

## GLORIA VELÁSQUEZ'S ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL SERIES: TOWARDS QUALITY MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE THROUGH RAINBOW COALITIONS<sup>1, 2</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** *The goal of this paper is to study several YA novels by Chicana writer Gloria Velásquez, the Roosevelt High School series (1994-2018), as an educating tool within the framework of multicultural education. The analysis takes into account Velásquez's choice of problematic situations (related to racism, sexism, or homophobic harassment, among others) and the solutions her novels propose, which include both individual responses and community-organized measures. Special attention is given to the criticism according to which Velásquez's Latinx and multi-ethnic characters are steeped in stereotypes, which would cancel the books' potential capacity to inspire social change. In contrast with this negative vision, this paper proves that Velásquez's series offers empowering role models for teen Latinxs of various ethnic backgrounds and effectively calls for the neutralization of race, class and gender stereotypes, thus contributing to the implementation of Jesse Jackson's 1984 proposal that ethnic minorities should form a "rainbow coalition".*

*Keywords:* young adult literature, Gloria Velásquez, multicultural literature, race, class and gender stereotypes, rainbow coalition.

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**LA SERIE ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL DE GLORIA VELÁSQUEZ:  
LITERATURA MULTICULTURAL DE CALIDAD A PARTIR DE  
COALICIONES ARCOÍRIS**

**RESUMEN.** *El objetivo de este artículo es estudiar varias novelas juveniles de la escritora chicana Gloria Velásquez, la serie Roosevelt High School (1994-2018), como una herramienta educativa dentro del marco de la educación multicultural. El análisis tiene en cuenta la selección de situaciones problemáticas de Velásquez (relacionadas con el racismo, el sexismo o la homofobia, entre otras) y las soluciones propuestas por las novelas, que incluyen tanto respuestas individuales como medidas organizadas por la comunidad. Se presta especial atención a la crítica según la cual los personajes latinxs y multiétnicos de Velásquez son estereotipados, lo cual cancelaría el potencial de los libros para inspirar un cambio social. En contraste con esa visión negativa, este artículo demuestra que la serie de Velásquez ofrece modelos de empoderamiento para la juventud latina multiétnica y colabora eficazmente en la deconstrucción de los estereotipos de raza, clase y género, lo cual, a su vez, contribuye a la implementación de la propuesta de 1984 de Jesse Jackson de que las minorías étnicas deberían formar una "coalición arcoíris".*

*Palabras clave:* literatura juvenil, Gloria Velásquez, literatura multicultural, estereotipos de raza, clase y género, coalición arcoíris.

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1. GLORIA VELÁSQUEZ AND CRITICAL MULTICULTURALISM: "I WANT TO EDUCATE OUR YOUTH"

An early pioneer of the Chicano Art Renaissance, Gloria Velásquez has dedicated both her teaching and her literary career to the promotion of social justice: "I want to inspire social change", she has claimed, and also: "I want to educate our youth. I want to politicize them" (Velásquez, cited in Day 1997b: 170). Equipped with her acute social conscience and a PhD from Stanford University in Latin American and Chicano Literatures, in 1985 she was hired as a professor in the Modern Languages and Literatures Department at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, California.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, she started to develop a literary corpus that comprises both poetry and fiction which have appeared in journals and anthologies throughout the US as well as in Europe. Her literary accomplishments have led to her inclusion in numerous literary biographies such as *Chicano Writers: Second Series* (Lomelí and Shirley 1992), *A-Z Latino*

<sup>3</sup> Back in 1985, Gloria Velásquez was the first Chicana professor on Cal Poly's campus, a fact she takes pride in (Herzog 2017). She became Emeritus Faculty in 2017.

*Writers and Journalists* (Martinez Wood 2007); *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Latino Literature* (Kanellos 2008a), and, among others, *Latina and Latino Voices in Literature for Children and Teenagers* (Day 1997a). Besides that recognition, Velásquez has received many honors for her writings. In 1989, for example, she was the first Chicana to be inducted into the University of Northern Colorado's Hall of Fame; in 2001 she was honored by The Texas House of Representatives for her outstanding contributions to literature; in 2006 she was featured in the PBS Documentary, *La Raza de Colorado* (Olken 2005-2006); besides, the Special Collections at Stanford University has honored her literary production with "The Gloria Velásquez Papers", archiving her life as a writer and humanitarian.

Among Velásquez's poetic compositions, there stand out two bilingual collections of poetry: *I Used to Be a Superwoman* (1997 [1994]) and *Xicana on the Run* (2005). A song writer, too, Velásquez is the author of "Son in Vietnam", a song that appeared in the PBS Documentary, *Soldados: Chicanos in Vietnam* (Trujillo and Rhee 2003). In the field of prose, she must be especially commended for being the creator of the popular Roosevelt High School Series (henceforth, RHSS), which includes ten novels to date. With the first one in the series, *Juanita Fights the School Board* (1994), Velásquez expressed her desire to write a collection of novels where young adults of different ethnic backgrounds would find themselves represented. Following Jesse Jackson's 1984 proposal that ethnic minorities should form a "rainbow coalition", she opted to model her fictional High School as a multicultural setting where Latinxs of multiethnic ancestry have to battle with numerous problems: racism, sexism, harassment based on their sexual orientation or on their inter-racial relations, among many others. The last one so far, *Forgiving Moses* (2018), introduces one further bone of contention in terms of race relations in the US: the high rates of incarceration of men of color.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the contribution of Velásquez's RHSS as an educating tool within the framework of multicultural education. The study will take into account Velásquez's choice of problematic situations and the solutions her novels propose, which include individual responses as well as community-organized measures. Special attention will be given to some critiques the series has received. According to these, Velásquez's characters and the situations they find themselves in are steeped in stereotypes. This, it has been argued, further denigrates Latinxs and, consequently, cancels the book's potential capacity to inspire social change, which is the author's intention, as she herself has claimed. In contrast with this negative vision, my paper will prove that Velásquez's series offers empowering role models for teen Latinxs of various ethnic backgrounds and effectively calls for the neutralization of race, class and gender stereotypes. Before I embark upon the analysis of the series, a few things must be said about

the reality of US schools, multicultural education and multicultural literature for young adults.

