

BORDER STORIES: THE IMMIGRATION JOURNEY, SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC
BELONGING, AND PARENTAL DETAINMENT IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE
BOOKS FROM 1998-2018

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
English

Charlotte

2019

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ABSTRACT

CHRISTIAN SILVERS MENDOZA. Multicultural curriculum inclusion, social belonging, and border stories in children's picture books. (Under the direction of DR. MAYA SOCOLOVSKY)

It is imperative for American students of all backgrounds to develop open-minded and respectful cultural awareness through education, empathy, and understanding. Latinx children's books are valuable resources that are beneficial in instilling positive self-esteem and a strong sense of identity within marginalized students through a combination of narrative and visual elements. Through this medium, which can act as metaphorical "windows and doors," children can begin to gain agency and their own powerful voices, which can spark social and political change through authentic awareness and cultural appreciation. Therefore, it is necessary to include these narratives within school curricula to promote academic belongingness within the American classroom. In this thesis, I will discuss the racist and derogatory discourse prevalent throughout American politics, which creates discrimination and bullying within the classroom, and I will be advocating for the mandatory inclusion of culturally responsive material in every United States' classroom, including the use of Latinx picture books to combat this rhetoric.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank Dr. Maya Socolovsky, who has helped and guided me through this project. Her insight and compassionate feedback have been invaluable to me, and I consider myself extremely blessed to have met her. I would also like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Paula Connolly and Dr. Elizabeth Gargano, who have both opened my mind and helped me grow in my knowledge and love of children's literature. I would like to thank my husband, Jose Mendoza, for being my rock through this process and for inspiring me to learn more about the flaws in our immigration system through our own citizenship journey. I also would like to thank Judy and Charles Ray, my heroes and my constant inspirations in life. Lastly, I would like to thank my soul sister, my muse, and my best friend, Brittany Dellinger – for everything.

Always.

This thesis is dedicated to my children – Persephone, Halen, and Winter. You are the three pieces of my heart, my soup snakes, my *raisons d'être* . . . I hope you can always see the beauty in every human and every culture.

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INTRODUCTION

In America, racist discourse is an unfortunate reality and adults and children are constantly exposed to it. Unfortunately, some of these attitudes have found their way into the American classroom, where Hispanic populations make up large percentages of low-income and Title I schools in which racial inclusion and thoughtful awareness over social justice issues may not necessarily be the focus.¹ In addition, the misguided academic paradigm of cultural deficit in school systems can be academically damaging and disadvantageous for certain students. Curriculum expectations and subject matter in K-12 schools often do not take into consideration diversity or promote cultural inclusion, which can be damaging for students who are searching for agency or belongingness, and who are left feeling like outsiders. Currently, only Oregon, Illinois and California have proposed or imposed mandatory statewide ethnic studies (Howard). For more inclusivity, mandatory multicultural educational material should be added into all government funded school curriculums. As part of this culturally responsive education, the inclusion of Latinx narratives and children's books, for example, could begin to combat recent racist rhetoric and promote positive self-esteem in the classroom and academic success for all students living in the United States.

Latinx narratives featuring immigration topics for both children and adults have become more popular within the last two decades. In *Documenting the Undocumented: Latino/a Narratives and Social Justice in the Era of Operation Gatekeeper*, Maria Caminero-Santangelo outlines the reasons behind this increase in the publication of

¹ According to the U.S. Department of Education, a "higher percentage of Hispanic (45%) . . . students attended high-poverty schools than of White students (8%).

Latinx narratives after an unlikely lineup of political and social justice issues sparked fear and hatred in America in the 1990's. She explains that these political incidents (including a conservative need for a separate campaign identity from the Democratic party, an unprecedented immigrant rights protest, and the unfortunate timing of the 9/11 terrorists attacks on New York City) which she describes as a "sketch of roughly two decades of developments in immigration legislation and enforcement, as well as of escalating and vitriolic rhetoric" . . . go "some way toward explaining why Latino/a writers in the United States increasingly turned their attention to the topic of the undocumented" (7). The need for these culturally inclusive and authentic publications is well timed, as racist rhetoric and discriminatory behavior toward people of color in America has risen alarmingly within the last few years, and the immigration process and rights of undocumented individuals in the nation are both so frequently misunderstood.

It is particularly important for American students of all backgrounds to develop open-minded and respectful cultural awareness through education, empathy, and understanding. For all children, basic human needs must be met before they are able to build self-esteem and successfully learn in the classroom. Self-actualization cannot be realized until confidence in one's identity is discovered. For children to build self-esteem, safety and physiological standards must exist as a constant and unfortunately, these standards cannot exist when a child feels like an outsider, or "the other." Therefore, it is necessary to include these narratives within school curriculums to promote academic belongingness within the American classroom. In this thesis, I will discuss the racist and derogatory discourse prevalent throughout American politics, which creates discrimination and bullying within the classroom, and I will be advocating for the

mandatory inclusion of culturally responsive material in every United States' classroom, including the use of Latinx picture books.

Anti-immigration rhetoric and racial discrimination have sadly become part of American culture and have increased drastically under Donald Trump's presidency. Not only that, but his negative opinions on immigrants, refugees, and marginalized populations have infiltrated many parts of the country, including U.S. schools and homes in an unprecedented, intimate communicative fashion. According to Jonathan Todres in his article "The Trump Effect, Children, and the Value of Human Rights Education," "statements by the U.S. president carry presumed authority and are widely publicized and disseminated. Trump's statements have been covered as extensively as any public figure, and his rhetoric has frequently been divisive and demeaning" (Todres 332). It may seem obvious that his statements carry presumed authority, since he is the current purported leader of the country, but never before has a president used social media so casually and conversationally. Not only has his rhetoric been deemed divisive and offensive, but it is delivered largely through social media apps like Twitter, directly from the president's unfiltered mind into the country's classrooms, living rooms, and bedrooms through news outlets and social media applications downloaded on phones and smart TVs. The widespread distribution of Trump's derogatory discourse combined with his influential status as the country's leader make his words and viewpoints on matters like immigration and race more powerful and damaging to our country's children. His discourse unfortunately carries the power to legitimate racist attitudes. This massive exposure and legitimization of discriminatory rhetoric also creates a space in which the leaders and educators in society now have permission to succumb to racist opinions, specifically

towards immigrants, which can be damaging to society and traumatizing to marginalized groups in and out of the classroom.

Todres notes that “President Trump has advanced a worldview in which selected people are devalued based on their religion, race, gender, sexual orientation, or national origin” (332). Hispanic immigrants (adult and child alike) are one such “selected people” that Trump clearly considers to be outsiders, and who are unfairly devalued within American society. Examples of his derogatory worldview of Hispanic immigrants include “his proposed construction of “a great and beautiful wall” at the US-Mexico border, his idea of repatriating 11 million illegal Mexican immigrants, and his constant association of immigration with crime and terrorism have all been considered evidence of [his] overt racism” (Demata 274). Multiple studies and analyses have been conducted using rhetoric from Trump’s presidential speeches and campaign rallies, and these studies have concluded that Trump intentionally and somewhat successfully vilifies immigrants and refugees.

Derogatory language meant to devalue and “other” a selected group is not the only traumatic issue Latinx students are facing in schools. According to Straubhaar et al. in their article ““ They Wouldn’t go to Our School”: Unpacking the Racialization of Latinx Children Through a Civil Rights Lesson in a New South Classroom,” “this corrosive rhetoric has led to a rash of bullying attacks against Latinx students in and out of school, and has further increased racialized divisions in schools” (2). Further research concludes that “after the presidential election of Donald Trump, reports about fear from Latinx populations . . . have increased. [These] reports . . . showed a post-election “Trump Effect” spike in attacks on Latinx students, with bullies mimicking Trump’s

rhetoric” (2), which includes dehumanizing metaphors and violent implications, such as framing migrants as dangerous or threatening. This research goes on to say that “90% of all schools surveyed noted a negative impact on school climate, and anecdotes abounded of racial slurs, derogatory language and negative incidents” (2). These statistics show how discriminatory discourse can encourage verbal and physical bullying, along with discriminatory acts. It is also worth noting that the negative incidents outlined within this study involve forms of racial discrimination by both peers and educators.

While bullying in schools is more commonly reported and associated with peer relationships, just as much damage can be done by educators and teachers who allow or encourage derogatory and racist political rhetoric to guide their perception of Latinx students. One such form of racial discrimination increasingly found in the classroom is the cultural deficit paradigm, which is a harmful and discounted educational theory correlating cultural differences and poor academic achievement and performance among minority students. Trump’s discriminatory discourse strengthens harmful theories like this one, when the *true* damaging culturally determinant attitudes in the classroom are “teacher expectancy responses.” Studies have shown a strong correlation between the *teacher’s expectancy* of the student’s academic success and the student’s actual success. If a teacher treats a minority student as if they are not going to succeed, or do not deserve success based on their documentation or skin color, the student will have a more difficult time succeeding in school.

Teacher expectancy is defined as “the idea that teachers’ beliefs can exert either positive or negative effects on students, [and]. . . these beliefs serve to *maintain* reality and hierarchies where the status quo is enforced” (Dabach et al. 39). And in fact, as

Dabach notes in her article on teacher's expectations and immigrant student's futures, "quantitative research has shown that negative expectancy effects are greatest for minoritized groups – especially Latinos and African Americans" (39). Because this link between teacher belief and student success is so strong, it is imperative for marginalized students to be perceived positively and equally by their teachers for academic and cognitive success and health, regardless of their background or prior achievement in American academia. Fortunately, it seems that "teacher attitudes toward Latinx children and other children of color are malleable, or able to be positively shaped by professional development, and that culturally responsive pedagogies. . . can have a particularly positive effect on teacher attitudes" (Straubhaar et al. 2) and potential biased outlooks. Multicultural education inclusion within a curriculum represents one such pedagogy, specifically the inclusion of children's Latinx narratives in all K-12 classrooms, which can help shape and develop less negative perceived teacher responses and create equity between students of all races.

With the election of Trump came unforeseen devastating and traumatic academic and socioemotional side effects for marginalized students in the American classroom. Todres notes that "while Trump's rhetoric and the violence of his supporters demand an immediate response, there is also a need for broader, long-term strategies that can address hatred, bigotry, and discrimination at their roots" (332). One such immediate response could be the mandatory inclusion of culturally responsive material in all state curriculums, particularly the inclusion of Latinx narratives and picture books to combat the current paradigm of racism within the American classroom. It will benefit students,

teachers, schools, and whole communities and will allow American schools to move one step closer towards being a “rights respecting culture” (2).

Currently, the subject matter included in American school curriculums is state mandated and does not follow any one set of federal guidelines, which means that it is the responsibility of each individual state to include multicultural material. The most comprehensive study of state curricula showed that far less than a quarter of the nation’s states included some form of culturally responsive education in their K-12 curriculum. The specific inclusion of Latinx material within a multicultural curriculum is also particularly important because, as Kurt Bauman notes in his article “School Enrollment of the Hispanic Population: Two Decades of Growth,” “by 2016, Hispanics numbered 57.5 million, making them the largest ethnic or racial minority in the United States.” The impact on schools based on these statistics is staggering, and, “from 1996 to 2016, the number of Hispanic students enrolled in schools, colleges and universities in the United States doubled from 8.8 million to 17.9 million” and that “Hispanic students now make up 22.7 percent of all people enrolled in school” (Bauman).

The inclusion of human rights education is an important element of multicultural education for K-12 curriculums, especially considering the unprecedented and blatant racist political discourse evident in American politics today. Todres notes that “human rights education imparts the idea that all children possess rights and each child is equally worthy. In doing so, it bolsters children’s sense of self-worth and their self-esteem, which can positively influence learning” (335). As with the current negative trickle-down effect of derogatory attitudes towards marginalized populations, instilling these invaluable human rights ethics deep within the hearts and minds of our nation’s children could lead

to academic growth for many. In addition, many Latinx picture books include culturally responsive and social justice lessons, and discuss difficult topics like immigration related trauma, which can spark age appropriate and necessary conversation in American classrooms.

Since schools in the U.S. “admit students every year from different racial and cultural backgrounds, . . . [these] diverse students need an educational system that addresses their needs and facilitate[s] their learning” (Alghamdi 45). An approach that would be useful for state curriculums to adopt would include a combination of the elements of standard multicultural education (the five dimensions of this approach are briefly outlined below) with elements of human rights education to contest current derogatory political discourse to instill academic belongingness in marginalized students and promote future success in the classroom.

The need for a combined multicultural and human rights approach is outlined by Yahya Alghamdi, who believes that “public schools in the US should consider the issue of multiculturalism in order to provide a quality-equity education and a democratic environment including social justice to all students who are less advantaged than their peers in the dominant society” (Alghamdi 45). State curriculums should also consider multiculturalism as a preventative measure to the negative effects created by teacher expectancy response and the cultural deficit paradigm. With the resolution of these perceptual discriminations in the classroom, low scoring students can begin to raise their test scores through an environment of conscious and confident identity that promotes mandatory cultural and social justice awareness.

