

Plantita Knowledge: A Journey of Writing a Healing Text

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Abstract

The following are lesson plans for high school teachers implementing Ethnic Studies in the classroom. The purpose of the lesson plans is to open up conversations about healing through plantita knowledge. Plantita knowledge as the title suggests engages students in a series of journeys that allow them to reflect on family and community relationships to plants through the themes of history, memory, place, self, and collective healing. We have included the words of youth which tell us why they believe writing a healing text is useful in helping them transform spiritual harm in educational spaces. We conclude that these lessons and healing texts enable youth to begin their own healing process as they begin to identify their pain, begin to critically reflect on their trauma, and then begin to find ways to work through it by remembering or finding affirmative places, plants and people who will help support them through their journey.

Introduction

Why is it important for us to have students write their healing text? Implementing healing text in our classroom is more important than ever before because of the anti-ethnic studies rhetoric, banning of books, and enduring impacts of COVID-19 which have taken the lives of our loved ones, and racialized police violence which have affected so many of our students' lives. We need to remind youth that they matter and that their stories matter. Healing text is done in community and in solidarity with each other. Healing text is not an individual act but an act in community where we help each other strengthen our roots and spirits.

Pedagogical Framework

It is important for teachers to show the pedagogical framework we are operating under in order to show that we are being intentional about our work. Schooling has been a place where students' spirits are murdered, where their dreams and visions for the future are killed as a result of interlocking systems of oppression that contribute to discrimination and harm. As the author Bettina Love reminds us with her book *Abolitionist Teaching*, "We want to do more than just survive," reminding us of how students are surviving and not thriving. Therefore, we used the work of Anita Revilla Tijerina and her concept of being spirit protectors and restorers, which she defines as "people, places, organizations, beliefs, and/or practices (they can also be art, poetry, books, music,

and dance) that give marginalized people the strength to reject and survive attempted spirit murder and/or restore our wounded spirits, especially in the face of repeated attacks and woundings both inside and outside of institutions of education” (2021, p.39). As we embarked on the work of creating and implementing lessons that can inspire youth to write their own stories as a form of healing. We were intentional about using *plantitas* as medicine in order to help their journey through restoring their spirit. Plantitas are also used as spirit protectors. For instance, lavender helps to protect our anxious spirit and ease the mind when we are triggered. Gifting students lavender pouches is a way students can use them whenever they feel triggered or want to calm the mind in order to be able to focus their learning (see Image 1).



Image 1: Student holding a lavender pouch.

Spirit protector means we as teachers are protecting students from a schooling system that controls their every move to create space where they are able to freely write an essay or poem that helps to restore their spirit. These are the three concepts we kept in mind as we created and implemented our lessons:

- Borrowing from Tijerina’s concept of spirit protectors and restorers, we would like to emphasize and expand *writing with and alongside plants* as a practice of spirit restoring, which gives youth the opportunity to reflect on a plant that is deeply rooted in their identity, culture, and family and community history.
- Through the plantita lessons students were able to *practice deep awareness, deep conocimiento, and connection to self and community, so that they could interrupt the spiritual violence and instead choose spirit restoration, spirit protection, and harm reduction* (Tijerina Revilla, 2021, p. 43).
- Tijerina Revilla says *healing and freedom require the restoration of people’s spirits and minds. It includes the reclamation of people’s worth and value* (Tijerina Revilla, 2021, p. 41). This methodology of centering students’ lived experiences is at the center of an ethnic studies pedagogy, which is about identifying power and oppression that creates harm in students’ learning, and reclaiming their spiritual connection to their embodied, collective knowledge and worldviews that decenter whiteness and place value in their *organic intellectualism* (Levins Morales, 2019).

These concepts helped us be intentional about how we cared and reviewed student writing, reviewing their work with love and giving suggestions on how to improve their writing. One can see the samples of their writing in *Courageous Cuentos, Volume #6*.

Recommended readings on spirit protecting and restoration:

- Tijerina Revilla, A. (2021). Attempted Spirit Murder: Who Are Your Spirit Protectors and Your Spirit Restorers? *Educational Foundations (Ann Arbor, Mich.)*, 34(1), 31–46.
- Love, B. (2019). *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*. Beacon Press.
- Levins Morales, A. (2019). *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals (Revised Edition)*. Duke University Press.
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions.

