Feminist children's literature: A work of translation

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FEMINIST CHILDREN’S LITERATURE: A WORK OF TRANSLATION

A Thesis
Presented in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
June 2010

BY
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Introduction

In this capstone project, I have explored the possibilities for gender fluidity within feminist literature for children as well as the issue of relational identity as defined by Aimee Carrillo Rowe. I have accomplished this by producing an original work of children’s literature, assessing what contemporary scholars of children’s literature have written regarding feminist concerns, and also by researching current feminist and gender theorists’ views on identity.

My interest in this project stems from an understanding that children are intelligent, thoughtful human beings who often have insight into the world. As a child I was painfully aware of the injustices and discrimination I faced on a daily basis due to my gender. I have just one younger brother and the inequities in our treatment by my parents became more apparent as we progressed through middle and high school. I was not allowed some of the same liberties, such as extended curfews, that my brother was at the time and especially felt as though my parents were trying to control the types of people with whom I chose to surround myself. I recall challenging the notion of separate but equal mandates in a high school social studies classroom. I explained, to the dismay of my teacher, that the only thing preventing me from engaging in certain behaviors or associating with particular people was that I had a vagina and my brother had a penis. I’m not sure if it was the crassness of my statement or the underlying idea that my teacher objected to more. He tried to explain that all people now are required by law to be treated equitably, but I knew then, just as I know now, that in practice equality rarely exists. I often wonder now how my life might be different if I had been exposed to feminism or
feminist ideologies at a younger age. Because of these feelings of inequity due to my gender I wanted to produce a work of literature that spoke to some of the challenges that young children face. My hope is that this work relates to their experiences and encourages them to think about identity in new and provocative ways.

The book that I have produced is an addition to the already rich body of children’s literature and I have sought to add my own feminist ideals to that body of literature. While I have defined feminist children’s literature as books that attempt to address issues related to the dynamics associated with gender, race, class, or sexuality, the label “feminist” is not widely used in conjunction with the categorization of children’s literature. I believe that feminist literature should be made available to children at a very young age and I hope that in another ten or twenty years there is enough feminist-defined children’s literature to show what changes or potential this type of literature may have. I also hope that at some point in the not too distant future I will be better able to say that feminist children’s literature is more culturally acceptable and available to children. By adding to the body of children’s literature I hope that I am able to model some alternative thinking patterns for children and potentially help them to make more sense of the world around them.

Many researchers have done work regarding how children use books as a way of processing the information they receive from the world around them. Evelyn B. Freeman and Diane Goetz Person write about the potentials of narratives as educational tools in *Connecting Informational Children’s Books with Content Area Learning*. Freeman and Person’s research focuses on material that is used in educational settings and points to the ways in which informational children’s books can be used for teaching children about
specific content areas. They state that, “Researchers have looked at how children develop in their ability to comprehend and produce expository text and have delineated the unique features of expository text structure. But the strict lines between exposition and narrative are beginning to blur” (7). This means that more traditional educational text books that use a literal explanation of the material also have the potential to use more narrative stories to explain the same points. This idea that narrative stories have a place in traditional education for children is important for my own work. My work takes a scholarly article and translates it into a narrative. Freeman and Person’s observation makes me think that it is also possible for non traditional text books to have a place in traditional educational settings and that children may be able to learn information more fully if it is presented in several different formats. Furthermore, Freeman and Person state that, “Writers of informational books for children often adopt a narrative framework for their work” (7). This narrative framework may allow children to better understand the information because it is put into a context or situation that is familiar in some way to the child. This narrative framework would then reinforce the thinking patterns that a child is already using to make the world intelligible.

In my experience working as a nanny in Chicago for the last two years, I have seen just how much children rely on the adults in their lives to model thinking patterns for them. Throughout that time I have had the opportunity to watch the growth of two little girls, now eight and five and a half, and a little boy, now two and a half. While observing the ways that they interact with the world and the types of questions they ask, I have often wondered how the literature they absorb affects them. Sometimes this process is quite clear and they will inquire about a concept that they just read in a book and apply
it to their own experiences. Other times it seems as though the literature has no impact on them. Their conceptions of gender, race, class, and sexuality and the thought of explaining such ideas in an intelligible way to such young people have often made my women’s and gender studies focused brain twitch and wriggle. When asked by the five and a half year old girl what a man was, I had to think carefully about the ways in which my answer might jeopardize my job while also giving care to the little girl’s inquiry. Surely, she has some conception of the term man and its perceived oppositional position, woman, which is why this inquiry seemed particularly interesting. She has always been a thoughtful, inquisitive person. I always try to treat her inquiries with the same respect I would give my contemporaries and I often find the need to oscillate between concrete and philosophical ideas when giving explanations. In this instance she seemed to be questioning the idea that a boy necessarily grows up to be a man. While, as far as I know, she has had no contact with or understanding of trans identities, her question does speak to a curiosity about the idea that boys and girls must grow up to be men and women. I often encourage the children in my life to dream big and tell them that they can be anything they want when they grow up, so maybe this type of thinking for this little girl in particular made her question the possibility of growing up to be a particularly gendered person. In response to her question, I opted for describing what a man is in concrete terms and in relationship to her own life. I explained that a man was a grown up boy like her daddy. I often try to leave my answers slightly open-ended to allow for further discussion and to allow the child’s thinking patterns to be modeled after my own. At this time it seemed as though offering a more philosophical answer about gender and its construction wouldn’t have helped her to understand what it meant in this society to be a man. Very
few of the books that I have read to this little girl deal with the dynamic issues involving
gender identity, sexuality, class, and race. As a child I also do not recall ever reading a
book that contained non-hegemonic conceptions about gender, race, class, or sexuality.
The lack of representations in children’s literature of diverse sexual orientations, gender
identities, races, and classes that I have experienced, as a child myself and also in reading
books as a nanny, has prompted me to be very aware in my own work of the artistic
choices that I made.

