

“We Learned to Read, to Speak, to Write, and to Make Our Voices Heard”: Paulo Freire’s Literacies in *The Last Cuentista*

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Introduction

Many things are necessary for critical educators to be able to do the work of collaborating with students towards liberation—to create communities where teachers and students build knowledge together that will lead to a more equitable society. Among them are texts by, for, and about the oppressed, as well as texts that help to illuminate the path to liberation. When educators find a text that fits the first category, it may not necessarily fit the second. In this paper, I examine one text by a Latina author about a character hoping for a better future, the recent Newbery Award winner *The Last Cuentista* by Donna Barbara Higuera, through the lens of Paulo Freire’s pedagogies to see how one highly regarded text by a minoritized author might be used to support liberation and where it might fall short.

Theoretical Framework: Freire’s Literacies

While Freire’s pedagogy is about much more than learning to read, learning to decode and comprehend print text is a foundational component of Freire’s model of education. He divides his model into two parts: literacy and post-literacy. These two parts are often referred to as “reading the world” and “reading the world,” respectively. In literacy, students learn to decode and comprehend writing; in post-literacy they learn to decode and comprehend the world. Despite the “post” part of “post-literacy,” students do not have to “read the

word” before they can “read the world.” Students often come to literacy because they started to read the world (post-literacy) and saw that they needed to change it; sometimes they learn about this needed change through the literacy work. In either case, as students learn to read and write print text (and images) they learn more about the world, which helps them better understand print text. “This becomes deeper and more diversified, as the act of knowing in which it began” (Freire, 1978/1983, p. 100). The learner finds themselves in one of the most common themes in Freirean pedagogy: the dialectic.

Though Freire’s work provides very few examples of literature qua literature being used by him or Freirean educators, it’s possible to imagine how literature—fiction and nonfiction—could be used by critical educators in his vision. *Education and Democracy* offers the case study of the Manoel de Paiva School, where literature is used alongside articles and other printed media from the environment in lieu of a textbook in order to address more “contemporary issues of [students’] lives” (O’Cadiz, et. al., 1998, p. 219). Literature, in Freirean pedagogy, is one tool for exploring a generative theme and providing perspectives from which students examine their world (Freire, 1970/1993, p. 84).

In order to use literature with a generative theme that facilitates exploration of the students’ environments, it is necessary for much of the literature to be written by and about people who are similar to

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the students' themselves. While she does not explicitly cite Freire, Rudine Sims Bishop offers "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors," as a helpful framework for discussing these texts that could be useful in these communities (1990). Freirean pedagogy uses texts that *reflect* the world around the students and the generative theme, but the reflection of Bishop's mirror texts also gets deeper into "the essence of dialogue itself: *the word*" (emphasis original) (Freire, 1970/1993, p. 68). The word itself has two parts: reflection and action. Freire is of course not saying that the reflection needs to come from a literal mirror or even a figurative literary mirror, but reflection is essential to dialogue and action. As students learn to read the word, teachers are also learning more about their students and their world, which informs their teaching and helps them teach their students literacy as well as identify ways that students and teachers will work for change in their communities. Through this dialogue everyone learns and the outcome is not just recreated knowledge, it's action (praxis). A text that facilitated reflection (and supported action) would be a useful tool in a Freirean classroom. But as Bishop and others have pointed out, these reflections can be hard to come by in the literature that is available. Recently, this has shifted slightly. Since 2015, the most prestigious award in children's literature, the Newbery Award, has been awarded to a person of color every year except one. In the 93 years prior to that only five people of color had ever received the award. As children's literature diversifies and critical educators have more mirrors for their students, there is still the question of how well these books support a liberatory pedagogy.

The Last Cuentista

In 2022, the ALA awarded the Newbery Medal for only the second time to a Latina author, Donna Barba Higuera, for *The Last Cuentista*. (It was also the *first* time it ever granted the award to a science fiction novel.) *The Last Cuentista* also won its respective award for a book written by a member of a minoritized group that "best portrays, affirms, and celebrates" that culture—in this case, the Pura Belpré Award. Because the book is science fiction, there is a unique opportunity to look at both the world of the book through the lens of Freirean

pedagogy and also look at the book from our perspective in the present on Earth as a potential tool for critical pedagogy. And given that Higuera and her main character are Latina, a possible reflective tool for millions of Latinx students.

