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"Some Words are Messengers/Hay Palabras Mensajeras": Interpreting Sociopolitical Themes in Latino/a Children's Literature

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During the past two decades, Latino/a literature has received unprecedented recognition as authors from this multiethnic community have gained both critical and popular acclaim. In addition, literary honors such as the Pura Belpré and Américas Award have focused attention on outstanding books by established and new Latino/a writers and illustrators for children. Given the relatively recent notice paid to Latino/a children's literature, it may appear to readers that the writers and illustrators are, themselves, new to literary arts and that their work is created largely in response to a demand for multicultural literature. Although multicultural educators and scholars have promoted the inclusion of Latino/a perspectives in education, it is not simply contemporary forms of multicultural awareness per se that have informed the work of Latino/a writers and illustrators. In fact, many of today's well-known Latino/a literary artists explicitly locate their aesthetic and political roots in *los movimientos* of the sixties. As Moraga

writes, "The . . . literature being read today sprang forth from a grassroots social and political movement of the sixties and seventies that was definitely anti-assimilationist. It responded to a stated mandate: art is political" (1995, p. 215).

Today's children's literature, written and illustrated by Latino/as is, in many respects, a continuation of the activism and vision of artists who forged and claimed a politicized Latino/a identity more than three decades ago. We believe that the links between Latino/a forms of cultural expression and political activism are crucial to the interpretation of contemporary Latino/a children's literature. Thus, we aim to illustrate relationships between sociopolitical themes identified in selected exemplary pieces of children's literature and the aesthetic expression of these themes. Through this thematic and literary examination of the literature we hope to contribute to more expanded, informed interpretations and mediations of Latino/a art in children's literature research and education.

Selecting Exemplary Latino/a Literature

For this endeavor, we read all of the books recognized as Américas Award winners¹ or commended books between 1993–1998, ranging from 66 to 103 during each of these six years. To qualify for this award, a book must be by or about the Latino/a experience in the Américas and it must be

written primarily for a young audience. In addition, we read children's books written by Latino/a authors who are also regarded as prominent authors for adults, and who have shaped the work of subsequent writers and illustrators. The contributions of these authors led us to include more dated publications for children, such as *Felita* (1979/1990) by Nicholasa Mohr.

Across the books considered, we focused on those that represented either a new stylistic approach toward, or a new perspective on, Latino/a experience in children's literature. Thus, among the Américas Award books in particular, we excluded folk tales and legends unless they were told with a markedly new variation. We also excluded books that focused specifically on grandparent and grandchild relations, holiday preparations, or other specific cultural preparations relating, for example, to food or clothing. While many of these books are well-crafted and are an important contribution to the broader understanding of Latino/a literature for children, they are also part of a well-recognized tradition of literature for children across all cultures. These books express pride and engagement in Latino/a customs and family relations. They are also typically written and designed in ways that depict the family or child in isolation from the larger society. This is certainly a viable way to write and illustrate books for children. Our interest, however, was in those books that specifically address the experience of living fully, with difficulty and with joy, in relation to a larger community and society that is neither homogeneous or equitable.

At the end of this selection process, 31 books were examined more closely for thematic and literary content, of which only a select number will be discussed in this article. Space limitations preclude us from listing all the books here. Together, these works explore Latino/a identity in terms of

labor and economic relationships, language status, and the meaning of spirituality, home, and citizenship. We argue that these are, in many respects, among the most important books for teachers to learn to mediate with children because they embrace the breadth and complexities of shaping a Latino/a identity in a society that highly values assimilation to European, English, middle class, and masculinist norms.

Significant Sociopolitical Themes in Latino/a Children's Literature

Across these exemplary books, we have discerned four sociopolitical themes that are central to the literature of adult Latino/a writers: border, home, language, and spirituality. In identifying these themes, we drew primarily on the works of

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Latino/a adult literary criticism that has informed the work of contemporary authors for adults and children. In Latino/a adult literary criticism, writers elaborate on the meaning of "the border" (Anzaldúa, 1987; Tabuenca, 1998; Ledesma, 1998); the meaning of home (Cofer, 1995; Mohr, 1992; Quintana, 1996); the politics of Spanish and English usage (Anzaldúa, 1987; Alegría, 1991); and the meaning and practice of traditional and contemporary forms of spirituality (Medina,

1998; Moraga, 1998). Although this literature is also inclusive of many other interests and experiences, such as Latino/a identity and popular culture (Maciel & Herrera-Sobek, 1998), sexuality (Trujillo, 1998; Cisneros, 1998), and family relations (Castillo, 1991; Alvarez, 1992; Cisneros, 1983), we have found that representations and interpretations of Latino/a experience are often dependent on the complex meanings associated with the border, home, language, and spirituality. Thus, we divided our analysis of sociopolitical themes in Latino/a literature for children into four sections: 1) Border crossing, 2) Coming home, 3) Healing, community, and spiri-

tuality, and 4) Shaping language and being shaped by language.

