

Nuestros Cuentos Cuantan: Storytelling as a Healing Modality in a Community College Classroom

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Abstract

This article describes Nuestros Cuentos Cuantan, a month-long student project designed for Dr. Lucha Arévalo's Introduction to Chicana/o/x Studies (CHST 101) course. The project is part of a creative and critical race literacy curriculum centered on empowering students to create the stories and illustrations they wish had been introduced to them as children and in doing so to explore the healing power of art and storytelling. The project culminates with each student writing, illustrating, and producing an original children's picture book. The growing collection of children's books by Dr. Arévalo's students is a testament to the possibilities of storytelling as a healing modality and political act in a community college classroom setting. Dr. Arévalo presents the five key values that underpin the creation of anti-racist children's books and provides a curricular overview of classroom lessons.

Keywords: children's books, art, storytelling, healing, community college, ethnic studies, pedagogy, teaching, curriculum

Nuestros Cuentos Cuantan: Storytelling as a Healing Modality in a Community College Classroom

"Why did I have to wait until I get to college to learn this?" This question, while expressed in many other ways, captures the sentiment of betrayal expressed by many students throughout my experience in teaching ethnic studies. For most of my students, my courses are the first time they have enrolled in an ethnic studies course. I cherish these moments of critical reflection and consciousness, as they allow for a deeper introspection into the wounds caused by institutional violence, erasure, pain, discrimination, and outright neglect in education.¹⁴ My ethnic studies courses offer students the space and language to name the collective oppression endured by racialized communities, as we spend weeks unpacking the social constructions of power across race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other structural conditions of vulnerability. My central challenge as an educator involves cultivating communities of care and relationships of healing that

¹⁴ My critical approach to education, schooling, and educational reform is deeply shaped by abolitionist traditions in teaching and learning, such as the work of Bettina L. Love (2019) and the Education for Liberation Network & Critical Resistance Editorial Collective (2021). For a historical overview and framing of education reform as racialized state violence, see my dissertation, *Insurgent Learning: Confronting Neoliberal Assaults on Public Education in Los Angeles County in an Era of Accountability, 2000–2015* (2019).

are empowering for students. How do we imagine, create, cultivate, and work toward alternate futures and possibilities that affirm life and dignity in the classroom? What does it look like to center the healing of wounds and trauma in the ethnic studies classroom?

While I do not claim to offer prescriptive solutions,¹⁵ these questions are at the forefront of my teaching praxis and have guided the development of a culminating class project I designed for students in my Introduction to Chicana/o/x Studies (CHST 101) course,¹⁶ which introduces students to both historical and contemporary issues that impact Chicanx and Latinx communities.

CHST 101 is the most popular course in my department, as it fulfills general education requirements in the humanities, social sciences, and ethnic studies. As a community college professor, I share the labor of love and *cariño* (care) poured into this project as a set of creative pedagogical tools that can disrupt the schooling process altogether and inspire educators to cultivate creative ways to protect and restore the spirit of our students. *Muxerista* and *jotería* activist-scholar and professor Anita Tijerina Revilla (2021) defines spirit protectors and spirit restorers as

people, places, organizations, beliefs, and/or practices (they can also be art, poetry, books, music, and dance) that give marginalized people the strength to reject and survive attempted spirit murder and/or restore our wounded spirits, especially in the face of repeated attacks and woundings both inside and outside of institutions of education (p. 36).

The power of my students' imaginations and the stories they carry have historically been devalued in academic settings.¹⁷ When we turn history on its head and honor what was once marginalized in the classroom, we gain the potential to unlock something special. I strive to cultivate a classroom environment that centers the humanity and well-being of my students and their communities, including my own as an educator. Doing so protects and restores the spirit of our students in the classroom and, by extension, engages in an act of healing.