The Story

The book tells the story of Petra Peña, a 12-year-old girl living in the year 2061. Haley's Comet is on a collision course with Earth. It is predicted to wipe out all of humanity, but a select few have been chosen to travel to a new planet called Sagan. Many people, including Petra and her family, will travel in suspended animation for 380 years and when they arrive will colonize Sagan for the human race. They will be supported by other humans, called monitors, who will monitor their suspension and maintain the ship for several generations until everyone arrives on Sagan. Petra's family is chosen because her parents are important scientists: her mother is a botanist, and her father is a geologist. Petra is reluctant to leave her abuela, Lita, and the cuentos she tells her. One consolation is how Petra will spend the next 380 years: while everyone is in suspended animation they will also be receiving "downloadable cognizance," or "cogs," implantations that deposit large amounts of knowledge into the recipient. Petra will receive cogs on botany and geology and also an elective on mythology so she can be a storyteller like her abuela. But of course, not everything goes to plan. First Petra does not receive the mythology cog as promised and also when she is put into suspended animation, she is still conscious. Her monitor, Ben, reads stories to Petra for a couple of days until she turns 13 and then "off the record," he "downloads" several civilizations of mythology as well as the complete works of several authors: Gaiman, Erdrich, Butler, Morrison, R.L. Stine, and others. She finally goes to sleep then and is reawakened 381 years later only to have all of these authors immediately systematically wiped from her memory. The people on the ship have renamed Petra to be Zeta-1 and expect her to "serve the Collective" as their botany and geology expert. The Collective is understood to have evolved from the monitors who were originally tasked with maintaining the ship when they left in 2061. They have genetically engineered themselves to lack diversity in

the name of equality. The author is careful to describe The Collective in a way that does not fit with any known race or ethnicity currently on Earth: they have translucent skin that reveals the tendons, muscles, and blood vessels beneath, and their features all have a lavender cast (Higuera, 2021, p. 73). We learn that virtually all the passengers from Earth who were meant to be kept in stasis until arrival on Sagan have been awoken at various points throughout the trip and had their memories wiped or, if memory elimination failed, they were “purged.” The malfunction with Petra’s original “downloads,” due to the fact that she was on the cusp of adolescence but was still treated as a juvenile, means she is the only passenger on the ship who retains full memory of her life on Earth and their original mission. The remainder of the book is Petra’s quest to free herself and the other people who were once Earthlings so they do not have to sacrifice themselves for The Collective.

The themes that the author highlights in *The Last Cuentista* are familiar in middle grade fiction and compatible with progressive educational goals: we are our stories, diversity is good, celebrate the uniqueness of individuals. The awards committee also likely appreciated the celebration of Mexican storytelling and culture through Petra’s retelling of her abuela’s cuentos and also a recurring appearance of another Pura Belpré Award-winning book by a Mexican American author, Yuyi Morales’s *Dreamers* (2018).¹ In *The Last Cuentista*, Petra’s younger brother, Javier, brings this book—about a single mother immigrating to the United States with her baby and finding community and solace in the library—aboard the ship with him as one of his few possessions. *Dreamers* reappears at several important points in the book to remind the characters of the power of story and to reenforce the theme of immigration and migration.

Cogs, Banking, and the Nature of Knowledge

One theme that stands out when examined through a Freirean lens is how knowledge and learning is approached in Petra’s world. There are two primary ways of learning: storytelling and Downloadable Cognizance (“cogs”). Both of them reveal predominantly anti-Freirean ideas about the power dynamics of knowl-

edge and learning and how learning and knowledge should be communicated and constructed.

Downloadable Cognizance is the most glaring example of the “banking” (Freire, 1970/1993) model of education. The “cogs” are spheres that are implanted at the base of a person’s skull that contain a predetermined body of knowledge that, when implanted in the person, simply “soaks in instantly. Nothing like school, where I have to work to remember it all” (Higuera, 2021, p. 55). Many aspects of this “learning” fit the description of Freire’s banking model of education. First and foremost, with the cogs, knowledge is something that can be easily packaged into a topic, and then deposited into the brain of a learner. This fits neatly within Freire’s description of a banking model in which teachers “‘fill’ the students by making deposits of information which he or she considers to constitute true knowledge” (Freire, 1970/1993, p. 57). Freire goes on to describe how this model perpetuates systems of oppression, which are mirrored in *The Last Cuentista*: “Since people ‘receive’ the world as passive entities, education should make them more passive still, and adapt them to the world. The educated individual is the adapted person, because she or he is better ‘fit’ for the world” (ibid). In *Cuentista*, the learners are so passive they are literally in stasis. As the story progresses, this kind of learning becomes highly manipulated by Petra’s oppressors. The Collective has ensured the recipients of cogs will have the knowledge necessary to help them colonize Sagan. People are pulled out of stasis who have cogs that The Collective needs at certain times, and when they are “reactivated” The Collective is looking for “impeccable knowledge and compliance” (Higuera, 2021, p. 85). People who possess *more* than the required knowledge are reprogrammed and, if that does not work to erase “unnecessary” knowledge, they are “purged.”

