

Interpreting Latino/a Literature as Critical Fictions

To la memoria of Gloria Anzaldúa. Con respeto.

Readers of critical fiction cannot approach work assuming that they already possess a language of access, or that the text will mirror realities that they already know and understand. Much critical fiction dynamically seeks to deconstruct conventional ways of knowing.

—hooks, 1991, p. 57

Reading Latino/a children’s literature has become a great passion and an important component of my work as an educator. The journey began while looking for children’s literary texts that somehow speak about aspects of my Puerto Rican/Latina identity and those communities close to mine. I was looking for personal and literary growth but also for ways in which I could share a different literary experience from the mainstream with children and teachers.

Getting access to the literature was quite challenging, but once I developed some familiarity with awards such as the Américas Award, the Pura Belpré Award; publications such as Nieto (1997) and Barrera & Garza (1997) and several on-line resources, accessibility became an easier process. As I continued reading more Latino/a literature and engaging in conversations around these texts with teachers and children, I realized that access to the literature was not the biggest challenge I would confront. Instead, what I found unsettling were my own interpretative lens, as well as those used by teachers and students to mediate our responses to the books. These lenses seem to be mostly centered in solely our personal responses to the literature without an in depth

analysis of the authors’ stances and the social, political and cultural ideologies represented in the texts. Like hooks suggested in the opening quote, I felt that I did not fully understand or possess the language to “deconstruct [my/ours] conventional ways of knowing” in the interpretation of the literature. The type of responses to the texts seemed monologic in nature in that they focused only on the reader’s responses and excluded the examination of Latino/a literature as culturally situated and ideologically constructed.

As a children’s and adolescent literature educator, I struggle with the same tensions raised by Cai (1997) and Rabinowitz & Smith (1998) in terms of my beliefs about Reader’s Response Theory and the ways in which authors’ stances could be explored. Beyond imposing a set of themes to a literary text, I am more interested in better contextualizing this literature in a way that becomes more meaningful and active for the readers especially from a sociopolitical perspective. As theories on critical literacy suggest (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002) it is important to challenge readers’ beliefs and disrupt commonplaces to look at the ideological aspects of texts and move authors out of neutral positions.

Approaching authors and texts as neutral leads to a form of colonized literacy where the literature is integrated to the curriculum but remains critically unexamined.

In order to explore the complex nature of the Latino/a experience in literary texts, I found that something more than just the intentions of bringing a text to the classroom was needed. This is particularly significant because many Latino/a writers both for young and adults speak about their social, political and cultural experiences as participants of the United States society¹. Latina literary critic [Rebolledo \(1990\)](#) believes that the issue of Latino/a cultural locations and how those are represented in literary texts is an area of research that has not been fully developed. She asks us look across the literature to contextualize and theorize *from within* but also to decolonize our ways of looking at the literature outside of a mainstream perspective.

Rebolledo's concern is also relevant for young adult and children's literature. Based on this idea I use notions of critical fictions ([Mariani, 1991](#)) to present the results of a study that examined a set of Latino/a literature. The purpose was to create a culturally relevant framework to situate, explore and contextualize the literature while trying to avoid falling into an imposition of a "fixed" meaning of the texts. The process was to look at the kind of metaphors and symbols authors' construct "imagining" aspects of Latinos/as' experience, looking for "places" to situate and unpack authors' ideologies. In order to develop the study I specifically looked at three texts that center on the theme of immigration. The criteria for selecting this texts was the vast amount of Latino/a literature available that portrays the complex nature of the immigrant experience. These three texts represent diverse and interesting perspectives on immigration and Latino/a literature in general. After this analysis I suggest further explorations around other critical themes such as gender, class and language among others.

