Tactics of Hope in Latinx Children’s and Young Adult Literature
TACTICS OF HOPE IN LATINX CHILDREN’S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE
JESUS MONTAÑO AND
REGAN POSTMA-MONTAÑO

Tactics of Hope in Latinx Children’s and Young Adult Literature

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TO THE NEXT GENERATION OF READERS AND ACTIVISTS,

Grace, Pearl, Robin, and Amelia (Arco) Iris
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Acknowledgments

Shortly after an election that promised to build a wall along the US/Mexico border, and thus a wall in every community across this nation where Latinx people live, we stared with blank shell-shocked eyes at our friends, our family, and our colleagues. What could be done? we wondered aloud. Better yet, what could we, as scholars and teachers, best do? Those moments of bewilderment eventually led to resolve, not only that something must be done but also that it must be done for all. In these moments, we also realized that if something was to be done, it would be done with the help of many people. To build a better community is to build it with the help of community. In this acknowledgment, we trace how our communities beckoned us, supported us, and encouraged us when we desperately needed it.

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TACTICS OF HOPE IN LATINX CHILDREN’S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE
FIGURE 1.1 Zeke Peña, Daisy and her Papi soar together on the motorcycle. Illustrations by Zeke Peña, copyright © 2019 by Zeke Peña. Used with permission of Kokila, an imprint of Penguin Young Readers, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved. UK and Commonwealth rights courtesy of Zeke Peña, used with permission of Fletcher & Co., New York.
“My papi has a motorcycle,” Daisy Ramona tells us in a Latinx children’s picture book that bears the same title as her exclamation. Motorcycles, perhaps even more than automobiles, gesture at mobility and freedom, at the adventure garnered with the wind in one’s face. Her simple declaration that her father has a motorcycle therefore positions us to anticipate what journey will unfold from the seat of a motorcycle. We soon find out, as her father’s truck pulls into their driveway. Though he is exhausted from his work building homes, he “always has time for me,” Daisy tells us as she tears out of the house with both of their helmets in hand. With an “¡Agárrate! / Hold on!” they take off on their ride around town. As Daisy relates, “we become a spectacular celestial thing soaring on asphalt. A comet” (Quintero, My Papi).

We are drawn to My Papi Has a Motorcycle (2019), written by Isabel Quintero and illustrated by Zeke Peña, for the way it allows us to join in this motorcycle journey as Daisy and her dad wind their way through their hometown. On their ride, for example, they pass Abuelita’s church and Tortillería la Estrella. When Daisy spots her librarian, Mr. García, coming out of Joy’s Market, she gives him a Latinx upnod (a form of greeting) that he reciprocates. This deep dive into the inner intricacies of Latinx culture is further highlighted in the illustrations, which show that Latinx children laugh in English (ha ha) and in Spanish (ja ja). Even the animals translanguage in Daisy’s community as the cats mix meow with miau and dogs combine woof with guau, showing off their code-switching dexterity. This merging of languages and cultures is further made evident in the geography of the place: the post office is next to “la panadería where Papi buys conchas on Sunday mornings,” and the bright colors of the houses “blend into one another redbluegreenorangepink.” As they continue their journey, Daisy and her papi pass by the various murals that tell of the city’s origins as “the lemon capital of world” and showcase the immigrants who worked in the citrus groves. They also cruise by Abuelito
and Abuelita’s yellow house, “the one with the lemon tree that grew from the seeds of the lemons Abuelito used to pick not far from here.” Their eventual aim is to visit the new homes that Papi is building, though they also plan to stop at Don Rudy’s Raspados for a shaved-ice treat.

In this journey through Daisy’s town, *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* allows us to see the world, specifically Daisy’s Latinx world, through her eyes. Away from the white gaze that often envisions Latinx neighborhoods as dangerous, Daisy presents her hometown as a loving place where English and Spanish are spoken, where businesses that cater to a Latinx clientele sit side by side with government offices and churches, and where a child and her dad can ride their motorcycle around town, in this way emphasizing their mobility and freedom. Through Daisy’s eyes, we witness how seemingly disparate languages and cultures, as well as geographical places, blend together. Instead of assimilation that insists on English-only and virulent forms of nationalism that privilege white American culture above others, Daisy presents her world as a natural composite of various linguistic and cultural elements woven together. What a joyous journey indeed!

