

***Nuestros Cuentos: Fostering a Comunidad de Cuentistas Through Collaborative
Storytelling With Latinx and Indigenous Youth***

J. Estrella Torrez
Michigan State University

Santos Ramos
Michigan State University

Laura Gonzales
University of Texas at El Paso

Victor Del Hierro
University of Texas at El Paso

Everardo Cuevas
Michigan State University

ABSTRACT. This article outlines the emergence and ongoing sustainability of *Nuestros Cuentos*, a community and youth-oriented storytelling project that highlights the stories and histories of Latinx and Indigenous youth in children's literature. By fostering what the authors call a *Comunidad de Cuentistas* (Community of Storytellers), *Nuestros Cuentos* provides a space for Latinx and Indigenous youth to write, edit, and publish a collaborative book of stories that is then distributed into their own community. Following the calls of researchers like Riojas Clark, Bustos Flores, Smith, and Gonzalez (2015), *Nuestros Cuentos* aims to increase the representation of multicultural literature for children, specifically by encouraging Latinx and Indigenous youth to write stories that represent their own experiences, histories, and interests.

Key Words: Storytelling, Community-Building, Latinx and Indigenous youth,
Latinx Literature

INTRODUCTION

The practices and lived experiences of Latinx people and Latinx cultures are constantly shifting (Gallego, 2014). Therefore, the ways in which we represent, teach, consume, and create Latinx literature in our communities is also malleable and context-dependent. As Latinx educators aiming to make spaces for Latinx literature in the educational spaces we work in, we have to constantly adapt our practices to meet both our own histories and experiences, the cultures and backgrounds of our students, as well as the institutional contexts that bring us all together. In addition, we have a responsibility to foster spaces that honor and value the diverse experiences and backgrounds of Latinx communities, especially as we are situated within institutions. As Aldama (2015) clarifies, the term Latino/a literature “is a flexible category because it grows out of the always in flux identity of Latinos generally” (p.1). Therefore, as we continue developing methods for both representing and teaching Latinx literature, it’s important to clarify how pedagogical models are inherently tied to material and institutional factors that both facilitate and limit our practices.

In this article, we describe the emergence and ongoing sustainability of *Nuestros Cuentos*, a multi-layered, community and youth-oriented storytelling project that aims to highlight the stories and histories of Latinx and Indigenous¹ youth in children’s literature, particularly by providing a space for Latinx and Indigenous youth to write, edit, and publish a collaborative book of stories that is then distributed into their own community. To increase much needed diverse representation in children’s literature, *Nuestros Cuentos* is an after-school program that provides a space for middle-school aged youth to collaborate with University and Community College students, all of whom collectively write, illustrate, and publish an annual book of stories. Through this work, *Nuestros Cuentos* builds what we call a *Comunidad de Cuentistas* (Community of Storytellers) among Latinx and Indigenous youth and collaborators both in and outside of the University. This *Comunidad de Cuentistas* is grounded in collaborative oral, visual, and written storytelling practices that create an intentional space to listen to and value youth voices. Following the calls of researchers like Riojas Clark, Bustos Flores, Smith, and Gonzalez (2015), *Nuestros Cuentos* aims to increase the representation of multicultural literature for children, specifically by encouraging (and creating spaces that encourage) Latinx and Indigenous youth to write and publish stories that represent their own experiences, histories, and interests. Thus, as we introduce the program and pedagogical methods presented for *Nuestros Cuentos* in this article, we will focus both on our own institutional and community settings, and on the relationships between participants involved in the development and teaching of Latinx literature in this particular context. The focus will be both on the Latinx literature being developed and shared through the project, and on the impact that these efforts had on the relationship and community building among the parties involved in the project.

¹ Although both Latinx and Indigenous youth participate in *Nuestros Cuentos*, our attention in this article responds to the call of the special issue that focuses on issues related to Latinx youth literature in specific. We also acknowledge that “Latinx” and “Indigenous” are not mutually exclusive categories of identity or culture and are implicated by policing colonial notions of identity and culture.

