

**(Play)Grounds for Dismissal:
Niñas Raras in Transborder Children's Cultural Studies**

by

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DEDICATION

Para todas las niñas raras, donde quiera que estén.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: TRANSBORDER POLITICS & NIÑAS RARAS IN THE MAKING

...no one questions the meaning of childhood. This apparent clarity—the confident unanimity over the implications and significance of “childhood”—is perhaps the most potent, and indeed dangerous, thing about this keyword. We have, it seems, a miraculous faith in childhood itself.

—Karen Sánchez-Eppler¹

The potent, yet potentially dangerous, effects of the seemingly “miraculous faith” in childhood is the impetus for writing *(Play)Grounds for Dismissal: Niñas Raras in Transborder Children's Cultural Studies*. Lawrence K. Frank asserted as early as 1933 that “the child is the bridge—biologically and socially—to the future.”² At the time, he served as director to the Rockefeller Foundation's child development program. His discursive play on the bridge as metaphor also conjures up images of women of color vacillating between civil rights movements and women's liberation movements, and critical texts like the now famous 1981 anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*. Children, like many women of color and queers of color, seem to hold an ambiguous relationship to power. Brian Low adds to the metaphor, “To build a bridge of a suitable design, however,

¹ Karen Sánchez-Eppler, “Childhood,” in *Keywords for Children's Literature*, ed. Philip Nel and Lissa Paul (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 35.

² Quoted in Brian J. Low, *NFB Kids: Portrayals of Children by the National Film Board of Canada, 1939-1989* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002), 13.

required some engineering of the social practices of those responsible for the care and nurture of future children, specifically their parents and teachers.”³ This suggests that parents and educators will target children in an effort to mold them into ideal citizens or members of a greater society. Such a utopic vision of children and childhood remains active today, producing what I term “childnormativity,”⁴ or an idealized normative sense of what it means to be a child or experience childhood. What is central to my interest in childnormativity is not the belief that children must be cared for and nurtured, but *how* this should occur. Determining what materials or texts should be introduced into children's daily lives is fundamental in answering how this occurs. Taken together, I define childnormativity as the convergence of subjects (e.g. girl, boy, infant, child, adult), materialities (e.g. children's literature and media), instructions (e.g. didactic texts and practices), and space (e.g. elementary schools or playgrounds). The primary goals of childnormativity are to identify and uphold the rubrics of appropriate child development for the successful socialization of future citizens.

Throughout this dissertation, I focus on the articulation, employment, and dissemination of childnormativity by excavating contemporary examples within children's literature, television, and short films, or what I collectively term children's cultural productions, which fall outside of or push against childnormativity. Stated differently, I have a particular interest in texts that do not fit neatly within the categories of appropriate children's cultural productions. I focus specifically on three characters, Meli, Dora, and Alex, and what they can tell us about their worlds, and the nation-states

³ Ibid., 13.

⁴ The terms “childnormative” and “childnormativity” are lexically patterned after others such as “heteronormative” and “heteronormativity.”

from which they were generated. Meli is the protagonist in the children's book, *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* (México 2004); Dora stars in her own children's animated television show, *Dora the Explorer* (United States 2000); Alex is the lead character in the short film, *Tomboy* (Canada 2008). I chose these characters because they pose a potential threat to childnormativity. They do not map onto the ideals of childnormativity and as such, these characters can provide critical insight into the structures of childnormativity, as well as the possibilities for thinking about childhood beyond its normative constraints. In this regard, I do not prioritize what children make of these characters. Instead, I focus on the significance of the production and distribution of these characters to the general public, including children, and the larger national and transnational contexts in which concepts of childnormativity emerge.

My title, *(Play)Grounds for Dismissal*, is a playful cartography of Meli, Dora, and Alex's fictionalized worlds as playgrounds. These characters risk being dismissed by childnormative authorities while *simultaneously* being dismissive of childnormativity. Thus, the guiding questions behind this research are: How do children's cultural productions across México, the United States, and Canada produce childnormativity? And how do characters like Meli, Dora, and Alex deviate from and challenge this concept? I engage these questions by arguing that Meli, Dora, and Alex be read as *niñas raras* who do not “fit” within appropriate content for children, and simultaneously challenge the very categorization of this content within each of their respective countries of origin. This occurs as follows: Meli, through association; Dora, through appropriation; and Alex, through embodiment. More specifically, Meli poses a challenge to

childnormativity through her association with her politicized and Central American lesbian aunt. My use of “association” expands on Chela Sandoval's reading of unusual affiliations, or temporal and situational political mobility.⁵ In the case of Meli, she holds an unusual affiliation to broader queer politics because of her close relationship with her loving aunt. In the U.S. context, Dora challenges childnormativity through her appropriation by immigrant rights political discourse. By “appropriation,” I refer to the manner in which mainstream society appropriates pan-latinidad as well as the ways in which immigrant rights movements re-appropriate bilingual and racialized cultural icons like Dora. Coco Fusco's critique of cultural appropriation and power is useful here in demonstrating how one can challenge “the right of the more powerful to consume without guilt” through re-appropriation.⁶ Finally, Alex challenges childnormativity through her embodiment of gender non-conformity, bilingualism, and queerness. I employ “embodiment” as a way of emphasizing a multilayered and intersectional approach to bodies, identities, and power. For example, Eithne Luibhéid problematizes the ways in which mainstream institutions “remain invested in constructing fixed boundaries.”⁷ For Alex, that signifies a constant questioning of her gender presentation

⁵ Chela Sandoval describes U.S. feminists of color as having an unusual affiliation with the 1970s white women's liberation movement, which was “variously interpreted as disloyal, betrayal, absence, or lack...They were the mobile (yet ever-present in their absence) members of this, as well as of other race, class, and sex liberation movements.” See Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 58.

⁶ Coco Fusco's critique of cultural appropriation builds on Richard Fung's evaluation of unequal acts of exchange and Kobena Mercer's acceleration of interculturalism. See Coco Fusco, *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 67.

⁷ Eithne Luibhéid identifies some of the ways in which U.S. immigration officers determined which bodies were granted entry into the U.S. Racialized, gendered, and sexualized bodies (e.g. those read as Mexican or Chinese, women, and/or queer) received the most scrutiny. See Eithne Luibhéid, *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 78; “Queer/Migration: An Unruly Body of Scholarship,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14 no. 2-3 (2008): 169-90.

within the public sphere, as well as audiences' and institutions' responses to *Tomboy* as appropriate children's content.

By approaching Meli, Dora, and Alex through the theoretical framing of association, appropriation, and embodiment, this dissertation presents each character as a prime example of a *niñas rara*. *(Play)Grounds for Dismissal* relies upon the interdisciplinary approach I refer to as transborder children's cultural studies in order to theorize *niñas raras* in relationship to childnormativity. This approach allows for rethinking studies of children and childhood alongside border studies and Anzaldúa studies through a uniquely queer and feminist lens. In what follows, I elaborate on my concept of *niñas raras*, which allows me in properly introducing you to Meli, Dora, and Alex. I then proceed with my explication of transborder children's cultural studies as a disciplinary field, and conclude with my methods and subsequent chapter summaries.

Anomalous Childhoods

If dominance is control exerted over others, and submission is the lack of power, a child is always-already assumed to be submissive to an adult. Perhaps this is a temporary submission since many children will develop into adulthood,⁸ and many of these adults will have children of their own. However, one can imagine countless examples where children exert power over the adults around them.⁹ For example, what do we make of a child who cares for their siblings while their parent works? Or a child who consoles a

⁸ Visit the World Health Organization Mortality Database at <http://www.who.int/healthinfo/statistics/mortality/en/index.html>

⁹ See Jo Boyden, "Children Under Fire: Challenging Assumptions about Children's Resilience," *Children, Youth and Environments* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 1-29.

parent instead of being the one who is cared for? Or a parent-less child who decides to wash windows for a few cents a day instead of attending school? While these examples are not far from the daily realities of many children, they counter dominant definitions of childhood since such children shoulder responsibilities usually expected of adults.¹⁰

Like the examples above, print and digital media can also create or recreate “strange” or extraordinary children. Sandy Rankin and R.C. Neighbors begin their introduction to *The Galaxy Is Rated G: Essays on Children's Science Fiction Film and Television* with:

Children's film and television, like any media or cultural artifacts, represent certain beliefs, ideas, and practices as natural, and conversely represent certain beliefs, ideas, and practices as unnatural, as questionable, impossible, or unthinkable, by their absence if not by their circumscribed or negated presence. Indeed, presence *and* absence, affirmation and negation, can delight, fascinate, instruct, interpellate (children or adults as subjects), irritate, alienate and shock.¹¹

I am most interested in those moments within children's cultural productions that irritate, alienate, and shock, as well as the purposeful absences and circumscriptions which I read as strange, or raras. Media embedded with illustrations and animation allow for a conceptualization of childhood, and a construction of girlhood which, especially when overlaid with notions of Latinidad, may irritate, alienate, or shock certain members of the general public. This illegibility is what makes these texts threatening to mainstream conceptualizations of childnormativity, since these moments of shock reveal negotiations of hegemony and counter-hegemonic praxis. Drawing on Foucault's notion of power as

¹⁰ See Emmy E. Werner and Ruth S. Smith, *Vulnerable but Invincible: A Longitudinal Study of Resilient Children and Youth* (New York: Adams Bannister Cox, 1998).

¹¹ Sandy Rankin and R.C. Neighbors, “Introduction: Horizons of Possibility: What We Point to When We Say Science Fiction for Children,” in *The Galaxy is Rated G: Essays on Children's Science Fiction Film and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 1.

“interwoven relations,”¹² Néstor García Canclini suggests that “identity is a narrated construct” operating on multiple axes of power and negotiation,¹³ whereas Juana María Rodríguez situates identity practices within discursive spaces organized rhizomatically.¹⁴ Extrapolating from Gilles Deleuze's rhizome¹⁵ as dimensions or directions in motion, Rodríguez calls attention to discursive sites of contradictions.¹⁶ It is these contradictions that allow for a more fluid understanding of identities within structures of power, where the construction of margins and centers are permeable, not static. Like Rodríguez, I am less interested in “What is identity?” but instead, in “What is identity for?”¹⁷ The re-framing of this question lends itself to more fruitful discussions that can help answer other questions: Under what circumstances are identities constructed and whose interests do they serve? More specifically, under what circumstances are particular concepts of the child constructed and whose interests do they serve? With this question in mind, I propose to analyze children's literature and media through the category of *niñas raras*.

My focus on *niñas*, or girls, is more aptly described as a focus on the ways all children are gendered. Dominant discourses relegate children to one extreme within a feminine/masculine, or concurrent, girl/boy dichotomy. I intend to focus on characters who are considered girls within this dichotomy while also challenging this rigid framing.

¹² Gorge Yúdice, “From Hybridity to Policy: For a Purposeful Cultural Studies,” translator's introduction to *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts*, by Néstor García Canclini (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), xii.

¹³ Néstor García Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts*, trans. Gorge Yúdice (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 89-96.

¹⁴ Juana María Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces*. (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 22.

¹⁵ For a discussion of rhizome and rhizomatic, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

I use the term *niña* in Spanish as a way of situating my analysis outside English-only discourses of children, but also as a lens through which to analyze the ways children are marked according to the languages they speak or those that surround them.

I intentionally pair *niña* with the term *rara*, which can be loosely translated as odd, strange, or queer. I do so as a way to mark examples of what I am tagging as counter-childnormative. I also prefer the term *rara* to queer because as both Norma Mogrovejo¹⁸ and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes¹⁹ have articulated, the term queer does not always translate well within a Latin American or Spanish-speaking context. Nor do I mean to impose it. Such was the dilemma in a 1997 special issue of *Debate Feminista* entitled “Raras rarezas.” Hortensia Moreno began with an editorial note stating, “El término *queer* es algo más que una palabra de difícil traducción al español, además de ser precisamente eso: un término generado en una cultura diferente de la nuestra..., el cual no tiene un equivalente que nos acerque de manera inmediata al sentido que en inglés evoca.”²⁰ What was agreed upon was that “son *queer* las gentes 'raritas,' las que se ven diferentes, las que aparentan a primera vista una discordancia respecto de la idea predominante de 'normalidad.’”²¹ Within a U.S. context one might trace the term to direct-

¹⁸ See Norma Mogrovejo Aquisé. *Teoría lésbica, participación política y literatura*. (México City: Universidad de la Ciudad de México, 2004).

¹⁹ See Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, “La política queer del espanglish,” in “Fronteras, intersticios y umbrales,” special issue, *Debate Feminista* 33 (April 2006): 141-53.

²⁰ “The term queer is something more than a difficult word to translate into Spanish, aside from being precisely that: a term generated from a culture distinct from our own..., [a term] which does not have an equivalent that brings us closer to the English sense of the word.” Moreno’s description of “queer” engages with an open letter written by Bolívar Echeverría and published as the first piece of this special issue. See Hortensia Moreno, “Editorial,” in “Raras rarezas,” special issue, *Debate Feminista* 16 (1997): ix. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

²¹ “those who are queer are the people who are a little 'strange,' those who look different, those who upon first sight appear in discordance to the prevailing idea of 'normality.’” *Ibid.*, x.

action queer activists of the 1990s.²² Yet that history is less meaningful within Latin America where LGBTTT²³ politics and identities take on different forms than what are accounted for by U.S.-based concepts of queer. Instead, it seems most appropriate to use terms that are specific to that region. Thus, in line with the Mexican feminist journal, *Debate Feminista*, I too, engage with “las raras,” or in my case, “las niñas raras.” This allows me to both identify and prioritize specific illustrated or animated Latina characters who stand out precisely because something about them does not “fit” with our contemporary understanding of what is appropriate for children. These characters unsettle the category of child, and the projected ideals of childnormativity, and in doing so, pave the way for broader understandings of childhood.

Introducing las Niñas Raras: Meli, Dora, & Alex

I situate my research into contemporary children's cultural productions within North America as a historically specific (post-NAFTA), geopolitical and sociocultural space encompassing the nation-states of México, the United States, and Canada. The specific racial/ethnic groups, languages, socioeconomic statuses, genders, sexualities, family formations, and cultural productions of each of these spaces speaks to the heterogeneity and nuanced interlockings of each. I have chosen to focus primarily on three illustrated or animated characters—one within each of the major North American countries²⁴—while also privileging a transnational and transborder optic. These characters

²² For example, the New York based organization, Queer Nation.

²³ “LGBTTT” is most commonly used in México as an umbrella term for non-heteronormative identities; it stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transvestite, and Transsexual. The double T's can also stand for “Transsexual and Transgender.”

²⁴ I group México, the United States, and Canada as three major countries within the North American

include Meli, the narrator in the lesbian-themed children's book, *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* (México); Dora, the protagonist in the children's animated television show, *Dora the Explorer* (United States); and Alex, the lead in the animated short film, *Tomboy* (Canada). See Figure 1.



Figure 1: (A) Meli on the cover of *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*, (B) Dora and Boots from Nickelodeon's *Dora the Explorer*, and (C) a screen shot of Alex in *Tomboy* by Coyle Productions.

A significant thread running through *(Play)Grounds for Dismissal* is my conceptualization of each character as uniquely rara. Meli came to life in 2004 with the publication of *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*. She was created by writer Melissa Cardoza and illustrator Margarita Sada to narrate the relationship between eight year old Meli and her lesbian aunt, Melissa. Together, this niece-aunt duo explore larger themes of family, love, and compassion. Meli has experienced modest circulation within mostly lesbian and queer circles, however Dora has reached mass media stardom. Known for her popularity amongst preschool-aged children, Dora continues to captivate her multiple audiences—both in the United States and worldwide. Dora Márquez—seven years old, bilingual, and adventurous—debuted as the protagonist of her own Nickelodeon animated

continent. This grouping excludes Greenland, the Caribbean, and the subcontinent of Central America (e.g. Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama).

television show in a pilot episode in 1999,²⁵ and *Dora the Explorer* became a regular series as of 2000.²⁶ Strategically created within a specific “pan-Latina/o” multicultural framework, one of the goals of her character is “to position the whole idea of being multicultural as being super-special.”²⁷ Thirdly, Alex made her 2008 debut in Canada. Alex, short for Alejandra, or Alejandra María Giner, is unlike other girls her age, making her the constant target of classmate ridicule. Unlike what may be deemed “appropriate” for nine year old little girls, Alex has short hair, wears boy-like clothing, and loves playing soccer. In this fourteen minute animated short film directed and produced by Barb Taylor, Alex is able to confront the challenges others pose to her gender through the encouraging words of her mother. This animated short is also an adaptation of Karleen Pendleton Jiménez's autobiographic children's book, *Are You a Boy or a Girl?*, which was published in 2000 by Green Dragon Press of Toronto. As I theorize each character as a *niña rara*, I ask readers to consider what this conceptualization tells us about broader questions around the interconnections between childhood, neoliberalism, and the movement of people and ideas across national borders. As a result, I am not only conducting a queer analysis of Latina illustrated and animated characters, but also illuminating what a queer analysis of children's cultural productions reveals about transborder politics.

²⁵ There are disputes as to the original airing of *Dora the Explorer*. Official Nickelodeon press materials released during Dora's 10th Year Anniversary state she originally aired in 2000, however it is unclear if this refers to the first official episode, “The Big Red Chicken,” or the original pilot episode.

²⁶ I use “*Dora the Explorer*” to refer to the animated TV show, and “Dora the explorer” or simply “Dora” to refer to the character.

²⁷ Brown Johnson, former Executive Vice President of Nickelodeon, as quoted in Rolando Arrieta, “Me Llamo Dora: An Explorer in Modern America.” *NPR*, April 14, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89531478>

Transborder Children's Cultural Studies

“Mirá, esto es el mundo ¿ves?”²⁸ (see Figure 2). This comic strip poignantly asks its readers to consider, quite literally, the world's current condition. Mafalda points to a globe, explaining that it is lovely compared to the actual earth, which is disastrous. She speaks to her teddy bear—a stand-in for the reader of this strip. Joaquín Salvador Lavado, writing under the pen name of Quino, created Mafalda in 1964. The Mafalda series—which originated in Argentina and ran between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s—was saturated with political commentary that primarily targeted an adult audience. Since then, Mafalda has become both a political icon and cultural figure across Latin America—for adults and children. Unlike archetypal girl comics characters, who are often passive or do not hold lead roles, Mafalda is politically astute and cunningly witty. Presently, one can continue to interact with Mafalda within diverse mediums including comic books, coloring books, and DVDs, as well as pirated versions of her that appear on birthday piñatas or get incorporated into street art graffiti.



Figure 2: Mafalda explaining a globe to her teddy bear. Quino [Joaquín Salvador Lavado], *Mafalda Tres*, 3rd ed. (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones de la Flor, 2004).

²⁸ “Look, this is the world, you see? Do you want to know why this world is beautiful, huh? Because it is a replica. The original is a disaster!” This strip was originally published in 1970.

Similar to Mafalda, the niñas raras within my research weave in and out of mediums, audiences, and even disciplinary fields. Earlier I argued for an analysis of niñas raras through what I suggested as transborder children's cultural studies. I name this disciplinary intervention transborder children's cultural studies in order to highlight objects of study that cannot be reduced to one national context or medium. I will substantiate this claim by providing an overview of the current disciplinary fields that inform my intervention. In what follows, I first introduce the fields of children's studies and childhood studies since my disciplinary intervention builds on many of their theoretical claims. I will then differentiate between childhood studies and studies of children's literature and media, or children's intertextuality, and compare this with studies of girlhood. Ultimately, I am advocating for their union under a queer and feminist disciplinary field of transborder children's cultural studies.

There are significant disciplinary distinctions between Children's Studies, Childhood Studies, and studies of children's literature and media. Gertrud Lenzer traces the birth of Children's Studies to its institutionalization as a program at Brooklyn College in 1991.²⁹ She posits that Children's Studies grew as a “response to the increasing fragmentation in child-research.”³⁰ While these programs strive for interdisciplinarity, they are usually driven by the social sciences. Karen S. Coats draws on this distinction by arguing that within the social sciences, “the impetus for these [children's studies] programs is coming from the disciplines of sociology, psychology, medical sciences, and

²⁹ Gertrud Lenzer, “Children's Studies: Beginnings and Purposes,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 25, no. 2 (April 2001): 181.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 183.

law.”³¹ She suggests that “researchers in these disciplines often choose to focus their energies on the politics and cultural practices that affect the lives of children.” In other words, their object of analysis is the child as a social class, or “real children.”³² Examples include a focus on children's growth and development,³³ children's education,³⁴ children's rights,³⁵ and children's niche markets.³⁶

Similar to Children's Studies, Childhood Studies has also emerged as a recent interdisciplinary field, however it is primarily dominated by the humanities and is aimed at theorizing the concepts of child and childhood.³⁷ Karen Coats observes that “the social sciences, along with medicine and law, tend to view children as real people or clients, whereas in the humanities, we are more likely to conceive of children as socially constructed ideological subjects.”³⁸ Consequently, common themes or research questions within Childhood Studies may revolve around the very categorization of child, or determining the age parameters of childhood.³⁹ Scholars are increasingly “rejecting the

³¹ Karen S. Coats, “Keepin' It Plural: Children's Studies in the Academy,” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 140.

³² Ibid.

³³ See Erik Parens and Josephine Johnston, “Troubled Children: Diagnosing, Treating, and Attending to Context,” *Hastings Center Report* 41, no. 2 (March-April 2011): 4-31; David Wood, *How Children Think and Learn: The Social Context of Cognitive Development* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

³⁴ For children's literacy, see Graver J. Whitehurst and Christopher J. Lonigan, “Child Development and Emergent Literacy,” *Child Development* 69, no. 3 (June 1998): 848-872.

³⁵ See Stephen Macedo and Iris Marion Young, *Child, Family, and State* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Ayelet Shachar, “Children of a Lesser State: Sustaining Global Inequality Through Citizenship Laws,” in *Child, Family, and State* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 345-97.

³⁶ See Juliet B. Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2005).

³⁷ See Peter Hunt, *Children's Literature: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1998); Chris Jenks, *Childhood: Key Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1996); Joseph Zornado, *Inventing the Child: Culture, Ideology, and the Story of Childhood* (New York: Garland, 2000).

³⁸ Coats, “Keepin' It Plural: Children's Studies in the Academy,” 140.

³⁹ See Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

presumption that childhood is a 'natural' category unaffected by historical or cultural contexts," as they draw on "detailed accounts of the 'construction' of childhood in earlier eras and assume that a similarly intricate set of forces is also operative at present."⁴⁰ The concept of childhood shifts to meet the demands of a society. Paraphrasing literary critic Mario Rey, historically, childhood has to do with human reproduction and sexuality, on the one hand, and with sustenance and work, on the other.⁴¹ Thus, societies that need to control their rate of reproduction broaden the ages recognized as childhood, and therefore, generate and prolong the activities and educational requirements of children. Other scholars, such as Stephen Kline suggest that our current understanding of childhood and children's culture emerged out of the transition into industrialization.⁴² Kline describes the shift from children as servants and cheap labor (or, adults dominating children) to children's rights discourse (adults protecting children). This shift manifests itself in institutions, such as schools, where "literacy and knowledge became the privileged objectives of socialization."⁴³ Even children's play becomes a form of socialization, through the creation of kindergarten, with a particular emphasis on children's self-discipline. This shift from dominating children to protecting them would crystallize into the late 19th century myth of childhood innocence, which is still very much alive today, and according to Henry Jenkins, is at the heart of all current discourses of children and childhood.⁴⁴ This myth would gain further momentum with mass

⁴⁰ Marsha Kinder, ed., *Kids' Media Culture* (New York: Duke University Press, 1999), 5.

⁴¹ Mario Rey, *Historia y Muestra de la Literatura Infantil Mexicana* (México City: SM de Ediciones, 2000).

⁴² Stephen Kline, "The Making of Children's Culture," in *The Children's Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 98.

⁴³ Kline, 98.

⁴⁴ Henry Jenkins, "Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Modern Myths," in *The Children's*

production of more goods, the commercialization of childhood, the construction of the nuclear family as a dominant form, and the public/private divide. Others, such as Philippe Ariès, bracket adults' obsessions in distinguishing between adulthood and childhood, and children's isolation from adult social life, as inherent to western cultures.⁴⁵

As a subfield of literary criticism, children's literature or literary criticism takes literary texts as its object of analysis.⁴⁶ Generally, children's literary scholars seek texts intentionally directed at children or young adults and written by adults—such as Dr. Seuss' *The Cat in the Hat* series or the *Berenstain Bears* collection within the United States. Children's literature may also refer to literary works not originally intended for children, but which have become appropriated by them, such as Japanese manga, or on the other hand, European children's classics, such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which have been marketed as children's literature although they are primarily read by adults or young adults.⁴⁷ One may also argue that stories written by children should be considered children's literature, although instead, they are generally referred to as children's writings or writing by children and are excluded from children's literary criticism. Children's literature is not always restricted to books. It may also include poetry, plays, songs, or picture books. Nor does it confine itself to literary genres, instead

Culture Reader, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 3.

⁴⁵ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage, 1962), quoted in Bernadette Casey et al., *Television Studies: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 31.

⁴⁶ Some works within children's literature also overlap heavily with Childhood Studies. For example, see Mary Galbraith, "Hear My Cry: A Manifesto for an Emancipatory Childhood Studies Approach to Children's Literature," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 25, no. 2 (April 2001): 187-205; Shelby Wolf, Karen Coats, Patricia Enciso, and Christine Jenkins, *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁴⁷ See Karen Coats, *Looking Glasses and Neverlands: Lacan, Desire, and Subjectivity in Children's Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004); Beverly Lyon Clark, *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

encompassing an array of fiction and non-fiction forms. Canonical surveys of children's literary criticism include for example, Peter Hunt's "Introduction: The World of Children's Literature Studies" and Karín Lesnik Oberstein's "Essentials: What is Children's Literature? What is Childhood?," as well as texts such as *Keywords for Children's Literature* edited by Philip Nel and Lissa Paul. While most literary criticism within children's literature includes close readings of texts, scholars like Jack Zipes, Julia L. Mickenberg, and Philip Nel also emphasize the context in which the literature was produced. For example, Jack Zipes argues, "from the very beginning, when books were first explicitly printed for children in the sixteenth century, politics played a 'radical' role in primers, the Bible, and alphabet books." Zipes also suggests that "to become literate did not mean simply to develop the ability to read; literacy entailed (and still does) a learning process that produced responsible citizens who functioned in a hierarchical society according to its rules."⁴⁸ Considering that one purpose of literacy is to socialize readers into the status quo, it follows that literary scholars like María José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman have argued that many examples of multicultural children's literature fell short in their political critique.⁴⁹ In her survey of Latina/o children's literature, Mary Pat Brady concurs, adding that "this lack of what we might call 'edge' could be traced to writers' desire to emphasize the positive in the face of omnipresent derogatory accounts; similarly it could be traced to writers' patronizing sense that young

⁴⁸ Jack Zipes, "Foreword: The Twists and Turns of Radical Children's Literature," in *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature*, eds. Julia L. Mickenberg and Philip Nel (New York: New York University Press, 2008), vii.

⁴⁹ María José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman, *Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children's Literature: Mirrors, Windows, and Doors* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

children should not read about dangers (even though they must navigate them).⁵⁰ Brady also cautions against normalizing a Latina/o aesthetic within children's literature since “the pull toward a kind of visual branding also suggests the challenge writers and artists face when asked to produce 'authenticity.’”⁵¹ This demand for 'authentically ethnic' children's literature risks reducing content to predetermined standards based on contemporary market trends.

Children's media studies, as a relatively contemporary subfield of media studies, is only recently gaining serious interest as a disciplinary area. Marsha Kinder defines children's mass media culture as “media software such as television programs, electronic games, movies, comic strips, books, and ancillary toys—produced for and consumed by youngsters in the United States.”⁵² Most research on children’s mass media

centers around children's access to unsuitable material (violence, sexual imagery or bad language), responsibility (of parents to regulate access and of broadcasters to provide suitable programming for children), morality and ethics (in terms of programme content), education (what, if anything at all, do children learn from television?), commercialization (are children being exposed to market forces?) and the exposure of children to mass-produced entertainment which, it is argued, ultimately leads to declining standards in literacy and the erosion of spontaneous and creative play—the bedrock of childhood.⁵³

Skeptical of these claims, Bernadette Casey et al. argue that these concerns “assume that children are vulnerable and need protecting. They are, in effect, seen as being passive and receptive to corruption or manipulation.”⁵⁴ Marsha Kinder, along with fellow contributors to *Kids' Media Culture* (e.g. Lynn Spigel, Henry Jenkins, Heather Hendershot, and Ellen

⁵⁰ Mary Pat Brady, “Children's Literature,” in *The Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature*, edited by Suzanne Bost and Frances R. Aparicio (New York: Routledge, 2012), 380.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Kinder, *Kids' Media Culture*, 1.

⁵³ Casey et al., 31-32.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 32.

Seiter), take it upon themselves to challenge these assumptions. They view children “primarily as active agents [and] perceive them as moving tactically through a diversified field of play that is part of a larger social history, which inevitably involves change...”⁵⁵ These scholars highlight the agency of children as highly discriminating viewers. Rather than dominating children’s lives, “children often intersperse television viewing with other activities such as playing, talking and reading.”⁵⁶ Additionally, television is “more likely to reinforce pre-existing attitudes and experiences in children than to radically modify or alter behavior.”⁵⁷ Therefore, argue Casey et al, “the importance of teaching children media literacy and the responsibility of parents and teachers in influencing children's attitude is paramount in shaping the perceptions and beliefs children bring to their experiences of watching television.”⁵⁸ Children's media scholars have been able to make these claims mostly based on their own unique methodological choices. Jenkin's observations of his son's interaction with *The Pee-wee Herman Show* impacted his research, whereas scholars such as Sarah Banet-Weiser and Ellen Seiter had direct interactions and access to children's mass media patterns within the media industry.

My research interests also draw me to studies of girlhood, which emerge out of a feminist analysis of girl culture. While studies of children's literature and media emphasize the texts as their defining theoretical approach, studies of girlhood prioritize a feminist critique of gender and gender roles. Its objects of analysis can include novels, films, comics, television, zines, websites, or an assortment of intertextualities. Many of

⁵⁵ Kinder, *Kids' Media Culture*, 4-5.

⁵⁶ Casey et al., 22.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

these emphasize coming of age narratives, with strong, female characters, and an overall feminist bent.⁵⁹ Studies of girls and girlhood also emerged in response to the ways other disciplinary fields tended to position girls as victims. Marnina Gonick gives these examples: “the repeated references in the writings of the Frankfurt School to girls as exemplary dupes of culture industries are contemporary with the new 1920s' and 1930s 'science' of market analysis, which often used girls as the model of mass cultural consumption.”⁶⁰ Moreover, one can trace this gender bias further back in manuals or full texts outlining how women and girls should behave. Examples include the 1845 *El Libro de las Niñas* by Rubió y Ors. Joaquín, published in Spain, and the 1898 *Girls will be Girls* by Florence Warden, published in London. Other scholars, like Catherine Driscoll, question the very utility of girl and girl culture, suggesting its limitation even when focusing solely on feminine adolescence within popular culture. Nestled within girlhood studies are growing subfields such as studies of boyhood culture.⁶¹ However, debates strictly about gender risk obscuring the nuances of intersectionality. For example, girlhood has also played a paramount role within the theorization of much Latina/o and Chicana/o scholarship. From Sandra Cisneros to Terri de la Peña, authors and critics have challenged good girl/bad girl binaries while also providing compelling responses to racism and heterosexism.⁶² However, because of the cultural and language references,

⁵⁹ See Elspeth Tulloch, “Re-Visioning the Girl's Narrative for the 1980s: The Case of the Short Story 'Jack of Hears' and Its Film Adaptation” in Loren Lerner (ed), *Depicting Canada's Children* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009), 173.

⁶⁰ Marnina Gonick, “Between 'Girl Power' and 'Reviving Ophelia': Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject.” *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 4.

⁶¹ See Shirley R. Steinberg, Michael Kehler, and Lindsay Cornish, “Introduction: Why Boy Culture?,” in *Boy Culture: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2010).

⁶² See Catrióna Rueda Esquibel, “Memories of Girlhood: Chicana Lesbian Fictions,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 23, no. 3 (1998): 645-82.

these works are usually relegated to a subfield of girlhood studies (under “ethnic literature”) or even a subfield of Latina/o studies (under “young adult, feminist, or queer literature”). My use of transborder intends to remedy this by centering an analysis that is intersectional in its approach.

My transborder children's cultural studies approach summons facets of Children's Studies, Childhood Studies, studies of children's literature and media, and girlhood studies. In a 1983 interview, Gloria Anzaldúa observed how “children are these little people with no rights.”⁶³ This sentiment inspired her to write children's books a decade later, including *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* (1993), and *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/Prietita y la Llorona* (1995). Both are picture books that deal with transgressions, politics, and border crossings. In the first book, Prietita's friend, Joaquin crosses from México to the U.S., whereas in the second book, Prietita crosses from her side of town into King Ranch where “they shoot trespassers.”⁶⁴ Both books also express undercurrents of queer and feminist analyses that inspire my own use of the term *transborder*. Thus, my insertion of *Transborder* before *Children's Cultural Studies* is anchored within studies of borders and borderlands.⁶⁵ Broadly, border studies emerges from the rich collisions between Chicana/o and Latina/o studies, Latin American studies,

⁶³ Gloria Anzaldúa, quoted in AnaLouise Keating, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 94.

⁶⁴ See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/Prietita y la Llorona*, illustrated by Maya C. Gonzalez (San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press, 1995); *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado*, illustrated by Consuelo Méndez (San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press, 1993).

⁶⁵ See for example, Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987); Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (2000); Sonia Saldívar-Hull, *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature* (2000); Mary Pat Brady, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (2002); Rosa Linda Fregoso, *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands* (2003); Marisa Belausteguigoitia y Lucía Melgar, *Fronteras, violencia, justicia: nuevos discursos* (2007); María Pallotta-Chiarolli, *Border Sexualities, Border Families in School* (2010).

and transnational feminisms. Privileging the malleability of borders, I prefer the term *transborder* over *border* to emphasize the constant state of flux of geographic, identity-based, and discursive borders. I strategically employ *transborder* over, for example, *transnational*, as a way to gesture toward the differences between transnational corporations or global economies, and the tangible bodies and communities that occupy, trespass, and transgress borders. This also builds on Gloria Anzaldúa's use of "atravesando fronteras," or of those who cross over, the "atravesadas"—the border-crossers. Within *(Play)Grounds for Dismissal*, these *atravesadas* are indeed *las niñas raras*, Meli, Dora, and Alex.

Methods

The bulk of this dissertation prioritizes discourse analyses and close readings of primary texts, including *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*, select television clips from *Dora the Explorer*, and the animated short film, *Tomboy*. Given their distinct mediums, I employ a loose definition of texts, including written text, as well as illustrations or animations, and sounds. I also reviewed unpublished versions of scripts, zines, brochures, and other relevant materials. The convergence of these texts in my analysis falls in line with current intertextuality trends within media studies.⁶⁶ This dissertation is also based upon over two years of extensive interviews between 2010 and 2011 across select research sites in México, the United States, and Canada. I conducted fifteen in-depth

⁶⁶ Marsha Kinder summarizes intertextuality as follows: "In contemporary media studies, intertextuality has come to mean that any individual text (whether an artwork like a movie or novel...) is part of a larger cultural discourse and therefore must be read in relationship to other texts and their diverse textual strategies and ideological assumptions. See Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 2.

face-to-face interviews as well as others over phone or email. These include interviews with content experts such as authors, illustrators, screenwriters, editors, producers, directors, animators, actors, distributors, and educators. I also engaged in participant observations at events pertaining to my research interests. Examples include attending *Dora the Explorer* live shows in both the U.S. and México, as well as Nickelodeon trade shows, and book signing events for *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*. Lastly, I visited several archives including the Hemeroteca Nacional de México at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, the City of Toronto Archives, and the Biblioteca Nacional de España.

Chapters

The chapters that follow are organized geographically across the North American continent, beginning with México, continuing through the United States, and ending with Canada. Each chapter and geographic location will also be anchored within a medium—print media, television, and short films respectively. I do so in an attempt to privilege the historical particularities of each medium as they relate to each contemporary nation-state. I also aim to de-centralize the United States as the origin of all media, and instead articulate a more cohesive history of children's print and digital media across the North American continent, from México to Canada.

