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## **Producing Cultural Imaginaries in the Playshop**

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In this chapter, we consider play and drama as more than pleasurable pastimes or enrichment activities but as core literacies for critical cultural production that enables children to explore who they are expected to be in a global world. Using this lens, we resituate play for contemporary times, examining how play enables children to engage cultural imaginaries in the multiple spaces they encounter at home, at school, on television, in the mall, on the internet, on the phone, or across international communities. We use the term *cultural imaginaries* (Medina & Wohlwend, in press) to describe collective visions of idealized communities, constructed through shared imagination rather than located in a specific physical geographical location (Anderson, 1991; Appadurai, 1996). Within these imaginaries, we write and play ways of being through the stories we tell, the films we watch, and the books we read, but also, through the media we play and the products we use. For example, media imaginaries circulate scripts for fantasy worlds in animated films or for melodramas in television programs that are distributed globally and replayed locally among children who enact and embody those worlds. But cultural imaginaries are not limited to media portrayals of fictional scripts; they include our idealized models of real places, whether schools, neighborhoods, communities, or countries. In our literacy research in early childhood and elementary classrooms, we found children playing transnational imaginaries, trying out cultural repertoires handed down across generations and continents as they pretended to be in distant places where children had never lived but that they knew through family stories, picture books, and photo albums.

Here we look specifically at the ways children collaborate to imagine together in dramatic productions in elementary classrooms in Puerto Rico and in pretend play in a kindergarten classroom in Iowa. In Puerto Rico, Carmen studied children's dramatizations of telenovelas, a Latino television genre that features melodramatic series, sometimes compared with soap operas. Karen studied how play and writing developed among children who have transnational connections to China and Iowa while they "played school". In our research at these sites, we teamed with teachers who worked intentionally to bring in children's cultural repertoires and literacy resources through

play and dramatization. In both places, we found play and dramatic performances provided ways of improvising scripts and performing identities that have rich potential for literacy education.

This way of resituating play in relation to writing and other literacies opens possibilities to expand writing workshop beyond a focus on honing an author's craft or producing individual child-made books; rather, it focuses on collective cultural production through what we are calling a *playshop*. Playshop is a curricular approach that recognizes play as a literacy that produces cultural texts and a tactic for reimagining cultural contexts (Wohlwend, 2011). By making drama and pretend play central to literacy curriculum and instruction, playshops encourage children to imagine familiar cultural spaces into the classroom and make diverse literacy practices available for enactment. This approach moves beyond allowing popular media into school as way of providing interesting topics and enriching writing workshop curricula. Playshop is a more fluid model that moves within and across spaces and imaginaries, moves that require children to negotiate and to improvise ways of belonging in these worlds. Further, in the playshop, all literacies merge together: neither reading, writing, designing, nor playing is privileged over the other. This is not play in the service of writing but assemblages of literacies in moment to moment interactions.

In playshop, children are expected to create meaning together, recognizing that the ways we relate to global landscapes are collaborative; social media like Twitter and Facebook are prime examples. By contrast, in many classrooms; writing is individualistic, with each writer held accountable and expected to fit into mainstream norms for writing measured by rubrics of traits on standardized assessments. Instead, playshop builds upon dramatic play and performance that require ongoing cooperation among players who work together to create and maintain a pretend situation (Corsaro, 2003; Sawyer, 2003). During pretense, all the players contribute to the emerging script with ideas openly under construction as children work together to keep the play going. Their collaborative imaginings rewrite the meanings of here-and-now classroom furniture and student identities and replace these with pretend ones: a chair becomes a throne, a pencil becomes a sword, a classmate becomes a queen, and so on. When children play and engage imagined worlds through dramatized texts, this rewriting facility can produce a contested and transformative space, dense with opportunities for children to improvise and productively use power. We found that when children were allowed to play at school, young children could use pretense to cross overlapping imaginary contexts and to remake restrictive expectations and classroom identities<sup>1</sup>. Here we ask: How do children use play and performance in playshops to write and rewrite themselves in and out of cultural imaginaries?

