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Grass Houses: Representations and Reinventions of Social Class through Children's Literature

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*Grounded in feminist notions of valuing lived experiences and constructing knowledge about the wider world from material realities, this article uses autobiographical narratives and poststructural and critical theories to argue for change in children's literature. The author presents two simultaneous streams of shifting, representations and reinventions, to explore possibilities of including more varied and contradictory ways of living class-specific lives and assertively positioning readers to question the invisibility of working-class and poor lives in mainstream children's literature. A metaphor of malleable "grass houses" is used to imagine broadened and more flexible ways of thinking and talking about social class through children's picture books.*

The tink-ta-tink of rain dropping on the tin roof of my childhood home, a singlewide trailer, is as comforting today as it was many years ago and I find myself recreating the physical space of that trailer over and over again as an adult who studies issues of social class and poverty. Where lives are lived matters. That mine was lived in a trailer in the back of a trailer park matters. Physical places and material living conditions generate possibilities for play and some of the most pleasurable pursuits of mine included designing dream homes that were firmly grounded in my lived experiences and bolstered by desires for material living that seemed more luxurious than my own. I begin this article with a narrative from my childhood, presenting one version of a child's life lived outside a carefully constructed ideal that privileges traditional family structures, spacious and permanent single-family homes, and materially-rich existences. This small sliver of a story from my young girlhood offers a useful metaphor –grass houses–for reimagining the boundaries and discourses of and about children's literature when it comes to issues of social class.

I draw on feminist theorists from both critical and poststructural perspectives because of the emphasis in feminist theory to ground understanding in the lived specificities of lives (Anzaldua, 1999; Hicks, 2002; hooks, 2000b; Kamler, 2001; Miller, 1996; Reay, 2005a, 2005b; Smith, 1987; Walkerdine, 1990; Weedon, 1997). This concentrated work of constructing knowledge and power from the ground up rather than accepting knowledge and power from above as truth is imperative in any effort to re-

present lives in official texts used in schools (books, photographs, artwork, videos, Internet sites, etc.) and reinvent discourses around all texts (print-based and non-print-based) in society. Dorothy Smith (1987) asserts that texts are the primary medium of power in our society and

the ways in which we think about ourselves and one another and about our society – our images of how we should look, our homes, our lives, even our inner worlds – are given shape and distributed by the specialized work of people in universities and schools, in television, radio and newspapers, in advertising agencies, in book publishing and other organizations forming the “ideological apparatuses” of the society. (p.17)

A radical feminist approach (hooks, 2000b) would argue that such ideological apparatuses of society privilege a small number of folks and damage the rest of us, therefore making it necessary to work toward the eradication of all forms of oppression inflicted by behavior and actions in every day lives. Though I focus in this article on the lack of representations of multiple working-class and poor lives in one kind of text – books – as a way to work against the marginalization of working-class and poor families, I align myself with the important work of acting against sexism, racism, ableism, heterosexism, ageism, and myriad other forms of oppression grounded in all kinds of texts in our society. And while this critical approach helps me to recognize how power is asserted in systemic ways to advantage some groups and disadvantage others, a poststructural lens offers tools for complex readings of power and positioning in moment-to-moment interactions and textual analyses (Davies, 2004; Saltmarsh, 2007; Walkerdine, 1990; Weedon, 1997).

In this article, then, I will use autobiographical narratives, poststructural theory, and critically-focused research in literacies, literature, and social class to present two parallel and interdependent trajectories I foresee forming around class and children’s books: 1) *Representations*: a proliferation of books representing multiple and even contradictory ways of living working-class and poor lives that can stimulate a more complex and nuanced discourse about social class amongst adults and children, and 2) *Reinventions*: an overt attempt to interrupt normative readings of class privilege in children’s literature through an assertive repositioning of readers who question their invisibility in books and reinvent language practices around texts including nuanced explorations of social class, power, perspective, and positioning (e.g. Jones, 2006a).

### **Grass Houses**

My mother bent forward, walking back and forth across the narrow patch of yard pushing the roaring old red mower in front of her. She urged us to stay out of her way, afraid that any daily activity could land us in the hospital emergency room seeking help for my sweet, adventurous, and accident-prone younger brother. It was everything we could do to wait, however, as we watched the bright green blades of grass shoot to the side of the rumbling machine in neat long strips and smelled their inviting scent. Mom’s short auburn hair grew with every slice along the yard as sweat dripped from her chin, sat on her scalp, and forced the ends of her usually well-controlled curls upward and outward away from her head. We did wait, even if impatiently, and as the motor rumbled to an abrupt quiet we ran into the sea of green and began collecting our piles. After gathering

our grass clippings, we spread them out neatly and watched as the sun literally pulled the dampness out of them.

