings. This dual orientation toward literary pleasure and educational purpose is central to understanding both the intent and the reach of these works. Together, they form a distinctive body of Francophone children's poetry in the

Prairies, where poetic play meets cultural memory and where the act of reading becomes an act of belonging.

#### 4. Ideology and Transmission in Minority Francophone Children's Poetry

In children's literature, a tension inevitably arises between what is said, how it is said, and to whom it is addressed. Within Francophone minority communities in Western Canada, this tension is heightened by a double imperative: preserving cultural identity while engaging with pluralism. Poetry becomes contested terrain, both a vehicle of cultural transmission and a space for imaginative cohabitation. Drawing on frameworks from Homi Bhabha (1994), Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), this section examines how Francophone children's poetry negotiates ideological meaning under these conditions of minority status.

We introduce the concept of a poetics of vulnerable cohabitation to capture this dynamic. In the works studied, poetic voices rarely resolve ideological conflict; they stage coexistence between voices, values and cultural memories within a fragile symbolic ecology. This vulnerability is not a weakness but a defining trait of minority literature: the simple act of speaking to a child in French carries both intimacy and political weight.

This ideological dimension often manifests through pedagogy. Collections like Pierre Mathieu's *ABC poétique* (1987) or *ABC écologique* (1991) use poetic form for explicit teaching, from letters to environmental awareness. Gilles Cop's *Si Dieu était une pomme* (1992) blends metaphysical speculation with religious allegory, continuing a long tradition of moral instruction in children's literature (Nières-Chevrel, 2009; Prince, 2010). Yet, as Christine Boutevin (2013) notes, the line between education and indoctrination can be thin: rhyme and meter, while charming, often tighten meaning and leave little room for ambiguity. In Mathieu's work, playful word games sometimes mask prescriptive content; Cop's metaphors, though imaginative, risk reinforcing dogma.

This tension is not unique to Canada. Studies of Senegalese children's poetry (Diouf, 2006) show similar uses of verse to transmit communal values, while Arabic children's literature reveals how "narrative polyphony" (El Shamy, 1999) can subtly resist authority. Within the Western Canadian corpus, didacticism persists but is frequently counterbalanced by poetic ambiguity. Duhaime's haikus and Bouchard's Métis-inspired albums, for example, invite multiple readings rather than imposing fixed interpretations.

A second ideological layer lies in the way poems address the child. Jacqueline Barral's *Solévent* (1985) and *Jongleries* (1990) speak in a lyrical yet prescriptive voice, presuming cultural literacy and emotional openness, with implicit religious and gendered undertones. Bakhtin's notion of "authoritative discourse" (1981) helps illuminate this adult-centered stance. In contrast, Bouchard's *Nokum: Ma voix et mon cœur* (2007) reconfigures address: the dialogic structure passes voice from elder to narrator to child, transforming the child from passive recipient to active interlocutor. Foucault's (1977) reflections on discourse and power are useful here: ideology in children's poetry operates not only through content but through relations of knowledge. Barral's verses inscribe moral order through sound and image; Bouchard's poems unsettle hierarchy by inviting relational thinking across generations and languages.

Rather than transmitting fixed values, these texts often negotiate between pedagogical expectations and plural identities. The poetics of vulnerable cohabitation describes this negotiation: community is staged not as a given but as something emergent, fragile, and always in tension. Vulnerability is linguistic (French as a minoritized language), cultural (dominant Christian or ecological references intersecting with Indigenous and Métis voices), and structural (poetic and didactic impulses blending to form a hybrid genre). This framework resonates with Bhabha's "Third Space" (1994) and Glissant's notion of relation and opacity (1990): identity emerges through negotiation, not affirmation.

Reception adds another dimension. As Brouillet et al. (2020) remind us, children do not consume texts passively; they appropriate, resist, or transform them. Letourneau (2009) highlights the performative contexts such as classrooms, public readings and family rituals where poems are sung, illustrated or staged. Even overtly didactic texts may be reinterpreted as play, while seemingly open poems can reinforce subtle norms. The ideological work of poetry is thus not only textual but performative, shaped by the circumstances of reading and recitation.

