

School Fights: Resisting Oppression in the Classroom in Gloria Velásquez's Latina/o Young Adult Novel *Juanita Fights the School Board*

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Abstract There is a long history of discrimination and marginalization of Chicanas/Latinas in the classroom due to xenophobia, language barriers, citizenship status, oversexualization, and much more. Through an analysis of Gloria Velasquez's (*Juanita Fights the School Board*, Piñata Books, Houston, 1995) I seek to demonstrate the ways in which Chicanas/Latinas have been resisting the oppressions they experience in the classroom by creating alternative ways of knowing. In Velasquez's narrative, Juanita is expelled for fighting and must appear before the school board to make a case for why she should be allowed to return to school. As the novel progresses, it is revealed that the policies, teachers, and administrators of Roosevelt High School are biased against students of color. By way of *Juanita Fights the School Board*, I introduce my concept of "conocimiento narratives" as a way to read stories like these as having the potential for healing in the lives of Chicanas/Latinas. Juanita uses the knowledges imparted by her family, her communities, and her culture to challenge and transform the discrimination she experiences at school.

Keywords Chicana · Latinx · Conocimiento · Conocimiento narratives · Gloria Anzaldúa · Latinx children's literature

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The 2013 report “Making Education Work for Latinas in the U.S.,” conducted by the Civil Rights Project, affirms that Latinas face many obstacles in their pursuit of education. Providing case studies of six young Latinas, the report illustrates the many barriers they face while attempting to graduate from high school and attend college: poverty, teen pregnancy, undocumented status, and community violence. Lead researcher Patricia Gándara explains that negative stereotypes about Latinas make it difficult for them to succeed academically. While the report makes clear that education is important to the families of these young Latinas, Gándara points to the tensions between the desire to pursue higher education and the real lived burdens young Latinas carry. In *The Latino Education Crisis* Gándara and Frances Contreras (2009) explain that though immigrants want to pursue the “American Dream,” they find that their access to higher education is compromised:

The prevailing mythology is that the society is open and welcoming of all who are willing to work hard and play by the rules. But of course, Americans have ironically never been very welcoming of immigrants, and racial and ethnic tensions have not been eradicated from this nation. [...] Moreover, recent anti-immigrant sentiment, which has led to increased sanctions on undocumented workers and attempts to withhold basic services, may further slow the social and economic integration of the children of immigrants who are born in the United States. (p. 51)

The point is that systemic oppression and discrimination make access to education difficult for immigrants, as the six Latinas discussed in the Civil Rights Project report discovered. In order to obtain an education, they had to fight against systemic and institutional violence. While the Civil Rights Project report makes clear the myriad obstacles that young Latinas must overcome in order to succeed academically, there is still no clear understanding of how these women might challenge oppression in the classroom on an individual level. By focusing on Gloria Velásquez's (1995) *Juanita Fights the School Board*, however, I will show that Juanita, though criminalized by her teachers and the school board, utilizes alternative knowledges, such as *conocimiento*, to challenge prevailing oppressive epistemologies. Juanita's expulsion from school in the story is complicated by the patriarchal violence she experiences at home. I have chosen to analyze this young adult novel precisely because Juanita has to deal with multiple oppressions on various fronts. By addressing the barriers Juanita faces at home and at school I will honor her complicated and intersectional identity.

Following in the tradition of Chicana feminism, I center young Chicanas/Latinas' lived experiences as sources of knowledge with the potential to challenge and transform the oppression they face. In “Learning and Living Pedagogies of the Home: The Mestiza Consciousness of Chicana Students,” Dolores Delgado Bernal (2010) observes that “Chicana feminist pedagogies refers to culturally specific ways of organizing teaching and learning in informal sites such as the home—ways that embrace Chicana and *Mexicana* ways of knowing and extend beyond formal

schooling” (p. 624). “Pedagogies of the home,” to use Bernal’s words, challenge many stereotypes and demeaning perceptions of Chicana/Latinas students that deem them “racially inferior, culturally backward, and socially undesirable” (2010, p. 7). Similarly, Tara J. Yosso (2006) uses “critical race counterstories” to highlight the experiences of Chicana/o students in contrast to majoritarian stories of education that assume “all students enjoy access to the same education opportunities and conditions [...]” (p. 4).

