“EVERY CHILD IS BORN A POET”: THE PUERTO RICAN NARRATIVE WITHIN AMERICAN CHILDREN’S CULTURE

By

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To Mami, Papi, Losmin, Abuelo Daniel, Abuela Basilisa, Abuelo Ramón and Abuela María (Yin)
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Diaspora child  A child of the Puerto Rican Diaspora.
Post-O.B.       Post-Operation Bootstrap
Piri Thomas, the self-proclaimed Nuyorican “poet laureate of El Barrio,” once said that “every child is born a poet and every poet is the child” (qtd. in McGill 174). In the context of children’s studies, Thomas’ line resounds with a reverence for childhood similar to Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and Golden Age children’s authors such as J.M. Barrie or Lewis Carroll. However, Thomas’ statement, “every child is born a poet” hails, not from the Lake District, but from the “mean streets” of New York City’s tenements and slums which, for many children, and for some of the Puerto Rican authors/artists presented in this study, is the inspiration for another kind of wonderland. For the greater Stateside and Island Puerto Rican community, children’s literature and media has served as a cultural and national bridge, uniting both Island and stateside communities; it also functioned as an entrance into United States national discourse and an outlet for resistance against U.S. colonialism. Island and U.S. writers and artists, such as Pura Belpré, Nicholasa Mohr, Sonia Manzano, and Judith Ortiz-Cofer, have used children literature and media as a repository for historical memory, as a foundation for a cultural and literary legacy, as a plea for U.S. identity, and as a way of positing new Englishes. Children’s literature also seems like the only literature where Island and
U.S. writers have been placed within the same tradition. Examining the Puerto Rican “narrative” within U.S. children’s culture helps scholars reconsider the child’s role, agency, and influence within society and showcases the value of children’s literature and media as an intellectual and creative space for constructing collective ideas of nationhood, language, and culture by both mainstream and marginalized groups. In addition, my study furthers the importance of children’s culture when studying U.S. literature.
CHAPTER 1
“NO PAST, NO FUTURE”: INTRODUCING THE PUERTO RICAN NARRATIVE WITHIN AMERICAN CHILDREN’S CULTURE

After the Spanish-American War, many Americans first encountered Puerto Rico through newspapers, travel guides, and children’s books. In “Their Islands and Our People: U.S. Writing about Puerto Rico 1898-1920” (1999), Felix V. Matos Rodriquez examines the “diverse yet often overlapping genres” of literature dedicated to introducing the new territory and the U.S.’s new position as a colonial empire to the U.S. public. Citing “military histories, resource assessment and investment guides, popular histories, academic studies, official government reports,” Matos Rodriquez seems almost perplexed by the numerous children’s volumes that form part of this post-1898 literature – “even children’s and juvenile books,” he adds as a kind of exclamation punctuating the previous list. Jorge Duany (2002), citing Matos-Rodriquez, also locates “juvenile novelists” within the extensive anthropological and documentary project undertaken by U.S. writers (anthropologists and newspaper correspondents among the first on site) eager to capture narratives and images of an impoverished Island population on the brink of so-called modernization (60-61). Of the larger project to document the U.S.’s responsibility and relationship to its colonies, Matos-Rodriquez asks: “Who was writing these books? Why? Was knowledge of Puerto Rico the realm of the journalist, the travel writer, or the historian?” (33) We might also ask, however, on the brink of empire, why send in children’s writers along with engineers and geographers? Considering the rush to capture history-in-the-making and consequently empire-in-the-making associated with these initial literary accounts, my dissertation analyzes the role of the children’s realm within the U.S. colonial project. Similarly, at the inception of a U.S. literary tradition, why the preoccupation with children’s materials
within the Puerto Rican Diaspora community? My dissertation considers how the children’s literary and cultural world acts as a stage for dominant and minority cultures to act out anxieties about national and colonial identity, class and race, economic and cultural development, and national literature and culture. Emphasizing the children’s realm as a space for dialogue between colonizer and colonized also invokes questions about the larger tradition of both U.S. and Puerto Rican children’s texts and media: Do children’s texts and media belong, as Matos-Rodriquez asks, to the realm of knowledge? Of history? Of fact? Of fiction?

The U.S.-Puerto Rico relationship (and the place of Puerto Ricans’ within U.S. culture) complicates all the markers of U.S. history and national culture that adults might prefer to simplify for children, such as language, national and geographical boundaries, and racial and national status. The question of whether or not Puerto Rican and/or U.S. Puerto Rican literature and culture should be examined as the product of an “ethnic,” U.S. minority, a postcolonial community, or a Latin American nationality is pivotal within Puerto Rican studies. Lisa Sánchez-González in her landmark study, Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora (2001) argues that scholars should treat U.S. Puerto Rican literature as “one that has self-consciously produced its own body of knowledge, based in its own specific assessment of its own unique predicament as a U.S. community of color” (17). Among her many arguments, Sánchez-González contends that scholars, particularly those on the Island, stifle critical discussion by insisting that U.S. Puerto Rican writing is simply an extension of Island national literature. Juan Flores, who has produced a formidable amount of critical work on Puerto Rican and U.S. Puerto Rican culture, has argued somewhat the reverse. As
Sánchez-González also cites, Flores views U.S. Puerto Rican literature as “retain[ing] its association to Puerto Rican national literature and by extension to Latin American literary concerns” (Flores, *Divided Borders*, 19). He also suggests that Island literature might be read as U.S. literature (153). In my own research on children’s literature and media, I have found it impossible to separate U.S. Puerto Rican writers from Island literature. For example, in the case of Pura Belpré, I present a writer who seemingly wished to position herself as reconstructing Island traditions in the Mainland. Belpré also complicates classifications with regard to language which is a key factor when deciding if a writer imagines himself/herself as a Latin American or North American writer. Indeed, though she published in both English and Spanish, Belpré saw her texts as the continuation of a catalogue of Island folklorists; her work, along with Mohr’s actually appears in the Island’s only published bibliography of children’s literature, *Un Siglo de Literatura Infantil Puertorriqueña/ A Century of Puerto Rican Children’s Literature* (1987). Writers such as Mohr and Ortíz-Cofer also appear to “write back” to specific constructions of Island national identity which make it difficult to see their work as a dialogue exclusive of the Island.

The use of postcolonial theory within conversations about Puerto Rico is also a controversial topic. Flores, for example, writes that, “The insights of theorists like Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak are no doubt of great explanatory value, as is the critique of [Benedict] Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ by Partha Chatterjee and others” ( *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* 214). Flores specifies that for U.S. Latino/a communities such as U.S. Puerto Ricans, Dominican-Americans, and Chicanos, “the economic and political domination of their home countries” makes “postcolonial” an inadequate term. Likewise,
Jorge Duany insists that a postcolonial critique such as Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities”\(^1\) cannot explain constructions of national identity within the greater Puerto Rican community. He argues that “Anderson’s formulation of nationalism presupposes that communities are imagined from a fixed location, within a fixed, bounded space” (Duany, “Nation on the Move”, 7). He suggests, as do I, that it is possible to imagine yourself as part of a “nation” without thinking of that nation as fixed in a particular geographical location. With regard to the U.S.’s political and legal relationship to Puerto Rico and its Diaspora, I have decided to use the term “colonial” and “colonization” within my study as opposed to neocolonial\(^2\) or even “commonwealth,” the official title of Puerto Rico, a title which masks the Island’s colonial position considering it is also used to refer to states like Massachusetts. Puerto Rico is politically and legally, however, very much a colony of the U.S. Those writers living and working within the Island and the U.S. represent a literature which exhibits colonial repercussions. Indeed, Puerto Rico has never politically or economically risen above the level of colony, first of Spain and then the U.S. It still remains an acquired possession without annexation governed by U.S. federal laws and economic policy.

A study of U.S. Puerto Rican children’s culture disrupts the traditional pedagogical approach to U.S. history as a narrative of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness with justice for all. Amy Kaplan emphasizes the silence often associated with the U.S.’s history of colonialism in her introduction to *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993):

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1 Anderson writes that people “imagine” nations as “limited,” “sovereign,” and “as a political community” (7).

2 The term neocolonialism has also recently been used to explain the economic and political influence of foreign governments upon other countries.
The United States is either absorbed into a general notion of “the West,” represented by Europe, or it stands for a monolithic West. United States continental expansion [and non-continental I would add] is often treated as an entirely separate phenomenon from European colonialism of the nineteenth century, rather than an interrelated form of imperial expansion. The divorce between these two histories mirrors the American historiographical tradition of viewing empire as a twentieth century aberration, rather than as part of an expansionist continuum. (17)

Kaplan implies that “linking United States nation-building and empire-building as historically coterminous and mutually defining” opens up the field for examining U.S. imperialist rhetorics and practices. In children’s literature studies, scholars have only begun publishing works on empire as with Clare Bradford’s study of Australian aboriginal children’s literature and Ann Gonzalez’s study of Latin American children’s literature; the latter perhaps considered more of a contribution to Latin American studies than to children’s literature studies. ³ Yet, one could easily dismiss those studies as relating the literary histories of cultures outside U.S. parameters. This dissertation gestures toward the contemporary view of the U.S. as empire by focusing on a group of U.S. citizens with a pattern of circulatory migration from the continental U.S. to the Island. Puerto Ricans are arguably the exotic stepchildren of the United States – the “unwanted” progeny of a “political union” as Judith Ortíz-Cofer suggests in her literary work “A Fable of Our Times” (2000). Puerto Ricans have lived in the United States before U.S. conquest, the earliest group comprised of political exiles fleeing Spanish rule (Acosta-Belen 31). However, the U.S.’s acquisition of the Island in July 1898, the subsequent Jones Act in 1917, and the Island’s seemingly endless economic upheavals

sparked a massive exodus of this group of U.S. citizens (over one million from 1917-1990; 470,000 from 1950-1960 alone).\textsuperscript{4}

As scholars like Edna Acosta-Belen, Juan Flores, Sonia Nieto, and Lisa Sánchez-González have shown, the Puerto Rican Diaspora impacted everyday aspects of U.S. culture, from the U.S. popular imagination to public school education. In \textit{Harvest of Empire} (2000), Juan Gonzalez narrates the Puerto Rican migration’s effect on the national consciousness:

\begin{quote}
Until World War II, Mexican farm workers were the most familiar Latin Americans in this country. True, a Latino might occasionally turn up in a Hollywood film role, or leading a band of in New York nightclub, or as the fancy fielder of some professional baseball team, but outside the Southwest, Anglo Americans rarely saw Hispanics in everyday life and knew almost nothing about them.

Then the Puerto Ricans came. (81)
\end{quote}

The coming of the Puerto Ricans impacted the landscape of U.S. children’s popular culture. In this dissertation, I contend that children’s culture (books, puppetry, theatre, educational television, etc.) is a major site of contention and negotiation of U.S. and Puerto Rican nationalist sentiments. Children’s culture has played such an important role in colonial protest that it would be impossible to discuss U.S. Puerto Rican and U.S. Latino/a literary history without discussing children’s texts and media. From introducing the development of a literature about the U.S. as a colonial empire, to perpetuating U.S. culture on the Island, to working through historical traumas and expressing a U.S. identity — the U.S.-Puerto Rico narrative grew up on the children’s bookshelf and then continued to revolutionize it. Moreover, the history of U.S. children’s culture is

\textsuperscript{4}For a more extensive review of migration data see Edna Acosta-Belen’s \textit{Puerto Ricans in the United States} (2006).
inseparable from the U.S. Puerto Rican experience. Likewise, U.S. Puerto Ricans have played an integral role in the creation of a U.S. popular children’s culture.

The texts I analyze are intertwined with a broader rhetoric of national “coming-of-age” narratives. Authors use words such as adoption, orphan, and stepchild to work through issues of national identity. Authors often seem to present narratives about children as a kind of allegory about national and racial anxiety. The texts themselves are often depicted as a kind of “orphan” category of literature. They are difficult to place within any national literature which results in “the orphan” literature’s abandonment by critics and readers. For example, a writer like Nicholasa Mohr explores the notion of being “adopted” by the U.S. Her characters’ encounters with agents of the state, such as teachers and welfare representatives depict U.S. Puerto Ricans as national “orphans” --- children belonging to neither the Island nor the U.S. The U.S. government acts as a kind of abusive foster parent. The use of children’s literature or even the designating of these writers by the publishing industry as “children’s writers” also mimics a kind of rite-of-passage for minority discourse into the dominant discourse. Even within the critical conversation, there is at times the sense that these writers, their work, and their critical audience have not yet fully developed.

My dissertation covers a span of children’s literature and media from around 1900 to 2004. The present chapter focuses on the influx of U.S. produced children’s books published after the U.S. acquisition of Puerto Rico in 1898 and, later, after the Island’s industrial modernization during “Operation Bootstrap” in 1948. My second chapter focuses on the 1920s to 1940s era and examines the literary and cultural interventions of Pura Belpré, the first Latina librarian and children’s storyteller at the New York Public
Library. Belpré’s work in children’s literature and folklore provides a context for my third chapter, an analysis of the gritty children’s novels of Nicholasa Mohr, published during the 1970s Nuyorican Movement. The 1970s spirit of civil rights and equality is central to my fourth chapter which examines the bilingual performance of one of the first Latinas on television, *Sesame Street* actor and writer Sonia “Maria” Manzano. Manzano’s emphasis on bilingual culture and her over 40-year presence in children’s television leads into the contemporary bilingual, experimental poetry of Puerto Rican poet and author, Judith Ortíz-Cofer. Ortíz-Cofer’s emphasis on bilingual Puerto Rican childhood as “poetry” is central to chapter five.

In this introductory chapter, I contextualize the work of these U.S. Puerto Rican children’s literary and television figures as expanding on a dialogue begun by U.S. writers. This dialogue concerns the U.S. as a colonial power and Puerto Ricans as colonial subjects. First, I give an overview of the post-1898, U.S. children’s literature so as to consider its main objectives and themes. I go beyond Matos-Rodriquez in that I present examples from those years immediately after 1898 and from books written in response to the 1940s-1960s intense economic development of Puerto Rico (“Operation Bootstrap”). U.S. children’s books about Puerto Rico mainly center on these two historical moments. Writers’ preoccupation with these two historical moments suggests a perception that these events warranted an orientation toward the Island for U.S. child readers. Writers also underline insecurity about relating U.S. history to children within a narrative about conquest and colonization. Second, I provide a synopsis of children’s publishing on the Island that frames the development of an Island “national” children’s literature as a source of anxiety for Puerto Rican educators. Third, by introducing some
of the main themes and arguments within this dissertation, I present the case of Puerto Rican children’s literature and culture as a movement toward more comparative approaches to the study of children’s texts and media. Similarly, I direct attention to the importance of children’s materials within U.S. Latino/a studies as a site of further study and contention.

“Eyewitnesses of Sorts”: Post-1898 and Post-Operation Bootstrap Children’s Books

Children’s literature produced by U.S. writers about Puerto Rico focuses on the two periods of Island history perhaps of greatest economic and political interest to the United States: the 1898 conquest and the 1948 Operation Bootstrap. The Spanish-American War of 1898 provided countless sensational headlines for U.S. newspapers, particularly at the onset of U.S. interventions in Cuba’s revolt against Spain. The conflict between Spain and the U.S. officially ended with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in December 1898, a treaty making the U.S. the foremost colonial power in the Caribbean and Pacific through its acquisition of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. Over forty-years later, Operation Bootstrap became the latest headline in the U.S.-Puerto Rico story. The “operation” refers to U.S.-funded economic/industrial initiatives, such as the building of highways and factories, engineered by Puerto Rican policy makers including such as Teodoro Moscoso and Governor Luis Muñoz-Marín. A major part of this economic reform policy supervised by Moscoso and Muñoz-Marín included a kind of expulsion of almost half the Island’s population by the Puerto Rican government, as I later discuss. It is important to remember that the U.S. produced children’s books underlined in this chapter were published in the States with no indication that they were read by (or written for) Island children, a matter I return to in my overview of the
children’s presses in Puerto Rico. Within post-1898 and post-Operation Bootstrap (post-O.B.) traditions, U.S. children’s writers emphasize common assumptions about the perceived role of children’s literature within any culture – some obvious (e.g. pedagogical, ideological) and some perhaps less obvious (e.g. re/creating history). These children’s books also contain obvious racist/elitist presumptions about the Island and its people to which I will refer briefly.

My analysis of these U.S. children’s texts centers on five patterns: re/creating history, adoption/infantilization, progress, amnesia with regard to migration, and poetry. By re/creating history, I mean that writers on both sides seem attracted to children’s texts as revising key historical moments, such as the U.S. invasion. Adoption/infantilization refers to how writers characterize Islanders as unwanted children inherited as wards of the state. The themes of progress and amnesia are interrelated in that early writers on both sides also tended to depict the Island as a paradise of progress, a place of unprecedented opportunity for different forms of capital. At the same time, children’s writers also turned a blind-eye toward the massive Puerto Rican exodus which undermined all the promises of progress. The theme of poetry underlines the importance of language within Puerto Rican cultural identity as well as the tension between oral and written culture highlighted in this study. These patterns are later repeated or refuted to varying degrees within children’s materials created by U.S. Puerto Rican authors and artists. Also, while U.S. and U.S. Puerto Rican writers approach child readers as pupils, they do so in different ways. Many U.S. writers tend to emphasize the Island, the Islanders, and child readers as a “blank slate” or tabula rasa, a theme closely associated with the project of colonialism and education, while U.S.
Puerto Rican writers (as I continue developing in the coming chapters) tend to characterize children as containing the stories/histories needed for filling in gaps in historical memory.

Matos-Rodriquez refers to the post-1898 group of U.S. writers as “eyewitnesses of sorts” (34). Writers hailed from the field of journalism, photography, religious education, and anthropology. They wrote from the perspective of those on the post-war frontlines. Matos-Rodriquez specifies that although children’s writers may have had less “contact with the Island’s reality” within this group, they still adopted the position of “eyewitness.” That is, even when children’s authors never experienced the Island, they still wished to form part of a brand of literature that spoke to U.S. readers as a testimony of the new Island possession. They chose to blur the lines between fact, fiction, and history—between storytelling and history lessons. The child characters they created within this tradition, specifically white child characters, reflect this “eyewitness” trend. Children act as “private detectives” and “explorers” (34). Yet, Matos-Rodriquez still sees this fantastic blend of fact and fiction as “overlap[ping]” with the anthropological and geographical writings he surveys since it is a literature teaching North Americans how to manage the “otherness” of the conquered inhabitants (i.e. the differences between “us” and “them”). Children’s literature, like the other types of literature within the post-1898 tradition, also justifies U.S. policy on the Island (34).  

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5 Jorge Duany in *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move* (2001), citing Matos-Rodriquez, also appears to place the children’s novelists within a similar tradition as the anthropologists and geographers writing about the Island.
The construction of the “other” within the Anglo gaze is a familiar theme in U.S. expansionist/exceptionalist rhetoric (indeed within Anglo imperialist rhetoric).⁶ The majority of U.S.-produced children’s texts (from 1900’s Greater America to 1962’s The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico) resemble anthropological field guides, complete with a map, an economic and agricultural break-down of the Island, and a synopsis about the culture, or lack thereof, of the natives. Indeed, these children’s texts contain politically-incorrect categorizations and justifications, beginning with the Anglicized re-naming of the Island—Porto Rico. Porto Rico, as depicted by prolific children’s writer, Edward L. Stratemeyer⁷ was an exotic land of buried treasure for young hunters and explorers. Writing under the pen name, Captain Ralph Bonehill, Stratemeyer plays the part of former officer in the Spanish-American War turned children’s author of Young Hunters in Porto Rico or the Search for a Lost Treasure (1900)⁸:

The work was written primarily for the reader’s amusement, yet I have endeavored within its pages to give a fair description of the Porto Rico of today, as it appears to the traveler from our States. This new island domain of ours is but little known to the majority of us, but when its picturesqueness [sic], and its mild climate, becomes a matter of publicity, Porto Rico is bound to become a Mecca for thousands of American tourists, in search of health and pleasure (iv).

Stratemeyer portrays the Island as a backdrop for exotic travel and adventure with no mention of its inhabitants. Another text in the explorer genre, this time directed at young girls, is Margaret Penrose’s The Motor Girls in Waters Blue (1915). Penrose creates the

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⁶ For a more comprehensive study on the “othering” of native Islanders see Lanny Thompson’s Nuestra isla y su gente: La construccion del “otro” puertorriqueno en “Our Islands and Their People” (1995). In terms of “the other” and Anglo imperialist rhetoric, refer to Edward Said’s study Orientalism (1975).

⁷ Stratemeyer was a ghost writer of The Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew series among others.

⁸ Matos-Rodriquez identifies Edward Stratemeyer as the author of this volume and “as perhaps one of the most prolific” of the children’s authors of the 1898 tradition. According to Matos-Rodriquez, Stratemeyer also wrote several books for children about Cuba and the “West Indies” (37).
Puerto Rican character of “Inez” (“the Spanish girl”) who acts as a translator for the all-American Motor Girls. Inez assures the Motor Girls: “[M]any here speak ze English as you do. Zere is little trouble.” Interestingly, the ideal Puerto Rican and U.S. Puerto Rican child is one gifted in the art of interpretation and translation. Inez, in the true spirit of capitalism, teaches the Motors Girls two very important words: “Quiero/I want” and “Cuanto/How much” (88). The “eyewitness” theme suggests a hyperawareness of how colonial acquisition should be memorialized for U.S. child readers. Like a blank page, the acquisition of colonial territories signaled a new era of U.S. and Puerto Rican history which required a somewhat unfamiliar narrative framework relating the possession of land and people. The distinction between American military forces and European colonizers of old was beginning to blur. The adoption of an eyewitness role in such texts also underlines the perceived absence of any previous historical identity belonging to the Island and its people. The project of validating history, creating a historical account, and revisiting key moments or traditions associated with Island memory, extends into the U.S. Puerto Rican tradition of children’s literature.

Both U.S. and U.S. Puerto Rican traditions feature a heightened preoccupation with history, and children’s literature is seemingly “the” place to mark a historical account. Children’s literature explains and justifies; it is also a place where one can create a beginning so as to have hope in the present. Although Matos-Rodriquez focuses on the post-1898 literature, his statements about the overall task of U.S. writers applies to both the post-1898 and post-O.B. phases of children’s literature. For example, he analyzes U.S. writers’ views of an ahistorical Puerto Rico as motivated by a desire to represent the Island as a place of societal and political chaos. An Island in
ruins justifies U.S. intervention. Matos-Rodriguez writes that “it is not unusual…to find many authors writing about Puerto Rico dismissing any sense of history and culture” (42). He highlights a statement by author Joseph Seabury in the children’s text Porto Rico: The Land of the Rich Port (1903): “Porto Rico has no prolonged or varied history, no exciting historical periods. For this reason but little space is given to the annals of the past” (qtd. in Matos-Rodriguez 42). Similarly, The Youth’s Companion’s Greater America, The Latest Acquired Insular Possessions (1900) provides many such examples of writers’ casting of Puerto Rico (and perhaps similarly child readers) as a kind of blank page, starting with the author’s use of the name “Porto Rico.” The unknown author introduces “[t]he first acquaintance Porto Rico made with the authority of the United States” this way: “[O]ur navy threw a few shells into the grand old Castle Morro at the entrance of San Juan harbor, like callers leaving cards as an indication of a future visit” (2). The use of “Porto Rico” here is curious considering the incident described occurred prior to the U.S. victory over Spain. The author assigns U.S. ownership of the Island at first sight and not after military turnover. He/she also dismisses the over 400-year Spanish presence on the Island with a telling description of the remains of the former empire:

When the [U.S.] flag was raised over San Juan, it overshadowed one house that, if insensate things could ever awaken to feel emotion, would surely have groaned and crumbled. That was the White House that Juan Ponce de Leon built and lived in nearly four centuries ago: but the White House survived the American flag, although all that is left of the old conqueror himself is a handful of dust in a leaden casket that rests in the Dominican Church of San Juan. (Greater America 11)

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9 The author(s) of this text is not listed in the book’s publication details.
I read the “handful of dust” as symbolic of a kind of annihilation of pre-U.S. history. The conqueror’s dusty remains symbolize, within the gaze of the unknown writer, a U.S. triumph over empire without realizing one’s own role within empire. Yet, I would argue that “insensate things” (those things with no life and little worth mentioning) refers to more than the old Spanish buildings and the dust of old conquerors (as opposed to new ones), but to the “Porto Ricans” as well. These “Porto Ricans” are depicted as a kind of blank people that were acquired by default, as the author writes, “The change [in political power] was made without the consent of the Porto Ricans, but there is reason to believe it was not against their wish” (6). The “Porto Ricans,” according to the author, had seemingly no volition of their own. They were “acquired in the same way” as California, although they are “the largest in the number of people whose allegiance has been transferred from one country to our own” (5). The reference to California erases the record of the military force used to subdue the inhabitants, both in the case of California and Puerto Rico. The author pretends to speak for both the people’s lack of volition as well as their “allegiance.” Years later, in a 1966, Post-O.B. children’s book, *Island Boy*, John Rambeau, Nancy Rambeau, and Richard E. Gross echo the theme of Puerto Rican migrants as weak-willed, history-less people:

> It is also true that some Puerto Ricans have a “no-past, no future” feeling about their lives. In Puerto Rico, they were Puerto Ricans, who were also American citizens. In New York, they are no longer just Puerto Ricans. They are blacks, or Hispanos, or just immigrants. The fact that they are American citizens means nothing. Most of them are not allowed to feel that they are really part of American life. Perhaps it is no wonder that many of them live for the day. They want to enjoy themselves today. They cannot worry about tomorrow. (44)

Rambeau et al describe a racially and nationally ambiguous people who, no matter the location, live in obscurity due to the repercussions of U.S. rule. In this passage,
Americanhood itself seems problematically presented as a kind of “nothing” identity which strips others of culture. Considering the reference to “blacks” and “Hispanos,” both representative of U.S. conquest, American identity presented as a state of nothing reflects anxiety about the U.S. as an imperial power rather than as a new site of liberty apart from European empires. Puerto Ricans, in this passage and within the greater U.S. tradition of children’s writers, possess neither a grounded identity before the U.S. nor one after. More than a children’s picture book, *Island Boy* was designed by Rambeau et al as a school textbook too. The book seems designed with the purpose of justifying the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Puerto Rican migrants into U.S. cities. Indeed, migrants created a great deal of unrest within the New York School system and countless reports were released on the “Puerto Rican problem” (Nieto, *Puerto Ricans Students in U.S. Schools*, 13). As a textbook, *Island Boy* features a “To Talk About in Class” section posing child readers with a question: “Do you know of any other group of people who have a ‘no-past, no-future’ view of life?” (46).

U.S. Puerto Rican authors like Pura Belpré and Nicholasa Mohr also attempt to fill a perceived void of history with children’s narratives. Belpré, in particular, seeks to prove the cultural heritage of the Puerto Rican child through the same medium perhaps most responsible for demeaning it – children’s literature. However, as I argue in chapter five, Puerto Rican authors tend to uphold children as the keepers of words and narratives. That is, children possess stories within them which the best literature will help draw out. As opposed to viewing children solely as the subjects of narratives, artists such as Mohr, Judith Ortíz-Cofer, and Sonia Manzano present children as
creating literature and art, as augmenting languages and cultures, and as refashioning subjugated spaces.

The theme of tabula rasa within imperialist rhetoric coincides with a strong rhetoric of infantilization within the post-1898/post O.B. texts. The author of Greater America, in addition to presenting the “Porto Ricans” as of little consequence with regard to the exchange of governmental rule, tends to place Islanders within the same role of object (“incessant things”) as he/she does the Island. With Spain gone and no other nation to claim the Islanders, Islanders seem like wards the U.S. happened to inherit after its marriage to the land: “Neither is there any ground for fear that the acquisition of the island will ever lead to foreign complications. The island lies so near to the American continent as to be almost part of it; and no nation has objected to its annexation to the United States” (6-7). The author encourages child readers to think of Puerto Rican children on the Island as “brothers.” However, U.S. writers within this tradition continually present these “brothers” within images of chaos and incivility. Along with a perceived lack of history, the Island’s “chaotic” state coincides with the apparent racial and political ambiguity of the natives. As Matos-Rodriquez writes, chaos and ambiguity directly relates to “racial mixture; filth and insalubrity; unruly traffic; incapacity for self-government; civic and administrative corruption; banditry and illiteracy, among others” (42).

Helen Orr Watson’s children’s book White Boots (1948) capitalizes on this theme of chaos and infantilization. The book relates the Island misadventures of White Boots, a “pure-bred” Boston Terrier (perhaps symbolic of a pure, American patriot considering

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10 John Locke’s Some Thoughts Concerning Education presents the development of tabula rasa as a concept in education which relates to nation-building.
the tie to Boston) that is more refined and wanted in the North American gaze than any native Islander. White Boots boards an extravagant ocean liner with his Boston aristocratic family; he then gets lost in the luggage cargo upon arrival. The dog’s story unfolds as “negro” Islanders mistake Boots for just a regular perro. They sell him to a rich Puerto Rican family. Watson’s story suggests a desire to distinguish pure U.S. culture from the chaos her middle class readers might have perceived within a racially-ambiguous Puerto Rico. Interestingly, the chapter “Sold” appears to draw on a U.S. heritage of slave and abolitionist rhetoric as a means of showing Boots’ victimization at the hands of his “savage” capturers. Yet, this time it is the “white” bred Boots who gets sold into the “negro” race. An illustration of a despondent Boots, in a barred cage, balanced on the head of one of the “negros,” suggests this role reversal (21). Watson emphasizes the Island as a savage place when describing Boots’ first moments on the Island:

Down a steep hill the fat man went with the Negro, Boots and the smaller boy behind him. Three-wheeled carts, piled-high with oranges and avocado pears, barred their way; taxi cabs honked at them. They passed open cafés where brown-skinned people sat at little tables, while loud phonographs blared fourth Puerto Rican music in a minor key. They moved under grilled balconies where women called down to ask if the dog was for sale. Crippled beggars helped out their hands crying, “Centavo, centavo! Half-clad children trailed after them, curious about the strange Boston Terrier. But the Negro paid no heed and doggedly trailed after the big man. (20)

The 1948 publication date places White Boots’ release a little before if not at the beginning of Operation Bootstrap, which may explain the emphasis on abject poverty and chaos. Contrastingly, children’s books published after the U.S.-funded economic initiatives emphasize industrial progress. The preponderance of “beggars,” “half-clad children,” and “Negros” (grouped together as the most desperate within a sort of brutish race) emphasizes subjects in dire need of U.S. economic and even cultural
parenting. Perhaps, Watson’s readership may have been shocked that “half-clad children” and “Negroes” did not know the value of a purebred American dog. Watson even depicts “the Negro” as more animal-like (“doggedly”) than Boots. Another child’s book, *The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico* (1962), published by the United Nations and the American Geographical Society, and written by Earl P. Hanson, reflects anxiety about racial-mixing. Hanson writes that the “color line” seems absent from Puerto Rico, yet he makes sure to specify that Islanders have “much Indian blood” and only “some Negro” (16). Nicholasa Mohr, whose works I analyze in chapter three, takes up this rhetoric of adoption, infantilization, and political orphanhood within her essays and fictional works like *Nilda* (1973) and *El Bronx Remembered* (1975).

The word “progress” might sum up the moral of the U.S.-produced children’s books. Promises of progress, whether through U.S. industry, military control, political freedom, or travel, drive the post-1898 children’s books while promises of progress resulting from the burgeoning, U.S.-funded and Puerto Rican administered factories, libraries, public schools, and cooperatives drive the post-O.B. books. The simple presence of the U.S. on the shore would seem to spark progress, as the author of *Greater America* writes, “With the sword in one hand and the healing arts of civilization in the other, the United States moved upon the islands of the sea” (32). Neither phase of children’s books addresses the almost 50-year interlude between 1898 and 1944 during which U.S.-appointed governors (mostly military officials) did little to deliver on U.S. branded freedom, opportunity, or citizenship. 1944 marked the first ever election in which Puerto Ricans participated in a gubernatorial election, placing Muñoz-Marin in power. *Greater America* touts the promises of U.S. citizenship (a right established 17
years after the book’s publication) by showcasing the first Fourth of July celebration by Americans on the Island in 1899. The author ironically highlights the tension between U.S. promises of freedom and prosperity and the Island’s reality. He/she describes how correspondents sought a young Puerto Rican boy in order to begin patriotic celebrations. The correspondents evidently wanted this boy to “raise a good old-fashioned Fourth of July yell” (42). If the boy’s shout honored the spirit of 1776, then his yell would call for independence rather than presidential-appointed governors and, for the most part, a military-regime. As Gonzalez underlines, for the subsequent 30 years after the acquisition the “population [was] virtually ignored by Congress, and U.S. policy toward it [was] controlled by a handful of American sugar companies” (62). Child readers learn that the boy, quite disconcertingly perhaps, “could make just as much noise as well as his brother back in the States” (42).

*Puerto Rico: Bridge to Freedom* (1963) perhaps best captures the kind of celebratory rhetoric about progress characteristic of the post-O.B. books. The book is exceptional in that it touts a sense of U.S.-Puerto Rico camaraderie by featuring one of the only (if not the only) forewords from then-governor, Muñoz-Marín. Further, *Bridge to Freedom* emphasizes a key theme identified by Matos-Rodriquez within U.S. promises of progress by characterizing the Island as an “experimental site for U.S. capital.” Even the title highlights an international consensus at the time of Puerto Rico as a “‘bridge’ or ‘laboratory’ between the U.S. and Latin America” (Matos-Rodriquez 40). Matos-Rodriquez writes that “[t]he image of Puerto Rico as a bridge or a test case of U.S.-Latin American relations—rendered with extraordinary power from the 1940s to the 1960s

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11 The book claims to have been authored by several correspondents, although it is not clear if these are anthropologists or reporters sent to the Island after the war.
under the local leadership of the Popular Democratic Party (PPD) and recently resuscitated in a more Pan-Caribbean version—was created during the early decades of the twentieth century” (40). The image of the bridge, so prevalent within both U.S. and Puerto Rican rhetoric (a bridge between the U.S. and Latin America; a “middle way” between nation and state) extends into depictions of Puerto Rican and U.S. Puerto Rican culture. The bridge image appears to capture U.S. Puerto Rican sentiments of “betweenness” (between nations, languages, cultures) expressed by theorists and writers like Juan Ramón Jiménez, Juan Flores, and Judith Ortíz-Cofer. For example, the child characters of U.S. Puerto Rican invention often embody a bridge or portal. In chapter five, I explain how Ortíz-Cofer, in particular, speaks of “a bridge” she maneuvered between as a means of avoiding the essentialist national identities she saw as constricting her (Puerto Rican or American).

In the tradition of anthropological literature, McGuire’s *Bridge to Freedom* opens with a dedication (“TO JOHN, whose faith in the ability of free people to solve their problems inspired this book”), an acknowledgement of “the time I spent doing research in Puerto Rico,” and the prerequisite map. The inclusion of Muñoz-Marin’s forward emphasizes U.S.-Puerto Rico camaraderie, yet it also gestures toward the tradition of the native informant. Muñoz-Marin’s writing contains equal amounts of hospitality and tension. To the “young friends and readers,” he writes that “your fellow United States citizens in Puerto Rico are very like you in their passion for liberty and love of democracy” (vii). Muñoz-Marin, however, centers his argument on the cultural differences rather than the similarities between Puerto Rican and U.S. children. Again, I

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12 McGuire uses the word “middle way” to describe Puerto Rico’s status as a commonwealth (69).
highlight a desire to separate from U.S. identity as a “nothing” identity: “They differ from you largely in their cultural background. Puerto Rican children learn Spanish at their mothers’ knees, are sung to sleep with Spanish lullabies, and—as they grow older—thrill to the cadences of poets like Rubén Darío, García Lorca, and their own Llorens Torres” (vii). Clearly, Muñoz-Marin romanticizes the Puerto Rican child’s Latin American upbringing, yet his description provides a rare glimpse (and a rebel yell) for U.S. readers of a distinct Latin American culture with a separate language and literary heritage. His decision to mark this difference in language suggests a form of protest considering early U.S. educational policy toward the Island included English-only books and instruction. English textbooks dominate as the main literature of contemporary Island public school children, though Spanish remains the language of instruction. Muñoz-Marin, then, emphasizes the thriving bilingual, industrial, and progressive society imagined during the years of Operation Bootstrap. A bilingual, industrial paradise coincides with the image of the bridge, closely associating multilingualism with productivity and diplomacy, a message repeated in the bilingual performances of Manzano and the writing of Ortiz-Cofer. The Island, according to Muñoz-Marin, acts as a “working-level United Nations” and as an experiment for developing agricultural nations into industrial modernization (viii). Bridge to Freedom pictures the new highways, the city buildings, the side-by-side U.S. and Puerto Rican flags, and the urban renewal and housing projects. Puerto Rico constitutes the very definition of thriving, according to McGuire’s Bridge to Freedom and the other post-O.B. books like Regina Tor’s Getting to Know Puerto Rico (1955), Jack Manning’s Young People of Puerto Rico (1958), and Dorothy Loa McFadden’s Growing Up in Puerto Rico (1958). U.S. writers present the state of the Puerto Rican economy
and society as so entirely successful and productive that one has to wonder: “Post-O.B., how can these writers explain the steady exodus of Puerto Ricans (over 470,000 during the 1950s-1960s alone) from the Island to the mainland?”

U.S. and U.S. Puerto Rican children’s materials often reflect a kind of amnesia with regards to the Puerto Rican Diaspora. For the U.S.-produced texts, the Diaspora stands as a sobering reality. If U.S. freedom and prosperity were as readily available on the Island as stateside, why would so many opt for living stateside? What drew them? U.S. writers fall silent when it comes to explaining the discrepancy between jobs created and those coming out of agriculture seeking the new avenues in industry (Gonzalez 63).

In terms of U.S. and Island cooperation, these books also mask the Island’s role in expelling much of its population in its pursuit of progress. Indeed, as Edna Acosta-Belen writes, migration was central to “Operation Bootstrap” economic reforms created by Island policy makers, including Muñoz-Marín (77). Government officials encouraged migration as a “remedy” for overpopulation and unemployment. The Puerto Rican government packaged migration initiatives to U.S. policy makers and corporations as a means of boosting the U.S. and Island’s economy by “exporting labor.” Many Islanders traveled to the Dominican Republic, Hawaii, and the Northeastern U.S. as “exports” of cheap agricultural and factory labor. They were coaxed by free travel funded by U.S. companies and the Island government (Acosta-Belen 78-79).

Moreover, the kind of anthropological/geographical narrative of agricultural-wasteland-turned-urban-metropolis within the post-O.B. children’s books also denies any Puerto Rican presence within the U.S. According to these texts, Puerto Ricans exist only on the Island saluting the flag and driving on new expressways. They never enter
the U.S. landscape. The early folkloric account of Pura Belpré replicates this kind of amnesia, centering on desire for the nostalgic, rural past. Belpré’s Puerto Rico is a romanticized place of dreams. The stories she chooses to tell and write, for the most part, reflect an Island mythology of virgin land, Spanish heritage, jíbaro farmers, and equal space for all to dream. Puerto Ricans exist within the storied traditions of the Island, wearing traditional jíbaro garb and never set foot in the U.S. The only child character she depicts within the U.S. lives in an utter state of displacement which stunts his ability to interpret his new surroundings.\(^{13}\) Again, if the Island indeed offered such spiritual riches for children, if things were simpler, the fruit trees bigger, the sun brighter, why leave it behind? On both sides, an unarticulated trauma, veiled behind these gaps in memory, haunts the literary account. U.S. and U.S. Puerto Rican writers present the Island as a paradise of progress. The U.S. writers focus on economic/political advances. For U.S. Puerto Rican writers, the Island can stand as a source of artistic/creative progress that usurps oppressive conditions. Writers like Mohr and Ortiz-Cofer take issue with the romanticized dreams of the past. In this light, we might better understand why interventions like Mohr and Ortíz-Cofer’s are innovative. They present children with alternatives (besides forever dreaming of returning) for negotiating their position in the world.

Returning to Muñoz-Marín’s sentiments about Puerto Rican children learning poetry at their mother’s side, my dissertation analyzes poetry as a kind of metaphor for Puerto Rican bi-cultural, bilingual identity. The word poet, viewed as both a position within and without literature, also seems to capture the tension between oral and written

\(^{13}\) See Santiago (1969). For a more thorough analysis of this work, see chapter two.
culture within this U.S. Puerto Rican artistic works. Every author and artist associated with Puerto Rican children’s culture has in some way constructed Puerto Rican children as deeply artistic and poetic. Children are often associated and even compared to spoken and written verse. Someone has asked me why title this work, “Every Child is Born a Poet” as opposed to “Every Child is Born a Scientist,” suggesting that U.S. Puerto Rican works simply purport familiar notions of children as divine innocents. However, as I explore in chapter five, the ideal child character within Puerto Rican culture is actually a kind of a vengeful thief. He/she is a “hustler”—a deviant. My title is a quote from Nuyorican author and writer, Piri Thomas, who some might say published one of the most memorable works of the late 1960s-1970s Nuyorican movement, *Down These Mean Streets* (1967). Works like Thomas,’ Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero’s *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* (1975), and Pedro Pietri’s “Puerto Rican Obituary” (1973) exposed the years of inequality and the diverse talents of a U.S. “ethnic” minority previously ignored by the literary establishment. Although the scholars like Flores, Efraín Barradas, and Sánchez-González have established the over 150-year literary legacy of U.S. Puerto Rican letters, Nuyorican works remain among the most influential and memorable works. Thomas’s dedication to minority youth advocacy using his experimental style of poetry or “flows” received national attention when PBS released the documentary film *Every Child is Born a Poet: The Life and Work of Piri Thomas* (2008). The cameras show Thomas, a former prisoner of New York’s fabled Sing Sing, lecturing male youth in a San Francisco juvenile detention center about the craft of poetry. For Thomas, poetry and violence go hand in hand, he tells his audience that he discovered both at a young age: “Violence
that's what I learned 'cause I came from violence. Poetry for me was a way out. Poetry is wisdom, poetry is spiritual..Poetry comes from your heart…Poetry is what you can’t tell another person, you tell it to a piece of paper and that piece of paper goes out to another person” (PBS). In the U.S. Puerto Rican tradition, poetry ties to a form of protest that aggressively steals back what the colonizer stole first, mainly language. Children are cast as deviants who enact revenge on the colonizer. Language, as developed in chapter four and five, is not inherited, but rather something children learn to perform, manipulate, and steal. Children take phrases, lines, stories and make something viable out of the societal rubble. Rather than signaling a utopian vision of the future, the poet plunders the colonizers’ riches so as to have a more viable present. Poetry stands in as a metaphor for Puerto Rican sentiments of hybridity, translation, and colonial resistance. Interestingly, the author of *Greater America* in 1900 made a somewhat similar claim to Thomas’ when he writes that “All the Porto Ricans are poets” (43). The author’s statement seeks to describe the “singing” and “extemporaneous poems by their authors with guitar accompaniment” he/she observed during the first, U.S.-led Fourth of July festivities on the Island. This celebration evidently happened on the heels of the acquisition in 1898. Along with the young boy’s “Fourth of July yell,” organizers summoned members of the “laboring class” to contribute their artistic talents to the make-shift celebration. Considering the Puerto Rican tradition of *bomba*, itself an improvisational musical tradition of African origin rooted in challenge and protest, and considering these “poets” may have utilized Spanish as a main language for entertaining the predominantly English-speaking correspondents and military forces, this performance suggests perhaps one of the earliest acts of subversion by Puerto
Ricans toward U.S. colonialism. The poet, in Puerto Rican and U.S. Puerto Rican tradition, always steals the best words and always has the last word.

**Children’s Presses on the Island**

Approaching children’s literature as an exercise in re/creating history underlines how U.S. and U.S. Puerto Rican writers assume that child readers/audiences mainly occupy the position of pupil though with varying degrees of agency. This conception of the children’s realm as a kind of seat of historical continuity, and the importance placed on children’s materials (on both sides) as the place to initiate a narrative about the U.S.-Puerto Rico relationship, compels my project. Indeed, when Island researchers and writers present U.S. colonialism as a hindrance to the development of a national children’s literature, we find perhaps the most telling presumption: children’s literature is key to nation-building. The documentation of Island children’s literature has traditionally fallen into the hands of education officials and professors affiliated with the University of Puerto Rico, though this area needs more critical research than I am able to present here. Flor Piñeiro de Rivera’s *Un Siglo de Literatura Puertorriqueña/ A Century of Puerto Children’s Literature* (1987) and Consuelo Figueras’s “Puerto Rican Children’s Literature: On Establishing an Identity” (2000) underline relevant trends within the establishment of children’s culture on the Island. My overall project centers on U.S. Puerto Rican children’s narratives rather than a complete history of the Island, though in my final chapter I present some ways we might see these often divisive identities in a dialogue. However, I want to offer here some contextual points about the character of

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Island publications and the rocky relationship between Island children’s authors and U.S. publishers.

