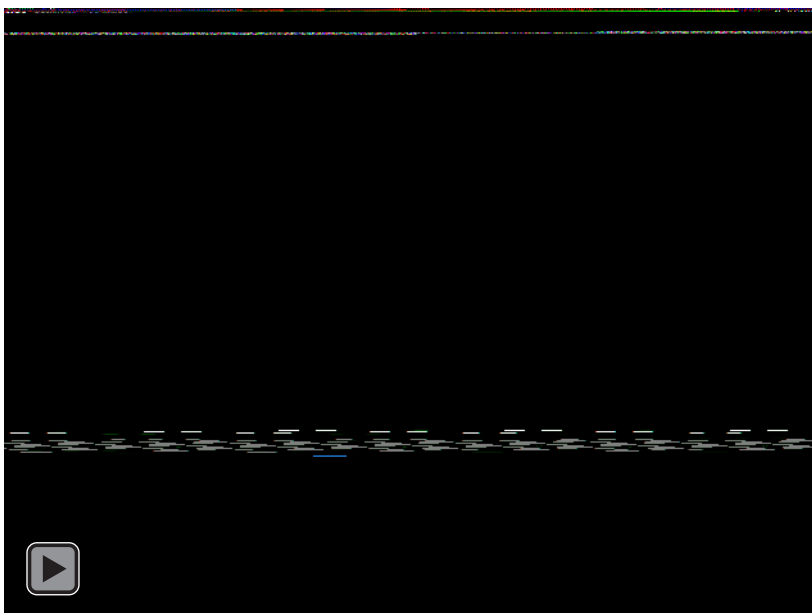


MAYA GONZALEZ: PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A RADICAL CHILDREN'S BOOK ILLUSTRATOR

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Abstract

A film, the [film transcript](#) (Appendix A), and this article are presented here together as a unit in *Visual Culture & Gender*, volume 3. Together and separately they elucidate the interconnections between the life and work of Maya Gonzalez, a fine artist and children's book illustrator. Maya Gonzalez identifies herself as a queer-focused, lesbian Chicana with a nature-based spirituality. Because her life and work are rich with critical rhizomatic themes, I have narrowed my focus to four roots within this rhizome—gender, race, sexuality, and environment, although many other threads are embedded within these constructs. To frame this story of an artist working for social and environmental justice through visual culture, I employ Gloria Anzaldúa's theoretical work on "conocimiento," a creative process of coming to know that leads to social activism.

[The] visual intuitive sense, like the intellect of heart and gut, reveals a discourse of signs, images, feelings, words that once decoded, carry the power to startle you out of tunnel vision and habitual patterns of thought (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 541).



Figure 1. *Snow White in the Flowercauldron with Rabbits / Beautician's Manual* (2003) by Maya Gonzalez. 7" x 9" ink on book page. Used with permission of the artist. From the collection of Mira Reisberg.

Created to accompany the digital film *Maya Gonzalez: Portrait of the Artist as a Radical Children's Book Illustrator*, this article as commentary provides an opportunity to explore in greater depth Maya's life and art within Gloria Anzaldúa's theoretical work on *conocimiento*. I discuss how our lives intertwine in my coming to know Maya Gonzalez and Gloria Anzaldúa, and then in my creating the film about Maya's exploration of social and environmental justice. Gloria Anzaldúa's concepts of *conocimiento*, *nepantla*, *border-crossing*, and *queer identity* argue for a skepticism of the categories and classifications that promote hierarchies of privilege and injustice. Using this framework I call for art educators to become social and environmental activists assisted by the work of artists such as Maya Gonzalez.¹

1 See Appendix B for a bibliography of Maya Gonzalez's children's picture books and a list of selected awards and honors.

Conocimiento is “derived from . . . a Latin verb meaning ‘to know’ and is the Spanish word for knowledge and skill” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 577). Gloria Anzaldúa writes,

Those carrying *conocimiento* refuse to accept spirituality as a devalued form of knowledge, and instead elevate it to the same level occupied by science and rationality. A form of spiritual inquiry, *conocimiento* is reached via creative acts—writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism—both mental and somatic (the body, too is a form as well as site of creativity). Through creative engagement you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet, with the struggles of the Earth itself. (pp. 541-542)

Gloria uses the term to define a process or path urging action on knowledge gained. In her article “now let us shift . . . the path of *conocimiento* . . . inner work, public acts” (Anzaldúa, 2002), she maps seven steps of this journey, which takes place in non-linear time with steps enacted concurrently and retroactively. These include knowledge gained from experiencing rupture, fragmentation, endings, beginnings, conflict, open-heartedness, the senses, the body, conscious and liminal thinking, the spiritual, rituals, and lived experiences.

Nepantla “is the indigenous Nahuatl word for an in-between state, that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race or gender position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity” (Anzaldúa, 1993, p. 39). Both Maya and Gloria embrace *Nepantla* as the necessary place of transformation enacted through conflict and the death of the old “self” in this process of *conocimiento*.

