

## Contested Children's Literature: Que(e)ries into Chicana and Central American *Autofantasías*

Children's literature has often sought not just to engage with instructions on manners and literacy, but also to explore those experiences that threaten.  
—Mary Pat Brady (2013, 379)

**T**he pedagogical utility of children's literature varies across educational settings and historical periods. However, its didactic functionality, meant to inculcate certain truths onto children, remains relatively constant (see Hunt 1995; Mickenberg 2006; Lerer 2008). As evidenced by annual awards and reading lists, authors, in conjunction with publishers, editors, illustrators, distributors, and consumers, are instrumental in determining which didactic truths merit the attention of young readers.<sup>1</sup> When Mary Pat Brady suggests that we consider how the genre of children's literature can also "explore those experiences that threaten," she pushes us toward the nonnormative, the taboo, and the marginal within what is currently considered appropriate content for children (2013, 379). During the 1980s and 1990s, for example, authors employed multiculturalism in order to challenge the invisibility of characters of color within the US children's literary canon (see Day 1997; Ada 2003). However, critiques of multiculturalism have proliferated, since representation alone did not translate into an analysis of power or address the normalization of whiteness within children's literature. Rather, as Maria José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman (2009) argue, many examples of multicultural children's literature fall short in their

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<sup>1</sup> The American Library Association (ALA) oversees prominent awards in children's literature including the John Newbery Medal (1922) in recognition of authors and the Randolph Caldecott Medal (1938) in recognition of illustrators. A lack of representation by communities of color and demands from segments within the ALA membership resulted in others such as the Pura Belpré Award (1996) for Latina/o children's literature and the Coretta Scott

political critique. In her survey of Latina/o children's literature, Brady concurs, adding, "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 children should not read about dangers (even though they must navigate them)" (2013, 380). Children experience xenophobia and queerphobia, for example, although adults rarely address either with children, and xenophobia and queerphobia remain taboo subjects within contemporary children's literature.<sup>2</sup>

Considering Botelho and Rudman's (2009) call for a critical multicultural analysis, and Brady's (2013) call for edgier children's literature, I engage with children's literature as a terrain of political sites that contest histories of dominance or difference by utilizing the literary technique I term *autofantasia*. Gloria Anzaldúa and Melissa Cardoza both wrote children's picture books that exemplify this concept.<sup>3</sup> I focus on Anzaldúa's (1993)

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King Book Award (1970) for African American children's literature. In 2004, the ALA also established the Schneider Family Book Award for children's books that dealt with disabilities and differently abled bodies, while the Stonewall Book Awards now include a "Children's & Young Adult" award category. Children's Book Week also prides itself in establishing the Children's Book Awards known as "the only national book awards program where the winning titles are selected by young readers of all ages" (see <http://www.bookweekonline.com/educators>). These awards are thought to generate incentives for aspiring authors and illustrators of children's literature, and to establish greater interest among publishers. The sale of children's literature is also linked to the construction of niche markets such as "Pan-Latinos" (see Guidotti-Hernández 2007; Brady 2013). Although these interlocutors of children's literature collectively create what Seth Lerer classifies as a "prize culture" (2008, 274), not all children's books are considered for award nominations. Some are rejected because of form, others for content, and many are ignored altogether. This is especially troublesome for children's books published by smaller, independent presses, which rely on grassroots distribution tactics that rarely reach a nationwide audience. Thus, when the *New York Times* publishes headlines such as "For Young Latino Readers, an Image Is Missing" (Rich 2012) or "Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books?" (Myers 2014), they engender an overwhelming response by readers who both scrutinize the newspaper for ineffectively including marginalized voices within its annual lists of "Notable Children's Books" (Olivera 2013) and provide their own reading list recommendations such as those generated by the Latina bloggers behind "Latinas for Latino Children's Literature" (Molina 2012).

<sup>2</sup> I utilize the term queerphobia over homophobia in order to account for multiple forms of gender and sexuality violence and discrimination. While I use queer as an umbrella term, its meaning can vary across theoretical fields, geographic locations, and languages. For a discussion of the term queer in Spanish, see La Fountain-Stokes (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Picture books rarely include page numbers. For a more thorough discussion of the picture book format, see Lewis (2001) and Lukens, Smith, and Coffel (2012). For a discussion of children's literature and publishing formats across Latin America, see Rey (2000) and Peña Muñoz (2009).

*Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* and Cardoza's (2004) *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*.<sup>4</sup> *Friends* is bilingual in English and Spanish, illustrated by Consuelo Méndez, and published by Children's Book Press of San Francisco, California (United States); *Tengo* is monolingual in Spanish, illustrated by Margarita Sada, and published by Ediciones Patlatonalli of Guadalajara, Jalisco (México). My analysis of *Friends* and *Tengo* prioritizes the authors' incorporation of autobiographical information within the texts' narrative arcs and character development. Anzaldúa, for example, inserts herself within *Friends* as a protagonist by the name of Prietita, or the little dark one; in contrast, Cardoza does so as the aunt to the child protagonist—both of whom share the same name, Melissa or Meli. In what follows, I first contextualize *autofantasia* and then scrutinize both *Friends* and *Tengo* in order to elucidate *autofantasia* as a literary technique. Both Anzaldúa and Cardoza wrote politically astute children's picture books that utilized the self—either within the past, present, or imagined future—in order to model solutions for contemporary social problems such as responses to xenophobia and queerphobia. The authors' provocative proposals situate them outside the sphere of works that are eligible for major awards in children's literature, which is precisely what draws me to them. While *Friends* and *Tengo* remain marginal within children's literature bibliographies or school curricula, they retain their political resilience and relevance given ongoing citizenship and sexuality debates such as immigration law reform, same-sex marriage, affordable health care, child bullying, and hate crimes.