More than 50 years after the Supreme Court's Brown decision (1954), there are still sociologists like Pedro Noguera who assert that US schools remain segregated on the basis of race and class (2003: 153). In fact, Noguera claims that "[r]ather than serving as the 'great equalizer' [...] schools in the United States more often have been sites where patterns of privilege and inequality are maintained and reproduced" (2003: 42). One of the terrible consequences of this segregation is that minority students develop "oppositional identities" that lead them to view schooling "as a form of forced assimilation" (Noguera 2003: 52). In order to avoid this outcome, it has been suggested that educators should teach students to "read the world" (Freire, cited in Noguera 2003: 16), and educators should also help kids acquire an understanding of the forces that maintain imbalances in wealth and power so that they can see their situation as an historical reality susceptible to transformation (Noguera 2003: 16). In other words, what these voices claim for is the implementation of "multicultural education", a concept "built upon the philosophical ideas of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity" and used to refer specifically to "a process that takes place at schools and other educational institutions" (Grant 2015: 83-84). The goals of multicultural education are these: to work toward structural equity; to develop positive self-concepts; to provide knowledge about the history, culture and contributions of the diverse groups that have shaped the history, politics, and culture of the US; to bring about change of current social issues involving race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, gender and disability; to teach critical-thinking skills and democratic decision making; finally, to build upon students' diverse learning styles (Grant 2015: 84).

Thus presented, multicultural education would be nothing to object to. However, the concept has been problematized and considered "haunted" by the "ontological and epistemological hierarchy that universalizes Eurocentric knowledges as the cutting edge of universal human progress while racialized and indigenous knowledges are marginalized" (Taylor and Hoehsmann 2011: 223). Because of this, Sneja Gunew has differentiated between "state multiculturalism", which is "often framed by a liberal pluralism where cultural differences are paraded as apolitical ethnic accessories celebrated in multicultural festivals of costumes, cooking, and concerts" (1997: 24), and "critical multiculturalism" (1997: 26), which can be "usefully invoked to counter hegemonic practices or appeals to nostalgic histories" (1997: 27). For this reason, I opt for "critical multiculturalism" as the framework for my analysis, as its goals (listed in Taylor and Hoehsmann 2011: 224) show a greater awareness of the dangers of incurring in Eurocentric practices. Among scholars, there is an agreement that "critical multiculturalism", as

a pedagogy, should heavily rely on reading “multicultural literature” in class, an activity that has been considered as “an exercise in developing social awareness and agency” (Torres-Padilla 2005: 23).

## 2. MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE FOR YOUNG ADULTS: “A LITERATURE OF INCLUSION”

Multicultural literature has been defined as literature that represents voices typically omitted from the traditional canon (Glazier and Seo 2005: 686-687), and “[a]s a component of multicultural education, [it] is often considered a powerful instructional tool for helping students develop understanding and respect for people of cultures different from their own as well as gain an appreciation of their own heritage” (Dressel 2005: 750). Its main goals are these: to help students to identify with their own culture in order to empower them and affirm their identities; to expose students to other cultures, thus promoting their inter/intra-cultural understanding and appreciation and challenging stereotypes; lastly, to open the dialogue on issues regarding diversity. Multicultural literature has also been defined as “a literature of inclusion” (Madigan 1993: 169) that deals with people of color, shows a world view that rejects the global centrality of any single culture or historical perspective, most immediately, Eurocentrism, and is not limited to including bits of other cultures, or adding a little color (Madigan 1993: 171). Besides, it implies “a social change agenda”, and it forces us “to reevaluate the whole system” (Madigan 1993: 171).

The positive consequences of using multicultural literature in the classroom are, according to many educators, numerous and far-reaching. It can help change the popular and simplistic perception of multicultural education as being a brief tour of foods and festivals (Godina 1996: 546). Thanks to it, students begin to see reflections of themselves in text, and this provides them with a familiar path for thinking critically (Godina 1996: 546). It gives voice to teens whose voices have gone unheard and whose lives are underrepresented or misrepresented; it challenges the single story, as it presents the complexity of racial and ethnic identity formation, and it helps readers to consider how the world looks to groups of people that have been marginalized and oppressed, raising awareness of the inequalities that those individuals face on a daily basis (Hughes-Hassell 2013: 215). Moreover, it can encourage and empower teens of color and indigenous people to take action and to show that they can overcome the constraints placed on them by the dominant culture (Hughes-Hassell 2013: 217). Kerri J. Richard and Gisela Ernst have reached similar conclusions, emphasizing, too, that multicultural literature can empower students to engage in social action, help avoid intercultural

misinterpretation or “cultural noise”, and examine the social norms and ethnic values that shape our views of the world (1993: 89).

The often lauded potential of multicultural literature does not obscure the fact that identifying quality multicultural literature is no easy task. A number of authors have issued guides or made recommendations on how to select quality texts. They all agree that quality multicultural literature should promote cultural understanding (Doll and Garrison 2013), where “culture” should refer to the social, economic and political systems of a society, and not to the so-called “5 Fs” (food, fashion, fiestas, folklore and famous people), which is a “touristic” approach that stresses the exotic and oversimplifies the complexity of the culture being “visited” (Begler 1998). Besides, quality multicultural literature should show insider perspectives and cultural pluralism (Doll and Garrison 2013); in other words, it should acknowledge that distinct differences exist within a cultural group and that it takes many books to create a multi-dimensional look at a culture, as it is not possible for one book to authentically represent all the elements of an inherently pluralistic culture (Naidoo and Dahlen 2013: 10).

