

## **Your Place or Mine? Reading Art, Place, and Culture in Multicultural Picture Books**

**By Mira Reisberg, Birgitte Brander,  
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### **Introduction**

Many teacher education programs, no matter how well planned and coordinated for program coherence, continue to produce fragmented experiences for students. For the student, this fragmentation is often experienced as the juggling of separate courses in subject matter content, teaching methods, and the foundations of education, as well as loosely coupled, or even counter-productively disconnected, internship experiences and related seminars. From a programmatic perspective, this structure of fragmentation commonly derives from teacher education standards that are mandated by individual states, and, to a certain extent, force colleges of education into the position of creating programs that demonstrate compliance with governing codes.

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Additionally, teacher education faculty are often hired to specialize in one particular area (e.g., science methods or multicultural education); programs are built and maintained by these specialists who demonstrate their expertise and focused commitment by designing, revising, and teaching courses that concentrate, quite understandably, on one area rather than many. These two trends of state standardization and academic professionalism reinforce one

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another to maintain programs that boast depth and rigor in specialty areas and that demonstrate accountability through conformity to fragmented rules. The unfortunate result for the student, despite significant efforts among faculty to the contrary, is that their teacher education is experienced as a poorly blended mix of specialty courses that gain their legitimacy not by virtue of being especially coherent as a whole, but by virtue of measuring up to scripted standards.

This article does not pretend to provide a solution to this problem, nor does it claim that any or all teacher education programs are incoherent and productive of only fragmented experiences. However, we have found through our relationships with other faculty across the U.S. that the sense of fragmentation we wish to confront is all too common; moreover, we wish to confront our own personal sense of fragmentation that, when we are honest with ourselves, we feel complicit in perpetuating through our teaching. The following story narrates one attempt to build connections bridging these divides through the use of multicultural children's picture books, place-based education, and social reconstructionist arts education. While the process we describe may not immediately resonate with all educators in their various disciplines, we have found it to be extremely helpful to our practice as teacher educators.

### **The Context**

As one untenured faculty member and two doctoral students who serve as instructors in an undergraduate teacher education program at a midsize university in the Northwest, we are not in the position to perform an evaluation of our programs or point out foundational problems to the faculty at large. That said, we believe that our basic thesis that teacher education programs produce fragmented experiences for students (and their instructors) is one that many of our colleagues share. Indeed, we frequently hear this complaint from both our students and our colleagues. We have recently participated in program reorganization that aims at better programmatic coherence, only to find a more finely-tuned version of the same sequence of courses and field experiences. Given the unlikelihood of our being able to create major programmatic changes, we have instead tried to make connections across the problematic structures that remain.

Together, we teach or have taught six different courses in two distinct and largely separate programs, elementary education and secondary education. The courses are Integrated Fine Arts (elementary), Social Foundations of Education (elementary), Multicultural Children's Literature (elementary), Learning and Development (elementary and secondary combined), Social Foundations of Education (secondary), and Family, School, and Community Collaboration (secondary). Unlike most faculty colleagues, we have had the opportunity to learn together in a graduate seminar where critical inquiry was the focus, rather than program delivery. This privileged critical, intellectual, and, to us, sacred space away from the needs and pressures of programs provided us with a place where everything was

open to question and where, thankfully, we were unconstrained by any stultifying bureaucracy. It was in this space that we began to challenge each other with the question of the extent to which we were putting our ideals and our vision about education into practice in our teaching of undergraduates.

Below we will first articulate these ideals by briefly introducing the educational traditions for which each of us has passion and a degree of expertise. We will then demonstrate how we have applied this confluence of educational tradition and passion to a collaborative, critical reading of the multicultural children's picture book, *Where Fireflies Dance* (Corpi, 1997), illustrated by Mira Reisberg, one of our co-authors. After outlining a protocol for exploring place, culture, and art in other texts, the article concludes with insights we have gained from this collaborative process that have implications for our own teaching and for the field of teacher education generally.

