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## Telling Tales for Justice and Equity: Storytelling as Public Nepantla Pedagogy

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# Telling Tales for Justice and Equity: Storytelling as Public Nepantla Pedagogy

Ayesha Rabadi-Raol

In 2020, as a global pandemic health crisis united us in a similar plight worldwide, I asked myself: How can spaces for social closeness traverse borders—creatively, publicly—and counter the discourse of social distancing, which in reality means physical distancing? My mind was “still racing back and forth, longing for a return to normality,” but I knew that “nothing could be worse than a return to normality” (Roy, 2020b).

With Arundhati Roy’s words as a North Star, amidst physical separation and stay-at-home orders, I considered: How might virtual spaces become an in-between space of hybridity—what Anzaldúa (1987) called Nepantla. As I began to recognize that the rupture the pandemic had brought about could serve as a site for transformation (Delgado Bernal, 2018), I wondered how my own feelings of in-betweenness—as a transnational, woman, teacher, and teacher educator of Color in North America—might serve as a site for reimagination.

I inhabit a space in-between; my identity changes depending upon my location, as is the case for many people. My identity and experiences made me think about what I could do in a pandemic to support children and families, to enact a public pedagogy from a site of Nepantla; [here is a little more about me and my history](#).

As Roy (2020b) reminded me, “in the midst of this terrible despair” I had the chance to “imagine the world anew” from my own location. And so, it was with more questions than answers that I envisioned and cultivated a virtual read-aloud space that crossed geopolitical borders in the form of Tell-a-Tale. While it was a response to the physical isolation, fear, and detachment brought about by COVID-19, [Tell-a-Tale](#) offers insights into the need for public educational spaces. Such spaces, although not altogether novel—they are similar to read-alouds in libraries and bookstores—allow for children and adults to engage from countries across the world. The virtual space thus becomes a “public” educational space.

## PUBLIC PEDAGOGY AT THE CROSSROADS

As the COVID-19 pandemic crossed geopolitical borders, I considered: What does it mean to break through the encapsulation of place? Inspired by Ripatti-Torniainen (2018), I thought about what it means to fashion a public space to honor our humanity, to reclaim our connections, to counter our isolation. My pedagogy employed the very tenets of *public* identified by Ripatti-Torniainen (2018):

- centering circulating discourses,
- honoring the need for social connections between strangers,
- considering macrostructures, and
- attending to the political public sphere.

Aligned with Ripatti-Torniainen (2018), when I discuss circulating discourses in public pedagogy, I mean how we interact with the dominant discourses in social and cultural ways which bring together individuals with similar or collective interpretations of meanings in the public realm. Identifying a

discourse does not mean agreeing with it, but instead, to be able to understand and address it. In the case of Tell-a-Tale, it meant coming together with the viewers twice a week to share children's literature and discuss how it related to justice and equity. In so doing, I made social and cultural connections with strangers through shared interpretations and online spaces. These connections were situated within larger contextual macrostructures, which in the case of Tell-a-Tale was the pandemic and how it affected teaching and learning.

Public pedagogy can be best understood as “an educational intervention enacted in the interest of the public quality of spaces and places and the public quality of human togetherness” (Biesta, 2012, p. 684). Applying public pedagogy as a theoretical construct, I used this platform to create a space of “public intellectualism and social activism” (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 338). In alignment with Lizárraga and Gutiérrez (2018) and considering macrostructures of exclusion in society, I sought to center “dispositions and practices that thrive on the boundary—spaces that are not always sanctioned as educational” (p. 38).

I did so by re-envisioning “the pandemic as a portal” (Roy, 2020a; 2020b), ensuring that stories and voices with an equity and justice perspective took center stage.

Tell-a-Tale encompassed historical, emotional, and social aims: It served as a way to explore some of the injustices experienced historically and contemporarily (e.g., racism, socioeconomic injustice, bullying), it brought together individuals isolated due to COVID-19, and it enacted a space for community. Through Nepantla, I inhabited the borderlands, both literally and metaphorically.