Student Voices

We implemented the lessons in two bilingual high school classrooms. At the end of the three-week lessons, we surveyed students if their writing healed them and they wrote the following:

- *Si porque pude compartir ese sentimiento que estaba dentro de mi y lo pude enfrentar.*
- Yes, because I got my feelings out and I felt better.
- I think this text did heal me because I think that it helped me open up and be comfortable with who I am and as long as I keep that mind set, I will always stay healed.
- Me sanó al escuchar los ensayos de los demás, porque me di cuenta que al igual que yo, muchas personas están pasando por lo mismo.
- They allowed me to have a voice.
- These texts helped me realize how much of a privilege speaking two languages is.
- Si, me sanaron los sentimientos que tenía guardado, porque no pude despedirme de mi padre, y al expresar mis sentimientos en un papel me sentí mucho mejor.
- Yeah, in a way as I didn't realize many things about myself that I now know.
- Yes, a little bit because when I listened to the essays of my classmates I realized that some of them were similar to mine and I felt better because I thought I was the only one.
- Yes, because I could talk about my past.

As one can see from the survey, students felt that these lessons and writing their healing text helped to restore and protect their spirits—students were able to return to themselves and who they are and what has shaped them. In doing so, they began to express their feelings that they had been forced to conceal and not confront. Plantitas served as their protectors as they opened up and shared their feelings, memories, and intergenerational traumas. As they embarked on their plantita healing journey, they also shared with one another *consejos* passed down by their families that highlighted the important role of communal spirit protectors and their words that help strengthen our spirits as we journey through schooling together.

Defining Healing Text

- Healing text is the ability to write freely meaning multilingually – no translating
- Healing text are about our ability to be our true selves without borders
- Healing text *es a veces contando/cantando nuestro dolor/* pain because you are detecting the cause of your *dolor/ anger/ impotencia/impaciencia.*
- Healing text unveil the path to your own healing
- Healing text are about happy moments that keep you going

- Healing text are about the *consejitos* we got along our path that made us stronger/ wiser / freer
- Healing text is about being in the spaces that make you zen/ happy.
- Healing texts are about the stories we are told, *familia* strength.
- Healing texts are stories about who we are because those stories *fortalecen* nuestras raices.
- Healing texts tell stories of love/*amor* - receiving pure love -love gives us strength
- Healing text is about important places/ people in our community– gives us roots /*raices* to place and people
- Healing text are the medicinal *plantitas* are ancestors taught us about how to plant harvest and use to heal
- Healing text can be working together because our thoughts and creations are strengthened

This broad definition of healing text gives students the ability to choose what they want to write about but also acknowledges that healing looks differently for all of us.

In this we will share five lessons we created for youth in order to get them inspired and grounded in writing their own healing text.

Collective Reflection (6 Lessons)

Lesson 1: Manzanilla (Healing)

1. Bring fresh/dry *manzanilla* chamomile to your classroom. Most people know this plant because it is given to us by our parents, guardians and aunts in order to heal menstrual cramps or stomach aches. Manzanilla is always handy ready to be used by our family members.
2. Ask- What is manzanilla/chamomile used for? Who uses it? What do you use it for?
 - a. Then ask “Where are the seeds of the manzanilla?” How do you know? If no one knows then ask - Why does no one or just some of you know how to find seeds in a plant? Are we seeds? How are we seeds?
3. Explore seeds through a literary analysis -*Read and discuss the following poem:*



Image 2: Manzanilla
(Chamomile) plant

Semillas / Seeds

Powerful seeds
Strengthen our roots

Somos semillas
You and me
We are seeds
You see
Tu y yo
As we plant
Them in dirt
As we grow
Our roots
Strengthening
our
community

Our seeds
are
beautiful words
That strengthen
Our wings
Helping us
Fly on our path

Just like
Seeds when
They sprout,
grow,
and
Heal our
bodies,
Earth and
soul
Beautifying every
Step we take.
Loving each inch
of our
Community.

But some seeds
Do not sprout
Like hurtful
Words they
wither us
away like
the wind

We flounder with
A lack of purpose
As we try
To land
Run and love

Just like too
much water
rots
our roots
unhealthy seeds
Lose their power
To grow
becoming
a beautiful
Rose

Seeds are
What we
Read
Listen
Learn
Helping us
Grow
wiser
Sensible
And witty
as the
Land we walk on
becomes
bountiful
With every step
we take.

Powerful
Seeds
Strengthen our roots

As we grow
To who
We are
And who
we
are becoming
Together

Protect
Your
Seeds
As you
Walk
Scattering
And Sprinkling
them through out
Your path.

Make sure
You protect
The seeds
sacredly
So you
Strengthen
Your roots
As you spread
Your power
To the world

4. Discuss poem

- What do seeds symbolize? What do seeds mean to you and your life? What were the authors trying to convey? What did this poem mean to you? How do you relate to it or not? Why?

5. Quick journaling: What do seeds mean to you? How are we seeds? Have we been good seeds or have we been broken seeds? Rotten seeds? How and why? How have we changed?

6. Share – Have students share their writing to class in a safe space. Students will share if they feel safe. Make sure to create these spaces in the class before you implement them.

