"Talking Walls": Presenting a Case for Social Justice Poetry in Literacy Education

A. Vincent Ciardiello

Reading and writing age-appropriate social justice poetry can provide students with a compelling voice that starts them on the path to democratic citizenship.

A wild patience has taken me this far...and when freedom is the question it is always time to begin (Rich, 1981, p. 8)

oet Adrienne Rich expresses lyrically and concisely the message of this article. When it comes to matters of freedom, it is never too early to begin training our students in democratic citizenship. Practicing democracy is not just for adults. Democracy involves civic practices besides voting and political participation; it consists of citizenship responsibilities that all people regardless of age can practice. Such practices include acts of social justice and empathy. Children need training in these democratic acts as part of literacy development. Literacy can play a role as a resource for cultivating civic responsibility and social justice in childhood education.

This article presents a case for reading and writing poetry of civic responsibility and social justice in literacy learning. It explores this argument through a historic event in which poetry played a major role in protesting social injustices. Specifically, the historic case study shows how young Chinese immigrants wrote poetry to protest their incarceration at the Angel Island detention center in San Francisco Bay in the United States during the early decades of the 20th century. This case is used as a model for implementing poetry of social justice into the childhood literacy curriculum. Guidelines containing specific materials

and strategies are suggested for the creation of teaching units in which poetry can be instrumental in the development of the democratic ideals of civic responsibility and social justice.

Literacy, Civic Responsibility, and Social Justice

Educational philosophers have long noted the connection between literacy and democratic freedoms (Dewey, 1916; Greene, 1988), and the mystical chords that tie the two ideals together. Nineteenth-century African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass noted this connection between the two ideals when he stated, "once you learn to read you will be forever free" (as quoted in Wolk, 1998, p. 144). In more contemporary times, the term *freedom* has taken a broader view to include civic responsibility and social justice concerns. In his autobiography, antiapartheid leader Nelson Mandela (1994), who was incarcerated for 27 years in a South African prison, expressed the notion that "to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that reflects and enhances the freedom of others" (p. 544). This extended version of freedom is the focus of this article.

Students need to develop and express civic responsibility through classroom interaction and subject matter learning. Democratic discourse has a place in our schools. It is in this public setting that, in the words of poet Elizabeth Alexander (2009), students can

encounter each other in words spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed, words to consider, reconsider. (p. 3) It is in school where words count not only as a means of communication but also as a measure of civic efficacy, a readiness and willingness to assume citizenship responsibilities. Even young students can develop civic efficacy by promoting harmonious relationships among classmates and playmates.

Students learn the value of civic responsibility and democratic ideals not only in peer interactions in school and on the playground but also when learning academic subjects in the classroom. They learn from historic and literacy models of civic activists. Prominent educators James and Cherry Banks (Banks & Banks, 1999) found that even students in primary grades can learn civic responsibility from age-appropriate case studies of people involved in human rights issues. Young students have a natural interest in issues involving matters of fairness and social justice. For them, these issues are not only abstract ideals and global concepts but also personal and social ones (Walters, 2004; Williams & Cooney, 2006). These personal issues can be used as stepping stones to learning about more global issues of social injustice involving discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities.

Young students are particularly sensitive to social conditions in which children have been forcibly separated from their parents. Indeed, fourth and fifth graders became angry when they learned that children were separated from their parents during immigrant processing at Ellis Island (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Moreover, the preservice teachers I worked with in my research reported that their elementary school students were upset to hear of the extended separation of Chinese immigrant families while detained on the Angel Island immigration station in San Francisco during the first decades of the 20th century. These immigrants, as I will show later, expressed their fear and frustration by writing poetry on the walls of the detention center, which later became known as "talking walls" (Zonkel, 2006).

