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Carrying the Stories of Las Mariposas: Literacy as Collective and Transformative

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Carrying the Stories of Las Mariposas: Literacy as Collective and Transformative

by Deborah Vriend Van Duinen



**Deborah
Vriend Van Duinen**

In the epilogue of Julia Alvarez’s (1994) historical fiction novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Dede, one of the main characters reflects on her decision to share the story of her murdered sisters. “We needed a story to understand what had happened to us,” she says. In choosing to “carry the stories” of her sisters, Dede allows these stories to be remembered and take flight. She also allows herself and the world to be transformed by them. Alvarez’s novel, based on the account of the four Mirabel sisters during the time of the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, speaks to the importance of stories and storytelling as a way to collectively remember, honor, and make sense of our experiences.

The Lakeshore communities in West Michigan explored this concept of “carrying stories” as part of the 2019 NEA Big Read and Little Read Lakeshore programs, both month-long community-wide reading programs focused on the reading of a common book. The NEA Big Read Lakeshore program focused on Alvarez’s story while younger readers took part in the connected Little Read Lakeshore program focused on Carmen Agra Deedy’s (2017) children’s picture book, *The Rooster Who Would Not Be Quiet* (Figures 1 and 2). Together, the programs consisted of over 50 main events that included lectures, panel presentations,

book discussions, art workshops, and music and dance performances. These events took place in a variety of spaces and were hosted by libraries, nonprofit organizations, schools, and businesses. While the purpose of the events was to explore the books’ topics and themes from a variety of perspectives, the events were collectively designed to help readers reflect on the following guiding questions: What does it mean to carry a story? How do we do this well? Whose stories do or should we carry? What does it mean to speak up for someone or ourselves? What or whose voices need to take flight?

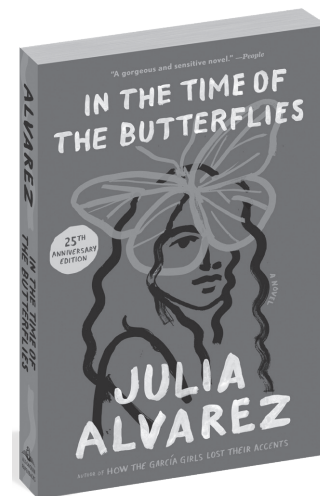


Figure 1. Book Cover of *In the Time of the Butterflies* (Workman Publishing Company, 1994)

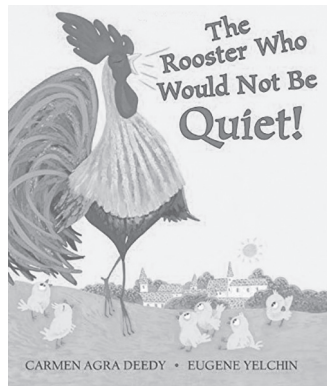


Figure 2. Book Cover of *The Rooster Who Would Not Be Quiet!* (Scholastic, 2017)

Over 10,000 readers, from PK-12 students to senior citizens, participated in these programs. Across demographics that often divide – race/ethnicity, age, educational, and work experiences – Lakeshore community members read and discussed *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *The Rooster Who Would Not Be Quiet*. Using the stories as springboards, these readers also explored stories in their own lives, community, and in the world that needed to take flight. They listened to and learned from each other as they interacted and spoke up in book discussions and art workshops, sometimes for themselves, sometimes on behalf of others.

A unique aspect of the NEA Big Read and Little Read Lakeshore programs is their emphasis on creating art in response to reading the chosen books. Reading a text alone or even in a book club or class is only part of the experience. One of the goals of the programs is to encourage participants to take what they have read and discussed and use it to create something that speaks into or about existing issues within the community for the purpose of societal change, of trying to bring more justice, empathy, joy, and truth to the community and larger world.

