

I am all that I see...
The Power of Reflection, Inside and Out
 by maya christina gonzalez

Imagine.

I love my imagination. It is wide and inclusive and powerful. I play with seeing myself as a young girl. In every direction I turn, I am met with sights and sounds that reflect who I am. All of this conspires to tell me that I am a competent resource for my community, holding gifts that are uniquely mine to claim and develop and explore without limitation! In my home, in the town that I live in, in my school, in the public library and the books I hold, the movies I see, in the songs that I hear, I understand my courage and strong-girl-stature. It is with great ease that I grow like a flower in to the expanse of the sky. I can grow as far as the sky can hold me. My roots dig into the earth as deep as I need them to. I am all that I see. This is how I experience myself, how I experience the potential and the beauty in all others and how we fit together to create our world.

I hold this imagined story like a yard stick and recall the life that I have lived.

I grew up in the Mojave Desert in the 1960's and 70's. I remember a lot of beige: the empty lots, the sand storms, the stucco houses. The desert wind would blow so hard I had to push against it to make my way home. It picked up the dust and the sand and stung my face with its force. It covered everything the color of the desert. Everything beige.

I don't think I fully understood it at the time, but that's how a lot of life felt growing up. As if everything was the same color and I had to push against some invisible force to make it home. I grew up Chicana and bi-racial in what seemed like a white, white world. I would not have had those words then. All I knew then was that I could never find books at the library that felt like me and I often found myself drawing my image onto the blank pages in the backs of books, seemingly because I needed some place to draw.

Now of course, I imagine that I wanted to see myself there. My round, Chicana, girl face inside the covers of a real book: hard cover, library shelf, reference label on the spine. As if I knew my image belonged there reflected in the "real world."

When I wrote and illustrated my first children's book I wrote about where I did finally find my reflection as a child. It was not in the few Latino faces I saw on television or in movies as gang members, maids or prostitutes. It was also not in the pages of books and magazines or on billboards. It was nearly nowhere to be found in the "real world." I found it in the sky.

I grew up on a cul-de-sac or a dead-end. Our house was the one at the very end that you would drive into if it was a through street. I used to say we lived at the "dead" end. But, if you walked out in front of our house at dusk, right there straight ahead, you could see the sun set. It was in perfect line. In my child's mind it was as if each day the sun positioned itself for its finest moment of glory just for me to see. Sunset became my favorite time of day. The sky would smear hot pink, bloody red and purple with orange edges. There in the

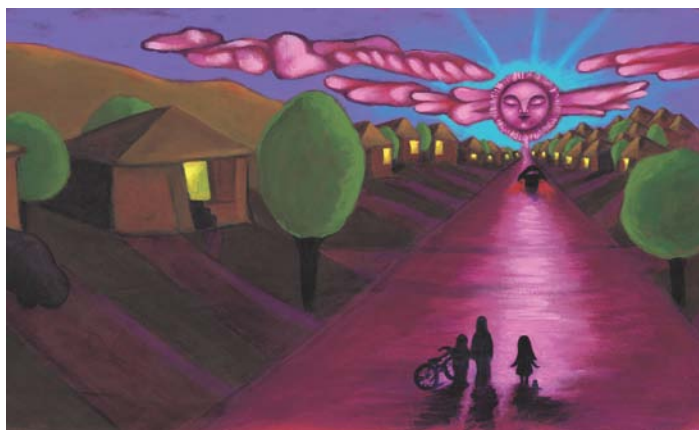
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center, the sun burned, a singular eye of fire. The power of the sunset was so fierce, it turned everything in my world pink, *hot pink*. It transformed the beige of the day into something that made sense to me, that felt more like me. Color!

As a grown-up and an artist, I have worked to reconcile the effects of not seeing myself reflected in the “real world” as a child. I have painted my round, Chicana, woman face as well as my girl face in my fine art, using the power of creativity to claim my face and place in the here and now. As an extension of this personal work, I have had the opportunity to paint my round, Chicana, girl face in book after book as a children’s book illustrator, no longer relegated to scratching myself onto the blank pages at the back of someone else’s book. I now fill all the pages with my own paintings *and* words, exactly where long ago and far away I intuited that I belonged, fully reflected page upon page. Doing this over and over has changed me. I still do it for the child that I was, for the girl in the desert. But I know very deeply now that I belong. So now I paint for every child who is invisible, excluded, denied: all children of color, girls in general, LGBT children and differently-abled children. I have learned the importance of seeing myself authentically reflected in my media. It is the wordless, intrinsic acknowledgement that I am here. I exist. I belong. I contribute in my presence and my experience. Clearly, this is not my story alone. I believe every child needs to hold a book in their hands that feels true... a book to find themselves, their face... a book in which to land and rest and then to dream.