"Talking Walls" and Social Justice

The official immigration policy was that it was unlawful to write on or deface property on Angel Island (Lyman, 2007), but the Chinese immigrant poets ignored it. They took it upon themselves to speak out against injustice, even though they were prohibited

Reflection Questions

- 1. What is the connection between literacy and social justice?
- 2. What role does poetry play in making our students more humane?
- 3. How can reading and writing age-appropriate social justice poetry become a part of literacy education?

from writing on the walls. Indeed, the talking walls were so crowded with untitled poems that one Angel Island immigrant complained that "it was not easy to find space on the wall to compose a poem. Poems were written wherever the hand could reach" (Lai, Lim, & Yung, 1991, p. 136).

Rich (2007) composed "Wallflower," which could easily be applied to the Angel Island poets. Some of its words are as follows:

History as wallpaper Urgently selected clipped and pasted But the room itself no where The handwriting On the walls are vast and coded. (p. 21)

The Chinese immigrants' poems on the barrack walls were also coded, in that they represented anonymous written messages of inner yearnings for freedom. The poets believed that no one could deny their right to protest injustice.

Characteristics of Social Justice Poetry

For days I have been without freedom on Island. In reduced circumstances now, I mingle with the prisoners.

Grievances fill my belly; I rely on poetry to express them. (Lai et al., 1991, p. 157)

Written by an anonymous Chinese immigrant on the walls of Angel Island, this poem is representative of social justice poetry, which protests unfair and unjust living conditions. It uses the power of figurative

language to combat social injustices and inspires democratic visions of a fair and just society.

Poetry of social justice is not politically neutral. It is biased toward democracy. For the oppressed and marginalized, this poetry represents power as the voice of the dispossessed. Many antidemocratic political regimes fear this type of poetry. They have suppressed poetry by silencing and arresting its poets. To dictators, poetry is dangerous and seditious.

Social justice poetry is also not frivolous. Its message is timeless and urgent. One of the young Chinese immigrant poets exhorted as he wrote, "Do not treat my works as idle words" (Lai et al., 1991, p. 122). In the Chinese cultural tradition, poetry was the preferred means of expression for exposing social injustices. The Angel Island poets borrowed from this cultural tradition. Their talking walls were a symbol of their determination to stand firm in demanding their rights as equal human beings (Lyman, 2007).

Some contemporary poets believe that the primary purpose of social justice poetry is to humanize (Pinsky, 2007; Rich, 1993). They believe it promotes and respects human dignity. Social justice poetry portrays democracy as shared friendship or a kind of equity of interest among citizens, which means treating even strangers as persons and not objects or commodities. Democracy depends on trustful talk among citizens, who are by and large all strangers (Allen, 2004). In other words, democracy equates literacy and humanism. Reading and writing are important only if they serve to make our students more humane (Ginott, 1972). In other words, social justice poetry speaks to the heart as well as the head, calling for empathy as well as rights.

Social Justice Poetry of the Heart

And a stranger shall you not oppress for you know the heart of a stranger, seeing you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (HB Exodus, 23:8)

The Hebrew Bible uses the power of metaphor, as shown in this quotation, to teach empathy and justice for strangers. The power of metaphor can transform the strange into the familiar by using what we already know and reducing unfamiliarity of the different (Ozick, 1989).

Some students come to school with a mentality of not interacting with newcomers or those who appear

different from them. This mentality is often carried over into these young students' earliest relationships with other classmates and schoolmates. Patricia, a preservice teacher, encountered this attitude in the following verbal exchange with Amanda, a fifth grader:

Patricia: Why do you play with some people and

not others [in school]?

Amanda: Because I have known them for years...

Patricia: Would you play with a stranger, such as a

new kid in class?

Amanda: Never, I'd want to get to know them first.

The fifth-grader's attitude is echoed by kindergarten student Lisa, who adamantly tells her teacher, Vivian Paley (1992), "I just want my own friends [to play with in school]. What if someone isn't nice and hits me?" (p. 82). A spirit of distrust for strangers is contrary to the democratic nature of classroom interaction. Developing a democratic disposition of caring for the feelings of the "other" is a civic responsibility for all students. Indeed, democracy depends on trustful talk among strangers and seeks to bridge differences between the known and unknown.

