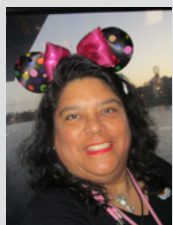


Speaking of Pronouns

An Interview with Author/ Advocate Maya Christina Gonzalez

Ana-Elba Pavon



A Spanish services specialist for over 30 years, **Ana-Elba Pavon** is enjoying retirement from Oakland Public Library.

Author and illustrator Maya Christina Gonzalez is known for her award-winning bilingual (English/Spanish) books such as *My Colors, My World* and *I Know the River Loves Me*. But this progressive educator and independent scholar/researcher has also delved into the world of pronouns.

Call Me Tree was written without any gender identifying pronouns, and she has since written substantially on the topic as well as writing and illustrating three children's books on the topic, including *They She He Me: Free to Be!*, *The Gender Wheel*, and *They, She, He Easy as ABC*. I asked Gonzalez to share about the importance of pronouns.

You wrote *Call Me Tree/Llamame Arbol* without gender identifying pronouns. What has been the readers' response?

I notice a growing trend toward acceptance that has recently been battered with fear. In 2014, when *Call Me Tree* was first published, the gender conversation was just tickling the edges of the public sphere. Parents, educators, and librarians were looking for gender expansive materials. *Call Me Tree* was there. But I had to point it out.

I asked my readers to specifically address gender assumptions after a review unnecessarily and incorrectly used pronouns to gender the main character. I slowed things down a bit, past the assumptions and the be-yourself framework and toward aligning with the strength and diversity of nature and what the bigger implications of that were regarding gender.

Since then, the gender conversation has exploded. Addressing gender assumptions has forced us to look at bigger issues beyond pronouns like our humanity, what we've been taught, and what we believe. This has created necessary movement and a great deal of turmoil.

We're crashing up against the power structures that hold us in place and force us to limit and divide ourselves. Amidst so much division, confusion, and reevaluation, we need something that reminds us of our unity.

Call Me Tree moves us beyond social constructs. It shows humans as an intrinsic part of nature. When we include the presence and necessity of body, gender, and relationship diversity throughout all realms of nature, we will have a profound shift in our mindset.

It will become easier and easier to understand that *he* and *she* can't hold us when we see ourselves within the greater flow of all life. *Call Me Tree*° was a seed. We're still growing. Only time will tell how high we'll reach, but it's hard to grow in fear.

You and Matthew SG have created Reflection Press. You use a nature-based, decolonized, holistic gender mode in your teachings that has grown into your Pronoun Protocol. Tell us about your upcoming book.

The Pronoun Protocol includes twelve agreements to create a gender-inclusive

environment while addressing your own assumptions. In the book, we will drop into each one, how some of the agreements function in the world plus anecdotes from parenting with *The Pronoun Protocol* in real life.

The first three agreements establish how to remove assumptions and reclaim fluidity. The next four give inclusive ways of speaking while respecting privacy and safety. The last five work to create systemic change.

Engaging any of the agreements is valuable and makes a difference. Some are as simple as always using gender-inclusive words like people and parents. Others take more consideration like, unless it is a confirmed safe space, don't ask someone's gender or pronoun—it is theirs to tell or not when ready. This means navigating notions of safety for gender nonconforming kids and learning how to use people's names or a formal pronoun for everyone equally without differentiation.

The Pronoun Protocol doesn't stand alone. It rises from the Gender Wheel Approach, a multidisciplinary foundation that includes nature, history, society, and more that we can teach kids. This gives strength and purpose to the protocol so everyone can relax into their own understanding and see for themselves how everything's connected.

I think a lot of times, people want to be respectful and gender inclusive but are afraid to say or do the wrong thing. Having a framework that provides the larger context of gender helps make sense of why gender expansion is important and what you can do about it. It becomes less about knowing what the right thing to do is based on an ever-changing society in struggle and more about your own awareness and commitment to changing the big picture of gender oppression.

Most people reading this work with children. What advice can you offer for conducting all-gender welcoming storytimes and class visits?



Maya Christina Gonzalez and Matthew SG

Librarians have the power to create safe spaces that open minds. The most fundamental agreement of *The Pronoun Protocol* is seeing people as people first without gender assumptions. When you dive into this agreement, you set the stage for everything else to fall into place.

If you come in without assumptions about who kids should be and how they should act based on their sex assignment at birth then you have done some of the most important work there is and the pronouns and other language will make sense and be easier to implement.

But gender assumptions run deep. You may not even know that you have them, but all of us do. Become aware. I explored how to uncover assumptions recently, using the children's book I illustrated, *I Can Be . . . Me!* written by Lesléa Newman. Ask yourself if a child is assigned male how should they dress? How should they act? How should they be treated? What books should they like? Again, with female? Challenge yourself to release these assumptions and just let kids be kids. &

Find more tips and resources at www.genderwheel.com.