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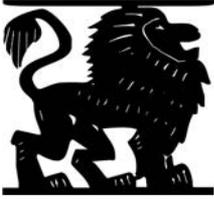
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## My Gay Agenda: Embodying Intersectionality in Children's Literature Scholarship

**Laura M. Jiménez**

*On a summer's day in Columbus, Ohio while attending ChLA's 2016 national conference, I am sitting beside three other women of color, preparing to provide our views on the needs of minority children's literature scholars. The hotel conference room is fairly basic, chairs enough for sixty, perhaps seventy people. I look at the glass of water sitting on the table in front of me as condensation darkens the tablecloth—the cold water in the glass and the few water molecules floating around the too-dry hotel conference room attempt to reach an equilibrium. As the organizer, Dr. Katharine Slater, begins by introducing Dr. Sarah Park Dahlen, then Dr. Marilisa Jiménez García, then me, and finally Dr. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, I wonder if I belong. I wonder if I belong at the table, at the conference, in academia.*

*I am not unique in my "imposter syndrome" musings. Many women who choose to enter academia are familiar with feeling inadequate or as if we are unwelcomed guests. For me, being in a room full of children's literature scholars always shines a spotlight on my "otherness-es." During our individual presentations each of us talks about how it feels to be on display as a minority scholar and the irony of this, as I sit on display, is not lost on me. When we invite others to share their stories, we listen to those in the audience. None of the stories are surprising. Women share incidences of microaggressions, macroaggressions, objectifications, and outright discrimination. These stories are echoed and confirmed by others in the room, and for many it is empowering to be believed. The ninety minutes is filled with story after story of being pushed aside, silenced, and belittled, and I look down at the table in front of me and wonder, why do we do it? Why do we place ourselves into such vulnerable spaces where we are undervalued, ignored, and hurt?*

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Professionally, I am situated as *the* children's literature person in a teacher education program. Teacher education is overwhelmingly White and female so I work with an overwhelmingly White, middle class, straight, and female population who are preparing for one of the most difficult and undervalued careers they could choose. I have noticed there is something about teacher education that makes speaking about, recognizing, and reflecting on people's identities off-limits or suspect. Therefore, it is not uncommon for me to be accused of having a "gay agenda." I've read the phrase on student evaluations, reviewers' comments, and heard colleagues use it to dismiss my arguments, assertions, and even my life experiences. Let me be clear, I have an agenda, and it is an out and proud agenda, but it probably isn't the one most people assume. My agenda isn't simply gay. My agenda is a race-class-gender-and-all-kinds-of-identities-that-make-people-uncomfortable-and-unsure agenda. In short, my agenda is an *intersectional* agenda.

In this essay I will present a blend of personal narrative and traditional academic scholarship to provide insight into the ways that I enact an intersectional agenda in the children's literature classroom. I focus on what we do with children's literature in our college classrooms. We choose the voices, stories, and narratives that are heard and silenced by the selection of scholarship and texts. If we, as a community of scholars, are truly interested in a shift in the ways children's literature enacts diverse voices, we must also enact that shift in our classrooms as instructors. I share this with fellow children's literature scholars to consider the myriad of identities that can enrich not only the stories we read but also the ways we push our students and ourselves beyond comfort—the comfort of normal, neutral, and known literature and scholarship.

The term *intersectional* was first used by Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, a law professor who published a framework that recognized the ways multiple identities such as Black *and* Woman had an additive effect in the erasure of specific groups in our society. Dr. Crenshaw wrote, "I will center Black women in this analysis in order to contrast the multidimensionality of Black women's experience with the single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences" (139). Her calling out the concept of a "single-axis" is key to the ways I enter into and create space for myself in the field of children's literature scholarship and teaching. I am Latinx. I am a lesbian. I have a learning disability. But these are not separate aspects of myself. Instead, they are intersecting and fluid; I am gay at the very same time that I am a person of color (although the color is vaguely beige; my father is Mexican and my mother is White), and I have a reading- specific learning disability, which means my history with education has been less than smooth and welcoming (to say the least).

