Scaffolding Critical, Anti-Bias Literacy in the Early Childhood Classroom

A Senior Capstone in Education Studies

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In his 1995 essay "Should We Burn Babar?", Herbert Kohl struggles with conflicting feelings about a foundational text from his childhood: Jean de Brunhoff's 1931 *The Story of Babar*. On the one hand, he claims, "I loved the book, identified with Babar, and found an abiding affectionate place for him in my heart" (Kohl, 3). On the other, as a critical adult reader he takes issue with many of the themes of the text: the implications of a story in which an elephant who lives among and adapts to civilized life with humans is made king by the elephants, because he has "learned so much living among men" (De Brunhoff, 38) and has "beautiful clothes" and a "beautiful car" (De Brunhoff, 36). Kohl references the specific critiques made by a friend who reread the books as an adult and

> *now hates the scene that shows Babar with his arm resting on Celeste's shoulder, Celeste with her head bowed, and the oldest elephant, Cornelius, with his glasses on, handing to Babar power over all the elephants. What had appeared magical to her as a child now represented the triumph of the Europeanized male. Did it harm her to have loved this scene as a child? Perhaps. It was one of the many children's books that showed her that women's happiness derives from being chosen by the right male.*
>
> (Kohl, 11-12)

This friend, Kohl explains, went on to lead the other parents at her child's nursery school in critically rereading and discussing Babar, as well as a number of other books in the school library— many of which they found promoted values counter to the ones they wanted to instill in their children. The resulting efforts of these parents were not decisive or unified. Kohl's conclusions about the text, as well as about the "barrage of sexist and racist books, videos, and comics aimed directly" (Kohl, 12-13) at children, are similarly inconclusive. Babar, he claims, not only features racism, sexism and colonialism (which, like other unpleasant topics, he

recognizes, “figure in life and literature, and should certainly be read about and discussed at home and in the classroom” (Kohl, 18)— it “explicitly propagandize[s] children through the way power works in the story” (Kohl, 18). Kohl then references a single visit to a third grade class in which he talked through his critical response to Babar; “there is no reason,” he argues, “why a discussion like this shouldn’t be part of a critical literature program as early as third grade, if not earlier” (Kohl, 21). However, he claims “I don’t see much critical reading going on in schools, and children don’t need to be propagandized about colonialism, sexism and racism” (Kohl, 28); as a result, while he would not ban it, burn, it or pull it from libraries, he sees “no reason to go out of one’s way to make Babar available to children” (Kohl, 28).

I feel that Kohl is misguided on a number of fronts. To begin with, there is the paradox that the readership of an article like this— those being instructed not to go out of their ways to make the book available— is bound to have a lot of crossover with those who are well prepared to face the task of critically reading the book with children; Kohl’s directions, as I see it, do little for those who are most likely to be faced by uncritical readings of Babar. More glaring is his contention that, assuming critical readings of Babar can be meaningful for children, “the question of reading Babar, for me, can be reduced to the question of whether uncritical reading of the book is so potentially damaging that it should be withheld from children when possible” (Kohl, 23). A far more helpful (and less reductive) question, in my mind, would be to ask how best to facilitate these critical readings for young children: what they should consist of, where they fit into current classroom literacy practices, and how teachers can begin to approach them. This essay, then, will focus on the place of critical literacy in early childhood education. I propose that literacy education in the early years is best guided by Paulo Freire’s theory of learning to read both the word and the world; though his work was designed with adults in mind,

I will show that it aligns perfectly with the theories and methods of anti-bias/multicultural education, as well broader components of best practice in early childhood, such as emergent curriculum and scaffolding techniques. These practices of critical literacy, I believe, are key to combating the development of implicit bias and giving students the confidence and skill not only to critically read and think, but to critically engage with the world around them.

This essay will focus on educational practices at the kindergarten level. It is important to recognize that, while levels of development can be roughly tied to age ranges, no two children are alike— much less any two kindergarten classes of multiple children. As Jennifer O'Brien so aptly puts it, in her account of teaching critical literacy in her kindergarten classroom,

> *This is not a how-chapter. There is no recipe for critical literacy… This is how the particular critical positions which I introduced in these classrooms worked for my students and me; these are the circumstances in which I introduced critically framed activities and talk; these are the personal and institutional histories that we associated with their introduction; and, several years later, this is how I now reread what happened*. (O'Brien, p. 37)

I will draw on the experiences and viewpoints of educators such as O'Brien in this essay; my hope is to synthesize the writings of a number of different educators and scholars coming from different backgrounds, to show how their methods and theories all have value in this discourse of early childhood critical literacy instruction. This essay, like the works it draws from, will by no means be comprehensive or a sufficient instructional guide for educators. I do hope to show the incredible value of these methods of critical literacy instruction for young children, and that if nothing else, educators will come away more willing to dive into the situations that offer such learning opportunities.

Freire, and an exploration of definition

Many of the terms that I have already introduced do not have clear cut and set definitions. The meaning of literacy itself is, as Radhika Viruru points out, difficult to pin down: "a definition of literacy is a statement of what it means to be literate: thus definitions provide a set of criteria against which a person's abilities are measured. Definitions reflect the power of those who do the defining: the meanings of literacy thus derive from the institutional sites from which they originate" (Viruru, p. 13) Viruru roots this explanation in a description of a woman he knew who "most people would define as illiterate"— signing her name was the "beginning and end of her schooled literacy" (Viruru, p. 13)— and yet, Viruru states, in their discussions of "abortion, marriage, children, human dignity and globalization", he concluded, "I know of few people who can read the world around them like she can" (Viruru, p. 13). This language draws directly from Paulo Freire's language on critical literacy. Barbara Comber explains that "there is not one generic critical literacy; rather it is an evolving concept" (Comber, 2003, p. 356), but she attributes the genesis of the concept to Freire, who introduces the concept in his book Literacy: Reading the Word and the World, as such:

> *In this book, we call for a concept of literacy that transcends its etymological content. That is, literacy cannot be reduced to the treatment of letters and words as purely mechanical domain. We need to go beyond this rigid comprehension of literacy and begin to view it as the relationship of learners to the world, mediated by the transforming practice of this world taking place in the very general milieu in which learners travel.*
> (Freire and Macedo, p. viii)

A fundamental component of Freire's conception of critical literacy that should be stressed here is that it is not simply about the decoding of words on the page— the "treatment of letters and words as purely mechanical domain", so as to be able to string letters together to make recognizable sounds. Luke and Freebody list this practice as only the first in a series of four that together constitute full literacy. These four resources are that of the code breaker (coding competence), meaning maker (semantic competence), text user (pragmatic competence) and text critic (critical competence) (Luke and Freebody, 1999). They advocate for an understanding of "the full idea of literacy as a family of practices" (Luke and Freebody, 1999, p. 4), the word family highlighting that they are "dynamic, being redeveloped, recombined, and articulated in relation to one another on an ongoing basis" (Luke and Freebody, 1999, p. 4). This framing of the practices in relation to one another (or as relations of one another, to follow the family terminology) supports another key tenant of their model: that "each family of practices is necessary for literacy in new conditions, but none in and of itself is sufficient for literate citizens or subjects" (Luke and Freebody, 1999, p. 4).

In early childhood, Barbara Comber notes, there is a tendency to put emphasis only on the first two of these resources within the confines of literacy learning: "Early childhood teachers have for the most part been held responsible for children learning to 'crack the code' and to 'make meaning' from texts" (Comber, 357). Roskos and Christie expand on this in their essay on 'Examining the Play Literacy Interface". Here they reviewed twelve studies of play-literacy, and found that authors gave "very liberal definitions of play", if they defined play at all, while their definitions of literacy were "more explicit, but also more conservative" (Roskos and Christie, 2004, p. 107). Play was, for the most part, seen broadly as whatever children did in play settings; literacy was "confined to a narrower strip of activity that involves primarily reading and writing.

Children scribble and write, they pretend read, they respond to books that have been read to them, they use print… in general, then, the majority of these authors keep a tight rein on what they mean by literacy, confining it primarily to print based experiences" (Roskos and Christie, 2004, p. 107). Within this premise, the benefits of play toward literacy result primarily from the infusion of text into play— the presence of text materials in dramatic play environments, for example— as well as from the chance children have in play to hear and use more advanced language than they would otherwise. These benefits are well proven and worthy of attention, especially because of the legitimacy they give to the act of play, in a society in which play is seen less and less as a valuable use of time for young children. However, such work tends to promote a limited view of literacy, as Roskos and Christie note, and with that a limited view of how play can aid literacy development.

This limited concept of literacy, prevalent in much of early childhood discourse, is given varied names by those seeking to acknowledge a wider concept of literacy. Cathy Hall refers to being able to "decode words and sentences and grasp, at least, their basic meaning" as "basic literacy" (Hall, 190). Viruru, as expressed earlier, refers to his friend's limited "schooled literacy", or her inability to write more than her own name. He sums up a number of common conceptions of literacy that fit into this schooled literacy model: "On a more specific level, according to Powell (1999), common ways of defining literacy include: (1) the ability to decode print into speech, (2) the ability to derive meaning from written texts and (3) the ability to read and write at a specified proficiency level" (Viruru, 14). Notably, Viruru places these notions of schooled literacy as not only distinct from but in opposition to critical literacy, which he states exists "in contrast to many views about literacy" (Viruru, 14). This is a contentious assertion; not only does it not align with the common view that limits literacy to code breaking and basic

meaning making, it does not align with Luke and Freebody's claim the multifold components of literacy should be learned together, which Comber sums up:

> *Precisely because it is an inclusive approach to literacy in that it does not discount the importance of any aspect of literate practice, 'the four resources model' has made critical literacy more attractive to teachers and policy makers. That is, it adds to what educators do already. It does not contest that code breaking or meaning making are essential, but it does stress that they are insufficient for proper literacy today. Further they argue that these dimensions of literacy need to be learnt together; that critical literacy is as important in early childhood as adult literacy or secondary school English* (Comber, 357)

We must ask, then, what exactly within this attractive model makes Viruru wary. From his view that a woman who had extremely limited "schooled literacy" was extremely world-literate, we can begin to recognize the disconnect. Luke and Freebody claim that each of their four practices is "necessary but not sufficient for the achievement of the others" (Luke and Freebody 1994); Viruru, on the other hand, sees literacy of the world as a separate entity for which schooled literacy is not a necessary prerequisite. Indeed, schooled literacy in his eyes can diminish one's ability to read the world: "to become literate in one way is to become illiterate in another; to acquire the dominant view of literacy is in some ways gaining access to power, but is also relinquishing other ways of knowing" (Viruru, 16). This assertion can be read in multiple ways. In keeping with the views reviewed by Roskos and Christie, the dominant view of literacy focuses on written texts. Viruru's caution could be seen as regarding the consequences of acquiring literacy that aligns with this dominant view, but it could also be seen as a caution

against acquiring that view of literacy: of adopting the readily established definition without question.