We want to clarify that although we are seeking to increase the existence and representation of Latinx literature, we aim to reach this objective by facilitating a process through which youth stories are shared, collaborated, and published for local distribution. Because our particular project is situated in an after-school program where youth gift us with their time after completing their regular school day, we sought to structure our activities around dynamic practices that offered opportunities to engage in activities that they may not have a chance to experience throughout the school day. While we could not directly influence the literature that our young collaborators were exposed to during school, our goal was to give them a space to share their own stories in our project. In other words, we structured our after-school program as a space for students to create (rather than solely analyze or discuss) literature that is representative of their experiences. In agreement with Nigel Hall (2000), we believe that “[i]t should be possible for children’s voices to be heard, right from the start, not only through what they say, but also through what they write” (p. 358). In this way, *Nuestros Cuentos* was developed to provide “a way to allow children the space and time to really use their own words,” without necessarily feeling the need to emulate the words of others (Hall, 2000, p. 358).

To introduce *Nuestros Cuentos*, we will begin by providing some background on the impetus for developing Latinx literature written by and for youth storytellers from Indigenous communities and communities of color. We will describe the physical contexts, histories, and the relationships that foreground *Nuestros Cuentos*, introducing the various community partners that build and sustain the *Comunidad de Cuentistas* embedded in this initiative. We will then move on to illustrate how this effort to encourage Latinx and Indigenous youth to write their own stories resulted in valuable lessons for understanding the relationships between language, culture, and community-building in the creation of Latinx literature in the 21st century. The purpose of the article, in line with the theme of this special issue, is to introduce the community-building practices of *Nuestros Cuentos* to make a broader argument about the power of listening to youth-directed storytelling in the development and sustainability of Latinx literature.

BACKGROUND

It is well documented that when it comes to diverse representation in children’s literature there remains a gap in reference to race (Myers, 2014; Rich 2012) as well as a gender (Yabroff, 2016). Despite the academic celebration of authors like Pat Mora, Walter Dean Myers, Julia Alvarez and many others who encompass contemporary canons of Latinx literature, stories by Indigenous writers and writers of color are not always reaching the eyes of the youth those stories are meant to empower and represent. Furthermore, as we demonstrate throughout this article, stories with Latinx youth at their center are limited (Aldama, 2015). Given the rich diversity that exists across the landscape of Latinx communities, Latinx literature has a lot of ground to cover to adequately and ethically represent the wide range of histories, languages, and cultures of Latinx people. To that end, *Nuestros Cuentos*, as a youth centered community building storytelling project, aims not only to create stories that center Indigenous, Latinx and

other youth of color, but at the same time to tell stories from a distinct point of view and set of lived experiences, opening up opportunities for diverse representation within Latinx literature. The purpose of this project, then, is not so much to provide an overview of existing Latinx literature, but rather, to describe a process through which Latinx youth stories were shared and distributed in a community space outside the constraints of formalized classroom practices.

History of Nuestros Cuentos

In December of 2012, a *New York Times* article entitled, “For young Latino readers, an image is missing,” called to attention to a gap in children’s literature for young Latinx readers. In 2010, just over 3% of the 3,400 children’s books published were written by and for Latinxs. Earlier that year, the 2012 *Pew Research Center*’s analysis of US student enrollment found Latinxs as the fastest growing population (Fry and Lopez, 2011). Furthermore, the research center found in 2011 that Latino students comprised nearly 25% of the overall nation’s public school enrollment. Considering the growing number of Latinxs in public schools, the gross underrepresentation of Latinxs in children’s books becomes completely unacceptable. Keeping in mind the statistics presented by the *New York Times* and the *Pew Research Center*’s report, the urgency of encouraging Latinx youth to envision themselves as storytellers and potential authors of their own stories is central to the development of the *Nuestros Cuentos* project. The importance of these types of projects have become more evident with the overwhelming enthusiasm exhibited by parents, school officials, and general community who seek opportunities for young Latinxs to be the authors and not just readers of their own stories.

Nuestros Cuentos is in part a university course focused on transforming a normative narrative of the US Latinx through a community literacy project intended to encourage young Latinx students to envision themselves as authors. Through dialogues with both the local school district’s Bilingual/Bicultural Executive Director and the Migrant Student Service Director from a research-intensive university, a partnership emerged to develop multi-aged collaborations serving Latinx populations both on and off campus. Within our dialogues, the issue of the lack of community-building among area Latinx communities, as well as the general absence of the acknowledgement of Latinx presence, emerged as the most relevant topics to the project development. In part, the objective of this project was to 1) empower Latinx and Indigenous students to own their narratives through sharing their lived experiences in their own voices and 2) create a multi-age, linguistic and cultural mentorship model focused on guiding students through predominantly white institutions.