Cultivating an anti-racist curriculum and teaching strategies rooted in the core competencies of ethnic studies (Academic Senate for Community Colleges, 2022) is essential for my campus, not only because it is central to my craft as an ethnic studies educator but also because, in the wake of the nationwide uprising after the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the state, the college in its mission statement formally identified itself as an anti-racist institution. Río Hondo College is a Hispanic-Serving Institution in which 80% of the student population is Latinx and 92% are Students of Color (Río Hondo College Marketing Department, 2022). Río Hondo College is a teaching-intensive college in the city of Whittier, California and serves a diverse population,

¹⁵ My teaching, research, and service are deeply informed by my own positionality as a first-generation mother of color faculty member who navigated Compton Public Schools as a working-class daughter of Mexican immigrant parents. My intersectional identities connect me to my students and their communities.

¹⁶ CHST 101 examines social, political, economic, and historical issues as they impact the Chicana/o/x experience in the U.S. Topics include identity, gender, language, race, sexuality, immigration, labor, poverty, and education. This course is designed to acquaint students with the interdisciplinary models and paradigms developed within the field of Chicana/o/x studies.

¹⁷ For an introduction to scholars who challenge subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) and deficit-thinking in education (Valencia, 1997), see work on culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive teaching (Hammond, 2014), and culturally sustaining teaching (Paris & Alim, 2014).

including undocumented, veteran, single-parent, formerly incarcerated, disabled, unhoused, foster, returning, and high school students. Most students attend part time and often balance work and family obligations. Thus, as a community college educator in the post-Assembly Bill 705 era,¹⁸ I acknowledge that assigning an essay or research paper without providing additional support and allocating significant class time to teaching the academic skills necessary to succeed can set students up for failure. In this teaching context, I am tasked with creating an anti-racist curriculum that disrupts rather than perpetuates white supremacy and injustice. At Río Hondo College, we accept students from all walks of life, and it is our duty as educators to meet them where they are.

In 2019, I implemented a month-long student project called *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan* (Our stories count and are telling), part of a creative and critical race literacy curriculum in my Chicana/o/x studies course that is centered on empowering students to create the stories and illustrations that they wish had been introduced to them as children and, in doing so, to explore the healing power of art and storytelling. The project culminates with each student writing, illustrating, and producing an original children's picture book. The curriculum I devised enables students to engage in anti-racist cultural production, critical self-reflection, and lifelong learning, which advances the course's learning outcomes, increases student retention and success, and contributes to the production of knowledge.

Today, I have a growing collection of hundreds of anti-racist children's books created by my students that challenge statistics and represent academic success.¹⁹ In the following, I offer my pedagogical writing and reflection as a scholarly research praxis. As a community college professor deeply invested in the art of teaching and learning in parallel with the academic and political project of ethnic studies, I am strongly committed to imagining new ways of connecting the classroom to my students' communities. I am uniquely positioned to focus on the craft of my teaching, delve into student learning, and develop collaborative partnerships. I aimed to share my teaching praxis with a public audience through *Ethnic Studies Pedagogies*, as there is a dire need to validate teaching pedagogies as scholarship, especially in ethnic studies.²⁰ Lastly, as ethnic studies courses become mandated at the high school, community college, and university levels in California, a project emerging from a community college that can be adapted to each level of education is not only necessary but critical to promoting the core competencies of ethnic studies. I begin by describing the five key values that underpin the creation of anti-racist children's books and end with a curricular overview of classroom lessons.²¹

Five Key Values of *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan*

I strive to uphold five key values in the unfolding of *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan* as summarized below.

¹⁸ AB 705 (2017) ended high stakes student-placement assessments and requires colleges to consider student's high school coursework, grades, and grade point average as primary determining factors for placement into transfer-level coursework in English and math. This law intends to get students into transfer-level coursework in English and math within a one-year timeframe.

¹⁹ To access the online digital archive of student-produced children's books, visit the Río Hondo College Library website guide for CHST 101: <https://libguides.riohondo.edu/CHST101>

²⁰ For a brief review on teaching as scholarship, see Ochoa (2011).