### **Toward a More Fully Integrated Pedagogy**

Too often in education, practices are developed and become entrenched without a clear articulation of the theories on which they are founded. Though the practices we advocate can be connected to many productive educational traditions, we have chosen to locate our work at the intersection of critical pedagogy, place-based education, social reconstructionist arts education, and multicultural children's literature. This combination of educational perspectives can help guide teachers and learners into territory that is often ignored and that would be difficult to discover without the integration we seek to promote.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy, grounded in critical theory, is committed to the exploration and development of a culture of schooling that supports "the nature of self-conscious critique" (Giroux, 2003, p. 27). Calling for an ongoing struggle for social change, social inquiry and democratic practices (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2003), Giroux (1992) states that critical pedagogy "functions as a cultural practice to produce rather than merely transmit knowledge within the asymmetrical relations of power that structure teacher-student relations" (Giroux, 1992, p. 98). Using a critical pedagogical lens in this paper shows how schools and teachers are able to promote "student empowerment and self-transformation" (McLaren, 2003, p. 194) by inviting students to construct and deconstruct knowledge critically, and thus be able to better understand the existing relationships between society, power, democracy, and community. It also facilitates what McLaren calls a "curriculum of practice" (McLaren, 2003, p. 191), fostering social and political change and improving relationships through community involvement. As Freire (1970) explains, critical pedagogy becomes empowering through a problem-posing process that integrates the students' own experiences and sense of local and historical place.

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Though important critiques have emerged that caution critical pedagogues against reproducing a dominator stance toward others (Bowers & Appfel-Marglin, 2004; Ellsworth, 1992), we embrace the tradition of critical pedagogy as a much needed antidote to teacher education programs that too often lack a critical edge. We also suggest that critical pedagogy can be productively discussed in relation to place-based education, art, and multicultural children's literature.

### **Place-Based Education**

Like critical pedagogues, place-based educators are centrally concerned with the cultural context of teaching and learning and the role of schooling in shaping and reconstructing society. However, place-based educators wish to draw specifically on local contexts of communities and environments outside of schools and classrooms for curriculum development. In drawing on the local environment, they also often focus explicitly on ecological contexts of community life, and thus seek to expand critical pedagogy's decidedly cultural focus to include the total ecological realm of human experience (Gruenewald, 2003).

Learning from the local provides students with the opportunity to create long-term connections with and respect for the places where they live. The practice of building relationships with places outside of schools is often linked to exposing learners to the political decision-making processes that impact community life. At the same time students are exposed to the cultural aspects of their neighborhoods, developing understanding, empathy, and connectedness with the diverse cultures in their environs. Through adult guidance and initiation, students can learn to participate in this process as citizens, and learn that democracy requires both knowledge and activism (Smith and Williams, 1999; Sobel, 2004). Place-based education stresses the value of experience with actual places close to home. Reflection on these experiences, and the social action that can emerge when students and teachers begin to ask political questions about how their places came to be and what they will become empowers both students and their communities to become active participants in their own lives (Sobel, 1996).

### **Social Reconstructionist Arts Education**

While place-based education, critical pedagogy, and multicultural education are all forms of social reconstructionism, arts educators working within a social reconstructionist paradigm seek to specifically use the communicative and collaborative aspects of the arts as tools for transformation and social activism. Cahan and Kocur (1996) comment that:

A social reconstructionist approach to art education requires not only a change in the content and organization of the curriculum, but a shift in instructional methods as well. Students are encouraged to bring their own preexisting knowledge and experiences into the learning process, lessening the privileging of one dominant "voice." (p.xxv).

Like place-based education, social reconstructionist arts education connects students with their knowledge of self and place (Cahan & Kocur, 1996; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Klein, 2000). We argue that while the arts can and should be taught for purposes such as developing reflective, aesthetic and emotionally healthy dispositions (Eisner, 1976, 1982, 1995), they are also a powerful tool for communicative and collaborative cross-curriculum learning that incorporates an ethic of care (Cornett, 2003). Dewey was one of the first to note that this form of integrated education is instrumental in developing highly beneficial “habits of mind” (Dewey, 1916, p.241). In addition, arts based research (AEP, 2000; Catterall, 1998; Fowler, 1996; NAEP, 1997) shows many positive factors derived from the emotive and cognitive benefits of arts instruction in the form of higher test scores, lower drop-out rates, and low income and minority students continuing on to higher education.

By creating socially and environmentally oriented art projects that benefit students’ communities, the environment and the welfare of others, social reconstructionist arts education becomes a bridge connecting people, ideas, and places (Cornett, 2003; Dewey, 1916, 1934; Fehr, 1998; Klein, 1992). One way to do this is by beginning with authentic multicultural children’s literature.

