

Readers as Leaders: Forming Young Activists in US Latinx Picture Books

Award Winner *Tomás and the Library Lady* (1997, awarded 1998) and Monica Brown's *Side by Side / Lado a Lado* (2010) offer young readers access to transformational US Latinx activist heroes — Tomás Rivera, Dolores Huerta, and César Chávez — who read. For young Latinx readers in particular, these heroes not only affirm ethnic identity but also inspire action and provide tools for social justice.

Drawing on Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel's radical children's book scholarship and theorist Michel de Certeau's notion of tactics, my paper points to the importance of literacy and associated practices (observing, listening, imagining, speaking, and responding) in the formation of young Latinx activists. I suggest that by foregrounding literacy as a key part of the childhood experience of these accomplished leaders, *Tomás and the Library Lady* and *Side by Side / Lado a Lado* offer practical possibilities for the personal and communal transformation of young readers. Further, both books affirm literacy as encompassing communicative abilities in English and Spanish. This is made evident in *Tomás and the Library Lady* when Tomás's grandfather asks him to read to him in English while the library lady asks Tomás to teach her words in Spanish. These scenes encourage a positive understanding of bilingualism and the idea of language increasing imaginative and communicative possibilities. *Tomás and the Library Lady* and *Side by Side / Lado a Lado* thus encourage young readers to recognize the value of literacy as a foundation of leadership, public activism, and social change.

Picture books have long featured young protagonist who are readers as a way of encouraging literacy. My paper examines how Mora and Brown's books, among other US Latinx children's books, stress the invaluable connection between reading and leading.