We stuffed a small fistful of those clippings into one hand and marked the perimeter of our three-dimensional blueprints for our dream homes by dropping clippings in a straight line on the ground, turning at corners until we each had created a long rectangle marked by dry grass. Interior architectural work was infinitely more complicated: bedrooms, bathrooms, closets, kitchens, living rooms, and game rooms were carefully planned and laid out with lines and curves of dried grass. Windows and doorways were included in the sometimes-quadrilateral-shaped, sometimes-triangular-shaped, and sometimes-irregular-shaped rooms. We were making primitive blueprints of our dream homes: idealized versions of our own rectangular single-wide trailers.

The designing and redesigning of the grass houses continued as the sun moved from high above head to low behind the trees. We pretended we were families living in the newly created homes, sometimes using Barbie dolls and action figures to dramatize our real and fantasy lives and other times sitting, standing, and tiptoeing inside the grass-clipping lines as if we were giants trying to live inside a trailer, or rather, miniature figurines moving around an architectural design on paper. Narratives of domestic routines such as washing dishes, folding clothes, and changing babies' diapers circulated in our play just as comfortably as negotiations around what kinds of games would be available in the "game room" and who in the family was going to have a bathroom adjoining their bedroom. Lines of grass clippings were quickly reconfigured to match the needs and desires of our play in the moment, and with increasing creativity and skill, we recreated the possible lives that could be lived inside these pretend homes while also modifying what we believed to be possible in the real world.

As dusk fell and the streetlight towering above the yellow speed bump on our road came to attention, mom would swing open the door and call out, "Stephy, Johnny, time to come in! Streetlight's on." Grumbling and mumbling with protests we pulled ourselves away from our work/play of the day leaving behind toys in our intricately designed model homes that began as straight lines shot out from a machine that no longer had control over what could be done with the grass clippings.

## **Representations**

### ***Working-Class and Poor Lives in Books***

Besides in my mind and in conversations with family and friends, I don't know where stories like the grass houses are. Stories of children growing up in trailer parks playing with their siblings and neighbors in the yard; stories of single working mothers wearing cut-off blue jeans to mow the lawn on a Sunday morning; stories of creative design work grounded in children's pride in their trailer-lived lives and desire for luxuries set forth in a society of consumerism; stories of long hours of uninterrupted and unstructured play. These are not only stories of the 1970s and 1980s when I was coming of age, but they continue today in working-class and poor communities around the country. Unlike many busily scheduled lives in middle-class and affluent families in this time of children as commodities and "resume-making" beginning at birth, millions of kids live their daily lives in various kinds of homes and neighborhoods uniquely

characterized by their humble economic affordances. Whether in homeless shelters, communal homes, trailer parks, modest single-family free-standing homes, apartment buildings, or in the basements of extended family members, kids' and families' lives move through sunrise and sunset and are filled with happiness, sorrow, pain, laughter, play, work, love, loss, stress, and leisure. And I want to know where their stories are.

Many such stories are written for adults and found in poignant memoirs and personal narratives (e.g., hooks, 1996; Rose, 1989; Walls, 2005), short stories and novels (e.g., Allison, 1988; Morrison, 1994), popular journalistic books (e.g., DeParle, 2005; Kozol, 1996), films or documentaries (e.g., Riggen, 2007; Sutherland, 2006), and in educational research (e.g., Hicks, 2002; White, 2001). And these are terrific resources for immersing adults - particularly in education, social work, policy, and public health - in nuanced readings of social class in the United States.

But what I'm asking is a question more closely grounded in the *ideological rearing* of young children: What kinds of economic lives are presented as *normal* and therefore *desirable* in children's picture books? Where are the picture books filled with trailer park homes? Barrio lives? Communal living? Joblessness? Homelessness? Simple living? Blue- and pink-collar employment? Government assistance? Herbert Kohl (1995) writes, "Children's books contribute to the formation of culture, and some books can even transform the way children look at and relate to the world" (p. 23). But when children find their existences to be invisible in the books they read, we must ask ourselves how children will look at and relate to a world that has deemed them so unimportant they do not fill the pages of books written for children, families, and schools.

There are gorgeous examples of working-class and poor lives in children's books (See Appendix A), but they are too few and many do not make their way into everyday classrooms. And perhaps due to the brilliant work of so many authors and illustrators to make varied representations of African American and Latino lives more visible in children's literature, most of the working-class and poor family lives I find in children's books are about African American and Latino families. The U.S. already struggles with a social imagination that conflates race and class, equating economic struggle or poverty with dark skin and economic stability or wealth with light skin (hooks, 2000a, 2006; Jones, 2006b), and the underrepresentation of White working-class and poor families in children's literature could perpetuate such conflation.