Poetry of social justice is empathic by nature. It empathizes with the feelings of others, especially minorities. It consists of what Noddings (1999) called "engrossment" or "state of rapt attention to hear, feel, and see what the other tries to convey" (p. 16). Students can relate well to this characteristic. They might not know what it feels like to be a detained immigrant, but they do know what it is like to be separated from family and friends (Skolnick, Dulberg, & Maestre, 2004).

Social justice poetry can help students learn to empathize with others whom they first meet in school. Reading and writing social justice poetry provides students with a literacy practice that helps develop countervailing habits to establish trust with the newcomers in our classroom. Friendship takes on a different meaning in the context of a democratic classroom (Allen, 2004). It is no longer based on personal experiences and preferences; it now entails civic and social responsibilities in the quest of the common good. In *Nathaniel Talking* (Greenfield, 1988), a juvenile fictional character, Nathaniel, expressed these democratic notions in a social justice poem he wrote on the topic of making friends:

when I was in kindergarten this new girl came in our class one day and the teacher told her to sit beside me... so I wiggled my nose and made my bunny face and she laughed then she puffed out her cheeks and she made a funny face and I laughed so then we were friends. (p. 7)

In a democratic classroom, reading and writing social justice poetry is not a frill or luxury in the literacy curriculum. Through its cultivation and expression, the democratic values of justice and empathy are encouraged as part of democratic citizenship training. A student expressed this democratic spirit in the following words:

When I hear Mira or Rachel read, I think, hey they have the same feelings I do. Even though they were brought up differently, even though they're Asian and White and I'm Black, we've experienced some of the same things. They teach me about humanity. (Christensen, 1991, p. 33)

Guidelines for Reading and Writing Social Justice Poetry

The idea of reading and writing social justice poetry can be implemented through these seven guidelines, which were derived from my own teaching experiences and the field experiences of my preservice teachers. They were also guided by the classroom action research of literacy educators (Damico, 2005; Espinosa & Moore, 1999; Napoli, 2007).

- 1. Set up a classroom learning environment that supports literacy as a fundamental human right. Become familiar with the International Reading Association's (2000) position statement in *Making a Difference Means Making It Different: Honoring Children's Rights to Excellent Reading Instruction.* Focus especially on the second children's right, which states, "children have a right to reading (and writing) instruction that builds both the skill and the desire to read increasingly complex materials" (p. 4). Frame the reading and writing of social justice poetry around this statement.
- 2. Introduce the nature and scope of social justice poetry. The nature varies from rhymed verse to blank verse and consists of many forms, including haiku, odes, sonnets, and acrostic types. Examples of 29 different poetic forms are presented for students in Janeczko (2005). See Table 1 for a selection of social justice poetry collections for juvenile readers.
- 3. Present models of students' social justice poetry. Samples of young students' poetry appear throughout this article. Students as young as first graders have had their poetry appear in published sources (Ada, Harris, & Hopkins, 1993). Online sources of students' poetry related to human rights and social justice issues can be found on the K–12 ePals Global Learning Community website at www .epals.com/content/humanrights.aspx. On this website, a poem entitled "Trapped" (O., n.d.) by a middle school student is particularly relevant to the theme of exclusion and incarceration of Chinese immigrants on Angel Island. The student poet wrote,

Table 1
Selection of Social Justice Poetry Collections for Juvenile Readers

Bruchac, J. (1983). Songs from this earth on turtle's back: Contemporary American Indian poetry. Greenfield Center, NY: Greenfield Review.

Giovanni, N. (1993). Ego-tripping and other poems for young people. Chicago: Lawrence Hill.

Greenfield, E. (2004). In the land of words: New and selected poems. New York: HarperCollins.

Medina, J. (1999). My name is Jorge on both sides of the river: Poems in English and Spanish. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills.

Mora, P. (2000). My own true name: New and selected poems for young adults, 1984–1999. Houston, TX: Piñata.

Nelson, M. (2004). Fortune's bones: The manumission requiem. Asheville, NC: Front Street.

