This article features a discussion with Mr. Duncan Tonatiuh and Dr. Violet J. Harris about the importance of diverse literature for children in the United States.

For this issue of *Language Arts*, I had the pleasure of speaking with two accomplished authors and champions of diverse children’s literature: Mr. Duncan Tonatiuh and Dr. Violet J. Harris. Our conversation centered on issues of diversity in literature written for children and youth in the United States.

Duncan Tonatiuh (toh-nah-tee-YOU) is a critically acclaimed author and illustrator. He is a repeat winner/honoree of the Pura Belpré Illustrator Award and the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children’s Book Award. Mr. Tonatiuh’s (2014) picturebook *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family’s Fight for Desegregation* won the prestigious Jane Addams Children’s Book Award and earned a Robert F. Sibert Honor. His (2015) book, *Funny Bones: Posada and His Day of the Dead Calaveras*, was named a *New York Times* Best Illustrated Book, won the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award and the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children’s Book Award, and earned a Pura Belpre Illustrator Honor. Mr. Tonatiuh’s (2016) latest book is *The Princess and the Warrior: A Tale of Two Volcanoes*. An author of Mexican and American heritage, Mr. Tonatiuh grew up in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, and graduated from the Parsons School of Design in New York City. His work is inspired by ancient Mexican art, particularly that of the Mixtec codex. With his works, Mr. Tonatiuh aims to create images and stories that honor the past but that are relevant to children in contemporary times.

Dr. Violet J. Harris is Professor Emerita of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Harris conducts research in the areas of children’s literature, multicultural literature, children’s book publishing, the historic development of African American literacy, and literacy materials created specifically for African Americans. Dr. Harris has been active in several professional organizations, including the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Given her expertise in children’s literature, Dr. Harris has served on numerous national committees, including the Multicultural Literature Board for Reading Is Fundamental, and the NCTE committee responsible for the first volume of *Kaleidoscope*, a multicultural booklist for K–8 teachers and students. In 2015, Dr. Harris received the Celebration of Teaching Excellence Award from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

This excerpted conversation was recorded on October 2, 2015, and has been edited for publication.

Jennifer D. Turner: Thank you both for taking the time to talk with me today. I wanted to open our conversation with your thoughts about the #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign, which, as you may recall, occurred in May 2014. What was really fascinating about the campaign was not only that it garnered national attention for pointing out the lack of diversity in books, but that it also invited the public to share their tweets...
about why diverse books are important. So, as we begin this interview, I thought it would be interesting to hear what you might tweet about diversity in children’s literature and why you think we need diverse books. Duncan, can we begin with your tweet?

**Duncan Tonatiuh:**
Tweets are tricky because they are so short! The United States is such a diverse country, and we need diverse books to reflect the different cultural experiences that children have. My tweet would acknowledge the fact that we need multicultural books so that different kinds of children can see themselves reflected in the books they read, and so that children can learn about people from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

**JDT:** Excellent! I totally agree. Dr. Harris, what would you tweet?

**Violet J. Harris:** My tweet would probably say “inclusive diversity matters.” And I use the term “inclusive” because I don’t want to push some groups to the forefront and push other groups to the back, because then we overlook the contributions and pioneering work of those groups in the background. For example, one issue that has been foregrounded in recent conversations related to diversity is disability, specifically people who are autistic or exhibit behaviors within the autism spectrum. However, what concerns me about the foregrounding of disability is that cultural diversity is moved to the background, and the fact that many people have disabilities, and not just one certain group of people, goes unacknowledged.

I’m not being negative; I hope my remarks are taken in the spirit in which they are given. There are many people who suffer from various disabilities and who are African American, Latino, or Native American. But, the overall impression one would get from books is that “inclusion” is only accessible to disabled persons who are White or European American. At the same time, I am noticing a trend where issues of race are being relegated to the background when we talk about diversity in general, and that concerns me.

