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Karleen M. Pendleton Jimenez
Trent University, kpendletonjimenez@trentu.ca

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The Street Belongs to Us: Chicana/o/x Studies for Kids (y Niñas de Corazón)

Karleen Pendleton Jiménez

In 2021, I published the middle grade novel *The Street Belongs to Us* (Arsenal Pulp Press), bringing together, among other influences, learning from my grandmothers' stories, my Chicana/o/x Studies degree, my tomboy/trans childhood, and Canadian and Indigenous perspectives of the land. The following is an excerpt from the novel where the 12-year-old protagonist Alex asks her "Nana" (her grandmother) about the Chicano Movement.

"What's a Chicano movement?" I ask.

"Oh!" she gasps. "I forgot to tell you about the Chicano Movement? That's terrible. I'm forgetting too many things, mjia."

"Don't worry, Nana." I reach to hold her hand. "I remember most of your stories, so that means we've got them safe in both of our heads."

She smiles. "You're a good kid."

I get embarrassed when grown-ups compliment me, so I change the subject as fast as possible. "What about the Chicano Movement, Nana?"

"Oh yeah." She takes a sip of her tea, turns down the volume on the TV, and begins. "Mira, way back in the 1840s, when the gringos stole a bunch of México, they made a whole lot of promises to us. They said we would keep our liberty and property rights. But they didn't follow their own rules."

"Like how?"

"You know Dodger Stadium, right?"

"Yeah, of course," I answer. "I love Dodger Stadium."

"Well, that used to be Chavez Ravine, which was stolen from Mexican Americans." She shakes her head sadly. "Your grandpa was so mad about that he resigned from his job with the city."

“Wow,” I say. “I didn’t know that.”

“And Rosemead is full of Mexican kids, but how much Spanish have you learned at your school so far?” she asks.

“None, Nana,” I admit. “I’ve only learned a few words from you.”

“We had a right to our language, but they don’t give us the chance to learn it.” She sounds angry now.

“That’s true.” I feel sheepish. I wish I knew Spanish better so my nana wouldn’t have to be so upset.

“Bueno,” she resumes, “we started getting really mad that the gringos weren’t keeping their promises. And also that they could be really mean to us, saying racist words and even beating us up sometimes, kicking us out of school, not paying us enough money at work, deporting us, a thousand kinds of awful things.”

I lower my head. I feel kind of ashamed of the stories she’s telling. Even though I’m part Mexican, I’m also quite a bit American. It’s like one part of my body was mean to the other.

She sees my head down and says, “Don’t worry, mija, we’re just getting to the good stuff.”

“There’s good stuff?” I ask.

“About twenty years ago, a whole bunch of Mexican Americans started fighting back, marching on the streets, striking in the fields, and demanding better schools and jobs and all the rights we deserve. Some of the ones who were fighting for justice even wore uniforms and called themselves the Brown Berets. In East LA they put together free health clinics for Chicanos, and one of the leaders, Gloria Arellanes, graduated from El Monte High.”

“Did anyone from Rosemead ever do anything?”

“Pues, sí.” My nana nods proudly. “Vikki Carr, the smoothest Chicana voice on the radio. She’s ours.” (109-111)

Memory

“I am Indian and so I don’t forget,” my grandmother used to tell me. Other times she would say she was maybe German (she was not; she was hoping such a claim might protect her against racism). Mostly she would tell me she was Mexican, from Chihuahua, a child who fled with her mother away from the

Mexican Revolution. As her dementia increased in her old age, she forgot almost everything of the day; but she remembered, with increasing clarity, a lifetime.

It might have been the last time I saw my grandmother when I told her, “Don’t worry, Nana...I remember most of your stories, so that means we’ve got them safe in both of our heads” (Pendleton Jiménez 109). Writing *The Street Belongs to Us* was a way for me to fulfill my promise to her. I have not forgotten her nor the many stories she told me about Mexico, immigration to the United States, Chicana culture, romance, tragedy, cooking, cunning, survival, shopping, racism, beauty. Before I made it to college, she had provided me, through her memories, an enriched Chicana/o/x Studies curricula.

Memory is on trial these days. Her stories stand in contrast to news of parents protesting “critical race theory,.” which they understand as any material that addresses racism(Kilgore). In Texas, where racism against Mexican Americans is a significant part of the state’s past and present (Perez), “suburban parents have attacked school boards and districts for teaching about sexuality and racial discrimination” having been “emboldened by one of the nation’s most far-reaching anti-critical race theory laws passed...in May” (Zelinski). Parents such as these do not want children to know how racism has hurt people, neither today nor historically. They are protesting against memory. They want the right to exclude certain memories in favour of others. U.S. racism against Chicana/o/xs is one of the excluded memories.