Taking my cue from scholarship intersecting Chicana feminism and education, like that of Bernal and Yosso, I introduce “conocimiento narratives” as a way to examine the use of alternative knowledges evident in realist fiction within Latina/o children’s and young adult literature. In “Now let us shift... the path of conocimiento... inner work, public acts” Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) uses her personal experience to theorize “conocimiento” as a process with seven stages¹ that may lead one into a space where one can use personal knowledges to challenge oppressive epistemologies. In this context, I utilize “conocimiento narratives” as a tool to trace how the young Chicana protagonist navigates through the discrimination she faces at school and uses her personal knowledges, like her friendships, community resources, cultural practices, and language to challenge these discriminatory narratives. In other words, oppressive dominant narratives and dominant ways of knowing can be challenged and transformed so that those previously oppressed may find empowerment. Conocimiento narratives are significant because they can potentially serve as a bridge between the text and young Chicana/Latina readers and in this way provide a space, even if only a literary space, where these students can see their struggles and themselves represented. Reading realist fiction in Latina/o children’s and young adult literature through the lens of conocimiento narratives further presents the opportunity to discuss the ways Latina/o children can process institutional racism, patriarchal violence, and xenophobia, for example. In other words, conocimiento narratives can serve as a classroom tool for teaching social justice issues and possibly create space for Latina/o children to participate in a transformative healing process. Reading *Juanita Fights the School Board* as a conocimiento narrative is an opportunity to center the ways Latina students may use alternative knowledges to challenge the oppression they may experience in their own classrooms.

¹ The seven stages of conocimiento include el arrebato (a rupture), nepantla (an in between space), the Coatlicue state (despair), the call (compromise), putting Coyolxauhqui together (putting the pieces together), the blow up (the clash of realities), and finally shifting realities. Anzaldúa explains that these stages are not linear but are instead a fluid process.

“They Made it Sound Like I’m a Criminal”: Juanita Fights the School Board

Juanita Fights the School Board (Velásquez 1995), the first book of Velásquez’s “Roosevelt High School”² series, is set in the fictional city of Laguna, California, a city clearly divided by race and class, where downtown and the surrounding suburbs are predominantly affluent white neighborhoods and the outskirts of the city are low income housing apartments where the majority of the students of color live. Roosevelt High is a predominantly white high school where the few students of color in the school often face discrimination from the student body and the teachers. In *Juanita Fights the School Board*, Juanita, a first generation Mexican–American student of immigrant parents, challenges the school board that suspends her for fighting Sheena, a white classmate. The chapters are divided between Juanita’s perspective and that of Ms. Martinez, a Chicana community psychologist who serves as a mentor throughout the series. As the story continues it is revealed that Juanita is unjustly expelled from school for fighting while Sheena does not suffer any consequences. As it turns out, Sheena has a reputation for discriminating against the students of color on campus and the school administration continues to ignore her abusive behavior. However, when Sheena accuses Juanita of starting the fight the white teachers support her claim and Juanita is immediately expelled. Under the direction of Ms. Martinez, Juanita gets a lawyer, Sam, a white man with a track record as a civil rights activist during the 1960 s. It is Sam who ultimately gets Juanita re-enrolled in school by proving that Roosevelt High has a history of discrimination and by promising that Juanita will be “rehabilitated.” In this section, I emphasize the ways Juanita is racially profiled and criminalized by her teachers, making it difficult for her to succeed academically. I read Juanita’s use of the resources around her, including her friends and family, as part of a *conocimiento* process that allows her to make sense of her expulsion and challenge the discrimination she experiences.

In “Schools, Prisons, and Social Implications of Punishment: Rethinking Disciplinary Practices” Pedro Noguera (2008) argues that schools are smaller representations of the ways society functions. Students are taught to follow order and structure so that they may be productive citizens in the adult world. Noguera further explains that through punishment, schools usually also emulate the prejudices and discriminations visible in society. That is, students are taught that there are consequences for disobeying rules just as there are legal consequences for breaking laws. Noguera (2008) observes:

² There are a total of 9 books in this series: *Maya’s Divided World* (1995) details divorce in the Latino community. *Tommy Stands Alone* (1995) narrates the coming-out process for Tommy amidst homophobia at home and school. *Rina’s Family Secret* (1996) speaks to the issue of domestic violence. *Ankiza* (2000) highlights the issues of inter-racial dating. *Teen Angel* (2003) speaks to the issue of teen pregnancy. *Tyrone’s Betrayal* (2006) charts alcoholism in the family. *Rudy’s Memory Walk* (2009) focuses on the elderly and Alzheimer’s disease. *Tommy Stands Tall* (2013) follows Tommy as he tries to help another queer youth. This series was unique in the late ’90s and early 2000 s because it was the first of its kind in mainstream children’s literature and in Latinx children’s and young adult literature to address diversity and center the experiences of diverse characters.