While Non-Hispanic Whites made up more than half of all people living in poverty in the United States in 2006 (19.2 million) compared to approximately 9.4 million African Americans living in poverty during the same year, it is still more common to find characters of color situated in relatively contemporary contexts constructed as overtly working-class or poor in children's literature (e.g., Atkins, 1998; Bunting, 1994a, 1994b, 1996, 1998; Cole, 2001; Hest, 1996; Jackson, 1996; Wyeth, 2002) than it is to find White/European-American characters similarly located (e.g., Borden, 1990; Bunting, 1993, 1997, 2006; Hazen, 1983; Williams, 2004). We may be raising our young children to connect light skin with class privilege and dark skin with class marginalization, a dichotomous notion that promotes a very narrow and dangerous understanding about social class in the United States.

Books that work to complicate the conflation of race and class often offer a wide range of living and/or working across race lines such as the workers in *Night Shift* (Hartland, 2007), the "statistically average" families across the globe in *Material World*

(Menzel, 1994), the diversity of homeless people in the background of a story about a homeless dog in *Mutt Dog* (King, 2005), and an African American small business owner giving a White homeless man an opportunity to work in *A Chance to Shine* (Seskin, 2006). Though these books offer rich complexities around issues of living and working in class-specific lives, they are not immune to critical readings and I would recommend they be actively interrogated as discussed in the Reinventions section in this article.

### ***Poststructural Readings of Representation***

Books offer visions of who we can be, who we are, who an ideal person is and how lives are lived and dreams are dreamed. These are the very reasons why I am so concerned with the children's books our young students are surrounded by and why I turn to poststructural theory to unpack power relations embedded in texts and to imagine new possibilities for representing diverse lived realities. Dorothy Allison (2002), a celebrated author who identifies as White, lesbian, and from a poor rural family in the south, reflected on the exclusion of lives like hers in books and why she began writing as an adolescent and young adult:

I was writing for myself, trying to shape my life outside my terrors and helplessness, to make it visible and real in a tangible way, in the way other people's seemed real – the lives I had read about in books. I had been a child who believed in books, but I had never found me or mine in print. (p. 4)

Allison was writing on and from the margins, attempting to write herself into "real" existence by responding to her invisibility in the published books she so believed in. Terrors and helplessness might very well be born out of such invisibility in texts written for young children. How is it that other people's lives seem real simply because they can be found inside the cover of a book whereas those excluded and pushed into the abyss, completely outside of the pages of a book, become "unreal" and as such also understood as undesirable? Texts mediate understandings of ourselves and of the worlds around us, so what if the mediator doesn't acknowledge our existence? Where do we stand *then*?

Poststructural theory offers tools to think about how children's books work alongside myriad discursive practices in the social world to "show the ways in which the real is constructed" (Davies, 2004, p. 5). Through images and corresponding text, for example, young readers might begin to imagine that "real lives" are lived in spacious homes equipped with life's material necessities and desires and lived by heterosexual, married parents and well-groomed, behaved children (see Baker & Freebody, 1989; Jordan, 2004). Additionally, many mainstream and popular children's books portray extracurricular activities, family outings, and even far-away trips by car or plane that presumably cost a lot of money, adding to the nuanced version of "real" families and lives in the United States as living the hypothetical American Dream. Kohl (1995) writes:

Though most books for young children don't portray a world of the rich and their servants, and are much more middle class in character, they still tie well-being to money and portray lives full of comfort and joy. By implication they provide an ideal type of life, one worth aspiring to. However, it is possible to live a full and decent life without great wealth, and it may be that the acquisition of great wealth always comes at the cost of other peoples' impoverishment. These possibilities are rarely if ever raised in children's literature. (p. 25)

Kohl asserts a concern about the representation of idealized lives as middle class in books to the exclusion of other ways of living, including recognition of cross-class relations in a capitalist economy.

Principles from poststructural theory, however, assert that such textual representations are not in and of themselves any more *real* than anything else. In essence, the creator of such representations – in this case an author or illustrator - “is not the final arbiter of meanings, nor can she/he necessarily control meanings” (Davies, 2004, p. 6), and thus the discursive practices around text and the dialogic engagement between text and reader are powerful mediators of meaning. For example, one book about bullies listened to by a group of first grade children can be read by them in many different ways including one child critiquing the ideology of the book (“it ain’t fair to call someone a bully”), one child articulating an important connection to her own life (“my dad’s a bully”), and other children quietly submitting to, and some seemingly fully agreeing with the ideological lessons of the text (to not be a bully) (Jones, 2004).

