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Becoming

Ada Vilageliu Díaz

Reflection

During the pandemic, I created a virtual story time for my son, his school, and other children of color. I wanted to support their literacy journey through positive images of children who look like them. When we were doing online schooling, I noticed that his school Spanish textbook only had one image of a Black person, and that was to teach the word “behind.” We started to color his workbooks making all the dads Black like my child’s father. I was painfully reminded of the colorism and anti-Black racism in my Latinx community, and I wanted to counter those images. I wanted children like my son to read stories about BIPOC protagonists and to be encouraged to read and inspired to create their own books. The story time program ran for half a year and included weekly events with BIPOC authors reading their books to bilingual elementary school children. Children were also invited to read books and draw themselves. I created the story time with my Latinx students, who were very proud to be supporting their own communities.

We were in my son’s toddler bed. He was still small enough to fit, and he liked the safety of the bed’s raised sides. I had placed a small bookcase next to it so that he could build and see his book collection. As a literature instructor, I wished to get him to become a nerdy bookie like myself or at least to discover the pleasure of reading and discovering new worlds. I opened the first page of a book about the Canary Islands that I had purchased there at the last minute. As I read each page, I felt proud to pass on the book’s cultural references about my homeland, but something was very wrong about this book.

We had recently returned from Tenerife in the Canary Islands to visit the family after three years of the COVID pandemic’s ups and downs. We wanted to be safe, so I didn’t travel during the pandemic. Spain was also on a very different pandemic schedule, and I was already too stressed out with remote work and homeschooling to even plan a trip of those proportions. However, I realized my son didn’t remember his first and only visit to the island. He was too little to remember the smells, colors, sounds, sights, or even the familiar hugs. Family was reduced to facetime calls in Spanish. His English overtaking the sounds and structures of my mother tongue.

I was worried that my son would not learn how to read during virtual schooling. I felt the responsibility and the weight of having to teach him how to read in English and Spanish.

Gramma used to read to him. Each session started with the words “Read, read, read.” The daily ritual of hugs in the sofa or rocking chair. Her arms around the joyful little boy, sweet and caring, arms of experience. We were each delighted to increase

his vocabulary, me in Spanish, she in English. He used to call her ABCs and 123s instead of Gramma. Their bond is one of love of learning. She used to come to his play-group classes before he got accepted into daycare, and she managed to take him to his first day in daycare before he turned two years old. A picture of her holding my son in her arms. Her smile wide like the sun.

She read to and cared for him until she died. I had to call an ambulance to take her to the hospital when I returned from teaching one of my adjunct jobs. She was laying in the sofa in pain, my son at her feet. I suspected that her stomach pain could be related to a heart attack. She had heart problems already, and I knew that women are sometimes misdiagnosed because our heart attacks could be in the jaw or the stomach. I had read that in a poster in the emergency room, and I insisted that she went to the hospital. Unlike the other times, I couldn't go with her because I had to stay home with my child. The ambulance took a very long time to pick her up. I went upstairs with my son, closed the door, and drew the curtains so my child, her only grandchild, could not see how paramedics took her out. She didn't return that night to our home by the Anacostia river. I received the call from my husband, telling me in painful gulps of air and silence. They simply said she was found dead in her room. An elderly Black woman ignored in her emergency room; her pain dismissed for hours. The darkness. The moonlight coming from the window. Silence.

Now I didn't know how to do it on my own. She was an expert educator in literacy. One of the few Black women to earn a Master's degree of her generation. How could I teach my son to read? How could I, a Spanish-speaking Latina immigrant, teach my Black child to read in English and to love himself at the same time? I was still trying to figure out my own ancestry, erased by colonial powers.

The summer I was planning my literacy project was violent. It had been violent for years. Images of Black men and women being murdered. Families and children assaulted across from the White House. I refused to watch. I knew those images from before. The pain was overwhelming. Pushed to nighttime when I could feel it, away from my child. At the same time, I had to prepare my Black son for those images and experiences. And I wished his Gramma was there to comfort all of us and teach me how to support my child. Her absence, a painful reminder that Black children need their Black family, one that we had lost to other unfortunate events.