Further reflection on the issue of authenticity (as carried out by Dresang 2013 and Madigan 1993), and, in particular, on authentic representations of the Latin experience in the US, agrees that quality multicultural literature should comply with these requisites: be based on substantiated fact, offer a faithful reproduction of features, and be true to the creator’s cultural personality. Authenticity likewise requires that the characters included in the texts and the themes dealt with are both positive and negative (Dresang 2013), as mature literature represents both; stereotypes, in any case, should be avoided by all possible means (Quiroa 2013). Thus, images of the *barrio* filled with crime and poverty may well be overstated; peasants riding *burros* and wearing *sombreros* are surely simplistic representations of Latin American countries; in terms of the presentation of gender, one should note the void of literature with LGBT themes and the abundance, by contrast, of stereotypical portrayals of Latinas whose figures are often rounded and stooped and who are frequently assigned the roles of nannies, housekeepers, storytellers, cooks or nurses. When it comes to the use of Spanish, it is advisable to avoid texts that include misspelled Spanish words, which are clearly intended for a monolingual English reader who will not notice, as well as concurrent translation of Spanish phrases into English, which results in unnecessary doublespeak for the bilingual. Finally, quality multicultural literature should deal with a variety of themes like, among others, family issues, untold history, important people, immigration and deportation, the specific challenges faced by protagonists with special needs, the implications of growing “mixed up” or of having a multiracial identity (Quiroa 2013; Chaudhri 2013).

The experience of being of mixed-race descent and its portrayal in multicultural literature call for a few extra considerations. In 1967 the US Supreme Court overturned the law banning interracial marriage between non-whites and whites. In 2000 the US Census allowed Americans to choose more than one of the five prescribed racial categories, and 6.8 million people opted for more than one race; the figure rose to 9 million in the 2010 census. Despite the increase of people who chose more than one race in the last two censuses, it has been pointed out that “[i]n the world of children’s and young adult (YA) literature, the inclusion of mixed-race experiences has been slow and sporadic” (Chaudhri 2013: 95). Educators entrusted with the responsibility of choosing materials that their students can relate to should try to bridge the gap between the growing reality of multi-racial Americans and their literary representation. Besides, special care should be applied when selecting texts that portray the experience of mixed-race people. According to Amina Chaudhri (2013), one should avoid books in which mixed-race characters live in unstable homes and rarely have two parents; the site of conflict is the fact of being mixed; the resolution comes from a solitary transformation process, not from changes in the attitudes of society; the character’s lack of group membership is a consequence of her being mixed, not of the rigidity of her environment; characters have to change to be accepted, as they are not able to enact change in their environment and remain true to themselves.

As already pointed out, the portrayal of mixed-race experiences in children’s and YA’s literature has not advanced at the pace that the US census has reflected the increase in multi-racial Americans: “While the identifying of various US ethnic literary canons has been taking place for some time now, their respective YA components continue to be disparaged by English Language Arts (ELA) teachers” (White 2015: 192). What is worse, Latinx teens, who are often of a very complex and varied ethnic and racial descent, “are routinely depicted in the mainstream discourse as ‘low achievers, high school dropouts, teen parents, or violent gang members, all stereotypes that paint a picture of an unassimilated population marked primarily by exclusion and difference’” (Hughes-Hassell 2013: 216). Despite this bleak picture, with few YA texts portraying ethnic minorities and mixed-race characters, and with many among the existing texts offering stereotypical images, there are critics who manage to see some silver linings: “Although Latino/a YA and children’s texts remain especially disproportionately underrepresented and somewhat invisible in the classroom and in publishing houses, the number of texts available in these categories is growing exponentially” (White 2015: 192). It is in this context of underrepresentation and/or misrepresentation that I want to look into the role played by Gloria Velásquez’s RHSS.

### 3. VELÁSQUEZ'S "RAINBOW SERIES"

Gloria Velásquez's RHSS presents its readers with a cast of ethnically diverse characters and addresses a number of poignant social issues: racial discrimination, for example, is dealt with in *Juanita Fights the School Board* (1994); interracial dating and growing mixed-up feature in *Ankiza* (2000); teen pregnancy affects Celia, a character in *Teen Angel* (2003); divorce and sexism are major themes in *Maya's Divided World* (1995a); domestic violence and alcoholism appear in *Rina's Family Secret* (1998); *Tyrone's Betrayal* (2006) delves into teen addiction to alcohol and school dropout; the challenges of living with grandparents who suffer from Alzheimer's disease complicate the main character's life in *Rudy's Memory Walk* (2009), while the problem of having one's parent in jail touches the protagonist of *Forgiving Moses* (2018); homosexuality, to cite one more thematic concern, is the main topic in both *Tommy Stands Alone* (1995b) and *Tommy Stands Tall* (2013). The author certainly showed determination when approaching this issue, as her first Tommy novel was met with incomprehension and bigotry. Indeed, it was banned in the Longmont school district, Colorado in 1997, and at Heritage Middle School, Colorado, while presenting her work, school authorities demanded that Velásquez refrain from mentioning the words "homosexual" or "gay". Despite opposition to non-heteronormative stories, she nonetheless gave Tommy Montoya one more chance to lead and shine in 2013.

Velásquez's resolve may well be related to the incident that inspired her to create the whole series. Back in the early 1990s, while watching an interview of Judy Blume in "The Joan Rivers Show", Velásquez noticed that none of Blume's successful YA novels were about adolescents of different ethnic backgrounds (Linn 2014), a realization that led her to a firm resolution: "Someone needs to write books that feature Chicanos, African-Americans, Puerto Ricans and I am going to do it" (Velásquez, quoted in Trom 2014). The author's intention was also given shape by the belief that she should follow Jesse Jackson's 1984 proposal that ethnic minorities form a "rainbow coalition": "I often will refer to the RHS Series as my 'Rainbow Series' since I modeled it after Jesse Jackson's concept of the rainbow coalition" (Velásquez 1994: 151).

The RHS novels have been praised by a number of critics who have acknowledged Velásquez's success in making her authorial intent a reality. Thus, the novels have been commended as "one of the first series to focus on a racially diverse cast of characters" (Trom 2014). For his part, Phillip Serrato (2015) considers Velásquez an innovative figure whose Latinx protagonists, who come from diverse economic backgrounds, tackle the same difficult issues that all adolescents face: Juanita, for example, is the daughter of farmworker parents, while Maya belongs in an upper-middle-class household. Serrato has lavished special praise on *Tommy*

*Stands Alone*: “a breakthrough novel that portrays the homophobia, parental rejection and suicidal tendencies that too many gay adolescents endure” (2015: 321). Nicolás Kanellos has emphasized Velásquez’s “outstanding sensitivity in interpreting teenage angst and social conditions” (2008b: 1218), and has deemed her “the Chicana Judy Blume” (2008b: 1218).