The power that children’s literature holds is that it often models thinking patterns
by showing particular representations of gender, race, class, or sexuality. These processes
of thinking about the world and the tools that we give children to process information
eyarly on can be instrumental to the ways that they view the world. I recall being a child
myself and having influential people talk to me about ideas that probably seemed
mundane and unimportant to them, but that touched me in very profound ways and still
inform my thinking today. As a child I was always taught to treat everyone as if they
were the same and to give everyone equal respect. Unfortunately, this led to my
reluctance to acknowledge any differences among people because it seemed as though
any difference would necessarily mean that people would need to be treated differently. I
now acknowledge that this notion was particularly problematic in terms of race and the
way that I viewed race as a child. I was unaware that while I was attempting to treat
everyone in the same way, I was also simultaneously ignoring structural oppression that
is the result of certain subject positions.

In my research I have found children’s books that could be labeled as feminist,
but these works largely address female empowerment and do not always address other
subject positions such as class or race or the ways in which these identities intersect. Books such as the *Fancy Nancy* series or the *Olivia* series depict strong, worldly, female-identified characters, but in many ways these characters also conform to standard views of femininity and socially constructed ideals of what it means to be a girl. The type of children’s literature that I am most interested in is literature that both challenges hegemonic views of femininity and more fully addresses some contemporary aspects of feminist theory. I am particularly interested in work that goes beyond just providing strong female-identified characters and that intimately wrestles with feminist critiques of identity.

The translation work that I have undertaken in my creative project involves making the original theory intelligible to children. This issue is certainly one that I have wrestled with for the entirety of the project. So many of the ideas must be filtered and manipulated in ways that will make sense to children that necessarily some of the original theory is lost. Also, the format of children’s books, especially for five- or six-year-olds, is short and punctuated with images. This format of text and images being intricately linked and mutually constituting can lend to explaining the theory, but it also must be a point of careful consideration as well. The short format of a children’s book forced me to make very deliberate choices with the images to convey additional ideas about gender, race, class, and sexuality that I would have been able to convey via text had I focused my work on a young adult or adult audience.

Children often act out scenes that they have read or viewed in children’s books, and pretend play and role playing are a big part of many children’s lives. In the article, “Pretend Play and Cognitive Development,” Angeline Lillard explains how pretend play
helps children to process social information and behaviors. Lillard theorizes that there may be a number of ways in which pretend play and social cognition influence one another. From my research, it also seems as though cognitive and intellectual ideas concerning childhood development show that children within the age range of five to ten years old are able to grasp many concepts if the information is provided in an age appropriate way. In the book *The Joy of Children’s Literature*, Denise Johnson explains that, “As children encounter new experiences, already existing memory structures in the brain or schema are reshaped, impacting the child’s linguistic, cognitive, social, and emotional development” (24). This suggests that children are able to interpret the new information they are given by relating it to their existing notion of the world. I believe that feminist ideologies regarding gender, race, class, and sexuality can be explained to children as young as five if the information is presented in a way that is engaging and understandable.
Aimee Carrillo Rowe and relational belonging

Aimee Carrillo Rowe’s article, “Be Longing: Toward a Feminist Politics of Relation,” has helped me immensely in developing a more inclusive notion of identity politics and translating that idea into a narrative for children. Rowe’s theory of relational belonging posits that our identities are constantly in flux and determined by our interactions with the people around us. The notion of relational belonging also lends to us the possibility of identity fluidity and encourages us to critically examine our identities as being created within the relations that we share with others and not wholly as an abstract within ourselves. Rowe explains that “The meaning of self is never individual, but a shifting set of relations that we move in and out of, often without reflection” (16). It is this fluidity and self awareness that Rowe focuses on as a strength of identity politics.

When I was introduced to Rowe’s theory of relational belonging in my first graduate course at DePaul I was very antagonistic towards this theory and the idea that identities were so fluid. I had always thought of my identity as steadfast and something that I had created myself. I did acknowledge that my experiences had shaped the various identities that I claimed, but overall I thought of my identity as something that I created by myself without taking others, or my relation to them, into account. As I heard my classmates discuss the article and their own experiences of shifting identities I began to see the ways in which my identity, even at that moment, was being pulled at from different people and positions. I immediately began to think about how I would explain this idea to people outside of our classroom and how to get these points across without using the jargon of women’s and gender studies.
I also began to think about what Rowe’s theory meant for organizing around identity politics. Rowe’s theory operates in a similar way to the notion of differential oppositional consciousness theorized by Chela Sandoval. In the article “U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Differential Oppositional Consciousness,” Sandoval defines oppositional consciousness as a way to maneuver among and between organizational tactics without being tied to one particular mode. Rowe’s theory of relational belonging allows us to tactically shift among identities in order to better situate ourselves among the people with whom we have contact. Pairing Rowe’s and Sandoval’s theories enabled me to see my identity in relation to my classmates and the ways in which we operated within the space of the classroom. I also began to think about how we could take the ideas from our class to outside spaces and how our articulations of the information as well as the ways we interacted would be different. In Rowe’s words, “Differential belonging, like differential consciousness allows us to move among different modes of belonging without feeling trapped or bound by any one in particular” (33). This is not to say that there should be a hierarchy of identities, but that the way we define our identities may shift depending on what type of organizing we are engaged in and with whom we are organizing. Just as the category of woman is constituted in different ways depending on who is doing the constituting, the same is true of other identity categories.