In chapter two, “Meli and her Aunt Who is Not a Nun: Que(e)ries in Mexican Children's Literature,” I trace the deployment of children's print media in México, beginning with biblical stories from the colonial period and tracing the genre to

contemporary forms of children's literature. I argue that in order to comprehend what is currently accepted as appropriate children's literature by the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), or those who regulate public school curricula, it is imperative to understand how nationalist projects construe the history of children's print media alongside the political history of México. In other words, contemporary children's literary scholars of Mexican children's literature tend to begin with the colonial era and move forward. This historical arc parallels nationalist rhetoric whereby anything falling outside of it is marked as unacceptable. This will be directly challenged by the lesbian-themed children's book, *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*, and the character Meli who becomes a *niña rara* through her association with her lesbian aunt. This text offers a critique to heteronormativity, racism, sexism, and xenophobia within the perceived rigidity of Mexican cultural nationalism.

I begin chapter three, “Dora the (Global) Explorer: Trespassing Across TV Screens Near You,” by historicizing bilingual children's television within the United States. I argue that Dora's success as a bilingual and girl character was initially due to the lack of educational media on cable networks. Dora would eventually become a *niña rara* over time, as she became more popular with children and as some parents began to take issue with her bilingualism, while others appropriated her image for use in immigrants' rights discourse. I will demonstrate this by first detailing the success of her educational curriculum and then juxtaposing her initial educational model, with her more recent marketing strategies. These include the 2010 tenth-year anniversary one-hour special episode, “Dora's Big Birthday Adventure,” and a companion documentary, *Dora: The*

Girl Heard 'Round the World, alongside political videos, posters, and memes linking Dora to current U.S. immigration debates and politics.

Chapter four, “Alex the Tom(boi): Gendered Multiculturalism in Canadian Short Films,” compares the contemporary short film, *Tomboy* (2008), to the original children's zine it is based on, *Are You a Boy or a Girl?* (2000), by Canadian Chicana lesbian author Karleen Pendleton Jiménez. She also wrote the screenplay for *Tomboy* and worked closely with director Barb Taylor on its production and distribution. I situate my discussion of *Tomboy* within children's educational media sponsored by federal initiatives in Canada, which initiate the wider production and distribution of this short film. I also argue that Alex, *Tomboy's* protagonist, is a *niña rara* through the embodiment of gender non-conforming queerness and bilingualism within Canadian multiculturalism.

I began this manuscript with an epigraph from Karen Sánchez-Eppler who suggested the underlying danger in putting one's faith in childhood. My final chapter, “Afterword: Toward a *Niñas Raras* Praxis,” serves to illustrate my own theorization of *niñas raras* as a model for contesting childnormativity. This chapter recapitulates my argument by emphasizing Meli, Dora, and Alex as examples of *niñas raras* across children's literature, television, and short films. I have conceptualized of Meli as a *niña rara* by association, Dora from appropriation, and Alex through embodiment. I am simultaneously suggesting the utility of theorizing them collectively under the disciplinary rubric of transborder children's cultural studies. In doing so, these *niñas raras* can usher in more transborder subjects, be they *niñas*, *niños*, *niñes*, or some other variation yet to be revealed.

CHAPTER II

MELI'S AUNT WHO IS NOT A NUN: QUE(E)RIES IN MEXICAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Eight year old Meli, imagined and brought to life by writer Melissa Cardoza and illustrator Margarita Sada, emits a copious aura of confidence as she narrates the caring and loving bond she shares with her aunt in the children's book, *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*. Notwithstanding her initial surprise of learning about her aunt's romantic partnership with another woman, Meli challenges readers to learn, to grow, and to find value in difference. This niece-aunt duo share more than a name—Meli, short for Melissa. They evoke what scholar Chela Sandoval suggests was the crux of U.S. third world feminism in the 1980s—theorizing through the hermeneutics of love.⁶⁷ Within a *niñas raras* framework, they challenge childnormative constructions of transborder families.

The intent of this chapter is to delve deeply into the surrounding context of children's print media within México so I may answer the following questions: (1) How has children's print media shifted across México's history, and what forms of childnormativity has this historical arc produced?, and (2) how does a character like Meli

⁶⁷ Chela Sandoval, "Dissident Globalizations, Emancipatory Methods, Social-Erotics," in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, eds. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 23. Also see, Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

in *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* counter childnormativity within México? More specifically, what does *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* elucidate about critical issues such as gender and sexuality, religion, neoliberalism, border-crossing, race, and ethnicity in México, and what vision of family does this book put forth in comparison to childnormative children's literature within México? I argue that Meli becomes a *niña rara* through her association with her aunt. Together they put forth a family model that challenges childnormative constructions of love, partnerships, and family formations. Moreover, by tracing the production and distribution of *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*, I am also arguing that Meli's formation as a *niña rara* is the result of a larger collaborative process intermixed within a matrix of power between the author, illustrator, publisher, and financial supporters.

Patlatonalli, a lesbian collective of Guadalajara, Jalisco, México, published *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* in 2004, ten years after the signing of NAFTA and at the onset of public debates around LGBTT rights in México. In 2003, México passed the Ley Federal para Prevenir y Eliminar la Discriminación, or the Federal Law to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination. It specified “preferencias sexuales”⁶⁸ under the list of categories protected against discrimination along with “origen étnico o nacional, sexo, edad, discapacidad, condición social o económica, estado civil,” among others.⁶⁹ It also included a separate clause stating: “También se entenderá como discriminación la

⁶⁸ “sexual preferences”

⁶⁹ The entire list includes: ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, disability, socioeconomic status, health, pregnancy, language, religion, opinions, sexual preference, or marital status. It was reformed in May 2013 to include “talla pequeña” or discrimination against little people. See “Ley Federal Para Prevenir y Eliminar La Discriminación,” Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión (Reformed June 12, 2013) <http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/262.pdf>

xenofobia y el antisemitismo en cualquiera de sus manifestaciones.”⁷⁰ Ana Laura Nettel Díaz suggests potential limitations within the current wording of the law, citing contradictions in its definitions of discrimination, as well as difficulties in implementing it across México.⁷¹ Moreover, the law does not account for an intersectional approach to discrimination. For example, in an effort to help with its implementation, this federal law also created CONAPRED, or the Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación, which serves as a federal advisory board while managing formal discrimination complaints.⁷² In 2010, 556 formal complaints were filed across the country, of which 148 pertained to sexuality. These figures do not account for cases where someone was discriminated against because they were a lesbian *and* not a Mexican citizen. Additionally, larger cities like México City or Guadalajara are more likely to disseminate information about this anti-discriminatory law. Approximately 46% of all formal complaints originated in México City. I suggest this does not signify more discrimination in México City, but rather that more people who were discriminated against within México City exerted their right to file a formal complaint.

Notably, México City has been at the forefront of public LGBTTT debates, often distinguishing itself from the rest of the country. In 2006, México City approved the Ley de Sociedades de Convivencia, granting limited legal recognition to members of the same household, regardless of marital status or blood relations, and in 2009, México City legalized same-sex marriage, becoming the first city in Latin America to do so. By

⁷⁰ “Xenophobia and antisemitism in any of its manifestations shall also be understood as discrimination.”

⁷¹ Ana Laura Nettel Díaz, “Igualdad y discriminación: Reflexiones sobre la Ley Federal para Prevenir y Eliminar la Discriminación,” *Alegatos* 67 (September/December 2007): 431-440.

⁷² Visit Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación <http://www.conapred.org.mx>

comparison, Argentina became the first country to legalize same-sex marriage nationwide in 2010, challenging México to follow suit.

More recently, México City sparked controversy over same-sex adoptions. In 2012 Mexican actor Felipe Najera and his partner, Jaime Morales, became “Mexico's first gay couple to adopt a child through a public institution.”⁷³ They initially attempted to adopt through the Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DIF), but were turned away. Next, the couple went to México City's attorney general's office, where they were “deemed fit to raise a child.” Najera expressed his frustration with the process by stating: “All the children who are abandoned or awaiting adoption come from heterosexual relationships.”⁷⁴ While this is not entirely true, queer parenting and adoptions can require additional planning, including questions over the child's sex. Najera explains, “We thought a girl would have it easier than a boy adopted by two men. If the boy turns out to be gay, (people will say) we passed it on to him, or the really sick minds could even think that we might rape him.”⁷⁵ Thus, the couple took the precautions they deemed necessary to prevent homophobic backlash over their desire to adopt and start a family. Najera's case is unique because of his celebrity status. However, despite the media attention, few commentators addressed the implications of this adoption for health care benefits. As of May 2013, Najera's partner and daughter have health care coverage after winning an anti-discriminatory case against the National Actors' Union, of which Najera is a member.⁷⁶

⁷³ “Famed Mexican Gay Couple Helps Blaze Adoption Trail” *Agence France-Presse, France 24: International News*, May 8, 2013, <http://www.france24.com/en/20130508-famed-mexican-gay-couple-helps-blaze-adoption-trail>

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Although dominant western discourses usually frame México within conservative, religious, patriarchal, and violently homophobic discourses, it is a richly heterogeneous country. In 2010, the Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL), a branch of the Mexican government tasked with fostering social development, distributed a colorful brochure targeting LGBTTT families that read:

The current situation invites us to think that there is not only one way to live as a family, as in the marital union between a man and a woman. Families, like social organizations, will change according to the historical and cultural moment in which they develop and that is why we must recognize the diverse types of families that exist today in our country.⁷⁷

Such desire for recognition echoes the current mainstream LGBTTT political movement in México. Although this recognition might challenge nationalistic heteronormative discourses of the family, state recognition of queer desire warrants further attention, since as Jasbir Puar suggests, it demonstrates a strategic incorporation by state power that creates the appearance of opposition to an imagined, inferior (sexually illiberal) other, while obscuring the state's own investment in heteronormativity.⁷⁸ Puar applied her concept of homonationalism to the United State's relationship to the Middle East, however a parallel argument may be made about México. Its incorporation of politically charged queer rhetoric may align México alongside other world powers, like the United States, which do not want to appear homophobic or discriminatory on an international

⁷⁷ I originally found a copy of this brochure in 2010 while in México City. Its content has also been published elsewhere, such as in “Declaratoria de la Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal y del Observatorio de Familias y Políticas Públicas con motivo del Día Internacional de la Familia 2010,” (México City: Instituto Latinoamericano de Estudios de la Familia (ILEF), A.C., 2010); Guadalupe Ordaz Beltrán, Lilia Monroy Limón, and Martha M. López Ramos, *Hacia una Propuesta de Política Pública para Familias en el Distrito Federal*, (México City: INCIDE Social, 2010).

⁷⁸ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

level although they enact discriminatory exclusion on a national level. Within this national level, major metropolitan cities like México City and Guadalajara may perpetuate similar queer rhetorics while distancing themselves from more rural spaces, and other ways of imagining non-heteronormativity. Similarly, I would suggest that childnormativity expresses itself differently within larger cities as opposed to smaller towns. Childnormativity will also change across time. In the following section I will outline the ways print media directed at children, or children's literature, has produced specific forms of childnormativity in México.

Historicizing México's Literary Works for Children

Notable children's literary scholars like Mario Rey and Manuel Peña Muñoz have each published histories of children's print media in México. I am interested in the ways literary scholars canonize children's print media in México, and in the process produce histories of children's print media that replicate childnormativity. In what follows, I am simultaneously presenting a brief history of México's literary works for children while also engaging in conversation with existing historiographies of children's literature.

Paralleling México's national history narrative, its children's literary canon begins with the precolonial and colonial eras, followed by México's independence from Spain, and the Mexican revolution. This context illuminates how children's books like *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* and characters like Meli push against childnormativity within México.

I begin with the precolonial era because México's national historical rhetoric often posits this period as a precursor to current national identity. There are many examples of

contemporary children's books, reading materials, and textbooks that integrate the precolonial era in precisely this manner. Stated differently, the precolonial era is used within children's literature as a nationalist recovery exercise to glorify an imagined past or validate the present. One can divide present day México into over thirty indigenous populations, although the most recognized within children's textbooks or histories of México are the Olmec⁷⁹, the Mayan⁸⁰, and the Aztec.⁸¹ This is primarily due to their “civilization-status” in this geographic region. Although at the height of their political power, they were primarily oral societies, the Olmecs are credited for developing the first writing system in Latin America. The Mayans and the Aztecs would follow with more sophisticated writing techniques, including what are referred to presently as codices. The surviving codices were written by the Spanish during the colonial era. Several include child figures within the illustrations, and according to Mario Rey, some of them also include “los huehuetlahtolli o 'antiguas palabras,’” which were precolonial stories told to children or youth.⁸² For example, the Florentín Codices written by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún include a narrative titled “Consejos del Padre a su Hija,” or “A Father's Advice to his Daughter.”⁸³ Intended as a guide to adulthood for a girl of an indigenous and noble background, it repetitively refers to a singular God and his glory, all the while stressing guilt, pain, and suffering. Several prominent bibliographies, such as Miguel León-Portilla's and Mario Rey's catalog of children's literature in México, describe this

⁷⁹ The Olmec were in power roughly from 1400 BCE to about 400 BCE.

⁸⁰ The Mayan civilization reached its ruling peak between 250/300 AD and 900 AD.

⁸¹ The Aztecs ruled from approximately the 1300s AD to 1521 AD.

⁸² “ancient words,” Rey, 41.

⁸³ Rey, 42. To access the Florentin Codices visit <http://www.wdl.org/en/item/10096/>

narrative as original, precolonial, and indigenous children's literature.⁸⁴ Instead, one might consider documents like “A Father's Advice to his Daughter” as narratives that were influenced by the pre-colonial era and then translated and re-written to produce a form of childnormativity in accordance with the colonial Spanish ideologies of their time.

The Spanish colonization of Latin America brought about a stark shift in what would be deemed appropriate, or childnormative, reading material for children of the “new world.” The Spanish arrived in present day México as early as 1517, with the period of conquest lasting from approximately 1521, with the fall of the Aztecs in Tenochtitlan, to 1810, with the beginning of the Mexican War of Independence against the Spanish Crown.⁸⁵ In an attempt to convert the indigenous populations to Christianity, a plethora of religious doctrines emerged during this era. As a result, the first books available for children in Latin America (which were also the books available to children in Spain at the time) were most notably, the bible and biblical stories of saints and their moral teachings.⁸⁶ Most acclaimed, Fray Pedro de Gante is credited with establishing the first school in Latin America, as well as writing the first children's text of the new world.⁸⁷ Not surprisingly, this text was a catechism for young children. It included

⁸⁴ Miguel León-Portilla, *Las Literaturas Indigenas* (1985), 170-174, quoted in Rey, 41-42.

⁸⁵ Brief chronology of European colonization of present day México and the nearby Caribbean: Christopher Columbus' first voyage—explores the Bahamas, followed by Cuba and Hispaniola (both Haiti and the Dominican Republic) (1492); Columbus' second voyage—Dominica, Marie-Galante, Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, Cuba, and Jamaica (1493); Columbus' third voyage—into the Lesser Antilles, including Trinidad, and then again to Hispaniola (1498); Columbus fourth voyage—much of the Central American coastline, as well as the Greater and Lesser Antilles (1502); Juan Ponce de León in Puerto Rico (1506, 1508—officially), appointed governor of Puerto Rico by the Spanish Crown (1509); Spanish occupy Cuba (1511); Francisco Hernández de Córdoba on coast of México—Yucatán (1517); Juan de Grijalva explores much of Southeastern México (1518); Hernán Cortés, along with Pedro de Alvarado y Contreras as second in command, arrives in Tenochtitlan and wages war against the Aztec empire (1519).

⁸⁶ Rey, 77.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

elaborate illustrations in a strategic effort to be legible to the indigenous communities who did not speak or read Spanish. Although it was directed at children, these materials were also meant to target and convert adults. This tactic, of using a medium originally intended for children on adults was also employed by Hernán Cortés. On his initial voyage to the Americas he brought with him two puppeteers, Pedro López and Manuel Rodríguez, whose performances were meant to entice both children and adults, and whose primary content was also biblical.⁸⁸

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is another prominent writer during the colonial era who is not widely known for her children's poetry. On the one hand, feminist scholarship by Chicanas and Mexicanas have rewritten her as a heroine, feminist, and even lesbian icon.⁸⁹ An illegitimate child born in 1648, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz taught herself to read and write before the age of five, possibly as early as three.⁹⁰ Feminist scholars celebrate this 17th century figure as one of the few women, and perhaps the most influential of her time, to challenge patriarchy and heteronormativity. Despite the limited roles for women during this era, she gained a degree of popularity that continued to escalate well after her death. As a child she considered dressing up as a young boy so she might have been allowed to attend school. Her intelligence and ongoing aspiration for knowledge would eventually catch the attention of political figures including the Viceroy Antonio Sebastián de Toledo and his wife, the Vicereine Leonor Carreto, as well as the Viceroy Marqués de

⁸⁸ Manuel Peña Muñoz, *Historia de la Literatura Infantil en América Latina* (Madrid: Fundación SM, 2009), 80.

⁸⁹ See for example, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Sor Juana's Second Dream* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007).

⁹⁰ Asunción Lavrin, "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695)," in *Latinas in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia*, eds. Viki L. Ruiz and Virginia Sánchez Korrol (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 197.

la Laguna and his wife, the Countess de Pareda, María Luisa—who it is rumored shared a romantic relationship with Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Denying several proposals for marriage, she voluntarily confined herself within the walls of the convent of San Jerónimo so she might continue her intellectual quest for knowledge. At the same time, her success was partially facilitated by her membership in an economically sufficient family of Spanish descent. Allegedly, and as was custom of Spanish nuns of this time, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz took in young girls as her servants, and at one point also owned a slave who was gifted to her by her mother. A selective reading of her poetry points to the racial politics of that era and her participation in them. Her most popular poems for children were those that mimicked afro-latino or black vernacular. Titles include “Negro” or “Black,” and “Negrillos” or “The Black Ones.” In analyzing a short stanza from “Negrillos,” one can see explicit differences in her use of Spanish. Standard Spanish syntax would read: “Si al cielo va | y a Dios la lleva, | ¿Por qué llora | si ella está contenta?” Instead, she intentionally writes in what could be read as black vernacular of that time. Her poem reads, “Si las Cielo va | y a Dioso la lleva, | pala que yola, | si Eya sa cuententa?” While one might say she is validating this form of speech by putting it into print, these poems were particularly popular with children precisely because of their humorous, and mocking-like rhythm and rhyme. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz would allegedly read these poems aloud to children around her, thus, performing a kind of minstrelsy for the purpose of entertaining young audiences.⁹¹ Finally, her ongoing

⁹¹ For a historical analysis of colonial México and blackness see Herman L. Bennett, *Colonial Blackness: A History of Afro-Mexico* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Ben Vinson III and Matthew Restall, *Black Mexico: Race and Society from Colonial to Modern Times* (Albuquerque: University of New México Press, 2009).

references to God and heaven, and her position within the church, suggest Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz did not escape the overt religious themes and tones dominating colonial writings.

Following the colonial period, the Mexican children's literary canon spans into the Mexican War of Independence against the Spanish Crown (1810-1821) and its resultant political turmoil and internal power struggles, the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), and the Mexican Revolution against Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship (1910-1920). More than a century of ongoing wars would drastically change the field of children's materials and cultural productions in México by forcing adults from across the political spectrum to create innovative methods for reaching out to children. The struggle for independence in the early 1800s gave rise to materials, including some directed at children, that critiqued the Spanish Crown. Given this political context, many authors of the time used pseudonyms to hide their identity. Even so, they could be found out and charged with crimes against the Crown. Such was the case with Mariano Barazábal, who served time in jail for his fables critiquing colonial politics.⁹² Julie Greer Johnson, in a biography of Barazábal wrote: "By devising dialogue to be spoken by animal characters, [Barazábal] presented his views of man and society, and thus revealed the current problems of Mexican life and aspects of it that needed reform."⁹³ It is important to note that he wrote prior to Mexico's War of Independence from the Spanish Crown so Mexico as a nation-state did not yet exist. Authors would continue to express their politics through fables throughout the war. A notable example was José Rosas Moreno, commonly referred to as

⁹² Peña Muñoz, *Historia de la Literatura Infantil en América Latina*, 46.

⁹³ Julie Greer Johnson, "Mariano Barazábal," in *Dictionary of Mexican Literature*, ed. Eladio Cortés (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 72.

“the childhood poet” of México, who was also persecuted for his political ideology and writing.⁹⁴

In addition to independent books or singled-authored stories for children, a particular phenomenon occurred in the nineteenth century, and continued through the Independence era and the eventual rise of the Mexican revolution. During this time, newspapers directly targeting children began to appear nation-wide. Children's newspapers were common during this era, and can be traced to 18th century Europe with examples such as the *Museum for Young Gentlemen and Ladies*, published in England in 1758. Unlike their European counterparts, however, the children's newspapers published in México during the Mexican Independence era were saturated with cultural nationalism and overt political content. These newspapers included everything from articles and short stories to poetry, biographies of historical figures, and information about current events. Examples include *El Mentor Mexicano*, or *The Mexican Mentor* (1811), *El Diario de los Niños*, or *The Children's Diary* (1839 to 1840), *El Escolar*, or *The Scholastic* (1872), and *La Niñez Ilustrada*, or *The Illustrated Childhood* (1873 to 1875). Since wartime conditions made for unreliable and interrupted school days, these newspapers were also meant to supplement school curriculum.⁹⁵ However, the political turmoil at the time meant that many of these publications did not stay in print very long, most lasting no more than one or two years, with exceptions such as *El Correo de los Niños* or *Mail for Children*, which ran for approximately ten years from 1872 to 1883⁹⁶ (see Figure 3). As

⁹⁴ Rey, 118.

⁹⁵ Rey.

⁹⁶ Scholars dispute the year *El Correo de los Niños* ceased publication. Dates range from as early as 1879 to as late as 1883. It is unclear if these dates refer to the continuous circulation of previously published volumes, or if new volumes were published up through 1883. See Nina Hasegawa, “Imagen del niño y

with political newspapers for adults during this era, several were produced abroad, including California and New York, and then imported into México.⁹⁷ *El Album de los Niños*, or *The Children's Album*, is but one example during the early 1870s. The sheer number and content of these newspapers speaks to the authors' strong desire to keep children aware of the political turmoil surrounding them, and ultimately to contribute to their political socialization within the newly formed nation-state.



Figure 3: Sample page of *El Correo de los Niños*. “Periódicos 1722-1916” (Fondo Reservado). Hemeroteca Nacional de México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, México City.

Post-Revolution, México prioritized the institutionalization of public education through the conceptualization and development of new departments, positions, and organizations invested in the role of children as future citizens. In 1921, the Secretaría de

la niña ideales en la publicación infantil mexicana: *El Correo de los niños* (1872-1879),” *Bulletin of the Faculty of Foreign Studies, Sophia University* 40 (2005): 77-98; Jimena Mondragón Contreras, “Una historia para una infancia: El discurso histórico en publicaciones periódicas infantiles de finales del siglo XIX en México,” *Boletín del IIB* 13, no. 1-2 (2008): 157-77.

⁹⁷ Rey.

Educación Pública (SEP), or Department of Public Education, was formed in an effort to centralize and organize the educational system on a national level.⁹⁸ This new department was led by José Vasconcelos, who was assisted by Gabriela Mistral of Chile. Both of them would prove to be controversial figures, even to this day; Vasconcelos, for his construction of Mexican identity under what he referred to as *la Raza Cósmica*, which romanticized an indigenous past and glorified the mixing of the peoples through colonization, and Mistral, who advocated morality, civility, and strict gender roles within the education of children, and whose influence spread across Latin America. Her text, *Lecturas para Mujeres*, or *Readings for Women*, initially published in 1923, remained common literature in public schools through the 1980s. Evidently, both Vasconcelos and Mistral were pivotal in shaping México's national public education system.

A brief survey of contemporary children's literature published in México and approved for inclusion within public education demonstrates the present-day tensions, contradictions, and anxieties around the socialization of children. Children's literature, as a new literary genre, did not become popularized in México until the 1970s, with México's *Primera Feria del Libro Infantil y Juvenil*, or its *First Book Fair for Children's and Juvenile Literature*.⁹⁹ This was the impetus for future book fairs, and facilitated a growing interest among writers, illustrators, editors, publishers, and distributors. Steering away from western classics, México pushed for the recognition of its own authors and illustrators, and showed particular preference for cultural nationalist histories. A survey of this literature also demonstrates a greater trend toward social realism and common

⁹⁸ See "Historia de la SEP: Creación de la Secretaría de Educación Pública," *Secretaría de Educación Pública*, last modified August 10, 2010, http://www.sep.gob.mx/es/sep1/sep1_Historia_de_la_SEP

⁹⁹ Rey, xxi.

themes such as culture and history. To a lesser degree, some of this literature directly tackles major taboos or marginalized topics such as poverty, violence, death, divorce, indigeneity, immigration, environment, differently abled bodies, sex, and sexuality. Many of these books continue to fall within the category I am labeling as childnormative. Those that fall outside of this category are often produced independently, such as with Patlatonalli's lesbian-themed children's book, *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*.

MELI, LA CUAL TIENE UNA TÍA QUE NO ES MONJITA

As a collective project initiated between author, Cardoza, and illustrator, Sada, *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* fuses their creative talents into a non-conventional, non-normative children's book. I employ non-normativity here as a critique of its presumed counterpart—normativity, including childnormativity. Rather than suggesting that this book counters the normative, I center non-normativity through Meli as representative of a *niña rara*. In doing so I am arguing that normativity is not stationary, but is instead an imagined false constant. As such, this book employs non-normativity, or *rarezas*, within its title, text, illustrations, and design. The clever and imaginative pairing of text and illustrations serves to capture audience attention in a manner that facilitates empathy for the characters and their negotiation of tough topics including gender, sexuality, religion, neoliberalism, border crossing, race, and ethnicity.

Hearing the title of this children's book is enough to catch one's attention. Its head-turning appeal speaks to the uniqueness and sheer genius of its seven-word title. By suggesting the protagonist has an aunt who is not a nun, the reader is drawn into

speculation as to why this may be the case, and to what she might be instead. Perhaps the aunt wanted to be a nun, but was rejected, or expelled from a convent. Maybe she began the process toward becoming a nun, but later changed her mind. Or perhaps the aunt is often mistaken for a nun. Evidently, the aunt is neither a nun nor does she want to be; she is instead a lesbian. The affirmation made by the book's title is quite clear. In the title, *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*, “no” or “not” is italicized and in bold, calling further attention to the indisputable position of said aunt, a position reaffirmed through illustration.

The title is amiably juxtaposed with the cover's illustration, drawing one in immediately with vibrant colors, which lend *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* a simplistic yet astute aesthetic appeal. Viewers are greeted with warm tones of orange, textured with what appear to be thick brush strokes, whose colors give off a soft, inviting ambience resembling that of an intimate, sunny room (see Figure 4). This backdrop is complimented with a sizable, bold and robust, bright red chair positioned in the center. Instead of the thick brush strokes that make up the backdrop, the chair is loosely outlined with what appears to be a thick black pencil or charcoal, giving the illusion of smeared edges. Imitating a lens brought into focus, we move toward the center of the cover, where the thick brush strokes, and then the charcoal edges, crystallize into thin, fine lines. It is within the center, occupying her place as the protagonist of this story, sitting gayly in this oversized chair, that we get our first glimpse into the life of the giddy little girl who will soon be introduced to us by the name of Meli. Unlike the thick strokes and smeared edges surrounding her, she appears perfectly palpable and lucid. She sits patiently, content, with

her arms crossed, relaxed. We are immediately taken in by her wide smile, her rosy cheeks, her pebble eyes, her yellow, triangulated nose, and her short, curly hair that darts outward from her composed circular head. She wears a white-striped, turquoise summer dress and matching turquoise shoes. And although she appears minuscule in size compared to the chair she occupies, I suggest we read this as a provocation in lieu of absence.



Figure 4: Cover of *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*

A conservative reading might suggest that the lesbian aunt is not visible or present on the cover because she is not pictured. Instead, I argue that her absence furthers her presence. In other words, the lesbian aunt is beckoned and interpellated through subtleties in text and image. In addition to the title, Meli's comfort within the chair suggests it may belong to her loving aunt. It appears familiar, intimate, almost womb-like, alluding to her lesbian aunt's mother-like qualities. To Meli's left is a crafty little yellow sheet of paper or cloth with a pink heart in the center, yet another indication of the familial and loving

feelings invoked by this niece-aunt relationship. As a final gesture toward visibility one must note that this book is loosely autobiographical and based on the author's own relationship with her niece. Thus, the "real" queer aunt, Melissa Cardoza, represents herself on the cover when she is credited as author in the far-right bottom corner, along with the illustrator, Margarita Sada.

When turning the cover, one is met with a sea of pink hearts, this time serving as the grid-like backdrop to the inner cover, or frontispiece. As with the connotations derived by these hearts, the paralleled title page provides additional symbolism. Like most children's books, the title page includes the book's title, author, illustrator, and publisher. And like most children's books, each page is also an opportunity to play with imagery via illustrations, colors, or format and design. This book is no exception. At the center is an illustration of a small, green house plant, a small but significant detail that will reappear four additional moments throughout the text, as well as on the back covers of other Patlatonalli children's books. As a young plant, it comes to represent life and growth, foreshadowed by its own particularly widespread shadow. This growth will manifest itself in the plot as both niece and aunt contend with who they are, what they believe, and how they will decide to carry out their lives.

Although one might derive that the main subject position of this children's book after that of the child's is that of the lesbian aunt, one cannot divorce the lesbian subject in this text from the nun the title invokes. These subjectivities are intertwined in deployment, definition, comparison, and absence. More specifically, the perceived characteristics of a nun provide points of comparison for the perceived characteristics of

a lesbian. At times, one subject precludes the other so that one can only exist exclusively as a nun or exclusively as a lesbian. At other moments, both subjects overlap, suggesting a potential slippage or possibility in subject formation and identification. We might ask ourselves, what distinguishing qualities or characteristics make up each identity? And what assumptions make these characteristics a determining factor in who belongs, or does not, in each category? As a first point, the reader might assume that the story will deal strictly with adults. In other words, a child can be neither nun nor lesbian. However, one's spiritual calling can begin at a much earlier age and there may be children who have already decided on their spiritual devotion to the church. Similarly, children should not be assumed to be asexual and it would not be uncommon for a child to be conscious of her attraction to other girls.

This brings me to my second point. Both the nun and the lesbian are gendered and assume a female-bodied cisgender identity.¹⁰⁰ As such, both nun and lesbian are constrained within heteropatriarchal relations of power. Notwithstanding, these body politics leave little room for transgender and gender-queer individuals. A nun, and likewise, a lesbian, must not be married nor have desires to marry. We see this in the text when Meli comments on her aunt's lack of interest in marriage: "No tiene esposo y no quiere tener."¹⁰¹ Similarly, nuns and lesbians are assumed to have no children nor to desire any. Again, Meli interjects with her observations of her aunt's de facto motherhood, which Meli directly benefits from since as she states, "Tampoco tiene hijos, mejor para

¹⁰⁰ The term "cisgender" usually applies to someone whose gender identity coincides with the gender or sex they were assigned at birth.

¹⁰¹ "She does not have a husband, nor does she want one."

mí, así soy su consentida.”¹⁰² This absence of husband and children puzzles Meli such that her initial explanation for her aunt's situation was that she must be a nun: “Como no tiene hijos ni quiere casarse, pensé que mi tía era monjita, pero no.”¹⁰³ Unable to come up with another explanation, Meli simply concludes that no, her aunt is not a nun. It will not be until later in the plot that she discovers her aunt's lesbian identity. While a lesbian identity may explain her aunt's desire toward other women, we can come up with numerous exceptions to the assumptions that lesbians are neither married nor have children. Likewise, there are also exceptions for nuns. A nun, like a religious sister, may have been married in the past so long as the marriage was annulled or she is now widowed. Although nuns and sisters take vows of chastity, this does not mean they are virgins or never gave birth. Nuns may have had children in their past, children who are no longer dependent on them once a woman enters a convent. Finally, the homosocial space of a convent is also worth mentioning. Although convents are historically associated with asexuality, under the guise of sisterhood and homosocial bonding, convents have also allowed the possibility of lesbian exploration and desire. Convents, like same-sex Catholic schools, have been widely documented in their fostering of same-sex or lesbian desire.¹⁰⁴

Although the subject of the nun is invoked throughout the text, nuns are only illustrated once (see Figure 5). This page of *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* highlights

¹⁰² “She also does not have children; better for me, that way I'm her favorite.”

¹⁰³ “Since she doesn't have children and doesn't want to get married, I thought my aunt was nun, but she isn't.”

¹⁰⁴ See Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manaham, eds., *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking the Silence* (Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press, 1985); Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Amie M. Evans and Trebor Healey, eds., *Queer and Catholic* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

the possible tensions and contradictions surrounding the figure of the nun and all she denotes. Despite México's *laico* condition, or the constitutional divide between the state and religion, Catholicism is heavily infused and saturated within the nation's history, politics, and society. Nonetheless, aside from explicit religious doctrines such as biblical stories or materials found within private schools, religion usually constitutes a taboo topic within children's literature. Through subtleties in diction and imagery, both the author and illustrator play with the representation of the nun figure in a manner that is explicit yet sensitive to the possible implications of including such a figure in a children's book. For example, the author chooses the term "monjita" over "monja." By privileging the diminutive form of nun, Cardoza is keeping in line with common Spanish or Latin American's use of the diminutive as a form of endearment. Cardoza's word choice and word order also employ the use of humor in a playful manner. Juxtaposed cleverly with the text, Margarita Sada uses visual techniques to guide the audience through their reading of the nun's figure. Upon initial inspection, we can identify this figure based on her attire. She wears a white coif surrounded by a black veil hiding her hair, a long holy habit, stockings covering the bottom of her legs, and modest shoes. In her hands she grips a rosary with the symbol of a cross dangling at the bottom. Appearing coy, her gaze looks away toward her left, all the while smiling, suggesting that like the other main characters of this story, she is content. I also want to call attention to the yellow "X" carefully drawn over the figure of the nun. As stated by the text below this image, it visually tells us that despite the similarities between Meli's aunt and a nun, her aunt is not one. Although this big yellow bright "X" crosses over much of the length of the page, it is lightened and

appears almost transparent over the actual body of the nun. This subtlety depicts the point made by the text in a manner that does not represent a full rejection for the sake of rejection of what a nun is or may stand for. Ultimately, this presents the possibility of merging lesbian identities with spirituality, or at least, not dismissing such a merger altogether.

Finally, in choosing to include the figure of a nun within *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*, the author was assuming a common understanding of Catholicism or at least, a basic recognition of this figure. Notwithstanding the saturation of Catholicism within Mexican society, at a presentation by Patlatonalli, two panelists shared similar anecdotes. On separate occasions while reading *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* aloud to children, they shared their surprise when a child asked not about the lesbian relationship, or to clarify what was a lesbian, but instead, “qué es una monjita?”¹⁰⁵ These anecdotes reverse possible anxieties over sexuality with those of religion. When a child asks for an explanation of what is a nun they are ultimately asking for a deeper explanation of religion and spirituality. It may have been that religion was not inculcated upon them by their parents or relatives. Or, it may be that they are of a different religion than Catholic or Christian. Regardless of the particular circumstances, these examples push back against a common association made between religion and nation in México, and challenge perceptions of normative Mexican cultural identity.

¹⁰⁵ “What is a nun?”



Figure 5: Illustration of a nun in *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*

The narrative arc culminates as Meli, hiding behind one of her aunt's green house plants, spots her aunt kiss one of her female “friends” on the lips. Although this is perhaps the most explicit representation of lesbian desire, the entire book pays homage to queer, and more specifically, lesbian families, communities, and loving partnerships. Before the aunt comes out to her niece, Meli comments on her aunt's friendships. She poignantly observes, “Tiene muchas amigas mi tía. Eso sí.”¹⁰⁶ These words are coupled with a collage of photographs depicting these friends and their tight-knit circle. Many of the photographs include Meli's aunt, either sharing a glass of wine with one of her friends, or holding another friend in a tight embrace. There are also several individual head-shots of other women. One is draped in a scarf and winter knitted hat, another is dressed in a suit and also wears a hat, while a third wears eyeglasses and tilts her head toward the camera. There are also several photos, we assume of Meli, either as a baby

¹⁰⁶ “My aunt has a lot of female friends. That's for sure.”

sucking on her pacifier, or holding a teddy bear, or hugging her classmates. Interestingly, the family resemblance between Meli and her aunt is such that these photos could just as easily be of Meli's aunt as a child. If we decide, however, that the person depicted is in fact Meli, we see yet another example of her integration into her aunt's social and emotional spheres. This collage alludes to the making of family, or choosing one's family—a common practice within queer communities. Such families often include one's partner. Being the keen observer that she is, Meli notices her aunt's preoccupation with one friend in particular. Meli describes this friend as having funny, red hair and wearing big shoes similar to those worn in agricultural work. It is only until one of these visits by her aunt's red-haired friend that Meli discovers her aunt's attraction toward other women.

