

Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis

ISSN: 2325-1204. Journal homepage: <https://www.iastatedigitalpress.com/jctp/>

Volume 9, Issue 1, 2020, Article 1, <https://doi.org/10.31274/jctp.11237>

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Debbie Reese, *Independent Scholar and Founder of American Indians in Children's Literature*

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Recommended Citation

Reese, D., Angton, A., & Anthony, K. (2020). An interview with Dr. Debbie Reese. *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis* 9(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.31274/jctp.11237>.

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Independent Scholar and Founder of American Indians in Children's Literature

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[Alexia Angton]

Q. We first want to thank you for agreeing to an interview and being willing to share your thoughts and expertise on educational barriers. As a Nambé Pueblo Indian woman, schoolteacher, professor, and parent, I think you provide an interesting perspective to understanding educational barriers and ways to navigate those barriers. Can you begin by telling our readers a little bit about your work and how you came to it? You had a talk and a workshop talking about your work with the representation of Indigenous people and children's and young adult literature. What happened to get you to studying this area?

I was teaching in the state that is currently called New Mexico. Before answering your question about my work, let me explain what I mean by using “currently called.” I follow activists who are First Nations people in what is currently called Canada. I learned this idea of using, “what is currently called” from them and think it has a lot of merit because it gets at that idea that boundaries change all the time and names change all the time. We're in this particular moment but a name or boundary could be different tomorrow. So, currently called.

I grew up on a reservation in New Mexico and in the early 1990s, moved to Illinois to do my Ph.D. At the time, our daughter was three years old, and I had been a former schoolteacher. I was teaching first grade. I had tons of children's books, and I'd been reading them with our daughter. I wanted to study an idea called family literacy, the transactions that happen between a parent and a child when they read together.

Before we moved here to Urbana, I was told that the University of Illinois had a Native mascot, and that there's a lot of protest activity going on around that. Professors recruiting us just wanted us to know about it, to give me a heads up on that mascot. I said, "Ah, that'll be fine. It'll be okay." Then, when we moved here, it wasn't okay.

In graduate courses at Illinois, when the semester starts, people go around to introduce themselves, where they're from, and what they want to study. As soon as I would say, "Well, I'm from Nambé Pueblo" someone would respond with, "Oh, what do you think of the mascot?" They said it with such glee, because they thought I would say, "Oh, it's wonderful," and of course I didn't say it's wonderful. When I didn't have the answer they wanted, they would pretty much retreat.

There's not many Native people in Champaign-Urbana. I also got invitations from local civic groups, They would begin by asking me, "Can you come and dance for us?" I'd say, "No, I can't dance. Dance is a form of prayer. We do it at a certain time of the year in a certain place for a certain reason. I'm not going to come and dance." Then there was, "Well, will you come and tell us some stories?" And I'd reply, "No, I'm not a storyteller. I study at the University of Illinois. I'm from a small Pueblo in northern New Mexico. I'm happy to come and talk with you about northern New Mexico and my Nation's history." Those weren't the sought-after answer either, and the conversation would end. Thinking on your interest in barriers that I've experienced, those responses to who I was and what I had to offer were barriers they erected to, in essence, shut out a Native point of view.

It was really interesting early on to get the strong sense of the public mainstream expectation that Native peoples are dancers and storytellers rather than academics that had anything to offer in that regard. I was trying to understand why that was so powerful, those ideas about Native people that non-Native people were holding onto, and still stay within the area that I was interested in, which is children's books. I started looking at children's books and thinking, "Okay, well, what's in these books that might be feeding this mistaken idea of who we are? I found characters in big headdresses in *Clifford the Big Red Dog*, and in *The Bernstein Bears*, I saw the idea that Native people dance and tell stories in so many books. The Clifford and Bernstein Bears books are the kinds of books you get at the grocery store, or at Walmart, or at Target. They're familiar to parents, so they buy them. Ones with depictions of characters who are Native or dressed up like they're Native are a child's first introduction to those ideas, particularly in areas where there are very few Native people.