Because poststructural theorists assume this relationship between a representation created by the author (and illustrator) and an infinite number of interpretations by readers, some may argue that more *accurate* representations of working-class and poor lives would not necessarily be a worthwhile goal of researchers or educators. Walkerdine (1984) and Davies (2003) argue, for example, that the more important work might be to investigate “how those practices within the text itself have relational effects that define who and what we are” (Walkerdine, 1984, p. 64). Therefore, from this poststructural perspective, a critique of children’s literature would lead to better understanding of what the text and reader do to one another, not necessarily the creation of different texts.

I agree with Walkerdine (1984) and Davies (2003) here for three reasons: 1) With no one “truth” or “reality” in existence, it is not possible to imagine all truths or realities to be represented because such possibilities are infinite; 2) Our attention can’t possibly be *only* focused on representations of different kinds of class-specific lives in children’s picture books, and; 3) I believe it is imperative to critically examine how existing texts actively work to position young children as actors in the world. These three beliefs firmly ground my analyses of text with Walkerdine and Davies, but I argue for a both/and approach to representations in texts. For example, it seems that Walkerdine and Davies, despite their brilliant analyses, work against a project to proliferate multiple and even contradictory possibilities for lives in books. I *insist*, however, that many different representations of various classed lives be accessible to children in school – an opening up of representation that would not necessarily attempt to *replicate* any particular existence but represent multiple and even contradictory class-specific lives in books. As Davies points out, “Analyses of stories, then, need to pay attention not only to the content, but also to the metaphors, the forms of relationship, the patterns of power and desire that are created in the text” (p. 47). When power is operating in texts through the persistent exclusion of lived experiences of working-class and poor families, educators can critique such exclusion and work with children to write themselves back into texts through discussion and composition (Jones and Clarke, 2007). Without some textual representations, however, we cannot offer models of published texts where various ways of being working-class and poor (even if represented in fantasy literature) are respected and valued.

Though I disagree with Walkerdine (1984) and Davies' (2003) theoretical emphasis on deconstruction only without a stated goal of also changing textual representations available to readers, Davies appears to, at least in *practice*, align with my both/and approach. For example, the goal of Davies' study of preschool children's responses to feminist stories (e.g. Browne, 1986; Cole, 1985, 1986, 1987a, 1987b; de Paola, 1980) was to introduce alternative ways of performing and imagining gender through different representations of "boy" and "girl" characters in books. It seems, then, that mainstream texts did indeed offer various ways that readers could position themselves as people in a social world (an argument Davies and Walkerdine would likely make), but also that Davies was not satisfied with the possible subject locations opened up in such texts and turned to less mainstream and popular books that opened up more possibilities for meaning-making and position-taking. This action specifically embarked on opening up classroom spaces to include textual representations that complicate dominant perceptions of lives (in this case, gender-specific lives). But without those complicating textual representations, where would Davies have turned? Saltmarsh (2007) reminds us, however:

This is not to suggest, of course, that texts merely reflect or reproduce social realities, but rather it is to understand that texts – even those produced for the very young – both draw on and play an important role in (re)shaping discourses that are already in circulation in the broader social world. (p. 97)

It is not only the positioning of the child reader that I am concerned with, then, since educators can teach even young readers to question the centering of economically privileged lives in texts and the simultaneous marginalization of working-class and poor lives. But I am also quite concerned with the discourses available for thinking and talking about class and how they operate in a society where compulsive consumerism, commodification of children, and the deliberate tying of economics to self worth and morality reigns. It is through texts – both words and images – that new discourses can emerge and be taken up by both children and adults to work against societal structures and practices that always privilege those with money, status, social networks, and other resources that enable them to have powerful access to institutions. Additionally, how will a child from a working-poor family perceive herself and her family when she rarely sees or hears any substantive familiarity in the books she is forced to listen to, look at, and read every day in school? She is certainly "discover[ing] ways of positioning [herself] as a person" (Davies, 2003, p. 47), and after being saturated with images, language, and practices of families and children living with class privilege, she may be constructing her position as outside what matters; worth less than those who can find themselves in books.

### *A Void in Children's Literature*

There is a great void in children's literature and it is one that attaches itself to working-class and poor families, classism, and structural understandings about money and power. And we need it all: everyday stories of working-class and poor families' lives that validate and value daily living experiences including happy, sad, ecstatic, tragic, and the mundane; fantasy stories transcending class categories; explicit stories of class power, classism, and social action around class across all genres; informational literature on labor, wage, and capitalism as it is in the United States and across the globe; and books

that challenge our simplistic assumptions about social class. All working-class and poor children and families need to be front and center in our conversations around class marginalization and oppression and class power including White children, African American children, Latino children, Asian children, Native American children, and all those who traverse these racial and ethnic borders that are more fluid than static.

