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Children's Literature as Tools of and for Activism: Reflections of JoLLE's inaugural *Activist Literacies* conference

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Abstract

Inspired by her attendance at the inaugural JoLLE Activist Literacies conference, the author ruminates on the ways in which children's literature and activist literacies are inextricably wed and manifested in myriad ways. References to a sampling of children's literature spanning genres and grade levels, websites, and affiliated articles provide opportunities for readers to further recognize how children's literature can be both tools of and for activist thought and action.

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The Georgia Center for Continuing Education brimmed with energy on the evening of Friday, February 22. Collective enthusiasm and anticipation permeated the air as diverse peoples from throughout the North American continent shared and discussed multimodal representations of activism with one another. Over the course of two days, life stories, *testimonios*, art, literature, dramatic, and civic-minded performances, digital storytelling, gaming, and dialogic inquiry infused the consciousness of attendees of JoLLE's inaugural conference, *Activist Literacies: Inspire, Engage, Create, and Transform*. Such diverse forms of expressions focused on the continual marginalization of peoples, cultures, and ideas and how both the singular and collective can enact change for social justice.

The community of conference speakers and activists, including renowned professors Glynda Hull, Christian Faltis, and K.C. Nat Turner, as well as the articles in this special issue, epitomize how life is often shared in narrative form (Bruner, 2004) and how Story, regardless of genre and form, is activist in nature. Stories serve as cultural guides and often *inspire, engage, create and transform* both the political and personal landscapes of humanity. As I journeyed to and between presentations and workshops, I was struck by the concept of the aesthetics in social justice and was reminded of how children's literature, as artistic, literary, and social texts, is both a tool *of* and *for* activism. While those whose scholarship involves children's literature often understand this, I remain convinced that part of our job is to be activists for the phenomenal presence of children's literature in our lives and the many different ways in which children's literature in the hands of many can be a means for social justice. By reflecting on the dynamic intersections of children's literature and activism at play during the conference, within the current JoLLE articles, and beyond, I hope to inspire others to take note of how children's literature can remain a critical means of being an activist in a more digitally and visually oriented world.



[Dr. Glynda Hull:](#)
[UC Berkeley](#)



[Dr. Christian](#)
[Faltis: UC Davis](#)



[Dr. K-C Nat](#)
[Turner: UM](#)
[Amherst](#)

Before engaging in such a reflection, I would like to note that scholarship within the field of children's literature often includes literature designated as "children's" and "young adult." Thus, when I use the term, children's literature, I am using it as an inclusive term embodying literature designed for youth populations from birth to adolescence

Children's literature, as physical artifacts of Story, illustrates and embodies activism from a variety of perspectives. For many, children's literature serves as connective tissue between humans and within communities. Children's literature is also often positioned as integral to activists' lives, as evidenced by Paulo Freire and Donaldo P. Macedo's (1987) assertion that we

need to “read both the word and the world.” When reflecting on the conference, I recognized how children’s texts helped presenters and attendees

- critically unpack, discuss, and reconstruct societal representations of gender in children’s literature;
- better understand the [UN Rights of the Child](#);
- inspire parents and teachers to advocate, and encourage youth to participate in initiatives such as [PeaceJam](#);
- engage in visual literacy, the transmediation between written word and art, and critical performative pedagogy such as Boal’s [Theatre of the Oppressed](#); and
- contemplate how the construct of “activism” is enacted and by whom, from international perspectives