²¹ This article does not provide the weekly breakdown of assignments. Forthcoming is a manuscript detailing the week-by-week breakdown of assignments for *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan*.

1. Validating Student Knowledge and Expression

"Profe, can I use 'I' in my writing?" When students enter my classes, it is often the first time they have been encouraged to incorporate themselves, their views, and their experiences into their academic work. Students are conditioned to believe that their personal stories and opinions are secondary, biased, and a hindrance to their success.²² In ethnic studies courses, we begin with our positionalities and subjectivities as a source of strength and knowledge. Our so-called biases are not a deficit to the learning community we create; rather, they are our areas of expertise.

As students write and illustrate their children's stories, they are simultaneously both students and teachers. Children's books are, after all, pedagogical tools for learning and literacy. A project such as this contributes to the production of non-hierarchical knowledge, in which my knowledge as a professor is not superior to theirs as students. After all, they are the experts on their own stories, and their stories are what informs their children's books. The children's stories students create are deeply informed by the funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth of their communities. The storytelling process validates students' experiences, voices, perspectives, and contributions, including their familial, cultural, and ancestral knowledge.

Children's books offer alternative narratives, expressions, productions, and ways of knowing that are uncommon in an academic setting in higher education, especially outside the disciplines of child development and literature. It is common to study articles, chapters, and books that research children's literature, but it is uncommon for students to engage in the act of creating it. The production of a children's book is itself a form of validation that does not depend on scientific proof and evidence to be real, rigorous, and important. As the books' production does not have to be verified by a bibliography of scholarly work, students are allowed to reimagine the past and envision new ways of being and relating. The focus is on the act of translating, representing, analyzing, imagining, and interpreting their children's stories visually through illustrations. By validating the knowledge and expressions students bring to the classroom, we can disrupt the consumer culture in education, in which students are perceived as merely consumers and not as producers of knowledge.

2. Cultivating Healing-Centered Engagement

Ethnic studies courses are heavy, as we name and unpack white supremacy, genocide, settler colonialism, and racism among other social issues. We examine the manifestation of these traumas historically, systematically, generationally, interpersonally, and internally, but how do we make space to heal from them? I am not convinced that resistance is always the answer. After all, resistance is not always transformational (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Healing is not linear or a singular cookie-cutter process. As I often tell my students, healing can be contradictory, problematic, and messy. There is no one way to heal. I am certain, however, that the classroom provides us space to heal together.²³ Together, we can devise a collective response to heal from

²² Although not exhaustive, an extensive literature has emerged on "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992), "pedagogies of the home" (Delgado Bernal, 2001), and "community cultural wealth" (Yosso, 2005) to challenge deficit perspectives in education that view students' personal and cultural knowledge as a hindrance to their academic success.

²³ Much credit is due here to the transformative work of licensed clinical social worker and therapist, Susana V. Parras, founder of Heal Together Wellness Services, whose recent project, Heal Together's Anti Carceral Care Collective,

collective harm, pain, and oppression. We do not have to embark on a path toward healing alone, in isolation, fear, shame, and hiding. The classroom space provides us with this opportunity.

Shawn Ginwright's (Boost Collaborative, 2018) transformative work on what he terms healing-centered engagement (HEC) offers a holistic approach rooted in five strategies to create safe, nurturing environments that are centered on culture, agency, relationships, meaning, and aspirations. Nimah Gobir (2022) summarizes the five strategies of the HEC model in the infographic (Fig. 1).

The five parts of the HEC framework align with Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan, as it is an asset- and strength-based framework focused on what students and educators contribute rather than focusing merely on what they are missing. Thus, we can shift the perspective from victimhood to being agents of our own well-being and social change. It is a humanizing approach that prefers transformative relationships over the transactional ones that are rewarded by educational institutions. Unlike many other frameworks, it incorporates the role of educators and permits us to check in with ourselves. We are not merely workers and public servants. Educators deserve joy, rest, and the space to reflect and heal (Ginwright, 2019).