For more serious infractions—fighting, defiance, cutting class—removal from the classroom or removal from the school through suspension or even expulsion serve as standard forms of punishment employed by schools throughout the United States. Increasingly, behavior that violates the law (for example, drug use or drug trafficking, assault against a teacher or another student) results in intervention by law enforcement and school sanctions. (p. 115)

The biased “zero-tolerance” policies set in place at Roosevelt High are the reason that Juanita is expelled for an entire year after getting caught fighting with Sheena (Velásquez, 1995, p. 7). Juanita’s violent behavior must be isolated and removed for the safety of other students. However, one of the major issues in Velásquez’s novel is that Sheena does not receive the same punishment for her violent behavior, which in turn forces the school board to recognize its own discriminatory biases and policies. As Noguera (2008) explains: “Consistent with the way we approach crime in society, the assumption is that safety and order can be achieved by removing the ‘bad’ individuals and keeping them away from others who are presumed to be ‘good’ and law abiding” (p. 115). In this way, by removing Juanita from the school, and not Sheena, the school board marks Juanita as the “bad” student. In doing so, Roosevelt High also criminalizes her. Lisa Marie Cacho (2012) explains in her monograph, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*, that “To be stereotyped as a criminal is to be misrecognized as someone who committed a crime, but to be criminalized is to be prevented from being law-abiding” (p. 4). Even though Juanita is not the one that started the fight, she is punished because her teachers and the school board do not expect her, and in general students of color, to be law-abiding. In other words, Juanita’s ethnicity and socioeconomic status are enough evidence for the teachers and the school board to decide that Juanita broke school rules and deserves to be expelled. Marcos Pizarro (2005) explains in *Chicanas and Chicanos in School: Racial Profiling, Identity Battles, and Empowerment* that profiling has lasting negative effects on students. “Just as the police often use racial profiles to determine who are potential criminals and who does not need to be pulled over,” he explains, “teachers use racial profiles to determine who will and will not benefit from opportunities to excel in school” (Pizarro, 2005, p. 240). By criminalizing and expelling Juanita, her teachers and the school board take away educational opportunities.

The expulsion hearing scene in the novel demonstrates how Juanita is criminalized as a way to justify her expulsion. In order to prove that she has a streak of violent behaviors, Mr. Robbins, the school board’s attorney, brings out teachers as witnesses to corroborate his statements and mentions other instances where Juanita has been aggressive towards other students. He says to Dr. Larson, the head of the school board, “I am attempting to show that Juanita Chávez had a pattern of violent behavior that led to this battery” (Velásquez, 1995, p. 81). Mr. Robbins and his witnesses continue to accuse Juanita of being in a “blind rage” and of being “out of control” the day she and Sheena fought (Velásquez, 1995, pp. 82–83). Throughout the novel, it is clear that Juanita regrets getting into the fight with Sheena and that the fight is completely uncharacteristic. Juanita is punished

and is forced to stay home where she is expected to clean and take care of her younger siblings when she would rather be at school learning and with her friends. Sheena, remember, has not been punished nor is accused of having a violent pattern of behavior, despite the fact that other students are aware of Sheena's constant racist remarks. The punishment imposed on Juanita very much reflects the way society targets and criminalizes poor communities of color. As Noguera (2008) explains: "Not surprisingly, those most frequently targeted for punishment in school often look—in terms of race, gender, and socioeconomic status—a lot like smaller versions of the adults who are most likely to be targeted for incarceration in society" (p. 115). Unfortunately, as Noguera points out, students of color are disciplined at a rate that reflects that ways that adults of color are treated in society. What was meant to be an informal hearing of Juanita's expulsion develops into a sorts of legal court trial, one that had already assumed Juanita's culpability. In response, Sam Turner and Ms. Martinez are determined to make Juanita appear rehabilitated by asking that she attend counseling and keep up with her school work, "because if we can show the school board that Juanita is getting rehabilitated, that will help our case. You know how *gringos* think. They love it when people are rehabilitated" (Velásquez, 1995, p. 61). Sam Turner's comment is another example of the ways conversations around racism in schools continue to be dismissed. Rather than address the institutional racism present at Roosevelt High, it appears to be easier to appease the system by rehabilitating Juanita from her "violent behavior."