### **“My China”: Playing School in a Transnational Imaginary**

In this section, Karen shares classroom excerpts from children's pretend play in a kindergarten in a K-6 public school in Iowa, a primarily rural U.S. Midwestern state. The classroom was one research site in a larger ethnographic study in which she sought to understand the semiotic

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, we also recognize that play can be problematic and exclusionary, posing complex issues that require teacher mediation. We have written extensively about these issues elsewhere.

work and social practices in children's literacy play. Anna, the kindergarten teacher in this classroom, provided a play-based literacy curriculum and worked to establish an atmosphere of mutual respect and learner independence. Anna had 17 years of early childhood teaching experience and a master's degree in developmental reading. She was committed to providing an "accepting, peaceful" atmosphere where children could actively participate and feel "comfortable and safe". In a typical morning meeting, Anna welcomed the class, explained her planned activities, and adjusted the day's agenda displayed on a large pocket chart to include activities that children suggested. These plans structured the day into segments: first, shared reading of big books and poetry charts followed by three consecutive 45-minute activity periods that mingled play and children's self-directed reading, writing, and drawing projects.

In this chapter, we share vignettes that show how playshop supported a transnational imaginary, "My China" for a Chinese international child who wrote in English and Chinese as she played school. Min was one of three girls in this kindergarten who had transnational histories with China and the United States with important similarities and variations in their relationships to these spaces. All three girls attended the same extracurricular Chinese language school on Saturdays and were learning to letter pictograph characters. The girls spoke English at school but said that they could speak Chinese as well although they rarely demonstrated this. At school, the girls imagined transnational play settings that they referred to as "My China" a shared imaginary that drew in their parents' and grandparents' desires to transmit Chinese values and their own experiences in Chinese school. This shared imagining created an affinity group, a regular play group of children who share a common play interest.

Among the children in the "My China" play group, individual desires, family histories, and cultural resources created important differences in the ways that each girl interacted with My China as a transnational imaginary. Michelle and Lily are Chinese-American students whose mothers had grown up in China. Lily was born in the United States and Michelle was born in China. Both girls' parents and grandparents stressed their desire to honor and transmit Chinese culture through cooking, language, literacy, and arts. Anna regularly invited parents to school to share their "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and for one week, Michelle's mother came to class several days to teach papermaking to the kindergartners. Michelle's mother characterized papermaking as a Chinese invention and tradition and helped the children to create their own sheets of personalized art paper. At school, Michelle and Min often drew, wrote, colored, or made Japanese origami crafts with Min.

Min is the daughter of two international graduate students who planned to return to China in a few years. For Min, the Chinese language extracurricular school that all three girls attended was a link to her future classmates and imagined school in China. Min's parents talked to Anna about their concern that Min must be prepared for Chinese schooling and could not afford fall behind her peers in China. Min approached school with a seriousness that stood out in this playful kindergarten. During play periods where other children pounded playdo or played house, Min would pull Chinese books or worksheets from her backpack to read and complete at school. In this

reversal of homework, Min used classroom play periods to get a headstart on the lessons in Chinese language and literacy that she completed at home, after school, and on the weekends. She frequently read by herself or drew and designed paper projects with Michelle . When Anna noticed Min’s skill in Chinese calligraphy and Japanese origami, she set up a play center where Min could teach origami and Chinese calligraphy to other children. These art-based literacy activities eventually enabled Min to join a boys-only play group with children who focused on university sports and competitive design through activities such as paper-airplane folding

The following example at the kindergarten writing table shows how Min’s writing and drawing provided a space to strengthen her personal connection and to share the cultural imaginary “My China”.

*At the writing table, children are writing in their journals for the first time. Min uses markers to draw two red houses with roofs that curved upward at the eaves. She uses pencil to write Chinese characters along the bottom margins and drew flowers and overlapping five-pointed stars around the houses. When Anna comes by, she kneels next to Min momentarily and asks about the drawing. Min dictates "houses in China" and Anna records it for the page’s caption (right page, Figure 1). On another page, Min drew with crayons to make a serpentine blue river running from the top to the bottom of the page. On each side of the river, she drew green grass. On the riverbanks on each side of the page, Chinese characters running vertically in green crayon are barely visible. On the right bank, she penciled in a Chinese character. On the river a stick figure sails a small boat at the top; in the middle, two triangles [looking like a small lamp] sit in the center of the river, and near the bottom, a large fish, a jellyfish, and another form that looks like a bubble letter backward R. After Anna moves on to the next table, another child (who had her own transnational history with Sudan) looks over at Min’s open journal and comments, “China, let me tell ya, let me tell ya, you know why I don't love China because-- I don't know, I don't have a, I don't have their China.” The children continue to talk about places as if personally owned.*



Figure 1. Min's "My China" and "Houses in China"