The notion of belonging in different ways and having your identity perpetually morph depending on the circumstances seems easily translatable to children’s literature. Children exist in many different social spaces and are able to acknowledge that certain behaviors are appropriate in different social contexts. I began to think about working on a
master’s thesis that would be intelligible to people outside of the women’s and gender studies academic community as well as this idea of translating information for different people or spaces. I wanted to produce a capstone project that would reach an audience larger than my own academic spaces. This idea of translating information for a wider audience and my recent work with children led to the idea of creating a feminist children’s book.

While I was thinking about Rowe’s theory in conjunction with my idea for a feminist children’s book, her idea of a politics of relation as a shift from a politics of location gave me hope for opening up spaces in children’s literature for the type of work that I am most interested in doing. Adrienne Rich coined the term politics of location in her article, “Notes Towards a Politics of Location.” Rich proposed that our politics are defined by our various locations, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality and that this process is very much an individualized process of self examination about the categories in which a person resides. Rowe’s politics of relation “…moves theories of locating the subject to a relational notion of the subject. It moves a politics of location from the individual to a coalitional notion of the subject” (Rowe 16). For Rowe, we should not necessarily focus on making or defining our own identities in the abstract, but should always be aware that our identities are shifting in relation to other’s identities.

Certainly it is important to critically examine this process of shifting relations and how our identities form particular power relations and either enable or disable our participation in coalitions or organizing efforts in different ways. But what Rowe is primarily concerned with is the spaces in which identities are interacting and mutually constituting and redefining one another. Rowe also critiques Rich’s politics of location
when she says, “…the ‘politics of location’ discourses constitute ‘location’ through articulations of identity in which belonging is assumed” (18). Rowe asks us not to make the assumption of belonging to identity categories in the abstract, but to acknowledge that our identities are constantly being redefined by those who are around us and our interactions with the world. Riki Wilchins, in the book *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer*, explains the relational identity of the category woman in this way:

> In such a revitalized feminism, Woman is no longer assumed but is always incomplete and unstable, in the process of dissolving and reforming as the political needs emerge. And mobility of identity is no longer a threat, but an important tactic, even a central feminist goal, and the disruption of identity becomes a means to overturn the male/female, boy/girl, man/woman binaries that make patriarchy (and gender stereotypes) possible. (129)

By allowing our identities to be reconstituted tactically, there is a greater allowance for fluctuations within identities.

> My work of children’s literature seeks to show children that there are ways in which we interact with the world and with individuals differently in different spaces, but that this is a process which does not undermine their sense of self.
Feminist critique of children’s literature

I have also researched current analyses of children’s literature to give myself a better understanding of the scholarly interpretations of and responses to this literature. By both reviewing original works of children’s literature and pairing them with current scholars’ analyses of children’s literature, I hope to show a more developed picture of what gaps and potentials lay in the current body of children’s literature.

Books are one way that children are introduced to the world. Books also model thinking patterns for children and provide socially appropriate ways of behaving and living in the world. The messages that children receive from literature shape the ways in which they interact with and view the world. Roberta Seelinger Trites, a scholar of children’s literature and an English professor, has studied the ways in which children’s literature has been used as a tool for the socialization of children. She writes, "At least as early as the eighteenth century, parents and educators recognized books as a way to indoctrinate their children into socially sanctioned behaviors, and authors have met that recognition for centuries" (4). Trites’ comment points to the potential use of children’s literature in social interactions. If there is space in children’s literature to teach about “socially sanctioned behaviors” there may also be space to teach about alternative social behaviors. Also, the proliferation of particular behaviors or social attitudes in children’s literature helps to produce physical beings with particular attitudes and beliefs. As John Stephens states in his book, Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction:

Childhood is seen as the crucial formative period in the life of a human being, the time for basic education about the nature of the world, how to live in it, how to relate to other people, what to believe, what and how to think -- in general, the intention is to render the world intelligible. (8)
If children’s literature covers a broad range of topics and expresses ideas outside of the hegemonic norms then children will be better able to understand those types of ideas and information when they see them outside of that literature. Stephens’ point also speaks to my own idea about the modeling of thinking patterns for children in literature. Books model thinking patterns for children and in this way shape how children see their roles in society.

Masha Kabakow Rudman also writes about how children’s literature is a template for appropriate social behavior in the book *Children’s Literature: An Issues Approach*. Rudman writes:

> Books for children have reflected societal attitudes in limiting choices and maintaining discrimination. Most traditional books show females dressed in skirts or dresses, even when they are engaged in activities for which this sort of costume is inappropriate. (180)

If children’s books have the power to limit choices and maintain discrimination then they also have the power to create choices and initiate social change. We, as adults, have the power to mold what types of literature are available to children and what messages are contained in that body of literature. I am not suggesting censorship, but rather making a conscious effort to produce works that are accessible to children that show a wide range of identities.

When narratives began to be written down instead of being transmitted in the oral tradition there seems to have been a solidification of culturally acceptable behaviors and the breadth of identities were consolidated to several archetypes. Angela Carter reminds us that story telling was largely an oral tradition up until the nineteenth century. Carter, in *The Old Wives’ Fairy Tale Book*, states that, “…the great impulse towards collecting oral material in the nineteenth century came out of the growth of nationalism and the concept
of the nation-state with its own, exclusive culture: with its exclusive affinity to the people who dwelt therein” (xv). If Carter is right then these stories were bound, quite literally, to preserve the cultural traditions and particular modes of behavior that were thought to be important for children. This at least partially explains the trend in children’s literature today to represent empowered female-identified characters, such as in the Olivia and Fancy Nancy series. These representations show a cultural shift from the male-dominated fairy tales of the early twentieth century.