## NEPANTLA

Nepantla is a word derived by Gloria Anzaldúa from Nahuatl, an Aztec language, that describes a feeling of in-betweenness, a feeling of having an identity that is neither here nor there (Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017). Maffie (2014) explained that Nepantla is “[t]he joining together of the two paths [that] creates a new space: an ambiguous space betwixt and between the two. The crossroads is ontologically ambiguous since it is neither one path nor the other yet simultaneously both paths together” (p. 361).

Nepantla is a space we inhabit when we lose control, when we experience anxiety, and when we are confused; it encompassed my feelings and my very self during the pandemic. It was also a tool for political change. It allowed me to inhabit multiple worlds, to enter multiple homes, and to be in dialogue with multiple individuals. In a world where much of the sense of connection takes place in private realms (homes), Tell-a-Tale allowed me to burst through the boundaries that encapsulate a sense of intimacy. It was a liminal space where multiple realities were at play. It was at these crossroads that I made sense of the interconnectedness of social, racial, ethnic, national, cultural, linguistic, economic, and gendered identities across geopolitical borders (Mancilla et al., 2014).

Nepantla afforded me an in-between positionality, whereby I rejected the rigidity of borders and occupied a liminal in-between space, being in my own home in Toronto while entering the homes of those tuning in, seeking connection, across the world. For me, Nepantla was “the site of transformation, that place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures” (Anzaldúa, 2002, pp. 548-549). Importantly, Nepantla calls for transformation of thought, theory, and action. It is not a site for simplistic solutions, but for complex questions.

## CONTEXTUALIZING TELL-A-TALE

With the school closures associated with the spread of the coronavirus, some families joined “pods” set up to teach kids, fashioning what *The Wall Street Journal* called “at-home schools.” Some parents did so by looking “online to replace or supplement in-person instruction” (Chaker, 2020). As newspapers verified, “these pods—in which small groups of families pool resources to supplement or replace school learning—have become the latest flashpoint in the national debate around race and privilege” (Koh, 2020). The school closures and “pandemic pods” fueled feelings and fears that the needs of the haves were being met while “leaving out the have-nots” (Koh, 2020). It was in this context that I launched Tell-a-Tale.

I began Tell-a-Tale on March 25, 2020, conducting online, livestreamed (via Facebook Live) read-alouds and connecting with children through picture books. When I started, I did not know how long it would last. Nevertheless, I knew that I needed a space to connect with children. I missed them and the sense of connection that took place in the preschools where I had taught.

Initially, the idea was to read a book, engage those in attendance in some experiential activity (being fully present and in community), and invite those who wished to do so to engage with me via email or social media messaging—sending photos, images, and artwork. I chose particular books to highlight issues of equity and justice with young children. Participants submitted artwork, which was displayed in subsequent episodes. The sharing of artwork in response and connection to livestreamed storytelling sessions became a means to connect with educators, parents, grandparents and caregivers, as well as children around the world.

It was a simple formula, but the fact that this was a free learning space in the midst of paid “pods,” which exacerbated educational inequities, seemed to fill a need. While I was unsure of the resonance Tell-a-Tale would have, what started spontaneously lasted six months—or 55 episodes. Gradually the viewership went from 200 to approximately 3,000 viewers per episode.

Each of these 55 episodes concluded with a talk to educators and families who might want to use the selected book with young children and/or simply discuss topics such as race, immigration, gender, and socioeconomic inequities. These were circulating discourses—and so they belonged in Tell-a-Tale as public pedagogy. Each episode was between 20 and 40 minutes in duration, livestreamed from my home with the help of my alma mater, Teachers College, Columbia University, and advertised through social media. The Tell-a-Tale series had its series finale at the end of September 2020.

While Tell-a-Tale was aired from the United States, I produced it from Canada. It was promoted by the Teachers College events team and by me on social media. It was received in India, the United Kingdom, Nigeria, the United Arab Emirates, Panama, Canada, and the United States. As such, it sheds light on the power and possible futures for public pedagogical spaces of hybridity and in-betweenness—during and beyond the pandemic. It sheds light onto Nepantla as a site for public pedagogy.