Previously, I emphasized that U.S. writers addressed an audience of predominately white, U.S. children. I found no record that these U.S. titles ever made it to the Island. However, it is certain that English-language children’s books and textbooks (those written originally written in English and those translated) formed part of the English-only campaign in Puerto Rico (Figueras 24). It is also possible that these titles occupied New York Public Library shelves at the time of Pura Belpré’s hire in the 1920s. U.S. writers’ continual emphasis on the lack of Puerto Rican culture may have partially triggered her interventions. Consuelo Figueras writes that translated children’s books and English textbooks comprise the bulk of children’s books and textbooks available on the Island today. Considering the U.S.’s imposition, and the Island’s 400-years under Spanish reign, any sort of Spanish-language children’s literature reflecting Island culture marks a form of U.S. colonial protest. The presence of Spanish, however, may uphold Spanish colonialism. Both Piñeiro and Figueras present Island children’s literature as “one closer to Latin American than U.S. children’s literature” (Figueras 24). They also locate the rise of Island children’s literature at the start of the twentieth-century. Figueras implies that “imported textbooks and religious” texts made up the majority of Spanish-language children’s reading materials at the end of the nineteenth century. Evidently, most Island children, outside of the very rich, had limited access to these books given the “79 percent illiteracy rate in Puerto Rico” in 1901 (24).  

15 One of the educational projects during Operation Bootstrap was the biblioteca rodante, or the “mobile library” which entered rural and impoverished areas offering library services. There was also the teatro rodante which brought stage plays and children’s theatre to similar neighborhood. Teatro Escolar became the official theatre program of Puerto Rican schools and it was mainly produced and acted by teachers.
Ironically, the first U.S. commissioner, Martin G. Brumbaugh, identified the need for more English and Spanish reading materials, although education officials mainly invested in English materials. Piñeiro and Figueras identify Manuel Fernandez Juncos, a writer Belpré cites as one of the great Island folklorists, as the main translator of children’s books from English to Spanish. Piñeiro specifies that Juncos “became the link between the departing Spanish regime and the coming American occupation” (19). One of Juncos’ greatest contributions was the Antologia puertorriqueña y verso para la literatura escolar (1907) which contains children’s poetry and folktales.

Piñeiro and Figueras mark the 1930s as the moment when Island children’s literature “began to be considered a field of its own, and the short stories, poetry, legends, dramas, and folklore were deeply rooted in the land” (25). In other words, authors began to use children’s literature as an artistic rather than a predominantly pedagogical, informational, or even folkloric platform. Piñeiro lists 1935 as the year of the Festival of Children and Poetry in Puerto Rico instituted by Spanish poet laureate, Juan Ramón Jiménez (25). Jiménez, whose influence on Island children’s literature I analyze in chapter five, is among the first to articulate fundamental ideas about the distinctive character of the Puerto Rican child, a theme that also overlaps with U.S. Puerto Rican writing. However, late nineteenth century Caribbean and Latin America writers and thinkers, perhaps because of the U.S. encroachment on the islands and the continent, such as Jose Martí (a man Piñeiro credits as “maker[] of nations and of the Hispanic American soul”) and Rubén Darío began writing children’s literature (17). Martí

and other school officials. For more information on Teatro Escolar see Manuel Moran’s dissertation The Development of Teatro Escolar, the Theatre Program of the Public Education System in Puerto Rico from 1960 to 1990 (2005)
published *La edad de oro* (1889), an Inter-American children’s magazine which Ann Gonzalez (who includes a whole chapter on this work in her study *Resistance and Survival*) specifies he “dedicated to the children of the Americas” (14). Darío, praised in Muñoz-Marín’s forward to *Bridge to Freedom* as part of the separate literary heritage marking the Puerto Rican child, partnered with Jiménez and Rabindranath Tagore, in the production of a series of poetry anthologies for Island school children titled *Versa y prosa para niños* (1935-1937). By the 1930s, Latin American writers issued a trend of crafting nationalist, “self-interpretive” sentiments expressing national character and philosophy and Puerto Rico, quite defiantly, followed suit with the 1934 publication of *Insularismo* by Antonio S. Pedreira (1934) (Flores, *Divided Borders*, 18). The rise of Latin American and Island children’s literature during the 1930s, as in the project of U.S. writers, echoes with the sense that children’s literature helps both build and dismantle nations.

U.S. publishing companies have been reluctant to publish Island children’s authors and have been wishy-washy at best when it comes to supporting the sustained publication of Island children’s materials. Moreover, although the American Library Association sponsors the Pura Belpré Medal for Best Latino Children’s Literature, no Island children’s author has ever won the top honor. From 1950 to 1990, the Department of Education operated the most successful Island children’s press to date, Editorial (Figueras 25). Editorial also published a weekly educational magazine, *Escuela*, for elementary and secondary public schools. Figueras notes that the Editorial era brought a steady number of children’s books and curriculum materials (authored by Island educators) which centered on “[t]he needs and interests of Puerto Rican
children.” Yet, she laments the Department of Education’s decision to close Editorial at the end of the 1990s. Since the handful of private children’s labels on the Island published only about one book a year from 1950 to 1990, Editorial’s closing signified a 13 percent decrease in all children’s publications. Many Island children’s writers have historically used their own private funds as a means of publishing and distributing their work. Perhaps, it is because of the low production of books that researchers like Piñeiro include U.S. Puerto Rican writers Pura Belpré and Nicholasa Mohr within Island bibliographies (again, see chapter five). The progress of Island children’s literature seems debilitated by the lack of support from U.S. companies, although a few authors continue publishing more artistic work such as Georgina Lázaro’s picture books (which won a Belpré Honor in 2010) and Rosario Ferré’s revisions of folktales.16

Even so, contemporary Island children’s literature bibliographies rely heavily on folklore and school textbooks, something I find problematic since it perpetuates children’s literature as primarily didactic and folkloric. Figueras implies that the U.S. publishing industry and the removal of children’s presses like Editorial basically resisted the development of a diverse Island children’s literature, even if the tradition preserves a rooted sense of separate Puerto Rican identity. Perhaps, no greater sentiment exists about the perceived role of children’s literature with nation and empire-building than when scholars view the stagnated development of a “national” children’s literature as a loss. However, these gaps in the development of Island children’s literature may explain why the works of Belpré and Mohr have been grafted into the Island tradition, something never before seen in adult literature, by Island representatives like Figueras and Piñeiro.

U.S. Puerto Rican children’s literature and culture has developed as a level of craftsmanship and experimentalism perhaps difficult for Island artists due to the lack of financial support provided by U.S. literary and media outlets. The dissertation chapters on U.S. Puerto Rican writers that follow this introduction emphasize the potential for creativity and experimentation within children’s materials which can resist stereotypes. Folklore, as Belpré furthers, is a rich medium and even a form of colonial protest (see chapter two). However, folklore at times perpetuates a stagnant view of culture (food, music, festivals, etc.) which U.S. Puerto Rican artists like Sonia Manzano, Sesame Street’s “Maria,” see as responsible for stereotyping children and their ethnic backgrounds. This perspective enhances how we see Nicholasa Mohr and Judith Ortíz-Cofer’s creation of Puerto Rican protagonists. In stories like Mohr’s and Ortíz-Cofer’s, we see children as actors within the U.S. landscape and not frozen within ideals of the past. Overall, the case of Puerto Rican children’s literature, and its underlying themes of nation-building, history-making, and colonial protest provokes my thinking through some fundamental questions within the present field of children’s literature and the place of children’s materials within the fields of U.S. Latino/a Studies, Latin American and Puerto Rican Studies.

At the Intersections of U.S. Latino/a Studies and Children’s Literature Studies

Children’s literature has a history of marginalization within the academy. However, the study of children’s texts and media has produced a complex, reputable field of inquiry complete with journals, conferences, and an international and interdisciplinary community of scholarship. Contemporary scholars have even begun organizing themselves into different schools of thought, such as those pursuing issues more within the social sciences realm, such as those interested in issues of a history of childhood
and education who may argue for a more pluralistic approach to children’s literature which includes the perspective of children as “real people” rather than constructions of the self. Another group may prefer literary analysis and even argue for a more liberal approach to what we see as texts so as to include different materials important within children’s culture, such as Marah Gubars recent work on children’s theatre in Artful Dodgers (2010). The increasing growth and relevancy of the field within the large scheme of literary and cultural studies has perhaps placed us in an advantageous position from which we might examine how it has developed in rather hegemonic ways. By this, I mean that when it comes to fundamental questions within the overall field of children’s literature such as “Who is ‘the child’?” “What is childhood?” “What is children’s literature?” scholars have mainly drawn on a heritage of Anglo literature to create theory. Within my own study, since what is often construed today as “children’s literature” so often concerns Anglo-British and Anglo-American writing (e.g. Romantic and Victorian literary traditions; U.S. and Canadian children’s coming-of-age narratives) I often underline such traditions as a point of comparison, as an intersection, a way we might engage other children’s literatures and rhetorics of childhood within a comparative view of children’s literature and media. Emer O’ Sullivan writes in the “Preface” to her study, Comparative Children’s Literature (2005) that “[c]hildren’s literature studies in English is mainly a monolingual phenomenon, mostly dealing with the wealth of children’s literature in English-speaking countries and referring to critical material written in English. Researchers who do not write in that language generally remain

internationally unnoticed” (x). She suggests that limiting inquiry to predominately Anglo children’s materials “neglect[s] to adequately describe and explain the crossing of linguistic and cultural borders” (1). Even with regard to scholarship emphasizing non-Anglo culture, scholars still seem to lump non-Anglo, bilingual cultures into one, homogenous “ethnic” category. In Ethnic Literary Traditions in Ethnic Children’s Literature (2009), a study that includes Latino/a and African American literature, Yvonne Atkinson and Michelle Pagni Stewart emphasize that “many of those who teach children’s literature or children’s literature courses may not have been trained in ethnic literature” (2). Atkinson and Stewart urge scholars to look at “ethnic children’s literature” as “ethnic literature first and children’s literature second” (1). Projects like O’Sullivan’s and Atkinson and Stewart’s expose the ways in which children’s literature studies has evolved as a discipline without the same kind of awareness and methodologies for complexities of nation, race, ethnicity, class, literacy, and language as other academic disciplines.

At the same time, scholars within U.S. Latino/a studies rarely consider the position of children’s texts and media within the study of historically-oppressed peoples. That is, within ethnic and postcolonial studies, children’s literature remains, for the most part, marginalized. Since Latin American and Caribbean writers also face marginalization in academic literary studies, Ann Gonzalez writes that Latin American and Caribbean children’s literature represents the “periphery of the periphery of the periphery” (2). Gonzalez specifies that Latin American children’s literature complicates Euro-American conceptions of children’s literature, for example, with regards to the agenda authors might have toward children:
Children’s literature deemed ‘subversive’ in the United States and Britain is most often any literature that has not been chosen or condoned by adults, rebellious stories that resist the good boy/good girl image. Latin American children’s literature, however, tends to be subversive in quite another sense. While U.S. and European literatures train their children to become better members of the dominant class, Latin American children, who have a long history of domination, first by Spain and then by the United States, have other lessons to learn: for example, how to resist submission or submit with dignity; how to fight the odds and insist on cultural, if not political independence; how to get what they want without appearing to so do and without angering the dominant class; how to speak through silence and have the last laugh (1).

Although Gonzalez seems to emphasize children’s literature as predominantly didactic rather than experimental/artistic, her perspective gestures for more comparative approaches to children’s literature studies. Beyond discussions about reader-response theory or the importance of access to culturally-relevant literature for minority children within U.S. Latino/a education, scholars rarely consider the place of children’s materials within the U.S. Latino/a narrative. If a prolific writer happened to publish as a children’s novelist, such as Nicholasa Mohr, it is often treated as a matter of coincidence or even as a way of marginalizing the writer’s U.S. colonial critiques. A similar example has played out in the case of Pura Belpré, a pioneer of the U.S. Puerto Rican narrative. Although she is often celebrated as the namesake of the American Library Association’s Pura Belpré Medal for Best Latino Children’s Literature, Belpré is also grossly understudied in U.S. Latino/a and Puerto Rican studies. Belpré’s children’s books represent some of the first (if not the first) published narratives of Puerto Rican history and culture in English in the United States, some of the first literature by a Latino/a author published in the States in English, yet scholars have difficulty justifying the relevance of her texts to the greater body of U.S. Puerto Rican literature. Writers like Lisa Sánchez-González, one of the first to provide a literary analysis of Belpré’s
speeches and folktales, may emphasize the literary and cultural merits of Belpré’s work, yet without a sense for how this work interacts with a larger tradition of U.S. and British children’s literature or even children’s literature by other U.S. Puerto Rican authors. Yet, as I hope to show, ignoring children’s materials within a study of historically-oppressed people fails to consider the ways in which children's literature and culture has supplied a major platform for subaltern groups.

Returning to one of those fundamental questions within the field of children’s literature and childhood studies (“Who is ‘the child’?), throughout this study, I am interested in how U.S. Puerto Rican writers create certain kinds of child characters depending on the historical, societal, and cultural issues important to the community at the time. I emphasize three child character types not as a formula or category for containing difference, but as a way of marking a progression in character development over the history of the U.S. Puerto Rican community and how this progression links with a sense of perceived community identity. Each coincides with first-generation and/or second-generation memory of the homeland, though in varying degrees. In addition, each character relates to notions of place with regard to one’s physical location in, from, and to the Island. First, there is the displaced child, a character prominent before the 1970s and perhaps best expressed by Pura Belpré in works like Santiago (1969). The displaced child is a type that always looks back at the homeland and, in so doing, never really exists within the U.S. landscape. This child may have been born in the homeland, yet all that is necessary for displacement is the inability to imagine oneself as part of the new site. The displaced child may have the tools to resist Americanization, but he/she must identify with past folk characters and within a view of culture which features a
paralyzing nostalgia. He/she longs for his/her homeland, and dreams of returning to it one day, perhaps to fight for independence or perhaps to simply take part in the dream of prospering enough financially in the U.S. so as to return and repossess those things lost (or at least perceived as lost) during migration. Second, there is the Diaspora child (abbreviation for child of the Puerto Rican Diaspora). Nicholasa Mohr, beginning her writing career in the 1970s, perhaps best expresses this child through her creation of “Nilda,” a child born in the U.S. yet possessing a second-generation memory of the homeland. The Diaspora child is the child that must dispossess the homeland by owning his/her Mainland identity. Indeed, this child claims the U.S. as the homeland. He/she demands his/her rights to promises of U.S. freedom and the American dream. The Diaspora child resists stagnant images of culture and may even participate in reinventing them, yet always in a way that locates him/her within the new site. Post-1990s, we have the rise of the third type, the Between-child, a hybrid child type alluded to since the beginning of the overall narrative (every major author involved in the U.S. Puerto Rican narrative revises this child type at some point). However, the author who best (or perhaps elaborates on the complexities of this type of child) is Judith Ortíz-Cofer. The Between-child is not just a merging of the two previous identities; he or she stands for the creation of a third culture. The Between-child chooses to claim both the U.S. and Puerto Rico as “home.” The Between-child intersects with major themes of history, artistry, poetry, translation, and hybridity within Puerto Rican culture. This child type is marked by a high-level of linguistic aptitude, particularly since this child literally acts as a translator/interpreter for adults left paralyzed by migration. This child is also characterized as a thief who steals and deals illegal “words.” He/she can perceive the
past and the future, yet occupies the present, choosing to flourish in gaps between constricting national identities. Between-children thrive on the tightrope cast over the divide, although this is never presented as the ultimate solution to the Puerto Rican plight. As I show in this chapter, though some U.S. Puerto Rican authors gesture toward an ideal future, writers like Ortíz-Cofer shows us how sometimes existing in the present (with all its dysfunction and unrest) may prove more productive than clinging to an idealized past or future.

Within my research, I revisit some familiar literary movements that make this study relevant to scholars of other disciplines and areas within literature studies. In chapter two, “Pura Belpré Lights the Storyteller’s Candle: The Rebirth of Puerto Rican Culture in the U.S.,” through my analysis of Pura Belpré’s literary and cultural work, I present a different perspective on the 1920s Harlem Renaissance. I argue that there was a Spanish Harlem Renaissance which occurred sometimes even in the same buildings and at the same time as the well-known Harlem Renaissance. U.S. Puerto Rican and other Latin American immigrants and migrants converged at the New York Public Library (even the 135th Street Branch, a landmark of the Harlem Renaissance, today known as the Schomburg Center for Black Culture). As Arturo Schomburg (a Black Puerto Rican) concentrated building an archive of global African heritage, I argue that Belpré (also Black Puerto Rican) decided to build an archive of oral and written folktales in order to refute stereotypes about the culturally-deprived Puerto Rican migrants. Children’s culture acted as a catalyst for this “renaissance” where U.S. Puerto Ricans and other Latin American immigrants (of varying races) came to the 135th Street and 115th Street Branches to hear stories, poetry, and participate in plays and festivals.
celebrating their heritage. Yet, perhaps because they didn’t fit a particular racial category, we don’t remember this renaissance. Or perhaps because they weren’t speaking English, we don’t consider it part of our U.S. literary heritage. I also use the word “renaissance” to imply a “re-birth” in that Belpré may have believed her cultural work re-established Island identity (as tied to a nationalist tradition of folktales) within the U.S.

In chapter three, “Nicholasa Mohr Writes Back: A Diaspora Child in a Garden of Multiculturalism,” I reconsider issues of class and race within constructs of Puerto Rican folktales and the British and Anglo-American “Golden Age of Children’s Literature.” How has the children’s bookshelf (those legendary tales that shape our early reading) acted as a mirror for historically-oppressed peoples? What does it mean for an author to say that he/she did not exist in literature? In children’s literature? How do minorities appropriate and remake Golden Age typology such as “wonderlands” and “secret gardens”? Nicholasa Mohr’s Nilda and El Bronx Remembered invite us to consider how a child of the Puerto Rican Diaspora might remake certain folkloric traditions and Golden Age tropes. For example, Mohr appropriates the symbol of “the secret garden” within Frances Hodgson Burnett’s The Secret Garden (1910). In Burnett’s story, Mary Lennox cultivates an abandoned “secret garden” as a means of claiming her English heritage after years of living as an ex-patriot in colonial India. Mohr uses Nilda’s “secret garden” (which Nilda finds in an upstate New York summer camp) as a means of making a statement about U.S. identity (i.e. “I am an American”). The case of Nicholasa Mohr as a children’s author also asks us to consider the marginalization of children’s
literature and how, perhaps, publishing authors as “children’s novelists” may have acted as a way of limiting colonial critiques.

Because language is such an integral part of Puerto Rican and U.S. Puerto Rican identity, chapter four and chapter focus on specific issues of language, bilingualism, and translation. In chapter four, “The Letter of the Day is Ñ: A Girl Named Maria, Sesame Street’s Language Pedagogy and Multilingual Children’s Culture,” I analyze the rise of children’s educational television during the late-1960s into the 1970s and beyond. Jim Henson, Joanne Cooney, and the staff of the Children’s Television Workshop (today known as the Sesame Street Workshop) created a kind of televised Head Start program that would reach disadvantaged, minority pre-schoolers. African-American and Puerto Rican inner-city youth made up the initial target audience for this educational experiment supported by the Public Broadcasting Service. At the time, middle-class America had received a steady influx of scandalous news stories and popular culture portrayals about U.S. Puerto Rican migrants and their “culture of poverty” in the inner city.\[18\] The Children’s Television Workshop created the character of “Maria,” a kind of bilingual muse of communication that would reach the youngest members of this U.S. community. Sonia Manzano, one of the first Latinas on television, not only plays “Maria,” but she also branches out as a staff writer, challenging the show and the audience’s constructs of Puerto Rican and Latino/a culture. A study of Sesame Street allows me to think through the show’s language pedagogy, particularly how the show negotiates language diversity. I direct attention to the differences between the way Spanish (and other alternate U.S. languages) are presented on children’s television versus children’s

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\[18\] Oscar Lewis, The Culture of Poverty
literature. In other words, what about television and performance allows for perhaps a more liberal expression of bilingual/multilingual identity? I also highlight and complicate Sesame Street’s dependence on performance itself as a kind of universal language for children.

In chapter five, “The Children of ‘Stepmother’ English: Judith Ortíz-Cofer and the Rise of the Between-child,” I ask us to consider the boundaries surrounding national literatures (i.e. geographical, linguistic) through my discussion of Judith Ortíz-Cofer and the Between-child. The Between-child is that child who challenges national associations and acts as a language interpreter, and thus an interpreter of history and culture for adults. This chapter asks us to consider the study of multilingual texts within “English” literature. Is a text written in mixture of Spanish (or any other language) and English still part of our American story? Ortíz-Cofer forces a consideration of English as the “stepmother” of many progenies. These progenies have changed the landscape of the field of English literature so much so that it is now necessary (in order to progress as a field of inquiry) to have English’s progenies “translate” for mother English. What does it mean to be the “stepchild” of the English language? In terms of children’s literature, how does the figure of the Between-child (a kind of prophet, poet, historian, and messiah figure) help us understand the place of children’s literature and stories of childhood through the progression of the Puerto Rican narrative? Within this chapter, I uncover the roots of the Between-child in Puerto Rican literature through my discussion of Puerto Rican children’s theory and Juan Ramón Jiménez, the Spanish poet laureate who wanted to establish an accessible, high quality children’s literature for Island children.
Jiménez imagined children as the commanders of a “kingdom of poetry” – children helped create a literature “above” national associations.

Overall, my goal is to present the case of Puerto Rican children’s literature as a case study for how we can begin participating in more comparative conversations about childhood, literature, and culture. The case of Puerto Rican children’s literature highlights how the literary histories of multilingual and multiracial peoples can fall off our radar as literary historians. For example, in the next chapter about Pura Belpre, I begin with a discussion of a picture-book, *The Storyteller’s Candle* (2008) by Lucia Gonzalez celebrating Belpre’s work in East Harlem. The illustrations by Lulu Delacre contain all the endearing images of Belpre, migrant children, and their parents that one might expect. However, Delacre’s decision to use actual newspaper clippings from the 1930s and incorporate these clippings within the illustrations provokes me to think about history similarly – as a kind of snapshot. My project asks us to think about who or what has been excluded from the frame of U.S. literary history. What do we leave out when we leave out children’s histories and those who told their history through children’s media? It turns out that history is a lot like a children’s book, and that children’s books have quite a bit to say about history.
CHAPTER 2
PURAS BELPRÉ LIGHTS THE STORYTELLER’S CANDLE: THE RE-BIRTH OF PUERTO RICAN CULTURE IN THE U.S.

In September 2010, El Museo del Barrio, Manhattan’s Latino/a-centered museum and repository, featured performances of The Storyteller’s Candle, based on Lucia Gonzalez’s 2008 picture-book about storyteller, librarian, and children’s folklorist Pura Belpré. Through a blend of storytelling and puppetry, Belpré’s retellings of Puerto Rican folklore once again rose to life in Spanish Harlem. The story centers on Belpré’s lighting of the storyteller’s candle at the New York Public Library and the ritual’s significance for a community living on the fringes of society. The play and picture-book, like the American Library Association’s Pura Belpré Medal, memorialize Belpré as a legendary trailblazer and heroine within her own American fable, a legacy she welcomed by calling herself the “Puerto Rican Johnny Appleseed.” As a storyteller, the role perhaps closest to her heart and one she occupied as a kind of weaver of history, Belpré’s retellings of Island folklore reframed the past for children, directing their gaze away from economic, urban disparities and onto a majestic Island of dreams—a place where el pueblo always found clever ways to triumph over oppression. Perhaps no other literary figure provides a better illustration of how attempts to capture historical memory (whether artistic or scholarly), as Juan Flores writes, “only uncovers new breaks and new exclusions” (Flores 49). Those who study Pura Belpré, her many faces and revisions, are forever coming up to her only to lose sight of her once more.

Belpré’s story is one rich in contradiction. Her storytelling and folklore played a central role in the evolution of the U.S. Puerto Rican settlement in New York; however, her position within literary studies remains enigmatic. Julio Hernandez-Delgado’s “Pura Teresa Belpré, Storyteller and Pioneer Puerto Rican Librarian” (1992) and Lisa
Sánchez-González’s chapter “A Boricua in the Stacks” in Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora (2001) are pioneer scholarly works on Belpré. Those efforts portray Belpré as a woman whose revolutionary efforts in children’s literacy and activism directly influenced U.S. Puerto Rican and Latino/a culture from the 1920s to 1980s. Her consideration within any canon, U.S. Puerto Rican or otherwise, however, has been limited given that, with the exception of a young adult novel, Firefly Summer (1996), Belpré’s children’s books and papers remain out-of-print or unpublished respectively. Her status as a black Puerto Rican in 1920-30s Harlem also contributes to the perplexity surrounding her legacy, since Belpré complicates traditional approaches to studying race and the Harlem Renaissance (Nuñez 54). In addition, Belpré’s use of children’s culture as her medium of expression complicates her critical assessment because, as Jose L. Padilla writes, though “Belpré’s work should interest scholars of Puerto Rican diasporic literature,” children’s literature “is not usually included among the more traditional literary canon and rarely, if ever, within ethnic literary studies” (93). Indeed, no one has considered Belpré from the perspective of children’s literature – an enormous oversight given her dedication to children and her work in NYPL children’s rooms at a critical moment during advances within both U.S. children’s publishing and U.S. Puerto Rican ideology in Spanish Harlem.

By studying Belpré’s unpublished papers and her published children’s texts, I analyze some of the breaks surrounding her memory in an attempt to gain a clearer portrait of her role in the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Beyond the fable, I am interested in what Belpré believed her work accomplished. I explore how Belpré participated within

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1 This novel was recovered from her archives; it was probably written around WWII, but was never published because of a “paper shortage.”
U.S. literary traditions while also using them as a means of subversion. I also examine her revival of Island traditions as symbolic of a rebirth of Puerto Rican identity within the U.S. I explore Belpré’s movements within two literary contexts during her early career at the NYPL: the Harlem Renaissance and children’s literature. Within these literary contexts, I analyze Belpré’s storytelling (with a lit storyteller’s candle) at the NYPL, her preservation of Puerto Rican folklore, and her belief that her sowing of folktales within Puerto Rican children resembled the activity of U.S. folk hero, Johnny Appleseed. The 1920-30s, as Juan Flores, Virginia Sanchez-Korrol, and Efraín Barradas have written, coincide with the first phase of migration and the forming of a colonia within Harlem which later progressed into other neighborhoods within Lower Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. Belpré’s rhetoric on Puerto Rican childhood and folklore occupied a prominent place within a strong Harlem network of cultural, literary, and civil liberties organizations which upheld “lo puertorriqueño.” During a Spanish Harlem Renaissance, Belpré’s revival of Island folklore nurtured children and adults with a sense of cultural citizenship within a displaced Puerto Rican cultural nation. She supplied this early community with enduring rhetorical and imaginative structures which encouraged their development into a non-assimilating U.S. identity. Her vision of storytelling and folklore as a process of seed-sowing, the very definition of diaspora,

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2 Edna Acosta-Belen and Virginia Sanchez-Korrol’s introduction to Jesus Colon’s The Way it Was and Other Writing’s describe “lo puertorriqueño” as “the Puerto Rican character.” This community’s investment in building a strong network served as a means of asserting identity and protecting civil liberties (16).

3 Renato Rosaldo’s term refers to the “right to belong be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one’s right to belong, in the sense of participating in the nation-state’s democratic process” (57).

4 I borrow Pedro Malavet’s idea of “cultural nationhood,” something he considers only within the Island. The reality that neither Island Puerto Ricans nor U.S. Puerto Ricans can claim “Puerto Rican” citizenship underlies the idea of a cultural nation. That is, that culture itself can transcend geographic and legal definitions of nationhood (25).
provides an invaluable context for understanding how U.S. Puerto Rican and Nuyorican ideology evolved, perhaps as a result of her planting, into the kinds of defiant, dual-identity expressions asserted by Nuyorican authors during the 1960-70s.

From the children’s room, Belpré revived Island traditions such as the Three Kings Day Festival and folk characters like “Juan Bobo,” helping create an environment where newly migrated Puerto Ricans (and other Spanish-speaking immigrants) viewed the NYPL as a hub for storytelling, lectures and poetry readings. However, beyond the children’s room, she viewed folklore as a project for harvesting subsequent generations of Boricuas. The first Puerto Rican author to publish a literary work in the U.S. as early as 1931, Belpré marks an imagined progression from the rural Island jibaro to the hybrid (though perhaps reluctant) Nuyorican found in her final children’s book, Santiago (1969). Yet, she believed the revival of Island folklore, born anew in English, was imperative for the creation of a U.S. identity. The birth/rebirth of a new Puerto Rican identity within the U.S. meant recreating the Island’s 400-year history which resisted the dominant U.S. view of Puerto Ricans as vagrant, culturally deprived newcomers, even as it upheld certain forms of Spanish colonialism. Much of Belpré’s folklore demonstrated modes of resistance against colonization for those oppressed, such as craftiness/trickery and civil disobedience.

Belpré’s location within children’s literature is no coincidence. She entered the NYPL’s literary scene when the library promoted storybooks and folktales as symbolic fixtures within an imagined global community for children. Yet, as early as 1899, American-produced children’s texts had already taken the lead in introducing Puerto Ricans as a new, curious group of “American” citizens. By establishing a U.S. Puerto
Rican children’s culture, Belpré could “write back” to this tradition of U.S.-produced texts – children’s culture provided a virtual (and sometimes actual) theatre for acting out a deeply nationalist project which proved the existence of Puerto Rican history prior to the American invasion in 1898. Belpré, as I will show, encouraged children to defy assimilation along with the textual and national boundaries created by the dominant culture. Her emphasis on storytelling, theatre, and puppetry rather than solely literature, reveals a revolutionary strategy against U.S. colonization.

**Belpré’s Harlem: A Tale of Two Renaissances**

*The Storyteller’s Candle* opens with an illustration by Lulu Delacre of a Puerto Rican mother and her two bundled-up, children walking through the cold streets of East Harlem. Gonzalez’s narration frames the picture: “Winter was harsh for the people of *El Barrio*… [but] Pura Belpré brought the warmth and beauty of Puerto Rico to the children of *El Barrio*” (2). The book places Belpré within the context of the Great Depression, however, Belpré’s unpublished papers and interviews illustrate that her Harlem was also once the Harlem of Langston Hughes and Arturo (sometimes referred to as Arthur) Schomburg. During the 1920-30s, Hughes emerged as one of the more recognizable poets of the Harlem Renaissance, while Schomburg’s archival projects, as Efraín Barradas writes, made him “an intellectual guide…and hero[] of black Americans” (11). Unlike Hughes but similar to Belpré, Schomburg was born a black-Puerto Rican, migrated to New York in the first migration,5 and worked as a librarian at the 135th Street NYPL. Belpré’s activities at the 135th Street Branch, and her interactions with Harlem

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5 The first migration of Puerto Ricans (1920-1930s) from the Island to New York begins after the Jones Act in 1917 made Puerto Ricans American citizens. Many working-class Puerto Ricans migrated from the Island at the time and received special ID cards proving their citizenship.
Renaissance figures like Schomburg and Catherine Allen Latimer, also a children’s librarian, emphasize how Puerto Ricans and African Americans developed into a community in Central Harlem that often participated in “interracial cooperation” (Nuñez 54). Victoria Nuñez writes that “American memory” historically memorializes Spanish (East) Harlem, Brooklyn, and the South Bronx as “Puerto Rican” and Central Harlem as “African American.” Yet, Belpré’s “memories of the community in Central Harlem highlight the partiality of the existing memory” (63). Early Puerto Rican migrants, of varying races, may have seen Harlem as a welcoming neighborhood. Belpré, in an oral history, narrates this sense of cooperation:

[At the 135th Street Branch] It was meeting an entirely different group of children. After having been acquainted with the blacks there…I did a lot of dramatic work. I had Reading Clubs, and I was very happy there. It was an enrichment that I’ve never forgotten. It was brand new to me coming from a Spanish tradition, to have this open door of black literature and black activities. (10)

Belpré’s experience in theatre and reading clubs for both black and Puerto Rican children highlights how easily it might have been to identify as African American during this time. Such racial categories have perhaps veiled our ability to see her activity within the traditional narrative of the Harlem Renaissance. Schomburg and Belpré’s tenure at the 135th Street Branch overlaps, yet, today the library has been renamed the Schomburg Center for Black Culture while Belpré’s legacy remains, not so much unnoticed as unresolved in the minds of literary scholars. Barradas writes that Schomburg’s “entry – [his] assimilation – into the culture of U.S. blacks represented the road many other Caribbean emigrants would see, much later, as a solution to the identity crisis with which they were confronted in the United States” (11). Though Belpré writes that she moved within the same circles of “the Black Renaissance” and witnessed
“the beginning of the now Schomburg collection come into being,” she resisted assimilation into black culture, always identifying as Puerto Rican (qtd. in Nuñez 63). Belpré’s recollections of Schomburg reveal that, when she spoke with him at the library, she did so in Spanish (Nuñez 69).

Schomburg and Belpré share a common interest in the preservation of culture, although their cultural preferences and approaches to using the library help contrast the “renaissances” in which they would participate. First, both Schomburg and Belpré viewed historical preservation as a means of disproving cultural inferiority. The NYPL hired Schomburg in 1926 as the curator of his collection of cultural artifacts (literature, art, music, etc.) which he believed refuted notions of African inferiority. The collection, similar to the cultural activities associated with the Harlem Renaissance, created a space within the U.S. for the celebration of black culture and a more unified black identity. By contrast, hired by head librarian Ernestine Rose in 1921, Belpré possessed an unwritten “archive” of word-of-mouth Puerto Rican folktales which became a practical asset to Rose as she rushed to accommodate the increasing Puerto Rican population arriving in Central Harlem, as Belpré recounts: “…Ernestine Rose…noticing a ‘Bodega’ (grocery story) and a ‘Barbería’ (barber shop) suddenly appearing in the community, thought the best thing to do was to secure the services of a Spanish-speaking assistant” (López and Belpré 88-89). Her use of terms like “bodega” and “barberia” emphasize the changing local colors and character of Harlem. Belpré’s unwritten archive created a space in the library for newly arrived Puerto Rican migrants who, unlike Black Americans, had no tangible artifacts within reach that gave them a sense of history or identity. In terms of U.S. or world history, the Puerto Rican migrant arriving in New York
City did so with a virtual blank slate of history and a nebulous racial identity, making assimilation, even into a minority culture, tempting. Belpré’s decision to identify as Puerto Rican and support the development of a colonia within Harlem meant she denied this temptation but also took on the daunting task of filling in history. As she understood it, creating a Puerto Rican identity within the U.S. meant bridging a gap in history. In addition, Belpré and other migrants’ celebration of Puerto Rican culture, as opposed to what was perceived as “Black” culture, meant resisting a language barrier which may have veiled the elements of resistance and renaissance in their efforts.6

Second, Schomburg and Belpré’s professional roles within the NYPL also help contrast the Black and Spanish Harlem communities with regard to age and gender. Schomburg’s work in preservation, and the space he was assigned at the NYPL, centered on creating cultural pride in the adult community, while Belpré, hired to assist both Spanish-speaking adults and children, generated cultural pride mainly from the children’s room. The children’s room within the library was a newly established institutional professional space. Belpré’s designation as a “child” librarian reflects a tradition within both U.S. and Puerto Rican society that women should work with children. Interestingly, this “women’s work,” created opportunities for Belpré, beyond those of her male, Puerto Rican contemporaries, to publish with major companies like Harper & Row and Frederick Warne, since, at the time, women like Anne Carroll Moore and Mary Gould Davis, both influential in Belpré’s publishing and library career,

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6 Puerto Rican studies scholars have established the existence of a core of Puerto Rican writers within the U.S. before what seems like a 1960s-1970s explosion of Nuyorican literature. Juan Flores, Edna Acosta-Belen and Lisa Sanchez-Gonzalez present writers such as Bernardo Vega, Jesus Colon, Pura Belpre and Luisa Capetillo within the early U.S. settlement. Placing early writers like Belpre within contexts like the Harlem Renaissance and children’s literature help illuminate the literary beginnings of this community.
expanded children’s librarianship into a powerful role within the children’s literary world (Eddy 7). Belpré’s librarianship showcases the capacity for influence and resistance within this “gendered” sphere.

While Schomburg’s collection might inspire a sense of cultural pride within black children, the collection was mainly an adult space for scholars and writers. Yet, outside of Schomburg’s collection at the NYPL, as Kate Capshaw Smith observes in *Children’s Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (2006), Harlem Renaissance thinkers and writers such as W.E. B. DuBois and Hughes valued children’s literature as a means of “training…a generation of ‘New Negroes’…[and part of] community galvanization, militancy, and racial pride” (xvii). DuBois, for example, published a children’s literary magazine, *The Brownies Book* (1920-1921) which “spotlighted the special role of the child to the movement for black social progress and artistic distinction” (Smith 1). Certainly, black children in Harlem also had a children’s librarian, Augusta Baker, hired at the 135th Street Branch in 1937, who built a professional friendship with Belpré and wrote the foreword to Belpré’s first collection of folklore, *The Tiger and the Rabbit* (1944). Smith, however, asserts that other influential Harlem writers shared in the project of writing for children as well as adults. Within this early Spanish Harlem community, no other Puerto Rican migrant authors directed their artistic and literary efforts toward instilling cultural pride in children, at least not during this burgeoning era. This is not to say that early Puerto Rican migrant authors such as Bernardo Vega⁷ and

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Jesus Colón⁸ did not consider Puerto Rican children important. However, Belpré’s work with children, as opposed to the “adult” work of writers such as Colón, a friend and fellow community activist, might signal further gender distinctions between the patriarchal Puerto Rican and African American culture. More importantly, given the lapse in publication between Belpré and Colón (exactly 30 years), it appears that the Puerto Rican community had more difficulty building a published repertoire of artists and writers that would represent this early community. Belpré, as the only author to publish during this period under a major label, is the exception among her contemporaries, highlighting children’s literature’s significance as a literary forum for a relatively disenfranchised community.⁹ Moreover, the open door granted to Belpré within the publishing world, as opposed to her “radical” compatriots, uncovers children’s literature as a subversive medium for nationalist and even revolutionary rhetoric.¹⁰ The lack of literary publications proclaiming Puerto Rican pride and solidarity, however, minimizes this early community’s memory as a thriving, artistic group within Harlem’s renaissance. However, as I show, Belpré’s storytelling and writing at the library evidences how Puerto

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⁸ Jesus Colón’s *A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches* (1961) is also studied among the first accounts of Puerto Rican life in the United States. Like Vega, Colón writes about the early PR settlement but his work was not published until 1961.

⁹ Schomburg and Colón published essays in newspapers before Belpré published with Warne in 1931; however, Belpré is the first to publish a literary publication in English in the United States during this period. Colón’s newspaper writing (*Justicia*, *Gráfico*, etc.) exemplifies other writing outlets for this community during this time.

¹⁰ Schomburg was an avid socialist while Colón, a member of the communist party, was under investigation by the House Committee on Un-American Activities during the 1950s. Belpré, a proclaimed nationalist though not a socialist or communist, avoided these investigations although the “American-ness” of her project in children’s literature is certainly questionable. For more on children’s literature as a politically subversive medium see Alison Lurie’s *Don’t Tell the Grow-ups* (1990) and Julia Mickenburg’s *Learning from the Left* (2005).
Rican migrants participated in a cultural revival, although at times in non-textual ways, taking part in their own Spanish Harlem Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance and its emphasis on children’s culture impressed Belpré which, in turn, impacted the NYPL’s Puerto Rican and Spanish-speaking patrons. As a newly arrived migrant, Belpré said she “found [her] profession” after visiting the 115th Street Branch with her sister. Upon entering the reading room, Belpré noticed then librarian, Catherine Allen Latimer, assisting a group of teenagers: “As I watched them the thoughts of my friends in the island made me feel lonely for the first time. I thought, ‘If I could do what this lady is doing for the rest of my life, I would be the happiest person on the earth” (López and Belpré 88). In her rhetoric, Belpré usually equates storytelling with community and a sense of home. She describes Latimer’s offering of books to young people as a kind of provision of spiritual subsistence. As she observed Latimer, her “profession” became clear: to create a home for herself and Harlem’s Puerto Rican community within the library.¹¹ As the library’s first Spanish-assistant, Belpré landed a position she could define and it is clear that Latimer and Rose’s emphasis on the library as a center for community organization and artistic expression influenced her.

Belpré’s hiring formed part of Rose’s integration of the 135th Street library staff in recognition of the thriving African American and Puerto Rican communities. Moore, as head librarian of the main Fifth Avenue branch, also “prided herself on multicultural hiring practices”¹² (Eddy 44). Nuñez questions the NYPL’s “commitment to integration beyond the 135th Street” since it seems the 135th Street Branch developed into “a ghetto

¹¹ Sanchez-Gonzalez also writes that Belpré, through her fiction and library programs, created a “home for children of color” (9).

¹² Eddy writes that these inclusive hiring practices were possible perhaps because “funding from the children’s room derived from the reference department rather than public funds” (44).
for people of color interested in library services” (68). The ghettoization of the library with regard to minority patrons and librarians suggests a similar ghettoization of the children’s rooms and, in turn, children’s literature. Indeed, Harlem children and beloved storytellers like Augusta Baker and Pura Belpré may have rarely ventured to Fifth Avenue’s main children’s room and patrons would not likely find texts on black and Latino culture within the main branches’ shelves. The NYPL and influential “bookwomen” like Moore pioneered this by-neighborhood approach to children’s library services. Though somewhat ideal in terms of personalization, neighborhood specificity also meant that the children’s rooms, the librarians, and the children’s texts were divided by race and socioeconomics. Considering that the NYPL and Moore’s policies, as Jacquelyn Eddy writes, set foundational trends in the emerging U.S. children’s literary world of the 1920s-1930s, it is interesting that even today, specialized children’s literature and activities, including special prizes for black or Latino children’s literature like the Belpré Medal, repeat a similar pattern that signals inclusiveness though not necessarily equality. Even so, Rose’s leadership has been credited with transforming the 135th Street Branch into the “intellectual pulse of Harlem” (Lewis 105). The 135th Street Branch, as Nuñez writes, became the center of Harlem culture and “sponsored readings and lectures by the important writers of the day, including Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon Johnson” (64). Nuñez suggests that, at the 135th Street branch, Belpré witnessed “a model” for a library’s potential in a “community’s cultural life.” I suggest she used this model to support a rebirth of Puerto Rican culture,

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13 Nuñez writes that when another librarian of color, Regina Andrews, applied for work of the NYPL, she was told to apply directly to the 135th Street Branch were she was employed. Rose would later have to defend her hiring practices at the branch after the Amsterdam News published a story stating that the NYPL would not offer African Americans jobs at any other library branches (68).
first at the 135th Street Branch through her storytelling, and, later, at the 115th Street Branch in 1929 which truly became, as Hernandez-Delgado writes, “the cultural mecca of the Spanish-speaking community of New York City” (431).

Belpré, narrating her arrival at the 115th Street branch, portrays her 1930s East Harlem neighborhood as one in which it would have been difficult to ignore the professional and creative presence of immigrants and migrants. As she frames it, “[The Puerto Rican migrant and Latin American immigrants ‘barrio’ covered] Eighth Avenue. Seventh. Lenox. And extending then almost to Fifth. But it was a Renaissance. It was the Renaissance, the Spanish Renaissance…It was Hispanic America around there…You walked the neighborhood itself. You walked up from that 116th Street, and you saw signs. You saw, you know, doctors, oculists.” (Belpré, Reminiscences, 12). Her description of this early group contrasts with the tendency to portray Puerto Rican migrants as wholly impoverished economically and academically. Belpré’s listing of the streets, particularly one such as Lenox Avenue, a well-known Harlem Renaissance center, signals her paralleling of the two communities’ revivals. Her reference to this group as “Hispanic America” underlines the community’s relevance to U.S. literary and cultural history. This was a barrio in which budding and renowned Latin American artists, poets, and actors shared their latest projects at the 115th Street Branch, the Grace Aguilar Branch, and other Spanish Harlem venues (such as El Club Obrero Chileno) to partake in this neighborhood’s renaissance. With Rosa Zubillago, the adult librarian at the 115th Street Branch, Belpré “collaborated” in the creation of “magnificent” theatre, poetry, and storytelling programs for Latino/a patrons. For example, she helped organized poetry readings by Chilean poet, Gabriela Mistral (19). Delgado emphasizes
that “it was not uncommon for such popular figures as…muralist Diego Rivera, or Puerto Rican tenor Antonio Paoli to visit the library and provide free public lectures” (430).\textsuperscript{14} A 1940s flyer from Belpré’s personal collection announces the reading of “la gran poetisa/ the great poetess) and Puerto Rican “mensajera/messenger” Julia de Burgos.\textsuperscript{15}

Through the speeches and essays she read at the NYPL, Belpré was a messenger in her own right. Her rhetoric played an integral part of the renaissance. Her unpublished writings represent some of the earliest work by a U.S. Puerto Rican interpreting the origins and intricacies of Island culture to U.S. audiences. Before the notion of “Puerto Rican Studies” or “Latino Studies,” Belpré lectured on topics such as folklore, children’s education, and puppetry as a way of introducing English and Spanish–speaking audiences to Puerto Rico, the origin of thousands of the newest New Yorkers. Such audiences may have only heard of the Island through newspapers and children’s books describing a chaotic, racially-ambiguous, and history-less land. A skilled orator, she often began her lectures with questions directing audiences to the nuances of Island traditions:

What is folklore? It is his [the Puerto Rican child’s] cultural heritage, ancient heritage which represent three races the Mongolian by the Taino Indian, the Caucasian by the Spanish Conquistador and the Negro by the African. A rich folklore preserved and polished by the creative telling and retelling of a people who endowed it with pure Puerto Rican charactericks [sic]. The merging of these three cultures represents the Puerto Rican culture. (“Folklore of the Puerto Rican Child” speech 1)

\textsuperscript{14} Nuñez also suggests that activities such the poetry and art gatherings at the 115\textsuperscript{th} Street Branch “beg[an] to play a role in the Spanish-speaking community similar to that being played by the 135\textsuperscript{th} Street Branch in the Black community” (67).