Children’s literature, including fairy tales, has changed in many ways throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first century and much of the research on children’s literature for ages five to ten has focused on fairy tales. As Jack Zipes explains in his book, Relentless Progress: The Reconfiguration of Children's Literature, Fairy Tales, and Storytelling, fairy tales help to shape cultural identities, morals, and modes of behavior within a given society. He argues that these cultural artifacts or memes as he terms them, in the form of fairy tales, provide valuable resources for children and inform them how to behave appropriately in their societies. Many other scholars writing in the 1980s and 1990s agreed with Zipes about the cultural impact of fairy tales on attitudes and behavior (See Carter, Singh, Kuykendal and Sturm). As Manjari Singh argues in the article, “Gender Issues in Children’s Literature,” “This reinforcement predisposes children to not question existing social relationships. At the same time, however, books containing images that conflict with gender stereotypes provide children the opportunity to re-examine their gender beliefs and assumptions” (2). There are certainly positive and negative effects to the promulgation of particular cultural attitudes, behaviors and expectations. When these attitudes, behaviors, and expectations are prescribed
inequitably to people this becomes problematic. The policing of these cultural ideals is often not done in a universal fashion. This is the issue in many fairy tales. Gender roles are rigidly prescribed to both women and men, girls and boys and this results in the proliferation of cultural attitudes particular to these gender roles.

Leslee Farish Kuykendal and Brian W. Sturm speak to the issue of focusing on empowered female characters without drastically changing the script of a story; such is the case in many fairy tales. In their article, “We Said Feminist Fairy Tales, Not Fractured Fairy Tales!: The Construction of the Feminist Fairy Tale: Female Agency over Role Reversal,” Kuykendal and Sturm critique feminist writers who have rewritten fairy tales to fit more contemporary understandings of women and girls’ roles and to give more agency to female characters. One of their examples is of the book The Paper Bag Princess. In this story Princess Elizabeth rescues Prince Ronald from a dragon (Kuykendal and Sturm 40). While this story clearly gives agency and independence to Princess Elizabeth, the protagonist, it does so simply by reversing the traditionally gendered roles of princesses and princes. While the authors note that it is important to have representations of empowered female characters, they point out that many works rely on a simple role reversal of the binary gendered system to show the empowerment of girls. Kuykendal and Sturm push for a restructuring of children’s literature to show that girls do not need to take on the stereotypical attributes of boys in order to gain agency, as is often seen when fairy tales are rewritten for the benefit of a feminist audience. While the authors do ruminate over why feminists have made a project of rewriting traditional fairy tales they acknowledge that this is a potentially important project. They also push
feminists engaged with this work to offer more female agency outside of the shifting paradigm of binary gendered roles.

The authors’ points are well made and I think that contemporary children’s literature in many ways is attempting to address a wider array of feminist concerns. While I think that it is important to address fairy tales because much of what may be labeled feminist children’s literature exists within this framework, it is also important for feminists to take on children’s literature in new and interesting ways. This is why I have structured my project around what I call the translation of feminist theory into children’s literature. By using contemporary feminist theorists’ ideas and translating this information into a form that is palatable for children I hope to avoid the problem of simple gendered role reversals.

Although Roberta Seelinger Trites, in her book *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children’s Novels*, does endorse strong female protagonists and the role reversal in children’s literature, she also points to the powerful effect of giving agency to female protagonists in a genre that often relegates women and girls to subservient and docile positions within the text. “…the feminist protagonist need not squelch her individuality in order to fit into society. Instead, her agency, her individuality, her choice, and her nonconformity are affirmed and even celebrated” (6). In my own work I have made my protagonist, Jo, a strong female-identified character who has agency. It is important to show young children that women and girls can have just as much agency as men and boys.

The question of whether or not the attributes displayed in children’s literature are transferable to real lives is expounded upon by Stephens. He writes about another
researcher who, “… suggests that if children can be made aware of how such ideologies operate in fictional representations they may be more empowered to identify equivalent ideological apparatuses in their experiences in the actual world” (11). If this is true then there is an enormous potential for changing how children view the world.

The earlier children are exposed to alternate ways of thinking and being in the world the more prepared they will be to interpret more complicated ideologies as adults. John Stephens explains the significance of exposing children to different frames of reference. He says that, “The principle aim in constructing a variety of subject positions for readers is to contribute towards a positive self-concept for children from minority groups, and to contribute to the social and personal development of all children by effacing notions of racial, class, or gender superiority” (51). Allowing children to explore different subject positions encourages them to directly identify with the literature and also allows children the opportunity to learn about subject identities that may not be their own.

Stephens has pointed to the need for diversity in children’s literature and it is important to note that people of color have largely been absent as protagonists in European and American children’s literature. As Joel Taxel points out in the article, “Cultural Politics and Writing for Young People,” in the anthology, Battling Dragons: Issues and Controversy in Children's Literature:

The call for multiculturalism in children’s literature is a reaction to a central reality in the history of American children’s literature: ‘Until quite recently, people of color have been either virtually excluded from literature for young people, or frequently portrayed in undesirable ways – as negative stereotypes or objects of ridicule’ (Sims Bishop 1993, 39). (Taxel 155)
Taxel is right that more representations can now be found in children’s literature showing various races and ethnicities, but as he points out more representation does not necessarily mean positive representation. While deciding how to represent the characters in my own work, I paid close attention to how race and ethnicity would be presented in order to address the historic lack of multiple representations.