Like Trom (2014) and Serrato (2015), Frances Ann Day (1997b) has seen many merits in Velásquez’s RHS novels. In her own words, the series plays a fundamental role, because it is “crucial to feature people of color in literature for young readers” (1997b: 170). Besides, it incorporates important issues (racism, harassment, etc.), it presents “stories that are very readable, interesting, and well written”, its characters are “multiracial high school students”, and, generally speaking, the author is “adept at capturing teenage emotions and thought as well as the nuances of Latino/a culture” (1997b: 170).

Focusing on *Tommy Stands Alone* (1995b), Alexia Kosmider has pointed out that the book brings to the foreground “important issues that affect all people of Hispanic communities”, it “opens a sophisticated discourse for young people to investigate issues regarding sexual preference and racial prejudice”, and, “without being too obviously didactic for teens, [it] explores the intricate relationship between the need to belong and the need to assert one’s individualism by showing young readers how cultural constructs operate and by giving these readers ways to counter racial and sexual discrimination” (1997: 130). Kosmider has also praised the book because it “demonstrates that there are people in a community who may be of assistance and who can provide comfort and support” (1997: 131), specifying that Dr. Martinez, a character that plays a fundamental role in each novel, is a “crucial link to the Hispanic community” (1997: 130). All in all, Kosmider has celebrated that Velásquez’s novel “sensitively explores the frequently painful process of young teens becoming aware of their sexual preference” and that it “communicates an important message that tolerance and human dignity are essential ingredients for living in this world” (1997: 131).

Despite these laudatory reviews, other critics have shown a more negative attitude towards Velásquez’s series. Thus, for example, Janie Irene Cowan, in her 2011 doctoral dissertation *Becoming “American”: Race, Class, Gender, and Assimilation Ideologies in Young Adult Mexican Immigrant Fiction*, has chosen to study Velásquez’s first novel in the series, *Juanita Fights the School Board* (1994), in the second chapter of her study, which is entitled “‘Sellout’ or Surrender: Assimilation as Conformity” (211-235). Cowan differentiates four types of novels as regards their “ideology of assimilation”: first, novels that show assimilation as unattainable and immigrants as unmeltable “others”; second, novels that present assimilation as conformity to European-American society (and are therefore based

on the myth of the country's motto, "E pluribus unum", and the metaphor of the melting pot); third, novels that feature assimilation as adaptation and/or bicultural practice (in keeping with the metaphor of the salad bowl); lastly, texts that inscribe assimilation as hybridity, and put emphasis on the fluid and evolving nature of mixing and remixing cultures.

Cowan's rationale for placing Velásquez's first novel under the second group is based on the conviction that Juanita's story presents assimilation as being possible only through conformity to Anglo dictates, and that it shows rejection or minimization of Mexican culture as a necessary and/or desirable requisite for successful life in the US. Cowan argues that Velásquez's first book offers a superficial, "heroes and holidays" approach, to Mexican culture (2011: 216); gender roles follow patriarchal conventions; material gain is equated with and attributed to assimilation; racism is inevitable; besides, relationships with European Americans are deferential, immigrants being forced to play by the hegemonic rules. Cowan's reading of Juanita's story, indeed, seems to validate the novel's integration into the group of texts that show assimilation as conformity, and an immigrant's only way upward on the social scale as depending on "'sellout' or surrender". As a matter of fact, for Cowan, the character of Dr. Martinez "suggests conformity to European American society to be the desirable route for an immigrant" (2011: 214). Mexican immigrants' problems (*barrio* life, poverty, racism) are portrayed as insurmountable and immigrant characters as powerless and incapable of solving their problems (2011: 227), which is why they need the assistance of Anglo benefactors. In this sense, she cites Sam Turner, the Anglo attorney that gains readmission for Juanita but who is unable to challenge the racist behavior of her classmate (2011: 228), and also Dr. Martinez, who attributes her success to her Anglo husband (2011: 214). According to Cowan, the narrative supports the conviction that racist behavior should be ignored or endured, and the novel's adults believe Juanita should conform to Anglo expectations (2011: 229); Dr. Martinez thinks Juanita should develop strategies to deal with racism; the attorney stresses the importance that Juanita shows the school board she is getting "rehabilitated" and attending a therapist's sessions; Sheena, the racist bully that molests Juanita, is not reprimanded by school authorities; the burden of getting along is placed upon the shoulders of the marginalized character.

As Cowan sees it, Mexicans' powerlessness in the novel is reinforced by their being presented as volatile and aggressive; Juanita, for instance, is noted to be in "some sort of blind rage" (2011: 214). Moreover, there is a superficial approach to Mexican culture (2011: 217), which explains why little Spanish is used (2011: 223), Juanita is often called by an American name: "everyone at school calls me Johnny" (Velásquez 1994: 30), and Mexicans are addressed by means of denigrating epithets,

like “wetback” (Velásquez 1994: 32), that univocally present them all as illegal immigrants. On top of this, Mexican characters rarely incorporate Mexican culture in their daily lives (2011: 218). The shallow treatment of Mexican culture is made worse by the fact that Juanita looks down upon her Mexican heritage (Cowan 2011: 217) and Dr. Martinez expresses “no sense of responsibility to her people” (Cowan 2011: 217). In truth, says Cowan, Dr. Martinez may want to help Juanita, yet she does not address the institutional hegemony within the school system that continues to ignore the racist behavior of students, staff, and administration (2011: 218). Cowan is particularly critical of the character of Dr. Martinez, whom she sees as a successful immigrant, but one who shows “extreme conformity to European American culture” and keeps “no ties to [her] Mexican family” (2011: 232). In terms of socio-economic status, the novel gives only two options: first, Juanita’s family, who comes “from a large family struggling to find the American Dream” (Velásquez 1994: 120), thus impersonating the newly-arrived immigrants who have not integrated yet; and second, Dr. Martinez, who has achieved the eagerly-awaited integration, but only because she has opted for conformity and assimilation. As regards gender roles, the novel likewise fails to offer much respite: Juanita’s mother is a homemaker, and though Dr. Martinez “offers a more assertive option for women, yet even she is concerned with ‘politely’ addressing a European American male school board” (Cowan 2011: 233-234). Cowan rounds off her devastating criticism by concluding that “Velásquez’s novel underscores the fallacy of simplistically assuming that we can predict what – and how – an insider (or outsider) to a culture will write” (2011: 214).