*Min responds, "Well, I love my China. [pointing places in a river that runs down the center of the page in her journal (Figure 1)] There and there and there. I'm going to make rain."*

The girls' attachment to this cultural imaginary created boundaries and bonds that included some children and excluded others from "their China". Anna worried that Min was filling her journal with Chinese writing and completing her homework during kindergarten play periods; Min also could not be persuaded to share her work during sharing sessions in front of the class. Anna's concerns reflect her awareness of Min's vulnerability within the school culture, shaped by federal accountability policies with a deficit orientation to English Language Learners. Although Min's interest in repetitive practice of Chinese character seemed to align with a skills mastery discourse and its focus on practice of discrete literacy tasks, testing, and measurable academic achievement, school district policies were based upon assumptions of monolingual (English) language and literacy skills. Additionally, in Anna's playful classroom, Min's preference for completing pages in her Chinese workbook as seatwork rather than engaging in group play activities sparked further concerns. A widespread play ethos (Smith, 1988; Sutton-Smith, 1997) in early childhood education (Roskos & Christie, 2001) constructs paper and pencil worksheet activities as "developmentally inappropriate" (Bredenkamp, 1983). Paradoxically in Min's case, this developmental discourse also supports children's right to choose and direct their own play. When layered onto a classroom ethic of tolerance, inclusion, and respect for families' diverse cultural values, Min's choice to work alone and to seemingly eschew play with other children posed a complex problem for Anna: How to bring Min into the play activity of the peer culture while respecting her authorial intent to set and meet her

own writing goals? Further, Min's desire to work on Chinese penmanship exercises aligned with her parents' goals for her and drew in important cultural resources.

But Anna's literacy curriculum was also a playshop where children were allowed to play together as they wrote. Children often brought dolls and stuffed toys to the writing table for inspiration or to act out stories as they wrote; they folded origami projects or paper airplanes and recorded the steps. Children could be found writing on the floor next to the puppet stage as they revised scripts or drew storyboards or constructed props and scenery from construction paper. Using a culturally responsive approach integral to playshop, Anna used pretend play to integrate Min's desire to complete her Chinese homework and her family's value of a print-oriented model of literacy focused on correct copying. With this goal in mind, Anna offered Min an opportunity to play teacher, "to teach Chinese numbers to the other kids" and Min responded immediately by telling Anna all about her Chinese language lessons. Anna often collaborated with children to imagine a play school space within the classroom, setting up a table as a play center with a student acting as the pretend teacher. Other children could choose to drop in and sit at this table, joining in the pretense to play students and engage in the featured activity. This teaching strategy was learner-led and interest-driven, a good match with developmentally appropriate discourse. It also aligned with Anna's goals of partnering with parents and building on familial areas of expertise as a way to make children's cultural resources present and visible in the classroom. Accordingly, Anna announced during the next morning meeting that Min would be at a special play center during choice time to help children write numbers using Chinese characters. When Michelle heard the announcement, she cheered and held out her arms to embrace Min.

Michelle and Min were the first ones to sign up for this new center. Once at the table, Min drew practice grids on blank sheets of paper and demonstrated how to write each character stroke by stroke (Figure 2). Michelle insisted that she already knew how to write the numbers because her grandmother had taught her how. Min's "Chinese Writing" play center ran for several weeks and was so successful that Anna followed up a month later with another of Min's strengths: origami, Japanese paper-folding that the kindergartners believed to be a Chinese art. Anna created another play center and added a how-to book and created color copies of its pages so that children could fold a variety of shapes from frogs to monarch butterflies. Michelle and Min worked on other independent origami projects regularly throughout the year, occasionally joined by Lily. The girls' shared interest in paper-folding strengthened their play group bond as well as their connection to China as an imagined participatory space but also offered classroom cultural capital when it became a valued design skill among members of another (all-male, all-white) affinity group. Important given the high-stakes testing environment, all the children in this fairly typical kindergarten met the school district benchmarks for writing and reading at the end of the school year. Additionally, due to the power of playshop to bring a