Belpré’s representation of the harmony between the three races is itself an oversimplification of Island national mythology; yet, it resists the “blank slate” mythology purported by U.S. writers after the Spanish-American War. Belpré’s emphasis on “pure Puerto Rican characteristics” gestures toward the kind of self-interpretative rhetoric sweeping Latin-America during the 1930s. Yet, she adds the revolutionary element of expressing Puerto Ricanness stateside and in English, which challenges elements of both traditional Puerto Rican nationalism (e.g. Spanish-only) and U.S. nationalism (e.g. English only).  

Interestingly, although other U.S. Puerto Rican writers may have written mainly for adults, Belpré’s focus on Latin American heritage and children connects with similar projects in the Caribbean and on the continent. Indeed, this Spanish Renaissance, with organizers/writers like Belpré at the helm and the vai’vien of such reputed Latin American artists into the NYPL parallels the spirit of the Generación del ’30/The ’30s Generation, an intellectual movement in Puerto Rico (and really much of Latin America at the time) underlined by Island scholar Mercedes Lopez-Baralt in her introduction to Antionio Pedreira’s Insularismo (1931). This ’30s Generation, including Pedreira and Burgos, expressed the trauma of 1898 and “lived through the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe, the Spanish Civil War, and the great Depression of 1929” (11). Baralt writes that this group was compelled to “pensar la patria” (literally, thinking through the issues of the nation). Within an increasingly U.S. dominated Caribbean and continent, philosophizing Latin American nationhood became an

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16 For more on Latin American rhetoric during the 1930s, please see my discussion in the first chapter along with Juan Flores Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity (1980) and Ann Gonzalez’s Resistance and Survival: Children’s Narratives from Latin America and the Caribbean (2010).

17 The comings and goings- “Vai’vien” is a Spanish slag term for constant back-and-forth movement. It has its roots in the Puerto Rican community’s migration back and forth between the Island and the U.S.
urgency. This urgency compelled writers such as Jose Martí, Rubén Darío, and Juan Ramón Jiménez to author distinctly Latin American poetry and prose for children. As in Belpré’s reference to “Hispanic America,” Belpré’s stateside nationalist rhetoric highlights the U.S. as a relevant site for discussing Latin American and Caribbean identity within a vision of “the Americas.” Belpré’s lectures highlight how the arts, the desire to self-interpret, the children’s realm, and the assertion of a unified, community identity work together within a cultural renaissance.

**Storytelling without a Storybook**

Belpré first lit the storyteller’s candle, a library-wide tradition, at the 135th Street Branch within the context of the Harlem Renaissance.\(^1^8\) I consider Belpré’s candle lighting at the 135th Street Branch as a symbolic ritual that signaled the birth of Puerto Rican narratives within the United States.\(^1^9\) Belpré’s candle lighting also underlines some presumptions about the role of storytellers in an urban metropolis. As a role, the storyteller highlights the tensions between orality and textuality, between rural and industrial life. In Belpré’s case, we see how she inhabits this role as a means of challenging notions of child literacy (i.e. storytelling required a published text) and even history. Belpré’s duties as librarian (shelving books, translating for patrons, etc.) placed her on the frontlines of the emerging *colonia*, an ideal location for surveying the lack of Puerto Rican and other Latino literary representations. She possibly encountered texts such as *Greater America* (1900) or *The Motor Girls on Water’s Blue* (1915), both of

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\(^1^8\) Sanchez- Gonzalez’s chapter on Belpré contains a detailed discussion of Belpré’s storytelling activities at the 115th Street Branch, however, like Nuñez, I emphasize that Belpré began her storytelling career at the 135th Street branch and then carried her experiences eastward into Harlem.

\(^1^9\) Delacre’s cover illustration of “La Señora Belpré” lighting a red wishing candle while two Puerto Rican children look on, one holding Belpré’s first publication, *Perez and Martina* (1931), capitalizes on the warmth and mystique of the candle as a symbol in Belpré’s hands.
which represent the Island as a U.S. commodity. Given her outrage over “racist” illustrations appearing in an edition of one of her Juan Bobo publications, Belpré likely experienced a similar outrage while viewing the demeaning portrayals of Puerto Ricans in such U.S. children’s texts (Belpré “Letter to Margaret Bedan” 1).

Anne Carroll Moore’s philosophy for librarianship presented Belpré, who had witnessed the library’s potential for the African American community, with a model for resistance against dominant ideologies, including U.S. nationalism and child education. Throughout her essays, Belpré credits Moore, along with Rose and Gould, with a “vision” of the library and children’s storytelling as a gateway into U.S. culture. Belpré, however, carefully specified that this “vision” allowed “the convergence, and mutual respect for the two cultures” (Belpré “NY Public Library and Folklore” 1). Librarianship, as Belpré learned, could provide a community with forms of resisting assimilation and prejudice. Belpré received extensive training, including an internship organized by Moore that developed “interbranch familiarity” and a required written research paper (Eddy 45). She learned Moore’s criteria for selecting the “best books” for children: creative, imaginative texts promoting internationalism as opposed to informational or moralizing literature. Ideal books included fairytales and folklore that introduced children to world cultures. Moore’s book selection and institution of a NYPL-wide storytelling program opposed several children’s education trends during the 1920s, such as post-World War I U.S. nationalism and the scientific, psychology-centered “child guidance” movement. Moore avidly refused scientific approaches to children and their literature, claiming instead that fairytales, folklore, and poetry nurtured the child’s humanity along

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Eddy writes that “Recalling prewar America with more nostalgia than reality warranted, many Americans embraced ‘100% Americanism’ during the 1920s” (92).
with their “intellectual honesty and spiritual clarity” (qtd. in Eddy 114). Through the proper literature, the child learned to approach society as a member of a global community. The female librarian, possessing a “natural,” as opposed to scientific, knowledge of children, nurtured a wonder and love for reading in children.

Moore’s preference for storytelling and folklore as naturalistic, remnants of the past, as Jacqueline Eddy writes, suggests a “critique of modernity” (92). NYPL storytellers literally drew the curtains on the outside world. By lighting the candle, a symbol of antiquity and imagination, the storyteller defied the structured, utilitarian “school room” (qtd. in Dain 70). Moore and Belpré’s conception of the storyteller’s role overlaps with some critical notions about this “archaic” activity in a postmodern world. Again, during the 1930s era in which Belpré began her public storytelling career, European theorists such as Walter Benjamin (in addition to Latin American writers such as Martí and Jiménez) had begun reflecting on the importance of oral culture, and consequently children’s narratives, within local histories. Benjamin reflected on his ideal storyteller, an “artisan,” who related valuable, “mouth-to-mouth experience” as opposed to the masses of information arising from an increasingly, mechanical world (84). Benjamin mourned the modern world’s loss of “wisdom” and “truth” which he suggests caused a decline in personal, relatable experience within communities: “After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding” (86). As in Island folklore’s celebration of rural life, Benjamin associates his ideal of storytelling and oral culture within images of the rural which seemingly subvert the influence of industrialization and mass media: “the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and
traditions” and “the resident tiller of the soil” (84). This view of storytelling might extend into subaltern groups and their desires to maintain local histories and cultures. The modern, mechanical world encroaching on personal “counsel” with the so-called arts of civilization strikingly resembles the image of the colonizer subduing native culture. As I discuss in my previous chapter, colonialism carries the goal of erasing a sense of local history as part of nation and empire-building. The sense of fleeting local histories and nation-building is a theme traceable to the nineteenth century at least when, as Island theorists like Flor Piñeiro de Rivera demonstrate, poetry and written folklore were seen as part of a project preserving typical oral, “national” traditions (17). In terms of preservation, however, the storyteller, even as Benjamin implies when he refers to him as a craftsman and artisan, also highlights the many revisions and reinventions, “the web” spun by such a storyteller relating (his)stories (91).

Through Moore, Belpré could also learn that NYPL children’s room activities and philosophies had an influence beyond Fifth Avenue, particularly with regard to the preservation of children’s folklore. Moore’s promotion of internationalism through children’s books sparked publishers’ interests in international children’s books during the 1920s, a trend Belpré possibly benefited from given that Perez and Martina was published close to this time, possibly since Frederick Warne & Co, acquaintances of

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22 From the late nineteenth century into the mid-1930s, Puerto Rican folklorists like Manuel Fernandez Juncos and writers like Martí, Dario, and Jiménez seemed compelled to publish and anthologize children’s narratives so as to preserve the Latin American soul of children living in an increasingly Americanized continent and Caribbean. Again, Belpré seems to echo this sense of Latinidad through her involvement in folklore during this critical period, particularly when she writes that folklore is a “bridge which united the Puerto Rican child to the Latin American child” (Folklore del Niño Puertorriqueño 1).
Moore, saw the Puerto Rican folktale as a contribution to international children’s literature (92). Belpre may have found her profession while watching Latimer, but she cemented her approach to writing and storytelling under Moore. Moore’s influence created opportunities for Belpre, within and outside the children’s room, for counteracting the lack of Puerto Rican-authored narratives.

Given Moore’s reverence for fairy tales and folklore at the NYPL, it is no surprise that Belpre’s duties at the library included “reading” the fairy tale shelves (Belpre “Folklore of the Puerto Rican Child” 1). In Belpre, Rose gained a dark-skinned, lively woman with trilingual skills (she also spoke French), an interest in children, and an unwritten archive of Puerto Rican folklore, a tradition Belpre always touted as combining Spanish, Taino Indian, and African heritages. Belpre’s physical features and talents may have made her just the candidate, in Rose’s mind, for the 135th Street’s mixed race patronage. Belpre arrived at the 135th Street Branch with a deep-rooted knowledge and love of folklore. Like the NYPL, Belpre also viewed storytelling and folklore as practices invoking the rural past. Indeed, the stories she told children reproduced Island’s folklore’s celebration of the jibaro farmer and the Taino, both often seen as original types within Puerto Rican culture. A revival of Taino culture is particularly associated with strong nationalism on the Island, resisting the Spaniard and the North American, even as it denies the influence of African cultures on the Island. I read Belpre’s

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23 I believe this reflects how U.S. publishers viewed Puerto Rican literature as foreign and not domestic.

24 Jorge Duany, in the Puerto Rican Nation on the Move, writes that the “quest for ancestral origins is a common discursive practice to narrate the nation by excluding certain autochthonous ideological elements and excluding foreign ones” (261). Duany writes about the struggle to define a “native” culture and how this has largely meant the exclusion of African heritage. He writes: “In Puerto Rico, the nativistic movement has historically faced several challenges. First, the Island’s original inhabitants were decimated during the first half of the sixteenth century, although their cultural and biological characteristics influenced the local population. Second, Puerto Rico changed colonial masters in 1898,
fostering of jíbaro and Taino mythology as part of her vision of Puerto Rican children as displaced children. One of the strongest examples of Belpré’s commitment to jíbaro mythology comes in her final work, Firefly Summer, a novel published posthumously. Teresita,25 the 13-year-old protagonist, dreams of returning to farm life after an extended period in a San Juan school. Belpré suggests a critique of the lack of schools in rural areas; something Teresita seems to believe disrupts the natural order of things:

Teresa’s real home was a finca in the highlands between Cayey and Cidra…The finca! How she missed it. Gone were the hours she spent watching the preparations for the planting of tobacco, but clear in her mind was the picture of the cool foothills, mountain slopes with carefully laid out plots…looking to her like clouds dropped from the sky” (14; 24).

Teresita finishes her school exams earlier than the other students so she can return to her beloved finca. As she leaves San Juan, landmarks like La Fortaleza and La Plaza Cristobal Colón fail to charm the teenager:

Someday there will be enough schools for all the children of the fincas. I would rather teach at a finca than anywhere else…[some] fathers own fincas and can send them to the city school. But there are all those children of the workers,’ she thought, ‘who could not afford to come, and the few schools available are miles away. (22)

As Teresita celebrates “The Feast of the Cross” and learns of the financial troubles threatening her family’s home, Firefly Summer reinforces a vision of the Puerto Rican child as belonging only the foothills of his/her native land, regardless of the luxuries of the metropolis, whether Puerto Rican or U.S.

25 Belpré’s full name was Pura Teresa María Belpré and she was from Cidra, Puerto Rico. Given Teresita’s name and her hometown (Cidra) it is possible that she is a somewhat autobiographical character.
In Taino legends, Belpré reproduces an ideal of the land as the indigenous inhabitants once named it: Borinquen.26 Taino legends often portray the race as dignified victims of the oppressor’s lust for the land. Moreover, these stories emphasize the Taino as a lingering presence residing within the earth which seemingly cause the rocks to cry out. For example, in “The Legend of the Royal Palm,” young Milomaki transforms into a tree in order to save himself from an attaching tribe. The narrator tells the reader that “the voice” of Milomaki still resides in the Island’s royal palms. Similarly, in “Amapola and the Butterfly,” a teenaged, Amapola learns that many of Borinquen’s stones are actually victims of a witches’ spell (Belpré *Once in Puerto Rico* 16; 33). The Taino, then, is represented as a kind of monument of the past preserved within the Island’s resources. Belpré’s retelling of this legacy in the English language reconstructs these “monuments” within a U.S. urban center, simultaneously making this folklore a part of U.S. heritage while always keeping a child’s gaze on the Island as a place of origin. She suggests that no economic or political circumstance should disrupt the Puerto Rican child’s tie to the native land.

Just as folktales and storytelling could invoke an ideal of the past, Belpré envisioned these practices as reinforcing this sacred tie to family, land, and nation in New York children. Belpré often prefaced her stories and speeches with a short illustration about folklore as instrumental to the Puerto Rican child’s upbringing. As she writes in her preface to *The Tiger and the Rabbit*:

Growing up on the island of Puerto Rico in an atmosphere of natural storytellers was fun: a father whose occupation took him all over the island; a grandmother whose stories always ended in a nonsense rhyme or song,

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26 The name Boricua is a term of endearment used to denote one who is of Puerto Rican descent. This name is also one used within nationalist ideology.
setting feet to skip or dance; elder sisters who still remembered the tales
told by their mother...No one ever went to bed without a round of stories.
(Belpré x)

Within this picture of folklore and child-rearing, Belpré represents Puerto Rican culture
as one in which the average person practically lives in verse. The people in this
passage (much like Belpré also portrayed herself) possess an internal archive of
stories. Her description also refutes notions of the Puerto Rican child as “culturally
deprived,” a common theme she may have encountered in U.S. children’s texts. In
“Library Work with Bilingual Children,” Belpré tackled this stereotype head-on:

Often the term “culturally deprived” is used with bilingual children
[specifically Puerto Rican children], as it is also used for all children residing
in sections of the city considered “underprivileged.” One can’t call a culture
that is 400 [years] old, culturally deprived. The fault of the term lies with
those who lack the knowledge of the background, and the respect for the
culture of these children.

…A child will be better prepared to understand the value of another culture
when he knows the value of his own. (qtd. in Sánchez-González 77)

Belpré cleverly reverses the rhetoric by characterizing the dominant culture as ignorant
rather than the child. As before, her strong associations with folklore, home, nation, and
child-rearing may explain her feeling of “loss” upon noticing Puerto Rico’s absence from
the NYPL’s fairy tale shelves: “I searched for some of the folktales I had heard at home.
There was not even one. A sudden feeling of loss rose within me” (“Folklore of the
Puerto Rican Child” 1). As she did when observing Latimer, Belpré equates a sense of
home with her ability to locate a place for her nation within the library, in this case, a
space on the bookshelf.27 If, as Moore believed, folklore cultivated in children the notion

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27 Delacre’s illustrations demonstrate this relationship between cultural belonging and space on the library
bookshelves when depicting “La Señora Belpré,” the children, and the parents during the story-hour.27
The desire for a place on the shelf may have been associated with a desire for cultural capital and
influence. In a scene picturing Belpré, the children, and the parents, Delacre lines the library shelves with
original clippings of 1930s stock exchanges (Gonzalez 20-21). “La Señora Belpré” is also pictured holding
of a global community, then shelf space could also signify representation and influence within that community. Absence signaled nonexistence. In the early 1920s, Belpré’s search for Puerto Rico on the fairytale shelves, about thirty years into the Island’s status as a U.S. colony, and five years after the U.S. made Puerto Ricans American citizens, revealed the Island’s symbolic absence from the world.

Belpré rationalized that no stories meant no history and, perhaps, no hope for the present or future. “To appreciate the present, one must have a knowledge of the past…to know where we go, we must know from where we came,” she emphasized in an unpublished essay (Belpré “Folklore” 1). Moreover, in tandem with her believes about child-rearing, she viewed “stories” and “poetry” as “natural” ways of “dreaming about the future,” an activity children rehearsed by blowing out the wishing candle at the end of each story-hour (“NYPL and Folklore” 1-2). Belpré recalled her confrontation with Puerto Rico’s apparent nonexistence as the inspiration for her literary intervention and preservation effort on behalf of Puerto Rican migrants. More specifically, she credited her concern with children as her strongest motivation: “I wished to preserve the folktales I knew for the Puerto Rican child in this new land. I knew that the knowledge of his folklore would develop a sense of pride and identification in him” (“Folklore of the Puerto Rican Child” speech, 1). This statement further reveals that Belpré imagined the Puerto Rican child as a displaced child or exiled child, although her specification (“in this new land”) acknowledges that a new identity, apart from the Island, had been born. She wished to give this child tools for resisting humiliation and the dreaded Americanization (loss of Spanish language and Puerto Rican traditions). Belpré, on the verge of creating the lit storyteller’s candle in front of a fireplace lined with original clippings of name registries of immigrant arrivals into New York.
some of the first U.S. Puerto Rican narratives, decided that a revival of Island culture grounded this emerging identity. Although the Island had become a distant reality for Island-born patrons, and the States would serve as the birth place for subsequent generations, Belpré’s stories could cause the Island to be “born in [them].” As in her description of her family of storytellers, Belpré again suggests stories as satisfying an innate hunger for origin.

Belpré’s desire to tell children stories at the NYPL, however, and her ability “to do it were two different things,” as she explained in an oral history interview: “[I]n the New York Public Library no one tells a story unless the book from where the story comes is on the table with your flowers and your wishing candle…the children look for it” (Lopez n.d.). Although Moore and the NYPL celebrated storytelling as a critique of modernity, they actually resisted this activity in its original, strictly oral form. The library’s preference for “scripted” storytelling clearly promoted its mission as a text borrowing institution, but also, as Nuñez writes, downplayed any other forms of literacy outside of published texts. Actually, the NYPL considered storytelling such an important aspect of their mission within children’s rooms that the area had a separate director, Mary Gould Davis, who taught storytelling courses at the New York Public Library School. In 1925, Belpré enrolled in Davis’s storytelling course which taught principles of storytelling and writing for children. The class led Belpré, as a prospective storyteller, through an almost audition-like process requiring her to lead a story-hour observed by Davis. In her

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28 I am not the first to include Belpré within a foundation for U.S. Puerto Rican narratives. Sanchez-Gonzalez also includes Belpré within a group of distinguished writers, Schomburg, William Carlos Williams, and Luisa Capetillo, as “sett[ing] the epistemic foundations for an entire century of Boricua literature” (102).

29 Hernandez, Mariposa. "Ode to a Diasporican: Pa' mi gente" (2001). “No nací en Puerto Rico/ Puerto Rico nació en mí” or “I was not born in Puerto Rico / Puerto Rico was born in me.”
“Folklore of the Puerto Rican Child” speech, Belpré explains that she originally wanted to use a “Puerto Rican folktale” as her selection for this observation, however, she “did not have a book to place on the table along with the bowl of flowers and the wishing candle” (Belpré “Folklore” 2). Instead, Belpré performed a tale from Anna Cogswell Tyler’s *Twenty-Four Unusual Tales for Boys and Girls* (1921). Although Belpré does not disclose the tale she read, the book by Tyler, also a NYPL librarian and storyteller, features a collection of European and “American Indian” folklore. Belpré might have chosen Tyler’s volume as a “safe” text since Tyler’s preface concurs with the NYPL’s preference for written folklore.³⁰ Tyler’s preface suggests that the NYPL believed written texts allowed children outside the library the enjoyment of the same stories presented at story-hours and provided non-NYPL storytellers with the texts as resources for other community story-hours. Tangible books offered accessibility and preservation beyond the children’s room; however, this notion competes with the belief in oral culture that proliferation of culture depends on interpersonal relationships or “word of mouth.” Belpré’s own career, in a sense, proves that cultural and literary legacies occur without tangible representations or continued preservation of written texts since, Belpré’s own children’s books have been out-of-print for over thirty-years, yet she established an undeniable, continued legacy within the greater Puerto Rican community.

Though she ultimately became a published author, Belpré’s legacy testifies to an impact one might make on literary history without texts. Indeed, an archive photo reveals an older Belpré in full form: her hands up, the story-hour book shut on her lap,

³⁰ Tyler’s preface reads: “It has been suggested that the boys and girls who have so often listened to these stories in the clubs and story-hours of the New York Public Library, might like to have a few of their favorites in one book; that other boys and girls might be interested in reading them; and that the storyteller, in search of stories for special occasions, might find this little volume useful.”
and surrounded by an audience of mesmerized black, white, and Latino/a children (Centro). Sánchez-González identifies “paperlessness” as “the narrative predicament of the Puerto Rican diaspora.” She writes that “while [scholars] revel in rescuing paperwork, we must realize that what literacy and papers signify cannot and should not stand in for people themselves” (8). Belpré’s story emphasizes the inability of texts to supplement speech acts and the predicament of accounting for literary activity that, without a traditional text, seems unaccountable. Her insistence on performing unpublished tales also highlights her belief that Puerto Rican culture would persist even without textual evidence or any official recognition. In “Folklore de El Niño Puertorriqueño,” a speech for a Spanish-speaking audiences, Belpré includes a brief history on the persistence of uniquely Puerto Rican folklore over 300 years under Spanish rule. She emphasizes that the Island possessed no printing presses during the majority of Spain’s colonial reign, and yet “el pueblo” (the people) managed to preserve a unique folklore generationally through the oral tradition. Belpré, interestingly, does not include this example within her translation of this speech for English audiences; this implies she reserved this subversive critique on colonialism for Spanish-speakers. Essentially, she implies that, even if U.S. presses never acknowledge Puerto Rican culture, the culture will continue thriving as it did under similar colonial conditions. The NYPL and Moore may have depended on the storyteller’s role as a kind of romantic relic; yet, Belpré emphasizes storytelling as a subversive activity that de-centers narrative histories. The storyteller professes the dangerous (for children’s education purposes) admission that stories are not fixed, but belong to a community and could change depending on the person retelling it. As Belpré emphasized during another
lecture, “[S]torytelling is a living art, and each teller embellishes, polishes and recreates as she goes along without losing the thematic value” (3). No one, in a sense, could claim a story as their own. The storyteller as “artisan” was free to leave his/her handprints on a story as evidence of the version’s originality and, by consequence, its subjectivity. Although literary texts are idealized in terms of preservation, the storyteller’s role is perceived as existing outside the literary establishment by empowering el pueblo with a sense of authorship.

Several of the folktales within Belpré’s storytelling repertoire emphasize this sense of el pueblo overcoming dominant ideologies and oppression. Her two folktale collections, *The Tiger and the Rabbit* and *Once in Puerto Rico* (1975) contain several tales which portray colonial oppression as a battle of wits more than a battle of force. The strength and dignity of a community could route the colonizer. The titular story from *The Tiger and the Rabbit* features a typical Latin American trickster tale:

> Long, long ago all the animals were friends and lived in peace with one another, except the Tiger. For the Tiger had promised himself to eat small animals, especially the Rabbit if he ever crossed his path.

> But the Rabbit was very clever and known for his quick wit. He knew that the Tiger wanted to eat him, and though he considered the beast stupid, clumsy, and a fool, he managed to keep away from his path and thus avoid trouble. But this was not always possible, since both them liked to roam about (Belpré, *The Tiger and the Rabbit*, 1)

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31 The trickster is a type found in other form of literature by marginalized groups such as Native American and African-American traditions. Gonzalez writes about the prevalence of the trickster character within Latin American culture, a character whose marginal position causes him/her to create alternate “avenues” of success within the dominant culture: “[T]rickster characters and the texts that portray their deceptions in Latin America all find ways to cover their tracks and hide what they do; they speak on multiple, sometimes even contradictory, levels to multiple audiences: children, adults, colleagues, and peers. Yet the message is always fundamentally the same. How to get what is necessary without direct confrontation or open resistance (8). A tale such “The Tiger and the Rabbit” might be read alongside a text such as “The Tale of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby.”
Within an allegory of colonial hierarchy, the Tiger\textsuperscript{32} represents the colonizer, the highest animal on the food chain who refuses to play nice. The Tiger’s brute force and greed would seemingly overpower any “small animal,” yet the narrator reveals the Tiger’s faults from the perspective of the “very clever” and “quick witted” Rabbit. The Rabbit discerns “the beast”’s intentions so as never to mistake the Tiger for a friend. The Rabbit’s low opinion of this “fool” (“stupid and clumsy”), however never causes him to forget the Tiger is a threat. Interestingly, Belpré’s description of the Tiger parallels with her rhetoric in “Library Work for Bilingual Children” when she describes the dominant group’s view of the Puerto Rican child as “culturally deprived” (i.e. “those who lack the knowledge…and the respect”). “The Tiger and the Rabbit” describes a colonial relationship typical of Latin America and the Caribbean in which the colonizer and the colonized live in such close proximity (“both liked to roam about”) that they are practically partners. When the Tiger threatens to eat the Rabbit, the Rabbit convinces the Tiger that both need to defend themselves from a “terrible hurricane.” The Tiger envies the Rabbit’s small size and fears his own enormity will make it difficult to find shelter: “He shivered at the thought of the howling of the wind, the crashing of the trees, and the downpour of the rain” (2). The Tiger’s fear of the storm suggests the colonizer’s own displacement within a land not rightfully his. He must depend on the native Rabbit who knows what to do in the event of a hurricane. The Rabbit convinces the Tiger that his best option is to remain still while the Rabbit ties him (no less than with the same cord of rope the Tiger previously uses as threat) to a tamarind tree. The Rabbit

\textsuperscript{32} Ann Gonzalez analyzes a tale from Costa Rica about a fat Lion and a monkey as representative of U.S. relationship (i.e. interference) in Costa Rica. The United States in Latin American tales is often represented as a tiger or lion. Belpré’s \textit{Dance of the Animals} (1972), a picture-book, also contains a story in which a group of lions organize a feast for all the animals. Only a pair of dogs realize that the lions are actually inviting the smaller animals so they can later eat them.
essentially puts a leash on the colonizer, as the other small animals gather to poke fun at the harnessed beast. The tale ends when, after a series of tricking the Tiger, the Rabbit rides off on the Tiger’s back in order to escape a pack of foxes. This action demonstrates the dysfunctional use and abuse within colonial relationships, such as using the colonizer’s strength as protection against internal community injustices. The Rabbit always remains one step ahead of the Tiger. He must simply work around his threats.

Other tales such as *Once in Puerto Rico’s “Ivaiahoca”* (a Taino legend) and “The Rogativa” (a Spanish legend) illustrate the community’s strength to persuade the colonizer or route his attack. Again, such a tale encourages a child’s identification with the indigenous Taino race’s struggle against Spanish colonialism.33 Ivaiahoca, a Taino woman, pleads for her son’s life when he is taken captive by the Spanish. Instead of the trickster tradition, Ivaiahoca’s speech to General Salazar illustrates a kind of civil disobedience founded on sacrifice and empathy:

> Señor Salazar, I know you must have a mother. Because of her you can understand my suffering. My son is young and loves his liberty. He should live to enjoy it. I am old. If he were in captivity, my last remaining days would be in agony. But if I knew he was free, I could pass those days in peace, whatever tasks and trials might come to me. Take my life and my services for his liberty. Heaven will reward your good deed. (39)

Ivaiahoca wins her son’s freedom through this speech. She then risks her life for General Salazar by delivering a letter to Juan Ponce de Leon. Her bravery leads to Salazar’s praise of Ivaiahoca’s “nobility” rather than deterring him from the war on the Tainos. Belpre’s retelling of “The Rogativa” combines trickster and civil disobedience

33 Duany writes about the trouble with indigeneity in Puerto Rico and how Puerto Rican folktales adhere to the practice of preferring to celebrate Taino heritage in lieu of African. As far as I have read, Belpre does not include African folklore.
tactics. In the story, thousands of Puerto Ricans assemble in the streets, curiously enough, with lighted candles so as to deter British fleets in San Juan Harbor, as Belpré narrates:

The English spies on watch sent an urgent message to Abercrombie’s headquarters. Great movement could be seen within the capital. They heard a loud ringing of bells and could see strange glimmering lights toward the west.

“They must be getting reinforcements from the country,” said the English general. (70)

The British interpret the lighted candles as symbols of conglomeration and resistance. The mass of people, each with a candle in hand, symbolizes the importance of each protester.

Perhaps in her own reenactment of “The Rogativa,” Belpré outsmarted the NYPL’s rules concerning published texts, earning her the right to tell her unpublished stories to children, lit candle in hand. Davis only gave the condition that she “[t]ell the children that they were the first children to hear the stories before they were in book form” (Belpré “Folklore” 2). Nuñez writes that Davis’ insistence that children understand that Belpré told unpublished stories contains a “humorous…ethnocentric assumption that children would expect to see a book when hearing a story” (70). Indeed, Davis’ concern seems more for the children’s comprehension of a kind of sanctioned literacy encompassed by published narratives.

Belpré’s initial lighting of the candle, without a published text, began a Puerto Rican literary tradition within the U.S. Even from this inception, I note that this narrative is characterized by a sense of existing outside established cultural, national, racial boundaries. As a storyteller, already a subversive figure, Belpré transformed an U.S. tradition into an act of resistance. Just years after the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico, she
persuaded U.S. society, represented by the NYPL staff, to acknowledge the birth of a new cultural identity within the United States. The candle’s flame evidenced that, even without an official political or legal status as an independent nation, the Puerto Rican cultural nation had claimed a position within the global community. This early stage of Belpré’s career at the 135th Street Branch established within the NYPL and Harlem that a Puerto Rican identity within the U.S. existed. The community’s story took its place within Harlem’s thriving environment of cultural pride. Belpré’s resurrection of Island culture underlined her belief that stories could provoke the Island’s continual rebirth within the imagination of Puerto Rican children throughout Spanish Harlem. Indeed, Belpré continued telling her unpublished tales outside the children’s room “in English and Spanish, throughout the library system, as well as in schools and PTA meetings” (Belpré “Folklore” 2). However, it is intriguing that, within the same library that Hughes, Cullen, and Schomburg gathered to celebrate a new Negro identity, and later at the 115th Street Branch, Puerto Rican migrants and their children gathered around Belpré’s candle to commemorate their Island heritage as the beginning of their American story.

As the Puerto Rican community grew into other parts of Harlem, Belpré continued lighting the storyteller’s candle in and around Harlem community centers (e.g. the Union Settlement, the Educational Alliance, and Madison House in the Lower East Side) as means of reaching children and parents, especially Spanish-speaking parents who may have found the NYPL unwelcoming (Hernandez-Delgado 429). After building the library’s first traveling puppet theatre, she created a group of puppet players called The
Cristobal Colon Club, a nod to the Island’s heritage, which produced a number of puppet shows around Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn. At the 115th Street Branch, she instituted an annual Three Kings Day Festival, complete with an appearance by the Three Wise Men and a play based on Perez and Martina. Her travels around Harlem, from La Casita María and La Milagrosa, the first Puerto Rican Catholic and Evangelical congregations in New York City respectively, to her partnership with La Liga Puertorriqueña and the Porto Rican Brotherhood (both formed in Harlem during the 1920s), trace the emerging settlement and renaissance of Puerto Rican culture that would give Spanish Harlem its name. Belpré’s leadership and policies at the 115th Street Branch cultivated an environment in Spanish Harlem for the continued interest and celebration of Latino/a culture for at least the ten years of her tenure. Her work, ostensibly “for children,” in fact impacted the greater Puerto Rican and Latino/a community by promoting a system for cultural pride and mobilization similar to the Black community’s efforts within the Harlem Renaissance. Her role within this Spanish Harlem Renaissance was two-fold: first, through her storytelling, lectures, and speeches, she initiated distinctly Puerto Rican folkloric and historical narratives into U.S. culture, and second, her cultural projects set the scene for a revival of Puerto Rican and Latino/a

34 Belpré’s naming of the club could imply her homage to Columbus’s statue in San Juan in the Plaza de Colon. The statue has been immortalized by a popular saying on the Island used for expressing an indefinite amount of time (“cuando Cólon baje el brazo” or “when Columbus lowers his arm”).

35 Sanchez-Korrol’s study, From Colonia to Community (1983) on the Puerto Rican colonia in New York reveals that several of the Puerto Rican organizations formed during this period were headquartered in Harlem.

36 Hernandez-Delgado and Nuñez both suggest that, as African Americans became the prevalent minority around 115th Street, the Puerto Rican era of the library came to a close. Belpré was transferred to the New York areas with the strongest concentrations of PRs throughout her career which ended in 1980, the same year she died.
culture that, as I explore in the following section, contributed to the cohesive identity necessary for subsequent generations of Boricuas “in this new land.”

**Of Juan Bobo and Johnny Appleseed: Folklore and the Harvests of the Renaissance**

Juan Flores writes that “the creation and perpetuation of diasporic conditions” requires a proliferation of ideology and culture,” a reality I believe Belpré understood and actively pursued in her storytelling career (*The Diaspora Strikes Back* 20). In “I Wished to be Like Johnny Appleseed,” Belpré draws a comparison between her work and the legacy of Johnny Appleseed, an American folk hero famous for planting a formidable crop of apple trees still visible today. She wanted her legacy remembered as that of the “Puerto Rican Johnny Appleseed” in the United States (Hernandez-Delgad436). Her imagined kinship with Appleseed, although endearing, also reveals her subversive approach to storytelling and folklore. Belpré’s adoption of this American hero resembles her participation within the NYPL’s candle lighting: transforming an American tradition into a statement about Puerto Rican identity. The image is that of Belpré, on a lone path through the New York wilderness, hands in the soil, planting a harvest for the coming generations of both Puerto Rican and American children. With this comparison in mind, I want to examine some of the possible harvests that Belpré may have desired through her figurative planting. Papers such as “New York Public Library and Puerto Rican Folklore,” “The Reluctant Reader What Makes Him” and “Library Work with Bilingual Children” provide further insight into Belpré’s planting in children’s literature.

The first harvest I believe she implied was a harvest of subsistence brought about by

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37 I did not have access to this unpublished paper but only have seen it listed within Centro’s Archive and within Hernandez-Delgado’s essay on Belpré. Belpré’s reference to herself as “the Puerto Rican Johnny Appleseed” also appears in her author’s biography within *Perez and Martina*. 

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the figurative story-seeds. For example, “New York Public Library and Puerto Rican Folklore,” written further into her career, contains the concerns of an older Belpré who by this time had witnessed the immense need of two concurrent migrations (1920s post-citizenship; 1940-50s post-Operation Bootstrap\(^3\)) of Puerto Ricans to New York. She implies in her analysis of the two migrations that the second group of migrants arrived less prepared for the realities of big-city, American life: “The possibilities for continuing the work were great, the need even greater. The City schools were filled with new arrivals from Puerto Rico with little or no knowledge of English” (4). No doubt Belpré confronted the overwhelming poverty and social struggles prevalent within this community of new “Americans” who left a vastly rural Island for industrial city life. However, a revival of stories and Island culture could provide temporary solace:

> In the present struggle to fight poverty, hunger and fear, to bring a semblance of peace and security into the home, the need for serenity and beauty seem to be forgotten. Food alone cannot accomplish the task; it needs an elevation of the spirit. Through the power of a story and the beauty of its language, the child, for a while, at least, escapes to a world of his own. He leaves the room richer than went he entered it. (Belpré “NYPL and Puerto Rican Folklore” 7)

Belpré draws clear parallels between storytelling and food and storytelling and security. The story-seeds satiated a need within the child beyond physical hunger. More than physical hunger, story-seeds satiated a child’s thirst for cultural identification. Further in the paper, she illustrates this point through the example of a Cuban mother who “discovering a collection of Spanish books exclaimed, ‘Come my children, quench your thirst!’” (5). Child and parent could find security, even in social or economic unrest, in

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\(^3\) This was the name given in the United States to Luis Muñoz-Marin’s, then governor of Puerto Rico, economic and political restructuring of the Island, including the creation of the Free Associated State (Estado Libre Asociado).
the children’s room with Belpré, a woman who provided them with a kind of “certainty in their moves,” as she writes: “They realized there was some one now, who not only could interpret for them and offer entertainment, but some one who understood their psychology and to whom they could discuss their problems” (qtd. in Hernandez-Delgado 429).

The second harvest Belpré suggests is a harvest of resistance where story-seeds produce resistance against Americanization. Belpré believed her planting, like Appleseed’s, produced a distinctly Puerto Rican crop within American soil. Indeed, Belpré viewed a combination of literary (publications) and cultural projects (storytelling, puppetry, festivals) as a more effective strategy for group mobilization and pride rather than literary work alone, something evident in her 1945 letter to Frances Clarke Sayer, NYPL superintendent of Work for Children: “One does not uproot the foundations solidly laid by a mere stroke of a pen…there cannot be a resignation from children’s work for me. I will still be carrying on, in my efforts to contribute, through my future writings something which the children will enjoy” (qtd. in Hernandez-Delgado 432). How very typical of Belpré to blend a sense of endearment with a rhetoric of revolution. To illustrate, Belpré’s folklore and speeches defended the Puerto Rican child’s right to bilingualism within the U.S. Many of her publications including her most popular, Perez and Martina, contain Spanish words and phrases. In “The Reluctant Reader, What Makes Him,” Belpré openly criticized teachers who considered bilingual children incapable of learning proper literacy skills, suggesting that teachers, in order to properly instruct children, required an education in a child’s culture – a remarkable argument given that she made these statements at least thirty years before multiculturalism
became a term within the American educational vocabulary. Belpré maintained that the Puerto Rican child, as “the latest immigrant to create a new foreign speaking community,” required “special care.” Considering her argument about teacher education, “special care” may actually refer to educating teachers about the “special” colonial relationship of Puerto Rico to the United States which made the Puerto Rican child different “from all other migrants in that they are American citizens” with a “tendency to cling to their native language and traditions even through their process of assimilation” (qtd. in Sánchez-González 76). Sánchez-González notes that, although Belpré saw Puerto Rican children as part of a “universality of childhood,” something I would add coincides with Moore’s view of the global community, she still reminded society that these U.S. citizens learned and would continue to learn Spanish as a first language. As Sánchez-González writes, “Belpré prefers to call attention the unique cultural and linguistic syncretism that Boricuas experience in the States, a syncretism that does not preclude ‘assimilation’ but rather nurtures the child’s development in unique ways, with its own built-in rhythms and tendencies” (77). I disagree with Sánchez-González to the extent that she writes that bilingualism, for Belpré, “does not preclude ‘assimilation.’” Belpré’s career, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, overlaps with trends in children’s education in which educational policies interpreted the onslaught of immigrants as an “invasion.” Efforts to assimilate, or Americanize, immigrant children during this time included discouraging children from speaking their native languages (Tyack 229). In addition, U.S. educational policy on the Island included the enforcement of English as the official language of instruction, though this
policy was later revoked. By defending the Spanish language as a part of the Puerto Rican child’s American experience, Belpré indeed defies total assimilation.

In addition to defending the Puerto Rican child’s right to language, the third harvest Belpré suggests is a harvest of nationalism through the nationalist themes invoked in her retelling of Island folklore. Her work combines a sense of upholding Spanish colonialism as an affront to the North American while also reinforcing the nativist Taino movement which resists the Spaniard. Indeed, folklore as a genre propagates some of the most beloved national myths within any country. Folk traditions assured that the Puerto Rican child in “this new land” received the same education in Puerto Rican national mythology as children on the Island. Belpré’s arguments against the notion of Puerto Rican children as “culturally deprived” contain nationalist sentiment and mythology. Belpré continually identifies Puerto Rico’s pre-U.S. history under Taino and then Spanish rule as the true origin of the Puerto Rican child, regardless of birthplace. She reveals further nationalist sentiment in “Folklore of the Puerto Rican Child” when, in retracing the history of Puerto Rican folklore for U.S. audiences, she quotes Puerto Rican folklorist Rafael Ramirez de Arrellanos’ preface to Puerto Rican Folklore (1926):

Firmly believing that the best preparation for the future is a complete and exact knowledge of the past, we present this collection to our people, so that in these pages he may see his life, his feelings, his habits, his customs, his sorrows, his joys, his songs and games—all the activities of those who left behind a country already formed, with a dignified and noble history, with hope and ideality. (Belpré “Folklore of the Puerto Rican Child” 1)

Belpße’s statement, through Arrelanos, upholds folklore as the creative and popular work of a people and a “country already formed.” She also maintained that the folklore

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39 See Malavet
she recounted served as the “foundation” of Puerto Rican literature. Here, I note that Belpré believed her work as a folklorist participated in a literary project that joined with the Puerto Rican national canon or the insular canon. This differs with Sánchez-González since part of her goal is to present Belpré within a U.S. literature independent from Island literature (19). I do not believe Belpré saw her literary work, at least not her folklore, as forming part of a U.S. canon. In this way, Belpré resembles the early group of “temporary sojourners” which Flores catalogues in the history of Puerto Rican literature and not the later group of writers, such as Nicholasa Mohr, who wrote about the U.S. as her home (Flores Divided Borders 144-146). In fact, she may have desired to perpetuate this attitude of “temporary sojourner” within children. In addition, because folklore represented the “collective psychology” of “a country already formed,” endowing the generations of Puerto Rican children with that collective psychology formed part of Belpré’s objective (Belpré “Folklore” 1). Folklore assured that the Puerto Rican child’s collective psychology concurred with the Island’s national myths. Further, Belpré also opens and closes her version of “The Three Magi” in The Tiger and the Rabbit with poetry by Manuel Fernandez Jucos, author of the “La Borinqueña,” the Puerto Rican national anthem (105-111).

Belpré’s stories like The Rainbow Colored Horse (1978) and Perez and Martina, contain nationalist themes fostering a child’s love of la patria.40 A child could imagine themselves as forming part of a Puerto Rican national ancestry rather than as subjects of a U.S. colony. The Rainbow-Colored Horse depicts the Island as a magical wonderland where adventure awaits at every turn. New York children hearing the tale

40 The homeland
step into the world of the traditional, agricultural campesino. The story about a magical, multicolored horse that helps a young farmer win the heart of a rich, young lady, contains distinctly Puerto Rican scenery and pastimes: farmer Tano and his sons rock on hammocks and play the cuatro. Even second-generation children can envision the land they “left behind “as a place of dreams. Island memories of a majestic paradise would haunt future generations of Nuyorican writers who either never returned or returned only to find themselves rejected as “gringos.”

_Perez and Martina_ serves as a fascinating study in Belpré’s nationalist rhetoric. Her most-told tale, the story became her first publication, her first audio recording, her first puppet show, and her first play script which children performed yearly at her organized Three Kings Day Festivals. The text begins with Belpré’s preface, writing that “This story runs from mouth to mouth but it has never been published. The story is told here in the way it came down to me from my grandmother.” Immediately, child readers and parents understand that this tale forms part of a traditional Island upbringing, something Island-born parents may have consider priceless.

_Perez and Martina_ perpetuates national mythologies of race, specifically the cultural superiority of the Spanish. Martina, a “pretty” and “very refined” Spanish cockroach, represents a prim and proper Spanish dame, who spends most of the time cleaning and keeping a proper home (8). The illustrations by Carlos Sánchez depict an

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41 Puerto Rican four-stringed instrument similar to a guitar.

42 Nicholasa Mohr repeats this pattern of imagining the Island as a mystical place of dreams in her novels.

43 The popularity of this tale with U.S. audiences, as opposed to a Taino legend or more obviously anti-U.S. colonial tale, suggests that publishers may have sought to purport Puerto Rican culture as a product of Europe. In the recording, Belpré speaks with a Castilian accent, something which she struggles to do, as was noted by reviewers at the time. It is not clear whether she was told to do this or whether she chose to. Most who heard her stories do not note her as speaking with a Castilian accent.
“exceedingly proud” Martina, in traditional Spanish dress—black lace shawl, red flamenco dress, and black fan. Since Sánchez based his illustrations on the puppets built by Belpré for her traveling puppet theatre, this would indicate that Belpré wished for children to envision Martina in her typical Spanish dress. Also, since children performed the characters of “Perez” and “Martina,” children would have dressed and acted out these traditional Spanish nuances as a source of cultural pride.

Martina’s pure Spanish descent, however, is somewhat in question as the story begins. As Sánchez-González writes, the story’s immediate description of her physical features establishes Martina’s position within a class hierarchy through an “imaginary social standing” based purely on race (86). It is not clear whether Martina was born on the Island or in Spain, making it possible for Martina to represent Puerto Rican women who benefited from “European good looks” as a source of “cultural capital” (Sánchez-González 86). Martina as a “cockroach”44 may also imply her status as a “leftover, disempowered European colonist[] in the Caribbean after the abolition of slavery” (87). Her decision to buy face powder as part of her courting ritual suggests how “whitening” one’s skin was perceived as sign of beauty and standing.