Critical fictions and the Latino/a literary imagination

[Mariani \(1991\)](#) defines "critical fictions" as those literary texts that speak about the political, social and cultural experiences of the authors and the communi-

ties they represent. Critical fictions often feature the voices of those authors from underrepresented and marginalized communities where their writing works as an agent of liberation to claim a space in society, including a literary community that has been dominated by white male perspectives. The significance of this form of liberation according to [hooks \(1991\)](#) derives from the fact that "Globally, literature that enriches resistance struggles speaks about the way the individuals in repressive, dehumanizing situations use imagination to sustain life and maintain critical awareness" (p. 55). Writing critical fiction is not just a form of sharing a narrative with a reader for its multicultural or cross cultural value. Multicultural theory works as the point of entry for these authors to gain visibility and access multiple audiences. However, their writing is a way for them to reflect and maintain a critical perspective that is first "inner" within the author and then becomes "outer" as readers access the story and make sense of it from their own cultural locations and positionalities ([Enciso, 1997](#)).

This notion of reflection is in a sense a form of "inner liberation" ([Anzaldúa, 1987](#)) and it is found in many examples of Latino/a literature. Mexican American feminist writer and literary theorist Anzaldúa, who has published both for children and adult audiences, argues in her explorations of writing that the struggle is first inner: "[A]wareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (p. 87). Latino/a writers for young audiences create and share images that many times are representative of the resistance and struggle in their own lives and the communities they belong to ([Author & Enciso, 2002](#)). It is interesting that many Latino/a writers for children and young adults are indeed established authors for adult audiences as in the case of Latina feminist writers such as [Anzaldúa, \(1987\)](#); [Mora, \(2002\)](#); [Cisneros, \(1983\)](#); [Mohr \(1990/1979\)](#); [Alvarez, \(2002\)](#); [Ortiz-Cofer, \(1995\)](#) and also male writers such as [Jiménez, \(1997\)](#); [Herrera \(1995\)](#); [Soto \(1995\)](#) and [Anaya \(1997\)](#) among many others. Their writing is part of a larger literary community that does not work in isolation. There is a history of Latino/a literary works that is diverse and complex in nature and that also informs the literary community.

Therefore, when looking for meaningful frameworks to read Latino/a children's literature, one powerful strategy is to read across texts to get a sense of multiple representations and various perspectives presented by Latino/a authors. At the same time it is also important to consider the author's unique literary style and locations to understand the diverse voices that compose a complex literary community.

Border Images and symbols: Latinos/as immigration

In order to illustrate the ideological nature of Latino/a literature I engaged in what Latina literary critic [Rebolledo \(1996\)](#) called a "descriptive thematic analysis" across the literature to analyze, describe and understand the multiple ideological forms of representation and themes within the literature. A powerful text set to review and use as an example of the analytical process, was to examine immigrants' representation across exemplary literature. The text set was examined around questions such as how is the immigration experience represented in Latino/a young adult literature? What kind of metaphors and symbols do these authors construct "imagining immigration"? What kind of personal stories and ideological representations are the authors sharing? What are the continued realities of immigration? What can a story convey?

The literature chosen was representative and speaks about the Latino/a experiences with immigrating to the United States and was reviewed as exemplary by the Américas Award Committee. The texts selected were *The Circuit* ([Jiménez, 1997](#)); *Esperanza Rising* ([Muñoz, 2000](#)) and *Before We were Free* ([Alvarez, 2002](#)) (Other possible texts on immigration are included on [Table 1](#)). The selection of literature provided a diverse range of immigration experiences that conveys the heterogeneous essence of Latino/a identity in literature.

Multiple nationalities, gender, racial and socio economic status

One significant aspect of reading the immigrant experience and any other Latino/a literature is to understand that Latina/o is an umbrella term that encompasses people from multiple Latin American countries from Central and South America and also

the Caribbean. Latinos/as emigrate from multiple countries making "border crossing" a powerful and diverse set of images in the literature. Immigration from Mexico is found in many texts including *The Circuit* and *Esperanza Rising*. Immigration from the Caribbean is found in texts such as *Before We were Free* a story from the Dominican Republic.