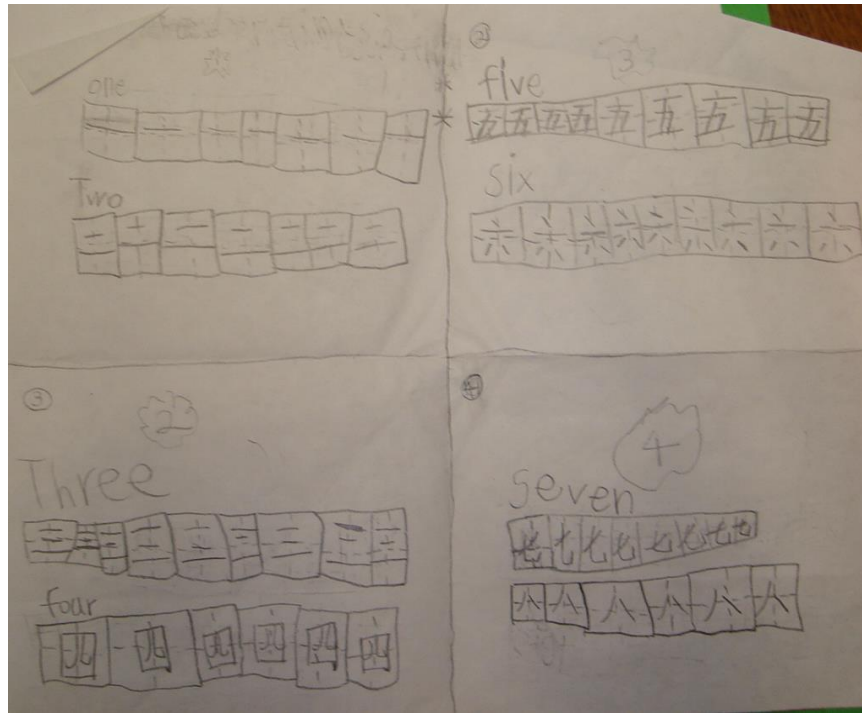


Figure 2. Min's Number Practice Sheets

cultural imaginary into the classroom, the children also enacted inclusive ways of playing and ways of accessing and exploring transnational literacy resources and identities.

But the emergence of cultural imaginaries in the playshop are not limited or exclusive to the transnational resources children bring to the playshop to generate new ways of participating in literacy practices. These transnational resources work in addition or overlapping with other global networks such as popular culture and digital texts among others. In the next section we explored some of these other cultural production dynamics in a classroom in Puerto Rico and examine those from the lens of the playshop. Our intention in writing this chapter collaboratively and looking across classroom experiences, is to provide a view of multiple sites where teachers encourage children to play and remake these imaginaries.

### **Boys Playing the *Barrio en la Calle*: A Media Imaginary**

*Barrio en la calle* [Barrio in the street] is a telenovela devised and performed by one group of students in an urban third grade classroom in Puerto Rico. Telenovelas are melodramatic shows that in some ways resemble soap operas but with unique characteristics that respond more to Latino/a idiosyncrasies. These melodramatic television shows are described as the most popular television genre among Latino/a viewers across Latin America and the United States (Joyce, 2008; McAnany & La Pastina, 1994 ) and are becoming increasingly popular around the world (Werner, 2006).

For this group of third graders telenovelas became their topic of choice when deciding on a popular culture genre to explore in the classroom through multiple literacies particularly dramatic inquiry. My colleague María del Rocío Costa, from the University of Puerto Rico, Bayamón and I have been working with a local teacher in the development of a critical literacy inquiry curriculum grounded in the students out of school interests. The teacher Maestra Vivian, has been part of a critical literacy study group and has been working hard in developing a critical literature based curricula and dynamic writer's workshop in her classroom. Nevertheless, her view of both critical literature and writing processes were grounded in the students' everyday experiences including "playing" with genres within and beyond the school expectations.

In our project we invited the students to select a topic of interest from a wide repertoire of choices such as video games, television show, movies, etc. to use those as a framework to develop a critical literacy experience integrating dramatic inquiry, reading, writing and media. When telenovelas were mentioned by one of the students they decided almost unanimously to work on this kind of television show. In the inquiry project the students analyzed, designed and performed telenovelas. They brought rich knowledge of this genre and demonstrated an awareness of how the social words and interactions are constructed within the fictional worlds of telenovelas but also how these representations resemble (many times in very stereotypical ways) everyday lifestyles and issues that relate to power, gender, race and the glorification of materialistic lifestyles. Their interpretations and representations became topics for discussions in the classrooms that many times moved from the actual content of the television shows into the discussion of everyday realities they live in their local communities in Puerto Rico.