Figure 1. Five strategies for developing a school-wide culture of healing
(N. Gobir, 2022. From Mindshift KQED. Creative commons license: [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/))

Contributing to the argument that healing can be found in the voices, stories, and activism of children's literature (see Montañó & Postma-Montañó, 2022), I assert that healing can be found through its creation. The process of creating children's books becomes a healing-engaged platform for students that is exciting, playful, and supportive. Students are given the creative freedom to critically reflect on their wounds and thrive in an academic setting that is supportive of their journey. The classroom space becomes a space of vulnerability to witness and encourage one another in the creative process. When students reflect on the issues and topics that they are most passionate about, it is easy to cultivate a class rooted in genuine excitement and interest. There is no right or wrong topic for a children's book, only what is right for them. Not all students tackle problems in their books, as many affirm and celebrate the beauty that already exists in their culture, community, and relationships. Regardless of the story told, the process of storytelling is a

provides a model of healing using anti-racist and anti-carceral mental health practices.
<https://www.instagram.com/anticarceralcollective/>

creative form of play. Play, after all, is the language of children, and, in an adult classroom, the playful act of creating children's books becomes a healing modality. Furthermore, play is meant to be fun and joyful, which is great for students and educators alike.

3. Shifting beyond Multiculturalism

It is far too easy to fall into the pitfalls of multiculturalism, especially in a project that focuses on children's books. This project challenges the notions of multiculturalism that are often advanced in mainstream discussions of children's books, such as the idea that more representation, diversity, and inclusion of characters of color is the ultimate goal. Similarly, it is not enough to critique the underrepresentation of authors of color without simultaneously critiquing the types of stories that are predominately told and deemed marketable. In ethnic studies, we move beyond the "heroes and holidays" approach rooted in multiculturalism, which stops at the celebration of diversity. Instead, we challenge students to question the dominant narratives told in books, interrogate whose interests are served, and analyze the contexts from which these narratives emerge. They can look at the lack of diverse stories and the underrepresentation of authors of color, critique the publishing industry, and at the same time ask where their own stories fit within that landscape. Is that even the landscape in which they want their stories told? Challenging multiculturalism requires that we also challenge dominant notions of writing, publishing, and success, especially as publishing is *the sine qua non* or marker of success in academia.

In my class, we make space to tackle the stories, issues, and topics that are most important to my students' communities. On the surface, those stories sometimes produce a book that honors the *Día de Muertos* (Day of the Dead), but, when we dig deeper, that particular book made it permissible for a student to grieve the loss of a loved one in my classroom setting. The *process* of creating a children's book is just as valuable as the final product, even when the final product may appear multiculturalist to an outsider looking in. As I push my students to shift beyond multiculturalism in their own work, I am reminded of the popular expression, *You should never judge a book by its cover*.

4. Moving toward Social Justice and Anti-Racism

Instilling a sense of civic responsibility in students through a social justice approach is a core tenet of ethnic studies and one that Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan upholds. The children's books created by my students are essential to their fight against racism and oppression in America, just as are the artists, poets, writers, and cultural content creators who allow us to imagine differently. This project enables students in an ever-changing society to develop tools to critically examine, creatively solve problems, and imagine courageously. In my class, it is not enough to learn about the survival and resistance of Chicanx/Latinx communities; this project enables students to be agents of social change as they civically engage in anti-racism and social justice through the creative power of art and storytelling. Students can explore complex social issues surrounding, for example, gentrification, ableism, and sexism, while sometimes they just want the space to tell a story about self-love, acceptance, beauty, or friendship. The self-expression and representation my students engage in through their children's stories are informed by social and structural critiques and motivated by their aspirations for social change. In this way, the production of a children's book that speaks to their most passionate concerns cultivates their agency and empowers those who may not realize they too have the power to create change.