At this point, one should recall the above mentioned admonition that “it is not possible for one book to authentically represent all elements of an inherently pluralistic culture” (Naidoo and Dahlen 2013: 10), as “it takes many books to create a multicultural look at a culture” (Yokota, quoted in Naidoo and Dahlen 2013: 10). Not bearing this in mind is, I think, Cowan’s main mistake in evaluating Velásquez’s first novel. Indeed, Cowan analyzes only one book of the RHSS despite the fact that she defended her dissertation in 2011, when eight of the books had already come out. In order to assess Velásquez’s work more adequately, it becomes necessary to take into account the ten novels in the series, and not simply the first one. In so doing, several aspects stand out: the diversity of characters and settings; the recurrent denunciations of racism and discrimination; the non-negligible use of Spanish, code-switching and syncretic words; the persistent denunciations of sexism and homophobia, as well as of women’s double discrimination. Moreover, when considered as a whole, the series succeeds in offering women plenty of positive roles, shows ample instances of the Latinx culture of resistance, and most importantly, in my view, of Latinxs’ capacity to establish multiple alliances

among different races, ages, social classes and sexual orientations. My analysis of Velásquez's series will show the novels' varied and complex portrayal of Latinxs after considering a number of issues, namely: (1) the characters' socio-economic backgrounds and their racial and ethnic ancestry; (2) school achievement; (3) the novels' different settings; (4) the treatment given to racism and discrimination; (5) the use of Spanish; (6) the topics of sexism and homophobia; finally, (7) Latinx resistance.

### 3.1. THE CHARACTERS' BACKGROUNDS

Velásquez's Latinxs come from different socio-economic groups. Some are first-generation immigrants, while others are second- or third-generation immigrants, as a few examples will prove. Maya's parents, for instance, are both liberal professionals and her family have been in the States for a long time. Her mother, in particular, is a university professor who teaches Ethnic Studies at Laguna University. Juanita's father, however, is a farmworker and her mother is a housewife, though sometimes she goes to the fields too; both are first-generation immigrants and their English is poor. In terms of racial ancestry, there is also great diversity. Many Latinxs are of Mexican descent, like Juanita, Maya, Dr. Martinez or Sonia (Maya's mother). Ankiza, for her part, is the daughter of an African-American father and a Latina mother with Native American ancestry, while her step-mother is a Chicana. The characters often establish inter-racial relationships. For example, Dr. Martinez, a Chicana, is married to an Anglo; Ankiza, who is African-American, Latina, and Native American, dates Hunter, an Anglo; after her divorce, Sonia, Maya's Chicana mother, starts dating Glenn (a High School Anglo teacher); Maya, a Chicana, dates Tyrone, who is African American; finally, the main characters' friends at high school are also from a wide variety of contexts: Puerto Rican, Jew, etc.

### 3.2. SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

At school, each character faces their own challenges, but there abound the Latinx teens that are presented as successful students. Maya, for once, is a high achiever at Roosevelt High School. Not only does she get very high grades, but she is also a great tennis player at the school's tennis team. Her story is not one of perfect success, though. Her difficulties to understand her parents' divorce lead her to hang out with new friends: *cholos* who smoke, go to bars, skip classes... By the end of the novel, she nonetheless manages to go back to her old friends and her usual academic achievements. Juanita's case is totally different. She is a hard-working student, but never as brilliant as her friend Maya. However, despite the difficulties she encounters (as, for example, expulsion from school

or having a low-income family), she makes good use of the opportunities she has and manages to pass all her tests and complete her assignments. Tommy Montoya, another class mate in Roosevelt High School, has his own worries too (discrimination, bullying...), but he makes considerable efforts to get high grades and, in the 2013 novel, realizing the importance of education, he becomes a tutor for a younger Latino student: “The only way we can get past fear and hatred is through education”, he states (Velásquez 2013: 89).

### 3.3. SETTINGS

Character diversity is not only shown through socio-economic status and school performance, but also through the characters' place of residence. Some of Velásquez's Latinxs live in the *barrio*, as for instance Juanita's family; others, like Maya's family, live in upper- or middle-class neighborhoods. Laguna, California, the fictional city where the series is set, is mostly an Anglo city, and Roosevelt High School is typically a white school, which gives rise to a number of problems Latinx and minority ethnic kids endure.

### 3.4. RACISM

The challenge of underrepresentation is frequently denounced in the series, as it triggers stereotyping of ethnic minorities and numerous cases of blatant racism. “Most people think we're only the gardeners or the cooks”, denounces Tommy (Velásquez 2013: 56). Immigrant bashing is unfortunately too common in this mostly white community of Laguna: “Why was it that immigrants were always blamed for society's problems?” (Velásquez 2013: 76). The picture the series draws does not fail to show the higher rates of school dropout, prison inmates, teen pregnancy and pesticide poisoning among the Hispanic population. However, the novels never argue that Latinxs are to be blamed for their problems; on the contrary, they denounce the institutionalized racism that prevents minorities from rising above society's negative stereotypes and low expectations.