### **Autofantasia as literary technique**

Children's literary criticism takes as its mode of analysis "classic" children's literature (see Stevenson 2009) and, more recently, contemporary picture books, chapter books, or young-adult novels. Children's literature is unique in that it is intended for children though rarely written by them. Unlike most hierarchical dichotomies, the child/adult dichotomy is also unique in that most children eventually enter into adulthood. Stated differently, we might conceive of the underprivileged category of the child as one that is presumably transgressed and temporally grounded in the past of all adults, including authors. Recalling childhood then becomes the inspiration or the experiential nexus by which marginalized authors conceive of an imagined child audience. By privileging characters and narratives who contest dominant discourse, these authors also privilege an imagined child

<sup>4</sup> Loosely translated as *I Have an Aunt Who Is Not a Little Nun*. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

reader who may be dealing with similar life experiences such as xenophobia and queerphobia. For example, the National Immigrant Justice Center released data on the staggering number of children and youth who migrate from Central America and México into the United States and are subsequently held in adult detention centers (see Preston 2012; NIJC 2013). Although it is unclear how many of these children and youth are also LGBTQ-identified, queer youth remain active and vocal in their own contestations of immigration reform, citizenship debates, and state power (see Berta-Ávila, Tijerina Revilla, and López Figueroa 2011; Escudero 2013; Seif 2014). Similarly, authors of children's literature find creative literary techniques, like *autofantasia*, for interjecting these political strategies into their narratives.

I propose *autofantasia* as a literary technique whereby authors deliberately insert themselves within a text in order to fantasize solutions or responses to hegemonic structures. As the root word, *auto*, suggests, the author intentionally writes from an autobiographical perspective. However, unlike an autobiography or memoir, the difference emerges in the pairing of *fantasia* after *auto*. As a genre of writing, autobiographies, including memoirs and life writing in general, are temporally situated within one's past. They include thought-provoking reflections of one's life and prior actions or experiences. The genre's assumption that authors may be motivated to write autobiographies or biographies of others after long, meaningful lives suggests that children cannot author or publish their own because they have yet to fulfill or reach greatness. Thus, children's biographies of famous figures, including picture books on Emma Tenayuca (Tafolla and Teneyuca 2008) or Sonia Sotomayor (Winter 2009), tend to encompass major achievements across the person's life trajectory, while children's autobiographies are written by adults reflecting on their own childhoods. Ruby Bridges's (1999) memoir, for example, documents her experiences with desegregation at the age of six, intermixed with personal photographs and news coverage of that period. A notable exception to the genre's age parameters may be the publication of one's childhood journal or diary, some of which can be found in archives such as the Historic Iowa Children's Diaries collection.<sup>5</sup> Whether autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, journals, or diaries, these life writings are also forms of fiction. As a genre, autobiographies have limitations. Sandra K. Soto (2010) cautions

<sup>5</sup> Examples include Belle Robinson's 1875–1877 diary, which she began writing at the age of thirteen. Visit the Historical Iowa Children's Diaries digital collection at <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/search/collection/diaries/searchterm/Historic%20Iowa%20Children's%20Diaries/mode/exact>.

against the authenticating effect autobiographic writing can have as well as the danger of applying one author's narrative to all "others" within any given marginalized category. Similarly, authors may purposely omit blatantly critical information if it reflects negatively upon them or reveals personal secrets (see Hernández 2009). In his introduction to the special issue "Autobiographical Que(e)ries," Thomas C. Spear surmises that autobiographies are at the "margins of both fact and fiction" (2000, 1). Thus, these examples of autobiographic writing serve as my basis for identifying ways in which authors may choose to insert themselves—auto—within children's literature. By accepting autobiographies as another form of fictionalized writing, it becomes clearer why I am postulating *autofantasia* over, for example, *autoficción* or autofiction, since these would be a redundancy on the concept of fictionalized writing.

*Fantasia* completes the concept of *autofantasia*, where *fantasia* is a form of fiction that engulfs everything that can be imagined or fantasized. I utilize *fantasia* as an umbrella term for what may be labeled speculative fiction or, more specifically, fantasy fiction, science fiction, and magical realism. These all incorporate elements that seem fantastical or unbelievable within our current world order or contexts. Common fantasy fiction tropes include supernatural abilities or magic or supernatural beings such as mermaids, while common science fiction tropes include high-tech robots or cyborgs, space exploration, alien encounters, and time travel. Within Chicana/o and Latina/o studies, Catherine S. Ramírez coined the term Chicanafuturism (2002b, 2008) and has led the reconceptualization of Anzaldúa's writing as science fiction (2002a).<sup>6</sup> Another notable example includes Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita's (2009) *Lunar Braceros, 2125–2148*, which reimagines the Bracero Program in a future dystopia set in space. Within children's literature, Juan Felipe Herrera's (2003) *Super Cilantro Girl/La Superniña del Cilantro* fuses super powers with dreams in order to discuss border crossing, green cards, and detention centers. Magical realism, an aesthetic popularized across Latin America, which "makes no distinction nor discriminates between events that defy the laws of nature (in physics or genetics, for example) and those that conform to the laws of nature," or between what is seemingly unnatural and natural, is usually thought of in opposition to realism (Aldama 2012, 334–35). Like magical realism and autobiographies, however, realism is also a form of fiction, even if it attempts to present "a reflection of reality" (Aldama 2012, 334). The utility of *autofantasia* then lies in emphasizing both

<sup>6</sup> See Ramírez's discussion of Chicanafuturism as it relates to Afrofuturism (2008).

autobiographies and fantasies as forms of fiction. Both autobiographical fictions and fantasy fictions collide into *autofantasia* as a fictionalized narrative or literary technique.