On the other hand, California recently passed a law requiring all high school students to take an ethnic studies course (Fensterwald). There is also a statewide K-12 Ethnic Studies curriculum (Asmelash) and a required course for California State University students. Nearly two centuries of excluding Chicana/o/x studies from schooling has erased neither Chicana/o/x knowledge nor the hunger to learn about it. The public has demanded that Ethnic Studies, including Chicana/o/x Studies be part of the education system.

I am particularly moved by the inclusion of Chicana/o/x Studies in California curricula as California is where I was born and raised. However, during my entire K-12 schooling, I was never provided a text written by or about Chicana/o/xs. The entirety of our Chicana/o/x studies curriculum consisted of a once-a-year Cinco de Mayo school party, with snacks and dancing. During the festivities, there was no lesson helping me to understand the historical relationship of the holiday with the Chicano Movement (Hayes-Bautista), or even that a Chicano Movement had existed. To add insult to injury, my trans/tomboy self

was forced into a little white dress to dance with another boy from my class in a little white suit on the black top playground with the other kid dancers, under the Southern California sun; we performed in front of the rest of the students at the school. Schools are a colonial tool that have been used to publicly perpetuate the stories of the conquerors, rendering invisible the knowledge and histories of the conquered (Wilinsky). Before I entered university, my learning of Chicana/o/x history came from my community, family, and my grandmother in particular. My ability to write *The Street Belongs to Us* in the 21st century speaks to the resilience of my grandmother's oral storytelling in preserving colonized histories and cultures despite school curricula.

In 1998 I moved from my California homeland to Toronto, Ontario, Canada. While Chicana/o/x Studies does not exist in Canada, I find that there are important connections between Chicana/o/x peoples and Indigenous peoples in Canada. Chicana/o/xs do not share the same history of colonization as Indigenous peoples in Canada, but there are similarities of Indigenous and mixed-race ancestry, multiple and overlapping European and North American colonizations, marginalization in schools (including abuse and destruction of language and culture), and movements of resistance. Learning about Indigenous peoples in Canada and relationships with land and each other often reinforces my understandings, and/or offers me new ways to look at Chicana/o/x Studies. *The Street Belongs to Us* tells a 1984 Los Angeles story of a mixed-race Chicana/o/x family, yet its focus on land is influenced by Indigenous teachings in Canada (Bell). While the kids do not develop a sense of stewardship of the land, they do develop a loving relationship and are guided by Alex's grandmother's advice that they both take pleasure in, and respect, the earth.

Here it is critical to note another, related kind of memory that surfaced subsequent to my book's publication. After many decades of Indigenous oral stories recounting the hidden deaths and murders of Indigenous children at Canadian boarding schools, bodies are being found. The recent discovery of hundreds of children's bodies in unmarked graves beside former residential schools in Canada shows that burying evidence will not silence memory (Dickson & Watson). It might take a while, but it will be unearthed. Canada faces its time of reckoning. History does not disappear from the land, and we have a responsibility to listen to oral story tellers and to dig.

Digging

The first idea I had for my book *The Street Belongs to Us* was to return to the summer they tore up my childhood street, Muscatel Avenue in Rosemead, California. With the cars unable to drive on our street, I remember the powerful and miraculous feeling of having the street belong to us kids for one summer. In addition, while I did not yet have a plot, I had faith that stories could emerge from all that digging around in the dirt. With the concrete and asphalt broken up and shipped away, a seal was broken. Deep inside their trench adventure, the tween characters could explore family, gender identity, mental health, racism, classism, sexism, and ableism. In addition, Nana, Alex's (the protagonist's) grandmother, takes the opportunity to share seventy years of cultural memory.

Rosemead, California is a little city inside the San Gabriel Valley. It is a region where forgetting is a pastime. In *Pasadena Before the Roses: Race, Identity, and Land Use in Southern California, 1771-1890*, Yvette Saavedra argues that Anglo American stories in this area have displaced “the history of Tongva Indians, Spanish missionaries and colonists, and Californios (Mexican Rancheros) that came before the roses” (3). Rosemead is also a neighbor of San Gabriel, where Cherríe Moraga documents a similar hierarchy and erasure of the cultures and peoples of her hometown in her memoir *Native Country of the Heart*,

The Native origins of the region had long been absorbed, close to extinction, into the culture of landless “Mexicans” who now resided on the other side of the tracks of Anglo America, in the shadow of ever-expanding freeway interchanges. (43)

My home on Muscatel Avenue was in earshot of the freeway and far south of the train tracks. My Rosemead education did not mention Indigenous, nor Mexican history, instead opting for the tale of a German horse-breeder who made a fortune through his horses housed at his Rosemead Stock farm, which became the city of Rosemead (Harness Racing Museum). While I did not know the concealed stories of the land where I resided as a kid, my grandmother had shared enough of her own for me to want to find out more. In addition, the overt racist remarks against “Mexicans” in Rosemead that I heard growing up fueled a rage in me to fight. I took Chicana/o/x Studies the first chance I got when I began college at Berkeley.

