

Children's Literature Association Conference 2019: Activism and Empathy

Tentative Paper Title: Critical Muralism: Activism, Community, & Transformation in *Hey, Wall*

Arturo Rossette explores the idea of critical muralism by examining selected American urban art projects. The author synthesizes the term's implications with the phrase "community-artist-activist-educator-leaders" (Rossette 4), thereby emphasizing the political ramifications of this transformative artist practice. My essay explores critical muralism in Susan Verde and John Parra's *Hey, Wall* (2018). The picture book focuses on an unnamed male child of color who leads a mural painting venture in his city neighborhood. I contend that the boy harnesses the roles of "artist-activist-educator-leader," which catalyzes a unified transformation of the community's outlier, an enormous blue wall, into an inclusive, humanized space.

Verde and Parra's book thus confers a male child of color with the agency typically wielded by adults in consensus reality, and challenges walls' symbolic associations with enclosure and entrapment through art activism. Surveying border wall prototypes in 2017, architect Christopher Hawthorne writes, "Walls suggest not just division but authority and control. Tunnels are about expanding the number of paths in the world. . . . Tunnels are stateless; walls give shape to statehood" (par. 11). In *Hey, Wall*, the child's voice and actions overturn the authority and control associated with walls; additionally, when the neighborhood harmonizes to paint the structure, both process and end result give shape to a larger sense of kinship. I hope to conclude this essay by showing how Verde and Parra's work transcends the aesthetic emphasis and social hierarchy of another recent picture book concerning art activism, F. Isabel Campoy and Theresa Howell's *Maybe Something Beautiful* (2016).

Works Cited

Hawthorne, Christopher. "Trump's Border Wall Through the Eyes of an Architecture Critic." *LA Times*, 30 Dec. 2017, [www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-building-type-](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-building-type-border-wall-20171231-htmlstory.html)

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