At home, I had been building a book collection that featured children who looked like him so that I could build his self-esteem. I wanted him to feel proud of being a Black child. We had books with Black male protagonists, Black scientists, Black artists, etc. I believed that those books would counter any textbooks or content that centered whiteness. I realized that when the school sent us a Spanish textbook that didn't feature any Black images other than one Black man used to teach the word "behind." We started coloring the white Latino fathers in another Spanish workbook. I didn't feel that I could trust any school or textbook to support my son's learning through healthy images of Black children or Black people. I remembered my own educational journey and how the textbooks centered whiteness and erased the history of my islands, brutally attacked by Spanish colonizadores: gods replaced, languages erased, memories buried, while white European tourists use our home as a

playground and Spaniards mock our accents. I had been struggling with my own Canary Island heritage because it had been purposely removed from my own textbooks – other than stories about flowers, animals, and volcanoes.

This book that we were reading in his small comfy bed was supposed to somewhat help me fill this gap. The Canary Islands were “discovered” in 1492 by Christopher Columbus, which led to the conquista, the enslavement, the displacement, and the whitening. I wanted to find books that included historical and cultural references about these islands so that he would feel proud. We came from warriors and survivors. We had a culture and a history before the violence. But this book we were reading was telling us that the islands were *regalos* gifted to Spain. After screaming in horror, I looked at the author’s bio. The writer was from Spain and not the Canary Islands. This was the type of colonial mentality I wanted to counter. The legacy of colonialism. The legacy of Franco’s dictatorship and nationalistic drive. Some books are harmful, like this one. Like the one we found at my child’s school that we tossed into the trash, one with a white protagonist and a Native person who was listed as an object in a museum.

In a meeting with the Latinx students I was advising, we discussed how to start a community engagement project, and we thought of a book drive at first. The logistics were complicated during the pandemic, and we couldn’t find a bookstore or library partner, so we chose to do a virtual storytime instead. We wanted to support Latinx families and provide educational content during online learning by readings bilingual books by diverse Latinx authors to their children.

The storytime we were planning had to showcase healthy and positive images of children of color. I realized that the best stories came from authors who themselves were members of those communities. At the same time, it was harder to find books published by BIPOC authors. In the case of Latinx writers, most books in Spanish were translations of books written by white authors. Most children’s books also featured white protagonists or animals. I also realized that the free books we had been receiving from the Imagination Library did not include Latinx stories. We needed to showcase and celebrate the stories written by those writers who were providing joyful and complex images of BIPOC children, who were writing to and from their communities.

We created it together. My Latinx students provided me with the love and support I didn’t know I needed as a Latina faculty member. Latinx administrators at my child’s school and a diverse group of parents also contributed to the planning. They made me realize that the school needed more books featuring LGBTQ+ and other minority stories. I told my son that this was his story time project too, and that he was the protagonist in all of this. He was not too interested in the story time at first, and I had to convince him to sit down and pay attention to the screen when he was more excited about seeing his best friend at the virtual meetings. The authors we invited to participate were happy to support our vision. One of my Latinx students became the teaching artist and created art activities for each book. Some children would join every week, happy to listen, speak, and draw. We were also joined by other families in different states (and my own family in the island). My best friend and her daugh-

ter helped us by inviting a Native author and preparing a bead medallion activity for the children. Her daughter taught us how to draw intricate, elaborate bead medallion patterns based on her own family tradition. Her mother was holding the camera so that we could all see it in detail. After the demonstration, we all tried to draw our own versions of the bead medallion using crayons and paper at home. It was a community experience.