Then, when children go to school, they get more "literary" kinds of books. That includes alphabet books that say that "I" is for Indian, or books by people like Tomie DePaola that are supposed to be folktales about Native people. I was seeing the many layered ways that Native peoples were misrepresented in children's books. Those early experiences when I arrived in Illinois, and images I was finding in children's books led me to the work that I do. Since then there have been research studies on the impact of mascot imagery that support my concerns that stereotypical, biased, and factual errors—even in fiction—must be addressed.

[Katie Anthony]

Q. Could you tell us about any other maybe barriers or challenges that you faced while you were completing your education? Or as you mentioned, you're still in Champaign-Urbana, so if there's anything that you may still be experiencing, or maybe one time that you felt more challenged or resisted?

That's a hard one because it wasn't one challenge, and it wasn't just me that was having challenges. Year after year after year there was something, because we were also raising our child in this community. Before we moved here, she had been through ceremony and things like that, so she was very strong in who she was as a Pueblo child. But here, she was running into ignorance and was not supported when she tried to speak. She was in preschool at the child development lab at the university. Her first year was great. The second year... That's when Disney's *Pocahontas* came out and the kids, as kids do, all want to play Disney films on the playgrounds. So, my daughter said, "I'll be Pocahontas, because I am a Native American." And

they said, "No, you're not." My husband is white, and she has fairer skin than I do, and her hair is brown, not black. They said, "You're not a Native American."

Little tiny kids, three- and four-year-old kids, denying her identity, clearly because they have expectations of what a Native person looks like based on society's films and TV shows and books. That was one thing from her early days in the child development lab.

She was also picking up on what I was studying and the books I was analyzing and talking about with students in my courses and colleagues in children's lit. One of those books was *Brother Eagle Sister Sky*. A student teacher at the child development lab was going to read *Brother Eagle Sister Sky* to the class one day. My daughter said something like, "But wait, that book's not right about my people." In this child development lab, where they're supposed to be educationally progressive and do things like listen to children, the head teacher's response to her was, "But this book is not about your people. These are a different people." They totally missed the idea that this four year old child is trying to tell them there are stereotypes in this book. They said, "If you don't want to listen to it, you can go play over there." And so they shut her out of the story time. I was livid when we heard about these two incidents. One day, the teacher wanted to talk to us because, she said, our daughter was having outbursts at school. And we're like, "Her?" She is very calm by nature. She doesn't have outbursts. The teacher recounted those two incidents. It just makes me livid thinking about it. Those kinds of assaults on her identity in her school were the very first ones that we experienced. But they happened all throughout school. Another was in third grade, when they were reading *Caddie Woodlawn*. That incident was also very hard. As it unfolded, I learned from her best friend that my daughter had been crying at school because of the content of *Caddie Woodlawn*. I was—and am—furious about what teachers inadvertently do to kids with books that denigrate who they are.

Your question reminds me of those experiences. Parenting a child so far from their home community in a place that is rife with stereotypes was a really difficult thing. My daughter learned a lot about speaking, speaking back, when to speak back, and when not to. As her parents—both of us are former schoolteachers—we never spoke down to her, we always respected her voice, her ideas, and her ways of speaking. She had a lot of support from us when these things happened. Many parents don't have the time or privilege that I had to be able to study this stuff and to articulate what was wrong with it. I get lots and lots of emails from parents, "I need help. My kids are reading this. I know it's wrong but what can I say to the teacher." What we experienced is not a unique situation. Kids are having this sort of experience across the country.

That was all very difficult in terms of being a parent. During most of the time that I was a graduate student and then later, on the faculty in American Indian Studies at Illinois, we were dealing with the mascot stuff. We were always under additional security because there were threats of violence directed towards us for speaking up about the mascot. I wish I knew how many millions of dollars the university spent on its security for that! I don't think they cared about us, specifically. They just needed to have someone there to document things for the university's protection.

[Alexia Angton]

Q. When you were younger, did you experience any of these things that you mentioned, or were there times before you were a professor and outside of your daughter's experience that you experienced anything like this?

My experiences in childhood were different from my daughter's, because I grew up on the reservation. My parents were there and the entire community was there. The Pueblo Nations of New Mexico are significantly different from a lot of other Nations across the country because we actually live close to each other, in a village located on our reservation. Where you drive onto Nambé's land, there's a sign that says you're entering the reservation. We have tribal police and tribal government and we can close the road when we need to. People can't come in unless we give them permission. This is due to our status as a sovereign nation that has jurisdiction over our lands. There are hundreds of tribal nations. Some have reservations, some don't. We're all different in what we're able to do.