Although these aspects of the literature are presented separately, they are closely interrelated and interdependent. Moreover, in adult and children's literature, each of these themes is typically expressed through specific representations and analyses of gender, class, and race (Anzaldúa, 1987; Moraga 1983; Cisneros, 1983; Herrera-Sobek & Viramontes, 1996). These social locations and their movement across situations are far more complex than we can address in this article. However, each will be considered within the four main categories of analysis, and as they are represented in the books we will describe and discuss.

Reading for Diversity Within Latino/a Literature

Although we read each of these books closely and repeatedly, we did not read them in isolation from one another. Nor do we recommend that any of these books be read as a singular representation of Latino/a experience. When reading across this literature, the reader gains a sense of diverse, complex aesthetics and experiences of Latino/a writers. The diversity of this literature teaches readers to disrupt assumptions of a homogenous Latino/a cultural experience and to acknowledge the distinct yet interrelated lives of Latino/as who represent different geographical, historical, and generational origins. Like many Latino/a writers and artists, we see ourselves as part of a dynamic history shaped by the thousands of people, young and old, who have lived in the United States when it was Mexico, who arrived in the United States as migrant laborers from Mexico, as second- or third-generation Puertorriqueñas in Ohio or New York, and as students using English with and against our Spanish; we are part of the people who have traveled back and forth to our homes either in memory and dreams or as newly designated *Americanos* arriving by land or air. Just as we value our own emerging sense of our distinct histories and solidarity, we value the literature and art that explores and speaks to both the specific and shared dimensions of Latino/a experience.

Border Crossing: Labor, Art, and Testimony

In Latino/a children's literature as in Latino/a adult literature, the border is both a setting and a metaphor. As Anzaldúa (1987) writes, the border exists literally, as a guarded crossing point, between the south and north. The border is also, unquestionably, a dangerous place (Tabuenca 1998). Yet it is not simply a static, fixed point of surveillance. As people from Puerto Rico, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America know, the border moves with those who cross it, making anyone who has an accent, a darker skin, or a Latino name vulnerable to questioning, the threat of harassment, or in some cases, deportation ("repatriation"). Crossing the border, then, is a never-ending oppression, while it is also an experience and place that has become an infinitely rich metaphor for describing what it means to be not only subjugated and vulnerable, but also empowered by the struggle for human rights, economic security, language, history, and identity. To understand the significance of the border in Latino/as' lives, it is important for readers to appreciate it as a site for the regulation of labor, particularly in the experience of *Mejicanos*. For *Cubanos* and *Puertorriqueños*, the border is not the same physical barrier that it represents for *Mejicanos* and often *Centro Americanos*. Instead, the border exists as a constant, lived experience of surveillance that monitors immigration status, political affiliations, citizenship, and identity (Esteves, 1987; Flores, 1993; Hernández, 1997). For all people who cross it, the border is also replete with histories binding their homeland and the U.S. in ongoing struggles over land, political self-determination, and economic independence. For Latino/as, each originating country/state's histories, politics, and relations with the U.S. condition how and why we cross the border.

The border, then, is a real, guarded, physical and political barrier, while it also serves literally and metaphorically, as a place of cultural movement and transformation. The intersection of perspectives, policies, and agency within this space has given rise to decades of innovative artistic representation. Latino/a writers and artists show us that when characters live "on the other side" they inhabit a space in which they are visible and invis-

ible, hopeful and afraid, necessary and expedient, self-determining and dependent, willing and exhausted. And they are in the midst of remaking and redefining the border in their own lives.

Anzaldúa's (1987 & 1990) writing is especially important to many contemporary scholars interested in border identities. Her writing is also significant in our analysis because she writes for both adults and children. Through her work, she has not only forged a working definition of the border as a metaphor, but also she has also created an aesthetic, literary form that enables readers to experience border movement and contradictions. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Anzaldúa uses multiple languages (eg. "Spanglish," English, *Tejano* Spanish) and literary genres including poetry, autobiography, and essays to express diverse, contradictory experiences and views within the boundaries of one text. She writes across the boundaries of language and genre to demonstrate the meaning of crossing borders through the act of reading across literary forms and spaces. To read across these forms/spaces is to feel disrupted, uncomfortable, and uncertain of the next move. At the same time, it is liberating to know that, as a reader you are not bound to one space or one way of making meaning. Through her artistic choices, and her positioning of the reader, Anzaldúa demonstrates that it is possible to be more than one singularly defined person; it is possible to be *mestiza*, informed by multiple, interrelated, even contradictory identities.