Nye, N.S. (2008). Honeybee. New York: Greenwillow.

Soto, G. (1995). Canto familiar. San Diego: Harcourt.

Weatherford, C.B. (2002). Remember the bridge: Poems of a people. New York: Philomel.

Within the dark walls, we are all trapped. The walls are not brick, nor wood, nor metal The walls around us are hate

- 4. Use students' lived experiences to teach the elements of social justice poetry. Students encounter everyday situations involving fairness and compassion in school and other public places. Tap into these experiences as a relevant venue for oral and written poetic expression.
- 5. Set up social justice poetry learning stations. Display literary models of age-appropriate social justice poetry by theme (see Table 2). Decorate bulletin boards with samples of students' poems. Keep them on display on a regular basis, not just for celebrating civic holidays.
- 6. Implement reading and writing strategies for teaching social justice poetry, which typically contains societal forces in tension (i.e., freedom vs. authority). Creating poetry for two voices is a very appropriate strategy for expressing the conflict between forces such as freedom and authority (Fleischman, 1988). In addition, examining and studying paintings, drawings, sculptures, and photographs that contain social justice themes inspire poetic expression (Gorrell, 2000; Panzer, 1994). I have used Norman Rockwell's painting of a young African American girl attempting to enter a segregated school as a powerful motivator for student literary expression (Ciardiello, 2001). Another promising strategy is teaching students to read, write, and share "I" poems about ethnic and cultural identity issues. A noted poet of juvenile poetry, Eve Merriam (1971) recommended reading and writing "I" poems, because they show that "each person has great individuality with a different voice, a different thumbprint, yet all of us share the human race; unique and the same" (p. 166). Poetry for two voices is illustrated later in this article.
- 7. Select relevant topics on social justice. Social justice issues inspire poetry. See Table 2 for examples of social justice poetry related to the compelling issues of slavery and emancipation; civil rights; ethnic exclusion; literacy, language, and discrimination; and cultural identity and pluralism.

A Case for Social Justice Poetry in Childhood Literacy

In this article, the guidelines listed in the previous section are presented in a historic case of young Chinese immigrants during the early decades of 20th-century United States. As mentioned earlier, students can learn abstract democratic ideals not only from their lived experiences in school but also from models and examples of marginalized people who have battled social injustice. Hopefully they will be able to compare and test their understanding of these models against their own experiences (Robinson, 1998).

Michael, a third-grade student and an immigrant from Ireland, was able to make this text-to-self connection when learning about the Chinese immigrant experience from Peggy, a preservice teacher. While reading *Landed* (Lee, 2006), a juvenile narrative about a young Chinese immigrant detained and treated inhumanely on Angel Island, Peggy attempted to make this kind of connection with Michael, as evidenced in the following exchange:

Peggy: Have you ever been treated like you were less than a human being, or maybe someone treated you differently because of the way you looked?

Michael: Yeah.

Peggy: Can you think of an example?

Michael: Well, one time when I was in recess in kindergarten and there was this play [sic] red fire truck and they said that only people from America could play with it.

Peggy: Do you think you could relate to how Sun [young Chinese boy in the story] may have

Michael: Yeah, because he wasn't allowed to go straight to America, because he was Chinese, and it's not like you get to choose where you're from.

Historic Context of Angel Island Poetry

Most Chinese immigrants who arrived during the great period of immigration (1880–1940) did not disembark on Ellis Island in New York Harbor. They entered through a western gate known as Angel Island in San Francisco Bay during the years 1910–1940. In reaction to Chinese immigration, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, specifically barring the entrance of all Chinese laborers while still admitting Chinese merchants, students, tourists, foreign diplomats, and children of U.S. citizens. Relatives of merchants could enter, too.