**JDT:** Yes, that is very concerning. Dr. Harris, your thoughts about inclusive diversity remind me of an article that you wrote in *Reading Teacher* (Harris, 2011) related to “hopescapes,” a metaphor developed by Virginia Hamilton. How does the notion of inclusive diversity help to highlight the dreams, struggles, triumphs, and hopes of different groups of people?

**Diverse literature for any group of people at any time and any place gives voice to the personal as well as testifies about a group’s experience.**

**VJH:** Virginia Hamilton is one of the most extraordinary writers, and I believe that she is one of those writers who provided an intellectual foundation for multicultural literature. Hamilton’s notions of diversity were uniquely expansive; although her ideas grew out of her extensive explorations of African American culture and writing African American children’s literature, she was also inclusive in her understanding of the plights of other ethnic groups. Diverse literature for any group of people at any time and any place gives voice to the personal as well as testifies about a group’s experience. I think Hamilton’s comments about “hopescapes” attempt to capture that range of cultural voices, because multicultural literature is much more than telling the story about an individual in a particular place or time; it is a story of a group’s experiences that reflect their history, their current existence, and their future. Interestingly, that idea is discussed in an article that Hamilton (1987) wrote titled “The Known, the Remembered, and the Imagined.”

So, Hamilton’s metaphor of “hopescapes” and her notions of inclusive diversity are intimately tied to her philosophy about writing. It’s
a very complex philosophy, and I’m not doing it justice here. But there are many authors who write what we call “multicultural literature,” and who are extraordinary in that they attempt to capture what it means to be a particular person in a specific cultural group at a given place and time in ways that illuminate the humanity of that individual or that character, but also embody the histories, experiences, and hopes of that cultural group.

JDT: Dr. Harris, I really appreciate that point about the expansive notion of humanity. Duncan, how does your work expand our ideas about humanity while featuring the specific dreams, struggles, and hopes of Latinos in America?

DT: Well, I guess when I make a book, I try to write about things that I find interesting that I see in the people around me or in my community, and hopefully that contributes to conversations related to issues of diversity. I think we need many different contributions and different ideas to create a broader, more diverse picture of life in the United States. In Separate Is Never Equal, for example, I was trying to take a story that not many people know about and write it for children; even I didn’t know until fairly recently about the Mendez family and their struggle to desegregate the schools in California. So, I thought it was a story that was important to tell. Hopefully, it’s a book that children of Latino descent can learn something from; I want them to see that their voices are important, too, and that there are courageous people who look like them and who make meaningful contributions to the United States.

Take Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin (Tonatiuh, 2010); I didn’t write that book as an autobiography, but it definitely relates to my experiences because I grew up in Mexico and later came as a teenager to the United States. Dear Primo is a book about two cousins who write to each other about their everyday experiences in Mexico and the United States: one likes to eat pizza and one likes to eat quesadillas; one likes to play fútbol (soccer), the other one likes to play basketball. So the book is about contrasts, but it is also about similarities, and that is what I experienced living in both countries and having families in both places. Although there are many differences between Mexico and the United States, there are also many things that are very similar. Ultimately, I think that people, especially children, are more alike than different.

JDT: Unfortunately, the types of multicultural books where children see these cultural differences and similarities are not always incorporated into our literacy curricula in elementary schools, and some teachers think they cannot or should not include diverse stories in their literacy instruction. Duncan, what would you say to teachers about the importance of using your books in their classrooms?

DT: I’ve had the opportunity to present Separate Is Never Equal at a number of different schools across the country, and I think the book helps to paint a more complex picture of the civil rights movement. I think when children are taught about the civil rights movement, we talk about important heroes like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Cesar Chavez. But I think my book does a good job of showing that it also took regular people, so to speak, to make changes. And it helps children understand that there were different groups experiencing segregation and other forms of unequal treatment, which hopefully will create empathy for and connections with different kids in schools.