- You can create safe spaces by asking students to create community agreements. Have students tell you what they need to make them feel safe to share. It might be aesthetics and also peer reactions to their stories. Then have everyone agree to guidelines from which they want to operate from in a collective supportive manner.
- You can ask students the following 3 sets of questions:
- Support: What does support look like? What does support feel like? What do we need to see in a supportive space? What do we need to hear in a supportive space? Now what guidelines can we create where we feel, hear, see and believe this is a supportive space?
- Solidarity: What does solidarity look like? What does solidarity feel like? What do we need to see in a space of solidarity? What should I hear in a space of solidarity? Now what guidelines can we create where we feel, hear, see, and believe it is a space of solidarity.

- **Safety:** What does safety look like? What does safety feel like? What should we see in a safe space? What should I hear in a safe space? Now what guidelines can we create where we all feel, see, hear and believe this is a safe space?

These questions will help you to create a solid set of agreements which you can point to when youth are being rude. But usually this works to build a respectful collective safe space because youth helped to create these agreements so their voice and opinions were respected and uplifted.

Lesson 2: Cempasúchil (Memory / Remembering)

- Bring fresh or dry cempasúchil flower (marigold)
- Ask what are Cempasúchi flowers used for? How are they used?

Cempasúchil flower is used for Day of the Dead to remember those who have passed away and what they have left behind. Their words or lessons stay with us – think about those who have passed away and have left us profound lessons on how we live our lives and how we walk on this earth.



Image 3: Cempasúchil plant

- Journaling- write about someone you love who has passed away. Include an important lesson that person taught you, or describe a particularly transformative moment you shared with them. Include something they'd say in their own words. If you have no one who has passed away, then you can write about a popular author, singer or celebrity who has taught you a lesson in life.

- Example you can share this example with students before they write, like the one below:

My grandma taught us how to have fun and laugh. She liked to play cards so she taught us how to play "montoncito." When I remember my grandmother, I remember when we laughed and had fun playing montoncito." I would laugh so hard when she caught me trying to cheat because she would lift her glasses and tell me "I see what you are doing." She looked funny and I would try to cheat to see if she was paying attention to the game. It was a game within a game - as she always taught me "Gavilán que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente" ("Hawk that falls asleep is taken by the current") so I was testing the popular theory and I concluded that my grandmother was a hawk.

Just like this story I am remembering the lessons and words my grandmother taught us. These teachings can also be seen as healing seeds because they help strengthen our roots and help to define our philosophy of life.

- **Share** by asking students share their writing

- Close by asking students where the seeds are in the flower? Show students how to find seeds.

We must always find the seeds in life because they are teaching us something about how to live and move in this world.

Lesson 3 - Creosote Bush/ La Gobernadora / Chaparral (History and Place)

Before listening to the podcast, show a picture of the creosote bush plant also known as la gobernadora/chaparral. Before you name the plant - Ask students do you know this plant? What is the name of this plant? What is it used for? Have students share and brainstorm.

Show a map of El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico and ask students: Have you been there? What do you know of this place? Then say this is the place where the creosote bush/la gobernadora/ chaparral grows.

Listen to Episode 1: Selena and Me from the podcast Anything for Selena (Futuro Studios, 2021). 30 minutes

Before listening to the podcast, show a picture of the creosote bush plant also known as la gobernadora/chaparral. Before you name the plant - Ask students do you know this plant? What is the name of this plant? What is it used for? Have students share and brainstorm.

Show a map of El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico and ask students: Have you been there? What do you know of this place? Then say this is the place where the creosote bush/la gobernadora/ chaparral grows.

Maria Garcia, the host of "Anything for Selena" (2021), opens up her podcast (Ep. 1: Selena and Me) by telling her story, introducing you to the place where she is from (Texas-Mexico Border) through the creosote bush plant. Later in the episode, she talks about discovering Selena, and how her music and legacy helped her find her place in the world.

Now let's listen to the podcast and as you listen, take out your journals. Write/ draw/ doodle what you feel and think about how this person is healing themselves.

After the podcast show a picture of her with the creosote bush/la gobernadora/ chaparral.

You can share with students the medicinal properties of this plant [here](#).



Image 4: Maria Garcia, the host and creator of "Anything for Selena," in El Paso, Texas, where she was raised. Image Credit: Ivan Pierre Aguirre for The New York Times. ([Link](#))

Then proceed to have a mini discussion with students about podcast and what they learned about the chaparral /la gobernadora/creosote bush: How did she heal herself? (Music, her story, and the plant). Why is this plant so powerful? How does the plant help tell her/our story?

This plant is like our thoughts/stories because no one can kill what lives in our memory and even when they ban our books or our studies, they still live within us and therefore just like chaparral it will always grow back even stronger like us!

Plants hold our stories, our memories. They are our spirit protectors because they help ground us to the place where we belong.