Contemporary narratives of border crossing, written for younger readers, reflect the same concerns with identity, citizenship, exploitation, and economic security that are found across adult border narratives. Not surprisingly, many authors have constructed their narratives through different forms of autobiography. For example, in *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* (1997), Francisco Jiménez relates his childhood and adolescent experiences as a farm laborer through the

fictional character, Panchito. Panchito's life unfolds from the beginning of his family's long journey across the border in the first chapter, "Under the wire," until the moment when he is addressed by his high school principal and asked to accompany an immigration official off the school grounds. In chronologically ordered chapters, Jiménez foregrounds specific details in Panchito's physical and social environment that give substance and direction to his life. He offers poetic descriptions of the changing land and climate, his homes, his family members, friends, insects, fish, games, his single notebook, and his teachers.

While each of these descriptions is likely to be very appealing to many young adult readers, what

might be overlooked in discussion of this literature is the author's metaphoric use of these defining relationships and observations. Like other authors of border narratives, Jiménez does not simply offer readers a first-person account of the life of a child migrant worker; he uses each chapter's focus as a metaphor to illuminate Panchito's vulnerability, his

family's relationship to the labor economy, the tensions and aching invisibility he experiences within formal U.S., English-only education, and the contradictions between democratic ideals and government policies that deny human rights.

Thus, although Jiménez has written a coming of age novel in the classic Western sense, it is more significantly, a new kind of coming of age novel through which the protagonist imagines the border's possibilities, awakens to its political and economic meanings, and shapes an identity in its material and metaphoric presence. Jiménez enables the reader to not only "relate" to Panchito, but also to interpret the border as a presence that is integral to Panchito's sense of identity and social consciousness.

Furthermore, Jiménez, like many Latino/a authors, has written a testimony/*testimonio*. His story is not merely a fiction, a history, or an artfully crafted

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autobiography. *The Circuit* represents a deliberate decision or action to speak to others, to refuse to be invisible or dependent on others' representations of his life (Anzaldúa, 1987; Felman & Laub 1992; Jehenson, 1995; Jiménez, 1999). Part of the ongoing presence of the experience of crossing the border as a migrant laborer is the constant fear that one will be "discovered." Because the flow of labor is controlled via the border and immigration rules, migrant laborers are always at risk and therefore always available to U.S. companies at the lowest possible wages. In addition, when labor is less in demand, migrant laborers often become the target of politicians and communities who describe migrants as a threat. Through Panchito and his family, readers can begin to understand not only the human conditions of working and living in fields and in labor camps, but also the economic and political forces that make migrant families so vulnerable.

Panchito's character shows us that despite the enormous contribution to the economy that is made by migrant laborers every year, people without documents must constantly be attuned to the perceptions and policies that render them "aliens" and "outsiders" who do not have the right to speak. Border narratives are testimonies because they are written despite this fear, so that other people who labor in U.S. fields will be less invisible and less afraid, and so their histories and lives might be more complete, with a frame of reference that is inclusive of their material, emotional, and political realities. Jiménez, like dozens of authors before him, has claimed the right to tell this story.

Similarly, in her first book for children, *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* (1993), Anzaldúa introduces readers to a geographic location that has been historically silenced or misrepresented in dominant descriptions of the Southwest. The story spans a brief time period in the life of Prietita, a young girl living in a Texas-Mexican border town, where she meets Joaquín, a

boy who has recently migrated, with his mother, across the border. In her introduction to the book, Anzaldúa clearly locates Prietita's story as autobiographical, providing the facts that serve as the history and setting for the story.

However, as she summarizes her story of Prietita, Anzaldúa notifies the reader that this story is not simply about a retelling of the facts. It is a retelling or resituating of the meaning of the story. Prietita is described as a brave friend who shows these qualities within a setting that is both hopeful and desperate. Through the picture book format, Anzaldúa's semi-autobiographical narrative challenges stereotypical depictions of and assumptions about *mojados* (wetbacks). Through Prietita's actions and decisions, through her social conscience-in-action in this particular "bordered" location, Anzaldúa reclaims the role of women in labor and cultural change, she raises questions about law and justice, and she elevates and complicates the perspectives of those who cross.

Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado and *The Circuit* are situated in the lives of authors who lived near and crossed the Mexican/U.S. border. Like Mexican authors, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Caribbean authors also express their experiences in terms of emerging identities and as testimonies that are constructed through an ongoing relationship with a bordered reality. As we will discuss in the next section on "Home," authors, such as Mohr, and Alma Flor Ada, create characters who wonder how they can or should envision themselves as members of both the U.S. and their island societies. Although less emphasis is placed on restrictions of movement than is evident in Chicano/Mejicano narratives, the psychology of moving across dominant categories of identity, location, politics, and language is explored through metaphor and description in great depth.