Our weekly meetings were a ritual of happy faces in little squares, fidgeting, listening, and jumping with joy. Many came every single Wednesday, ready to listen, engage, and draw themselves. Their smiles filled the screen, and their little hands would go up in excitement when they could ask questions to the authors themselves. They would ask very insightful questions about the creative process and the storyline. For example, one time, a small child made suggestions to Carlos Aponte on what image he could have added at the end of his book (something I can't remember right now). These children, after all, are his audience, and Carlos agreed with a huge smile that the comment made sense. There was another brilliant child who was our star reader. She would volunteer to read her favorite books at the beginning of many of our sessions, a protagonist in her own right, her expert reader's voice commanding the space. We were so enchanted by their energy, joy, and creativity that we would keep the event going until each child who wanted to speak could do so. In fact, many authors stayed until the very end to see what the children would draw and create with our teaching artists. They would proudly show their drawings and describe every little detail of their imagination. We would all cheer and celebrate their weekly creations.

And the little boy who didn't want to read started to create his own books. We would fold pages in two and create a bundle that I would staple together in the shape of a book. During story time sessions, during his own virtual class sessions, and while talking to his grandparents in Tenerife, he would draw ninjas. That was and still is my son's favorite character. In his books, he and his best friend became ninjas who fought against evil. One time, he wanted to "read" his book during a storytime event. He wanted to be the invited author. I let him show some of his pages, full of drawings, while I quickly transitioned to the guest author's reading.

I also wanted to write my own book, but I didn't know who I was. I took a virtual creative writing class with Mayra Santos Febres in Puerto Rico, who challenged me to write in Spanish and to craft my memoir, but I was only able to create fragments and images of ancestral dreams and visions. My family history on my mother's side seemed incomplete. I didn't know my roots. During a CCW fellowship opportunity with Herstory Writers, I continued to put the pieces together and tried to write my story again. I was being trained to facilitate memoir-writing sessions with communities, but my story was still stuck inside. I asked my mother to confirm my suspicion that we could be related to a Guanche warrior in the island of Tenerife. My great-grandmother's last name was Bencomo, but a clerical error and a judge decided to remove her last name from her own children's names. In the Canary Islands, we follow the Spanish model for naming. Each child gets the father's last name and the mother's last name after that. In total, everyone has two last names. When I did my family tree, an assignment I also gave to my students at Howard University as part

of their reading Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns*, I found out that my mother's grandmother was named after Bencomo, the last warrior against the Spanish conquistadores. No one ever said anything to us about it. It felt part secret, part ignorance, part shame, part mystery.

When my child and I visited the Canary Islands, I made sure to share with him the story of the Guanches as his ancestors. I spent a week at the library of the Universidad de la Laguna, where I had received my BA in English and DEA (now replaced with an MA) in American literature but graduated not knowing about my own culture and heritage. At the library, my desk was full of books written by the priests and the colonizers on the one hand, and by the Canary Island researchers on the other. Stories of how ignorant, savage, and primitive we were countered by stories of how we used to pray, heal, and live before and after the conquest. It did not feel real. It still felt like I was reading about people who did not exist anymore.

It was the English Program holiday meeting and the Sigma Tau Delta English International Honor Society induction at work. I had to bring my son because the meeting was in the afternoon. We were a small group of faculty and students. I was one of the advisors to Sigma Tau Delta, and one of my students was being inducted. Other faculty, alumni, and students were joining online as we had a laptop set up on a table so that they could hear and participate. There were cookies, fruits, and drinks in this corner room surrounded by windows leading to a busy Connecticut Ave. I prepared a plate for my son and set him up with activity books, stickers, and his iPad. I wanted to keep him entertained and distracted and expected him to eat his snacks and watch Netflix while we conducted the meeting.

He stood up and introduced himself. Hi! My name is Elijah y soy descendiente de Bencomo.

Author Bio

Ada Vilageliu-Díaz received her Ph.D. in English from Howard University and her B.A. in English Philology from Universidad de La Laguna, Canary Islands. She currently teaches writing and literature courses at the University of the District of Columbia. Her research focuses on rhetoric and composition, community-based teaching, community-based scholarship, Latinx, Afro-Latinx, and Caribbean literature and writing. Her poetry has been published in *Knocking on the Door of the White House: Latina and Latino Poets in Washington, D.C.* In 2014, She directed the documentary *Near the River* about environmental women leaders in DC. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, she created--with the students of the UDC Latinx Student Association--a virtual story time featuring Latinx children's books.