*Autofantasia* is also a play on Gloria Anzaldúa's definition of *autohistorias*, or autohistories (Keating 2009a, 319), where one shares prior experiences through the retelling and rewriting of history. "A story is always a retelling of an older story," explained Anzaldúa (2009c, 216). *Autohistorias* challenge the production of history or what constitutes valid history, and although Anzaldúa's (1993, 1995) children's books may be read as another example of *autohistorias*, we should consider them as examples that merge both autobiographical fiction and fantasy fiction, or *autofantásias*. By writing herself as a child within her stories for children, Anzaldúa recreates her childhood past in order to demonstrate what could have been. In doing so, she is creating an *autofantasia* that is autobiographical in her insertion of self and fantasy fiction in her rewelding of the past. "By redeeming your most painful experiences," explained Anzaldúa, "you transform them into something valuable, algo para compartir, or share with others so they too may be empowered" (2002, 540). While both *autohistorias* and *autofantásias* may empower readers, the former is temporally anchored within past events, while the latter suggests alternative realities or responses to contemporary worldly problems through its temporal flexibility. In September of 1979, Anzaldúa began drafting her *autohistoria*, "La Prieta," which she subsequently published in 1981 in *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; see also Keating 2009b, 326). Deemed la Prieta, the dark one, or la Prietita, the little dark one, Anzaldúa struggled throughout her life with the multiple complexities of identities, belongings, borders, and politics. However, once a contested label, la Prieta metamorphosed into Anzaldúa's own alter ego and reemerged throughout Anzaldúa's works, including an unpublished novel or collection of stories also titled "La Prieta" as well as the protagonist in her published (and unpublished) stories for children (Anzaldúa 2009a, 157).<sup>7</sup> Several major events occurred in Anzaldúa's life while she was conceptualizing and ultimately publishing for children. These included the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989 in San Francisco; the continuation of her graduate work at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she was ini-

<sup>7</sup> Anzaldúa drafted stories for children that have not yet been published. Some included Prietita as their child protagonist and were directed at children, while others read more like short stories of Prietita as a child and Anzaldúa's reflections of her childhood. She shared five of these stories with Harriet Rohmer of Children's Book Press in 1989. See Harriet Rohmer, "Personal letter to Anzaldúa," 1989, Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa Papers, 1942–2004 (box 9, folder 4), Nettie Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

tiating her dissertation tentatively titled “Lloronas, Women Who Wail”; and in 1992, her diagnosis with type I diabetes (Keating 2009b, 330–31). Given this context, it is not surprising to anyone familiar with her scholarship that her children’s books, *Friends* (1993) and *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/Prietita y la Llorona* (1995), also dealt with many of the themes in her published works for adults, including identities, illness, spirituality, poverty, and immigration.<sup>8</sup> Anzaldúa published extensively across literary genres despite being a novice author of children’s literature and spoke openly about her desire to write children’s books in order to present alternative narratives to those of white authors and white characters. Recalling her youth, she observes, “When I went to school all we had were white books about white characters like Tom, Dick, and Jane, never a dark kid, una Prieta. That’s why I write for children, so they can have models. They see themselves in these books and it makes them feel good!” (Anzaldúa 2000b, 244). Anzaldúa’s children’s books are political commentaries. In this manner, *autofantasía*—embodied through Prietita—functions as a pedagogical model for theorizing and suggesting overt political action. As Edith Vásquez suggests, in Anzaldúa’s children’s books, “children’s behavior prevails as humanitarian, diplomatic, and instinctually responsive to the borderlands’ dangers. Anzaldúa shapes children’s behavior into a manifesto for human rights. Childish *travesuras* constitute a mode of oppositional poetics and politics” (2005, 74). These *travesuras* (antics), these moments of disobedience enacted by the characters, simultaneously function as calls for sedition from readers.

*Autofantasía* applies similarly to Cardoza’s children’s picture book, *Tengo una tía que no es monjita*. The author inserts herself into the text as a woman in love with another woman, recalling actual discussions with her niece. As an adult, Cardoza left her home in Honduras, migrating to México, where she resided approximately nine years.<sup>9</sup> On a trip to her home country, she was inspired to write *Tengo* after visiting her eight-year-old niece, who told her she must be a nun since she was not married and had no children. Cardoza recalls, “Creo que para ella no había más opciones y le causaba sorpresa que fuera una monja que no usara hábitos ni rezara.”<sup>10</sup> Cardoza clarified to her niece she was not a nun but rather a lesbian and had a novia, or girlfriend, and that like men, women could have

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/Prietita y la Llorona*, see Esquibel (2006) and Perez (2008).

<sup>9</sup> Melissa Cardoza, personal communication, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> “I believe 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 she ever see me praying” (*Infobae* 2005, 1).

girlfriends as well.<sup>11</sup> This response suggests that it was imperative that she be transparent with her niece about sexualities outside of heteronormative coupling. However, to Cardoza's disillusionment, her niece has yet to read the published version of *Tengo*, since her parents are adamant about shielding their child from its lesbian-themed content.<sup>12</sup> Thus, *autofantasia* works within *Tengo* to provide a space in which Cardoza can reimagine an expanded conversation with her niece, perhaps one that may still occur at some point in their future.

The fictionalization of both autobiographies and fantasy fiction yields *autofantasías* steeped in personal experience, observations, political commentary, and utopian idealism meant to both educate and entertain children and the adults around them. Feminist theory, critical race theory, and queer theory have been particularly useful in expanding literary theory, critical theory, and cultural theory within literary studies. Within these theoretical frameworks, a text, in this case children's literature, cannot be read solely as a text but rather must take into account the context in which it was produced, its authorship, and its intended audience. Undoubtedly, once these texts are released into the world, readers will engage with them in nuanced, plural ways regardless of the authors and their intentions. Yet *Friends* and *Tengo* shape readers' responses by refusing to shy away from potentially polemical conversations within children's literature, just as the authors refused to shy away from politics within their own lives.

### Plotting against xeno/queerphobia

My deliberate pairing of *Friends* and *Tengo* hinges upon their mutually nuanced feminist responses to xenophobia and queerphobia. Both Anzaldúa and Cardoza interweave more than one narrative arc into their picture books, pushing the boundaries of what constitutes appropriate content for children. While *Friends* explicitly addresses immigration and xenophobia, it has undercurrents that read as a queer text. In comparison, *Tengo* explicitly addresses sexuality and same-sex partnerships while its subplots suggest that it can also read as a commentary on immigration and neoliberalism. In this manner, what one book foregrounds as its primary subject matter the other alludes to within its subtext.