Ruptures in Children's Pictures Books

Maya and I met in San Francisco when she began illustrating

picture books for Children's Book Press (CBP), the same radical² publisher who had published my first picture book shortly before (Reisberg, 1988). Harriet Rohmer had founded CBP, the first multicultural press for children, with the express mandate to create literature for, about, and whenever possible by people from marginalized cultures within the U.S. as a form of agency. Harriet found me through my exhibition at La Raza Graphic's gallery where I was working at the time. The exhibition was raw and bloody, full of difficult content depicted with bright colors and at times a humorous edge. Harriet found Maya the same way. Harriet was interested in working only with artists from the edges. She nurtured both Maya and me, helping us and many other artists create critical, “edgy,” award-winning picture books.

Over the years I came to know Maya from our being in exhibitions and anthologies together and showing up for each other's events as well as other Children's Book Press functions. I came to love and admire Maya's courage in claiming herself outside of the dominant paradigm with multiple piercings and tattoos on her face, arms, and hands, with an outrageous fashion sense of high queer femme (long before any of this was fashionable), and with her intensely personal artwork dealing with nature, sexuality, spirituality, death, healing, and her Chicana heritage. Because of my insider status as a children's book artist and my admiration for a group of CBP artists, when I became an academic, I chose to focus my research on this group who I felt had much to share with the world of art education. Needless to say, neither my film, nor this article, or any of my research into the lives and work of children's book artists like Maya is either impartial or objective. This insider status has enabled me to amass a considerable amount of rich data from interviews to form an ongoing collaborative research project, a process that began with my initial dissertation work in 2003 (Reisberg, 2006).

The movie, *Maya Gonzalez: Portrait of the Artist as a Radical Children's Book Illustrator*, slips between the edges of Maya's life and work to find connections between experience and expression, beliefs and manifestations. Its narrative falls within a rough chronology of Maya's experiences of social markers of race and sexuality in three distinct

² I use the term radical to denote behavior that is extremely divergent from what already exists or is at odds with the dominant culture.

environments: childhood (Mojave desert's beiges and fuchsias, appreciation of subtle differences); teen and young adult years (rural Oregon's racism and homophobia); and adult years as an artist (San Francisco's gay mecca, queer and Chicana culture, and multiple hybrid identities). In the movie, I use pictures and narration to introduce how Maya explores social and environmental concerns. In this article, I pursue these ideas in a different way to both deepen the viewer's/reader's understanding and tell other stories. It is a tricky terrain to tread—what to include where? I note in the film some of the many critical rhizomatic threads addressed in Maya's life and work such as gender, sexuality, healing, art, environment, spirituality, postcolonialism, racism, resistance, immigration, indigenous ways of knowing, intergenerational relationships, bilingualism, and representation. Because of time and bandwidth limitations, I focus on the interconnected threads of gender, race, sexuality, and environment. My article provides the theoretical framework.

In the film, using paintings from *Prietita and the Ghost Woman* (Anzaldúa, 1995), I highlight Maya's images of Prietita's apprenticeship with the local "curandera" (or healer). Prietita is a courageous young Chicana girl who embarks on a hero's journey into the forbidding woods of The King Ranch in search of the rue plant to save her sick mother. I describe in the film's narration how the *curandera* shares her indigenous knowledge about healing plants in a process of intergenerational teaching and learning.

Maya's images show girls and women who are neither disempowered nor evil, and overweight boys who despite not meeting conventional standards of masculinity and attractiveness are happy and appealing. In the film, I contrast these images with my own Disneyesque³ drawings of hegemonic gender constructions, such as those put forth by Disney and other dominant media culture purveyors.⁴ I mention Maya's conflict with the book's editor over her illustration of Francisco Alarcón's autobiographical *Angels Ride Bikes* (1997) in which Maya painted Francisco as he actually was, a slightly overweight boy. After some discussion,

³ Because of Disney's reputation for suing people who use their images, regardless of whether they meet "fair use in copyright" standards, I created my own "Disneyesque" images.

⁴ See Giroux (1997, 1999, 2007) and Tavin and Anderson (2003) for analyses of gender and race constructions in Disney films.

Harriett finally agreed with Maya that it was important for children to see all body types. However, in *Prietita* (Anzaldúa, 1995), Maya was asked to repaint an image of Prietita sitting with her legs open because the seam in her pants resembled a vagina. This desexualization is common in children's book illustration where signs of children's sexuality are closely regulated to avoid controversy and censorship, and thus the economic viability of the press.

Many of Maya's images correspond with her identity as a queer-focused, lesbian Chicana with a nature-based spirituality (Reisberg, 2006). Perez (2003) writes: "to queer the border is to look at the usual documents with another critical eye, a nonwhite, non colonial, nonheteronormative eye" (p. 122). Maya does this in her personal art, and to a lesser degree in her children's books where she is more constrained by cultural production issues. For example, in her personal painting Figure 2, "Girlhood with Snake," Maya has painted a young girl trapped in a suburban environment. The girl stares fiercely out at the viewer and although she wears a dress and has pigtails, her look and demeanor are not "normally" associated with little girls. Thus Maya queers the notion of "girl" as the girl queries us. On her website (Gonzalez, n.d.), Maya writes that the snake woven into the girl's dress tells us that her path is "not an easy [one]. We must face the rattlesnakes we have chosen to learn from [T]hose snakes are a part of us. Only by remembering that can we truly become fearless." Gloria writes,

The snake is a symbol of awakening consciousness—the potential of knowing within an awareness and intelligence not grasped by logical thought. Often nature provokes an "aja," or "conocimiento," one that guides your feet along the path, gives you a *el ánimo* to dedicate yourself to transforming perceptions of reality, and thus the conditions of life. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 540)

Because of the depiction of adolescence, the suburban nature of the image, and the seriousness of the girl in Figure 2, I paired it in the movie with Maya's story of moving to a White suburban town in Eastern Oregon and first encountering racism.