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Where is home?: Family, Community, and Migration

The experiences of "home" and "going home" are explored from multiple perspectives by Latino/a authors (Quintana, 1996). The titles of their works, including *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1983), *Here* (Esteves, 1995), and *La carreta made a U-turn* (Laviera, 1992), suggest that home is a physical space, but of course, in the forms of novels and poetry it is also a metaphorical space. Explorations of the place and meaning of home are also prevalent themes in Latino/a children's literature. When readers encounter the works of numerous authors, it is possible to develop a sense of the diverse ways Latino/as compose definitions of and claims for home.

To better comprehend how images of "home" and "going home" are represented throughout the literature it is important to consider the influences of multiple nationalities, multiple generations of Latinos/as, gender, and class on authors' writing. For example, authors working from a *Puertorriqueño/a* or *Cubano/a* perspective might consider the different political relationships between the U.S. and Latin American countries as they plan to travel; they might also consider how immigration laws and citizenship rights create particular constraints or openings as they plan for a trip "back home." *Mejicanos* are more likely to be affected by questions related to the circumstances under which undocumented immigrants can be sent back to their countries of origin (whether or not they are citizens or legal residents of the U.S.). And many Latino/as born and raised in the U.S. ask where home is for them if "home" is always experienced in both a U.S. context and in their parents' country of origin. Authors also ask how home becomes idealized by those who left their countries to come to the U.S. and whether home is a Latino/a community in the U.S., a Latin American country, or both. All of these questions are aspects of the images explored by Latino/a authors expressing the complexity of a personal and cultural/group claim for home.

Throughout the literature for children and young adults there are diverse images and representations

of going home and/or defining home. Those images vary from very easy movement back and forth from the U.S., to the negotiations of communities/homes and their meaning within the U.S.. For the purpose of this section we are going to examine these multiple experiences through the following books: *Yagua Days* (Martel, 1976), *Felita* (Mohr, 1990/1979), *Going Home* (Mohr, 1989/1986), *Celebrating the Hero* (Becerra de Jenkins, 1993), and *The Circuit* (Jiménez, 1997). These texts represent different publication years from the 1970s to the present, different character ages from young children to adolescents, and different nationalities and genders.

In *Yagua Days* (1976) by Cruz Martel, Adan, a young boy who lives in New York with his parents, goes to visit his relatives in Puerto Rico for the first time. The family in Puerto Rico warmly greets him and they have a fabulous vacation on the island. For Adan, home is New York City but there are close connections with the family in Puerto Rico. While for Adan going to Puerto Rico might not literally mean going home, it does involve traveling to the island in order to become a visible part of his family and Puerto Rican identity. *Yagua Days* presents a positive narrative of a child's experience of traveling to Puerto Rico with his parents. This experience is very familiar to many Puerto Ricans who, as U.S. citizens, travel easily back and forth from the island to the mainland.

A more complex perspective on home in the U.S. is explored in *Felita* (Mohr, 1979/1990). Mohr presents the reader with a critical perspective on the construction of ethnic and cultural identity within and across U.S. ethnic communities. In Mohr's writing it is clear that although familial and within-group relationships create a sense of belonging, people are also subject to cross-ethnic interpretations and practices of power and discrimination. In Mohr's story, Felita, a young girl in the fourth grade, and her family move out of a mostly Puerto Rican community in New York to a mostly Jewish community in search of what her father calls: "a better future" (p. 27). However, the family is not welcomed by a group of people in the predominantly Jewish community. A series of verbal and physical aggressions toward Felita's family push them to go back "where they belong" in the Puerto Rican neighborhood.

Home for Felita then gets limited to the Puerto Rican community in New York and the idealized image of Puerto Rico that her *abuela* creates for her. In the sequel to Felita, *Going Home* (Mohr 1989/1986), an older Felita finally gets an opportunity to visit her relatives in Puerto Rico. However, her experiences in the island are not necessarily what she expected. The idealized image her grandmother had created of the island is not what Felita experiences during her vacation there. Felita finds herself again an outsider. As in the Jewish neighborhood to which her family moved, she is told again to go back where she belongs. Felita struggles with her identity in relation to the meaning of home. In Puerto Rico, her idealized "home," she is not Puerto Rican enough, while in the U.S. she is not perceived as North American enough to determine or claim a home outside the Puerto Rican community.