<sup>11</sup> In Spanish, the full quotation reads, "Le dije que además de no ser monjita, era lesbiana y le expliqué que yo tenía novia y que las mujeres podíamos hacer eso." Melissa Cardoza, personal communication, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



### **Writing the child: Anzaldúa as Prietita**

In a 1995 interview, María Henríquez Betancor confessed her confusion over Anzaldúa's *Friends from the Other Side*, asking herself, "Who's her audience here? Is it a children's book?" (Anzaldúa 2000b, 245). Betancor's uncertainty suggests that despite the fact that *Friends* is a picture book narrated by a child and published by the Children's Book Press, its content may be inappropriate for children. Prietita, a Mexican American girl, or Chicanita, befriends Joaquín, an undocumented boy from México. While Prietita is assertive, Joaquín is timid. Throughout the narrative Prietita comes to his aid, defending him against bullies, hiding him from border patrol agents, and helping heal the boils on his arms caused by physical labor and inability to access health care. In this manner Anzaldúa inserts her alter ego, manifested in the form of Prietita, as a witness to injustices by framing the protagonist's benevolence toward Joaquín within the context of contemporary immigration debates and in response to xenophobia.

Anzaldúa creates a literary world where child's play is routinely interrupted by a culture of fear and intimidation on the basis of citizenship status. The initial pages of *Friends* create a stark contrast between Prietita and Joaquín, and between child's play, or leisure, and child's work. While Prietita enjoys the summer outdoors, perched on a mesquite tree and freely observing everything around her from the comfort of her own backyard, Joaquín roams the outdoors, approaching each house in an effort to sell the bundles of firewood he carries over his back. This initial page correlates Joaquín's need to work with his position as a border-crosser. Prietita inquires, "Did you come from the other side? You know, from Mexico?" Joaquín is also linguistically marked as an outsider, because as Prietita keenly observes, "his Spanish was different from hers." The contrast between the two characters is further illuminated by the following page. While responding affirmatively to Prietita's line of inquiry, Joaquín appears abashed—standing awkwardly with his head tilted downward (see fig. 1). Prietita, now standing, arms crossed, on the ground directly across him, appears confident, with an inquisitive expression on her face, expecting an answer. The characters are depicted on opposite ends of this two-page spread, separated by southern Texas's flora and fauna, including chickens and lizards. Joaquín's bundle of wood, now on the ground, serves as a visual reminder and barrier between them. His demure facial expression and body language are coupled with text describing how his "skinny fingers kept pulling his sleeves over his wrists." Prietita has already noticed this, wondering "why he wore a long sleeve shirt when it was so hot that



"Yes," answered Joaquin, keeping his head down, a chunk of limp blue-black hair falling over his forehead and his face. His skinny fingers kept pulling his sleeves over his wrists.

When he bent to lift up the cord of wood, Pricita noticed the large boils on his forearms. She realized that he was ashamed of the sores. She thought about the herb woman and her healing powers, but before she could say a word, Joaquin hurried away with his head down.

"Sí," contestó Joaquin, manteniendo la cabeza agachada. Un mechón de su pelo liso, tan negro que parecía azul, cubría su frente y parte de su cara. Con sus dedos flacos estiraba los puños de la camisa sobre sus muñecas.

Cuando él se agachó a levantar la leña, ella notó que sus brazos estaban cubiertos de llagas horribles. Se dio cuenta de que él sentía vergüenza de tener esas llagas. Pricita pensó en la curandera y en sus remedios, pero antes de poder hablar, Joaquin ya salía con la cabeza bajada.

Figure 1 Pricita and Joaquin. © 1993 by Consuelo Méndez. © 2015 by Lee and Low Books. Reprinted with permission.

most boys went shirtless.” Soon Prietita, and readers, discover large boils on Joaquín’s forearms: “Prietita realized that he was ashamed of the sores. She thought about the herb woman and her healing powers, but before she could say a word, Joaquín hurried away with his head down.” His scurrying away can be interpreted as shame. However, I also want to consider his own sense of agency. Prietita is, after all, interrogating him, and he chooses to put an end to it, to pick up his firewood and leave.

As their friendship develops, Prietita is privy to Joaquín’s lived reality as an undocumented boy. On a visit to his home, Anzaldúa tells us that Joaquín and his mother live in a “tumbledown shack with one wall missing. In place of the wall was a water-streaked tarp.” The front door appears to be made of a similar material. These tarps hang loosely, secured only at the top, leaving this space fully exposed to hazardous weather or potential intruders, and reflective of the vulnerable status mother and son share as undocumented. The word “Fragile” runs across one of the wooden panels that make up the other walls of the shack, symbolic of its dilapidated condition and representative of *colonias* across South Texas. Despite this, they have gone to great lengths to transform this shack into their home. Potted plants adorn the front wall. A horseshoe hangs over the doorway, and to its side, a wooden cross is nailed into another panel, along with a bundle of dried herbs. When Joaquín announces they have company, his mother invitingly gestures, “Come in, come in.” And when offered something to eat, Prietita replies, “No, thank you,” since “she saw pride in their faces and knew that they would offer a guest the last of their food and go hungry rather than appear bad-mannered.” Anzaldúa’s attempt to humanize this family is followed by a more nuanced critique of the role the United States plays in the ill treatment of those who are undocumented. Joaquín’s mother explains that they “had to cross the river because the situation on the other side was very bad. [She] couldn’t find work and Joaquín was in rags.” Squatting on the dirt floor, Joaquín responds, “It’s the same on this side.” Thus, while other children might have decorative rugs over wooden floors or carpeted playrooms, Joaquín has dirt. His position as poor and undocumented allows him to critique poverty within the United States based on his own experiences and that of those around him. Joaquín then goes on to wish for “real work instead of the occasional odd job in exchange for food and old clothes.” This desire is met with optimism from Prietita: “I’ll tell the neighbor women about you. Maybe they’ll have some work.” However good-intentioned, Prietita—like Anzaldúa—is not undocumented and has possibly never held a job up to this point in her life, so while the neighbor women may have work, it is likely to still be within the informal sector. Any positions outside the informal

sector would require a valid work permit. Moreover, Joaquín is a young boy and likely not yet fourteen, the minimum age for employment in the United States. On her way out, Prietita tells Joaquín to “bring some wood tomorrow and see if you can stay and play with me.” Here, although the solution she proposes is temporary, Prietita once again attempts to assuage his poverty-stricken living conditions by suggesting that her own family will purchase wood from him.