### Reinventions

Multiplying representations of working-class and poor lives will never be enough if we don't reinvent the ways students engage themselves (through language, thought, and action) as readers regardless of whether they find themselves in texts or not. Much of my own reading experience in K-12 schooling was passive and uncritical, leading to little commitment as a reader and few memories of reading at all. It is my impression that until I was exposed to a book that foregrounded specific themes familiar to me and my family, I was a complacent reader of mainstream texts who never consciously questioned my invisibility in books or the social practices privileged in children's literature. Additionally, I am certain that I was not encouraged to voice my disconnect from textual representations – perhaps one key goal we might have in reinventing discourse around school texts.

Unlike the vast collection of stories I have about my life as a young girl building grass houses, fishing in the trailer park pond, and hearing the blood-curdling scream of my mother when she discovered my brother's earthworms in the refrigerator, I have no memories of stories in books until I reached fourth grade. The first book I recall being read to me or reading myself was *The Headless Cupid* (Snyder, 1971) in the fourth grade, a story filled with the supernatural mysteries of an old house, an attic, and young children with a teenage step-sister. Turning through pages and reading with extraordinary speed with eyes wide and mind spinning, I found, for the very first time, a slice of a world inside a book that was familiar to me: the haunting sounds echoing through stairwells, the mysteriously moved items in an old house believed to have a ghost as a resident.

I do recall my fingers working to turn the pages of a basal reader in second grade without any recollection of the images or words on those pages; an emptiness surely not unrelated to my psychosocial experiences of the readings and the presumably sanitized ideology represented in the texts (e.g. Baker & Freebody, 1989; Jordan, 2005; Luke, 1987, 1988). Though I had lived through four full years of schooling and had surely read and had dozens if not hundreds of stories or books read to me, my memory clearly falls to *The Headless Cupid* as the "first" book.

My grandmother and her sisters, and my mother and her sister, were rich resources in my expanding knowledge of the supernatural when I was young. Stories of salt and pepper shakers leaping from cabinets and landing on countertops alongside sudden and inexplicable smells of a pipe emanating from inside a small closet and tales of ghostly images on the side of a dark and quiet road soaked my experiences as a young girl. The women in my family believed in spirits living among us as well as their uncanny abilities to act in the material world. Ghosts would not hurt us, they insisted, but they will surprise and perhaps scare us. And yet we should not be frightened, for their presence was simply a fact of life; or rather, death.

Much like the White working-poor girls in Hicks' (2004) study of a critical reading project, I lived in a material world that acknowledged spatial and psychological dimensions beyond the living. This afforded me the opportunity to deeply connect with, devour, and truly enjoy my first-ever reading experience in the genre of horror fiction – a reinvention of myself, at least temporarily, as a deeply engaged reader with a kind of text that was not typically promoted in school. And like the young adolescent Brandy in Hicks' analyses of the passion and fervor with which the girls in her study engaged with horror fiction, there was likely for me a "...psychological meaning that infused some girls' attachment to fictional genres that provided both a more familiar and thrilling entry point into a school language arts curriculum" (p. 72). Hicks observed that the girls in her study experienced a "...cultural depth to horror's appeal, as many girls' mothers, grandmothers, and aunts have reported hauntings" (pp. 72-73). For me, I would add, a connection to astrology and meanings of the zodiac – another resource that was likely immeasurably helpful in engaging with *The Headless Cupid*.

My intent here is not to analyze my own marked experience with a horror fiction book as the first memory I have of reading as one that engaged the psychological, social, material, spiritual, emotional, and cultural depth of my lived reality. Nor is my intent to imagine how the intersections of popular media mediated such experiences as in Hicks' (2004) study where the girls enjoyed watching horror films, though this is also an important part of the complex act of reading in school (see also Blackford, 2004). Rather, my intent here is to call for a radical reinvention of how school reading works including the kinds of texts that are available, the discursive practices around performing as readers, and the language practices we use about texts.