There is another book I’ve written called Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant’s Tale (Tonatiuh, 2013), which is a fable that is similar to Little Red Riding Hood. But the word “Coyote” in this story has a second layer of meaning: the Coyote is not only an animal, it is also a person who smuggles people across the US-Mexico border. And when I’ve had the opportunity to...
present *Pancho Rabbit* in different schools, kids who have had a migrant experience really connect to the book, and the story just opens them up. After the kids read *Pancho Rabbit* in one Texas school that I visited, they decided to create a multi-voiced poem in the classroom about their own families’ journeys to the United States, and I thought it was very powerful. We need different books that speak to the multiple experiences that people have, so that children will be energized to tell their own stories and voice the things that they think are important.

**JDT:** Duncan, I am very drawn to this idea of energizing kids in ways that help them to tell their own stories and to take action, because I think that was a powerful theme in *Separate Is Never Equal*. Helping children understand that being an everyday activist is so important, because it is not just the big heroes like Martin Luther King, Jr. who can make a difference; as people concerned about the community, we must stand up for our rights and take action so that our voices can be heard. Dr. Harris, this reminds me of an article that you wrote in *Reading Research Quarterly* (Willis & Harris, 2000) about literacy as a political practice. What does it mean for us to think about literacy as a political practice, and why is literacy intimately tied to equity, diversity, and advocacy?

**VJH:** I don’t think we could ever divorce literacy from politics or political processes. From the very beginning of this country, literacy has been tied with politics. Consider the establishment of public schools in Massachusetts; shortly after the colony was founded, the Old Deluder Satan Act mandated that communities with a certain number of people provide common schools for young children so that they could learn to read. Although the ultimate purpose for the schools was to cultivate children who would be able to read the Bible themselves and not need the intercession of a priest or minister, this example demonstrates a strong connection between literacy and the political sphere. And this connection has been an ongoing factor throughout US history. When the United States Army gave its Alpha tests, they found that a significant number of enlisted men in World War I were illiterate; consequently, there was a strong societal interest in expanding literacy, and policies were created to achieve this goal, including mandating schools to age 16 and the expansion of post-secondary schooling with the G.I. Bill after World War II.

But there have also been negative consequences related to the interconnectedness of literacy and politics; the denial of literacy to enslaved Africans, and the denial of equitable access to literacy education for African Americans after the postbellum period are good examples. These educational inequities continue today; a major example is the situation with the history and social studies textbooks in Texas, where there is a whitewashing of what the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) represented in the past and in current times. It is preposterous to say that the KKK was productive for our society, but that kind of sentiment is finding its way into our children’s social studies textbooks. At the same time, there is a movement within some social studies textbooks to deny the horrors of slavery by replacing descriptions of the unjust and inhumane treatment that slaves endured with erroneous information. Consequently, literacy has never been divorced from the political sphere.

We need different books that speak to the multiple experiences that people have, so that children will be energized to tell their own stories and voice the things that they think are important.

The fact that it remains so difficult to get books that feature diverse writers into the hands of children is another inequity that we must work to resolve. We have many wonderful librarians and teachers who seek out books featuring African American and Latino children, and the teachers who work with me often request these books. Also, bilingual books are often requested by educators, and increasingly, they are not only written in Spanish; many are written in French because we have a growing population from the Democratic Republic of the Congo that speaks French. In addition, there is a growing number of bilingual books written in Asian languages, including Chinese and Korean.

So, we will never be able to divorce political aspects from literature; it is almost impossible.

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But most important, if we say that we want to introduce children to the best writers and the best illustrators, then “the best” cannot mean literature that emanates from or represents only one group of people. If we want to introduce children and youth to those writers who are innovative, we have to look at innovation and creativity wherever it might exist. And that’s a powerful statement to convey to youth: that creativity, literacy excellence, and artistic excellence can be found in any cultural group. We have an obligation to make sure all children receive that message, and to help all students become open to the idea that they, too, have the possibility of creativity and intellectual and artistic greatness within them.