It is important to recognize that many who write about critical literacy are still working within many of the confines of dominant definitions of literacy pointed out by Roskos and Christie— specifically, that all literacy happens in relation to written text. In the section of her paper on the relative importance of critical literacy in the infant classroom, Hall makes a point of limiting herself, "for convenience… to one dimension of critical literacy i.e. written text. It is reasonable to say, that basic literacy enables critical literacy. One cannot grasp any meaning from a written text, let alone several meanings, unless one can decode it" (Hall, 190). Though Hall does make clear at the outset of this section that she is only talking about one fragment of critical literacy, her subsequent claims risk reinforcing this limited notion of literacy as bound by written text, and thus of a relation between "basic" and critical literacy not only of enabling in both directions but dependence of one side on the other. Hall goes on to state:

> *I do not see critical literacy as a variable to be introduced after certain knowledges and skills have been acquired. Critical literacy is about the kind of literate person we ought to try to create. Some children in the classroom example above had not yet mastered the skill of decoding print but they were, nevertheless, engaging in critical literacy where the authors' crafting was not merely enjoyed but also disrupted in terms of versions of reality represented*.
>
> (Hall, 190)

Referencing an earlier example given in her piece (Barbara Comber discussion of techniques used by Jennifer O'Brien, 1993) Hall shows that children can be taught to interact critically with written texts at an early age. This is important, and something I will revisit and discuss further at

a later point in this essay. What I want to recognize here is that there are elements of literacy that have nothing to do with written text; moreover, that there are elements of critically reading and interacting with the word which require that one has already begun to critically read and interact with the world.

In the opening chapter of Reading the World and the World, Freire delves into his recollections of his early childhood, attempting to recall "the experiences I lived at a time when I did not yet read words" (Freire and Macedo, 31). He sees the world, then, of an "average house in Recife, Brazil, where I was born, encircled by trees" (Freire and Macedo, 30), as his first text:

> *In this world I crawled, gurgled, first stood up, took my first steps, said my first words. Truly, that special world presented itself to me as the arena of my perpetual activity and therefore as the world of my first reading. The texts, the words, the letters of that context were incarnated in a series of things, objects and signs. In perceiving these I experienced myself, and the more I experienced myself, the more my perpetual capacity increased.* (Freire and Macedo, 31).

Freire makes clear that the process of reading the world was a part of his life well before reading the word. What he describes is not unique to him; all children children crawl and gurgle and take first steps through a space before reading words is even an option on the table. What we must recognize here is the power we have, in establishing a working definition of literacy and the process of literacy learning, to include and promote processes without any obvious connection to written text that, rather, aid children in their ability to read the world. "Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world" (Freire and Macedo, 35). What follows, then, is that when educators do turn focus to reading of the

word, rather than destroying or negating the children's ability to read the world, they build upon it, creating a dialogue between the two literacies.

An Intersection: Reading the World and Current Best Practice

I'd like to turn, then, to a brief review of what it means for children to learn to read the world, and how educators can help them to do so. This review will bring up theories already considered by many to be part of best practice in early childhood, but with an eye to reframing them as part of critical literacy development. Ross A. Thompson, in discussing early child development, states that "school readiness is not simply a matter of encouraging literacy and number skills. It must also incorporate concern for enhancing the social and emotional qualities that underlie curiosity, self-confidence, eagerness to learn, cooperation, and self control" (Thompson, 20). Thompson separates the development of these social and emotional qualities and the traits they enable from literacy; given a broader definition of literacy, however, which includes the ability to read the world, these necessary facets of school (and world) readiness can be included as key components of literacy learning.

Freire's first descriptions of his experience in learning to read the world are set in and around his childhood home; this process of course begins before a child sets foot in a school setting. However, the school setting is special, in part because it offers children the chance to engage with their peers. Piaget states that three to four year olds, though they generally have a good command of language, maintain an egocentric view in their interactions with others: "they seem cognitively centered on themselves and fail to take into account others' point of view" (Reimer et al, p. 27). This limit is key to understanding the development of moral reasoning in young children. Fraiberg gives the classic example of explaining wrong versus right by putting

yourself in the other person's shoes: "How would you feel if someone did that to you?" does not move a three-year-old; "at that moment he simply doesn't care how the other guy feels, and his imagination does not carry him into the personality of his victim" (Friaberg, 1959, p.190). Building on Piaget's work, Kohlberg discusses the development of the role-taking ability— "the capacity to react to the other as someone like the self and to react to the self's behavior in the role of the other" (Reimer et al, p. 49)— which he claims develops around the age of six, and is a turning point in the development of moral judgment. This development is mirrored by another example given by Fraiberg: that of a little girl who enjoyed squashing caterpillars at age four, but was devastated at the sight of a dead caterpillar two years later, at which point "she had put herself imaginatively in the place of the worm and suffered through identification" (Fraiberg, 1959, p. 191). These timelines places kindergarten students— 5 year olds, on average— in the middle of this development.

Piaget and Kohlberg's writings on moral judgment are relevant to understanding the development of theory of mind— a system of inferences that allows one to attribute mental states to oneself and to others, as well as to recognize that there is a disconnect between the mental states of the self and the other (Patnaik, 2008, p. 329). It is crucial to recognize here that this development all occurs in a social context. Thompson emphasizes the importance of learning with other people, stating that young children "do not learn about the world by themselves. A young mind's innate capabilities and its incessant activity each provide powerful avenues for understanding when aided by everyday experience and the behavior of other people" (Thompson, 20). The interactions that young children have with other children in school settings are a vital part of them learning about the world: about their own needs and feelings and place in

it, as well as the needs and wants and feelings of others, which can both resemble and differ from their own.