My intersectionality is rooted in what Gloria Anzaldúa referred to as *La Frontera*, or The Borderlands. Much like Crenshaw's intersections, Anzaldúa's

La Frontera is not a physical place as much as it is a manifestation of the mindsets that exist between privileged classes and those that lack those same privileges. Some obvious borderlands exist between Blacks and Whites, men and women, and rich and poor. But these borderlands also exist between straight women and LGBTQ women, between White women and women of color. There are more borders than there are people. We are complex beings, and our identities are complex amalgams of seemingly opposing forces—straight and gay; male and female; able and disabled. But these kinds of distinctions are too simplistic and too blindly binary to be helpful. Instead, I see these Fronteras as spaces that can be used to recognize and appreciate each other.

In the preface of *This Bridge We Call Home*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes that transformation is a responsibility for all: “It’s about honoring people’s otherness in ways that allow us to be changed by embracing that otherness rather than punishing others for having a different view, belief system, skin color, or spiritual practice. Diversity of perspectives expands and alters the dialogue, not in an add-on fashion but through a multiplicity that’s transformational, such as in mestiza consciousness” (4). The homogeneity of teacher education is not unique in academia, and so my experiences are not uncommon among my colleagues who are *not* straight, White, middle-class, neurotypical, or able. On the other hand, for the mostly White, straight, female students who love school so much they decided to make it their career, it is often jarring to them to hear about privilege and racism. Bringing teachers towards an awareness of privilege is one step but it isn’t enough to transform classroom practice. Sarah, a White student, said it best: “I know there is racism in school. I feel bad about that. But now I am just scared of saying the wrong thing, so I don’t say anything at all.” Many teacher education students are left with a combination of good intentions and perceived powerlessness. The void between awareness and action can feel like an insurmountable obstacle, but it is my job to give students the time and space to do the work and build their own bridge.

One way this void can be navigated is to provide my students with an alternate worldview that includes authentic voices from mis- and under-represented communities. Using diverse texts on a regular basis instead of ghettoizing literature into a *diversity week* has been a struggle for many of my students. Some come to realize they have never read a book by or about anyone who isn’t White. Assaf, Garza, and Battle’s research shows positive growth in preservice teachers when they have opportunities to think and discuss race, culture, sexual identity, and issues of power and privilege. But these same issues are often either not addressed, or treated in what LaDuke terms an “add-ins approach” (43). Remember that class in which issues of

diversity, multiculturalism, or equity were highlighted on a single day? Usually shunted toward the last part of the semester, something to get to if there was time? The add-in approach was the educational equivalent of the *ethnic aisle* in the supermarket where jasmine rice sits next to cans of refried beans and across from matzo ball soup mix. This ethnic aisle method of handling diversity makes one thing clear: non-White, nonheterosexual, nonmale, non-neurotypical, nonmiddle class, nonChristian communities are lumped together not because of what we are, but rather because what we are not. The message is clear: we are not normal.

The field of children's literature, which includes teachers, librarians, authors, publishers, and scholars, has been grappling with multiple identity issues—sensing the specters from the past and rushing into an unseen future. In her chapter “Waking up to Privilege” included in *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, Stephanie Shields addressed the not so distant past when White women were trailblazers in academia and White men were the historic gatekeepers (30–31). Shields does not simply congratulate White women on their accomplishments; instead she reflects on her own limited view of the world of academia: “I had arrived into this overwhelmingly white, Judeo-Christian, heteronormative, and nonimmigrant world from another that was just as overwhelmingly white, Judeo-Christian, heteronormative, and nonimmigrant. I didn't notice anyone missing as I moved from one environment to the next. This, of course, is the essence of privilege” (34). Shields' characterization of her experience and her unquestioned privilege in academia might as well have been directed at the children's literature field in 2016, which remains “overwhelmingly white, Judeo-Christian, heteronormative, and nonimmigrant,” and too many do not see who is missing.