Multicultural literature helps all children see the possibility and the promise. Few White children in this country have difficulty finding books that feature who they are, but it is quite common to find African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian American youth, as well as multiracial and biracial children, who have never read a book that highlights their cultural identities. In my classes, I have had countless adult students who are from diverse ethnic groups, and they have tears in their eyes when I show them books that emphasize their experiences. I’ve had adult men tear up when I’ve shown them Kadir Nelson’s (2008) *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*. I gave one of my former students and her husband one of Lee Tae-Jun’s bilingual books, *Waiting for Mama* (2007), written in Korean and English, because her husband just kept taking it off my bookshelf. Finally, I said, “You can give that to your daughter; she can have the book,” and he was so excited. These examples show there is still a tremendous need for us to be very direct, open, honest, and active in the way that we choose diverse books to share with children and youth.

**JDT:** There are so many threads that I want to tug on in what Dr. Harris discussed. One thread that I want to pose to you, Duncan, is this idea of innovation and creativity. Dr. Harris mentioned that introducing children to “the best” multicultural literature means that creativity should not just be expected from one cultural group, but can be found in diverse groups and cultures. I believe that your work really helps children to know much more about the creative and ancient art of Mixtec and other aspects of your Mexican heritage. Could you tell us more about your own cultural inspirations, and why your references to pre-Columbian art are such a significant aspect of the creative energy in your picturebooks?

**DT:** Well, I haven’t always been interested in pre-Columbian art, but I’ve always been interested in art. When I was a kid, I was interested in comic books and Anime, and then when I was in high school, I was interested in painters like Vincent van Gogh. When I came to the United States, I was a teenager, and over time, I became more nostalgic and more curious about things from Mexico, especially Mexican history and art.

When I was in college in New York City, I became friends with a guy named Sergio, who was Mixtec (indigenous Mesoamerican peoples of Mexico). There is a large Mixtec community in New York City, so I decided to do a project about Sergio and his journey to the United States. One of the first things I did was go to the library and look up Mixtec artwork; I came across these pre-Columbian images that the Mixtecs made in the 14th and 15th centuries, and although I’d seen artwork like that before in textbooks when I was kid, or in different places as I grew up, I hadn’t really paid attention to it. But when I looked at that time, I immediately decided that I was going to do a modern-day Codex (a richly illustrated text that provides a window into the life and culture of a group of people) about Sergio.

I’ve been drawing that way ever since, and I’m very happy that I put those things together, because hopefully it’s a way to celebrate the art
from the past and to connect people—especially children of Latino and Mexican descent—with this artistic tradition from hundreds of years ago that produces very beautiful and original images. Also, in my books, I write stories that happened in the recent past or that are happening currently, and hopefully these stories make the Mixtec artwork that existed hundreds of years ago interesting and relevant to children nowadays.

**JDT:** Duncan, your words reminded me of author/illustrator Allen Say. Several years ago, Mr. Say spoke at the International Literacy Association’s annual meeting, and he described how he draws his pictures first, then he writes the text when he creates books. As an author/illustrator, do you create the illustrations first, or do you tend to write the words first?

**DT:** Nowadays, I usually write the story first, and once that’s close to being done, then I do the drawings, or the sketches, for the entire book. But as I write, I always try and have in my head the pictures that are going to be on the page; I make little doodles, just little thumbnail sketches, to have an idea of what that page would look like. So, I try to work in tandem. I do my illustrations on a regular piece of paper, and go over it with a pen, but to create the different textures that you see in the books, I do a digital collage. I hope that young readers find the artwork attractive and understand that it represents an ancient style that also has a modern, contemporary feel to it.

**JDT:** Duncan, the issue you raised about the interplay between the old and the new that you strive to create in your picturebooks is fascinating. Dr. Harris, how is this idea of connecting the old with the new manifested in your work, given that some diverse authors of color might write about contemporary times and issues, while others might be writers of the past?

**VJH:** Well, in some ways this idea is evident in my work, because one of my goals is to bring wonderful opportunities to read great stories and to look at great art to all children through multicultural literature. But, as I previously mentioned, I also recognize creativity in a range of perspectives, and it’s not relative to a time or space.

**JDT:** Thank you for such an enjoyable conversation. I learned so much, and I wish you both continued success in your work.

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