Mirroring the case studies published in the Civil Rights Project, Juanita has many economic, cultural, and societal barriers to overcome in order to succeed in school. While the central plot point of *Juanita Fights the School Board* is that Juanita's expulsion is due to the discrimination students of color face at Roosevelt High, the novel also reveals that there are larger systemic issues at play which make it significantly challenging for someone like Juanita to complete high school. Juanita better understands these larger oppressions while at the expulsion hearing where Mr. Robbins builds a case against her character. Juanita tells Ms. Martinez, "They made it sound like I'm a criminal or something. And they blamed me for everything, not Sheena" (Velásquez, 1995, p. 87). In fact, Juanita is being criminalized because dangerous, and very common, misconceptions are being made about her class background, her ethnicity, and her immigrant status. In the novel, the school board does not blatantly make these accusations; however, their determination to expel the "bad" student for the protection of the other students stems from these prejudices. Noguera (2008) explains that "Schools typically justify using removal through suspension or expulsion by arguing that such practices are necessary to maintain an orderly learning environment for others. The typical rationale given for such practices is that by sorting out the 'bad apples,' others will be able to learn" (p. 121). In this way, Juanita needs to be removed so that order can be maintained at Roosevelt High. Because Juanita is a "bad apple" she is not read as capable, or worthy, of participating in this particular educational system. It is made painfully evident throughout the hearing that Sheena's racist comments do not mark her as a "bad apple" and it is for this reason that she can remain in school. The school board does not recognize racial slurs, or even racism, as a violent act. Noguera further explains that removing students from school "requires that we accept the fact that

not all students will succeed and that some students must be deemed expendable so that others can be saved” (2008, p. 122). In this case, the teachers at Roosevelt High decide Juanita is expendable while Sheena “can be saved.” The teachers’ prejudices, while maybe not intentional, are grounded in a much larger oppressive system that condones white supremacy and reinforces racism.

Throughout the novel it is clear that Juanita is emotionally distressed by her expulsion. The first chapter alone focuses on the way she suffers from low self-esteem because of her unfair expulsion. She expresses her embarrassment: “I can feel everyone stare at me. I hate that” (Velásquez, 1995, p. 7). In reference to Maya, her best friend (also Mexican–American, the daughter of a Chicana professor and Chicano engineer), and living in the affluent part of town, Juanita says, “She’s so smart, not dumb like me. And her parents are smart, too. I wish my ‘Amá and ‘Apá were more like them. I have to talk to them in Spanish all the time” (Velásquez, 1995, p. 9). The chapter concludes with, “Maybe I’m just another dumb Mexican, like the white kids call us. I turn my radio on and cry myself to sleep” (Velásquez, 1995, p. 10). It is important to understand Juanita’s low self-esteem and self-hatred as a symptom of the discrimination she, and other Mexicans/Mexican–Americans, face in society. She does not want others to look at her because, in a school that is predominantly white, being singled out makes her vulnerable to more violence. In referencing California’s education system, Pizarro (2005) explains that Chicana/o students are “painfully aware” of the negative stereotypes their classmates and their teachers believe to be true about them and their community. Pizarro observes that “looking Mexican” is often associated with being undocumented, “with language difficulties, disinterest in school, and interest in working with one’s hands. Still others associate looking ‘Mexican’ with being a troublemaker, a gangbanger, or a class clown [...] but it is rare that looking ‘Mexican’ is associated with having the intelligence and determination to succeed in school” (2005, p. 243). Juanita, like the students in Pizarro’s study, knows that her white peers and white teachers think negatively of her and the expulsion only reaffirms that for her. Furthermore, it is important to remember that Juanita’s comparison to Maya emerges because of the expulsion. Pizarro explains that “When students are confronted with the fact that they are disempowered along a certain axis of social interaction, they are forced to address this disempowerment in their identity formation” (2005, p. 245). In other words, Juanita’s intersectional identity (as a Mexican–American young woman) is affected by the expulsion which forces her to make sense of what the punishment reveals about her identity. Because Maya and her parents seem to steer away from the “looking Mexican” stereotype, Juanita wishes to be like them. Maya and her family can assimilate into dominant society because of their education, citizenship status, and ability to speak English fluently. Maya’s family’s ability to assimilate is a reason that, according to Juanita, speaking English is recognized as a marker of intelligence. Juanita and her family do not easily blend into the dominant narrative because their immigrant experiences, their class status, and their inability to speak English further marginalizes them. If one takes into account the external forces working against Juanita, and other young Latinas for that matter, it is no surprise that Juanita suffers from low self-esteem and even depression. In *The Latino Education Crisis* Gándara and Contreras (2009) argue that depression can be a