It is a wonder to me why the first four years of my school-reading life is a blank: empty pages held together by hard-bound covers and characterized by flimsy, worn corners that had been turned by many fingers before my own. Is it possible that I never fully engaged with reading or being read to because the worlds represented in print and images were not familiar to me? Is it possible that even though the children characters in *The Headless Cupid* lived in a big fancy house signifying economic stability – or better yet, privilege - the centrality of the spirit world in the narrative and pictures was enough for me to link my culturally-specific ways of knowing and create a powerful reading experience? Reinventing what educators perceive to be "quality children's literature" (horror fiction as one example of genres not typically on that list) and how readers can position themselves to and within texts is imperative. And then, assuming that at least some of the above was "true" for me in one way or another as a child, two important questions emerge: Why did it take four years to find a glimpse of a life I knew in school books? And, why don't I have memories of engaging in dialogue about the disconnect I experienced with other books? If young readers are finding themselves positioned similarly in contemporary picture books and early reading books, it is crucial that we work with them to reinvent the way they engage themselves with texts. We want to encourage a critical repositioning of themselves as readers and a persistent questioning of the invisibility of particular kinds of characters, lives, themes, and social issues in books.

*Reinvention as Critical Reading of Representation*

It would make me dance in the streets if I learned that all teachers carefully analyzed their classroom libraries and read alouds to ensure validating representations of working-class and poor families and children were a significant part of their collection across genres. This would entail an overt expansion of what many would consider “multicultural” books to include White working-class and poor characters and social class issues across representations of race, ethnicity, gender, geography, and language (see also Heilman, 2004). I would be even more ecstatic if social class-related content was taught beginning in the early grades (economic systems such as capitalism and socialism; labor history in the United States; contemporary labor in a global economy; studies of local informal and formal economic structures; deep valuing of all kinds of work and workers; critical understandings of workers’ rights in the U.S.; collective movements for economic justice, etc.). It is never enough, however, to simply “insert” alternative or non-mainstream perspectives via representation that have been silenced and marginalized for more than one hundred years in the early elementary classroom because mainstream or dominant literature will always be a force to be reckoned with. The insertion is not enough – we must reinvent our language practices around the reasons for insertion, the reasons for historical exclusion, and the gap between the two.

There is a great void, also then, in the ways in which we perform as readers with all children’s literature. We must always make it a valued option to disconnect from literature and to explore those disconnections (Jones, 2006a; Jones and Clarke, 2007). We must always make it a valued option to critique representations of “normal” childhoods, families, and adolescents perpetually portrayed in children’s texts (Skinner, 2007). We must always make it a valued option to ask critical questions about the unequal structures in society that lead to certain kinds of lived realities, events, etc. experienced in children’s books.

These notions of critical reading are grounded in the field of critical literacy theory and practice (Bigelow, 2005; Clarke, 2005; Comber, 1998; Jones, 2006a; Jones and Clarke, 2007; Leland et. al, 1999; Luke & Freebody, 1991; Spector and Jones, 2007). Critical literacy as a field is informed by both critical and poststructural theories and aims to question and challenge stated truths whether in oral discourse, images, or printed texts. Though the poststructural readings of representation presented earlier in this article are useful in thinking through theoretical questions around how readers are positioned in relation to texts, critical literacy offers pedagogical possibilities for use with young children specifically in reading instruction but also expanding far beyond “reading.”

In my work (2006a) I outline a framework of critical literacy practices that includes three layers of critical literacy inquiry: perspective, positioning, and power (p. 67). Assumptions grounding this work are that 1) all texts are constructed by people informed by particular ideologies and therefore entrenched in *perspective*; 2) all texts make the experiences of some people seem more valuable than others, enabling some to exercise power more freely than others and therefore contribute to social and political *positioning*; and 3) all texts grow from language practices embedded in relations of social and political differentials that are inequitably distributed across society therefore both indicative – and generative – of *power*. These three layers of a critical literacy practice

are always interrelated, but each layer can be foregrounded to offer various entry points into critically reading any children's text (Jones, 2006a, p.79).

I believe that explicitly teaching and inspiring children to engage themselves as critical readers of all texts can reinvent the ways we talk about books, society, and ourselves inside and outside classroom spaces. And if children are in a position where they cannot locate familiar familial themes in school-sanctioned books, they can at least question the sanctioning of texts that aren't inclusive of students' lived experiences. This repositioning of young readers can help them to utilize the mediating artifacts of children's literature as vehicles for powerful possibilities for rethinking what books do to readers and what readers can do through critical engagement with books.

In addition to specific questions related to different layers of a critical literacy practice (See Appendix B), I have found with young children that a simple question such as – What would you change about this story/book to make it more like your life (or someone's life in your family or neighborhood)? or Is this story/book like your life or no? can launch a small group or whole group discussion into a critical reading of a text.

