

Calling you out, ChLA!
In what ways are Francelia Butler's
"the great excluded" still excluded?

Debbie Reese, ChLA 2018
Remarks delivered on Saturday, June 30

Good morning! And thank you for inviting me.

In the letter I received, inviting me to give the Butler lecture, I was told I could do what I wanted to, so, I plan to. When I learned that Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop had been selected as the recipient of this year's Anne Devereaux Jordan Award, I realized that her mirrors and windows metaphor might help me with this lecture. I'm providing you with a window on how I feel about ChLA and I hope you look into a mirror – one of those that are magnifying ones with lights, perhaps – that show you, you, with all your flaws.

This lecture is more like... commentary that is not suited for the association's research journal. **That, by the way, is call out #1.**

Diversity Jedi are in the room. Many of us were at ALA just a few days ago. Here we are at the Newbery Caldecott Legacy Banquet (Top row: Breanna McDaniel, Nicole Cook, Sarah Park Dahlen, Megan Schleishman, Debbie Reese, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, K.T. Horning; Bottom row: Sam Bloom, Wade Hudson, Cheryl Hudson, Sarah Hamburg.)



Now I'll say more about Call out #1.

Call out #1: my lecture

Two years ago, some of the Jedi submitted papers to ChLA's journal, but those papers got rejected for not being the sort of "scholarship" the journal publishes. They were characterized as "commentary." That—of course—did not sit well with any of us.

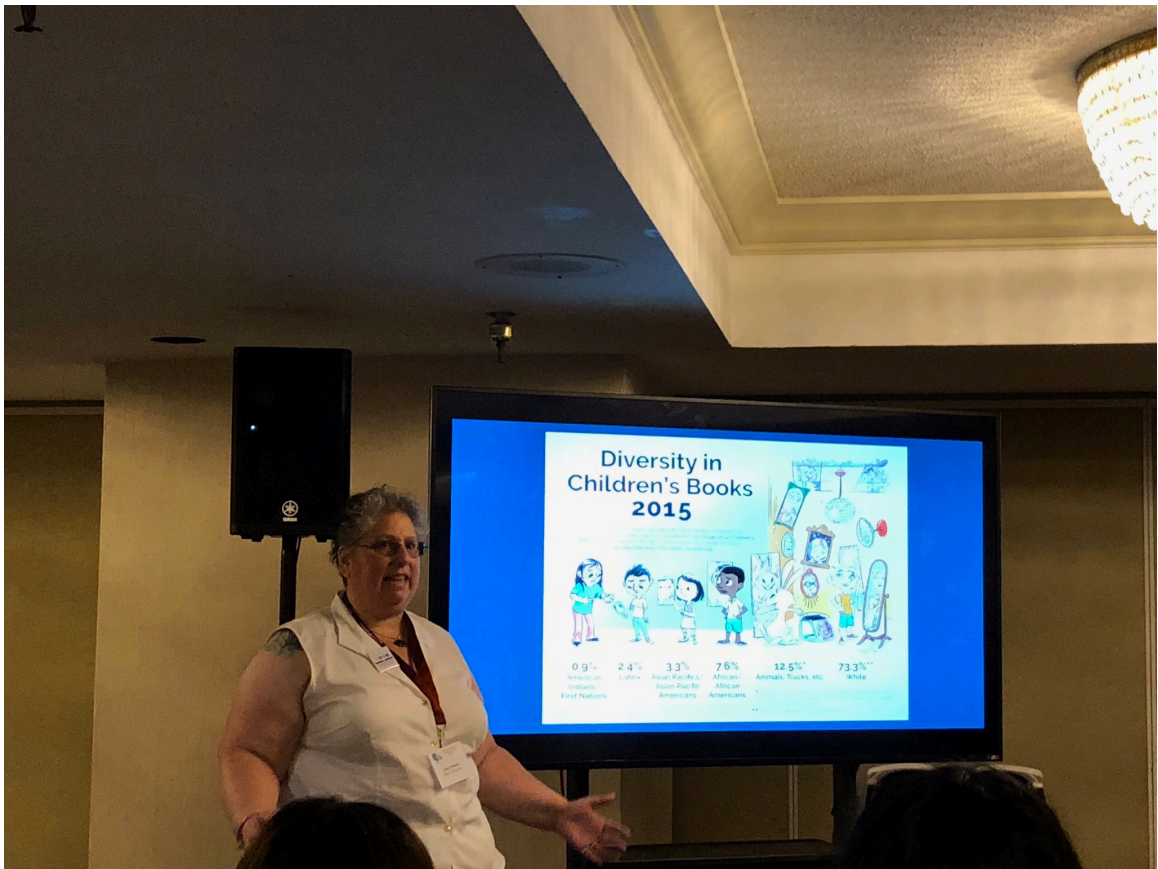
The DiversityJedi are a force. Making change. Upending the status quo. Like getting the name of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award changed. In case you haven't heard yet, it is now the Children's Literature Legacy Award.