Slavery and emancipation	Angelou, M. (2007). Still I rise. In E.G. Wilson (Ed.), Poetry for young people. Maya Angelou (pp. 30–31). New York: Sterling. Resilience of African American women
	Dove, R. (2003). The abduction. In M. Meltzer (Ed.), Hour of freedom: American history in poeti (p. 33). Honesdale, PA: Wordsong & Boyds Mills. Slave trade in the United States
	Greenfield, E. (1993). Harriet Tubman. In A.F. Ada, V.J. Harris, & L.B. Hopkins (Eds.), A chorus of cultures: Developing literacy through multicultural poetry (p. 134). Carmel, CA: Hampton-Brown Praise for the courageous "conductor" of the Underground Railroad
	Weatherford, C.B. (2002). Remember the bridge: Poems of a people. New York: Philomel. African American memories of crossing over from oppression to freedom
	Whitman, W. (2003). The runaway slave. In M. Meltzer (Ed.), Hour of freedom: American history in poetry (p. 39). Honesdale, PA: Wordsong & Boyds Mills. Aiding runaways on the Underground Railroad
Civil rights	Angelou, M. (2007). Harlem hopscotch. In E.G. Wilson (Ed.), Poetry for young people. Maya Angelou (p. 14). New York: Sterling. Optimism of young African American girl living in a ghetto
	Dove, R. (1999). Rosa. In <i>On the bus with Rosa Parks: Poems</i> (p. 83). New York: W.W. Norton. Lyrical description of the righteous and courteous civil rights leader
	Giovanni, N. (1993). The funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr. In Ego-tripping and other poems for young people (p. 10). Chicago: Lawrence Hill. Elegiac poem of the civil rights leader's shortened life
	Weatherford, C.B. (2007). <i>Birmingham, 1963</i> . Honesdale, PA: Wordsong. Fictional witness accounting of the tragic event in the segregated southern U.S. city
Ethnic exclusion	Angelou, M. (2007). Caged bird. In E.G. Wilson (Ed.), <i>Poetry for young people. Maya Angelou</i> (p. 34). New York: Sterling. Allegorical poem comparing the liberating song of a free bird and the oppressive song of a caged bird
	Dove, R. (1998). Primer. In C. Clinton (Ed.), I, too, sing America: Three centuries of African American poetry (p. 126). Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Bullying in a school yard
	Hughes, L. (2006). Merry-go-round. In D. Roessel & A. Rampersad (Eds.), Poetry for young people Langston Hughes (p. 36). New York: Sterling. Segregation in transportation facilities
	Ling, A. (1993). Slit eyes. In A.F. Ada, V.J. Harris, & L.B. Hopkins (Eds.), A chorus of cultures: Developing literacy through multicultural poetry (p. 13). Carmel, CA: Hampton-Brown. Racial stereotyping on a school playground
	Mora, P. (1989). Borders. In J. Beaty & J.P. Hunter (Eds.), New worlds of literature (pp. 514–515) New York: W.W. Norton. Language exclusion practices
	Wong, J.S. (1994). Bombs bursting in air. In <i>Good luck gold and other poems</i> (p. 17). New York: Margaret K. McElderry. Racial prejudice in a baseball park
Literacy, language, and	Dove, R. (1989). Parsley. In J. Beaty & J.P. Hunter (Eds.), <i>New worlds of literature</i> (pp. 501–503). New York: W.W. Norton. Dangers of practicing literacy in a dictatorship
discrimination	Harper, F.E.W. (2003). Learning to read. In M. Meltzer (Ed.), Hour of freedom: American history poetry (p. 36). Honesdale, PA: Wordsong & Boyds Mills. Courage of African American freed people to gain literacy after slavery
	Medina, J. (2004). The dream on my wall. In The dream on Blanca's wall: Poems in English and

Medina, J. (2004). The dream on my wall. In The dream on Blanca's wall: Poems in English and Spanish [El sueño pegado en la pared de Blanca: Poemas en ingles y español] (p. 4-5). Honesdale, PA: Wordsong.