Through her writing for children, Mohr explores aspects of identity and home that are not only part of a literary theme but part of her life experiences as a Puerto Rican woman born and raised in New York. Like the works of Jiménez and Anzaldúa, her writing for children and adults is intended to be both an engaging, reflective representation of childhood, and a testimony about living with conflicting meanings of self, home, and belonging (Mohr, 1994, 1992).

Going back home is also represented as a form of past discovery and identity reaffirmation. This is the case in *Celebrating the Hero* (1993) by Lyll Becerra de Jenkins. In *Celebrating the Hero*, Camila, a young woman of 16, goes back to Colombia after her mother's death to a special town celebration honoring her grandfather. Her previous lack of interest in her mother's stories about her family and heritage is transformed through this trip. While Camila discovers that her mother's stories of her father's accomplishments are idealized and in sharp conflict with the perceptions of numerous townspeople, she also discovers that the truths of her family history place her at the heart of colonial and indigenous Colombian history and relations. For Camila, this is a profound life experience in her mother's homeland. By the end of the novel, she reflects on the possibility of living in, or between, two worlds.

The Circuit (Jiménez, 1997) represents a more politically complex perspective on "home" and "going home." Through his writing, Jiménez engages in a profound exploration of his life experiences as the son of immigrant farm workers while also representing two important dimensions of the meaning of "home." First, he describes the particular circumstances under which undocumented immigrant families come to the U.S. and experience the ongoing possibility that they will be arrested and "sent back." And second, he shows readers how home for migrant laborers is defined and redefined with each successive move from one labor camp to another. Repeated images of filling the truck with belongings, mapping routes, and moving from and returning to labor camps offer readers a sense of time and setting while they also create a sense of the unending cycle of movement in migrant workers' lives. Yet with each move, a home is made. Jiménez' characters focus on making floors, walls, and routines. Their material goods are always sparse, yet each new space opens into an ever-widening circle of awareness for Panchito, the main character. The chapter titles also establish a sense of constant movement but without necessarily attaining the ideal of stability and security. Titles such as "Under the wire", "Moving still" and "The circuit" evoke movement while they also suggest the need to stay within a bounded area or face the threat of being forcibly returned "under the wire."

Toward the end of the novel, it is clear that Panchito has, indeed, come of age, as he takes a clear-eyed measure of his life experience in comparison with that of his school-age peers. He views the differences in opportunity and quality of life through the calendar and calculations of the days and weeks of his labor in and out of school, within and across borders.

Jiménez' narrative enables us to imagine what is lost and found by migrant workers as they both define home and constantly have home defined for them. Across the books described above, it is evident that no one definition of home is adequate when considering its meaning in Latino/a experience. Home is always informed by political, economic, and cultural borders that are invariably shaped by governments, employers, and the people.

Mother Nature, Healers and Curanderas: Spirituality as a Form of Decolonization

Mother nature, healers, and *curanderas* are found as representations of spirituality in the works of Latino/a writers but especially among the stories and poetry of Latinas. These traditions are inherited from the Indigenous and African influences in Latino/a culture and constitute another theme that runs across the works of many children's literature writers. Images of spirituality have been used creatively by Latino/a writers to disrupt Western notions of religion and colonialism which sought to displace indigenous beliefs and practices. Thus, the representation of strong female spiritual figures is both a means of claiming local spiritual strength and opening possibilities for redefining relationships with Western, dominant ideologies. As noted by literary critic Medina (1998), the role of spirituality in writing by Latinas is a way to: "supplant patriarchal religion with their own cultural knowledge, sensibilities and sense of justice" (p. 189).

Medina describes four important functions of spirituality in the works of Latina writers. First, she argues that Latinas' spirituality is a way to disrupt the patriarchy and Eurocentrism of the church. Secondly, spirituality is a form of decolonization of the spirit, enabling women to heal and be healed. Thirdly, it is a form of liberation and self-determination that has a direct effect on their politics. And lastly, it is a way to find a connection within one's sense of being and becoming a more complete person. Spirituality then is a space of reaffirmation where past heritage and present influences are both honored and disrupted. Furthermore, the spiritual roles played by the characters carry a sense of social justice and a commitment to heal past and present social oppressions.

In the books we reviewed, spirituality is ever present and part of the everyday perceptions and experiences of children and families. Authors and illustrators do not try to explain spirituality in

Western or Protestant Christian terms. Rather they depict faith as a form of healing, caring, and coming together as a community. In looking at the role of spirituality we will focus on George Ancona's *Barrio: José's neighborhood* (1998), Gloria Anzaldúa's *Friends from the other side/Amigos del otro lado* (1993) and Carmen Lomas Garza's *In my family/En mi familia* (1996).