All of these ideas place great responsibility on the language practices we choose to use with children in classrooms and around books. The power of language as a medium is not to be overstated here, but we should remember that such power is not always positive or generative. Instead, it is important to remember the double-edged sword of language:

Language is a necessary tool for survival in the social world. But language also provides the tools and the materials with which the social structure is created and maintained. In passing language on to children we also pass on a relative entrapment in the social order, including those elements of the social order we might well want to move beyond. (Davies, 2003, p. 1)

Categories of class, race, gender, dis/Ability might be some of those elements of the social order we might well want to move beyond – so let's begin to work toward that through shifts in our language. "Working-class" and "poor" as signifiers only signify what discourses allow them to tell us. To construct a more complex and nuanced understanding of what it might mean to be categorized as "working-class" we may introduce, read, and research various ways working-class family structures look as well as various places they may live, what they may do to earn and spend money, and different ways families use their leisure time. It would be imperative to emphasize there is no "archetype" of a working-class family, but rather, this is a broad and fluid economic location we're pointing to and lived experiences including family structures, geography, variations of income, etc. intersect with specific experiences of race, gender, sexuality, language, and dis/Ability in ways that make a particular class location lived uniquely.

Reinventing reading practices in school to ensure powerful positioning of working-class and poor children should be seen as an effort simultaneously engaged with an emphasis on broadening and complicating representations of class-specific lives in children's books. Working to ensure working-class and poor children can recognize themselves in children's literature is equally important as teaching them to reposition themselves as critical readers who recognize in/visibility in texts and speak out against representations that marginalize and devalue tens of millions of families' lived realities in the United States.

### **Grass House Pedagogies: Attending to Issues of Class**

Straight lines of grass clippings were initially generated in my childhood yard by a machine designed to do something quickly (trim the blades of grass) and orderly (pile the grass in lines so it could be easily removed later). Our educational machines too often operate for similar purposes shooting out straight lines of instructional materials and strategies to educate quickly and in an orderly fashion. But just like our work/play as children took those orderly lines of grass clippings and made something new out of them, so we must do with our classroom practices. The lines in our grass houses were malleable, we just picked up the grass and spread the clippings out in a different direction or removed clippings to add a doorway – an opening to something new we hadn't considered the first time around. This medium allowed us to represent our lives and fantasies front and center while always reconsidering and reinventing those representations. It was probably the very idea that the grass houses would stay in place as long as they met our needs (unlike, say, a sandcastle, a snow fort, or a drawing on a fogged window) but also afforded us the luxury of not having to make permanent our desires (unlike, say, a painting or a drawing made with markers or crayons) that made them such extraordinary creations.

Texts, and the images that accompany them, don't seem quite as alterable as grass clippings in a yard, but the discourse we engage around texts and images are indeed changeable in significant ways. If we imagine young children nestled between the metal mobile home structures of their trailer park creating and recreating their idealized versions of lives, we can begin to see how generative and creative working with grass clippings can be. What if our thinking about social class power and marginalization was so malleable? What if our decisions about what kinds of books should be in our classroom library were so flexible? What if the ways we imagined classroom discussions around children's books were so movable? What if the possibilities for class-specific lives in published books were so supple? Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody (2001) write:

Class is still written across the bodies and minds of young women, but it produces signs whose name can only ever be whispered and which can more easily be read as evidence of personal failure and pathology than social inequality and oppression. (p.19)

Class matters a great deal, and how class is represented in children's books works to situate materially lived lives under disparate economic conditions in a hierarchical fashion, making our reinvented talk around such representations heavy with import. With increasing public and political emphasis for families to read to their children beginning in the womb, infancy, and most certainly preschool and school age children, babies and children are increasingly exposed earlier to normative representations of White middle-class lives idealized and made permanent testaments to what childhood should look like, feel like, and sound like. Soon those babies and children may begin to recognize themselves and their families' lives as lived beyond the glossy laminations in picture books and many will begin to believe their lives are less valuable than those who have access to more financial resources; lower on the respectability food chain; nonexistent in the worlds of books and therefore nonexistent in the consciousness of schools and mainstream society.

