



CRITICAL LOVE:

A Conversation

Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz
on how critical love expresses itself in the classroom

For activist, scholar, and teacher educator **Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz**, the goal for equitable schools is love. This is not a complacent, rest-on-your-laurels kind of love. This vision of love is grounded in justice for oneself and all communities. In order to realize this love, she says, educators must be willing to stand up for themselves and their students.

“When are schools and teachers going to stand in solidarity for humanity?” she asks. “That’s what critical love is.”

Sealey-Ruiz, associate professor of English education with Teachers College, Columbia University, outlines a framework for enacting these values called “racial literacy development.”

In her recent NCTE Policy Research Brief, *Racial Literacy* (bitly/NCTE-racialliteracy), she defines racial literacy as a skill and practice whereby educators and students learn to interrogate racism and examine its effects at the personal, systemic, and societal levels.

THE RACIAL LITERACY FRAMEWORK

The racial literacy framework consists of six interwoven components: critical love, critical humility, critical reflection, historical literacy, archaeology of self™, and interruption. Critical love is the first, most pivotal step.

Sealey-Ruiz defines critical love as “a profound ethical commitment to caring for the communities in which we work.” Educators and students alike can access critical love through a personal excavation process Sealey-Ruiz calls the “archaeology of self.” Through this process, she explains, we examine our hearts and minds to uncover the dissonance between what we’ve been told and what we believe, and the reality in front of us.

Critical love inspires us to rigorously examine how these scripts operate within us. Peeling back the layers of these socially engrained beliefs is a slow, formidable endeavor, cautions Sealey-Ruiz. Therapy, mindfulness, journaling, and quiet contemplation can help. Practitioners cultivate the habit of continuously

returning to their inward experience to touch whatever is immediate, raw, and real. “[Critical love] is here,” she says, pointing to her heart. “It’s here.”

Through this daily, gradual practice, Sealey-Ruiz contends, we see with newfound clarity how insidious biases diminish us and those around us. We honestly assess how the privileged and marginalized aspects of our identities are socially constructed and reified—and the pain those constricting categories create.

“[Critical love] is doing a kind of teaching and a kind of loving that frees the teachers themselves from the scripts they’ve taken in about who’s worthy and who’s not, who deserves AP classes and who doesn’t, which communities are smart and which aren’t,” Sealey-Ruiz says.

What does critical love ask of us? Sealey-Ruiz’s premise is that, in the context of teaching, critical love impels us toward vulnerability and authenticity. It urges educators to learn accurate history and share the truth. Within their curriculum, practitioners enact critical love by building historical literacy, another interwoven aspect of racial literacy development. These teachers develop what Sealey-Ruiz calls “a rich and contextual awareness of the historical forces that shape the communities we work in but also the society we live in.”

“The erasure of history is what allows the status quo of racism to ride on,” Sealey-Ruiz says. Her hope is that, motivated by critical love, practitioners learn and teach accurate histories that fully reflect diverse realities. Making historical literacy a priority allows students, especially those with historically marginalized identities, to know they are so much greater than what has happened in the past. It supports students from dominant groups in adopting an antiracist mentality and those from marginalized groups in resisting the victim stance. This allows *all* students to step more fully into their own humanity.

“When you have historical literacy,” Sealey-Ruiz explains, “you put in perspective from a sociological standpoint that, ‘Oh, my community was designed like this.’ ‘Oh, this was part of the plan 400 years

ago when they brought the first 20 enslaved Africans to Jamestown, Virginia.’ ‘Oh, 400 years ago they deliberately and purposely designed the criminal justice system, the healthcare system, the schooling.’ . . . You have a different perspective of yourself, and so even though you know that [racism] is pervasive systemically, you don’t always feel like a helpless victim.”

Sealey-Ruiz outlines how, within a pedagogical framework, critical love keeps the focus on real life. Skilled educators facilitate intentional conversations about the current sociopolitical reality, as critical love translates into truth-telling about the immediacy of this moment. Teachers guide students in constructive dialogue about whatever may be currently affecting humanity on a profound level, whether it be the murder of George Floyd or Breonna Taylor, or the January 6 assault on the Capitol.

INTERRUPTING RACISM

The full expression of critical love in the classroom, then, is action. In racial literacy development, action manifests as actively interrupting racism and inequality at the personal and systemic levels. Interruption can take many forms—for example, teachers with dominant identities can decenter their own voices to elevate diverse perspectives; teachers can practice critical humility (see note, this page) by remaining open to understanding the limits of their own worldview and ideology; students can be taught to care for others and to love and respect themselves. The bottom line? “Interruption is daring to have a conversation,” says Sealey-Ruiz.

Sealey-Ruiz exemplifies active interruption through her own Black Girl Literacies curriculum. The goal of the course is to provide students with the knowledge to internally dismantle the deficit models they’ve inherited about Black girls—“and we know you have them because the world has been giving them to you.”

Her students spend 15 weeks documenting how they’re living out racial literacy development in their lives and how they’re engaging in archaeology of self. They examine multimodal texts such as TikTok videos,

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NOTES

The term *critical humility* was originally coined by a group called the European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness. It began as a method for white people to confront each other constructively around statements about race they find problematic.

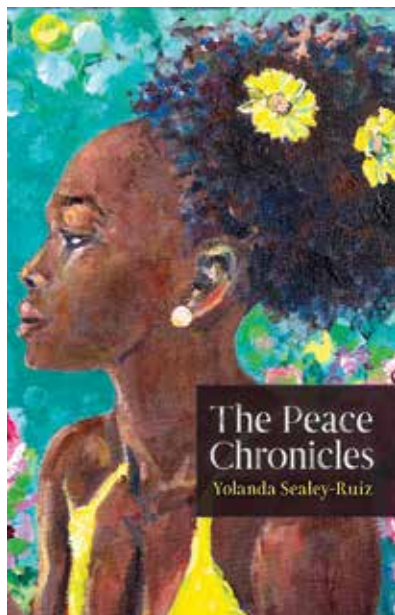
To learn more about cultivating an antiracist stance and resisting a victim mentality, Sealey-Ruiz recommends Gholdy Muhammad’s research on culturally and historically responsive literacy. See *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* (<https://bit.ly/3FAeyzj>).

memes, and print writing to expose harmful cultural messages about Black femininity operating in the media. She asks her classes to explore what “activates” in them as they engage with a text. Students learn to recognize moments for interrupting oppressive messages and practice skillfully executing them instead of tacitly taking in the harmful messages.

While the commitment to critical love starts from within, Sealey-Ruiz stresses that its development must be a cocreation, in which practitioners help one another recognize their blind spots, heal, and continue to grow.

Ultimately, the message Sealey-Ruiz wants us all to hear is that critical love is a process that happens at the level of the heart. “Once you shed off everything, the heart comes through.”

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Learn more about poet, scholar, and activist Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz and check out her most recent poetry collection, *The Peace Chronicles*, on her website at <https://www.yolandasealeyruiz.com/>. *The Peace Chronicles* is a follow-up to her first full-length poetry collection, *Love from the Vortex & Other Poems*, from which Sealey-Ruiz shares excerpts in this video from her NCTE Member Gathering presentation: <https://vimeo.com/401007647>.

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