Figure 2. *Girlhood with Snake* (2000) by Maya Gonzalez.
35" x48" acrylic on masonite. Private collection.
Used with permission of the artist.

It was in Oregon that Maya first realized she was biracial when she was put in a study of “mulatto” children.

I have very fair skin, my mother is extremely white so I'm clearly . . . a biracial child . . . [W]hen I moved to Oregon, I was put into a study. . . and asked questions about being biracial, but back then they called it mulatto. I had no idea what mulatto meant. [I imagined] . . . not being a horse, not being a donkey and being a mule . . . that . . . can't reproduce because of the combining.⁵

5 This and all of Maya's quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from personal interviews conducted over the past five years, from 2003 to 2008.

She described how being both exposed to racism and unrepresented in the books she read as a child “used to piss me off a lot . . . because I felt really invisible.” When she illustrates books now, she includes many biracial children and is delighted that most of her books are also bilingual, helping to challenge the privileging of the White Western world. Mirroring Gomez-Peña's (2005) statement “hybridity is no longer up for discussion [but] . . . a demographic, racial, social, and cultural fact” (p. 39), Maya believes that

we are becoming a different kind of race now, much more mixed and that is a step in the right direction in a lot of ways. We also retain what makes those races unique, individual, culturally sound, it's a complicated move. My fantasy is that my books are helping, [that by] simply being who I am, there is a way for it to be communicated and shifted.

Each of Maya's images has many stories. In choosing which image to use where in my video editing choices I was guided by a desire to create a narrative exploring the interconnections between cultural and environmental issues in children's picture books and the artists who make them. Thus, I investigated these connections in Maya Gonzalez's life, personal art, and work to foreground their relationships. My voiceover provides interpretation and connectivity. I include my extensive reading of Maya's words because of her eloquence and my desire to have her speak for herself as much as possible.⁶ Because I am concerned that some may struggle to understand my hybrid Australian/American accent I include a transcription of the film's narrative with the movie.

I originally wanted the video to “stand alone” as something short enough to be shown in teacher education classrooms. I wanted to demonstrate the potential of exploring the images in certain multicultural picture books to engage students critically through both the picture books and the people who make them. However, the term “multicultural” has itself become a form of hegemonic control reinscribing certain communities as “others,” outside the “norm,” and situating culture as monolithic, fixed, and immutable (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Consequently, I real-

6 Given greater financial resources, at some point I would like to professionally film and record Maya to include her own presence more directly.

ized the need to provide a video discussion that could foster multivocal, rhizomatic discourses. One key strategy is for readers/viewers to find their lives connected to Maya's children's book illustrations by analyzing and applying the *Disneyesque* juxtapositions and the narrative combinations of voiceover and images in my film. These combinations show how Maya's life experiences and values are mirrored in her personal art and children's books. Teachers can ask their students how they, or others they know, have experienced or witnessed either directly, or in children's picture books or films, racism, gender and/or sexual identification, immigration/moving/language issues, and/or connecting to nature and animals. Students can then create meaningful art in response to these experiences by making their own picture books or films among a myriad of other possible art projects.

In both my film and this article, I theorize that Maya's picture books, fine art, and information about her life suggest discourse strategies for any age group. Informed by Gloria Anzaldúa's work on hybridity, border crossings, queerness, challenging cultural identities, and environment (Anzaldúa, 1987/2007, 1993, 2002), I propose that by looking at these constructs in the lives and work of exceptional children's book artists such as Maya Gonzalez new avenues of exploration can be opened up for art educators to gently forge social and environmental connections with their students. I had met Gloria in Santa Cruz through Harriet. It felt awkward to de-personalize her as Anzaldúa, and yet citing her could be confusing. Struggling between personal authenticity and academic writing, I decided to use the personal *Gloria* except for citations. Also, in one of my interviews with Maya, she mentioned that illustrating Gloria's book *Prietita and the Ghost Woman* (Anzaldúa, 1995) was incredible, "being a lesbian and a Chicana [it] was just like this wet dream." She told me how impressed she was with the way Gloria addressed colonialism in *Prietita and the Ghost Woman*.

The King Ranch . . . is like the whole landowner taking over everything and making lots of money and leaving the indigenous people with nothing. So...[Anzaldúa is] really smart when she pulls the story through. The little girl is not only going through a spiritual quest but she's entering into this kind of forbidden land

where she's ... not ... allowed and she's not only following her desire to heal her mother but [there's] also this idea of her courage [in] going out.