### **Multicultural Children’s Literature**

Many authors write of the importance of selecting authentic, quality, multicultural children’s literature stating that it is for all students and needs to be included in the curriculum (Ladson Billings, 2000; Nieto, 1997; Yenika Agbaw, 1997). A critical approach to multicultural literature (Nieto, 2000) promotes not only the pleasure and importance of reading as a cultural skill, but also encourages students to identify the issues raised in the books and question the ideologies that the stories are based upon in terms of authentic versus stereotypical depictions. At the same time a critical approach to multicultural literature recognizes and validates the vitality of ethnic and cultural diversity and how places shape the lives and identities of individuals, groups, and nations. Newling (2001), noting that Whites are now often a minority in public education, advocates for the inclusion of all ethnicities’ literature in the curriculum including European Americans both to negate the illusion that European American’s have no culture and to dispel the concept that European Americans do not belong in multiculturalism. Newling (2001) comments:

Certainly the White experience is part of the fabric of society and deserves to be in the patchwork quilt, but it is no longer the whole cloth. . . How adept the nation’s students become at dealing with difference and interacting with other human beings who do not look, speak, or act like them is an assignment that can be made or broken in the classroom. It is a task that can succeed or fail, depending on what passes in school for multicultural literature and education or the absence thereof. (p. 10)

Through multicultural children’s literature students can be encouraged to develop

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their knowledge and experiences through their own and other's cultures, worldviews, places, and experiences (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

### **Practicing Integrated Theory**

In order to integrate the preceding theoretical frameworks into a specific practice that cuts across diverse areas of teacher education, we advocate a critical, place - and arts-based approach to reading and reflecting on multicultural children's picture books. The basic structure of this approach is to read place-specific multicultural children's books as texts through which the concepts of cultural critique, place-consciousness, literacy and art can each be examined while, at the same time, these concepts are connected through experience and reflection. After elaborating on this process through an extended example, we will provide a set of questions that can be used to choose suitable texts and direct readers to an appended reference list of quality, place-specific, multicultural children's picture books.

In order to demonstrate the richness of an integrated, theoretically-grounded reading of a multicultural children's book, each of us performed a close reading of *Where Fireflies Dance* (or *Ahí, donde Bailan las luciérnagas*), a 2000-2001 Texas Bluebonnet Masterlist Award book illustrated by Mira and written in Spanish and English by Lucha Corpi (1997). We chose this multicultural children's book because of its potential to communicate the themes of critical pedagogy, place, and art. We also had the rare opportunity of analyzing a children's book with the illustrator herself, which provided all of us with insight about the role images play in telling a book's story. Below, after a brief synopsis of the book's story, each of us reflects on the story from a different perspective. David focuses on place, Birgitte on critical pedagogy, and Mira on the arts. Methodologically, we create a conversation about the book that builds on and integrates each other's responses. Since Mira knew the book the best, her reflections come last so that her knowledge of the book does not over-predict David and Birgitte's responses. Following these reflections, we analyze core themes, and discuss potential venues for such integrated readings of multicultural children's literature among teacher educators, teachers, and children.

#### **Synopsis**

*Where Fireflies Dance* is an autobiographical story of Lucha Corpi's childhood in the town of Jáltipan, Veracruz, Mexico. Lucha and her brother, Victor, wander off at night to the haunted house of Juan Sebastian, the local legend and Mexican revolutionary. From the haunted house they are drawn by beautiful music to a *cantina*, where they return on following nights to listen to songs that move them. Though the children's mother and father punish them for wandering at night where they have been told not to go, we are presented with images of a strong and loving family. The kids' grandmother tells stories, and through her we learn the mystery of Juan Sebastian's ghost and the meaning of Zapata's revolution. In the family

home, Lucha learns about love, family, tradition, and even the possibility of realizing her own destiny.

*David—Place*

Though I frequently read picture books to my own children, I don't think that I have ever read one as an "academic." As a former high school English teacher and current faculty member in a college of education, I have never really taken children's books too seriously, though I do have my favorites—ones I like reading over and over to my kids. Some of these are deep and moving; others are just silly, cute, or fun. Unaccustomed to reading children's literature outside of my kids' bedrooms, my first response to the story was of having to pay attention in a new way. First I merely read the book's words; I glanced at, but didn't really pause long enough to appreciate the illustrations.

Reflecting on this, I wonder, how did I ever get the idea that I could know a story without seeing it visually? What is the relationship between text and image? How, I wonder, does schooling condition and confine our ideas and experience of literacy to the printed text? I was reading, after all, with my mind on the concept of place, a concept that was surely not to be named as such in the text of the book. I would have to see it. I would, as Freire taught, have to read the word and the world of the story. My second reading, therefore, was much slower, and focused on the world described by the pictures and the words. Though I know little Spanish, on my third reading, I tried reading the Spanish text, and with the help of the pictures, I learned a few new words. During each reading, I took notes on elements from the story that I felt connected with the theoretical concept of place.

From the perspective of place, *Where Fireflies Dance* raises for me five significant themes, each of which are worthy of extended exploration by learners of all ages. The first obvious theme, hardly mentioned in the text but bursting forth on each page of illustration, is that of the lush and colorful environment of Jáltipan, Veracruz, a small town in tropical Mexico. The vegetation, the architecture, the clothing, the birds, and even the sky are all uniquely local. The art creates a place that I have never been to, but that I experience as authentic through the artist's attention to the details of life, through the vibrancy of the colors, and through the many specific places in which the story unfolds.

