



The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Representation of Urban Public Space in Selected U.S. Children's Books

Kimberly Black

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

(klblack@utk.edu)

Abstract: Henri Lefebvre's concept of "the right to the city" suggests that all urban dwellers irrespective of class, ethnicity, or citizenship status have a right to participate in the shaping of the city. Children's literature has long represented varying views of cities and the experience of the city as a place. Many contemporary U.S. picture books engage important themes of social justice and the right to the city. Important issues explored include the regulation of physical access, the regulation of speech and dissent, and the regulation of homelessness/domicile that result in social exclusion.

Keywords: social justice, city, picture book.

Introduction

Social critic Henry Giroux suggests that education should promote social justice as an integral component of democracy. He observes that: "curriculum... is not simply knowledge to be consumed or valued for its measurable utility, it should be rooted in the best that has been produced by human beings and designed to both stir the imagination and empower young people with a sense of integrity, justice and hope for the future" (Giroux, 2010). Although Giroux's specific comments are addressed to neoliberalism in U.S. education reform movements, they can also be applied to children's trade books and used to define what good children's literature should offer. Good children's literature should be critically engaged with issues of social justice, and freedom for all members of a democratic society.

The Right to the City and Public Space

Urbanization is a persistent and growing global demographic trend and over half of the world's population now lives in cities. Understanding the city as a specific spatial formation and how social justice can be produced in cities has been an important undertaking by social scientists and social theorists. Henri Lefebvre has argued that 'space' doesn't merely exist as an external, physical extent, but rather that space is produced and negotiated through a series of spatial relations. The production of spatial relations is a social practice that can also reproduce the social power relationships among people. The morphology of the physical city conforms itself to existent social power relationships and can act to maintain



these social relationships. Thus, the physical city that an individual experiences is the product of human social relationships.

In *Writings on Cities* Lefebvre presents the concept of “the right to the city.” He asserts the existence of this right in passionate terms:

the *right to the city* is like a cry and a demand... [It] cannot be conceived as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be reformulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life... [I]t gathers the interests...of the whole society and firstly of all those who *inhabit* (Lefebvre, 1996: 158).

Lefebvre’s remarks about the city are framed using ‘rights talk’ – discourse about social relations cast in the language of human rights. As Mitchell argues, “‘rights’ are relationships not things; they are institutionally defined rules specifying what people can do in relation to one another. Rights refer to doing more than to having, to social relations that enable or constrain action” (Mitchell, 2003: 25). Thus, Lefebvre’s concept of “the right to the city” suggests that all urban dwellers irrespective of class, ethnicity, or citizenship status have a human right to participate equitably in the shaping of the city as they inhabit it. The “right to the city” is a particular enactment of social justice. It promotes the notion of expression and self-determination by all who live in a city –that all have a right to participate in the shaping of the city in a meaningful way.

Don Mitchell has examined real world struggles over the control of urban public space and their importance to social justice in his work. In *The Right to the City*, Mitchell explores

the relationship between social exclusion, social rights and social justice in American public space... [D]ebates and struggles over who has access to public space and who is excluded, define ‘the right to the city’ – and why a right to the city must be at the heart of any vision of a progressive, democratic, and just world (Mitchell 2003: 5-6).

The City in Picture Books

Children’s literature has long represented varying views of urban life and the experience of the city as a place. Several contemporary U.S. picture books present views of the city and engage in a dialog about important themes in social justice and the right to the city in their written and visual narrative. The strategies for the representation of these issues in picture books have been through a direct depiction of the issues in books such as Youme Landowne and Anthony Horton’s *Pitch Black* and Eve Bunting and David Diaz’ *Smoky*



Night. Strategies of representation have also been allegorical in works such as Christopher Myers' *Black Cat* and Janet Schulman and Meilo So's *Pale Male: Citizen Hawk of New York City*.

This remainder of this paper will explore how these four picture books have explored and critiqued the complicated issues of social justice and the right to the city for children. Important themes explored in these works include the regulation of physical access to urban public space, the regulation of speech, speech acts and dissent in public spaces, and the regulation of homelessness and domicile that result in social exclusion and restrict participation in city life.