Multicultural education has multiple dimensions that work off each other and is quite accessible and obtainable in all levels of academia. Alghamdi outlines five internal and external dimensions in culturally responsive education which include: content integration (the dimension on which I will be mainly focusing for the purposes of this thesis), knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure (47). The latter four dimensions are largely conceptual, and the explanations seem to overlap with that of human rights education. The first dimension, content integration, is an easy and imperative first step allowing all classrooms to become more culturally tolerant and fair.

Content integration is defined by “the extent to which educators will use examples and different sources from a variety of cultures in their curriculum” (47). Examples can include cultural history, holiday festivities, and multicultural children’s literature, among many others. According to Alghamdi, the inclusion of these sources “will create an environment of appreciation and respect among diverse students” (47). Content integration can be something as simple as including two Latinx picture books on the student’s reading lists and discussing the cultural implications of the books in class with an honest and respectful conversation. Although scholars agree that implementing a multicultural or human rights focused education approach in all schools would require “an overall school reformation” (Alghamdi 45), I believe that there are small steps the educational community can take, such as simply including multicultural child-appropriate books in all state curriculums. In fact, studies find that “by using culturally and linguistically responsive literature in the classroom, teachers are allowing students to experience these books, in both text and illustration, in a manner that allows them to

‘read their world’” (Alamillo and Arenas 55). G. Gay has also outlined the importance of this phenomenon in *Culturally Responsive Teaching* and defines it as “those early or previous experiences that have shaped that students’ thoughts and ideas about the world, and specifically the knowledge that they possess of their world” (Alamillo and Arenas 55). Latinx picture books are excellent resources useful for children to gain empathy in early academic years, along with the cultural awareness and appreciation which are imperative for socioeconomic growth through a combination of picture and text.

Latinx narratives and picture books have gained increasing popularity and social relevancy despite the devolution of the current western political climate in which “build the wall” is a national slogan and derogatory racial labels are heard from the mouths of our partisan leaders, both in speech and through popular social media outlets. Facing this, children in schools all over the country question whether they belong. Belonging is a fundamental part of gaining an identity and agency during childhood, and the inclusion of immigration topics in Latinx picture books and other multicultural curriculum material creates a sense of belonging within a classroom, a community, and an individual. In her analysis of Latinx picture books, Maya Socolovsky states, “the rhetoric of nation and citizenship has long pervaded children’s texts, which are recognized as culturally, educationally, and socially formative, while ethnic children’s literature in particular shapes and determines children’s discourses of nationhood and difference” (148). Because of the weight these texts carry in shaping our children’s various discourses within their formative years, it is imperative for children and adults, educators and students – both migrant and non-migrant – to learn about, understand, and empathize with the immigration and human equity problems of our flawed system. According to

Todres,” multicultural children’s books offer a “safe, imaginative world in which children can confront and explore challenging real-world issues. Reading itself fosters empathy. Beyond that, numerous books address, explicitly or implicitly, human rights themes” (337). These culturally responsive texts are necessary in classroom settings as part of a multicultural and human rights centered education curriculum to promote inclusivity, academic belongingness, and social justice in our nation’s schools and within students during their socially formative years.

For the purposes of this study, I have researched multicultural inclusion in K-12 school curricula, and my findings suggest this is an area in which more inclusivity is badly needed. I discuss the social and academic consequences of immigration related trauma and the feeling of belongingness in students, and found that through authentic representation in children’s books, personal agency and voice can be acquired. By finding windows and doors in border stories and immigration narratives, by discussing these sensitive and culturally specific traumas in a safe space, and by using testimony to bring their stories to light, children can begin to understand the importance of this issue in the classroom. The authors of the children’s books I analyze in this thesis have all used their stories to create awareness, so that a more inclusive academic atmosphere will be attainable for all children living in the United States.

CHAPTER ONE: SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC BELONGING THROUGH TRAUMA
AND TESTIMONY IN *AMÉRICA IS HER NAME* AND *SEPARATE IS NEVER EQUAL*:
SYLVIA MENDEZ & HER FAMILY'S FIGHT FOR DESEGREGATION

Latinx children's books dealing with immigration and social justice issues are imperative in classroom and home settings for understanding and normalizing immigration topics children are currently facing in America, and to illustrate the paradigm of racism presently in existence, since awareness can spark social change. Recent research into inclusivity within Western society "suggests that feelings of systemic marginalization or exclusion could negatively affect Latinx youth's mental health and socioemotional development" (Wray-Lake et al. 194). Additionally, "accumulated exposure to discrimination contributes to higher levels of stress, which puts Latinx adolescents at increased risk for mental health difficulties such as lower self-esteem, more depressive symptoms, higher levels of stress, and increased substance use" (195). These negative effects seen in children and adolescents in American schools caused by wide spread prejudice and discrimination are an unfortunate reality that desperately seeks a solution before getting worse, one that may be found in normalizing immigration related trauma through multicultural immersion and inclusion, specifically in academic settings.

Bringing marginalized literature into the classroom and allowing children to empathize and gain understanding of a potentially unfamiliar topic is essential for social change to take place. The Latinx picture books that deal with immigration issues exist as a genre of their own, discussing heavy and often traumatic topics. Like the trauma often featured in Latinx immigration narratives for children, many students living in America have gone through or are currently going through immigration related situations

themselves and can relate to the specific type of trauma often found within this genre. Although sometimes emotionally difficult to read and discuss, culturally responsive and honest representation of these immigration issues in picture books fosters empathy and awareness in children and a safe space for open discourse, which is badly needed in Western society.

A common and important topic explored in Latinx picture books concerning immigration issues is that of trauma, both existential and personal (sometimes referred to here as social trauma). These traumas can be experienced by individuals and by groups, the latter of which is referred to in this chapter as collective trauma. Often within these specific texts, examples of both individual and collective trauma are depicted individually and within a group (often a family unit) and the characters frequently must overcome their trauma in a search for agency and belonging, and for social change to happen. In this chapter, I will analyze the 1998 Latinx picture book, *América Is Her Name*, written by Luis J. Rodríguez and illustrated by Carlos Vásquez, as well as the 2014 picture book, *Separate is Never Equal*, written and illustrated by Duncan Tonatiuh. In these books, the use of illustrations, textual elements, and linguistic features for a child audience all set immigration themed Latinx children's books apart as an important genre. Here, I will show the collective and individual traumas that the main characters, América and Sylva face, along with the collective traumas their families face and overcome, as their different immigration journeys lead them to agency and personal belongingness.

It is important to note that picture books are unique in that they cannot be fully analyzed or understood without studying both the visual and textual elements both together and separately. In fact, according to Perry Nodelman, author of *Words About*

Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books, “because the words and pictures in picture books both define and amplify each other, neither is as open-ended as either would be on its own” (viii). In this analysis, I will explore how each author and illustrator portrays difficult immigration related topics in a way that can help children both learn and truly understand.

Existential Trauma and Belongingness

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth explains that “the story of trauma as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality. . . rather attests to its endless impact on a life” (7). Indeed, in western culture, “the “unauthorized” journey north along with accompanying issues of. . . the existential trauma of being “illegal” became the focus of a flurry of books published in the 1990s and early 2000s” (Caminero-Santangelo 7). In fact, Ngai notes in her book, *Impossible Subjects*, “that illegal immigrants are a caste group that is categorically excluded from the national community. In contemporary political language, they live “in the shadows” and can never embark on the “path to citizenship” (xxiii). Exclusion from a group can be traumatic, especially if one feels like “the other” in their own home. The existential trauma of being “illegal” is not something children (whether they have documentation or not) should have to experience. Yet they are experiencing it, every day. Along with this existential trauma caused by national and societal exclusion, personal trauma is often experienced due to a lack of inclusion in a social setting, and often manifests as social unbelonging.

Examples of both existential and personal trauma can be found in Luis J. Rodríguez’s *América Is Her Name*. This picture book tells the story of nine-year-old

América Solis, a poetic migrant from Oaxaca, Mexico, living in the Pilsen Barrio of Chicago. The book opens with América, a smiling girl who appears to be deep in thought amid brightly colored and abstract, dreamlike backgrounds reminiscent of her past in Oaxaca. Her story is one that clearly illustrates immigration related trauma (collective and individual). For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the traumas América faces, namely, the essential question of identity, and the invisible implications that go along with the word “illegal,” and how the current political rhetoric has shifted that word to mean something else entirely. I will also explore how América gains agency through literacy, as well as existential and personal belongingness.

As Caminero-Santangelo discusses in *Documenting the Undocumented: Latino/a Narratives and Social Justice in the Era of Operation Gatekeeper*, “the rhetoric of the “illegal alien” ensures that the unauthorized migrant is seen as . . . *essentially* – rather than just incidentally or temporally – not belonging in the nation” (9). From not belonging to identity loss, “in Trump’s . . . narrative, the “illegal” in “illegal immigrant” or “illegal immigration” is a premodifier which has become a constitutive element of the identity of the migrant” (Demata 291). This is a linguistic example of “othering” and is a small and powerful tool that unfortunately can be and often is used to diminish the sense of belonging in a character and an individual in life. In *América Is Her Name*, after she overhears her teachers whispering about her undocumented status, and after she hears her ESL teacher say, “she’s an illegal” to another teacher, América wonders “how can a girl called América not belong in America?” (Rodríguez). According to Mary Seeman in her article “Name and Identity,” “identity, although complex, can be encoded in a name. The name bears the stamp of the namers’ traditions and their hopes for the child. The infant’s

characteristics influence the choice to some degree, and, to a degree, a name affects the person who bears it” (136). So, although América’s name suggests belongingness within the nation, her status as “illegal” attempts to negate this. Caminero-Santangelo notes that “the status of being “illegal” drastically limits the power of the undocumented to “speak for themselves” and *make themselves* heard in American popular discourse” (10).

Although América clearly has difficulty finding the power to speak for herself when she chooses not to respond to her teachers’ painful and racist remarks, she does question the idea of belongingness and her own name internally, which leads her to an eventual understanding of her identity.

Difficult themes like these are commonly explored within this genre of literature, and often are partially resolved through the character’s journey navigating through trauma, healing, and gaining agency (often with the help of artistic production). As Socolovsky notes, “the visual and verbal texts of [Latinx narratives] document migrant citizenship and belonging by demonstrating and encouraging the acquisition of literacy through multiliterate experiences as their protagonists continually renegotiate their own relationship to reading and writing” (149). In addition to the existential trauma surrounding her identity, América still must face the separate and personal trauma of social unbelongingness, something to which many students can relate. Throughout *América Is Her Name*, América grapples with not belonging, which is evident from the beginning of the story when the reader learns “she is in a strange place she can’t even pronounce” (Rodríguez). Tellhed et al. define social belongingness as “the perception of social connectedness in groups” (88). They note that belonging “has been recognized as a fundamental human need, underlying much of our psychological function” (88). Without

that basic and fundamental need being met, América is unable to fully obtain agency, and is actively living trauma through the passing of time. Evidence of this trauma is available through América's expressions and body language. Though she is smiling, her arms are crossed tightly against her chest, creating a slight barrier and distance between herself and the reader. And though she is nine, her face and body seem exaggeratedly older and more mature, suggesting that events may have already transpired which mentally forced América to grow up quickly.

Duncan Tonatiuh's picture book, *Separate is Never Equal*, is another example of a Latinx narrative depicting existential and explicit trauma, and one that illustrates and narrates Sylvia Mendez and her family's fight against segregation and discrimination seven years before "the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregated schools in the entire country (36). Like in *América Is Her Name*, the opening scene in *Separate is Never Equal* is a traumatic one, immediately showing and telling the reader that Sylvia feels as if she does not belong, and for good reason. A group of light (and some slightly darker) skinned children are crowded around Sylvia in a school hallway, whose head is down and whose shoulders are slumped. A little boy angrily points a finger at her and says, "Go back to the Mexican school! You don't belong here!" (2). Sylvia's eyes are filled with tears as she walks through the hall, clutching her books tightly against her body. Tonatiuh's illustrations are realistic and digital. Although Sylvia's outfit and hair are no different than the other children, the reader's eyes are immediately drawn to her because of her posture and facial expression. While all the other children have their heads held high and their chins slightly lifted, Sylvia's eyes are downcast, and she is crying. The only physical difference between Sylvia and the other children in the

illustration is that Sylvia's skin is a slightly darker brown than the child beside her (whose hair is black like hers), and the shape of her eyes, which makes her stand out. It is clear from this opening page's illustrations that Sylvia is struggling with the personal trauma of not belonging, in the school and even in the nation. With this lack of belongingness, Sylvia is unable to express herself. In fact, "for the rest of the day, Sylvia did not speak or introduce herself in her classes (3). Not belonging and a loss of voice are thematic elements within these two narratives and are relatable ones for children in schools, issues that affect not only América and Sylvia, but their families as well, creating a shared or collective trauma that has built up over time.