Each of Mira's illustrations creates a specific place worth analyzing on its own; however, the story and the pictures work together to create other powerful themes. The second theme that emerges for me is that of forbidden and adventurous space. Lucha and Victor enter two places they are not supposed to go: the haunted house of Juan Sebastian, the revolutionary, and just outside the doors of the *cantina* where a jukebox plays beautiful music that they risk punishment to hear. Each of these places beckons them to enter, and each is surrounded by warnings that make entering dangerous, courageous, and even disobedient. These forbidden spaces are spaces of adventure and learning.

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“Rules are rules,” the kids’ father explains when they are caught one night at the *cantina* and grounded to the house during the evenings for one week. The third space of significance is the family home, a safe place of love, respect, and intergenerational learning. In the safety and comfort of the home, Lucha and Victor’s grandmother tells the history of Juan Sebastián, and their father sings songs, including a *corrido*, a ballad about Juan Sebastián written by a local songwriter. Though the previous adventure into forbidden space leads to the punishment of staying inside the home at night, the home is, in a sense, transformed by the transgression and becomes its own place of adventure and connection to the past.

The fourth space that I read into the story is more abstract, but just as real and powerful as the haunted house, the *cantina*, and the family home: this is the place of “destiny”—a place of deep personal meaning that guides one through one’s place and time in the world. Grandmother tells her grandchildren that when Juan Sebastián left his family home (what later became the “haunted house” to the children) to join General Zapata’s revolutionary army, he left behind a note to his parents that said, “Please forgive me. This is my destiny, to fight for land and liberty. I promise I’ll be back—dead or alive.” The illustration for this part of the story shows Sebastian clutching a portrait of his parents; a guitar hangs from a strap around his shoulder. On the next page Grandmother explains, “Your destiny is doing what you were born to do. . . . Everyone has a destiny.” The illustration shows Lucha’s arms around her grandmother; Lucha narrates, “I promised myself that I, too, would find [my destiny] some day.”

Local space, forbidden space, safe space, and the space of destiny are all connected in *Where Fireflies Dance* to the story-within-the-story of Juan Sebastián and the Mexican Revolution. The fifth place of significance to me in this story is the place of revolution. It is both a literal place, where people fought with Zapata for land and freedom, and a metaphorical space of adventure, transformation, and destiny.

All of these places, though specific to the story, can be generalized to readers everywhere. What, we might ask, is unique about our place culturally and ecologically? Where are our forbidden, dangerous, and adventurous places? Where are our safe places? What is the significance of family and of a sense of intergenerational connection to the past? What are our places of destiny and revolution? These are rich questions. They push my thinking about the possibilities of place-based education into new territory. Though I have thought a lot about place, I have never really explored the ideas of places of destiny and revolution. Nor had I deeply explored the implicit or explicit role of place in children’s literature before.

#### ***Birgitte—Culture/Critical Pedagogy***

The cultural authenticity of *Where Fireflies Dance* is revealed through Lucha’s autobiographical story about her family traditions and the significance of the Mexican culture and community. Lucha’s childhood is one surrounded by people who value the cultural traditions as part of their everyday lives; music, singing, poetry, and storytelling create a shared history.

Through the lens of critical pedagogy I will look at some examples of how *Where Fireflies Dance* can be used to empower children through a problem-posing process that involves the students' own experiences and sense of local and historical places.

Lucha's narrative brings us back in time when she was a little girl and she went on an adventure to explore an old haunted house where Juan Sebastián, the revolutionary, once lived. Juan Sebastián lived in Jáltipan with his family and has now become a legend in the town. The presence of Juan Sebastián can still be felt and seen among the people in Jáltipan. Juan Sebastián's ghost can be seen riding on his horse through Jáltipan at full moon. It is said that he is looking after his house.

The story of Juan Sebastián allows for a deeper analysis and exploration of Mexico's past, her history, and the political issues of the time. Juan Sebastián joined General Zapata in the Mexican revolution between 1910-1920 against the dictator rule of President Porfirio Díaz. Mexico has had several revolutions throughout her history; and it is imperative that as students start analyzing the stories of the Mexican revolution and General Zapata they examine all aspects of what a revolution is: Why does it take place? Who participates? What happens after a revolution? Are there other places in the world where revolutions have taken place?