Notably, this lesbian desire is not pathologized. Even when Meli's father says about her aunt, “Está loca” or, *she is crazy*, he appears as a caricature of himself. Unlike any of the other people in this book, the father's eyes are mere dots encircled within exaggerated spirals. His tongue hangs out from the side of his mouth and his fingers move in a circle resembling the commonplace gesture for suggesting one is crazy. He is surrounded by a cluster of blurred stars in the background. These elements work collectively to suggest that he may be the one who is crazy or mistaken, not Meli's aunt. Moreover, adjacent to the image of the father, the following page shows Meli and her aunt in a very playful and loving manner. Both are smiling and appear extremely comfortable with each other. Similar emotions will be revealed toward the end of the book. Though initially surprised after seeing her aunt kiss a woman, Meli gasps, “Huuuuu

¿por qué la besa en la boca, tía...?”¹⁰⁷ The aunt responds with the following: “Vení, te voy a contar un secretito. Y me dijo bien suavcito en el oído...Es que es mi novia.”¹⁰⁸ These phrases are paired with an image of Meli's aunt and her girlfriend side by side and enclosed in a big heart surrounded by additional hearts (see Figure 6). Turning the page, the final pages of this book depict the niece-aunt duo hugging and smiling, the assumption being that Meli understands and accepts her aunt's relationship with her girlfriend. This moment also provides a lesson in adult-child power dynamics. Her aunt's revelation is met with an initial pause, during which Meli remembers, “Yo la vi a los ojos y le brillaban mucho como cuando parece que va llorar.”¹⁰⁹ Unlike the perceived normative and hierarchical relationship between a niece and aunt, the aunt's pause and teary eyes indicate she is seeking validation from her niece. However briefly, this moment flips, or queers, the roles of the adult and child, challenging the perceived autonomy of adults and instead, placing the power of approval and validation on the child, in this case, on Meli. Similarly, the reader, assuming a child is the target audience, must make a decision—to accept or not accept the lesbian relationship at hand. Ultimately, it is their choice. As such, children will exercise their power as readers and critical thinkers.

¹⁰⁷ “Ohhhh, aunt, why do you kiss her on the mouth?”

¹⁰⁸ “Come here, I'm going to share a little secret with you. And she whispers softly in my ear...It's just that she is my girlfriend.”

¹⁰⁹ “I looked into her eyes which shined brightly, like when she is about to cry.”



Figure 6. Meli's aunt with her partner

I do want to point out, however, that although this book centers lesbian subjectivity and lesbian desire, the actual term “lesbiana” is never mentioned within the narrative of *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*. The absence of this term may be read as invisibilizing the lesbian or as a cautionary gesture when introducing such subject matter within children's literature. However, I do not believe this to be the case since this text is so overt in its representation of said identity and desire. Most evident, of course, is the image of Meli's aunt kissing her girlfriend on the lips. Additionally, when picking up a book, even a children's book, it is likely one will flip to the back in anticipation of the book's summary, review quotes, or information about the author or illustrator. At the far left-hand corner of the back cover is Patlatonalli's logo, which includes two naked women embracing one another. Following a brief summary of the text along with autobiographical information about the illustrator, Sada, and author, Cardoza, we are also given additional information about Patlatonalli which I will quote at length:

Las Mujeres en Patlatonalli AC, Lesbianas en una Organización Ciudadana, jugamos diversos juegos, creemos en las Niñas y Niños y nos gusta que conozcan y disfruten sus Derechos; entre ellos, el de Vivir en una Diversidad familiar. Todas las familias son Diferentes. Todas las Familias son Sagradas.¹¹⁰

Thus, if the term “lesbiana” is not mentioned within the text itself it is mentioned in the paratextual apparatus of the book. This summary also merges sexuality with other forms of diversity, such as family units, all the while prioritizing children.

The book's handling of lesbian subjectivity and desire however, is limited to adult lesbian subjectivities and desires. Normative societal threads assume children are asexual, and they are often represented as asexual within children's literature. As I have already noted, this book is loosely autobiographical and as such, Melissa Cardoza was mostly invested in telling her current story—as the queer adult aunt. Similarly, the families who are most likely to acquire *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* will be those with queer adults who are attempting to find children's literature that speaks to their realities as queer families. Members of Patlatonalli are aware of this limitation and welcome authors who are willing to take this to task by developing children's literature with explicitly queer children.

The centrality of sexuality in *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* does not take away from the other proposals made by this children's book. This text could have easily been solely a coming out narrative. Instead, the author interweaves a sub-text critique of the United States and neoliberalism. A pivotal moment occurs when Meli bakes a cake for her aunt's birthday. Above the words, “Cumplió años hace poco y le hicimos un pastel

¹¹⁰ “The women of Patlatonalli, lesbians in a civil organization, play diverse games, believe in girls and boys and we like for them to learn and take advantage of their rights; among these, the rights to live within a diverse family. All families are different. All families are sacred.”

con muchísimas velas, es que tiene un montón de años. Yo tengo ocho,”¹¹¹ we see bug-eyed Meli enthralled as she whisks away at an enormous bowl surrounded by a whimsical cloud of flour. This commotion is surrounded by additional baking supplies, including a spatula, eggs and egg shells, a milk carton with the word “leche” on it, a bag of flour with the word “harina,” and butter. Unlike the milk carton and the flour, it has the word “butter” in English. If one did not notice the word in English, the next page directly points it out. The text reads, “Se enojó porque hicimos el pastel con mantequilla gringa y ella prefiere la que hace la gente de aquí, la que compra en el mercado.”¹¹² By differentiating between local products and imported products, the author challenges Meli, and us readers, to consider our role as consumers, and encourages socially responsible consumerism. Interestingly, her contention with imported butter may also be read as a critique against the “guns and butter” model in economics, suggesting the direct correlation between imported goods and militarization, particularly after the implementation of NAFTA.

This critique of imported goods from the United States is paralleled by a similar critique of the imposition of U.S. children's culture and its entertainment industry in Latin America. For example, Melissa Cardoza asks us to reflect on the media conglomerate, the Walt Disney Company. After baking her aunt's birthday cake, Meli begins to fantasize about her own birthday, “Para mi cumple yo quiero ir a Disneylandia.”¹¹³ Her desire to go to Disneyland is met with opposition from her aunt who tells her “que [la] va a llevar a

¹¹¹ “It was her birthday and we baked her a cake with a lot of candles; it's because she is many years old. I'm eight.”

¹¹² “She got upset because we baked the cake with butter from the U.S. and she prefers the one made by the people here, the one she buys at the local market.”

¹¹³ “For my birthday I want to go to Disneyland.”

conocer Guatemala que es más bonito.”¹¹⁴ Meli responds affirmatively with, “Le digo que sí.”¹¹⁵ This exchange between niece and aunt speaks to a number of issues, namely border crossing and México's relationships with both the U.S. and Guatemala, as well as the potential challenges of having this dialogue with children. Discussing border crossing and nation-state relationships also implies an understanding of passports, visas, immigration debates, and the role of tourism. By steering her niece away from Disneyland, the aunt may be telling us something about her socioeconomic or immigration status. Disneyland, located in California within the United States, would be a challenging destination for someone who could not afford to apply for a U.S. tourist visa or who did not meet visa requirements. Furthermore, the cost of flying to California and the actual theme-park expenses are beyond the reach of many in Latin America. If this were strictly an economic issue, we might say that the aunt chose Guatemala instead since it borders México to the south, and would be much more economically feasible. However, being the loosely autobiographical text that it is, I would like to focus on author Melissa Cardoza as a political agent who has publicly advocated against U.S. globalization, as well as in favor of immigrant rights. Originally from Honduras, Cardoza migrated to México, which is where she originally wrote *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*. Thus, it is more likely that Cardoza dismisses Disneyland because of what it represents—U.S. neoliberalism. In this case, neoliberalism manifests itself vis a vis the mass commodification of children's media and consumer products, making Disney characters easily recognized by children around the globe. And although there are currently no Disney amusement parks in Latin

¹¹⁴ “she will take [her] to visit Guatemala instead since it is prettier.”

¹¹⁵ “I say yes.”

America, regular Disney cruise ships, such as the Disney Magic or the Disney Wonder, can be observed sailing off of the various Mexican coastlines.

It is also imperative to reflect on Guatemala's historical and current sociopolitical position to México. As with U.S. travel into México, it is far easier to cross into Guatemala if one is Mexican and is much more difficult to cross into México if one is Guatemalan, or Central American in general. Mostly, this has to do with the influx of migrants from Central America and México's inability or lack of interest in accommodating their needs.

Cardoza's deliberate choice of Guatemala over Disneyland, and Meli's subsequent agreement, need further contemplation. A potential peril in including numerous subplots within the narrative of a children's book is that each will not receive equal degrees of attention. Within *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* we see a bright little girl making sense of her aunt's preoccupations with her world-order. It is quite possible that Meli may not grasp the entirety of her aunt's disapproval of Disneyland nor why this might make her aunt's eyes tear up. Despite this, and perhaps because of it, Meli understands that these things—consumer products, countries, socioeconomic divisions—are important and heart-felt to her aunt. These issues trouble her aunt such that Meli will sacrifice her desire to go to Disneyland by trusting in her aunt that Guatemala is indeed more beautiful. Other readers may not be as easily convinced and may not make the same sacrifice as Meli without an explanation or justification as to why they should go to Guatemala over Disneyland. Evidently, children are highly critical thinkers and readers, and can sift through the material on their own without necessarily requiring major explanations

within the text itself. On the other hand, Disney characters saturate popular culture of México and Latin America such that their dismissal might seem unfounded for a young audience who has grown to esteem the magical world of Disney. This illusion that is sold by Disney has been challenged by numerous scholars on grounds of racism, sexism, ableism, and corporate greed.¹¹⁶ Deciding between Guatemala and Disneyland, then, would be a potential place in a children's narrative to introduce these critiques in a simple and straightforward manner, and could very easily be the main plot-line of a book of its own. Without such a context in *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* it is more likely that if given the choice, most children would choose Disneyland.

Such was the case in a play adaptation of this book. In 2007, school children under the direction of the lesbian organization Hijas de la Luna, chose to reproduce *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* during the Second Annual Sexual Diversity Cultural Festival of Zacatecas.¹¹⁷ In the process of deciding who would play each role, the children collectively decided they would change the lines of the text so that they could go to Disneyland instead of Guatemala. These children read the original children's book, decided to replicate it, and revised it according to their own needs and world views, reflecting their critical engagement with the text. Although I do not seek to discredit their agency, I will problematize it by pointing out that they may have been reacting less

¹¹⁶ See Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells, eds., *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Vincent E. Faherty, "Is the Mouse Sensitive?: A Study of Race, Gender, and Social Vulnerability in Disney Animated Films," *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education* 1, no. 3 (August 2001): 1-8; Mia Adessa Towbin et al., "Images of Gender, Race, Age, and Sexual Orientation in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films," *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 14, no. 4 (2003): 19-44.

¹¹⁷ Marta Neri, personal interview, 2010; "*Tengo una tía que no es monjita*," directed by Julia Robles. See also, *Teatro en los Estados* (2007), 77. www.teatromexicano.com.mx/wiki/anuario2007.pdf

critically to the commercialization and marketing strategies of corporations such as Disney.

As with the theatrical interpretation of *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*, an intertextual analysis of the book's short-film adaptation can help us think through the axioms of race and ethnicity as manifested, or not, within each medium. As previously alluded to, notions of race and ethnicity cannot be understood in México in the same manner that they are understood elsewhere. For example, racial hierarchies and stereotyping in U.S. Children's literature have been well documented in the work of Donnara MacCann.¹¹⁸ Within the children's literature she analyzed, whiteness was often positioned in opposition to and above anyone considered non-white or “of color.” Unlike the particular racial politics of the U.S., however, México's colonial history was one of racial mixing creating what is more commonly referred to today as a mestizo population. This national discourse of mestizaje, however, aims to boost national morale by valorizing an indigenous past—one that allegedly belongs to all Mexicans—all the while refusing to acknowledge the modern nation's own role in slavery and acts of genocide. In demarcating indigenous and black populations into an imagined past, México consequently invisibilizes its current indigenous and black populations from its national imaginary. These communities are only made visible in national discourses of multiculturalism or tokenism. How, then, are characters racialized, or not, within Mexican children's literature? What we can observe is a pattern where characters in children's books are only racialized within books specifically about a particular

¹¹⁸ See Donnarae MacCann, *White Supremacy in Children's Literature: Characterizations of African Americans, 1830-1900* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

community. Otherwise, the majority of characters are, by default, light-skinned mestizos.

In keeping in line with this logic of mestizaje, at first glance all the characters of *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* appear to have the same mestizo, caramelized skin tone. On closer inspection we can observe the subtle racialization, or racial subversion, of Meli and her aunt through a critical reading of hair and diction. Meli and her aunt share the same short, curly, brown hair that darts upward and around their faces. As Ginetta E. B. Candelario has shown, the politics of hair can tell us much about perceived notions of beauty, representation, and power dynamics within societies.¹¹⁹ Within U.S. children's literature, authors have taken it upon themselves to validate different types of hair, including prime examples such as *Happy to be Nappy* written by bell hooks and illustrated by Chris Raschka, and *Hair/Pelitos* written by Sandra Cisneros and illustrated by Terry Ybáñez. Although *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* is not explicitly about hair, the visual representation of it warrants our attention. Within the logics of mestizaje, mestizas are usually represented with straight or wavering hair, whereas tight, curly hair is more often reserved for explicitly racialized characters. These are arbitrary distinctions. What they do tell us, however, is how any given society perceives racial and ethnic phenotypes and the qualities attributed to them. Thus, Meli represents a positive racialized character in the role of protagonist, as does her aunt. In probing further, Meli's aunt is also othered through her use of language. After Meli discovers her aunt and partner, Meli's aunt calls her over, “Veni, te voy a contar un secreto.”¹²⁰ In paying

¹¹⁹ See Ginetta E. B. Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Yeidy M. Rivero, *Turning Out Blackness: Race and Nation in the History of Puerto Rican Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹²⁰ “Come here, I going to tell you a secret.”

attention to diction we see the use of “veni” instead of “ven” where the former is used most commonly in parts of Central America and the latter is most common in México. Moreover, to consider Central America, and Honduras specifically given the author's background, also requires us to consider these regions' racial politics. The particularities of racial formation in Honduras blur the lines between who belongs or does not within black and indigenous groups.¹²¹ Recently, Melissa Cardoza has been publicly organizing and identifying as a “negra lenca,” or someone who is black and part of the indigenous population, Lenca.¹²² Her participation within these movements can be read as a clear indicator of her own identification as a racialized subject within Latin America.¹²³ Thus, although *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* does not explicitly mention race or ethnicity, it is alluded to via subtleties in image and diction.

Unlike the ambiguous racialization of the illustrated characters within the book, the short-film adaptation under the same title, *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*, brings forth a more overtly racialized version of the original. Produced and directed by Gloria Margarita Larios Ponce in 2008, it would be publicly screened at the Universidad de Guadalajara and given the award of “Mejor Cortometraje,” or Overall Best Short-film, by Ruth Padilla Muñoz, director of the Sistema de Educación Media Superior (SEMS). As

¹²¹ See Mark Anderson “When Afro Becomes (like) Indigenous: Garifuna and Afro-Indigenous Politics in Honduras,” *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 12 (2007): 384-413.

¹²² Vinicio Chacon, “Feminista: Honduras es laboratorio de las mas crudas politicas neoliberales,” *Semanario Universidad*, July 19, 2013, <http://aux.semanariouniversidad.ucr.cr/index.php/noticias/pais/10418-feminista-honduras-es-laboratorio-de-las-mas-crudas-politicas-neoliberales.html>

¹²³ Melissa Cardoza also wrote a piece titled “Para Un Nino Garifuna de la Resistencia Hondurena: Chicho,” or “For a Garifuna Boy from the Honduran Resistance: Chicho.” Available on *Radio Internacional Feminista*, it is unclear if this is fiction or nonfiction. This short piece details the resistance of the Garifuna against present day attempts to silence their political struggle, including attempts at murder by burning down the homes of political activists, such as that of Chicho's family. See <http://www.fire.or.cr/index.php/noticias-todas/noticias-actuales/370-honduras-para-un-nino-garifuna-de-la-resistencia->

the winning short-film, it was also distributed within the SEMS school system and shown publicly on Televisión de la UDG, the local university television channel.¹²⁴ Just under seven minutes, this short-film retold the story of Meli and her aunt using hand-held puppets.¹²⁵ The most prominent differences between it and the original children's book include, in addition to the use of puppets, subtle variations of the story line, as well as the inclusion of audio (voice-overs and music). Placing the illustrated version of Meli and her aunt side-by-side with their puppet counterparts reveals the striking differences in the manner in which each is racialized. In addition to having dark curly hair, the puppets are also dark-skinned (see Figure 7). In part, this may have to do with the puppeteers who created them. A family business, this group is invested in representing and giving voice to less visible groups, such as indigenous communities in México. Thus, in their attempt at localizing the narrative they also reverted back to the use of “ven” instead of “veni.” And finally, before the credits, it reads: “La tolerancia es el respeto con igualdad sin distinción de ningún tipo.”¹²⁶ While this was most likely emphasizing sexuality and sexual difference, it could just as easily apply to racial and ethnic differences. In my comparison of each medium I am not suggesting that one—either book or short-film—is necessarily “better” or more complete than another. Instead, I am arguing that each speaks to the contextual realities that created it. As occurred when a group of children adapted the story into a play, each interpretation presents the possibility of localism, depending on particular meanings imagined by the audience.

¹²⁴ See email correspondence “El Mejor Corto, Prepas de la UDG,” Musas de Metal list serve, March 18, 2008.

¹²⁵ This shortfilm is currently available online. Visit: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HS11eJ-nY_0

¹²⁶ “Tolerance is equal respect for everyone without any type of distinction between people.”



Figure 7: Screen shot of short film, *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*

“TODAS LAS FAMILIAS SON SAGRADAS”

Se es política con la convicción y con el cuerpo.

—Norma Mogrovejo¹²⁷

Tengo una tía que no es monjita is best understood within the larger context of México, LGBTT rights, laws, and politics. This children's book would spearhead a larger campaign under the slogan, “Todas las Familias son Sagradas,” or “All Families Are Sacred.” This political project grew out of a need to situate local politics within national ones and came at a critical time in México's sociopolitical history. Here I provide a condensed history of LGBTT and lesbian feminist organizing in México, followed by a closer look at Patlatonalli, and their campaign, “Todas las Familias son Sagradas.”

Strategically invoking the institution of marriage, self-created families, and religion and

¹²⁷ Norma Mogrovejo Aquisé, *Teoría lésbica, participación política y literatura* (México City: Universidad de la Ciudad de México, 2004), 112.

spirituality, this slogan speaks to the manner in which Patlatonalli has woven itself within the fabric of Mexican nationalism while also contesting it.

Historian and lesbian activist Norma Mogrovejo credits the political climate of the late 1960s¹²⁸ as the impetus for the emergence of México's LGBTTT movement. In the context of this political climate, and the rising visibility of queer politics worldwide, the 1970s would formally give rise to México's initial LGBTTT movement. The Frente de Liberación Homosexual de México (FLH) was formed in 1971 in an attempt to organize a public boycott against a Sears' department store in México City after firing a gay employee.¹²⁹ Following similar incidents in México and the U.S., Nancy Cárdenas, a Mexican actress and member of FLH, agreed to an interview on then-México's most popular national television show, *24 Horas*. Hosted by Jacobo Zabłudowski and airing in 1973, Nancy Cardenas would become the first person in México, and Latin America, to publicly come out.¹³⁰ Using her local celebrity stardom to catch the nation's attention, Cardenas discussed discrimination, the lack of laws and rights, and her critiques of the pathologization of non-heteronormative sexualities.¹³¹

Following the initial work of Nancy Cárdenas and the Frente de Liberación Homosexual de México, other organizations and public manifestations began to form.

¹²⁸ The student movement was particularly strong, ending in the student massacre of Tlletelolco which the Mexican government of the time attempted to hide.

¹²⁹ See Ian G. Lumsden, *Homosexuality, Society, and the State in México* (México: Solediciones, 1991) as referenced in Lionel Cantú, Jr., *The Sexuality of Migration: Border Crossings and Mexican Immigrant Men*, eds. Nancy Naples, and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 89.

¹³⁰ Evidently, nonheteronormative sexualities were practiced before then and many were publicly ostracized, such as in the controversial case of Los 41 in 1901. Cardenas case was different because she choose to publicly out herself.

¹³¹ See Norma Mogrovejo Aquise, *Un amor que se atrevió a decir su nombre: la lucha de las lesbianas y su relación con los movimientos homosexual y feminista en América Latina* (México City: CDAHL, 2000), 64-65.

Focusing on the lesbian movement, they emerged as a result of political tensions within the larger gay movement on the one hand, and the larger women's movement on the other. In 1975, a group of lesbians denounced the myth that homosexuality and lesbianism were western concepts in the Declaración de las Lesbianas de México. Then in 1977, women formed the group Lesbos, out of which a splinter organization, Oikabeth, formed in 1978. That same year Lambda formed as a mixed gay and lesbian group, and out of it, in 1986, Marta Nualart and Guadalupe López co-founded a lesbian group in Guadalajara, Jalisco. Initially named Grupo Patlatonalli, and later Lesbianas en Patlatonalli, it remains to this day the longest consecutive-running lesbian organization in México.¹³²

Patlatonalli's decision to publish children's books was initiated by Marta Nualart's personal ties to the author. Marta Nualart described how she was handed a near-finished version of the book by Melissa Cardoza, with whom she was romantically involved.¹³³ Cardoza had written the story after visiting her eight-year old niece, who told her she must be a nun since she did not have children nor was she married. As Cardoza recalls, “Creo que para ella no había más opciones y le causaba sorpresa que fuera una monja que no usara hábitos ni rezara.”¹³⁴ She explained to her niece that she was not a nun but a lesbian, and notes, “...le expliqué que yo tenía novia y que las mujeres podíamos hacer eso. Creo que es muy importante enseñarles a los niños las opciones que tenemos.”¹³⁵ After writing the story, Cardoza asked her friend Margarita Sada to illustrate it, and

¹³² Patlatonalli document, “Lesbianas en Patlatonalli A.C.” Courtesy of Rosa María Laguna Gómez, 2010.

¹³³ Marta Nualart, personal interview, 2010.

¹³⁴ “I think that for her there were no other options and it surprised her that I was a nun who did not use traditional religious attire nor did I pray.” “Publican un libro sobre familias lesbicas dirigido a niños,” *Terra.cl* (February 26, 2005): 1. http://www.terra.cl/actualidad/index.cfm?id_reg=468478&id_cat=306

¹³⁵ “I explained to her that I had a girlfriend and that women could do that. I think it is very important to teach children about the different options we have.”

together they produced the initial prototype of *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*, although an earlier version of the title was *Las amigas de mi tía*.¹³⁶

Although neither Cardoza nor Sada were members of Patlatonalli, the personal ties with the members of the organization, and Cardoza's gifting of the book to them, resulted in a new direction for this organization. Upon receiving the story, Patlatonalli was faced with several conundrums, including basic logistical questions such as, how does one reproduce and distribute a children's book, and what must one do to become a registered editorial press? In the process of answering these and similar questions the organization also worked with Cardoza on a few changes to the book's prototype, including the new title, the addition of “Edicionales Patlatonalli” to the cover, and the inclusion of a short blurb about the organization on the back along with the logos of their two funding sources—Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice and the Global Fund for Women.¹³⁷ As Marta Nualart notes, Patlatonalli had from its inception focused on cultural productions, and at that moment they noticed a void in lesbian-themed literature—none of it was directed toward children. Inspired by *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*, Patlatonalli decided to place a call for other lesbian-themed children's stories with the intent of publishing the winner of this competition. *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* would become the first of a series of books focusing on queer families. Under the slogan of “Todas Las Familias Son Sagradas,” Patlatonalli would begin to foster a new political line of inquiry, this time directly targeting the notion of families and heteronormativity.

¹³⁶ “My Aunt's Friends.” Marta Nualart, personal interview, 2010.

¹³⁷ According to Rosa María Laguna Gómez, each book goes through an editing process where more prototypes are made and then shown to children and literature/language specialists who provide additional feedback.

As Nualart wrote:

Como parte de la sociedad, las familias lésbicas somos una realidad. Nos agrupamos en familias, muy a pesar del esquema heterosexista y monogámico que la propia sociedad conservadora ha intentado perpetuar. Pero insistimos en nuestro derecho a pertenecer en el concepto familiar como insistimos en renombrar y defender nuevas formas de convivencia.¹³⁸

Within their new political goals Patlatonalli stressed not only the adults in lesbian families but the role of children within these. “Lo que pretendemos no es tanto inventar un mundo diferente,”¹³⁹ clarified Nualart, but instead, “hacer que las niñas y niños se sientan cómodos y seguros en ese mundo que ya es diferente para ellas y ellos.”¹⁴⁰ This focus on children as members of a larger lesbian-centered and queer reality would be a first of its kind within all of Latin America.

The children's story competition that ensued after the publication of *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* resulted in a series of queer-themed books to be published by Patlatonalli. This “Convocatoria al Primer Concurso de Cuentos Para Niñas y Niños con el Tema Familias Lésbicas” competition was judged by the core members of Patlatonalli along with three honorary judges. These included Melissa Cardoza, author of *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*; Silvia Eugenia Castellero, poet and literary magazine editor of *Luvina*; and Baudelio Lara, psychologist and art critic at the Universidad de Guadalajara. Patlatonalli received a total of fifteen submissions. In an almost unanimous decision, first place was awarded to Juan Rodríguez Matus for his story, *Las tres Sofías*. This children's

¹³⁸ “As part of society, lesbian families are a reality. We gather as families in spite of the heteronormative and monogamous scheme that mainstream conservative society has tried to perpetuate. But we insist in our right to be a part of the conceptual framework of family just like we insist in renaming and defending new ways of living.”

¹³⁹ “What we intend is not so much to invent a new world.”

¹⁴⁰ “To make sure that girls and boys felt comfortable and secure in this world which is already different for them.”

book was illustrated by Anna Cooke and was published in 2008. It narrates the life of a little girl named Sofía who is from an indigenous community in Istmo de Tehuantepec, in the state of Oaxaca, México. After her father passes away, and her mother completes the traditional mourning process, Sofía witnesses her mother's audacious transformation as she puts on a bright colored dress and marches over to the house of the woman she has always loved. Together, the three of them—Sofía, her mother, and her mother's new partner—become a loving family.

In addition to publishing *Las tres Sofías*, Patlatonalli decided to publish three other stories that caught the judges' attention since, as they noted, “...no existen libros infantiles en nuestro país (y son contados en el resto del mundo) que traten el tema de las niñas y niños que nacen y viven en familias lésbicas.”¹⁴¹ In 2009, Patlatonalli published the late Tatiana de la Tierra's *Xía y las mil sirenas*, also illustrated by Anna Cooke.¹⁴² De la Tierra is best remembered for her latina lesbian poetry and creative writing.¹⁴³ Her children's book described the journey Xía makes from her city near the sea to her new adoptive family—two mothers, a brother, and a pony. Employing elements of surrealism and fantasy, Xía meets mermaids along the way who provide comfort during her transition. In addition to the first three, Patlatonalli is currently in the process of publishing two additional stories that were entered in the original call for publications competition. These were presented at the Primer Coloquio Internacional de Escrituras

¹⁴¹ “There does not exist children's books in our country (and few world wide) that focus on children who are born and live within lesbian families.” Official competition results; Patlatonalli document given to me by Marta Nualart.

¹⁴² There was some controversy over the illustrations as Tatiana de la Tierra disapproved of them.

¹⁴³ Tatiana de la Tierra was originally born on May 16, 1961 in Villavicencio, Colombia and passed on July 31, 2012 in California, U.S. See *For the Hard Ones: A Lesbian Phenomenology/Para las duras: Una fenomenología lesbiana* (Chicago: La Calaca Press, 2002).

Sáficas, hosted by various venues including Voces en Tinta, a cultural cafe and book store, on November 25, 2010. Lorena Mondragón Rocha, author of *Mi mami ya no tiene frío*,¹⁴⁴ read her story aloud. It centered on a little girl and her mother who attend a puppet performance. One of the puppeteers catches their attention and after visiting their home, the little girl observes that her mother is no longer cold since she now has her female friend to keep her warm. Similarly, noted lesbian author Rosamaría Roffiel read her story, *El secreto de las familias*, aloud.¹⁴⁵ According to this narrative, the secret to all happy families is love. This lesson emerges as the reader follows the protagonist of the story, who is teased at school for having two mothers. In a dream she learns that there are numerous forms of families and that in the end, her family is truly special since she has two mommies who love and support her unconditionally.

One of the greatest challenges in publishing these children's books has been the lack of funding. Patlatonalli has applied to numerous funding sources throughout the years and has been awarded grants by the Funding Exchange, MacArthur, Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, Coesida Jalisco, Semillas, Global Fund for Women, as well as smaller government grants from México City.¹⁴⁶ These awards have ranged significantly in amount and duration. As the members noted, most of the major grants come from international funding sources, making the competition pool much larger.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, the lack of local grants speaks to the lack of prioritization by potential

¹⁴⁴ "My Mother Is No Longer Cold." The book was illustrated by Dirce Hernández and published in 2012 by Patlatonalli in collaboration with the Escuela de Administración Pública del Distrito Federal (EAPDF).

¹⁴⁵ "The Secret to Families." This book is forthcoming.

¹⁴⁶ Patlatonalli brochure, "21 Aniversario Patlatonalli AC," 2007.

¹⁴⁷ Martha Neri, personal interview, 2010; Rosa María Laguna Gómez, personal interview, 2010.

Mexican funding sources. Additionally, members of Patlatonalli have noted that the budgets they initially submit cannot account for circumstances beyond their control and the funding they get does not cover all of their project's costs. Given that they lack the personal means to cover the organization's costs, they are often forced to postpone projects until they can find additional funding sources.

Despite their funding troubles, Patlatonalli has focused much of their efforts at strategically distributing the books they were able to print. From presentations at international book fairs to local artisan markets, members of Patlatonalli are constantly thinking of creative ways to promote their work.¹⁴⁸ Although most of the books are available for purchase through their distributor, Bertha de la Maza who owns LesLibros.com, Patlatonalli has also given numerous copies away. Seeking the attention of local governments, in both Guadalajara and México City, Patlatonalli has given copies of the books to select legislators, as well as to then-first lady Marta Sahagun de Fox who was head of “Vamos México” and the Sistema Nacional Para El Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DIF)—two nationwide programs targeting families.¹⁴⁹ Unfortunately, these attempts have not been fruitful since they have yet to receive any responses. Instead, their distribution goals have been most successful when tied to particular localized government projects. In 2010, Patlatonalli, along with other organizations, was funded by a local government initiative of Jalisco. The purpose of the project, “Programa Rescate de Espacios Públicos,” was the “recuperación y mejoramiento físico de espacios públicos y apropiación del espacio público a través de la participación social y comunitaria.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Rosa María Laguna Gómez, personal interview, 2010.

¹⁴⁹ Martha Neri, personal interview, 2010; Rosa María Laguna Gómez, personal interview, 2010.

¹⁵⁰ “recovery and physical improvement of public spaces and the appropriation of public space through

Through a series of workshops around Tlajomulco, Jalisco, members of Patlatonalli discussed identities, self-empowerment, private and public spaces, and politics. These workshops served several purposes. Although they were not directly targeting a lesbian audience, much of their content was lesbian focused. They presented themselves openly as lesbianas feministas and this had a direct impact on the communities they worked with. By stating their politics and intentions openly and from the beginning they gained the trust and confidence of their workshop participants, which included entire families at times. The workshop facilitators were also amazed at the reception they received about their book series. Patlatonalli, in turn, donated copies of the books to workshop participants as well as to all the school's library collection's where the workshops were held.¹⁵¹ This was also an opportunity for Patlatonalli to work with and build coalition with other like-minded groups, like Sedesol, who are not necessarily queer-centered.¹⁵²

Aside from the public schools where they have worked, Patlatonalli has been unable to distribute its book series to other local schools.¹⁵³ They have, however, had success with individual school teachers. Most successful on a local level, independent teachers have taken it upon themselves to introduce their students to these children's books and queer themes. Currently Patlatonalli is also working on a teacher's guide, which would accompany the book series. Similarly, this book series has also made an impact on individuals within the larger, international book distribution circuit. They are currently available for purchase in Spain and can be checked out of several public

social and community participation.” Tlajomulco. Visit <http://www.tlajomulco.gob.mx/index.php?pag=noticia229>

¹⁵¹ Rosa María Laguna Gómez, personal interview, 2010.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Rosa María Laguna Gómez, personal interview, 2010.

libraries in New York City.¹⁵⁴

Perhaps not surprisingly, Patlatonalli's children's books have traveled internationally within the non-profit circuit. Given that they were funded by major international foundations, such as the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice and the Global Fund for Women, these granting organizations have taken a particular interest in the progression of Patlatonalli's campaign, "Todas Las Familias Son Sagradas." Ana María Enriquez, former director of the Global Fund for Women mentioned at the Women's Funding Network conference in 2005 that she and her husband read *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* to their child every night.¹⁵⁵ The book also appeared on the cover of the Astraea's 2005 newsletter, *Threads* (see Figure 8). In a segment on México, former Executive Director Katherine T. Acey commented, "Patlatonalli's wave of social change has indeed transcended sexual orientation, as well as borders."¹⁵⁶ The organization's transnational mobility can also be attributed to the global political climate in México they must work in. As Astraea notes:

Patlatonalli and other progressive organizations in México work in the face of a hostile climate that is buoyed by a cadre of international support. In 2005, México City was the site of the annual conference for the World Congress of Families—a powerful right-wing and fiercely homophobic, anti-abortion, anti-contraception, and anti-sex education entity. Over three-thousand delegates from around the world gathered to discuss the topic, "The Natural Family and the Future of Nations: Growth, Development and Freedom."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Marta Nualart, personal interview, 2010.

¹⁵⁵ *Threads*. Astraea Newsletter (2005), 2.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

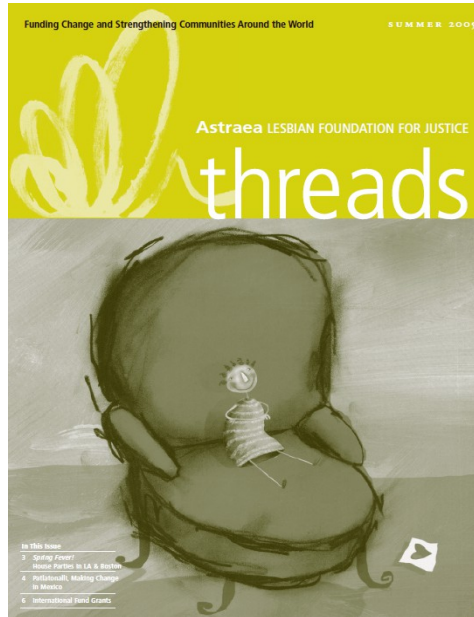


Figure 8. Cover of *Astraea Threads* (Summer 2005)

Similar events have been held on a local level within major cities across México. The notion of “family,” then, is one that remains very much at the heart of national discourse.

* * * * *

*Para las mujeres que vivimos desde la disidencia sexual, la realidad de la exclusión y la discriminación diaria debida sólo al hecho de que nuestra cotidianidad no se construye y se vive en torno a los hombres, resulta contundentemente evidente.*¹⁵⁸

—Enoé Margarita Uranga Muñoz¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ “For the women who live their lives from the position of sexual dissidence, the reality of exclusion and daily forms of discrimination solely based on how we choose to exist daily, surrounded by men, is strongly evident.”

¹⁵⁹ “Introducción” in *1er Foro Legislativo por los Derechos Humanos de las Lesbianas en México*, Comité del Centro de Estudios para el Adelanto de las Mujeres y la Equidad de Género (June 25, 2010): 11.