In the closing remarks of her presidential address at the 2016 ChLA conference, Dr. Annette Wannamaker asked the membership: “[W]hat do we do with these gifts we have inherited and with the ghosts that haunt us, how do we build upon them, what legacy are we leaving behind to younger scholars just coming up in the field?” Still focusing our attention on the direction of the field, she became increasingly specific: “How is our mission affected by the current state of the humanities in higher education? . . . By a continued lack of diversity in children's texts?” *And*, I wanted to add, *by a continued lack of diverse scholars and scholarship*. And so, a large aspect of my intersectional agenda is to make diversity the new normal.

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*Another fall semester, another group of mostly White, mostly straight, all cis-gender, mostly female literacy education students. These students have enrolled in a children's literature class in hopes of re-living their imagined childhood with books. The literature they hold dear to their hearts are the books that helped them see themselves, helped them build themselves, and through which they experienced the world. But, those aren't the books we are going to be reading. The students wait, laptops or tablets at the ready. But, I wonder, are they ready for me? Are they ready for a new view of children's literature? Are they ready to do the work and change?*

*I hand out the multiple copies I have brought with me of *King and King* by Linda De Haan and *Stern Nijland*, *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Brown, *Flotsam* by David Wiesner, and *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan. These are the books we start the course with instead of the picture book canon they expect. While I hand out books, I tell them to "go ahead and start reading." These are the books that are often saved for the last days of class, when all the work that needs to be done is complete and they have a bit of extra time. But, in my classes, this is where we begin.*

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When we begin with *King and King* and *Voices in the Park* the class becomes complicit in my intersectional agenda. Instead of a focus on a single aspect, such as race *or* class *or* sexual identity, we begin by reading specifically for the interconnected and additive ways identities can be represented in children's literature. At the same time they read these texts I provide an authentic model of intersectionality. I say the words that my students fear. The words that need to be said out loud and often. The words Black, White, Asian, Japanese, African American, Arab, Persian, race, racism, Latinx, Chicano, women, men, Native American and First Nations, cis-gender, able, disabled, neurotypical, gay, queer . . . all the words need to be said out loud. The words that need to be talked about so these teachers get to know the feeling of these words on their tongues.

I come out to my students as a complex person by addressing my intertwined identities. I am performing myself in ways that most of my students have never seen a teacher do, have never had to do themselves, and will come to recognize as one way to normalize diversity. Often, the students I have in my children's literature class come from homogeneous communities and classroom experiences. Christine Sleeter refers to this phenomenon in teacher education as "the overwhelming presence of Whiteness" (201) where the students, professors, and curriculum are White (and I would argue straight), thus making it extremely difficult to see or recognize anything other than Whiteness.

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*"Ok! Aristotle and Dante (by Benjamin Alire Sáenz) live happily, gayly ever after. Now, let's talk about the women." They have discussed most of the points I wanted them to recognize: The craft of deftly drawn characters, the complexity of culture, the stereotypes they hold about Latinx, fathers and sons, and gay romance. They talked about their initial discomfort with the idea of gay sex, and the many faces of bravery that Sáenz gives his readers. Now, I am asking them to see what isn't there.*

*Katie, a history teacher, looks around the room and inhales before she speaks, "Well, they aren't there much. I mean, the moms are great, but . . . there just isn't much there for them to do."*

*Donna, picks up the thread, "I don't know. I mean, can every book do everything?"*

*It is a great question. One I do not have an answer to, so I ask a question, "I'm not sure, but here is what I do know. As a Latina I see the familiar patriarchal non-sense the boys need to deal with and wrestle with. The struggles ring true. But, as a lesbian—because, remember, I am still a lesbian, even when I am reading about Mexicans—I am left with some resentment. Where are my happy endings?"*