### 3.5. USE OF SPANISH

As seen, Janie Cowan (2011) has denounced the first novel's scarce use of the Spanish language. This, however, needs to be qualified. Velásquez does use a few words and expressions in Spanish, most of which are mainly related to food, traditions and festivals (like *Cinco de Mayo*), family or personal relations (*abuelita*, *maestra*, *mamá*, *m'ija*), terms of endearment (*flaca*, *mocosa*...), names (Dr. Martinez, Mr. Villamil, Sonia, Sandra...), sayings like “No hay mal que por bien venga” (Velásquez

2000: 135), and, among other things, political slogans such as “¡Qué [sic] viva La Unión de Campesinos!” (Velásquez 1995a: 92). In most volumes there is a glossary where the words in Spanish are clarified for the English-speaking reader, though the words and expressions used in Spanish never compromise the understanding of the story. It should be underlined that the said words and expressions do not simply refer to food, as Cowan (2011) denounces in her diatribe against the first book in the series. As a matter of fact, Velásquez resorts to syncretism on a number of occasions, a frequent phenomenon in the Spanish used by US Latinxs, to refer to activities unrelated to food: “I really like Mr. Villamil because he never disrespects us when we use words like *plogear* and *wácbale*”, says Tommy (Velásquez 2013: 27). It is undeniable that Juanita strongly favors English over Spanish, seems to enjoy being called “Johnny” by her classmates, and admires Maya’s parents, who speak only English at home. As Cowan has put it, this might imply a connection between English proficiency and intelligence or social achievement. But it is no less true that Juanita, as Cowan herself acknowledges (2011: 224), also claims to “really love Spanish” and admits that in the future she would like to “be a Spanish teacher” (Velásquez 1994: 32). To this, one could add that Maya confesses most of her classes are “boring, except for Spanish and Art” (Velásquez 1995: 17), and Maya’s mom tells Juanita “how much she loves speaking Spanish” (Velásquez 1994: 95), all of which further complicates Cowan’s simplistic assumptions that Velásquez’s Latinx characters have given up on their Spanish in order to blindly and uncritically embrace English.

The character of Dr. Martinez adds further diversity to the language question by being a proud Chicana who is perfectly fluent in English and Spanish, and who actually code-switches from one to the other depending on what the circumstances demand. Eventually, Juanita learns to admire Dr. Martinez’s ability to communicate in English when it is required, and to speak “perfect Spanish” to her parents, who are practically monolingual (Velásquez 1994: 18). Apparently, most of the conversations in the novels take place in English, because that is how the narrator presents them to readers. But the narrator often warns them that a certain conversation is taking place in Spanish (for example between Dr. Martinez and Juanita’s parents). Therefore, the question of language use in the series is far more complex than Cowan has been able to show, and it features aspects like Juanita’s eventual admiration for Dr. Martinez’s bilingual competence that one book alone cannot possibly display.

### 3.6. SEXISM AND HOMOPHOBIA

One of the recommendations for choosing quality multicultural literature has it that selected books should show positive and negative aspects of any given

culture. The RHSS offers both. As regards negative aspects, it strongly denounces sexism in Hispanic communities (and in society at large). Thus, readers are told that Chicanas are often “raised to be voiceless”, and this, coupled with the fact that they are women of color, makes them “even more invisible” (Velásquez 2013: 98). Frequently, in their Hispanic circles, women are deemed responsible for divorce and it is considered that they should not get a PhD nor have a profession (that is the case of both Dr. Martinez and Sonia). With relative frequency, women are controlled by their fathers, boyfriends or partners (Juanita and her sister Celia, for example, are strictly monitored by their father); they are told to attend to their husbands’ needs (Dr. Martinez’s mother insists on that), and, given these circumstances, it is no wonder they often feel trapped in abusive relationships (Maya with Shane, and Dr. Martinez with Raúl, her first husband). Men, as is characteristic in patriarchal systems, are taught to fight over women (Hunter and Mark over Ankiza; Tyrone and Shane over Maya). Lastly, women endure double standards: Sonia, for instance, is worried that she is older than Glenn, her second partner, and is afraid of society’s “double standard with regard to aging” (Velásquez 2000: 130).

The novels’ representation of women’s condition does not only show the infamies Latina women are forced to endure. In fact, Velásquez’s novels also feature women of color who act as positive role models; female readers can feel empowered by them and find inspiration in their fictive “sisters”. Despite their communities’ admonitions against women’s liberation, both Dr. Martinez and Sonia divorced when they thought they should, obtained college degrees, and managed to have successful careers. Maya, too, extricates herself from an abusive relationship with Shane thanks to the support of three women: her mum, her “shrink” (Dr. Martinez) and her friend Juanita. Celia, for her part, overcomes the challenges of her teen pregnancy thanks to Dr. Martinez’s support, her mother, her sister Juanita and other girlfriends. Dr. Martinez, whose success, according to Cowan, was solely attributable to her being married to an Anglo, comes, in fact, from several other sources too. When devastated by her fertility problems and a series of miscarriages, she manages to overcome her mental issues thanks to her husband’s support, but also, to a large extent, to her friend’s constant support. Though, as seen, Cowan has accused Dr. Martinez of showing “no sense of responsibility to her people” (Cowan 2011: 217), the reality is that she is a pillar for her community, especially for the Latinx teens that resort to her as a mentor or a therapist, and who continue to pay her frequent visits even after their recovery. Undeniably, Juanita is admitted back in school thanks to Dr. Martinez, who found a legal advisor for the student. Like other female characters, Dr. Martínez has also endured sexism and racism, among other problems, but these have made her and

her Latina friends resilient survivors, not helpless victims. As she herself puts it when she thinks about Sonia's and Maya's recovery processes: "It would take some time and hard work, but Maya would survive. So would Sonia. After all, weren't women of color the greatest survivors?" (Velásquez 1995a: 71).