Re-reading some of Gloria's work reminded me of how much I love the way she transgresses traditional academic writing forms. In her writing, she privileges different forms of Spanish on the same level as English, which, because of the clever way she does this, is often surprisingly understandable for the non-Spanish speaking reader. Gloria also breaks the "fourth wall"⁷ by using "you" as both the reader and herself as in the following quote:

Many are witnessing a major cultural shift in their understanding of what knowledge consists of and how we come to know . . . a shift away from knowledge contributing both to military and corporate technologies and the colonization of our lives by TV and the Internet, to the inner exploration of the meaning and purposes of life. You attribute the shift to the feminization of knowledge, one beyond the subject-object divide, a way of knowing and acting on *ese saber* you call *conocimiento*. Skeptical of reason and rationality, *conocimiento* questions conventional knowledge's current categories, classifications, and contents. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 541)

Crossing Borders, Crossing Species

Both Maya and Gloria play with "border crossings" or the borderlands in different ways. These border spaces are the point of contact between different cultures, the geographic and conceptual spaces that create different forms of hybridity, shape- and mind-shifting identities, and alliances with others. Gloria writes:

I think of the borderlands as Jorge Luis Borges' *Aleph*,⁸ the one

7 "Breaking the fourth wall" refers to a theatrical or literary tradition where the actor or author acknowledges awareness of the audience or reader and refers to them directly.

8 Borges' (1971) short story *Aleph* refers to the 1st letter in the Hebrew alphabet

spot on earth, which contains all other places within it. All people in it, whether natives or immigrants, colored or white, queer or heterosexual, from this side of the border or del otro lado, are personas del lugar, local people—all of whom relate to the border and to nepantla in different ways. (Anzaldúa, 1993, p. 39)

To paraphrase Gloria, it is in this space that artists resist, rupture, implode and explode, reconstituting fragments to create “a new assemblage” (Anzaldúa, 1993, p. 40). Gloria continues, “[b]y disrupting the neat separations between cultures, they create a culture mix, una mestizada in their artworks. Each artist locates herself in this border ‘lugar’ and tears apart then rebuilds the ‘place’ itself” (Anzaldúa, 1993, p. 40).

Border crossings appear in Maya’s books in the literal crossing of Mexican/U.S. borders and the biracial characters she includes. The crossings also appear in the alliances Maya’s children’s book characters make with animals who act as guides and “familiar,” such as in *Prietita and the Ghost Woman* (Anzaldúa, 1995), *My Colors, My World* (Gonzalez, 2007), *Honoring our Ancestors* (Rohmer, 1999) and *My Diary from Here to There* (Pérez, 2002). By including Mesoamerican imagery in her books and personal art, Maya crosses the borders of time and space to show ongoing relationships/influences/experiences of heritage and culture, perhaps questioning the dimensions of time, which may be occurring simultaneously in parallel dimensions.

Mesoamerican/contemporary crossings also appear in Maya’s personal iconography, where rabbits and deer are guides who teach her how to deal with fear; the powerful jaguar teaches about sexuality, power, and personal freedom; the snake, awakening consciousness and transformation; the hummingbird, the miraculous; and birds in general, imagination and escape. However, in some of Maya’s recent work these alliances have evolved into actually physically (or metaphysically) crossing into becoming the animal.⁹ In images such as the following, Maya border-crosses species to become a chimera, a different kind of hybrid/mulatto—

representing the cardinality of infinite sets. Borges posits Aleph as a space in which the entire universe is contained.

⁹ See Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 1987) and Donna Haraway (2003, 2007).for more information about becoming animal and animal people.

part woman, part deer; or a girl wearing a jaguar hood and gloves but with feet turning into talons and thighs sprouting abstracted antlers or horns.



Figure 3. *Girl with Mother in Horns* (2003-to present/work in progress) by Maya Gonzalez. 35” x 48” acrylic on masonite. From the artist’s collection. Used with permission of the artist.

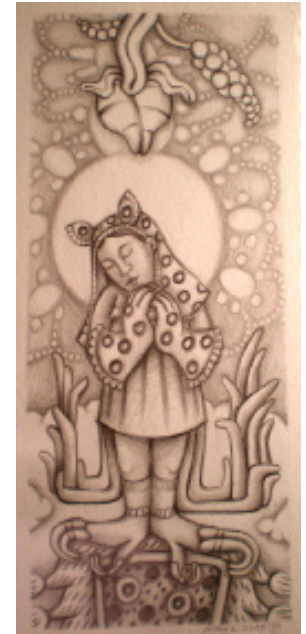


Figure 4. *JaguarBirdGirl Anointed by SkyFlower* (2005) by Maya Gonzalez. 3” x 7 1/2” pencil on archival paper scrap. From the artist’s collection. Used with permission of the artist.

Queer Identity

Queer identity is another kind of crossing, moving beyond the limiting binaries of straight/gay, male/female, etc. to a more expansive identity that promotes interrelatedness beyond normative standards (Anzaldúa, 2002, 1987/2007; Barnard, 1997). Barnard describes how Anzaldúa connects “queer” with “*mestizaje*” as “cross-identification

between race and gender . . . between race and sexuality. She uses queerness to make queer identifications, to make identification queer, and to queer identity” (p. 42). He writes:

Because queerness is so slippery to define, often connotes a politicization of identity, and does not depend on a binary opposite for its signifying power . . . it can problematize the kind of single issue activism that has caused further undelineated lesbian and gay articulations to imbue the categories “lesbian” and “gay” with a default whiteness, middle-classness, and USness. (Barnard, 1997, pp. 37-38)

Gloria describes the borderlands as a “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition . . . [where] the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (Anzaldúa, 1987/2007, p. 25).

