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Tomboy

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The girl never thought about acting like a girl or a boy. She just did what she liked to do...Ever since there were boys and girls there have been girls who like to do boy things and boys who like to do girl things...and when you grow up you can do anything you want to do.

—Alex's mother in *Tomboy*

TOMBOY

Rita E. Urquijo-Ruiz

Tomboy. Directed and produced by Barb Taylor; created and written by Karleen Pendleton Jiménez. Animated color film, 14 mins. Toronto: Coyle Productions, 2008. Distributed by Barb Taylor.

The new millennium heralded much hope for Chicana and Latina queers (especially for butches—soft, hard, and everything in between) living, at the time, in Southern California or in Toronto. The main reason: Chicana butch queer writer and educator Karleen Pendleton Jiménez (who claims roots to both cities) published a groundbreaking children's book titled *Are You a Boy or a Girl?* (Toronto: Green Dragon Press, 2000). The lucky queers—like me—who have known Pendleton Jiménez personally, received a signed copy early and celebrated seeing our stories represented. The sixteen-page text is filled with the author's pictures that portray a non-gender-conforming young child who is asked constantly to

identify herself as a girl or a boy. In the end, the mother encourages her to be who she is—in spite of the bullying she suffers—and affirms for her daughter “that’s the best way to live.” This book was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award under the transgender category and serves as the foundation for the short animated film *Tomboy* (2008).

In the film, Pendleton Jiménez (as the creator and scriptwriter) delivers a story of survival narrated by Alex, a Canadian Latina child in elementary school who suffers her classmates’ (Berto and Dionne’s) bullying because, according to them, she “looks like a boy” and “does boy things.” Alex’s main supporters are her teacher (of African descent) and her mother (a dark-skinned Latina), who defend her choice to be free of societal gender limitations. *Tomboy* thereby opens up the discussion on gender by and for children and should be a part of every teacher’s and library’s collection. It is never too early to begin this difficult discussion, especially considering the high rate of suicide by queer teenagers of all ethnicities.

Tomboy is composed of a multiethnic cast and offers a universal story of self-acceptance as seen through the eyes of a Latina child living in Canada. There are many cultural-specific references to Alex’s ethnicity and bilingualism throughout the film, such as code-switching between English and Spanish. There are also minimal, but significant, references to Canadian culture: the whistling of the song “Alouette/Skylark” and a Canadian shield on the classroom wall (more on these references below).

The film opens in a classical cartoon manner, with a colorful bird flying over a playground to show the general surroundings and then focusing on the protagonist and the story. The next scene is a close-up of Alex’s room, replete with Latina/o cultural identifiers (Mexican flag, Virgin of Guadalupe, and

posters of a *lucha libre* [wrestling] masked hero, a space shuttle, and a Latina singer) on the wall. The room also contains hockey sticks, bats, a South American bamboo flute, a trumpet, and a car-shaped bed. The first time we hear and see Alex, she is throwing things from under her bed, looking for her super-bouncing ball. After finding it, she stands on the bed, while her mother is repeatedly calling her and eventually calls her by her full, feminine name: Alejandra María. Alex continues to ignore her mother and throws the small ball across the room, hitting the walls, toys, and bed as she finally skids on her knees to catch it. The mother hears the noise and asks: "What was that? What's going on in there? ¿Qué haces hija? What are you doing in here? Didn't you hear me?" Alex answers that it was really a "*pesadilla*, a horrible nightmare" about a fire-spitting dragon and that she fought it while wearing armor as she attempted to rescue a princess (a dark-skinned Latina girl in a tower wearing what could be an indigenous outfit). The protagonist pretends to be a prince rescuing a princess, indicating her desire to be chivalrous and have a girl as her "love" interest instead of a boy.