So, I grew up with all of that. My parents, grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, everybody was there. So, I think that when I came across disparaging content in books, it was water off my back. It didn't matter because I knew who we were and fellow students did, too. I think the community itself as a buffer that protected me from the harm of stereotypes..In what is currently called northern New Mexico, there's a higher ratio of Native to non-Native people than is the case in other places. Anytime in public school when we were having a ceremonial period or a ceremonial day, we were all excused from school. It was also the case that when there were dances that were open to the public, our teachers could come. They could come for lunch, but sometimes they would bring a group of students with them. So, everybody had plenty of firsthand experiences with actual Native people. I think that a lot of the stereotypical kinds of stuff that appear didn't have the same impact in New Mexico as it does in Illinois where there are very few Native people.

[Alexia Angton]

Q. How do you think educational settings, whether that's at an institutional level or an individual classroom level, how could they change to overcome some of these barriers or challenges that you've expressed?

I think it's crucial that teachers assume that there will be a Native child in their classroom. What happens, here, or in most places in the country, is people assume that Native people have long black hair and darker skin. That's just not the case. We have a wide range of physicality because of history. It is an unfortunate fact that a lot of teachers in the US think that they need not worry about this or that particular demographic because they don't have children of that demographic in the classroom. That is short-sighted, obviously, but it can also be wrong and harmful! Teachers might think they don't have a Native child in their classroom because the school where they teach is not in a state with a reservation, or, they may be expecting a Native child to look a certain way. Physical appearance doesn't matter. It is not a factor in how a Native Nation determines who its citizens are. A child might have a Black parent and a Native one, and look Black. That doesn't matter. If that child meets the criteria of their mother's nation, they are a citizen of that nation. Same holds for a child who has a Latinx parent, or an Asian one, or a white one..What I'm getting at is our political status. Teachers have to stop assuming they don't have Native kids in their classrooms. I think 2010 census data showed that more Native people live off reservation than on, which means we're everywhere! . So, first, that realization has to happen. And with it, an understanding that "Columbus discovered America" lessons may be especially

hurtful to a Native child. It is factually wrong and shouldn't be taught, to anybody, but some things land with a Native child in a way that it might not land with a non-Native child. That said, lessons like that with young children aren't best practice. Educational best practice in an early childhood classroom is the here and now. What's in front of kids, now? What can they see, hear, taste, touch or smell? Teachers forget best practice teachings when they're doing long-ago and far-away Columbus or Thanksgiving activities. And a lot of those activities are full of stereotyping. Instead of that, teachers can use children's books that show Native people in the present day, and they should avoid "folktales" because most of what gets published is appropriated, or a misrepresentation, and sometimes, completely made up by an outsider who likes Indians.

One of the newer conversations about children's books in the classroom focuses on the merits of books created by white writers who create stories with racist storylines and arcs. In chapter one, they have someone being very racist towards a character of color or to a Native character. By the end of the book, the racist character has evolved and understands racism. They—and the audience the writer has in mind—learn something about racism. In essence, the book is written for a white audience. Native and Black and Latino and Asian children whose class is reading the book just have to suck it up, day after day, for the benefit of the white child. That's wrong. That has to stop, too. That sort of thing happens with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. When I see another parent talking about their child reading it, I think "Oh my God, can teachers please stop teaching that book?" Books like that are for white readers, but the rest of us? We're thrown under the bus.

I think there has to be a radical shift in who teachers center in their teaching. They need to decenter whiteness, so that everybody's wellbeing is considered. First and foremost, when teachers are developing lesson plans, it is important that they ensure that nobody is thrown under the bus for someone else; that's not necessary. The reality is that white kids walk into the classroom having been affirmed over and over and over in their existence and that children of color and Native children who come into the classroom have not been. Everything that the teacher does in that classroom is going to hurt them more, or it's going to help them. It dang well better help them, and they better not be hurting them. Those hurts are cumulative.