Through these layers of pedagogical tension, modes of address, fragile negotiation and active reception, Francophone children's poetry in Western Canada reveals its paradoxical force. It teaches yet questions, affirms yet disrupts. Rhythm, image and silence become tools for imagining community in the midst of vulnerability, transforming poetry into a site of cultural dialogue rather than simple transmission.

#### 5. Ideological Traces in Francophone Children's Poetry

Poetry for children in minority Francophone contexts is never ideologically neutral. Whether through moral instruction, symbolic cues or culturally situated imagery, these texts engage belief systems and transmit values. In the corpus studied, three broad tendencies emerge: the persistence of religious and moral frameworks inherited from Catholic publishing, sociopolitical critique and the questioning of norms, and implicit ideas about the child as learner, innocent or resistant. These dimensions often overlap and sometimes collide, revealing the complexity of speaking to a child in French on the Prairies.

Religious ideology, softened but still present, threads through much of the poetry by Gilles Cop and Pierre



Mathieu. In *Si Dieu était une pomme* (1992), Cop turns theology into parable: God is imagined as an apple that can be picked and shared. The metaphor is disarmingly simple yet carries a clear moral invitation. Faith becomes sensory, communal and universally desirable. Pierre Mathieu's collections (*Les oiseaux en liberté*, *Le zoo enchanté*) are similarly steeped in biblical motifs. Noah's Ark and angels mingle with animal fables and alphabet games. One poem recounts how a bird plucks thorns from Christ's crown and earns a ruby mark on its breast. Compassion and sacrifice permeate this salvific bestiary. René Ammann's work is less overtly religious yet equally moralizing. His *L'horloge champêtre* and *Joue, carcajou* combine rhyme and rhythm with language lessons and civic virtues, reflecting the priorities of the classroom.

In contrast, Jacqueline Barral's poetry privileges the child's perspective as a critique of adult rationalism. In *Solévent* and *Jongleries*, children appear as imaginative subjects rather than docile learners. The poem "Un enfant?" opposes adult categorizations such as house, garden or street to a child's spontaneous perception, *un p'tit bout de liberté*. The echo of Saint-Exupéry's *Petit Prince* is unmistakable: adults, Barral suggests, cannot truly see. Her poem "Ça n'arrive qu'aux autres" confronts adolescent pregnancy and closes on unresolved questions: *Avons-nous le droit de le refuser ? Avons-nous le droit de le faire ?* These questions shift attention from individual choice to collective responsibility. Moral ambiguity emerges not through answers but through silence and fragmented voices.

Pierre Mathieu's abécédaires blend didactic ambition with global curiosity. His poems summon Russian bears, Dutch clogs, Guatemalan jungles and Chinese customs, signaling an inclusive pedagogy that seeks to open Francophone children to diverse worlds. Yet this cosmopolitanism can slide into exoticism. References to faraway cultures often appear as decorative curiosities rather than genuine invitations to encounter, celebrating diversity while simplifying it. In *ABC écologique*, the letter Q's tongue-twister *Qui quadrilla ces quatre quinquas ?* delights in linguistic play yet assumes knowledge of obscure cultural artifacts, leaving young readers amused but distanced.

Other poets work in a quieter register. André Duhaime's haiku collections resist overt moralizing, offering instead a poetics of attentiveness. His seasonal verses, a snowman saluting cars or a leaf trembling on a branch, invite the child not to learn but to notice. Ideology here lies in form: brevity and silence cultivate a posture of observation and an ethics of attention. This minimalism resonates with Édouard Glissant's right to opacity. The poem need not explain itself to exert influence. It models a poetics of vulnerable cohabitation, where shared fragility rather than instruction binds the reader to the text.