Through their curiosity Lucha and Victor explore the mystery of Juan Sebastián as they enter the house. They see wonderful old pictures and a faded Mexican flag. One of the pictures shows Juan Sebastián playing a guitar and singing. Lucha gets very intrigued because she also likes to sing, and slowly Lucha starts to explore who Juan Sebastián really was. Through vivid narratives told by her grandmother, Lucha learns about Juan Sebastián and his family. The grandmother tells Lucha and Victor that Juan Sebastián followed his destiny "to fight for land and liberty," and through these stories Lucha slowly understands what destiny means and relates it to her own life.

The community plays a big role in *Where Fireflies Dance*. First of all, the grandmother's narrative about Juan Sebastián gives Lucha agency, understanding, and power to follow her own destiny with support from her family. Second when Lucha and Victor's father sings Mexican ballads, *pasodobles* (bullfighting songs), Argentinean *tangos*, children's songs, and songs about Juan Sebastián written by a local songwriter, there is a connection to the local family traditions. Community is also presented through the *cantina Cuatro Cañas*. The *cantina* is a tavern where Lucha and Victor stand outside listening to the music playing from the juke box inside. The *cantina* is a gathering place where we only see men, signifying the gender differences within the cultural setting.

As she grows older Lucha never forgets the story about Juan Sebastián, and just like him she also leaves town to find what she was born to do. Her brother stays behind—"perhaps because that was his destiny." You can speculate about why Lucha really leaves Jáltipan to travel to America. Is it for social change and better possibilities of pursuing her dreams? Is it to explore "the American Dream"? When she leaves Jáltipan she brings her favorite photos of her family, her memories of the fireflies, her grandmother's stories, her father's songs, and the spirit of the community.

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When reading and analyzing *Where Fireflies Dance*, it is important that we critically question the notions of who has agency and relate these notions to our own lives and families. Through the story telling about Juan Sebastián and his destiny, we are able to explore and critically inquire about Lucha's empowerment and self-transformation by examining the notions of social change and understanding the past and existing relationships between society, power, democracy, and community.

#### ***Mira—The Arts***

One of the things I love about this book is the kind of emotional truth that comes through clearly in both the poetry of Lucha's language and her obvious love and affection for all the characters in the book. There are no evil villains, no big lessons you have to learn, and the characters are all believable and real. The characters in the book are people that you would want to meet and know (except maybe Juan Sebastián's ghost, unless you are very brave).

Lucha writes: "*Where Fireflies Dance* is that place where imagination and memory blend and take on new color and voice" (Corpi, 1997, p.32). This statement informed the illustrations in the use of magical realism, a Latin American literary form that extends realism into the realm of fantasy. The illustrations provide visual details of culture, landscape, and class not mentioned in the text. We see that Lucha's home is clean and welcoming, but the cooking was done on a wood stove and there aren't many frills. We see that it is a tropical environment from the vegetation and landscape and from Mom wearing a light, short-sleeved dress in a tropical rainstorm. The bus Lucha boards as she comes to find her destiny in the United States is called *El Mundo* (the world). The border of the illustration features the Mexican flag while her suitcase has a sticker of an American flag. Every now and then a purple cat comes to play.

I worked closely with the author to provide authenticity in the book. She gave me photographs to draw from, and I persuaded her to make drawings of everything from clothing and shoes to the thatched houses and stoves. Having traveled in Mexico was also helpful for my research as was living in the Mission district (also known as the Latino area) of San Francisco for over twenty years. This information is not mentioned in the book. As the illustrator critiquing her own work, I wish I had created more of a range of skin colors, which would have been more accurate instead of focusing on the darker skin color of my near neighbors, who I felt were underrepresented in children's books. I managed to collage in some of the author's childhood photos of family members from the book, which delighted her to no end and affirmed her statement: "[This book] is my way of paying homage to my family, and bestowing their legacy of culture and love . . ." (Corpi, 1997, p.32). It was also my way of paying homage to Lucha, her family and the many stories she was telling about her love of family, Jáltipan and its history.

The illustrations feature many of the colors associated with Mexican artists' work, such as Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. These are the bright, saturated colors of houses in Mexico, the rich tropical colors of exotic vegetation, and the playful

colors of the Mission district's houses and murals. These colors represent a celebration of life, something I try to do in my own art and life. It was important to me to portray sympathetic, believable characters within the magical realist context I was working in, particularly in portraying Juan Sebastián and Lucha's family. I employed many art techniques to create lively compositions ranging from using diagonals, to juxtaposing a myriad of contrasts such as near and far, angular and curvy, big and small, and the use of warm and cool colors together.