Martina’s standing gives her a privileged status when Island suitors come to court her—she can discriminate and she does. Specifically, Martina uses language and dialect as a marker for pure Spanish heritage; in fact, the tale itself represents a defense of the Spanish language as a refined language of royalty. For Martina, each suitor must prove his worth by “telling her how they will talk to her in the future.” Each suitor seems to represent a native, non-pure Islander. Martina scorns the sound of their

44 This was a slang term/insult used to describe those left behind in the colonies.
speech calling it “noise” and “tiresome” (26-33). Her favorite, the “gallant little mouse” Perez, a type of Spanish courtier, wows her with his skill in music, dancing, and manners: “No one else could bow as Perez could. No one danced as he danced and talked as he did and many wondered if Perez had not come from royal descent.” Perez’s possible royalty becomes a theme throughout the story; he is a gentleman with a royal mansion in Spain. Perez even sings a song celebrating his ties to Spanish royalty: “De España un ratoncito soy…a veces veo al Rey y la Reina/ I am a little mouse from Sunny Spain, In Royal Mansion's halls is my domain. / At night I watch the sun set in the sky, And sometimes see the King and Queen pass by” (37). The song becomes a subversive act on the lips of a young Puerto Rican boy, asserting his alliance to Spain and Latin American, within Harlem. Perez wins Martina by speaking to her in proper Spanish, “the language of [his] forefathers” which Martina exclaims “sounds just like music” (57). While the story mainly touts Spanish heritage, Perez and Martina, as in other examples of Belpré’s animal fables, also issues a warning to the colonizer. The genteel Perez eventually marries Martina, yet there is certainly no happy ending:

Christmas was coming, and Martina thought to give Perez a pleasant surprise. “What shall I make for him?” said she. “There is a Christmas dish that I am sure Perez has never tasted. I will make it for him.”

So she went to the kitchen and took a kettle. Then she put some rice and some coconut juice, some almonds and some raisins. She mixed these up and put in some sugar.

Then she put in some water and put it all in the kettle to boil. Then she went around the house making it tidy for the grand affair.

She had hardly departed when Perez the Mouse came in. He immediately smelled the new dish. “It is an entirely new smell,” said Perez.
He followed the smell to the kitchen. There he found the kettle, but it was too high for him to see what was inside. So he brought in a stool, and stepped upon it.

He peeped in. “If it tastes as good as it looks,” said Perez, “I am certainly going to have a great treat.”

He then stuck in his paw and tasted it. When he did so, he knew he had never tasted anything like that before.

He peeped in again. Then he noticed a fat almond getting brown all over. “Oh, if I could only get it,” said Perez.

“One good pull and it will be mine.”…He gave it a good pull but unfortunately he lost his balance and fell into the kettle.

He screamed and called for help. But who could help him? (Belpré Perez and Martina 44-50)

Sánchez-González reads Perez’s death at the end of the tale as sexual, implying his genteel, Spanish ways were no match for the too-hot, Islander Martina (90). However, as Perez’s dainty, high-heeled feet hang out of the boiling kettle, he also represents a sense of greed for the delights and riches of the Island, whether women, land, or other forms of “capital.” Greed the narrator severely punishes. Also, like the Tiger who fears the oncoming hurricane in “The Tiger and the Rabbit,” Perez the pure Spaniard, though somewhat celebrated, meets his tragic fate precisely because he is unaccustomed to native ways and a colonizer.

The planting of Perez and Martina as a story-seed nurtures children’s recognition of Puerto Rico’s position as a Latin American country under U.S. rule. Ultimately, the story features anti-colonial, nationalist themes which emphasize Puerto Rican rather than Spanish or U.S. pride. Children at Belpré’s story-hours, celebrating la patria, may have begun to question the Island’s status as a U.S. territory. Furthermore, Belpré may have sought to reproduce nationalist rhetoric within children which coincided with her
belief in Puerto Rican independence. In tandem with her perspective of “temporary sojourner,” her folkloric project may have also carried the mission of educating children, who perhaps as adults, would return to the Island and carry on the cause for independence.

The Children of the Renaissance

As a Puerto Rican Johnny Appleseed, Belpré’s planting of story-seeds, with harvests of subsistence, resistance, and nationalism, undergirded the formation of a Puerto Rican colonia in New York. Sanchez-Korrol credits Belpré’s “leadership” with “preserv[ing] the customs and cultural traditions of the Puerto Rican people, setting them apart as a distinctive group” (69). This colonia eventually developed into a unique American group of color known as the Nuyoricans whose presence within New York captured American imagination in the 1950s-70s, through a proliferation of pop culture including Broadway musicals, salsa, and poetry slams at the Nuyorican Poet’s Café. Although Belpré held fast to Island folklore throughout her career, one of her final, original, children’s texts, Santiago (1969) captures her conception this new Puerto Rican or Nuyorican. The story, though certainly not a negation of Island culture, represents an admission that the Nuyorican child, embodied in the character of “Santiago,” would enact his future on U.S. soil. Santiago is a little boy whose teacher notes “lives in two places” (29). Santiago, just arrived from Puerto Rico, spends his time looking at pictures of his pet hen that he was left behind on the Island. He wants his best friend Ernie to see Selina’s picture; he fears his best friend will not believe his stories about her. He constantly refers to the hen, Selina, throughout the story, both at

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45 Sanchez-Gonzalez writes that Belpré’s unpublished essays on the Island’s status revealed she supported independence (100).
home and in the classroom; every moment he believes he sees her out of the corner of his eye. When Santiago asks two grown men whether they have seen the hen, one of them replies, “Look, Sonny, this is a parking lot, not a chicken coop.” As the Puerto Rican child of Belpré’s imagination, Santiago breaks the established barriers of what is expected and wanted in his New York City classroom. He sits in his class but continues to long for the Puerto Rico of his past. Santiago contrasts the modern city against the jibaro farmer. With all the modernization of the city and its sophistication, Santiago still longs for a piece of rural island memory. Belpré seems to acknowledge how a continual desire for the Island blocks total acclimation, and in turn assimilation, to city life, a sentiment echoed in Piri Thomas and Mohr’s Nuyorican novels. The story ends when Santiago takes his teacher and classmates to his apartment to see the pictures of Selina and a carved gourd made by his grandfather on the Island. The gourd depicts the history of Puerto Rico with carvings of “the Indians, Columbus, Ponce de León” (28). It is then that Miss Taylor “understands why Santiago lived in two places” (29). He can never forget his native land.

Long before the Nuyorican movement’s defiance of poverty and racial injustice, Pura Belpré lit the storyteller’s candle and planted her story-seeds in a Harlem community seemingly void of history. In the case of Piri Thomas, Nuyorican author of *Down These Means Streets* (1967), Belpré’s librarianship had a direct impact. Thomas remembers Belpré as “the librarian” who always let him walk out of the NYPL’s Aguilar Branch, her final library post, with more books than the quota. Thomas stuffed the extra books into his shirt and pants, leaving the library “pregnant with books.” Thomas, attending Belpré’s NYPL retirement ceremony in 1980, was surprised to learn that
Belpré always “noticed [his book sneaking] but since he returned them she made no complaint” (SLJ 14). Of course, Belpré encouraged children’s transgression of societal rules throughout her career, such as claiming national pride even without legalized nationhood. Rules and boundaries could always be outsmarted. Belpré’s own story is one that breaks proscribed rules in literature; such as that you must have a text before you can have a literary legacy. Indeed, today, perhaps no one within literary circles can name one of Belpré’s publication titles, yet she is the namesake for a literary prize.

An initial glance at Belpré’s rhetoric, and her over 40-year storytelling career throughout New York, leads one to the conclusion that the figurative seeds she planted were the stories themselves. However, although I do believe she likened stories to seeds, and believed in the possible harvests that they would grow, I suggest that she also viewed the children as seeds. As she grew older and the number of children at her story-hours grew, Belpré found it more difficult to have a close relationship with her patrons. In “New York Public Library and Folklore,” Belpré contemplates the expansiveness of her project:

When one wonders at the great distances that have been covered over these decades, there is also a longing for the intimacy of the first Children’s room in which this work became a reality and where the children where the children were close by. But this is a fleeting thought, for, as Frances Spain consoled us: “It is not the room, but the child. Think how many more you can reach this way."

It seems a very long time since the first vision of Ernestine Rose; but the seeds she planted have taken roots, grown and the harvest has been good. (NYPL and Folklore 8-9)

The solace Belpré finds within Spain’s statement, “It is not the room, but the child,” and the possibility of reaching as many children as possible, highlights the true drive and pursuit behind her colossal undertakings: the Puerto Rican child. It is her pursuit of the child, her
interest and concern for this new type of Puerto Rican living in U.S., which she credits as the impulse behind her publications and storytelling in the figurative New York wilderness. It is this pursuit of the child which seemingly plucked her from a life of obscurity and transformed her into “the most accomplished woman of the pioneros generation” – a fabled Puerto Rican Johnny Appleseed whose face graces medals honoring Latino/a children's literature (58). Belpré pursued the child because the child was the figurative seed of the coming generations. If she could nurture children as seeds, then these children, the children of the renaissance, would secure a remnant of Puerto Rican culture in the U.S.
CHAPTER 3
NICHOLASA MOHR WRITES BACK: A DIASPORA CHILD IN A GARDEN OF MULTICULTURALISM

Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel’s *Tales for Little Rebels* (2008) anthology features a photo essay about Elizabeth, a “Puerto Rican-American” girl from New York City’s El Barrio. Written in 1974 by Joe Molnar, Elizabeth’s story demonstrates the complexity of representing Puerto Rican children in literature, even within a project promoting diversity. By labeling Elizabeth as “Puerto Rican-American,” like Molnar, Mickenberg and Nel gloss over the colonial encounter which translated this reluctant, little “American” into the U.S. narrative. Elizabeth, an Island girl given her recollections of the house and friend she left in Puerto Rico, speaks to the reader about the “dirty streets” of the Barrio through Molnar’s photographs and his transcription of her words. Like Pura Belpré’s “Santiago,” Elizabeth casts a backward glance at the Island, telling readers she hopes to return to her native land as soon as her father saves enough money. A displaced child, a fixture within an attempt to document ghetto life, a child with no sense of authorship within her own narrative – such was the typical portrayal of Puerto Rican Diaspora children in popular culture until Nicholasa Mohr published her landmark novel *Nilda* (1973). Her children’s fiction confronts a literary landscape vacant of U.S. Puerto Rican fiction and U.S. Puerto Rican child protagonists.

In her fiction, author and graphic artist Mohr continually associates existence with creativity, transforming marginality into a training ground for the exceptional. In “On Being Authentic” (1987), Mohr writes that her writing career began as an act of intervention in the tradition of Belpré. Mohr, recalling the literary worlds she encountered

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1 Pura Belpré, *Santiago* (1969). Belpré's only original publication, I review this book in the previous chapter.
as a child, emphasizes “I, as a Puerto Rican child, did not exist in North American letters.” She contends in another essay that “if I as a woman and my ethnic community did not exist in North American letters, then [through her writing] we would now.” If Mohr’s fiction reacts to what she perceives as an absence within U.S. letters until the 1970s, then her work critiques not only Anglo literature, but those literary portrayals which assign no place for U.S. Puerto Ricans within U.S. culture. Though Belpré toured New York libraries and schools, offering tales of the Island’s imagined past, Mohr states that she “never found a book [at the library] that included Puerto Ricans or, for that matter, other Latinos. My family, my friends, and all of us in my community did not exist...”

Like Belpré before her, Mohr sought a representation of herself on library bookshelves – precisely what animal fables and tales of Island jíbaros could not provide. Although I have argued that Belpré’s project in folklore promoted the kinds of critical readings of U.S. history continued by Nuyorican authors like Mohr, Mohr is the voice of a generation of Diaspora children born and bred en Nueva York. She speaks to the perplexity of being “American” by way of Puerto Rico.

Mohr’s early fiction is characterized by her poignant and complex presentation of Diaspora children. I remind readers that her work is indeed fiction since there has been a tendency to categorize Mohr as an autobiographical or testimonial writer. Instead, I hope to shift attention to Mohr’s artistic and experimental talents, such as the satirical

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3 I use the term “Diaspora children” here to denote U.S. Puerto Rican children. I have three reasons for using this term. One, to veer from the geographical terminology confusion (U.S. Puerto Rican, Nuyorican, Neorican, Diasporican) that dominates discussions of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Second, I think the term opens up my study to other immigrant, Diaspora, and migrant cultures which may find this discussion helpful. Third, to break away from using the perpetually universalized term “the child” that I find problematic in children’s literature and children’s studies. More specific terminology is needed when discussing children and children’s literature or media.
and playfully subversive ways in which she challenges traditional Puerto Rican and Anglo American texts and imagery. Reading Mohr should involve the consideration of multiple literary and cultural traditions (inherited through the U.S. colonial project) which she both relies on and resists. Her diverse perspective offers reinterpretations of certain myths of childhood (present both in Puerto Rican and Anglo American culture) which should interest children’s studies scholars since Mohr spins familiar children’s literature iconography: “once upon a time,” imagined wonderlands, secret gardens. Her focus on Diaspora children contributes to both Puerto Rican studies and children's literature studies by offering alternate readings of the American dream, the lure of the Island, and the representation of minority children in literature. In particular, reading Mohr should cause us to reconsider vital questions within the study of children’s culture, for example: What separation, if any, exists between adulthood and childhood? Between children’s worlds and adult worlds?

Mohr’s representation of childhood in early texts like El Bronx Remembered and Nilda, the works I address here, is organized around a discourse of political orphanhood and adoption which probes at notions of child subjectivity. She contributes to an ongoing conversation within children’s literature studies about the idealization of children as innocent others.⁴ Mohr’s child protagonists exhibit tremendous amounts of

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⁴ Marah Gubar discusses the “the child of nature” paradigm within her study, Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children’s Literature (2009). Popular notions of children as innocents, perhaps, can be traced to the Romantic Movement and Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth. “Child of nature” is actually a line from Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode.” There are also those who believe the so-called “cult of the child,” a movement in 19th century England continued and perhaps even cemented childhood as a cultural construction. However, stemming from this, within critical children’s literature studies, Jacqueline Rose’s The Case of Peter Pan began a dialogue about children as “colonized” and children’s literature as a kind of apparatus of adult desire designed to “colonize” children. Gubar, through her discussion of the “child of nature” paradigm contests the model as providing little room for child agency. The displaced child that I underline and the child of nature share similarities, in that, both feature children within a construct of an idealized, rural past. However, the biggest difference
agency and self-authorship within their postcolonial realities. These children, born-in-the-USA, oppose the displaced child type used by writers such as Belpré and Molnar, a model depending on the Island as a fixed point of origin that essentially banishes Diaspora children from U.S. society. Instead, Mohr presents her child characters as cast-off, nation-less children or orphans contending for their right to a place (or adoption) within the U.S. imaginary. This view will, in later chapters, contrast with writers like Judith Ortíz-Cofer who present children as neither displaced children nor as adopted children, but as a third “Between-child.”

Some critics, such as Barbara Roche-Rico, who recently argued for a “critical reassessment” of Mohr’s work, may view my discussion of Mohr in terms of “children’s literature” as counterproductive. Roche-Rico rightly argues that Mohr, one of the first U.S. Latina authors, has received relative critical silence when compared to other Latina writers such as Sandra Cisneros or Julia Alvarez (3). With the exception of critics such as Roche-Rico, Lisa Sánchez-González, or Eugene Mohr, literary discussions of Mohr are dominated by interviews and book reviews within education and library journals touting the importance of multicultural education. These sources often feature Mohr as

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6 Such interviews include Leonard S. Marcus, “Song of Myself: Talking with Authors” (2000) in *School Library Journal* in which he interviews Mohr along with Lawrence Yep and Bruce Brooks. He also published “Talking with Authors” (2000) in *Publisher’s Weekly*. Roni Natov and Geraldine DeLuca also published “Interview with Nicholasa Mohr” in *The Lion and the Unicorn* Vol. 11, No. 1, June 1987. Myra Zarnowski, “An Interview with Nicholasa Mohr” *Reading Teacher* Vol. 45, No.2, October 1991. Mohr has also published a variety of essays on the autobiographical connections in her writing, however, she often reminds that the works are still fiction. See Mohr’s “Puerto Rican Writers in the United States, Puerto
a kind of interpreter of her own work, suggesting a tendency to view her writing as testimonials of real life on “the mean streets” rather than as narratives contributing aesthetically and historically to U.S. fiction. Roche-Rico believes that classifying Mohr’s texts within the “reductive” category of children’s literature limits her scholarly consideration and places unrealistic expectations on her work by those looking for library books containing “role models” for children (161). Even Mohr has said that only two of her works, *Felita* (1979) and *Going Home* (1986), were meant for children, though the majority of her works have been marketed and reviewed as children’s literature, something she has discussed within the context of censorship. Mohr implies that marketing her works as “for children” stems from publishers’ perspective of “a Puerto Rican female as ‘perpetually juvenile’” (109). Mohr is clear: “Hispanic” literature is largely unread in the U.S. “because it is not being published!” Diverting her fiction from an adult readership and publishing it as juvenile fiction, Mohr suggests, may serve as a form imperialist control: “The best way to censor a people is to ignore them. In this way there is not even the possibility of confrontation. And, those enjoying such eminence and affluence need have no fear that the literature of the people of color will in any way impinge or threaten their well-guarded empire” (109).

Indeed, I believe lumping Mohr’s works into school library projects celebrating diversity and U.S. multiculturalism evades her unsettling accounts of U.S. colonialism. Her categorization as a “young adult” author during the post-civil rights multicultural

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7 I purposely draw a reference here to Piri Thomas since Mohr herself has said that publishers were initially disappointed with her stories, hoping for more “shock-effect.” Flores writes that publishers probably were looking for a “female Piri Thomas” (53).
movement suggests a stifling of her political critique on U.S. colonial relations. However, my study views children’s literature not as a “reductive category,” but as an important platform for subaltern resistance employed by U.S. Puerto Ricans since the community’s inception. Children’s literature is a political medium that has shaped how dominant and minority cultures imagine childhood and, within my study, how these cultures imagine the development of their narrative histories. Mohr has expressed frustration with her categorization as a children’s author. However, in a 1999 essay titled “Freedom to Read” published in the children’s literature journal The New Advocate, Mohr revised her “I did not exist in North American letters” statement to “My family and I did not exist in children’s literature” (emphasize mine). Children’s literature forms part of the literary tradition to which Mohr “writes back” and this includes Belpré’s folklore and Anglo children’s literature. Within my analysis of Mohr, children’s literature tropes function as a kind of theory which I apply to her texts. I focus on what I see as her appropriations and reinterpretations of Puerto Rican folklore and Anglo, Golden Age children’s texts. First, I examine how Mohr’s El Bronx Remembered challenges the concept of folklore and displaced children within her creation of a kind of urban folklore for U.S. Puerto Ricans. This folklore develops the concept of childhood as a combination of innocence and experience. Second, I read Mohr’s Nilda as incorporating elements of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s classic, The Secret Garden (1911), a text loaded with tension in terms of exile and postcolonial relationships. Though no one has studied this connection between Mohr’s garden and Burnett’s, I believe Mohr’s

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8 My use of the term postcolonial when referring to the U.S.-Puerto Rico relationship by no means implies that Puerto Rico is post-colony, since the Island remains a colony of the United States. Rather, I employ it to denote the relationship and consequences after colonization. Puerto Rico has always, sadly, never been a sovereign nation.
treatment of this classic, and its central image of the garden, can illuminate our understanding of how Nilda transforms her urban spaces into a “wonderland” and imagines her position in the world. Reinterpreting Golden Age texts allows for a discussion of the differences between the socio-economic (e.g. class and space) and political make-up of Anglo children’s textual worlds and Diaspora/postcolonial children’s worlds. These reinterpretations of children’s folk traditions and children’s classics form a narrative about the Diaspora in which I view Mohr as arguing for “a bit of earth”9 within the U.S. literary landscape.

**Cuentos de Mama y de Hada**10: Urban Folklore and Remnants of Island Lore in *El Bronx Remembered*

A notable shift occurs between the 1920-1930s Spanish Harlem Renaissance which I proposed in my previous chapter and what Sánchez-González calls a 1960s-1970s “Nuyorican Renaissance”: the emergence of the novel as a medium for representing the Diaspora. Writers like Mohr and Piri Thomas argue more explicitly against racial injustice and employ, as Sánchez-González writes, “modern discourses of anticolonial resistance and civil rights” (103). However, I would add that these writers inherited a dialogue of resistance from earlier writers employing less traditional mediums, such as storyteller Belpré or newspaper columnist Jesus Colón (103). As a self-professed “daughter of the Puerto Rican Diaspora,” Mohr inherits a variety of narrative discourses representing U.S., European, Latin American, and indigenous Island cultures. Her diverse narrative perspective functions as a kind of collage of cultural difference; for example, she frames *Nilda* with a poem by Spanish poet

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9 From *The Secret Garden*

10 Literally, “Tales from your Mother and from fairies.”
Frederico García Lorca, organizes *Nilda* as a kind of Euro-American *bildungsroman*, but, as Roche-Rico suggests, also includes elements of Latin American magical realism (170). *Nilda* also fits within a “larger enunciation of dissent” during the civil rights era by U.S. groups of color (Sánchez-González 106). Many scholars, including Sánchez-González, Pilar Bellver Saéz, and Roche-Rico focus on how Mohr and other U.S. Puerto Rican writers such as Thomas and Esmeralda Santiago revise the *bildungsroman* by presenting social situations “not as a given, static set of conditions, but rather as a contradictory and flexible situation in which characters not only can, but must create new models of social agency in order to situate themselves more comfortably and integrally in the existing social order” (Sánchez-González 106). Given Mohr’s emphasis on art and creativity as a tool for transforming social situations, perhaps *kunstlerroman* better describes her narratives of development; however, a continual emphasis on her work as “novels of development” may perpetuate autobiographical readings of her work. I am more interested how Mohr “writes back” to Euro-American traditions beyond *bildungsroman* such as canonical children’s texts and Island folklore. Island folklore, in particular, can represent elitist, pro-Spaniard standards that govern the Puerto Rican national canon.

Flor Piñeiro de Rivera in *Un Siglo de Literatura Infantil Puertorriqueña / A Century of Puerto Rican Children’s Literature* (1987), published by El Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, the Island’s university press and long-time guardian of national culture, identifies Belpré and Mohr as the first and second generation of Diaspora

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11 El Editorial has been a key player within some of the debates about representing Puerto Rican culture, both in the U.S. and on the Island. For example, the press recently accepted English manuscripts for publication, a controversial decision given the press’ strict adherence to only Spanish language text as
children’s writers, respectively. It is significant that, in representing the Island’s academic press, Piñeiro offers an extensive review of Belpré’s publications as “authentic Puerto Rican juvenile literature” (42). However, Piñeiro makes a distinction between Belpré and Mohr:

The first generation of writers found its inspiration in memories of the folklore, the scenery, the history and personal experiences of the Puerto Rico of its childhood. The second generation bases its writings on memories not of the island, but of the Hispanic areas where its life is rooted. This present generation is interested in social problems, searching for new structures to replace the depressing conditions of the Barrio. (42)

Piñeiro also highlights Belpré’s use of Spanish (her texts were published both in Spanish and English) and Mohr’s use of English as a distinguishing factor. In comparison to her four-page analysis on Belpré, Piñeiro includes only a paragraph on Mohr, listing only *Niida* and *El Bronx Remembered*. There is an element of authenticity within these two texts which Piñeiro endorses as Puerto Rican, though not in the same way she sanctions Belpré. Using an Island paradigm (commitment to Spanish, focus on national culture, landscapes, and customs etc.) as a guideline for authentic Puerto Rican literature produced in the States limits Piñeiro’s ability to analyze Mohr, along with many Diaspora writers,¹² within her discussion. She attempts to unite Belpré to a canon of authentic Island literature, something Belpré desired, but has difficulty placing Mohr.

The limited visibility within Island literature, coupled with the minimal impact of U.S. Puerto Rican literature on the U.S. canon, designates Diaspora texts within a kind representative of the Island. See Frances R. Aparicio’s “Writing Migrations: The Place(s) of U.S. Puerto Rican Literature” in *Beyond Borders: American Literature and Postcolonial Theory* (2003).

¹² The exclusion of Diaspora voices from the U.S. and Island canons is an important argument within Puerto Rican studies scholarship, and one that I do not wish to discuss in detail within this chapter. I believe this situation has influenced the trope of orphan hood in Mohr’s texts.
of orphan category of literature.\textsuperscript{13} Mohr assesses this orphanhood within her perspective of the U.S. Puerto Rican predicament, calling herself, and Puerto Ricans, in general “adopted citizens.” These adopted citizens, Mohr states, do not “look like that family and long [] to know who his or her parents really are.” The adopted child-adoptive parent relationship, Mohr contends, which portrays Puerto Rico as a child, specifically an orphaned child-nation, was perpetuated in the schools she attended: “I was taught that Americans adopted Puerto Rico, it is not a real country. So, am I supposed to be forever grateful because someone adopted us and took us in? The Spaniards first and then the United States? How does a child, then, form an identity?” (90) By remapping the migrant community’s history and point of origin in her texts, Mohr aids in remediating this sense of political orphanhood, presenting Puerto Ricans as legitimate, U.S. heirs. She offers the Diaspora child a new folk culture that locates Diaspora characters within in the U.S. metropolis.

Texts like \textit{El Bronx Remembered} present a radical reimagining of U.S. Puerto Rican history. I read \textit{El Bronx} as the literary presentation of a new folk culture, complete with characters, landscapes, and moral lessons, which resists the Spain-centered, academic-sanctioned, Island folklore which Belpré believed best represented the community’s history. Though upholding Island folklore served as a strategy for resistance by purporting that migrant children were not culturally deprived, Island folklore contains its share of racial, classist, and linguistic prejudices. The racial and class hierarchies of the Spaniard, the Negro, and the indigenous Taino, the lower status

\textsuperscript{13} The problems with placing U.S. Puerto Rican literature within both Island and U.S. canons is a long standing dilemma within Puerto Rican studies (see Juan Flores, Efraín Barradas, Lisa Sanchez-Gonzalez).
of woman, and the Romanticization of the Spanish settlers, are all problematic elements within retold folktales like *Perez and Martina* (1932). For example, Martina rejects and mocks each of her native-born Island suitors since they do not speak the Queen’s Spanish, favoring the Spanish-born courtier Perez. Belpré’s employment at the New York Public Library, an institution Mohr calls “her university,” means that Puerto Rican folklore, through storytelling and texts, were available to children like Mohr within the 1940s-1950s Spanish Harlem and South Bronx libraries. Yet, although she affirms that “el cuento puertorriqueño, storytelling” was “an intrinsic part of Puerto Rican culture,” Mohr emphasizes storytelling as ritual and strategy for survival within migrant homes: “When our family faced difficulties, an adult would say, ‘Don’t lose hope, sit back and relax, and I’ll tell you a story.’ Our family would gather around the storyteller, fascinated by the ancient folk tale or modern adventure. Our problems and burdens began to seem lighter, and life appeared promising.” For Mohr, “the ancient folktale” and the “modern adventure” complement each other; she does not privilege Island folklore over family-originated stories. Such family tales may even center on the daily struggles with prejudice and poverty in the city, serving perhaps a similar function as the traditional folk tale in terms of cultural transference.

Some examples of family-survival tales occur in Mohr’s *Felita*, when “Mami” and “Abuelita” transform a traumatic event into an opportunity for a story. After relocating to a wealthier neighborhood, Felita seems inconsolable when a group of white children and their parents physically and verbally assault her. “Mami” evokes a cultural legend by diverting Felita’s attention from her torn dress and toward her turned-up hemline:

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14 Mohr, Nicholasa. *Growing up in the Sanctuary of My Imagination* (1994)
“The hemline is turned up. You are lucky this day...when that happens the very first time a person wears a dress, there’s a true saying. It’s a custom I heard, that if that person kisses the upturned hemline and wishes for a new dress, she’ll get one!” (38) After kissing the hemline and making a wish, Felita finds a yellow party dress “sparking like the sun” on her bed: “My wish had come true!” Abuelita has a similar reaction to Felita’s assault, asking Felita if she would like to “hear a story” (55). When Felita turns down her offer, Abuelita then urges Felita to tell her story. Felita recounts her victimization, reframed by her grandmother’s wisdom and consolation. Abuelita also reinforces Felita’s pride in her cultural heritage through stories about the Island’s foliage: “Why, you never saw so many marvelous colors.” The women alter Felita’s trauma into a site of magical myth making. Folklore for Mohr, then, combines the urban experiences of the migrant community with a sense of magic. When she writes that the library books and popular culture portrayals such as *West Side Story* did not contain representations of her community, Mohr underlines the absence of the everyday Barrio heroes and heroines from the U.S. imaginary:

Where were my mother and aunt? All those valiant woman who left Puerto Rico out of necessity, for the most part by themselves bringing small children to a cold and hostile city. They came with thousands of others, driven out by poverty, ill-equipped with little education and no knowledge of English....This is where I came from, and it was these women who became my heroes. When I looked for role models that symbolized strength, when I looked for subjects to paint and stories to write, I had only to look to my own. And my source was boundless, my folklore rich and the work to be done could consume an eternity. (“Journey Toward a Common Ground” 83)

In this passage, Mohr essentially argues for rewriting U.S. Puerto Rican lore from the bottom up. If the Puerto Rican Diaspora consisted of some of the poorest, working class Islanders, why should they inherit a folklore celebrating Spanish classism? Instead, the
unlikely hero and heroines of the Diaspora, mainly women and children, would form the locus of culture in Mohr’s narratives.

In *El Bronx Remembered*, Mohr chooses to incorporate elements of children’s narratives such as fairy tales and folktales within her piercing commentary of urban life. The collection of short stories reframes the Diaspora community as a group with established U.S. roots. Her dedication to *El Bronx* unites the text to a myth of storytelling: “To the memory of my mother, for those days of despair when she shared her magic gift of storytelling, making all things right.” Through this dedication, Mohr associates herself with a matriarchy of storytellers (the Mamis and Abuelitas) capable of providing strategies for community survival. Mohr’s storytelling contains an allure of magic and fantasy which, as I will show with respect to *El Bronx* and *Nilda*, can still function within stories of urban violence and injustice, though not without its share of interruptions. She prefaces the collection with a short narrative on U.S. Puerto Rican history for those unfamiliar with Puerto Rican New York which may include U.S. readers and Island Puerto Ricans. Mohr’s opening sentence – “‘There have been Puerto Ricans living in the mainland U.S.A since the middle of the last century’”—designates these stories as the heritage of a long-standing U.S. community, countering those who might view an influx of Puerto Rican narratives into U.S. fiction as a sudden occurrence.

It is significant that, in recapping and remapping U.S. Puerto Rican history, Mohr weaves in folkloric tropes which transform the epoch, landscape, and people groups of this U.S. culture. For example, she contrasts basic information about Puerto Ricans

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15 Juan Flores writes in his influential essay “Puerto Rican Literature in the United States: Stages and Perspectives” (1988) that “[n]ot until the late 1960s, when distinctly Nuyorican voices emerged on the literary landscape, did it occur to anyone to speak of a Puerto Rican literature emanating from life in this country” (143). The emergence of the Nuyorican movement in the 1960s and 1970s was a result of a long history of Puerto Rican literature in the U.S., both in English and Spanish.
legal entry into the U.S against a kind of rhapsodic image of their arrival: “As citizens they did not face immigration laws or quotas…and so they arrived by the tens of thousands, first by freighter and later by planes (x).” Her use of ellipses denotes a silence in the narrative; a moment which dramatizes the migrants’ travel through time and space. This is a story where humble villagers, instead of setting off for their quest on foot, board airplanes and ships to reach their promised land. Mohr also locates the narratives within a fabled time of U.S. progress; the stories concern the “everyday struggles for survival” of Puerto Rican migrants “during that decade of the promised future 1946 through 1956, in New York City’s ‘El Bronx.’” The “promised future” refers to the post-World War era of economic and political advancement that, arguably, catapulted the U.S. into a dominant world power. Mohr situates the Diaspora community within the nation’s greatest metropolis, New York City, during its greatest period of progress, post-World War II. The elements of myth and nostalgia at work in her collection heighten when, reading in retrospect, readers know that few of Mohr’s migrant characters enjoy the promises of the nation’s future. Readers enter the world of *El Bronx* understanding that they are meeting a generation of people which has since passed, frozen within a time of great optimism. Mohr also outlines a new landscape which Belpré, for the most part, suppressed by keeping the child’s gaze on the Island. Rather than cafetal plants or tropical rainforests, Mohr introduces the reader to the urban spaces of El Barrio and El Bronx within New York, a city with a level of notoriety and expectation rivaling any fantasy land. Mohr explains how areas like the South Bronx are “known to Puerto Ricans as El Bronx.” Renaming major areas of a modern U.S. city with Hispanicized names is reminiscent of the old conquistadors who acquired and
renamed land in the name of their native country. However, as Mohr emphasizes, only Puerto Ricans “know” these Hispanicized names, denoting the community’s political subjectivity rather than dominance. Mainstream readers, some for the first time, must grapple with Puerto Rican’s ownership of U.S. history and culture.

By imagining Puerto Rican characters within U.S. soil, Mohr radically presents the concept of a Puerto Rican America. *El Bronx* in particular features Mohr’s vivid sketches of characters and caricatures of the types and personalities one might encounter in 1940s-1950s Puerto Rican New York. The heroes of this folk culture are working-class, urban city dwellers as opposed to the rural *jíbaros* and animals with Spanish alliances. Mohr allows readers a window into the life of characters such as Graciela Fernandez in “A Very Special Pet”, a typical Diaspora mother looking to feed her children, Hector in “Shoes for Hector,” the valedictorian who cannot afford new shoes for his graduation, and Alice in “Hector and Alice,” the pregnant teenager with broken dreams; these are characters never found before in U.S. fiction. It is also significant that these characters, as Sánchez-González writes, “speak and signify completely in Boricua and other urban vernaculars” (107). Mohr uphold the U.S. Puerto Rican community as its own culture with its own customs and language.

Mohr’s characterization of Diaspora children, in particular, contrasts with previous portrayals by Pura Belpré and Molnar. Mohr’s heroes and heroines navigate their quests within the U.S. and not within an imagined Island landscape. Though Mohr’s child protagonists confront identity confusion, they are not children in perpetual limbo.

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16 Sanchez-Gonzalez writes that Mohr and Thomas’ use of migrant speech is significant in that “all first-person direct or indirect discourse and third-person narration” is presented in “so-called idiomatic speech” (107). It is interesting that children’s book reviewers have actually criticized Mohr’s decision to incorporate the speech patterns and colloquialisms of the Diaspora community within her fiction, citing it as improper grammar and usage.
Diaspora children, instead, vie for a place within U.S. culture, and at times challenge their categorization as ethnic other within the system. For example, in “The Wrong Lunch Line,” Yvette willingly contests the school’s system of organizing lunch lines by ethnicity and color when she decides to stand in line with her Jewish friend, Mildred. She is kicked out of the “Jewish” lunch line by school administrators for looking “Spanish” (Mohr *El Bronx* 107). The administrator reprimands Yvette for “taking someone else’s place” and “going where you don’t belong.” However, the administrator’s act of rejection highlights that a place does exist, albeit a subjugated place, for the “Spanish” Diaspora child even within a faulty U.S. system.

Mohr’s take on the Diaspora child’s marginality differs greatly from Belpré’s. For example, Belpré’s Santiago remains within a state of exile and isolation while living in New York City. The only remedy for such feelings of displacement within the displaced child model is a return (either literally or artistically) to the Island. Instead, Mohr views marginality as an opportunity for creativity. Mohr’s interpretation of marginality coincides with a pattern which I highlight in my study of U.S. Puerto Rican children’s culture: the significance of the children’s bookshelf within concepts of nationhood and global community. Within this metaphor of spacelessness or shelflessness, a displaced child is a nonexistent child in children’s literature. Children and their communities lose visibility within an imagined global narrative if they are without nation and without a representative book. The children, like their nation, are orphaned from the world of

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17 As mentioned in the previous chapter, within the 19th century, fairy tales and folklore increasingly became part of library catalogues in Europe and Latin America as a reflection of nationalism. After two subsequent World Wars, 20th century trends in fairy and folklore and nationalism took on another level of patriotism. 20th century cultural institutions such as the New York Public Library and the children’s room projects of Anne Carroll Moore reflect this connection between national character and folklore. (See Jack Zipes’s chapter “Storytelling as Spectacle” in *Relentless Progress: The Reconfiguration of Children’s Literature, Fairy Tales, and Storytelling* (2009).
literature. Mohr’s characters are symbols of marginality, yet it is not their destiny to stay in the margins, but to transform their subjugated spaces into productive arenas through self-authorship and artistry. In fact, as I show further in *Nilda*, marginality functions as a training ground that develops the child into an artistic and poetic (even prophetic) figure, a concept that will develop through later chapters. Marginality as the substance of creativity and defiance coincides with Bill Ashcroft’s statement about postcolonial communities when he writes that “the alienating process which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the ‘margin’ turned upon itself” and created an atmosphere where marginality could “bec[o]me an unprecedented source of creative energy” (12).

Mohr also distinguishes herself from other writers like Jesus Colón or Belpré by highlighting Diaspora children as pioneers alongside adults in her stories. In the preface, Mohr identifies the daily interactions of children as prominent, if not the most prominent, locations of cultural exchanges within migrant and immigrant communities: “[Migrants] moved into congested neighborhoods inhabited by the children of earlier immigrant groups” (xi). Her stories can actually serve as an argument for how these Diaspora children, along with immigrant children, experience greater consequences (e.g. identity confusion, humiliation) than adults as a result of migration. In addition to adult-governed realms, such as the principal’s office, children must negotiate power among competing immigrant groups within child-governed realms, such as on the playground or the lunchroom. Children, such as Elba in “The Wrong Lunch Line,” who continually reminds Yvette that she is standing in the wrong line, police some of the societal boundaries within the school and neighborhood.
Roche-Rico writes that Mohr’s description of “these migrants and their children” as “strangers in their own country connects the narratives of her characters to a shared cultural myth…these terms at once connect Mohr’s writing to a tradition of immigrant fiction and establish a clear distinction from it” (164). However, Mohr’s migrant mythology contrasts with immigrant or American Dream mythologies in that instead of simply traveling to the U.S. in search of, as Mohr writes, “a piece of the good life known as ‘the American Dream,’” these voyagers were translated to the U.S. by the dark side of the American Dream, that is American expansionism through colonization. Also, though critical, the close association between folklore and nationalism suggests Mohr’s desire to unite U.S. Puerto Ricans with U.S. national mythology.

*El Bronx*, then, presents a kind urban folklore which inverts some of classic folkloric and mythological structures, such as class and gender hierarchies, heroes, landscapes, etc. Anglo and Island readers have come to expect from this tradition. Though she resisted publishers’ desires to sensationalize U.S. Puerto Rican life, what she sarcastically termed “the whole chilling spectacle of ghetto existence,” her texts still expose an underbelly of urban life that does not, as Belpré and the NYPL did, draw the curtain on war, death, and poverty.¹⁸ Mohr exposes societal turmoil from the domestic realms of home and school. She plays with reader’s expectations of folklore as a means

¹⁸ Eugene Mohr in *The Nuyorican Experience* (1982) believes that “the underplaying of sensationalism in her work” has led to problematic assumptions that her texts are somehow innocent or not as gritty as her male contemporaries such as Piri Thomas. Approaching works like *El Bronx* as “innocent” children’s texts gives readers “the misleading impression of their seriousness and has encouraged the quality of criticism they deserve.” E. Mohr writes that readers neglect “the adult looking out through the children’s points of view is clearly writing for people as adult as she” (74). Again, as with Roche-Rico’s critique of Mohr’s juvenile label, I maintain that comparing Mohr’s texts to children’s literature, or examining how Mohr employs tropes from children’s narratives, should not mean undermining her complexity as a writer. If it has, it is because of the prejudices that have surrounded children’s literature within the academy, for one, that children’s texts make no considerable impact on societal culture.
of exposing hypocrisy within agents of socialization such as the school and the nation, particularly through her use of the phrase “Once Upon a Time” and her treatment of the Island’s jíbaro mythology.

“Once Upon a Time,” the disarming title of a short story in *El Bronx*, is a tale in which Mohr ushers readers into a world where it is not uncommon for children to encounter a dead body during play time. The familiar folkloric phrase frames a story about child’s play set against the backdrop of street brutality. The story opens with a children’s rhyme, one of three recited by the three girl characters. Like the title, the rhyme contributes a playful though eerie quality to the narrative. Mohr’s use of these rhymes seems to invite readers to look behind a shroud of simplicity and innocence covering the child’s world: “Bouncey, bouncey, bally, / My Sister’s name is Paulie / She gave me a smack, I gave her one back / Bouncey, bouncey, bally.” (Mohr 58) Each girl, varying in her degree of street smarts, recites a different rhyme as she takes a turn bouncing the ball. Mohr refers to these girls simply as “the first girl,” “the second girl,” and “the third girl”; their namelessness perhaps signifying that these are typical Diaspora children one might find playing in the streets and on the roof tops. “The first girl” and “The third girl” exhibit the most street smarts which correspond to the rhymes they recite. For example, “The first girl” recites a rhyme about receiving and returning a “smack” from her sister which correlates with the self-preservation she exhibits in the story. The third girl, who maintains complete composure when the girls stumble upon the body, recites a rhyme that hints at her past experiences with violence and death: “Once upon a time/ A baby found a dime. / The dime turned red, And the baby fell down dead!” (58) Interestingly, “The second girl” who exhibits the greatest innocence through
the story, recites the most patriotic rhyme: “One, two, three a nation. / I received my confirmation / On the Day of Decoration / Just before my graduation. One, two, three a nation!” This rhyme suggests her attachment to certain social apparatuses, such as the Catholic Church (“my confirmation”) and the U.S. government (“Day of Decoration” or Memorial Day), which may prevent her from processing the brutality of the scene the girls later encounter. For example, while the other two girls alternate between thinking the man is dead and asleep, the second girl never diverts from the illusion that he is asleep. Also, by reciting the words “nation” and “Day of Decoration” in the midst of a game, “the second girl” demonstrates how Diaspora children are intimately acquainted and tied with a discourse of American patriotism during the war. The patriotic words, recited nonchalantly within a children’s rhyme, underscore Mohr’s ability to craft social critiques which a reader cannot assess without breaking from an idealist view of children as innocent others or children’s literature as sweet, little medium.

As examples of Mohr’s child protagonists, the girls in “Once Upon A Time” are not the traditional, Anglo child characters with assigned children’s spaces such as a nursery. Mohr’s children have remarkable access not just to the adult world, but the underworld of gang and street life; this is exemplified by the facility with which the girls, simply by looking for a more comfortable place to play, encounter the body of the “tough guy” leader of the Puerto Rican Leopards “curled up, facing the wall” (65). The first girl, who hatches a plan to inform the Leopards about their leader’s death, knows the exact location of the Leopards’ club house: next to the candy store. A gang clubhouse beside a candy shop highlights the almost symmetrical existence of the underworld and child’s world. As they observe the body, the girls stand in a dark hallway which may represent
the societal darkness of urban life encroaching on these children. In order to comprehend the gruesome site, the girls “concentrated as they stared at the body, trying to make things out. After a while, their eyes adjusted to the dark and he became more visible” (62). Mohr upholds children as innocent, since the girls’ sight must adjust to the abnormal sight of a dead body. The adjustment (or maturation) happens only after prolonged exposure to societal darkness which seems both unjust and inevitable. Yet, Mohr depicts the girls as slipping easily between child’s play and this confrontation with death. By the end, the girls revert into a kind of childish reasoning, deciding that the man was probably “sleeping and has woken up by now.” Mohr implies that Diaspora children unavoidably encounter societal darkness; however, this moment of “their eyes adjusting to the darkness” does not necessarily forsake innocence. The second girl suggests “another game of ball” and the girls begin bouncing the ball to each other again, the narrative ending with the third girl’s ominous rhyme “Once Upon A Time/ A baby found a dime/ The dime turned red/And the baby fell down dead! (67). Like William Blake before her, Mohr highlights innocence and experience as inseparable, symmetrical realities for urban children. Her portrayal of childhood resists the “Child of Nature” model which has been extensively analyzed and challenged within children’s literature studies and which enforces a distinct barrier between adulthood and childhood, usually understood to be innocence (Gubar 5). Though usually discussed within the context of 19th century British authors as in Gubar and Jacqueline Rose’s work, I believe this paradigm still drives much of our discussions of childhood and

19 Songs of Innocence and Experience (1789). Blake chose to depict children within two sides of life which he referred to as innocence and experience. Images of innocence in these poems depicted children within more rural, spiritual settings, while experience portrayed children suffering from the decays of society such as poverty and abandonment. I believe, Blake, perhaps more than other Romantic writers demonstrates innocence and experience, light and darkness, as sort of two halves of the same coin.
children within the field, whether we prescribe to it or not. However, here, precocity or an urban child’s interaction with societal maladies does not have to result in ruin or monstrosity, such as in Charles Dickens’ portraits of London street children. These Diaspora children pass from innocence into experience and back again – it is innocence in the face of experience (5).

