Walk into a classroom where poet Juan Felipe Herrera is working with students, and you might see clotheslines strung with words, or students jumping up and counting backward, or the class frozen in a mannequin challenge.

The US poet laureate is a whirlwind of prompts, getting students out of their chairs, engaged with each other, mixing up classroom—and literary—hierarchies and rules.

“I know the AP students are going to be fabulous, going to have a lot to say,” he says. But he also wants to make sure the students in the back of the room are part of the conversation. “I know the students on the margins have a lot to say, and I want all the students to know each other. That’s one of my agendas, inner visions.”

Five decades into his career as a teacher and a poet, a journey that has taken him from a childhood in the migrant farm fields of southern California to his second (one-year) term as the country’s first Latino poet laureate, Herrera is not slowing down.

If anything, he’s even more in motion these days, diving into the Library of Congress archives, working with high school English teachers in Chicago and near his home in Fresno, and launching the second national writing project of his term as laureate, “The Technicolor Adventures of Catalina Neon.”
He’s also written poems about the violence that has ricocheted through public consciousness during the last two years, including police-related shootings, the mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, and the death of a University of California, Long Beach, student in the Paris attacks.

[Note: Links to all of these at http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/herrera/.]

**“THESE ARE EVERYONE’S STORIES”**

“I didn’t start out to be a poet. Because I had been silenced, I started out to be a speaker,” Herrera says in the introduction to his 2007 collection, *187 Reasons Mexicanos Can’t Cross the Border*.

Punished for speaking Spanish in his early years in school, Herrera found his voice and went on to become one of the most prolific poets to emerge from the explosion of poetry, theater, visual art, and political activism of the 1960s Chicano Movement.

He has published 30 books, including poetry, young adult novels, and picture books, among them *Half of the World in Light: New and Selected Poems*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the bilingual picture book *Calling the Doves*, which told the story of his childhood with his parents following the harvest.

His work is multivoiced and experimental, spilling out in long lists, incantations, epics, and songs, poems of witness, humor, and deep humanity.

In “Mexican Differences, Mexican Similarities,” for example, he slyly reminds readers that the border that some consider a wall has always been permeable, that the cultural exchange has always flowed both ways:

“You build the fence we climb the fence
You hammer it up we rock it down …
You ask Are you American Citizen? We say Yes way before you”

Another multipage poem, “One by One,” grew out of stories students told him in a classroom in Tucson. The poem loosely follows a family of four border-crossers, two parents and their teenage daughter and son.

Through their story, Herrera tells the story of the river of people crossing the border, their hopes and dreams, their obstacles and dead-ends, what they left behind and what they hoped to find in the North.

“one by one
this is how their dreams arrived
walking
dragging themselves hugging each other
through the tunnels the canyons
this is how they lived.”

“Years ago, I met two of the children I mention in the epigraph,” Herrera says. “Mayra and Alfonsito. They were the survivors of a family that crossed, the only ones who made it.

“They told me that story, some of it, and I remembered it, kept it in mind. I didn’t want it to disappear. Jorge Argueta,”—a third student mentioned in the dedication—“came up after Central America blew up. He told me the story of his trek from El Salvador to San Francisco, jumping on cars, getting lost.”

While the students in the class were telling individual stories, their small piece of a great migration, Herrera, whose own family history stretches from Mexico to El Paso to southern California, wove them into a story-poem that tells the story of a people.

“These are very big stories, everybody’s stories,” he said.

**“THE HOUSE OF COLORS”**

While Herrera’s work has always been loose and improvisational, weaving and amplifying a range of voices that are silenced in mainstream culture, in recent years he’s launched large-scale poetry projects that go even further.

His first project as US poet laureate, “La Casa de Colores” (“the House of Colors”), included a monthly prompt that classes could use to contribute to a community poetry project that Herrera helped weave together.

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Prompts touched on family, friendships, language, peace, veterans, democracy and a final “world unity tortilla.” The project’s open-ended nature allowed poems in any language and form, from haiku to hip-hop. And the monthly poems, woven by Herrera into “an ongoing flowing shifting transformative collective poem,” as he describes it, were published in close to real time.