Nuestros Cuentos was initially intended to be a collaborative storytelling project involving four distinct communities: a liberal arts residential college and the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) at a large Midwestern University, elementary students from a local school district, and the Indigenous Youth Empowerment Program (IYEP) in Lansing, Michigan. CAMP is a federally funded program offering former migrant youth the opportunity to transition from agricultural labor to higher education. IYEP, on the other hand, is a non-profit organization providing culturally appropriate community-building services to the Greater Lansing Area Urban

Indigenous community. Students from all groups come together over the course of a semester to create, to write, and illustrate stories of the youths' lives in Michigan.

Beginning in the Spring of 2013 with 18 Latino children from an area elementary school interested in sharing their lived experiences, the *Nuestros Cuentos* project has published four fully illustrated anthologies of 110 children's stories, four mini-documentaries, hosted three book unveilings that have drawn over 200 hundred community members at each event, and has produced over 100 pieces of accompanying artwork in the form of screen prints, retablos, collages, photos, and digital prints. Additionally, a 12' X 8' mural was created and installed permanently in a local elementary school. The multilingual books were published in Ojibway, Spanish, and English, and were made available and accessible to youth both at the book unveiling and through further distribution at local school libraries. Each of the stories represents Latinx and Indigenous students understanding of family, community, place, and identity.

In addition to the 110 4th through 6th grade Latinx and Indigenous Lansing School District students who have shared their stories, the project has brought together over 180 undergraduate students (representing multiple units on campus), six graduate students, as well as multiple faculty members contributing in their areas of expertise. Although there have been several iterations of *Nuestros Cuentos* since 2013, in this article, we focus specifically on the collaboration that took place during the Spring Semester of 2016. During this semester, the authors of this article came together to partake in *Nuestros Cuentos* to various capacities. Dr. J. Estrella Torrez is the director of *Nuestros Cuentos* who also taught the undergraduate course in a liberal arts residential college. Santos Ramos, Dr. Laura Gonzales, Victor Del Hierro, and Everardo Cuevas were Latinx graduate students whose participation in the project was structured as an internship for their department that included attending the undergraduate course, help plan curriculum, and facilitate activities with youth during the bi-weekly school visits. As graduate students at various stages in their careers Ramos, Gonzales, Del Hierro, and Cuevas also used this collaboration with *Nuestros Cuentos* as a way to research and practice community-oriented pedagogies. In addition, all authors of this article used their experience with *Nuestros Cuentos* to build community with other Latinxs as they worked through the challenges of navigating a Predominantly White Institution.

This course was composed of undergraduate humanities majors who would meet as a class twice per week, completing readings and assignments related to Latinx and Indigenous youth histories, storytelling, and community practices. Most of the undergraduate students did not have previous experience working with Latinx and Indigenous youth and the class time embedded in this project gave undergraduate students the space to combine in-class curriculum covering various strategies of working with youth with after-school engagement activities. The authors also modeled teacher/learner positionality and sought to avoid the oversimplified "server" and "served" binary (Torrez, 2015) that can permeate community engagement projects. This position was intended to promote an understanding for participants to imagine themselves as members of the communities, who had many new cultural competencies to learn from the youth storytellers. In turn, the undergraduate students were responsible for reading and learning

about working with Latinx and Indigenous youth, for developing and facilitating bi-weekly storytelling activities with the youth at the local middle schools, and for helping coordinate the end of semester public unveiling ceremony and distribution of youth stories. Through these structured relationship and mentoring possibilities, we attempted to engender moments of open and organic community building and storytelling, which went a long way in supporting everyone involved in telling their own stories.

The Power of Youth Storytellers in Creating a Comunidad de Cuentistas

In order to make space for the creation of Latinx literature written for and by youth storytellers, *Nuestros Cuentos* practices the power of stories through intentional moves that hope to form what we call a *Comunidad de Cuentistas* (Community of Storytellers). The initial moves we made were intended to make a space that encouraged youth to share their stories. It is not enough to simply ask or direct youth to write. Instead, it is important to begin this process of storytelling by establishing a layer of community trust and friendship that can lead to more vulnerable and open experiences with (and through) writing. In *Nuestros Cuentos*, this trust and friendship is established initially through community-building activities that interrogate and challenge traditional youth/adult power dynamics. In order to trust each other enough to write stories together, collaborators in *Nuestros Cuentos* spent time building relationships, getting to know each other's interests, histories, and experiences, and forming bonds with each other throughout the process. A *Comunidad de Cuentistas*, in turn, is started when youth are open and feel comfortable sharing their stories with collaborators.

