

EDITOR'S COMMENTARY

This World Is For Us

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A few years ago, my compañero and I went to the Four Corners Music Festival in Pagosa Springs, Colorado. Even though I grew up in the area, I had never been to the festival in the dense Colorado wilderness. To attend, you have to hike through beautiful pine trees rooted deep in the rich dark soil. The stage is nestled in a clearing surrounded by tall trees that are hundreds of years old. It's a beautiful place for a concert, and the kind of setting you imagine as the backdrop to magical mischief of woodland creatures.

The day wore into night and we enjoyed the music and our surroundings. Suddenly, as the last acts of the night took stage, children in a clearing adjacent to the stage started playing with glow sticks, glow necklaces, and every manner of luminous toy. Kids twisted rubber band-powered luminescent helicopters and winged fairies and sent them floating into the silhouettes of the surrounding trees. It was breathtaking. You could hear laughter and the joyful bellows of play. For the most part, the children were there playing with other children while their parents enjoyed the show. Their play synced with the music to create a powerful ambiance.

I reflected to my partner that those children were so lucky. They were having so much fun. In the moment, I couldn't help but think that my parents didn't often have the opportunity to take my siblings and me to these kinds of events. I asked, "What do you think it's like for them? What would it mean to grow up coming to places like this?"

He responded without a beat, “They grow up thinking the world is *for* them.”

A lump materialized in my throat, and I felt burning in my eyes. What does it mean to grow up thinking the world is *for you*? Clearly, it struck a nerve about my own growing time, about the need we felt as Chicano children to enter into places with skepticism about the world. There was often an underlying message of “don’t get too comfortable” when we entered into other worlds that were racialized and classed. (This crowd and their children in the field were predominantly white and seemingly affluent.) I’d not anticipated the emotions that seized my grown woman head and chest. After all, we were there enjoying the show too, but that ache was coming from a hurt girl inside of me. It forced me to consider how children of color do and don’t grow up thinking the world is for them.

It’s a moment that sticks with me. I often tell this story when I’m teaching “Ethnic Literature for Children and Young Adults” and we discuss what it means for children to think the world is for them when their experience or their family’s experience can consistently feel contrary to this emotion. We discuss this in terms of representation: How can the world feel like it is for you if there are few to no images of you? How do children of color recognize their own faces in the stories that they do read and watch? What does it mean for people of color to belong? Mostly, how does this translate into moments of play, joy, and laughter for children of color too?

In this section we are celebrating Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous creative writers who create worlds, sing poems, draw imagewords and channel our ancestors for the benefit of Latina/o/x and Chicana/o/x children and young adults. Through the work of such innovative writers breaking through into the market of children and young adult fiction, we are creating a literary

world that is absolutely for us.

In the story, “La Esperanza de Joaquín,” Rocio Delgado tells the story of how a trans-child and their mother decide on a new name that is the perfect fit. It is a story that demonstrates how gender fluidity need not be contentious in families, but rather how a child’s development into their true self is a time for coming together to positively embrace change. This story echoes the true story of trans children in our own communities, like 13-year-old Santi Ceballos, who along with two other students, is suing the State of Arizona in a complaint filed in the U.S. District Court of Arizona this March. Plaintiffs claim the “no promo homo” law their state is prevents “LGBTQ students from having educational opportunities equal to those of their heterosexual peers,” arguing they are unconstitutional under the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment (Lang 2019). Go Santi!

As children accept their truths, they are creating the world they need. By extension, they are changing the world for all of us to be more accepting and open for all children (people!) to thrive. For young people like Santi, they are fighting to shift the status quo. Other children, like the narrators in Adriana Dominguez’s collection of poems, “Cuerpo,” are learning to be body positive in a world that sends conflicting and contradictory messages about our bodies. For the young women represented in these poems, bodies are changing, confusing, and at the same time, powerful, beautiful, and strong. Bodies, especially brown bodies, are given a space to be celebrated as they sashay and dance across—at times lingering—on the pages.