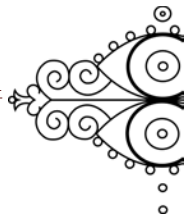


One of my favorite things to do is to go to the library, although it is still tricky to find a book that reflects the child that I was. Less than one percent of the children’s books published each year are written and illustrated by or about Latinos and our experience. But we *are* still here, and now in ever increasing numbers. As we reach more than 20 percent of the population, our persistent presence is creating slow but expanding change. I recently went to the University of South Carolina for the 2nd Annual Latino Children’s Literature Conference to lecture about reflection. I spoke about the girl in the desert and the sunset. I knew the majority of attendees were students who would be in the classroom soon. Their faces were mostly white and female. Soon they would be teaching desks filled with brown and cinnamon faces. I spoke about what it was like to grow up invisible and how as an artist I had worked to resolve the very complicated experience of it



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all. I wondered if this was unfamiliar territory to any of them: to feel that they did not belong, that this country was in any way not their own.

It is valuable for us to acknowledge the truth that we *are* all equal. And that our current power structures and school systems reflect that we are not all treated equally. This is a conflict that is palpable and uncomfortable, however wordless to the children who are not authentically reflected in the world around them. As I have experienced, it has a very real effect. What I know is that there is discomfort on both sides of this situation. Without adequate representation, we continue to stand as the unknown, the different, the other. And humans are often unsure and uncomfortable with the unknown. I imagine also that it is challenging to acknowledge a privileged position in the current power structure and that there are feelings I cannot know. How do we begin? How can we be in right relationship?

While I love my own books and love the beautiful and amazing Latino focused books that *are* produced every year, I want to acknowledge and accept what is true now. My opening vision “I am all that I see” does not yet exist. In fact, despite all the awesome and necessary efforts to use the resources we currently have available, we still land far short of any genuine reflection in our country; specifically here I speak about our children of color, primarily Latino. The children’s book industry alone would have to produce 190 percent more Latino-relevant books per year. I sense that may be a ways off. It is clearly relevant that we continue to join together and support the good work being done by many authors, illustrators, educators and librarians on this front. It is also relevant to allow ourselves to wonder. How can we further resource ourselves through this current state of limitation as we slowly become more visible in our books? How can the children who are living through these times and its effect best be empowered? And how can educators, often white, model sincere equality in this state of affairs? Can white educators serve as reflections in any way for our children of color?

We all learn from example, but especially children. Without word or thought we look to the primary figures in our life to set an example. From talking to educators over the years, I have come to respect not only their position in our schools, but the many stresses specifically attached to their job. As a child, I naturally used creativity as a tool to navigate some of the conflict I felt from not being reflected by drawing myself on to the blank pages of books. I created my own reflection. As an adult, I now understood how important it is for us to see ourselves reflected in our world. Yet, as I’ve had the great privilege of creating so much imagery like this, I found that I have not filled pages with images of Chicanas solely because I needed to know that I exist. I have created images because I needed to know myself, to explore and expand. I like the word reflection because of its double meaning. *Reflection is an image; representation; counterpart. But also, reflection is a fixing of the thoughts on something; careful consideration; a thought (or an image) occurring in consideration or meditation.* My personal work has led me to link the two meanings. I create reflections of myself so that I can reflect upon them.

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Many educators know and value creativity and would like to bring it into their classrooms. But with much pressure in their work, seldom have the time it takes to gather and implement all the necessary pieces to not only empower themselves, but then to form it into something for their students to work with. As I've gone into the classroom and worked with hundreds of students, I of course found that yes, we all need to see ourselves in our



world AND we all need to know ourselves. No matter what age we are. Growing up as a child of color along with 15 years going into the classroom and a lifetime committed to creativity, the curriculum I call "Claiming Face" slowly evolved. It grew out of my own experience as an artist and my experience of taking creativity into the classroom to work with kids like myself.