The Jedi got their papers published in the *Lion and the Unicorn*, but they did more than that. They launched *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*.



Dr. Sarah Park Dahlen and Dr. Gabrielle Halko are co-editing it. If you haven't looked it up yet, do so before you leave the conference.

I've known Sarah a long time. I met her years ago when I was teaching at Illinois. She created a graphic that many of you use...



(Photo credit: Michelle Martin)

But did you know that Margarita Engle wrote a poem, inspired by Sarah's work? (Read the poem aloud:

SMALL REBELLIONS
a poem for Sarah Park Dahlen
by Margarita Engle


We turn diverse stories
face forward
on library shelves.

In bookstores, we bury the Art of the Deal
Under mountains of Radical Hope.

At grocery store checkout counters
we hide the tyrant's screaming face

behind peaceful green
garden magazines.

One word at a time
we begin to see
unity
growing from all our small
separate
courageous
pages.

**Margarita Engle**
31 mins · 🌐

SMALL REBELLIONS
a poem for **Sarah Park Dahlen**
by Margarita Engle

We turn diverse stories
face forward
on library shelves.

In bookstores, we bury the Art of the Deal
under mountains of Radical Hope.

At grocery store checkout counters
we hide the tyrant's screaming face
behind peaceful green
garden magazines.

One word at a time
we begin to see
unity
growing from all our small
separate
courageous
pages.

Why did ChLA choose me?

When I got the letter, I hesitated. Past experiences with ChLA people left me feeling like I was being tolerated. In fact, I've applied to positions at three of your universities. I didn't get interviews at any of them. All I got was those form letters that say "thank you for applying, but..." I hope you see why I might look askance at the invitation to do this lecture.

Am I window dressing for ChLA? A token?

Some language in the invitation letter gave me pause.


But, I said yes. Then, I went to the website to read more about the conference.

The language in my letter was similar to the language in the call for papers.


How do I, today, speak about the language in the letter and in the call for papers and all that has happened since then? I find myself feeling hesitation.

I had that same hesitation Monday at ALA. Several months ago I had been invited to sit on the Association for Library Service to Children's president's program, named for Charlemae Rollins.

ALSC CHARLEMAE ROLLINS PRESIDENT'S PROGRAM




Edith Campbell




Margarita Engle



Debbie Reese



Jason Reynolds



Ebony Thomas

JUNE 25, 2018 | 1:00 - 2:30 P.M.

Considering All Children: A New Ideal in Evaluating and Engaging around Books for Youth

Image credit: ALSC Blog,
<http://www.alsc.ala.org/blog/2018/06/alsc-charlemae-rollins-presidents-program/>

Edith Campbell moderated the panel. There were four of us. Me, Margarita Engle, Jason Reynolds, and Dr. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas. We had been asked to frame our remarks along the theme of "Considering all children."

We had submitted our slides a few days ahead of time. I had a lot to say about *Little House on the Prairie*. I believe that a lot of the content of that book, and the uncritical embrace of it, and the reappearance of content from that book in books written today—content that isn't called out by reviewers—have created the adults who are leading the country right now.

I was connecting the dots from this country's creation, to the stories it tells of itself, to the speech of US soldiers, in Iraq. "We were like Custer" [surrounded by Indians] and that they were going into "Indian Territory."

In a way, ChLA is like the USA. Thinking it is exceptional, when, it isn't. You don't eat your young, some of you say, but you don't feed them either.