“We had hundreds and hundreds of submissions,” Herrera says. Whole classes sent in poems, from high school English classes to adult English language learners. The poems were in Spanish and English, in remembered and recovered fragments of immigrant and birth languages including Korean, Italian, Russian, Finnish, Tagalog, and Choctaw.

“I was very moved by that,” Herrera said of seeing whole classes submit work. “The teachers made a great effort, the students made a great effort.”

From the very first prompt, on families, the poems drew together a range of American experiences, crossing class, gender, language, and national boundaries.

“It was interesting that we get to see families in many forms,” Herrera says of the first prompt. “We get the notion that family at its core is love, not just one prescription for family.”

He was stuck by one family, made up of “two white mothers, two Asian daughters,” and another about a migrant father.

“Bracero mi padre, con manos llenas llega a casa/A guestworker my father, with full hands he arrives at home,” he translated. “That’s interesting. His hands full of produce, with work, with gifts, gratitude, love, or just hard labor.”

“It’s the sort of voice that’s often missing in poetry classrooms and texts: a bilingual voice, a working—class voice, a family shaped by hard, physical labor.

Herrera’s Year 2 project, “The Technicolor Adventures of Catalina Neon,” is another community poem, this one focused on elementary-grade students. Working with artist Juana Medina, he wrote

“If I hadn’t written, the feeling of isolation would have eaten me up. I lived as a migrant child, on the road. When I came to school, if I hadn’t found writing, if the teacher hadn’t acknowledged me, if I hadn’t found my voice, I wouldn’t be here.”
Learning how to enact culturally sustaining pedagogy takes time, reflection, and above all, being deeply attuned to our students. It cannot and should not be done alone; instead, it should be done in collaboration with our students, their families, and the community.

—from “Creative Failure in Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy,” by Kelly Puzio et al. (Language Arts, March 2017).

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the first chapter of a children’s book about a young superhero and her dog. Subsequent chapters will be written by student contributors.

Students can download images, exercises, and writing prompts, can work together and contribute to chapters in progress, answering questions and pulling the story forward. The project launched in October 2016 and the final chapter will post in June 2017.

“YOU HAVE A BEAUTIFUL VOICE”

Herrera often recounts an early experience in the classroom, the moment when a third-grade teacher, recognizing his silence and shyness, invited him to come up in front of the classroom and sing.

Five words from the teacher, “You have a beautiful voice,” transformed Herrera, turned his next few years in class from silence to engagement. His teacher put him on his first stage, Herrera says; his work now is using that voice “in this giant classroom that is America.”

Back in the Michigan classroom during Herrera’s visit, students had finished brainstorming clotheslines of words, had finished creating a battle scene of frozen bodies and then using that as a writing prompt. They had moved their bodies, broken free from the page; they were loose and connected to each other and Herrera was finally ready for the deep work, the vulnerable work of writing a poem.

He gave them their third prompt: “What are you concerned about?” And the words—and the poems—began to flow. The students wrote and talked about tough issues, rape culture, violence: everything they’re afraid to let out and put into words.

Herrera calls this the “What’s Going On and What Do You See,” Project, a small way that those in the room can begin to hear each other, to see each other, to become visible in a culture full of stories and images that leave so many out.

“I want students to discover writing in an artistic sense, become writers, create realities in so many ways, with their voice, bodies, ideas, drawing with each other, that’s the idea, to touch magic, find magic,” Herrera says.

To those who fear poetry might disappear, or wonder whether art has a place in the high school classroom, Herrera says it has never been more urgent.

“We have to kick that up a notch: have our students read out loud, engage in self-expression instead of bottling it all up,” he says. “If I hadn’t written, the feeling of isolation would have eaten me up. I lived as a migrant child, on the road. When I came to school, if I hadn’t found writing, if the teacher hadn’t acknowledged me, if I hadn’t found my voice, I wouldn’t be here.”

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