Embedded within Anzaldúa’s critique of poverty is her ongoing assessment of immigration laws and discriminatory practices as they affect border-crossers. Most of the action in *Friends* centers on two distinct incidents where Prietita intervenes on behalf of Joaquín. Both are tied to his status as undocumented. In the first example, we witness a jarring depiction of bullying rooted in xenophobia. A group of boys confront Joaquín as he leaves Prietita’s home. “‘Look at the *mojadito*, look at the wet-back!’ called out Prietita’s cousin, Teté. ‘Hey, man, why don’t you go back where you belong? We don’t want any more *mojados* here,’ said another boy.” The diminutive form of *mojado* does little to mask this direct form of harassment and hostility from similarly racialized subjects. They all, including Joaquín, share similar hair and skin tone and resemble one another such that Joaquín could easily be one of their cousins or even siblings. Instead, Joaquín is targeted because the other boys have identified him as undocumented and therefore unlike them. The text is paired with equally jarring illustrations. Three boys stand with their backs to the reader, taking up most of the page. One of them, presumably Teté, wears a green shirt with “Pocho Che” written across the back.<sup>13</sup> He points a finger toward Joaquín, who appears almost miniscule in comparison to the larger boys. Joaquín’s body also appears tense, as if caught off guard. This confrontation also seems to draw the attention of the surrounding dogs and cats, which appear on the edges of the page, as if observing. Behind them, we catch a snippet of a fence with a “Keep out” sign and the words “U.S. Border.” The following set of pages depict Teté with a rock in one of his hands and the word “Bully” written across the front of his green shirt. Meanwhile, Prietita refuses to remain a casual observer, choosing to confront her cousin and his friends: “What’s the matter with you guys? How brave you are, a bunch of *machos* against one small boy. You should be ashamed of your-

<sup>13</sup> The shirt appears to say “Pocho Che,” which can be read as a play on both “pocho” and “Che,” where the latter may reference Ernesto “Che” Guevara while the former is slang for Chicana/os or Mexican Americans who may either not speak Spanish or speak it with limited proficiency. Pocho-Che was also the name of a San Francisco editorial press started in 1968 that was dedicated to publishing Latina/o writers and artists (Pérez, Guridy, and Burgos 2010, 220).

selves!” Her cousin responds, “What’s it to you? Who asked you to butt in, Prietita?” Eventually the boys decide Joaquín is not worth the trouble and leave. “I was scared,” admits Joaquín to Prietita. “I know,” she says. “Come on, I’ll walk you home.” This incident asks us to ponder the differences between those who are documented, even if they are also Chicana/os or Latina/os, and those who are not. This scene could also be discussed in terms of larger bullying discourse and antibullying measures such as contemporary campaigns against queerphobic bullying, since Joaquín is targeted both because of his immigration status and his presumably effeminate demeanor.<sup>14</sup>

The bullying scene foreshadows an immigration raid by border patrol agents depicted toward the end of *Friends*. Once again, child’s play is interrupted, this time by the state. In an interview with Linda Smuckler, Anzaldúa observed how “children are these little people with no rights” (2009d, 94). According to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children’s rights fall under a larger human rights framework. However, the United States has failed to ratify this treaty. Undocumented children pose a unique challenge to children’s rights discourse within the United States because they lack protection from the state. While playing *lotería*, Joaquín and Prietita are suddenly interrupted by a neighbor’s cries, “¡La migra, allí viene la migra!” [The Border Patrol is coming]. The sense of urgency in this woman’s voice is echoed in Joaquín’s reaction to the news: “Joaquín jumped out of his seat. ‘You know they’ll check the old shacks. They’ll find my mother and take her away!’” he exclaims. Once united with his mother, Joaquín asks, “Where can we hide?” Prietita takes his trembling hand and, guiding son and mother through the town, provides a solution: “The herb woman will know what to do.” Indeed she does. La curandera draws the curtains while hiding Joaquín and his mother under her bed: “From behind the curtains, Prietita and the herb woman watched the Border Patrol van cruise slowly up the street. It stopped in front of every house.” Once again, Anzaldúa takes this opportunity to further complicate the us-versus-them paradigm. “While the white patrolman stayed in the van, the Chicano *migra* got out and asked, ‘Does anyone know of any illegals living in this area?’” Like the bullying incident, this example emphasizes tensions and divides within Chicana/o and Latina/o communities while challenging how we imagine Border Patrol agents and the role communities of color play within state institutions such as the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement under

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of masculinity and boyhood within children’s literature, see Serrato (2011).

the Department of Homeland Security.<sup>15</sup> The tension caused by their presence is lessened by the witty response from another neighbor: “They heard a woman say, ‘Yes, I saw some over there,’ pointing to the gringo side of town—the white side. Everyone laughed, even the Chicano migra.” Although this is meant as comic relief, the woman’s response is not entirely unfounded, given the cases of undocumented immigrants employed as domestic workers or day laborers. Once the Border Patrol agents drive off, Joaquín and his mother resurface. Vásquez reads this incident as exemplary of childhood *travesuras*, observing: “Prietita and Joaquín perform heroically, humanely. Yet they disobey legal, political, and social strictures. En este sentido, son niños traviosos” (2005, 65). We may also consider their acts of illegality alongside current immigration debates. Joaquín and his mother bring another face to these debates, that of women and children.