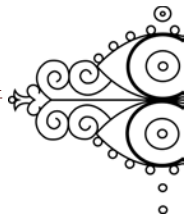
Creativity belongs to all of us. Focusing on this common ground unifies us. But creativity is also highly individual, so no matter what, it remains wholly our own. It is no secret that creativity is important. I could cite countless studies that say how fabulous it is, what the benefits are, how much we need it. How it supports our self esteem, our ability to think new thoughts, make new connections, expand beyond perceived limitation. But the truth is that creativity is

something with whom we are losing our connection through standards, testing, overcrowded schools, and much more. In this country, studies show that most adults creative expression operates at a 4th grade level at best. It's not that I dislike stick figures, in fact I like them very much. What I am more curious about is what contributes to the thoughts and beliefs that one can only safely draw a stick figure and that only "artists" are creative. Around 4th grade, we begin to limit ourselves. We begin to distance from our own creative power and instead point to "the artist" in the classroom. We become more externally focused and indoctrinated into the systems surrounding us that convey what we can and can't do, who we are, what is available to us. At times the messages are explicit. But it is the messages that are subtle and insidious, virtually invisible, that affect us the most. Like the fact that we do not have enough books that adequately reflect our presence and experience as Latinos. We begin to believe on multiple levels what the world tells us about "the way things are."

Although I've spent a lifetime learning from creativity and focus on my relationship with her every day, I adjusted the "Claiming Face" curriculum to take as little as 20 minutes a day. I've found that there are a few basic elements that seriously compensate for the constant inundation of external messages. One is doing something, even a little something, every day. Two is having role models in our environment who are not only doing what we are doing, but who are being how we're trying to be. Third, is to remove judgment and treat all things with a sense of curiosity and respect. With these basic elements as a backdrop the curriculum explores reflection through creativity to develop emotional, mental and psychological skills, not necessarily art skills. Art skills will most likely develop, but the goal

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of the curriculum is to create the powerful link between creativity and a sense of self. Using a vast and diverse sense of self-portraiture, we explore, empower and express.

There are 26 basic projects in the curriculum. They are broken down into categories of *Reflection, Freedom, Empowering, Exploring, Expanding, and Expressing*. In projects like *Animal Self-Portrait, Frida Mirror and Courage Portrait*, we focus on Reflection. In *Self-Portrait as Space* and *Map of Me*, we explore ourselves while in *What No One Can See* and *Touch Your Face Portrait*, we expand. Our sense of self changes, we change as we engage with knowing ourselves more through our creative power. And since we are consistently using our self as our subject, an association between our sense of self and this creative force flowing through all of us naturally develops.

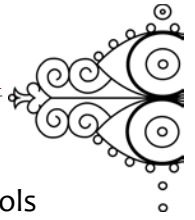
What we show about ourselves through our art no one else in the world can. I love to tell the students “you are the boss of you. Only you can know you!” Through this steady and persistent engagement with creativity a sense of self and empowerment grows until it is deep within us and becomes a part of who we are and how we navigate the world. When we have a strong sense of self and feel that we are our own agent, we are freer to learn. Our mind is unburdened from some of the external messages because our sense of self is securely rooted internally. The energy usually spent managing the constant external input can instead be put to whatever is the task at hand. We can use our energy on what we care about and what best serves us. Often this is a quiet, progressive shift. It can be seen as an ability to focus easier, feel lighter, care more about the day and share more about ourselves. But sometimes there are profound shifts within one session that are quiet, but dramatic. I witnessed one boy completely frozen in his “I can’t” come into a place of powerful expression and a look of joy and self-respect in his eyes. The children are ready.

Most of us have stories and experiences of being invisible or un-empowered. We are all learning and exploring our entire lives. When we take time for ourselves we are silently communicating to our students that they too can benefit from taking time for themselves. It is a style of thinking and being. This is the “artist’s way.” When we focus on ourselves as “artists,” we become equal. I do not feel separate from the students I work with, not just because we have the shared experience of growing up children of color in this country at this time. More importantly I feel unified with them the same as I do with the grown-ups I work with, because we are doing the same work. When we engage in creativity alongside our students, we are modeling equality. We all struggle. We all triumph. We all hit creative blocks. We all find our way through them. In this way, white educators become reflections for our children of color, in practice if not in image. This conveys a powerful message, the unspoken kind. An educator committing to modeling equality like this in the classroom can go a long way in compensating for the limitations often reflected in the external world.

It seems at this time, the strange gift is that we are **not** reflected. Most of us will not experience externally the vision I created with my imagination at the beginning of this chapter: *I Am All That I See*. But what may be more important to our current situation is that it forces upon us the opportunity to create that vision internally. This era challenges us to root our sense of self within and it begs us to engage with one of the great teachers of all time, Creativity. I believe one day I will see all of us reflected in the world as beautiful,

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valuable, equal and strong, growing without limitation as high as the sky can hold us. Until then I support our children and educators in becoming the artists they are! Our schools and systems are in need of change. It doesn't have to be something dramatic or external. It can be something simple and slow from within. The power and effects of creativity are something steady to rise up through the schools and into our world. The children are already keen on this, we have only to meet them. I believe.

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