As the first openly lesbian state legislator of México, Enoé Uranga has been charged with multiple obligations from all sides of the political spectrum. Some may argue that the simple fact she was elected speaks to the possibilities of change within México. However, on a more cautionary note, queer inclusions within national discourses have also signaled the ascendancy of neoliberal politics. Furthermore, Enoé Uranga's election, coupled with national debates around same-sex marriage, and countless hate crimes against LGBTTT members, speaks to very real contradictions in México. It is within these contradictions that projects like Patlatonalli's "Todas las familias son Sagradas," come into fruition. This book series in general, and *Tengo una tía que no es monjita* specifically, challenge us to think outside of traditional standards of normative children's literature. The book also offers a glimpse into contemporary anxieties surrounding children and childhood. And more importantly, it tells us how select pockets of individuals—be it the author, the illustrator, the editors, or the audience—construe their own utopias and imagined society through niñas raras such as Meli.

CHAPTER III

DORA THE (GLOBAL) EXPLORER: TRESPASSING ACROSS TV SCREENS NEAR YOU

*If you're a nice person, and a good friend,
and you're smart and adventurous you can
reach anybody. You can change the world.
And I really believe that Dora is changing
the world.*

-Rosie Pérez, Actress¹⁶⁰

*The children around the world are relating
to Dora because she's a child like them.*

-Mariana Díaz-Wionczek, Nickelodeon¹⁶¹

2010 marked a monumental year for Nickelodeon's television show, *Dora the Explorer*. In celebration of its tenth year anniversary, Nickelodeon aired a special one-hour television episode titled “Dora's Big Birthday Adventure,” followed by a specially commissioned anniversary documentary, *Dora, the Girl Heard 'Round the World*, featuring guest stars such as Shakira and Rosie Pérez. That year, Nickelodeon also sponsored *Dora the Explorer* events across the United States. In Los Angeles, for example, Salma Hayek Pinault was photographed “reading an interactive Dora the Explorer storybook about education and getting ready for school to a group of L.A.-area preschoolers,” at an event that kick-started the school readiness campaign, “Beyond the

¹⁶⁰ *Dora, the Girl Heard Around the World*, Nickelodeon Anniversary Documentary, 2010.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Backpack,” sponsored by Nickelodeon and the Children's Defense Fund.¹⁶² According to a Nickelodeon press release, Dora was also scheduled to make a personal appearance “at local community and multicultural events around the country including all five Junta Hispana festivities in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Miami.”¹⁶³ Nickelodeon even orchestrated a Dora flash mob, choosing over sixty children and youth to sing and dance at New York City's Times Square.¹⁶⁴ Nickelodeon staged this performance in front of a huge billboard above Toys R Us with an image of Dora—well over twenty five feet tall—leaning over her birthday cake as she is about to blow out her candles. The birthday cake read “Dora's Big Birthday Adventure,” and the first rendition of this advertisement announced, “Tune in Sunday, August 15th at 8pm/7c only on Nickelodeon,” whereas the second rendition—after the birthday episode aired—read, “Available NOW on DVD” (see Figure 9).



Figure 9: *Dora the Explorer* advertisement at New York City's Toys “R” Us. *Dora the Explorer* is a registered trademark of Viacom International Inc.

¹⁶² Nickelodeon, “*Dora the Explorer*, 10th Year Anniversary Launch,” Promotional booklet, 2010.

¹⁶³ Press Release, “Nickelodeon Launches *Dora the Explorer*'s Landmark Tenth Anniversary with 'Beyond the Backpack' Pro-Social Campaign to Champion School Readiness,” Nickelodeon, March 2, 2010.

¹⁶⁴ This event was recorded and uploaded online. It was posted by user NinaWagaMojares on August 22, 2010. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1m3uqvLLh8>

That year, *Dora the Explorer* won two Imagen Awards, meant to encourage and recognize the positive portrayals of Latinas and Latinos in the media.¹⁶⁵ The first award was for the category of “Best Children's Programming,” winning against *Handy Manny* (Disney Channel), *Go Diego, Go!* (Nickelodeon) and *El Perro y El Gato* (HBO). The second award was for the category of “Best On-Air Advertising.”¹⁶⁶ Nickelodeon's “Dora 10th Anniversary Campaign” beat out unlikely competitors, such as FOX Deportes “All Leagues.” These awards offer an important foundation for my discussion of *Dora the Explorer* as they point to three critical elements that marked Dora's success: programming, marketing, and consumption.

I situate this discussion of Dora within the larger discourse of U.S. bilingual children's television, and U.S. immigration debates by asking: (1) What can children's television reveal about U.S. bilingual and immigration politics?, and (2) can Dora in *Dora the Explorer* be read as a *niña rara*, and if so, within what context? I argue that unlike Meli or Alex, Dora weaves in and out of the *niñas raras* category so that her status as a *niña rara* fluctuates across time and space. Moreover, she often exists as both a *niña rara* and not a *niña rara*. Given the limitless possibilities, I will primarily focus on Dora within the U.S. since she can no doubt be read differently outside of the U.S.—against the backdrop of changing forms of U.S. structures of dominance and difference. Such a distinction is necessary in order to comprehend how, even within the U.S., Dora both perpetuates childnormativity and challenges it. In light of this apparent paradox, my

¹⁶⁵ “Press Release,” *The Imagen Foundation*, 2011. See <http://www.imagen.org>

¹⁶⁶ “Winners of 26th Annual Imagen Awards Announced Honoring Latinos in Entertainment,” *The Imagen Foundation*, 2012. See <http://www.imagen.org>

discussion of Nickelodeon's *Dora the Explorer* will prioritize an in-depth examination of her initial success (e.g. curriculum and pan-Latina marketing of girlhood), and her popular icon status (e.g. 10th year anniversary and tween version), alongside her appropriation within U.S. immigration debates, in order to identify the nuances of Dora's character within a *niñas raras* transborder framework.

CONTEXTUALIZING BILINGUAL CHILDREN'S TELEVISION IN THE U.S.

In order to fully comprehend the nuances of Nickelodeon's *Dora the Explorer*, and Dora's rise as a popular icon, I first unpack bilingual children's television within the historical context of U.S. children's television, and television more broadly. Media scholar Raymond Williams articulates that “the invention of television was no single event or series of events,” depending instead on a complex network of “inventions and developments in electricity, telegraphy, photography and motion pictures, and radio.”¹⁶⁷ Williams traces the origins of these technologies as far back as 1875, however television as we understand it today came into fruition through technological advances of the 1920s, following the invention of sound films, or “talkies.”¹⁶⁸ According to Williams, this delay was in part due to the lack of social investment in combining all of the elements necessary for television despite the fact that “a system of television was foreseen, and its means were being actively sought.”¹⁶⁹ In 1925, television had an historically exceptional

¹⁶⁷ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 7.

¹⁶⁸ Consider the history of the following: electricity (Benjamin Franklin in 1752; popularized in late 1800s by Thomas Edison, others); electronic telegraphy (1800s); photography (1820s); black and white silent motion pictures/films (1860s/70s); motion picture projector (1880s); radio (1890s/early 1900s); sound films or “talkies” (1920s).

¹⁶⁹ Williams, 10.

year. That year, multiple attempts were made around the world to create technology that would capture and transmit moving images along with sound. Throughout the late 1920s and 1930s those invested in the technology behind television experimented widely with these new forms of televising sound and image. Like the technology it relied on, television programming was not yet standardized, and varied widely by geographic location. Thus, although television sets became commercially available in the 1920s, they were mostly purchased by commercial businesses or governments, not private homes.

Programming directed at children, or intended for both adult and child audiences, began in the United States during the late 1940s with radio adaptations. In the 1920s, before television programming, children could listen to bed-time stories narrated over radio. With the new television platform, producers adapted radio shows for new parameters and challenges, such as the role of image. No longer solely about voice and imagination, the medium now asked audiences to listen while their imaginations were guided by images. One such adaptation occurred in 1947 with the premier of the *Small Fry Club*, which include specialized segments such as “Movies for Small Fry,” from 1947-1951. It originally began as a children's radio show hosted by Bob Emery, referred to by his loyal fans as “Big Brother Bob.”¹⁷⁰ That same year, Burr Tillstrom received his own variety show program on television. *Junior Jamboree* aired locally in Chicago in 1947, and then changed its name to *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* (KFO) in 1948. It aired on NBC from 1949 to 1954, and then moved again, this time to ABC, where it stayed until 1957. A third show, *Howdy Doody*, also aired in 1947. It was created and produced by E.

¹⁷⁰ Jeffery Davis, *Children's Television, 1947-1990* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1995), 175.

Roger Muir on NBC until 1960. While it ran the longest of the above three examples, it was aired live, which meant that it could not be repeated through syndication and was therefore less profitable for the major networks.¹⁷¹ A handful of more localized and less popular shows also aired during the late 1940s including *Juvenile Jury* by Jack Barry, and *Judy Splinters*, starring female ventriloquist Shirley Dinsdale.¹⁷²

By the 1950s, the standard schedule for children's programming shifted; such programs were shown on weekday mornings instead of in the evening or at bedtime,¹⁷³ giving rise to what we now understand as Saturday morning cartoons for children. Two important creations involving mice also emerged during the 1950s: Disney's television series *The Mickey Mouse Club*, and the Warner Brothers' Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies, whose popular cast of characters included Speedy Gonzalez (see Figure 10). Mickey Mouse and Speedy Gonzalez are especially significant figures for my own analysis because the former became synonymous with white American values whereas the latter is associated with racial and ethnic stereotypes of Latina/os in the U.S. The two also represent a version of the “good boy/bad boy” dichotomy within childnormative media.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Paul Wells, “Tell Me about Your Id, When You Was a Kid, Yah!": Animation and Children's Television Culture,” in *Small Screens: Television for Children* (New York: Leicester University, 2002), 61-95.

¹⁷² Davis, 249.

¹⁷³ Such as *Captain Kangaroo*

¹⁷⁴ See William Nerriccio, *Tex{t}-Mex: Seductive Hallucinations of the “Mexican” in America* (Austin: University of Texas, 2007); Chon Noriega and Ana M. López. *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996).

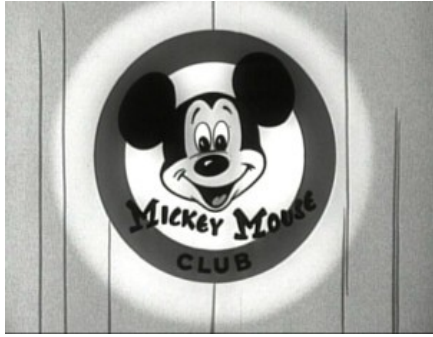


Figure 10a: Original Mickey Mouse Club logo



Figure 10b: Speedy Gonzales animated feature film

The 1960s ushered in many of the popular cartoons and children's media still watched to this day. These include classics such as *The Flintstones* (1960), *The Bugs Bunny Show* (1960), *Yogi Bear* (1961), *The Bullwinkle Show* (1961), *The Alvin Show* (1961), *Hot Wheels* (1961), *The Jetsons* (1962), *The Adventures of Jonny Quest* (1964), *Gilligan's Island* (1964), *Tom and Jerry* (1965), *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (1966/67), *George of the Jungle* (1967), *Archie* (1968), *Scooby-Doo* (1969), and *Hey, Hey, It's Fat Albert* (1969). By the late 1960s, popular superheroes had emerged, such as *Batman* (1966), *Superman* (1966), *The Lone Ranger* (1966), *Aquaman* (1967), *The Fantastic 4* (1967), and *Spiderman* (1967).¹⁷⁵

Sesame Street, which premiered in 1969 on the PBS network as a production of the Children's Television Workshop, deserves particular attention. As a way to appease the demands of the civil rights movements of the 1960s, *Sesame Street* was created with funding from the U.S. federal government, the Carnegie Corporation, and the Ford Foundation (see Figure 11). The original purpose of the show was to subsidize early

¹⁷⁵ Davis, "Appendix B: Landmarks in Children's Television," 249-262.

childhood education with public broadcast educational television.¹⁷⁶ It was also meant to be representative of urban, multicultural, and working class communities. Providing a fresh reading of *Sesame Street*, Hendershot details how the show itself, as well as researchers who study its effects, have positioned the show in opposition to “bad” children's programming; however, “good (uncensorable) and bad (censorable) programs are not binaries but rather mutually defining.”¹⁷⁷ Hendershot's critiques of *Sesame Street* pay attention to the program's emphasis on cognition as a “leveler of social differences.” She argues that the show was federally funded because the costs of funding it would be lower than instituting federal preschool programs; not only was it cheaper, it was reusable.¹⁷⁸ This reusability made *Sesame Street* an inexpensive educational commodity not only within the U.S., but globally. Here Hendershot is interested in not only how the show traveled globally, but also how researchers have conceptualized its global success. *Sesame Street's* foreign content is the result of the program's development of “foreign versions of itself.”¹⁷⁹ Most troubling for Hendershot, researchers have tested the reception of the show in countries worldwide without any discussion of the implications of its exposure. *Sesame Street* continues to run on the PBS Kids network, making it the longest running children's show in the US. Many would agree it set the standard for children's entertainment—making it extremely popular amongst educators and researchers.

¹⁷⁶ Yeidy Rivero has described the history of the 1972 Emergency School Aid Act and the U.S. Office of Education Emergency School Assistance Act-TV Program (ESAA-TV) as it relates to *Sesame Street* and bilingual children's educational programming. See Yeidy Rivero, “Interpreting Cubanness, Americanness, and the Sitcom: WPBT-PBS's *¿Qué pasa U.S.A.? (1975-1980)*,” in *Global Television Formats: Understanding Television Across Borders*, eds. Tasha Oren and Sharon Shahaf (London: Routledge, 2011), 90-107.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

Nonetheless, warns Banet-Weiser, “Even in a show that was specifically created to address the politics of racism in the United States, *Sesame Street*'s political identity needs to be made palatable for a broad audience.”¹⁸⁰ She goes on to declare that “it is this kind of colorblind ideology that structures much of children's television—in fact, creators of kids' TV often create characters that are animals or aliens precisely in order to sidestep the problematic issue of racial representation...”¹⁸¹ In the case of *Sesame Street*, they use Muppets, and even these do not escape racialized, gendered, and sexualized politics.



Figure 11: Early *Sesame Street* cast. *Sesame Street* is a registered trademark of Sesame Workshop.

Dovetailing *Sesame Street*, bilingual (English/Spanish) children's television emerged in the early 1970s with programs such as *Carrascolendas* (1970) and *Villa*

¹⁸⁰ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 146.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Alegre (1973).¹⁸² Both were live-action shows centered around Latina/os in the U.S., incorporating English and Spanish in addition to cultural knowledge and experiences. In both, children, youth, and adults intermixed with surrealist or imaginary realities like wizards, oversized dolls, or speaking lions. Aida Barrera has written at length about her experience producing and starring in *Carrascolendas*. She also detailed her constant efforts to gain financial support for the show, as well as the challenges of working with other amateur actors. Barrera was responsible for much of the show's content, relying on her personal experience. She recalls, "As I encountered the challenge of creating a television program for which I had no preconceived patterns, I relearned those familiar rhythms, sayings, and riddles of my childhood and put them into different dramatic and visual settings."¹⁸³ Barrera also gained invaluable experience with television production, noting, "I quickly learned that television is essentially a dramatic medium, and unlike a presentation made to an audience that is physically present, television depends on dramatic and theatrical techniques to retain an unseen public."¹⁸⁴ Overall, both *Carrascolendas* and *Villa Alegre* were significant in their representations of Latina/os on television.

Like Barrera, others would also gain access to television production by working on children's content. Given the relatively low production value of children's television, at least initially, it provided Latinas and Latinos a way "in." Many notable Latina/o actors, directors, and production crew members, either began in children's media or used

¹⁸² See Aida Barrera, *Looking for Carrascolendas: From a Child's World to Award-Winning Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

this space to fine-tune their skills. Examples include Moctesuma Esparza's role as executive producer in the formerly mentioned *Villa Alegre*, as well as Jesús Salvador Treviño's executive producer role in *Infinity Factory*—also live action but with a more multicultural cast.¹⁸⁵ Other Latina/os worked on specific episodes or certain themes within a show. Such was the case with Sylvia Morales who directed segments of *Sesame Street* for a Cinco de Mayo special.¹⁸⁶

Unlike the previously mentioned, low-budget productions, other shows such as *Hot Wheels* were sponsored financially by major toy companies. As a result of protests from parents, the FCC intervened in 1969 and then again in 1971, stating that, “Network executives might have seen children’s shows as little more than the padding between ads, but shows could not actually be designed to advertise toys.”¹⁸⁷ This led to the proliferation of educational children’s media until the Reagan administration overturned the 1971 FCC ruling. FCC deregulation created another boom in children’s television except it was once again saturated with an emphasis on toy consumerism, thereby lowering the educational standards of children’s media. Consequently, the 1980s is best remembered as the era of children's television derived from toy productions. Examples include *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* (1983), *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (1983), *ThunderCats* (1984), *The Transformers* (1984), *She-Ra: Princess of Power* (1985), *The Care Bears* (1985¹⁸⁸), *My Little Pony 'n Friends* (1986), *Popples* (1986), and

¹⁸⁵ Noriega, 140.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 140-141.

¹⁸⁷ Heather Hendershot. *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids*. (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 9.

¹⁸⁸ *The Care Bears* first appeared in a TV special in 1983 and then again in 1984, but wouldn't become a regular television series until 1985.

Pound Puppies (1986). By contrast, the 1990s gave rise to animated cartoons with more mature content, such as *The Simpsons* (1990), *South Park* (1997), and *Futurama* (1999). These animated cartoons blurred the lines between children's animated media and young adult or adult's animated media.

While the FCC was regulating children's media within the U.S., an important book criticizing Disney's Donald Duck began to circulate in Latin America. Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart originally published *How to Read Donald Duck* in 1971 amidst ongoing political tensions in Chile, just before the Pinochet takeover. Their text criticized Disney's role in fueling conservatism in Chile, especially through its use of comic strips, which were more accessible to a wider audience. Furthermore, Disney outsourced production of its Donald comics to local editors who would rewrite the comics to reflect their political ideologies. *How to Read Donald Duck* is unique not only for its claims, but also because it blurred the lines between the corruption and violence found in the realm of politics and the “innocence,” or childnormativity, that characterizes the realm of children's media—something *Dora* would eventually do as well.

NICK'S NICHE: MARKETING CHILDREN'S AGENCY

Nickelodeon emerged in 1977—originally as Pinwheel—at a moment when the spotlight was on children's media and parental concerns over television consumption. Like the early television shows of the 1940s, Nickelodeon attempted to be both kid and adult friendly, and would pride itself in reaching inter-generational audiences. It would do so by branding itself as the children's television network that fostered children's

empowerment.

Nickelodeon has expanded considerably since its fruition, emerging as “arguably one of the most successful cable channels in history and [working] aggressively to claim and maintain its position and image as the preeminent distributor of television programs for young children, tweens, and teens in the United States.”¹⁸⁹ Its preschool-aged programming truly drew attention with the success of *Blue's Clues*. This show premiered in 1996 and would emphasize an approach based on building comprehension skills, cues for attention, transitions and montage, attention inertia, and audience participation.¹⁹⁰ Through this model, Nickelodeon would learn several lessons about creating successful preschool-aged programming. Most importantly, the popularity of their programming emerged from the power of repetition and audience interactivity. Nickelodeon's marketing professionals would also learn to thoroughly research and test the network's shows in front of a live audience of children before they aired.

When compared to *Sesame Street* or the Disney channel, less scholarship exists on Nickelodeon. Early Nickelodeon scholars have taken a historical approach, documenting how the company was created and what contributed to its growing success. The 1971 FCC ruling played a critical role in establishing Nickelodeon's place as a valid producer of children's educational media. Therefore, “Nickelodeon succeeded because the product-based shows, which owed their existence to deregulation, had drastically lowered the standards of children’s TV. There was a vacuum waiting to be filled.”¹⁹¹ Sandler further

¹⁸⁹ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁹⁰ Heather Hendershot, *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids*. (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 255.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

elaborates on the network's ability to capitalize on the “Saturday morning” through merchandise sales.¹⁹² Additionally, as Murray points out, Nickelodeon shifted its attention from children's network programming to programming for adults, such as “Nick at Nite” and “TV Land.” This shift into prime-time meant capitalizing on adult nostalgia and the “child within” through reruns of “classics.” However, the epistemological and pedagogical challenges, according to Murray, become that “while the channels have helped familiarize a new generation of viewers with 'classic' programs that they might not otherwise have had the opportunity to see, they also recontextualize them in a manner that strips them of their original historical and cultural meanings.”¹⁹³ Other scholars, like Pecora, have approached Nickelodeon primarily as a leadership model for diversity.¹⁹⁴ Because children's programming was generally seen as less prestigious, it was mostly associated with women and communities of color. Interestingly, the role of women in senior level positions within children's programming also meant that Nickelodeon was able to cast “girls as leads, without losing the audience of boys—as industry wisdom predicted would happen.”¹⁹⁵

Thus, in 2000, and nearly thirty years after *Carrascolendas*, Dora Márquez—seven years old, pan-Latina,¹⁹⁶ bilingual in both English and Spanish, and adventurous—debuted as the protagonist of her own Nickelodeon animated television show, *Dora the*

¹⁹² Kevin S. Sandler, “A Kid's Gotta Do What a Kid's Gotta Do’: Branding the Nickelodeon Experience.” in *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids*, edited by Heather Hendershot. New York: New York University Press, 2004.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 73.

¹⁹⁴ Hendershot, 17.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 121.

¹⁹⁶ Nickelodeon representative, Mariana Díaz-Wionczek has confirmed that Dora is both pan-Latina and an American child.

Explorer. Interestingly, this occurred only one year after the Cartoon Network decided to cease airing Speedy Gonzalez (1999) due to critiques about its ethnic stereotyping. Known for her popularity amongst preschool-aged children, *Dora the Explorer* quickly reached mass media stardom both in and outside the United States. The overwhelming success of this television series directed at preschoolers would spawn a plethora of Dora consumer products, including DVDs, children's books, and endless variations of toys. Her marketing success became the impetus for its spin-off show, *Go, Diego, Go!* (2005), and *Ni Hao, Kai-Lan*¹⁹⁷ (2007). Other networks followed suit, producing their own bilingual or Latina/o themed shows, including PBS's *Maya and Miguel* (2004), and Disney's *Handy Manny* (2006) and *Special Agent Oso* (2009).

DORA, MORE THAN AN EXPLORER, AN INTERACTIVE FRIEND

Dora's curriculum model is critical in comprehending her initial success. In what follows, I detail the show's design, characters, curriculum, testing, and subsequent developments in order to demonstrate how Dora went from “just an idea” to a cultural icon. In doing so, she shifted children's attention away from others, like Barbie. According to Nickelodeon, the “inspiration for the name Dora Márquez was *exploradora*, the Spanish feminine word for 'explorer,' and the acclaimed writer Gabriel García Márquez.”¹⁹⁸ Popular legend has it that the original idea for a show with a Latina heroine emerged after one of the creators attended a conference on the lack of Latina/o visibility

¹⁹⁷ Aired from 2007 to 2011; it was originally produced in Canada, focusing on emotions and effective communication skills; the show featured Kai-Lan, a Chinese American, and was canceled due to of poor ratings.

¹⁹⁸ Nickelodeon, “*Dora the Explorer*, 10th Year Anniversary Launch,” Promotional booklet, 2010.

in the media.¹⁹⁹ *Dora the Explorer* premiered on Nickelodeon on August 14, 2000, and was “instantly ranked as the number-one rated preschool show on commercial television.”²⁰⁰ Five years later, in 2005, a massive inflatable Dora debuted in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade as the first Latina character.²⁰¹ According to Nickelodeon, approximately three hundred people work on *Dora the Explorer*, and it takes over an entire year to produce a single episode of the show—no easy feat. Let's explore why!

Design

Created by Chris Gifford, Valerie Walsh, and Eric Weiner, *Dora the Explorer* is “a program built on pedagogical research concerning the use of television to educate preschoolers.”²⁰² As suggested by the show's title, Dora often goes on quests, teaching her audiences about new places, animals, languages, and cultures. In each episode, Dora and her friends must complete a task or solve a problem. Episodes follow a basic narrative pattern in which Dora and her friends pass through three main obstacles before reaching their final destination. Each episode is also designed to interact with viewers so that, for example, Dora may ask her audience a question, which will be followed by a pause, allowing her viewers to respond. A blue arrow serves as a computer cursor and “clicks” on the correct answer, “thus encouraging a kind of active engagement on the part of the preschool-aged audience.”²⁰³

¹⁹⁹ Referenced in popular media cover stories of Dora's origins, and confirmed by Nickelodeon's staff. See Mariana Díaz Wionczek, personal interview, January 7, 2010.

²⁰⁰ Nickelodeon, “*Dora the Explorer*, 10th Year Anniversary Launch,” Promotional booklet, 2010.

²⁰¹ Nickelodeon, “*Dora the Explorer*, 10th Year Anniversary Launch,” Promotional booklet, 2010.

²⁰² Banet-Weiser, 165.

²⁰³ Ibid.

Characters

As for the main character herself, Dora is curious, courageous, and highly intelligent. She is always friendly, optimistic and energetic, and she can usually be spotted wearing a bright pink shirt, orange shorts, yellow socks, white shoes, and a beaded yellow bracelet with a blue flower attached at the center. She is notorious for her short, straight dark brown hair cut at shoulder's length and accompanied by bangs, along with her bright, brown eyes, and light-brown skin. She is also usually spotted sporting her purple backpack—one of her many friends who accompanies her on her adventures. In the U.S. Dora is bilingual, speaking mostly in English while teaching others around her Spanish. However, outside of the U.S., Dora speaks the native language where she is being aired, while almost always teaching English.²⁰⁴

Dora is always accompanied by her loyal friends (see Figure 12). Boots is named after the pair of red boots he always wears and is voiced by Harrison Chad. As Dora's best friend, this little monkey goes everywhere she does and helps in all her missions. She is also accompanied by Map (voice by Marc Weiner), and Backpack (voice by Sasha Toro). Map guides Dora on her quests, telling her where to go next, whereas Backpack provides valuable items depending on her particular needs. Most episodes also include Swiper, the sneaky fox who is constantly trying to swipe items away from Dora and her friends. Other characters weave in and out of the series, such as her cousins Daisy, Diego, and Alicia, and animal characters such as Tico the Squirrel, Isa the Iguana, and Benny the

²⁰⁴ “Dora teaches Spanish in the U.S., Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Ireland, but teaches English in every other market around the world.” See “Did You Know?,” Press Materials, Nickelodeon, 2010.

Bull.²⁰⁵ In addition to Map and Backpack, the series is heavily saturated with anthropomorphic characters such as Arco Iris and Roberto the Robot. Many of the characters are also directly related to Dora so that we get a sense of her wider family network, which includes her parents, her grandmother, her twin siblings, her cousins, aunts and uncles.

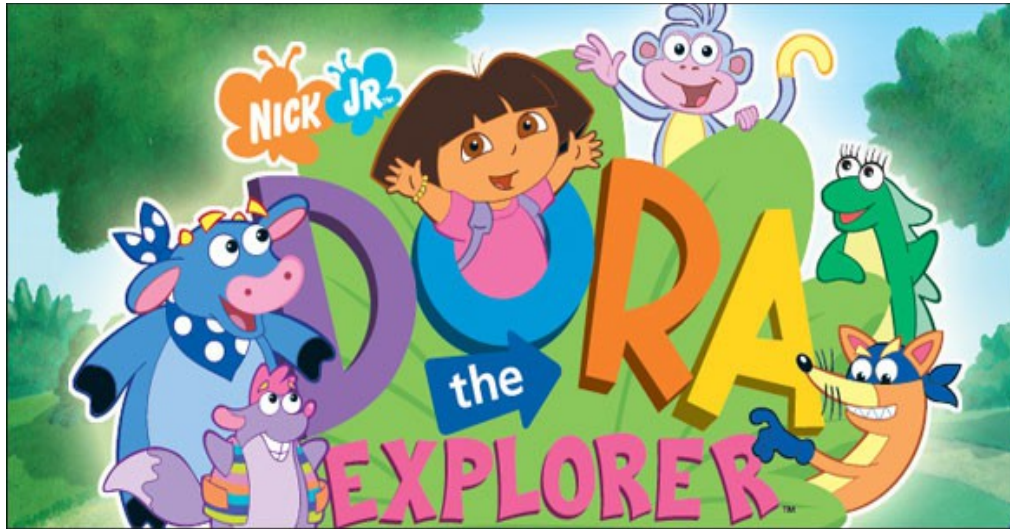


Figure 12: Dora the Explorer and friends. *Dora the Explorer* is a registered trademark of Viacom International Inc.

Curriculum

According to the official statement, “Dora the Explorer: About the Curriculum,” issued in 2010, “Dora the Explorer follows Nickelodeon's preschool tradition of 'play to learn' by investing kids in the emotional stakes attached to a problem, presenting the problem in an entertaining way and having the viewers figure out the solution along with Dora and her friends.”²⁰⁶ As a television show aimed at pre-school aged children

²⁰⁵ Dora’s cousin Diego has been given his own show, *Go Diego, Go!* Although I do not discuss it within this draft of this chapter, I hope to eventually compare the success of both *Dora the Explorer* and *Go Diego, Go!*

²⁰⁶ Nickelodeon promotional materials, “About the Curriculum,” 10th year anniversary, 2010.

primarily between the ages of three and five, the research and development team of *Dora the Explorer* has set the following goals for its curriculum: (1) cultural ties, (2) cognitive skills, (3) problem-solving, and (4) education technology.

The first goal is to “increase viewers' appreciation and awareness of Latino culture, introduce the Spanish language and enhance preschoolers' appreciation for the value of communicating in another language.”²⁰⁷ This is accomplished through Dora's own “Latina background,” where “the entire show is infused with a vibrant Latino flavor, from the art design and songs to the way in which obstacles and problems are embedded into the environment.”²⁰⁸ And “because Dora embraces her Latina identity and pride, she serves as a role model for all children to develop self-confidence and a positive self-image.” Furthermore, “at least once per episode, viewers are encouraged to assist various Spanish-speaking characters in activities by saying a Spanish word,” and “because many of the characters in Dora's world speak Spanish, one of the primary goals of the show is to promote effective ways of communication and proper social skills.”²⁰⁹ In other words, Dora is purposely constructed as pan-Latina, without a specific national origin, so that she may be from anywhere in Latin America. Moreover, *Dora the Explorer* is marketed as educational precisely because of its ability to educate children on Latino cultures. This is manifested in the credits with specific roles such as “Producer/Director of Research and Development,” “Research Manager,” “Cultural Content Supervisor,” “Research and Curriculum Consultant,” and “Cultural and Spanish Language Consultants.” More than

²⁰⁷ Nickelodeon, “*Dora the Explorer*, 10th Year Anniversary Launch,” Promotional booklet, 2010.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

twenty cultural consultants have worked on *Dora the Explorer*.²¹⁰

Space, represented as geographical place, was also integral to the cultural authenticity of the show. Geographic space operates as a marker of belonging, and is policed when challenged. Like nationalism, “commercial media play[s] a pivotal role in creating cultural definitions about what it means to be a citizen—indeed, our sense of ourselves as national citizens emerges from (not in spite of) our engagement with the popular media.”²¹¹ Children’s media works very similarly. Although *Dora the Explorer* was created in the U.S. for a predominantly U.S. audience, it is situated aesthetically outside the nation-state—geographically located somewhere in Latin America. The show benefits from this geographic ambiguity to the extent that it represents Latin America as “culturally authentic” and “traditional.” Along with the desire for authenticity is a concurrent desire for specificity, both of which are promoted as necessary for “educational” purposes. Thus, not specifying a specific country of origin for Dora Márquez allows for the show to move through all of Latin America, since at best, we know Dora lives in a rainforest and rainforests can be found throughout North America, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean.

When speaking with Mariana Díaz-Wionczek, Director of Research and Development for *Dora the Explorer* and *Go Diego, Go!*, she also explained that the show had multiple target audiences, including (1) bilingual speakers who identified with Dora's bilingualism, and (2) monolingual speakers who wanted to learn another language to become bilingual. This could include English speakers who may want to learn Spanish or

²¹⁰ Nickelodeon, “*Dora the Explorer*, 10th Year Anniversary Launch,” Promotional booklet, 2010.

²¹¹ Banet-Weiser, 2.

Spanish speakers who may want to learn English. One way the show addresses this is by including regular characters that are monolingual. Boots for example, speaks English and throughout the seasons learns Spanish, whereas Tico only speaks Spanish, and throughout the seasons learns English. However, what about someone who is monolingual or multilingual in languages other than English or Spanish? Within the U.S., this could include any number of linguistic variations, including someone who speaks Mayan, or Cantonese, or Arabic. It is also important to distinguish between language and racial or ethnic backgrounds and citizenship or nationality. Despite the differences between these terms, *Dora the Explorer* can be faulted for fusing many of them together, often without any context for the political implications of their differences.

The second curricular goal behind *Dora the Explorer* is to enhance cognitive skills—an approach built around Howard Garner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI). In an article published in the *Journal of Children and Media*, members of the *Dora the Explorer* research team stated it as such: “Dora was developed through an intensive multiyear process. The creative and research teams considered various program concepts, developed a preschool curriculum based on Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences, and strove to seamlessly combine entertainment with education.” Multiple Intelligence theory, or MI, was initially developed as a way to account for people's different ways of learning and provided a more rounded approach to measuring one's intelligence that differed from standard IQ measurements.²¹² *Dora the Explorer* was built around seven multiple intelligences, which include: visual/spatial, verbal/linguistic,

²¹² See Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

logical/mathematical, bodily/kinesthetic, musical/auditory, interpersonal skills, and intrapersonal skills.²¹³ Mariana Díaz-Wionczek explained that some episodes may emphasize one intelligence over others whereas another episode may combine several, and so forth.²¹⁴

The third curriculum goal for *Dora the Explorer* is to support children's problem-solving skills. "In every episode, viewers are asked to solve problems and become active participants in each learning opportunity."²¹⁵ Dora also helps model problem-solving strategies such as (1) use what you know, (2) break down problems into manageable units, and (3) ask for help. In the end, Dora always reaches her goal. A potential limitation to this approach is that it may assume one correct path toward the final answer, leaving little flexibility for other potentially correct answers.

Finally, the fourth curriculum goal is to "familiarize young children with computers by introducing and using the conventions and vocabulary of computer games."²¹⁶ This can include, for example, the introduction of computer technology icons such as an onscreen computer cursor arrow for clicking, dragging, or highlighting objects. Additionally, Nickelodeon claims that "many game segments within the show look similar to games kids might play or see on a computer screen."²¹⁷ This claim, however, assumes all children have access to new technologies including video games or computers. Interestingly, because *Dora the Explorer* is only available on cable, in the

²¹³ Mariana Díaz-Wionczek, Valeria Lovelace, and Carlos E. Cortés, "Dora the Explorer: Behind the Scenes of a Social Phenomenon," *Journal of Children and Media* 3, no. 2 (2009): 205.

²¹⁴ Mariana Díaz Wionczek, personal interview, January 7, 2010.

²¹⁵ Díaz-Wionczek, et al, 205.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

U.S. at least, it would be easier to imagine households with cable might also have video game consoles or internet access.

Testing

With these primary curriculum goals in mind, each episode of *Dora the Explorer* is tested in front of children. “Every episode of *Dora the Explorer* is screened by at least seventy five preschoolers before it airs on TV.”²¹⁸ Mariana Díaz-Wionczek further elaborated on this process. Her research team tests the content and appeal of every single episode at three phases of production.²¹⁹ After the writers brainstorm ideas for a new episode, the research team produces a storybook with approximately thirty six pages. This is the beginning of phase one. Mariana Díaz-Wionczek, along with either a writer or the Executive Producer, Chris Gifford, begin visiting preschools located in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Their database includes approximately three hundred schools and they have visited around ninety of them. On these visits, the research team observes while another staff member, the “reader,” reads the storybook to a small group of children, mixed boys and girls, from the same age group. This occurs for each of their target age groups—five, four, and three. While observing, the researchers take notes on children's reactions to the storybook, and whether they look engaged, attentive, and excited. They try to identify when the children appear bored or are disengaged so they can change those sections. After reading the storybook and noting initial observations, they ask the children individually for appeal, or how the story made them feel, on a five-

²¹⁸ Nickelodeon, “*Dora the Explorer*, 10th Year Anniversary Launch,” Promotional booklet, 2010.