Her mother does not correct Alex about being a prince or a princess and instead proceeds to scold her about taking a bouncy ball to school because of the possibility of it getting her into trouble. But when Alex tells her that the ball is her science project, they both start to walk to Kahlo Public School (named after famous bisexual Mexican artist Frida Kahlo). On their way, Alex whistles the French-Canadian children's song "Alouette," which is about a gentle skylark that is to be deplumed entirely from head to legs. While Alex is walking and balancing on top of the tree planters, a chubby, friendly mailman joins her in song and says, "Nice whistling, son." Her mother corrects him by saying, "She's a girl, sir" and keeps walking. He excuses himself and says that it is very difficult to tell some boys and girls apart. Both adults are cordial and wish each other a good day. Alex looks back at the mailman, jumps off the

planter, and joins her mother. While “Alouette” is a happy song about a painful event, in the film it foreshadows Alex’s painful encounters with her classmates, who insist on metaphorically stripping her of her own sense of gender identity. Like the skylark, Alex shows her firm, yet gentle manner throughout the story.

At school, as Alex walks to the front of the classroom to talk about her project, she passes by a Canadian shield on the wall. After Alex explains her ball’s bouncing length in metric measurements, the teacher walks up to her and puts her hands on Alex’s shoulders, standing behind her. The teacher acts as a shield (emphasized by the one on the wall) to protect her from the harm that is to come her way from her peers. Berto, a Latino bully, raises his hand to ask, “Is she a boy or a girl?” The teacher answers: “Now, that is completely inappropriate!” Alex only sighs at this. The teacher walks away to her desk and explains, “There is no such thing as a ‘boy thing’ or a ‘girl thing’ in this classroom. Every child can develop an interest in every topic. Remember, just last week we studied the work of the first female astronaut.” At this point she puts Berto on the spot by asking him the name of this famous woman. Berto is embarrassed that he does not remember the woman’s name. Although the teacher’s philosophy is encouraging, Kareem, a Southeast Asian student, says that outside her classroom there “really are girl things and boy things.” Berto harasses Alex one more time, she challenges him back, and he retreats.

The next scene takes place in the playground, where again Alex is confronted, this time by Dionne, a very feminine girl and classmate, about doing “boy things” and wearing boys’ clothing, such as her maroon-red shorts. On the playground, there is a discussion between boys and girls about short hair versus long hair and about the color red. They emphasize that there are important shades of red: if it goes toward the shade of pink, red is for girls; if it goes toward the shade of maroon, red is for boys. No agreement is reached.

(As a counterpoint, Alex continues to beat Berto at soccer.) The harassment continues and toward the end of recess, Alex asks Kareem about the discussion about gender performance. When Kareem explains the color (boy-red vs. girl-red) and suggests that Alex wear a clear-cut “girl” color, Alex replies that girl colors are too bright and that she runs the risk of being followed by bees for pollen. She finally says that wearing something bright would be “too painful,” referring to the pain involved for her in “dressing like a girl.”

Toward the end of the day, the bullying finally causes Alex to go home crying inconsolably. When the scene returns to her bedroom, there is a close-up on the lucha libre masked hero who is ready to fight. The image alludes to the idea that Alex cannot and will not give up, by continuing to be a *luchadora*/fighter in spite of the present and future challenges regarding her gender identity. Her mother comforts her by sharing a story about a girl like Alex who did not like to do “girl things” but who was happy to be the person she was. She also tells Alex: “You’ll never be a girl like other girls, and you don’t have to be.” With these words of empowerment, the two of them hug each other. The video ends with original music composed and produced by Alejandra Núñez.

Tomboy is reminiscent of the 1997 French feature film *Ma Vie en Rose* that addresses transgender and gender issues about a young boy who wants to grow up to be a girl. *Rose*, however, centers on a white child and family, while Pendleton Jiménez’s gift of *Tomboy* lies largely in the fact that Latina queers can see themselves, their culture, and their languages represented in this short film. Watching the film is like looking into the future and seeing exactly the types of teachers and mothers that every queer child of color should have. Even if these representations seem unrealistic for some, Pendleton Jiménez states that it is important to imagine them and put them into cultural representations, such as *Tomboy*.