## SITES FOR CONVERSATIONS ON EQUITY AND JUSTICE

Engaging with social media and digital literacies, my purpose in starting the Tell-a-Tale series was to do something positive for young children in these troubling times. I wanted to reach out and make connections with children’s literature with a strong stance on justice and equity. Aligned with Ayers and colleagues’ (2009) three pillars of social justice education as equity, activism, and social literacy, my plan was to choose books that spoke about equity and diversity through an online platform.

I highlight books that offer insight into how books can serve as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). They take readers into a world without borders and full of possibility, a world of Nepantla, “where the outer boundaries of the mind’s inner life meet the outer world of reality ... a zone of possibility” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 544).

In reading picture books, I drew connections to my own experiences as a transnational woman of Color and created my own artwork, which I showed on the live broadcasts, inspired by the books. This invitation to engage with the books and create artistic responses was taken up by children and adults watching from all over the world and I received many pieces of art and artistic expression related to the stories I had read. For example, on June 8, 2020, I featured the YouTube video, *Animation Series: Something Happened in Our Town by Story Time*, which is a **Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center** program in conjunction with Atlantis School for Gifted Youngsters (#AtlantisBuild). This animated story talks about race and racism and how a family is discussing it with their children. I highlighted this video because of the Black Lives Matter protests that were taking place and to share resources for educators and parents to talk to young children about race and racism as they pertain to the #BlackLivesMatter movement.



Figure 1. Black Woman by Kavya Ray

Kavya Ray,<sup>1</sup> a 14-year-old from Toronto, Canada, sent me the image of a Black woman (Figure 1) in response. In the following episode, I discussed Kavya Ray’s art and how she had used various colors, almost signifying an erasure of the woman’s Blackness. Kavya’s art served as a departing point to discuss how racism and anti-Blackness are not limited to the geopolitical borders of the United States, but global issues that need to be addressed by all communities. Responses such as Kavya’s added texture and voices to the Tell-a-Tale space.

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1 Permission has been granted to use the original names and identities of all mentioned viewers except for Frida, which is a pseudonym.

Another response came from a 4-year-old viewer from New York. Frida (pseudonym) was very excited about the read-aloud of DK's First Animal Encyclopedia, after which I had shared a stick mask-making activity. I also shared some of my own experiences with animals. It turned out that Frida had two dogs and was an animal lover as well. She felt connected to me via Tell-a-Tale and urged her father to send me the photo (Figure 2) and a video clip, where she was excitedly dancing with the animal masks she had made.

These artistic responses from children, youth, and young adults pointed toward the impact and resonance of this in-between public pedagogical space. Through emails and private messages, I became aware that families were engaging in and continuing necessary conversations pertaining to justice, equity, and rights (whether it be anti-racism, animal rights, or climate justice). In this way, I saw glimpses of the reach of public Nepantla pedagogy in action. I saw this as “informed activism,” by which I mean that the children were leading the way to show the grown-ups what it meant to be resilient and adapt to a different way of communicating and connecting through the online platform.



Figure 2. Animal mask

## CHILDREN'S BOOKS AS TOOLS FOR EQUITY AND JUSTICE

As an early childhood educator, I have learned about the value and power of children's picture books and how to critically examine them with a lens of equity and justice (Souto-Manning, 2009, 2013). As I began to envision the Tell-a-Tale series, I wanted to choose books that showcased issues of race and racism, colorism, gender bias, (dis)ability, and environmental justice. I saw the books as tools to foster sites for “young people's pedagogical encounters ... pedagogies that welcome people into caring relationships” (Nxumalo, 2021).

Books—and the stories they tell—are potential sites for the interruptions of microaggressions (Pierce, 1970, 1974), which are everyday enactments of racism and entangled systems of bigotry. And regardless

of how powerful the book or text was, I positioned it as a tool for critical literacy—for reading and problematizing inequities in the world (Souto-Manning, 2009).

The selection of books and how I read them and made meaning with them was geared toward this activism through social media (Hochtritt et al., 2017). Nevertheless, during the pandemic, access to books was difficult. Due to pandemic-related reasons (such as delays in shipments and library closures), I began by reading books I already had. The remaining titles I ordered online. These reached me at various times, so it was difficult to follow a particular narrative arc. Later in the series, I chose e-books to mitigate this issue.