In *América Is Her Name*, after school one afternoon, América hears her mother and father fighting, and her mother describes to her family the derogatory and traumatic incident she experienced during the day: "I was called a 'wetback' at the market today. No matter what we do – we don't belong" (Rodríguez). Undoubtedly, the subject of belonging is one with which the entire Soliz family struggles, creating a collective trauma. Because of these struggles, América has lost some of her sense of identity as well. Rodríguez focuses on the loss of voice as an important part of her narrative: "América used to talk all the time . . . She sang to the morning. She recited the many poems taught her since she was a baby. She had a voice – strong, open and free. Somehow, in Chicago, she has lost this voice" (Rodríguez). América's loss of voice and her struggle to belong stems from the confusion of an undocumented life, primarily because of the way others treat her based on her status as an "illegal" immigrant and the feeling she has of not belonging. Her peers do not see her as one of their own and treat her as an outcast; therefore, she feels like an outcast. Later in the book, a guest speaker

arrives to talk to América's class. Mr. Aponte, a visiting poet from Puerto Rico, tells the class, "when you use words to share feelings with somebody else, you are a poet, and poets belong to the whole world" (Rodríguez). América finally realizes that through her voice and her own poetry, belonging can be hers because "a poet, América knows, belongs everywhere" (Rodríguez). This moment is critical in the narrative because it is the moment in which América gains agency as well as existential and personal belongingness. Although América's family does not gain citizenship in the narrative, América's poetry is in itself a kind of documentation. Although it will not grant her citizenship, it does create legitimacy and personal belongingness. As América gains agency through her own self-actualization, she can somewhat overcome the existential trauma associated with her citizenship status.

In *Separate is Never Equal*, Sylvia's mother, father, and brothers also experience collective familial trauma. After the opening scene showing Sylvia crying in the hallway, her mother reminds her how far their family has come. The narrative flashes back to three years earlier, when the Mendez children were forced to attend a separate school for Mexican children, where they were required to eat their lunch outside on the ground. Although Sylvia was already an American citizen (her father had taken the steps to become a U.S. citizen himself and her mother was from Puerto Rico) and could speak perfect English, the Mendez children were segregated from the white children because of their skin color. At first, Sylvia did not understand why she was unable to attend the same school her cousins (of Mexican and French descent) attended. In the flashback, Sylvia looks down at her body with a frown on her face, separated from her two lighter skinned cousins by the gutter of the page. She looked at "her own hands and bare arms. She

wondered, *Is it because we have brown skin and thick black hair and our last name is Mendez?* (10). In this moment, Sylvia questions her identity and experiences social unbelongingness when she seems to understand that her coloring has set her apart from other children, a realization that takes her father much longer to grasp. This existential trauma quickly turns into a more physical type of trauma in the narrative when the reader sees the conditions at the “Mexican School.” The “Mexican School” that Sylvia and her brothers were required to attend was surrounded by an electrified fence, and the “halls were not spacious or clean” (15).

Tonatiuh’s illustration shows the Mexican children sitting on the ground with flies buzzing around their hair and sandwiches in their hands, and cow feces right on the other side of the fence. None of the children are smiling (15). None of the Mendez family expected the children to be sent to a separate school and Mr. Mendez could not understand why, even though his daughter suspected it was racial discrimination from the start, suggesting wisdom and social understanding beyond her years. However, the illustrations show that he was determined not to allow his children to be separated and discriminated against by any school system, no matter the country. He went around and collected signatures for a petition and eventually hired a lawyer, David Marcus, who took the case to court and filed a lawsuit on March 2, 1945 (23). Two years later, on April 15, 1947, “the judges in the Court of Appeals in San Francisco ruled in favor of the Mendez family” (33), allowing Sylvia and her brothers to join the public school with their cousins. After the court verdict was reached, the flashback in the book ends, and the reader is thrust back into the present with Sylvia at the public school.

After the flashback in the narrative, when Sylvia's mother finishes reminding her of all they went through to make true social change in America, Sylvia visibly changes in the illustration. Through the resolution of this collective familial trauma and judicial victory, Sylvia has gained agency and a stronger sense of identity. At the public school, Sylvia swings with a blonde haired, light skinned little girl and they are both smiling. Although the children have different physical appearances (skin and hair color, as well as eye shape), their posture now matches. Sylvia's head is held high and her chin is in the air. She is visibly happy, more secure in her identity and her sense of social belonging.

Explicit Trauma Through Visual and Textual Analysis

In addition to the collective traumas surrounding their identity and their families' desire to belong, América and Sylvia's narratives both explore individual traumas made explicit through specific texts and illustrations that need to be closely interpreted – a violent criminal shooting, in América's case, something to which many American students can certainly relate. This incident is graphically depicted for a child audience, but serious issues like these open a space in homes and classrooms for honest conversation that is important to have.

In the illustration, while América stands to the left of the two-page spread, with the gutter of the page between her and the shooter, she does not seem to be in immediate danger. However, her posture, along with her hands clasped over her mouth, suggest shock and terror; and, while witnessing this traumatic incident, América drops her paper, signifying a temporary loss of voice, which is common in those suffering from post-traumatic illnesses.

In the right-hand image of the spread, the tension between the gunman and the potential victims is obvious, and the threat of danger is clear and present for the reader. As Molly Bang explains in her illuminating analysis on illustrations, “there is more tension in [a] picture because the objects are “on edge” at the two poles of the page, separated from each other by the vast, diagonal empty space cutting through the center. . . associated and drawn together by color” (110). Bang illustrates this point more clearly by creating two figures, a small one on a ledge, and a far larger, more sinister creature looming from the bottom of the page. In the first image, Bang shows the two creatures face to face with very little space between them. It is jarring, but not necessarily frightening. She notes, “a threat doesn’t feel so scary when it’s right next to the victim, because there is no time for the victim to move before it gets devoured – and no time for us to be scared” (108). However, in the second image, Bang uses the exact same two figures with the exact same expressions to model how “wide space can create tension between divided objects” (110), as is the case with the shooter and victims depicted within this traumatic scene.

This time, instead of being face to face, the characters are spaced on opposite ends of the page. The effect on the page is a simple one, but its effect on the reader is profound. It is much, much more frightening. Bang notes, “when the attacker and victim are spaced far apart, I, identifying with the victim, have more time to be scared. There are at least two seconds now before I’ll be attacked, rather than the finest split second that I had before” (110). As an illustrator, Vásquez employs this same tension with the shooter and the running victims. Placed on opposite sides of the page with a large area of blank

diagonal space in between the images, the tension has increased tenfold, and the threat of the traumatic incident and the gunman seem more menacing to the reader.

More ways Vásquez conveys relatable trauma through this illustration are with color, shape, and emotion. The bright yellow and orange background on the page expresses instant alarm, as do the emotionally expressive faces of the victims running from the shooter. Not only do the colors bring the two images together and signify tension for the reader, so too do the background shapes behind the two images. The people running away are isolated near the top of the page in a triangle shape, and the background behind the shooter (near the bottom left of the page beside the gutter) has a triangle cutout. The missing space forces the reader's eyes to move between the gunman and victims, following the trajectory of an unseen bullet. Furthermore, in this example of explicit trauma, the two images are positioned diagonally on the page. This is significant because, according to Bang, "diagonal shapes are dynamic because they imply motion or tension (58). The diagonal positioning creates tension and movement within the picture, and the shapes and color force the incident to stand out in the minds of the readers as a traumatic one. Long after the gunman has gone from the page, the solemn tone remains in the mind of the reader like an aftertaste, as trauma often does.

In contrast, one of the most explicit illustrated traumas in Tonatiuh's *Separate is Never Equal* does not depict a traumatic violent action like the shooting portrayed in América's story, but rather illustrates a segregated public pool as part of Sylvia's family's flashback. The last straw before Mr. Mendez decided to hire an attorney to represent his family against the segregated school was when he found out that "not only were schools segregated but also other public places as well, such as pools, parks, and movie theaters"

(18). The illustration of this segregated pool space depicts the trauma of discrimination based on skin color and nationality. Almost all the action takes place on the right side of the spread. Tonatiuh's digital illustrations are especially interesting to analyze, because each digitally created image is filled with a photo-realistic pattern. So, although the children swimming in the pool are cartoonish, their hair is filled with photo-realistic pictures of different hair patterns. Tonatiuh employs this method in many of his illustrated books. He often uses real photos of denim to fill in the character's drawn jeans, or (in this instance) he uses a photo of water for the filled illustration of the pool, giving it a more realistic appearance and a unique look using the mixed mediums (19).

At first glance, the image seems to be a happy one. The light skinned children swimming in this photo-realistic pool seem full of delight and laughter and are obviously having a good time. The boys in the illustration have their hands thrown into the air, with wide grins and opened mouths, and the girls sit on the edge of the pool with their feet dangling and small smiles on their faces. All their chins are lifted, and self-confidence is portrayed through their expression and action. For all intents and purposes, these children are having a great time in the pool. Although this fun, seemingly light-hearted scene fills up almost all of the space on the page, the reader's eyes are drawn quickly to the top of illustration, where there is a smaller section portraying a gate (which looks very similar to cell bars), and three children standing behind the bars. These three children have darker skin and hair than the children in the pool, and it becomes immediately evident to the reader that these children are not allowed to swim in the public pool, or even enter the gates. Everything about these children suggests a deep sadness: heads pointing toward the

ground, eyes downcast, and especially the fact that they are all three grasping the gate (bars) with both hands, as if they are locked in a cell.

Tonatiuh's illustrated characters in this book are shown in profile, but none of the light skinned children in the pool seem to have any concerns about the darker skinned children who are left out and unwelcome. They are looking at each other and ignoring the children behind them. As mentioned previously, the children who are behind the bars and who have darker skin and hair have a different eye shape than the children with lighter skin and hair. While the Mexican children have teardrop shaped eyes, the light skinned children in the book (in the pool as well as in the hallways and playgrounds at Sylvia's school) have eyes shaped like half-moons. This is important to note because the eye shape creates a dynamic contrast in facial emotion between the groups of children, separating the two groups and giving the light skinned children a more aloof appearance, while allowing the reader to identify more with the teardrop shaped eyes belonging to the characters in the book with darker skin. In Bang's picture book analysis, she notes that round shapes seem more "huggable and stable" (9). The use of a more rounded eye in the depiction of the Mexican children allow the reader to identify and empathize more closely with them, and relate to the trauma they are experiencing, even though they take up much less space on the page.

A small part of the pool seeps across the gutter and into the left page of the spread, where there are no children swimming or watching. Instead, there is a solemn sign posted, reading in capital letters, "NO DOGS OR MEXICANS ALLOWED." The word "or" is much smaller than the other words on the sign, and in fact, the word "MEXICANS" is in a larger font size than even the word "DOGS," bringing the reader's

attention to it (18), along with the reader's realization that signs like that really existed and humans were truly equated to dogs because of their skin color. Illustrations like these can help children process harsh and raw realities, which is an important skill in adulthood. The trauma depicted in this scene can also make children realize that this was an unfortunate and very real part of our country's history, and only by remembering and progressing toward a more inclusive future can we prevent the nation from repeating its past mistakes.

This discriminatory scene of the children in the pool, or the violent traumatic incident like the shooting in *América Is Her Name*, depicted in the pages of a children's book, represent an existential trauma such as the lack of social belongingness, or the question of identity based on documentation. Through pictorial representations like these, of individual and collective trauma within this genre of Latinx children's books, cultural awareness is realized. Books like these can clearly shine light on important social justice issues the entire country is facing. This revelation of self-worth through resolved collective trauma, which is also a reoccurring topic within certain Latinx children's literature, will hopefully be mirrored within society as more culturally sensitive academic atmospheres and classroom materials emerge.

Authenticity in Linguistic Representation and Visual Analysis

An additional aspect of Latinx children's literature that is important to consider and in which the significance must not go unnoticed by the reader is authenticity in the text and within the included illustrations and multimodal functions. Authenticity is one of the most important factors when discussing multicultural education materials, because the

inclusion of inauthentic material can easily skew or make a mockery of the culture it portrays if not created and presented in a respectful way. In the illustrations and in the text within this genre of children's literature, the authenticity is made explicit through unique bilingual features such as code switching and visual cultural representation.

Code switching in this context refers to the careful and intentional shift from English to Spanish that is commonly found in Latinx children's literature. As an evolution to the dated system of giving the English definition to Spanish words in Latinx literature, code switching helps preserve authenticity in texts, and makes for less interrupted reading. In their article "The Use of Spanish in Latino Children's Literature in English: What Makes for Cultural Authenticity," Barrera and Quiroa note that "in the fictional narratives that make up the bulk of Latino children's literature, Spanish words and phrases hold considerable potential for enhancing the realism and cultural authenticity of English-based text" (Barrera and Quiroa 247). In a study conducted by Alamillo with exclusively bilingual students as participants, it was found that most of them had friends or family at home who used code switching in their personal lives (Alamillo and Arenas 56). According to the results of their study, "the language used in Chicano children's literature represents the linguistic diversity in Chicano homes, and . . . presents authentic portrayals of the Chicano experiences in the United States" (Alamillo and Arenas 56). Tonatiuh employs this method often within *Separate Is Never Equal*. An example of code switching within this particular text is when Sylvia's mother is reminding her why they fought for equality. "Sylvia," said her mother. "*¿No sabes que por eso luchamos?*" "Don't you know that is why we fought?" Code switching can certainly be educational and beneficial to children outside of the culture who do not speak

Spanish and who are interested in learning more of the language. However, for children who already speak the language and know the cultural representations depicted, code switching can become problematic, as the change to italicized letters could be considered “othering” and inauthentic, and part of the tension of having multiple audiences.