5. Creating Accessible Tools for Our Communities

Children's books can be accessible literary tools for our communities. Often, students write stories for specific family or community members who may not typically read a class assignment, such as a research paper or essay, but will pick up a children's book. Children's books are not only for children, as adults can and should read them too. Students are excited and proud to share their stories with their loved ones. For example, they have expressed excitement that they can finally produce something in Spanish, as it is the only language in which their parents are literate. Students have expressed that the project was deeply meaningful, as it allowed them to grieve the loss of a loved one or produce something for a younger sibling who struggles with learning differences/disabilities. Students create with their intended audience in mind and ensure that it will be accessible to them. Creating such projects, which are accessible to our communities, is something that I value, because ethnic studies is fundamentally for and by the community. After all, if it is not accessible, is it even revolutionary?

¡Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan! Our Stories Count and Are Telling!

This section presents an overview of the lessons that students engage with in preparing to create their own children's books. They review some of the content as homework, and, at other times, we review the material together in class or through online discussions.

Books as Medicine and Bookmaking as a Political Act

I think a lot of people that ban books do not read the books they ban, or they hear about them and get frightened. They need to understand that books are good medicine, and, if this isn't your prescription, you just put it back on the shelf for someone who needs it. If you don't need it, that's fine. That's why we have libraries with so many prescriptions. You take what you need. (Cisneros, 2023, 01:18–01:39)

I open *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan* with Chicana author and poet Sandra Cisneros, who in an interview discussed the banning of her children's book, *The House on Mango Street* (1991).²⁴ We begin the project when students learn about Arizona House Bill 2281 (2010), which banned ethnic studies along with more than 80 books in the state's public schools, and students learn that *The House on Mango Street* was among the banned books. As Cisneros stated, some people see or hear the themes of her book and, without ever opening it, want it banned. While there is recent legislative support for ethnic studies in California, the historic attack on ethnic studies and the literature that sustains it continues to gain traction nationwide, especially when it pertains to the education of young children.

The rise of more diverse and anti-racist children's books has been met with strong attacks against them. For the past 15 years, book banning has targeted anti-racist books, especially those that explore race, gender identity, and/or sexuality. Each year, the American Library Association surveys the top 10 books removed from library shelves, and books that address racism, policing,

²⁴ *The House on Mango Street* (1991) is a coming-of-age book about a 13-year-old Chicana who grows up in a predominantly Latino neighborhood in Chicago. In a series of vignettes that show her world through her eyes, the book touches on themes of identity, gender, sexuality, racism, patriarchy, social class, and poverty.

and LGBTQIA+ themes have soared over the past five years.²⁵ These concerns were recently echoed in a *Washington Post* investigation of book challenges across 150 school districts nationwide in the 2021–2022 school year (Natanson, 2023). The article describes an overwhelming concern with children's picture books that center on LGBTQ+ characters and storylines, noting that filed expressions of concern primarily used words such as *dangerous*, *grooming*, *reckless*, *racist*, and *lying* to describe the books. Collectively, the nationwide attacks on anti-racist children's literature represent the weaponization of critical race theory and reflect a resurgence in white supremacy; meanwhile, we cannot forget that these attacks are a response to progressive and radical politics, including, in this case, the successful integration of anti-racist literature and ethnic studies curricula in public educational institutions.

Cisneros's articulation of books as medicine reframes the attacks on anti-racist children's literature, characterizing them as an attack not merely on books but also on the well-being of the communities that are most served by them. Cisneros in this way describes the healing power of literature. In a medical setting, when a patient is denied medicine, we call it medical neglect. In an educational setting, however, when we ban anti-racist children's literature, we do not call this educational neglect. What adults may fail to see is that a child's perspective when reading a book is vastly different from that of an adult. Adults are making meaning of books and analyzing them in ways that children simply do not do naturally. We must remember that the intended audience for children's books is, first and foremost, children, not adults. Adults are the ones who sexualize children's stories that highlight LGBTQ+ characters. When we elevate an array of children's books, we are also defending and protecting children's right to literacy, their right to have multiple lenses for viewing the world.