Sometimes spirituality is represented in the form of specific holiday celebrations such as *El Día*

de Los Muertos. George Ancona's photo essay *Barrio: José's neighborhood* presents life in a barrio in San Francisco. Among the important aspects of this community highlighted by the author is the transformation of a traditional holiday, *El Día de Los Muertos*, into a healing event for the com-

munity and school. In the school, teachers and students set up an altar in honor of a teacher who died of AIDS. The children and teachers also perform several cross-ethnic and invented or borrowed rituals to honor their teacher and friend. This representation of *El Día de Los Muertos* moves beyond exoticism to a representation of a profound spiritual experience for the people in the school and community. While the decorative aspect of this holiday is beautifully highlighted by Ancona, his focus is on the deeper meaning of the holiday as a time of affirmation of family and community and as a time to heal our sorrows.

In *Friends from the other side/Amigos del otro lado* (1993), among the events explored by Anzaldúa are the tensions and threats experienced by undocumented immigrants who may be "found" by the border patrol, *la migra*, and deported to their countries of origin. In this story, when the border patrol looks for undocumented immigrants, Prietita takes Joaquín and his mother to *la curandera's* house to hide them. *La curandera* runs to close the curtains and hide them under her bed. When the Chicano border patrol asks the neighbors if they have seen any "illegals," they respond "No." *La curandera* is represented by Anzaldúa as a

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supporter and protector of her community. She creates a "sense of justice," and adds to the growing theme of equity and justice within this story.

Artist Carmen Lomas Garza (1996) also explores the connection between mind and body through spirituality in the Mexican American community. She depicts the everyday and significant events of her childhood through detailed oil paintings. These paintings have been exhibited nationally and internationally, but they have also been collected in two books edited by Harriet Rohmer of Children's Book Press. According to Amelia Mesa-Bains (1994), curator of one of Garza's exhibitions in Chicago, "What we experience in these works is a collective curing of personal and community ills. This is a cure for oppression, racism, humiliation and loss" (p. 27). The process of healing is beyond physical; in many works by Latina authors, healing is a metaphor for "social healing." In her books, *In My Family/En mi familia* (1996) and *Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia* (1990), Lomas Garza combines her precise, detailed paintings inspired by her family and childhood along with first-person narratives. The images and words together create the sense of healing through honoring and respecting her life experiences and her community. For example, in representing the role of *la curandera*, she informs the reader that the healing occurs in their home through the use of available medicines (plants) and the wisdom and sense of commitment to the community carried by the older woman. Like *la curandera* represented in Anzaldúa's story, the elder woman is recognized as a trusted, highly spiritual person in her community. In books such as *Calling the Doves* (Herrera, 2001), *An Island Like You* (Cofer, 1996), and *Walking Stars* (Villaseñor, 1994), people who are deeply informed by their faith are seen as insightful healers, who are also spiritual leaders. They are perceived as people who can understand human relationships, human suffering, and human needs. They also have gained an invaluable knowledge of local remedies that may often carry powerful healing capacities. As many Latino/a authors and illustrators suggest, spirituality can be, in part, a practice of paying attention, acknowledging the unknown, and experiencing the inner resources in our lives through art and imagery rather than only through "hard-nosed" facts.

Heterogeneous Representations of Language: "Spanglish," Español, and English

Literature that makes use of Spanish, English, or "Spanglish," a form of code switching between Spanish and English, has become, according to literary critic Hernández (1997), "a resistance to a norm or standard imposed by two uncontaminated groups" (p. 8). By using non-standard English and non-standard Spanish, Latino/a writers transform language into a form of expression relevant to their cultural locations. According to Flores (1993) "Rather than rejecting a language because of its association with a repressive other, or adopting it wholesale in order to facilitate passage [into a "dominant" culture], Latino expression typically uses official discourse by adapting it and thereby showing up its practical malleability" (p. 220).

"Spanglish" is represented in different forms in the work of Latino/a authors and it has to be considered and discussed to understand a critical aspect of the literature. Many Latino/a authors have written about the complexities of being bilingual in U.S. society and represent it in multiple forms through their work. Two approaches are most significant for children's literature. First, language is politicized as authors select words, phrases, and forms of translation to represent the perspectives of different characters across circumstances and settings. Second, language is often the subject of characters' identity explorations as they examine their language through interior monologues or through external conflicts and resolutions with other Spanish/English speakers.

Latino/a authors writing for children use language as a theme and poetic representation in their works, focusing on the relationship between language and identity, language and politics, and language and power. In this section we examine the use of language by Anzaldúa in *Friends from the other side/Amigos del otro lado* (1993), by Ada in *My name is Maria Isabel* (1993), and by Francisco Alarcón in his bilingual book of poetry *Laughing Tomatoes/Jitomates Risueños* (1997).