Two days prior to our session, ALSC's executive board voted to change the name of the Wilder award. Wilder fans across the country and at the conference responded to that news with tears.

In the hours before my session, I thought "maybe I shouldn't go hard on LHOP right now." I was going to show a photo of the recreation of the little house on the prairie,



Photo credit: Minnesota Public Radio,
<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2015/08/11/bcst-books-thread-laura-ingalls-wilder-bloody-benders>

And then this one—don't worry—that's not the little house on fire...



Photo credit: Shenandoah County, <http://shenandoahcountyva.us/fire-rescue/news/2014/01/08/cabin-outside-edinburg-destroyed-fire/>

... to make the point that for many of us, our houses have been on fire for a long time. I thought, given the emotions people have about the books and name change, maybe I should not show those slides.

But, my answer then, was no.

I chose to stick with my commitment of standing strong for children, especially children of the many marginalized groups in the country. From one school to another, they're asked to read books that misrepresent them. For those children, the images and words are wrong. To some, the images and words inflict harm, create scars, and nudge them along a path where they disengage, and drop out of school.

So, my hesitation here, at ChLA was, do I go easy on you?

And of course, my answer is no.

I am not here to "tell you off" or to shame you, but I do want many here to feel shame and embarrassment because our kids feel shame and embarrassment all too often. For kids, I will call you out.

Call Out #2: the original call for papers and the letter about changing it.

Call out #2: The original call for papers and the letter about changing it

A group of us wrote an open letter that described problems in the call. In the midst of that, Graeme wrote to ask me about doing a Land Acknowledgment to open the conference (I have a bit more to say about that; it turned into Call Out #4).

Based on the call for papers, I truly felt that a Land Acknowledgement could not be done in a good way. I explained a bit of the history and how Indigenous people feel about them. In short: the intent is good but the delivery and the lack of action post-delivery indicates they're more like a mascot.

In other words, a token, an empty honor.

I let Graeme know that I had helped draft the letter about the call, he said he'd seen it, they were talking about a response. I came away with the sense that ChLA would not do the Land Acknowledgment and I felt that the exchange I'd had with Graeme was a good one. These things take a lot of time and energy, and sometimes you come out of them thinking it was worth that time and energy.

On August 22, the association leadership responded to our letter. They would change the call. They made that announcement publicly on the association website and perhaps an email. I don't know because I'm not actually a member of ChLA.

We were, of course, glad for the change. The letter, though, said that the call had...

“...information and phrasing that caused concern for members who were excluded and marginalized.”

Any of us here could do an analysis of that and say “ok, not everybody in the association was concerned.”

Just...

THOSE people. Those complainers. Those whiners.

Is that what it signaled? I don't know, but based on my past and current experiences in children's literature, I could definitely say that is an accurate read of that sentence.

Call out #3: Accessibility

Call out #3: Accessibility

In addition to our letter about the CFP, ChLA got one from members who drew their attention to specific accessibility issues at last year's conference.

ADA law passed 18 years ago.

1990

ADA
Americans with
Disabilities Act

What sort of care went into arrangements for this year? If you pull out that letter today, what grade might you give to yourself?

And--related to that is presentations themselves. I was in one yesterday where the text raced onto the screen and other text rushed off the screen. Images spun or were, in other ways, animated. None of mine do that sort of thing because that is not in compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act.

Call out #4 – Land Acknowledgements

Call out #4: Land Acknowledgements

In April, I learned that ChLA reached out to a Woman of Color to see if, based on something she shared on Facebook, she thought it would be ok to go ahead with a Land Acknowledgement.

The person who reached out noted that I wasn't keen on it. That person knew that I did not think it ought to be done. So, what to make of that person's decision to reach out to another WOC? To go around me? To ignore the input of the keynote speaker?

I was angry. I considered not showing up at all. I considered coming but then walking out of the room after my introduction. I considered doing what Dr. Beatrice Medicine did in 2004 at the Newbery Library in Chicago.