It's easy to understand why kids disengage from school; there are writings about that. Native children and children of color just stop paying attention, because who wants to pay attention to that kind of thing? It's very subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, but it's there over and over and over. Re-centering the instructional narrative is important.

There's also a really interesting development, of late. When I started doing my graduate work in the 1990s, some of us were saying to editors at review journals, "You know, maybe you should include the identity of every main character when you're doing a review, instead of only including the identity of characters that not white ." Editors said, "Oh God, that would be awful." Fast forward to the last few years, and that is happening. Vicky Smith, the editor of the review journal, *Kirkus*, published an article called "Unmaking the White Default." In essence, she said, "All right, from here on, we're going to name the identity of all the main characters. If the main character is white, we're going to say so." That's the kind of thing that we need to do and get used to doing. For so many years, we've "othered" everybody but white people. A colleague and I recently adapted *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*. It was originally published in 2014 for an adult audience. Teachers and librarians wanted a young adult version so

the publisher asked me if I would do the adaptation. I said, "Sure, but Jean Mendoza has to do it with me." We spent three years doing it. Jean's married to a Creek man, and they have children, so she has Creek children (she's white). We met in grad school at Illinois and went through grad school together and parenting our Native children in this community. Jean's children had experiences with teachers and books, much like the ones we had. As we adapted *An Indigenous Peoples' History*, we had our children in mind all the way; we didn't want this book to hurt kids like them, in any way. We wanted to be honest, but we also were very careful to adapt the book in ways that would not harm their sense of well-being.. One of the ways that tried to be mindful of de-centering [whiteness] in the book was in the index. When the editor sent us the index to look at, they wanted us to make sure all the tribal information for named individuals was correctly spelled, etc. When I got to the W's, I noticed how the index otherized Native people and centered white people. George Washington was just "George Washington, page 39," or whatever the page number was, and I thought, "Wait a minute. Let's name his whiteness. Let's put that in there." So, we did. I think that's a first for an index of any kind. Every person in that index has some kind of racial or national identification along with their name. That's another way that I think that teachers and professors can push the field to change the way we talk: De-center that normalized whiteness.

[Katie Anthony]

Q. Could you talk about how important community is among Indigenous and Native peoples for their educational journey and experience, and how that might look?

There were only a handful of Native people at Illinois when I was in graduate school, and it was hard. Getting my Ph.D. at Illinois was hard because of the experiences that I was having with my daughter, Native students were having similar difficulties. Even though I had very good friends who are Native that were going through grad school with me, we were such a tiny group. We'd get together a lot and we helped each other to get through all of that. That said, my experience getting my master's in library science was a 180-degree flip.

After I finished my doctorate, there was a grant to have a cohort of 20 Native students going to San Jose State University's online library science program – San Jose State is one of the universities that has a huge online library science program and people can get their library science degree online. So the grant found 20 of us and we all went through that program together. We didn't take every class together, but because it's a limited program, we were often taking the class in couples, or someone had taken it last semester. We had the shared experience of going through that and being able to get together online and talk about it, all 20 of us and bouncing ideas around. 20 seems like not very many, but compared to what I had at Illinois, which was five or six, 20 was a lot. That made a huge difference in my experience. It's a little backwards. I think most people believe that an online program is not very good because you're not in in-person, physical meetings. The in-person gets too much emphasis, I think. It's the persons themselves that you have as your cohort that are important.

There wasn't a cohort at Illinois when I was going through school there. Forming cohorts, whether they're online or on campus, is very important. That's nothing new, though. People do that, or they try to, or they used to try to.

[Alexia Angton:]

Q. If you had complete power over the educational system, how would you change it?

We would start with the land. I know that Iowa State now has a land acknowledgement. I suspect it is like most land acknowledgements that are being developed and recited across the country and Canada. They are just being recited. It feels like they are being done in order to check a box of what-to-do... and then the person/event moves on and there's a sense that they did a good thing by reciting the land acknowledgement. I think that what really needs to happen is that they have to have meaning tied to action. There has to be an action paired with land acknowledgements. For example, when you name the tribal nation, you can also recommend a writer of that nation. Or a book by a writer of that nation. And if there is no book, or no writer, say so! Point out the gaps in what and who gets published.