Lesson 4: Affirmation- You Belong Here: A Self-Portrait with a Plant (Identity and Celebration of Self)
(Note: this might take 3-5 days)

Students can look at Courageous Cuentos for ideas on how to draw their self-portrait.

1. Draw a self-portrait of yourself. Include as part of your self-portrait a plant that tells your story, that tells us something about who you are and/or where you come from.
 - Feel free to use pencil, pen, markers, colors, paints, etc.
 - I recommend using a photo of yourself that you can use to create your self-portrait.
 - The focus of your portrait must be of your face/head. (Shoulders are ok, and hands if they are part of the pose).
 - Make sure to give your self-portrait a title.
2. Once they complete their portraits, have them respond to the following reflection questions:
 - What plant did you include in your self-portrait, and why? What story does it share about who you are, and where you come from?
 - Discuss your experience creating your self-portrait. What were your initial thoughts/feelings on this assignment, and how did they evolve during the making of your self-portrait?

Lesson 5: Read Healing Text (Building Community)

1. Silent reading (10-15 min) -have students read healing text from Courageous Cuentos: A Student Journal of Counternarratives (Volume 6, Spring 2023).
2. Students get into groups of 3-4
3. Groups choose the writing they want to focus on.
4. Have students read the text they have chosen and ask themselves how did the author/s heal? What is the message the author is trying to convey?
5. Share the piece of writing they have chosen with the whole class

You can give students these instructions:

- Choose a piece of writing → Read piece → Summarize it → Discuss the piece
 - How did the author heal themselves? Did you like the piece? Why or why not? Could you relate to the piece? Why or why not? Why did you all choose this piece to read?
6. Share the piece with the whole class (choose someone to summarize the piece, say how they believe the author healed, and overall thoughts of the piece: Did they like it? Why or why not? And could they relate to the piece? Why or why not?)

Lesson 6: Write your Healing Text (Creando Raíces / Creating Roots)

Have students begin to write and go through their writing process. During this time, you can do 10-minute mini lessons that can strengthen student writing. Ideas on mini lessons (strong openers, active verbs, descriptors/adjectives, dialogue, titles, strong conclusions, etc.) are below. This is how we conducted the second to third week but you can change it around depending on what you observe of student writing needs. It took us three weeks to finalize and publish student writings.

1. Talk Story: Have students orally tell each other stories about how they heal themselves or how they are trying to heal their wounds.
2. First Draft: Have them write their first draft.
3. Peer Editing #1: Share your first draft with classmates.
4. Author's Chair: You can invite students to orally read their stories in front of the classroom and get feedback from peers.
5. Mini Lesson #1: Active Verbs/ Active Voice: Ask - What are active verbs? Have a list of active verbs. Make the connection between active voice and active verbs. Tell students to use them in their writing (As students are editing their second draft).
6. Mini Lesson #2: Strong Openers: Engage the reader, make the reader want to read your text. Give students examples of strong openers and discuss why they are strong (As students are editing their second draft).
7. Draft #2: Keep in mind strong openers and active voice/ active verbs.
8. Peer editing #: Students can focus on openers and active verbs.
9. Author's Chair #2: Invite students again to share their story and get feedback.
10. Mini Lesson #3: Include Dialogue: Show examples of stories and poems they have read that include dialogue- Yosimar Reyes and Julio Salgado's poems are a good example of this as students are writing their third draft.

11. Mini Lesson #4 - Adjectives: Show a list of cool adjectives and let students know the importance of adjectives in their story. Adjectives help to describe people, places, and things. They help the reader to see and connect to your story.
12. Draft #3: Students can focus their writing by including dialogue and adjectives in their third draft.
13. Peer Editing #3: Editors focus on writing to help their peers include adjectives and dialogue. Texts do not have to include dialogue if the author does not want to. Nevertheless, in some instances dialogue does help the text come alive.
14. Author's Chair #3: Invite students again to share their story and get feedback from the whole group.
15. FINAL Mini Lesson #5- Strong Conclusion: Show examples of strong conclusions and why they are strong. Have students look at their ending and see how they can strengthen their concluding words or paragraphs. (Students are writing their final draft).
16. FINAL Mini Lesson #6- Strong Titles: Show examples of strong titles and discuss why they are strong titles. Ask students to look at their writing and think about a strong title -have them play with words. (Students are writing their final draft).
17. FINAL Draft: Students focus their writing on conclusions and titles.
18. FINAL Peer Editing: Students do their final peer editing work- they focus on the whole story.
19. FINAL Author's Chair: Last chance-invite students again to share their story and get feedback from the whole group.
20. Publish: Have students finalize their edits and PUBLISH! You can publish your own classroom book or have students submit to Courageous Cuentos. If they consider publishing their article in Courageous Cuentos: A Student Journal of Counternarratives, contact: Nancy Perez nancy.perez@humboldt.edu or Marisol Ruiz mr1890@humboldt.edu.

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