Another convention I draw on in my illustrations is the use of borders to create a visual text and subtext. There's the story in the main picture and then another story in the border around the picture, either adding another layer or somehow commenting on the inner picture. These frames create a picture within a picture that both contains and expands the visual narrative frequently employing abundant patterns to enhance the illustrations. Like mathematicians, I too look for patterns—in flowers, trees, stars, clothing, embroidery, etc.; and this love of pattern is reflected in all my children's books. For example, on nearly every page of the *Where Fireflies Dance* we see images of fireflies creating patterns with their spiraling dances giving off light and energy. What an apt metaphor they provide for the energy and illumination that comes from engaged learning and beauty. Finally I would like to draw attention to the issue of creativity that is evident in Lucha's culture—father's songs, grandmother's stories, Lucha's writing, mother's attention to beauty in the home environment, the beauty of the tattered altar in the haunted house, and even Juan Sebastian is seen carrying a guitar as he leaves to fight in the revolution. This clearly is a culture that values creativity. They are not passive consumers of culture but are actively engaged in their own heartfelt creativity.

### **Collaborative Teacher Learning**

While reading and reflecting on each other's analyses, we were impressed with the diverse perspectives that each of us brought to the book. The ways that David presented multiple interpretations of place to extend far beyond the physical, how Birgitte foregrounded issues of culture, power and agency, how Mira viewed the book through the lenses of art and creativity—all of this deepened our understanding of the book by looking through each other's favored theoretical lenses. Through this process, we also extended the range of our own conceptual frameworks to include theory and application that usually lie outside of our own individual teaching practices.

In our conversations about our varied readings, several core themes emerged that are both specific to *Where Fireflies Dance* and also generalizable to the contexts of other multicultural children's picture books, especially when viewed through the lenses of place, culture, and art. The importance of family and family stories, the aesthetic and psychological dimensions of place, and the presence of cultural history all stand out to us as major themes worthy of exploring in other texts

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and in the texts of any reader's life. In *Where Fireflies Dance*, family stories unfold through Grandmother's storytelling and father's singing. The story of Juan Sebastian the revolutionary is part of the family's "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Ananti & Neff, 1992) while also being a part of the historical and cultural memory of Jáltipan. Family, culture, place, and history in this story are intertwined, and each of these themes is connected to the additional leitmotifs of cultural revolution and personal destiny. In our conversations, we also saw that the story, *Where Fireflies Dance*, could easily serve as a springboard into the telling of other related stories: adventure stories, family stories, ghost stories, revolution and political upheaval stories, destiny stories, immigrant stories, insect stories, and environment stories. We remarked on the relationship between storytelling and personal and collective action—how certain stories can illustrate acts of agency and resistance, how with adult guidance, stories can become catalysts for change or for reclaiming traditions at the personal, community, or cultural level.

We realized that many multicultural children's picture books lend themselves to this level of cultural analysis and that these texts provide excellent opportunities to teach about culture, place, and art (among other topics) across the curriculum of teacher education programs. While such books are usually selected for courses such as children's literature or literacy, we have found them to be productive for bridging concepts in multicultural education, foundations of education, art education and in the wider effort to educate for culturally-responsive teaching. Table 1 provides a set of questions generated from our readings of *Where Fireflies Dance*. These questions serve two important purposes: first, they can help readers determine the appropriateness of a text for exploring the themes of culture, place, and art; second, they can serve as prompts for learners of any age to relate these themes to their own diverse readings and experiences.

Significantly, each set of questions elicits not only a complex analysis of the story and its relationship between the reader, other people, place, and culture, but also suggests, as does Corpi's story, the possibility of taking significant life- and place-changing action. Combining prompts for textual analysis with personal reflection, (multi)cultural analysis, an aesthetic sensibility, and the opportunity to envision personal and social action, the questions in Table 1 provide a protocol for making the most of multicultural children's picture books and for applying their creative cultural messages to the work of teacher education.

### **Conclusion**

When we began "Your place or mine?" two of us had little experience of working intensively with multicultural children's literature. We quickly recognized the value of this genre as being appropriate for a surprising range of ages and ideas. We created a series of place-based art lessons that demonstrated the synthesis of critical theory, place-based pedagogy, and social reconstructionist

Table 1  
Examining Place, Culture, and Art in Multicultural Children's Picture Books