The attack on children's literature comes at a time when, gradually, more diverse children's books are being published, yet the paucity of children's books published in the U.S. that are authored by and are about BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) is alarming. Every year, the Cooperative Children's Book Center [CCBC] (2022), a research library based at the University of Wisconsin, collects data on the number of books published by and about BIPOC. In 2022, U.S. publishers produced a total of 3,173 BIPOC children's books, and only 351 (11%) of those books were written by Latinx authors, and 231 (7%) of those books were *about* Latinx characters. When it comes to racial and ethnic diversity in children's literature, Latinx and Indigenous representation is worse than Asian and Black representation. Even more problematic, these numbers are lower than reported, as a book is counted as "by" if at least one of the primary creators (author or illustrator) is BIPOC. The CCBC website offers an interactive CCBC Diversity Statistics Book Search that can filter for author and illustrator by race. A search filtered for white authors and Latinx illustrators in 2022 yields 87 entries, meaning that the number of 351 books categorized as "by" Latinxs is inaccurate and misleading, as 25% of those books are actually authored by whites. While these data are not representative of all the books released each year, and while there are exceptions in cases in which books include multiple authors, the data offer a sampling of recent trends worth discussing. The CCBC data provide a great tool for students to think critically about data reporting in general, discuss the types of publishing companies, compare and contrast historical trends with current ones, and analyze issues regarding diversity and representation in children's books.

²⁵ The nonprofit American Library Association has tracked book banning since 1990. The extended list of banned books is available at <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10/archive>.

Students in CHST 101 examine the children's book industry, from its content creators to publishers, and question the continued lack of diversity. They explore these issues through their exposure to social media initiatives, such as the websites *We Need Diverse Books*,²⁶ *#DignidadLiteraria*,²⁷ and *#LatinxPitch*.²⁸ Students take it one step further to situate statistical trends within a political and historical context that censors specific BIPOC authors and anti-racist children's books. Instead of simply promoting multicultural books and diversity in general, situating the need for anti-racist children's literature within a political landscape of censorship and underrepresentation enables students to engage in the creation of anti-racist children's books as a political act.

The Power of Storytelling

Students in my CHST 101 course are given a lesson that overviews the common issues in children's books, from the depiction of stereotypical characters to the lack of diversity in storylines that feature Latinx characters, so they are exposed to the overt and subtle forms of racism that appear in children's stories.²⁹ Instrumental to this lesson is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, which addresses the harm of reducing the diverse experiences of an entire racial or cultural group to a singular portrayal or story. Adichie reflects on growing up in Nigeria and reading American and British children's books. The types of books available influenced her worldview, view of self, and even the desires she eventually had as an adult. It was not until she read African authors that her perception of literature transformed: "I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature" (Adichie, 2019, 02:16–02:24). Adichie's exposure to the voices, experiences, and stories of African people opened a world she did not know existed in literature. Adichie shares that, even as an adult, she still struggled with singular stories of places and people. After all, she, like her audience, did not create those singular stories. These single stories are told and retold in the print and digital media to which we are all exposed every day.

Students can discuss the danger of myth-making and singular portrayals in the absence of an array of diverse stories to challenge them or present alternatives. Adichie reminds us that stories are connected to power: "How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are dependent on power" (Adichie, 2019, 09:55–10:03). Students can share their written and verbal reflections on the main points they take away from Adichie's talk with a set of guiding reflection questions I created for them to consider as they begin developing their own stories:

- Who has power, agency, and voice in your story?
- What is the context, history, and setting of your story?
- What is the bigger purpose of your story?

²⁶ This website advocates for changes in the publishing industry and brings attention to the importance of diverse creators and books. <https://diversebooks.org/>

²⁷ Dignidad Literaria is a network of Latinx authors that combats the invisibility of Latinx authors, editors, and executives in the U.S. publishing industry and the dearth of Latinx literature on the shelves of America's bookstores and libraries. <http://dignidadliteraria.com/>

²⁸ LatinxPitch is a kidlit pitching event for creators of children's literature who belong to the Latinx community. <https://latinxpitch.com/>

²⁹ A great resource for students to use in their own assessment of children's literature is "Ten Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Sexism and Racism" (Derman-Sparks & A.B.C. Task Force, 1989).