Taxel also states that, “Like other cultural artifacts, children’s literature is a product of convention that is rooted in, if not determined by, the dominant belief systems and ideologies of the times in which it is created” (Taxel 159). While the history of children’s literature in the United States has been fraught with patriarchal motifs it is encouraging to see some authors and publishing companies beginning to take the risk of putting out material that contradicts the historically anti-woman/girl messages. It is also encouraging to see multicultural representations in contemporary children’s books. This inclusion of various races, ethnicities, and gender presentations is certainly an indication of current cultural ideas and trends and the radicalizing of children’s literature.

Jack Zipes is one scholar of children’s literature who believes in the radicalizing power that Taxel and Stephens allude to in their work. In the foreword to the book, Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children’s Literature, Jack Zipes explains that in order to be honest with children, writers need to be radical: radical in the sense of showing the root cause of the issues that are being displayed in literature for children. Zipes further explains that the history of children’s literature has not been very radical:

There might have been radical elements in some books that undermined the hegemonic social code of the civilizing process, but for the most part young people were not exposed to radical political ideas in literature produced specifically for children that was flourishing by the nineteenth century. (Zipes in Mickenberg viii)
As Trites, Stephens, and Rudman have shown, children’s literature is used as a form to teach socially sanctioned behavior. Zipes reminds us that this process of acculturation can also be done with more radical ideas. My hope is that more children’s literature will be produced with this idea in mind. The idea that children’s literature can be a radical activist endeavor has been the foreground of my own work. I believe that writing narratives and creating characters that have the potential to radicalize children and make them see the world in a new way is certainly an activist effort. I hope that my own work is received this way and can add to the existing body of radical children’s literature.
Examples of children’s literature

While doing research for this project I read numerous children’s books. In sifting through this body of literature there were three books that stood out to me as potential templates with which to structure my own work. Those three books, which I have analyzed here, are The Name Jar by Yangsook Choi, Milton’s Secret: An Adventure of Discovery through Then, When, and the Power of Now by Eckhart Tolle and Robert S. Friedman, and Happy to be Nappy by bell hooks. As my project developed it was clear that each of these three books spoke to different parts of my own work. My focus is on children’s literature that has been published in the last five to ten years. These three works represent a wide range of children’s literature; therefore, I have pulled different aspects from each to include in my own work.

The Name Jar, by Yangsook Choi, begins with the protagonist Unhei, who is a young Korean girl and new immigrant to the United States just starting at a new school. When Unhei introduces herself to some of the children on her bus they find her name difficult to pronounce and are quick to poke fun at its pronunciation. When she arrives in class she decides that she will pick a new name and tells the class that she will announce it next week. Unhei interacts with her family and a local shop keeper to process her feelings around changing her name. Unhei’s classmates decide to help her with her name selection and put suggestions in a glass jar, which they call the name jar. Each day Unhei reads the suggestions, but none of them ever seem to quite fit. After running into one of her classmates at the local Korean market and discovering that he likes her name, Unhei finally decides to introduce herself to the class with her original name instead of changing
it to one of the options presented in the name jar. The book ends with Unhei feeling a sense of comradery with her classmates and their new appreciation for her name.

This book, while focusing on Unhei’s name identity, weaves in other elements as well. Her cultural Korean heritage and the history of her name come from anecdotes told by her mother, her own remembrance of interactions with her grandmother, as well as conversations with a Korean store owner, Mr. Kim. Another aspect of identity for Unhei that is presented somewhat ancillary to her name identification is her recent immigrant status. The issue of her Korean identity is bound up in her name and the author does a great job showing the reader how a cultural identity can inform other aspects of a person’s life. This is evident in the scene with Unhei and her mother as they shop for traditional Korean food in Mr. Kim’s Korean market. Unhei’s mother reminds her that just because they are not in Korea anymore doesn’t mean that they will stop eating Korean food. This is one way in which the author provides a context for the idea of shifting identities while also retaining previous identities. These concepts are presented in a very relatable way so that the target audience of four to eight year olds will be able to grasp the concepts. The use of relatable examples aids children in applying these ideas to their own lives.

One problematic aspect of the narrative in The Name Jar is that of Unhei’s friend Joey as the final catalyst in her decision to use her own original name. There are many lead up factors and people that influence Unhei’s decision to keep her name. The final example we see in the book though is of a white boy named Joey who tells Unhei that he thinks she should use her original name. This does fall into the idea of a white person as the savior for a person of color. This situation could be easily remedied by changing
Joey’s race and although this particular point is problematic for a feminist analysis I still think that this book encapsulates many other feminist ideas.

As the protagonist of the story, Unhei is presented as a reflective, thoughtful, girl dressed in plain clothing. She is neither overtly feminine, nor overtly masculine. The other characters in the book also offer a range of presentations in dress, gender identification, and ethnicity. While there is a substantial amount of text on some pages the text seems necessary to deliver the storyline and to adequately inform the reader. There is a nice balance between the types of illustrations included in the book and the illustrator provides the reader with many different sized visual representations to engage the viewer. The drawings overall are often simplistic in form, which allows the often abundant text to be the focal point of the story. In this way the reader is not both overwhelmed with textual information and images at the same time. The simple style of the images compliments the complex ideology of identity reformation and reification that is present in the text.