Within *El Bronx*, Mohr also dispels some of the mystique surrounding the image of the Island jíbaro, arguably, the most prevalent metaphor and symbol of Puerto Rican folk life. Some of Island’s earliest published rhetoric such as Manuel Alonso’s *Gibaro* (1849), as well as fundamental articulations of national character such Antonio S. Pedreira’s *Insularismo: Ensayos Sobre el Caracter Puertorriqueño* (1926) revolve around the mythical jíbaro, a kind of Puerto Rican Adam. As the emblem for the Partido Popular, the Democratic, pro-Commonwealth party in Puerto Rico, the jíbaro continues to thrive as a modern articulation of national, political ideology. Accompanied by symbols of rural life (straw hat, bohio, hen, and machete), jíbaro folktales such as the *Juan Bobo* (Simple John) tales included by Belpré in her repertoire, feature the innocent farmer partaking within a type of sinless, abundant paradise. By sinless, I imply that tales such as Belpré’s *The Rainbow Colored Horse* (1978) present jíbaros like Tano enjoying the beautiful landscape as he plays his quarto with the intense poverty in rural Puerto Rico – the lack of education, food distribution, and income produced by Spanish and U.S. colonization which propelled the Diaspora – never interrupting farm life. The Island represents an Eden untouched by the kind of societal darkness so prevalent in

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20 Nathaniel Cordova, “In his image and likeness: The Puerto Rican Jibaro as Political Icon” (2005). The emblem for the party features the silhouette of the jibaro.

21 *Juan Bobo and The Queen’s Necklace* (1962)
stories about El Barrio or El Bronx. Belpré’s Santiago\(^{22}\) reflects the jíbaro type in his inability to acclimate to city life and his desire to reclaim his pet hen in Puerto Rico. Considering the prominence of jíbaro mythology within Puerto Rican national typology, Mohr’s “A Very Special Pet,” “A New Window Display,” and “Uncle Claudio” read almost like anti-Santiago or anti-jíbaro tales demonstrating the devastation awaiting city dwellers who cling to the jíbaro myth.

“A Very Special Pet” in particular resists the jíbaro myth through its central premise: Graciela Fernandez, a Diaspora mother desperate to feed her family, nearly slaughters Joncrofo, the family’s pet hen who lives in a box under the kitchen sink. Joncrofo, a Hispanicized pronunciation of 1940s film actress, Joan Crawford, represents the rural Island fantasy which Mr. and Mrs. Fernandez and their five children cherish as a family. Though Joncrofo is pampered and “cantankerous,” often nipping the children on their arms and legs, like the Fernandez’s dream of buying an Island farm, the family continues feeding it (the hen/the dream) even though it never lays an egg (materializes). Joncrofo symbolizes the fantasy, and absurdity, of returning to an idyllic Island past: a coddled, sterile hen eating cockroaches along the floor of a New York tenement. Joncrofo is also an anachronism representing the impossibility of maintaining a national identity based on the Island of old in the contemporary U.S. metropolis. Through Mr. and Mrs. Fernandez’s dream of buying an Island farm, Mohr expresses the disillusionment which many working-class migrants experienced as hard work failed to reward the sacrifice of leaving the homeland:

“Someday I am gonna get that job…and we could make a lotta money. Why I could..” Mr. Fernandez would tell his family several times a week.

\(^{22}\) Belpre, Pura. *Santiago*. (1969)
“Oh, wow, Papi, we are gonna be rich when you get that job!” the children would shriek…

“We gonna get everything and we gonna leave El Bronx,” Mr. Fernandez would assure them. “We even gonna save enough money to buy our farm in Puerto Rico—a big one! With lots of land, maybe a hundred acres, and a chicken house…And Joncrofo don’t have to be tied up like a prisoner no more – she can run loose.” (Mohr 6)

Mr. Fernandez imagines Joncrofo, a symbol of the migrant dream of returning to jíbaro roots, as confined within the U.S. metropolis, but liberated within the Island. The hen acts almost as an extension of the family itself; it represents a piece of the family they strive to become after sharing in the American Dream. However, once Mrs. Fernandez begins reflecting on how “things are not going that well” and that “they had not saved one cent toward their farm,” the reality of a coddled hen living under the kitchen sink becomes incongruous with life in El Bronx: “Lately, she had begun to worry; it was hard to put meat on the table” (6). Contemplating the barren hen, Mrs. Fernandez comes to a decision: “Tonight, her husband would have a good fresh chicken broth for his cold, and her children a full plate of rice with chicken. This silly hen was really no use alive to anyone, she concluded” (8).

Mrs. Fernandez’s decision to slaughter the hen actually uncovers a level of brutality within rural farm life which rarely enters the jibaro fantasies. Interestingly, Mrs. Fernandez’s decision emphasizes an unromantic truth about rural life: “It had been six years since Mrs. Fernandez killed a chicken, but she still remembered how” (8). The idyllic Island past is suddenly ruptured by images of survival; without productivity, the hens on an actual Island farm were not coddled as pets, but prepared as food. As Mrs. Fernandez begins preparations to kill the hen, she still worries about disturbing the innocence of her city-raised children: “She would tell the children that Joncrofo flew
away” (9). Indeed, the children are horrified to find their mother twirling the hen by the neck. As Olga, the oldest, exclaims, “You killed her! You’re bad, Mami!” Mrs. Fernandez remembers her Island childhood, “When she was Olgita’s age she was already helping her mother slaughter animals for food” (14). Through Mrs. Fernandez, Mohr emphasizes a type of violence and basic survival within the rural farm for which city children are unprepared—something perhaps even more horrifying than their exposure to drugs or gangs. However, after Joncrofo survives the attack, Mrs. Fernandez decides to continue the children’s fantasy of Joncrofo/the farm/the Island by telling them that the hen simply “got sick and went crazy” and that sometimes those “things just happen.”

The children leave the kitchen and Mrs. Fernandez places a traumatized Joncrofo under the sink. The story ends on an unsettling note as the children hear their mother “singing a familiar song…about a beautiful island where the tall green palms trees swayed under a golden sky and the flowers were always in bloom” (18).

Though Mrs. Fernandez, in the face of her children, struggles to give up the fantasy, Mohr implies that a migrant’s survival in El Bronx may depend on the death of the Island fantasy which cripples migrants between two impossible dreams—the American and the Puerto Rican. The theme of Island fantasies and attachments as crippling to the migrant recurs in “Uncle Claudio” and “A New Window Display.” For example, Uncle Claudio, as his nieces and nephews recount, returns to Puerto Rico shortly after his arrival because he cannot give up the social status he enjoyed on the Island: “At home, when he walks down the street he is Don Claudio. But here in New York City, he is Don Nobody..” (136). Uncle Claudio, as his Nuyorican brother tells him, “is always dreaming instead of facing life.” His return outfit, which the children notice is
the same outfit he arrived in, pictures Uncle Claudio as the epitome of Puerto Rican masculinity, reminiscent of the jíbaro: “a white suit, white shirt with a pale-blue tie, white shoes, and a very pale beige, wide-brimmed, panama hat” (141). The image of jíbaro masculinity contrasts with a kind emasculation perceived by the children in an earlier scene when Uncle Claudio, stating his reasons for wanting to return, “buried his face in his hands and was crying out loud” (134). “A New Window Display” centers on the death of an Island boy, Little Ray, who dies as a result of the terrible New York winter which he seems biologically incapable of withstanding. Little Ray never learns English, in fact as one of the children comments, he “talks Spanish as good as my grandmother and parents” (24). Little Ray is a tragic figure since he rejoices in the freedom of El Bronx (he tells the children the Island has stricter code of conduct for children) yet, as readers, we know he will not go on with the next generation of Diaspora children (28). His inability to acclimate, both linguistically and physically, to his new environment makes him weak and prone to disease, costing him his life. Little Ray is also a kind of fantasy child in that his close association with the Island, like Joncrofo, inches him closer to his death in El Bronx. His kindness and manners, possibly associated with his Island upbringing, cause the children to see him as “a little angel” as they observe him lying in his coffin, seemingly the only fate in El Bronx for such a child (35).

In the narratives of Joncrofo, Uncle Claudio, and Little Ray, Mohr implies a generational shift. A new culture had formed which was no longer displaced and not merely an extension of the old, but an altogether separate existence. Mohr’s framing of this new culture and its heroes as a competing Puerto Rican mythology resists the myths of the Island though it is not without its share of romanticism; even the title El
"Bronx Remembered" hints at a sense of nostalgia and loss within this portrait of a generation. However, in Nilda, Mohr’s argument for the U.S. Puerto Rican narrative as a separate existence from the Island, and an experience deserving a rightful place in U.S. letters, addresses the silences apart from Island literature, directing her critique toward Anglo literature. Mohr’s portrait of the Diaspora child within the U.S. literary landscape becomes even more complex when analyzing her decision to transpose Nilda with a canonical children’s text like The Secret Garden.

Making Magic in Nilda’s World: Barrios, Wonderlands, and Secret Gardens

My study of U.S. Puerto Rican literature examines, in part, how Puerto Rican and Diaspora childhood portrayals react to Anglo narratives of childhood, especially since Anglo narratives have been central within contemporary studies of U.S. childhood and children’s texts. Researching childhood as a cultural construction and subject of contention within U.S. literature requires the inclusion of narratives representing varying discourses of “American” childhood with regard to issues such as race, nationality, and ethnicity. Critics should also consider that those childhood narratives by authors representing U.S. colonial history may mimic Anglo narratives as a means of subversion.²³ For example, in Nilda, Mohr sought to create the first Puerto Rican child protagonist in U.S. literature, but in doing so I believe she is responding to classic Anglo children’s literature. Nilda is the story of a misunderstood girl (and orphan by the story’s end) who locates a secret world which provides her with a sense of purpose and freedom. The plot, present in Burnett’s The Secret Garden and, in varying degrees,

²³ Homi Bhabha writes in his chapter “Of Mimicry and Man” in The Location of Culture (1994) about the how subjugated cultures incorporate elements of a dominant culture within their practices and ritual. This “mimicry” or appropriation “repeats rather than re-presents”; in other words, mimicry repeats with a difference and that difference is the location of contention (125).
within other Golden Age children’s classics such as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), enables Mohr to highlight the unique experiences of Diaspora children while also locating Nilda Ramirez within a familiar literary world populated by Anglo heroines such as Burnett’s Mary Lennox or Carroll’s Alice Liddell. Secret lands or spaces within children’s literature are certainly not a British or North American invention; however, the privileging of an underdog child hero (a child who overcomes all odds to gain success) occurs more commonly in North American than Latin American literature. As Ann Gonzalez writes, trickster characters are prominent within Latin America (as seen in Belpré’s folktales), and though “both [underdog and trickster] figures are socially disadvantaged characters who succeed in the end,” the methods toward their success distinguishes the two: “The American underdog [I would also consider England and Canada within this motif as a result of colonial relations] is an individual who, against the odds, achieves success, defined in terms of the American Dream, through perseverance and strength of character. In Latin America, however….the underdog is….an astute figure whose deceptions represent the unconventional ways that the periphery uses to satisfy basic needs (hunger and survival)” (7). The trickster creates alternative strategies for “success,” hides “their deceptions,” and teaches children “how to get what is necessary without direct confrontation or open resistance” (8). Interestingly, *Nilda*, reflecting an interwoven discourse of colonialism, incorporates elements of the underdog (through Nilda’s perseverance in improving her craft) and the trickster (through the private fantasies Nilda forms around her oppressive environment). Nilda, then, represents Mohr’s creation of an “American” girl imprinted by Latin American culture; she is not simply an extension of a Latin American nationality.
Nilda’s encounter with a hidden Eden, like so much in Mohr’s work, foils reader’s expectations of a story about inner city life: “[Nilda] noticed…a thick wall of bushes. Curious, Nilda went towards it and started to push her way through. Struggling, she pushed away the bushes with her arms and legs and stepped into an opening of yards and yards of roses delicately tinted pink” (Mohr 154). Much of Nilda’s story takes place within the confines of a six-room tenement (she shares the space with eight other family members including an infant) or within inner city classrooms that restrict her on multiple levels (e.g. physically, linguistically, creatively), but the secret garden is a welcome moment of relief at the center of the tale for both Nilda and the reader. For E. Mohr, Mohr’s secret garden distinguishes the novel as a “memorable comment on womanhood,” making “Nilda particularly satisfying…both within and without the context of Nuyorican writing” (77). Yet, given Mohr’s interest in childhood, Nilda’s secret garden, a central image within the novel, also links Nilda with Golden Age typology and a critique of empire. Humphrey Carpenter asserts the importance of garden imagery within the Golden Age of children’s literature by writing that Burnett’s The Secret Garden represents “a work of fiction which, more clearly than any other single book, describes and celebrates the central symbol [the garden] of the Arcadian movement in English writing for children” (188). Carpenter, like Jerry Phillips, interprets Burnett’s garden as a symbol of adult desire for utopia – a return to a paradise lost. However, apart from the tradition of garden imagery within literature concerning womanhood and childhood, Phillips emphasizes The Secret Garden as a powerful commentary on

24 This is really the only moment where Carpenter discusses The Secret Garden although the entire critical work is named after Burnett’s novel. The Arcadian movement, for Carpenter, refers to an unprecedented celebration of childhood innocence in 19th century English literature which gave rise to the classics of children’s literature (Peter Pan and Wendy, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, The Secret Garden, Winnie the Pooh, etc.).
empire and healing through nature. More specifically, it is Burnett’s mediation on “the possibility of a blowback” that underlies her representation of the consequences of imperialism (343). By blowback, Phillips refers to the unsettling of domestic British society caused by the “return of the imperial program” (e.g. the return of British settlers to the homeland). Burnett’s text deals with the “predicament” of settler children, like Mary Lennox, who experience identity confusion while attempting to find a place within their “native” land (345). Similarly, Mohr’s “secret garden” offers an interpretation of the consequences of U.S. Empire, this time for the children of Puerto Rican Diaspora. Like Belpré’s harvests of story-seeds, Mohr’s garden captures the image of scattering seeds – in this case, wild, unwanted seeds. The garden scenes also contain Mohr’s plea for the acceptance of Diaspora children within U.S. culture. However, though Mohr’s child characters share similar interests with their Anglo compatriots, she presents them as developing in fundamentally different ways. As Sánchez-González writes, “Nilda’s life [is] similar to most children’s lives…However, at each turn in Nilda’s childhood she is faced with oppressive structures of power that continually interrupt her world and impose themselves in obnoxious and threatening ways” (122). Through a postcolonial lens, Mohr’s garden allows readers to see Nilda as a study in difference from the ways Anglo narratives present a child’s voyage into an imaginary or secret realm and a child’s, especially an orphan child’s, search for an individual, creative space within the actual world.

Nilda’s secret garden enables Mohr to comment on a Diaspora child’s journey into a kind of wonderland experience and how that journey differs from an Anglo child’s. The garden scene suggests a splitting of the novel into two sections (Nilda, before the
garden; Nilda, after the garden) with regard to Nilda’s ability to “journey” into a secret
realm. Pre-garden, Nilda’s secret realm or wonderland exists only within her imagination
and creativity; it is not a physical space but a state of mind. Readers filter the story
through Nilda’s perspective which means incidents are sometimes scattered and
characters are often exaggerated. Nilda’s “box of things,” a container with cardboard
cutouts, paper, and crayons that she keeps under her bed, exemplifies her ability to
project her imagination around moments of oppression or embarrassment: “…[S]he
began to divide the space, adding color and making different size forms. Her picture
began to take shape and she lost herself in a world of magic achieved with some forms,
lines, and color. She finished her picture feeling that she had completed a voyage all by
herself, far away but in a place she knew quite well.” Ever the artist, Nilda continues
this strategy of coloring around and reshaping disturbing situations, as when she
imagines pricking Mrs. Heinz, a social worker who humiliates Nilda and her mother over
the child’s “filthy nails.” Nilda “wants to stick her with this stupid nail file,” given to her by
Mrs. Heinz. She imagines Mrs. Heinz’s death, dramatizing what others would say after
she disappeared: “No blood would come out of her because she hasn’t any. But just like
that…poof! She would begin to empty out into a large mess of cellophane…First her
eyebrows disappeared…And now she is all gone. Disappeared, just like that! Poor
thing. My what a pity” (71). Post-garden, however, Nilda remembers the “secret garden”
as a tangible experience which she conjures during moments of transition and loss,
such as her stepfather’s death. Nilda also shows her cousin, Claudia, a drawing of the
garden, and the trail leading to it, at the very end of the novel. This moment cements the
garden as representative of an actual place of purpose and opportunity beyond simple fantasy and the constricting social conditions of the Barrio (Mohr 292).

Mohr emphasizes child agency through creativity and imagination, suggesting that Diaspora children can and must transform subjugated spaces into what Sánchez-González calls “an alternative space” (123). However, Nilda envisions this space as a kind of proactive, self-fashioned wonderland. If Nilda is going to experience a journey into a fantasy realm, she must take charge of the experience, drawing her wonderland over and around the actual world as a kind of graffiti. For example, in the novel’s opening, Nilda and many Barrio residents feel as if they are “baking alive” in the summer heat. Jacinto and some of the other men break open a city hydrant, creating a momentary oasis for adults and children. Some children even wear bathing suits or jump into the water naked, a moment that Nilda sees as transforming the street into a “magical waterfall” (4). Then, Nilda, through her imagination, “erase[s]” the white policemen who break up the crowd: “If this happens again, one more time, I’m going to arrest all your asses! The whole…bunch of you spicks” (6-8).

This sense of Nilda drawing over and around the actual world contrasts with Anglo texts such as The Secret Garden which present a child’s entrance into and out of their secret, magical spaces as happening with relative ease. Though fantasy realms may reflect an author’s commentary on social issues, in traditional Anglo children’s tales the child and the reader generally experience an uninterrupted voyage into the other world with clear boundaries between the magical and actual, such as a garden door, a rabbit

25 In “Puerto Ricans in New York: Cultural Evolution and Identity” (Mohr has actually defended graffiti artists saying that it an expression of “children of color-mostly Hispanic and Black.” Mohr sees this graffiti as a cry demanding for recognition: “I exist” (157-158). I believe this coincides with her presentation of the Diaspora child’s imagination as a process of drawing around or over the U.S. given.
hole, or a wardrobe. In *The Secret Garden*, for instance, Mary Lennox finds the key to the secret garden and takes possession of the space with little opposition: “[Mary] was inside the wonderful garden and she could come through the door under the ivy any time and she felt as if she had found a world all her own” (Burnett 95). Mary, Colin, and Dickon, the central child characters, spend several uninterrupted hours within the garden as if it were their own private kingdom. Mary actually considers the garden her “secret kingdom” and carefully considers to whom she allows entrance. Colin, the master of Misselthwaite Manor in his father’s stead, demands that the adult staff of Misselthwaite keep away from the children’s space: “I will not let any one know where I go…Everyone has orders to keep out of the way” (Burnett 302). Similarly, characters like Alice or C.S. Lewis’ Pevensie siblings remain within their magical spaces over several episodes, awakening from a dream or walking out of the wardrobe at the end of the tale. Additionally, like Mary and Colin, Alice and the Pevensie children are portrayed as conquering the fantasy worlds they encounter (e.g. Alice is crowned Queen in *Looking-Glass World*, the Pevensie children are the Kings and Queens of Narnia). Arguably, the drama within these Anglo children’s stories centers on a child’s ability to subdue the magical world. However, Nilda’s fragmented adventures suggest that a prolonged wonderland experience, where a child quickly accesses a portal and persists within a secret space for a long period in the text signals luxury and even imperialistic entitlement.

Phillips highlights the “class politics” of Burnett’s interpretation of the British Empire in India and her characterization of lower-class areas of England such as

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26 See Carroll and C.S. Lewis *The Chronicles of Narnia*
Yorkshire. Although Mohr ultimately likens Nilda’s ambiguous national identity with Mary Lennox’s position as an Anglo-Indian, I suggest class politics have also figured into the way Burnett (and, arguably, other “Golden Age” authors) mark the separation between child and adult spaces in contrast to Mohr. Gubar has argued that Golden Age authors like Burnett thought of children as much more socialized and connected to the adult world than has been suggested (5). I would suggest that, regardless of Burnett’s ability to construct child characters that were intellectually and culturally on par with adults and keen to the realities of the adult world, class is still an imperative issue within Burnett’s idealization of children’s spaces. Mohr’s narratives suggest that the ability to access a separate child space or to maintain a barrier between adult and child worlds depends not so much on a child’s ability to maintain innocence, but on class. Class governs space, whether it is space to maintain or to feign a children’s innocence. Mohr presents Nilda as imagining, dreaming, and living differently from an Anglo child; this impacts the construction of a secret world, particularly with regards to space and time.

In Nilda’s Barrio, privacy is a nonexistent commodity. As in El Bronx, Nilda contains none of the nurseries or playrooms prevalent in classics like Peter Pan or Mary Poppins. The economic instability of the Ramirez family compromises Nilda’s physical space; her home experiences several additions and losses in family members as the story progress. Nilda must give up her room to both her aunt and later her brother’s girlfriend and the new baby: “Nilda had Frankie’s cot in her parents’ bedroom. She

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27 Separation between the adult and the child is an important point of contention within children’s literature studies.

28 Clearly, this is with regard to time, in terms of the 19th century rise of childhood and the notion of children having a separate world from adults, however, with regard to race and class, it is still relevant that children in Anglo stories are often depicted as having their “spaces of childhood” which is really a class distinction.
missed her bed and her room, especially her window. Her own bed used to be by the window and she could look and see the sky anytime she wanted. She missed the privacy she had been used to…Nilda was constantly aware of the fact that she could not make any noise” (72). Nilda’s lack of physical space compounds with the frequent violent and social interruptions which inhibit the linear progression of Nilda’s imaginary adventures. For example, on a walk in the neighborhood, Nilda’s mediation on the shapes and colors in the concrete lead her to a gruesome discovery:

The different shapes of the worn-out surfaces of concrete and asphalt developed before her eyes into dragons, animals, oceans, and planets of the universe. She continued looking for the new and wonderful worlds that lay hidden underneath the concrete.

Nilda was completely absorbed when she saw tiny red dots all about the same size of a dime. She bent down to examine the shiny surface and as she touched the dot with her shoe, its spread. It’s liquid, like paint or something, she thought…The red dots led Nilda to a doorway and beyond, into a pool of glistening red liquid inside the hallway of a building. ‘Ay, ayyy,’ someone moaned….Looking up and into a corner, she saw a man clutching his stomach. His light blue shirt was streaked with crimson and his hands were drenched in blood. His face twisted in pain, he looked at Nilda, his dark eyes pleading for help. (36)

Nilda’s first impression of the blood (“like paint or something”) is oddly beautiful, a moment of innocence suggesting a deeper reality: transforming blood, shed in violence, into an artist’s tool. As in *El Bronx*, the moment also suggests Mohr’s conception of childhood as an equal relationship between innocence and experience, never a forfeiting of one over the other.

Recalling *El Bronx*’s Joncrofo narrative, Mrs. Fernandez explains Joncrofo’s would-be slaying by telling the children that the hen had a moment of madness – a “thing that just happens sometimes.” Those “things” that “just happen sometimes,” like the persistent inequality and darkness surrounding Mohr’s characters, are recurrent
ruptures in the Diaspora child’s dreamscape which prevent linear journeys into a dream world. Nilda’s adventures into the secret space of her imagination are sporadic and must occur between interludes of city noise, adult reprimands, and violence.

The narrative’s interruptions, along with Mohr’s illustrations, help lead the reader into Nilda’s world which Sánchez-González believes forms part of Mohr’s “woman-centered prose” and “hermeneutic co-participation with the reader” (121). Living in Nilda’s world means that even moments of play, day dreaming, and sleep, often considered sacred childhood activities, are interrupted, as illustrated in Nilda’s experiences at an Irish Catholic charities camp, a free summer camp for Puerto Rican and other minority children. As Nilda and the children board the train to the camp, signs of the city slowly fade from Nilda’s window view. She sees “no tall buildings at all” but the unfamiliar landscape of upstate New York:

White churches with pointed steeples. Barns and weather vanes. Neat patches of grass and flowers. It reminded her of the movies… the Andy Hardy pictures, she almost said out loud. In those movies Mickey Rooney and his whole family were always so happy. They lived in a whole house all for themselves. She started thinking about all those houses that so swiftly passed by the train window. Families and kids, problems that always had happy endings. A whole mess of happiness, she thought, just laid out there before my eyes…. Nilda smiled, losing herself in the happy plot of the story. (Mohr 9)

Yet, though Nilda begins getting “lost in the happy plot of the story,” a nun’s interjection quickly prevents her fulfillment: “Don’t pick your nose. You’ll get worms… You! You! I am talking to you.” Mohr’s allusion to the 1940’s Andy Hardy films, and the image of Nilda and the other “brown” children looking out of the train window at a world apart from the inner-city, also probes at the class and racial division which literally color a Diaspora child’s dreamscape. “The happy plot” belongs to the images of whiteness that Nilda sees on the movie screen or outside the train window, not to the children heading for
the charity camp. Nilda’s pleasure in fantasy, something which momentarily erased her awareness of onlookers, is interrupted by the nun and the “embarrassment spreading all over her face as everyone laughed” (9). Indeed, the charity camp scenes resonate with images of alienation and humiliation. Continuing the trend of orphanhood, the scene where the campers line up to receive their nightly meal from the nuns resonates with *Oliver Twist*, complete with a serving of gruel. Nilda and the other female campers fall asleep to the sound of their own sobs: “Pulling the covers over her head, she began to cry quietly…until she fell asleep. During the night the sounds of sobbing and whimpering coming from the other cots woke her, but each time she closed her eyes, going back into a deep sleep” (16). Mohr depicts Nilda as a continually awakening from a “deep sleep” which parallels with Nilda’s inability to “lose herself” in fantasy. Nilda’s intermittent dreaming also occurs during another episode in which she imagines “building a neat fortress of snow in Central Park” as her teacher’s, Mrs. Langhorn’s, voice fades “far, far away.” Nilda’s thoughts about the snow fort (“Maybe Nilda thought, we could build an igloo house like I seen in them pictures about Eskimos”) are interjected with Mrs. Langhorn’s lecture about the importance of hard work in America (“Nobody gave you anything for free those days”). The reader gains admission into Nilda’s secret places much in the same way that Nilda does, by editing out the interruptions (54).

More than mere escapism, a wonderland experience in children’s texts often serves as a critique of the social order, protocol, customs, and mythology of the actual,

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29 In Humphrey Carpenter’s “The Road to Arcadia” introduction to *Secret Gardens*, Carpenter implies that a desire to escape the childhood death rates, uncertain political conditions, and overly religious instruction of children may have sparked a Golden Age of children’s narratives and children’s text specifically as a proliferation of literature tending toward “introspection” and the security of childhood. Gubar has recently
governing world. Carroll’s *Wonderland* does this through Alice’s encounters with characters who continually ask her to recite or obey arbitrary rules as in “The Mad Tea Party” scene which functions as satire of the politics of order at the tea table. Similarly, by inviting the reader into one of the most notorious and marginalized U.S. neighborhoods, deciphering Nilda’s world involves the reader’s descent into an underground world which pokes fun at the sometimes nonsensical politics of order, particularly within the U.S.-Puerto Rico colonial relationship. Because many critics treat *Nilda* as an autobiography, they miss the experimental and satirical aspects of the text. Mohr evokes this descent into the Barrio during a scene where Nilda walks home during her lunch hour and must pass through a series of dark, urine invested tunnels on Park Avenue: “The tops curved into archways; inside each tunnel a single bulb shone, giving off very little light. Nilda squinted her eyes as she stood at the entrance trying to see inside” (58). Ten-year-old Nilda, who sometimes sings in the tunnels, already has an awareness of crime and keeps her money in her shoes, advice from her brother who told her not to “be a sucketa, stupid.” The image of a little girl singing and walking through dark tunnels in order to reach home underlines the Barrio’s illicit reputation within upper New York society, represented by Park Avenue, a symbol of New York wealth and power. Mohr’s spiraling illustrations, containing both words and pictures, also enable the reader’s sense of descent into the Barrio underground. On *Nilda’s* original 1973 book jacket, a Harper & Row reviewer writes that “the more you look at these pictures, the more deeply you enter Nilda’s world.” Mohr’s illustrations do not challenged this with a much more nuanced view of the “cult of the child” and cultists like Carroll and Burnett, mainly by claiming that Golden Age authors did not separate children from the adult world.

30 Mohr’s illustrations are perhaps the least mentioned elements of her creative work in children’s fiction which is really an irony since she started out as a graphic artist.
“create scenes” or “convey moods” but “combine representational art, symbols, and words to express the essence of the characters and to make a statement about their interrelationships.” For example, the opening fire hydrant scene, the novel’s first illustration, pictures a mangled mess of Barrio residents (women, men, and children) floating in the ripples of the “magic waterfall.” Mohr’s illustration of Nilda and her stepfather, Emilio, pictures one of Emilio’s obscene lectures to Nilda on the U.S. government and the Catholic Church. A row of Barrio buildings are sketched in the upper periphery of the drawing. Nilda’s image is sandwiched between the buildings and Emilio’s image. Nilda, lying on her stomach, her hand pressed to her chin, drifts into daydreaming, presumably another “happy plot” considering the words, “No BIG Buildings???...all about People who live in little houses. Everybody does?” sketched above her head. Emilio’s smoke rings, like those of Carroll’s caterpillar, spiral before Nilda’s face. The smoke rings read: “Ok, think Nilda…racists…war killing…Nilda listen…bunch of garbage…basura” (207).

Inside this Barrio underground, readers engage with a series of caricatures and contradictions that poke fun at the power structures in Nilda’s world. Nilda’s story highlights that, for Diaspora children, anyone from adults to children, Puerto Rican or Anglo, can represent an agent of power policing the Barrio. For example, Nilda’s white teacher, Mrs. Reilly, and Olga, a young girl from Spain, both ridicule Puerto Rican Spanish as a class marker (155). Even Nilda’s mother slaps her for defying Mrs. Heinz: “If I make that woman angry, God knows what she’ll put down on our application. We have to have that money in order to live” (70). Everyone is “a little mad” in Nilda’s world; she really has no one to provide her with direction or validity.
Mohr captures the oppressive forces in Nilda’s world through her caricatures of the Barrio’s white authority figures, such as Mrs. Langhorn and Mrs. Reilly, both who represent a project of internal colonialism within U.S. education. Mrs. Langhorn is a teacher obsessed with locking the supply cabinet so as not to “tempt a thief.” The thieves: her classroom of U.S. Puerto Rican children. Mrs. Langhorn lectures against what she perceives as the children’s inherent, habitual thievery: “That’s how it all starts; first it’s a pencil, then perhaps a fountain pen. It’s so easy why not open somebody’s purse? Oh, no! Start right from the beginning and you’ll get into the habit of being honest. H-O-N-E-S-T, she said, spelling out the word” (52). Mrs. Langhorn’s “loud sandpaper voice” causes the children to call her “Foghorn.” Mohr’s description of Mrs. Langhorn exaggerates the teacher’s features:

She was a short plumpish woman close to sixty years of age. Her thinning grey hair was cut short and done up in a tight permanent wave. She had a sallow complexion and small eyes surrounded by puffy skin….The loose-fitting dresses she wore were made of a crepe materials, usually dark in color, and most had stains that years of dry cleaning had permanently set into the fabric. Her bosom caved in and her stomach extended out. She always wore low-heeled shoes in need of a shine. (51)

Mohr’s emphasis on color in Mrs. Langhorn’s description enables the reader to see the teacher as Nilda does, all “grey,” “dark,” and “in need of a shine” – she is the antithesis to Nilda’s visions of shape and color.

Mrs. Langhorn, a caricature of the U.S. education system, seeks to impart children with idealist notions of U.S. progress, history, and the American Dream. Mohr, through Mrs. Langhorn, highlights the impossibility of this dream particularly since this idealist vision offers no place for children who look and speak like Nilda. Mrs. Langhorn lectures Nilda and the class about the potency of the imperial project: “Brave people they were, our forefathers…They were not going to permit the Indians to stop them. This nation
was developed from a wild primitive forest into a civilized nation. Where would we all be today if not for brave people? We would have murder, thievery, and no belief in God?"

By mentioning “thievery” within her list of consequences of an uncivilized nation, Mrs. Langhorn implies that she perceives the children (thieves) as challenges to American imperialism, making her instruction part of the civilizing process. Like a cartoon villain, Mrs. Langhorn smiles through “discolored teeth from smoking” and wears stained clothes while reprimanding the children “for coming into class unwashed.” She seeks to transform the children into “good Americans,” something which she demands not only through her lectures but, further symbolizing the imperial project, through violent force (52). Nilda and the children continually get “rapped on the knuckles” by Mrs. Langhorn for disobeying one her “most strict rules” – speaking Spanish within the classroom.

Mohr depicts Nilda, who is both beaten on her hands and made to wear a “dunce” cap for speaking Spanish, as literally coloring around the abuse: “[Nilda] hated when the skin broke and the knuckles swelled; her hands stayed sore all day and hurt for a long time. This was especially upsetting to Nilda when she looked forward to working on her cutouts and drawings for her ‘box of things’ at home” (53). Nilda’s injured hands, a disturbing image within Mohr’s portrait of Diaspora childhood, represent Nilda’s defiance of the rules as well as the opposition she must endure in creating her secret place.

Nilda’s injured hands also reflect the combination of trickster and underdog models at work in Mohr’s characterization. Nilda defies social order both publically (underdog) and privately (trickster), but she does not always “hide her deceptions.” More the underdog, Nilda represents strategies for confronting and pushing past injustice. Spanish, within Mrs. Langhorn’s context, corresponds with a child’s degree of assimilation and acts as a
hindrance to American progress: “You will never amount to anything worthwhile unless you learn English. You'll stay just like your parents. Is that what you people want? Eh?” By emphasizing the children’s parentage and home life as dishonorable, Mrs. Langhorn renders Puerto Rican parents as void within the criteria for raising good Americans. Without proper parentage, the children are, in a sense, wards of the state in need of proper upbringing made possible only through the U.S. school system.

Mrs. Reilly, a “petite woman” with neat silver hair, also highlights the U.S. education system’s tendency to alienate Diaspora children, this time by undermining Latin American heritage. Mrs. Reilly, the Spanish teacher, teaches the children Spanish with “an American accent [that was] so thick that Nilda had a hard time understanding what she said.” For Mrs. Reilly, whose “favorite country was Spain,” the children’s Puerto Rican Spanish (“that dialect”) hinders their status within an ideal of Spanish and Latin America culture (213-214). She tells the children that in Spain “they speak Castilian, the real Spanish; I am determined that this is what we shall learn and speak in my class; nothing but the best!” Mohr’s caricature of Mrs. Reilly highlights the nonsense of a teacher speaking with an American accent while demanding that her students annunciate as Castilians: “Accent! Remember, proper enunciation diction…” (215). The scenario becomes even more ridiculous as Nilda observes Edna, a student “born in Puerto Rico,” faulting as she tries to speak “with the accent that Miss Reilly required.” Mrs. Reilly responds to Edna: “Very well, Edna, you are doing a little better. However, you must practice and stop speaking that dialect you speak at home; it is not helping you…We mustn’t forget what the Spanish tradition is and means…pride” (216). Mohr underlines the burden of children like Nilda who, as colonized individuals searching for
identity and place, negotiate between varying sets of nonsensical, cultural standards established by the colonizer. Like a mad tea party of sorts, Nilda and the other U.S. Puerto Rican children are incapable of performing the standards for a place as proper Americans or Latin Americans. Nilda and the children, like Alice, are left with no space at the metaphorical table.

I want to shift now to how Nilda’s secret garden helps us evaluate the political and social intricacies of Nilda’s search for a space within U.S. culture. Nilda contains Mohr’s assertion of a U.S. identity, so Nilda’s secret garden represents more than an imaginary wonderland; it is also a symbolic place of exploration and dialogue, within the U.S., for Diaspora voices. Mohr’s garden, like Belpré’s story seeds, fixates on the literal seed scattering within the concept of Diaspora. While Belpré speaks to planting a harvest, Mohr speaks to cultivating something already planted creating an intriguing connection between these women writers: Is Mohr’s garden a representation of the kind of planting done by Belpré and the older generation of U.S. Puerto Ricans? Like her desire to build a new urban folklore, Mohr’s garden contains anxieties about national origin, specifically proclaiming the U.S. as a new point of origin outside of the Island paradigm. Roche-Rico also highlights Mohr’s interpretation of the Diaspora as regeneration: “[Diaspora for Mohr is] more than ‘scattering’ - geographical and cultural dispersion; it is also a ‘sowing’– a propagation of new forms, new opportunities for artistic expression and cultural exchange” (172). Mohr, like Belpré, emphasizes the difference between those Puerto Ricans migrating from the Island and those born stateside; however, unlike Belpré, Mohr interprets this difference as a gain and not a loss. Belpré hoped Diaspora children would foster a love for Puerto Rico which would eventually return them to their
homeland. However, Mohr claims the U.S. as the homeland, and through her narratives, holds her homeland accountable for its parentage of Diaspora children.

Nilda’s secret garden gathers themes of marginality and orphanhood present throughout Mohr’s portrait of Diaspora childhood. As Nilda finds the trail to the garden, she attempts to connect the scenery to her mother’s stories about the Island; she “remember[s] her mother’s description of Puerto Rico’s beautiful mountainous countryside covered with bright flowers and red flamboyant trees (153). Mary Lennox’s first vision of her garden also connects her to a memory reflecting her own ambiguous national identity. She remembers the roses of India, a country which she left for her “true” nation, England. Nilda’s second-generation memory of the Island also reflects a sense that she is distancing herself from one country (Puerto Rico) in order to pursue another (the U.S.). Considering Phillips’ point about The Secret Garden as a critique on returning to the homeland after Empire, Mohr inverts the traditional narrative of the homeland. In Puerto Rican literature, the homeland is usually the Island, yet Mohr emphasizes a child embracing the U.S as its homeland. Interestingly, Nilda’s first memory of national foliage and landscape, which she associates with ideas of belonging and place, and a memory carrying her to the end of the text, happens not on the Island, but in a rose garden in upstate New York. The garden is specifically a “wild” rose garden which, as in Burnett’s classic, has been left unkempt and unwanted. Like Burnett’s Mary, Nilda must push the overgrown branches and shrubs in order to behold her discovery: the “scattered” roses “growing wildly on the shrubs” (154). As in The Secret Garden, the rose garden can represent Nilda’s position as an unwanted, “contrary” child. Nilda is “contrary” within a U.S. metropolis where national origin is
almost synonymous with social and geographical order (e.g. Chinatown, Little Italy, and Spanish Harlem). She is not American enough for the Mrs. Langhorns of the city and not “Spanish” enough for the Mrs. Reillys who demand distinct cultural boundaries from children in terms of national identity. The parallel between these two texts enables Mohr to liken Nilda to Mary by placing Nilda within the role of orphan. The child orphan, as Phillips writes, may actually figure as “a metaphor for the instability of identity, the crisis of representation in certain social relations” in nineteenth century culture (345). Nilda’s orphanhood, however, is specifically a political orphanhood – a child without a nation to claim her as its own. Perhaps, Mohr desires readers to see Nilda as Mary, who before finding the secret garden, lamented about her lack of parentage and place: “[Mary] had begun to wonder why she had never seemed to belong to anyone even when her father and mother had been alive. Other children seemed to belong to their fathers and mothers, but she had never seemed to really be anybody’s little girl” (Burnett 14). As Nilda walks into her secret garden, she is, figuratively, also not “any [nation’s] little girl.”

Once in the garden, Nilda finds a sense of order and belonging that proved impossible within the city. In upstate New York, Nilda experiences the kind of spiritual renewal and healing that Mary, Colin, and Dickon enjoy in the English countryside. Mohr depicts Nilda as “inhaling the sweet fragrance of the flowers.” The sun shines down on both Nilda and the roses, “enveloping her…as was part of them…they were part of her.” By blending into the roses, Nilda exhibits a freedom from the “signs” of physical and creative restriction that continually encroach on her life: “DO NOT WALK ON THE GRASS…DO NOT PICK THE FLOWERS…VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED” (Mohr 154). Furthermore, Nilda models this belonging within the garden through a
highly symbolic act: “She took off her socks and sneakers, and dug her feet into the earth like the roots of the shrubs. Shutting her eyes, Nilda sat there for a long time, eyes closed, feeling a sense of pure happiness; no one had given her anything or spoken to her. The happiness was inside, a new feeling, and although it was intense, Nilda accepted it as part of her life that now belonged to her” (155). Like Nilda’s injured hands, digging her feet into the earth proclaims Nilda’s (and Mohr’s) defiance of the societal boundaries which would render her and her community mute and non-existent. Nilda positions herself as an American rose, growing wildly in a scattered garden which, though ignored and perhaps unwanted, continues to form part of the New York landscape. Once again, there is something about marginality that somehow privileges Mohr’s characters with insight and an artistic, almost prophetic gift. Nilda can see the future in the garden; it leads to her first feelings of “happiness” which she claims as part of her new life. It is Nilda, the orphaned Diaspora child, who finds the secret garden and then leads two other female campers into the secret space. She leads the two girls up the path to the garden, saying, “You are going to have to push the bushes and the branches out the way.” The girls, both white, stand with Nilda in the garden, a gesture which reveals, as E. Mohr writes, her “offering [of] a deeply personal gift –offering them, as it were, herself” (77). The girls ask Nilda questions about living in the Barrio, a place they know for its violent reputation. Nilda tells the girls a story about “seeing a man knifed”, even as she talks about returning to the camp and visiting her new friends. By inviting the girls into the garden, Nilda offers the garden as a platform for dialogue and storytelling. The garden may even hold healing for race relations. Mohr’s illustration of the three girls in the garden (each girl blending into the other, arms outstretched,
playing, and a rose at the feet of each girl) further emphasizes Nilda’s position as an American little girl. Upon returning to the Barrio, Nilda uses the garden as a point of reference; it is the evidence that a productive, nurturing place where she can thrive does exist: “The perspiration began to run down the sides of her face and, for a moment, she remembered the camp, the trails, her garden, and the silence. That is happening, she thought, right now too, someplace real far, where I was this morning” (168).

“A Bit of Earth”: Art, Creativity, and Belonging in a Garden of Multiculturalism

Because the garden is a site for creation and dialogue, Nilda’s secret garden also contains Mohr’s advocacy for the arts as an outlet for Diaspora children. Like Burnett’s garden, Mohr’s garden is a place where the child can govern and take action. When Mr. Craven asks what Mary wants for amusement, Mary requests “a bit of earth.” The request reveals her desire to beautify and remake the unwanted garden. Mr. Craven grants Mary’s request saying “take it, child, and make it come alive” (143). Through Nilda and texts like El Bronx, Mohr essentially makes a similar request of the U.S. literary establishment: a “bit of earth” that testifies to the existence of her community and its children within U.S. culture. Nilda’s possesses the garden only temporarily; however, she claims the feelings and creative energies sparked by the garden for the remainder of her life. Toward the end of the novel, readers gain a greater understanding of the garden’s connection to Nilda’s artistic gift – the garden and the gift become interchangeable symbols. Nilda’s mother, Lydia, reserves her dying words to ask her daughter a thought-provoking question: “…[I]f you have no money and little education, who will help you, Nilda?” The moment comes as an unexpected insight into Lydia Ramirez’s broken dreams who, unlike her daughter, never found her own secret
place, either real or imaginary. Lydia connects Nilda’s privacy with her ability to draw:

“Do you have that feeling honey? That you have something all yours...you must...like when I see you drawing sometimes, I know you have something all yours...Keep it...hold on, guard it. Never give it to nobody...not to your lover, not to your kids...it don’t belong to them...and...they have no right...no right to take it” (277). Lydia’s remarks are oddly similar to Mary’s justifications for keeping her secret garden when she tells Dickon: “Nobody has any right to take it from me when I care about it and they don’t. They’re letting it die. ...I’ve nothing to do...Nothing belongs to me. I found it myself and I got into it myself. It’s a secret garden, and I’m the only one in the world who wants it to be alive” (122). Both Lydia and Mary equate the cultivation of a private space with the right to ownership and control of access. Nilda’s artistry allows her to have something her mother never had, “a room of one’s own.”

It is also significant that the novel ends with a scene in which Nilda shows her drawings of the garden to her cousin, Claudia. Nilda emphasizes not only the garden, but the “special trail….see how it winds…well, that trail leads to the secret garden.” Sanchez-Gonzalez writes that “the path leading to the garden suggests that Nilda has already found the tools she can use for demystifying an oppressive social order in the United States and successfully reconceptualizing herself as an integral and sovereign subject in the world” (131). However, more than finding the tools, I believe Mohr wishes for readers to see the path as an invitation. They too can develop the creative strategies necessary for surviving in a hostile environment. Nilda, as in the García Lorca poem, “Ballad of the Little Square” (1955) that prefaces the novel, has learned “the path of the poets” which, arguably, leads to a kind of

31 Virginia Woolf
preservation of the soul. In the Lorca poem, this soul is that of “a child, ripened with legends, with a feathered cap, and a wooden sword.” Again, Mohr underlines the ability to maintain childlike innocence even within depressing conditions. Artistry and creativity outline this “path of the poets” leading to survival. Survival is realized not by passively accepting social restrictions, but by carving out opportunities from what one is given. Perhaps more importantly, Nilda’s drawing of the path also means that readers, like the girls at the camp, can follow Nilda into her secret garden, partaking in a cultural perspective radically different from their own. In fact, by the end of the novel, readers can get the sense that they have been standing in Nilda’s secret garden all along, listening to her story of heart break and resistance.

Perhaps, this sense of gaining insider knowledge into another culture, particularly subaltern cultures, is the most admirable, democratic promise of multicultural literature. Children’s literature in particular, as Ann Gonzalez writes, seems to offer greater access into the mentality and ideology of subaltern groups. However, Mohr also offers a kind of cautionary tale against the uncritical, optimistic spirit of post-civil rights multiculturalism. I say this because her work has yet to receive the kind of critical attention of other “ethnic” writers. Instead, we have looked to Mohr as a kind of cultural guide and her texts as works testifying to ghetto life. Some of her original

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32 Lawrence Sipe, “Children’s Response to Literature: Author, Text, Reader, Context.” *Theory into Practice, 38* (3), 120-129. In this article, Sipes describes what he calls “insider” and “outsider knowledge” referring to an author’s knowledge of a culture. For example, a writer narrating experiences from his/her culture of origin would possess “insider knowledge” of that culture.