Illustrations deepen these ideological tensions. In David Bouchard's *Si tu n'es pas de la prairie* (2007), Henry Ripplinger's hyperrealist paintings of wheat fields and prairie skies amplify nostalgia and affirm a rooted Francophone identity. By contrast, Pierre Mathieu's cheerful cartoon animals soften his moral or religious content. As Marcoin and Chelebourg observe, "the use of children's literature for ideological formation is ultimately the political corollary of its moral function. It consists in taking advantage of projection or identification to shape the attitudes of young readers" (Marcoin & Chelebourg, 2007, p. 69, my translation). This observation sheds light on the subtlety of Mathieu's imagery: rather than delivering explicit lessons, it invites children to identify with playful figures whose charm quietly channels moral or cultural norms. Marcoin and Chelebourg complement this view by noting that picturebooks often transmit values through affect rather than argument, creating what he describes as a "felt pedagogy" in which images do as much ideological work as words. Seen together, these insights reveal that the seeming innocence of illustration, its cuteness, humor, or tenderness, can serve as a powerful conduit for shaping cultural attitudes while remaining below the threshold of overt instruction. In *Nokum: Ma voix et mon cœur*, Allen Sapp's artwork bridges Cree and French worlds and extends the poem's relational ethics into the visual field. Here, images do not simply echo the text; they co-author meaning and shape how children feel and remember.

These poems also bear the weight of inherited forms. Catholic pedagogy and nationalist publishing left lasting marks on poetic structures such as abécédaires, moral fables and nature poems, even as secularization reshaped their content. Mathieu and Ammann exemplify this dual inheritance. Their texts teach letters and virtues while reviving pastoral nostalgia. Cop's apple-as-God metaphor likewise replays catechetical frameworks under playful disguise. Such echoes should not be dismissed as relics. They function as cultural palimpsests where old and new coexist. The tension between tradition and innovation animates much of Western Canadian children's poetry, staging a fragile negotiation rather than a clean break. This diversity of approaches can be summarized in Table 1, which maps the dominant ideological modes of each author and highlights the primary poetic strategies through which these modes are expressed. The table is not meant to reduce complexity but to provide a snapshot of recurring patterns before we turn to questions of spatial identity in the next section.

Table 1. Summary of Ideological Modes Across the Corpus

Author	Ideological Mode	Primary Vector
Gilles Cop	Religious universalism	Allegory, metaphor
Pierre Mathieu	Moral didacticism with curricular intent	Abécédaire, animal symbolism
René Ammann	Normative instruction	Lexical precision, school-aligned topics
Jacqueline Barral	Child-centred counter-narrative	Irony, questioning, fragmented voice
André Duhaime	Contemplative minimalism	Haiku, seasonal cycles, aesthetic restraint
David Bouchard	Cultural affirmation and relational ethics	Bilingualism, place-based identity, oral form

Over time, ideological resonances shift. A poem once cherished for gentle instruction may appear dated or even exclusionary to new generations. Cop’s apple metaphor risks alienation in pluralist contexts, while Mathieu’s exotic animals can evoke colonial tropes rather than wonder. As Nathalie Prince observes, childhood reading leaves enduring traces: books may continue to act as “powerful little levers” that shape memory and perception long after they have been read (Prince, 2021, p. 43, my translation). This insight reframes children’s poetry as more than a mirror of past values. It is also a reservoir of latent influences that resurface when readers, now adults, revisit these works with new eyes. The Francophone child of 2025 does not read like the child of 1992; changes in family structures, language practices and cultural representation transform how these texts are heard, performed or even set aside, yet traces of earlier readings endure in the cultural memory they help sustain.

The corpus spans multiple ideological modes. Cop embodies religious universalism. Mathieu combines moral didacticism with global curiosity. Ammann represents school-centered normativity. Barral’s voice is subversive and child-centred. Duhaime cultivates contemplative minimalism. Bouchard affirms intercultural dialogue. This plurality exemplifies a poetics of vulnerable cohabitation, where authority and invitation, norm and ambiguity coexist in fragile balance. Rather than resolve these tensions, the poems stage them and invite readers, young and adult alike, into a shared yet unsettled imaginative space.

## 6. Poetic Forms as Cultural Negotiation: Cohabitation and Resistance

Children’s poetry in minority Francophone settings is never purely decorative. It is shaped by a history of transmission and authority while also opening space for survival and imagination. These poems root the child-reader in landscapes of wheat fields and Saint-Jean-Baptiste celebrations, yet their stakes extend beyond local color. They negotiate identity through language, rhythm, ancestry, and seasonality, enacting belonging while holding tension rather than imposing unity.