In the film, I briefly describe Maya’s geographic border crossing from living on the land in rural Eastern Oregon to living in San Francisco, literally at the border where the Castro (a gay mecca) and the Mission (the Latino/artists’ neighborhood) meet. In this article, I provide more details.

There were five of us, we were all dykes and people would always ask why we lived alone because we had no man with us . . . we got shot at, it was [a] very heavy-duty, tiresome, oppressive state and country . . . I can’t believe I live in the city [now] but in the city I can be a big freaky queer . . . The only way I’m noticed is if some fabulous drag queen says I look good if I have some outfit on. I love that I don’t stand out and that has given me a feeling of rest and ease.

Interestingly, in Maya’s description of moving to San Francisco from the wilds of Oregon, she refutes the trope that a large urban city is a dangerous place while a rural environment is peaceful and safe. This sense of safety in the city enables Maya to “relax and share whatever I need to share, ’cause in my home and in my neighborhood I feel secure

and cozy.” She spoke about the diversity within the Latino population and how her borderlands area also includes living across the street from a “bunch of schools” where she sees children all the time. “So I feel blessed . . . It’s very strange, we have tried to move out of San Francisco over and over again and it has just been so inviting we can’t seem to leave.”

With San Francisco’s reputation as a city of refuge for many different kinds of communities, it is not surprising that Children’s Book Press began there. Nor is it surprising that they have welcomed queer border-crossing artists or done the kind of ground-breaking work that they have.

Learning about Radical Children’s Picture Book Artists

Certain children’s picture books, such as most of CBP’s books, can provide seductive entry points to explore critical constructs such as culture and environment. Constituting an important part of children’s early visual culture, they help children form seminal understandings of the world around them (Marantz & Marantz, 2005; Mitchell, 2003; Nodelman & Reimer, 2003; Schwarcz & Schwarcz, 1991). However, most mainstream publishers who have recently begun publishing multicultural picture books, largely fail to highlight the intrinsic intersections of environment and culture, partitioning off the foundations of life into discrete categories. Nor do they explore complex constructions of cultural pluralism and hybridity in the overlapping of diverse cultural identities, such as ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and place, inadvertently serving to maintain a system of singular “othering” under the rubric of multiculturalism. In addition, mainstream publishers of “multicultural” children’s picture books often use European-American professional illustrators to illustrate stories from cultures of which they have little first-hand knowledge. Such illustrators can reify dominant culture ideologies (Reese, 1997; Nieto, 1997). For example, award winning books such as *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* (Jeffers, 1991), *Arrow to the Sky* (McDermott, 1978), and the well-received *A Day’s Work* (Bunting, 1994) have all been criticized for perpetuating offensive stereotypes through their art.¹⁰

10 For further examples, see Oyate’s section on “Books to avoid” (Oyate, n.d)

Introducing children's picture books illustrated by diverse insider artists into the visual culture education curriculum can help students question the dominant order by seeing representations from a wider range of perspectives than those normally available. For example, the following autobiographical anthologies—*Honoring my Ancestors: Stories and Pictures by Fourteen Artists* (Rohmer, 1999), *Just Like Me: Stories and Self-Portraits by Fourteen Artists* (Rohmer, 1997), and *On my Block: Stories and Paintings by Fifteen Artists* (Goldberg, 2007), as well as her own autobiographical book *My Colores, My World / Mis colores, mi mundo* (Gonzalez, 2007), allow access into the life experiences of artists such as Maya Gonzalez. Other sources of biographical information can come from sources such as the artist's web site (www.mayagonzalez.com) or books (Erickson, Villeneuve, & Keller, 2004; Keller, 2002; Keller, Phillips, Smith, & Szabo, 2005).

Although CBP has published some books about children with gay parents, none of Maya's children's books directly address her queer identity, or, until recently in *My Colors, My World* (Gonzalez, 2007), her ethnic hybridity. While a deep reading might uncover clues, her personal art and other texts make this identification explicit. I believe part of an art educator's job is to expose children to other ways of being, seeing, and understanding beyond mainstream culture's privileging of an Anglo-European, heteronormative, male perspective. Thus, I advocate for providing information about the lives, books, and personal art of critical picture book artists on the same level of attention that most fine artists are afforded in the contemporary art education curriculum.