Inspired by Daisy, we begin our book by imagining what the world would look like if we saw it through the eyes of a Latinx child or young adult. If we take *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* as a guide for our adventures, we find that, like Daisy, many of the characters in the picture books and young adult novels chosen for our study live in *nepantla*, Gloria Anzaldúa’s term for the interstitial place between seemingly disparate elements. Anzaldúa’s term evokes the in-between spaces. As she explains in *This Bridge We Call Home*, “Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning tierra entre medio. Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries” (1), and these kinds of spaces can offer amazing insights, new ways of seeing and being and doing. Like Daisy, Güero in *They Call Me Güero* (2018) by David Bowles and Lupita in *Under the Mesquite* (2011) by Guadalupe García McCall, for example, the young characters in our study navigate the nepantla spaces and, through this journey, transform themselves and their contexts to reflect their lived experiences and the shared dreams of their communities. That is to say, in these spaces where cultural hybridity and translanguaging are everyday realities, children and young adults, as presented in the works we analyze, offer keys to transform the world. They offer this transmuted world for us to see. Entailed
in this gesture is that we, too, will be transformed in the ways we see. Our project thus follows the directive of Aurora Levins Morales, who urges that “as adults, we need to listen to children more than we talk to them. We must back the initiative of children themselves, secure resources and share skills, respect their right and ability to lead themselves, and learn to let them lead us” (108). Our intention in this book is to listen to children and young adults and, in this, to let them lead us.

Children of Conocimiento

As we listen to children, let us consider specifically how children experience intersecting facets of identity—race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and others—and, from this lens, how children engage with issues of exclusion, discrimination, and other injustices. While some critics and readers, notably those invested in the idea of childhood innocence that is free of discourse on controversial topics, may disparage our insistence that children and young adults be consulted on such matters, as Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel remind us, “Neither children nor literature for them can be extricated from politics. By choice or by default, children often get drawn into the ‘adult’ worlds of politics, violence, and power struggles” (445). Children are fully aware of politics and of the injustices that affect them directly, such as those related to deportation in our examination of Efrén Divided (2020) by Ernesto Cisneros in chapter 4. Because of his age, however, Efrén is not invited into discussions on, nor is he allowed to engage with, issues of deportability that affect his family and his community. Yet, when his amá is deported, what Efrén showcases, as he translates his newfound awareness of deportation into activism, is that children and youth, as well as the literature written for them, can, as Levins Morales posits, address problems that stymie our nation and world: “Children have far less tolerance for overt injustice than do adults. From Soweto to Managua we have seen young people take to the streets, propelling mass movements forward into open rebellion almost faster than adults could build organizations behind them” (107). Further, Marilisa Jiménez García asserts that foregrounding such youth involved in revolutionary practices allows readers to imagine the possibilities for young people:

In young adult literature, a medium known for its propensity toward problem resolution, what problems do Latinx writers
for youth seek to resolve? Latinx young adult literature (YA) demonstrates that the promise of a young person transitioning into, though never reaching, adulthood forms part of how Latinx writers imagine the work of recovering from racial and colonial violence. Whereas earlier generations emphasized stories of migration and assimilation, recent Latinx YA serves as a window into how authors narrate the promises and failures of cultural nationalism of past generations and how they imagine youth participating in revolutionary practices today, including accessing alternative forms of literature and education beyond and apart from established academia. (231)

Following the trajectory of Jiménez García’s argument, children and youth in Latinx children’s and young adult literature propose in their imaginings revolutionary ways to recover from racial and colonial violence. What Jiménez García and Levins Morales track in their discussions is that children and youth create in their imaginings new realities and, from these epistemological shifts, they propel movements and participate in revolutionary practices that bring about societal transformations. Our argument is that healing from the violence of racism, sexism, binarism, and other forms of exclusions and oppressions can be found in the voices, the stories, and the activisms of children and young adults, especially as these are presented in literature for young readers.

Our critical approach for illustrating the need of children to lead us in questions of exclusions and injustices is powered by Gloria Anzaldúa’s theorizations of conocimiento. Conocimiento, from the Spanish word for “knowledge,” is redefined by Anzaldúa to incorporate, as AnaLouise Keating describes, “self-reflection, imagination, intuition, sensory experiences, rational thought, outward-directed action, and social-justice concerns” (“From Borderlands” 10). Much like her theories of mestiza consciousness and la facultad, conocimiento is transformative in nature. Conocimiento, much like her earlier theories, begins in oppressive contexts and moves toward transformative healing via the deepening of perception. In her theories of conocimiento, Anzaldúa further “underscores and develops the imaginal, spiritual-activist, and political dimensions implicit in her previous theories” (“From Borderlands” 10). In this way, conocimiento can be seen as a nonlinear journey from inner works to public acts. It begins with an arrebato, or a susto that fractures the self. Seemingly floundering in chaos, the next stage is nepantla, the interstitial,
liminal space where one is torn between different perspectives. Though the processes may zigzag, the next few stages involve the Coatlique state, where the cost of knowing is exacted; a call to action, the crossing over to conocimiento; and then putting the pieces of Coyolxauhqui back together through personal and collective stories. The possibilities and potentials are revealed in the final two stages, a clash of realities, as new imaginings contest older forms of knowing, and finally a shift in reality that set in motion the acting out of the vision in forms of activism (Anzaldúa, “Now Let Us Shift” 546–74).