Here are some of the books I worked with on the Tell-a-Tale platform, ranging from a focus on immigration, socioemotional learning, Indigenous/First Nations rights, and children of Color to how art can transform our lives. This is an approach to the selection of books that can guide early childhood educators in public pedagogies, as well as within the four walls of a brick-and-mortar classroom.

### ***Where Are You From?* by Yamile Saied Méndez**

This was the first book in the series—in which I discussed the intersections of immigration and race, and how we come *from* so many people, places, and things. It challenges the microaggression enacted by the question, “Where are you from?” and the typical follow-up question, “No, where are you really from?” It explains that geographical location is not the only identifier and that we need to think more expansively about a life that traverses the borderlands of multiple identities.

I used **George Ella Lyon’s poem *Where I’m From*** along with this book and created a simplified template for young children to engage with (Appendix). I received responses from children in Canada and the United Kingdom sharing their I Am From poems, which I featured on the following episode.

### ***No, David!* by David Shannon**

With *No, David!*, I wanted to discuss how as adults, we repeatedly tell children not to do things and use the word “no.” This was especially the case during a global pandemic, which added an extra dose of anxiety to everyday interactions.

For the connection activity, I made my own book using stylistic elements similar to the original book. In this book I drew things we could say yes to, such as washing hands, staying home, and staying safe. I attended to behaviors particularly related to the pandemic. I did this because I knew many children and parents were frustrated because they were staying home to stay safe. Many children did not have an open space to play or socialize with other children, which might have impacted their socioemotional well-being and mental health.

I invited participants to author their own “yes” books and communicated with a number of families who said on the social media chat how much the children enjoyed making them.

Rayaan Karunakar, a 7-year-old from India decided to make a *Yes, Rayaan* book and share it with me on a **video clip**. Another parent sent messages telling me that her daughter was busy making her own book where she could write about all the things her mother said “yes” and “no” to.

These conversations with family members were extremely important to me as I began to realize that multiple portals of communication and exchange were opening up. They offer insights into expanding

communication with families beyond what is traditionally employed in schools—both during and beyond the pandemic.

***Shi-shi-etko* by Nicola I. Campbell**

This book features the story of a child who is taken away from her Indigenous community to a residential school in Canada. It was important to read this book because the stories of Indigenous and First Nations people are not highlighted, even in forums that seem to be working with a diverse perspective and purporting to sponsor books by and about persons of Color. It is even more critical with the recent findings of hundreds of unmarked graves of Indigenous children on the grounds of former residential schools in Canada.

This book was very important because I learned a part of Canadian history I was not aware of. Being new to the country, I learned about how First Nations people in Canada continue to be marginalized, even though efforts for education and reconciliation are being made. Pointing toward the miseducation of many adults, family members reached out (mostly privately), confessing that they had never known about residential schools in Canada. Their reactions offer insights into the need for teachers to engage with more books by and about Indigenous persons everywhere in the world, and the need to repair the miseducative journeys of many adults whose schooling has been entirely Eurocentric.

***The Best Part of Me* by Wendy Ewald**

This book is co-authored by children who selected photographs of a part of their bodies that they love. The photos are positioned alongside short paragraphs explaining why they chose that part of their body and how it is meaningful to them. It includes children of many races and ethnicities, as well as their stories and connections with their bodies—and at times, the parts of their bodies that are most critiqued by dominant societal discourses (e.g., hair, nose). This was a way for children to see themselves in a book (their words are handwritten on the page and their spelling is left uncorrected) and to envision themselves as authors. It was also a tool for honoring the beauty of many bodies and body parts—despite societal standards of beauty, which have traveled across time and space yet remain deeply rooted in concepts of coloniality.

***Maybe Something Beautiful: How Art Transformed a Neighborhood* by F. Isabel Campoy and Theresa Howell**

This is the book I read for the last episode of Tell-a-Tale. Based on a true story, it tells the story of Mira, who lives in a gray urban community. The book describes how a neighborhood mural connected its residents and created a positive shared space.