²¹⁹ Mariana Díaz Wionczek, personal interview, January 7, 2010.

point scale—from very happy, happy, ok, sad, or angry. The children point to a face and if they do not feel happy or very happy researchers try to explore with them what they find troubling about the story. This is followed by a group discussion with the children where they walk them through the story and ask them to identify what was memorable. Another one-on-one interview with each child assesses their attainment of curriculum goals, like testing for math comprehension or Spanish language acquisition. The researchers repeat this a second time and send a summary of their observations to the writers who produce a script that can be animated.

In phase two, this script is sent to Los Angeles where an animatic storyboard is produced. This animatic works like a blue print of the actual animation. It is composed of rough animation sequences and is not yet in full color. This animatic is used as a research tool and tested for attention, or “eyes on the screen.” The research team measures different attention points and notices when children divert their attention from this video animatic to nearby toys, for example. They also note how the children are responding to the questions asked by Dora and if they have enough time to respond to each question, or if too much time is given for a response. Recommendations for changes are made based on these observations. The research team then develops a quad split screen, which includes each scene from the animatic in one quadrant with video footage of children's reactions to specific interactions with various attention points in the other three quadrants. These final recommendations are sent once again to Los Angeles.

Finally, in phase three, the final animation is produced in full color and with full dialogue. It is sent back to New York where it is tested one final time, this time in front of

a smaller group of children. At this point only minor changes can be made, if needed, after which all final edits are locked into place and the episode is complete.

Ongoing Developments

Although *Dora the Explorer* did not premiere until 2000, conceptual work for the show began at least a year or two prior. Likewise, each season offers the producers an opportunity to develop something new within the series. Season Five, for example, was especially significant since several shifts were made to the series as a whole. For example, prior to Season Five, Tico the squirrel only spoke Spanish and had not learned any English although Boots, also monolingual, had already begun to learn Spanish. That season, the development team worked closely with the California Association of Bilingual Education (CABE) on two-way language immersion. By the end of Season Five, Tico began learning English.

Conceptually, Season Five also presented Dora as ambassador to the world. This may seem ironic considering she technically belongs to no nation-state, although Mariana Díaz-Wionczek asserted she is meant to be a pan-Latina in the U.S. and is therefore an “American child.”²²⁰ In order to present Dora as U.S. Ambassador to the world, then, the development team had to ask themselves, how they could bring Dora to the world if she lived in a fantasy world? Mariana Díaz-Wionczek identified what helped her make that leap. She explains that “the relevance of all this has to do with its correlation to the real political and environmental situation.”²²¹ Season Five was developed and produced

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

between 2008 and 2010, and was inspired by UNICEF's global visibility during that time. Thus, in most episodes of Season Five Dora meets a child from a different part of the world. Notably, the development team did not want Dora to simply go to other parts of the world with the arrogance of assuming one can fix everyone's problems, and instead, Dora travels as a respectful observer, learning from others, and engaging in reciprocal cultural exchanges. Some of these locations included China, France, and Japan. The development behind these episodes included specific cultural experts so as not to be patronizing or stereotyping. Díaz-Wionczek highlights this further: "I do truly believe that what makes a show a hit is its impact on a social context."²²² She recommends then, for anyone who wants to develop a new show: "you definitely have to see what's your social, political, economical, global context and try to do something that's relevant, and not... a light and fluffy show that is not going to give you much. I think that the social relevance has enormous weight."²²³ Interestingly, the end of Season Five coincides with Dora's 10th year anniversary. Thus, while the research and development team behind *Dora the Explorer* was creating Dora as ambassador to the world, Nickelodeon was also quite literally creating and implementing a global marketing campaign for Dora's 10th year anniversary celebrations.

MARKETING DORA'S BIG BIRTHDAY ADVENTURE

"Dora's Big Birthday Adventure" premiered Sunday, August 15th, 2010 at 8:00pm (ET/PT) on Nickelodeon (see Figure 13). Unlike the usual thirty minute episodes, this

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.

one ran for a full hour, including commercials. Also unlike regular episodes, this one was a primetime TV movie highly promoted before it aired, featuring guest stars such as Rosie Pérez as La Bruja, John Leguizamo as the Flying Monkeys, and Hector Elizondo as the Wishing Wizzle.



Figure 13: DVD cover of “Dora's Big Birthday Adventure.” *Dora the Explorer* is a registered trademark of Viacom International Inc.

This special birthday movie also has its very own opening. Unlike the usual *Dora the Explorer* theme song and opening of Dora swinging around in the rainforest surrounded by her lovable friends and family, this one opened similarly to how one may imagine classical fairy tales. An aged giant brown book with worn out corners and a weathered cover descends from a sunny blue sky, surrounded by a magical ring of glitter-like particles that gently guide the book down, flipping through its pages while showing us multiple images of Dora and her friends across various adventures. We see Dora as a mermaid, Dora in skies, Dora as a princess, and Dora as a pirate. The camera then focuses on one page, zooming into an image of Dora and Boots being transported into the

book. What follows foreshadows this episode. We see Dora and Boots surrounded by furry little creatures that will soon be introduced to us as wizzles, followed by an image of a witch and her flying monkeys. Dora and Boots are in danger, however by the end of this opening they are once again reunited with Dora's family.

As with almost every *Dora the Explorer* episode, this one begins with an introduction. “Hola, soy Dora!” “And I'm Boots.” “We're in the magic storybook where we've been having really great adventures,” announces Dora. “But now we are going back home for a big party,” explains Boots. And as with all episodes, Dora questions the audience: “Do you like parties? Do you like birthday parties?” All her questions are followed by a moment's pause where it is assumed the audience is responding in the affirmative. The movie persists with Boots announcing that it is Dora's birthday and she is having the “biggest birthday party ever.” “And you're invited, too!” says Dora. “Will you come to my birthday party?” Like all *Dora the Explorer* episodes, Dora is on a quest. This one is no different in that she has a specific destination she must reach, in this case Wizzle mountain. And to arrive at her destination she asks Map for guidance. Map informs us that Dora and Boots will have to go across the lake, through the forest, and over the rainbow to get to Wizzle mountain. However, unlike the usual thirty minute episodes, this one is expanded with musical numbers. “Now it's time for us to go home to the rainforest,” says Dora. “Yeah, we've had some of our greatest adventures back home in the rainforest,” recounts Boots; “remember, Dora?” “Sure, Boots, I remember!” Reminiscing, Dora begins singing:

I'm remembering my home,
in the rainforest. [chorus]

The place where we come from, [Boots]
in the rainforest. [chorus]
Qué bello es mi hogar,²²⁴
where strawberry mountains live,
to chocolate²²⁵ trees,
it's all waiting there for me.
And me! [Boots]

The song continues to describe what Dora loves most about her home, the rainforest, and lists many of the relatives she can not wait to see, like her parents, her twin siblings, and her other friends who are not currently with her. The song ends with multiple repetitions of “We're going home...”

The song, like the opening to the primetime television movie, is telling because it introduces a narrative arc that loosely parallels the infamous musical, *The Wizard of Oz*. This may not be coincidental considering that *The Wizard of Oz* was re-released in 2009 in select theaters in honor of its own 70th anniversary. In a similar fashion, then, in 2010 Dora embarked on her own campy musical through Wizzle world, accompanied by her loyal friends, and with a clear message in mind: *there is no place like home*. Or, in the bilingual spirit of *Dora the Explorer*; ¡Qué bello es mi hogar! At the beginning of their journey Boots even proclaims, “We're off to see the Wishing Wizzle!” Other similarities with Oz include Boots as a stand-in for Toto, the wizzles as a stand-in for the 'munchkins,' and a dichotomy between the “bad” witch and the “good” witch, or in this case, the “good” princess. Unfortunately, however, the bad witch, in this case La Bruja as a stand-in for the Wicked Witch of the West, is portrayed as darker-skinned, dressed in black, whereas the good witch, in this case, the Snow Princess as a stand-in for Glenda,

²²⁴ “How beautiful is my home.”

²²⁵ “Chocolate.” It is spelled the same in both English and Spanish, but was pronounced in Spanish here.

the good witch of the north, is lighter-skinned and draped in white. Challenging this dichotomy would have brought a more original perspective to this movie, and would have been in line with more recent attempts to reclaim witches or question the naming politics behind good and bad witches. Such is the case for example, with the musical *Wicked*, which narrates *The Wizard of Oz* from the perspective of the supposedly evil witch. Alas, Dora's episode reinforced the racialized binary between good and bad. On a campier note, Dora's version is complete with rainbows, unicorns, and two flamboyant flying monkeys dancing together in unison. Other visual references include lollipops, a scarecrow who is afraid of crows, spell-infused dancing trees, and instead of a yellow brick road, Dora must follow a lavender road adorned with colorful stars. In the end, the message is clear: “The love of friends can be very powerful,” explains the Wishing Wizzle. “When you make your wish, close your eyes, and think of all the friends you've helped, and all the friends who have helped you... Just close your eyes and say, 'I wish to go back home.’” Simultaneously, others within the audience say, “I wish Dora back home, I wish Dora back home...” In the end, Dora and all her beloved friends prevail and Dora and Boots are wished back home, just in time for Dora's birthday party where she is surrounded by all her friends and family—dancing, singing, and hugging.

This extended episode is followed by commercial breaks informing viewers to stay tuned for more Dora. In yet another birthday tribute to her, the commercials eventually make way for Dora's birthday documentary short film. It opens with:

“First and foremost, she's a really good friend,” Rosie Pérez.

“She's joyous,” Shakira.

“She's got this twinkle in her eyes,” Sherri Shepherd.

“Independent,” first child.
“She represents diversity,” Salma Hayek Pinault.
“She saves people,” second child.
“She's adventurist,” Shakira.
“She's a great dancer,” Valeria O. Lovelace.
“Nice to everyone,” third child.
“Got this sense of fun,” Sherri Shepherd.
“She's such a jet setter,” Rosie Pérez.

With such high praise, who wouldn't want a friend like Dora? And who wouldn't aspire to be like her? *Dora, the Girl Heard 'Round the World*, was a specially commissioned short documentary-like film that aired on Nickelodeon following “Dora's Big Birthday Adventure” in August, 2012. This twelve minute short-film was directed by Debra Eisenstadt, produced by Brett Morgen, and edited by Andy Grieve. At least sixteen children were included in the short-film, along with celebrities like Rosie Pérez, Shakira, and Salma Hayek Pinault, as well as news anchors and television hosts like Soledad O'Brien, Sherri Shepherd, Elisabeth Hasselbeck, and Don Kaplan. The remaining participants included educators, cultural consultants, and individuals who have worked on *Dora the Explorer* or are affiliated with Nickelodeon.

This documentary is organized around a staged interview with Dora. Don Kaplan even states, “I've been trying for many, many years to land a sit-down interview with her, and to be honest with you, she's always very, very busy.” Simultaneously we see the camera cut to a wide shoot of a studio set with cameras, stage lights, computer monitors, and a white chair positioned in front of a white backdrop. We see an animated cartoon Dora being escorted into the studio, toward the empty chair she will occupy as the interviewee. The film then cuts to an image of Dora, sitting, wearing her usual pink shirt, orange shorts, yellow socks, and white shoes. Someone in the background shouts, “Last

looks” while a makeup artist moves toward Dora, who begins to giggle as she receives her final make-up “touch ups.” Rosie Pérez is then depicted, stating that she wishes she had Dora's hairstylist, “cuz her hair is never messed up.” This is followed by another anonymous studio voice, “Look right at the camera, Dora,” at which point Dora asks, “Which one?” “Straight ahead, Dora.” “I can do that!”

This opening, both with the testimonials and the off-camera preparation for her interview, is a deliberate attempt to humanize this animated character. These 'behind-the-scene' examples of Dora are aimed at depicting her everyday, average qualities that make her like every other child, while what is said of her point toward her heroism and global fame. At the beginning of Dora's interview, it must be cut and re-recorded because Dora makes a mistake. Clearly, this is not an actual mistake, but instead a deliberate one created by an entire team of producers, animation artists, and actors, creating an effect similar to showing “bloopers” after an animated film. In *Dora, the Girl Heard 'Round the World*, Dora's initial 'mistake' is staged so that audiences can more closely relate to Dora. Like any other person, she may not be error-free, but she can try again, until she succeeds. In this instance, she had to get acquainted with being an interviewee, from interacting with the film crew to looking at the correct camera, and answering the questions tailored for her.

As previously noted, sixteen children were credited for appearing in this short-film—their thoughts on Dora interwoven throughout. At times, one child began a statement and another one finished it, so that for example, one child began describing Dora with, “she's kinda like a normal girl, but what makes her not as like a normal girl

is...” The camera then cuts to another young girl who continues, “she never, ever, ever quits!” This is followed by a response from Dora herself, “it's true, I never give up!” Other children, of different genders and racial backgrounds, say equally heartfelt things about Dora, such as “I love you, Dora” or “Dora is very cute,” “and is so adorable.” In a separate scene, a little girl blows a kiss at Dora, whereas another waves. These children appear highly enthusiastic when speaking of Dora, whom they consider their dear friend. As a friend, they speak directly to Dora, while other children show off drawings they had made of themselves with Dora. One was of a little girl and Dora taking pictures together, a second depicts another child and Dora riding a horse together, and another shows a child, Dora, and Boots having a sleepover. While commenting on Dora, the children are also modeling positive results from the show's overall curriculum goals. This becomes more evident when the children are juxtaposed with adults.

The adults affiliated with Nickelodeon are meant to justify the show and its educational merits, whereas the adults not affiliated with Nickelodeon are meant to validate the show for a larger, mainstream audience. Chris Gifford, Executive Producer and Co-creator of *Dora the Explorer* assures viewers that “the most important thing for the show is that we create a story that kids really want.” Cyma Zarghami, current President of the Nickelodeon Kids & Family Group, explains that this is done through the assistance of children, “We don't do anything without putting it in front of a group of kids, and we don't do anything without putting it in front of a group of kids a hundred times.” Maríana Díaz-Wionczek, Director of Research and Development, concurs. “I tell the children, you're helping us make the show better. And I really mean it,” she says.

“What we're looking at is their interaction with the story, their interaction with Dora.” As Díaz-Wionczek explains this process we see a group of children in a classroom, enthralled in a storybook read by a member of the *Dora the Explorer* research and development team. In the background, we get a glimpse of Chris Gifford and Mariana Díaz-Wionczek observing the children while taking notes. “Are they relating? Are they excited? Are they leaning forward?...Obviously, we want them to engage.” Valeria O. Lovelace, a Research & Curriculum Consultant for *Dora the Explorer*, adds, “Writers feel when the children were really engaged, and they make changes right out on the field.” At these test sites, Dora comes alive through the storybook reading and the children become a stand-in for the larger, target preschool-aged audience.

The short film further clarifies *Dora the Explorer's* emphasis on audience engagement through the use of extended pauses during an episode. Brown Johnson, President of Animation at Nickelodeon, recalls how when *Dora the Explorer's* pilot was first shown to mothers, “moms were like, my kid's not gonna watch this.” They were referring to the extended pauses after Dora's questions, such as for example, “What was your favorite part of the trip?” Chris Gifford explains, “We took the longest pause and put it there for kids to actually think, 'I'm being asked what my favorite part is.’” After the pause Dora responds with something like, “I like that too.” The reasoning behind the pauses is further confirmed by Don Kaplan, a reporter for the *New York Post*, who admits that initially, he “had a big problem with the pauses.” “I really didn't understand exactly what was going on.” Kaplan was not able to fully comprehend the effect of the pauses until he had a child. Now, he admits, “[his] daughter absolutely loves talking to Dora.”

Gifford adds, “It is a relatively, for a preschool show, high stakes adventure. There's some danger involved.” “But I think because Dora asks the kids for their help there is sort of a pact between Dora and the audience that they'll be in control, and that things will be ok.” Furthermore, the children are conscious of their interactive role in each episode. Although these pauses are staged, children nonetheless know they are being asked a direct question. As Gifford summarizes, “very often in research we'll ask kids, 'well, who helped Dora?' Invariably the kids will say, 'well, I helped Dora.’” Thus, this short-film visually emphasizes to skeptical audiences the positive benefits of using pauses within the show, and of children's perception of their own direct interactions with Dora. It is easy then, to discern why so many children feel personally connected to Dora. As described by Elisabeth Hasselbeck from *The View*, “Dora reaches through the screen and becomes your kid's best friend.”

Dora is equally adored by celebrities like Rosie Pérez, Salma Hayek Pinault, and Shakira, and their inclusion within this short-film is not coincidental. At the most basic level, each of them is meant to further validate the show for a more mainstream audience. They are recognizable figures within U.S. television and cinema, and each one of them is also a visibly strong Latina within mainstream U.S. culture. However, each one also has a prior contractual affiliation with *Dora the Explorer*. As mentioned earlier, for example, Rosie Pérez lent her voice to several *Dora the Explorer* episodes, including voicing for La Bruja in “Dora's Big Birthday Adventure.” On the other hand, Salma Hayek has served as the prominent celebrity face for Dora's Backpack campaign (see Figure 14). Shakira holds a unique relationship to Dora, both as someone who has guest starred in a

special Dora episode as herself, but also, as someone who recently authored a *Dora the Explorer* book, and who has other *Dora the Explorer* consumer products currently in development. Contractually affiliated or not, each one demonstrates a convincingly genuine appreciation and approval of Dora. So much so that the very last image as the credits role is of Shakira, who says, “¡Feliz cumpleaños, Dora! Un besito,” as she smiles and blows her a kiss, “y que la pases muy feliz en tu día.” It is truly compelling. The question then becomes not whether or not these celebrities support Dora, but what their public support means for Nickelodeon, for the show, and for the ongoing sale of *Dora the Explorer* consumer products. Undoubtedly, these celebrities further boost Dora's fame.



Figure 14: Dora, Boots and Salma Hayek. *Dora the Explorer* is a registered trademark of Viacom International Inc.

Presumably, Dora can become every person's best friend, regardless of age and geographic location. Such global citizenship is implied with a title such as *Dora, the Girl Heard 'Round the World*. In 2010, when this short-film aired, *Dora the Explorer* could be

seen in 30 languages and in 151 territories around the world. Dora's global fame was even observed by Diego, who recognized that “no matter where [he] goes, everyone seems to know [his] prima,” or cousin. Thus, although I cannot speak for the show's interpretations worldwide, and because I am specifically arguing for more localized critiques of global media, I focus on the U.S. and agree with Soledad O'Brien's assertion that “Dora broke a ton of barriers.”

DORA GROWS UP, TARGETS TWEEN AUDIENCE

Generally applauded for her astute, zealous, and team-building persona, Dora's image came under close scrutiny as Nickelodeon revealed her tween counterpart in 2009. Initially released as a mere silhouette, the new tween image was met with overwhelming disapproval by parents and educators on online news articles, blogs, and social media sites. Nickelodeon and Mattel responded with a marketing campaign that introduced audiences to a doll version of tween Dora—the Dora Links doll—and its accompanying online community for Dora and her new set of friends, the Dora Explorer Girls (see Figure 15). Tween Dora was also brought to life on screen in the television special musical episode, “Our First Concert,” which guest starred Latina singer Shakira as herself while promoting team work and community service. Unfortunately, however, the motivation behind Dora's growth spurt was not driven by altruism, but instead by a fear of losing audiences who were growing up and out of a preschool-aged television show, and exchanging their Dora dolls for Barbie or Bratz dolls. Not wanting to lose this fan-base, Nickelodeon and Mattel teamed together, and in February of 2009 at the American

International Toy Fair announced plans to grow Dora into a tween.²²⁶



Figure 15: Tween Dora. *Dora the Explorer* is a registered trademark of Viacom International Inc.

Dora's original short, rounded features were transformed into a taller, leaner, long haired version. Her t-shirt and shorts were replaced with what appeared to be a short dress of some sort. Without the inner details, audiences were left to speculate around Dora's silhouette. Such was the controversy that an online petition against Dora's new image began on March 14, 2009, forcing Nickelodeon and Mattel to release a joint statement along with a fully detailed color image of tween Dora just two days later. In an effort to appease parent's concerns over the new tween Dora, Nickelodeon and Mattel affirmed their commitment to the original *Dora the Explorer* preschool Latina heroine. “The Latina heroine has connected with a generation of young boys and girls all around the world through her courageousness and sense of adventure. We at Nickelodeon and Mattel want to assure parents that none of that is changing.”²²⁷

Approximately six months later, toward the end of September of 2009, the Dora

²²⁶ Aarthi Sivaraman, “Mattel to Tout Tween Dora, Elmo Gloves in '09,” *Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood*, January 22, 2009.

²²⁷ “Dora's Explorer Girls Statement,” Nickelodeon, 2009.

Links doll went on sale accompanied by its interactive website (see Figure 16). Mattel announced: “We took the core DNA of Dora—the love of adventure and learning, the empowering and self-esteem—and applied that to a doll that matches play patterns of girls ages 5-8.”²²⁸ “There are many preschool doll choices, but few age-appropriate dolls for girls 5-8. The new Dora's Explorer Girls doll line, featuring a new, slightly older Dora (dressed in a flowered tunic, leggings and sandals), is an exciting extension of the established and continued brand.” Mattel seems particularly concerned with mothers: “It is designed to address the requests of moms asking for a way that the character can grow and engage with their children as those kids get a little older. The reason for creating this new Dora line is to offer an alternative to moms who want their daughters to stay little girls, a little longer.”²²⁹ Only mothers are interpellated here. What about fathers? What about other caregivers or family relations? Can others be just as concerned as mothers?



Figure 16: Dora's Explorer Girls & Dora Links Home Screen. *Dora the Explorer* is a registered trademark of Viacom International Inc.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

As with tween Dora, the same rationale applied in transforming Dora's initial group of rainforest friends into a group of tween girls, the Explorer Girls. Dora now lives in Puerto Verde, her online urban neighborhood, along with her new group of multicultural friends—Kate, Alana, Emma, and Naiya. “The absolute intention with Dora's Explorer Girls,” explained Mattel, “is to make an age-appropriate doll for girls 5-8 that is infused with all the empowering attributes that make Dora such a global and groundbreaking phenomenon. Nickelodeon and Mattel are very proud of Dora the Explorer...and we will continue to empower kids with positive images and role models like Dora, in all her incarnations.”²³⁰

In August 2011, Nick Jr. premiered the animated television musical episode of Dora's Explorer Girls titled “Our First Concert.” Shakira guest stars as herself, in an overall positive message: together is better; let's all work together to make this a better place. The premise of the plot is that Dora and her four friends are going to their very first concert, a Shakira concert. Shakira has asked her audience to also bring things to donate to charity, including clothes, school supplies, and so forth. Unlike the Dora Links doll's emphasis on fashion and aesthetics, “Our First Concert,” while still about girl culture and having fun at a concert, is also about team building, giving, doing something good, and having fun in the process (see Figure 17).

²³⁰ Ibid.



Figure 17: Shakira and the Dora's Explorer Girls. *Dora the Explorer* is a registered trademark of Viacom International Inc.

Finally, it is also important to note that Dora grew into a tween because Nickelodeon made a deliberate choice to do this. This decision led to greater capitalization of the Dora brand despite the initial controversies over her new image. What happens, however, when the youth who lend their own voices to Dora grow up? If one compares the initial voice of *Dora the Explorer* to her current voice, one is sure to notice a subtle difference. That is because, to date, three different people have brought Dora to life with their voices. These have included Caitlin Sanchez (Dora's voice from 2000 to 2004), Kathleen Herles (2007 to 2010), and Fatima Ptacek (2010 to present). Nickelodeon has stated that they have had to move from one girl to the next because of these actors' own growth spurts. However, it is also salient that Kathleen Herles filed a law suit against Nickelodeon for allegedly not compensating her fully for her work. Ultimately, these young actors are under contract, which begs the question, how much agency do they have, especially in light of potential legal penalties for breaking a

contract? In this regard, an animated tween Dora may have more longevity than other live action tween hits like Disney's *Wizard of Waverly Place*, even if it does star a Mexican-Italian family with magical powers, and tween celebrities like Selena Gómez.

PUBLIC (re)APPROPRIATIONS OF ICONIC DORA

In 2010, and in the midst of her birthday celebrations, Dora appeared in a public service announcement asking the audience to take part in that year's U.S. census.²³¹ This PSA was distributed by the US Census Bureau in collaboration with Nickelodeon. Dora and Boots began the video by singing “We Did It!” at which point Isa the iguana enters and asks what they did. Dora proudly announces, “We helped Mami fill out our census form!” “And we mailed it back,” adds Boots. Notice that Dora said “our” not “her,” alluding to the importance of the census for the entire family, and explains the importance of the census for children: “Cause everyone counts on the census form, especially little kids! Including them helps us get important things in our town, like daycare centers, schools, and more!” This voice-over is paired with images of infants, a suburban home, and a grade school classroom, ending with Dora proclaiming that indeed, “children count too!” Interestingly, the comments section on this YouTube video uploaded by the official U.S. Census Bureau had been removed (see Figure 18). In its place a notice read, “Comments are disabled for this video.” It is also telling that of the over 848,000 views it has received, more than half were dislikes.²³² This seems to suggest possible contention

²³¹ See “A 2010 Census Message from Nickelodeon's Dora the Explorer,” US Census Bureau, *YouTube* March 17, 2010 http://youtu.be/9E17zgAr6_E Last visited November 12, 2012.

²³² 222 likes to 276 dislikes as of November 12, 2012; 219 likes to 274 dislikes as of October 17, 2012; 193 likes to 243 dislikes as of September 18, 2012.

from viewers. I will venture to say that many of these viewers may not be the targeted preschooler audience of the television show since preschool-aged children do not make up the largest YouTube user demographics. This contention, then, exemplifies a larger public's anxieties over *Dora the Explorer*, the U.S. census, and especially, as I argue, the pairing of both.

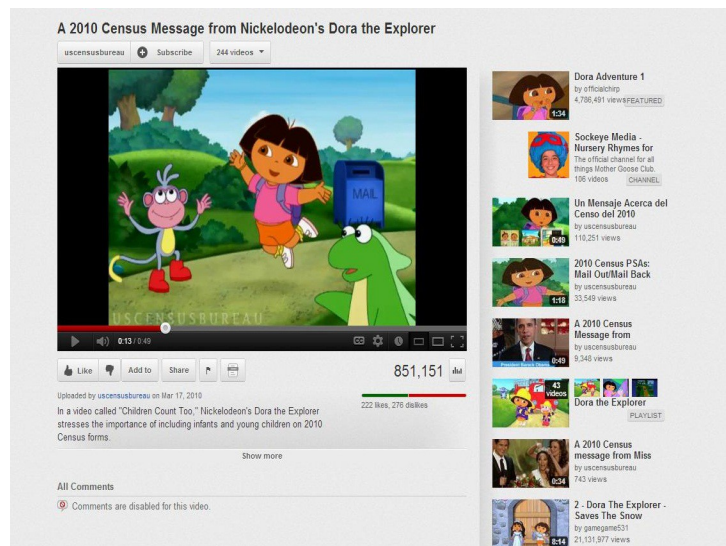


Figure 18: *Dora the Explorer* US Census PSA. *Dora the Explorer* is a registered trademark of Viacom International Inc.

If *Dora the Explorer* can be understood as an entity under Nickelodeon, which can be understood as an entity under Viacom, how might we begin to conceive of Dora's imagined publics? And how do Dora's multiple publics engage with her? As we already saw with tween Dora, parents are most definitely engaged within such debates. Similarly, as Nicole Guidotti-Hernández has demonstrated, “parents who post messages on the *Dora the Explorer* Nick Jr. website, who watch the show with their children, and who buy the consumer products attached to the show express political anxiety about language,

immigration, citizenship, entertainment, and education.”²³³ However, what happens when these political anxieties become inspiration for other political campaigns? What can we say about those who distribute images of Dora not for profit, but because they seek to present a message through Dora's image predicated upon her cultural capital as an iconic public figure? Dora's recognizable popularity amongst children, parents, educators, and corporate businesses has made her into a public vehicle through which individuals, and even entire communities or campaigns, can promote their particular political interests.

Within the U.S., Nickelodeon and Mattel sell an image of *Dora the Explorer* as every child's friend and favorite brave heroine. They also sell the idea that every child can be a part of Dora's world, be it through watching the television show on cable, owning a *Dora the Explorer* backpack or school supplies, or any number of dolls and toys, or by visiting *Dora the Explorer* spaces like the corporate offices in New York or seeing Dora live at a local fair or retail store. It is also possible to become Dora, quite literally, through *Dora the Explorer* Halloween costumes, for example. It is within this context that Dora eventually gained mainstream recognition amongst a U.S. adult viewership. Thus, Dora's popularity progressed, from initially only being identifiable to preschool-aged children with cable at home, to a broader group of primary school children who purchased her products, to the families of those with children, and eventually, to a broader adult audience. Through the examples that follow, I trace how these audiences' appropriations of Dora's iconic status pull her into U.S. immigration politics, challenging the boundaries of appropriate, childnormative behavior for animated characters.

²³³ Nicole M. Guidotti-Hernández, 211.

One may argue popularity begets criticism, and so, on March 24, 2007, NBC's *Saturday Night Live* aired an animated parody of *Dora the Explorer* whereby Dora's name was changed to Maraka and Boots became Mittens.²³⁴ These nicknames, and the skit as a whole, revealed Dora's general recognition as an animated Latina character (see Figure 19). Her new name, "Maraka," can be read as a play on the Latin American musical instruments, maracas. Throughout the skit, Dora speaks Spanish among many other languages, while asking the audience to say and do random things like "break a fifty" dollar bill, or "flap your wings and yell." "Don't question it, just do it," she demands. Unlike the original Dora, Maraka uses foul language and asks about controversial issues like whether or not Robert Blake was innocent, or when presenting an image of a person, asking whether they are a boy or a girl. Both of these inquiries are followed by a pause where presumably the audience should answer. However, unlike the original *Dora the Explorer* episode format for interactivity, these pauses in Maraka's dialogue are coupled with a laugh track.



Figure 19: SNL's Screenshot of Maraka and Mittins

²³⁴ See *Saturday Night Live*, Season 32, Episode 16.

This skit aired as part of the SNL segment TV Funhouse, an animated satire written by Robert Smigel, which feature public figures from the worlds of popular culture and politics. It should also be noted that TV Funhouse is notorious for its recurring skits like “Ambiguously Gay Duo” or “The X-Presidents” and has even been censured by NBC because of a 1998 segment titled “Conspiracy Theory Rock,” which called attention to the monopolization of the media by larger corporations like GE, Disney, and Fox. Equally noteworthy, the Maraka parody aired during SNL's season 32, episode 16, which was hosted by football star, Peyton Manning, and included Carrie Underwood as the musical guest. Interestingly, Peyton Manning begins the episode with a parody of former U.S. president George W. Bush giving a press conference over the dismissal of several federal prosecutors by the Department of Justice while noting that should there have been any wrongdoing on the part of the Department of Justice, the then Attorney General, Alberto González would be “the first to go.” González was appointed by Bush in 2005, becoming the first Latino U.S. Attorney General, and he would announce his resignation in August of 2007 because of this and various other controversies.

SNL's parody of former president Bush and former attorney general González, along with Dora's “Maraka” skit should be understood within broader U.S. immigration discourse. Notably, this episode aired about a month and a half before the introduction of the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007, or Senate Bill 1348. It was originally introduced as a bill “to provide for comprehensive immigration reform and for other purposes.” Those other purposes would have included an increase in border patrol agents along the U.S.-Mexico border as well as more layered fencing along this same

border. It also included the entirety of the Dream Act, a guest worker program, and would have introduced a point-system as a pathway for naturalization.²³⁵ Like similar attempts to reform U.S. immigration laws in 2005 and 2006, heated debates ensued on all sides of the political spectrum and Senate Bill 1348 died on the senate floor with a final cloture vote, effectively ending debate on the bill.

On April 26, 2010, and three years after the *Saturday Night Live* parody, Dora the explorer and Boots made a guest appearance on *The Daily Show* (see Figure 20). Unlike SNL's subtle connection to immigration reform law, Dora's appearance on *The Daily Show* was an overt commentary on immigration, this time focusing on legislation that had been recently passed by the Arizona legislature. Commenting on Arizona's recent immigration law, Senate Bill 1070, the episode referred to Dora as "illegal" and Boots as "flamboyantly gay."²³⁶ Their presence here warrants attention because it speaks to the contemporary political climate surrounding children's cultural productions. More specifically, the framing of Dora as illegal and Boots as gay highlight ongoing U.S. debates over such issues as immigration reform, English-only curricula, gay marriage, global economies, and human rights discourse. This episode of *The Daily Show*, titled "Law and Border," a play on the series *Law and Order*, included Jon Stewart's critique of SB 1070, which he referred to as draconian. This episode inserts footage from Fox News to sum up Arizona Senate Bill 1070 as follows: (1) [It is a] state crime to be in [the] U.S. illegally, (2) Legal immigrants must carry documentation, (3) With "reasonable

²³⁵ "Bill Text 110th Congress (2007-2008) s.1348.PCS," The Library of Congress, THOMAS <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c110:S.1348>:

²³⁶ See "Law and Border," *The Daily Show* (April 26, 2010) *thedailyshow.com* accessed April 28, 2010 <<http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/mon-april-26-2010/law---border>>.

suspicion,” police must check for documents, and (4) Citizens can sue local government for not enforcing law. Stewart goes on to comment on the second point above, “It's not unprecedented—having to carry around your papers. It's the same thing that free black people had to do in 1863. [Audience laughter.] Lord knows that didn't leave any residual anger. [Audience laughter.]”²³⁷ Here we see Jon Stewart's attempt to caution Arizona. In response to the reference made on “reasonable suspicion” in point three, Stewart shows footage from former congressman, Tom Tancredo, Republican from Colorado known for his conservative views on immigration reform. Tancredo says, “I do not want the police here, there, Arizona, anyplace else pulling people over 'cause you look like you should be pulled over.” Whereby Stewart's response is: “Holy sh** [Audience laughter.] He thinks you've gone too far, Arizona. Tom Tancredo! [Audience laughter.] The man Mexican parents tell their kids about to get them to eat their vegetables. [Audience laughter.]” To further illustrate the point that SB 1070 would exacerbate racial profiling, Jon Stewart and Wyatt Cenac engage in a dialogue over a series of photos whereby Stewart is supposed to identify who is and is not “illegal.” Within this lineup, Wyatt Cenac shows an image of Dora and Boots and asks Stewart whether or not to arrest them under SB 1070. Coerced into racial profiling, Stewart finally agrees that yes, one would have to arrest Dora.

²³⁷ Ibid.

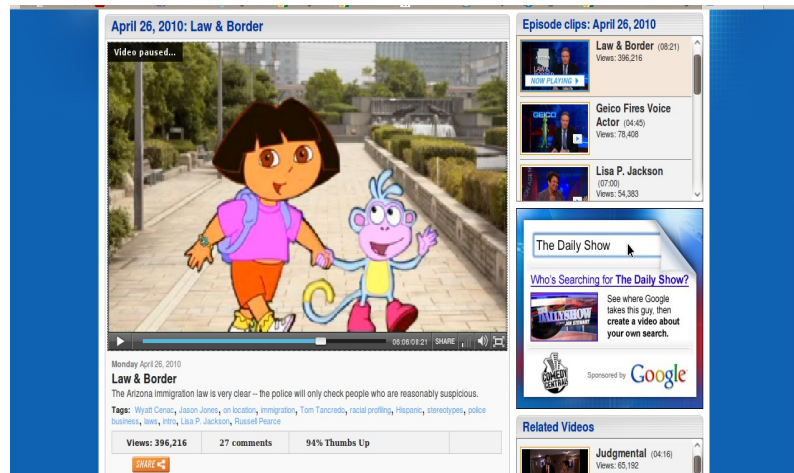


Figure 20: Dora the Explorer and Boots on *The Daily Show*

Running parallel to anxieties about immigration are anxieties about sexuality, in this case summoned through Boots. Within this ruling of Dora's immigration status, Boots, however, is spared for being a flamboyantly gay monkey since, as Cenac clarifies, “Jon, we have laws to protect people, and flamboyantly gay monkeys, all right.” This dichotomy sets up a dangerous and faulty binary between migrant rights and gay rights, where they are assumed to be mutually exclusive. Instead, we might try to find points of unity between the two.²³⁸

Similarly, this clip of Dora on *The Daily Show* also alludes to children's rights. From children being held in detention centers, to children being forced to testify on their own, without a parent or legal guardian, children are increasingly becoming direct targets of xenophobic laws, such as SB 1070. Perhaps unknowingly, *The Daily Show's* use of Dora not only ties her to immigration laws, it ties children to them—shifting the public face of immigration from adults, most often thought of as men crossing the border, to the

²³⁸ For example, the rising UndocuQueer movement and its involvement within immigration reform debates. Visit their book project site at www.undocuqueerbook.com

face of a child, a little girl, *Dora the Explorer*. According to a New York Time's article published in August of this year, “From October through July...authorities detained 21,842 unaccompanied minors, most at the Southwest border, a 48 percent increase over a year earlier.” It goes on, “The figures are striking because overall migration from Latin America, especially from Mexico, fell last year to the lowest level in two decades...Yet the numbers of young unaccompanied Mexicans crossing illegally have stayed steady, and minors from Central America—especially El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras—have nearly doubled since last year.” What this demonstrates is that not only are children crossing international borders on their own, but also that if they come from Central America, this means they are crossing first into Mexico, traveling across Mexico, and then crossing into the U.S. This article was accompanied by a short documentary titled “In Deportation, Age 6.”²³⁹ The film's caption reads: “Liliana Munoz, 6, was alone when Border Patrol officers caught her as she was being smuggled across the Rio Grande. Now facing deportation, she's also alone in immigration court without a lawyer.”²⁴⁰ With little advocacy, most of these children will be deported, also on their own. Thus, many of these children risk being detained, deported, or worse, at any point during their journeys across multiple borders.