*And so it goes. They talk about the words gay, lesbian, Mexican, poor, college educated, right, and wrong. I am not trying to get to the TRUTH of the story. Instead, I am trying to get them to talk and listen and think about all the sides of story that have truth to tell to us and our students.*

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The teachers and preservice teachers I have in my children's literature classes are extremely successful in the educational ecosystem of the United States of America, in which White, middle class, straight discourse is reified to such an extent that it seems normal and even neutral. But Paulo Freire provided teacher education with a way to look at the unexamined bias and the lie of neutrality within Western pedagogy. His work points to the folly of duplicating what has come before and expecting change. Furthering Freire's ideas of disrupting the oppressor and oppressed paradigm, Kathleen Weiler urges educators to recognize the "continuing force of sexism and patriarchal structures and the power of race, sexual preference, physical ability and age to divide teachers from students and students from one another" (13). The disruption of admitting to differences, by naming those differences and directly addressing them in a classroom, can be transformative and in that transformation, change is possible.

I am committed to an intersectional agenda as part of my pedagogy as I stand on these borders between teacher education and children's literature. I strive to create a learning community where I act as an expert peer but not the sole expert. When I sense students trying to regurgitate my ideas instead of integrating new understandings into their existing schemas, or changing those schemas, I often say, "I know what I think. I want to know what you think." But even this is a careful balance, because as a Latinx with a learning disability, I need to stake a claim to my right to be included in academia. Often, when I introduce myself to my classes, I provide my qualifications (Ph.D., years of teaching, most recent article, and awards I've received) because these are also parts of my teaching identity. Students recognize the trappings of the college professoriate, but even as I talk about my professional self, I am keenly aware of the fact that teacher educators have consistently omitted sexual orientation from the list of diverse or nonnormative populations represented in the explicit curriculum (Blackburn and Buckley 203). In fact, Moje and MuQaribu warn that omitting sexual identities in school contexts contributes to the ease of which such identities become threatened and threatening (205–6). And so each time I voice my identity as a Latinx lesbian I am reminding these students that White, straight, and middle-class are not unchallenged, unbiased, neutral identities.

Each semester brings new students, new books, and new points of history to draw upon in the children's literature classes I teach. The relationship teachers have with children's literature is a powerful one. They, like librarians, have the power to provide children with diverse voices and authentic representations. That is, if teacher education provides opportunities for them to learn to recognize the stories they are not a part of, are not native to, are not privileged by and to hear the voices that are unfamiliar, and believe the narratives that run counter to their lived experiences. Piaget's concept of learning has helped me understand how to challenge preservice and practicing teachers. For Piaget, learning takes place when a person experiences disequilibrium, attempts to assimilate the new information into their existing schema, and finally must change that schema to accommodate the new knowledge. But for this to happen, the learner must first recognize what is unknown, must be aware of the disequilibrium and want to change it. Disequilibrium is by definition uncomfortable; this discomfort is often caused by the mere fact that the new knowledge is in direct opposition to the learner's existing schema.

In her presidential address, Annette Wannamaker reminded us of Derrida's warning: "One never inherits without coming to terms with some specter . . . more than one specter" (21). And for me, the multiple specters of racism, homophobia, and misogyny are not distant. They are ever present in the books we read, the questions students ask, and the world we live in each day.

*I listened to Dr. Slater give her closing remarks and watched the glass in front of me. Although there were few water molecules in the dry hotel air, they had gathered on the glass to form rivulets that slowly streamed down the glass. The condensation was absorbed into the white tablecloth, changing the color, leaving an irregular pattern, and changing the texture of the cloth. The change wasn't permanent, but it was change. That is why I do this work. It may not change people permanently to hear me speak, to take a class with me, to read my scholarship, but I'm adding my ideas to a larger community. I must believe that we are altering perceptions, making patterns, changing the feel of what used to be into something more.*

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