Additionally, Barrera and Quiroa note that authors of bilingual literature “must strike a fine balance of sorts in the text, providing the monolingual reader with the necessary information to discern the meaning of [potentially] unfamiliar Spanish terms while holding to a minimum of information that might be unnecessary or redundant for the bilingual reader” (249). Essentially, the author is tasked with creating an accessible and authentic text for more than one group to enjoy. (Barrera and Quiroa 250). In addition to Tonatiuh’s use of code switching within the narrative, he employs another interesting linguistic feature within the text: the use of a glossary for English terminology (mostly pertaining to immigration court issues) that children, native English speakers and non-native English speakers alike can use to find the meaning of words they may not understand (38).

Because these texts represent authentic culturally specific scenarios and “the use of literary code switching . . . validates the bilingualism existing in the homes of Chicano students . . . [and] represents authentic language practices” (Alamillo and Arenas 56), the genre specific linguistic elements found within Latinx texts are valuable resources to add to a multicultural and human rights-based education curriculum, and allow children to fully understand immigration related traumas, even if they have not experienced them first hand.

Testimony, Agency & Belonging, and Academic Achievement in the Classroom

Whether the traumas experienced are direct and made explicit through the text or illustrations, or whether the trauma is collective, familial, and building slowly through the passing of time, the picture books *América Is Her Name* and *Separate is Never Equal* both highlight common traumatic topics found within the genre of immigration related Latinx literature. More importantly, they both show how agency is gained and belongingness is acquired. Only through the realization of her poetic gifts and the power of the written and spoken word can América's story shift from that of trauma to that of a testimony. Similarly, it was the trauma and discrimination that Mr. Mendez's family endured that compelled him to use his voice and petition for change. The change he and his family made in our country is truly a testimony to what can be accomplished if enough voices are heard. According to Caminero-Santangelo, "testimony marks a transition from being subjected to the violence of social catastrophe to being the subject (author, narrator) of the history of that catastrophe – from witnessing to bearing witness" (22).

In América's story, her testimony is revealed through literacy. Although the reader is never shown the words América writes, and the text does not reveal the words América says in her poetry, it is made clear through the illustrations that her poetry *is* her testimony; she becomes the author of her own history (from Oaxaca to America) and bears witness to her family and the world, changing them and her own mindset in the process, and gaining a strong sense of identity and belonging. Not only does América gain agency through her words, she also bears witness to others. Her mother begins writing about her life as well and begins to preserve her own cultural identity. Even her

brothers feel encouraged to join in. Eventually, even her father accepts and commends América for embracing who she truly is – a poet who belongs.

As noted, early in the book América often has her arms crossed in front of her body, creating a slightly uncomfortable relationship between reader and protagonist. América seems (deservedly) distrustful. However, when she is with her paper and pencil, magic seems to happen within the illustrations, showing the power coming from within. The sea erupts from her paper; dark blue waves crash against each other in her imagination while the moon winks down. Animals dance in the air, conjured seemingly out of nowhere. Lush mountains stand tall and stories are woven across the page, indicating her natural linguistic abilities and gifts as a poet, whose art transcends cultural boundaries. Interestingly, the surface upon which the paper sits while América is writing is green in every instance. Similarly, Vásquez's beautiful swirling illustrations that represent América's poetry are heavily saturated in green as well. Perry Nodelman notes that green is "traditionally the color of growth and fertility" (61). América's growth as a poet and as a person are represented in the imaginative illustrations that live in her words. Through the difficulties of life as an undocumented student, América's narrative shows that true agency and social belongingness stems from within and begins from a place of empathy and the understanding that all human beings are equal.

In conclusion, Latinx children's books are valuable resources that are beneficial in instilling positive self-esteem and a strong sense of identity within marginalized students through a combination of narrative and visual elements. According to Alamillo and Arenas, "the utilization of such books will help children develop linguistically, cognitively, and academically, and can potentially be used to build awareness . . . [and]

break down stereotypes in the classroom [to] build acceptance for all groups” (61). While América’s testimony is represented through her ability to overcome racial discrimination and trauma using poetry and words as a successful means of agency and representation, students can also begin to overcome their own traumas and deliver their own testimonies using a more inclusive multicultural and human rights educational curriculum. And through Sylvia’s story and her willingness to speak in court about the flaws within the education system in America, children can learn that true social change happens through a collection of voices not being afraid to speak out. Jonathan Todres states that “by empowering children to stand up for their own rights and to speak out when the rights of others are threatened, human rights education helps foster a community that cares about and fulfills the rights of all individuals” (335).

Latinx children’s books are a necessary form of children’s literature, often depicting human rights issues in an age appropriate and sensitive way and are essential in creating a sense of inclusion in the classroom, and perhaps answering questions that children and adults were not aware they had. Many children today may even *need* these inclusive texts (that are so different from traditional western children’s books) to find their own sense of belonging. There are so many children in America today who are sitting silently, dealing with the trauma of their own undocumented status, wondering how to fit in. Because of recent derogatory discourse and discrimination in American politics and culture, there are children who are scared to tell their friends about their cultural identity for fear of prejudice. There are children who have lost their parents through deportation and are attempting to make it through the day.

We owe these children a more comprehensive understanding of their plight and a more decisive plan of action for kindness and empathy to ensure all children living in the United States feel like they belong. Socolovsky states that texts such as this one, “show multiliteracy as a politically significant strategy for the entire community, one that can counter prejudice, stabilize identity, and forge belonging and can thus serve as an apt “reading” experience for validating and recognizing migrant life” (149). The psychological, social, and ethical implications created by Latinx children’s books documenting immigration issues through picture and text illustrate the clear need for a multicultural human rights inclusion in American education. Through this education, students may begin to understand endured cultural trauma and how important it is to stand up for your fellow students, regardless of race or status. These texts allow students to become authors of their own story, realizing the power of words and a strong cultural identity, and using them to make a positive social impact. If every child found the power in their own voice, imagine how incredible our nation could be.

CHAPTER TWO: VOICE AND POWER: EXPLORING THE GIRL HERO
RESCUE NARRATIVE IN *MAMA'S NIGHTINGALE: A STORY OF IMMIGRATION
AND SEPARATION* AND *SUPER CILANTRO GIRL*

America is often referred to as “the melting pot” of cultures. Indeed, most American homes and classrooms are diverse spaces, where people with different cultural backgrounds and identities come together. It is important for all individuals to be able to share and take pride in their heritage, as well as bring to light serious issues like racism and cultural “othering.” It is through dialogue and human interaction that social progress and acceptance is created. Culturally responsive material respectfully conveys differences within cultures, allowing spaces to open for dialogue and inclusion. More specifically, culturally responsive picture books focusing on immigration issues often depict unique situations and traumas that some American children may initially find difficult to identify with, as many may not have experienced these issues themselves.

Edwidge Danticat’s picture book, *Mama’s Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation*, and Juan Felipe Herrera’s *Super Cilantro Girl* are two such multicultural stories that present serious topics like parental separation and incarceration in an age appropriate way for children. These books help children gain a true, empathic understanding of important and difficult issues through text and illustration. According to Katharine Smith in her article “Introduction: The Landscape of Ethnic American Children’s Literature,” “children’s literature allows readers a means to reconceptualize their relationship to ethnic and national identities. Telling stories to a young audience becomes a conduit for social and political revolution” (3). In this vein, through their stories that are aimed at a young target audience, both Danticat and Herrera have created

powerful and impactful works of fiction and want to bring awareness and eventually a positive change into the nation's attitude toward immigration and human rights.

Both picture books (and many other culturally responsive narratives) educate children and introduce them to these real-life concepts through images and text for them to question and decide for themselves what is right in a country where *right* is sometimes different from lawful. Both picture books have also been used with success in the classroom and lesson plans for each have made a cultural impact on students across the nation.² In this chapter, I will analyze the two female rescue journeys through both textual and visual lenses to discover the importance of narratives like these – children on a mission to save their parents. While Saya's story in *Mama's Nightingale* lucidly depicts the power of voice and the journey to realized agency, Esmeralda's adventure in *Super Cilantro Girl* embraces the lesser known girl superhero narrative, allowing young girls to role play and explore complicated issues along with discovering their own "superpowers" and agency. Both narratives have the power to inspire readers to find their own voice and agency and act as a catalyst for true social change.

Voice and Power: Parental Incarceration and Separation in *Mama's Nightingale* and *Super Cilantro Girl*

Edwidge Danticat's picture book, *Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation*, vividly and realistically illustrates the account of Saya and her parents, and their journey through forced parental separation. Although this book is not a Latinx narrative, it is still a border story that specifically focuses on the parental incarceration

² Links to some of these lesson plans appear before the works cited page.

experience of immigration detainment, and importantly, often depicts it through unfiltered, lucid illustrations. As the story begins, Saya's mother has been imprisoned and is incarcerated, awaiting a decision from the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE). For too many children in America, parental incarceration accompanied by the threat of their parent's possible deportation is an unfortunate reality. According to Joanna Dreby, author of "U.S. Immigration Policy and Family Separation: The Consequences for Children's Well-Being," data reveals that "in the United States, the government has forcibly removed a record high of 1.06 million immigrants from this country, nearly 400,000 each year since 2009, many of whom are the parents of U.S. born citizen children" (245). Saya's emotional journey in *Mama's Nightingale* ultimately raises awareness of flaws within the immigration system in the United States, and through text and pictures illustrates the correlation between parental separation and mental health issues in children, in addition to showing the powerful impact a single child's actions and voice can bring to the world.

This book is illustrated by Leslie Staub with vivid, swirling oil paints, bringing a whimsical and magical quality into the story, making it visually enjoyable for children. The whimsy in the images also sometimes softens the trauma in the narrative – making it less shocking and more emotionally accessible for children. Perry Nodelman notes that "there is a fairly obvious connection between the pure sensual pleasure offered by brightly colored pictures and the tolerance for and delight in the innocent joys of childhood" (3). Along with the vivid and highly saturated images invoking Haitian folk art, nature is beautifully depicted throughout the peaceful scenes and in Saya's dreams, often demonstrated by renditions of nightingales, trees, flowers, and celestial illustrations

like the moon and stars. Emotion is clearly conveyed through the character's body language and facial expressions, allowing the reader to understand when Saya and her parents are feeling happy, or when they are feeling sad.

In Saya's story, the images are often childlike and colorful, almost comforting to a child audience – while the text deals with a lot of heavy material in a very realistic, adult way. Though Saya can dream and use her imagination to listen and create stories of her own, the beautiful magic and color found within the images is a contrast to the (sometimes harsh) material it opens for discussion. The story takes the reader through a courtroom and a detention center cell and boldly discusses political implications (as with the case of Saya's father's ignored pleas) of the negative attitude toward documented *and* undocumented migrants. Childlike, accessible illustrations combined with serious subject matter is one way that children's books can successfully convey human rights issues and help children make decisions of their own, and it is employed successfully here in *Mama's Nightingale*.

On the opening page of the book, Saya is smiling as she listens to her mother's prerecorded voice on the answering machine after her father has fallen asleep. Her mother's voice, and perhaps some of her spirit is swirling around the room in vivid blue. Not only can Saya hear her mother's voice; it looks as if she could reach out and touch it. This swirling physical representation of Saya's mother voice is bright and colorful, filling the room and the reader with peace. However, though she is smiling, Saya is clutching her stuffed monkey worriedly in one hand and a photo of her mother in the other hand. Throughout the book Saya holds her stuffed monkey (who wears a diaper) in a nurturing,

maternal way that represents the separation anxiety caused by her mother's forced absence (Danticat 1).

According to Dreby, "forced separation resulting from enforcement practices creates anxiety for parents and child alike" (250). This anxiety continues to be evident when Saya accidentally erases the recorded message on her answering machine and says that she can "no longer hear Mama say those cheerful words that always make [her] feel so warm inside" (Danticat 3). Clearly distraught, Saya is still clutching her stuffed monkey in one hand and holding a picture of her mother in the other. In contrast with the previous scene, which was filled with color and warmth as her mother's voice floats tangibly from the answering machine, the background in this scene is stark white and empty, signifying the emptiness of her home and life without her mother. Saya's papa "sits at the kitchen table and writes letters to [the] mayor and congresswoman and all the newspapers and television reporters he's ever heard of. No one writes him back" (Danticat 4). The absolute hopeless feeling portrayed in this scene as Saya and her father do everything they can, seemingly without success, is a very sad and realistic portrayal of the many who do attempt to write and petition for release or social change but who are ignored.