Child deportation and child detainment based on citizenship status was also the main theme of a popular *Dora the Explorer* meme that began to circulate throughout social media sites soon after Arizona's SB 1070 (see Figure 21a). It depicted Dora in a front-view head-shot taken while presumably detained by ICE. One of her eyes was

²³⁹ Short documentary by Brent McDonald and Julia Preston, August 2012.

²⁴⁰ Julia Preston, “Young and Alone, Facing Court and Deportation,” *New York Times*, August 25, 2012 http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/26/us/more-young-illegal-immigrants-face-deportation.html?_r=0

badly bruised and she bled from both her nose and the corner of her mouth. Her identification placard read, “Dora The Explorer, Illegal Border Crossing, Resisting Arrest.” Interestingly, this image was created by Debbie Groben of Sarasota, Florida, months before SB 1070 for a Photoshop Pictures Contest on FreakingNews.com titled “Celebrity Mugshots.” This contest was inspired by Charlie Sheen who was arrested for domestic violence charges in December of 2009. The contest, which ended December 31, 2009, gave the following instructions: “Photoshop your favorite politicians or celebrities in their police mugshots. Your entries are advised to include 'mugshot info tags' to distinguish them from 'just photos'. It's also OK to use fictional characters (from movies, paintings, cartoons, etc) for the mugshots.” As an example for contest participants, FreakingNews shared a photo of Barbie (see Figure 21b). Given the instructions and example from FreakingNews, it is not all that surprising then, that one of the many entries would be of *Dora the Explorer*, just like there were many others of popular cartoons like Peter Pan or Elmo, as well as many of celebrities and politicians like Oprah Winfrey, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Paris Hilton, and even President Barack Obama. Needless to say, given the overall amateur quality of the image manipulation, the image of Dora did not win this contest. We might ask ourselves then, what made Dora's mugshot stand out amongst the others, elevating it to meme status?



Figure 21a: Dora entry for Mugshot Contest



Figure 21b: Example from FreakingNews Mugshot Contest

The widespread circulation of Dora mugshot across social media sites, newspapers, and television newscasts was rather serendipitous. It caught the attention of various national news outlets only after and amidst public debates around Arizona's SB 1070, which was signed into law on April 23, 2010 by Arizona's governor, Jan Brewer. The mugshot was used, for example, in a news segment on WLWT's Cincinnati, Ohio Channel Five. The segment asked whether or not Dora was illegal, and also included an interview with Professor Erynn Massi de Casanova. "I find that Dora is sort of a blank screen on to which people can project whatever ideas or feelings or anxieties they might have about Latinos," she said. Correspondent Amy Wagner continued, "Moms don't want their kids to see their beloved cartoon portrayed this way." One mother agreed, stating, "It's very disturbing. I would hope that a child wouldn't see that image." The segment ends with the following: "No matter where you stand on the issue, *Dora the Explorer* is now exploring the immigration debates...The Florida woman who drew Dora as an illegal

immigrant is against the Arizona immigration law. She said she wanted to do something funny and irreverent...” Regardless of the initial motives, the attention generated by this meme would further position Dora as a poster child for Arizona and immigration reform precisely because this image's circulation was predicated upon its appeal to both right and left political agendas. Conservatives circulated the image as a way of justifying their claims that bilingual television like *Dora the Explorer* promoted sympathy for “illegals,” whereas the left circulated the image as a way of justifying their claims that SB 1070 was extremist, generated racial profiling, and would affect everyone, even children. What we get then, is a classic example of both side's anxieties over childhood and children's innocence entangled with larger political debates about bilingual education and immigration reform.

The traffic and popularity generated from the Dora mugshot across social media sites, newspapers, and television newscasts encouraged yet another contest at FreakingNews, announcing the following contest directions:

Our mugshot image of Dora the Explorer (by Debbie Groben, aka Andwhat) has been on almost every news channel, and was featured in the newspapers and magazines in light of the Arizona's Immigration Law debate. This mugshot image was used in the public rallies and was met with a lot of controversy, revealing some Americans' attitudes about race, immigrants and where some of immigration reform debates may be headed. Photoshop what Dora the Explorer's life would be like if Dora were an illegal immigrant in Arizona.²⁴¹

The contest ran from May 22, 2010 to May 26, 2010 and in only five days, generated thirty four entries. One of these memes included tween Dora. In this example she is depicted proudly showing off her very own permanent resident card (see Figure 22). She

²⁴¹ See <http://www.freakingnews.com/Is-Dora-the-Explorer-an-Illegal-Immigrant-Pictures--2907-0.asp>

stands outside in the middle of a desert, presumably Arizona. The Grand Canyon serves as a backdrop, and at the forefront, a barbed wired fence. Dora is positioned between a sign that reads “Green Cards” and a mobile trailer, the message being that anyone who is undocumented can purchase a permanent resident card since they are presumably readily available. Anyone, even Dora, who proudly holds a “Welcome Kit” in one hand and her green card in the other.



Figure 22: Tween Dora showing off her green card

Entangled within Arizona's xenophobic laws was also a ban on Ethnic studies programs and curriculum. In protest to the attacks on Ethnic Studies and banned books, memes re-appropriating animated characters, like Dora and Pocahontas, began to circulate once again through social media networks. Dora was depicted sitting on the ground with her legs stretched out, holding a book in her hands (see Figure 23a). This was one example from San Francisco State University.²⁴² Above her, the caption reads:

²⁴² From the Richard Oakes Multicultural Center Library (see www.romclibrary.org)

“Esta Chicanita Reads Banned Books.” In this image, not only does Dora become a “Chicanita” who reads banned books, she is also darker-skinned, as is Pocahontas. The contrast between this version of Dora and the original Dora further highlights U.S. anxieties around race and skin tones, while also asking us to consider popular representations of indigeneity and complex histories of colonialism across the Americas (see Figure 23b).



Figure 23a: Dora reading banned books



Figure 23b: Pocahontas reading banned books

Dora continues to be a popular meme choice for current U.S. politics and elections. She entered the slew of memes following the second U.S. presidential candidate debate on October 16, 2012. After Mitt Romney's repeated use of the phrase “binders full of women,” social media sites exploded with memes criticizing Romney. Within a stream of memes under the heading, “Binders Full of Women,” one depicted Dora popping out of a three-ring binder with “Women for Self-Deportation” on the front

cover (see Figure 24). This meme not only captures Romney's thoughts on women and equal pay, it also links back to his widely-criticized immigration reform propositions, which included plans to encourage self-deportation.²⁴³

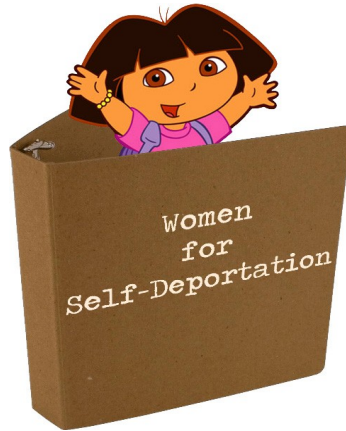


Figure 24: Dora meme of Romney's "Binders full of women."

It is nearly impossible, nor am I attempting, to divorce any one of these political debates from another. Embedded within citizenship rights and immigration laws and policies are broader discussions of gender, sexuality, racial and ethnic inclusion/exclusion practices within the national imaginary, as well as larger debates about U.S. neoliberalism. Dora has become a U.S. cultural phenomenon not only for an altruistic love of children, but also for corporate and political gains, so that a nuanced reading of Dora's impact needs to be contextualized within these very precise histories, publics, and spaces. Thus, within a U.S. immigration context, Dora vacillates in and out of the category of *niña rara* depending on who is using her image and for what purpose.

²⁴³ Note: the first presidential debate on October 3, 2012 also generated a series of memes based on Mitt Romney's comments over PBS and Sesame Street. Most of these memes included Big Bird being attacked by Romney.

CHAPTER IV

ALEX THE TOM(BOI): GENDERED MULTICULTURALISM IN CANADIAN SHORT FILMS

Are you a boy or a girl? The question implies there are only two options. While many children may not experience any anxiety in answering this presumably simple and straightforward question, other children may be haunted by the inquisition. Alex, short for Alejandra, knows how to whistle a harmonious tune and score an unprecedented number of goals during a recess soccer match, however she is less confident in explaining her gender to others. Perhaps she is still attempting to decipher it for herself. If she lived in a world where gender was not limited to arbitrary decisions such as what color one wore or how short was one's hair, perhaps those around Alex would not constantly confront her with clarifying whether she was a girl or a boy. Alex's character is based on the 1999 children's zine by Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, *Are You a Boy or a Girl?* Jiménez developed this story, while working closely with producer and director Barb Taylor of Coyle Productions, into what would eventually become the screenplay for the 2008 children's animated short film, *Tomboy*. Less than fourteen minutes long, this short film is semi-autobiographical, based on Jiménez's own experiences with gender identity, sexuality, and her relationship with her mother. *Tomboy* also provides the audience with a glimpse into children's networks, peer pressures, bullying, and ally interventions.

Throughout this chapter, I will interrogate child's play, public education, and storytelling alongside a macro analysis of *Tomboy's* production and distribution within Canada's educational media circuits. My discussion will be guided by the following questions: What messages does Alex convey around intersectionality, subject formation, and bullying at school within a Canadian context? And what was the collaborative process behind creating this *niña rara*? I argue that Alex embodies the category of *niña rara* precisely because of her own navigation through gender. Moreover, she challenges the inclusion practices within categories like women of color or girl of color through this interrogation of gender intertwined with a Chicana/Mexicana/Canadian identity. I will also argue that the process of creating *Tomboy* extends beyond Karleen Pendleton Jiménez and is instead reflective of a lengthy and fruitful collaborative process that began with Jiménez's own childhood experiences as a tomboy.

In recent years, Canada made international headlines over parents' decisions in raising gender-neutral children. One case involved Storm Stocker, the child of Kathy Witterick and David Stocker. The parents stated in an email delivered in 2011 to those around them, “We decided not to share Storm's sex for now—a tribute to freedom and choice in place of limitation, a standup to what the world could become in Storm's lifetime.”²⁴⁴ The *Toronto Star*, one of Canada's leading newspapers, was the first to publish Storm's story while a number of major international news networks followed, including ABC's *The View* in the United States. According to psychologist Michael

²⁴⁴ Quoted in Linsey Davis and Susan Donaldson James, “Canadian Mother Raising 'Genderless' Baby, Storm, Defends Her Family's Decision.” ABC News, May 30, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/genderless-baby-controversy-mom-defends-choice-reveal-sex/story?id=13718047#.UbD8rfnVBrI>

Bradley on *ABC News*, the parents were inspired by U.S. author Lois Gould's story *X: A Fabulous Child's Story*. It was originally published as a short story by *Ms. Magazine* in 1972, and then republished as a children's book in 1978.²⁴⁵ The story describes a successful child who was raised gender neutral as a result of a scientific social experiment and went by the name of X. Eugene Beresin, at the time serving as the Director of Training in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, gave the following public comment in response to Storm: "To raise a child not as a boy or a girl is creating, in some sense, a freak. It sets them up for not knowing who they are. To have a sense of self and personal identity is a critical part of normal healthy development. This blocks that and sets the child up for bullying, scapegoating and marginalization."²⁴⁶ Witterick was surprised by the negative feedback. "The strong, lightning-fast, vitriolic response was a shock," admitted the mother; "The idea that the whole world must know our baby's sex strikes me as unhealthy and voyeuristic."²⁴⁷ Although Storm was the primary focus of the controversy, news coverage also emphasized the family's progressive approach to schooling, or as the parents described it, "unschooling." This included, for example, allowing their other five year old child, Jazz, to wear his hair in long, braided pigtails. Prior to Storm, another case involving a child by the name of Sasha also made international headlines. The longevity of this case sparked further controversy since the parents did not publicly mention Sasha's sex for five years. According to Sasha's mother, it became impossible not to once Sasha had to enroll in elementary school. One can deduce several points from these headlines. First, I

²⁴⁵ Lois Gould, "X: A Fabulous Child's Story," *Ms* (December 1972), 74-78.

²⁴⁶ Davis and James, 2011.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

would argue that the media is conflating sex and gender. Secondly, I would contend that institutions such as education, media, and the state play an active role in replicating and policing childnormative gender roles.

In a 1995 draft of the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development, gender is defined as follows: "...'gender'...is used sometimes indiscriminately to describe different things at different times. Sometimes it means 'women,' sometimes 'sex' and sometimes more precisely 'gender'...Gender refers not to men and women, but to the relationship between them and to the ways in which the roles of women and men, girls and boys are socially constructed..."²⁴⁸ Most gender theorists, ranging from Beatriz Preciado to Judith Butler, would agree with this description of the social construction of gender.²⁴⁹ And yet, gender continues to be a highly contested and debated category. The Commonwealth Plan ended with: "A holistic approach to social change dominates the horizons of the future. The interests of each individual—women, men and children—and of society as a whole are inextricably linked."²⁵⁰ Perhaps this holistic approach will also include characters like Alex, who fall outside a gender binary.

Contextualizing Canadian Educational Media

In order to understand the context in which Coyle Productions created and distributed *Tomboy*, one first needs to consider the development of Canada's mass media and Canada's use of didactic media. I begin this brief chronology with the telegraph and

²⁴⁸ Quoted in *Setting the Stage for the Next Century: The Federal Plan for Gender Equality* (Ottawa, ON, Canada: Status of Women Canada), 11.

²⁴⁹ See Beatriz Preciado, *Manifesto Contra-sexual* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2002); Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

²⁵⁰ *Setting the Stage for the Next Century*, 77.

railroad lines. By 1850 major eastern hubs within the Canadian settler colonies were linked by telegraphs that ran within present day Canada and across Canada and the U.S.²⁵¹ Soon after and throughout the 1850s, these Canadian colonies also began the first railroad lines, which would eventually become the Canada Pacific Railway (CPR). The railroad helped create more demand for early print media such as newspapers and magazines. Together, the telegraph and railroad lines were significant because they greatly facilitated communication and movement not only from east to west within Canada, but also from north to south between the Canadian colonies and the U.S.²⁵²

This relationship between Canada and the U.S. foreshadows many of the challenges in conceptualizing Canadian media. Kirsten Kozolanka, Patricia Mazepa, and David Skinner suggest the following five tensions when conceptualizing a distinctly Canadian context.²⁵³ First, tensions between Canada's official languages, English and French. Second, tensions between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal people. Third, tensions between early Canadian settlers and more recent racial or ethnic migrations. Fourth, tensions between the location of major cities along the southern and coastal borders of Canada, and the less populated rural regions that geographically comprise most of Canada. And fifth, tensions between defining Canadian culture against U.S. culture. With Confederation, Canada became a federal state in 1867 although it was not entirely autonomous of British Parliament.²⁵⁴ By the 1920s, radio “broadcasting from the United

²⁵¹ Mary Vipond, *The Mass Media in Canada: Who Decides What We Read, Watch, and Hear?* (Toronto, Canada: James Lorimer & Company LTD., 2011), 18.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁵³ Kirsten Kozolanka, Patricia Mazepa, and David Skinner, “Considering Alternative Media in Canada: Structure, Participation, Activism,” in *Alternative Media in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012), 4-5.

²⁵⁴ Queen Elizabeth II currently serves as Canada's head of state, and until the British North American Act

States was flooding the Canadian market, and it was widely perceived that unless Canada acted to establish a Canadian broadcasting service, [Canadians] would be smothered in American culture.”²⁵⁵ By 1949, there were “at least 3,600 television sets in Canada, but no Canadian stations;” that year the Canadian federal government approved of a plan to create a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, or CBC, to begin producing Canadian television content.²⁵⁶ This occurred only two years after the Citizenship Act of 1947 in which “Canadians were defined for the first time as citizens of Canada, not British subjects.”²⁵⁷ Thus, Canada's national identity was being constructed through its attempts to distance itself from both the U.S. and Britain.

Similar concerns over the U.S.' influence also arose during the establishment of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) of 1987, the Broadcasting Act of 1991, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1994. As a result, Canada established “federal and provincial organizations whose primary goal is to help create and produce film. These include Telefilm Canada, the Societe generale des industries culturelles (Quebec), the Ontario Film Development Corporation, and, of course, the National Film Board (N.F.B.), whose mandate is to produce culturally significant rather than commercially viable films.”²⁵⁸ The media generated by these organizations were meant to

was amended in 1982, the British Parliament was responsible for approving specific changes to Canada's Constitutional Acts. See Margaret Conrad, *A Concise History of Canada* (New York: Cambridge, 2012); Desmond Morton, *A Short History of Canada, 6th Edition* (Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart, 2006).

²⁵⁵ See “Who We Are, What We Do.” CBC. <http://www.cbc.radio-canada.ca/en/explore/who-we-are-what-we-do/>

²⁵⁶ Vipond, 55.

²⁵⁷ Rudyard Griffiths, *Who We Are: A Citizen's Manifesto* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre), 2009, 132.

²⁵⁸ Pierre Veronneau, “Canadian Film: An Unexpected Emergence,” *Massachusetts Review* 31, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 1990): 213.

“establish [Canadian] cinema in terms of cultural affirmation and identity.”²⁵⁹ This is significant because it funneled federal funds into the production of media in an attempt to both be more competitive with foreign mass media, and to establish a Canadian nationalist presence on the screen.

Presently, the Department of Canadian Heritage, Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) and Industry Canada are responsible for overseeing Canadian media policies.²⁶⁰ However, according to Mary Vipond, “the current state of our mass media” is “largely Canadian-owned but filled with American content.”²⁶¹ She describes this as the result of

tensions between these two Canadian idea systems, the myth of communications and the ideology of liberal individualism. The mass media in Canada have developed mostly in the private sector as profit-seeking enterprises because of our prevailing liberal belief in freedom of the press. The natural economic consequence of private media ownership has been to reduce expenses and enhance profits by importing American content. Governments have intervened only very cautiously for the same liberal reasons.²⁶²

Thus, despite Canada's efforts, most of its media content continues to be imported from the U.S. or Britain.²⁶³ Paradoxically, many of these U.S. and British shows are now being filmed and produced in Canada with Canadian actors because of lower production costs. Thus, many Canadian actors are becoming well acquainted with U.S. casting calls for specific character types, such as “a generic Latina.” I will return to this toward the end of the chapter as I contextualize *Tomboy's* production.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Vipond, 37.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 13.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Current British programming includes BBC, the British Broadcasting Corporation.

***Tomboy*, an Animated Short Film for Children**

Tomboy's picturesque opening includes an assortment of trees and shrubs colored in varying shades of green. A black chirping bird with bright red wings descends from the right of the screen—gliding through this opening sequence and guiding the viewer's gaze from the flora at the foreground, to the neighborhood behind it, and further back to a city skyline. It seems fitting to begin *Tomboy* with the image of a bird given most species' seemingly dichotomous male/female divisions in appearance and categorization. This particular multicolored bird resembles those found under the taxonomy categorization of the Passeriformes order—songbirds or perching birds—and could possibly be mistaken for a sparrow, a finch, or a lark. Based on the sexual dimorphism of most birds, one might assume this bird is male since they tend to be the most colorful, exhibiting vibrant colors compared to the duller tones found on their female counterparts. However, this fictionalized bird also has a turquoise swirl circling through its eye and running down, below its beak. Though subtle, the medium of animation allows the creative team leverage or creative license to draw, color, and animate this bird in this particular manner. The general audience is still able to identify the object as a bird, while anyone attuned to bird colorizations may also identify this bird as an anomaly. In this manner, this multicolored bird becomes a metaphor for the uniquely strange and provides an appropriate introduction to the short film's title. The word “Tomboy” appears in multicolored bouncing letters resembling construction paper cut-outs bordered with colorful markers and dotted along the edges. Each lowercase letter bounces to its own rhythm, complementing the short film's opening musical score (see Figure 25).

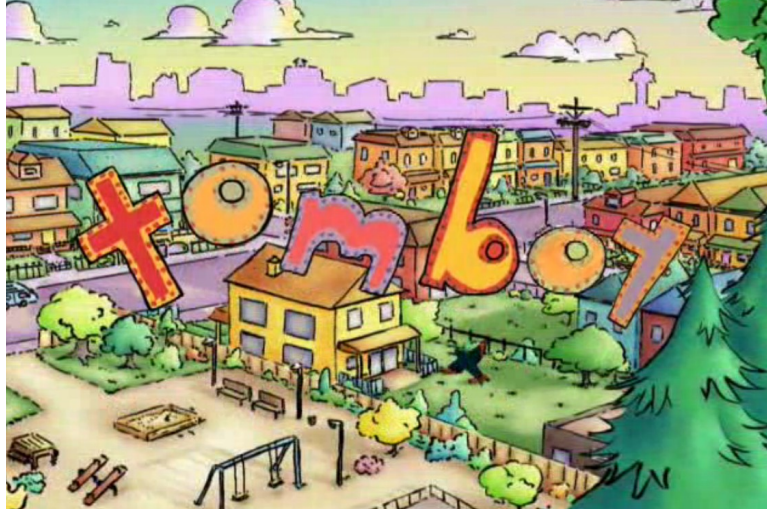


Figure 25: Screen shot of *Tomboy's* opening

At the top of the frame, and serving as the furthest backdrop, outlines of skyscrapers fill the skyline. At first inspection, this setting could represent any number of major cities. Upon closer examination, one can make out the City of Toronto's CN tower. It is one of the tallest structures worldwide, and one of the modern Seven Wonders of the World, serving as an identifiable marker of the city, and by extension, Canada, as it is also referred to as Canada's National tower.²⁶⁴ It was originally built by the Canadian National Railways company in 1976, and became federally owned in 1995. Currently, AM, FM, and DAB radio stations as well as wireless service providers make use of this communications tower. Its relevance to *Tomboy* is two-fold. It situates the film within the geographic space of Toronto, Canada, and it gestures toward federally funded media and telecommunications. Between the skyline, and complementing the colors of the title one

²⁶⁴ See Canada Lands Company, "World Wonders and Facts at a Glance." CNTower.com <http://www.cntower.ca/en-CA/About-Us/Architecture/World-Wonders-and-Facts-at-a-Glance.html> (accessed 6/18/13)

can also identify a neighborhood. As the title fades out of the frame within the opening sequence, the shot appears to zoom in. The details of this neighborhood will come into closer proximity as the chirping multicolored bird flies down, guiding the viewer's attention to a yellow house at the center of the screen. Similar homes surround this two-story house, or duplex, while one of its sides borders a playground complete with swings, teeter totters, and a sand box. Together, this opening sequence is both Toronto-centered and child-focused. The setting, musical tune, colors, and animation work collectively to situate the short film within children's media. It also sets the tone for introducing viewers to Alex.

How does one animate gender ambiguity on the screen? As Judith Butler and Elizabeth Weed write, “to understand gender, we cannot pose the question of its ontology. It is not possible to know what gender 'is' apart from the way that it is produced and mobilized; and further, it is not possible to know whether gender is a useful category of analysis unless we can first understand the purposes for which it is deployed, the broader politics it supports and helps to produce, and the geopolitical repercussions of its circulation.”²⁶⁵ Within *Tomboy*, gender is embodied and contested through Alex, and further interrogated through specific incidents between Alex and characters around her. Each incident gradually escalates the predicament of gender ambiguity, or transgression, providing the narrative arc for the short. The audience is initially introduced to Alex on a school day morning. Toys are being flown across a bedroom and eventually, someone bounces up from behind a bed shaped like a red sports car. Meanwhile, one can hear

²⁶⁵ Judith Butler and Elizabeth Weed, “Introduction,” in *The Question of Gender: Joan W. Scott's Critical Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 3.

someone call out, “Alex?” Not yet knowing who is doing the interpellating, the question, “Alex?,” quickly becomes a directive, “Alejandra María Giner, I’m calling you!” By this time, Alex has jumped from behind her bed to on top of it! One is immediately drawn to her energetic playfulness as she sways back and forth before bouncing a ball on the floor only to lose control of it as it bounces from one wall to another (see Figure 26). She eventually manages to catch it just as her mother opens and enters the bedroom.



Figure 26: Alex jumping on her bed while holding her bouncing ball

Alex's hair is short, perhaps dark brown or black, and outlines her juvenile face. Thick eyebrows perch over her large, wide eyes while a small tilted 'u' makes up her nose. Animation techniques bring her to life through dynamic facial expressions comprised of gesturing eyebrows, eyes, nose, and mouth—which at times can be a single line drawn across her face and at other moments opens up to reveal a full smile. Her ears

are exposed, revealing small, round earrings, proving her only accessories aside from the ball she holds in her hand. She wears a solid green t-shirt, jeans, and brown shoes. A vest and brown backpack complete Alex's attire, accompanying her to school.

As with animated feature films or television cartoons, the sound track and voice-overs add another degree of depth to character development. The tone in Alex's voice comes off as vivid, or cheerful. She is often outspoken and assertive. Although her name, Alex, may be gender-neutral or ambiguous, her full name, Alejandra María, is not. Similarly, Alex's mom refers to her as *mi'ja*, an abridged version of *mi hija* in Spanish, or *my daughter* in English. The pronunciation of Alex's full name along with the term of endearment, *mi'ja*, work collectively to gender Alex for anyone who speaks Spanish or can recognize the 'a' at the end of Alejandra or *mi'ja*. Thus, this opening dialogue both genders Alex and establishes the relationship between mother and daughter by interspersing Spanish.

Although *Tomboy's* primary narrative arc stresses gender identity, Alex also embodies a unique Chicana Canadianness. Her English has a Canadian accent, suggesting she was born and raised in Canada, whereas her mother speaks more Spanish and her English has a heavier accent, suggesting she migrated to Canada. This generational difference between children born in Canada and their parents echos Michelle Habell-Pallán's treatment of Latina/o theater in Vancouver. She quotes Chilean-born director Carmen Aguirre as stating, "Their parents describe them as Canadian but they're not accepted by the mainstream, which sees them as Latino. So these kids are stuck in the

middle, trying to find their own ground.”²⁶⁶ Alex's 'middle' is more tumultuous, straddling between genders as well as languages and cultures. Alex's bedroom further exemplifies her biculturalism. The Mexican flag hangs on the wall above her red sports car bed. Several posters encircle the flag, including one of a space ship gliding amongst stars and planets, one of the Virgin of Guadalupe, one of a black or Afro-Latina artist with the words “Concert tonight,” and one of a luchador in a blue and red costume. On the same wall, and to the right of the door, hangs an adornment resembling a *sagrado corazón*, or sacred heart. On the opposite wall, framed pictures adorn a dresser and mirror. Together, Alex and her mother also challenge normative representations of Chicano or Latino nuclear families. Theirs is a loving, single-parent matriarchal home. Her mother is a strong woman of color single-handedly raising and caring for her child. Phenotypically, they cast a wider representation of *Latinidad* through their hair and skin tones. Both mother and daughter have dark hair, however Alex's is thick and straight whereas her mother's is thick and curly. Alex is also lighter skinned compared to her mother's darker skin.

Alex's gender is initially called into question on her way to school. She whistles a tune to herself while hopping along the sidewalk with her mother by her side. A mail carrier approaches them from the opposite direction and joins Alex in whistling, complementing her by observing “Nice whistling, son,” as he passes on by. Alex's mom immediately interjects, “She's a girl,” to which he responds, “Oh, well, umm you, you never can tell these days, I guess. I didn't mean to...” Again, Alex's mom replies, “I know.

²⁶⁶ Michelle Habell-Pallán, *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 209.

Good day.” “Good day,” he agrees. This exchange occurs between both adults, the mail carrier and Alex's mom, while Alex remains in the background—a mere observer despite being the focus of this dialogue. In this example, one adult makes an assumption about Alex's gender while another adult challenges that assumption—namely that Alex must be a boy due to her appearance and actions. These two adults also represent the seemingly dichotomous divide between femininity and masculinity, where Alex's mom is equated with the former and the mail carrier with the latter. She wears a purple blazer, pink skirt, heels, make-up, and bright earrings, whereas he wears his work uniform consisting of a blue baseball cap, blue shirt, and shorts. In this dichotomy, both gender extremes operate within heteronormative presumptions and are also racialized so that femininity is made 'hyper' visible through the mother's Latinidad while masculinity is made 'hyper' visible through the mail carrier's whiteness. This dichotomy is visually depicted through movement on the screen, with the mother walking off-stage toward the left of the frame, and the mail carrier on the right of the frame, walking in the opposite direction. Together, their bodies seem to represent an imaginary tug-of-war, pulling on opposite ends of femininity and masculinity. And at the center stands Alex, occupying her ambivalent position between each extreme. As previously stated, Alex never speaks, only glances. Her energetic demeanor within the privacy of her bedroom, and then her visible presence whistling and hopping around the sidewalk, is suddenly paused. She does not appear upset. Perhaps she identifies with both figures, or perhaps with neither. Another possibility exists in recalling Alex's prior whistling of the French Canadian song, “Alouette.” The refrain repeats, “Alouette, gentille alouette, | Alouette, je te plumerai,”

which can be loosely translated into English as either, “Lark, gentile Lark, | Lark, I will pluck you” or “Skylark, lovely skylark, | Skylark, I will pluck you.” Rita E. Urquijo-Ruiz notes that “while 'Alouette' is a happy song about a painful event, in the film it foreshadows Alex's painful encounters with her classmates, who insist on metaphorically stripping her of her own sense of gender identity. Like the skylark, Alex shows her firm, yet gentle manner throughout the story.”²⁶⁷

Alex first encounters her classmates within the setting of a Toronto public school named after the bisexual Mexican artist, Frida Kahlo. Alex is nine years old, which would place her in elementary school, or fourth grade. Specific identifiers, such as a poster of the Canadian shield and the classroom's anglophone multiculturalism help add a more nuanced dimension to *Tomboy's* setting. Alex walks past a poster of the Canadian shield as she moves from her desk toward the front of the classroom. The current 2013 social science curriculum lists the Canadian shield as one of the key terms found within its Glossary. Its definition reads, “A vast landform region that extends from the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River to the Arctic Ocean, covering almost half of Canada. It is characterized by Precambrian rock and is rich in minerals.”²⁶⁸ The curriculum also gives the following guidelines: “By the end of Grade 4, students will analyse [sic.] some of the general ways in which the natural environment of regions in Canada has affected the development of industry (e.g., how the characteristics of the Canadian Shield made possible the development of mining and smelting, forestry, fresh water fisheries, pulp and

²⁶⁷ Rita E. Urquijo-Ruiz, Review of *Tomboy*, *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* 8 (2009): 63.

²⁶⁸ “The Ontario Curriculum: Social Studies Grades 1 to 6, History and Geography Grades 7 and 8.” Ontario Public Service (2013), 200. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/sshg18curr2013.pdf>

paper...).”²⁶⁹ The poster of the Canadian shield thus serves to once again locate *Tomboy's* setting geographically within Canada while also depicting age-appropriate elementary school curriculum. However, the poster is in English, not French. Language, in this case English, becomes the common denominator within the multicultural Toronto classroom. Like Alex and her mother, the characters in the classroom also have an array of accents and skin tones in an effort to depict Toronto's multiculturalism. Alex's teacher is black-Canadian while the students could be read as Latina/os, Black, Caribbean, South Asian, Asian, First Nation, or European. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Section 15, Equality Rights, lists “race” as a non-discrimination category. However, the very category of 'race' also shifts depending on its historical and sociopolitical context. Thus, 'race' within Canadian multiculturalism can serve as a placeholder for racial differences, ethnic differences, cultural differences, nationality differences, or even religious differences. Like gender, it's policing reflects the political projects invested in its production and mobilization.

While at school, Alex is once again caught between childnormative constructions of femininity and masculinity. The words, Science Day, appear on the chalkboard along with the names of several students including Dionne, Kati, Berto, and Alex. Dionne stands at the front of the classroom holding a doll whose blonde hair is tied into two pigtails and wears a pink dress. Meanwhile, Dionne wears her red headed hair in a side ponytail along with a violet and aquamarine sweater, matching pants, and earrings. Speaking rapidly and with a sense of confidence, Dionne begins her class presentation,

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 102.

“Minnie is ten years old. Last weekend she completed her nature walk badge for Girl Guides. She learned about tree bark that smells like vanilla and poison ivy that feels like fire. Then she hosted a tea party and that's the end. Does anyone have any questions? Would anyone like to see her up close except for you, and you, and you, and you and you in the back. No, well good. And thank you.” Her presentation darts out one example after another, leaving no actual time for questions. Nor does she seem to want any of her peers to see her doll up close. The overall lack of enthusiasm for Dionne's presentation suggests that either Dionne is not well liked by her peers or her object of choice, the doll, and her presentation of it were not appealing. Dionne does not seem to care. Her overall demeanor comes off as selfish and entitled or even bratty. Tone aside, Dionne's ranting mentioned a critical organization for young girls, the Girl Guides of Canada. Although her doll Minnie most likely did not earn a badge, it is probable that Dionne is a member of this organization. The Girl Guides of Canada was founded in 1910, two years before the U.S. Girl Scouts. The organization's current “Promise,” or mantra, goes as follows: “I promise to do my best, | To be true to myself, my beliefs, and Canada. | I will take action for a better world | And respect the Guiding Law.”²⁷⁰ Dionne may not be the best spokesperson for this organization, however Dionne is gendered through her own attire, doll, tone, and association with the Girl Guides of Canada, making her emblematic of childnormative femininity within Canada.

Dionne's femininity becomes starkly contrasted with Alex's own gender ambiguity. Dionne lets out an overextended sigh while rolling her eyes as Alex passes her

²⁷⁰ See “Mission, Vision, Promise, and Law.” Girl Guides of Canada. https://www.girlguides.ca/uploads/File/who_we_are/mission-vision-values-promise-law-poster.pdf

on her way to the front of the classroom (see Figure 27a). Alex disregards her, focusing instead on her ball, “This super neon bouncing ball bounces up to seventy-five percent of its original dropping altitude! And, it's even faster when I throw it hard.” “How fast does it go?,” interrupts Kareem. Eventually the teacher asks, “Now, are there any more questions?” Berto, wearing a frown on his face, raises his hand (see Figure 27b). This time it is the teacher who sighs. “Yes, Berto, do you have a question?” “Yeah, is she a boy or a girl?” The teacher raises her voice, “Now that is completely inappropriate!” Berto continues, “Cuz she's got a girl's name, but the stuff she talks about, it's all, you know, boy kinda things.” The film moves from a close-up of Berto, to a close-up of Alex who is now visibly upset and lets out a “Hmmm” in objection. The teacher takes this opportunity to challenge Berto, “There is no such thing as a boy thing and girl thing in this classroom. Every child can develop an interest in every topic. Remember, just last week we studied the work of the first female astronaut. What was her name, Berto?” “Ah, I don't know,” he says, slightly embarrassed.