This model of education and knowledge is framed as clearly evil, but the evil comes from the erasure and disregard for aspects of the person aside from their knowledge. The story does not question this method of knowledge transfer as having any inherent problems. Freire’s warning that the structure of the banking model itself creates passivity isn’t illustrated here. This is clear because the character of Petra is still a hero who tries to fight back against The Collective despite being

1 This paper’s title comes from this text.

the recipient of biology and geology knowledge deposits and, more importantly, never having engaged in any kind of dialogue that we see.

Which brings us to the story's most problematic perspective with respect to Freirean pedagogy: not that it might be useful to dump a lot of information into someone's head, but that people will learn and grow without ever engaging in any kind of dialogue. Freire does not say that there is never cause for the rote memorization of certain facts. He would probably appreciate having the ability to flip a switch and instantly be able to name all of the muscles in the human body or locate every country in the world on a map. However, this kind of learning does not even rise to the level of "necessary but insufficient," leaving it miles away from "sufficient" (Freire, 1970/1993, p. 31).

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"But wait," one might say, "isn't one of the predominant themes of the book that stories are important?" Petra is ostensibly, according to the title, humanity's last storyteller. This must illuminate some importance to learning and knowledge beyond banking. But storytelling is not often dialogue, and it is not dialogue here, either. Petra is the recipient of stories from Lita. She is discouraged from interacting with Lita's stories or asking questions:

"Había una vez" she begins her story, "a young fire snake nagual. His mother was Earth, his father the sun."

"A nagual snake?" I ask. "But how can the sun and Earth be parents to something part human, part animal—"

"Sssh. This is my story." (p. 3)

This particular story is even used to obscure and soften reality:

"I'm scared Lita," I whisper.

She pats my arm. "But for a moment, did you forget your troubles?"

I don't answer out of shame. Her story *had* made

me forget. Forget about what could happen to her and everyone else (ibid).

Later in the story, as Petra tries to free herself and other children who left Earth with her from The Collective, she uses stories, but like Lita, she uses them to pacify and even manipulate, not to engage in dialogue: "When we go on the next scouting mission," Petra tells the other children, "you all have to follow my directions. If you do, I promise to tell you as many cuentos as you want" (p. 209).

Petra's love of stories is peppered throughout the book, and the early scenes in which her monitor goes to great lengths to ensure that she hears as many stories as possible communicate that stories are essential to humanity. But in illustrating how and why stories

are essential to humanity, the book falls short. Stories are windows and mirrors. They are opportunities for dialogue. But, in *The Last Cuentista* they are simply one more thing to be deposited by bankers, used to mollify the listener into acceptance.

Class, the Oppressor, and the Oppressed

The other theme of *The Last Cuentista* that is especially relevant to Freirean pedagogy is how it addresses power between groups. The book is a part of the current advancement for representation of minoritized identities in children's literature. For a long time, one of the most common storylines featuring a non-White protagonist were stories of struggle that stemmed from the oppression or obstacles imposed on a character's ethnicity (Thomas, 2016). Books such as *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* or *Esperanza Rising* are still widely taught in schools today because they are well-written texts that feature non-White protagonists, and also teach lessons about the struggles of Black Americans in the South or Mexican American migrant workers. In contrast to this framing, Petra's ethnicity is an aspect of her character that fills out her background and colors how she approaches the challenges she faces in the story, but it is only the source of her challenge in as much as

the antagonists of the story seek to wipe out the idea of ethnicity entirely with the goal of utopic unity and equality. Petra's parents are not struggling undocumented immigrants, they are accomplished scientists who have been invited onboard a ship sent to populate a new civilization. In the names and descriptions of the other passengers on board the ship, the author clearly makes an effort to depict a diverse group of people who have been sent to colonize Sagan: Petra describes the line of people boarding her ship as having "rainbow tones of neutral skin colors from white to dark brown" (Higuera, 2021, p. 22) who have last names like Nguyen and Aqarwal. The brief, cursory indications of the other characters' ethnicities gives the impression that in the year 2061 ethnic diversity is the norm, not something to be heavily commented upon. In many ways this is an advancement in the world of diverse children's literature. Mexican American readers should be able to read about characters who trans-language in Spanish and English and who are accomplished scientists. Non-White ethnicity does not need to be a burden.