In "Parental Deportation, Families, and Mental Health," Schuyler Henderson and Charles Baily state that "family members of children who [have] experienced the arrest of at least one parent reported behavioral changes in . . . children, including sleep and eating disturbances, excessive crying, [and] increased fear" (451). Several of these natural and understandable behavioral changes occur when Saya and her father visit her mother in the correctional facility, where she is currently detained. Although her visit is

wonderful because Saya is permitted to “sit on her [mother’s] lap and breathe in the smell of coconut pomade in her hair” (Danticat 5), the visit comes to an abrupt and cruel end when the guards force Saya and her papa to leave. Saya says, “I kick and I scream and beg to stay with her. Tears run down Mama’s face as she is led away” (7). The background on the page is again white, still, and empty.

In contrast, Saya is in frantic action. She is forcibly being held back by her father, with a facial expression of complete anguish. Her arms are in perpetual movement, showing that she is being pulled from her mother’s embrace. In his picture book analysis, Perry Nodelman notes that “the sequence of pictures offers enough repetition – images of the same characters in different postures or of the same settings under different conditions – to convey a sense of continuing action” (159). He also notes that “distortion of bodies and even of objects is another conventional means by which pictures convey motion” (162). Indeed, the dramatic effect used here to show frantic movement in this scene is created by multiplying Saya’s arms (Danticat 7). In the illustration, she has three arms on each side of her body. Instead of this looking strange, however, it is a visual effect used to trick the eye into imagining movement, and it certainly works, making the already traumatic scene that much more raw. As Saya screams to return to her mother’s embrace, the illustration shows her father’s wrists and hands grabbing her and holding her back. She is forcibly removed from the situation and not permitted to follow her natural inclination, suggesting that she has not yet gained agency at this point in the book.

This very traumatic material (that does not occur in much of western children’s picture books) explicitly shows the horror of being physically forced to leave a loved one behind. Dreby reports that “rather than foster resentment due to unmet expectations, the

shock of the sudden detention or deportation of a parent engenders high levels of insecurity and anxiety” (249). Saya demonstrates this lack of resentment in the car after leaving the detention center. Emotionally exhausted, but never appearing angry, she falls asleep and dreams of her family being reunited, while she innocently clutches her baby monkey. In Saya’s dream, as “Mama comes home with Papa and me” (Danticat 8), her family is finally together and complete, each holding their arms up to the sky. Saya’s dream is illustrated in a deep, calming blue cloud, emanating from the exhaust pipe of the car. Saya is not holding her monkey, suggesting that the dream is a sort of coping mechanism or safe haven, and the first hint in the story toward Saya’s rescue journey and search for agency.

Another way that authors and illustrators can convey serious material successfully and accessibly to children is through the fantastic, like magic and superhero stories. Unlike the slightly disconcerting hyper-realism found in Saya’s narrative in *Mama’s Nightingale*, Juan Herrera takes a completely different approach depicting parental incarceration in his picture book, *Super Cilantro Girl*. In Herrera’s book, Esmeralda achieves the impossible and rescues her mother using newfound superpowers. According to the author’s note at the beginning of the book, as a child, Juan Herrera’s favorite movies were superhero movies. He identified with them powerfully and knew other children would as well. Although most superhero books for children feature boy heroes, this book is unique and empowering for little girls because Esmeralda herself turns into a superhero. As Lisa Hager notes in her article, “‘Saving the World Before Bedtime’: The Powerpuff Girls, Citizenship, and the Little Girl Superhero,” in Western culture, “young girl superheroes have been generally absent from print and screen fiction” (62). She also

notes that “little girl superheroes offer a compelling, though momentary, counternarrative that spectacularly redefines what it means to be a girl and a heroine” (75). Recent research has concluded that superhero play (including imaginative role play using literature) is beneficial and a powerful tool that sparks creativity, imagination, and leadership in children. According to Herrera himself in a 2016 interview, “We need to promote everyone, of course . . . but we also need to promote Latinas, all girls to become writers and think about literary projects and to see themselves in a positive manner in the media. In this case, in writing” (Dallasnews).

It is especially empowering for young girls and good for all children to read books like *Super Cilantro Girl* to gain agency and learn to not be afraid to take social action when it is necessary (like when witnessing discrimination or marginalization). It is also important for parents and teachers to open a safe place where superhero play is encouraged for both young boys and girls. According to Jackie March in her article, “But I want to Fly Too!: Girls and Superhero Play in the Infant Classroom,” “in order for girls to take more active roles in heroic discourse, teachers need to ensure that they create the conditions in which this can happen. Girls need to feel safe and be given the permission and space in which to explore these roles” (219). Books like *Super Cilantro Girl* can help open a space in the classroom (and at home) where imaginative and empowering role play is less gendered and binary, creating a more inclusive learning environment.

As Esmeralda turns into a superhero to rescue her mother from the detention center at the border, readers have the opportunity and are encouraged to ask questions about immigration laws and misconceptions, gender stereotypes and racial discrimination, magic and superpowers; about what is real and what is imagination, and

that sometimes the line between the two is not always clear. Superhero play and imaginative texts (such as *Super Cilantro Girl*) can create cultural learning opportunities for children and adults alike. In fact, according to Katharine Smith, with “play and experimentation, children’s texts foreground the possibilities of linguistic hybridity, bilingualism, and biculturalism. Additionally, examination of children’s literature highlights the thread of inter-generational storytelling that runs through the fabric of many ethnic texts” (6). These elements of play are found through Herrera’s book, and the narrative satisfies the reader with a more traditional happy ending. However, represented within the fun and the magic of the story are very serious topics like those of detainment, parental separation, isolation, and the realistic depiction of the border itself – grey against the cilantro green.

Honorio Robledo Tapia’s illustrations are painted, mostly green and brown, and heavily saturated. The front and back covers of the book, along with all the borders and gutters are a bright, cilantro green. As mentioned earlier, in Nodelman’s discussion of color within his picture book analysis, he notes that green is “traditionally the color of growth and fertility,” and that “green and brown, the colors of the earth and foliage, often create an atmosphere of organic richness” (61). Indeed, at the beginning of the book, Esmeralda Sinfronteras (this translates to “without borders” in English) is shown as a little girl with brown hair and brown eyes, picking bright green cilantro from her mother’s garden. She soon hears from Abuelita that her mother has “been stopped at the border in Tijuana. They say she needs a green card” (Herrera 5). This is strange because after Esmeralda questions what a green card is, Abuelita says, “She’s a citizen, Esme. Everything will be OK” (5). Citizens of the United States do not need green cards, so the

agents who stopped her at the border and detained her due to ‘lack of documentation’ were more than likely racially profiling her. Although Abuelita does not seem very worried, Esmeralda makes a wish in her room that her mother would return soon.

Green and brown are the predominant colors in *Super Cilantro Girl*. In fact, the color green at first seems to exist *as* her superpower, though Esmeralda tries to hide it in shame before she realizes it gives her power. She notices it for the first time when putting on an apron to help her grandmother in the kitchen the morning after her mother’s incarceration. “Esmeralda starts to put on her apron, but when she looks down at her hands . . . “UUUUUY!” she cries. “My fingernails! My hands! They’re GREEN!” (9). Tapia’s illustration on this page shows Esmeralda at a sink, attempting to scrub off the bright green that is now covering her hands. Her eyes are open wide, and her mouth is twisted into a frowning grimace, quickly showing the reader that Esmeralda does not like the changes that are happening to her, and she is actively trying to resist them (9).

One way Esmeralda attempts to hide the fact that she is slowly turning green is by borrowing large, rainbow stained gardening gloves from the school janitor. After borrowing the gloves and putting them on, Esmeralda looks at herself in the mirror with a smile on her face, happy because, “this way, no one will see [her] green-green hands” (10). Esmeralda sings a song to herself in the bathroom, which also makes her smile. “I hope Mamá is on her way! I hope she comes home soon! I hope Mamá can clean the ugly green away!” Even though green represents positivity in *Super Cilantro Girl* when discussing her mother’s garden and growth, green also is representative of being “the other” and is the color of the documentation that has torn her family apart. While in the bathroom, Esmeralda is still attempting to hide her power, and is ashamed of how it is

manifesting, through her skin color and physical appearance which makes her look different than the other children in school. In fact, when she finds out that her teeth have also turned green, she is so ashamed of herself that she temporarily loses her voice, and with it – her agency.

Esmeralda's loss of voice is made evident that afternoon when she comes home from school. Abuelita asks her why she is wearing gloves, and not speaking or singing. "You haven't said a word, Esme. You know, when you come home singing, my heart grows little feathers" (12). This telling statement made by her grandmother shows that Esmeralda's voice is already powerful enough to spark emotional growth and change, even if she is not aware of it yet. However, not only does Esmeralda feel unhappy and ashamed at the changes her body is experiencing, her teacher and classmates at school also notice and exacerbate her shame by laughing at her green hair and sunglasses she is using to hide the now bright green of her eyes. This social rejection further "others" Esmeralda, who still does not understand what is happening to her.

This social ostracization is directly shown in the right side of this image, where the children in the classroom are all seated at their desks, pointedly staring at Esmeralda and laughing. Esmeralda's teacher demands for her to come to the front of the room immediately, asking, "“Why are you wearing sunglasses in here?” Mrs. Contrario (whose name translated in English is Mrs. Contrary, already giving the reader a glimpse of her personality and a foreshadowing of what's to come) asks. The narrative responds, "Esmeralda is silent" (14), once again signifying the loss of her voice and agency. On the left side of the image, Esmeralda stands in front of Mrs. Contrario, who smiles almost gruesomely and beckons with her hand. Mrs. Contrario's bright yellow hair is shaped

neatly around her head, and is starkly contrasted against Esmeralda's, whose hair is a dark, leafy green and standing wild all around her face. The contrast between the two characters is purposeful and clear. Mrs. Contrario seems taken aback and disgusted with Esmeralda's appearance after examining her hair up close. "Your hair, it's. . . it's fuzzy and. . . and tangled with vines!" (15). She immediately sends Esmeralda to the nurse to "get it fixed up" (15), showing her lack of tolerance and awareness for her students' physical differences.

Further showing the school's lack of empathy for diversity and need for student conformity, in the nurse's office, although the nurse is smiling at Esmeralda, she forces her to sit in a chair. Esmeralda does not argue or fight, again showing the helplessness she feels about her mother and the shame she feels about her own physical appearance and newfound powers. These feelings of shame and hopelessness shift, however, when the nurse mispronounces her name. "Sit on this chair, *Esmeralta*." With this new name bestowed upon her, Esmeralda speaks and defends herself for the first time since turning green: "My name is *Esmeralda*. . . *Alta* means *tall*" (16). As the nurse comes toward her in the illustration with a large pair of metal shears and begins clipping "the green-green leaves curling around Esmeralda's ears," something happens. "The green-green vines spin a cocoon around the nurse, race up the walls, pop open the windows, and bounce Esmeralda right out onto the sidewalk!" (17). The illustration here depicts the bright green vines swirling wildly all over the page, growing everywhere and lowering Esmeralda gently to the ground, showing that she still has not realized the extent of her powers, and has not yet learned to control them.

As she runs home from school, she wears “her backpack like a hat to hide all that green,” clearly still ashamed of the changes and powers developing within her (18). As Esmeralda reaches her house, she realizes that she is too tall even to fit inside her own front door when she bumps her head on it attempting to enter. It is in this moment that she finally begins to understand her powers and gain her voice back. She says, “I am too tall! I can’t even get into my own house! I *am* Esmer-*alta*!” (19). As she reclaims the pejorative name given by the nurse, she “feels a tender breeze from the south brush her cheek. She turns toward Mexico. “I know what to do!” she sings. “I’m going to bring Mamá home myself!” (19). As Esmeralda accepts her powers and gains her voice, she realizes that she is the only one who can rescue her mother.

Voice and Agency in the Child Rescue Narrative: Encouraging Social Action

In *Mama’s Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation*, the text shows both the various disempowerments and empowerments of voice, and the complexities that comes along with them. In this book, voice both creates agency within Saya through parental rescue, as well as illustrating how difficult and often frustrating communication can be between a child and their incarcerated parents. One evening, Saya receives a letter in the mail with a tape cassette, containing “*Yon istwa dodo pou Saya*,” “a bedtime story for Saya” (Danticat 9). She holds her monkey close as her father plays the tape on a cassette player in her bedroom. Once again, bright and vivid colors fill the page as Saya’s mother’s voice physically envelopes her. The warm blue swirl, now symbolic of the voice of her mother, is illustrated coming out of Saya’s blanket, wrapping around her and tucking her in. Saya and her father are both smiling, though she still holds her monkey close, again signifying the anxiety associated with the separation from her mother. The

familiar blue swirls through the page and around Saya's body like a hug (Danticat 9). The tape recorder is a significant connection between Saya and her mother, allowing the two some semblance of a relationship while separated.