Within the diverse nationalities one also finds diverse racial and socioeconomic representations. In *Before We were Free* the characters living in the Dominican Republic seem to belong to a more privileged middle class where children attend American private school and the family can afford a housekeeper from Haiti. In *Esperanza Rising* two of the main characters, Esperanza and her mother, come from an affluent class in Mexico. The girl, Esperanza, attends private school and lives in a *hacienda* with her family and house keepers. In the story, Hortensia and Alfonso, two house employees immigrate with them to the United States. They are from a lower socioeconomic status and somehow guide Esperanza and her mom through their new life in the United States.

Latino/a authors explore diverse ideological constructions of gender, race and class in the literature as it relates to the previous reality before coming to the United States. Furthermore, they also explore how those constructions acquire new ideological meanings and are among the factors that situate the characters in different contexts once they arrive in the United States. Rather than a homogenous perception of Latinos as one race and one social class the reader encounters a range of representations. Reading across the literature helps one understand the complex gender, social and racial identities of Latino/a immigrants in the United States.

Critical fictions: Authors' identity embedded in the story

Using the notion of critical fictions ([Mariani, 1991](#)) allows one to see how the authors' identity and social, political and cultural locations are embedded in the stories they narrate. Those personal locations are represented in multiple forms such as genres and literary language. For example, one way in which Latino/a authors create critical fictions is by authoring texts that tell personal and community stories that represent the multiple circumstances of immigration.

In *The Circuit*, Jiménez narrates his personal autobiography crafting a literary text written in an evocative language that incorporates significant Spanish words in the author's life intertwined in the narrative. The chapter titles are strong metaphors of their lives such as "to have and to hold", "moving still" and "learning the game". In addition, the powerful and realistic ending leaves the reader wondering what the future holds for this family.

The reader has access to the author's life experiences as the child of migrant farm workers including the moment they cross the U.S./Mexico border, experiences in labor camps and being deported back to Mexico. The author shares a personal reality that is representative of the life, hopes and struggles of many undocumented immigrants in the United States. In an interview (Barrera, 2003) Jiménez shares that writing his personal story is a form of catharsis where he discovers new aspects of his identity and his work as a writer.

They [his experiences] were not necessarily unique to me, but common to many, many people in the past and the present. As I reflected on and began to write about them, I learned this was a deeper purpose for having gone through these experiences (p. 2).

Like in Anzaldúa's notion of "inner liberation" Jiménez creates a powerful reflection of his life that becomes a form of inner empowerment.

Authors also create critical fictions by sharing family stories. In *Esperanza Rising* for example the author, Muñoz, crafts a fictional tale using her grandmother's story about a young girl who used to be rich but also who lost everything after her father died. Esperanza, her mother and two house employees had no choice but to immigrate to the United States and become farm workers. Furthermore, the story took place during the time when César Chavez and the farm worker unions were starting to add to the narrative a layer of political activism and social justice. Muñoz looks into her past to tell a story that speaks to life and reality faced by previous generations and passes it to new ones.

In *Before We were Free*, Alvarez tells a fictional story based on her family's persecution living in the Dominican Republic during Trujillo's dictatorship. Her father, who was committed to the country's liberation, is in danger of being caught by Trujillo's military forces. Written in a diary form by the young girl Anita,

the author writes a novel "imagining the life of those who stayed behind, fighting for freedom" (p. 166). She creates powerful images and metaphors of a historical and political reality that is an important part of the life of many people who emigrate from the Dominican Republic. This is a fictional but personal account about political repression, justice, the search for democracy and the power of the imagination as a tool for liberation.