In *Friends from the other side/Amigos del otro lado*, language is foregrounded through the style and content of the book. The format of the book is bilingual, but it is deliberately written in non-stand-

dard English and non-standard Spanish. The non-standard presentation of language reflects the complex political and personal process of mixing and inventing languages that Anzaldúa experienced throughout her youth. In the story, as Joaquín and Prietita first meet, Prietita asks him if he is from "the other side" (Mexico) because his Spanish is different from hers. Implied in this exchange is the fact that Prietita has already begun to shift her language usage to reflect her "belongingness" to the border town. Meanwhile, Joaquín's language marks him as an "outsider," not unlike the kinds of encounters experienced by Mexican immigrants in other parts of the United States. In this brief dialogue, language is represented as dynamic and flexible, yet it is also the object of exclusion and inclusion within Latino/a communities. Anzaldúa makes clear that, counter to general beliefs, language is not a homogeneous, agreed-upon symbol of unity among Latino/as.

In *My Name is María Isabel* (Ada, 1993), the connection between language and identity is explored through a third-person narrative of a young girl's desire to belong to both her classroom community and her family's cultural heritage. María Isabel begins school in a classroom where there are other girls named María. To reduce the confusion, the teacher decides to call María Isabel, "Mary." The story explores María Isabel's frustrations with her teacher's lack of understanding and her own fears related to the teacher's authority as she considers the personal and familial implications of her new name. Flor Ada uses the metaphor of a spider's web to suggest that both school and home communities are interconnected and both have a significant role in María Isabel's sense of her developing identity. Yet María Isabel feels she is caught in this web: "She was caught in a sticky, troublesome spider's web of her own, and the more she tried to break loose, the more trapped she became" (p.44). Eventually, María builds the cour-

age and insight to describe her wish to be called by her real name, María Isabel Salazar López, and also to be recognized as a legitimate participant in classroom life.

For many Latino/as who were born in the United States, name change is a common theme. It is part of the history of "being different" in a society that sets a pre-defined norm for the ways language, and therefore names, should sound. The story of María Isabel offers a poignant and positive representation of an alternative response to assimilationist pedagogies and intentions.

Alarcón's poetry is both a celebration of language and a challenge to the assumption that only one perspective is sufficient for experiencing life. Poems in *Laughing Tomatoes/Jitomates Risueños* (1997) were written either in Spanish or English first and then translated so that each poem has a second counterpart. As Alarcón explains, "Some of these poems were written first in Spanish, others in English, and some came out in both languages almost at the same time. Poems, like tomatoes, grow in many forms and shapes" (p.31). This view of language as malleable and interrelated is recognizable in the form and content of his poetry. His poem, "Other voices/Otras voces", for example, asks the reader to hear other voices "between these lines" (p. 28). "Words are birds/Las palabras son pajaros" explores the transformations of words themselves in relation to the experience of migration. In Alarcón's poems, birds, like people and words, migrate across borderlands and carry meanings, images, hopes, and possibilities with them.

He reaches young readers through language that is playful, rhythmic, and surprising, and draws attention to the joy of owning and shaping multiple languages related to multiple lives. Clearly Alarcón is not writing bilingually simply to impart a Spanish lesson. Rather, languages are used as aesthetic and political tools to create representations that are part of diverse Latino/a identities.

Latino/a authors writing for children use language as a theme and poetic representation in their works, focusing on the relationship between language and identity, language and politics, and language and power.

Through their selective use of language in literary texts, authors encourage us to question our beliefs about the authority of one language in relation to another. They ask us to consider who defines "the rules" by which language will be learned and spoken? How do we use language to relate to one another? What languages do we need to sustain our relationships or build new ones? What joy do we find in the particular sounds and images different languages evoke? And, what is lost when this joy is marginalized and overlooked?

Conclusion

From the time that we began our reading and review of Latino/a children's literature to the present, many provocative, beautifully written and illustrated books have been published. These include, for example, *Elegy on the Death of César Chavez* (Anaya, 2000), *Salsa Stories* (Delacre, 2000), several poetry collections by Francisco Alarcón, and two picture book versions of chapters from *The Circuit*.

Across these books, the same themes and questions arise: What is the experience of border crossing? What does it mean to be home? How can healing be a form of faith, power, and community? And, how do languages shape us as we also shape languages? As we stated at the beginning of this article, other themes are also present in Latino/a literature for children, including cross-generational perspectives on Latino/a identity, gender identities and tensions, and schooling experiences as oppressive and/or transformative. These themes are explored through the language and metaphors of journeys, the natural world, creating meals, and storytelling.