A bilingual girl's dreams of becoming a teacher

Mora, P. (n.d.). Elena. Retrieved September 9, 2009, from www.poemhunter.com/poem/elena-2/ Language differences between immigrant parents and their children

Soto, G. (1995). Spanish. In Canto familiar (pp. 4-6). San Diego: Harcourt. Cultural benefits of knowing two languages

(continued)

Cultural identity and pluralism

Baca, J.S. (2003). Immigrants in our own land. In M. Meltzer (Ed.), *Hour of freedom: American history in poetry* (pp. 74–75). Honesdale, PA: Wordsong & Boyds Mills.

A Hispanic immigrant's unfulfilled dreams

Bruchac, J. (1989). Ellis Island. In J. Beaty & J.P. Hunter (Eds.), *New worlds of literature* (p. 291). New York: W.W. Norton.

A poet's reflections on the emotional conflicts about his mixed European and Native American heritages

Clifton, L. (n.d.). *Listen children*. Retrieved September 9, 2009, from www.poemhunter.com/poem/listen-children/

Urging black children to praise their African American heritage

Wong, J. (1994). Speak up. In *Good luck gold and other poems* (p. 5). New York: Margaret K. McElderry.

Poem for two voices about the identity crisis of Asian Americans

It was believed that the Chinese working-class immigrants would never mix into the American melting pot. According to the Chinese Exclusion Act, allowing the Chinese labor class to enter would affect the stability of American economic life. The Chinese laborers were a threat to American workers. However, Chinese immigrants found a way to circumvent the law by purchasing false identity papers containing detailed biographical information, trying to show a blood tie to a United States citizen. Many Chinese entered illegally with false identities and would be detained and segregated from all others in prisonlike conditions on Angel Island for an average of two weeks, and some for up to two years, before admission or deportation. A working-class Chinese immigrant had to prove a blood tie to a U.S. citizen, or other favored status, and was detained until such proof was provided to the immigration authorities. See Table 3 for references to juvenile fiction and nonfiction on this topic.

In 1940, the immigration station at Angel Island closed after a fire destroyed the mess hall and administration building. Thirty years later, the unoccupied barracks were scheduled for demolition when a park ranger rediscovered the Chinese writing on the walls. Two local historians and a poet were called to investigate and found 135 anonymously written poems by former detainees. These poems have been translated by an academic team and published (Lai et al., 1991). Also, the talking walls have been carefully preserved, and the entire immigration station has been declared a national historic landmark. See Table 4 for examples of digital sources on Angel Island poetry and history.

Strategies for Reading and Writing Poetry of Social Justice

Young students relate to poetry of social justice, because it speaks to many of the same fairness issues that they experience in their own lives. These beliefs became evident to my preservice teacher candidates when they taught lessons on Chinese immigrant poetry. On matters of fairness and injustice, one poem in particular captured young students' attention:

America has power, but not justice. In prison, we were victimized as if we were guilty.

Given no opportunity to explain, it was really

I bow my head in reflection but there is nothing I can do. (Lai et al., 1991, p. 58)

Students also expressed interest in Angel Island poems that referred to young immigrants and family living conditions. There were many children among the detained Chinese immigrants. Indeed, most of the immigrants were males in their teens or early twenties. Children under the age of 12 were assigned to the care of their mothers. Husbands and wives were separated from one another and could not see or even communicate with each other during their detainment (Lai et al., 1991). Young students were also eager to respond in verse to the Angel Island poetry that focused on these themes. Several students were particularly moved by the following Angel Island poem:

The young children do not yet know worry.

Arriving at the Golden Mountain, they were imprisoned in the wooden building.

Not understanding the sad and miserable situation before their eyes,

They must play all day like calves. (Lai et al., 1991, p. 106)

When asked to write a poem that he would have written on the talking walls if he stood in the shoes of a young Chinese immigrant poet, Andrew, a fourth grader, penned the following poem of social justice:

Why should I be locked behind this great big fence When it is sunny not even raining?
I miss my mother
And I miss my father.
I'm locked behind this fence
As tall as a gifaffe [sic]
I can't even laugh.
I thought I would strike rich with gold.
Instead I'm sad
And miserable.