significant barrier in Latinas' pursuit of education. They also say that "depression may develop over time as a realistic response to the harsh conditions and stress, in part due to racism, that this population faces in the United States" (Gándara and Contreras, 2009, p. 77). The story of Juanita's expulsion tracks perfectly with Pizarro's (2005) and Gándara and Contreras's (2009) research.

Juanita's comparison to Maya and her family is an example of how the barriers she experiences at school overlap with the difficulties she experiences at home. The low self-esteem and depression arising because of the expulsion can be read as the beginning of Juanita's *conocimiento* process. The expulsion serves as "el arrebato" that shakes her present knowledge of her identity. Anzaldúa (2002) attests that "Cada arrebataada (snatching) turns your world upside down and crack the walls of your reality, resulting in a great sense of loss, grief [...] As you move from past presuppositions and frames of reference, letting go of former positions, you feel like an orphan, abandoned by all that's familiar" (p. 547). In other words, *el arrebato* challenges one's way of looking at the self and the world. Without the comfort of said knowledges, one is thrust into despair. Juanita's expulsion as an *arrebato* forces her to take stock of the knowledges she held to be true. Racism and discrimination against students of color at Roosevelt High and the various barriers she experiences at home are present even before Juanita is expelled. The present knowledge available to Juanita dictates that racism and discrimination are the ways students of color are treated at Roosevelt High and that those are the norms she is expected to follow. These same knowledges criminalize Juanita, and other students like her, and are the ones that tell her she is inferior. The *arrebato* is what allows Juanita to begin questioning these oppressive knowledges and create alternative ways of knowing. Juanita has a difficult time with her expulsion and spends a lot of time in what Anzaldúa (2002) describes as the "Coatlicue State," "Where overwhelmed by the chaos caused by living between stories, you break down, descend into the third space, the Coatlicue depths of despair, self-loathing, and hopelessness" (p. 544). It is during this stage that Juanita compares herself to others and contends with the possibility that maybe she is "another dumb Mexican" (Velásquez, 1995, p. 10). The despair she feels in the Coatlicue state further exacerbates the tension she feels about her home life.

Expulsion has forced Juanita to spend more time at home and take up more family responsibilities, like taking care of her younger siblings. Being home more exposes her to her father's strictness. Mr. Chávez does not allow Juanita to date, go out to parties, talk to boys, or wear short skirts. Oftentimes, Juanita dismisses his behavior as having to do with traditional gender expectations in Mexico. Regardless, she is still emotionally impacted by her father's refusal to let her participate in seemingly mundane activities typical of American teenage experience, like going a dance. After not being allowed to go to the Valentine's Day dance, Juanita states, "Sometimes I hate 'Apá. He makes me so mad. It's not fair, the way he is. Why is he so strict? I wish I were dead. Sometimes I hate my whole life. I cry myself to sleep" (Velásquez, 1995, p. 124). By pointing out the unfairness of the situation, Juanita signals the double standard of gender expectations in her traditional Mexican/Mexican-American household. Her older brother Carlos, who is also in high school, is allowed to come and go as he pleases, while Juanita, as the

eldest daughter, is often confined to the home and to her younger siblings. She once again compares her family to Maya's. In doing so Juanita makes evident the generational differences and class privileges that Maya benefits from. In discussing the ways that family structure impacts Latinos' ability to succeed in school, Gándara and Contreras (2009) argue:

Many Latinos are accustomed to parenting in a more traditional, “authoritarian” style, in which parents set inflexible boundaries and young children are discouraged from exploring their surroundings. This parenting style, however, may be essential in other ways. Latino parents may be responding well to their particular sociocultural circumstances, adapting their parenting style to the realities of their situation. Higher-risk urban environment may call for a disciplinary style in which young people are not allowed to ‘explore’ their less secure neighborhoods. [...]. (p. 69)

Gándara and Contreras (2009) posit an interesting interpretation of Latino parents' strict rules, like those of Mr. Chávez. While the construction of gender and societal gender expectations still need to be applied here, it is also worthwhile taking into consideration that Mr. Chávez is being particularly strict because of his class and immigrant status. Gándara and Contreras further argue that “Unfortunately, ... this parenting style may not foster the kinds of behaviors that are prized in American classrooms, where autonomy in problem solving is expected” (2009, p. 69). In other words, there is yet another tension between Juanita's cultural background and the dominant educational system that makes it difficult to succeed in school. While Juanita is upset because she cannot attend the dance with her friends, her father's strict rules, combined with the school's racist policies, make it extra difficult for her to earn her high school diploma. Despite her father's rules, Juanita does find ways to participate in activities her father does not approve of, like dating. Juanita is aware of the knowledge her father has created for her—a knowledge that dictates she is limited because of her sex and gender. When she decides to lie and attend the dance anyway to meet her boyfriend, Juanita participates in what Anzaldúa (2002) calls “el compromiso.” In the fourth stage of *conocimiento* “the life you thought inevitable, unalterable, and fixed in some foundational reality is smoke, a mental construction, fabrication. So, you reason, if it's all made up, you can compose anew and differently” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 559). By lying and sneaking out, Juanita contests her father's authority and decides to construct an alternative, one that allows her agency over her body and acknowledges her right to make her own decisions. Regardless of the respectability politics attached to her decision to lie and sneak out, Juanita participates in a *conocimiento* process that shifts her reality.

Juanita is able to return to Roosevelt High after Sam Turner makes evident to the school board that Roosevelt High has a history of discriminating against students of color. Juanita, however, must continue with her counseling. Nothing happens to Sheena. By the end of the novel, Juanita worries about returning to school, she expresses concern about having to see Sheena at school, and what other students might say about her after the expulsion. Juanita is determined to avoid another physical altercation that may threaten her education As Gándara and Contreras (2009) point out:

Physical safety is not the only kind of safety that matters at school. Even students who do not fear for their physical well-being can experience the psychological fear of being ostracized, marginalized, and excluded. Especially for adolescents, for whom the need to belong is so powerful, being excluded can be more painful and debilitating than being physically attacked [...]. (p. 111)

Juanita's return to school is meant to be read as a victory. However, Juanita's "psychological fear" of how others may treat her at school is yet another barrier that makes it difficult for her to succeed academically. Unfortunately, Juanita's return to school does not guarantee that she will finish, because the school policies have not changed. The racist and discriminatory structure that criminalized Juanita in the first place still stands. Winning the hearing only proved that Juanita should not be read as a criminal. During the expulsion hearing Sam says, "Miss Chavez is polite, well-dressed, and makes a good appearance. She is a young woman of considerable charm. There are no signs of drugs or 'hardness.' She has not indulged in vandalism, graffiti, or other conduct which would make a bad student" (Velásquez, 1995, p. 120). By highlighting her positive qualities Sam points out the differences between Juanita and the "bad students" who may not be as easily "rehabilitated" into productive citizens as she.

To read the ending of this novel as a complete victory dismisses the structural violence present at Roosevelt High that make it difficult for students like Juanita to succeed. Although Juanita is able to return to school by distinguishing herself from "bad students," the characterization only serves to further marginalize students of color that do not conform to the standards of "good students." In relating criminality to value, literary critic Lindon Barrett says, "As he theorizes, the 'object' of value needs an 'other' of value because 'for value negativity is a resource, an essential resource. The negative, the expended, the excessive invariably form the ground of possibilities for value'" (qtd. in Cacho, 2012, p. 13). In this way, Juanita can only be a "good student" because there are "bad students," students who have been criminalized by the educational system as Juanita was criminalized at the beginning of the novel. Cacho (2012) asserts that, "When we reject these criminalized others of color, we leave less room for questioning why such status categories are automatically and categorically devalued" (p. 18). By arguing that Juanita does not participate in behavior that may mark her as a "bad student," Sam's character reinforces that these students are less than and possibly deserving of punishments like expulsion.