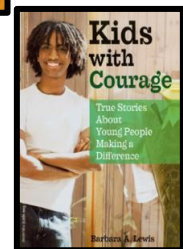
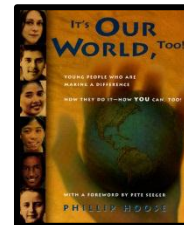
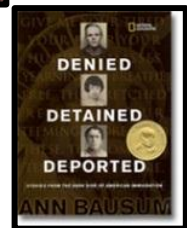
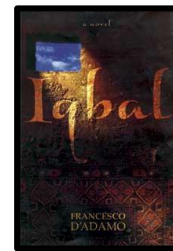
Clearly, creators of children’s literature have the potential to facilitate activism by changing the Story and also the *Storyline*. Some consider contemporary picturebooks as ideal exemplar of how the linear, left-to-right Western model of reading texts is just one of *many* ways in which we read both the word and the world. This is especially true from a cultural perspective (e.g. reading in countries such as China, Japan, and Saudi Arabia) and given our current era of New and Digital Literacies. We increasingly live among, read, and construct visually rich and intoxicating texts and by doing so, we engage in recursive relationships with words, images, words as images, and the intersections of all of those variations (see Lawrence Sipe ‘s 1998 *Children’s Literature in Education* article or revisit the JOLLE [Spring 2012 article](#) for further discussion about transmediation and the synergistic relationship between word and image).

Award-winning, multivoiced, non-linear narrative exemplars that provide counternarratives for both the concept of Story and the act of reading include postmodern picturebooks such as David Macaulay’s [Black and White](#) (1990), Anthony Browne’s [Voices in the Park](#) (1998), Melanie Watt’s [Chester](#) series, and Margaret Wild’s [Woolvs in the Sittie](#) (2007), not to mention fractured fairytales such as David Wiesner’s [The Three Pigs](#) (2000), Shaun Tan’s graphic narratives such as [The Arrival](#) (2007) and [The Lost Thing](#) (2000), as well as Manga series from Japan. Other picturebooks that disrupt dominant social narratives include Armin Greder’s [The Island](#) (2008), [The City](#) (2010), and his collaboration with Libby Gleason on [I Am Thomas](#) (2011). Interestingly, most of these narratives are written and published outside of the US. [Suzette Youngs and Frank Serafini’s article](#) on youth reading historical fiction picturebooks as well as [Carmen Lilian Medina and Maria del Rocío Costa’s](#) research involving children’s scripting of telenovas provide additional evidence about how the seeds of activism are planted through transmediation. The literature exemplars, the conference-based digital storytelling sessions, art-based response workshops, and relational aesthetic explorations, as well as this issue’s articles all testify to the interwoven layers of Story, the complexities of authorship, audience, intentionality, and receptivity. Adopting an activist stance with children’s literature involves considering not only who tells the story but also how the story is told and who the idealized reader is.

JoLLE’s *Activist Literacies* Conference provided ample evidence that, at times, children’s literature can be both “windows and mirrors” (Bishop, 1990). As evidenced by the plethora of

recommended “children’s literature and activism” book lists found online with a quick search (e.g. [GoodReads](#), [Compassionate Kids](#), Jessica Singer Early’s (2006) [Stirring Up Justice](#), [Jane Addams Children’s Book Award](#), [Stonewall Book Award](#)), activism is a topic children’s book authors, educators, and other community members embrace rather than avoid. The topic of activism can provide youth with mirrors of self and society as well as windows of opportunity, courage, and hope. Narratives that include the voices and actions of youth activists, past and present, reflect a shared collective who dare to defy others or defend themselves as part of the social norm. Furthermore, the historical and contemporary portraits are evocative reminders of how powerful and integral creativity, determination and networking are to individual success and societal change. Exemplar books and notable authors include

- [Iqbal](#) (D’Adamo, 2003), the fictionalized biography of Iqbal Masuh, a Pakistani child slave who brought child slave labor to the global stage;
- [I am Najood, aged 10 and divorced](#) (Ali & Minoui, 2010), a memoir which addresses the cultural norms of families marrying off their young girls to older men as a way of lessening their financial burdens;
- a variety of books written by [Deborah Ellis](#), a self-identified global activist who has detailed the lives of youth stricken by crime, war, and illness;
- historical nonfiction books such as [Kids on Strike](#) (Bartoletti, 1999), [Denied, Detained, and Deported](#) (Bausum, 2009), [Muckrakers](#) (Bausum, 2007);
- literary documentaries such as [Who Will Tell My Brother](#) (Carvell, 2002), a novel in verse which details Marlene Carvell’s son’s fight to remove the school’s disrespectful use of an Indian mascot for their sports teams; and
- The [CitizenKid series](#) at Kids Can Press, Phillip Hoose’s [It’s Our World, Too!](#) (2003), and Barbara Lewis’ (1992), [Kids with Courage](#), all of which offers narratives of international youth activism grounded in the environment and economic sustainability.