<b>Place</b>	<b>Culture/Critical Pedagogy</b>	<b>Art</b>
<p>What are the unique cultural, geographical, and ecological features of the places described by the narrative and the illustrations? What is the relationship between the places in the story and the story's characters, plots, and themes? How are the places and people you know the same or different from the places and people in the story? How are some places, both in the story and in your experience, more desirable than others? Should any of the places in the story, or people's relationships with them, be transformed or conserved? If so, why? How? Should any of the places you know, or people's relationships to them, be transformed or conserved? If so, why? How?</p>	<p>What are some of the cultural and community based characteristics described and illustrated in the text? How are the interactions between family and community shown in the text, and through your own experiences? Do the characters in the text have any agency? If so, how? How are you an agent in your life? Is the culture(s) of the text similar or different from your culture? If so, how? Describe your own culture. Do you see any cultural stereotypes depicted in the text and/or illustrations? How are these stereotypes described? How is democracy depicted in the text? What does democracy mean to you, your family, and your community? What kind of change do you see happen in the text? How has change helped you in your life?</p>	<p>If the illustration style is cartoony, does it still convey emotion while avoiding stereotypes? Do the illustrations convey the mood of the writing, details of the place, and present believable characters? Do they provide dignity for the characters? If you were to illustrate this book—how would you do it differently? Is there a second story embedded in the visuals not included in the text? What might it represent for the illustrator? Do the pictures engage, inspire, and/or delight you? Do they make you want to know what happens next?</p>

arts education using the methodologies of art practice with deep readings of multicultural literature. Pre-service teachers can easily learn, and in turn teach their students using this methodology. For example, when Lucha goes in search of her destiny she becomes an immigrant, a common experience in most North American families.

We asked pre-service teachers to interview their elders to find out about their immigrant heritage—how their families came to be in this place called home. Though immigrant stories may not connect with all students' family histories, all students can narrate and reflect on their cultural and geographical past through the medium of art. After creating these family heritage narratives, they are then hung in a local public space such as the library, with an interactive board inviting community members to share their stories of becoming part of the local history. In this way students connect with and benefit their local place, develop empathy with

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recent immigrants, and develop meaningful skills in writing, art, communication, history, geography and possibly math.

However, even as we created and implemented lessons from the themes we uncovered in *Where Fireflies Dance*, we realized we were more interested in the collaborative process of curriculum development than we were in simply providing recipes, or exemplars. Building a collaborative analyses and creating a collaborative tool for analysis out of multiple theoretical frameworks, we realized how powerful the collaborative process is, and how rarely pre-service teachers and faculty actually embark on this kind of focused and multidisciplinary pedagogical journey around a common text. For us as teacher educators, we believe this process of collaborative learning across the boundaries of our respective content areas has great potential for integrating the programmatic fragmentation endemic to many teacher education programs. We also realize that the structural constraints on teacher education programs tend to work against this kind of cross-disciplinary collaboration.

However, the specific practice we advocate—that of developing shared readings of quality multicultural children’s picture books—has the pragmatic advantage of being doable in multiple contexts. First, many such texts exist (see appended reference list), and they are brief enough to be read individually or aloud to a group without a major investment in time. Thus, these books can be read and discussed without elaborate preparation during the stretch of any faculty or class meeting. Second, despite their brevity and seeming simplicity, quality multicultural children’s picture books, as we have demonstrated, can become the focus of deep analyses within and across diverse topic areas current in teacher education today. In fact, the simplicity of the stories is part of what opens space for creative analysis and interpretations based on diverse perspectives. Third, though suitable for intellectual conversation among teacher educators and teachers, multicultural picture books are written for children, and can thus be used to promote the reading of the word and the reading of the world (Freire, 1998) at any reading level and across all age groups.

Place, culture, and art, we believe, are themes that no practice of education should neglect. However, even more important is the act of participating in a collaborative conversation in which teachers become learners together. There are, obviously, many ways to practice collaboration. Building a shared reading of multicultural children’s picture books can be a springboard for integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, and in making connections across diverse, and too often unrelated, areas of teacher education. We invite other readers to participate in this process, and to bring other theoretical lenses to the reading of multicultural children’s picture books.

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## **Appendix**

Summaries of twenty place-specific, multicultural picture books from California.