In the devising and production of their telenovelas, the students brought multiple worlds that fit within the structures of telenovelas but also remade those in quite playful ways. Elements of irony, the creation of catchy titles, the mixing of genres and the places they selected around the school as settings to reenact and produce their telenovelas were part of the elements that the students foregrounded as they authored and produced their work. In this process the students also did not limit their creative work to the worlds of the telenovelas, as they knew them. Through the inclusion of a multiplicity of other semiotic resources and worlds they relocated and recontextualized their stories in interesting and complex ways.

This was the case in the telenovela *Barrio en la calle* [Barrio in the street]. *Barrio en la calle* was devised by a group of boys who were interested in hip-hop culture. In Puerto Rico as in many other places around the world, hip-hop is a popular global music genre and within the island there is an existing local type of hip-hop called *reggeatón* that mixes local Puerto Rican, Caribbean and hip-hop styles and it has become nationally and internationally popular (for an analysis of *reggeaton* in relation to literacy practices see Medina & Costa, 2010). The students' composition of work is grounded in the relocalization of rich signs, people and spaces within their construction of the telenovela.

In the inquiries we did with the students, they worked on devising, writing scripts and performing their telenovelas. At the point when the students were finished with their first drafts we created a dramatic inquiry event where co-researcher Rocío and I entered the room in the role of telenovelas' producers. In role we asked each team's writers to present their telenovelas and to tell us:

- why should we (the producers) consider their telenovela for production?
- what makes an excellent telenovela?
- how did they think the audience would respond to their work?

In other words we (the producers) wanted to know if they (the script writers) thought audiences would watch and love their telenovelas. The students interacted with us in role and each group shared the highest qualities of their telenovelas while we used the space to get familiar with the students' conceptualization of ideas in their production work but also to suggest revisions and places where we were unclear about a particular aspect of their work.

One of the interesting interactions happened when the students presented *Barrio en la Calle* to us. When they shared their work with us, our initial thought when we heard the title was that their telenovela dealt with the theme of homelessness. We were "lost in locations" and because we immediately jumped to the conclusion that it was about homelessness, we were having a difficult time following the students' proposed storyline. In their frustration with us they explained: "Porque no es un deambulante. Es que esta en la calle. Alguien que todo el tiempo esta en la calle y despues cuando va a acostarse va a la casa." [Because he is not a homeless person. It's that he is on the streets. Someone who spends all the time on the streets and when he goes to sleep goes to his home]. They were borrowing from the spatial and cultural resources of hip-hop culture and re-presenting it as new knowledge in their telenovela's design. The genre of telenovelas served as a space in the classroom to bring different cultural imaginaries such as in their idea of populating the streets with people from streets and where life mostly happens in the streets. These perspectives allowed for the possibility for us (teacher and university collaborators) to learn from them and to embrace the new hybrid world they were presenting to us.

A close look at the multiple versions the students production in their creative process it is possible to see the multiple layers of meaning making that they were negotiating. The initial version of the students' telenovelas was written in a graffiti style, a transnational or globalized form of writing, that has acquired popularity in Puerto Rico in the last few years and that is visible in the streets. The students' letter design in Figure 3 hints at and guides the reader to the notion of "la calle", the street signaling the urban hip-hop cultural imaginary that is at the core of their telenovela. Similar to the design of telenovelas titles, the composition of the title is not simply grounded in a linguistic or written design but provides the viewer an entire visual experience where shape and context references matter. The interesting aspect though is that on the second draft of the telenovela in Figure 4, the text is transformed more into a script that resembles the more traditional representation of the genre of script writing. Looking across versions one can noticed that the first

one is more situated in a stronger representation of “la calle” while the second revised version becomes a hybrid text that shows the students’ negotiation of formats of the “street” and the classroom structures of writing.

In addition to the title and the graffiti style, the students were using particular other references to construct “la calle” and this was also evident in their choice of characters. A second interesting recontextualization that happens across texts is the use of characters. In the first draft they tell a simple story about “The Game” and “T.I.” who are friends. The Game falls in love with a girl and they get married. The Game stays alone for while and T.I. eventually dies. The Game eventually marries but he is not quite sure if he marries for money or love. “The Game” and “T.I.” both hip-hop artists, are described as artists whose artistic work speaks of their experiences living in urban centers. More specifically T.I., who is a music artist, producer and author of the book *Power and beauty: A love story of life in the streets* (2011), centers his work as grounded in the streets. The students’ telenovela storyline, from a sociocultural perspective, shows how on the students’ playfulness with the text, they portray characters that are aligned to the larger urban hip-hop imaginary that was part of the composition with the graffiti writing. In their second draft they write a more elaborate plot but they lose the characters T.I. and “The Game”. The main characters become “la joven” [the young woman]/el joven [the young man] and el esposo [the husband]/la esposa [the wife]. The story is also resituated as happening in San Juan where *la esposa* and *el esposo* go for a walk and get robbed which makes for another interesting perspective on relocalizations and the emergence of new cultural imaginaries.