In Joy E. Dili’s (Ohkay Owingeh) “Grandma’s Garbanzos,” we are reminded that our ancestors and elders create(d) sites for us to learn and be *of* a place. For children from the Ohkay Owingeh tribe in New Mexico, years are divided

into cycles of ceremony. On ceremonial feast days, Pueblo homes are opened to visitors—known and unknown—to share in abundance. Everyone is welcome. Everyone can eat, but one rarely thinks of the hours it took the family to prepare for hours of dancing and feeding. Dili’s story describes a closeness between grandmother and grandchild, being part of community togetherness, and how playing with your food can be spiritual. In this story, the reader understands that there are ways that the world is always already *for us*.

Gabriela Serrano’s *Xilatano 43* takes a speculative approach to thinking about larger universal conflict that bring about atrocities against Chicanos and Mexican Indigenous peoples on earth. We are publishing the first chapter of her novela, where we are introduced to a science fiction universe based in El Paso, TX where the author, in her own words, turns to “Alien Theory and Afrofuturism to critically examine the systematic oppression of people of color and Indigenous cultures in the United States and Mexico, respectively. Perceiving aliens as ‘others’ will help us make the connection between how those in positions of power alienate underrepresented groups” (read more in the “Overview” before her chapter begins). Chicana science fiction meets decolonial theory, yo! I’m here for this, but we must acknowledge that Serrano’s text begins with terror and loss in our communities and that it is through her use of the science fiction imagination that she is attempting to create understanding for young people.

The exciting thing is that the field of Chicana/Latina/Indigena children’s writing keeps growing, shifting and re-writing all the rules. The authors included in this special section are a part of this bigger shift that includes authors like Dominican-American Elizabeth Acevedo, who is surfacing in all of the major children’s book award pools. Her book, *The Poet X*, has been honored with the Pura Belpré Award, the Printz Award for best teen

fiction, the National Book Award, and she is the first Latina and author of color to win the prestigious Carnegie Medal. Critical literary anthologies like *Voices of Resistance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Chican@ Literature* (2017) edited by Laura Alamillo, Larissa M. Mercado-Lopez, and Cristina Herrera are emerging to critically discuss the contents and quality of the literature available to young people. On TV and in movie theaters more and more shows are being created with Latina/Chicana/Indigena protagonists. The reboot of *Charmed* featuring Puertorriqueña and Afrolatina witches, and the recent release of the film *Dora and the Lost City of Gold* (2019) bring representations of Indigenous Latina brilliance, innovation, and creativity to the big and small screen.

There are days when the world definitely seems wide open for us. And then there are days like August 3, 2019. On days like August 3rd, young white men who think the world is only for them drive 600 miles to kill Latino parents and children shopping for school supplies and anyone else who gets in their way. On days like August 3rd, young white men murder 22 people, injure dozens more and victimize an entire city with premeditated acts of domestic terrorism. It's on days like August 4th that we have to fight the urge to put our pens down, take our fingers off the keyboard, or take our paint brush off the canvas.

On August 5th I reached out to some of our contributors for this section, understanding that two of them are from and/or currently live in El Paso, Texas. I paused in my office that day wondering if I should wait to send messages, not knowing if they or their families were directly impacted by the shooting. But I knew that I had to reach out, be a good vecina and hold space in the very small ways that I could. Gabriela and Adriana, our hearts are with you and your beloved city, and we dedicate this section to

the memories of those killed and injured on August 3rd in El Paso. We remember their families and write to honor their memory and to continue creating the world we all deserve. #elpasostrong

In honor of this dedication we begin this section with a poem entitled, “The Only God You Believe In” by Demetria Martinez. This poem along with 21 others were presented at “22 Poems: A Reading and Candlelight Vigil for El Paso” held at the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque, NM on August 29, 2019. *c/s*

References

- Lang, Nico. 2019. “Arizona Teen Helped Change How Their State Teaches LGBTQ Students About Sex.” *Teen Vogue*, June 13, 2019. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/arizona-teen-helped-change-how-state-teaches-lgbtq-students-about-sex>