Once youth are comfortable enough to share their stories, to sustain our *Comunidad de Cuentistas*, we focus on ensuring that these stories are valued and respected. It is important to not only encourage youth to share their stories, but to also build value and respect for the voices of youth into the community storytelling space. This happens by engaging in verbal acceptance and appreciation through our group analysis and discussion of youth stories. Furthermore, community partners, also shared personal stories to affirm and compare to the stories that youth shared. Through the sharing of stories, all parties involved could be vulnerable while providing intergenerational solidarity that was foundational to the project.

The relevance and power of youth's stories is described by developmental psychologist Susan Engel when she explains one of the functions that stories play for children, stating, "[t]he stories we construct not only order experience but order it in ways that are meaningful to us" (1994, p. 32). Engel argues that youth are already telling stories to make sense of the world and often use those stories to communicate. For this reason, in building Latinx literature that is grounded in youth storytelling practices, it is important to foreground an appreciation for and a respect for listening to the ideas and diverse voices that youth bring to the table. It is important for all collaborators in *Nuestros Cuentos* to take turns sharing and listening, with all members earning and receiving validation and gratitude for their time, effort, and shared vulnerability.

To help all members of the *Comunidad de Cuentistas* feel comfortable sharing, the community also has to honor how youth present their experiences through their own lenses and their own words. We cannot deny youth the opportunity to use storytelling as a way to process

hardships and negative experiences, asking or requiring them to focus on “happy” or positive messages and endings. Instead, storytelling with Latinx youth, at least for us working in the *Nuestros Cuentos* partnership, required an openness to the messiness inherent in the experiences and transitions being experienced by Latinx youth throughout their daily interactions.

Julia López-Robertson (2012) illustrates the benefits of Latina youth storytelling as an approach that “allow[s] children to reflect on their lives and use their everyday funds of knowledge and ways of expressing knowledge...to make meaning and share it with others” (p. 230). Understanding the power of narrative as both a method to “think with and to communicate,” *Nuestros Cuentos* focuses on storytelling in order to make this space accessible and conducive to Latinx youth through the valuing of the stories they tell (Engel, pg. 26). López-Robertson (2012) further emphasizes the ways that youth can be empowered to use storytelling as a way to encourage their participation and increase the diversity of narratives that are brought into Latinx literature, including complex topics like race, class, and gender. Due to this emphasis on inclusion, youth in *Nuestros Cuentos* are thus offered a space to process the complexities of their lives in shared spaces. Our goal is not to limit the shape of our youth partners’ stories, but rather to create a community space where youth feel comfortable sharing their stories in whatever form they see fit. Starting as oral stories told in our community space, were then molded, negotiated and transformed over our time together into the stories that would eventually be written down as the content of *Nuestros Cuentos*.

RESULTS

The Spring 2016 iteration of *Nuestros Cuentos* provided each of us with an opportunity to learn about and hone in our orientations to community building and storytelling with Latinx youth. In addition to the *Nuestros Cuentos* book that was published and distributed to families, local classroom libraries and school district administrators, the stories written and shared by our middle-school partners, and the experience of writing these stories collaboratively, provide important findings and implications to be considered in Latinx literature and pedagogies. More specifically, our collaborative experience establishing a *Comunidad de Cuentistas* with *Nuestros Cuentos* helped us understand how Latinx literature written by youth represents the diversity in language and culture embedded in Latinx communities. In addition, the *Nuestros Cuentos* collaboration highlights the important relationship between storytelling and community building that is so central to Latinx experiences. We emphasize that the process and character of our *Comunidad de Cuentistas* has been specific to our local community and results from the formation of relationships with students and their families not only during the semester which we describe in detail throughout this article, but (in some cases) over the course of several years. For us, this speaks to a responsibility to respond to the localized needs and cultural perspectives of the communities with which we partner, as these can vary and greatly impact students’ ability to participate in a project.