Access to Urban Space

One of the most basic rights to the city is that of simple physical access to public spaces. Modern cities regulate access to public space and closely regulate the activities that are permissible in public space. Class mores and interests have an overwhelming influence on who has access to public space and what activities they can conduct there. Mitchell notes: "[T]he problems with the bourgeois city...is that it is not so much a site of participation as one of expropriation by a dominant class (and a set of economic interests) that is not really interested in making the city a site for the cohabitation of differences" (Mitchell 2003: 18). Thus, marginalized groups such as those experiencing homelessness and poverty and ethnic and racial minorities must struggle to assert their membership in larger society by inhabiting and using public spaces in ways that enlarge their base of rights in a community. Mitchell notes that

public space is a place within which political movements can stake out territory that allows them to be seen... In public space – on street corners or in parks, in the streets during riots and demonstrations – political organizations can represent themselves to a larger population, and through this representation give their cries and demands some force (Mitchell, 2003: 129).

Landowne and Horton's *Pitch Black* confronts the issue of the regulation of access to public space and the attempts by the vested class interests of the state to regulate behaviors conducted in them. *Pitch Black* tells the biography of Horton who became homeless as a teen. In the text, he described harassment from the police when he attempted to rest on public benches: "I went from bench to bench. The cops would not let me stay in one place. They would slap me on the soles of my feet and tell me to move on" (Landowne and Horton,



2008). Though Horton was not behaving in a threatening way to others in his use of public space, he was still forced to relinquish space simply because he was believed to be homeless. He had little influence in the shaping of the city. *Pitch Black* does an excellent job depicting the impact that the heavily regulated conditions of access to public space in modern city life have on those who experience poverty.

Bunting and Diaz's *Smoky Night* also illustrates regulation of access of public space. The story is set in a multiethnic urban neighbourhood and has a theme of community building across ethnic difference. The narrative opens with the protagonist and his mother looking out of a window as people in their neighbourhood take to the streets in a riot. Rioting is an extreme and terrifying use of public space, but this text opens the possibility for children to explore why riots happen. The protagonist's mother explains the reason for the riot in simple terms: "[Rioting] can happen when people get angry. They want to smash and destroy. They don't care anymore what's right and what's wrong" (Bunting and Diaz, 1994). The text also explores the contrast of emotions in a riot – repressed rage and frustration as well as relief and happiness through the forceful assertion of presence. Riots, as political acts, demand a particular type of social visibility for their participants – rioters take the city by force and shape it without state-sanctioned permission. This is a use of public space that can ultimately be constructive and result in the expansion of social rights despite the immediate destruction that usually attends a riot.

Both texts highlight access issues and the regulation of behavior in public spaces with attention to the implications of this regulation for social justice. They both depict meaningful struggles to access and use public space in the face of social exclusion.

Free Speech/Dissent

Another component of social justice in cities is the regulation of speech and dissent in public space. Free societies value and protect free speech; free speech and dissent are important characteristics of democratic societies and are integral to the right to the city. The concept of "free speech" tends to be discussed in abstract terms; however actual enactments of dissents take on meaning when grounded in a place and a context. Mitchell suggests that the ideas of free speech and dissent are "abstracted out of the actual political struggles from which they necessarily emerge... The terms of that abstraction are determined... in public



space itself – in the real struggles to speak and be heard, to listen and to gather, to protest and picket, that continually shape the right to the city” (Mitchell 2003, 73).

Some stories illustrate the power of dissent and free speech in order to effect social change. Schulman and So’s *Pale Male: Citizen Hawk of New York City* tells the true story of a red-tailed hawk named Pale Male who, with his mate, made a nest on a ledge above a window in a tony Fifth Avenue apartment building in New York City. The affluent building residents objected to the presence of the birds and worked diligently, despite animal protection laws, to remove the nest. Pale Male, however, had a large number of birdwatchers who objected to the efforts to have him removed. People from all over the city gathered and protested the removal of the nest. Schulman’s account describes the protest in the following way:

The dedicated birdwatchers and the Audubon Society immediately organized protests across Fifth Avenue... Every day more and more people joined the chorus chanting, ‘Bring back the nest’... Two protestors dressed as birds urged cars to ‘Honk 4 Hawks’. Taxis, cars, and city buses honked. Trucks let out ear-piercing blasts of their air horns. Even fire trucks let loose their sirens. (Schulman and So, 2008).