Photo credit: Social Justice For All:

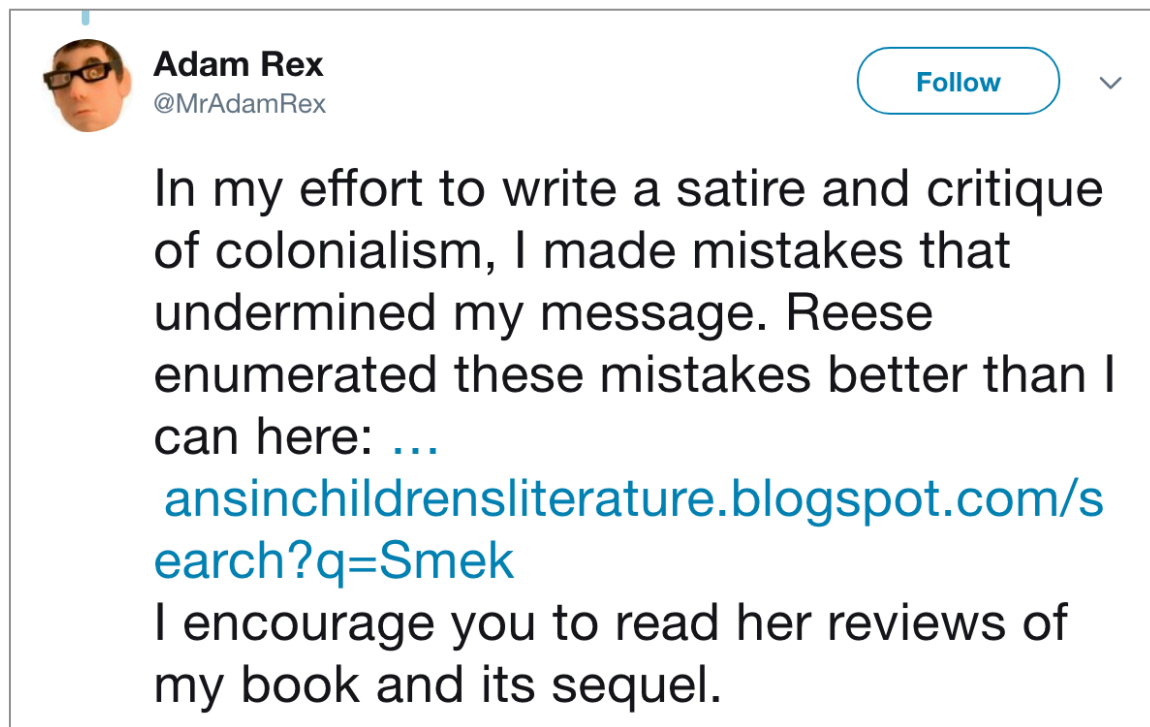
<https://hulshofschmidt.wordpress.com/2014/08/01/celebrating-beatrice-medicine/>

It was a large meeting, held at the D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian Studies. The center was established in 1972 to support the research of Indigenous scholars. Bea was in the first class of fellows and so she was invited to do the keynote in 2004. We were friends and hanging out together at the meeting. She was introduced and went up to the podium. The audience applauded. Then she said something to the effect of "this center was supposed to help Native scholars, but look around you. It isn't doing what it is supposed to do." And then she returned to her seat. The audience there was stunned.

I thought I might come here and do what she did... Say a few words and sit down, but obviously, I decided to say a bit more than that.

--Interlude--

I want to take a time out right here to share something from yesterday. As I was revising this paper yesterday, feeling the weight of the ways that ChLA treats some of us, I popped over to Twitter and saw that Mia Wenjen had tweeted and tagged Adam Rex about my critique of his Smekday books. In reply to her, he said he had this pinned to his Twitter page:



Learning he had pinned it, quite honestly, brought tears to my eyes. That's respect. That's visibility. That's taking ownership of your errors. That's helping others to learn. I'll say more about that in Call out #6.

A lot of writers are sincerely listening. Adam Rex is one. Others step up when the chatter in writers circles about a critique that I've done gets intense. Laurie Halse Anderson, Jackie Woodson, Martha Brockenbough, Daniel Jose Older, Mike Jung, Cynthia Leitich Smith, Anne Ursu...

And at ALA, Jason Reynolds said something like "Debbie Reese is not a troll under a bridge."