### *Los Angeles*

1. Alarcon, Francisco. (1999). *Angels ride bikes/Los Angeles Andan en bicicleta*. Illus. by Maya Christine Gonzalez. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press. *Angels ride bikes and other fall poems* tells of Francisco Alarcon's Mexican-American childhood in Los Angeles.
2. Soto, Gary (1995). *Chato's Kitchen* Illus. by Susan Guevara. New York: Scholastic Books. Soto's story teams Chato and his friend Novio Boy as two barrio cats, ready and eager to have their new neighbors, the mice for dinner.
3. Cohn, Diana *Yes we can! / ¡Sí se puede!* (2002). Illus. by Francisco Delgado. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press. This inspiring book tells the story of the 8,000 janitors who went on strike in Los Angeles in 2000 as seen through the eyes of one of the janitor's son Carlito.
4. Jaskol, Julie & Lewis, Brian *City of Angels—in and around Los Angeles* (1999). Illus. by Elisa Kleven. New York: Dutton Books. Featuring a breezy approach to the diverse neighborhoods of Los Angeles the book includes a selective historic timeline of the area.
5. Perez, A. I. (2000) *My diary from here to there / Mi diari de aqui hasta allá*. Illus. by Maya Christine Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press. Perez writes of her sadness at leaving her home in Juarez, Mexico on her journey to her new home in El Monte, East of Los Angeles.
6. Perez, A. I. (2000) *My Very Own Room/Mi propio cuartito* Illus. by Maya Christine Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press. In this sequel, Perez writes about having to share her room in El Monte with five brothers until finally she comes to have a room of her own.
7. Gunning, M. (2004) *A shelter in our car*. Illus by Elaine Pedlar. San Francisco: Children's Book Press. Jamaican mother and daughter Zettie find themselves homeless after Papa's death and live in a car in Los Angeles.

### *San Francisco and Berkeley*

8. Argueta, Jorge. (2001). *A movie in my pillow / Una película en mi almohada*. Illus. by Elizabeth Gomez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press. Argueta and his father fled to San Francisco to avoid the El Salvadorean death squads. He writes about the strength of his family and the losses and gains of moving to a new country.
9. Corpi, Lucha. (1997). *Where fireflies dance/Ahi, donde bailan las luciérnagas*. Illus. by Mira Reisberg. San Francisco: Children's Book Press. Corpi's tells of her childhood and family adventures along with her town history in Jaltipan, Mexico. Ultimately she finds her destiny in Berkeley, California.

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10. Wolff, Ashley (1995) *Stella and Roy*. New York: Puffin Unicorn Books. *Stella and Roy* is a contemporary retelling of the hare and the tortoise tale set in San Francisco's famous Golden Gate Park.

11. Lee, Millie. (1997) *Nim and the war effort*. Illus. by Yangsook Choi. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. The story factually interweaves the racism that Asians have historically endured particularly during World War II with a young Chinese-American girl's efforts to help.

12. Robles, Anthony. (2003) *Lakas and the Manilatown fish/Si Lakas at ang Isdang Manilatown*. Illus. by Carl Angel. San Francisco: Children's Book Press. This whimsical story conveys the importance and respect Filipino's hold for their elders while telling of Filipino-American history in San Francisco.

13. Argueta, J. (2003) *Xochitl and the flowers/Xóchitl, la Niña de las Flores*. Illustrations by Carl Angel. San Francisco: Children's Book Press. Based on a true story Xochitl (Soh-cheel) and her mother sell flowers on the street before finally making enough money to start a nursery in their backyard.

*Central California*

14. Herrera, Juan Felipe. (1995). *Calling the doves/El canto de los palomas*. Illus. by Elly Simmons. New York: Children's Book Press. Herrera's childhood as a Mexican migrant farm-worker child moving from place to place with his family form the basis for this loving and poetic book.

15. Krull, Kathleen. (2003). *Harvesting hope. The story of Cesar Chavez*. Illus. by Yuyi Morales. New York: Harcourt, Inc. The story of Cesar Chavez's childhood and growth as a union leader fighting for farm workers' rights, climaxing in the historic long march to Sacramento.

16. Williams, Sherley Anne. (1992) *Working cotton*. Illus. by Carole Byard. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Shelan is an African American child who can't wait until she is old enough to pick cotton and help her family with the backbreaking labor they endure every day.

*Northern California*

17. Santiago, Chiori. (2002) *Home to Medicine Mountain*. Illus. by Judith Lowery. San Francisco: Children's Book Press. Lowery's true story about her father and uncle being forcibly relocated to an Indian boarding school and how they managed to escape the school for a summer.

18. Wolff, Ashley (1999) *Stella and Roy go camping*. New York: Dutton Books. Set in the Sierra Nevada mountains this imaginative retelling of *The boy who cried wolf* includes much information about the natural wonders of the place.

19. Partridge, B. (2001). *Oranges on Golden Mountain*. Illus. by Aki Sogabe. New York: Dutton Children's Books. Set during the California Gold Rush the story weaves in aspects of Chinese culture and spiritual beliefs with historical information about racist practices against Chinese-Americans.

*Spirit of California*

20. Rohmer, H. (1999). *Honoring our ancestors: Stories and pictures by fourteen artists*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press. Created in San Francisco with twelve of the fourteen artists residing in California and a wide variety of ethnicities represented *Honoring our Ancestors* embodies some of the spirit of California in its wide-open approach to story, its saturated use of color, and the plurality of cultures represented.