



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

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

and

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Gloria maps out the seven steps of *conocimiento* as a journey of personal transformation leading to creative acts for social justice and environmental car-

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

Gloria writes,

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

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

Maya’s books also challenge polarizing images of older women as evil, and girls as temptresses, or sacrificing themselves for males, or helplessly in need of saving. Instead, she shows women as sources of wisdom sharing indigenous knowledge, women and girls as strong and courageous, girls as tender with each other, and both girls and boys as physically and sensually empowered.

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

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

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

Maya was particularly impressed with how Gloria addressed colonialism and feminism, saying, *The King Ranch* . . . is like the whole landowner taking over everything and making lots of money and leaving the indigenous people with nothing The little girl is not only going through a spiritual quest but she’s entering into this kind of forbidden land where she’s . . . not . . . allowed and she’s not only fol-

lowing her desire to heal her mother but [there's] also this idea of her courage going out.

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

She told me that she also uses her art to draw connections between contemporary children's literature and Mesoamerican culture. In *From the Belly Button of the Moon* and other seasonal poems (Alarcón, 1998), Maya uses glyphs (iconic symbols from Mesoamerican codices) to visually connect time, history, place, and culture. She sees her own healing as part of a larger picture of spiritual healing from ancient woundings, such as Aztec sacrifices, saying "Now Mexicans need to learn to 'unsacrifice' – themselves, the earth and the animals." She describes praying into the paintings as she does them, saying, "The intention is that I'm healing, and then my fantasy is that when others view my work they also get to experience that healing energy."

Maya recalled how important the images in children's books were to her as a child, telling me, "They meant so much to me and yet I could never completely hold them 'cause I never found myself in them, so it was a tense relationship in a way. I don't want these kids to feel that way; when they open up to a book, I want them to feel that book open up to them."

She told me that participating in this study had refreshed her excitement and enthusiasm about children's literature in the curriculum while providing "a continuing feeling that there is something changing in the world, a contribution . . . is being made, and I'm certainly not alone in it and never have been and that feels good."

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

For this list of selected books illustrated by Maya Gonzalez please see Appendix B attached to the transcript "Maya Gonzalez: Portrait of the Artist as a Radical Children's Book Illustrator."

With many thanks to:

Maya Gonzalez – www.mayagonzalez.com
Children's Book Press – www.childrensbookpress.org
Ildiko Carrington, Gail Jacky, Jody Summers, Michael Salmond, Janie Wilson-Cook, Ed Pierce, Guy Geduldig and *Visual Culture and Gender* editors and reviewers.

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

- Alarcón, F. X. (1997). *Laughing tomatoes and other spring poems / Jitomate risuenos y otros poemas de primavera*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Alarcón, F. X. (1998). *From the bellybutton of the moon and other summer poems / Del ombligo de la luna y otros poemas de verano*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Alarcón, F. X. (1999). *Angels ride bikes and other fall poems / Los Angeles and an en bicicleta y otros poemas de otono*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Alarcón, F. X. (2001). *Iguanas in the snow and other winter poems / Iguanas en la nieve y otros poemas de invierno*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Anzaldúa, G. E. (1996). *Prietita and the ghost woman / Prietita y la llorona*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Gerson, M.-J. (2003). *Fiesta feminina: Celebrating women in Mexican folktales*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. New York: Barefoot Books.
- Goldberg, D. (2007). *On my block: Stories and paintings by fifteen artists*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Gonzalez, M. (2007). *My colors, my world / Mis colores, mi mundo*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Pérez, A. I. (2000). *My very own room / Mi propio cuartito*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Pérez, A. I. (2002). *My diary from here to there / Mi diario de aqui hasta alla*. Illustrated by Maya Gonzalez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Pérez, A. I. (2007). *Nana's big surprise / nana, que sorpresa!* San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Rohmer, H. (1997). *Just like me: Stories and self-portraits by fourteen artists*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Rohmer, H. (1999). *Honoring our ancestors: Stories and pictures by fourteen artists*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.

Selected Book Awards and Honors for Maya Gonzalez

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