Russian psychologist and pedagogue Lev Vygotsky offers a key viewpoint that shows the importance of these interactions in development. He postulates that "learning and development are neither separate nor identical processes. Instead, they combine in a complex, interrelated fashion such that instruction leads, or elicits, development" (Berk and Winsler, 104). Vygotsky explains that this works if the activities and interactions that the child engages in in the classroom fall within their zone of proximal development, or ZPD: "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky,1978, p. 86, as cited by Berk and Winsler, p. 26). The role of education in Vygotsky's model, then, is to "provide children with experiences that are in their ZPDs— activities that challenge children but that can be accomplished with sensitive adult guidance" (Berk and Winsler, p. 26). Scholars refer to this sensitive guidance as scaffolding. Scaffolding is a key component of emergent literacy and, more generally, an emergent curriculum. Elizabeth Jones explains the outline of an emergent curriculum: "Curriculum emerges from the play of children and the play of teachers. It is constructed by the children and the adults and the environment itself. To develop curriculum in depth, adults must notice children's questions and invent ways to extend them, document what happens, and invent more questions" (Jones, 67). An emergent curriculum, then, is developed by a joint effort of the students exploring the world of the classroom, and the teachers responding to them. These responses include helping the children to respond to each other:

> *The capacity of young children to collaborate, like other abilities in childhood, is a developmental attainment that must be cultivated by adults. Just as preschool teachers play a critical role in providing scaffolding experiences to promote children's cognitive development and self-regulation, they also need to serve as scaffolders of children's social interactions and social problem solving skills.*
>
> (Berk and Winsler, 132-3)

Part of scaffolding, then, is helping children not only to read but to interact with the world.

Berk and Winsler succinctly describe the role of the teacher, saying that it "includes both designing an educative environment and collaborating with children by scaffolding their efforts to master a new skill" (152). The inclusion of designing the environment is key. As Freire makes clear, one can begin to develop a knowledge of reading the world before entering the classroom. Part of what makes learning in the classroom special, however, is that it is an intentionally designed space. Vygotsky stresses that learning cannot be divorced from the culture or society in which it takes place, but there is potential for a classroom setting to be its own special microcosm of society, with its own unique culture. This is by no means to suggest that the classroom should shield students from all of the world's troubles. Rather, the classroom should offer a safe and nurturing space in which to explore the world in its many facets.

Kohl states that "critical reading consists of questioning a text, challenging it, and speculating on ways in which the world it creates can illuminate the one we live in" (Kohl, 22)—here Kohl acknowledges one tenant of Freire's claim, that the reading of the word enables us to better read the world. What Kohl does not explore is the reversal of this process: becoming literate in reading the world, which Freire states should begin first, such that this literacy can inform the reading of the word. Kohl description of what critical literacy education should look

like is limited (within the essay "Should We Burn Babar?") to a single visit to a third grade classroom— a red flag in itself, as an isolated visit cannot prioritize the process of building a trusting community of learners in which to voice opinions (a priority I will explore further later). After explaining that he wanted to "examine the different meanings in Babar", he went on and "defined colonialism and pointed out that the costume of the hunter gave him away as a colonist. Next I gave them some history of French colonialism in Africa, and we discussed the meaning of clothes in the story" (Kohl, 21). One might argue that Kohl, who uses his knowledge of the world to read the word in Babar, is teaching the students to do the same. And yet, in this scenario the class is working with Kohl's knowledge of the world, which he instructs— one might even say imposes upon— the students and the story. In Kohl's defense, we should recognize that he does not call the discussion he led a full education in critical literacy; rather, it could be "part of the critical literature program as early as third grade, if not earlier" (Kohl, 21), and perhaps he does recognize that giving children the space and support in early childhood to gain comfort in reading the world for themselves is a vital component of instructing critical literacy. His mode of imposing his reading however, and feeling that the process was successful because by the end, "the third-graders must have sensed some of this, because most of them expressed anger at the hunter and no longer thought the story was cute or charming" (Kohl, 21), suggests otherwise.

The Roots of this Project

It was with Viruru in mind that I attempted to divorce reading the world from reading the word. The distinction is not so sharp as this, nor should it be— in high quality educational programs for citizens of todays society, children should be learning to read the word and the world together. I took this approach because I wanted to make sure to recognize the forms of

literacy and literacy learning that are less obvious to those of us conditioned to immediately attach literacy to books. I do think it's important, though, that I give some background on my own childhood, and the way in which I was introduced to the word and the world. This is not to hold my own experience up, any more than any other specific example in this paper, as the "right" way to approach these issues with a young child. Rather, I hope that this exploration will help to identify certain preferences and biases that I have on these matters, that might otherwise skew my readings of the world of reading.

There was no shortage of books in my own childhood. The words and worlds of A. A. Milne, Robert McCloskey, Jean and Laurent de Brunhoff, Ludwig Bemelmans and Maurice Sendak, to name only a few, are woven into my early memories. My parents' love of language spilled over when they read the books; they would relish Jean de Brunhoff's assertion that the whale who abandons Babar and Celeste on an island was a "giddy thoughtless creature" in *The Travels of Babar*, Bemelmans' rhyming of "in France" with "vengeance" in *Madeleine's Rescue*, McCloskey's onomonapiadic dropping of blueberries into a pail in *Blueberries For Sal*— "kerplink, kerplank, kerplunk." Reading a book was, for me, about imagining myself in that world, and this effort was aided not only by long periods spent looking at the illustrations and pretending that I could "go in", but also by the way in which the language and the characters entered every day life, from the games of make believe to the common sayings. The strength of this presence in my childhood lends a certain structure to my memory and my nostalgia. Freire reminisces about the "deep emotion" of revisiting his childhood home as an adult: "Then, what I like to call a gentle or well-behaved nostalgia emanated from the earth, the trees, the house, carefully enveloped me. I left the house content, feeling the joy of someone who has reencountered loved ones" (32). My own family moved when I was three and a half, from

Massachusetts to California, and something similar to Freire's experience occurs when I open up one of the books; I find that the time and place of our old house in Cambridge still exists. In the realm of memory it is almost difficult for me to distinguish between the word and the world; I saw so much of what I read on the page in the world around me. Freire attempts in his recollections to think back to a time before he could read the word, but in my own realm of memory— which includes a pretty high density of very early memories— it is difficult to reach back to a time when I wasn't engaging with the notion, if not the full practice, of reading the word.