Crossing "la frontera": Multiple realities faced in a new country

As part of the authors' narrative there is a critical reflection of what happens once Latinos/as arrived in the United States. In Latino/a literature and literary criticism one can find multiple images and metaphors to describe the social, physical, ideological and psychological space Latinos/as navigate while living in the United States (McKenna, 1997; Herrera-Sobek & Viramontes, 1996). Images such as the "borderland," the place where multiple aspects of Anglo and Latino/a identity coexist in tension and harmony (Anzaldúa, 1987) or Neplanta (Mora, 1993), "the land in the middle," have been created by authors to describe the complex realities and identities of Latinos/as in the United States. Among the many ideological and socio-cultural realities found are the notion of the American Dream, citizenship and language, literacy and culture.

The search and hope for the "American Dream" is one of the complex realities portrayed by authors in their literature. From the first chapter in *The Circuit*, Jiménez states the reason to move to the USA is to get out of poverty. However, the reality encountered by the family once they crossed the border was one of extreme poverty and instability as they moved from one labor camp to another, living most of the time without running water or electricity. Like the title of the book suggests, the family was stuck in the "circuit" of migration, poverty and marginalization. In addition to the hope for a dream there are also issues of citizenship and acquiring legal status. In the author's case, only his father had a green card and the rest of the family lived in the United States undocumented and under the fear of being caught by the immigration authorities. Access to social services such as health care were inaccessible to the family, and this almost costs the life of one of the Jiménez children. Despite the labor contribution of his father, mother,

brother and eventually himself for less than a minimum wage, his family lived in the margins and were denied a fair life.

Language, schooling and identity are other aspects of the reality confronted by the characters in *The Circuit*. In the story Jiménez, now a professor of Modern Languages in California, includes his literacy narrative based on the schooling experiences in his life. Moving from one labor camp to another he had multiple experiences in schools as an English language learner. Even though he was constantly moving from one school to another he was committed to learning and succeeding. Many of the chapters focus on the author's experiences in school and his development of a biliterate identity.

A somewhat similar but also counter narrative is presented in *Esperanza Rising* when the characters crossed the border to move to the United States. Esperanza and her mom left a past of wealth to begin a new life as migrant workers. Given their upper class status in Mexico they were able to obtain legal documentation to come to the United States. Crossing the USA/Mexico border is not a contested issue like in other narratives such as *The Circuit*. However, while the legal status made the process of coming much easier for them, the reality faced in the labor camps was still one of poverty and marginalization.

Esperanza, a girl who came from a highly literate family and who attended a prestigious private school, found herself in a labor camp babysitting instead of attending school. And while her Spanish language was very sophisticated, she struggled in her new home to learn English.

In Before We were Free the perspectives on freedom are very different. Anita and his family escaped the Dominican Republic under political asylum. Other members of the family who immigrated first, welcomed them to the United States. Anita, her mom and brother moved to United States without their father who was kept prisoner by Trujillo's military forces. The mother believes they will be going back as soon as her husband is liberated and the political situation changes. Anita's mother asks a nun to let Anita sit in a classroom temporarily until they go back home and even though she is twelve years old and attended American school in the Dominican Republic, she is placed in the second grade classroom. The characters in this book eventually realized that

they were not going back and they had to begin a new life in a new place. This is a form of what sociologists called "involuntary immigration." The reader gets a sense of how the Dominican Republic's past political history has impacted the growing immigration to the United States.

Testimonios: Implications and further ideas

There is a tradition of *testimonios* or testimonies in Latino/a culture where according to Alvarez (2002) "It is the responsibility of those who survive the struggle for freedom to give testimony. To tell the story in order to keep alive the memory of those who died" (p. 166). The composition of Latino/a voices from the narratives presented here constitutes part of the multiple *testimonios* available for children. These literary pieces are not just about those who came before us and/or have died, but also about the present reality and experiences faced by many Latinos/as. These texts are critical fictions and help us understand a unique set of experiences.