This book was a good way to bring together the concept of Tell-a-Tale as a storytelling platform and as a place where artwork was shared. It also served as a glimpse of hope to transform our neighborhoods, communities, and futures into something beautiful. Being careful not to oversimplify the devastation and racial inequities exacerbated by the pandemic, this episode allowed me to invite children, youth, and adults to reframe their gaze—from risks to promises, from gray to Color, from despair to hope, from impossibility to possibility.

Inviting participants to shift their own gaze and reconsider their own positionality and agency helped to bring some closure to this public Nepantla pedagogy. It offers implications for the book and

text selections teachers make after the pandemic. It reminds us not to limit ourselves to books and stories featuring characters who identify as Black, Indigenous, and of Color that focus on trauma and oppression. It urges educators to center the joy, magic, and humanity of Black, Indigenous, and persons of Color.

## REIMAGINING EDUCATION OUTSIDE A SCHOOLROOM

In the midst of a public health crisis and associated governmental dysfunction, I sought to determine my own function as an educator committed to justice. It was with much unease that I embarked on the journey of bringing people together, prizing the relational aspect of teaching and learning while attending to the need for social connections between strangers, considering macrostructures, and attending to the political public sphere (Ripatti-Torniainen, 2018).

My aim was to use the online read-aloud platform with children’s literature to create a space that could transcend borders and allow children and families to take up an active and an activist stance, creatively engaging with the texts and making connections with their lives from all over the world.

When I started Tell-a-Tale I did not realize that the pandemic would last so long, and that so many lives would be lost. Nor did I realize that what I was doing, a simple storytelling activity, would connect so many people globally. Through Tell-a-Tale, I sought to “reclaim or reinvigorate the public sphere” (Biesta, 2012, p. 683). The windows into Tell-a-Tale that I have shared here offer a situated representation of a public Nepantla pedagogy.

I was inspired by Arundhati Roy (2020b) and accepted the challenge to see this pandemic as a portal and reimagine, reinvent, refocus, and build anew. Throughout the journey, I learned invaluable lessons, both personally and professionally. I learned the value of adapting to change, even an unwelcome one. The pandemic gave us no choice. I also relearned the power of storytelling and how stories—boundless and borderless—are a connective force that can be used to create positive change. I learned how interconnected we are through social media and shared values, commitments, and experiences. Tell-a-Tale also served as a representation of how universities may use their platforms for the greater good, bringing people together and sponsoring programming.

The power and promise of a public Nepantla pedagogy is in thinking of new ways to reimagine education outside the confines of a school building or classroom walls. I hope the reimaginings offered here shed light on possibilities for you to fashion “transformations ... in this in-between space” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. xv). It is a space for reimagining, renegotiating, and reconceptualizing what education can and should look like—in the middle of and after the pandemic.

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## Appendix

**I am from....**  
**“I Am From” Poem Template**  
**Adapted by Ayesha Rabadi-Raol**  
**Inspired by “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon**

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ (names of family members)  
 from \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ (other people you love)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (where you live)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ (a detail about your  
 city/hometown – a smell, taste, or feel)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ (food you like to eat)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (favorite animal/pet)

I am from the \_\_\_\_\_ (favorite toy or game)

I’m from \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ (things you do with  
 your family) and \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ (family habits).

I’m from \_\_\_\_\_ (place of birth)  
 and \_\_\_\_\_ (family ancestry, nationality or place)

I am from love and all the people who love me!

By (name) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Ayesha Rabadi-Raol** is an experienced early childhood educator and teacher educator. She has taught in diverse settings in India, the United States, and Canada for the last 20 years. After earning an EdD from Teachers College, Columbia University, she is now an assistant professor at Sonoma State University. Rabadi-Raol's research focuses on equity and justice, centering the experiences of intersectionally minoritized children and teachers of Color. Critically examining pedagogies of power and privilege in early childhood education and teacher education, as a teacher and scholar, she believes in amplifying the stories of historically minoritized populations of young children and their teachers.