Also at ALA, I learned, by the way, that I'll deliver the Arbuthnot lecture in Madison! The date isn't set yet. Some of the Jedi will be there for sure, and I hope some of you can

come, too. That is a huge honor. There was a campaign to have it taken away from me. A site has been selected for the lecture; clearly, that campaign got nowhere.

---Interlude over---

Call Out #5

In the last month, I began gathering materials for my talk. I'd been asked to submit a title, so, I got to work. Carol Gay wrote

"Dr. Butler, impatient that there was no scholarly journal in the field of children's literature, had started *Children's Literature: The Great Excluded* in 1973, after opposition and ridicule from many quarters."

Call out #5:

Opposition and ridicule

Opposition and ridicule.

That is what ChLA is doing, overtly and with subtlety. I know it is happening. Just a few days ago, several association members took part in a conversation about the Wilder award name change and *Little House on the Prairie*. That was an opportunity to expand

what people know, for example, by sending people to my writing, to provide others with a Native viewpoint on that book.

Breanna McDaniel and Sarah Park Dahlen stepped into that conversation.

That is the way you move in the world, when you are sincerely and actively committed to the work of scholars who are marginalized. If you or your friend have done some of that work, fine, but if a scholar of a marginalized community has done that work, omitting or ignoring it is an act of exclusion. And when you lift someone, how you do it matters, too. In that thread someone characterized my work on LHOP as being “bits” of writing. See what I mean about opposition and ridicule, and why I am drawing from Butler’s work to call you out, ChLA?

Let’s move on to Call Out #6 – Owning and Keeping Errors in the Public Eye

Call out #6:

Owning errors Keeping them visible

Over the past months, as I thought about what I’d say in my lecture, I’d often go back to the ChLA website to look at that original cpf and the letter we wrote.

Then, not long ago, I was looking for the original cfp and the letter but couldn't find them. They were gone. In a thread on Facebook, I asked where they were. By the end of the day, ChLA had added a link on the drop down menu that includes statements it has made. That's good, but why did that material go away in the first place?

Was ChLA hoping it would kind of go away?

Some of you are probably thinking that it is wrong for me to think that ChLA might want to hide all that mess, but when you're someone of a marginalized group, you see that sort of thing all the time.

In 2014, for example, Jacqueline Woodson won the National Book Award. After her acceptance speech, as she returned to her seat, Daniel Handler (Lemony Snicket) was at the mike. He made a watermelon joke. An apology was made by way of a banner that appeared on the National Book Award website for a few days, but then, it disappeared. The sting of that joke, however, did not.

Opinion

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Pain of the Watermelon Joke

By Jacqueline Woodson

Nov. 28, 2014



424

If you haven't read Jacqueline Woodson's essay in the NYT about that, make time to do so.

Call out #7: How ChLA responds to criticism

Call out #7

How ChLA responds to criticism

Two weeks ago when news media began to report on children being separated and detained apart from their parents, a conversation took place on the Syllabus Swap page on Facebook.

People there asked whether or not ChLA was going to issue a statement.

A terse discussion took place. To many of us it felt like ChLA should have been on it, and in the discussion, we learned that some of the board members were, indeed, working on it, but we characterized the lack of attention to it, as a call out.

One response to that was to tell us how to use our call out energy.

The conversation on the syllabus page looked like one in which participants really care about brown children. And yet...

Call out #8: Words versus action

Call out #8: Words versus Action

There was a session on Thursday. The women giving papers are teachers who came here, undocumented, as children. The room had 60 or so chairs in it. There were maybe ten of us there.

I tweeted that the room was probably the most not-white space of the entire conference. Most of the people in the audience were women of color.

What do all those empty chairs tell us about meaningful interest in the lives of brown children? Quite frankly, I seethed internally as I remembered how enthusiastically people talked about making posters for the protest.

Why is it that Friday's session with Kate Capshaw, Althea Tait, and Philip Nel was so packed that hotel staff had to bring in more chairs? They are noted scholars, for certain, but how could so many miss that opportunity, the day before, to listen and learn from those teachers?

So, there you go. I'm out of steam.

In my remarks I've turned my activist research lens—not on children's books—but on you.

An association that is about children's books.

Are you living up to Butler's vision?

That's all I've got to say right now. I'm going to the protest. We can talk later.