Although *Friends* explicitly pushes the boundaries of xenophobia and immigration law, its queerness is most embedded within its subtext. This is due in part to taboos over children’s sexuality. While Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) suggests the ubiquitousness of children’s queerness, mainstream discourse usually posits children’s asexuality within a broader assumption of childhood innocence (see Bruhm and Hurley 2004). Meanwhile, children are raised within rigid gender binaries that often conflate gender transgressions, gender fluidity, or transgender children with gay or lesbian sexuality (see Sedgwick 1991)—where queerness, bisexuality, pansexuality, and any other form of nonheteronormativity is made invisible. Within queer discourse, coming out remains the pinnacle representational trope (see Manalansan 2003), while queer childhood is usually discussed in retrospect. These examples rarely imagine a queer child audience. Thus, within queer children’s literature, it is often an adult within the narrative who is marked and accepted as queer rather than the children. As a result, *Friends* is not usually included within bibliographies of queer-themed children’s literature, since one could easily dismiss it for its lack of overt queer content. However, in other writings or interviews Anzaldúa reflects on her writing style and how she prefers that readers read critically and between the lines. In her essay, “To(o) Queer the Writer,” she states: “One always writes and reads from the place one’s feet are planted, the ground one stands on, one’s particular position, point of view. . . . But I don’t always spell things out. I want the reader to deduce my conclusions or at least come up with her

<sup>15</sup> The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was created in 2003; it was preceded by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service. Tensions between Mexican Americans or Chicana/os and immigrants are vividly depicted in media such as Alex Rivera’s music video to La Santa Cecilia’s song *El Hielo* or in the science fiction film *Sleep Dealer*.

own" (2009e, 172). Within *Friends*, Anzaldúa utilizes *autofantasia* in order to write herself into the text and embody Prietita. As such, Prietita symbolizes the queer butch Chicana growing into Anzaldúa's queer Chicana butchness. If, as readers, we challenge heteronormativity as a child's default sexuality, Joaquín, too, could register as queer. Likely, potential censorship limitations prevented Anzaldúa from publishing *Friends* as an explicitly queer text. Anzaldúa was mindful of the publishing industry for children's literature, stating, "I have to struggle against the standards and marketing strategies in children's book publishing" (2000b, 245). She elaborated on this in a 1996 interview with Andrea Lunsford; commenting on bilingual children's books, Anzaldúa asks, "How much can I get through the censors in the state of Texas in any particular children's book? Texas has more stringent censorship rules than the other states, and most publishers can only do one book for all the states. So the publishers tend to be conservative because they want to get these books into the schools. How much can I get away with pushing at the norms, at the conventions?" (2000a, 259). This is most likely why any reference to Anzaldúa's sexuality is omitted from her biography at the end of the picture book. Unless one is already familiar with her texts, one could easily miss her contributions to queer theory and queer Chicana scholarship. However, research into Anzaldúa's life and publications by any reader unfamiliar with Anzaldúa would quickly reveal Anzaldúa's counterheteronormativity.

As an *autofantasia*, Anzaldúa presents us with a child version of herself. In this sense, Prietita represents more than a tomboy; she represents the queer child coming to terms with her queerness. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa (1987) writes, "Being lesbian and raised Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, *I made a choice to be queer*" (19). Here, queer functions as a political marker, something one chooses. And yet, like *Borderlands*, the original essay, "La Prieta," may be ignored or overlooked as queer scholarship, despite Anzaldúa's explicit engagement with queer thematics. Anzaldúa concludes "La Prieta" with the following: "We are the queer groups, the people that don't belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective cultures. Combined we cover so many oppressions. But the overwhelming oppression is the collective fact that we do not fit, and because we do not fit *we are a threat*" (2009b, 50). Since her early publications, Anzaldúa has deliberately positioned herself as a queer writer and theorist, although her works are not always accepted as foundational to the modern queer canon. It is not surprising then that her children's books have also been dismissed by queer audiences or those seeking queer children's books. On the other hand, those most familiar with her writings will actively seek out *Friends* pre-

cisely because of Anzaldúa and her political discourse embodied through Prietita.<sup>16</sup>

**Writing the adult: Cardoza as Meli's aunt**

While the subversiveness of *Friends* is aptly concentrated against xenophobia, *Tengo* is most subversive around queer love and families. *Tengo* is narrated by Meli, a vibrant eight-year-old girl who adores her aunt—both of whom share the same name. The primary plot revolves around the coming out of Meli's aunt. The queer subject, in this case the aunt, is neither married nor has children. Meli directly benefits from her aunt's de facto motherhood, stating, "Tampoco tiene hijos, mejor para mí, así soy su consentida."<sup>17</sup> This absence of a husband and children puzzles Meli such that her initial explanation is that her aunt must be a nun. It will not be until later in the story that she discovers her aunt's queer identity. This narrative arc culminates as Meli, hiding behind one of her aunt's green houseplants, sees her aunt kiss one of her female "friends" on the lips. Although this is perhaps the most explicit moment representative of lesbian desire, the entire book pays homage to queer and more specifically chosen families, communities, and loving partnerships. Before the aunt comes out to her niece, Meli comments on her aunt's friendships. She poignantly observes that her aunt has many female friends. These words are coupled with a collage of photographs depicting these friends and their tight-knit circle. The collage alludes to the making of family, or choosing one's queer family.<sup>18</sup> Such families may include one's partner, and being the keen observer that she is, Meli notices her aunt's preoccupation with one friend in particular.