I say all this in part to give some recognition to the sort of foundational years that would lead a twenty-one-year-old college student to write about books for three year olds. I also want to acknowledge, upfront, my inevitable nostalgia and pre-existing attachments. There is a tendency to reference classic children's books as a universal language and common denominator of our population. Adam Gopnik, in his review of a *Babar* exhibit at the Morgan Library, does just this: "With Bemelman's 'Madeline' and Sendak's 'Where the Wild Things Are,' the Babar books have become a common language of childhood, the library of the early mind. There are few parents who haven't tried them and few small children who don't like them" (Gopnik, 2008). Those books were part of my language of childhood and the library of my early mind, and remain at the basis of my current language, the library of my adult mind. I have no doubt this was true for Gopnik as well, but I want to push back against claims that purport universal, or even near universal, reach. Not everyone reads Babar as a child. I want to hold onto these stories because I love them, but that is not equivalent to saying that they are an indispensable part of our culture. I cannot presume to be a totally objective or distanced observer and analyst of what children should read or how they should read it. That these books were part of my childhood in

the way that they were unquestionably influences my desire to preserve them, my hope to share them with the children whose lives I am a part of, and how I hope to do that. In approaching this project I have attempted to to think about the books which have stuck with me, and to do so with the skills that I have as an adult reader— to think critically and pick out what, besides habit and tradition, makes them "good" books.

I came across the French edition of *Blueberries for Sal* (*Des myrtilles pour Lily*) this past summer while doing research for an exhibit at the Musée de l'Illustration Jeunesse, a French museum of children's book illustration. It was moving simply to find myself, living alone in a foreign country, faced with something so deeply familiar, but I also began to consider, as I prepared to bring the book to the curator I was working for, what exactly it was that Robert McCloskey had done so well. The drawings are realistic and detailed, yet simple in their blue and white palette and clean lines. The text has a comforting rhythm and repetition to it, and strikes a perfect balance between the drama of the Little Sal's mother and Little Bear's mother losing their children, the humor of the situation, and the certainty that everything is going to work out alright in the end. My supervisor hadn't grown up with the book. I had wondered how much of people's attachment to a book like *Blueberries for Sal* stemmed not only from nostalgia for their childhoods when they had read it, but from a nostalgia that often accompanies images of classic midcentury Americana, a category in which many would place McCloskey's work. (The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Books had a McCloskey exhibit that I visited last fall titled "Americana on Parade".) But my born and raised French supervisor, from first reading, loved it.

<u>Implicit Bias and the Classics</u>

It is important to recognize, however, that part of the reason books like Blueberries for Sal have stood the test of time— indeed, that they exist in the first place— is that they fit societal norms. All of the authors I listed earlier— not all but many of the authors whose works I consider to be classic picture books— are white men. Blueberries for Sal takes place outside, following Sal and her mother as they go blueberry picking, but the opening image of the book is the endpaper, which shows Sal and her mother in the kitchen: a little blond girl making bracelets with jam jar rings while her mother, apron around her waist, cans blueberries. The kitchen is a safe, warm space of predictable domesticity, and for many— including, I believe, my white, female French museum supervisor— this image is immediately recognizable and immediately charming.

I do not mean to suggest that someone who is not white and who did not have a domestically inclined stay-at-home mother cannot relate to and love *Blueberries for Sal*. It is important to recognize, though, that a book will resonate in a different way with someone who shares identity and experience with the characters than with someone who does not. Rudine Sims writes, "All-white books do not permit black children to develop a strong sense of their own humanity, to affirm their sense of self-worth, or to discover their own identity within a group; thus black children lose out on some of the major benefits of exposure to children's literature"(Sims, p. 650). There is much to love in McCloskey's many books, but recognizing oneself on the page is not a universally shared experience. The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Books had an exhibit of McCloskey illustrations in the fall of 2016; walking through the gallery, I became aware to a degree I hadn't been before of what a white world he created— how little the people in the illustrations reflected, say, the children and teachers at the daycare center where I had worked in New Haven, Connecticut two summers before, which served predominantly

black and Asian families. In the whole of the exhibit I saw one black person: the boy at the end of the chapter "The Doughnuts" in Homer Price, who in his one illustration is depicted in a stereotypically poor, ragged manner, with a patch on one elbow and a rip in the other. Nancy Larrick's 1965 essay "The All-White World of Children's Books," reported that less than 7 percent of the children's books published between 1962 and 1964 as featuring African American characters in the text or illustrations— and a significantly lower percentage if one didn't count books in which African American characters were represented in blatantly stereotyped manners or subservient roles, or books in which they only featured in large crowds (a stipulation that includes others of McCloskey's illustrations that were not on exhibit at the Carle). Rudine Sims responded to this study nearly 20 years later with "What Happened to the 'All-White' World of Children's Books?" (1983), finding that "we are no longer where we once were— though not yet where we ought to be" (Sims, p. 650)— reflected once more, over 30 years later, in the 2017 survey by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), which found that about 22 percent of children's books published in 2016 were about (main character or featured significantly in the plot) people of color— a broader category, of course, than African Americans. This is well below 38 percent— the percentage of the US population that identified in 2016 as people of color— and especially insufficient when one considers the accumulative total of children's books available. Mingshui Cai's asserted in 1989— forty years after *Blueberries for Sal* was published— that literature about people of color is a "fledgling literature" (p. 12); this is still relevant another thirty years down the line.