Even as a Puerto Rican/Latina person who is considered many times as an insider to Latino/a culture, I found it useful to read and unpack the ideologies presented by these authors. It is after this process of looking closely at the complexity of Latino/a literature that I feel better prepared to read and mediate it with children and teachers (See Medina, 2004). Perhaps I have gained a language of access that helps me deconstruct my relationships to these texts (hooks, 1991) and it now informs my mediations of the literature using a literary and cultural context situated in the multiple locations from where authors speak. As I mentioned at the beginning, this is not an attempt to give fixed meaning to the literature but a way to understand the authors' literary, social and cultural complexity. The purpose is to broaden our literary imaginations, questioning both authors' and readers' ideologies. While the reader will always construct a unique interpretation of a text, this kind of cultural and ideological reading helps us move beyond looking at Latino/a literature as a generic cultural experience that is neutral or homogenous. As African American author Morrison (1993) stated:

Readers and writers both struggle to interpret and perform within a common language shareable imaginative worlds.

And although upon that struggle the positioning of the reader has justifiable claims, the author's presence—her or his intentions, blindness, and sight—is part of the imaginative activity. (p. xii)

I suggest similar explorations could be done through the creation of other Latino/a literature text sets (See table 1 for suggested titles). The text sets could be arranged to take a closer look at literacy and schooling experiences for Latinos/as in the United States, Latina writers and the construction of gender identities, the experiences of second generation Latino/a immigrants or an exploration of Latino/a authors who write for adults and children. The idea is to understand Latino/a literature as an existing body of literary texts and not as isolated pieces of literature.

By looking at it from broader perspectives, we will move the reading of this literature out of the neutral place in the curriculum to develop culturally visible literacy experiences in the classroom.

Endnotes

- ¹ For a good example on how Latino/a author's identity get constructed in texts see [Anzaldúa \(1987\)](#).
- ² Many of the books fit in multiple categories. This table is meant to be a beginning place and not a fix set of categories.

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Table 1: Reading across Latino/a literature: Suggested Text Set ²

TEXT SETS	SUGGESTED LATINO/A LITERATURE AND AUTHORS
Other immigration titles	<i>Tonight by the Sea</i> —Frances Temple (C.B.) (Haiti) <i>Behind the Mountains</i> .—E. Dandicat (C.B.) (Haiti) <i>The super cilantro girl/La niña del supercilantro</i> —Juan Felipe Herrera (P.B.) (Mexico)
Literacy, language and schooling	<i>Tomás and the Library Lady*</i> —Pat Mora (P.B.) (Mexico) <i>La Mariposa*</i> —Francisco Jiménez (P.B.) (Mexico) <i>The Circuit *</i> —Francisco Jiménez (C.B.) (Mexico) <i>My Name is Maria Isabel*</i> —Alma Flor Ada (C.B.) (Puerto Rico)
Latina writers and the construction of gender identities	<i>Cuba 15</i> —Nacy Osa (C.B.) (Cuba) <i>The Meaning of Consuelo</i> —Judith Ortíz Cofer (C.B.) (Puerto Rico) <i>Friends From the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado</i> —Gloria Anzaldúa (P.B.) (Mexico) <i>My Diary From Here to There/Mi diario de aquí hasta allá</i> —Amanda Irma Pérez (P.B.) (Mexico) <i>Before We were Free</i> —Julia Alvarez (C.B.) (Dominican Republic) <i>Me in the Middle*</i> —Ana Maria Machado (C.B.) (Brazil)
Second generation experiences	<i>Felita</i> —Nicholasa Mohr (C.B.) (Puerto Rico) <i>Going Home</i> —Nicholasa Mohr (C.B.) (Puerto Rico) <i>An Island Like You: Stories From El Barrio</i> —Judith Ortiz Cofer (C.B.) (Puerto Rico) <i>Finding Miracles</i> —Julia Alvarez (C.B.) (Dominican Republic)
Adults authors writing for children	Gloria Anzaldúa Nicholasa Mohr Francisco Jiménez Pat Mora Julia Alvarez Sandra Cisneros Rudolfo Anaya

*Spanish versions available

P.B.—Picture Books

C.B.—Chapter Books

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