This post-racialization of Earth 2061 is something to reflect upon given Freire's oppressor/oppressed dialectic. Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed has two stages: the oppressed realize they are being oppressed and through praxis they commit to transforming the system, and in the second stage this pedagogy and praxis no longer belongs only to the oppressed, it belongs to everyone (Freire, 1970/1993, p. 36). Power has to be reinvented, it cannot simply pass to the oppressed lest they become the oppressors (p. 39). In Freire's work he talks mostly of the oppressor and oppressed in relation to class. In America today, it is very difficult to separate race from the oppressor/oppressed class dichotomy. The economic and governmental regulations of the U.S. have tied race to class on many levels, from red lining to gentrification to education. But Freire saw class as the most salient stratifier. Forty years in the future, this story would have us believe that race has somehow been disentangled from this, but it avoids directly addressing class in terms of this dialectic. The only mention of class comes in Chapter 2, when the author (via Petra) describes how the world came to have three giant ships capable of traveling to a far-away planet in the first place. They were originally "luxury ves-

sels to take rich people across the galaxy in comfort. . . reserved for the adventurous elite." Petra explicitly says the people who were supposed to board these ships were "nothing like us" (p. 7). The implication is that the starkest class distinctions of the oppressor/oppressed dialectic are not at play here. The very rich are not the ones escaping the planet's demise. But the author also does not give us any clues about what divides the "have's from the "have-nots" at this moment in (future) history. Petra narrates, "How did those government politicians choose?" (p. 7) with no answer. The world still has power imbalances that aren't clearly defined.

In *The Last Cuentista* there are three groups. The group Petra is a member of, which is elite in any interpretation and, from the perspective of the other two groups in the book, the oppressor. Petra, her family, and everyone else who is put into suspended animation on the ship was specially chosen: "scientists, terra-formers, and leaders the government thought deserved to live more than others," with no stated criteria for this decision (p. 7). The parameters of the story are such that Petra's group of Sagan colonists are not explicitly oppressing the people being left behind on Earth. A solar flare has redirected Haley's Comet on a collision course with Earth only a week before the events of the beginning of the story take place (p. 8), creating a time crunch in which it is not conceivable that even a truly egalitarian society would have been able to figure out how to save everyone. By creating this time crunch and not revealing the criteria that the government used to select the people to colonize Sagan, the author seems to be performing a kind of feint—a passing of the buck on the discussion of whether Petra and her family made an ethical decision in agreeing to the mission. Petra voices her concerns about this briefly: she is reluctant to leave her abuela and at one point threatens to reveal her disability, a degenerative eye disease, to the people organizing the loading of the ship (p.10). Even though we don't know the actual criteria by which any of the passengers were chosen, Petra infers (and her parents confirm) that a disability would not be welcome. (This ableism is not directly addressed. Petra's disability is only mentioned at a few points in the story, and it is largely used as a method to complicate the plot.) It is also in this moment that the author gives the reader

the starkest picture of who is being left behind: "I don't want to remember the woman pulling off her wedding ring and pushing her baby forward, toward the armed guard. 'Please, please,' she mouthed over and over as we drove right through the gates" (pp. 11-12). There is acknowledgement that there is a great injustice happening, but the story avoids addressing who or what systems exactly are responsible for the imbalance of power. Short of stating in the first-person narrative "If I could, I'd let them all on" (p. 49), Petra does nothing to right this injustice.

The other oppressor/oppressed dialectic is less constrained by time and circumstance of the book. The question of whether and whom to evacuate from Earth has to be answered within a week, and Freire would admit that this was not enough time to dismantle systems of oppression that led to decisions that saved only a select few. Once some people are on the ship though, another conflict arises. While still on Earth the reader learns of "an international movement" that has "received both great praise and even greater criticism," asking us to "imagine a world where humans could reach a consensus. With collective unity, we can avoid conflict. With no conflict, no war. Without the cost of wars, no starvation. Without differences in culture, in appearance, knowledge..." (p. 17). The spokesman for the group goes on to explain: "Inconsistency and inequality are what have led us to such unrest and unhappiness" (p. 18). The story has presented a dilemma that is not uncommon in Newbery-winning fantasy literature: "Wouldn't it be nice if there was peace and equality? But what if that meant we had to eliminate diversity? That's not such an easy decision, is it?" This rebellion against sameness is a theme in Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993), and it becomes the central theme of *The Last Cuentista*. Some members of this international group make it aboard Petra's ship among the monitors. We learn on page 50 that of the three ships slated to leave Earth and transport people to Sagan, one has left several days before Petra's ship and the third was to leave just after Petra's but was attacked by people on Earth who were being left behind. This third ship was the ship carrying the current politicians and president. Petra, in her semi-suspended state upon leaving Earth, hears the "Lead Monitor" say