The text also elaborates on ways in which Saya's mother is in a state of detainment through its use of visuals. For example, when Saya's eyes are peacefully closed as the "room is filled with Mama's wind-chime voice" (Danticat 8), Staub's illustration shows Saya's mother physically in the room with her, smiling down and reaching out. Draped across her mother's arm are two caged nightingales, linked by a pink ribbon, who are not singing like the other nightingales. This ribbon draped around her mother's arm visually symbolizes her current state of detainment, trapped and unable to truly be there to tuck her daughter in. In this picture, although Saya is in her bed with her eyes closed, her bed is suspended in midair, surrounded by deep blue sky with the moon and the stars. Her mother's fingertips are reaching out seemingly halfway in Saya's dream and halfway in Saya's bedroom, almost touching her daughter's braids, again showing the influence of voice and the complexity of the power that comes with it. Saya's mother's voice has the power to bring her physical presence into the room (even if imagined) and bring her daughter some form of comfort.

The issue of the empowerment of voice towards social action is also seen in *Mama's Nightingale*, as Saya's father continues to write letters to various government agencies and media outlets. Saya approaches him against a background of white, again clutching her monkey behind her back. She asks him, "When is Mama coming home?" (Danticat 15). After her father is unable to answer, Saya asks if she can write letters too. She decides to "sit down and write [her] own story" (Danticat 16). This is a turning point

in the narrative as Saya has decided to use her voice and tell her (and her mother's) story. Saya's mother's voice is continually represented by a swirling cloud of deep blue, which, according to Nodelman, represents sadness. He notes that "the association of blue with melancholy is so much a part of our cultural tradition" (60). In contrast, Saya's own written voice is represented in a cloud of cheerful yellow, radiating from the letter that she has written. Yellow represents hope and happiness and, according to Nodelman, is the "conventional color of cheerfulness" (61). In the illustration, within that pastel yellow cloud (or more literally, the petition for her mother's release from the immigration detention center) are two nightingales, one holding an envelope marked "Mama;" an opened lock and with it, a key; and notably, Saya's stuffed monkey. Saya's story to the media is one of love and separation anxiety, represented by the monkey. After releasing her anxiety, hopes, and fears into the world, Saya becomes more hopeful, and no longer needs to carry her monkey with her.

After Saya's father sends her letter, a reporter leaves a message on the answering machine, "saying that she wants to print [Saya's] story in the newspaper for everyone to read!" (Danticat 18). After the story is published, a television reporter comes to interview Saya and her father at their home. Saya's father "tells the television reporter how Mama was arrested by the immigration police while working in a restaurant. And how she might be sent back to Haiti at any time" (Danticat 19). Saya reveals that "Mama came to America before she met Papa, and before I was born, and she doesn't have the right papers" (Danticat 19). While Saya is reading her story in the newspaper, and while she is being interviewed by the television reporter verbally telling her story and expressing her voice, she is smiling, not needing to clutch her monkey, as she begins to realize that her

small voice can make a big impact in the world, and that some people do care and want to help.

Saya and her father feel comfortable sharing their story with the media; however, this is not always the case. Henderson and Bailly find that “social marginalization of undocumented immigrants, combined with their frequent wariness of professional and (especially) government institutions, makes them a challenging population to help and to study” (451). Families with both parents lacking papers may be more hesitant to bring their story to the media, for fear of deportation themselves. In this narrative, because of Saya’s brave decision to go the media and tell her story, her mother is seen in immigration court in front of a judge: “The judge says Mama can come home with Papa and me while she is waiting for her papers” (Danticat 22). When the judge’s gavel comes down announcing her verdict, nightingales, hearts, and keys erupt from it into the courtroom, framing the happy faces of a family about to be reunited. Saya says, “I’m so happy and proud I feel like running up to the bench and giving the judge a big hug” (Danticat 22). Saya’s mother is finally at home, and the family is together at last. Saya holds a large cake that proclaims, “Welcome home Mama.” Everyone is smiling, and her mother and father are gazing at each other adoringly over her head (Danticat 23).

Although they have been reunited, there are other issues that have not yet been resolved. Later that night, Saya’s mother holds her in her arms as they lie down for bed, finally able to truly tuck her daughter in. The image of the caged nightingale has returned, but the first singing bird has been freed. This freed nightingale is representational of Saya’s story and the realization of the magnitude of her own voice. With this realization; she has become free. Sometimes, “in the context of migration,

whether forced or not, children frequently demonstrate remarkable resilience, and their experiences can even strengthen their developmental trajectories” (Henderson and Baily 452). This freed nightingale holds a key that signifies Saya’s voice, the voice that rescued her mother and brought her home, representing her own ‘remarkable resilience.’

Unfortunately, the second nightingale is still sitting on its perch, singing, seemingly ready for its own freedom. Although Saya and her mother are both smiling and one nightingale is free, the other is (curiously) still halfway in the cage, unable to fly. Saya is also holding her stuffed monkey again, signifying the post traumatic anxiety present after her mother’s release and the anxiety associated with the fact that her mother has only been temporarily freed (Danticat 24).

Saya’s mother has *not* been promised citizenship or cancellation of removal by the immigration judge. This caged bird represents the trauma caused by parental separation, which can last long after the parent has returned home. Dreby states, “whether via a mechanism of parental sacrifice or via the mechanism of state intervention on families, [the] U.S. immigration policy has significant and lasting impacts on children’s well-being” (250). Although Saya’s mother is at home with her family, she has not been granted a permanent residency or offered the possibility of American citizenship. At this time, she has only been permitted to come home “while she is waiting for her papers” (Danticat 22). For many children, this waiting period may last for years, because “although individuals may apply for cancellation of a deportation judgement based on “exceptional and extremely unusual hardship”” (Henderson and Baily 452), their applications are often denied. Henderson and Baily explain that “personal distress and emotional hurt” are typical responses to deportation and therefore do not constitute

grounds for such cancellation” (452). Saya’s mother sadly must petition for cancellation based on something more serious than separation from her child. Although Saya and her mother are happy to be together and back in each other’s arms, the monkey and the caged bird remain there to remind the reader of the uncertainty and worry associated with immigration application approval. Unlike many typical children’s books, this one does not quite have a completely happy, reassuring ending, even though Saya does rescue her mother. This book opens uncomfortable and emotional subjects for discussion and fully lends to a more empathic understanding of what it would be like to lose a parent through migration or deportation. The visuals and narrative show this uncertainty that might increase reader sympathy.

Saya asks her mother to tell her the nightingale story, the first one sent home from the detention center on the cassette tape. ““How does the story end?” I ask Mama, even though I already know the answer. “A smart and brave little nightingale helps her mommy find the right rainbow trail,” Mama says. “And the mommy follows it home”” (Danticat 25). This two-page spread is eye-catching and cheerful, with bright colors showing Saya, her mother, and the monkey following a rainbow trail back to their home, where Saya’s father is waiting in the doorway, arms outstretched. And although the family (and monkey) are smiling in this dream version of Saya’s mother’s return, and although the nightingales are all free in the story version, the caged nightingale appears again. The second nightingale is still shown trapped halfway inside its cage, unable to fly freely with the other bird.

Similarly, in *Super Cilantro Girl*, Esmeralda realizes her superpowers and gains her voice, finally embracing the green that has overtaken her body. She makes a bright

green mask out of construction paper, “puts on her best green tights,” and “picks a fresh bouquet of cilantro from her mother’s garden” as she sings “green like my mother’s salsa verde, green like the earth in spring. Take me across the mountains to my mamá so I can hear her songs again” (Herrera 20). Esmeralda temporarily assumes the parental role here as she rescues her mother and (quite literally) flies her home in her pocket (Herrera 25). The elements of fertility and growth are represented physically within the green in the illustrations, especially during Esmeralda’s heroic rescue journey at the end of the book. As she flies toward the border with the cilantro clutched tightly in her hand, the picture shows green stars flowing from her cape into the sky. The border itself, when Esmeralda finally arrives, is noticeably lacking the bright colors that featured in the rest of the narrative. This drastic color palette change is not only evident in the illustrations but is made clear through the text as well. After arriving at the detention center surrounded by a barbed wire fence, Esmeralda “gawks at the great gray walls of wire and steel between the United States and Mexico. She stares at the great gray building that keeps people in who want to move on” (22). Gray, according to Perry Nodelman, is the “color we attach to characterless people, [and] often suggests bleakness, lack of intensity, [or] a cool detachment” (61). Indeed, the gray and black depicted in this scene quickly suggests a bleak hopelessness, and is a stark contrast to Esmeralda, who is still bright green.

Though Esmeralda tried to push back her powers (the emerging green color) at first, when she is actively rescuing her mother, she seems to be embracing them. Even though she “has grown many feet taller, [and] her hair is longer than a school bus,” (Herrera 22) she is smiling, seemingly confident in her new role as a superhero. She continues to smile in the next page as she flies home safely with her mother, even as

“helicopters and patrol sirens beam in on them” (25), and even as her mother expresses her fears and doubts. Esmeralda confidently decides to use her powers to make everything green, so there will be no more borders. As the stars falling from Esmeralda’s cape land, she “touches a brown-brown tree. The tree grows and sprouts leaves, fruit, flowers. Vines cover buildings. Cilantro starts growing everywhere. The officers stop the chase, [and] stumble out of the helicopters and patrol cars in all directions, just to smell the green aromas” (27). Esmeralda uses her power to “make everything so green-green, the border will disappear!” (26). Unlike in *Mama’s Nightingale*, the green and brown landscape at the end of this book represents a world with peace and without borders, or sin fronteras, like Esmeralda and her mother’s last name.

Going forward, according to Dreby, “as the U.S. government determines policy priorities and immigration reform, the implications these decisions have for family members must be considered” (250). So many children are affected by these immigration practices, and parental separation has definitive negative consequences upon the mental health of these children. Dreby also brings to light that “the unintended consequences of immigration policy are the creation of single-parent or no-parent, low-income households, familial environments which not only seem inhumane when enforced by the state but may have severe and lasting impacts for child development” (250). Unfortunately, stories like Saya’s and Esmeralda’s are all too common, and children are living their lives and attending school all over the nation without their parents, and in turn are experiencing situations which will severely impact them psychologically.

Saya and Esmeralda’s stories are two illustrated examples of what children go through in America every day. The anxiety Saya feels and that is depicted through the

monkey in the story is correlated directly to the forced separation between Saya and her mother. This same anxiety is felt in children across the country. In Saya's story, she finds within herself agency and a powerful voice that can make true social changes, and through exercising her voice, she is able to free herself from some of the negativity surrounding her mother's immigration status. In Esmeralda's narrative, although it is less realistically depicted, children can relate to feeling ashamed of the skin they are in. Esmeralda finds agency and true superpowers by exercising her voice and embracing her identity on the journey to rescue her mother, inspiring children and giving them hope that their own voice can be used as a superpower, while encouraging superhero play in both boys and girls. Not only will these books help bring awareness to those who have not had to experience parental separation, they will also help bring normalcy, an emotional outlet, and a safe place for discussion for those children and families who have and have not experienced immigration related trauma.

CHAPTER THREE: WINDOWS, MIRRORS, AND WALLS: PARENTAL PROTECTION AND THE JOURNEY TO THE BORDER IN *LA FRONTERA*

Children's books often play an important role in a child's life, both in the classroom and at home. Books are often the gateway for children to escape, through language and illustrations, into imaginary worlds, and allow them glimpses into the lives and stories of real people from different cultural backgrounds. Because each child has a unique cultural background and home life, their perceptions of others will not always be the same, and the needs they have for 'windows' and 'mirrors' in that literature will also be different. This is also true when it comes to students and how they learn. According to Emily Style, "no student acquires knowledge in the abstract; learning is always personal. Furthermore, learning never takes place in a vacuum; it is always contextual" (Style 1).

Rudine Sims Bishop stated it best when she said, "those of us who are children's literature enthusiasts tend to be somewhat idealistic, believing that some book, some story, some poem can speak to each individual child, and that if we have the time and resources, we can find that book and help to change that child's life" (Sims Bishop 2). Because students all learn and acquire knowledge in different ways and have unique personal and cultural backgrounds, it is necessary that the literature used in the classroom is never exclusionary. Teachers must make a conscious effort to include characters from all backgrounds so that all children can have mirrors and windows in which they can see themselves and others authentically represented.

Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors: A History in Education and Literature

The idea of metaphorical mirrors and windows appearing in school curricula was first introduced in 1988 in Emily Style's essay "Curriculum as Window and Mirror." The research behind the metaphor focused on "the need for curriculum to function both as window and as mirror, in order to reflect and reveal most accurately both a multicultural world and the student herself or himself" (1). This is important during the primitive years of childhood, when a sense of identity is forming, because "if the student is understood as occupying a dwelling of self, education needs to enable the student to look through window frames in order to see the realities of others and into mirrors in order to see her/his own reality reflected" (1). Style maintains that a curriculum full of 'mirrors' is not enough for children to gain an empathic understanding of other cultures. She argues, in fact, that "knowledge of both types of framing is basic to a balanced education which is committed to affirming the essential dialect between the self and the world. In other words, education engages us in "the great conversation" between various frames of reference" (Style 1). This research was groundbreaking in education discourse and remains an important and fundamental consideration within the discipline, with many researchers adding their own dimensions to the framework, which slightly changes as society changes.