If there is a topic that makes Velásquez's series especially noteworthy it is that of homophobia and, more generally speaking, LGBT issues, since, as already discussed, the latter are to some extent underrepresented in YA literature. Just as sexism among Hispanics is often denounced in the novels, so is the homophobic attitude of many Latinxs and of society at large. LGBT-related themes dealt with in the books include the following: the violence endured by the members of the LGBT community (homophobic harassment, insults, murders...); high suicide rates; family rejection; fears to come out and the challenges of coming out; the impact of HIV/AIDS,<sup>4</sup> discrimination at school and teachers' lack of empathy (many educators fail to reprimand homophobic behavior, which is why the series calls for the need of sensitivity training for teachers); religious condemnation and Christian bigotry; the formation of "new" families; and, to cite but one more, legal bigotry, especially conspicuous in the banning of same-sex marriage by Proposition 8 (passed in California in 2008). As with sexism, though, Velásquez does not stop at presenting LGBT-related themes of a negative nature, but moves on to offer a way out of the homophobic trap. On the one hand, she does so by introducing gay characters with central roles: most notably, Tommy Montoya, the protagonist of the 1995b and the 2013 books, but also Frank's brother (Bryan), who is HIV positive, and Dr. Martinez's deceased brother (Andy), a young gay man who did not dare to come out, and then died in a car accident which, his sister suspects, might have actually been a suicide intended to end his suffering. Most importantly, the series shows that characters discriminated against on account of their sexual orientation can fight for their rights, and they can choose from a number of strategies of resistance which include both individual tactics and collective approaches.

### 3.7. STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

Not only do the Tommy books show ways of contesting discrimination and bigotry, but the other novels in the series present instances of various strategies of

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<sup>4</sup> Gross *et al.* argue that there has been an increase in the number of young lives affected by HIV/AIDS (2008: 398), which demonstrates that teens' need for information related to the virus infection persists. However, they state that "[f]rom the very beginning of the AIDS epidemic, it has been difficult to provide information about HIV/AIDS to young people" (2008: 399). Because of this, they argue that fiction should be called to play a role in transmitting accurate information. Velásquez's *Tommy Stands Alone* (1995b) appears among the YA novels they list as showing a concern with HIV/AIDS and, to some extent, performing that role (Gross *et al.* 2008: 415).

resistance. *Maya's Divided World* (1995a), in particular, offers numerous examples of Latinx resistance to segregation and discrimination. The novel, indeed, tackles some of the specific problems that migrant workers are confronted with, as, for example, housing problems and pesticide poisoning. Many of their strategies of resistance rely on the support of groups such as the United Farmworkers labor union and MEChA.<sup>5</sup> This novel, like others, often brings to mind the outstanding work carried out by the leaders of the Chicano Movement, namely César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, as well as some of their most successful stratagems, like the 1965 Grapes boycott. The concept of Aztlán, that mythical land that is home to the Mexican-American, is called forth in an attempt to ground the Hispanic community, to remind it of its belonging in North America, despite the bigots' insistence that all Latinxs are aliens. Apart from historical groups and activists, the novels also stress the importance of each individual's contribution to the cause of social justice, regardless of the person's notoriety. Thus, both Sonia (Maya's mother) and Dr. Martinez are shown to be long-term activists who have found countless ways of fighting for justice. Sonia's activism is materialized through her work as an Ethnic Studies professor who is keen to help students from low-income families by, for instance, giving them extra classes. For her part, Dr. Martinez, as a psychologist, uses her position to help Latinx teens without economic resources: she volunteers her time to counsel them, works as their therapist, sometimes for free, or helps them find proper legal advice. Of particular salience is the fact that Latinxs fighting to end discrimination are not simply concerned with conflicts or injustices they are directly affected by; on the contrary, they are fast to involve themselves in multiple fights, and to show solidarity with whoever finds themselves discriminated against.

#### 4. THE ULTIMATE STRATEGY OF RESISTANCE: "THE RAINBOW COALITION"

Despite Janie Cowan's assertion that the Latinx characters in *Juanita Fights the School Board* (1994) are powerless and incapable of solving their problems, and that they capitulate in front of the alleged superiority of the Anglo characters, thus impersonating sellout and surrender, my analysis has proved that, when the whole RHSS is considered, there is no room for such a negative piece of criticism. On the contrary, it is my contention that Velásquez's YA novels can be rightfully said to feature countless characters that are neither defenseless nor unable to pull themselves up. As seen, Latina characters show ample examples of resilience, and their strength is based both on their individual resolve to fight injustice and fence for themselves, and in their capacity for sorority and to form coalitions of different

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5 MEChA is the acronym for Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlán. It unites Chicax students and its goal is to enhance the development of La Raza through education.

kinds. It is true that Dr. Martinez, for instance, relies heavily on her Anglo husband, but she counts on her Chicana friends with as much confidence; besides, she acts as a central pillar for the Latinx community, volunteering her job to help the young and the needy. Similarly, Tommy overcomes the difficulties of being a gay youth in a homophobic environment by plucking up courage and deciding to look the beast in the eye; but, even more importantly, by relying on others, as when he sets up the GSA (Gay and Straight Alliance) Club at school, and by generously giving back to the community the support he himself has received, which results in his becoming a tutor for a Mexican kid who barely speaks English.

Quality multicultural literature requires that books cover a variety of topics, that they show cultural understanding, an insider perspective, and authenticity; they should also avoid stereotypes and offer not only positive characters and themes, but also negative ones. All of these characteristics are present in Velásquez's RHSS when the whole collection is taken into consideration. To prove this point further, I will insist on the fact that Latinx characters do not always triumph over all the difficulties and challenges they are confronted with. Dr. Martinez, for example, never overcomes a sense of frustration every time she recalls her brother's death and fears that the car crash that took his life might well have been a suicide. She has to live with the awareness that she failed her brother, as she was unable to help him come out of the closet. Her own fertility issues are left unresolved, and her desire to become a mother is never realized. Tommy, for his part, is given an award for setting up the GSA Club and in recognition of his contribution to the normalization of non-heteronormative choices at school. He also succeeds in gradually moving his father to discard some of his homophobic ideas. But this is only a partial advance, as at the end of the second book Tommy's dad does not fully accept his son's sexual preference, and therefore refuses to attend the Awards banquet where his son's activism in favor of gay rights will be recognized (Velásquez 2013: 106). On top of that, Tommy also dismally fails to persuade Albert, another gay student who is bullied at school for his sexual orientation, to come out. In fact, by the end of the 2013 book, Albert is still in denial, pretending he is not gay, unable to join the GSA group, and he even accepts his mum's advice that he visit a shrink who will allegedly cure his "illness", circumstances which, for Tommy, amount to a dismal failure on his own part.