33 Citing Gayatri Spivak and John Beverly respectively, Gonzalez argues that, though critics have argued that “the subaltern cannot speak” or that “the subaltern cannot speak in a way that really matters, a way that would carry any sort of authority or meaning for us without altering the relations of power/knowledge that constitute it as a subaltern in the first place” children’s literature offers a different opportunity. She writes, “Clearly, peripheral groups find it difficult, if not impossible to speak to the metropolis, to “us,” but even they can and do speak to each other and to their children (who are even more marginalized than they are), often through oral storytelling, myths, and legends” (4-5).
reviewers saw Nilda as “the story of the hardship and discrimination faced by a poor Puerto Rican girl” and “a beautiful expression of a young girl’s coming of age in the ghetto.” However, it seems critics have done little more than celebrate Mohr as a voice of “hardship.” Part of Roche-Rico’s argument for the redirection of Mohr’s critical appraisal includes looking to Mohr as a “naturally privileged—though not exclusive – authority on her own body of work.” Roche-Rico writes that Mohr, like many female writers, has “combated the invisibility and silence of their positions --- and the indifference, apathy, or antagonism of early reviewers – by devising their own polemics, their own language for assessing their literary output…” (163). She points to Mohr’s essays and her “partial memoir,” Growing Up in the Sanctuary of My Imagination (1994), as the beginning for how to understand Mohr. It is easy to see Mohr’s fiction as speaking to the importance of diversity and pluralism within the U.S. However, critics have turned a blind eye toward specificity within an optimist vision of multiculturalism in which a Puerto Rican rose scattered in the U.S. landscape is just another ethnic rose. Critics have missed the specific ways in which Mohr holds U.S. ideology accountable for its imperialism and its promises of democracy and pluralism to the colonized. The metaphor of the children’s book shelf which has been so important in my study demonstrates this desire for pluralism and inclusion; however, the organization of that bookshelf, and the children’s literary world, continues to mirror a kind of separate, but equal ghettoization.

In this chapter, I have argued that Mohr’s critical attention should shift away from her autobiography and toward her art – toward the experimental and provocative

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34 The first quote, from the School Library Journal, the second, from the Amsterdam News (1973) both cited on the cover on the first edition of Nilda.
portraits within fictions like _El Bronx Remembered_ and _Nilda_. I have argued that we can begin assessing Mohr’s critical, aesthetic practices by studying her appropriations of children’s narratives, such as Island folklore and Anglo children’s literature. I have demonstrated that reading Mohr’s work as children’s literature should not limit our ability to study Mohr as an imposing force in U.S. fiction, particularly since children’s literature is a political medium. Moreover, considering children’s literature a “reductive category” limits our ability to examine many writers who have used children literature and culture as a means of experience and resistance.

Nicholasa Mohr is the child whom Belpré sought. She grew up in the Barrio where Belpré began her planting of Island folklore as a way of harvesting Puerto Rican identity within Diaspora children. Yet, Mohr did not recognize herself in Island folklore or in the Anglo children’s stories available in the New York Public Library. Instead, Mohr, through her experimental fiction, asserts a new U.S. identity by advocating a new folk culture and creating, for the first time, a Diaspora heroine, an exceptional child, who defeats that nagging feeling of displacement by “stealing” her own secret garden. The concept of the Diaspora child as an exceptional, poetic child within a training ground of marginality and linguistic and cultural diversity will be explored in the coming chapters.

35 Mary Lennox says, “I’ve stolen a garden” (105)
CHAPTER 4
THE LETTER OF THE DAY IS N: A GIRL NAMED MARIA, SESAME STREET’S LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY AND MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN’S CULTURE

A wooden casita, built over an abandoned lot in East Harlem, foregrounds an icon of American children’s culture, Big Bird. After greeting Sesame Street’s child viewers by saying “Hola,” Big Bird explains that a “casita is a special kind of house just like they have in Puerto Rico.”¹ The casitas, rural Island dwellings sandwiched by modern skyscrapers, exemplify a pattern within the art of the Puerto Rican Diaspora: the building of a structure, whether imaginative, physical, or, in this chapter, linguistic, over a U.S. given. Big Bird among the casitas also demonstrates how the Diaspora’s² approach, and imposition, toward U.S. culture imprints and bends the dominant culture – an American icon speaking in the language of the conquered. “Hola” is a familiar word in the Sesame Street universe, particularly since the 1971 introduction of Sonia “Maria” Manzano, the U.S. Puerto Rican actress and writer for the Children’s Television Workshop,³ the producers of Sesame Street. Maria gave a face and voice to a Diaspora community seriously underrepresented in the children’s literary world. Even with the work of Pura Belpré, Nicholasa Mohr, or Judith Ortíz-Cofer, U.S. Puerto Ricans and Latinos overall remain among the least represented groups in all children’s literature.⁴ However, as one of the “friendly neighbors” on one of the nation’s most beloved


² By Diaspora, I am referring to the Puerto Rican Diaspora community.

³ The Children’s Television Workshop changed their name to the Sesame Street Workshop. They have productions in at least 11 countries around their world, including Israel, Palestine, and Germany. However, I will refer to it as the CTW since many of the sources on Sesame Street refer to the group as CTW.

television shows, the strong presence of Maria on *Sesame Street* forces a consideration of why children’s television, and not children’s literature, offers such a prominent cultural address for this community.

I turn to *Sesame Street* at this point in my study for several reasons. *Sesame Street* has and continues to play a critical role in representing the multilingual lives of Diaspora and Latino/a children. A child’s ownership of language has been a point of contention within the U.S. Puerto Rican narrative since Pura Belpré’s defense of a child’s right to “cling” to Spanish. U.S. Puerto Rican artistic and literary culture, as Juan Flores⁵ and Eugene Mohr emphasize, is distinguished by its defiantly bilingual nature, particularly in the post-civil rights era. For example, the Nuyorican movement of the 1970s (led by poets such as Miguel Piñero and Piedro Pietri) was characterized by radical experiments with language such as code-switching (the interchanging between English and Spanish without translation). For Flores, language is an issue linked to identity and memory. The bilingual aspects of Diaspora art and literature, Flores asserts, frame Puerto Rican memories within a “dual vision…a communication where languages bifurcate and recombine…Puerto Rican memories are mixed code memories, lodged at the points where English breaks Spanish and Spanish breaks English” (52). Bilingualism and its role within identity and artistic formation intersect with another pattern within my study: the concept of marginality as a catalyst for artistic and poetic expression. The notion of the marginal Diaspora child as poet develops further when examining the role of language, specifically the depiction of children as

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⁵ Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip Hop*. The chapters “Broken English Memories” and “Life Off the Hyphen” talk about the place of bilingual discourse and Latino literature. U.S. Puerto Rican discourse, as Flores writes, is characterized by its “porousness” and its “breaking of the authority of monolingual discourse”; a discourse representing a serious challenge to a monolingual children’s literary world (Flores 58).
linguistically gifted through their manipulation of English and Spanish. However, the Puerto Rican Diaspora’s identification with bilingual discourse complicates this community’s portrayal within children’s literature. The children’s bookshelf is a highly segregated space where books, authors, librarians, and awards are contained by ethnic labels, making multilingual and transnational perspectives difficult to categorize. For example, although Mohr, the only children’s author within the Nuyorican era, injects Spanish words and phrases, she limits code-switching given her relationship to her audience: “[Poets] can read their work aloud and have close contact with their public. When I do use words in Spanish, I follow them up with English in a way that is clear” (Rodriquez 93). Here, Mohr implies that performance seemingly transcends certain limits within literature.

My reading of Maria and Sesame Street’s language pedagogy, by which I mean the show’s approach to language and foreign language instruction, focuses on this relationship between performance (e.g. miming, music, theatre) and language. Like the casitas, Sesame Street presents Spanish as difficult to ignore since it has augmented the structure of official English. Bilingual characters like Maria and Luis collide with a variety of characters and cultures. Maria personifies bilingualism as a communicative gift which can benefit everyone on the Street. She is particularly intriguing in that, unlike Belpré and Mohr’s creations, Maria is a combination of television producers’ imaginings and Manzano’s both performative and literal authorship. While children’s literature, as Clare Bradford writes, reflects the language-related power struggles of colonial societies, such as naming and ordering territories, this kind of language

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6 In Unsettling Narrative (2007), Clare Bradford dedicates a chapter to language and the notion of languages “collid[ing].” She examines books like the Papunya School Book of Country and History
experimentation and interaction is nonexistent (Bradford 20-43). Despite its turn toward international perspectives, outside of discussions on translation, children’s literature says little about the use and exchange of foreign languages, and even less about Spanish, within U.S. children’s culture.  

My aim here is to examine what happens when languages mix and how Sesame Street sometimes enables exchanges like non-translated dialogue and segments completely in Spanish. Languages do not exist behind borders, an idea that bilingual books tend to enforce when, apart from a literal line drawn on the page, foreign words are managed by either translating them or providing their meanings in context. The result is a repetition of words and phrases even when representing conversations between native speakers.

Language is central to what is sanctioned as literary and non-literary which coincides with a community’s access to the literary establishment. My discussion probes the question of access with regard to historically disadvantaged children, among them African-American and U.S. Puerto Rican pre-schoolers, the two “at-risk” groups targeted by Sesame Street’s early research and self-esteem curriculum. Maria’s creation marks television producers’ desire to reach a U.S. Puerto Rican community perceived as violent and impoverished – a group of preschoolers which producers may have felt had more access to television than literature. Similarly, Sesame Street’s portrayal of bilingualism allows for a consideration of the complex relationship between language and literature. In her study The Case of Peter Pan, Jacqueline Rose directs scholars to

(2001), a picture book from Australia depicting the life a segment of the lives of Aboriginals. Bradford examines “narrative modes” and some bilingual books such as Caribou Song: Aihiko Nikamon (2001). In terms of the Caribou book, she writes about how words are glossed, giving readers enough information about a certain words to decipher its meaning, and then using the word again, engaging the reader’s memory. I would say these examples still enforce monolingual discourse. (25;55)

7 Emer O’Sullivan Comparative Children’s Literature (2005)
the transformation that occurs before language becomes literature. Language and literature are closely related, yet like the spilt layout of a bilingual book, where authors do their best to tell the same story side-by-side to no avail, they are two different things:

the question of language becomes the question of literacy, and the question of literature hands over to that of literary language (how and what to speak, what to read and to what end?). By this almost imperceptible shift, both language and literature are released as objects of policy – policy by means of which the child’s relationship to its culture can be defined…Both the language and the literature available to the child fall inside institutions which constitute them differentially and with different values and meanings at different times. (118)

Children’s authors seem particularly self-conscious about this transformation, perhaps because these texts help form our opinions of what constitutes literature. While language and literature are both “released as objects of policy,” as Rose suggests, this “imperceptible shift” constitutes a certain sanctioning of a preferred written code. This sanctioning occurs through literature’s interaction with the State and the elite, literary establishment. One must think “against literature” in order to examine those groups which seem absent from “world” created by literature. By thinking against literature in this essay, I hope to emphasis children’s television as a medium that helps us understand the silences within children’s literature when it comes to representing multilingualism. Yet, this is not a study in linguistics, nor is it a comprehensive study on

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8 Beverly’s book, Against Literature (1993) contains an interesting theory of as he says, “negating the literary” so as to take into account projects and perspectives that go against what is normally sanctioned as literary, including testimonial narratives. In “The Formation of the Ideology of the Literary (from Garcilaso to Greenblatt)”, Beverly writes that desires for a national language and national literature permeate through the “over valorization” of literature. When it comes to the roots of literature as a place of dissidence, he writes: “Difference could be tolerated even encouraged – but only within the centralized power system represented by the state and a national language, which existed like the literary text itself, both to make difference possible and to contain it” (26). I am particularly interested in Beverly’s take on the literary because he uses Latin America as his case study. Like Beverly, I believe “[w]e tend to think of literature as a sanctioned space for the expression of social dissidence or marginality,” but should consider that literary texts have served as vehicles to both “make difference possible and to contain it” (25). Also, avenues like theatre and television feature children as participants and not only subjects (Gubar 33). I believe this is something that requires more attention overall.
Sonia Manzano’s role in television history, although my analysis sometimes touches on these subjects.

I explore what I call *Sesame Street*’s pedagogy of language. Maria, a representation of the U.S. Puerto Rican migrant, acts as an illustration within both sections since it is my belief that she embodies the show’s language ideology. First, I analyze the show’s approach to presenting bilingual discourse as a give-and-take negotiation of power. What children’s programs like *Sesame Street* compel us to see is that languages do not always run parallel, as bilingual books often suggest. “A bilingual,” Ana Celia Zentella writes, “is not two monolinguals stuck at the neck” (56). I highlight the historical and social issues underlying Maria’s creation as drawing on popular portrayals such as *West Side Story* (1955) while still opposing stereotypes of migrants. Maria illustrates the show’s approach to pacifying relations between rival languages, English and Spanish. Second, I examine the role of performance in *Sesame Street*’s language instruction. Language and performance on *Sesame Street* are interrelated to the point that the show presents performance as language and language as a performance. Maria, particularly in her performances as a mime, illustrates the show’s representation of language as process of mimicking sounds and/or gestures, similar to miming, singing, or dancing. In the show’s pluralistic vision, *Sesame Street* presents pre-school children with the theatrical concept of people, and their languages, forming an ensemble. For over 40 years, this concept of ensemble has enabled *Sesame Street* to “do things with words”⁹ that have not been possible in children’s literature.

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⁹ J.L. Austin’s title
Rumble: Language as Duel, Bilingual Children’s Culture, and a Girl Named Maria

In “Bilingual Fruit Song” (1986) from Episode 1646 of Sesame Street, a pear, an apple, a banana, and a pineapple sing that “two names are better than one.” The fruits chosen for the song symbolize the U.S. Anglo (domestic apple and pear) and Hispanic cultures (the more tropical banana and pineapple acquired through trade and colonization) which, as in a fruit bowl, are forced to live together. However, the happy compromise between fruit does not come without a fight:

Apple: Hey, pear, this banana here says he is a platano and I’m a manzana.
Banana (to the pear): Si, Buenos dias, pera.
Pear (to the banana): What did you call me?
Banana: Pera.
Pear (to the apple): Pera? I’m a pear.
Pineapple (to the apple and pear): But, pera is pear in Spanish.
Pear: It is? Hey, who are you anyway?
Pineapple: I’m piña.
Apple: Piña. You sure could pass for a pineapple.
Pineapple: That’s right, I am a pineapple. Just like, platano is the Spanish word for banana…
Banana: ¿Yo soy un banana?
Pineapple: A-ha, and manzana is the Spanish word for apple.
Apple: Boy, well, I’m a big manaza.

The apple’s final line cues the song, yet it is also a play on words for the Big Apple or New York City. The banana/platano represents the Hispanic immigrant who, without knowledge of English, innocently begins speaking Spanish to his Anglo companions.
who react in fear at the notion of having Spanish names. The pineapple represents the bilingual who acts as an intermediary between the groups. Eventually, the “big” apple realizes that there is enough room for everyone in the fruit bowl; two names are better than one. The song illustrates a principle within Sesame Street’s pedagogy of language: the coexistence of languages leads to tension and compromise. To be bilingual is to participate and perhaps pacify in a battle between two languages.

Languages, particularly in bilingual cultures, engage in a duel, according to Puerto Rican writer, Rosario Ferre. “English and Spanish,” Ferre writes, “have been at war since Queen Elizabeth sank King Felipe’s Spanish Armada in 1588.” In a bilingual book, Ferre suggests that languages face each other on opposite sides of the page as if on a battlefield. Here, placing languages side-by-side heightens a sense of rivalry rather than camaraderie – something often ignored when considering bilingual children’s literature. For example, the parallel stories of a bilingual children’s picture book are presented as conveying the same message through equal representation; there is no consideration of the competition between languages. Additionally, there is a presumption that languages never interact, but stay safely confined behind the border. The result, I believe, leads to a mixed message, as illustrated in Monica Brown’s Side by Side: The Story of Dolores Huerta and Caesar Chavez/ Lado a Lado: La Historia de Dolores Huerta y Caesar Chavez (2009). The phrase “side by side” alludes to both the story’s plot, the partnership between Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez for farm workers’ rights, and the “side by side” Spanish and English narratives (separated by a black bar) telling the story. An illustration by Joe Cepeda, perhaps, attempts to

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10 Rosario Ferre, Duelo de Lenguaje/ Language Duel (2002). The text is a bilingual poetry anthology.
unconsciously unite the narratives: Chavez and Huerta are pictured holding hands across the page division. Yet, considering Ferre’s critique, “side by side” may actually precipitate the very issues this bilingual book seeks to inspire (e.g. partnership between cultures and languages), all the while leaving the reader in the thick of a duel. Readers must “side” with one or the other, at least initially, since no one can read both sides simultaneously.\textsuperscript{11}

In illustrating “rules for justice and fair play,”\textsuperscript{12} Sesame Street likewise admits the tension between rival languages. The skit “Vamos a Comer” (2006) performed by Muppets Telly and Rosita, interprets the division between languages as a space for dialogue. The skit begins with Telly standing in a park, a narrator (human cast member Luis) says, “When Telly is hungry he says...” Telly looks down at his stomach, saying, “Let’s eat.” Suddenly, the screen splits, revealing Rosita at the beach with a picnic basket and sandwiches. The narrator says, “When Rosita eats, she says...” Rosita looks at her sandwiches, announcing, “Vamos a comer.” An astonished Telly looks at Rosita’s side of the screen, hearing her even through the dividing blue line. As the narrator continues repeating the prompts, the line between Telly (English) and Rosita (Spanish) becomes inconsequential:

\begin{quote}
Narrator: Telly says...
Telly: Let’s Eat.
Narrator: Rosita says...
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} The use of interlinear books such as the interlinear Bible translations may help remedy this situation, although I would say you still need to make a choice over which language to read.

\textsuperscript{12} This phrase is part of Sesame Street goals/learning objectives for its first season. We should remember that the show is made up from what is called the CTW model: Independent researchers that test the content’s affects on pre-school children, curriculum supervisors or educators who suggest learning objectives to production, and content producers that write the scripts (Fisch and Truglio xvii).
Rosita: Vamos a comer.

Telly: (pointing to Rosita’s side of the screen) Hey, Rosita, what did you just say.

Rosita: (startled at first) Oh, I said, vamos a comer. That means let’s eat in Spanish. Mmm, hmm.

Telly: Great! ¡Vamos a comer, Rosita!

Rosita: Si, Telly! ¡Vamos a comer!

Telly: Oh, no. I can’t eat. I didn’t bring any food.

Rosita: Ay, no hay problema, Telly. You can share some of mine. (pushing the sandwich to the Telly, across the blue line) Here you go...

(Telly reaches over the blue line and grabs a sandwich. Rosita and Telly both laugh)

Rosita and Telly (in unison): ¡Vamos a comer!

Ultimately, the skit illustrates the necessity of interaction, even between languages, in order to bring about an expected end (i.e. eating). The division erodes as the “English” side begins speaking Spanish and the “Spanish” side begins speaking English. It also suggests that though there is a division, either side can easily cross the line. The notion of dueling languages enables us to see language as a border, but also as a weapon and even an actor.

Maria is a kind of bilingual muse of communication on Sesame Street, though notions of rivalry and battle underlie her creation. Indeed, Maria is a creation of the show’s writers, although Manzano, since the 1980s, has participated in writing scripts for the character and ensemble. As a character, the 1970s, teenaged Maria provides a glimpse into how the CTW imagined the Puerto Rican and Latino community within urban America. By the time Maria arrives at Sesame Street, the Puerto Rican Diaspora had been fixed into U.S. popular culture, mainly as a source of anxiety. Puerto Rican
migrants dominated New York’s Hispanic minority and established neighborhoods in El Barrio, El Bronx, and Loisada (the Lower East Side), as Mohr affirms in her children’s narratives. However, New York and Island (PR) educational officials, along with sociologists and psychologists, developed two popular labels for the Diaspora: the “Puerto Rican problem”\textsuperscript{13} and “the culture of poverty.” As early as 1948, the New York Department of Education\textsuperscript{14} began examining the “problem” of educating Puerto Rican migrants with regard to economic progress and stability. The New York Public Library, under an initiative led by librarians Pura Belpré and Lillian Lopes (the South Bronx Project) identified the predominantly Puerto Rican South Bronx of the 1970-80s, as needing special services due to the low education rates and poverty.\textsuperscript{15} The consensus among psychologists and anthropologists like Dan Wakefield (1959)\textsuperscript{16}, Benjamin Malzberg (1965)\textsuperscript{17}, and Oscar Lewis (1966), was that Puerto Ricans’ incorporation into U.S. culture had been a catastrophic failure. “The culture of poverty,” a phrase still used when referring to cycles of dependency within the urban poor, emerged from Oscar Lewis’ \textit{La Vida}\textsuperscript{18} (1966), a study on the lives of Puerto Rican migrants in New York.

\textsuperscript{13} This phrase is taken from a special 1955 commission by the New York Department of Education that was formed to investigate the educational patterns of Puerto Rican migrants in New York. (Nieto)

\textsuperscript{14} The New York Department of Education had an Island (PR) official on it board and studies were conducted on the Island as well.

\textsuperscript{15} Oral History with Pura Belpre (Columbia University Oral History Project, 1979); NYPL files

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Island in the City: Puerto Ricans in New York}. New York: Corinth, 1959

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Mental Disease among the Puerto Rican Population in New York State, 1960-1961}, Albany, NY: Research Foundation of Mental Hygiene, 1961.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family Living in the Culture of Poverty-San Juan and New York}. New York: Random House, 1966.
Researchers credited migration for every sort of malady, from overpopulation to mental illness.\textsuperscript{19}

In \textit{Sesame Street and the Reform of Children’s Television} (2006), Robert W. Morrow writes that works such as Lewis’ \textit{La Vida} “shattered” postwar idealism about U.S. prosperity and equality (33). National consciousness shifted toward targeting urban poverty and juvenile delinquency, both issues directly invoking the Puerto Rican migrant. Like \textit{La Vida}, Leonard Bernstein’s \textit{West Side Story}, both the play and later the film, immortalized the Puerto Rican migrant as trapped not only in a culture of poverty, but of gang violence and social unrest. During the late 1960s, educational reformers and those mobilizing the new “War on Poverty” emphasized poverty\textsuperscript{20}, not race, as the source of social and educational inequality (Morrow 37). Reformers, including President Lyndon Johnson, believed that early education would remedy the perceived correlation between poverty and social mobility. Eyes turned toward the pre-school child or the pre-literate child who would eventually enter the public school with considerable disadvantages in comparison to more affluent (mostly white) children. The Pre-School Movement, the ideology that undergirded \textit{Sesame Street}, focused on educating pre-school children as an avenue for social mobility and equality. Joan Cantz Cooney, the founder of The Children’s Television Workshop, seized the opportunity to unite children’s educational programs with the newly approved medium of public television.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{19} Benjamin Malzberg

\textsuperscript{20} Morrow emphasizes that this line of thinking was problematic as it critiqued poverty itself as opposed to the economic system.

\textsuperscript{21} The Killian Commission recommended public television in 1967.
As Maria sits at her window during many a show opening in the early 70s, she symbolizes the anxieties and hope for reform associated with the urban, bilingual Puerto Rican that led to programs like *Sesame Street*. Manzano remembers producers telling her that they wanted “the kid on the Lower East Side to look at [her] and say, ‘That’s me.’” Producers also told her that they hoped to reach the Latino child viewer, through her. Gerald S. Lesser and Joel Schneider (2001) confirm that the show’s researchers targeted U.S. Puerto Rican children as representatives of the larger Latino community while designing curriculum and content that raised self-esteem. Maria’s early creation resulted from taking fragments of a formerly negative portrait of the Puerto Rican migrant and transforming it into a positive image of productivity and mobility. Although Manzano has exercised more control over her character, it is important to remember that producers fashioned the early Maria by drawing on images of Puerto Rican culture engineered by white America. For example, Maria is partially drawn from “Maria” of *West Side Story* which, at the time, was a ubiquitous icon of Puerto Rican youth and femininity. I see *Sesame Street’s* producers as invoking *West Side Story* iconography in their casting Maria as a kind of beautiful peacemaker and intermediary, both roles which shape her task of language facilitator. For example, in the closing of 1974’s Episode 666, the frame closes in on Maria, dressed in her nightgown, at her fire-escape, tossing her hair, holding a book, and looking dreamily at the stars. The image mirrors a pivotal

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22 Manzano, “Speech at the Television board”

23 *G is for Growing: Thirty Years of Sesame Street Research* (2001). Researchers found that children in the Puerto Rican group were more likely to feel ashamed of the color of their skin than white, Asian, and African American children. (Fisch and Truglio71). These children also had trouble identifying the color of their skin.

24 Charles Rosen, the set designer for *Sesame Street*, actually conceived of the show’s set as a hodgepodge of New York’s ethnic areas, including Harlem and the Upper West Side neighborhood memorialized in the Leonard Bernstein musical (Murphy 1).
scene in *West Side Story* when Maria meets Tony on her fire escape which, in turn, mimics Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet.* In 1972’s Episode 406, David asks Maria to “come down” from her fire-escape. Maria climbs down and walks down the street with David, arm in arm. Perhaps, the most outright homage to *West Side Story’s* Maria comes when the Spanish, opera singer and flamingo, Placido Flamingo, falls in love with Maria while visiting the Fix-It Shop. The Muppet bursts into song: “Maria, Maria, I love you, Maria…” Later, the love-struck Placido is seen standing outside Maria’s fire-escape during the night where he again sings a tune that is almost identical to Bernstein’s famous “Maria”: “Maria, the sweetest one I know/ Maria, the one that I love so / Maria, Maria.” The camera foregrounds Placido as Maria opens her window and tells him “this can’t go on.”

These allusions to *West Side Story* work in two ways with regard to language instruction. First, they associate Maria with a strong femininity (beauty, love, and romance) which can endear her to children as a motherly ideal of womanhood. In later years, Manzano has actually developed Maria’s womanhood by writing content about marriage, pregnancy, delivery, and even breast-feeding. Maria touts feminism (taking a position on a construction crew as a response to 1970s feminism) while still possessing enough feminine charm to melt Oscar the Grouch (he affectionately calls her “skinny”). With regard to Oscar, Maria’s taming of this abrasive Muppet may suggest

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25 Playwright Andrew Laurents based *West Side Story* as a contemporary *Romeo and Juliet.*

26 Maria, the most beautiful name…Maria, I just met a girl named Maria.

27 Maria has played the love interest of both David, the loveable, African-American neighbor and employee of Mr. Hopper’s Store and Luis, the charming Latino neighbor and manager of the Fit-It Shop.

28 María and Luis are in Love; Baby video
producers’ hopes that she might tame racial and linguistic prejudice since producers
designed Oscar as a representation of the “conflicts arising from racial and ethnic
diversity” (Morrow Figure 10). Maria’s femininity also reinforces her gender-appropriate
role as a trustworthy teacher which she employs when instructing children in various
subjects beyond Spanish (reading, hygiene, relationships, etc.). For example, in the skit
“Captain Vegetable Rhymes,” Maria cuddles two children (one white and one Latino) on
her lap while they listen to “superhero” Captain Vegetable recommendations on healthy
eating. Maria hugs the children, examines the suggested vegetables, and gently
encourages the children to listen (“We have to listen, now”). Her position as Spanish
language instructor, however, places Maria in a culturally relevant role since, in Puerto
Rican culture, women are often charged with conserving and teaching Spanish to
Diaspora children. Second, beyond underscoring the “lovely” similarities between the
two Marias (Puertorriqueñas singing, dancing, and “feeling pretty” in New York),
invoking West Side Story also introduces the darker elements of gang rivalry from the
play into Sesame Street. I see both Marias as caught in a rumble: West Side Story’s
Maria travails between rival white and Puerto Rican gangs while Sesame Street’s Maria
helps bridge together the rival “gangs” of Spanish and English. Considering Ferre’s
theory, the duel between Spanish and English is, perhaps, just another version of a
knife fight. Though Sesame Street’s pedagogy of language, as per the show’s mission
for equality, ultimately leads to a peaceful co-existence between languages, this co-
existence requires a compromise between rivals. Maria’s story will not end with a shoot

29 Growing Up Bilingual by Ana Celia Zentella
out in the streets, as in *West Side Story*, but she will cause rivals to drop their weapons.\(^{30}\)

A Spanish-speaking Maria, presented as a model of instruction, disarms a major stereotype perpetuated by 1950-1960s educational studies that discriminated against Puerto Rican students. As Sonia Nieto has surveyed, such studies repeatedly label Diaspora children as “losers” and “outsiders.”\(^{31}\) *Sesame Street*, instead, develops the concept of bilingualism as an asset (“two names are better than one”) to children's learning and not a deficiency. Migration as a result of colonialism seemingly shocked educators accustomed to a pattern of U.S. immigration in which students forsook their native languages, such as Italian or Yiddish. Researchers studying children on the Island and Stateside insisted that school performance necessitated full assimilation (e.g. English-only) into U.S. culture. Low scores and high drop-out rates, according to researchers, resulted from children’s exposure to Spanish. Later reports showed that tests and curriculum were, in some cases, deliberately discriminatory (Nieto 16).\(^{32}\)

Manzano herself was a product of this derisive school environment. As a Bronx high school student, Manzano painted her nails in class, while teachers spent minimal time engaging with her class of Puerto Rican students. “Very little,” Manzano says, “is expected of ghetto kids.” One teacher, reminiscent of Mohr’s character, Mrs. Langhorn, once told Manzano’s class that the world was divided into “white people and black

\(^{30}\) Scene with Maria where the gang members drop their guns.

\(^{31}\) Nieto

\(^{32}\) Nieto also writes that some New York City teachers went so far as to design curriculum and classroom activities ridiculing Puerto Rican culture and language (16-17). Nietro references a case study she did on “Miss Dwight” who, among other things, taught a lesson on nutrition “in which no Puerto Rican foods were included.”
A class member asked the teacher, “What about brown people?” Manzano’s teacher replied, “There is no such thing as brown people.”

Similar to Belpré and Mohr, Manzano believes her performance intervenes on behalf of a community she perceived as invisible within U.S. culture: “As a kid, I asked, how can I contribute to a world that doesn’t see me?” Manzano’s position within television and drama as a means of impacting her community’s portrayal highlights some key differences between her interventions and those of Belpré or Mohr.

Manzano’s statement about contributing to a world that “didn’t see her” resonates with Belpré and Mohr’s desire to testify to the community’s existence. Perhaps as a result of Manzano’s input, Maria and Luis’ apartment contains subtle tributes to the Island’s rural past so dear to Belpré’s generation: a painting of a rural casita and a jibraro farmer, a picture of flamboyan tree, and a gigante mask. Each item pays tribute to the Island’s cultural and racial diversity and highlights a certain Romantization of the homeland, suggesting Manzano’s appreciation for the traditional narrative. However, as with Nicholasa Mohr, the traditional, folkloric narrative did not quell Manzano’s desire for a place within U.S. society. Maria’s presence on the Street speaks to the existence of an established community at home in the U.S.A. Perhaps due to the prominence of visual culture, Manzano has arguably been able to exercise a wider influence upon the image of Puerto Rican identity projected toward U.S. children than Mohr and Belpré combined. Indeed, Manzano’s influence may expand beyond the children’s realm considering she was one of the first, and remains one of the few, Hispanics on television. Though Sesame Street producers originated the character of Maria, Manzano believes her

interpretation has extended the character beyond stereotypical imaginings of Puerto Rican culture.34 “Puerto Ricans,” Manzano says, “are not just rice and beans.” Manzano’s location within children’s educational television during its development allowed her to play the role of pioneer, similar to Belpré’s involvement at the NYPL during advancements in children’s literature. Manzano, as a young actor on the set, began suggesting changes to the props such as adding plantains to the show’s fruit cart. After discussing her desire to see more authentic pieces on culture (something “besides food and music”) with CTW writers, one writer told Manzano, “The only way we are going to get this right is if you write it.” Sesame Street’s writers handed Manzano the show’s curriculum objectives, allowing her to write some of the show’s segments provided that she stay within the curriculum. Manzano points to her first written piece on the show during the 1980s as an example of transcending stereotypes. In the skit and bilingual song, Maria and Luis perform a la Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. For Manzano, Maria is “who I needed to see on television as a child.”

In Maria, children see an example of bilingual culture presented as more than just a mish-mash of languages, but as a give-and-take negotiation of power. Other characters like Luis, Grover, and even Big Bird introduce Spanish words to children on the show, but Sesame Street locates Maria within symbolic settings that hint at her strengths in communication, problem-solving, and literacy. Linking bilingualism with masterful communication and problem-solving skills coincides with the show’s goal of

34 Interestingly, in later years, although Maria and characters like Luis are still featured, they are not as prominent as new characters like Leela, the newest cast member, representing the Indian-American community.

Maria was one of the first Hispanic characters on television. Maria and Luis were the first Hispanic married couple on television and are still one of the only few. Manzano has won 15 Emmys for her writing on Sesame Street.
presenting bilingualism as an asset. Even while sitting on her fire-escape, the early Maria is often seen holding a book or reading. In her over 40-year residence on *Sesame Street*, Maria’s first job as a teenager was in the show’s bilingual lending library, a la Belpré. Maria then progressed to partnering with Luis at the Fix-It Shop (a hardware and repair store) which later Luis and Maria (as a married couple) converted into the Mail-It Shop (a post office). Other cast members often benefit from and rely on Maria’s communication skills, such as in the *Sesame Street* film, *Follow that Bird* (1985). After Big Bird is adopted and leaves Sesame Street, it is Maria whom Big Bird entrusts with a letter for the cast. Maria calls the cast around her as she emphatically reads the letter aloud. In the letter, Big Bird seemingly praises his new family; however, Maria’s keen sense for reading between the lines allows her to quickly sense his homesickness. She pauses and stares at the letter before reading his last line, “I should be happy here. What’s wrong with me?” Maria, as the other cast members look on, also intercedes for Big Bird when his social worker demands that he return to his proper “bird” foster family: “He doesn’t need another family. He has one right here…We are all happy here on Sesame Street…we got all kinds…we got people and cows…and birds…and kids.” Turning the social worker’s attention to the similarities between neighbors (“We are all happy…”) enables Maria to disarm the threat of difference that almost costs Sesame Street its most recognizable icon.

Maria’s function as a bridge between Puerto Rican and U.S. difference is exemplified in Episode 1316 from the 1979 season. The episode is also an example of what I suggest is truly bilingual children’s culture (i.e. made for bilingual children). *Sesame Street’s* pedagogy of language from the 1970-1980s mainly incorporated
Spanish through sight words (e.g. Luis writes “agua” on piece of paper next to a glass of water\textsuperscript{35}) and non-translated dialogue by bilingual characters (e.g. Luis tells a young, African-American girl that, “Si alguien llama, le dices que regreso en cinco minutos”).\textsuperscript{36} By including non-translated dialogue, producers presume and reward a multilingual audience. In Episode 1316, Maria travels to her homeland of Puerto Rico for her 21\textsuperscript{st} birthday celebration. Maria and Olivia (her African-American best friend) arrive in Puerto Rico and immediately take a bus that tours them through the Island. The camera captures Puerto Rican landmarks such as San Juan del Morro and La Fortaleza, while a Spanish salsa-vamped version of Sesame Street’s theme song plays in the background: “Dia de sol…si me dices como ir…como ir ha Sesame Street.” The song implies that Sesame Street, this ideal community of cultures and languages, is not a fixed place in Manhattan, but a kind of state of mind that transcends geographic borders. Indeed, the CTW has taken its educational/cultural/linguistic philosophy around the globe by creating different “Sesame Streets” in countries such as Israel and Kosovo.

I interpret the first scene between Maria and her Island relatives as symbolic of Maria’s almost ambassadorial role. As Maria and relatives embrace in a Spanish-style plaza, the Puerto Rican and U.S. flag fly “side-by-side”\textsuperscript{37} in the distance. Maria and her family begin speaking entirely in Spanish without subtitles or translation, a gesture

\textsuperscript{35} Episode 536 (1972). “Sight words” refers to a phrase used in literacy research that indicates words which children should recognize during pre-school age. The words are usually presented in flashcards or, often on the Sesame Street, through the appearance of a word on screen. Also, as per the curriculum, Sesame Street began incorporating Spanish sight words in 1972-1973 season (Fisch 31). The show was accused for stereotyping Latino and Spanish by a group in New Mexico, according to Morrow, which led to their casting of bilingual characters like Maria and Luis (Morrow 155).

\textsuperscript{36} “If anybody calls, tell them I will be back in five minutes.”

\textsuperscript{37} Pun intended. Side-by-side, as we have seen, can reveal anxiety about difference rather than a spirit of cooperation.
adding an element of authenticity and, once again, rewarding a U.S. audience of Spanish-speakers. Maria hugs her cousin, Yamira while stretching out her arm toward Olivia, introducing her to the family: “Quiero que conozcan a mi mejor amiga, Olivia.” During each introduction, which she now repeats in English, Maria holds onto Olivia’s hand while also clasping the hand of one of her Puerto Rican relatives. At one point, Maria stands between her “primo” Ronaldo and Olivia as she joins both their hands in hers. The scene prevents the viewer from seeing the monolingual Olivia as an outsider, but also avoids any awkwardness for native Spanish speakers by allowing Maria and her relatives to speak as they would without a monolingual present. The scene also familiarizes children with the linguistic format of the show, mainly switching between Spanish and English. Following the scene in the plaza, a Spanish cartoon “commercial” introduces the letter “A.” Children can see that “A,” it turns out, is not just for “Apple,” but for “Ancla” and “Alfombra.” Such alternating between languages suggests that, as in any diplomatic conversation, in order for one language to be heard, the other must fall silent.

Sesame Street’s pedagogy of language touts diplomacy38; however, the show’s teaching of Spanish evidences the tensions and clinking of swords between rivals, even in the show’s silences. In the 1990s and 2000s, Sesame Street began presenting Spanish in more deliberately “literary” ways, perhaps as a result of a trend in pop culture spotlighting Latino/a literature.39 The “Spanish Word of the Day” took center stage as a

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38 The 2009 Annual report lists diplomacy as one of the goals within Sesame Street education objectives. The official term “muppet diplomacy.”

39 Flores writes about the proliferation of Latino narratives after The Mambo Kings by Oscar Hijuelos won a Pulitzer Prize in 1990 (167). This award made the literary world take more notice in Latino/as readership.
regular skit on the show, representing time allotted for a segment dedicated only to the
teaching of Spanish words and phrases. *Sesame Street* also introduced a bilingual
Muppet, Rosita from Mexico, to the cast. Maria and Luis continued as the show’s lead
Spanish teachers; however, other characters such as the Count, Grover, and Mr.
Snuffleupagus began teaching Spanish counting and the “Spanish Word of the Day.”
This underscores Spanish as a practical language beyond a specific ethnic minority.
*Sesame Street*, however, opts out of teaching the Spanish alphabet, although it does
teach the American Sign Language Alphabet which presents children with alternate
“signing” symbols for English letters. The teaching of individual Spanish words and
select Spanish letters (“A”) instead of the whole alphabet, perhaps, reflects a
commitment to focusing on sameness rather than difference. The Spanish alphabet,
perhaps, crosses an uncomfortable line into difference considering Spanish requires
letters in addition to English: “Ch,” “LL,” and “Ñ.”

The show’s treatment of the letter Ñ particularly evidences the ruptures between
languages. In a skit, “Professor” Grover, the loveable, absent-minded monster,
introduces the words “niño” and “niña” as Episode 4040’s “Spanish Word of the Day.” A
Latino boy and girl listen as Grover announces that the word for “boy” and “girl” in
Spanish is “spaghetti,” giving the children a sense of agency as they correct the Muppet
by announcing the proper “niño” and “niña.” The words appear over the children’s
heads revealing the mysterious “ñ” required for each term. The letter “Ñ,” with its
unfamiliar tilde, presents a challenge as it is the one Spanish letter not found in the
English language. Child viewers awkwardly receive the spelling and meaning to words
requiring unfamiliar letters that are enunciated, yet not introduced or taught. It is
significant that this silence happens with regard to letters – the building blocks of language. Pre-schoolers learn both letters and numbers as a basic code that helps them order their world. I interpret this silence as a signal that – regardless of Spanish words and phrases – *Sesame Street*’s favoring of the English alphabet positions English as the clear victor in terms of the official U.S. code. English is flavored and accented, though never ruled, by Spanish, as illustrated by Elmo’s interaction with the letter “E” in Episode 3917. A salsa dancing letter “E” tells Elmo that he and his other alphabet letter friends are all going to a salsa party or, as “E” calls it, a “Salsa-bet” party. To be sure, although English is the ruling alphabet, the notion of a “Salsa-bet” suggests *Sesame Street*’s admission that U.S. English has been augmented (i.e. built over, embellished) by the rhythms of Spanish. Unofficial linguistic structures and intonations, like the casitas, testify to the presence and influence of Spanish within English. This carries the implication that any official English in the U.S. is a product of cultural influences, including the Hispanic.

Within a duel of languages, *Sesame Street* navigates between speech and silence – between cultural specificity and homogeneity – in its quest for peace. The show’s emphasis on sameness means that sometimes language is, at times, presented in a superficial manner. Does knowing that “gato” means “cat” really make a native English-speaking pre-schooler suddenly bilingual? In Episode 3664 (1997), Rosita sings “No Matter What Your Language” which reinforces a desire for universalism: “…I say “me gustas”/ that means “I like you”/ I say “Hola”/ that means “Hello”/…No matter what your language/ no matter what your name/ the things that you say can be the same.” Though the message unifies, the performance relies heavily on ethnic stereotypes of Latinos.
(i.e. Rosita and her chorus of Muppets wear fruit hats and Mexican sombreros). The lyrics establish similarity between meanings, however, by the song’s end, the subject shifts as Rosita transitions from “the things that we say can be the same” to “We’re all the same.” The show later revises this notion of words as inconsequential in Episode 3986 (2002) with a much more culturally specific lesson about the role of language as a site of history and place. The episode centers on Big Bird’s rescue of a lost baby bird who only knows how to say one word: “Paraguay.” Big Bird struggles with the word’s meaning, thinking that, by shouting (“Paraguay!”), the baby bird is calling for help. He seeks guidance from various characters who each interpret the mysterious word. Meanings change according to the character, suggesting the subjectivity of language and translation; for example, Snuffleupagus, a melancholy elephant-like Muppet, interprets “Paraguay” as “I’m sick,” while the ever-resourceful Alan of Mr. Hopper’s Store immediately knows “Paraguay” is a country in Latin America. Alan and Big Bird eventually take the baby bird to the Mail-It Shop in hopes of using the internet for more information on Paraguay. Of course, entering the Mail-It Shop means encountering Sesame Street’s resident communication superstar, Maria. As Maria helps Alan and Big Bird with the computer, she asks the baby bird, “¿Eres de Paraguay?” The baby bird’s beak opens in awe upon hearing her native language.

Maria’s bilingual skills enable her to assess the baby bird’s true predicament. Through Maria, Big Bird, Allen, and the audience learn that the baby bird’s name is Fatima and got separated from her parents on a trip. Mother and father bird arrive by the show’s end. However, throughout this ordeal, “Paraguay” is repeated, each time

\[40 \text{ Are you from Paraguay?}\]
with a new meaning. Children are exposed to the concept that one word can mean “help,” “country”, and “home.” Words are defined according to meanings assigned by individuals with relationship to culture and family. Word meanings are also subject to individual expression or performance.

Performing Language: Mimicng, Music, Theatre and Language (“Rhythm is Gonna Get You”)

In addition to language as a border or a weapon, Ferre’s concept of language as duel also presents language as an actor. In my reading of Sesame Street’s portrayal of Spanish and the Diaspora community, I underline two additional principles within the show’s language pedagogy which support its staging of content like non-translated dialogue: performance is a type of language and language is a type of performance. The show’s content resembles a televised musical theatre in which performance (e.g. puppetry, music, and dramatization) serves as the show’s main “language.” This “language” serves as the conduit for Sesame Street’s elementary and social curriculum. Performance also frames the show’s representation of colonial relationships and colonial languages, such as Bob and Luis’ performance of the song, “Bienvenido.” The song consists of English and Spanish lyrics; the Spanish lyrics repeat only a key phrase in the English lyric. However, the musical arrangement blurs any audible division between languages by merging the lyrics in a way that makes it seem like Bob and Luis finish each other’s sentences. Bob, a music teacher, and Luis meet at the Fit-It Shop, where Bob tells Luis, “Hello, Luis. Are you ready for the party?” Bob then turns to the camera and begins singing the lyrics, “I want to say, ‘Welcome…’” to which Luis, also looking into the camera, repeats “Bienvenido…” As Luis and Bob walk down Sesame Street singing (“thanks for all the good things we’ll share and come what may…pase lo
que pase”), Bob leads the way while Luis walks slightly behind him. The scene suggests the interchangeability of English and Spanish, yet, visually invoking a subtle subordination of Spanish as an alternate but unofficial U.S. language. In addition to framing the relationships between languages, performance also serves as the basis for communicating word meanings. For example, a typical “Spanish Word of the Day” segment features Maria walking by a flower pot. She sees, smells, and holds the flower to her face, enunciating, “F-ll-o-rrr. Flor is ‘flower’ in Spanish.”