Style maintains that recognizing authentic human beauty combined with a welcoming and inclusive space to spark culturally sensitive conversations (and create true understanding in children) is the most successful way to educate her students about other cultures. In fact, Style argues that the classroom is one of the best places to begin having those conversations. She notes, "for me, the beauty of the classroom gathering lies in its

possibilities for seeing new varieties of Beauty. This multiplicity, in turn, enables both students and teachers to be engaged in conversation about an evolving definition of the beautiful” (1). She believes that “such dialogue requires the practice of *both/and* thinking as participants acknowledge the varied experiences of reality which frame individual human perspective” (Style 1). This “both/and” thinking that Style describes is one crucial way to become a culturally sensitive and accepting adult later in life, one who is respectful and willing to be open minded when it comes to cultural differences.

Sometimes, Style continues, opening these windows and looking into these mirrors can cause preconceived notions or biased opinions from influential adults during childhood to be questioned and even dismantled. Another important aspect of her essay discusses how, in education, sometimes windows and mirrors within the curriculum overlap. Style notes, “the truth is that sometimes when we hear another out, glancing through the window of their humanity, we can see our own image reflected in the glass of their window. The window becomes a mirror!” (Style 1) As windows, mirrors, and cultures overlap, students can begin to realize that their lives have more similarities than they may have believed. These overlapping and shared experiences are what bring humans together. Style notes, “it is the shared humanity of our conversation that most impresses us even as we attend to our different frames of reference” (Style 1).

Style’s work and research gained some attention in the education community, and in 1990, Rudine Sims Bishop’s revolutionary essay, “Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors” was published, adding a new dimension to the theory that would eventually change the course of multicultural education. This essay, “uses the metaphor to explain how children see themselves in books and how they can also learn about and enter the

lives of others through literature” (O’Donnell 2). Sims Bishop’s addition of sliding glass doors explains how, through pictures and text, children can open the door to another world (or culture), and walk through it and immerse themselves in it, at least during the short time they are reading the book. “Though coined nearly 30 years ago, the phrase [windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors] is more potent than ever, continuing to shape pedagogy, inspire more culturally relevant practices, and propel the field of children’s literature toward greater diversity” (O’Donnell 2). Sims Bishop expounded upon the windows, mirrors, and, importantly for cultural diversity - sliding glass doors, and showed the importance of them used in conjunction with one another. She noted that “books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author” (Sims Bishop 1). There are many reasons that literature acting as a sliding glass door is important for students, but probably the most glaring is that immersion is one of the most effective techniques for understanding another’s culture.

Specifically, for students who have experienced immigration related trauma, books that reflect similar narratives can help foster validation and identity in a child. As Sims Bishop states, “when lighting conditions are just right... a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience” (1). It is essential for mirrors to exist in literature, for children to be able to look inside a page and see a child reflected whose story and past resembles their own.

These mirrors in literature are validating and help shape identity in students. In 1990, Style found through her research that

more than half of our culture's population (all girls, and boys from minority groups) are trained and expected to look through windows at others who are viewed as the valid participants in a sport; an exclusionary curriculum, often perpetuated by the unaware, holds no mirrors for the majority of the students.

This is problematic because reading then "becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. For many years, nonwhite readers have too frequently found this search futile" (Sims Bishop 1). The following graphic represents diversity found in children's books published in 2015. The percentage of published literature featuring white characters is an overwhelming 73.3%. In the infographic on

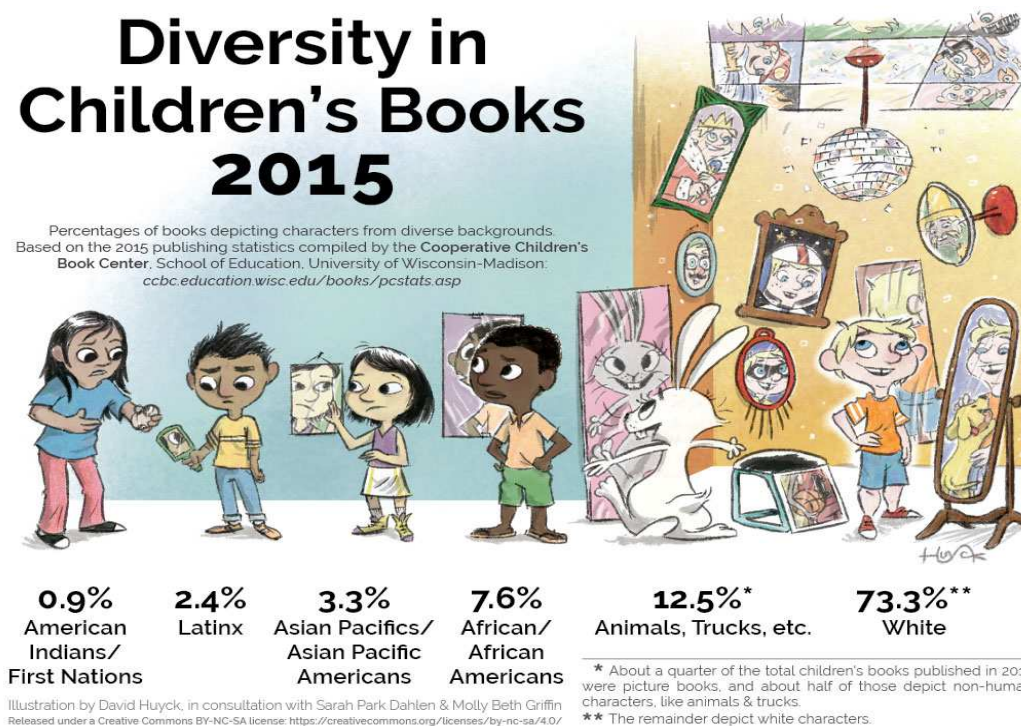


Figure 1: Diversity in Children's Books 2015

published children's literature from 2015, this same exclusionary statistic remains true. The infographic shows the white male student surrounded by mirrors. They show him as a superhero, as a king, as a spaceman. They show him that he can do or be anything.

This gross underrepresentation of cultures in published material absolutely influences children, who are forming their identity during the primitive years of childhood. In 1990, when Style's essay on windows and mirrors was introduced, she noted that many may not see the explicit need for windows and mirrors. She explains that "the common sense of needing to provide both windows and mirrors in the curriculum may seem unnecessary to emphasize, and yet recent scholarship on women and men of color attests abundantly to the copious blind spots of the traditional curriculum" (3). Nearly thirty years later, this remains just as true. Not only is it disadvantageous for students of color to not find mirrors in literature, it is also disadvantageous for white male

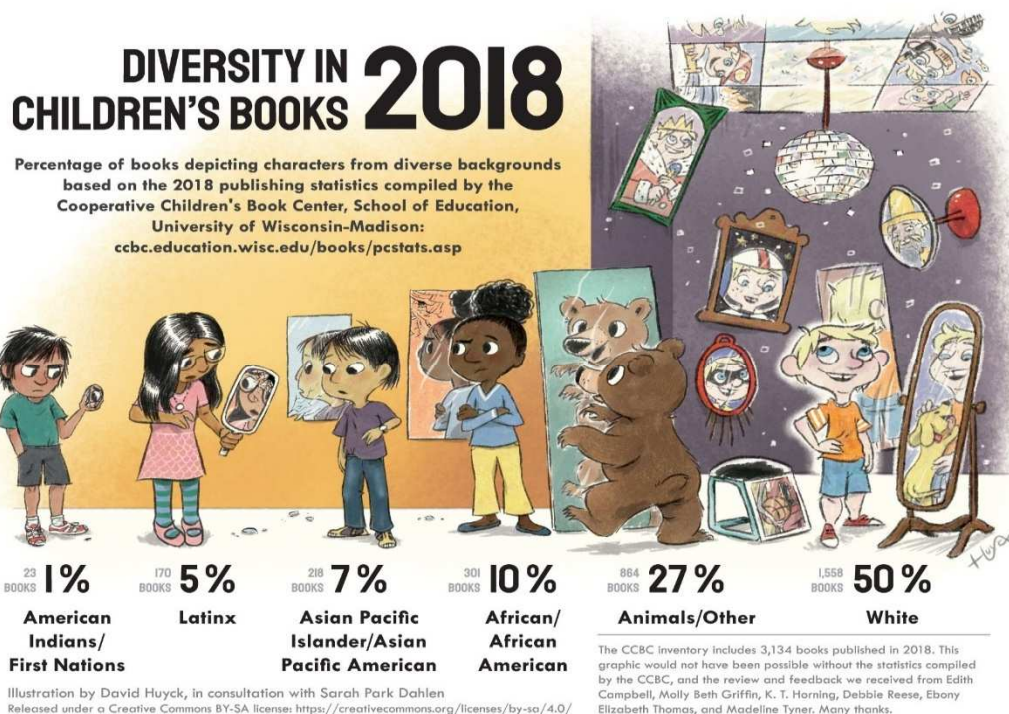


Figure 2: Diversity in Children's Books 2018

children (by far the highest occurring character in published literature) to *only* have mirrors. Style notes that “white males find, in the house of curriculum, many mirrors to look in, and few windows which frame others’ lives. Women and men of color, on the other hand, find almost no mirrors of themselves in the house of curriculum; for them it is often all windows” (Style 3). In 2018, the same research was conducted, and an updated infographic (above) on character demographics was published.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, white characters were still by far the most prevalent. The number did go from 73.3% to 50%, which is a significant decrease; however, a number as disproportionate as fifty percent is still problematic for both underrepresented children, and for white male students alike. David Huyck and Sarah Park Dahlen, the creators of these illuminating infographics notes the deliberate and important differences between the two graphics:

One important distinction between the 2015 and 2018 infographics is that we made a deliberate decision to crack a section of the children’s mirrors to indicate what Debbie Reese calls 'funhouse mirrors' and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas calls 'distorted funhouse mirrors of the self.' Children’s literature continues to misrepresent underrepresented communities, and we wanted this infographic to show not just the low quantity of existing literature, but also the inaccuracy and uneven quality of some of those books (Huyck & Dahlen).

According to Sims Bishop, “children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need the books as windows onto reality, not just on imaginary worlds” (1). White male children “need books that will help them understand the

multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as a member of just one group, as well as their connections to all other humans” (1). Western society is currently in a politically turbulent time, where racial exclusion and discrimination are common place. In Sims Bishop’s essay, she states,

in this country, where racism is still one of the major unresolved social problems, books may be one of the few places where children who are socially isolated and insulated from the larger world may meet people unlike themselves. If they see only reflections of themselves, they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world (Sims Bishop 1).

To combat this exaggerated sense of self-importance, students must be exposed to cultural experiences they may never have known existed. A study conducted by Sanjuana Rodriguez and Eliza Braden found that “since the 2016 presidential election, the urgency to provide humanizing stories about immigrant communities in classrooms has grown. Xenophobic rhetoric dehumanizes children of immigrants and their families” (47). Indeed, if the only words that Latinx students hear devalue their culture and journeys, their identity will be wrapped up in shame. Rodriguez and Braden’s research concludes that “picturebooks have the potential to help students understand issues around stereotyping and othering by individuals who are unfamiliar with immigration experiences” (47). They continue, noting that “accurate and authentic picturebook stories focused on immigration can help children who are dealing with the emotional toll exacted by xenophobic policies” (47).

Books that authentically and respectfully convey immigrant characters and immigration related stories will help all students gain a realistic expectation of respecting

differences and diversity in their school and in life, which is why authentic and diverse picture books should be a part of every American classroom and child's home. Human differences make us unique, and should be embraced and studied, rather than ignored. "Traditionally, American education has been more comfortable focusing on similarities. Despite our democratic rhetoric, differences have made us uncomfortable" (Style 3). It is, however, these differences and culturally diverse backgrounds that allow our country to grow and thrive. Although "there are still American educators who pride themselves on being "color-blind," thinking that ignoring "accidental" differences of race or gender or region or class creates the best classroom climate," it is simply not true, and can be harmful for children whose identity is beginning to take shape. According to Emily Style, "promoting such partial seeing is highly problematic for the creation of curriculum which will serve all students adequately" (Style 3). For these reasons, stories that realistically depict unique cultural life and struggles are necessary for identity and empathy in students.