Especially noteworthy in the series is the fact that Velásquez's Latinxs deploy different strategies of resistance, both personal and collective, and that all forms of discrimination are systematically confronted, contrary to Cowan's critique that racism is accepted as inevitable. In the case of homophobia, for instance, characters who endure this form of discrimination rely on friends and colleagues for support, as when Albert calls Tommy for help (Velásquez 2013: 56-57). On other occasions,

it is organizations that back them up. In *Tommy Stands Tall* (2013), for instance, they resort to the GSA Club, to PFLAG (Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays), to LGBT at University, and to the American Psychological Association. The intervention of individuals and collectives may not magically solve all conflicts, as already said, but they do bring about important changes. At Roosevelt High School, for once, there will be sensitivity training for teachers, who will also have to attend a conference on Teaching Tolerance; besides, the school authorities agree to modify the anti-discrimination school policy to include sexual orientation, an issue about which the school code had said nothing until Tommy started his crusade.

Hate speech is another problematic reality the Roosevelt High School community has to face. In the past, the school's attitude had been deplorable, but in *Ankiza* (2000), some of the Latinx teens, led by Rina, decide that it is high time that the situation changed: "Rina, who knows how uncaring the school administration has been toward students of color, tells Mr. Marshall [the principal], something better be done about this or else!" (79). As in other novels of the series, the main characters resort to associations that can help them in their endeavor. In *Ankiza*, in particular, the kids turn to both MEChA (Velásquez 2000: 30) and NAACP (Velásquez 2000: 81). Some individuals also volunteer to get into the fray, as for instance Ankiza's father, who likewise recognizes the need to count on larger collectives as NAACP: "I'm calling the school principal first thing in the morning. And I'm going to demand an investigation as well as a formal apology in writing. I'm also going to contact the local chapter of the NAACP" (Velásquez 2000: 81). Similarly, Sonia threatens to call the NAACP (Velásquez 2000: 95), and she also organizes a cultural diversity panel at school with three speakers: Sam Turner, a white Civil Rights lawyer, Connie Koger, the African-American author of *Rainbow Voices*, a documentary that celebrates cultural diversity (Velásquez 2000: 103), and Sonia herself, in her capacity as a Chicana professor of Ethnic Studies.

Regardless of what biased criticism of the series may state, the truth remains that racism is always confronted in it, even if not systematically eradicated. If the latter were to happen, in fact, the novels would appear to be naïve and unrealistic, and they would not meet the requirements for quality multicultural literature. What is worth praising here is that the series acknowledges racism as a monstrous beast against which there are no easy or ready-made solutions. Each new attack of the beast will have to be fiercely fought against, and the fight will have to go on for decades to come. As Sam Turner sadly, but realistically, admits in *Ankiza*: "The school administration will most likely try to give you the run-around, try to sweep the racial incident under the rug. They tried to do this with Juanita" (Velásquez 2000: 94). In other words, racist episodes have occurred in the past and will go on taking place, but that should not deter anyone from combating them each and every time.

Indeed, the series transmits the belief that one of the keys to eventual success will be Latinx teens' untiring perseverance. Even more importantly, that dogged determination of theirs will have to go hand in hand with their capacity to not base their resistance exclusively on identity politics, but to resort, instead, to multiple alliances that defy essentialized identities. The examples, in the series, of those coalitions are manifold. The Gay Straight Alliance Club of *Tommy Stands Tall* (2013) illustrates gay and straight cooperation. Chicanxs and African Americans are shown to share a common past of brutal racist treatment: "some Chicanos, like African-Americans, were also lynched during the nineteenth century" (Velásquez 2000: 106), so it makes much sense to have Connie Koger, the African American director of *Rainbow Voices*, invited to the school panel that will discuss racial intolerance against Latinxs (Velásquez 2000: 103). Jews and Gentiles are likewise willing to come together to confront racism; thus, for example, Marsea Schaller, the Jewish dean of students, is quick to side by the teens that are being the butt of hate speech at school, and she finds it easy to empathize with them because of the long history of discrimination her own people have endured: "how disturbed I am by the racial incident that happened at our school. [...] I know what it feels like to be attacked for who I am" (Velásquez 2000: 88). The alliance between the working class and the middle class is symbolically represented through the friendship between Maya, a middle-class student and the daughter of parents with liberal professions, and Juanita, whose parents are first-generation immigrants with no education and low-income jobs in the fields. Whites and people of color are also shown to have no trouble in working together towards the common good and a fairer society. Thus, Sam Turner, Juanita's Anglo lawyer, is said to be working for the NAACP to revise "Roosevelt's racial harassment policy so that it will include a step-by-step procedure on how to respond to acts of intolerance" (Velásquez 2000: 135); Frank, Dr. Martinez's white husband, supports his wife in her activism and behaves as a cooperative partner who does not see household chores as being beneath his masculine ego; Glenn, Sonia's Caucasian partner, is another case in point, just as Turner, Ankiza's white boyfriend.

To cite but one more example of collaboration between representatives of heterogeneous identities, I will conclude by referring once more to the bond between Juanita and Sam Turner. Juanita, whose character spawned the series, is a young Chicana woman who meets the Anglo attorney Sam Turner on her live journey. The distance between them is apparently too large to be bridged. Indeed, in terms of race, ethnicity, immigrant status, education, social class or sex they stand on opposite ends. Velásquez's books, however, construct a universe where such separated identities can come together to help one another. They can form that "rainbow coalition" Jesse Jackson called for at the Democratic

National Convention on July 18, 1984, in which he invited Arab Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, the youth, disabled veterans, small farmers, lesbians and gays to join with African Americans and Jewish Americans for political purpose. In my view, the success in building up a fictive world where such a rainbow coalition is possible, though not unrealistically all-powerful, is ultimately what I see as Velásquez's major contribution to YA multicultural literature, and the proof that her novels offer quality multicultural reading.

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