In addition to Sesame Street’s position as educational entertainment, the show’s mode of performance targets a perceived audience of pre-school, pre-literate children. The child audience is represented by child actors and Muppets like Big Bird (who is six years old) and Elmo (who is three years old), all who depend on humans like Maria, Luis, and Bob. Producers created the show as a kind of television version of Head Start, organizing production around a school readiness curriculum targeting disadvantaged, minority preschoolers. By 1969, television’s accessibility meant that Sesame Street could reach children outside of Head Start. In terms of children’s literature studies, I think is important to note that producers interpreted illiteracy in three to five-year-olds as a product of socio-economic disadvantage and not simply youth. A key assumption, both for Head Start and Sesame Street engineers, is that low-income pre-schoolers (especially black and Puerto Rican children) received inadequate literacy

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41 Sesame Street originally solicited regular children (non-actors) to assist on the show. Producer/co-creator Jon Stone discusses the use of Muppets represent the child audience (40 Years of Sunny Days DVD).

42 Maria, in particular, is the object of Zoe’s song “Read Me a Story” which depicts how children need to ask an adult for assistance with reading.

43 Fisch and Tiglio write that “compensatory education was part of the first proposal for Sesame Street.”

44 98% of people had a television… G is for Growing.
education both at home and in the community. However, the show’s high viewership within this at-risk community seems to further suggest that children had greater access to television rather than literature.\footnote{Statistics show that children who are not read to at home are less likely to watch Sesame Street than children who do get reading instruction at home. However, low-income children were more likely to watch Sesame Street rather than more affluent children (89;134;135)} \textit{Sesame Street} actually testifies to a distinction between literacy education and literary education since it attempts to impart reading skills without using literature, something educators initially resisted and continue to resist.\footnote{Cooney’s introduction to \textit{G is for Growing}. Also, some researcher speak out against television as an interference to literacy (134).} Educators express concern over children’s ability to process information through performance on television. However, the correlations between race, class, and access to literature suggest the importance of other mediums (e.g. musical theatre), aside from literature, within the study of minority children’s narratives.

Performance on \textit{Sesame Street} presents children with a view of reading and literacy as a practical, everyday affair. Manzano’s recollections during an oral history interview coincide with this notion of reading as a practical rather than academic (i.e. elite) skill: “[As a child] I thought you only read what the teacher told you to read. I didn’t know that it was for reading a label or a traffic sign. What is reading good for except for reading what the teacher tells you [to read]?…It never occurred to me that reading is everywhere. It is something everybody does.” \textit{Sesame Street}’s adoption of this anthropological concept of the world as a readable text\footnote{“Meaningful Action as a Text” -- Paul Ricouer} reinforces literature’s importance while problematizing its institutional role. Performance enables the show to
occupy a “safe space” outside of the academic literary establishment while empowering an audience of pre-literate children with access to literary tools.

Communicating with pre-literate children requires *Sesame Street*’s language of performance (e.g. a comical skit introducing the letter “M”) to convey meaning without relying on a child’s preconceived knowledge of symbols or letters. This “performance language” allows the show to make some critical associations between colonial languages and performance arts such as miming, music, and theatre. Maria also helps illustrate these alternative forms of communication. Throughout her years on *Sesame Street*, Manzano as Maria has performed the role of Charlie Chaplin in several pantomime skits.\(^{48}\) In a 1974 skit teaching children about exits, Maria/Chaplin finds herself trapped in a room. She walks into walls, banging her head, seemingly ignorant of the “exit” sign above the two doors in the room. Children’s voices\(^{49}\) are heard yelling, “Exit!” as they direct Maria/Chaplin to the sign – stressing the importance of reading. Yet, Maria/Chaplin, continuing to ignore the sign, opts for walking through the wall as her “exit.” Her disregard for the sign, though perhaps meant to encourage reading, may have the opposite effect. The skit’s charm derives from watching Maria/Chaplin walk through the wall, not the properly labeled door. Considering Maria’s position on the show as masterful communicator, I find it very telling that she, rather than another *Sesame Street* character, should repeatedly perform Chaplin. Maria’s performance of Chaplin works in two ways with regard to language: First, merging Maria with Chaplin

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\(^{48}\) Exit is from Episode 666 (1974), “What Happens Next?”

\(^{49}\) Morrow writes that *Sesame Street* uses children’s voiceovers in at least 63 segments of the show. As a way of testing the show’s educational outcomes, researchers would tape children as they watched the show and then use these voices for production. The voiceovers were another way of representing the child viewer as part of the show (102-103).
(an icon\textsuperscript{50} for silent performance) reframes her multilingual skills, this time, as extending beyond merely speech which, in turn, posits language as a performance. Second, by putting on Chaplin, Maria acts out the role of inventive “tramp” or outsider resisting the dominant culture, a theme resonating with the Diaspora’s pattern of marginality and creativity. Yet, beyond the character’s relevance to the Diaspora, Maria/Chaplin continually subverts the scenarios (the “script”) she encounters, highlighting the role of performance as a means of subverting traditional literacy and literary constructs.

As a mime, Maria/Chaplin illustrates a performer’s capacity to embody an action, a story, or an object (animate or inanimate). The mime is a relevant image within language, childhood, and postcolonial theory. For example, Walter Benjamin writes that language is a manifestation of what he sees as one of humanity’s greatest gifts, “the mimetic faculty.”\textsuperscript{51} Language emerges from the miming of sounds and utterances which creates an “archive” of “nonsensuous similarities, of nonsensuous correspondences” (333). Children, for Benjamin, employ “mimetic modes of behavior” naturally in play, yet their talent goes beyond imitating human behavior: “The child plays at being a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train.” However, Homi Bhaba emphasizes mimicry as an expression of resistance, in that, miming never produces an exact replica but always suggests a slight difference. In view of these theories, Maria/Chaplin’s recurrent skits develop the notion of a “pure” symbolic language which may even mirror an illiterate child’s “natural” language learning mode. This language, independent of sound or text, seems possible only in performance and

\textsuperscript{50} Benjamin calls Chaplin, with his black top hat, tail coat, can, and signature walk, a “walking trademark.”

\textsuperscript{51} Benjamin writes that script also incorporates mimetic modes of behavior, although in less ephemeral ways.
allows for individual difference. However, as in Rosita’s “No Matter What Your Language” song, the representation of this “pure” language teeters between universalism and specificity.

The Chaplinesque skit “Me” (1977) simultaneously furthers the concept of a silent, universal language while promoting individuality. The skit helps children explore the complicated notion of identity represented by the word “Me.” Maria/Chaplin walks past a large mirror on an empty stage. Face to face with her “reflection,” she begins adjusting her mustache and suit, suddenly seeing a slight variation in the mirror. Her reflection is actually fellow cast member and deaf actress, Linda Bove (also “Linda” on the show). Like Maria, Linda demonstrates linguistic diversity on Sesame Street through her use of American Sign Language. Portraying Maria and Linda as reflections of each other highlights their common role as performers who regularly communicate with the audience using alternative linguistic symbols. Together, Maria/Chaplin and Linda/Chaplin posit language as a system apart from the literal and the audible. Indeed, it is a system where the performer and the symbol are one. Interestingly, Sesame Street casts these two linguistic “tramps” as the duo most capable of imparting meaning through silence. The pairing draws out the subversive qualities of mimicry, since from the beginning, we know this “mirroring” is performed by two non-conformists. After a few moments of mimicking each other, Maria/Chaplin turns to the camera and mouths

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52 Episode 1032

53 Many theorists including Michel Foucault, Mikail Bakhtin, and Jacques Lacan analyze the formation of human subjectivity as predicated on language and dialogical relationships.

54 Maria and Linda are also featured in the “Chaplin” skits “The Picnic,” where Linda plays the love interest to Maria/Chaplin and “The Museum,” where she plays a woman in a painting that comes alive during Maria/Chaplin’s visit. I find it telling that both these actresses are always paired in the Chaplinesque skits.
the word, “Me?” For pre-schoolers, the skit seems to simplify the concept of “me” by attempting to answer questions such as: Who does “me” refer to? What does it mean to be “me”?

Maria/Chaplin and Linda/Chaplin circle the “mirror,” each time trying to outdo the other in speed and precision. As Maria/Chaplin suddenly bows down, Linda/Chaplin’s hat falls to the floor. The two Chaplins in the mirror project a powerful image which portrays identity as a process of exploration. Mimicking another’s behavior aids in the discovery of one’s uniqueness. In this illustration, the mimetic faculty works as a tool for learning one’s subjectivity and place in the world, specifically, through interpretable silences. After Maria/Chaplin picks up Linda/Chaplin’s hat, Linda/Chaplin accepts it back with a respectful bow and smile. All this “mirroring,” it seems, forms part of a friendly competition fostering non-conformity where the objective is to usurp the mirror image through even the slightest difference, as in Bhaba’s critique. The skit ends with both Chaplins standing arm in arm as they look into the camera, each pointing toward herself and confidently mouthing, “Me.”

The skit “What Happens Next?” further explores the role of the mimetic faculty as a tool for resistance by challenging the concept of narrative sequences. “What Happens Next?” is a lesson on narrative patterns and sequences, such as logical outcomes in a story plot. The comedic performances of Gordon, the science teacher, playing the role of game show host, and Maria/Chaplin playing the unsuspecting “fool” in each mystery scenario, frame the lesson. Child audiences must decide Maria/Chaplin’s fate as she encounters what seems like one disastrous circumstance after another. In order to

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55 Episode 2407, July 26, 1988
prompt the audience’s decision, Gordon sings the show’s theme song, “Do you know what’s going to happen next? / Do you think that you can tell? / If you know what’s going to happen next / then tell me before I ring this bell.” A split screen separates Gordon and Maria/Chaplin. He is seemingly safe in his game show studio while Maria/Chaplin, walking in a park with a stack of newspapers, seems unaware of her position as a character governed by an audience or script. In the first scenario, Maria/Chaplin walks through the park as she tucks her newspapers and cane under her arms. Yet, as Gordon begins to sing the theme song, she suddenly freezes with one foot suspended off the floor, naive of the banana peel directly below. “Well, what do you think?” asks Gordon. “Do you think that our friend here is going to slip on the banana peel and fall down?” The unseen audience bursts with delight, “Yes!” The audience claps as Maria/Chaplin slips and falls backward, her facial expressions revealing a sense of suspicion. She stands up slowly, still hurting from the fall, as Gordon introduces the second scenario: “Our friend here is about to sit on that park bench…but you will notice that the bench has only one-two-three legs.” Gordon’s introduction dictates Maria/Chaplin’s action; she “mirrors” his directions by walking toward the flimsy bench, doomed by the scripted scenario. As she begins preparing to sit and read her newspapers, Gordon begins swaying and smiling as the ominous theme song begins playing. In mid-squat, Maria/Chaplin once again seems suspended in action as the audience contemplates her fate. “What’s that?” Gordon says. “You think that our friend here is going to sit on the bench and that the bench is going to fall. Well, let’s find out.”

56 Again, these voices could come from Sesame Street researchers’ recording of viewer’s responses to the show. This is an interesting notion because it would suggest that viewers delighted in the character’s misfortune and rebellion.
Instantly, the bench comes apart as Maria/Chaplin falls with her stack of newspapers to
the delight of Gordon and the audience. She remains on the floor this time, looking into
the camera and gathering her newspapers. “Our friend here is now getting ready to read
a newspaper. But, and this is our last and final mystery situation...will our friend be able
to read it?” asks Gordon. A cloud suddenly appears over Maria/Chaplin’s head with
sounds of thunder in the distance. She freezes as Gordon begins swaying to the tune.
However, as Gordon asks the audience (“What happens next?”), unlike the other
scenarios, Maria/Chaplin quickly unfreezes and begins rising from the ground,
discerning the joke and Gordon’s questions to the audience: “What’s that you said? You
think our friend here is going to get all wet?” Maria/Chaplin looks into the camera and
shakes her head at the audience. She is a character in rebellion about to usurp the plot
of her “story.” As Gordon laughs, anticipating the imminent rain storm, Maria/Chaplin
lassoes the cloud with her cane and pushes it into Gordon’s side of the screen.
Interestingly, it is only when Gordon says “rain” that rain, as per the script, begins
pouring into his game show studio.

“What Happens Next” highlights the distinctions between literature and
performance. Literature (the script), represented by Gordon as the host, is portrayed as
a source of predictable, stifling control while performance (the mime), represented by
Maria/Chaplin, wins the ultimate favor of the audience through its playfully subversive
ability to change the story, the scenario, and even fate. Gordon’s annunciation (“rain”)
brought about the storm, suggesting the power of audible and written language for
creating and ordering circumstances.\(^57\) In this skit, power was initially assigned to

\(^{57}\) J.L. Austin “speech acts.”
Gordon. His use of language allowed him control of the script, the narrative, the audience, and the character. However, mimicry and silent performance allow Maria/Chaplin to thrive using a language discernible only to the audience, though not to the literature-reliant Gordon. Like Belpré’s storytelling at the New York Public Library, performance enables Maria/Chaplin to gain power by outsmarting the stagnant rules of literature. The script continues, affecting only Gordon, even when the character has managed to perform her way out of the plot, resulting in shouts of victory from the audience. In the end, Maria/Chaplin clicks her heels together and dances out of the shot. With regard to the Diaspora, I see Maria/Chaplin’s ability to transcend the script as commenting on the place of the multilingual within a monolingual society. To speak Spanish in a predominately English language society, to enunciate Spanish words and letters where there have only ever been English ones, to switch from English to Spanish and back – this constitutes Maria’s breaking of the U.S.’s standardized dialogue, both within and without Sesame Street.

Sesame Street further illustrates the mimetic faculty’s role with regard to language through the show’s linking of miming to music. Several episodes unite the concept of miming audible language as analogous to singing a song, dancing with a rhythm, or playing an instrument. Episode 4046 (2003) and Episode 3901 (2000) emphasize the musicality of speech by presenting speech as an activity similar to singing. They also

58 Maria (Manzano) is also featured in another skit that demonstrates this kind of “script breaking”: The Cursed Prince. Grover, dressed as a fairytale character, read the story of a “beautiful princess (Maria) and a handsome prince.” The prince has been cursed by a witch; the spell can only be broken by three kisses from a beautiful princess. Grover reads the story which dictates the action of the actors, though they sometimes forget to do as Grover says, which angers Grover tremendously. In the end, the actors “break character” when they are unhappy with the result of the story and walk out of the shot, leaving Grover alone with his book.

59 Derrida including the performer in the “speech act” process.
suggest musical sounds and rhythms as infectious. In a musical theatre format, Episode 4046 features the intermingling of speech and song. These musical intonations arise from cast members due to an infectious though unperceivable quality “in the air.” In the show’s opening, Bob and Alan announce, in song, that “there is something in the air today / that makes you want to sing/ ….it’s not a smell/ it’s not a sound/ it’s nowhere, yet it is all around.” Big Bird arrives and tells Bob and Alan that, though he does not know why, he also has a sudden urge to sing. Gabi, Maria and Luis’ daughter, enters the scene with Miles, Gordon and Susan’s adopted son. Gabi repeats Bob and Alan’s melody about this sense of “nothing, yet it’s something” that has overtaken the street’s residents. Even a group of sheep chime in by contributing their “bah” sounds to the chorus. Episode 3901 unites singing and speaking as one and the same by introducing children to the mechanics of opera. Big Bird persuades residents to completely forgo speaking in exchange for “singing everything [we] say.” Bob tells Big Bird, “You know, that’s a lot like opera.” Big Bird then initiates “Opera Day” on Sesame Street. Bob sings his shopping list (“…I need to buy socks and dennntal, dennntal, dennntal floss”), Alan sings the contents of his menu, and Gordon sings an operetta with the number “0.” As Elmo sings about “Opera Day” with a group of child actors, Oscar the Grouch protests against the annoying habit of singing instead of speaking. Yet, Elmo responds to Oscar in song: “The I Don’t Want to Sing Song.” Before long, and much to his outrage, Oscar unwillingly begins mimicking the notes in the song even as he enunciates his protests. Elmo leaves with the children while a dumbfounded Oscar remains unable to speak without singing. In both examples, singing involves the verbal copying of another’s
intonations. Also, anyone can sing because sounds and rhythms are transmittable even to those who may resist.

Maria and Luis, in the skit “Firefly Song,” help illustrate how Sesame Street blends the musicality of speech, music, and language instruction. At dusk, Maria and Luis sit on the famous Sesame Street stoop with a group of multiracial children. Muppets Telly and Baby Bear enter the scene in search of a firefly. “Have you seen a firefly,” Telly asks Luis. “No, but I know a song about a firefly,” Luis responds. Luis sings his “firefly song” with the chorus, “Fly /little firefly/ fly” which Maria and the children repeat. Suddenly, Maria asks the children, “Do you know what the Spanish word for ‘firefly’ is? It’s luciernaga. Can you say that? Luccc-ie-rrrr-naga.” She repeats the words several times, asking each of the children to repeat the word. One of the boys, deciphering Maria’s particular way of rolling her “R”s, mimics the sound. Luis then looks into the camera and asks, “Can you say ‘luciernaga?’” He pauses, waiting for the child audience’s reply. “Good,” Luis says in affirmation of the audiences’ possible attempt at copying the sound at home. Continuing the theme of music as infectious, Telly asks Baby Bear if he wants to leave so they can continue looking for the firefly, yet, a mesmerized Baby Bear replies, “No, I want to listen to the rest of the song.” Referring back to Maria and the children, Luis strikes his guitar, saying, “Let’s sing it [the firefly song] again…en Español.” The children, Luis, and Maria repeat the chorus, this time exchanging the word “luciernaga” for “firefly”: “Fly/ luciernaga/ fly.” The children seamlessly sing the Spanish word (rolling their “R”s) along with the English. Baby Bear

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60 Episode 4165 (2008)
then tells Telly, “Let’s go find that luciernaga.” Through music and repetition, Baby Bear learns the proper pronunciation and meaning of the word.

Maria and Luis also illustrate the show’s connecting of musical rhythm and speech within Episode 3917 (2001). The episode features, among other things, the previously mentioned salsa-dancing letter “E” and the notion of the “Salsa-bet.” The show opens with Elmo walking down Sesame Street in pursuit of a catchy rhythm he hears, but cannot identify. The audible trail leads him to Maria and Luis, who are teaching Gaby and Miles to dance salsa. “What’s salsa?” Elmo asks. “It’s an old dance that I learned to dance when I was a little girl in Puerto Rico,” Maria answers. Elmo insists on learning the new dance, so Maria begins her lesson by instructing him on the salsa’s 1-2-3 rhythm. As a means of learning the dance, Elmo both repeats the counts (“1-2-3, 1-2-3”) and dances the beat, suggesting the transferability of this new rhythm through mimicking speech (i.e. sound of the beat) and movement (i.e. silent performance).

Once he has mastered some of the steps, Elmo begins his search for a salsa partner for Sesame Street’s salsa party. One of his prospects for a partner: the letter “E”. The letter “E” tells Elmo that he loves the salsa because “it’s exciting, entertaining, and enticing” (emphasis mine). “E” begins dancing the 1-2-3 rhythm and recommends that Elmo track the beat by inserting the letter E into the salsa counts (“E-E-E”). Elmo dances the salsa with “E” to the modified counts of E-E-E. As suggested earlier, a salsa dancing letter illustrates how Spanish can and has modified the English language, in this case, with Puerto Rican intonations and rhythms. Moreover, this example portrays English letters as musical notes that have been augmented to the extent that they have been incorporated into another cadence. Equating letters with musical notes, again, links the
concept of language with performance, particularly language as performance. As in a
song or dance, language requires the mimicking of sounds (or notes) and gestures.
Mimicking movements and sounds is presented as something anyone can do (i.e.
inherent) as by the show’s end, the entire cast dances the salsa on Sesame Street.
Elmo invites the viewer to dance the salsa with him, “Try it. 1-2-3, 1-2-3. Or like the
letter ‘E’ told us, E-E-E, E-E-E.”

**Ensemble: “There is a Place for Us”**

The interrelationships of performance, language, miming, and music promoted on
*Sesame Street* has implications in terms of the incorporation of foreign languages like
Spanish into U.S. society. These interrelationships underline the tension involved when
interacting in a multilingual society. The notion of language as music frames linguistic
diversity within a theatrical metaphor. Languages, like instruments, form an ensemble
which reinforces the show’s fostering of U.S. and global diversity. However, within these
interrelationships, I want to emphasize the show’s pattern of depicting music
(particularly in my interest, rhythms associated with Puerto Rico like salsa) as
infectious or, as the letter “E” tells Elmo, “enticing.” The theme of enticement also
coincides with *Sesame Street*’s early casting of Maria as a beautiful and perhaps,
beguiling, arbitrator between Puerto Rican and U.S. culture.

Tito Puente’s 1993 appearances on *Sesame Street* further demonstrate the
show’s strong association of language, mimicry, music, and enticement. Puente, a
legendary U.S. Puerto Rican drum (timbalon) soloist, plays his “catchy” rhythms in at

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61 “Somewhere,” lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, from *West Side Story*

62 Salsa has its origins in Puerto Rico and Cuba though it is traditionally considered a dance from Puerto Rico.
least two *Sesame Street* episodes. On the show, Puente acts as type of Puerto Rican pied piper; his beats enrapture the cast and the child extras as they all dance and sing (in English and Spanish): “Play the Timbalon, Tito/ Play the Timbalon/ Suena el Timbalon, Tito/ Suena el Timbalon.” However, similar to Elmo’s “singing” with Oscar the Grouch, Puente's interaction with Oscar (again, a character symbolic of prejudice) emphasizes music, and in turn language, as charming even the most resistant bigot:

Oscar: Whoa, hold it. Who are you and what are you doing?

Puente: My name is T.P. Tito Puente. And I was about to start my band and play a number.

Oscar: Oh, yeah. Well, my name is Oscar the Grouch and I was about to start a Grouchketeer meeting here. So, I suggest you and your little band here go play somewhere else.

Other Grouches: You tell’ em Oscar.

Puente: Hey what’s the matter? Don’t you guys like my music?

Oscar: Is your music lively and does it have a nice catchy rhythm that people love to dance to?

Puente: It sure does.

Oscar: Well, then we don’t like it.

Puente: Hey, wait a minute, Mr. Oscar. I have a feeling we could get even Grouches like you to dance to our kind of music?

Oscar: Oh, yeah!

Puente: (defiantly) Si. Yeah.

Oscar: I’d like to see you try…You’ll just be wasting your time. (sarcastically, to the camera) You know, I think this might be fun to watch.

Puente (to the band): Arriba muchachos!
As Puente begins playing, the Grouchketeers (children dressed like Oscar) are the first group to start dancing, perhaps suggesting the malleability of children with regard to culture. Slowly, the other “grouches” begin moving to the rhythm, something they are ashamed to do in front of their leader. For shame, each grouch ducks into their respective trash can. The camera later catches them swaying behind Puente. Losing his resistance, Oscar begins unconsciously tapping his fingers to the beat. The tapping turns into full dancing and swaying and Oscar also hides in his trash can. Puente continues playing the drums as the children gather around him. His music ultimately makes the reclusive Oscar leave the safety of his trash can, a notable circumstance for regular viewers. Oscar dances frenetically in front of the drums; his movements are depicted as uncontrollable. When the music ends, Puente asks, “Well, Oscar. What do you say now? I got you to dance.” Oscar responds, “What do I say now? Don’t ever do that to me again!” However, the rhythm rules over Oscar, something Puente exploits by, once again, banging on his seductive drum, saying “Do what?…This.”

Oscar’s frenetic dance, though comical, posits both democratic and problematic notions about sound and rhythm with regard to language. In terms of the democratic, pluralistic nature of *Sesame Street*, Oscar’s exposure to the music melted his harsh exterior and he not only listened but took part in its performance. This coincides with the show’s offering of new experiences and languages that enrich the metaphorical fruit bowl such as in “Bilingual Fruit Song.” As Maria advises the Muppet Lu Lu, who refuses to sing with others unless they sing her favorite song: “Well, Lu Lu, maybe it’s time to

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63 Since Oscar lives in his life in a trash can, the Grouchketeers don tin, trash can lids on their heads and green t-shirts.
sing a new song.”\textsuperscript{64} Maria’s words like Puente’s drums also gestures toward the notion of U.S. children’s culture “singing a new song” through the incorporation of Spanish as an accessible, practical, performable language for U.S. preschoolers. Oscar’s dancing, like the salsa dancing letters, illustrates the fluidity of language and culture. Language and culture are moldable, performable aspects of everyday life. Anyone, even a Grouch, can incorporate the sounds and cadences found in Puerto Rican culture. However, emphasizing linguistic/musical rhythms as uncontrollable and seductive suggests a problematic exoticization of Puerto Rican culture.

Yet, regardless of \textit{Sesame Street}’s imperfections, the show boldly accepts the messy task of representing bilingual discourse and culture. Particularly in the show’s early days, \textit{Sesame Street} displays a raw, experimental quality (in the ensemble of performances, writing, and producing featuring people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds), that keeps the show from “getting it all right.” The tension the show displays in managing rivals (such as sameness and difference and English and Spanish) and switching codes (such as silence and speech) does not compromise its vision of peace. The show’s employment of theatrical concepts like performance and ensemble, in particular, challenges the children’s literary world in terms of access as well as racial and linguistic representation.

First, children who may never read books like \textit{The Secret Garden}, \textit{Perez and Martina}, or \textit{Nilda} watch \textit{Sesame Street}. Many children and adults, U.S. Puerto Rican or otherwise, will never meet Mohr’s Felita, but they will know \textit{Sesame Street}’s Maria. The case of \textit{Sesame Street} is one that highlights the gap between literature and minority

\textsuperscript{64} Episode 3920 (2001)
communities constructed either through ambiguity, scarcity, or indifference projected from both sides. As much as authors like Belpré and Mohr contribute to an ongoing narrative about Puerto Rican history and culture within children’s literature, their out-of-print, undersold titles and the lack of critical interest tells another story. Although Belpré is the namesake of a literary award, the literary world (scholars, educators, booksellers) has historically been indifferent to U.S. Puerto Rican writers. Yet, as creative artists, Belpré, Mohr, and Manzano are united by a common project to represent Puerto Rican culture as rich and varied. These women all underline the importance of building figurative “casitas,” in this case, educational and creative outlets outside of the U.S. given (e.g. the education system and literary establishment) which foster cultural pride. Librarian and storyteller Belpré began a pattern of going outside the schools and texts by implementing storytelling programs and puppet shows within the U.S. Puerto Rican community around New York. Likewise, Mohr highlights the importance of the library and art as a means of filling in the gaps left by the New York City school system. Mohr also creates characters that draw and build over the racist and stifling environments they encounter by transforming marginalized spaces into thriving, creative training grounds. Manzano, through her performance as Maria, illustrates the U.S. Puerto Rican community’s restructuring and augmenting of U.S. English through her breaking of established linguistic codes. She emphasizes the role of educating children on cultural and linguistic differences before even entering the school system. Manzano also highlights how language and language pedagogy can alter children’s perspectives of the world, perhaps, as in Mohr’s *Nilda*, even making a world outside the lines. *Sesame*
Street’s Maria, as a personification of bilingualism, maneuvers in and out of languages, rules, and artistic forms.

Second, I have suggested that the U.S. Puerto Rican and Latino population’s adherence to Spanish has complicated their representation in predominantly monolingual literary market. However, Sesame Street’s preschool audience means that the show communicates to a group of children that have not yet been “coached” on the limitations of traditional U.S. dialogical relationships (e.g. English-only). Remaining outside the literary and inhabiting a world constructed through performance supports the show’s presentation of Spanish within such radical contexts as non-translated dialogue. Spanish is not a foreign language to children who are still learning the basics of communication and literacy, such as letters and numbers. Third, performance on Sesame Street portrays English and Spanish as a colliding and mixing much in the same way that children might experience in their communities. English and Spanish are not presented as equals, but as languages vying for children’s attention. Fourth, performances introduce children to the concept of language as a performance, much like miming someone’s gestures or mimicking sounds like music. Presenting language as a mimicking of sounds and gestures removes language from the realm of inherent linguistic codes and into the realm of transferring and molding language, perhaps even creating new, unofficial languages.

Lourdes Torres in “In the Contact Zone: Code-Switching Strategies by Latina/o Writers” writes about something she calls “radical bilingualism” a concept she illustrates through Giannina Braschi’s novel Yo-Yo Boing which contains passages completely in Spanish, with no translation. I believe the children’s literature tends to support notions of child socialization and enforces the language of the State. This is why I don’t think we don’t see a truly bilingual children’s book: a book made for a bilingual audience and not a monolingual one.
Finally, the notion of ensemble, several characters and languages simultaneously performing for an audience, posits the greatest challenge to the literary world. Within the *Sesame Street* universe, since languages are presented as a product of the people who speak them, individuals are also presented in the context of ensemble. Episode 1056 (1977) illustrates this notion of people as an ensemble in its “One of These is not Like the Other” portion of the show. The song focuses on the concept of matching patterns and prompts children to choose the out-of-place object or picture in the pattern: “One of these things is not like the other/ one of these things just doesn’t belong..” The skit features Maria, David, Gordon, Susan, Mr. Hooper, Luis, Olivia, and Bob surrounded by a group of children and Gladys (a cow Muppet). The song begins and the camera pans over the group, prompting the viewer’s choice. David says, “Hey, I know, it Gladys because, you see, we (pointing to cast and the children) are all people and Gladys is not.” The idealist vision (“we are all people”) perhaps captures the dreams of racial equality that were so prominent during the civil and post-civil rights. The 1960s-1970s idea of “a beloved community” or a “Great Society” seems safely, stored within the *Sesame Street* universe. Faith in these ideologies, and in the malleability of children, may contribute to the show’s over 40+ years of centrality to children’s television.

In terms of children’s literature and children’s television, some may object to my critiques by quickly pointing out that “one of these things is not like the other.” Few, however, can deny the tendency within children’s literature to organize books, librarians,

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66 Jennifer Mandel writes in “The Production of a Beloved Community: *Sesame Street*’s Answer to America’s Inequalities” (2006) that the concept of a “beloved community” has roots in 18th and 19th century Christian movements, however, she credits Dr. Martin Luther King for pronouncing the concept during his civil rights work. She believes *Sesame Street* best illustrates the concept (7).

67 “The Great Society” is a term that became popular during President Lyndon Johnson’s administration. It was used to refer to set of public programs with regard to poverty and equality.
and awards by ethnicity. A world constructed by children’s books is a highly segregated world. I have said that this ghettoization has contributed to the sense that a type of child, culture, or language can register as non-existent without a properly labeled national or ethnic identity. What Sesame Street does (that children’s books have yet to do) is present children in the context of a group of players all playing a part on the same “stage.”

As a performer and script writer, Manzano believes her presence on Sesame Street helps counteract the stereotypical portrayals of Puerto Rican and Latinos in U.S. society. According to Manzano, outside of Sesame Street, she was offered roles where producers directed her to perform with an accent, something she said, “wasn’t me.” Her auditions before Sesame Street were for “the prostitute… the drug addict… the maid” and, today, when she does audition for another role, she still gets offered the part of “the maid” and never the “soccer mom.” She jokingly suggests that she gets offered “the Latina soccer mom that now has a catering business because she used to be a maid.” Her role on Sesame Street, according to Manzano, is the only place that allows her “to be a real person” which, in turn, invites child viewers to be seen as “real people, they don’t have to be a black person or a Latin person, they can just be a person.” Manzano objects to those who would present Puerto Rican and Latino culture as stagnant, something she also desired to remedy through her writing of the show’s scripts: “I got tired of the Hispanic culture bits always being presented as the same…food and music…like cultures don’t grow. Like all Puerto Ricans are food and music and we don’t change.” My study of Sesame Street’s pedagogy of language has examined the show’s portrayal of Spanish as well as the role of historic, bilingual characters like Maria. My
analysis provides a context in which we can examine the complexities of language and culture as moldable facets within a child’s life. The malleability of language takes priority within the next chapter on children as translators.
CHAPTER 5

In the children’s book *Greater America: Our Latest Colonial Possessions* (1900), the unknown author claims to have witnessed Islanders performing an impromptu poetry and music session for U.S. soldiers during the first Fourth of July celebration. Considering the early date, the performers presumably spoke and sang in Spanish which suggests that the meaning of such songs and poems for U.S. soldiers, either positive or negative, was lost in translation. Of this performance, the author writes, “All Porto Ricans are poets” (43). The author’s stereotypical view of the Island and its inhabitants throughout this early text make it easy to disregard this statement as simply another caricature. Yet, it is difficult to disregard the continual references by U.S. Puerto Rican children’s writers to “poetry” as an essential practice of the community. *Greater America*’s description of the Island’s first Fourth of July overlaps with the tense and varied relationship among notions of poetry, translation, and protest described within U.S. Puerto Rican children’s writing.

Pura Belpré once said that if “you scratch a Puerto Rican…he is a poet.” She touts poetry and storytelling as forms of oral culture integral to the “Spanish [Harlem] Renaissance,” a literary and cultural movement among U.S. Puerto Ricans and other Latino/as in 1930s New York.¹ The Spanish poet and lover of Borinquen, Juan Ramón Jiménez, declares in his 1936 Island children’s poetry anthology that “poetry belongs” to the “miraculous” Puerto Rican child. Reading poetry only served to unlock this child’s

¹ Oral History with Pura Belpré, interviewed and transcribed by Lillian Lopes. Belpré discusses the emergence of the U.S. Puerto Rican community with regards to organization in addition to the NYPL such as La Liga Puertorriqueña and Casita Maria, a Catholic Puerto Rican Center. Belpré’s comment about poetry responds to Lopes’ question concerning the content of programs organized by Belpré and Cuban Abelardo Hernandez for Mother’s Day.
“inner poem.” Representing the 1960s Nuyorican movement, writer and poet Piri Thomas uses the titles “poet” and “child” interchangeably, claiming that “Every poet is born a child and every child is born a poet.” His compatriot, Nicholasa Mohr, in her novel, *Nilda* (1973) creates a gifted child character who found “the path of the poets.” In the 21st century, poet and prose writer Judith Ortíz-Cofer intensifies this correlation between Puerto Rican childhood and poetry, so much so that for Ortíz-Cofer, a child’s bicultural, bilingual lifestyle is itself an act of poetry. From Jiménez to Ortíz-Cofer, references to poetry seem linked to writers’ notions about the cultural work of literature and the arts, even the tensions between oral and literary culture. The title “poet” refers to the task of the creative writer, verse writer and performer, and artist. Yet, Puerto Rican and U.S. Puerto Rican narratives, as the products of a bilingual culture, also emphasize poetry as the arduous and imperfect task of the translator.

This chapter, in part, explores how poetry within U.S. Puerto Rican and Puerto Rican children’s writing is closely associated with notions of hybridity or “betweenness,” translation, and colonial resistance. Poetry is purported to be a form which conveys the “hustle and flow” of a life in constant transit and linguistic exchange. The word “poetry” represents the high value assigned to language in this culture along with the conception of language as a performable, fluid practice. As in Belpré’s emphasis on oral culture and storytelling, the poet represents a figure outside the literary establishment who

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2 Jiménez fled Spain during Franco’s reign, residing in Puerto Rico during his later years. He became active in creating a tradition of poetry for children on the Island and decided to be buried in Puerto Rico.

3 These authors seem to reflect a construction of poetry that is similar to Sir Phillip Sidney’s description of poets in his “Defense of Poetry” (1595). Sidney argued that poetry had a rightful place in society and should never be censored since it had the potential to encourage morality within the public. He used the term “poetry” and “poets” to refer to various kinds of literature and artistic roles. However, it is clear that U.S. Puerto Rican writers seem interested in the oral component of poetry (the sounds and switches between languages and the “translation” that takes place between oral and written “poetry.”
empowers *el pueblo*. Poetry is also characterized as a state of being ("between") and as a practice of breaking and arranging languages in a way that helps one survive in the present. Ortíz-Cofer marks a progression in how earlier authors viewed children in relationship with literature and art as an expression of the past and future. She casts the poet as a kind of interpreter of the present. Rather than leading the way to a perfect, Promised Land, the poet helps others thrive in the moment without casting a blind eye toward society’s imperfections. Within this narrative, children are often characterized as these ideal poets/interpreters. Adults covet youth for its perceived adaptability to constant flux. Adults, unlike children, are ostensibly less equipped to “hustle” words which are likened to stolen treasure. They need children in order to function in the present. We have seen many characters within the U.S. Puerto Rican narrative, such as the trickster, the underdog, the displaced child, and the Diaspora child. However, the ideal child character emerging from contemporary narratives is a third hybrid child who acts as a “bridge” between past and present generations.

This Between-child resists the typical romantic conception of children since this child character is linked to deviancy and violent resistance against the colonizer, as Ortíz-Cofer demonstrates.4 Far from the days of Belpré’s animal fables of harmless trickery and civil disobedience, Ortíz-Cofer shows how Between-children “steal” the

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4 Children as gifted with language, and as natural born poets has often been discussed in terms of British Romanticism and poets like William Wordsworth and William Blake. Joseph Thomas in “Child Poets and the Poetry of the Playground” argues for a reconsideration of what he calls “playground poetry” or the spontaneous poems children create during recreational activities. Educational researcher Morag Styles even argues that children are “natural poets” within her article “Just Like a Kind of Music: Children as Poets” (1992). She includes samples of poems written by children from her classes and educational research. Richard Flynn (2006) also argues for recovering poetry as a kind of lost discourse for American school children
colonizer’s language, making something new out of it. She characterizes this child as a little hustler and thief. She demonstrates how this poet-translator negotiates among nations, generations, and languages. Yet Ortíz-Cofer never upholds the work of these children as the ultimate solution to the Puerto Rican plight. As she says, “This is not utopia.” Ortíz-Cofer’s own upbringing and education represents postmodern Puerto Rican identity: born on the Island, raised in Patterson, New Jersey, educated in the southern United States, the Island, and England, and now a tenured professor in Georgia. Ortíz-Cofer disrupts the traditional immigrant/migrant plot since her characters reject neither the motherland nor the “stepmother” land. She “plants [her] little writer’s flag on both shores” (110). Ortíz-Cofer’s work highlights an ongoing narrative of Puerto Rican writers/artists yearning for a unified cultural and literary legacy. Every major Puerto Rican writer and artist within Puerto Rican children’s literature and culture has provided at least a glimpse of this character, yet Ortíz-Cofer fleshes out this deviant figure and exemplifies its capacity for creative and political revolution.

Through a discussion of poetry as a kind of metaphor for bilingual culture, this chapter marks the development of this Between-child character; a character which fosters a comparative conversation between Island and Mainland Puerto Ricans. Faith in the poetic soul of children, and in a child’s ability to literally speak for el pueblo, drives

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5 Walter Benjamin, whose work on translation I engage with in this essay, writes about how children manipulate objects and “waste products” as toy or play things. Children can make a toy out of anything even those things adults may no longer see as attractive or valuable. In “Old Forgotten Children’s Books,” he writes that children “do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produced their own small world of things with the greater one” (408). I highlight this because Judith Ortíz-Cofer characterization of the Between-children shows how children “take” valuable things, like words, and knowing the value of these things, make something different out of what was taken. However, Ortíz-Cofer depicts children as stealing things that are prized (although perhaps taken for granted) precisely because they are items of wealth. Also, Ortíz-Cofer’s children are not depicted as playing with language as much as fighting back with it. It is a much more aggressive image of youth.
this narrative about children who stand in the gaps between divisive national identities. I trace this development by focusing on two qualities associated with the Between-child’s poetic interventions: betweenness and translation. First, I concentrate on the notion of “betweenness” and hybridity and its relationship to poetry, tracing it back to the Island and the work of Island children’s theorists such as Flor Piñeiro de Rivera and poet Juan Ramón Jiménez’s work in Island children’s literature. Second, I focus on how Ortíz-Cofer’s portrait of poetic, hybrid children reacts to and against Jiménez. She appears to draw on the concept of trasladar a Spanish word meaning “to translate”/“to crossover” and the concept of interpretar, meaning “to translate/interpret” which also implies creative license for those translating. The notion of translation as a creative though imperfect practice, as theorists like Walter Benjamin have also suggested, demonstrates its capacity for resistance, such as when Ortíz-Cofer pictures poetry as “stealing back” from the colonizer. Third, continuing my discussion of the role of translator as interpreter, I focus on how Ortíz-Cofer’s depiction of children interpreting for adults coincides with the work of Pura Belpré’s allegories and Nicholasa Mohr’s political critiques. Moreover, Ortíz-Cofer’s take on children as interpreters extends beyond Puerto Rican culture and into the notion of “English” literature. She suggests that, like so many of the English language’s “stepchildren,” U.S. Puerto Rican narratives have a rightful place within “the House of English” or the English literary establishment. She takes issue with the very notion of “English,” even proposing the creation of new Englishes.

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6 Similar to Rosario Ferré’s allusion to Queen Elizabeth I’s attack on the Spanish Armada Ortíz-Cofer’s critique reaches across Euro-American boundaries.
Ortíz-Cofer’s emphasis on intermediary spaces/identities/cultures, however, destabilizes the traditional organizational binaries of Puerto Rican literature and culture, particularly when Ortíz-Cofer claims she overcame feelings of exile by “bring[ing] the Island with me” (Ocasio 48). Belpré portrayed the Island as “home,” even for children born in the U.S., yet Ortíz-Cofer’s sentiment speaks of a “home” independent of geographical boundaries. This is a home of a child’s own design where he/she is equipped for today’s dysfunctions. Her desire to merge cultures and literatures has been met with its share of critiques. However, Ortíz-Cofer participates within a narrative, begun before her, by writers fixated on the child, the Island, and the path of the poets. This narrative within Puerto Rican children’s literature seems the only space for a dialogue between U.S. and Island identities, even if that space seems more like a gaping wound. Island theorists have included U.S. Puerto Rican children’s writers within the same bibliographies as Island ones. The sections that follow place Ortíz-Cofer’s portrayal of “Between-children” in “In Search of My Mentor’s Gardens” (2000) and the novels Call Me María (2004) and The Line of the Sun (1991) in conversation with Jiménez, Belpré, Mohr, and Manzano.

For one, Lisa Sanchez-Gonzalez has read Ortíz-Cofer’s The Line of the Sun (1993), as “re/creational, or recreational re-creation writing”; specifically that Ortíz-Cofer “presents the past as something that can be revisited and revised for pleasure” (149). Although Sanchez-Gonzalez focuses her critique on The Line of the Sun, she indicates in a citation that she believes that the Ortíz-Cofer’s work is an autobiographical project with the intentions of revisiting and reinterpreting the past. Sanchez-Gonzalez writers about Ortíz-Cofer’s narrator Marisol: “Marisol’s life and her problematic perspective of her Puerto Rican heritage will remain the author’s recurring thematic material” (153). Sanchez-Gonzalez seems to consider Ortíz-Cofer’s work problematic because she emphasizes Ortíz-Cofer as writing assimilationist narratives. However, I am more interested in Ortíz-Cofer’s work as a transnational project, though it is certainly controversial. Specifically, Sanchez-Gonzalez believes Ortíz-Cofer’s work reinforces stereotypes of assimilation that validate the dominant culture.
“I am a Poem”: Piñeiro, Jiménez, Ortíz-Cofer and the Poetic Discourse of Betweenness

Preciosa serás sin bandera / sin laures/ ni glorias/ Preciosa te llaman los hijos de la libertad.

(Precious you will be without flag/without laurels/ even without glory/ Precious is what you are called by the children of liberty.) – Preciosa, Rafael Hernandez (1947)

Carmen Fayonville identifies Ortíz-Cofer’s transnational narratives “as an instant of that new ‘intermittent time and interstitial space’ in literary studies” proposed by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (131). Bhabha underlines “the possibility of being, somehow in between.” He narrates that this state of betweenness “opens up a space that is skeptical of cultural totalization, of notions of identity which depend for their authority on being ‘originary,’ or concepts of culture which depend for their value on being pure, or of tradition, which depends for its effectivity on being continuous.” A third identity beyond the center and exclusionary binaries (i.e. Puerto Rican or American), a place of “great political and poetic and conceptual value,” as Bhabha specifies, is attractive. Puerto Rican Studies scholar Juan Flores uses the above passage by Bhabha as a description of an “experience…so deeply familiar to Puerto Ricans in the United States…” (Flores From Bomba to Hip-Hop 55). For my purpose of examining the child’s role within Puerto Rican culture, Bhabha’s vision of this third identity is even more attractive given that the embodiment of this “between” entity is a “little figure of subversion intervening in the interstices.”

In “Are You a Latina Writer?” Judith Ortíz-Cofer describes her writing as a “bridge of [her] own design and construction” that she, as a young Puerto Rican poet, used to

“travel[] back and forth without fear and confusion as to where I belonged—I belong to both” (Women in the Line of the Sun 108). Traveling along a bridge, walking a tight rope, entering in and out of a door; all these descriptions -- Ortíz-Cofer, Manzano, and Jiménez’s respectively – emphasize Puerto Rican youth as a state of betweenness. Recalling Manzano and Sesame Street’s view of bilingual culture, Ortíz-Cofer conceives of betweenness as a necessary advantage rather than a handicap. The bridge distinguishes her from her parents “who precariously straddled two cultures, always fearing the fall, anxious as to which side they really belonged to” (108). Betweenness seem to operate outside the locations of exile, creating its own position and culture. Moreover, Ortíz-Cofer’s bridge (where children can scurry from one side to another) suggests that life in the between necessitates a literature of liminality which provides a place to stand in the gap. Ortíz-Cofer’s bridge is one constructed out of words by a child who realized that “language could be tamed” (109). Words constitute survival, as her protagonist María tells readers in Call Me María, “I know more words than many native English speakers because I need words to survive” (28). Each word is like a link in the bridge, a knot on the tightrope.