In the fall of 1990, I was lying on my bed in co-op housing doing my Chicano history homework. I turned a page in Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* and found my grandfather:

Actions of the neo-robber barons became so outlandish that DeWitt McCann, an aide to Mayor Poulson's Urban Renewal Committee, resigned, stating, "I don't want to be responsible for taking one man's private property through the use of eminent domain and giving it over to another private individual for his private gain." (297)

In my Chicano history course, I learned that celebrated places like Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles were created through the destruction of Chicana/o/x neighborhoods and the theft of their homes. I learned that in every era there have been people like DeWitt McCann (my grandfather) who knew to do the right thing and challenge colonialism ("urban renewal"). I learned that it was possible for white men like him to act in solidarity with Chicana/o/xs. I learned that my family, and the land where I grew up, were intimately connected to Chicana/o/x Studies. I wanted to know more and I wanted to become an educator who would locate and provide the complex and multilayered cultures and histories of a given landscape. Whether the digging was literally into the land, or metaphorically within libraries, archives, and the internet, I would strive to take seriously this responsibility in my classroom.

Chicana/o/x Pedagogies

Nana, Alex's grandmother in *The Street Belongs to Us*, brings forth a combination of the stories I learned from my own grandmother and from my formal Chicana/o/x Studies education that began in college and has continued through my participation in the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies, Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social, and my own reading and scholarship. Through Nana's stories and sensibilities, she models Garcia & Delgado Bernal's discussion of complicated, intergenerational teaching through "pedagogies of the home." With her humour, warmth, and loving relationship with the protagonist, Nana also embodies Alexandra Arraíz-Matute's notion of "pedagogy of cariño."

In the disrupted earth of Muscatel Avenue, the characters express complex cultural identities constructed through centuries of relationships, "competing

visions,” and “dynamic continuities” with the land (Saavedra 4). There are hateful bullies who claim ownership through their taunts; there is the mixed-race protagonist coming to terms with a body that is both complicit with, and victim of, colonization; there is the grandmother who recounts her own immigration to California, as well as the rights of Chicana/o/xs to live in peace on this land. The character of Nana resists the erasure of non-White inhabitants of the region, explaining to her grandchild that Rosemead is the traditional land of the Tongva people, where Chicana/o/xs and Anglo-Americans have settled.

In addition, linear time falls aside in the novel. The characters ostensibly exist in the 1980s, a decade when North America experienced a shift from more liberal politics to conservative values and economics; when civil rights movements were displaced by Reaganomics; when *One Day at a Time* was replaced with *Family Ties*. It is a rapid “motion-change” that L. Heidenreich urges us to recognize. In order to survive and contribute to a more just world, Heidenreich explains that “it is critical that we learn from the past and utilize both old and new to carve out spaces of resistance” (xxx). This type of blurring and flexibility of time is how the novel moves. There are no clear divisions between the grandmother’s stories of the Mexican Revolution (the caves where she hid as a young girl to escape the battles between the Federales and Pancho Villa’s army), the Los Angeles streets where Chicana/o/xs marched to fight against racism, and her own trans/nonbinary/tomboy grandchild who she celebrates standing proudly before her. Binaries of time, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are thrown out and replaced with transhistorical stories of pleasure, relationships, politics, heartbreak, and survival. I offer *The Streets Belong to Us* as one answer to Heidenreich’s “callout to the Mexican and Chicanx dream of a Sixth Sun ... [that includes] transgender Mestiz@s” (xxx).

Conclusion: The Aspirations of Autofantasías

In her article, “Contested Children’s Literature: Que(e)ries into Chicana and Central American Autofantasías,” Isabel Millán discusses the role that children’s literature plays in their education, often “meant to inculcate certain truths onto children” (199). Millán creates the term *autofantasia* to identify children’s books that have the potential to challenge “us to think outside of traditional or child-normative standards for children’s literature” (219). She describes *autofantasías* as “autobiographical information [that merges] with alternative realities, or fantasies” (219). As she explains, “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” (202).

In *The Street Belongs to Us*, I fantasize healing to personal and communal wounds. I bring my grandmother to live with me in a home where I had faced isolation. Her stories serve as entertainment, adventure, puzzles, and teachings for the protagonist. I also show the protagonist overpower the neighborhood bullies and express their fury against the bullies’ racism, transphobia, and ablism. I give the protagonist’s best friend the words to help them embrace their gender diverse body and eradicate gender binaries. I provide the twelve-year-old protagonist the chance to confront her father and ask him to step up in his responsibility to her as a parent. It is my hope that these stories “critique the injustices around them by guiding readers toward counterhegemonic futurities” (219-220), that *The Street Belongs to Us* will join the Millán list of Latinx autofantasías, and that children will enjoy the adventure of the novel as they develop critical consciousness.

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