In this process as teachers and university collaborators we learned a great deal from the students and our approach to a playfulness that focuses on cultural production and foregrounding the complex ways children live in this world. Opening the classroom to an inquiry exploration of a television genre such as telenovelas served as a trigger to create a space in the classroom to make visible the overlapping ways children engage in and with cultural production and the playful ways in which they remix and redefine the limits of any texts.

The results of this experience with the telenovelas served as a way to open new curricular spaces in the classroom. In the second year of our work we took as stance and deliberately created a new model of a literacy workshop that integrated the multiple worlds students navigate culturally. For example on the second year instead of a writer’s workshop we constructed a possible vision for a playshop since there is no one scripted way of “doing” the playshop (see Medina, Costa and Soto for a detailed description of the second year curricular process). The students were allowed for example to bring action figures to the third grade classroom, play with them and create texts with them. They were also invited to think beyond a classroom cultural imaginary and ways of selecting topics for exploration. One interesting case that helped us reaffirm a space for youth and classroom culture was the hip-hop/reggaeton text created by Marcos entitled *El salon loco* [The crazy classroom] where in the story the reggaeton artists Jowell and Randy visit the classroom and sing their hit “Loco” [Crazy] about falling in love with a beautiful woman.

These perspectives allowed for the possibility for us (teacher and university collaborators) to learn from the students and to embrace the new hybrid worlds they were presenting to us. Furthermore in their playful ways of constructing scripts and envisioning their production of their telenovela, hip-hop references and hip-hop texts, the students created assemblages of literacies overlapping writing in the classroom, out of school popular culture literacies, performance of particular lifestyles.

Instead of looking at this production process as isolated literacy events (writing, revising, performing), we take a playshop perspective on cultural production and overlapping imaginaries. In this view, it becomes significant to pay attention to composition details across drafts, across literacies and across worlds. At the end one could ask which version or literacy is more authentic or has a stronger craft, which one is a better representation of the students' ideas or does it matter to ask these questions. In the playshop, where composition works in relation to other forms of representation (writing, performance, embodied, visual images), it is significant to look at cultural and social production as a critical element of any authoring *process*.

## **Conclusion**

When we compared the two playshops, we saw several elements that are unique to this curricular approach. First, teachers and children negotiated the playshop, but its content comes from children's cultural resources and their diverse areas of expertise, whether writing Chinese letters or graffiti-inspired texts, playing school or performing telenovelas. Second, a playshop is a curricular activity that imagines spaces but it is also a here-and-now exercise in collaboration and communication to produce a shared script and sustain the imagined context. Through playshops, children

- Accessed familiar cultural spaces to make diverse literacy resources available (e.g., popular drama music, and art genres and scripts, multilingual writing forms)
- Negotiated and improvised ways of belonging across multiple spaces (e.g., school and home)
- Combine literacies to enact cultural imaginaries in ways that stretched classroom practices

Today's schoolchildren are growing up immersed in social media and digital worlds where they need to be experts at collaborating, inventing, and producing texts together. It's likely they will need to become expert in producing meanings with printless literacies that we cannot yet imagine. Our view of transnational and media imaginaries provides a way to understand children's engagements with these spaces as more than individual consumers, authors, or directors but as co-players and interactive participants in cultural production. We see children as always/already critical consumer/producers who negotiate enabling and constraining media. We recognize children as developing learners who are exploring and approximating cultural texts they find themselves immersed in. The notion of cultural imaginaries, accessed through play and drama and actively and collaboratively invented, promises to be a powerful way to forge new links between the classroom and worlds that originate in lived experiences, worlds that are populated by familiar characters and

structured by deep attachments and connections among our individual and collective imaginations.


Un hombre  
se llama PHE  
Gama y Suamiga  
TATE  


Figure 3. Original Text

<p>Y el extranjero se la quito a la fuerza ¡Dejame! Dijo la mujer pero el extranjero no le hizo caso y se llevo la cartera</p>	<p>Uno la Policia atrapo al extranjero y le dio la cartera a la mujer ¡Gracias! Dijo la mujer</p>
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Figure 4. Revised Text

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