This work could be viewed as a feminist project for its inclusion of characters that represent various ethnicities and gender presentations as well as for having a female protagonist. The sole presence of a female protagonist does not make a work of children’s literature, feminist. The ways in which the author, Choi, presents Unhei as a character who embodies agency in her act of deciding to change her name shows the reader that Unhei is a self aware person. While Unhei is not the most brazen character and her confidence in her name waivers throughout the book she is committed to the process of self discovery, which allows her agency within the story. While the other characters in the book give Unhei different ways to model thinking patterns about her
name and identity, Unhei herself is continually reconstituting what those identity
categories mean to her. Choi allows Unhei to engage with this process of self discovery
in a scenario where Unhei ultimately has control over the outcome. In the end, she does
not passively accept the suggestions given by her classmates, but instead chooses her own
path, which shows the reader a potential way to model their own thinking about difficult
situations.

This book influenced my project because it modeled some thinking patterns for
the reader on how to problem solve and it also dealt directly with issues concerning
identity and how identities can be altered or shifted. Unhei’s identity and sense of self
changes when her family emigrates from Korea and her name is unpronounceable to her
classmates. In a similar way my protagonist Jo’s identity is put into question when her
school friend Darius refuses to play with her at a local park. The depiction of Unhei in
The Name Jar made me realize how important it is to give agency to a protagonist. I
structured Jo’s path of self discovery in a similar way to Unhei’s whereby Jo sought
advice from various family members about how her identities and nicknames relate to
other people. While each character in my work modeled a different thinking pattern for
Jo, in the end Jo was the author of her own destiny. I found this point particularly
important because although in The Name Jar Unhei seems to be processing different
modes of thinking from other characters in the end her decision seems to be made largely
by her conversation with one character, Joey. I wanted to show in my work a character
that is influenced by others, but ultimately has all of the decision making power.

The Name Jar also has amazingly thoughtful illustrations that depict a wide range
of racial and ethnic differences among the students in Unhei’s classroom. The book also
depicts Unhei’s neighborhood as being cross cultural and in this way can be relatable to a wider audience. The inclusion of various identities and people that is present in The Name Jar makes it a feminist children’s book. I took the idea of representing multiple racial and ethnic differences in a different direction with my own work and chose to use animals instead of people. In The Name Jar Unhei’s ethnic identity is intimately tied to her name. I didn’t want to make this same distinction in my work and thought that by representing a variety of animals of different shapes, sizes, and colors, I could direct the reader’s attention to the idea that difference existed among the characters without pointing to specific races or ethnicities.

The second children’s book I have chosen to explore in relation to my own work is Milton’s Secret: An Adventure of Discovery through Then, When, and the Power of Now by Eckhart Tolle and Robert S. Friedman. In this book Tolle and Friedman translate the theories that Tolle presents in his book The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment for a younger audience. This story tells of a young boy named Milton who is taunted by a bully at school named Carter. Milton becomes reluctant to attend school and begins to obsess over the potential bullying he may receive. After seeing how his cat Snuggles is able to blissfully cuddle in his lap not long after being attacked by a bullying Doberman, Milton’s grandfather begins to explain the concept of living in the now. Then after a subsequent conversation with Grandpa, the ideology of living in the now is explained more fully to Milton and the reader. Milton also encounters the woman who works in the ice cream shop in a dream. She explains the concept of living in the now further. After these events Milton then encounters Carter again at school, but this time he
doesn’t have the same apprehension and Carter does not bully him. The book ends with Milton explaining his new found confidence with living in the now to his Grandpa.

This book is a great example of how a complex idea designed for adults can be translated into children’s literature. While this book aims at a target audience of seven or older the concepts are explained in accessible language and in a relatable way. The example of a child worrying about a bully at school is a common enough occurrence that many children will be able to relate either directly or indirectly to the character Milton. The use of dream sequences to further explain the ideas helps to bring up the same ideas in a new way so as not to seem redundant. I was not aware of Eckhart Tolle’s work previous to reading this book, but now feel that from reading this children’s version I have at least a base sense of what the more complex concept of living in the now is. This book fulfills its aim of introducing a complex adult ideology to an audience comprised of children.

While I admired this book for its translation work, unfortunately, the representations of characters were homogenous. The majority of the characters are white; the only exception being the ice cream shop lady, who is not even given a name. She also appears in Milton’s dreams as a mystical and magical character who reveals the light inside all living beings. Her depiction as an African American woman is exaggerated to accentuate stereotypical features. Also, her use as a magical fortune teller of sorts and her equation with black magic is problematic. If there had been a balance of characters to offset this one particular image then this character would not seem so stark in contrast. All of the women depicted in the book are dressed in stereotypical attire and not a single one of the three depicted women/girls wears pants. There are many more male characters
depicted in the book, although the main cast of characters is evenly divided in number in regards to gender representation.

Another issue I found with this book is that while Milton does have some original thoughts regarding the bullying he receives from Carter, his opinions and thought processes are largely informed by other characters, namely his Grandpa and the ice cream lady. In the scene after Snuggles is attacked by a Doberman the conversation is guided entirely by Grandpa, leaving little room for Milton to show the reader his own agency. Similarly, in the conversation during his dream with the ice cream lady, Milton’s thought process is guided entirely by her instead of him thinking for himself and postulating how to deal with his situation.

The lack of agency that Milton displays as well as the lack of attention to issues of diversity makes it difficult for me to use the term feminist in reference to this children’s book. The notion of taking a complex concept and making it accessible to a wider audience could be taken as a feminist project. Accessibility of materials and knowledge is something that academic feminists often contemplate.