To make space for youth language and culture, Latinx literature produced through *Nuestros Cuentos* had to honor not only heritage languages, but also other languages youth navigate, including text-speak and contemporary slang. Furthermore, producing Latinx literature with youth through *Nuestros Cuentos* helped us remain conscious of youth's agency in the stories they were interested in writing, even when the reality and vulnerability of these stories made certain adult partners uncomfortable. Themes like death, natural disasters, and otherness, reflected our youth writer's everyday experiences and it was important to make space for these discussions. Finally, the centering of story and storytelling in *Nuestros Cuentos* helped to build a community around the project intended to honor and value the diverse identities of Latinx youth. In this way, *Nuestros Cuentos*' emphasis on community building through story aligns our efforts with Django Paris' *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, grounded in the "explicit goal [of] supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers" (p. 95, 2012).

In order for *Nuestros Cuentos* to create a space where Latinx and Indigenous youth felt comfortable writing and sharing their stories, we had to establish a *Comunidad de Cuentistas* (Community of Storytellers) among all parties involved in the project. A *Comunidad de Cuentistas* is a space where youth and adults openly negotiate shared agency, and where stories emerge through structured, open-ended, codefined practices and through the relationships built and sustained among collaborators. This *Comunidad de Cuentistas*, in turn, is what facilitates the storytelling practices that result in the publication of the *Nuestros Cuentos* books, increasing much needed diverse representation in children's literature both through the products of these published books and through the process and practice of collaborative storytelling. Based on our experiences building a *Comunidad de Cuentistas* in *Nuestros Cuentos*, in the sections that follow, we elaborate on the lessons and implications stemming from our collaboration, highlighting the role of mentorship, language, culture, and community in the complex work of honoring and representing the multilingual and multicultural experiences of Latinx youth going to school and living in Michigan.

Language and Culture in Latinx Youth Stories

In "Multicultural Latino Children's Literature: A Tool to Enrich the Lives and the Learning of Latino Bilingual Learners," Riojas Clark and Bustos Flores (2015) explain, "Books for our Latino children should represent concrete reflections of culture and language experiences and weave them seamlessly into storylines and characters' creations and actions" (p.3). Like the lived experiences of Latinx communities, representations of Latinx cultures and languages in literature should be organic and diverse, moving away from colonial notions of "authenticity" to instead aim for diverse representations of the many languages and practices enacted by Latinx communities today.

The *Comunidad de Cuentistas* in *Nuestros Cuentos* gave youth the opportunity to write their own stories in their own words, creating interesting spaces for culture and linguistic convergences resulting from students' own experiences and interests. Rather than telling youth that they needed to include their heritage languages and/or cultural representations in their

stories, the community building embedded into the project, grounded in traditional Latinx and Anishinaabe oral storytelling practices, gave way for a creativity and freedom that allowed students to move across their languages and cultures to create stories that represent their identities through their own lenses.

For example, meet Iyanah (depicted in Figure 1), a fifth-grader who wrote a story for *Nuestros Cuentos* about two characters running through a school in search for their missing cell phone.



Figure 1: Iyanah, a Cuentista (Storyteller) in *Nuestros Cuentos*

During a consultation with an adult collaborator in *Nuestros Cuentos*, Iyanah read a piece of the dialogue she included between the two characters who would be depicted in her story. As she read this dialogue, Iyanah broke from reading directly from her paper to explain to her collaborator, “Then [the character] said ‘Y/N,’ which means “your name.” In this specific instance, Iyanah brought in text-speak into her story, creating an organic representation of how she envisions high school students speaking as they search for their cell phone. Although Iyanah does not include the clarification of what “Y/N” means within her story itself, when she described the story to her collaborator (one Iyanah perceives as an adult professional), Iyanah choose to clarify the meaning of this phrase in order to clearly communicate with her audience. In this case, Iyanah’s inclusion of text-speak within her story might signify the ways in which she embeds her own communicative practices into her writing, while her clarification for the collaborator echoes how Iyanah perceives an older audience member interpreting her writing. The excerpt below illustrates other portions of Iyanah’s story, where she continues to incorporate text-speak and other relevant pop-culture references into her narrative:

From Iyanah’s Story: The College Disaster

Foxy and Bonnie were riding their bikes at college when all of a sudden they saw a singer.

“O...M....GOODNESS!!” They said.

They ran up to the singer and realized it was Meghan Trainor.
Foxy and Bonnie said, “Can we get an autograph and a picture?”
Meghan said, “Sure!”
Foxy and Bonnie realized that they had lost their cell phones at college
and couldn’t take a picture.

Although in her story Iyanah was navigating between her discourses in text-speak and what she might define as more formal writing, this awareness of the need to both bring in and clarify discursive practices for various audiences was not an isolated case in this project.