In contrast to Cardoza's own family dynamics, as an author she employs *autofantasia* in order to avoid pathologizing the lesbian desire in *Tengo*. For example, when Meli's father says her aunt "está loca," or is crazy, he appears as a caricature of himself. Unlike any of the other characters in this book, the father's eyes are mere dots encircled within exag-

<sup>16</sup> Anzaldúa described in a letter: "I just returned from two gigs where the campus bookstores were selling Amigos del otro lado [Friends] like hotcakes. They lined up for hours during my autograph sessions." [Personal letter to Laura Atkins]. Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa Papers, 1942–2004 (box 9, folder 4), Nettie Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>17</sup> "She also does not have children; better for me, that way I'm her favorite."

<sup>18</sup> Kath Weston's *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (1991) is often cited as a canonical text for documenting the process of chosen families within lesbian and gay communities. However, Juana María Rodríguez (2003) and Richard T. Rodríguez (2009) speak to the nuances of family formations within queer Latina/o and Chicana/o communities, respectively.



gerated spirals. His tongue hangs out from the side of his mouth, and his fingers move in a circle resembling the common gesture for suggesting that one is insane. These elements work collectively to suggest that he, not Meli's aunt, may be the one who is crazy or mistaken. Moreover, adjacent to the image of the father, the following page shows Meli and her aunt in a playful and loving manner. Both are smiling and appear extremely comfortable with each other. Though initially surprised after seeing her aunt kiss a woman (see fig. 2), Meli appears in the final pages of the book hugging her aunt and smiling, the assumption being that she understands and accepts her aunt's relationship with her partner. This moment also provides a lesson in adult-child power dynamics. Her aunt's revelation is met with an initial pause during which Meli observes, "Yo la vi a los ojos y le brillaban mucho como cuando parece que va llorar."<sup>19</sup> Unlike the perceived normative and hierarchal relationship between a niece and aunt, the aunt's pause and teary eyes indicate that she is seeking validation from her niece. However brief, 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. Similarly, children who read *Tengo* must make a decision: to accept or not accept the lesbian relationship at hand.

The centrality of lesbian sexuality in *Tengo* is further nuanced by the other proposals made in this children's picture book. This text could have easily been limited to the quintessential coming-out narrative. Instead, the author interweaves a subtextual critique of the United States and neoliberalism through the lens of Central American migration. A pivotal moment occurs when Meli bakes a cake for her aunt's birthday. We see bug-eyed Meli enthralled as she whisks away at an enormous bowl surrounded by a whimsical cloud of flour. Additional baking supplies intermix within this commotion. However, unlike the milk carton and the flour, the word "butter" is 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."<sup>20</sup> By differentiating between local and imported products, the author challenges Meli, and readers, to consider their role as consumers.

This critique of imported goods is paralleled by a similar critique of the imposition of US children's culture and its entertainment industry in Latin

<sup>19</sup> "I looked into her eyes which shone brightly, like when she is about to cry."

<sup>20</sup> "She got upset because we baked the cake with butter from the United States, and she prefers the one made by the people here, the one she buys at the local market."

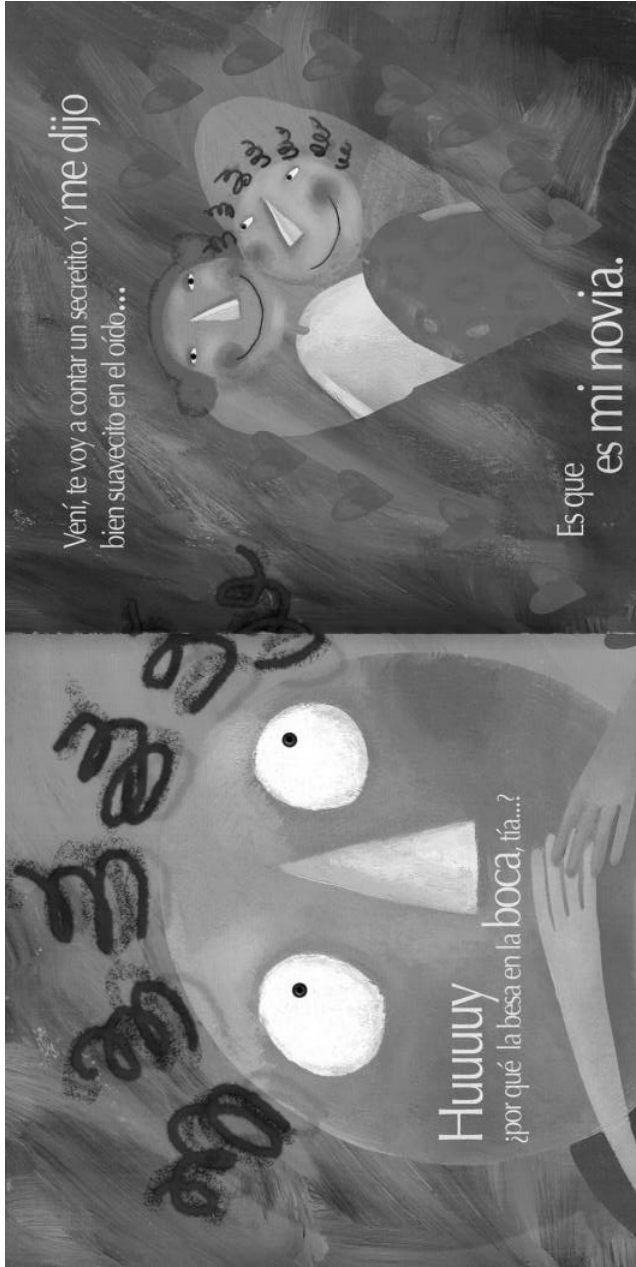


Figure 2 Meli discovers her aunt has a novia, or girlfriend. © 2004 Ediciones Patlatonali. Reprinted with permission.