To support teachers and community members in this, the NEA Big Read and Little Read Lakeshore programs hire local professional artists to serve as artists-in-residence. These artists help develop the concept for a community-wide art project and collaborate with

participating area teachers. Through class visits, the artists share with students how they approach the creative process and think about embodied texts through efferent and aesthetic responses to literature (Rosenblatt, 1982). The artists then help guide students to brainstorm ideas for their individual or collective art projects and assist students as they research and compose these ideas. The artists and teachers encourage students to use their out-of-school experiences and literacy practices to inform the content, medium, and genre of these projects and then work collaboratively with them throughout the process.

In November 2019, Lakeshore P-12 students and community members responded creatively to *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *The Rooster Who Would Not Be Quiet* by creating art in response to the concept of “carrying stories.” With local artists, Joel School-Tanis and Erik Picardo, students created art pieces in a variety of shapes, genres, and forms by composing visual, audio, linguistic, and spatial representations of the stories they wanted to share. Some of these stories took the form of individually decorated butterflies (Figure 3). Other stories were done collectively by small groups or entire classes. These included photography, poetry, 3-D sculpture, graphic novel panels, paintings, and book covers (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Carry the Stories student artwork example.

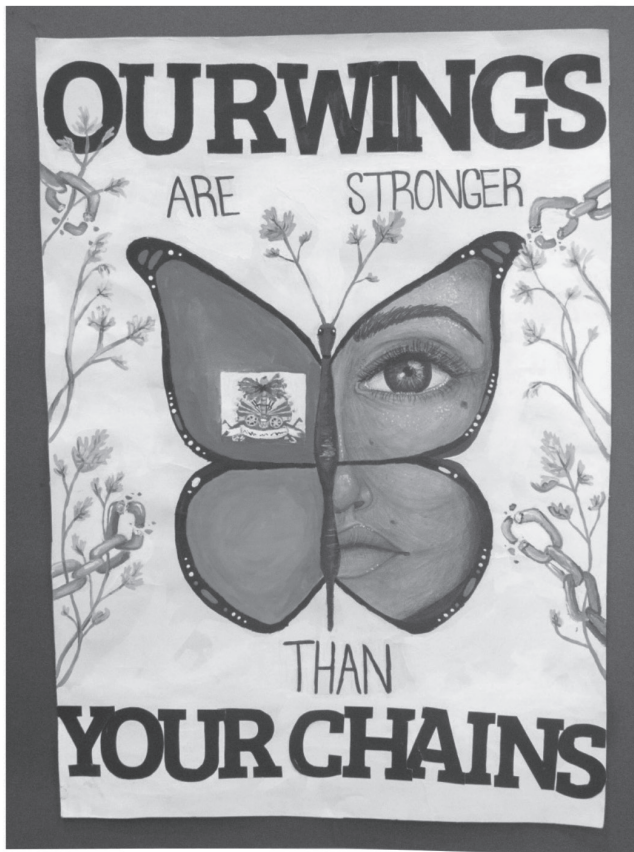


Figure 4. Carry the Stories student artwork example.

At the end of the month, students' art pieces were displayed in a butterfly-themed Student Exhibition of Learning event at the Holland Armory. Over 1000 people – teachers, students and their families as well as community members – attended this event and witnessed these stories taking flight (Figure 5).

Reflections on Reading with Our Community

This powerful, community-wide experience prompts me, as the director of the NEA Big Read and Little Read Lakeshore programs, to think more deeply about how literacy could and should be considered in more collective and communal ways. Literacy is often defined and practiced as a solitary individual activity, as the skills, knowledge, and proficiencies individuals possess or perform. Sadly, school-based notions of literacy contributes to this. Reading initiatives, instructional support, and high stakes literacy assessments foreground individual literacy skills and focus on what often happens in an individual's mind. Literacy instruction tends to focus on proven methods that support a clearly defined and one-size-fits-all process of literacy skill development.



Figure 5. 2019 Student Exhibition of Learning Event (Photo taken by Rob Walcott).

But what if there were other ways to think about and experience literacy? What if literacy was understood and practiced within different frameworks? A historical look at literacy reveals that throughout the years and by different groups of people, literacy has indeed been experienced as more than just the acquisition of individual skills and knowledge.