that this functional elimination of the current structure will allow them to "create a new history."

For revolutions to happen there must be an overthrow of the current oppressor. However, the story erases this by simply disappearing the government. A coup can be bloodless if one leaves the current government behind on a different planet. The Collective, of which the Lead Monitor is a member, says they want to remake and rewrite the world in a way that will be equitable for all. They acknowledge that the current structure doesn't allow for this. However, rather than participating in a dialogue that transforms their environment and liberates themselves and the government oppressors, the government just disappears and there is a void. And, in the space in which The Collective establishes a new government, no dialogue happens. Freire is explicit that a clear egalitarian vision needs to be developed and maintained through constant cooperation and dialogue (p. 39). Like many other vagaries in the plot, the author fails to show how this takeover actually takes place—our narrator is asleep for the entire evolution of the people who develop from the plan developed by either a group or one leader. What we do know is that, while egalitarianism is the goal, their only plan to achieve that is to equalize everyone physically and culturally (in that remnants of culture such as history and story are eliminated). Again, class is ignored, and rather than developing a pedagogy for everyone the oppressed become the oppressors.

This example of a failed liberation of the oppressed makes *The Last Cuentista* useful as a tool for Freirean pedagogy. The characters in the book agree that egalitarianism is good, but sameness is not the ideal way to achieve that: "I saw Dad shaking his head. 'Equality's good. But equality and sameness are two different things . . . It'll be our job to remember the parts we got wrong and make it better for our children and grandchildren. Embrace our differences, and still find a way to make peace'" (p. 19). Once Petra is awoken by The Collective the book outlines the ways in which this uniform and utilitarian society are not ideal: if it has potential to benefit the whole society, individuals are sacrificed. They also do not exactly follow through on their promise of no war: while there appears to be no major conflicts among members of The Collective them-

selves, when they arrive on Sagan and it is revealed that it is likely that the first ship to leave did arrive safely and has started to establish a settlement, The Collective tries to devise a way to wipe them out. The conclusion being that sure, The Collective can establish a world without war as long as they eliminate anyone who is not a member of The Collective—and isn't that what war on Earth was in the first place? The Collective has recreated the same problems of Earth even though they claim to have addressed the problems that caused them. This leaves a space for educators and readers to discuss: what would a truly liberatory pedagogy be for the future citizens of Sagan?

Conclusion

Science fiction stories are designed to highlight injustices and problems with our current society, and what is slightly jarring about *The Last Cuentista* is that while it does shine a spotlight on the problems with erasure of diversity and culture, the fact that it does *not* shine a spotlight on other problems of the current culture such as class and uncritical models of education may make it seem like it is okay with these injustices. However, the failing of the characters in *The Last Cuentista* to live up to Freirean pedagogy still make it a fruitful text for educators using a Freirean pedagogy—perhaps even more so than a text that presented an ideal. The “cogs” seem cool! But they fall drastically short of creating a liberatory pedagogy, so what would we need to add? The role of story in the text is also ripe for examination. Why is story important? When is it important to rewrite stories? What do stories tell us about others and ourselves? The author also perhaps purposely left plenty of unanswered questions that could spur dialogue in addition to problematizing her educational system. When Petra says, “It’ll be our job to remember the parts we got wrong” (p. 19)—what did we get wrong? What is the way to make peace? In leaving these unanswered, the book serves as launching point for dialogue that could be quite productive.

Having books or characters who are the same ethnicity as an oppressed student is not sufficient for creating a liberatory pedagogy, but they are necessary. The recent diverse winners of ALA awards do necessary but not sufficient work to reflect our society and problematize different structures within it in a way that

could facilitate dialogue in classrooms. This has not always been true of children’s literature, but there does seem to be some indication that publishers, educators, and people who evaluate books are providing more and more opportunities to find and use these texts. There is always reason to be hopeful.

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