Anzaldúa arrived at these processes of conocimiento shortly after 9/11, when she experienced an arrebato at seeing the towers in New York City fall. In her testimonio given shortly after, Anzaldúa speaks to the physical and psychological fragmentation caused by the attack:

The day the towers fell, me sentí como Coyolxauhqui, la luna. Algo me agarró y me sacudió, frightening la sombra (soul) out of my body. I fell in pieces into that pitch-black brooding place. Each violent image of the towers collapsing, transmitted live all over the world then repeated a thousand times on TV, sucked the breath out of me, each image etched on my mind's eye. Wounded, I fell into shock, cold and clammy. The moment fragmented me, dissociating me from myself. (Light / Luz 9)

With seer-like vision, Anzaldúa notes that in the aftermath of the towers falling Americans would be faced with two paths. One path, the one of desconocimiento, would lead into ignorance, fear, and hatred; this easier path “uses force and violence to socially construct our nation” (Light / Luz 19). The other path, the more difficult one of conocimiento, “leads to awakening, insights, understandings, realizations, and courage, and the motivation to engage in concrete ways that have the potential to bring us into compassionate interactions” (19). As we came to find out, the United States would choose the path of desconocimiento. The attacks, although they had nothing to do with Mexicans, Mexican Americans, or immigrants from Latin America, radically altered migration policies and increased prejudice toward Latinx people and other Brown people. As Francisco Alba underscores, “the US approach to managing Mexican migration changed radically after the attacks on US soil on September 11, 2001. Before the attacks, expectations were high, particularly among Mexican political leaders, that a long-term, mutually
agreed-upon strategy could finally be implemented to manage the flows of Mexican migrants to the United States” (17). The attacks resulted in a reconfigured understanding of migration as a US national security issue, including the criminalization of undocumented migration (Romo 3). Further, the fear of future attacks and subsequent policies fueled xenophobia; it was not long before “terms like ‘illegal alien’ and ‘illegal immigrants’—sometimes shortened to ‘illegals’—predominate[d] in the contemporary discourse about immigration” (Anguiano 93). In other words, alienization, racialization, and criminalization, as Anzaldúa foretold, would become the dominant features of a twenty-first century America.

In the midst of a fearful nation that became hostile and violent toward Latinx people, Anzaldúa provides balm and wisdom: “We must use creativity to jolt us into awareness of our spiritual/political problems and other major global tragedies so that we can repair el daño” (Light / Luz 19). With conocimiento, she tells us, we can recognize and repair el daño, the damage that is caused not only by the terrorist attacks but also by racisms and exclusions resultant from, as we came to find out, America’s path toward desconocimiento. For our purposes, we utilize Anzaldúa’s theorizations of conocimiento to examine the way children and youth, as represented in literary works for young readers, engage with conocimiento to counter forms of desconocimiento. This includes fighting the deportation regime, as we will discuss in chapter 4. Conocimiento, we posit, permits Efrén in Efrén Divided, Betita in Land of the Cranes (2020) by Aida Salazar, and José in From North to South / Del norte al sur (2013) by René Colato Laínez and illustrated by Joe Cepeda to recognize the oppressions in their lives and provides them the understanding and awareness to challenge and transform them. In another example, from chapter 5, Julia in I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter (2017) by Erika L. Sánchez and Gabi in Gabi, a Girl in Pieces (2014) by Isabel Quintero use autohistorias to reveal their complex inner lives, specifically the struggles in negotiating Latinx identity and challenging gender norms imposed on them by parents and society, and from these counter-stories and self-inscriptions they disrupt the seemingly neat separation between cultures and create a mestizada, a new cultural mix, through creative acts (Light / Luz 49). In this way, conocimiento narratives, as Sonia Rodríguez notes, “highlight how knowing is a healing process captured within the stories and exemplified through the characters. Conocimiento is an opportunity to recognize the oppressions that direct the characters’