Lampela (1998) describes the importance of including gays and lesbians in the art education curriculum, noting that “[a]rt teachers who want to provide their students with a culturally diverse curriculum [should] include . . . a focus on art created by lesbians and gay men” (p. 22). Observing the historic lack of research on borderland queers, Perez advocates for an “epistemological shift . . . challeng[ing] the rhetoric and ideologies about racialized sexualities” (2003, p. 122). In a review of Saslow's (1999) *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in*

and *Using Multiethnic Literature in the K-8 Classroom* (Harris, 1997). For resources in evaluating multicultural books to avoid bias see The Council on Interracial Books (n.d.), Reisberg, Brander and Gruenewald (2006), and Reisberg (2008).

the Visual Arts, Check (2002) refers to “historical imperialism” in art history where “queer people of color, social class diversity, multiple genders . . . and radical artists get pushed to the edges” (p. 189). These texts support the value of including Maya's life and work as a valuable source of study in art education curricula.

Community and Environment

While Maya's children's books tend to be situated within the traditional extended Latino family, some of them also depict larger contexts of community, such as in *Prietita and the Ghost Woman* (Anzaldúa, 1995), *Angels Ride Bikes* (Alarcón, 1999), and *Iguanas in the Snow* (Alarcón, 2001),

You question the doctrines claiming to be the only right way to live. These ways no longer accommodate the person you are, or the life you're living. They no longer help you with your central task—to determine what your life means, to catch a glimpse of the cosmic order and your part in that cosmovisión, and to translate these into artistic forms. Tu camino de conocimiento requires that you encounter your shadow side and confront what you've programmed yourself (and have been programmed by your cultures) to avoid (desconocer), to confront the traits and habits distorting how you see reality and inhibiting the full use of your facultades. (Anzaldúa, 2002, pp. 540-541)

When I asked Maya about her family, she spoke of the present and the community she has created with others:

I have an externally alternative family where imagination and sensuality are foundational, . . . I feel that my home now reflects a lot of what I believe and perpetuate [in] my books . . . I would say that the dominant culture has absolutely no idea what to do with somebody like me at this point because I feel like I'm finally in that place where I'm in line with my beliefs and completely out of line with the beliefs of the dominant culture.

It is in living and creating that Maya embodies a personal commitment to a holistic and critical approach to life that necessitates caring for the environment and other beings. This commitment is evident in her art where she shows heartfelt connections to the natural world, and particularly in her children's books where she is able to gently show human/nature connections. Gloria writes, "You lament the loss of connection to the earth, a conscious being that keens through you for all the trees felled, . . . water polluted, [and] animals slaughtered into extinction" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 543). Then she asks:

How can you step outside ethnic and other labels while cleaving to your root identity? Your identity has roots you share with all people and other beings – spirit, feeling, and body make up a greater identity category. The body is rooted in the earth, la tierra itself. You meet ensoulment in trees, in woods, in streams. The roots del árbol de la vida of all planetary beings are nature, soul, body. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 560)

Maya creates images that are literally rooted to the earth, creating connection and *conocimiento*. I have shown how her images exemplify *conocimiento*, *nepantla*, border-crossings, queer perspectives and the larger root identity that Gloria describes. In the film I focus on the obvious environmental connections in *Prietita and the Ghost Woman* (Anzaldúa, 1995), and touch on these connections in her four books of eco-social poetry that she co-created with Francisco Alarcón (Alarcón, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2001).

In both the film and this article, I have explored critical rhizomatic themes in her life and work and their connection to the larger context of resisting narrow definitions of being in one's self, with others, and in the world. I hope that other art educators will explore Maya Gonzalez's body of artwork to share with their students as inspiration to find the courage and creativity needed to live in a place of *conocimiento*. Teachers can ask their students about experiences of rupture, fragmentation, endings, beginnings, conflict, open-heartedness, the senses, the body, conscious and liminal thinking, the spiritual, and rituals in their lives.

They can guide students to visualize such lived experiences and recreate them in tangible form to share with the world.

By exploring social and environmental connections in critical picture books while studying the lives and personal art of the artists who make them, teachers can help expand their students' awareness of the interrelationships of gender, race, sexuality, and environment in different visual culture sources as well as in their own lives.



Figure 5. *Girl with Root Fingers* by Maya Gonzalez from *Laughing Tomatoes and Other Summer Poems / Jitomates Risuenos y Otros Poemas de Primavera* (Alarcón, 1997). 17" x 25 1/2" watercolor on archival paper. Used with permission of Children's Book Press.

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Appendix A: Transcript of the Video, *Maya Gonzalez: Portrait of the Artist as a Radical Children's Book Illustrator*

Maya Gonzalez identifies herself as a queer-focused, lesbian Chicana with a nature-based spirituality. She spent her early childhood in a small town with a very diverse population in the Mojave Desert. She remembers a vast beigeness with breathtaking orange and fuschia sunrises and sunsets. When she was thirteen, the family moved to an “extremely Anglo-European town” in Oregon. It was here that she first personally encountered racism, which she said left her with a “complicated relationship with race.” As an adult, Maya also experienced intense homophobia. Finally, after she and some friends living in a lesbian community in the Oregon wilderness were shot at by men with guns; Maya moved to San Francisco.