In the story and in real life the protests worked and the affluent residents eventually relented and allowed the birds to nest on the building. The text illustrates that dissent can create a more equitable space in the city through protest. It also suggests that animals can have a voice in how a city is shaped and that all creatures must be respected and given a meaningful voice in city life.

Pitch Black also explores uses of speech to convey a message of dissent, but does so using the illicit speech acts common to cities – graffiti – which saturates imagery in the text. The messages embedded in the graffiti carry some of the book’s central themes. One of the images that appears early in the text is of a subway platform with a large advertisement displaying the face of a woman with the words “BUY YOUR SELF”). Through various scenes of the platform, the reader is slowly shown graffiti words written on the lips of the woman image: “You are not alone”. This visual is an artful contrast between a commercial message of worth (one’s value is that of a consumer who can buy things) and a communitarian message of worth (the phrase “not alone” implies that others are with you – that value come from being a part of the community).



Both stories highlight the power of free speech and dissent in the shaping of the city towards justice and equity.

Homelessness

One of the most basic social justice issues that confront cities is the experience of homelessness and how issues of domicile impact the use of public space. Mitchell notes that “although homeless people are nearly always in public, they are rarely counted as part of *the* public... For them, socially legitimate private space does not exist, and so they are denied access to public space and public activity by the laws of a capitalist society that is anchored in private property” (Mitchell, 2003: 135). People experiencing homelessness must conduct the basic activities of daily living (urination, elimination, bathing, sleeping, etc.) in public spaces if they can’t secure private spaces to perform these tasks. However, public spaces are regulated such that these activities are illegal when conducted in public space. In these instances, the ability of the poor to shape the city is often curtailed in favor of the more affluent.

All of the texts relate to homelessness/loss of domicile. *Pitch Black* tells of Horton, who experienced homelessness as a teen and who resorted to living in subway tunnels deep beneath New York City. In *Smoky Night*, the protagonist’s apartment building catches fire in a riot and he and his neighbors must quickly flee to a shelter in the middle of the night. *Pale Male* presents the dispossession of the hawks’ nest and they are rendered without a “home.”

Christopher Myers’ *Black Cat* also interrogates issues of domicile in a city in a unique way that asserts the rights of all creatures to create home in public space. The text and images in the story depict the life of a black cat who roams about its city. Throughout the text, the narrator asks the cat where it lives: “Black cat, black cat, we want to know/where is your home, where do you go?” (Myers 1999). This persistent question of domicile permeates the text as the cat traverses its urban neighbourhood – on the streets, in parks, in alleyways, at the park, and in the subway. At the very end of the story, the cat finally responds to the question of domicile: “Black cat answers... anywhere I roam” (Myers 1999). The cat’s home is literally the entire city –a domicile as infinite as its reach which is an amazing assertion of presence and the right to the city. The black cat inhabits the city and unapologetically shapes its spaces as it wills. The black cat exemplifies self-determination and self expression as it carves out domicile in an urban public space.



Conclusion

Because children's literature can have such a powerful socializing role in the lives of children, it is important to carefully examine how the perception of social reality and the varying levels of access to social power among different groups in a society is presented. Issues of access and use of public space, freedom of speech and dissent and homelessness work collectively to constitute "the right to the city" – the right that all creatures have to participate in the shaping of the city. By exploring these issues through the prose and visual imagery of children's picture books, young readers can better understand how to interpret their world with compassion for all its members and can learn how to imagine an even better world that they can create as they grow into adulthood.

Bibliography

BUNTING, Eve (1994), *Smoky Night*, New York: Harcourt Brace.

GIROUX, Henry A. (2010), "Dumbing Down Teachers: Attacking Colleges of Education in the Name of Reform" [online], *Truthout*, [<http://www.truth-out.org/dumbing-down-teachers-attacking-colleges-education-name-reform5982>] Consultation June 2010.

LANDOWNE, Youme and Anthony Horton (2008), *Pitch Black*, El Paso, TX: Cinco Punto.

LEFEBVRE, Henri (1996), "Right to the City", in Elenore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (trans.), *Writings on Cities*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

MITCHELL, Don (2003), *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, New York: The Guilford Press.

MYERS, Christopher (1999), *Black Cat*, New York: Scholastic.

SCHULMAN, Janet (2008), *Pale Male: Citizen Hawk of New York City*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