This is not to say that Robert McCloskey's books are bad or that they shouldn't be read: rather, that the worldview they provide is incomplete — that certain among the qualities that make them relatable to some are not universally relatable. Moreover, they are the product of a

dominant culture that has been responsible for silencing many differing voices over history. In her 1989 instructional guide on Anti-Bias education, Louise Derman-Sparks defines racism as "any attitude, action, or institutional practice backed up by institutional power that subordinates people because of their color. This includes the imposition of one ethnic group's culture in such a way as to withhold respect for, to demean, or to destroy the cultures of other races" (3). This definition establishes an important category of racism: that which, while not actively subordinating people because of their color, is granted worth— in the case of children's literature, readership and cultural importance— by institutions or, more broadly, a society that holds these values. We can see here how such institutionalized racism so easily continues to exist today: through those who, for instance, laud the seemingly innocent cultural relics of mid 20th century America without recognizing that these books were produced at a time when there was little chance for a book about a black child and her mother blueberry picking. The effects of these "gentle doses of racism through their books" (p. 63), as Larrick puts it, as subtle, implicit and unintentional as they may be, are broad, as Sims explains:

> *This situation damages black and white children alike, since literature is one of the important vehicles through which we socialize children and transmit our cultural values to them. White children, finding in the pages of books only others like themselves, come to believe in an inherent "rightness to whiteness" that grants to other races no important place or function in the society. Exposed only to ludicrous or pathetic images of blacks, white children absorb even more deeply the poison of racism — and grow to perpetuate this evil for yet another generation.*
>
> (Sims, p. 650)

Derman-Sparks, along with Patrica Ramsey, addresses this danger in the anti-bias/multicultural education book, "What if all the kids are white?" (2011). They put rest to any claim that United States is today a post racial society (they cite incidences of violence in response to President Obama's 2008 election; I would consider the entirety of the 2016 election last year to be a case in point), and then offer a strong response to the assertion that education about diversity is unnecessary in a classroom without obvious racial diversity. They write, "It is not enough for White people to accept and respect People of Color or to tweak the current system. White individuals need to undergo a profound shift from viewing the world through a lens of dominance, however unrecognized, to making a commitment to equitably sharing power and resources" (Derman-Sparks and Ramsey, p. 2).

In his central tenants on critical literacy Freire states, "In the larger sense, literacy is analyzed according to whether it serves to reproduce existing social formation or serves as a set of cultural practices that promotes democratic and emancipatory change" (Freire and Macedo, p. viii). We must consider the way in which a book like Blueberries for Sal, if treated "neutrally", will serve to perpetuate existing social formations, and think about the ways in which it can be used to do otherwise.

Messes and Overall Straps and Quiet Triumphs

While I've focused so far mainly on representations of race, and the ways in which Blueberries for Sal reproduces social formations, it needs to be acknowledged that with regard to representations of gender, *Blueberries for Sal* has a lot going for it. It was published in 1949; in a literary world of passive little girls in bobby socks and frilly dresses, in the vein of *Dick and Jane*, Sal is a breath of fresh air. Her hair is short and messy. She is dressed in a sensible pair of

overalls, with one strap perpetually sliding down one shoulder. This book at once manages to show a little girl following in her mother's footsteps— "little Sal brought along her small tin pail and her mother brought her large tin pail" (McCloskey, p. 6)—and a little girl who is entirely her own person— indeed, who for a portion of the book blissfully follows in a mother bear's footsteps instead. Sal is at home in the domestic kitchen scene with her mother that opens and closes the book, but on her own terms: hair still tussled, overall straps still falling off the shoulder, using the spoon and the jar rings not to help can jam but to see whether, if she holds the spoon, she can slide the rings all the way from its tip onto her arm. It is worth noting that in an early sketch of this illustration (displayed in the McCloskey exhibit at the Carle), McCloskey depicted both Sal and her mother in aprons: Sal's is an oversized floral apron with a big bow tied around her neck. This is endearing because it is familiar: it suggests, at least to an adult reader, a little girl's desire to be just like her mother, and a mother's attempts to keep her child clean. However, as Derman-Sparks reminds teachers in her anti-bias curriculum guide, we are conditioned to think that a boys are allowed to get more dirty than girls (28). In the final version, Sal does not wear an apron, and while this is a subtle detail and perhaps not motivated by these intentions, I find it significant; it is hugely refreshing to see a little girl both indoors and outdoors being entirely her authentic self, rather than conforming to standards of gendered domesticity.

This image is echoed in certain other treasures of midcentury children's literature, perhaps most notably in Beverly Cleary's Ramona— original illustrations from which were, incidentally, on exhibit at the Carle at the same time as the McCloskey exhibit, along with other works by illustrator Louis Darling. Cleary wrote *Ramona and Beezus* in 1955, the first in a series about the girls who lived down the street from her original protagonist, Henry Huggins. The Carle Exhibit placed the books in a post war context, in which "Women, many who had worked

factory jobs during the war, left their employment to stay home and raise their children. This trend formed the traditional image of the perfect midcentury housewife. Cleary staged many scenes in and around the Quimby's kitchen, adding a dollop of childhood chaos to domestic life" (Louis Darling exhibit). A dollop seems an inadequate quantity to describe Ramona's presence in the Quimby household. Look, for instance, at Louis Darling's illustration in Beezus and Ramona at the start of the chapter "A Party at the Quimby's": Beezus and her mother, hair coiffed, skirts full, and aprons tied, are doing the breakfast dishes. Ramona, in her Sal-esque overalls and beloved bunny ears, is whizzing through the kitchen on her tricycle, short hair streaming behind her, singing at the top of her lungs.

Freire states that "literacy becomes a meaningful construct to the degree that it is viewed as a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people" (Freire and Macino, p. viii). McCloskey's and Cleary's works do not empower people of color, and may contribute to an inherent 'rightness to whiteness,' as Sims puts it. At the same time, they show two little girls living in patriarchal worlds and leading, in the pages of their book, quiet rebellions. Sal, romping independently around Blueberry Hill and calmly offering a startled mother bear her blueberries, has the potential to empower young girls, and this should not be dismissed. What must be recognized, then, is that it is possible for a book to promote a certain bias or stereotype, either implicitly or explicitly, but counter another.