Figure 27a: Alex, Dionne, and Kareem



Figure 27b: Berto

A closer examination of the teacher's response to Berto suggests certain

challenges for didactic media. Educators and producers of children's media usually assume it will be didactic. Within *Tomboy*, the teacher serves as an authoritative figure. On one level, she models ally behavior by defending Alex against Berto's antagonism. She accomplishes this by both challenging Berto on an individual level as well as speaking broadly against gender norms. The teacher's sigh and tone upon seeing Berto raise his hand also suggests Berto is an ongoing problem within the classroom and she anticipates his comment will be disruptive. According to a 2004 study of 2,755 respondents across Canada, "Approximately 45% of students in the study experienced bully-victim problems, sexual harassment or racial discrimination at least once during a four-week period... Approximately 40% of the students were not directly involved in these peer relationship problems, yet were affected because they saw or heard these incidents. In other words, only 15% of the students in this study reported that they were not involved in any way in these incidents."²⁷¹ This report suggests widespread bullying. Other research suggests social factors that may lead to bullying. For example, "Aggressive youth who experience social problems are less likely to be academically engaged, more likely to disrupt the activities of others, and at increased risk for academic difficulties, school failure, poor teacher-student relationships, and school dropout."²⁷² Furthermore, bully profiling can also be gendered and raced so that it may be easier to label boys of color as bullies as opposed to girls who are white, such as Dionne, whose attitude comes off as bratty, whereas Berto comes off as a bully. In a later scene, Dionne

²⁷¹ See, Mark Totten, "Assessment Toolkit for Bullying, Harassment and Peer Relations at School" (Ottawa, Ontario: Canada Public Health Association, 2004), 6. http://www.cpha.ca/uploads/progs/_safeschools/assessment_toolkit_e.pdf

²⁷² Thomas W. Farmer and Hongling Xie, "Aggression and School Social Dynamics: The Good, the Bad, and the Ordinary," *Journal of School Psychology* 45 (2007), 464.

will both criticize Alex amongst her peers and directly confront Alex about her gender, however she will do so outside of her teacher's purview—limiting the possibility of the teacher's intervention. Furthermore, how can the teacher motivate her students to address these issues? Within *Tomboy*, the dialogue between Berto, Alex, and the teacher is paired with a scan of the room whereby the camera pans from left to right. Many of the children appear disinterested or distracted. One student has his eyes shut as if he were asleep. Whether this was intended as comic relief or is a mere animation glitch, it does illustrate the challenge of engaging an entire classroom in gender equity and anti-discriminatory discussions. Kareem's comments are critical as they demonstrate his genuine desire and attempt to comprehend gender nuances. “Yeah, but Miss,” he says, “outside of [the] classroom there really are boy and girl things. You should see the girls hop in hopscotch. I mean, the boys try, but they don't do it too well and they fall down. It's really a girl thing, I think. And then there's...” Unfortunately, this is a missed didactic opportunity since the teacher is unable to respond because Berto once again interrupts, “So, are you a boy or a girl?” The teacher's frustration is evident as she asks, “Do you have any questions about the ball?” Equally frustrated, Alex responds, “Duh, I'm a girl.” “Nauw,” challenges Berto. “What did you say?” “I said nauw, I don't have any more questions, whatever, about you being a girl.”

The following scene cuts to the playground outdoors where Dionne will make crass assumptions about hair amongst her peers, further revealing the ways children engage in gender policing. According to Dionne, everyone appears to have “gender-appropriate” or childnormative hair except for Alex, and perhaps Rodger. Dionne is quick

to point out, “Look at that hair! That's boy's hair!” Kati challenges her, “What's boy's hair?” “Short hair!” Kati persists, “But I've got short hair. And Rodger's got long hair.” Replying to Kati, “Yeah, but you've got girl short hair. She's got boy short hair. And well, I've always wondered about Rodger.” Kati cuts her off, “Wondered what? You're crazy!” The difference, according to Dionne, is the manner in which the hair is cut and styled. Alex's hair is cut short around her head in a manner that creates a semi-spiked or tousled appearance. Kati's hair is short and in cornrows. Dionne's hair is long, as is Rodger's, which falls just past his shoulders. It is unclear why Dionne “wondered” about Rodger although the audience can deduce she is insinuating he may be gay. Rodger is dressed in a blue and green striped shirt and dark shorts. Despite Dionne's disapproving tone, Rodger embodies the possibility of queerness. He never speaks and only appears on screen in the background, however viewers may identify with him simply because of Dionne's comments. Additionally, Rodger could be gender queer or trans, or identify as feminine regardless of his sexuality. Thus, like Dionne, the audience is also left wondering. Moreover, any of the children, including Berto or Dionne, could potentially be queer. I am suggesting one view all the characters outside a heteronormative lens so that each child could equally represent the possibility of queerness.

Gender policing also occurs around children's choice of playground activities. Norah L. Lewis suggests that through play, “children test the rules of cause and effect, utilize deductive and inductive reasoning, and develop their imaginative and creative thinking skills.”²⁷³ These rules and reasoning also pertain to how children will gender

²⁷³ Norah L. Lewis, *Freedom to Play: We Made Our Own Fun* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002), 1.

each other based on who they play with or what they play during recess. A pan shot of the playground in *Tomboy* shows children engaging in a soccer game while others play hopscotch, jump rope, or rest on benches nearby. How divided is the playground? In *Tomboy*, there exist clear gender divides as demonstrated by Kareem's observation of hopscotch. With the exception of the bench, which seems to border the other activities, each space is divided so that the girls play hopscotch or jump rope and the boys play soccer. Alex challenges this gender dichotomy as she too, plays soccer. Dionne observes, "What is she doing playing with the boys?" Alex's presence on the soccer field and Dionne's preconceived notions of who should play soccer suggest wider assumptions about girls and women in sports. Scholar Brian Pronger notes, "Rather than taking advantage of the many similarities of male and female physical capacities, sports have developed to emphasize the differences, thereby reproducing in that athletic/social sphere the mythic discourse of gender difference."²⁷⁴ In Canada, "the affirmative action provisions of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, as well as some provincial human rights codes, allowed for both coeducation and female-only programs, and protected the latter from discrimination complaints by male athletes."²⁷⁵ However, not all sports receive equal funding and "in Canada and elsewhere, trends in Olympic competition have an impact on the funding and popularity of university and community sports for girls and women."²⁷⁶ These trends inevitably shape gender perceptions of which sports are most appropriate for boys and which are most appropriate for girls. Within

²⁷⁴ Brian Pronger, "Sex and Sport" in *Queerly Canadian: An Introductory Reader in Sexuality Studies* (Toronto, Ontario: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc., 2012): 389.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁷⁶ Helen Jefferson Lenskyj, *Out on the Field: Gender, Sport and Sexualities* (Toronto, Ontario: Women's Press, 2003), 29.

Tomboy, the soccer field is clearly marked as a masculine space. Alex seems to fit in fine, passing the ball and assisting in scoring goals, however the game will come to a complete halt once her presence on the field is openly contested. No longer content with simply talking behind her back, Dionne walks into the soccer field, toward Alex. “Are you a boy or a girl anyway?,” asks Dionne. Alex is taken aback, “What are you talking about? Get off the field!” Rather than answering questions about her gender, she seems more preoccupied with continuing the soccer game. Dionne has other plans, “You play soccer and basketball with the boys. You play the trumpet. You talk about cars and bouncy balls. You even run like a boy. You never play with the girls over at the hopscotch.” “So what!?” exclaims Alex. “So, are you a boy or a girl?” Dionne's persistence is exasperating. “I already told you, I'm a girl! I'm a girl! I'm a girl, ok! So you can leave me alone now!” By this time the other children are standing around, observing. Dionne's antagonism is matched by Berto who takes this opportunity to once again challenge Alex. “Dionne's right! If you're a girl, you should stop being a boy!” “Oh, yeah! You should stop being a boy!” “You should stop doing all the boy things!” Presumably, that includes no longer playing soccer with him and the other boys. “Why?” challenges Alex. “Cuz I said so!” “Well that's a silly reason. Got anything else?” At this point the boy next to Berto provides an unconvincing response. “Cuz boys are silly, silly.” He says this in a giggly tone of which does not satisfy Berto who shoves his elbow into him. “Oooh! What was that for?” “We're boys, remember?” “Oh, yeah. I mean, boys who are girls are silly. I mean girls who are trying to be boys. I mean girly boy girls. I mean, aw, I don't know what I mean. What do I mean, Berto?” The conversation once again shifts between Berto

and Alex. He angrily proclaims, “That tomboys need to get off the soccer field and go find pretty dresses to wear instead.” Alex redirects, choosing not to engage with his comment on how she dresses, or does not dress. Instead, she says, “Oh, so this is about you losing to me again. Don't take it so hard, Berto. It's ok to be second best.” Her response allows her to challenge Berto on grounds she is familiar with, the soccer field. Berto accepts, declaring “I can take you any day.” “Alright.” Alex will use her skills at soccer to take on Berto, proving she belongs on that soccer field as much as he does.

Alex may have prevailed against Berto on the soccer field, however she is unsure what to make of everyone's accusations. After the game she heads toward Kareem for an explanation, “Hey Kareem, you better tell me what's going on.” Unsure, he asks, “why me?” Alex leaves him little choice, “Because I taught you all your math this year and I'll stop helping you and you'll fail.” “Oh, yeah,” he agrees. “So fess up, Kareem.” He recalls an earlier conversation he had with Dionne and Kati. After Dionne had mocked Alex's short boy hair, she went on to complain about the color of Alex's clothes, “And look at those soccer shorts! They're red!” “Yeah, so what about it?,” asks Kati. “Aww, everyone knows red's a boy color,” points out Dionne. Kati comes to Alex's defense by pointing out other girls who also wear red, “It is not. Look at Daphne. She is the girliest girl in the whole school. And she's got the reddest capri pants I've ever seen.” “It's true,” confesses Dionne, “Red's hard. It can go either way. It's all in the shade of the red. Red, light red, going on pink, that would be girl red. But red, dark red, going on maroon, clearly boy, right?” She gestures toward Kareem who has joined them on the bench. “I've never really thought about it. I just kinda put clothes on everyday. Though, now that you mention it,

red has always been a bit confusing. I only wear blue.” Blue, it seems, is always a boy's color. As evidenced by so many baby announcements, “It's a boy!” is often in baby blue, whereas “It's a girl!” is often in pink. Thus, red is “a bit confusing” because of its proximity to pink—the combination of red and white. Alex tries to understand, “But they're red! That totally counts as a girl color!” “Nope,” clarifies Kareem, “Dionne says it depends on the shade and those aren't red going on pink, which could be seen as a girl color, they're red going on purple.” Dionne's insistence on the tone of the color red also suggests that brighter colors are more appropriate for girls and darker colors are more appropriate for boys. These are arbitrary distinctions that do not apply to all girl's or boy's clothing, however they are consistent with many contemporary baby and children's items. Kareem eventually makes up his mind on the color red: “Actually,” he continues, “red really is known as a boy color. I mean, it's like a main boy color.” This is not what Alex wants to hear. “Are you sure?” she asks with some hesitation in her voice. “My favorite color is blue. Just to avoid the whole thing, you might just want to choose something clear cut like that, but in girl. Maybe pink or yellow?” Alex frowns, “Thanks, I know you're just trying to help, but I can't do it. I mean, they're too bright. I would have to get sunglasses to look at myself. Moths would bump into me for warmth. Bees would circle me for pollen. It would just be too painful.” Alex already owns and wears bright colors. Instead, her response is revealing because of its underlining message, she wants to dress as she does and anything other than that would feel inconsistent with who she is, or as Rita E. Urquijo-Ruiz suggests, the pain involved in her “dressing like a girl.”²⁷⁷ Thus,

²⁷⁷ Urquijo-Ruiz, 64.

Dionne's observations on the shade of the color should also be taken alongside the style or cut of the clothing. For example, Daphne can likely wear any shade of red since the garment is most likely consistent with girl's attire. In other words, she was wearing capri pants, not soccer shorts. Similarly, many of the boys on the soccer field wore patterns or brighter colors, however they all wore shirts consistent with a boy's t-shirt or sports jerseys. This is further evident in Berto's comments, who did not mention colors but rather, Alex's inability to put on a "pretty dress." Taken as a whole, the classroom as the playground provide little comfort for Alex as she tries to understand her classmates obsession with her appearance or likes and dislikes. Together, her science class demonstration, her short hair, her desire to play soccer, and her red shorts make up who she is—the embodiment of a *niña rara* challenging childnormative constructions of gender.

Tomboy begins and concludes within the private sphere of Alex's bedroom where the role of storytelling proves critical in comprehending her worldview. In the first bedroom scene, Alex tells a story to her mother who is trying to get Alex to hurry up: "Alex, we got to go. We're gonna be late." "Sorry mami, ¡I tripped!" Her mother is not convinced. "Ay, pero there were a dozen crashes and booming," she notes; "Did you break something?" Alex's effort to justify why she is not yet ready lead her to a story about dragons and princesses. She begins, "I tripped a few times. You see mama, ¡fue una pesadilla, a horrible nightmare!" This nightmare quickly becomes an elaborate story about Alex's bravery. She continues, "See, there was this dragon breathing fire and then I fought it with my sword." The voice-over is paired with an image of Alex in plated armor

making her way through a thorny forest as she is confronted by a huge, green dragon no doubt breathing fire as fiercely as the rage in its eyes. Alex continues, “And then I leapt to save the princess! And then I slipped off my airplane and fell on top of my junk pile.” The animations continue. This time the shot centers on a tall stone tower. At the top is a window and peeking outside of it is a princess. Alex's mother is perplexed, “¿Cómo, Alejandra? Why does crazy stuff always happen to you in the morning?” “But, ¡mami!,” tries Alex once again. One can deduce from this brief dialogue Alex's own worldview, whereby she does not hesitate inserting herself as the hero of this story. In doing so, she provides a twist to the classic fairy tale trope of the damsel in distress locked away in a tower. Whereas the “knight in shining armor” within classic, or childnormative fairy tales is usually depicted as male, the audience is left wondering if Alex considers herself a knight, and if so, what association does that have to her sex, gender, or sexuality? Alex is drawn and animated such that she could embody multiple options, challenging the very categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. For example, if one reads Alex as a cisgender girl, she is a girl fantasizing about rescuing another girl, both of whom could be read as lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or some other variation of queer.²⁷⁸ She can just as easily be read as a trans boy. Or, Alex can embody a girl who is also a boy, as we will later see.

Rather than pinning her down to any of these categories, the uniqueness of this short film

²⁷⁸ For a discussion on queer children or queer theory and children, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “How to Bring Your Kids up Gay,” *Social Text* 29 (1991): 18-27; Robin Bernstein, “‘Too Realistic’ and ‘Too Distorted’: The Attack on Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* and the Gaze of the Queer Child,” *Critical Matrix, The Princeton Journal of Women, Gender, and Culture* 12, no. 1-2 (2001): 26-47; Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, eds., *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Michelle Ann Abate and Kenneth Kidd, eds., *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011); Kenneth Kidd, “Queer Theory's Child and Children's Literature Studies,” *PMLA* 126, no. 1 (January 2011): 1-23.

is that Alex does not fit neatly within any of them. Moreover, Alex's mother is not surprised by Alex's desire to save a princess. This suggests she has possibly heard this before, or even if she has not, is not bothered by this narrative. Instead, she seems to care most about getting her daughter to school on time. Within this example, storytelling provides a space by which Alex can explore a spectrum of gender identities, embodying whatever costumes or roles she deems fit (see Figure 28a).

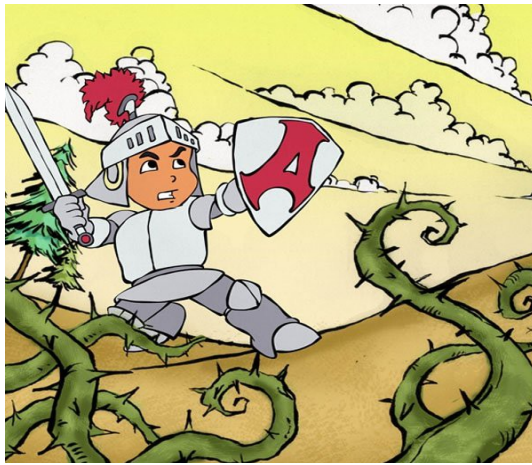


Figure 28a: Alex in armor



Figure 28b: Kati as the princess in Alex's story

Alex's fantasy also challenges the childnormative category of princess. As Alex Layne and Samantha Blackmon explain, “Since Donkey Kong tossed his first barrel in 1981, princesses in video games have served one purpose: to be saved... Women were cast as damsels in distress and have predominantly been trapped in this role. More than three decades later little has changed.”²⁷⁹ One can trace representations of damsels in distress

²⁷⁹ See Alex Layne and Samantha Blackmon, “Self-Saving Princess: Feminism and Post-Play Narrative Modding,” *ADA: Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 2 (2013). <http://adanewmedia.org/2013/06/issue2-layne-blackmon/>

well before video games and Donkey Kong. A classic example of women trapped in towers is the middle ages fairy tale, Rapunzel, or its contemporary remake, Disney's *Tangled* (2010). “Such is the power of visual representation that children tend to believe that Disney's version of the fairy tale is the real story rather than the 'classical' version to which they may or may not have been exposed through school or home.”²⁸⁰ Unlike the long, blond-haired and “fair skinned” princess, Rapunzel, the princess within Alex's fantasy is none other than her classmate Kati who, as previously noted, wears her hair short and tied back in cornrows. Kati is also black-Canadian whose family is originally from the Caribbean, possibly Jamaica. This would be consistent with the large population of Jamaican-Canadians in Ontario. And unlike the long, draping gowns usually associated with a princess within mainstream media, Kati wears a beige top bordered in a triangular green and orange motif (see Figure 28b). Within the infamous Disney princess series, Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) stands out as the only black princess (see Figure 29.). Of all the Disney princesses, she is one of two (along with Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* (1991)) who was not born into royalty. Tiana does not become a princess until the very end, upon marrying Prince Naveen of Maldonia. Tiana is also an unconventional Disney princess given her greatest aspiration in life was to open a restaurant in New Orleans and she worked diligently, often at two jobs, to save money for a down payment to the old sugar mill she would eventually transform into her restaurant.²⁸¹ Tiana comes to Prince Naveen's aid multiple times, as does Kati who spoke

²⁸⁰ Dorothy L. Hurley, “Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 74, no. 3 (2005): 222.

²⁸¹ Interestingly, Belle does not aspire to be a princess either. She is a book worm and cares more about reading and her father than marring the most popular guy in town; nor is she blond.

up against Dionne on behalf of Alex. The biggest difference between Tiana and Kati is that Tiana eventually becomes a princess whereas Kati does not. This challenges common princess narratives that often end with the happy union of the princess and the prince. In *Tomboy*, Alex and Kati's potential relationship remains paused. Thus, its possibility exists and does not necessarily need to materialize in order to be significant for Alex.



Figure 29: Disney's Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog*. *The Princess and the Frog* is a registered trademark of Disney Enterprises, Inc.

The final scenes of *Tomboy* cycle once again to storytelling within Alex's bedroom, although this time Alex's mother is the one with a story. No longer surrounded by her classmates, Alex releases all her hurt, sobbing into the pillow she clutches firmly with both arms as she lays face down on her bed. Within the privacy of her own room, Alex is able to show her true vulnerability and all the pain caused by her classmates taunting. Her sobs escape through the walls, drawing her mother toward her. “Alex, ¿eres tú? What are you doing home so early? Mi'ja, what's wrong?” Alex is reluctant at first, “I don't want to talk about it.” Her mother sits next to her. “Oh, baby girl, what happened?”

she asks as she caresses Alex's hair. Alex eventually speaks up as she repositions herself into her mother's arms, "Why are you the only one who can tell I'm a girl?" Her mother employs storytelling as a way of answering her daughter's question. "Tengo un cuento, I heard a story once." Alex hesitates, "Oh, no, about what?" Her mother begins, "Well, there once was a girl who didn't like girl things. No make-up, or dresses, or dolls." Alex interrupts, "What did the other kids say about her?" Her mother's story has succeeded in sparking Alex's interest. "The people who didn't know that people are different couldn't and wouldn't understand." "I'll bet," agrees Alex. "They kept asking her if she was a boy or a girl." Alex undoubtedly relates, responding "Well, she better get used to it!" Alex's repeated interruptions to her mother's story suggest both apprehension in finding out what happens next and the story's relevance to her own life. Her tone suggests she is projecting from the day's prior experiences. Her mother persists, "But the girl never thought about acting like a girl or a boy. She just did what she liked to do. But someone would always say something to her about it..." Alex agrees, "Yeah, every single day they want to know if I'm a boy or a girl! And they look at me like I'm a rat or some hairy animal. And they point! And make jokes!" This is a critical moment within the short film. It depicts, along with her earlier sobbing, how much her peer's comments about Alex's gender truly affect her. The bedroom backdrop creates a degree of intimacy within this shot sequence so that the audience initially views from a distance, as if serving as witnesses to the effects of her classmates' bullying. The extreme close-ups and downward angle shots draw the audience further into the mother and daughter's private world. Alex, unaware of the audience, pours her hurt out, into her mother's comforting arms. Her mother reassures her, "Alex,

you'll never be a girl like other girls. And you don't have to be. Right now it's hard because too many people don't know about girls like you.” “Girls that are like boys?” Alex's response posed as yet another question suggests her own attempt to understand and articulate her gender.

Alex's mother continues her story by suggesting Alex is not alone. Rather, examples of gender non-conforming people exist across history. “Ever since there were girls and boys there have been girls who like to do boy things and boys who like to do girl things.” This sole sentence compresses imagery layered within the polemics of queer historiography. First, the animation paired with “girls who like to do boy things” depicts a woman in medieval plated armor with a sword in one hand and a banner in another. Her posture and positioning on the screen starkly resemble Alex's earlier fantasy of her in armor while fighting off a dragon. Even the clouds and the trees in the background are similar. Thus this figure serves as a historical point of reference for women in armor and also as a possible future for Alex into adulthood. Presumably, this figure is Jehanne Darc, in medieval French (Jeanne d'Arc in modern French, or Joan of Arc, in English) who lived in France during the late middle ages (c1412-1431).²⁸² One can recognize her by her medieval armor, sword and banner (see Figure 30). Popular depictions of her commonly attribute white, golds and reds to her as well. According to archival records, Joan of Arc allegedly received visions from several archangels and saints including the Archangel Michael, and the Archangel Gabriel, as well as from St. Catherine of Alexandria and Saint Margaret of Antioch. She believed “these visions ordered her to lift the siege of

²⁸² Visit the Joan of Arc digital archive at <http://archive.joan-of-arc.org/>. It is curated by historian Allen Williamson, founder of the Historical Association for Joan of Arc Studies. Allen Williamson, “Joan of Arc's Life – Brief Overview,” Joan of Arc Archive (2010). Last accessed June 26, 2013.

Orleans on behalf of its captive Duke and to bring the Dauphin to Rheims for his coronation.”²⁸³ Stated differently, she was to defend France against the English and ensure Charles VII's position as heir to the French throne. By contemporary standards, Joan of Arc would have been in her early teens when she had her first vision at thirteen years old. At age seventeen she went before Dauphin Charles, pleading for him to allow her to fight. He was allegedly inspired by her words but nonetheless had her medically examined to ensure “nothing improper has been found in her, only good, humility, chastity, piety, propriety, simplicity.”²⁸⁴ At the time, he was also a youth by contemporary standards, and with the success of Joan of Arc, became King Charles VII at age sixteen. Soon after, Joan of Arc was captured, tried and eventually executed at only nineteen years old. I emphasize age as a point of comparison between the middle ages and contemporary conceptualizations of childnormativity. Interestingly, Joan of Arc's choice to wear men's armor was brought up as a charge against her during her trial. She justified it by saying “the saints in her visions had commanded her to wear male clothing, primarily in order to protect her virginity, and because it would be 'too strange' to ride in a dress among so many soldiers.”²⁸⁵ Moreover, Joan of Arc's case is particularly significant because she has become the poster child for women leading armies. Thus, it is not surprising she is included within *Tomboy* alongside “girls who like to do boy things.”

²⁸³ Allen Williamson, “Joan of Arc's Life – Brief Overview,” Joan of Arc Archive (2010). Last accessed June 26, 2013.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Quicherat, vol IV, pp250-251, as quoted in Endnote 2, p21 of Robert Wirth, et al. “Primary Sources and Context Concerning Joan of Arc's Male Clothing,” Historical Academy for Joan of Arc Studies, 2006. <http://primary-sources-series.joan-of-arc-studies.org/PSS021806.pdf> ; Also see http://archive.joan-of-arc.org/joanofarc_rape_refutation.html



Figure 30: Joan of Arc in *Tomboy*

While Joan of Arc seems like an obvious illustrative choice as an identifiably historical figure, there are other notable examples of women playing critical roles within major wars or battles. For example, if “girls who like to do boy things” refers specifically to women leading armies into battle, this would include figures like Princess Erendira who led the P'urhépecha in a rebellion against the Spanish in the 1520s²⁸⁶ or Agustina de Aragón (the Maid of Saragossa) who fought in the Spanish War of Independence during the early 1800s.²⁸⁷ Moreover, why is leading an army considered “a boy thing” in the first place? Or is the emphasis on women dressing in men's military attire and joining an army? In which case, that would include figures like Hua Mulan of ancient China, or within México, María de la Luz Barrera, who was a Zapatista, and Petra or Pedro Jiménez who was a Maderista.²⁸⁸ These three figures allegedly only dressed as men to

²⁸⁶ See Elizabeth Salas, *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 17.

²⁸⁷ See Cicely Mary Hamilton, *A Pageant of Great Women* (London: Suffrage Shop, 1910), 42, 67.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

participate in their respective wars and afterward returned to wearing women's clothes and assuming women's roles. Cross dressing and passing were temporary gender performances as a way to participate in war. What about those for whom it was not temporary? Alex, for example, does not wear shorts at school and skirts at home. More recently, scholars have been drawn to the Mexican revolutionary figure Amelio Robles Ávila (see Figure 31).²⁸⁹ Born Carmen Amelia Robles Ávila in 1889, he joined the revolutionaries against Porfirio Díaz in 1912 because according to Gabriela Cano, “En la guerrilla, Amelio descubrió 'la sensación de ser completamente libre.’”²⁹⁰ This sense of freedom lasted beyond his participation in the Mexican Revolution as he continued to go by the name Amelio until his death. In his later years he lived with his partner Angela Torres and together raised an adoptive daughter.²⁹¹ Stories of his time in war have been popularized through Mexican corridos although these are often vague when discussing his nuanced gender or sexuality. On the other hand, queer and lesbian scholars usually refer to Amelio as a butch lesbian whereas transgender scholars reclaim him as trans. Perhaps, what both Amelio and Alex share is that others cannot conceive of them without answering the question, are they a boy or a girl? The limitation and danger of this question is its presumed simplicity and its perpetuation of dichotomies. Although it seems there are only two options—boy or girl—there are countless more. The “boy” or “girl” options conflate sex with gender and sexuality so that characters like Alex embody

²⁸⁹ Gabriela Cano, “Amelio Robles, andar de soldado viejo: Masculinidad (transgénero) en la Revolución Mexicana,” in “Cuerpos transexuales y transgéneros,” Special Issue, *Debate Feminista* 39 (April 2009): 14.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁹¹ David Hernandez Mata, “Tambien Lucharon por el Pais” *El Porvenir.mx* (September 18, 2010) http://www.elporvenir.com.mx/notas.asp?nota_id=430900 (last accessed 6/27/13)

something else entirely that is unimaginable or illegible.



Figure 31: Amelio Robles Ávila

Similarly, *Tomboy's* illustration of an indigenous person alongside “boys who like to do girl things” can be further complicated. Western anthropologists have imposed the term “berdache” onto any indigenous or First Nations person who does not seem to fit western constructions of gender binaries or heteronormativity.²⁹² According to Sue-Ellen Jacobs, French explorers first applied the term, deriving it from the French word *bardash*.²⁹³ We'Wha of the Zuni (c. 1849-1896) is perhaps the most famous person associated with the term although it has also been applied to others, such as Hastiin Klah, who was Navajo (1867-1937).²⁹⁴ Like Joan of Arc above, this illustration is meant to

²⁹² See Sue-Ellen Jacobs, “Berdache: A Brief Review of the Literature,” *Colorado Anthropologist* 1, no. 1 (1968): 25-40.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁹⁴ Will Roscoe, “We'Wha and Klah: The American Indian Berdache as Artist and Priest,” *American Indian Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 127-150.

represent someone of the past. However, while Joan of Arc represents a specific historical era and an actual person, this image represents someone who is nameless and meant to stand in for an entire group—indigenous people—who are often relegated to the past (see Figure 32).



Figure 32: Image paired with “boys who like to do girl things”

Alex does not necessarily see the image of Joan of Arc or the indigenous person since it is her mother's story. Alex does, however, hear her mother's reassuring words that others like her have always existed. “Is that true, or are you just making it up to make me feel better?” she asks, sounding a little skeptical. Her mother reassures her once again, “It's true, I swear it. And when you grow up, you can do anything you want to do.” Her final words are, “Do you believe me?” Alex does not reply with words, opting instead to hug her mother even tighter (see Figure 33).



Figure 33: Alex and her mother in *Tomboy's* closing sequence

Are You a Boy or a Girl?: The Zine Behind Tomboy

The creative inspiration that catapulted *Tomboy* materialized on paper in the late 1990s. Karleen Pendleton Jiménez received her MFA in creative writing in 1997 from San Diego State University in California. Her final writing project was a theater collection that included a series of semi-autobiographical stories, one of which dealt with her gender identity as a tomboy while growing up. Simultaneously, Jiménez volunteered in a kindergarten class where her partner at the time, Lisa Ortiz, was the teacher. Jiménez noticed the children's preoccupation with gender and their genuine curiosity in understanding hers. They asked her if she was a boy or a girl, and what made someone a boy or a girl? They compared themselves to her, noting how she dressed or cut her hair, while trying to determine how one's anatomy measured up to one's gender. According to Jiménez, "The kids there, they were really into talking about gender in ways that were not uncomfortable. They were very confident, and to me, they were little researchers...They were very, very focused on gender research in a way that wasn't embarrassing or humiliating or weird or any of the awkward adult stuff...So I thought, I should be writing something for them, to be a part of their conversations since they were interested in

having them.”²⁹⁵ Jiménez also used her time in the classroom to familiarize herself with children's literature, noting the different stories, styles, and overall aesthetics. She took advantage of Ortiz’s expertise in the classroom by asking her questions such as, what makes a successful children's book? Reflecting back on her initial two page story of her experience as a tomboy, Jiménez adds that even though she did not write it in a conventional children's book format, she conceived of it as a piece in conversation with children.²⁹⁶

Upon completing her MFA, Jiménez made the bold decision to migrate to Toronto, Ontario in 1998 in order to be with her current partner, Hilary Cook, who would also influence the development of *Tomboy*. Cook read selections from Jiménez's MFA work and suggested she publish her tomboy short story as a children's book. Inspired by the idea, Jiménez began tailoring the language in her short story to a children's audience and sent it to local publishers. Jiménez was initially disheartened, feeling a sense of discouragement upon being rejected from every publisher.²⁹⁷ At the time, Jiménez also began to immerse herself within the lesbian writing scene in Toronto. In the fall of 1998, Elizabeth Ruth began the Clit Lit reading series for lesbian and feminist writers at the Red Spot Latina/o restaurant and lounge “in the heart of the 'gay ghetto' in Toronto.”²⁹⁸

Jiménez recalls her first time attending Clit Lit:

I went the first time because she told me to go, and she was cute and had kissed me before. I went because my actual girlfriend was still married to a man and she was spending the night with him. I needed to get my mind off of her and fill my

²⁹⁵ Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, personal interview, 2011.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Elizabeth Ruth, “Introduction” in *Bent on Writing: Contemporary Queer Tales* (Toronto, Ontario: Women's Press, 2002), x.

time well. Bumping into the other cute one could do the trick, I thought. I went because I was a dyke and a writer in a new city and this was where I could meet more of my kind—in a bar, on a weekend, over a dinner of chile verde, huddled together from a cold outside that I had never experienced growing up in California. I was searching for context.²⁹⁹

Although she did not read that night, she recalls feeling “extremely happy that all these dykes were hungry for writing, and that [she] was a writer.”³⁰⁰ She attended the following Clit Lit, and soon became a regular reader. Jiménez simultaneously began to write zines and even attended a zine workshop at the 519 Church Street Community Centre, a queer community space in downtown Toronto. Once again, her partner Hilary encouraged Jiménez to pursue writing children's literature and suggested she write a zine for children similar to the zines she was already creating. Hilary's children were four and one at the time so Jiménez also had access to their children's books, using them as additional models. Because she did not consider herself a very good artist, she relied mostly on photographs to accompany her text, along with a few pencil illustrations she did. Jiménez described the process of assembling the text, photographs, and illustrations as “playing at Kinkos.” She goes on, “I was just really playing...so I just kinda threw it together with this kind of zine aesthetic.” The bottom of the cover even states, “a zine for progressive children.”

Jiménez chose a photo of herself as a child for the cover of her children's zine. She gazes at the camera wearing somewhat of a smile. Light enters through a window on the right causing half of the photo to appear overexposed whereas the other half is dark, casting a shadow over half of Jiménez's face. Both shadow and light coalesce, yet another

²⁹⁹ Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, Preface to “My Dad in Pink,” in *Bent on Writing: Contemporary Queer Tales*, ed. Elizabeth Ruth (Toronto, Ontario: Women's Press, 2002), 61.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

metaphor for Jiménez's gender ambiguity, and the looming title above this photograph, poses the question: *Are You a Girl or a Boy?* Like Melissa Cardoza in *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*, Jiménez has recreated an autobiographical narrative based on her own experiences. However, unlike Cardoza, who inserted herself as an adult aunt to the protagonist in her story, Jiménez inserts herself as the child protagonist in hers. Although she never names herself, she accomplishes this by writing in the first person, and pairing the text with photographs of herself. The reader is able to identify her throughout the zine, at various stages of her early childhood. The first page is both the title page and first page of the narrative, beginning with: “There once was a girl who didn't like girl things | no make up or dresses or dolls | And the people who didn't know | that people are different couldn't and wouldn't understand.” If you recall, these words were uttered by Alex's mom in the closing sequence of the short film *Tomboy*. Here they serve as an opening to the zine. This text is centered and reads like a poem, in the sense that it does not include standard punctuation and utilizes strategic line breaks. Jiménez chose to pair this text with a photograph of a Cabbage Patch doll in a stroller and a large “X” over it representing her rejection of dolls and “girl things,” or childnormative constructions of femininity. Throughout the zine, other children ask her if she is a boy or a girl. Jiménez employs repetition emphasized by tone to drive the narrative arc. For example, the first time she is asked if she is a boy or a girl, she *whispered back* “I'm a girl.” The second time, she *answered back*, “I'm a girl,” and the third time, she *yelled back*, “I'm a girl!” Despite her efforts, “nobody would believe her,” causing her to be “very sad.” The zine also emphasizes that “they never asked nice. And sometimes they would laugh. And the

girl was so tired that she wanted to cry.” This page parallels Alex's confrontation with Dionne and Berto on the soccer field followed by her crying in her bedroom. Similarly, the mom, or mama in the zine, comes home to the girl's crying. Eventually, the mother is able to comfort the girl. The final page ends as follows: “And she felt soft and safe curled into her | mama's big body | that smelled like yellow flowers and chocolates | and she believed her.” This text is juxtaposed with a floral, white and black backdrop that takes up most of the page, as if invoking her mother through it.

Jimenez originally made one hundred copies in black and white and took them to the following Clit Lit where they sold out. Thrilled by the positive feedback, she made five hundred more copies. She invested a little more in this second print, deciding to pay for a red and black cover and back on hard-stock paper, making it slightly more durable (see Figure 34a). Jimenez describes how she both sold (at three dollars Canadian) and gave away these copies, taking them everywhere she went and as with most DIY projects, auto-promoting and distributing at events, book stores, and anywhere else she could. Jimenez also distributed her children's zine outside of Canada, mostly at U.S. Chicana/o academic conferences such as MALCS (Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social) and NACCS (National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies).³⁰¹

³⁰¹ Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, personal interview, 2011.