While reading *Landed* (Lee, 2006), the event that prompted the most criticism by students involved the cruel and unjust interrogation procedures that the newcomers faced on Angel Island. Christine, a preservice teacher, modeled a poem she created for two voices representing the conflicting views of a detained immigrant and an immigration official:

Sun (12-year-old Chinese immigrant)	Adult immigration official
You can't say	We can say
I can't stay.	You can't stay.
I didn't do anything bad.	We understand America is
Being treated this way	a popular location,
Makes me sad.	But we are looking out for our nation.
I really am who I say.	You could be a paper son for all we know.
I did not lie in any way.	If we find out that you are, you'll have to go.
America is supposed to be	America is a wonderful place to be.
The land of the free	Once you get through Angel Island
But so far injustice is all I	You will see.

see.

Table 3
Juvenile Books on Chinese American Immigration and Angel Island Detention

Chetin, H. (2002). *Angel Island prisoner 1922* (C. Harvey, Trans.). Tiburon, CA: Angel Island Association.

Currier, K.S. (2004). *Kai's journey to Gold Mountain:* An Angel Island story. Tiburon, CA: Angel Island Association.

Lee, M. (2006). *Landed*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Wong, L.K. (2006). Good fortune: My journey to Gold Mountain. Atlanta: Peachtree.

Yep, L. (with Yep, K.S.) (2008). The dragon's child: A story of Angel Island. New York: HarperCollins.

Table 4
Digital Sources for Angel Island Poetry and History

Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation. (2007). A fresh look at poetry and inscriptions at Angel Island. Retrieved October 25, 2009, from www.aiisf.org/index.php/about/articles/124-afresh-look-at-angel-island

Center for Educational Telecommunications. (n.d.).

Angel Island immigration station poetry 1910–1940.

Retrieved October 25, 2009, from www.cetel.org/
angel_poetry.html

Department of English, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. (n.d.). *Modern American poetry. Angel Island poetry.* Retrieved February 13, 2009, from www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/angel/angel.htm

KQED Asian Education Initiative, The. (n.d.). *Discovering*Angel Island: The story behind the poems. Retrieved
July 4, 2009, from www.kqed.org/w/pacificlink/
history/angelisland/video/

Visuals can also be used to prompt student composition of social justice poetry. The drawings in *Landed* (Lee, 2006) offered an opportunity to empathize with Sun, a 12-year-old Chinese immigrant separated from his family and detained on Angel Island. One drawing of Sun and two other young immigrants standing behind "prison" bars stimulated Michael, the third-grade Irish student, to write the following poetic response:

People are treating me like an animal
Nothing better than a camel
There are locks on the windows, walls and doors
I just can't take it any more
All these people questioning me
Who could I really be?

Talking Walls: An Enduring Voice!

Photographs of the original talking walls of the anonymous Chinese immigrants were not published in book form for posterity. Yet, the walled poetry has become an educational resource and literacy treasure. The words of Mexican American social activist César Chávez are illuminating on this matter: "real education should consist of drawing the goodness and the best out of our students. What better book can there be than the book of humanity" (as quoted in Campano, 2007, p. 31). The talking walls can be considered a "book of humanity."

The talking walls send a powerful democratic message to our youngest citizens. There are particular ways of reading and writing that are necessary for cultivating civic responsibility and social justice goals (Lee, 2008). Reading and writing social justice poetry helps create civic awareness and democratic citizenship-building. We want our young students to begin aspiring and training for what Martin Luther King Jr. called the greatest citizenship challenge and responsibility of our times, which is to become "drum majors for justice" (as quoted in Kazemek, 1988, p. 67). We want our students to become active, critical, and compassionate heralds for democracy. Reading and writing age-appropriate social justice poetry can provide our young citizens with a compelling democratic voice that could resound through the ages.

Notes

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Ciardiello teaches at Iona College, New Rochelle, New York, USA; e-mail aciardiello@iona.edu. Copyright of Reading Teacher is the property of International Reading Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.