By reading *Juanita Fights the School Board* as a *conocimiento* narrative, the ending can be understood as a part of larger healing process wherein the victory over the school board is only one of the potential shifts in reality in Juanita's life but that there can be other realities that are inclusive of all students. Anzaldúa (2002) explains that while a *conocimiento* process may begin at the individual level, *conocimiento* also calls for collective and communal healing. She writes, "In the seventh [stage], the critical turning point of transformation, you shift realities, develop an ethical, compassionate strategy with which to negotiate conflict and difference within self and between others, and find common ground by forming

holistic alliances” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 544). While Juanita’s story is at the center of Velásquez’s novel, her experiences map onto those of the other students of color both in the novel and in real life. In this way, readers of *Juanita Fights the School Board* relate to Juanita’s experiences. Juanita won the school board ruling by relying on the knowledges of her family and friends. In doing so, she challenged oppressive epistemologies that criminalized her. By going up against the school board, Juanita demonstrates that students like her can challenge institutional racism and begin to create alternative ways of knowing that center their experiences.³

School Fights: Resisting Oppression in the Classroom

The “Making Education Work for Latinas in the U.S.” report attributes young Latinas’ resilience as a contributing factor for their ability to succeed academically despite the various oppressions they experience (2013). In *Juanita Fights the School Board* Juanita also exhibits a resilience that allows her to challenge a discriminatory ruling by her school board. This resilience, however, is not meant to take away from the real consequences that discrimination in the classroom has on the lives of young Latinas. Juanita faces discrimination at school because of her ethnicity, immigration status, and class background. *Juanita Fights the School Board* is a model for the ways that Latina/o children and young adult literature can address some of the pervasive injustices making it difficult for young Latinas to succeed in school. While there are certainly many systemic and institutional changes that need to take place in order to make public education a safe and fulfilling space for Latinas, *conocimiento* narratives like Velásquez’s can begin to create conversations about those needs. Juanita further demonstrates that large institutions like public schools can be challenged. In challenging her school and her teachers, Juanita is able to shift their realities and create spaces where her complex Latina identities can be a powerful attribute for her educational success rather than a hindrance. By challenging the school board, Juanita sets a precedent for the ways that students of color should be treated.

Presently, Chicana/o and Latina/o students continue to face discrimination in the classroom. For example, there was an attempt in Texas to introduce a high school textbook that labelled Mexicans as “lazy” (Heim, 2016). While the textbook did not make it into the classroom, it is an example of the everyday violence that Chicana/o and Latina/o students experience in the U.S. educational system. Conversations around the barriers students face in the classroom also invite discussions on ways to create paths toward healing; and, *conocimiento* narratives like *Juanita Fights the School Board* serve as tool for such dialogues. By tracing Juanita’s *conocimiento* process readers have the opportunity to explore the complexities of Juanita’s expulsion, its implications for her identity, and her use of alternative knowledges to win her case and draw attention to structural discrimination. Velásquez centers

³ Other Latina/o children’s and young adult literature text that also center Latina students challenging institutional racism in public education include Rodríguez’s (1998) *America is Her Name* and Tonatiuh’s (2014) *Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family’s Fight for Desegregation*.

Chicana/Latina student experiences and in doing so she challenges long histories of oppression that seek to erase or silence their stories. It seems that, despite having been written over 20 years ago, *Juanita Fights the School Board* still rings true for many Chicana/o and Latina/o students. Velásquez's novel presents an opportunity to empower students by examining the ways Juanita resists oppression in the classroom, and by extension, in her home, and her community. By connecting Juanita's story to students' personal experiences it is possible to explicate the value of *conocimiento* narratives. By understanding how *conocimiento* takes place in the lives of the Chicana/Latina protagonist they read about it is also possible that they will be able to apply a *conocimiento* process to their own lives and, in this way, resist oppressions they may experience in the classroom and beyond with the potential to shift their own realities into ones where they feel empowered.

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