Françoise Lepage offers a crucial lens for understanding this dynamic. She argues that children’s literature can reveal the values of a society even more starkly than adult literature because of its hierarchical structure: adults write to shape children. “Those who write it have the task of forming those who read it,” she notes, “and for several decades, many authors for youth did not attempt to conceal their didactic intentions. The values and ideologies underlying these texts appear without disguise and, at times, without the polish of fiction” (Lepage, 2000, p. 16, my translation). This clarity of purpose helps explain why poems in this corpus are such potent cultural documents. They register not only what adults wish to transmit, but also the anxieties and aspirations of communities seeking to endure in minority contexts.

Voice is central to this negotiation. Many poems are designed to be spoken aloud or chanted together, transforming reading into a communal event. In *Solévent*, Jacqueline Barral weaves refrains and whispered questions that echo through the breath of the child-reader. The poem gains meaning not just through its words but through how it is sounded and shared. David Bouchard’s *Nokum: Ma voix et mon cœur* frames its story as a dialogue between a Cree grandmother and her grandchild. The interplay of Cree and French resists assimilation. Both voices coexist in their fullness, embodying Édouard Glissant’s call for the right to opacity. These poems refuse to flatten difference; instead, they cultivate relation.

Hybrid forms reinforce this ethos. Duhaime’s haikus, Mathieu’s abécédaires, Barral’s illustrated verses: all blend modes and media, defying conventional literary categories. Sophie Van der Linden’s concept of the “composite album” is particularly illuminating here, as it captures how text, image, and layout work together to generate meaning. In minority settings, this hybridity becomes more than formal play. It enables different cultural references (French, Indigenous, Prairie) to inhabit the same poetic space without demanding fusion. The fragmentary nature of these works invites interpretation and allows multiplicity to coexist within a single book.

Spatial anchoring deepens this cohabitation. In *Si tu n’es pas de la prairie*, Bouchard maps identity onto geography: wheat fields, barns, and icy roads function as semiotic anchors for a shared imaginary. The landscape is not background but an active participant in cultural memory. Barral’s *Jongleries* expands this mapping. Her poetic child juggles multiple identities: immigrant, girl, prairie-dweller. Each stanza redraws the map of belonging, offering points of encounter rather than fixed borders. Edward Soja’s idea of thirdspace (1996), understood as a lived and relational geography, is helpful here. The poems imagine belonging not as exclusivity but as cohabitation.

This collective dimension extends to performance. Many of these texts are intended for group recitation in classrooms, community gatherings, or family settings. Cop’s *Si Dieu était une pomme* encourages shared reflection

through simple metaphor. Mathieu's *ABC écologique* transforms alphabet learning into ecological ritual. In these works, repetition and refrain do more than structure language; they cultivate community. As Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, "to be is to be with" (2000). The plural voice is not an addition to the poem's meaning; it is its very condition.

Reception, however, is never uniform. The same poem may resonate deeply for one child and alienate another. Francophone newcomers, Indigenous children, and bilingual readers may encounter these texts from different positionalities, seeing themselves reflected, erased, or somewhere in between. Mediators such as teachers, parents, community leaders, further shape meaning, selecting certain poems for their perceived appropriateness or curricular value while neglecting others. This negotiation mirrors what Creese and Blackledge (2010) observe in multilingual schools, where norms are not simply imposed from above but constantly renegotiated by learners.

The most enduring poems in this corpus are those that acknowledge this fragility. They do not prescribe identity; they create a space where belonging can be improvised and contested. In this sense, children's poetry becomes a practice of vulnerable cohabitation. It carries the memory of past ideologies yet leaves room for new interpretations, inviting children and their communities to dwell in a world where contradiction and creativity are allowed to coexist.

## 7. Conclusion: Towards a Poetics of Vulnerable Cohabitation

What emerges from this study is a portrait of children's poetry in minority Francophone contexts as a literature that negotiates belonging, memory, and identity under fragile conditions. These poems are more than cultural artifacts; they are active sites where communities imagine themselves, pass on values, and hold space for multiplicity. Understanding this dynamic requires attention not only to their textual forms but also to how they circulate and are received.