- Are you creating a story that is culturally authentic and representative?
- Should you be the one to tell this story?
- Does your story reproduce stereotypes or problematic ideas about a specific group of people, cultures, or communities?
- How are you using your creative freedom to create something different and help us imagine new possibilities?

These reflection questions are provided early in the project and are used throughout the books' development. The questions are based on the notion that stories are connected to power. Students have power in creating their story, and the story itself has power.

The guiding questions create space to discuss ethical concerns about the power of storytelling. Just because a student can come up with a great story does not always mean that they should be the one to tell that story. Storytellers should always question their *why* to avoid the exploitation of particular communities to which they do not belong, especially racialized and marginalized communities. This is a great opportunity to connect these guiding questions to prior knowledge of power and privilege derived from the course. A way to mitigate ethical concerns is for students to tap into their own community's cultural wealth as a source of inspiration. This approach draws from students' funds of knowledge, is asset-based, and honors their subjectivities as a strength and resource in the process of storytelling. After all, the best stories are those that are authentic to our lived experiences and stories we know enough about to tell them.

Promoting Early Critical Consciousness and Racial Literacy

Children's books should be age and developmentally appropriate but should also aim to develop early critical consciousness in young readers who are the targeted audience. Since most of my students decide to create picture books, they learn about the types of picture book, the typical word count, and the important role of illustrations in telling the story. I rely heavily on the work of early childhood educator Akiea "Ki" Gross, the founder of Woke Kindergarten.³⁰ Students engage with Ki's woke read-aloud of the book *Saturday* (2022), authored and illustrated by Oge Mora.

In the woke read-aloud of *Saturday*, Ki models the importance of connecting with a story, demonstrating one way that students can cultivate early critical consciousness in their readers. Ki begins the segment by highlighting the importance of making critical connections when we read a book and provides a set of four grounding questions to guide us:

- Have I done this before?
- Have I felt this way before?
- Has this happened to me before?
- Have I heard this before? (Woke Kindergarten, 2022, 02:01-02:14).

These questions are instrumental, as Ki pauses throughout the read-aloud so that readers can make their connections to the story. Since the read-aloud is targeted at children, students are visibly uncomfortable at first, but as the video progresses, they become more engaged with the

³⁰ Woke Kindergarten is a global abolitionist early-childhood ecosystem and visionary creative portal supporting children, families, educators, and organizations in their commitment to abolitionist early education and pro-Black and queer and trans liberation. <https://www.wokekindergarten.org/>

storyteller. For most students, it has been a long time since they experienced a playful and interactive storytime. Ki models how children's books should be read, reminding students that stories are not only to be comprehended but also for making critical connections with them.

Ki offers "thinking moments" throughout the read-aloud so that young readers can pause and reflect to make critical connections. In one thinking moment, Ki offers an opportunity to reflect on why caregivers and parents work so much, using the story as illustration.

Why does Ava's mom have to work so much? Why do they only have one day [Saturday] to do fun things together? Do you feel like that sounds like something fair? ... Unfortunately, we live in a society that runs off capitalism. Can you say capitalism? [pauses] Good. Capitalism is a system where there are people in one class that have to work hard and long for not a lot of money, and, while they're doing all the work or labor, there are people with more power and more money that make money off of them working. (Woke Kindergarten, 2022, 07:45-08:23)

While the book itself does not mention capitalism on any of its pages, the thinking moment allows for the introduction of capitalism as a new vocabulary word that is defined and explained using the story as an example. Ki proves that children can understand capitalism because their lives are already shaped by it. A book that, on the surface, appears to present a fun story about a mother and child who spend Saturday together is a story that offers a sobering critique of capitalism.