Limits of the Quick List

A number of works on anti-bias and multicultural education— including Derman-Sparks' *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children* and Stacey York's *Roots and Wings: Affirming Culture in Early Childhood Education*— cite a list published in 1980 by the

Council on Interracial Books for Children, titled "Guidelines for Selecting Bias-Free Textbooks and Storybooks." Derman-Sparks titles her adaptation of the list "Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Sexism and Racism." Derman-Sparks introduces the list with a goal that aligns with goals of critical literacy: "It is difficult for a librarian or teacher to convince children to question society's attitudes. But if a child can be shown how to detect racism and sexism in a book, the child can proceed to transfer the perception to wider areas" (Derman Sparks, 143). This goal proposes, then, that the process of reading the word critically will help children critically read and respond to the world. The issue with this list as a resource, though, is that while it proposes to be about teaching children to analyze books for sexism and racism, it is written for adults. It is, of course, important for adults to read a book critically before bringing it into the class, but the process should not stop there. A next step is to consider how the book— it's topic and method of storytelling, but also its biases— match the given students' abilities to critically read. The Zone of Proximal Development can be considered in choosing books: what books display issues that, with appropriate teacher scaffolding, the student could critically engage with. And yet the implication of this list— especially modified with the word "quick"— is that if the teacher finds the books to contain biases, they should not be used.

I recently attended a professional development workshop at the Connecticut Children's Center's Early Childhood Resource Center, led by director Sandra Malmquist, on 'Girls in Books'. She brought to the teachers' attention a few statistics on the underrepresentation of girls in picture books, as well as the chilling results of a recent study of its effects: by the age of six, if told a story about an un-gendered protagonist (who is described as being "really, really smart"), both girls and boys were more likely identify the character as male. She then led the group in examining a number of highly regarded, otherwise randomly selected picture books, with an eye

toward if and how female characters were portrayed. The teachers then engaged in critical discussion of the books— a practice that many of them had not previously engaged in. Malmquist explained to me later that she did not wish for teachers to stop reading their students these books. Rather, she wanted them to recognize that there is always more on the page than first meets the eye, and that as teachers they have an unmatched power, to hold the child's attention and say, "Look what else is happening on this page." Within the workshop the discussion of each individual book was, indeed, quick, as we only had a limited amount of time. It was understood, though, that this workshop was not an end in itself, but an introduction to a tool kit that teachers could continue using in their practice. The discussion also included the beginnings of talk of how the observations made on the pages of the book could be translated to the classroom. One teacher, for example, had a book about building a house, in which all of the construction workers and almost everyone else involved in building the house was a man. She noted that she had a female relative who was a construction worker, and that she could share this personal example— especially in reading with her preschool aged daughter, who had the shared experience of knowing this person.

Derman-Sparks does not advocate completely removing the books that a teacher deems biased from the classroom. Her recommendation is, rather, to remove them from everyday use, but to "keep some of your old books that you now realize are stereotypic to teach 4- and 5-year-olds critical thinking" (118). She gives an appropriate book for this activity: Popcorn (1979), by Frank Ash (Derman-Sparks, 74). In the story a bear invites all his friends over for a Halloween party; they make too much popcorn and it fills up the entire kitchen. The bear is dressed up for Halloween as an Indian— a cloth around his waist and a feather sticking up from a band around his head. Derman-Sparks suggestions for this lesson are dependent on being incorporated into a

larger program in which children are taught about stereotypes and how to recognize them. Thus, in sharing the book with her class, her students would already, with her guidance, be building the skills to recognize stereotypes, as well as how harmful they can be. This example, however, still does not counter the implication that adults are capable of objectively naming the books that are biased, as opposed to not, and then taking only the biased ones off the shelf for future use.

Someone wrote this

One key component of critical literacy education is that of drawing children's attention to the fact that the material they are using was created by another person— the craftedness of the text. Australian educator Jennifer O'Brien constructed activities for her classroom of five to eight year olds around certain texts that highlighted the author and their choices. For example, before reading Anthony Browne's *Hansel and Gretel* to her class, she asked her class to "Draw the stepmother the way you think that Anthony Browne will draw her. Show her face and her clothes. Use a speech bubble to show what she says" (O'Brien and Comber, 2000, p. 159). This offered the class the opportunity to consider and discuss the stereotypes that they had about stepmothers; without denying that the stepmother in the story was indeed a wicked one, they could acknowledge that they made this assumption before reading the story, and discuss how all stepmothers that appear in stories seem to be wicked. Such an activity could be followed by a discussion of some real life experiences with stepmothers— particularly if anyone in the class has a stepmother, or knows someone who does. In this way, the discussion of the word (and image on the page) becomes a discussion of the world, as the children perceive it. This activity further gave the class the chance to think about this stereotype not only as one that they themselves assumed about stepmothers, but one that the author had chosen to depict.

The structure of O'Brien's initial question strikes me as very complex, too much so perhaps for children who had not done this sort of activity before, or with younger children than the ones in O'Brien's class. It asks not only that the child imagine what the character will look like but that they imagine what the author imagined that the character would look like, which could push at the limits of theory of mind, for preschool or even kindergarten aged children, that we discussed earlier. However, with younger students a mention of the author's name could work its way into the discussion in other ways— as simple as responding to children's comments about the illustrations with some variant of, "Yes, Anthony Browne, the author and illustrator of this book, decided to show her that way. How else could he have drawn her? How would you have drawn her?" These questions, like the original question that O'Brien posed to her students, allows the children to parallel the actions— drawing on prior knowledge and imagination, then writing and drawing— of the author and illustrator of a book. This puts value on the child's creative ability, and her ability to share stories of her own creation; furthermore, it unseats the creators of the book from a place of absolute power, showing that even though their book is printed and bound on glossy paper, it was created by another human being with his own limited views and opinions.