Indeed, activist stories emphasize and promote humanity. Within those stories are also invitations to discuss all that accompanies the concept of humanity and the pursuit for justice. As evidenced during the conference, children's literature and other multimodal compositions can evoke dialogic inquiries about the extensive sacrifices one makes for "the cause" as well as the ideological constructs of activism and activists. What are the master narratives of "activist"? Who are portrayed as activists and what do they do? What distinguishes an "activist" youth from "disillusioned," "naïve," or "rebellious" youth? Who has the power to decide such labels (and some might say identities), and how are stories of activist success and or failure constructed and conveyed? Furthering the discussion are multiple "co-authored" books that document people successfully overcoming insurmountable odds. When authors such as Linda Sue Park and Karen Lynn Williams either write another's story (e.g. [A Long Walk to Water](#) (2010) by Linda Sue Park) or share the authorship of an experience (e.g. [Four Feet, Two Sandals](#) (2007) by Karen Williams & Khandra Mohammed), they ignite inquiries about authorship, cultural capital, and activism. Why might those who have overcome seemingly insurmountable odds, require the partnership of notable authors in order to share their stories with others? Additionally, how might the "known" authors, with such immense cultural capital, become known as "activists" largely due to their cultural capital? How do cultural capital and class structures become part of activist storylines? How might storytelling via TEDTalk offer counternarratives to the economics and politics of publishing? Children's literature can spark inquiry and critique in a multitude of ways.

The concept of personal and community space as part of an activist's process and path and as a conduit for transformative literacy (composing for the cultivation of humanity) is also seminal to our understanding of Story as a mode of activism. Conference keynote speakers Nat Turner, Glynda Hull, and Christian Faltis, local artists, and the authors of one of the latest JOLLE articles, showcase how activism is at the core of urban literacies as well as how one's sense of space and place fuels one's activist pathways. While children's literature and activism tends to be localized in the classroom, other forms of activism occur at after-school youth programs and involve the arts. Programs through the Youth Action Coalition (e.g. [Get Up Get Down](#), [Girls Eye View](#)), hip-hop music, digital stories, murals, and the creation of [community gardens](#), help connect youth from around the world (e.g. [Space to Cre8](#)). Literature which speaks to issues of space and place when building community and honoring heritage includes photoessayist [George Ancona's](#) work involving murals and other art forms in various Latin@ communities, G. Neri's urban-based graphic narratives such as [Yummy](#) (2010) and [Ghetto Cowboy](#) (2011), Paul Fleishman's picturebook [Seedfolks](#) (1997), and Sharon Dennis Wyeth's picturebook, [Something Beautiful](#) (1998). The concept of shifting spaces and places is furthered in [Watch This Space](#) (Dyer & Nqui, 2010), an informational text for older readers that discusses the relationship between public space and privacy as well as how to successfully share, design, and use public space for personal and social good. Similarly, Jeannie Baker provides readers with the life cycle of a neighborhood and the influences of both the community and government in her wordless picturebook, [Home](#) (2004). All of these multimodal compositions reinforce how the personal is inextricably connected to the political. The JoLLE conference as well as a plethora of books continues to stress the idea of composing *what* you know and *where* you know.

There are countless other ways in which the JoLLE inaugural Activist Literacies Conference reinforced the need for and benefits of activism and inspired others to act. Additionally, there is ample evidence of the inextricable relationship between children's literature, reading, and activism. I hope this brief reflection about the conference and the ways in which children's literature was explicitly and implicitly involved will accentuate our need to ensure children's literature is a part of youth's lives and to encourage copious amount of conversations as we move forward in improving the lives of our communities and the world.

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