I specifically chose *Milton’s Secret: An Adventure of Discovery through Then, When, and the Power of Now* because it took an adult concept by a religious philosopher and translated it for children. I have viewed my project as a translation of Aimee Carrillo Rowe’s work with relational belonging. It was clear that the concepts in Tolle and Friedman’s work were carefully translated from the original. At times the story seemed contrived, which is an issue that I encountered in my own work. To make a narrative out of an abstract concept is a difficult task and to then translate it even further for children is even more difficult. The illustrations in this book made me realize the importance of
showing diversity in my own work and stood in stark contrast to the images in *The Name Jar*. This book also helped me to craft my examples of Aimee Carrillo Rowe’s theory of relational belonging in a way that worked with the story arc I was creating. In a very practical way this book also helped me to understand what I didn’t want in my own work and some of the pitfalls I could easily have fallen into, such as lack of diversity among characters and forced interactions among characters to further elaborate the theory.

The third work I explored for my project is *Happy to be Nappy* by bell hooks, a well known feminist theorist. This book is written in poetic verse and complimented with simple unnamed female characters with various hair styles. The overarching message of the book is that these women and girls are happy to have nappy hair. This book is targeted to an audience of four to eight year olds and the easy, often sing-song quality to the text helps to engage young readers in the content of the book.

The characters, all unnamed and all presented as female, range greatly in skin tone. Some of the characters appear in dresses while others wear skirts, shorts, or pants but all of the clothing is white, which helps to put the focus on the hair in each scene. Every possible hairstyle configuration is represented in this book and the simple child-like drawings give the book a feel of endless possibilities in the creation of various hair styling options. Many of the styles appear fanciful and whimsical and are accentuated with bold spots of color on the page to indicate various hair accoutrements.

The overall feeling from this book is a sense that the characters are happy with their appearances and that their hair is a source of pride and a way to express themselves. This book falls in with the trend in children’s literature to produce works that empower children. The idea of children as purveyors of agency is interesting because in many ways
children’s agency can be limited by parents and caregivers. This limiting is most often not out of any malice towards a child, but is an attempt to protect a child and to show them how to interact with the world.

This book exemplifies some of the possibilities for feminist children’s literature. hooks’ work speaks to the beauty standards of contemporary U.S. culture where long, straight, silky hair is glorified and seen as ideal for women. Happy to be Nappy offers young African American girls a forum to celebrate their hair in a time when few spaces exist.

Although hooks’ work doesn’t translate one particular feminist article or theory for children it does touch upon several general feminist concepts. Female empowerment is a feminist concept that is important in a culture where women are not always valued equally to men. The standards of beauty and the ways in which these standards are used to marginalize women is also a feminist concept at work in hooks’ book. Both of these adult feminist concepts were shown in age appropriate and engaging ways in Happy to be Nappy much in the same way that I have worked to show relational belonging in my own work of children’s literature.

This book reminded me to keep my ideas on par with my intended audience. The first few drafts of my own book were inundated with information and complex notions that were inaccessible to children in the age range of five to six years old—my target audience. hooks’ work reminded me to slow down and refocus on the most basic aspects of what I wanted to convey. The style that hooks’ used for the text, which mimicked poetry, gave small bits of information in a package that was palatable for young children. I used this sentiment when crafting the later drafts of my own work.
My book-*Josephine, Josie, Jo*

In my own work, titled *Josephine, Josie, Jo*, the protagonist Jo is planning for her sixth birthday party. Jo is placed in different social contexts where various behaviors are expected of her and in each case she must negotiate what it means to be a part of that space while still retaining the particular identities that she showcases in other spaces. This is illustrated through the use of various nicknames in different spaces. Her name changes in these instances, and sometimes so does her behavior, and Jo must wrestle with what it means to both change and remain the same person in these different relations. On the first two pages of the book we see Jo and her friend Darius at the local playground. Darius refuses to play with Jo because, as he says, “We’re not park friends! We’re just school friends!” This rejection starts Jo’s ruminations over what it means for her to exist in various spaces with various nicknames and various identity representations. The remainder of the book is an exploration of how Jo negotiates her sense of self in relation to her changing surroundings and her changing nicknames. The story culminates with her sixth birthday party.

The premise of my work was to translate Aimee Carrillo Rowe’s article, “Be Longing: Toward a Feminist Politics of Relation” for children. I often found myself struggling to use the feminist language that I felt necessary to convey the theory while still remembering that the phrases must be appropriate for five-to six-year-old children. In the end, I chose to illustrate the ideas through the action and events in the story coupled with Jo’s contemplation about what was taking place. I chose the language very carefully in order to make my points clear and I believe I achieved a decent balance of appropriate and engaging language to get across the main ideas of relational belonging.
Every part of the process of writing and considering illustrations for my book was done with great care. I envisioned what my cohort might say about representing characters in a particular way or illustrating them this way or that. In the end it was a more laborious process than I had ever envisioned, but I believe that the care I used in putting together this project shows in the final product.

I chose the names of the characters very carefully as well. I wanted to denote certain characters as female or male embodied, but also chose names like Coach Chris which could just as easily stand for Christine as it could for Christopher. By allowing the reader to make some of these judgments my hope was for the reader to be able to relate the text to their own life and to allow for some questioning to take place. My favorite children’s books are ones that allow a space for additional conversations to develop between the adult reading the book and the child observing or reading along. Books that make a child and/or adult think and question allow for more thinking patterns to be modeled and, in this way, for the child to develop more critical thinking skills. I also chose for Teddy, Jo’s little brother, to be a different animal than the rest of the family and for there to be no father figure in the book. The reader is then allowed the space to decide for themselves why Jo’s family is represented this way. Teddy could be adopted or have a different biological father than Jo or Mom could have been artificially inseminated. Also, the lack of a father figure allows this particular family dynamic to be determined by the reader. A heteronormative family could view this depiction as an absent father scenario whereas another family unit could view the lack of a father as an indication that Mom may be a lesbian. I chose not to focus on any of these aspects within the text of the book,
but thought it was important to include them to allow the reader as much space as possible to write themselves into the story.