Part of the effect of introducing children to the crafted nature of a book, by another person like themselves, is to encourage them to participate in reconstructing, or rewriting, the story. This can take a very simple form of asking the students what they might do differently if they were writing the text. Derman-Sparks advocated a simple version of this technique in response to *Popcorn*, asking what else the bear could have dressed up as for Halloween besides being an Indian. Kindergarten teacher Vivian Vasquez gives the example of a student who brought up her concern about the Beluga whales being in danger, after hearing something about

it on the radio; this led the students to question the truthfulness of the lyrics to the song Baby Beluga, by Raffi, in which the whale swims "wild and free". "I talked to them about how different texts offer different perspectives of the world… We also talked about how important it is to think about other ways that a text could be written or presented and how the words chosen by the authors of the text shape the way we think about an issue or topic" (Vasquez, 137). The children still loved singing the song, and so they decided to rewrite the lyrics to focus on stopping pollution: keeping the song but amending what they had collectively deemed to be its inaccuracies. In this way, they did not have to throw away a thing that they loved, and they were able to see the word not as static, but as constantly evolving, with themselves as players in this evolution.

Pedagogy of Listening

In her book *Negotiating Critical Literacies With Young Children*, Vivian Vasquez discusses a number of classroom examples that, like the rewriting of Baby Beluga, truly emerged from her students:: their questions, worries, thoughts and ideas. Even in a classroom that is not so totally emergent as this one, though, there is space to incorporate techniques that align with those Vasquez used. A key part is to really enforce the importance of listening to different voices. In her writing on anti-bias education, preschool teacher Ellen Wolpert says, "We develop a lot of our lessons based on comments we hear from children" (201). She recalls an example of this from her classroom. She had used a picture book version of the *Three Little Pigs* as part of a larger lesson on different types of houses that people live in. After reading the book, a child saw a picture of a Peruvian house made of trimmed tree limbs, built on stilts, and said, "That's a stupid house" (Wolpert, 201). Wolpert explains her reaction to this: "I realized that *The Three*

Little Pigs implies that stick homes are poorly built with laziness by a brother who just wants to dance and play, but brick homes are superior, strong, and built with intelligence and hard work" (201). Wolpert had not identified the story of the *Three Little Pigs* as a biased story, and it is likely that an independent critical reading of the story prior to discussing it in class would not have led her to the same precise conclusion of implicit bias that she later recognized from her student's comment. This again highlights the limits to a "quick list" approach, in which a teacher presumes to be able to identify and weed out all bias from the books introduced to the class. To quote Sandra Malmquist, "Our children learn the very things we don't think we're teaching them"; what the student took away from the book was entirely different than what Wolpert had anticipated. The best teachers of anti-bias and critical literacy, then, approach a story (especially a seemingly neutral, broadly well known one like the *Three Little Pigs*) recognizing that their own readings are limited, and that the potential for critical literacy extends beyond what they can think of on their own.

A key part of any discourse about listening in early childhood is that of morning meeting. Julianne Wurm writes about the difference between the Italian assemblea seen in the Reggio Emilia schools, which is similar to morning meetings in certain American schools, and the more typical American morning meeting, more commonly referred to as circle time. While many American teachers fill this time with planned activities, Wurm argues that it should be used as a time for everyone, teacher and students, to practice the "pedagogy of listening"— a time when children can bring up questions and thoughts for the consideration of the group as a whole. She writes, "Listening legitimizes the one who is speaking because communication gives form to thought. When someone is listening, the thoughts of the speaker are at the center of the interaction, the reason for the connection. In the case of teaching young children, listening to

them makes the children the center of the interaction, the protagonist." This kind of legitimization is key for children to feel that they have individual voices and perspectives that merit other people's attention and consideration. It is only in this kind of validating, encouraging environment that children will develop the confidence to write the word and the world for themselves.

I spent some time observing at the Kitty Lustman-Findling Kindergarten at the Calvin Hill Daycare Center in New Haven, Connecticut. The head teacher, Winnie Naclerio, held a meeting with the children every morning. She would often begin it by asking a child to share something— a question, observation, or object— that they had shared with her the previous day, and which she had proposed they bring to meeting to discuss with the group. The child would have the chance to stand in front of everyone and explain their thoughts before the discussion opened to everyone. I was struck, from the first time I observed, at the way Naclerio modeled the practices of a good conversation for the children: engaging thoughtfully and constructively with other's thoughts and ideas, even when there were conflicting ideas. She would repeat what a child said sometimes, reminding them as she did that "I'm using your words". The repetition seemed an act of appreciation for what had been said, of stressing that those words were worth thinking and sharing. "I'm using your words" built on this, adding a sort of citation or acknowledgement: *you* came up with this, and I thought it worthy of repeating. At the same time, it also was a way of separating herself from the ideas being expressed: to make clear that by saying these words and appreciating these ideas, she did not necessarily have to agree with them. This sort of practice falls at the very core of an emergent curriculum— building off of what interests the children. Further, it is at the very core of early critical literacy: of teaching children

to value their own voices and the voices of others, and to build these voices together to effect change— to read and write and rewrite the world.

Conclusion

I'm still grappling with what to do with Babar, and probably will be for some time. It is a tricky text. Kohl's claim, that there isn't enough critical literacy happening in schools, is valid; while I dislike the seeming complacency of his response, I do have to acknowledge that we are a long way from having a school system in which teachers like Winnie Naclerio, Louise Derman-Sparks or Vivian Vasquez are in charge of all classrooms— in which teachers are prepared to approach anti-bias, education and critical literacy in the ways that have been proposed here. I think a key step, though, will be recognizing literacy as covering a much broader category than it traditionally has: to place value on the interactions and classroom practices, tied directly to printed text or otherwise, that are helping children to read and write their worlds.

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