Now, Maya lives in a funky old Victorian flat on the borderlands of the Mission District. This geographic location is highly symbolic of Maya's identity - to the right of Maya's apartment is the Mission (the Latino part of San Francisco) and to the left is the Castro (a gay mecca). Maya's home is rich with colors, textures, and ornamentation, combining kitsch, Mexican pop cultural icons, and religious art, along with her paintings and drawings. One of the major images in her bedroom is her own totemic icon “Hello Kitty,” suckling/nourishing a woman. Maya describes it as a personal reincarnation of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Maya herself is tiny with delicate dotted tattoos on her face and a series of bolder symbolic bands and animals tattooed on her left hand and arm. During most of this study, she was very ill from heavy metal poisoning, from the chemicals involved in silk-screening many years ago. Fortunately, she has since recovered.

Although it is difficult to create a short portrait from Maya's life, the following excerpt shows some of the connections between her life, her ideas, and her art, and their relationship to visual culture education. Maya's life and work is rich with many critical rhizomatic themes. Consequently, I have narrowed my focus to four roots within this rhizome – environment, sexuality, gender, and race, although all of the other threads are embedded within these constructs. I decide to use Gloria Anzaldúa's work on *conocimiento* and border crossings to frame my narrative. Maya had illustrated one of Gloria's children's books, *Prietita and the Ghost Woman* (Anzaldúa, 1995), and I had spent time with Gloria many years before, little knowing that she would end up being a guide in my research into Maya's life and work as well as an influence in my own quest for transformation and social/environmental activism.

Gloria maps out the seven steps of *conocimiento* as a journey of personal transformation leading to creative acts for social justice and environmental caring. In *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (2002), she describes this journey as requiring immersion in the clashing of conflicting perspectives and the abandonment of your old “self,” whose identity, as Gloria says, has been, “inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures.” This space is “Nepantla,” an ancient Aztec place of in-between-ness, where, as Gloria says “you struggle to find the outer expression of change and your inner relationship to it” (pp. 548-549).

Gloria writes,

With awe and wonder you look around, recognizing the preciousness of the earth, the sanctity of every human being on the planet, the ultimate unity and interdependence of all beings – *somos todos un país* You share a category of identity wider than any social position or racial label. This *conocimiento* motivates you to work actively to see that no harm comes to people, animals, ocean – to take up spiritual activism and the work of healing. (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 558)

In *Borderlands: La Frontera*[,] the new *mestiza* (Anzaldúa, 1987/2007), Gloria's seminal book on queer, feminist, and Chicana theory, she describes different forms of hybridity including using and mixing different languages, shifting gender identifications beyond the limiting binaries of male or female, possessing and changing multiple cultures, ethnicities, affiliations, and the crossing and mixing of nation state identities, geographic locations, and states of being. She also documents the history of broken promises, land grabs, and racism that have made parts of Mexico North American as well as the exploitative working conditions created by imperialism and globalization. While Maya's work does not explicitly address global capitalism, it does so in images of border crossings with immigrants in search of better paid work, migrant farm-worker children, and Maya's father in the background of a field similar to where he once worked. And then there are the effects of global capitalism in a polluted Los Angeles, where children cannot go out to play in a city designed for production and consumption at any cost. Maya's images, or glimpses, provide openings for art educators to lead discussions and create art about immigration, racism, bilingualism, and farm-working conditions.

Maya's books also challenge polarizing images of older women as evil, and girls as temptresses, or sacrificing themselves for males, or helplessly in need of saving. Instead, she shows women as sources of wisdom sharing indige-

nous knowledge, women and girls as strong and courageous, girls as tender with each other, and both girls and boys as physically and sensually empowered. In addition, Maya's portrayal of male protagonists also contrasts sharply with the dominant culture's images of males. In these images of Francisco Alarcón, author of the four seasonal books of ecosocial poetry that he and Maya co-created, Maya stayed true to her source material. She portrayed Francisco as he actually was – an attractive, sensitive, slightly overweight boy, and urged the publisher to keep him that way, saying that she liked Francisco's size and that big kids need to see positive representations of themselves as well. "You know me" she said, "[If I could] every other child would be a homo, fat, [and with] green hair."

For Maya just being seen and heard is a political act, particularly as a lesbian and a woman of color, she says, "even if it's in the most rudimentary sense of letting other children who are disenfranchised see someone standing up and claiming who they are." Maya stands up in her children's books, her personal art, and in her artist/illustrator presentations and workshops in schools. She told me that it is also important for her to show how culture and environment interconnect. In this painting from *Prietita and the Ghost Woman* (1996), Prietita who has been apprenticing with Doña Lola, the "curandera," or healer, is shown the rue plant. Prietita needs to find this plant to help heal her sick mother. Unfortunately, the plant can be found only in the now-fenced-in and forbidden woods of The King Ranch in Texas, land that once belonged to Prietita and her community. Besides the fact that they "shoot trespassers," The King Ranch is scary for other reasons; "La Llorana," the ghost woman, is rumored to haunt these woods, stealing children. However, on successfully completing her hero's journey, Prietita tells her waiting community about La Llorana helping her. Her cousin Teté says, "But everyone knows she takes children away. She doesn't bring them back." To which, Doña Lola responds, "perhaps she is not what others think she is."

Gloria had researched the earliest roots of the story to retell it from an indigenous and female perspective. She writes, "I want to encourage children to look beneath the surface of what things seem to be in order to discover the truths that may be hidden" (Anzaldúa, 1995, p. 32). In this case these truths include recognizing the importance of respecting nature and traditional ways of knowing as well as challenging colonial issues of property "ownership."