Children's books provide a great opportunity to promote early critical consciousness and racial literacy. An age and developmentally appropriate children's book do not have to shy away from exploring complex social issues. There is a widely held sentiment that children are too young to tackle and explore heavy topics in the areas of immigration, family separation, unemployment, loss/death, gender identity, disability, and racial and gender discrimination. The reality is that CHST 101 students have created anti-racist children's books that tackle these topics in creative and profound ways. Additionally, students have created children's books that celebrate joy, culture, beauty, healing, and love and that break away from BIPOC stories that are only about struggle, hardship, or survival. A crucial step in all this is for students to consider who their targeted audience will be and use their creativity to craft a story for their intended audience.

Identifying the Community Cultural Wealth in Children's Books

The goal of this activity is for students to locate community cultural wealth in children's books using Tara Yosso and Rebeca Burciaga's (2016) *Reclaiming Our Histories, Recovering Community Cultural Wealth*, in which the authors "name community cultural wealth as an array of knowledges, skills, abilities, and networks possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression" (p. 1). The authors situate this framework within the tradition of critical race theory, which allows students to situate cultural assets and resources as a challenge to the underpinnings of racism and colonialism. The reading presents students with the six types of cultural capital that form a kaleidoscope of community cultural wealth. The kaleidoscope analogy is a great example, as many students can recall looking into one as children. *What do you remember seeing through the kaleidoscope?* Students are eager to answer that they see geometric shapes that change as the tube is rotated to create beautiful, colorful, intersecting patterns. Students connect this lesson to their prior knowledge of intersectionality, noting that the

different types of capital can intersect, as they are not mutually exclusive. The kaleidoscope effect is created using light and mirrors, which is what students will require to locate the community's cultural wealth in children's books—the students shed light, offer mirroring reflections, and make critical connections.

Students locate the community cultural wealth of a preassigned book given to each group. As the groups engage in a read-aloud of their book, they are asked to keep in mind that they will have to present to the class a summary, two types of cultural capital, and one thing they found unique about the book. For the third request, I ask the students to consider what makes this book different from most books they remember reading as children (i.e., illustrations, language, theme, and/or select pages). As the groups present, they are simultaneously showcasing the book. By the end of the class, this interactive activity has served as an opportunity for students to master the course content while showcasing examples of the types of children's book they can create. Presenting students with the multiple possibilities of what a children's book can look like opens their imaginations to what their books can look like.

The community cultural wealth in children's books makes them “a tool of reclamation—a tool for social justice” (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016, p. 2). When students create their own children's book, therefore, they make a tool for reclamation and social justice as they engage in exploration, empowerment, discovery, celebration, analysis, learning, and (re)affirmation. It is important to note that, while adults can apply a critical race theory lens such as community cultural wealth to a children's book, children themselves are not thinking of the framework as they read the book. Similarly, while we may see a theme of sexuality, gender, race, or social class in a book, the book itself does not explicitly mention those themes. This is the creative ingenuity I encourage students to showcase in their books. This activity is fun for students to do together and prepares them to begin the process of creating their own children's books.

Closing Reflections

When I became a parent, I was confronted with the suppression of my childhood. Simply put, I grew up too fast. Becoming a mother gave me permission to be a kid again and begin the healing journey of my inner child. When I found myself reading children's picture books, engaging in play, and providing for my child what I never had, I was able to begin to heal the little girl that lives within me. Engaging in the act of creating a children's book gives my students an opportunity to tap into their childhood dreams, aspirations, imagination, and desires. As adults, we have found a way to use the community college classroom space and give our inner child something special. I affirm the life and dignity of my students while engaging in storytelling as a healing modality and political act. *Nuestros Cuentos Cuentan* is an offering to our communities. Through this project, we can pay homage, celebrate, remember, discover, explore, unpack, tackle, disrupt, and, most of all, bear witness to one another's humanity. It is my hope that this project can inspire educators to adapt it as their own.

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