Although Latino/a literature has gained a greater measure of visibility through journals such as *The New Advocate* and through the recent literary awards devoted to the works of Latino/a writers and illustrators, it may be that in these times of English Only laws only a handful of this fine collection of literature will become a familiar part of children's lives. Furthermore, given recent "backlash pedagogies" described by Gutierrez and her colleagues (2000) whereby teachers are under se-

vere pressure to restrict the range of literature, discussions, and meanings associated with reading, it is even more urgent that teachers and librarians understand not only the significance of increased visibility of and accessibility to Latino/a literature, but also the potential meanings and sources of literary aesthetics found across these works. With this knowledge it is possible to argue more persuasively for students' access to Latino/a literature. As recent studies of children's response to literature suggest (Martínez-Roldán & López-Robertson 1999; Medina 2001), by reading Latino/a children's literature, it may be possible for children to understand how to become a reader of multiple, interrelated themes and representations of identities in contested lands, histories, and relations.

Endnotes

- 1 For further information on the Americas Award, see http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/CLACS/outreach_americas.html

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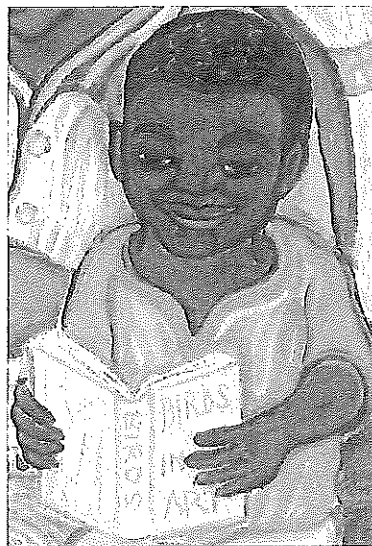
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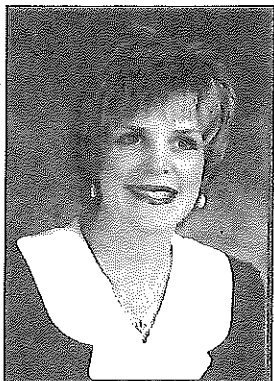


Teacher/Librarian Grant Winners

Teachers/Librarians Like You Winning Cash for Their Classrooms!

"One big challenge I face in my classroom is to inspire a love of reading in children who are bombarded by the 'instant images' in the media and entertainment industry..."

—Deborah Stairiker, Northeast Middle School, Reading Pennsylvania



As a sixth grade reading teacher it is my goal to create a learning environment where students feel comfortable to share their concerns and comments about what we are reading and the way we are reading it. I want the classroom to provide a challenging and interesting atmosphere where students are involved in responsibly directing their learning.

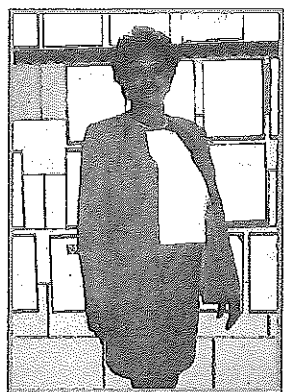
One way in which I have tried to achieve this goal is through the use of *Reading Workshop*. By using this strategy, students are able to *choose* their own books to read. They are *involved* in literature circles where they are able to *discuss* their books with their peers. This group then presents the book to the rest of the class. After the presentation is over the class may ask questions about the book. Many great discussions follow these presentations.

This school year a group of my sixth grade students who were involved in Reading Workshop agreed to help me present this concept to our district's middle school reading teachers. It was my biggest reward of the year to hear the students discuss the books they had read and the projects they had completed with all of these teachers. The teacher had many questions about how the class was run and about the specific books the children were reading in class.

My challenge for the future is to continue expanding Reading Workshop with the finest literature I can find and to fine-tune it so that it is as effective and productive as it can be.

"One of the most rewarding aspects of teaching young adolescents is how eager they are to learn about themselves. They want to do right and they are hoping that you, as a teacher, can help."

—Carolyn Jenkins, 8th Grade Teacher, Paterson, New Jersey



My main goal is to interest my young readers in reading. I do this by reading every book they have to read. We have group discussions daily about the books using literature circles. This reading strategy is great for this age group and I learned and developed my work with this strategy in part because of my master's work at William Patterson University.

In my life, I have worked with children of all ages and the one thing I tell parents is to read to children from birth on. For many reasons this is not done and so children do not have the interest.

One of the greatest challenges for me is to bring back the enthusiasm the children had for reading in the younger grades. This can be done by showing how education, especially reading, can be useful now and in the future. I see the future as being more challenging. We are competing with television more each day. The children are very concerned with what's going on in their lives.

Their reading interest has changed to novels they can relate to. I also wonder about the challenge of teaching children to learn to love to read and how this contrasts so drastically with national expectations about passing standardized tests.