Maya was particularly impressed with how Gloria addressed colonialism and feminism, saying, The King Ranch . . . is like the whole landowner taking over everything and making lots of money and leaving the indigenous people with nothing The

little girl is not only going through a spiritual quest but she's entering into this kind of forbidden land where she's . . . not . . . allowed and she's not only following her desire to heal her mother but [there's] also this idea of her courage going out.

The book also highlights other environmental concerns. In particular, Maya foregrounds the sentient qualities of animals. When Prietita becomes lost on her journey, she encounters various animals who act as guides. Maya made clear the spiritual connection she feels with animals, telling me how images of deer and rabbits and Mesoamerican jaguars were important childhood guides and continue to be important in her ongoing healing as well. She spoke about how what can be seen as inconsequential childhood characters, such as Bambi or Hello Kitty, may in fact be powerful totemic archetypes acting as survival guides for children. These animals can give children strength and courage in difficult times.

She told me that she also uses her art to draw connections between contemporary children's literature and Mesoamerican culture. In *From the Belly Button of the Moon* and other seasonal poems (Alarcón, 1998), Maya uses glyphs (iconic symbols from Mesoamerican codices) to visually connect time, history, place, and culture. She sees her own healing as part of a larger picture of spiritual healing from ancient woundings, such as Aztec sacrifices, saying "Now Mexicans need to learn to 'unsacrifice' – themselves, the earth and the animals." She describes praying into the paintings as she does them, saying, "The intention is that I'm healing, and then my fantasy is that when others view my work they also get to experience that healing energy." Maya recalled how important the images in children's books were to her as a child, telling me, "They meant so much to me and yet I could never completely hold them 'cause I never found myself in them, so it was a tense relationship in a way. I don't want these kids to feel that way; when they open up to a book, I want them to feel that book open up to them." She told me that participating in this study had refreshed her excitement and enthusiasm about children's literature in the curriculum while providing "a continuing feeling that there is something changing in the world, a contribution . . . is being made, and I'm certainly not alone in it and never have been and that feels good."

This film is in honor of Maya Gonzalez and Gloria Anzaldúa as well as all others who work to create a more socially just and environmentally sustainable world.

For this list of selected books illustrated by Maya Gonzalez please see Appendix B attached to the article "Maya Gonzalez: Portrait of the Artist as a

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Appendix B: Bibliography of Children's Picture Books Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez

- Alarcón, F. X. (1997). *Laughing tomatoes and other spring poems / Jitomate risuenos y otros poemas de primavera*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Alarcón, F. X. (1998). *From the bellybutton of the moon and other summer poems / Del ombligo de la luna y otros poemas de verano*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Alarcón, F. X. (1999). *Angels ride bikes and other fall poems / Los Angeles and an en bicicleta y otros poemas de otoño*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Alarcón, F. X. (2001). *Iguanas in the snow and other winter poems / Iguanas en la nieve y otros poemas de invierno*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Anzaldúa, G. E. (1996). *Prietita and the ghost woman / Prietita y la llorona*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
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- Gonzalez, M. (2007). *My colors, my world / Mis colores, mi mundo*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.

- Pérez, A. I. (2000). *My very own room / Mi propio cuartito*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Pérez, A. I. (2002). *My diary from here to there / Mi diario de aqui hasta alla*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
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- Rohmer, H. (1999). *Honoring our ancestors: Stories and pictures by fourteen artists*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.

Selected Book Awards and Honors for Maya Gonzalez

- 2008 Pura Belpré Honor Illustration Award from the American Library Association
- 2000 Pura Belpre Honor Award from the American Library Association Americas Award Commended List
- 1999 Skipping Stones Honor Award
School Library Journal's Américas Award Commended List
Tomas Rivera Mexican American Children Book Award
- 1998 Cooperative Children's Book Center Choice
Americas Commended List
Recommended by the Elementary School Library Collection
Pura Belpré Illustration Honor Award
from the American Library Association
National Parenting Publications Gold Medal Award
- 1996 Américas Honor Award
Pura Belpre Honor Award
National Parenting Publications Gold Medal Award
Riverbank Review "Children's Books of Distinction" Finalist
Smithsonian Notable Book
- 1994 Americas Honor Award
Smithsonian Notable Book
General Awards and Honors for Maya Gonzalez
- 2007 San Francisco Arts Commission Cultural Equity Grant
- 2001 "Hispanic Americans Profiles of Excellence" Honoree of ABC-7 and San Francisco Board of Supervisors
- 2001 "Hecho En Califas: The Last Decade" Certificate of Recognition, State of California Senate.

About the Author

Mira Reisberg, Ph.D., teaches art education at Northern Illinois University. Her teaching and research practices are located at the intersection of art, culture (or ethnicity), place, and environment as mediated through children's picture books and other visual culture sources. Her theoretical interests include critical race theory, critical place-based art education, postcolonial studies, a/r/tography, *conocimiento*, and visual culture. Prior to becoming an academic, Mira taught art in K-12 schools, illustrated picturebooks, and exhibited her personal art, some of which can be seen at www.mirareisberg.com.

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