My choice of a female protagonist was intentional. Although feminist children’s literature does need strong representations of female-identified characters it also needs strong male identified characters that represent masculinity in non hegemonic ways. I felt that using a female-identified character who also engaged in traditionally male spaces such as athletics and who also had strong male allies (e.g. Grandpa) that the story would be palatable to both male- and female-identified children. I also chose to represent Jo’s family in a way that allows her the greatest amount of agency. In all of her dealings with family members the overarching thinking pattern that is being modeled is that Jo can solve her own problems and has the ability to do so. While Jo does look for guidance from her family it is clear that they are allowing her the space to decide what is right for her. I think that it is important to allow children agency in decision making. Throughout the book Jo is contemplating who to invite to her birthday party. The fact that she is solely responsible for the guest list shows how her family values her decisions and that they believe she has the ability to make good decisions. This confidence building and agency at such a young age exemplifies what a feminist children’s book should be and shows children that they are valid contributors to their own lives as well as the lives of others.

Since I do not have an art background, it was interesting for me to see how many of these ideas could be represented within the illustrations. While I worked with the illustrator, Ailisa Qualkinbush, on this project we spoke at length about the various stylistic choices that would best illustrate a feminist book project. I was very fortunate to
have such a large voice in the illustration project as this is not typically true of illustrated books. Ailisa and I chose to represent the characters as animals because we felt that this would allow us to show diversity among the characters without their diversity and differences being the main focal point. I also felt that we would be able to show a greater range of gender representations if we used animals instead of people as the characters because there would be fewer gender indicators for the reader to latch onto. I have chosen to have some of the characters dressed ambiguously in clothing that could be worn by any person. There are certainly also characters that conform more readily to notions of a dichotomous gendered system, such as Jo’s Mom who wears long dresses in the book. Many of these choices were stylistic ones made by Ailisa during the creative process of drawing and due to our limited time frame we were unable to fully develop more supporting characters to show a wider breadth of gender representations. I have also put Jo on a sports team, soccer, and given her a female best friend, Wing-Yee, as well as provided her with both male and female-identified role models.

The characters need to be recognizable to the viewer, both parents/caregivers and children. While children interact on a daily basis with various types of people who perform their gender in a myriad of ways, unfortunately, much of U.S. society fits into a rigid gender dichotomy as well as many other dichotomies. Those who do not readily fit into the predetermined binaries are often forced to do so through the threat of ostracization and often violence. In order for my work to be accessible to children I must work within these realities, but my hope is that by including some characters that are not easily defined that this will open up the doors of possibility for the inclusion of various gender portrayals in future children’s literature.
I wanted a wide variety of animals to be depicted to show that there were nuances to these other characters’ identities as well as to Jo’s. These different animals can be read as a depiction of various racial or ethnic categories as well as different gender representations, but it was important to me not to use any stereotypically racist images or undertones. I felt that if I had used human characters the reader might focus too intently on the exact representation of race, class, or gender of the character and then feel alienated if none of the characters matched their own identities. Using animal characters allows the reader to make some judgments about how they relate to the characters in ways that might not be apparent to me as a writer.

While I gave Ailisa input on how I wanted the illustrations depicted, especially the characters, the creative process was all her own. She used some mixed media and collage techniques as well as photographs to produce most of the illustrations. I think that these techniques created some amazing images that really draw the reader into the book visually. Many of the images have multiple layers and texture that add to the experience of the book. Ailisa’s knowledge and love of children’s books and illustrations really helped me to finalize my decisions about how to visualize this book.

Throughout the process of writing Josephine, Josie, Jo I was consistently aware of how I wanted to model thinking patterns for the reader both in the text and in the images. By putting Jo in spaces such as the park, her school, a soccer game, and her birthday party I was encouraging the reader to put themselves in Jo’s shoes. While the reader may not have the particular experiences that Jo had I tried to make the situations universal enough that a large audience would find some resonance to her experiences. In all of these scenarios Jo seeks advice from the people in her life to sort through the issues she is
having with her nicknames and her identities. The major thinking pattern that all of the adults in Jo’s life replicate is one of assuming that she is capable of working through these difficult thoughts on her own. Jo’s family allows her the agency to make her own decisions and doesn’t dictate what she should do. They respect her and her ability to make her own decisions. By doing this, they allow her to show that she has agency over her own life. This effect is also surely one of self confidence. Jo’s family is giving her the tools to build confidence in herself and in her decisions.

Jo’s contemplations about her identity and the ways in which she interacts with her family in the book largely mirror my own experiences as a child. While I did not have numerous nicknames I do have a precocious little brother, a mother with whom I still don’t always see eye to eye, and up until a year ago a grandpa who always had an ear to listen. The book that I produced is one that I wish I had access to as a child to help me understand how people navigate different spaces in the world, but remain true to themselves.

Throughout the creative process I strived to create a balance between theory and praxis. I struggled with what it means for me personally to take the theories that I have learned and to create something as a way of inviting others into my world. I have always thought of feminism as the way in which I view the world and I hope that this lens is present in my creative work here. Malcolm Gladwell, in the book The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference, writes, “There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it” (132). My hope is that the work of children’s literature that I have created stands up to this sentiment.

**Bibliography**