The reception of children's poetry in minority Francophone contexts is never purely literary. It unfolds through schools, cultural institutions, publishers, libraries, families, and teachers, each shaping which texts are celebrated, circulated, or quietly sidelined. Within this web of mediators, poetry is rarely encountered as art alone; it is also expected to carry cultural memory, foster linguistic attachment, and meet curricular goals. This dual demand produces a paradox. The genre is often deemed too literary to serve pedagogical aims and too didactic to gain canonical status. Yet it is precisely in this marginal space that its subversive potential emerges. Free from canonical pressures, children's poetry experiments with hybrid forms, oral cadences, and multilingual textures that do not seek to resolve cultural tensions but to hold them open, making room for a fragile, plural cohabitation.

This tension is particularly visible in the Franco-Manitoban corpus, where abécédaires and seasonal collections coexist with more experimental works. On one hand, Pierre Mathieu's alphabet books or Gilles Cop's religious allegories have long been used in classrooms, their clear moral and educational frameworks aligning with institutional priorities. On the other hand, the more questioning voices of Jacqueline Barral or the contemplative haikus of André Duhaime often resist easy classification, offering ambiguity and silence where educators might expect explicit lessons. This divide echoes Spyrou and Rosen's (2019) view of children's literature as a "discursive technology," a form that does not simply reflect childhood but actively constructs it, positioning the child within symbolic and cultural networks that carry implicit ideological weight.

Reception is far from static. Poems evolve in meaning as readers and contexts change. Cop's metaphor of God as an apple, cherished in earlier decades for its simplicity, may now seem reductive or exclusionary in pluralist classrooms. Similarly, the exoticized animals and faraway landscapes in Mathieu's work, once celebrated for fostering curiosity, may now evoke colonial tropes. These shifts remind us that children's poetry operates within what Reynolds (2007) calls a marginal literary space, a position that paradoxically enables subversive possibilities. Free from canonical expectations, minority children's poetry experiments with hybrid forms, oral cadences, and multilingual play that might not emerge in mainstream traditions.

This is where the concept of a *poetics of vulnerable cohabitation* becomes central. Across the corpus, poems do not seek to impose unity or resolve contradictions. They invite readers, children and adults alike, into encounters between voices, generations, and cultural worlds. These encounters are fragile yet generative. Rather than dictate belonging, they stage it as something negotiated and provisional. This openness is not weakness but a form of ethical engagement: literature that survives by holding space for multiple ways of being.

Such resonance is more than Canadian. Poets in francophone Africa, like Véronique Tadjo, or in South Asia, like Sampurna Chattarji, explore children's poetry that crosses linguistic borders, honours memory and diaspora, and embraces ambiguity. These global voices echo the same ethos: inviting multiplicity, refusing closure, creating communal resonance from fragments. While Tadjo's works for young readers are widely available in French and circulate across francophone Africa and Europe, Chattarji's children's poetry remains primarily anglophone. Her work, however, has been translated into multiple languages, including French, but also German, Irish, Scots, Welsh, Tamil, Manipuri, and Bambaïyya, which signals a growing transnational reception despite the absence of full French editions.

Studying these poems thus demands more than literary critique; it calls for interdisciplinary listening: to how

they circulate in classrooms, how teachers mediate them, and how children embody or resist them. This study has gestured toward that need but has not pursued empirical reception data. That absence is deliberate yet significant: it underscores how meaning remains historically situated, reader-dependent, and often contested, and it points toward a clear trajectory for future scholarship.

Understanding these dynamics demands an interdisciplinary approach that blends literary analysis, reception studies, and the sociology of reading. It requires attention not only to textual strategies but also to how poems circulate, how they are mediated by adults, and how children themselves interpret or resist them. Jean-Luc Nancy's (2007) notion that "to be is to be with" offers a compelling lens: these poems create spaces where being together is enacted rather than asserted, where belonging is practiced through rhythm, repetition, and relational listening.

Ultimately, minority Francophone children's poetry emerges as a literature of watchfulness. It does not offer fixed answers about identity or culture. Instead, it opens symbolic shelters where children can dwell with contradictions, explore heritage and invention, and imagine community without erasing difference. In this lies its most radical contribution: to teach not by imposing, but by inviting, by leaving space for what cannot be resolved yet still matters deeply.

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