If I had the power to change the educational system, I would say, "All right, whose land are you on? Let's start there." Giving kids, college students, accurate information from the get-go about the land they're on, the people who used to be there, where they are now – because they're not all dead, most got moved somewhere else. So how did that move happen? What was the loss to that Indigenous community? As the U.S. moves forward in time and invades other countries, and take resources from other countries, it is repeating the same kinds of things in those places that it did to Native people. This is a pattern of behavior—of empire building—that we have to interrupt. Otherwise, the same kinds of culture wars are going to keep happening because there's a lack of respect for humanity. There's an utter lack of respect for different cultures. Empire and capitalism are shaping everything. That's to the utter destruction of everybody; of the whole planet. It's just going that way. If we could start over in a different way that looks honestly at history, that's what I would do.

[Katie Anthony]

Q. If you could implement one immediate change to educational systems that would take place right away, what would that look like?

I guess staying with this land acknowledgement – that it has to be coupled with some kind of action. The thing would be to change the way those land acknowledgements are being done. It seemed like a good idea when people first thought of them, but they turned into today's mascot. Instead of something with meaning, they're a token and empty honor. They're performative rather than behavior-changing. I also want teachers to emphasize Native Nations and our sovereignty. Teach about us as nations with unique cultures—but start with nations because that's key.

[Alexia Angton]

Q. Is there anything else that you have to say or would want to give some thought to in terms of barriers, in terms of offering alternatives to educational opportunities, things that you've experienced or that you would like to see, or anything maybe that you didn't discuss that you feel like would be very valuable to the issue?

Yes. We have to encourage other people to speak up. Too many people read a review that I did and they'll say, "Oh yeah, okay, I'm not going to use that book." What they need to do is talk about that review, tell others about that review. Otherwise, what they learn sits only with them. For change to happen, we need way more than that one person learning. We need to share what

we learn. A huge chorus of voices can diffuse the personal attacks some of us endure for speaking up. Let me give you some context.

I was a bit uneasy about coming to Iowa State to give my lecture because a retired professor at Iowa State has objected to my work on the racism and anti-Native content of the *Little House on the Prairie* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. That professor—Jane Cox—wrote a lot of emails in 2019 when I was selected to deliver the American Library Association’s Arbuthnot Lecture. She wrote to me and a lot of others, too, stating that she does not think I deserve that award. She registered to attend the lecture in Madison. I knew she was there and tried not to think about her as I delivered my lecture. Sometime after that, I was invited to come here, to Iowa State to give a lecture in the Helen LeBaron Hilton Chair series. A few weeks before coming over here, I realized that I was planning to give a lecture at the campus of that retired professor. I decided it was appropriate to let organizers here know about those emails. Cox attended my lecture that night. I’ve since learned that she objects to criticisms of Carrie Chapman Catt.

I’ve looked at some of Catt’s writings about Native people and they’re awful. They’re racist and they’re white supremacist. I see people trying to frame Catt as “a product of her time.” People say that about Laura Ingalls Wilder, too. The implication is that nobody thinks that way, today, but that’s not true! People talk like that right now. Just think about the things the sitting president has said. I wonder how history textbooks will write about him?! Textbooks usually depict presidents in positive ways. It is important to remember that not everyone shares the same point of view. In my talk, I asked people to think critically about George Washington. He practiced slavery, and the Haudenosaunee people did not think well of him at all. Their kids were afraid of him. Their mothers would look behind their back when they heard George Washington was in town. They had their own name for him. They called him the Town Destroyer. So, in my lecture I talked about whether he is a hero or a monster. The answer depends on who you ask. In the Q&A, someone asked “But didn’t he do some good things?” And I said, “Yeah, but you already know the good things. I told you the not good things, and you’re asking me to make you feel comfortable again. You need to own the fact that he was a racist and that he killed Native people and destroyed their homes. Don’t come asking me to make you comfortable with this new knowledge. You have to sit with that new knowledge and share that new knowledge.”

As we do this work, we make people uncomfortable. It is important that we not give them comfort. They need to own the knowledge and use it to do something different... to interrupt the status quo.