In another instance, Iyanah worked with another middle-school cuentista (storyteller), David, to write a speech that would be delivered at the book unveiling for *Nuestros Cuentos*. During their planning process, David and Iyanah worked together to discuss what they should write about to share with everyone in attendance at the event, noting that what they said needed to be understood by teachers, administrators, community members, as well as parents. It was at this point that David and Iyanah decided that they needed to write a speech in both English and in Spanish, in order to make their speech accessible to families who felt more comfortable with one language or the other. It’s important to note here that neither David nor Iyanah self-identified as fluent speakers of Spanish. Although each of them have family members who speak Spanish and not English (and vice versa), David and Iyanah both felt more comfortable speaking English. However, for the purposes of this important book unveiling, these two young students decided on their own that they needed to write and deliver a collaborative speech in both languages. They decided to begin by writing their speech in English, and to then work with one of the graduate students in the project to start a translation. Finally, in order to make sure that the speech was clearly represented in a version of Spanish that would be understood by the families, both David and Iyanah decided to take their translated speeches home, where they would work with family members who speak Spanish to ensure that their speech was clear in both languages.

Through this process, David and Iyanah illustrate the power of self-representation in Latinx literature as described by Clark, Flores, Smith, and Gonzalez (2015), using linguistic and cultural references in their storytelling to represent not only their own strengths and abilities, but also those of the family members and elders who are important to them. In this way, by creating and sharing stories that include a broad range of cultural and linguistic representations (e.g., text-speak, Spanish, English), students in *Nuestros Cuentos* wrote stories that represent the experiences and histories of contemporary Latinx and Indigenous youth—those who move across languages, platforms, and communities fluidly, both in and beyond their classrooms.

Storytelling as Community Building

While the book we produced through *Nuestros Cuentos* captures stories written by the youth, what is less visible from an outside perspective is the day-to-day storytelling that occurred throughout the semester. These stories took place as we began each day with snacks and group conversation, through the daily games and “ice-breaker” activities we facilitated, and they provided a easy transition into the writing portion of the curriculum by helping us to first become

more familiar with one another. Designing these social experiences into the program was integral to the establishment of relationships and the founding of a *Comunidad de Cuentistas* among all members of the group, because it provided us with opportunities to listen to stories the youth would tell organically. Taking a cue from auditory neuroscientist Seth S. Horowitz (2012), who writes that “[t]he richness of life doesn’t lie in the loudness and the beat, but in the timbres and the variations that you can discern if you simply pay attention,” listening closely to the variations of youth stories also helped mentors to more fully engage with the nuances of their writing.

It was not uncommon for the youth to focus our conversations on some of their favorite movies, cartoons, and video game characters. *Dragon Ball Z*, for example, is an anime television series which was frequently discussed, and it inspired several parts of David’s story, “Super Hero Friends.” David drew openly from his favorite *Dragon Ball Z* characters, incorporating a number of plot devices and approaches to character development he had become familiar with through the cartoon show. The excerpt below illustrates how David blended cartoon elements and references to superheroes in his story:

From David’s Story: “Superhero Friends”

Dave replies, “Oh yeah I forgot we had powers.” Timmy says, “Well, get started.” FWOOSH. “Done,” Dave said.

Timmy says, “Well these costumes are looking good.”

Timmy and Dave begin walking home.

“Let’s go watch some TV once we get home,” Timmy says.

Dave says, “Great idea. We should see what’s on TV anyways.”

Timmy turns on the TV and the news is on. Dave says, “Whoa, it’s a bank robbery.”

Timmy says, “it is a great chance to test out our super powers and use them on the bad guys.” So then Timmy and Dave put on their suits and went to save the day.

While David’s written work provides one story that incorporates superhero elements, conversations in other parts of the program provided mentors with important contextual stories, which showed us that his characters had personal histories and were simultaneously wrapped up in other storylines. Many of David’s writing decisions were made with an awareness of how his story would play with the characters’ experiences in storylines written by other authors, and when asking for advice on his writing, he would often preface his inquiry by first asking if we could remember a certain character or storyline that he had described for us in the past. For this reason, it was important for us to not only provide mechanical writing advice to students like David, but to listen—and to show that we had been listening—to the complicated narratives being worked out in both the spoken and written stories we were being told.