In *A History of Reading* (1996), Alberto Manguel describes how it was not until well into the 10th century that reading changed from being a social activity that always involved reading aloud to others to an individual and silent experience. He tells of how Saint Augustine, in the 4th century, wrote bewilderingly about watching someone silently reading. Manguel posits that Augustine's surprised reaction reveals that reading with "eyes scanning the page and tongue held still" was uncommon. Reading was typically done out loud and in conversation with others; the very idea of reading for oneself was shocking.

This shared experience of reading continued until well into the 1700s. Historian Robert Darnton (1990) describes how reading continued to have social and collective purposes, often taking "place in workshops, barns, and taverns. It was almost always oral" (p 168). Reading a text brought people together and helped connect them to each other.

Historically, different groups of people have also experienced literacy in collective ways. In her book *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* (2020), Gholdy Muhammad traces the history of Black literary societies or "literary institutions" throughout the 19th century among Black populations. These collaborative teaching and learning spaces – typically with under ten members, but in some cases as large as over 100 members – helped members of different ages and experiences to develop literacy skills around "meaningful and significant texts," and to share their knowledge, ideas, and information (p. 25). The development of individual literacy skills was valued, but the societies also had a larger purpose. They also endeavored to "advance the conditions of African Americans and others in the

wider society" (p. 25). In other words, reading in these spaces wasn't just about reading the words on the page and taking in the information. The purpose of these societies was to "share knowledge gained from acts of literacy rather than keep education to one's self" (p. 26). Literacy was understood to involve some sort of collective action that would lead to the transformations of self and society.

Our community-wide reading program experiences, as well as these experts, offer us a view of possibilities for literacy understanding and instruction, even amidst what can be more narrow constructions of literacy.

Carrying the stories of Las Mariposas gave my Lakeshore community a glimpse into what literacy can look like as a social activity and responsibility. In the many programs we offered, students developed literacy skills such as close reading, annotating, predicting, and inferring as they read and discussed our chosen books. Yet, they also participated in the social aspect of meaning-making and the advocacy that came out of this. Reading *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *The Rooster Who Would Not Be Quiet* and collectively exploring the concept of "carrying stories" prompted our community members. They reflected on stories in our own community that need to be carried such as immigration experiences, a lack of housing options, and racial inequalities. Collectively, we became more aware of stories of pain, fear, misunderstanding, and injustice that we didn't know about or fully realize. For some, this experience also gave us space for individual and collective stories to be heard, seen, and honored.

As students explored how to carry their own or others' stories, they developed writing skills such as stating and supporting opinions, organizing ideas, editing and rewriting. At the same time, they were supported in brainstorming and envisioning ways to collectively respond to and let these stories take flight. They were encouraged to articulate a vision of what could and should be in our community and world. Their individual literacy skill development, in other words, was reoriented for the transformation of self and society.

As I look back on this experience, I'm grateful for the ways that Muhammad's (2020) work gives language to this powerful community-wide reading program experience of collectively "carrying the stories." Our community's embodied experiences of carrying stories in visible and concrete ways helped us reframe the "whys" of reading. We got a glimpse of the benefits of collectively sharing knowledge from acts of literacy. We got a taste of what it might mean for literacy to be transformative.

In her keynote address to our Lakeshore community, Alvarez reflected, "When you read, you become someone else; you're exercising the muscles of compassion... It's so important to have a reading community if you want to be a free people." Framed in this way, reading and literacy necessitate interaction with others. We need each other to read, write, and tell the stories of our community and world. We need to compose, carry, and let these stories take flight so that we, as individuals and as a society, become more compassionate, empathetic, just, and free.

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Author Biography

Deborah Vriend Van Duinen is an Associate Professor of Education at Hope College and Director of the NEA Big Read Lakeshore, a community-wide reading program. In her work with preservice teachers, she emphasizes inquiry-based teaching and reflective practices. Deborah writes and teaches in the area of English education, disciplinary literacy, young adult literature and adolescent literacy.





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