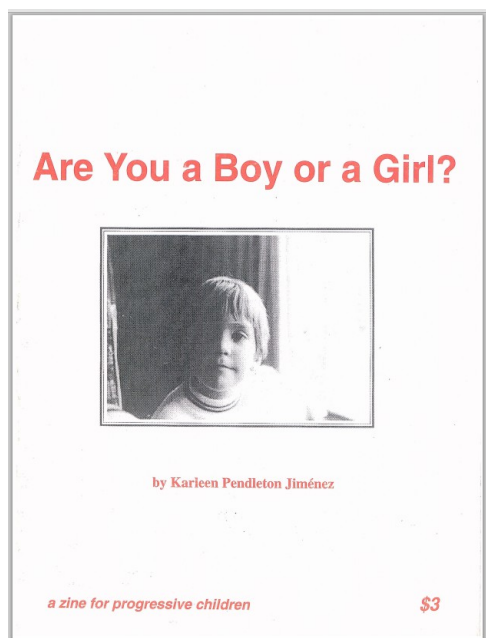


Figure 34a: DIY zine version (2nd Printing)

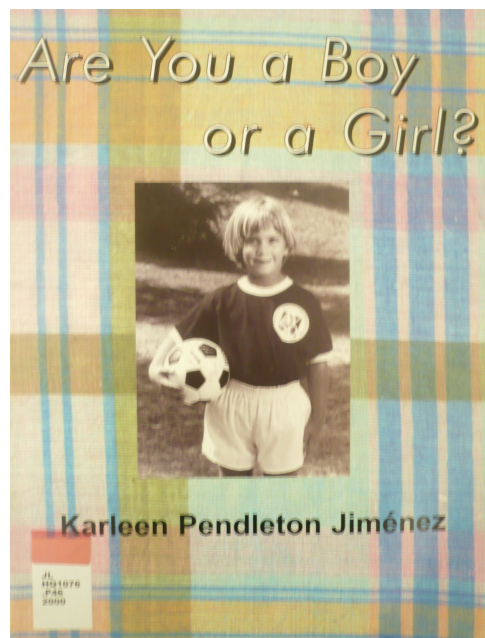


Figure 34b: Book version published by Green Dragon Press

In 2000, two major events occurred in Karleen Pendleton Jiménez's career as a writer—Lengua Latina and the Green Dragon Press. In May 2000, Jiménez co-founded Lengua Latina, a writing group for Latinas in Toronto. She explained that, “In Toronto you cannot simply walk out the door and bump into dozens of Latinas on your way to anywhere. In Toronto you must create ways to purposely bump into one another, or you can walk alone for a long time.”³⁰² Although she was enthralled by the attention she received at Clit Lit, she also desired a space that was Latina-centric. Her work within the group eventually led to her doctoral research on Latina writers in Canada.

³⁰² Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, “Lengua Latina: Latina Canadians (Re)constructing Identity Through a Community of Practice,” in *Learning, Teaching, and Community: Contributions of Situated and Participatory Approaches to Educational Innovation*, eds. Lucinda Pease-Alvarez and Sandra R. Schecter (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2005), 240.

Also in 2000, Green Dragon Press published Jiménez's zine as a children's book. Jiménez recalls distributing her zine to Tim McCaskell, whom she met as a doctoral student in Education at York University. At the time, McCaskell worked with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). He is known within Ontario for his work in equity and anti-oppression education. Approximately two weeks after receiving the zine, McCaskell called Jiménez asking her for five hundred additional copies, which he wanted to incorporate into the TDSB Equity Department curriculum for local Toronto schools. Jiménez laughed as she remembered the phone call. "Hold on,' he said, 'we need them nicer...Let's see if we can get you a publisher.'" And they did. Green Dragon Press agreed to publish a children's book version of the zine with the financial assistance of TDSB and the Linden School, an all-girls independent school in Toronto. Pat Staton, the publisher at Green Dragon Press did not want to lose the zine-like aesthetic, so it did not change too drastically. The major changes from zine to book included a multicolored cover and back cover, changing the cover photo to one of Jiménez in her soccer uniform, smiling while holding her soccer ball, and removing "a zine for progressive children" along with the price tag (see Figure 34b above). This book version also included a dedication page and a title page along with a synopsis of the book, and a copyright page with photo credits. The photograph of the Cabbage Patch doll was replaced by a photograph of a group of generic dolls in white dresses, perhaps so as not to infringe on copyrighted material. New photos were added whereas others were removed. Although none of the words changed, the publishers did include punctuation such as commas, quotation marks, and periods at the

end of the sentences.³⁰³

Aside from wanting to keep the zine aesthetic, the publishers at Green Dragon Press also made a bold decision regarding the design of the book's back cover. It includes the name of the press, along with the ISBN number, as well as the following letter addressed to the author:

To: Karleen Pendleton Jiménez
I am writing as my 5 year old son dictates:

“I like the book. People think that I am a girl when I am really a
boy,xxxxxxxxxxxxx %%%
%%%(I love you. I like pink but people say that's a girl colour. And I like
dolls even if I'm a boy. Thanks for writing this book+++++++”
Julian

The decorations were done by my son and he wrote his own name.
Alicia

While most book cover designs include quotes from other authors or critics that praise the publication, this book includes praise from a five year old. This is significant because it puts Julian's voice on par with any other book critic's comments. It also illustrates Julian's response to the book as someone whose gender is questioned by others. Finally, it depicts Julian's mother's willingness to let Julian express themselves³⁰⁴ as they see fit—in terms of clothing, toys, and keyboard strokes. Alicia, or the editors at Green Dragon Press, could have easily deleted those extra “x's,” “%’s,” “(’s,” or “+’s.” Instead, they deliberately chose to keep them. Julian's mother referred to them as decorations and upon initially seeing them, they reminded me of emoticons. These characters reveal the technicalities of dictating for one's child. Judging by Julian's proximity to the keyboard, I

³⁰³ Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, personal interview, 2011.

³⁰⁴ I purposely use “themselves” as opposed to “himself,” and “they” as opposed to “he” or “him,” in order to be gender-neutral and inclusive of children as they discover their gender identities.

will assume Julian was either on Alicia's lap, next to her, or on the surface where she typed. Notice all of the characters appear just as Alicia presses “Shift,” either after a comma or before quotation marks, and appear between sentences or paragraph breaks. Thus, they capture, if briefly, conversations between Alicia and Julian, between Julian and Jiménez, and between author and publisher.

Once Green Dragon Press published the book, they distributed it to the Toronto District School Board and the Linden School. ETFO, or the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, also purchased copies for their Equity Boxes, extending the book's reach from Toronto to across all of Ontario, Canada. *Are You a Boy or a Girl?* is also available at public libraries across the province. Additionally, the book became a 2000 Lambda Literary Award Finalist, drawing an international audience. Jiménez notes how its listing as a finalist automatically meant it was featured on multiple websites. It was also featured in *Teaching for Change*, an education magazine for teachers in the U.S. Moreover, Jiménez continued her own personal distribution of the book, publicizing it at events and conferences. Jiménez was able to introduce the book into her own classrooms within the Education department at York University, and later, as a professor at Trent University.³⁰⁵

Jiménez regularly conducts gender and equity workshops where she discusses the book at length. Her most common audiences are children, future educators, and students in women studies courses. This is significant because it has shown her both the impact of her book on others, and the larger systemic ways in which all people are gendered.

³⁰⁵ Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, personal interview, 2011.

Reflecting on these workshops, she states, “I thought it would really speak to the tomboys or the girly boys, but when I started doing the workshops, people would just raise their hands...And it would be the most masculine guy or feminine women...and it became clear to me that the kind of policing of gender was so much bigger.” She continues, “It just kinda went from me having this little story to now, I almost spend my life doing these workshops around gender and trying to get people to...be proud of who they are and how they express their gender.” The book has also sparked many discussions about Jiménez's own gender and the differences between identifying as a butch lesbian or a transgender heterosexual male, as well as the limitations of this dichotomy. Jiménez's own navigation through ongoing gender and transgender discourse has greatly shaped her current articulation of her own gender. She notes that when she first moved to Toronto in 1998 was when she started hearing more about the term transgender. She began attending trans groups and now says at least half of her friends have transitioned from female to male. Currently, Jiménez self-identifies as butch, dyke, and transgender in the sense that she feels “as both a man and a woman.” She also notes that, “It is such a contested thing between who transitions and who doesn't or what gets counted as transgender and what does not.” In response to her book, “A lot of trans people really like the book, and then sometimes people say well, the person is not really trans because they say 'I'm a girl'...There is this authenticity thing that will come up. Not very often, because I think most people take the spirit of it.” Jiménez also admits she continues to reflect on her gender and perhaps, she states, “If I was telling my story now...maybe my character wouldn't be saying “I'm a girl, I'm a girl, I'm a girl, but certainly when I was a kid...”

Jiménez attributes much of the tension within the transgender community to the role psychology and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) have played in pathologizing genders and sexualities. For her, “The lines are not so rigid,” however “psychology has claimed these issues, and kinda ...almost like colonized the language of it. I find there is a lot of tension within the trans [community] of who counts as what. This book lands in the middle, but I think it is mostly liked because its a kid, you know. Give the kid a break. [chuckle].” Despite being explicitly about gender, Jiménez also admits a lot of overlap with themes around sexuality, and queer sexuality. Jiménez shared a story about a group of secretaries whom she described as “nice, but conservative.” She recalls, “They got a hold of my book and because they knew me, they were looking for the 'gay' thing. They didn't know I was in the other room.” She observed how they were “trying to find the page that was the 'gay' page that was going to try to turn the kids gay. But it's not in there.” She laughs, “So they were killing themselves trying to find it... I've also heard, oh, straight people are going to ban it, but I've never seen it banned...It rides a line, it's not explicitly gay, but there is...a lot of overlap.” I would agree that the ambiguity around the book's protagonist, and then again in the short film adaptation, is what allows the audience to construe multiple readings and associations with the main characters. Thus, one of its greatest strengths is its ability to connect with multiple audiences, even unexpected ones.³⁰⁶

Jiménez's greatest regret regarding the zine and book, *Are You a Boy or a Girl?* was that they did not incorporate as much of a racial, ethnic, or cultural analysis,

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

something that was remedied in the production of its short film adaptation, *Tomboy*. However, I suggest that, though subtle, there are elements of the book that mark it as not quite white Canadian. As with sexuality, Jiménez's Mexican background is evident if one knows to look for it. Similar to *Tomboy*, it is mostly evident in the protagonist's relationship with her mother. The mother's loving and compassionate presence in *Tomboy* was inspired by Jiménez's own mother and her paramount presence in *Are You a Boy or a Girl?* Jiménez shares, "My mom died in '96 so it was a bit of a tribute to her as well." The book version is dedicated to her, Elaine Dee Jiménez McCann, where one can note that both mother and daughter share the Spanish surname Jiménez. The book's synopsis also mentioned her mother in the last sentence: "It is the story of a child thinking through who she is, a child learning through her mother's love how to be both strong and soft." This mother's love is illustrated toward the end of both the zine and book. One page includes a photograph of Jiménez's mother, followed by a page of Jiménez as an adult, smiling. Both photographs are strikingly similar as they seem to mirror each other. Both figures sit in a similar position and both gaze downward, toward the right. In addition to her mother's reassuring words, the photographs depict, as if gazing into the future, that Jiménez is indeed content. These final pages also reveal Jiménez's use of the term "mama" to describe her mother. According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, "mama" originated as baby talk, and means "mother" or is slang for "wife" or "woman."³⁰⁷ In Spanish, "mamá" would be equivalent to mom, mum, or mother. However, Jimenez uses "mama" without an accent. I read this "slip" as a gesture toward her emerging Chicana

³⁰⁷ See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mama>

Canadian identity, and her ongoing use of Spanglish, or Chicana/o Spanish. She does something similar in writing the script for *Tomboy*, which I will soon discuss, where she writes “mija” instead of “mi'ja” or “mi hija.” Gloria Anzaldúa would do similar things in her children's books, explaining that she wrote purposely in what she called Chicana/o Spanish, or spanglish, which is “different from the Spanish used in Latin America and Spain.”³⁰⁸ Lastly, Jiménez notes that Canadians do not think she is Latina because she is not dark-skinned, nor does she have dark hair.³⁰⁹ Thus, the photographs of Jiménez and her mother challenge common assumptions in Canada about representations of Latina/os.

Green Dragon Press continues to distribute the book version of the initial zine, *Are You a Boy or a Girl?* Jiménez is content with the book's publication, stating, “I wrote something that really connected with a lot of people. And not just a lot, but in really profound ways...That's what I could contribute to the world that..was important.”³¹⁰ Rightly so, Jiménez is similarly proud of the zine's short film adaptation.

Producing & Distributing *Tomboy*

*The kind of beauty of the genre is that it's
the genre of dreams.*

-Karleen Penleton Jiménez³¹¹

Jiménez came to the realization that animated films were the genre, or medium, of dreams while working on *Tomboy*. Its transformation from short story, to zine, to book, and eventually, to an animated short film involved very close working relationships with

³⁰⁸ See Gloria Anzaldúa's biography in *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* (San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press, 1993).

³⁰⁹ Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, personal interview, 2011.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid.

several individuals, including director and producer Barb Taylor. Together, over a span of more than four years, they embarked on a journey to create *Tomboy*. In this section, I will dissect the production and initial distribution of *Tomboy* in order to map out the extensive network behind this short film. I argue that this collaborative production process coupled with its Canadian context resulted in the creation of a character who embodied a *niña rara*. This occurred through Jiménez and Taylor's strategic use of animation in order to present Alex's transborder worldview.

Barb Taylor initiated the development of *Tomboy* the moment she approached Jiménez directly, asking if she would be interested in collaborating with her on its production. They shared a close friendship that began in the late 1990s, when Jiménez first moved to Toronto. Taylor was also familiar with Jiménez's book and the positive impact it had within local queer communities in Toronto. At that time, Taylor identified primarily as a visual artist, with over ten years of experience in sculpting. Her initial desire to produce an animated short film resulted from her later work for a leading commercial animation company. Like Jiménez, she also realized the potential power and possibilities of animation. However, she became keenly aware of the limitations within commercial animation. Taylor recalled one production in particular where the company did not want to imply an elephant was queer based on its character design or animated mannerisms. “They were very sensitive to any gay thing in kid's productions,” she remembers; “It couldn't be gay.”³¹² Thus, commercial animation drew a line at heteronormativity, rejecting anything that could potentially be read as queer. Taylor's

³¹² Barb Taylor, personal interview, 2011.

conscious decision to contest this line within children's productions was a deciding factor in choosing Jiménez's story since she believed "Karleen's book had an importance in that way for children" because it was of "social impact." She also related to *Are You a Boy or a Girl?*'s main theme on a personal level since like Jiménez, she too had been a tomboy as a child. Upon choosing the book, and Jiménez agreeing to this project, Taylor's next task involved learning the basic techniques required to direct and produce an animated short film. Prior to *Tomboy*, Taylor had only created a two-minute short film on the Sheela na gig of Ireland as part of a workshop sponsored by Inside Out, the Lesbian and Gay Film Festival and the Toronto Animated Image Society.³¹³ In addition to the skills she learned at this workshop, Taylor also credits individuals whom she had worked with at the commercial animation company with their patience in showing her many basic animation techniques.

According to Jiménez, who has published extensively both fiction and non-fiction, developing the screenplay for *Tomboy* was the most rigorous revision process she had ever experienced. In part, this was Jiménez's first screenplay, which meant she had to teach herself a new style of writing. She did this by searching for scripts online, learning terminology and proper formatting. Overall, Taylor had her go through approximately ten revisions of the script. Each time, she got as much feedback as possible. For example, similar to her access to her partner's children's books when she first wrote the zine, she also had access to feedback from her partner's children, Joshua and Maya, and their children's spaces, including playgrounds where she got to observe children interact with

³¹³ Ibid.

each other and with her. Joshua even contributed a line to the short film. As Jiménez was thinking aloud about the color red, Joshua said, “red is like a main boy colour.”³¹⁴ By comparing different versions of the screenplay, one is able to note how each one changed with the feedback Jiménez received, either from Taylor or those around her. Major changes included, for example, the title. Early 2004 and 2005 versions of Jiménez's scripts listed the title as *Are You a Boy or a Girl?*, whereas a later, 2005 version listed *Tomboy* as its title. Other changes pertained to the characters. Originally the teacher was a male who was not explicitly black Canadian, and did not step up to defend Alex when Berto challenged her in the classroom. Moreover, Jiménez did not include the scene of Kati as a princess until much later and when she did, Kati was originally written as wearing a “long blue sparkling gown.” Another notable shift occurred in transforming Jiménez's originally conceived of Chicana-U.S. context to a Mexican-Canadian context. For example, originally, Alex's neon bouncing ball was written as a U.S. Air Force airplane. Additionally, the illustration of the indigenous person in *Tomboy* was first written as: “a femmy Aztec prince (maybe a young Moctezuma) studying the stars from the top of a pyramid.” Lastly, the final version of *Tomboy* does not include the word “moron,” which they deleted after a friend pointed out its implications as an ableist term.³¹⁵ These examples illuminate the collective process involved in writing the screenplay. As Jiménez notes, she signed away her rights to the book version when she published it, and again when she created the screenplay. However, like her publisher,

³¹⁴ Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, personal interview, 2011.

³¹⁵ Barb Taylor shared four versions of *Tomboy's* screenplay with me. They included “Writer's Draft – 2004,” “Writer's Draft – 2005,” “Coyle Productions Draft – 2005,” and “Coyle Productions Draft – 2007.”

Taylor was also adamant about receiving feedback on the entire film, not just the script.³¹⁶

While Jiménez revised the screenplay, Taylor began to assemble the production team, which was eventually made up of artists, animation editors, color stylists, a casting director, and a music composer, among others. Each person played a critical role, however I want to draw attention to those involved in designing the characters. Similar to the numerous screenplays, the characters in *Tomboy* went through several revisions of their own. I will focus on Alex and her mother to highlight some of the challenges in creating animated Latina characters. Jiménez, for example, had described Alex's mother as large and round, wanting the character to resemble her own mother's body shape. However, the first illustrator who attempted to draw the mother created what Jiménez called a Latina stereotype. Despite her descriptions, this character was thin, curvaceous, and a stereotypical media representation of a “sexy Latina.”³¹⁷ Following this initial disappointment, Taylor went into the NFB, or National Film Board's, offices in Toronto where one can screen their films for free. She found a children's film with characters she really liked, *Lights for Gita* (2001), and noted the director, Mike Vo.³¹⁸ She then contacted him directly and asked him if he would be interested in working with her on *Tomboy*. She sent him the screenplay and he agreed. Vo designed all of *Tomboy's* characters, including Alex's mother, based on Jiménez and Taylor's descriptions (see Figure 35). Alex's character also posed an artistic challenge to the production team since they could not agree on how to properly gender her. Ultimately, Jiménez and Taylor decided to include round earrings on Alex, although Taylor wasn't originally too keen on the idea. As

³¹⁶ Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, personal interview, 2011.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ View *Lights for Gita* (2001) by visiting NFB online at http://www.nfb.ca/film/lights_for_gita/

Jiménez recounts, earrings are quite common on Latina children. She also wore earrings as a child and remembers either putting them on or taking them off depending on how she wanted others to read her gender. Interestingly, the earrings continue to puzzle viewers. While some may think that Alex looks too much like a boy, others wonder why a tomboy would wear something so feminine.



Figure 35: Alex's mom by Mike Vo.

Similar to the attention given to developing the screenplay and designing the characters, Taylor and Jiménez were also adamant about hiring actors who would best capture their vision for *Tomboy*. While Taylor knew some people who were actors, she insisted on hiring all unionized actors. Thus, she made a conscious decision to choose actors who were members of the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA) union. According to its membership page on its current site, “When

you're part of ACTRA, you're part of the strongest, full-service cultural union in Canada. Think of it like a 22,000-strong family that's got your back.”³¹⁹ The union was founded in 1943 and originally represented those in radio, then expanding to include Television and Cinema. ACTRA's primary role is to “negotiate, administer and enforce collective agreements to provide performers with equitable compensation as well as safe and reasonable working conditions.” Their website also states, “ACTRA is proud to be the leading voice for Canadian culture and the development of Canada's audiovisual industries. We lobby tirelessly for regulation and government policies that protect our culture and encourage audio-visual production in all genres, thereby expanding work opportunities for Canadian performers.”³²⁰ This description falls in line with Canada's overall media industry's attempts to produce more Canadian content. The union is also unique in that it determines which roles one can audition for based on points so that, for example, each production helps an actor accumulate points so they may then try to land bigger roles.³²¹ This provides a good incentive for professional actors or those in training, to begin with short independent films or low budget productions. Thus, *Tomboy's* cast was made up of an array of actors, from very amateur to professional and already established ones. For example, Athena Irene Karkanis voiced Alex. Her first television experience was in 2003 on the Chappelle's Show, and her first film was the voice of Harmony Bear in the 2005 film *Care Bears: Big Wish Movie*. Her filmography prior to *Tomboy* also included a role as Agent Lindsey Pérez in *Saw IV* and numerous roles on television series including Dawn Vargaz in *The Best Years* (2007), as well as voices for

³¹⁹ See <http://www.actra.ca/main/members/> (accessed 6/16/13)

³²⁰ See “Our Union” page at <http://www.actra.ca/main/our-union/>

³²¹ Barb Taylor, personal interview, 2011.

animated shows like the character Diwan on *Skyland* (2006-2007) and Joanna Torres on the *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas* video game (2006). Since *Tomboy*, she even played another tomboy on *Survival of the Dead* (2009), and more recently, Nadia on *Lost Girl* (2011-2012). *Tomboy* also included famous Canadian musicians such as Alejandra Nuñez,³²² who composed the score, and Jesse Cook³²³ who volunteered his time as a voice engineer for the short film.

One of the challenges of placing an open casting call through the union was that most of the actors who originally auditioned were white Canadians. This was partially the result of not specifying all the characters racial or ethnic backgrounds, however even when Jiménez did, many of the accents sounded exaggerated. Moreover, many of actors, regardless of their backgrounds, were used to doing racial or ethnic accents from the U.S. even though they were Canadian. For example, Sandi Ross, who voiced the teacher, was used to performing a U.S.-black accent and had never done a black Canadian, even though she herself is black Canadian. Casting for Alex's mom was particularly challenging. As with her design, Jiménez was not content with the first person who voiced this character. Jiménez explains that it, “was difficult because the actor was Latina,” and Jiménez didn't want to “get in the middle of an accent war,” but she also “didn't want to get it wrong.” Unsure, Jiménez shared the first voice with a group of Chicana friends from the U.S. who also agreed it did not sound quite right. So Jiménez and Taylor tried again, placing another call for Alex's mom. In responding to the call, one actor said, “Yes, I have a generic Hispanic accent.” The challenge, as Jiménez describes

³²² Visit her personal website at <http://alejandranunezmano.weebly.com/>

³²³ Visit his personal website at <http://www.jessecook.com/>

it, is as follows: “They've outsourced a lot of Hollywood to Toronto. And they've outsourced Mexican stereotypes to Toronto. So the Latinas here, when they get parts, they are supposed to perform a Mexican stereotype.”³²⁴ When Jiménez refers to Latinas in Canada, she is including Canadian Latinas with backgrounds from across Latin America. Therefore, regardless of the actor's background, most will learn to perform a Mexican stereotype, which is often overly exaggerated. In an attempt to not reproduce other racial or ethnic stereotypes, Taylor hired cultural consultants who gave their input on the various characters.

Taylor's ability to hire union actors and cultural consultants was made possible by grants and financial sponsorship from various federal funding sources. These included, for example, monies from CBC, Canada Council, Canadian Independent Film and Video Fund, Canadian Heritage, the Shaw Rocket Grant, and funding from Appeal, the Lesbian and Gay Community Foundation. Some of these federal grants required that Taylor become incorporated, so she founded Coyle Productions, named in honor of her mother. The CBC grant, or Canadian Reflection Award, was of particular significance not only for its sum, but also because it facilitated qualifying for additional federal monies. “This award demonstrates CBC's commitment to supporting women in the industry and fostering new talent,' said Kirstine Layfield, Executive Director of Network Programming for CBC Television. 'By recognizing creativity and innovation, and increasing diversity on our screens, CBC benefits both the film and television community and our audiences from coast to coast to coast.’”³²⁵ Part of the reward also included

³²⁴ Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, personal interview, 2011.

³²⁵ “WIFT-T Announces 2006 CBC Reflections Award and Call for Applications,” *Broadcaster: Canada's Communications Magazine*. <http://www.broadcastermagazine.com/news/wift-t-announces-2006-cbc->

consultation advice from a CBC drama executive and an airing of the winning film on national CBC television.³²⁶ This helped generate additional interest in *Tomboy* across Canada. Jiménez also did two interviews with CBC's radio show, *The Current* where she discussed *Tomboy*.³²⁷

Tomboy's distribution extends throughout Canada and internationally. It has also been screened at film festivals across Canada, as well as in Europe, Latin America, and the U.S. Jiménez has attended many of these screenings, noting how much she thoroughly enjoys the Q&A sessions. For example, she shared this: “And I love the moment when the kids couldn't even get it out, couldn't even get the words out, but wanted to say something like, that had Spanish in it! That had Spanish and English! That's what I speak. And I was like, 'yeah, that's what I heard growing up too so I wanted to put it in there. And a lot of times they don't write books in the schools like that but that's our world, and that language counts, and that's important.' And they were like, 'yeah!'” She has also received a lot of affirmation from queer of color and women of color audiences, noting that queer or gender non-conforming content is often white and she wanted to show something that countered that narrative: “We don't have to be white to know how to love our children or care for them. Even if we don't have the words, you know, white people are not better at it than Mexicans. And I really wanted that image of that brown woman taking care of her brown kid and knowing how to love her and putting it up on the big screen. And often, they won't necessarily say it out loud in front of the

[reflections-award-and-call-for-applications/1000054895/](#) Accessed 6/15/2013.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ The last interview is currently available online. Visit <http://www.cbc.ca/thecurrent/episode/2013/05/27/the-disappearing-butch/>

crowd, but the one or two women of color will come up and say thank you for that.”³²⁸

Following the circuit of film festivals and awards, *Tomboy* is now available on Vimeo and has received over sixteen thousand views from 2008 to 2013.³²⁹ As of this year, one can purchase a DVD copy from Amazon online (see Figure 36). Moreover, several educators including Jiménez, have made *Teacher's Guides* to accompany the short film. For example, “Tomboy: A Teacher's Toolkit” begins with “Tomboy is a 14 minute animated film for children. It is a great teaching resource on topics of gender stereotyping, bullying and diversity in the classroom.” It then goes on to describe the guide's teaching objectives, which include: (1) Positive Ways to Counter Gender Discrimination, (2) Canada is a Country of Many Cultures, (3) Choices into Action: Guidance and Career Education, and (4) Self Awareness and Self Reliance. Each objective is followed with a series of discussion questions. Thus, like the gender workshops conducted by Jiménez around the book, *Are You a Boy or a Girl?*, these teacher's guides demonstrate the extent of *Tomboy's* circulation within Canadian primary education.

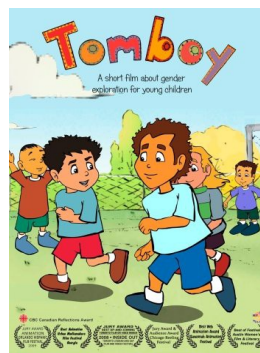


Figure 36: Cover of *Tomboy* DVD

³²⁸ Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, personal interview, 2011.

³²⁹ As of 6/5/2013. See <http://vimeo.com/10772672>

The impact of *Tomboy* continues to be significant for Jiménez such that she is currently working on a project titled, *Tomboys and Other Gender Heroes*. She is still conceptualizing it, however she expects it will be “a broad qualitative investigation of narratives of gender construction and policing that emerge in response” to *Tomboy*.³³⁰ She intends to draw upon “artistic expression (narratives and film) to create dialogue and capture what hurts these individuals, where their resiliency lies, and how they conceptualize beauty and meaning.” Her final goal is to “offer opportunities for participant empowerment, to create rich, diverse representations, and to provide analysis for the development of more inclusive school environment.”

Throughout this chapter I have argued for the significance of niñas raras like Alex, and the importance of the elaborate and collaborative process involved in creating these characters. Jiménez's ongoing work further demonstrates that this process is continuous. Perhaps one day Alex might debut in her very own feature film! For now, *Tomboy* and its earlier renditions continue to circulate—particularly within educational circuits across Canada.

³³⁰ See Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, “Research: Future Directions”
<http://people.trentu.ca/kpendletonjimenez/research.html>

CHAPTER V
AFTERWORD:
TOWARD A NIÑAS RARAS PRAXIS

The Walt Disney Company holds ample power as one of the world's largest media conglomerates, particularly within the children's entertainment sector. Disney's meddling in international politics has been described by scholars such as Steven Watts.³³¹ Disney is also famous for vigorously lobbying to extend copyright,³³² as well as actively pursuing legal action against anyone who allegedly infringes on its copyright.³³³ It seems one cannot discuss children's cultural productions without at least mentioning Disney, since it has even managed to make its way into my theorization of *niñas raras*. If you recall, Meli initially wanted to visit Disneyland for her birthday, *Dora the Explorer's* Nickelodeon is comparable to the Disney Channel, and I contrasted Alex's daydream version of Princess Kati with Disney's Princess Tiana. With these examples, I am suggesting Disney is unabashedly in the business of producing childnormativity.

Recent controversies reveal Disney's particular interest in the Latina/o market.³³⁴

³³¹ See Steven Watts, "Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century," *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 1 (June 1995): 84-110.

³³² For example, the Copyright Term Extension Act (CTEA) of 1998.

³³³ Major cases include the film *Steamboat Willie* and the character Mickey Mouse. See for example, Joseph Menn, "Disney's rights to Mickey Mouse may be wrong," *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 2008 <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/aug/22/business/fi-mickey22> (accessed December 4, 2008); Douglas A. Hedenkamp, "Free Mickey Mouse: Copyright Notice, Derivative Works, and the Copyright Act of 1909," *Virginia Sports & Entertainment Law Journal* (Spring 2003): 254-279.

³³⁴ For a thorough discussion of U.S. Latino niche markets, see Arlene Davila, *Latino Spin: Public Image and the Whitewashing of Race*, (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Arlene Davila, *Latinos*

In 2012, Disney haphazardly announced its first Latina princess, *Sofia the First* (see Figure 37).³³⁵ Sofia's Latinidad was immediately called into question across media platforms because many argued she did not represent an “authentic” Latina.³³⁶ Disney quickly retracted its announcement of the first Latina princess, stating Jamie Mitchell, the producer of the *Sofia the First* television series, “‘misspoke’ during a press tour and that the title character is not a Latina.”³³⁷ Nancy Kanter, Senior Vice President of Disney Junior Worldwide, clarified through social media outlets, posting this online: “Some of you may have seen the recent news stories on whether Sofia is or isn't a 'Latina princess.' What's important to know is that Sofia is a fairytale girl who lives in a fairytale world...The writers have wisely chosen to write stories that include elements that will be familiar and relatable to kids from many backgrounds including Spain and Latin America. For example, Sofia's mom comes from a fictitious land, Galdiz, which was inspired by Spain.”³³⁸ Perhaps Disney envisioned a princess version of tween Dora since Sofia targets a slightly older, tween audience.³³⁹ Sofia is currently available Friday mornings in her own television series on Disney Junior.³⁴⁰

Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

³³⁵ See Cindy Y. Rodriguez, “Disney Producer ‘Misspoke’: ‘First Latina Princess’ isn’t Latina,” *CNN Entertainment* (October 25, 2012) <http://www.cnn.com/2012/10/25/showbiz/disney-sofia-not-latina> (accessed July 1, 2013).

³³⁶ See Nicole Guidotti-Hernández, “Princess Sofia and Barack Obama: Why I Must Choose Accordingly,” *The Feminist Wire* (October 23, 2013) <http://thefeministwire.com/2012/10/princess-sofia-and-barack-obama-why-i-must-choose-accordingly/> (accessed July 1, 2013).

³³⁷ Cindy Y. Rodriguez, “Disney Producer ‘Misspoke’: ‘First Latina Princess’ isn’t Latina.”

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Press material for *Sofia the First* state its target audience is children ages two to seven, however the show's themes fall more in line with comparable shows targeting tween audiences. See Cindy Y. Rodriguez, “Backlash for Disney's First Latina Princess,” *CNN Entertainment* (October 22, 2012) <http://www.cnn.com/2012/10/19/showbiz/disneys-first-latina-princess/index.html> (accessed July 1, 2013).

³⁴⁰ Visit <http://disney.go.com/disneyjunior/sofia-the-first>



Figure 37: Disney's *Sofia the First*. She is a registered trademark of Disney Enterprises, Inc.

Amid this controversy, Disney revealed to the National Hispanic Media Coalition that independent of Sofia, they have “an exciting project in early development that does have a Latina as the heroine of the show.”³⁴¹ It remains unclear when this Latina heroine will make her debut, however, I wonder if she is at all tied to Disney's 2013 Latina/o controversy. International Worker's Day is observed on the first of May; it was also the day Disney filed several U.S. Patent and Trademark Office applications for the phrase “Día de los Muertos” or “Day of the Dead.”³⁴² Disney claimed the applications were for a Pixar *Día de los Muertos* feature film tentatively scheduled for 2015.³⁴³ In what many called a victory, Disney withdrew its application after an uproar of protest on social media networks, including an online protest at change.org³⁴⁴ and a cartoon by Lalo Alcaraz (see Figure 38). Like Sofia, public protest resulted in Disney's retraction. However, it is unlikely Disney's forthcoming Latina heroine will be radically different from Disney's other female protagonists. What would it take to disrupt Disney's

³⁴¹ Cindy Y. Rodriguez, “Disney Producer 'Misspoke': 'First Latina Princess' isn't Latina.”

³⁴² See Cindy Y. Rodriguez, “Day of the Dead Trademark Request Draws Backlash for Disney,” *CNN Entertainment* <http://www.cnn.com/2013/05/10/us/disney-trademark-day-dead> (accessed July 1, 2013)

³⁴³ See <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/movies/2012/05/pixars-d%C3%ADa-de-los-muertos-movie.html>

³⁴⁴ Visit <http://www.change.org/petitions/walt-disney-company-stop-trademark-of-dia-de-los-muertos>

perpetuation of childnormativity? I propose the creation of more niñas raras across media platforms.



Figure 38: Muerto Mouse cartoon by Lalo Alcaraz

Throughout *(Play)Grounds for Dismissal: Niñas Raras in Transborder Children's Cultural Studies* I introduced three fictional characters, Meli, Dora, and Alex. Each one was uniquely strange, odd, queer, rara. I argued that these niñas raras challenged childnormativity in distinct ways: Meli, through her association with her lesbian aunt; Dora, through her appropriation by immigrant's rights discourse; and Alex, through her embodiment of gender non-conforming queerness. I situated my readings of each character within the countries where they were produced, engaging with each character against its national sociopolitical context. For Meli, that required an overview of print media within México, for Dora, I focused on bilingual television within the U.S., while my discussion of Alex privileged a broader overview of mass media within Canada. My

focus on these nation-states did not mean I excluded broader transborder politics, but rather, I incorporated those transborder politics into the particularities of each nation-state context.

Moreover, I argued that these *niñas raras* be understood within a larger transborder children's cultural studies approach. This requires we analyze them as transborder subjects who counter childnormativity, which can be present in how mainstream society conceptualizes of subjects, materialities, instructions, and space. Therefore, a transborder children's cultural studies approach to childnormativity would be invested in identifying how children's cultural productions fit within the formerly mentioned categories.

The larger implications for this research can be drawn from my areas of analyses. As a whole, this research set out to study queer and bilingual children's literature and media across México, the U.S., and Canada. This description was necessary because there were few ways for me to think about how all of these categories, identities, locations, and mediums converged. I synthesized this list by focusing on *niña raras* as a category of analysis, using transborder children's cultural studies as an analytical framework. Additionally, I am suggesting that both the framework and category of analysis be applied to spaces outside a North American context. Future direction for this research could include a transborder children's cultural studies analysis of Central America, South America, or across the Caribbean, for example. Finally, I do not intend for my categorization of *niñas raras* to apply exclusively to “girls.” I hope it was evident through my analysis of Alex that there are numerous ways to embody a *niña rara*. Rather than a

static or rigid category, its strength lies precisely in its ambiguity and fluidity. That said, I can also envision future projects that take on the categories of niñas rares, niñxs raxes, niñ@s rar@s, or as I gestured toward at the start of this research, any other variation yet to come.

I want to conclude by way of a question: what is a childnormative aesthetic? Throughout this research I have assumed there is a child's aesthetic in illustrating and animating content for children. However, I want to challenge myself and readers to imagine children's cultural productions outside of bright colors, large and geometric shapes, and minimal text. Perhaps this childnormative aesthetic will become clearer if we try to imagine applying it to content for adults. I return to Mafalda as a case in point (see Figure 39). While her overall aesthetic *appears* child-like, its content was originally intended for an older audience. Perhaps Mafalda is also a niña rara because of her ability to subvert intended audience age categories. In the comic below she asks, “Well, why don't we in this upcoming year finally initiate that postponed construction of a better world? Huh?” In that manner, niñas raras like Meli, Dora, Alex and even Mafalda, propel us forward by identifying the linkages between context, politics, and audiences.



Figure 39: Mafalda surrounded by her friends. Quino [Joaquín Salvador Lavado], *Toda Mafalda*, 8th ed. (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones de la Flor, 2004).

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