Figure 2: David Writes and Illustrates his Story, “Super Hero Friends”

Annabelle Nelson (2009) describes storytelling as a community-oriented form of communication with Indigenous roots, noting that it is “the traditional

method...of transmitting values and establishing cultural identity and self-concept” and of nurturing the innate gifts of the individual toward a place and time that allows the individual to contribute more effectively to the group (pgs. 209-210). In this sense, storytelling is not just a vehicle by which people come to gain an understanding of their surroundings, but also a social process through which we continually build relationships and establish trust with one another. David’s work in the program reflects the commitment of *Nuestros Cuentos* to storytelling as community building, and it highlights the opportunities for multi-layered and community-oriented mentorship that emerged amongst students from many different levels of education. While graduate and undergraduate students offered advice about writing and stories, the youth offered their own insights about storytelling, in addition to teaching us about a range of new popular culture and media. These intergenerational interactions were not unidirectional in the sense that mentors were responsible for dispensing knowledge. Conversely, the *Comunidad de Cuentistas* in *Nuestros Cuentos* enacted a form of mentorship that encouraged Latinx and Indigenous youth to create and tell stories of their own, and to be partners in the process of community building.

IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

We can remember Dr. Torrez instructing the graduate and undergraduate students early in the semester that “*Nuestros Cuentos* is not just about teaching writing, it’s about *building community through writing*.” The sustained success of *Nuestros Cuentos* as a storytelling project has been the emphasis on community building. To center community first means to center relations between people and land first. Building from these relations, we must listen critically and make space for stories to emerge. Through these practices, *Nuestros Cuentos* offers a model

for youth to locate themselves within children's literature. As Latinx scholars, centering community in our work yielded stories, literature, and experiences relevant to the local contexts we live in, not for an imagined, nationalistic pan-Latinx identity.

Michigan historian Delia Fernandez (2013) invites scholars to consider the dynamics of "modest sized cities" (as compared to large urban centers like Chicago and Los Angeles) and what they can reveal about Latinx identity and community formation (76). Fernandez (2013) goes on to say, "Although culture is often represented through music and food, it is actually the affective connections between people that foster the environment that nurtures the reproduction of cultural practice" (p. 99). We take lead from Fernandez's (2013) claims as we unpack the stories, relations and community that make up *Nuestros Cuentos*. Through the development of our *Comunidad de Cuentistas*, our community building and storytelling (re)defined the definition of Latinx for our communal needs and purposes. By publishing in Ojibwe, in addition to Spanish and English, this was one way that *Nuestros Cuentos* reflected the interests that youth wanted to share with us and make public as they challenged and reimagined *Latinx* in our local context.

Terese Guinsatao Monberg (2008) argues that we must be conscious and critical of our orientation to power as we strive to create spaces for youth to tell their own stories, stating, "Community members are seen as research objects to be categorized rather than as human beings who might be affected by the methods and outcomes of academic knowledge production" (98). To interrogate and build on our contextual and local relations means we must listen honestly and critically. Listening, as described by Indigenous, Feminist and women of color, is a practice of critically analyzing the information, representations and/or knowledges we are hearing and not hearing. To continue in this type of listening, we must adopt what Royster calls "a habit of critical questioning" (qtd. in Monberg 2008, p. 87) and be willing to be critical about our own ears, eyes and senses as we listen to the stories Indigenous and youth of color tell.

By centering community and building a *Comunidad de Cuentistas*, the relationships we cultivated in *Nuestros Cuentos* through ongoing listening, storytelling, and writing, encouraged youth and all participants to tell new and re-imagined stories through the voices and subjectivities present in our space. For us as community engaged scholars, our experiences gesture heavily to the importance of listening in the production of youth literature: who are we listening to? how are we listening? what are we listening for? Our immediate answer is to localize this listening in local community contexts with the goal of sharing local stories with local audiences. *Nuestros Cuentos* differs from professionally published literature because the publication and editorial process is completely subjective to the local youth authors' voices. This offered us an opportunity to add to the literature in our local community and amplify the voices of our youth in shaping the discourse of Latinx representation for ourselves and our community.