Representation of Latinx Immigrant Characters in Children's Literature: *La Frontera*

In the past two decades, more picture books have featured Latinx characters and the immigration story than any other time in American history. Although the statistics of Latinx characters in children's books are still extremely low, the number has begun to rise as teachers and parents realize the significance of mirrors in literature and in classroom curricula. Sims Bishop notes, "when children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are

a part” (1). For a child’s identity to be positively shaped and their personal cultures and backgrounds celebrated and embraced, “our classrooms need to be places where all the children from all the cultures that make up the salad bowl of American society can find their mirrors” (Sims Bishop 1). One such book that features as both mirror for Latinx students who have experienced an immigration journey with a parent to the border, and as a window that authentically and respectfully shows a journey that some American students may never imagined is *La Frontera: El Viaje con Papá* written by Deborah Mills and Alfredo Alva and illustrated by Claudia Navarro, published in 2018.

This children’s picture book is an important text as it belongs to the genre of memoir, depicting Alva’s true childhood journey. Since it is a true story, and the co-author and main character are the same person, cultural authenticity has been preserved. In fact, many authentic Latinx children’s books are written by those who have experienced the journey, either personally or through a family member, and the narratives are loosely based upon experience. In *La Frontera*, Alfredo journeys with his father from La Ceja across the Rio Grande and into America. The illustrations depict the scary parts of the journey, like the coyote who “helps” Alfredo and his father cross.

Many American children may not be able to identify with the fear of men known as “coyotes,” but other American children, (who have been through this experience or have known someone who has) may have immediate negative feelings surrounding the very word. The illustration on this page acts as both a mirror and window for students with varying levels of cultural awareness. In Navarro’s illustration, the coyote’s back is shown in the chair. Alfredo cannot see his face, denying the reader any humanizing familiarity or comfort. However, the shadow cast from the man in the chair is highly

visible, and the reader's eye is drawn immediately to it. Instead of reflecting the man's body position as he sits in the chair, the shadow is a literal coyote, mouth open and sharp teeth bared (Alva & Mills).

Fear is represented again as Alfredo and his father float across the Rio Grande river in an inner tube. Although the stars and moon are beautifully and serenely reflected in the water, Alfredo's father's eyes are wide and round, and his arm is wrapped protectively around his son. The vastness of the river is evident in Navarro's illustration, and though the water seems calm, the text tells a different story: "Papa and I took the inner tube and tried to cross, but the current was too strong. . . we put our sacks on our heads and quickly waded in. As it got deeper, Papa took my sack and tied me to him with a piece of rope" (Alva & Mills). As Molly Bang notes in her picture book analysis, "space isolates a figure, [and] makes that figure alone: both free and vulnerable" (104). Navarro exemplifies this feeling of isolation and vulnerability in this scene, which again makes it both a window and mirror for the children reading it. Alfredo and his father, alone and surrounded by the deep blue of the Rio Grande, are completely isolated. The only buffer against the fear in this illustration is Alfredo's father, who does not let go of his son.

Not only does *La Frontera* represent the fear that often goes along with the journey to the border, it also represents cultural traditions in a respectful and authentic way, once again becoming a mirror for children who have experienced the traditions, and a window for those who have not. Sims Bishop's sliding glass door metaphor is evident during these represented visual traditions, allowing readers to move back and forth between both their world, and the world within the pages, immersing themselves in the

cultural traditions and learning through the experience of reading. In *La Frontera*, before Alfredo and his father leave to go on their journey to the United States, “Uncle Tomás announced that we would have a going-away celebration, and he would roast the family pig for the feast. All the villagers came to the party – the very old and the very young. It lasted all day and all night” (Alva & Mills). The cheerful illustration shows family and friends gathered under lights and beautiful decorations, hugging and dancing, while the children run freely. The table in the party is filled with food, and at the celebration Alfredo and his family “filled [their] stomachs with tortillas, rice, corn bread and much more” (Alva & Mills). The party and feeling of love and contentment within this spread also serves as both window and mirror, because children from all walks of life can relate to celebrating with those they love. Themes like these show children that they have more in common with one another than they may have realized and serve to bridge the cultural gaps that separate us from one another.

In addition to the narrative that serves as an authentic mirror and window for students at home and in the classroom, the fact that Alfredo Alva was willing to share his difficult journey to America adds to the well of societal knowledge that is available for children to learn about others. At the end of the book, there is a black and white photo of Alfredo and his family, and a brief history of his immigration story. “This book tells the true story of Alfredo Alva’s journey to Texas in the 1980’s” (Alfredo & Mills). It goes on to tell how Alfredo’s family found a successful life together in the United States, after being split up for over four years. There is also a map of North America, showing Alfredo and his father’s journey from Mexico to the United States. The book gives a brief history of the Rio Grande River, noting that “it is almost 2,000 miles long. In some

places, the river is deep and wide; in others, it is more narrow and shallow.” The last pages of the book detail what immigration is, and what many have had to overcome in order for their family to be safe. *La Frontera* is one book of a growing number that can act as a window and mirror for students. As Sims Bishop states, “When there are enough books available that can act as both mirrors and windows for all our children, they will see that we can celebrate both our differences and our similarities, because together they are what make us all human” (2). After reading Alfredo’s story, a child would be much more likely to absorb the history behind immigration and the geographical details within the border journey, because they are more likely to be emotionally invested in the main character, Alfredo. This empathy that is fostered through mirrors and windows in children’s books is especially prevalent in the author’s notes that appear at the end of almost every Latinx immigration story, who use their narratives as a call to action to make the world a better place for the next generation.

CONCLUSION

Like Alfredo Alva's author's note in *La Frontera*, each border narrative explored in this thesis includes an author's note explaining why immigration related issues are particularly important to them. Each author has either experienced their own immigration story, or someone close to them has. Each author's note brings awareness, whether it details childhood memories or immigration statistics, and serves as an individual call to action. In *Separate is Never Equal*, Duncan Tonatiuh discusses the statistics on "segregation based on race or national origin" (36). He uses this space at the end of the book to show photos of Sylvia Mendez and her parents and discuss the ramifications of the landmark case. He also uses the space to discuss current necessary statistics on modern segregation in school, noting that in 2012, "segregation has increased significantly in recent years" (36). In fact, "this study. . . also reveals that Latino and black children are likely to have fewer resources and less experienced teachers. All too often I see this inequality when I visit schools in different parts of the country to read and to talk about my books" (36). Using his platform as an award-winning illustrator and children's author, Tonatiuh brings awareness to schools across the country about social inequalities that desperately need to be addressed.

In *América Is Her Name*, Luis Rodríguez includes a personal author's note on the publishing page, before the narrative even begins. He begins, "this story is based on experiences I had working with Spanish-speaking children and their parents in the Pilsen barrio of Chicago on writing from their lives and imaginations" (Rodríguez). Not only does Rodríguez include his reason for wanting to bring the importance of words to children, he also "has worked extensively with gang members to guide them in positive

directions” (Rodríguez). Through the stories he has learned from his students, and through his commitment to help rehabilitate those who are recovering from their past, Rodríguez is committed to making a true social difference.

Similarly, in *Mama’s Nightingale*, Edwidge Danticat shares her own story of immigration and parental separation in the author’s note at the end of the book, having grown up in Haiti while her parents lived in the United States. As a child, Danticat and her brother “sometimes played writing games, making up passports, visas, and other documents that might one day reunite us with our parents” (Danticat 27). As an adult with children of her own, Danticat wants to bring awareness through Saya’s story about the many issues concerning immigration and parental separation: “According to ICE, the people Saya refers to as the immigration police, over 70,000 parents of American-born children have been jailed and deported in recent years” (Danticat 28). Along with the awareness brought to immigration issues in the United States, Danticat’s “book is dedicated to those children, who, like Saya, are dreaming of the day when their mother, father, or both parents, will come home” (Danticat 28). Her picture book serves as both an accurate representation of the flaws in the immigration system and as a call to action to spark social change.

In addition, in *Super Cilantro Girl*, Juan Felipe Herrera describes his own childhood in the author’s note before the opening of the book. He explains how he used to go back and forth across the border as a child, without issue because of his family’s documentation and his grandfather’s status as a U.S. citizen. However, growing up, his family told him stories of times when that was not the case. His grandfather often reminisced about the days before a wall was built, “I came from Mexico before there

were borders, before 1924 – when we lived *sin fronteras*. There was an official frontier between Mexico and the United States, of course, but there weren't a lot of rules about keeping people in or out" (Herrera). Later in the note, Herrera says, "I was happy that we were all together as a family. But what about other families kept apart by borders? I wondered. Maybe, I dreamed – and still dream – there is a way to bring families back together" (Herrera). Herrera's childhood story inspired him to write a book that would allow others to really think about something like a border and what that really represents.

These notes are so important because in the case of all the picture books discussed, the author's notes are what blur the lines between fact and fiction. Although some of the books are fictional, the author's notes bring the narrative into the factual world, where we cannot miss their real-life importance. Because we hear from the authors themselves, it then becomes easier to explicitly connect the fictional narratives and illustrations to contemporary politics. These notes show why the literature is necessary, and why *they* must be the ones to tell the story.

Like many families in the United States, my family has our own immigration story. We, too, dealt with parental detainment and separation because of my husband's status as an undocumented migrant. My daughter spoke to her father through a glass window, rather than bars, like in Saya's case in *Mama's Nightingale*. And, like Saya's father, I wrote countless letters to local and national government agencies and appealed to social media without having to fear for myself in an attempt to free the father of my children because of my privileged status as an American citizen. We too had to stand in federal immigration court waiting on our fate, and the judge ruled that he too could come

home while he was waiting for his papers. My children have lived nearly their entire lives with the fear of deportation and parental separation looming over them.

I was twenty-two years old when I met my husband. He was a cook at a restaurant, and I was a server there. We met and fell in love. His kindness, his morality, and his sense of humor matched mine so closely that it did not matter that our language and cultural backgrounds were different. When we started dating, I knew him by a name that was not even his own, because he had to create a false identity in order to work for a corporation. For months, he was too ashamed of his status as an undocumented migrant to even tell me his real name. Years later, I began to understand that fear was the reason he did not feel comfortable telling me his truth. He was ashamed of who he was. The fact that someone so kind and beautiful would be ashamed of their authentic self absolutely broke my heart. I reassured him that paperwork or documentation would never be the reason I would abandon someone I love. From that moment on, we began to work on his path to legal residency. We sought legal advice from a friend of mine who is a lawyer, but before we could begin his application towards residency, he was arrested for having an expired license.

I found out we were expecting twins about a month before his arrest. The next few months were very difficult. As with Saya's story, my husband was held under an ICE hold, and there was no chance of him bonding out. Pregnant with our children, I found an immigration attorney who thought we could get my husband out of jail and back home. I stood in front of a judge at the Department of Homeland Security, pregnant with our children, pleading for him to be able to come home. Although our chances were slim, he

was released and able to temporarily come home while applying for his permanent residency, what is commonly referred to as a green card.

During this waiting period, we had our precious twins and tried to live a normal life with our children. He worked, and we waited. For seven years, we had the threat of his detainment and eventual deportation hanging over our heads. We did not know if he would be able to stay with us. At this time, I was desperate for help. I have always used books as a coping mechanism to get through difficult periods of my life, and vividly remembered how helpful they were for me as a child. I thought that picture books detailing the same traumatic process my own children were going through might help them better understand. It would give them a mirror and validation and would show them that other children have experienced some of the same things they did. Unfortunately, there was not much literature for children detailing these immigration experiences. This remains true today, as the statistics on diversity in children's literature prove, and that needs to change. All children who have gone through these traumas, whether personal or collective, should have access to a curriculum and literature that authentically represents their specific cultural journeys, traumas, and traditions.

Our family was lucky in that our personal "hardships" were deemed extreme enough for my husband to gain his permanent residency. In February of 2018, he and I entered Ciudad Juarez, as I was the petitioner for his residency and Juarez houses the country's consulate. We crossed the border on foot back into the United States and he received his own "green card," but citizenship is still years away.

As a mother of children who have their own familial immigration story, I want my children's school to teach them in a culturally responsive and inclusive way. I want

other children to recognize the difficulties that my children and so many others have faced as they were separated from their parents through detainment and deportation. I would like immigration related traumas to be discussed, so healing can begin. I want my children to be able to pick up books at home and in their classrooms and find their own mirrors and windows. I want them to feel safe, to feel loved, to feel validated – so their own strong identity and cultural pride can begin to take shape. I want them to realize that a border is just that, a place where two cultures merge together, neither better than the other. As a mother, I would like to see children embracing their cultural differences and learning to grow from the experiences of one another. Healing can begin with children. Just as ancestral traumas are created from generations before our own, healing can begin with the newest generations – the children who have open minds and hearts. They will change our world.

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APPENDIX: LESSON PLANS AND IDEAS FOR TEACHERS

https://refugeedolls.org/pdf/plans/mamas_nightingale.pdf

<https://www.literacyworldwide.org/blog/literacy-daily/2016/01/06/putting-books-to-work-em-mama-s-nightingale-a-story-of-immigration-and-separation-em>

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<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/c8/9d/59/c89d596bb0b8c17129f3aa1b1243b952.jpg>

<https://latinosinkidlit.com/tag/super-cilantro-girl/>