Class, then, gets written onto the minds and bodies of children and youth through the production of possible subject locations for them to fulfill. Children's literature serves as one medium through which such subject locations are produced. For example, possible subject locations opened up in traditional fairy tales include the damsel in distress, the heroic savior, the wicked step-mother, the poor peasant, or the wealthy ruler. These become the "roles" children may opt to play in their dramatizations of the storybooks in their backyards, bedrooms, on the playgrounds, and in their classrooms. Such fairytales also offer limited options for characters in relation to economic status: poor and in need of being rescued, poor and committed to getting "out" of an impoverished place, or wealthy and in the position of rescuing. Reay (2005) reminds us of the often unspoken tragedies of upward social mobility:

Only I know probably better than most that this is no fairy tale transformation because the fairy tale of social mobility has no happy ending. It is always at others' expense. Cinderella becomes a princess but a whole host of young women take her place in the gutter. And what happens to Cinderella's mother? Killed off in the fairy story but alive and slighted in most working class children's lives. Once you put the social back into individual transformation others bear the costs of self-betterment and you are left with guilty gratitude – the dirty pleasures of privilege that have always left me feeling slightly soiled. (Paper presented at the Centre for psycho-social studies, Bristol University of the West of England)

Children's books produce discourses through which we discuss society around us, and the terribly limited discourses around social class in/around literature today restricts us all in the ways we might conceptualize, think about, and talk about class – and mobility - amongst ourselves as adults and with children in schools. Reay (2005) reminds us of those dangers, including the idealized version of upward mobility as it is portrayed in so many children's books (she focuses on fairy tales here, but it is a theme that saturates texts across genres). It is only in reality that upwardly mobile adults from working-class and poor backgrounds know "the dirty pleasures of privilege" that leaves us all slightly soiled.

Just as Davies (2003) attempted to offer feminist alternatives to the traditional heteronormative sexist tales rendering young women as beautiful and in need of being rescued by young men to the preschoolers in her study, I argue that we *must* offer creative and desirable alternatives to the steady diet of books portraying glorified versions of middle-class and affluent lives. Just as traditional heteronormative and sexist tales operate to regulate young children's bodies and minds in ways that conform to a heterosexual and patriarchal order, the saturation of children's books with class-privileged lives operate to regulate young children's desires and fantasies about status, consumerism, and wealth. All the while, the invisibility of bodies and environments representative of more varied classed ways of living operate by getting children to compare their own living conditions to the uninterrogated fantasies printed in books.

As researchers, educators, humans, we are still stringing along the dried grass clippings to design ways for working with young children in language and literacy rich classrooms. Those ways are not set in stone and nor should they ever be. Much like the creativity employed to imagine a three-dimensional blueprint of an ideal home – an ideal that shifted continuously – we must reengage creative muster to imagine new ways to think about, talk about, and imagine social classed lives in our daily pedagogies:

If we see society as being constantly created through discursive practices then it is possible to see the power of those practices, not only to create and sustain the social world, but also to see how we can change that world through a refusal of certain discourses and the generation of new ones. (Davies, 2003, p.xiii)

This means that some of our “old” ways of doing things must be opened up to new possibilities we hadn’t considered before, that new metaphorical doorways can be created, new rooms, new configurations, and new negotiations made. And we can largely begin this work through language, or discourse, that medium so malleable, so changeable, and so latent with possibility. It is, indeed, the improvisation of language that keeps it alive and filled with potential, for it is only when we thoughtlessly and consistently repeat language that language becomes dead. With live, playful, and possibility-filled language, we can move it around as easily as we can dried grass, and hope that the very act of reinventing discourses will lead to new representations, performances, and daily practices.

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Appendix A

*Children's picture books that are embedded in or foreground social class issues or working-class lives*

- Atkins, J. (1998). *Get set! Swim!* New York, NY: Lee & Low Books, Inc.
- Baylor, B. (1998). *The table where rich people sit*. Aladdin Books.
- Borden, L. (1990). *The neighborhood trucker*. New York, NY: Scholastic Inc.
- Browne, A. (2001). *Voices in the park*. DK Children.
- Bunting, E. (1993). *Fly away home*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.
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Appendix B

*Possible questions for generating critical readings around perspective, positioning, and power*

“Perspective” questions teachers can encourage readers to ask:

- Who could have created this text?
- Who did the author/illustrator think s/he was making this text for?
- What does the author think about his/her audience?
- What kinds of readers might think the same way?
- What kinds of readers might think something different?
- What other ways of thinking are not a part of this text?

“Positioning” questions teachers can encourage readers to ask:

- What kinds of people/lives/experiences/beliefs are in the center of this book?
- What kinds of readers might feel like “insiders” reading this book?
- What kinds of readers might feel like “outsiders” reading this book?
- How does this book position me as a reader – as an insider, outsider, both, or neither?

“Power” questions teachers can encourage readers to ask:

- How is the author/illustrator using her/his power in this book?
- Does the author/illustrator use his/her power to repeat things that already happen a lot in books?
- Does the author/illustrator use his/her power to show how important things are that don’t happen a lot in books?
- What kinds of people/lives/experiences get attention from the way the author/illustrator used his or her power?
- What kinds of people/lives/experiences don’t get attention from the way the author/illustrator used his or her power?