America. 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, suggesting a trip to Disneyland. This is met with opposition from her aunt, who tells her that instead she will take her to Guatemala, since it is "más bonito," or much prettier. Meli responds affirmatively. This exchange between niece and aunt suggests a closer examination of border crossing and México's relationships with both the United States and Guatemala, as well as the potential challenges of having this dialogue with children, since 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 tells us something either 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 US tourist visa or who did not meet visa requirements. If this were strictly an economic issue, we might conclude that the aunt chose Guatemala since it borders México to the south and would be more economically feasible. However, given that this is a loosely autobiographical text, or *autofantasia*, I would like to focus on Cardoza as a political agent who has publicly advocated against US neoliberalism, as well as in favor of immigrant rights.<sup>21</sup> It is more likely that Cardoza dismisses Disneyland because of what it represents—US neoliberalism (see Alvarado 1987; Cardoza 2011). In this case, neoliberalism manifests itself within the mass commodification of children's media and consumer products, making Disney characters easily recognized by children around the globe. Although there are currently no Disney amusement parks in Latin America, Disney cruise ships such as the Disney Magic or the Disney Wonder can be observed sailing off of various Mexican coastlines. Within *Tengo* we see a bright little girl making sense of her aunt's preoccupations with her world order. Meli may not grasp the entirety of her aunt's disapproval of Disneyland. Nonetheless, she will sacrifice her desire to go to Disneyland by trusting her aunt's assertion over the beauty of Guatemala. Moreover, Guatemala also borders Honduras, Cardoza's home country. Thus, while Cardoza wrote and published *Tengo* in México, she may also imagine Hondurans as a target audience or fantasize about the possibility of traveling from Honduras to Guatemala with her actual niece in the future.

A reading of *Tengo*'s illustrations alongside its text can also help us think through the intersectional axes of citizenship, race, ethnicity, and indi-

<sup>21</sup> For Cardoza's most recent work, see *13 Colores de la resistencia hondureña* (2011).

geneity. The colonial history of México and Central America was one of racial mixing, creating what is commonly referred to today as a mestizo population. In keeping with this logic of *mestizaje* and the invisibility of blackness or indigeneity, at first glance all the characters of *Tengo* 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. The politics of hair have much to tell us about racialized notions of beauty, representation, and power dynamics within societies (see Rivero 2005; Candelario 2007; Bernstein 2011). For example, within US children's literature, authors of color have deliberately validated different types of hair, including examples such as *Hairs/Pelitos* (1997), written by Sandra Cisneros and illustrated by Terry Ybáñez, and *Happy to Be Nappy* (1999), written by bell hooks and illustrated by Chris Raschka. Within the logics of *mestizaje*, mestizas are usually represented with straight or wavy hair, whereas tight, curly hair is more often reserved for more racialized, socially marginalized roles, and signals blackness. These are arbitrary distinctions; however, they tell us of the ways a given society perceives racial and ethnic phenotypes and the qualities attributed to them.

Meli's aunt is also othered through her use of language. After Meli discovers her aunt with her partner, Meli's aunt calls her over, "Vení, te voy a contar un secreto."<sup>22</sup> In paying attention to diction we see the use of "vení" as opposed to "ven," where the former is most commonly used in parts of Central America, while 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 this region's racial and indigenous politics. The particularities of racial formation in Honduras blur the lines between who belongs or does not within black and indigenous groups (see Anderson 2007). Melissa Cardoza publically identifies herself as *negra* and *lenca*, that is, someone who is both black and part of the indigenous Lenca population (Chacón 2013). Her political participation within these movements is an indicator of her own identification as a racialized and indigenous subject within Latin America. Thus, although Cardoza does not explicitly mention citizenship status, race, ethnicity, or indigeneity within *Tengo*, her inclusion of self through *autofantasia* alludes to all of these themes via subtleties in imagery and diction.

<sup>22</sup> "Come here, I'm going to tell you a secret."

## Conclusion

Both Anzaldúa and Cardoza are recognized authors within their respective realms. Even after her death in 2004, Anzaldúa continues to inspire new generations of activists and writers. Cardoza, on the other hand, continues to write. In May 2014 she returned to Mexico City to present her book *13 Colores de la resistencia hondureña* (2011) as part of the LesbianArte art festival. Both Anzaldúa and Cardoza intertwine an intersectional, multi-issue politics into their children's literature. Together *Friends* and *Tengo* challenge hegemonic structures of power by proposing alternative models or realities within the boundaries of the picture book format. Anzaldúa does so by inserting herself into *Friends* as a child and Cardoza into *Tengo* as an adult. In both instances, these authors merge autobiographical information with alternative realities, or fantasies—producing children's literature based on *autofantasías*.

Xenophobia and queerphobia remain taboo subjects within public education curricula and children's literature. Entangled within xeno/queerphobic discourses are broader discussions on citizenship, sexuality, gender, race, class, ability, and age. The degree to which Anzaldúa and Cardoza were able to subvert commonplace assumptions about appropriate content for children was regulated in part by the production and distribution of their publications. While *Friends* was, from its inception, meant to target a more mainstream public educational audience, *Tengo* initially emerged as a personal project for Cardoza and one that drastically changed the political work of Patlatonalli, the lesbian collective in Guadalajara, Jalisco, México, which became an editorial press as a result of the book's publication. However, given their overt political subject matter, *Friends* and *Tengo* do not circulate widely and are currently out of print.<sup>23</sup> It is within this context, then, that *autofantasías* such as *Friends* and *Tengo* come into fruition, challenging us to think outside of traditional or child-normative standards for children's literature. These texts give us a glimpse into contemporary anxieties surrounding children and childhood, as well as how adults, in this case the authors, construe their own sense of self through the rewelding of past, present, or imagined futures. If, as José Esteban Muñoz describes, "utopia is an idealist mode of critique that reminds us that there is something missing, that the present and presence (and its opposite number, absence) is not enough" (2009, 100), then Anzaldúa and Car-

<sup>23</sup> Lee and Low Books acquired Children's Book Press in 2012 and intends to reprint *Friends*.

doza utilize *autofantasia* in order to critique the injustices around them by guiding readers toward counterhegemonic futurities.

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