CONCLUSION

Storytelling can be broadly defined, understood, and practiced. In some occasions, it is used as moment to share knowledge, experiences, or impart valuable lessons. Often, storytelling

is also used to create a relationship between storyteller and listener. In *Nuestros Cuentos*, storytelling served two purposes: 1) to create a space for stories that are often left out of the larger narrative or told about a specific community without the voices of community members themselves; and 2) to build relationships across linguistic, cultural, age, and educational boundaries. The need for these types of projects is not new; however, *Nuestros Cuentos* is among the first initiatives of this kind driven entirely by the call for Latinx youth to share their stories in the format of their choosing. *Nuestros Cuentos* opens a space for Latinx youth to guide the process and the outcome of their own stories, while fostering an environment for university students to learn how to establish meaningful collaborative partnerships with youth.

We believe that initiatives like *Nuestros Cuentos*, and the community-building practices that emerge from these projects, can serve as valuable sources of empowerment for students of all levels and backgrounds. In our case, the university students in this project entered *Nuestros Cuentos* assuming that it was focused on writing stories with youth. The youth, on the other hand, entered the project knowing that writing was secondary to their goal of learning about “life” from the university students. In the end, it was the university students who learned invaluable “life” lessons and the youth who gained an appreciation for writing. The youth walked away from the project with a sense that they could own their writing, their story, and give voice to a narrative often used to describe the Latinx community. In addition, knowing that they could shape the stories often told about them as Latinx youth was empowering for all parties involved in the project, fueling the connections that guided this *Comunidad de Cuentistas* to continue writing and thinking together.

The need for a *Comunidad de Cuentistas* is increasingly becoming crucial given the present political climate, where political figures and certain media outlets are putting forward anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric. Latinx youth voices are critical in combatting the gross misrepresentation of the Latinx community. *Nuestros Cuentos* prompts participants to see the world from multiple perspectives, to inject their voices in conversations shaping their lives, and to be agents of change for a stronger community— initiatives we imagine are needed in defining Latinx literature for future Latinx generations to come.

REFERENCES

- Aldama, F. L. (Ed.). (2015). *Latino/a literature in the classroom: Twenty-first-century approaches to teaching*. Routledge.
- Clark, E. R., Flores, B. B., Smith, H. L., & Gonzalez, D. A. (2015). *Multicultural literature for Latino bilingual children: Their words, their worlds*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Clark, E. R., & Flores, B. B. (2015). Multicultural Latino children's literature: A tool to enrich the lives and the learning of Latino bilingual learners. *Multicultural Literature for Latino Bilingual Children: Their Words, Their Worlds*, 3.
- Engel, S. (1995). *The stories children tell: Making sense of the narratives of childhood*. Macmillan.
- Fernández, D. (2013). Becoming Latino: Mexican and Puerto Rican Community formation in Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1926–1964. *Michigan Historical Review*, 39(1), 71-100.
- Fry, R., & Lopez, M. H. (2012). Hispanic student enrollments reach new highs in 2011. *Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center*.
- Gallego, C. (2014). Introduction: Migration and movement (s) in Chicano/a Literature. *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 70(2), 1-7.
- Horowitz, S. (2012). The science and art of listening. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/11/opinion/sunday/why-listening-is-so-much-more-than-hearing.html>
- López-Robertson, J. (2012). “Esta página me recordó”: Young Latinas using personal life stories as tools for meaning-making. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 35(2), 217-233.
- Monberg, T. G. (2008). Listening for Legacies: Or, How I Began to Hear Dorothy Laigo Cordova, the Pinay Behind the Podium Known as FANHS. *Representations: Doing Asian American Rhetoric*, 83-105.
- Myers, C. (2014). The apartheid of children's literature. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/the-apartheid-of-childrens-literature.html>
- Myers, W. D. (2014). Where are the people of color in children's books?. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/where-are-the-people-of-color-in-childrens-books.html>
- Nelson, A. (2009). Storytelling and transformational learning. *Counterpoints*, 341, 207-221.

- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93-97.
- Rich, M. (2012). For Young Latino Readers, an Image Is Missing. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/05/education/young-latino-students-dont-see-themselves-in-books.html>
- Torrez, J. S. (2015). Construyendo comunidad: Developing a bicultural and bilingual framework For community building. *Service-learning and civic engagement: A sourcebook*. O. Delano-Oriaran, M. Park, and S. Fondrie (Eds.). Sage Publications,
- Torrez, J. S. (Ed.). (2016). *Nuestros Cuentos: Let's Go on an Adventure*. Michigan State University Press.
- Yabroff, J. (2016). Why are there so few girls in children's books?. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/01/08/why-are-there-so-few-girls-in-childrens-books/?utm_term=.a37e32ca0315