Though not the first, Ortíz-Cofer is perhaps the most fluent and critical writer on the experience of betweenness in Puerto Rican culture. Betweenness is, in many ways, the “language” she uses to speak to readers. As a poet, Ortíz-Cofer furthers this discourse of betweenness by drawing on its original language – poetry. Betweenness, specifically childhood betweenness, is an integral theme within Puerto Rican literature; moreover, betweenness is part of the founding myth of its children’s culture and theory from the Island to the mainland. Though Island and U.S. academics tend to categorize
these texts with regard to geographical boundaries, children’s literature seems the only literature where, similar to Ortíz-Cofer’s bridge, child readers are invited to scurry from one side to the other. Maybe even to linger in this state of transit. This invitation traces back to deep-seated notions of children’s literature as a site of recovery where children represent hope for historical continuity, something evident in Flor Piñeiro de Rivera’s *Un Siglo de Literatura Puertorriqueña/ A Century of Puerto Rican Children’s Literature* (1987). A theoretical text meant as a bibliographic introduction, *Un Siglo* evidences Piñeiro’s (and the academic culture in Puerto Rico’s) attempt to catalogue a distinct Puerto Rican “national” children’s literature. Moreover, Piñeiro, writing the only history of Puerto Rican children’s literature and one of the only Island bibliographies for researchers, bases the history of children’s literature on another founding myth: the relationship between poets and children. Poets and children are often associated as helping create ideal literature. In English letters, one has only to think of William Blake’s opening in his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1799) in which he too introduces the cohabitation of child and poet as necessary for literary creation:

>Piping down the valleys wild / Piping songs of pleasant glee / On a cloud I saw a child / And he laughing said to me. /...Piper sit thee down and write / In a book that all may read / So he vanished from my sight. / And I plucked a hollow reed. / And I made a rural pen, / And I stained the water clear / And I wrote my happy songs, / Every child may joy to hear. (Blake Archive)

Blake’s description of this encounter marks a progression between oral and written culture. This progression also marks a tension between performance/orality and the written text, a sense that something is lost in translation. A similar desire to restore what is lost between written and oral culture, as well as between Spanish and English, compels the work of Puerto Rican and U.S. Puerto Rican children’s writers.
In addition to establishing Puerto Rican children’s literary history on a broad tradition of poet-child interaction, Piñeiro also situates *Un Siglo* as a national response to the United Nations General Assembly’s 1979 International Year of the Child. Children’s literature, she writes in “To the Reader,” aids in the fulfillment of a child’s fundamental rights by catering to the “education, intellectual and spiritual needs” highlighted by the UN (3). Printed on *Un Siglo*’s cover, the UN logo for this landmark year (a child reaching up toward an adult, the adult reaching down, figures locked in an embrace) conveys a child’s “need for tenderness” and “quest for love.” Piñeiro highlights the logo as representing children’s needs; however, this child-adult embrace forms a circle suggesting a kind of symbiotic relationship. The two figures actually form one, further emphasizing the child’s importance within stable social paradigms. *Un Siglo*, then, “represents the bibliographical contribution of Puerto Rico to the world’s effort to make this ideal [social, national, familial stability] a reality.”

Piñeiro’s rhetoric of the “ideal” builds from the ideal child/adult relationship, brought about through literature, into the ideal group of writers. At first, “Puerto Rico” seems to reference the Island and its writers; however, Piñeiro’s list of writers defies geographical boundaries: “Authors such as Pura Belpré, Nicholasa Mohr, Ester Feliciano Mendoza…” (9). Belpré and Mohr are listed alongside Island children’s writers like Mendoza within a narrative tradition that furthers an ideal of Puerto Rican childhood. Indeed, Belpré writes the prologue to this volume, reinforcing her status as a modern Johnny Appleseed: “May the seed [*Un Siglo*] sows flourish even in arid soil and bring light where there was darkness” (XIII). After listing the authors, Piñeiro transitions into
the notion of an ideal literature by invoking the legacy of poet laureate and Island children’s literature pioneer, Juan Ramón Jiménez:

Juan Ramón Jiménez used to ask Puerto Rican children what gift they would like and they always replied that they wanted a book. This was so even though they carried textbooks. The poet saw in the brightness of the children’s eyes that they wanted an ideal book…. (14)

She pronounces Jiménez’s blessing over this national bibliography by adopting Jiménez’s definition of the ideal book. The bibliography is a book “foreseen in our early years, the one revealed at the threshold of life.” The definition is a quote from Jiménez’s speech during his initiation of the 1935 Festival of Children and Poetry in Puerto Rico, an event Piñeiro credits for “setting a high standard” and “exert[ing] a powerful influence on the development of children’s literature” on the Island. Written folklore, chapbooks, and songbooks existed in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, yet Piñeiro highlights the 1935 Festival of Children and Poetry⁹ as beginning a tradition of highbrow yet accessible books for school children. As a result of the festival, poets such as Jiménez and Nicaraguan Rubén Darío headlined a series of free poetry anthologies for Island’s schools.

Invoking Jiménez’s blessing goes beyond simply aligning children’s texts, and subsequently child readers, with poetry. Jiménez’s ideology reaches into the realm of prophesy. His 1935 speech, which Piñeiro treats as a founding document of children’s literature, contained the poet’s proclamation of the poet-child relationship as the beginning and, future, of these ideal books:

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⁹ This is also within the few years that Belpré published her first folktale Perez and Martina (1931) and a movement in Latin America to publish for children, making the 1930s a significant period for the mobilization of a “Puerto Rican” children’s tradition.
The Puerto Rican child, attracting all the colors of Paradise, the poor child above all, has moved me profoundly. I have met this poor child often, walking that difficult road of his first life, in the city and the country; I have stopped him in front of me, I have stopped in front of him and I have asked him what he most wanted. “A book…” (qtd. in Gullon 64)

As in his poetry, Jiménez seems fascinated by contradictions and binaries. His description of this child captures a dual vision of Paradise and poverty. The poverty on the Island, as Belpré and Mohr suggest, was a leading factor in the Great Migration, though prosperity did not necessarily follow relocation. Like Belpré, Jiménez connects literature to a type of spiritual sustenance. However, Jiménez emphasizes this child as capable of obtaining a form of sustenance through his/her internal poetry. Children contain literature and create it as opposed to simply receiving or being conditioned by literature. In the eyes of this child, Jiménez asserts that he saw a promise of an ideal literature. Moreover, this promise is part of a moment during childhood “we” all share; this book is one “we have all foreseen in our infancy, a book revealed to us during the beginning of our lives.” Piñeiro ascribes this description (those ideal books “foreseen by the poet in eyes of the Puerto Rican child”) to the books listed in the bibliography, those of the old and new generation of writers, naming Belpré and Mohr, but also leaving room for later writers like Ortíz-Cofer. The implication: within the eyes of this poor, little poet met by Jiménez on the road, a scroll containing U.S. Puerto Rican and Island children’s writers, each emphasizing a different shade of Paradise was “foreseen.” For Piñeiro, who includes a photograph of the poet surrounded by Island school children, Jiménez is godfather and sage of Puerto Rican children’s literature.

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10 The original is “que todos hemos entrevisto en nuestra infancia, y que se nos ha revelado en la mañana de la vida..” I have translated the phrase differently from Piñeiro. The quote implies that children come into the world with a heavenly vision of an ideal literature/book.
Through Jiménez, Piñeiro positions children as the progenitors of Puerto Rican literary tradition since children contain the scroll needed for interpreting the present state of literary projects.

Looking more closely at Jiménez, his philosophy of children as poets, prophets, and originators of literature seems grounded in anxiety about historical and political continuity. Jiménez idealizes poetry as a means of drawing out the secrets within the scroll. As he wrote in his 1936 introduction to Verso y Prosa Para Niños, poetry nurtures within “the miraculous Puerto Rican child” an “impulse, a fixation” with his/her own poetry.\(^{11}\) In Jiménez’s eyes, this miraculous child was more than a poet. By physically and spiritually uniting the essential qualities of his/her people, the child was a poem. Jiménez narrates another instance of his interactions with these children; children whom he believed contained the possibility of reconciling what was culturally and even racially irreconcilable:

The old man and the old woman of Puerto Rico, with all the echoes of the life of their race, with all the colors and adornments of body and soul repeated by the years, their labyrinths grafted into their skin, all these things squeezed together, dry and final, they are impossible. Inside, the child, as a synthetic prelude, reunites the possible and impossible. We cannot forget the material and immaterial vision, this logical and illogical, this death and life of a child walking on a path, through a door, under a palm tree, under the sun or rain or moon. All of the paradisiacal oasis within this clear and nebulous exceptional island of life and death, is still soft clay, a marvelous compendium, within these little, indescribable beings...(22)\(^{12}\)

\(^{11}\) Jiménez’s Versa y Prosa is listed in Piñeiro’s intro as published in 1957 but Jiménez intro within this volume is dated 1936.

\(^{12}\) The original: “El Viejo, la vieja de Puerto Rico, con todos sus ecos vividos de raza, todos sus colores y matices de cuerpo y alma repetidos por los años, sus injertos laberínticos, apretado todo en seca unidad ultima, son imposibles. El niño reúne en si, preludio sintético, este posible y este imposible. No se puede olvidar la visión material e inmaterial, lógica e ilógica, vida y muerta de tal niño por un camino, en una puerta, bajo una palma; al sol o la lluvia o la luna. Todo el oasis paradisiaco de esta clara isla nublada de vida y muerte tan excepcionales, esta amasado, compendio maravilloso, en estos pequeños seres indecibles, islillas” (22). There is no English versión of this volume so I translated it from the Spanish.
In this passage, Jiménez hints at the Island’s historical traumas. The old man and old woman seem cast in stone, imprinted by the years. They embody the contradictions and instability of their colonial history to the extent that they seem incapable of articulating in the present. Yet, the child, as a kind of poem/history in process, is still active, “like soft clay,” capable of interpreting the past and present. Jiménez also locates his description of these little poems within images of historical trauma (“little white, copper, and black forms…invaded by every subtle cadence”) (22). The description suggests a conglomeration of races while also emphasizing violent conquest. Children, as multiracial poems, are “exceptional” since they, like the old man and old woman, bear witness to the Island’s dark, yet beautiful past. However, unlike the previous generation, these children project a raw, powerful rhythm (a product of historical violence) into the present. The child’s exceptional quality also stems from his/her existence in the between. It is this state of betweenness that makes children “indescribable.” Even during everyday activities, children exist between “life and death,” “logic and illogic,” “material and immaterial.” They are “animated” by a “force” that is both “original” and “terminal” and walk between “life and the past life.” Jiménez emphasizes the child poet’s messianic qualities by describing children as entering and exiting through a door marked “origin” and “terminal,” (i.e. alpha and omega) (22).

Betweenness, then, implies not only an identity or position, but also a practice. Jiménez presents betweenness as a discipline of arranging the “written lines” imprinted on past generations (el Viejo/la Vieja) together with present history. More than a poetic gift, Jiménez’s child poet lives life as poetry. The poetic gift, however, allows the child to usher in a kind of a political, messianic kingdom. Jiménez further contends that since he
can give this child nothing, he must have a different objective for the anthology: “[If I cultivate the child’s] desire to toil for the unique and total kingdom of poetry that is over his land and under his sky…I will be happy. That my book may be, can be…a good companion. This succession of the kingdom would be enough for me.” Jiménez posits a kingdom of poetry “over the land,” separate from the ruling and political authorities, where children reign. Jiménez’s kingdom of poetry unites with Ortíz-Cofer’s image of the bridge by emphasizing the need for a literature that fills the gaps of inequality and historical trauma left by colonialism. Both poets, generations apart, reveal a similar vision when contemplating the colonial fragments within Puerto Rican culture. However, as I will show, although Ortíz-Cofer celebrates children as poets, she dwells much more on the darkness surrounding these little figures. Her child characters use poetry as a means of getting what they want from society; even enacting revenge rather than an idealized sense of “peace in the kingdom.”

However, if we consider the child’s preeminence within Piñeiro’s history and Jiménez’s vision as the articulation of a fundamental Puerto Rican sentiment, then we might better grasp why children’s texts and media have played such a crucial part within the Diaspora. Through this lens, historical recovery transforms into a process of gathering the literature (the scroll) already existing in children. A scroll bearing the secrets of the “kingdom” becomes the driving force behind Belpré’s folklore for children, Mohr’s assertion of U.S. identity within children’s literature, Manzano’s ground-breaking performances on children’s television, and Ortíz-Cofer’s appeal to the poetic soul of

13 “El afán por el reino total y único de la poesía sobre su tierra y bajo su cielo, aislado suficientemente en poesía por su mar, estere contento. Que mi libro sea, pueda ser para el limpio apoyo, estimulo fiel y buena compañía. Esta sucesión del reino solo será bastante para mi.” (23)
children. This interpretive lens also destabilizes essentialist views of Island identity by tracing the origin of betweenness, particularly within fundamental articulations of Island children’s literature and history, to the Island. For example, within the displaced child character (exemplified by Belpré’s *Santiago*), the Island is a source of stable, Latin American identity and Spanish heritage. The displaced child always looks back to the Island in order to navigate the present, never fulfilled within the U.S. landscape. The displaced child possesses tools to resist certain aspects of colonialism, but one could say this child type does not exist within the U.S. landscape. Within Mohr’s revision of folklore, the Island represents an impossible dream due to its perfection; it is a “memory” of imagined prosperity and stability one can never obtain. The Diaspora child must dispossess the Island in order to embrace his/her U.S. position. However, the Between-child’s very existence emphasizes an inherent instability and limitation within both positions. Jiménez, and Piñeiro through Jiménez, establish the Island child as an inherently diverse identity of shifting colors, nations, and rhythms, as Jiménez writes “invaded by every subtle cadence.” In other words, betweenness is suggested as part of the Puerto Rican child’s heritage, Island or Mainland. Moreover, writers present betweenness (and thriving therein) as something the Puerto Rican child does best. Developing this quality in children, and encouraging them to embrace it is the key to survival.

### Putting Together the Pieces: Ortíz-Cofer and Poetry as Translation and Stealing

*Por que la estrella de mi bandera no cabe en la Americana*

(Because the star in my flag doesn’t fit in the American flag.) --- “La Estrella Sola,” Andres Jiménez
Jiménez’s description suggests betweenness as tied to language; the Between-child’s very words record the nation’s multifarious history. Reinforcing Jiménez’s concept of messiah, the child and the Word seem linked and the Word holds the power to impact history. Perhaps, it is this strong association between the child and the Word that elevates children to the status of ideal poets and, further, ideal translators in Puerto Rican culture. In “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin highlights the association between ideal translation and poetry within the minds of those searching for “faithful” translations. Readers tend to regard a translation as faithful if it transmits information, yet they often overlook certain intangibles (“the unfathomable, the mysterious, the poetic”) as non-essential. Yet, Benjamin suggests that a translator “can reproduce” these intangible essentials “only if he is also poet” (70). Benjamin’s notion of translation as (re)producing “the unfathomable” resonates with Jiménez’s picture of children gathering together “the impossible and the possible.” Jiménez’s “foreseeing” the whole of an ideal literature in a child’s eyes as a kind of unfolding of a scroll also joins with Benjamin’s image of translation as the gathering of fragments of a vessel. Benjamin writes that the relationship between the original language and the language of translation should complement each other like shards “a vessel … glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as

14 Here I am ascribing to a more New Testament view of “messiah” or “the Christ” something Jiménez also appears to do. However, it is not my intention to dissect this child characters role as messiah but rather to mark a progression between Jiménez’s sketch of this child and Ortiz-Cofiér’s. Ortiz-Cofiér does not place so much emphasis on the role of messiah, perhaps because her writing dwells more on societal imperfection and practical strategies for survival.
fragments are part of a vessel (78). Within a culture already viewing children as possessing the fragments of a greater history, it seems to follow that the same children would also possess the ability to “lovingly” assemble the fragments of a greater language. Even so, Benjamin’s image of the “shards” and Jiménez’s fragments of the scroll, again, underscore translation as kind of violent and imperfect practice. The original vision remains somehow unattainable which may explain why children are forever chasing the best words and adults are forever chasing children.

Ortíz-Cofer, through child poets like Maria from Call Me Maria, suggests a partial joining of Jiménez’s vision of little poetic messiahs with Benjamin’s ideal of faithful translation. If we consider Ortíz-Cofer as picking up on a tradition within Puerto Rican children’s theory, then her reading of Island and Mainland literatures, her desire to “recognize [herself]” within both, may seem less objectionable. Ortíz-Cofer’s narratives reveal more of the complexity (e.g. the hypocrisy within the colonial project from both Island and U.S. perspectives) within the child poet’s interpretations of past and present Puerto Rican identities. Unlike Jiménez, she focuses on the chasing down of words and in unfinished task of putting together the pieces. Her revision of this child type emphasizes children as little hustlers/thieves15 rather than innocent messiahs. Her narrative perspective does not uphold “a peaceable kingdom – the lions and the lambs” or a “utopia,” but a kind of “pluralistic” representation of the trouble in Paradise16

15 Marah Gubar’s chapter in Artful Dodgers on E. Nesbit called “Partners in Crime” also links children to stealing. However, Gubar’s idea of how Nesbit encourages child readers to think of themselves as “editors” or “revisers” of literary works doesn’t not seem to carry the same kind of licentiousness implied by stealing in Judith Ortiz-Cofer.

16 Not assimilation that rejects the Puerto Rican roots because El Museo del Barrio, for example, has cultural artifacts. El Teatro Pregones puts on plays in Spanish and English. This is pluralism: it is taking
She celebrates the poetic interventions of these children, yet always characterizes them as dangerous.

In Ortíz-Cofer’s work, betweenness as a critique of essentialist identity paradigms is also exemplified through language. Ortíz-Cofer seems fascinated by the mechanics and rhythms of Spanglish which in *Call Me Maria*, María touts as her third language. “I am a trilingual poet,” Maria tells her mother, to which her mother replies “Spanish, English, and….” Maria interjects: “And Spanglish” (115). Ortíz-Cofer’s use of Spanglish and Spanish within an “American” text suggests her critique of English-only or Spanish-only narratives as limited when representing migrant life. For example, María leaves the Island and her mother, an English teacher, in order to accompany her father to the United States. “Papi” is experiencing a depression or as Mami tells Maria, “It is a tristeza that is very serious” (Ortíz-Cofer, *Call Me Maria*, 9). Ortíz-Cofer’s use of the word *tristeza*, as opposed to simply sadness, coincides with her view of writing, and incorporating Spanish, as a process of memory. She has said that Spanish in her narratives is “an energizing force” – a “magic formula”:

> When I hear somebody say “la muerte,” it rings bells in my head in a way that hearing somebody say “death” doesn’t, because when I would hear my mother say something like *la muerte llegó a la casa*, it was a dramatic statement. The same as when they talked about “la maldad” or “el mal” or something like that. Since I didn’t grow up using Spanish all the time, Spanish was magical to me. (Hernandez 101)

Within English, Spanish serves as a reminder to readers, monolingual or bilingual alike, that “what they’re reading or hearing comes from the minds and the thoughts of Spanish-speaking people. I want my readers to remember that.” Ortíz-Cofer the best of both cultures and making a third culture. This is not the future, it is the present, the only thing is that it is not universally acknowledged. It isn’t utopia. There are still drugs, and crimes, and welfare and all that
distinguishes language as an expression of the internal. A mind “invaded” (to borrow Jiménez’s rhetoric) by Spanish and English operates within a sphere of memory that English alone might not reach and vice-versa.\(^1\) Benjamin also implies that successful translation means that the translator should “allow[] his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue” (Benjamin 81). Recovering memory through language, similar to recovering the pieces of a scroll or the vessel, lies within the Between-child’s discernment of these linguistic boundaries (i.e. where Spanish ends and English begins/where English ends and Spanish begins). Maria’s describes the switches between languages as poetry: “In the late afternoons and sometimes even at night, I sit on our building’s front stoop to enjoy their Spanglish poetry slam and gossip sessions” (110). When she first hears Spanglish, María quickly discerns its mechanics:

\begin{quote}
I am beginning to hear this new dialect invented by people who can dream in two languages. I used to think it was broken English, but it really does have its own rules of grammar: Oye, vamos to the marqueta ahora, or La maestro has me entre un rock and a hard place. I mean, you have to dive in feet first before it starts making sense. (Ortíz-Cofer, Call Me María, 18)
\end{quote}

Ortíz-Cofer emphasizes Maria’s chaotic environment as an ideal for training young poets. Ana Celia Zentella has implied that the barrio children she interviewed in her

\begin{quote}
Juan Flores also links language to memory within his chapter “Broken English Memories” in From Bomba to Hip Hop. He writes:

In what language do we remember? Is it the language we use when we speak with friends and family in our everyday lives? Or does choice of language of memory involves transposition, a translation in the literal sense of moving across: trasladar, "de un lado a otro" [from one side to the other]? For Puerto Ricans, half of whom may be on either “side” at any given time, a symbiosis between language and place, and between identity and memory, is especially salient today. Spanish, English, Spanglish, all in the plural and in lowercase, make for an abundant reservoir of expressive codes with which to relate (to) the past. For language is not only the supreme mnemonic medium, the vehicle for the transmission of memory; fifty years of Puerto Rican history have shown that language can also be the site and theme of historical action, the locus of contention over issues of identity and community that reach far beyond our preference for, or reliance on, this or that word or grammar. (Flores 57)
\end{quote}

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language research already possessed “the same inter-sentential switching rules and strategies” perfected in “[m]uch of the best Latin@ poetry and prose” (56).\(^{18}\) Indeed, poet Miquel Algarín declared the Spanglish rhythms spoken and heard daily by children like Maria as a new language of survival, the language of “Puerto Rican words and feelings.”\(^{19}\)

For the poor New York Puerto Rican there are three survival possibilities. The first is to labor for money and exist in eternal debt. The second is to refuse to trade hours for dollars and to live by your will and “hustle.” The third possibility is to create alternative behavioral habits. It is here that the responsibilities of the poet start, for there are no “alternatives” without a vocabulary to express them. The poet is responsible for inventing the newness. The newness needs words, words never heard before or used before. The poet had to invent a new language, a new tradition of communication. (Algarín and Piñerio 9)

Algarín furthers Spanglish as the language of a new manifesto of the oppressed. Spanglish was certainly part of the literary sensation and genius associated with the Nuyorican Poets like Algarín, Piñero, and Pietri. María’s friend, Whoopee, further highlights the implication (i.e. threat) of Spanglish to essentialist notions of identity, specifically U.S. identity: “You call it Spanglish, María. I call it American. I speak American!” (50) More than merely the existence of a third culture, the Between-child and his/her discernment of the gaps surrounding essentialist identities evidences the need for a third culture. The persistence and need for a third culture unsettles any ideology of pure language or race, exposing the impact of the colonial encounter on both conqueror and conquered.

Maria’s new language is the product of a violent struggle where English has “broken” Spanish and Spanish has “broken” English. Each time children speak this


\(^{19}\) *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* (1975)
language, they persist in the battle. Algarín’s analysis suggests the practice of “switching” between languages as part of a new “hustle” for surviving the barrio. Instead of trading illegal commodities for dollars, children like Maria trade illegal words for their livelihoods. Each switch represents a contraband word smuggled into another language. This is a much rougher portrait than Jiménez more romantic version of children. Even in the British Romantic tradition, writers might depict ideal children as challenging the proscribed rules of education but not so much as participating in an illicit activity. Ortíz-Cofer disrupts perceptions of children as ingénues since children like Maria know exactly how the rules are being broken; yet thrill in doing so.

_Call Me Maria_, as “a novel in letters, poems, and prose,” demonstrates the Between-child’s manipulation of language and culture. Indeed, Ortíz-Cofer’s narrative style suggests that only through the abstract language of poetry (and the switches between codes and genres) can readers access this migrant life in translation. Language and culture succumb to the hands of the child poet who one, can learn the rules better than anyone, and two, as a bilingual, has access to more rules and more words than native English speakers. As Mr. Golden, María’s English teacher, tells her class:

_There are more than one million words in the English language._

_All the poems yet to be written are contained in the_

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20 I cannot resist the connection here to “switch” blades which were a calling card of the notorious Puerto Rican gangs in New York.

21 For example, in William Wordsworth’s poem “We Are Seven” (1798) the little maid defies the poet’s question and answer series which resembles catechism. This child is generally praised for her idealism and persistence.

22 This is the subtitle for Call Me Maria.
dictionary.

A poem is made by choosing the best words and putting them in the best order.

Words are weapons.

Words are tools.

“María, you are a poet,” declares Mr. Golden. (46)

Though Maria’s narration, from the outset, contains poetry, she receives her official title of “poet” from Mr. Golden. From Mr. Golden, María also learns that poetry, as Jiménez also implies, is the practice of ordering and arranging words and lines. She contemplates the poetic office as both a necessary and everyday role.

Mr. Golden, *esta bien*, I believe you, since you declare I am a poet, since it is imperative that I be a poet, I will be a poet. But how do I become a poet? I live in a small world with few exclamation points and many question marks…Will I have to look for metaphors in the plaster of the wall of our home, in the sad notes of my father’s guitar late at night, in the sad golden eyes of my father Uma? Will I have to make poems out of common ordinary things no one except me cares about? (104)

Maria exercises her poetic faculty by gathering “lines” from the different people and cultures in her life. Similar to Jiménez’s conception of the child poet, María’s line gathering coincides with a kind of history gathering illustrated in her favorite game “Instant History” (which she plays with her fellow Between-child, Whoopee). Maria and Whoopee attempt to discern the histories of those walking around their ethnic barrio by “try[ing] to guess what kind of person is going by just from their zapatos, by the way they walk, the sounds of their voices as they hurry down the street” (21). Maria accesses every tone, movement, and rhythm in creating her instant histories; it is María’s “instant history” of Whoopee that causes Mami to pronounce Maria “a poet” toward the end of the novel.
More than a poet, like Jiménez’s child, Maria declares herself “a poem.” When she prepares a “Who You Are Day” outfit for a school activity, each wardrobe piece “tells” Maria’s new American story: her Island mother’s red skirt, her Indian friend Uma’s old sari, her Nuyorican father’s sharkskin suit jacket, her friend Whoopee’s platform shoes, and her Island grandmother’s shawl. Wearing this suit of many colors and cultures, Maria promptly interprets her choices to her Abuela: “When I part the clothes in my closet and come out like an actor in a play, Abuela’s eyes open wide. Before she can say anything, I point to each piece of my outfit and say a name: Mami, Papi, Uma, Whoopee” (97). Abuela, like Jiménez’s “La Vieja,” symbolizes the past Island culture that has difficulty interpreting the present. Abuela finds Maria’s love of the Broadway show *Cats* ludicrous – something readers only learn after Maria translates Abuela’s journal and includes it in the narrative (“I find it impossible to be moved by a female cat singing her heart out about a hard life, and this after having been run over by a car”). Through Maria’s interventions, Abuela not only “speaks” to the reader, but also begins grasping her granddaughter’s modern history:

> Abuela’s face changes as she begins to understand the meaning of my fashion statement.

> “Ahora sé quién eres, Maria, y quién puedes ser, si quieres. Ven acá, mi amor.”

Abuela says that she knows who I am and who may be if I choose. I have heard these words before but I don’t remember where….when I go into Mr. Golden’s class and his eyes ask me, *Who are you today, Maria?* I will say by the way I walk in, head held high, that today I am a poem.” (97-98)

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23 This is an intended reference to Joseph from the Book of Genesis, a young prophet and dreamer, the chosen one among Israel/Jacob’s sons.
In *Call Me Maria*, Ortíz-Cofer likens poetry to the practice of translation/interpreting and to acts of thievery. Her furthering of Between-children as translators and thieves emphasizes this child type’s devious nature. The Spanish language contains an implicit relationship between poetry and interpreting/translation/crossing over, something relevant and helpful when considering Ortíz-Cofer’s child characters. Interpreter or *intérprete* carries the element of performance since the word can refer to an actor or/and poet. *Intérprete* references the actor’s artistic choices (body movement, staging, voice intonation, script analysis, etc.) while performing or to a poet’s recitation of a poem (even if it is not an original composition). *Intérprete* contains the admission that what I am seeing and hearing is a series of choices that have created a separate original. Yet, *intérprete* can also refer to a person performing as a translator (i.e. someone standing between a message and a receiver). As Benjamin suggests in his theory of translation, interpreting/translating is not so much about reproducing the original as it is about creating something new. The ideal interpreter balances between “fidelity and license” (78).

Ortíz-Cofer positions Maria as a poet, narrator, and interpreter within *Call Me Maria*’s menagerie of poems and stories. Outside the novel, readers must consider that Maria stands between them and the narrative. In the case of those characters said to speak mostly Spanish like Mami and Abuela, readers only decipher what Maria has decided to translate.24 Within the novel, María functions as a cultural and linguistic

24 Ortíz-Cofer’s adult novel, *In the Line of the Sun*, features a similar case. Mid-novel, readers learn that the first half of the novel has been a clever mythology concocted by (between) child narrator, Marisol. In the Epilogue, Marisol tells the reader that she put the story together like a “puzzle” from stories she heard from family members; this “puzzle would reveal many things about my own life” (*In the Line of the Sun*, 187; 287). Perhaps, Ortíz-Cofer’s Between-child narrators such as Maria and Marisol mirror the creative process of their originator since she has said that “[w]hen I am creating a character who speaks in
interprète/interpreter for her family members, each symbolizing an aspect of Puerto Rican identity, including her Papi (Mainland, Spanglish identity), Mami (modern, bilingual Island identity) and Abuela (traditional, monolingual Island identity). Readers evaluate Maria’s relationship with Mami through their correspondence. More than keeping in touch, Maria and Mami write letters to each other as means of “practic[ing] our English.” Though I generally believe Ortíz-Cofer means for Mami to stand for the Island and Papi for the U.S., Maria’s observations of her parent’s linguistic habits collapses traditional Island/U.S. language labels. As an Island bilingual and English teacher, Mami also represents the shifting colors of Island betweenness; it is ambiguous which “mother” or “native” tongue Mami represents for Maria (Spanish, English, perhaps even Island “English”). Mami speaks Spanish to her daughter and husband, yet speaks English so well that it is the reason Papi and Mami fell in love (Ortíz-Cofer, *Call Me Maria*, 80). Maria also informs the reader that Papi speaks “fast” Spanish to Mami, but seems to blossom only when he begins speaking his native Spanglish in the barrio (8; 29). Maria actually writes that “[g]rowing up, I had to choose which of my parents’ versions of English I would speak” (121).

*Trasladar* is another word which Maria seemingly embodies. In Spanish, trasladar can refer to translation but also to the act of crossing over, from one side to another. In the end, it seems Maria negotiates between both parents’ essentialist views and their decisions to act out their inherently hybrid identities within a particular geographic location of the Puerto Rican spectrum. Unlike Maria, both parents deny their betweenness which restricts their ability to thrive in both places. As Mami tells Maria

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Spanish, that character is speaking Spanish to me in my head, and I am translating him or her…I was hearing these people speaking in Spanish, and I was transcribing what they were saying into English. My own creative process includes being a translator of my own work as I write” (Ocasio “Infinite Variety” 734).
about Papi, “It is like we are from two different countries, hija. Both Puerto Ricans, but we have never spoken the same language” (116). Clearly, Mami’s remark about language refers to something other than “English” or “Spanish” or even “Spanglish” since both parents speak and understand each of these to a degree. They have forsaken poetry, the official language of the between (the third) state, which as Jiménez and Ortíz-Cofer both highlight, operates outside of geographic and nationalist realms. They are unable to adapt to the “hustle and flow” of language exchange. It is only Maria, the child poet and interpreter, who can trasladar in the breaks between her parents and, outside the text, speak for her parents to readers.

As the interpreté, Maria advocates for Mami and Papi at various points in the novel. Maria’s interpretations reveal the Island and Mainland’s hypocrisies regarding “pure” language and culture. As in a previous example, Maria deeply admires her father’s Spanglish and defends his use of this “third” language, calling it her third language in front of Mami. At one point, Maria asks Mami about “the kind of English…Papi speaks.” Mami jokes that Papi speaks “impeccable Spanglish” as opposed to the “impeccable English” she believes she was taught on the Island and wants Maria to adopt. Here, Mami upholds an illusion of linguistic purity. She purports an ideal of pure English even when extreme purists might view Mami’s “English” as a blemished product of a colonial relationship (121). Maria’s decision to stay with Papi validates Papi’s rejection of Mami’s view – a view in which he is always seen as an outsider for speaking Spanglish. Maria both defends and reprimands Mami when she visits Maria and Papi in the barrio. Mami is quickly categorized as an Island snob; her

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25 Juan Flores emphasizes the importance of “trasladar [from one side to the other]” (56).
colorful apparel makes her the object of ridicule within the barrio. Interestingly, Maria tells us that it is the older women who seem most resentful of Mami, calling her a “fancy pajara”: “They enjoy el gufeo, goofing off, Spanglish style. The catcalls and verbal abuse inflicted by the ones who snobbish around the gate keepers, as Whoopee call the old woman who sit, watch, and comment on everything that happens on our street, are a familial part of daily life here” (112). Unlike Mami or even Papi, Maria and Whoopee, as Between-children, possess an uncanny ability to name and maneuver within the socio-cultural hierarchy of the barrio. A skilled interpreter, Maria views this scene “through Mami eyes” and through the perspective of the gatekeepers (112). The old gatekeepers object to Mami’s position as a so-called “pure” Islander even within a neighborhood rampant with Island nostalgia. For example, Maria had previously heard these same gatekeepers “talking about how much better life was en La Isla: the people were kinder, the weather perfect…talking about the food cooked by their mamas makes them stand up on the top step like poets inspired to recite verses to their native land” (109). Maria grasps Mami’s hand, standing between her and the gatekeepers, in order to “get her past the evil tongues, las malas lenguas”: “At the risk of my own future, I start to tell them to shut up” (112-113). Mami seemingly reminds the gatekeepers of something they perceive as lost. The oldest women are reduced to silence, realizing that “[t]hey were once Island women themselves. They know. Sometimes you are born to be one or the other. Sometimes you can cross over” (113). The old women and Mami seem frozen within an ideal of pure barrio and/or Island culture. As Ortiz-Cofer has said, these older women, including Mami, fear the “fall.” The young Maria, however, finds her footing in the between.
Those child poets/interprétés standing in the between must also practice a kind of thievery. In other words, Ortíz-Cofer’s rendering of this child type, a poet and interpreter of language and culture, does not so much possess a “gift” of poetry. Ortíz-Cofer actually suggests that any linguistic prowess that Maria possesses has come through her plundering of language. In Call Me Maria, poetry stands in as a metaphor for the appropriation of language within a history of conquest and rebellion. Within the novel, the prose and poetry sequence “American Beauty,” “Crime in the Barrio,” and “Confessions of a Non-native Speaker” seems to deliberately repeat this theme of poetry and stealing. “American Beauty” finds Maria setting off the security alarms at the local drugstore, seemingly a victim of racial profiling. The manager commands Maria to empty the contents of her purse on a drug store counter:

Without touching any of my things, as if I carried the bubonic plague in my handbag, he inspects its contents, poking around inside with a pen he has pulled outside of his pocket, letters scrolled in gold on its side: We value our customers. This is what he finds: half a roll of breath mints (tropical flavors), two lipsticks (Brown Sugar Babe and Hot Spice Girl), hairbrush, pink sunglasses with slightly scratched lenses, envelope with a letter I am still writing to my mother…Finally, finding nothing that looks like merchandise, he looks me over as if I were hiding something in my clothing or maybe hidden deep within my bushy foreign hair. (63)

The security guard’s suspicions appear to stem from prejudice, yet Ortíz-Cofer leaves ambiguous the source of the alarm trigger. Even after the guard finds no proof of theft: did the alarm sound due to the guard’s targeting of Maria, or does she have secret plunder in her possession? Maria leaves the store, understanding that the guard acquitted her due to “a lack of evidence” but not a “lack of guilt” (64).

The next poem in the novel, “Crime in the Barrio” by Maria, explains another kind of theft, one eluding the local authorities. The thief is a mysterious character who, among many things, steals Maria’s “second last name,” “accent,” and “childhood”:
It begins
With your second last name
Gone missing from your mailbox,
School ID, and learner’s permit.
It is hard to explain to your relatives
Back on the Island.
Your mother says
You had it
When you left home,
Where is it now?
You cannot claim
To have misplaced your mother’s surname.
...
Whose is responsible for these crimes
in the barrio? Who needs a Puerto Rican accent, a second
last name, or the answer
to the question,
Where are you from?
desperately enough
To break a into a basement
....
To steal it
From a fifteen-year-old girl
Named Maria? (67-68)
Maria views this thief (described as both a “she” and a “him” in this poem) as stealing more than the obvious markers of her cultural identity; the thief succeeds at stealing her childhood. The notion of lost childhood as associated with cultural markers like an accent and a second last name suggests a few things about this dialogue of thievery. First, since Maria experiences the transition from Island to Mainland as a child, she attributes a sense of stable cultural identity to childhood which, as time passes, seems farther away. Second, her poetic reflections on childhood (including this narrative of poems memorializing both the Island and the barrio) reflect her desire for a stable cultural identity. Third, Maria might perhaps fill in the holes left by this thief through an act of revenge (i.e. stealing back her cultural stability).

The final poem in the novel, “Confessions of a Non-Native Speaker,” elaborates on Maria’s decision to fill in the gaps left by the thief. As a child poet, Maria knows the worth in taking and collecting words and lines. “Confessions of a Non-Native Speaker” also reflects back on Maria’s confrontation with the security guard. Perhaps, a cleverly stolen English word, concealed in the heart of a foreigner, set off the alarm at the drug store. Ortíz-Cofer, through Maria writes:

I confess,
I had to steal English
Because what I had
Was never enough.
The sly taking started as a word here,
A word there.
It was easy.
I slipped words
Into my pockets,
my crime unnoticed
as the precious palabras
spilled out
of unguarded mouths,
And when they were left behind
Like empty glasses and china
after a banquet,
or like familiar jewelry,
The everyday gold
Tossed anywhere
at bedtime. (125)

Maria likens words (“precious palabras”) to a glorious, though “unguarded,” inheritance. However, only a Between-child, forever chasing after words, recognizes the value of a word for creating a place to stand in the gap. Maria describes the words she stole as similar to “empty glasses” at an abandoned banquet and “everyday gold / Tossed anywhere.” She gains possession of English only because the so-called rightful heirs have squandered their riches. Maria refers to her accent as “her cloak of invisibility” which she uses to “slip[] in/ while the ones who had more/ than they could every use , / dreamed / their long, luxurious dreams, / spoiled children / unaware of the real value, / their inherited wealth, / language” (126). Non-native, Between-children are the least expected to steal English, yet the best prepared to do so. English fills in the places ravaged by the thief. English is now “legally [hers] since no one has ever claimed / a word, taken back a sentence.” Maria compares her second language to “a silver cup”
and “a necklace” made of pearls, diamonds, and rubies. Maria reflects the child poet of Jiménez’s dreams, yet she does not lead us to a kingdom of peace and safety but to a place where we learn to take things by force. Maria knows the value of a word and arranges them like fine jewelry. She comprehends that words are the seeds of poetry and history, that rules are meant to be broken, and that she who possesses the most words wins. Maria can thrive in the between, help others avoid the fall, interpret the present, and, as a child rich in English and Spanish, she glories in the shifting colors of Puerto Rican identity—the new creation.

“Dile, Dile”\textsuperscript{26}: Belpré, Mohr, Ortíz-Cofer and Children between the Generations

\textit{Quiero volver/ quiero volver…}  
(I want to return / I want to return…) – Verde Luz, El Topo

In the narratives of Piñeiro, Jiménez, and Ortíz-Cofer, the Between-child emerges as a child skilled in the poetry of translation. Ortíz-Cofer specifies this child as a kind of heroic deviant who crosses the same precipices that endangered the previous generations. Piñeiro and Jiménez suggest betweenness as an intrinsic quality within all Puerto Rican children, Island or Mainland. Yet, more than simply highlighting the existence of such children, Ortíz-Cofer illustrates the Between-child’s potential as a protagonist who, embracing this quality, rearranges (“breaking”) the histories, traditions, and languages surrounding her. She delves into the literary and political implications of children who, without the fear of losing an essentialist identity, create opportunities for dialogue across linguistic and national boundaries. Adults in these narratives benefit and thrive on a child’s youth; however, this is not the same sort of search for the fountain of youth one might find in a narrative such as J.M. Barrie’s \textit{Peter Pan} (1911).

\textsuperscript{26} Literally, “Tell them, tell them.”
The *Peter Pan* fable, among many things, suggests a certain desire to stay a child forever so as to evade death, such as when Barrie implies that childhood is “the beginning of the end” (1). “Peter Pan” is able to visit subsequent generations of children and re-hatch the dream of Neverland because he never grows old. The impossible dream child of the Puerto Rican narrative is a child sought for his/her perceived malleability (i.e. their ability to adapt to different languages, cultures, locations). In a culture marked by continual migration and instability, youth is coveted as a defense against another kind of “death” – the failure to navigate and communicate in the present (i.e. the new site, the new language).

Ortíz-Cofer’s portrait of children negotiating for older generations dwells on the sacrifices children make as they figuratively lay down so others may pass. For example, when Maria first moves from the Island to the barrio, she feels literally torn in two. The separation from Mami and the Island, the constant struggle between Mami and Papi, ultimately take their toll. Maria tells the reader about her two names: Maria Alegre (what her mother called her on the Island) and Maria Triste (what she calls herself on the Mainland). Indeed, Maria often feels she must perform for her parents. She plays the housewife for Papi in their barrio apartment, saying he “needs” her more than Mami (*Call Me Maria* 4). She plays the clown for Mami, picking up a pair of maracas and dancing in an attempt to cheer up Mami about Papi’s depression (9). During Mami’s farewell from the barrio, a pivotal moment (hence the title) comes when Maria no longer wants to identify as “triste” or “alegre.” Maria watches her mother leave, as she thinks, “Call me Maria. Just Maria.” So, although the Between-child helps bridge the gaps between divisive identities, this child also personifies a bridge, and to an extent, a
portal. In the tradition of Nicholasa Mohr, Ortíz-Cofer emphasizes children as pioneers who pay a heavy price for migration and colonialism. Ever the Between-child herself, Ortíz-Cofer inspires a dialogue about the importance of children as cultural bridges among post-migration children’s writers, mainly herself and the two most prominent writers of previous generations, Pura Belpré and Nicholasa Mohr. Ortíz-Cofer’s portrait of Between-children joins with Belpré’s allegorical storytelling and Mohr’s critique of U.S. colonialism.

Placing Judith Ortíz-Cofer and Pura Belpré in conversation offers a comparison of what Svetlana Boym calls restorative and reflective nostalgia. In The Future of Nostalgia (2002), Boym explores the etymological roots and psychological “tendencies” of nostalgia as homesickness. Puerto Rican children’s literature, as common in minority and/or postcolonial literatures, contains a discourse of exile and a project of (re)creating a “home” (casita) through literature and other creative arts. As a storyteller, author, and librarian, Belpré focused on building a casita for Puerto Rican migrants and their children through children’s folklore. I have argued that Belpré’s role at the New York Public Library undergirded the formation of the early Puerto Rican colonia in New York and aided in a renaissance of Puerto Rican culture within the U.S. Her project coincides, for the most part, with Boym’s term restorative nostalgia – through children’s culture Belpré “propose[d] to rebuild the lost home and patch up memory gaps.”(41) Like Piñeiro’s approach to children’s literature, Belpré saw Puerto Rico’s national representation within the global community as symbolized by Puerto Rican folktales on library shelves. Yet recreating “the monuments of the past” (e.g. the Taino and jibraro mythology) for migrant children was also a way of thinking about, and to an extent
securing, the present and future (Boym 41). Nostalgia was also a means of rebellion for Belpré, of providing cultural artifacts as an affront to stereotypes of migrant children as “culturally deprived.” Sure, after seeing the folkloric heritage of the Puerto Rican child no could continue accusing the community of having “no future and no past.” Belpré does not linger on past devastations, yet only provides a glimpse.

Ortíz-Cofer portrays contemporary Between-child protagonists like Maria as new creatures, a third culture, not merely an amalgam of Island and U.S. culture. The nature of this new creature is perhaps best described through Ortíz-Cofer’s image of a flower growing through concrete. Maria describes her mother and father’s capacities to thrive within their “native” environments:

I saw my mother growing stronger as she planted herself more and more firmly in her native soil, opening up like a hibiscus flower, feeding on sand and sun. I saw my father struggling against the imaginary sand that cut his skin, I heard him losing his voice – sand in his throat, sand in his lungs, he said.

I will go with Papi. I will explore a new world, conquer English, become strong, grow through the concrete like a flower that has taken root under the sidewalk. I will grow strong, with or without the sun.” (Ortíz-Cofer Call Me Maria 14)

Here, Maria complicates the notion of the “native” and “native soil.” She has witnessed the advantages and disadvantages of clinging to these terms as a means of identity and livelihood. She asserts she will grow “with or without the sun” or (i.e. with or without her native environment). Maria represents a new era and rebirth of her people with the strength to thrive within (and breakthrough) the limits of her surroundings. Belpré, the

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27 From Belpré’s speech but this stereotype was pervasive during early migration and to an extent continues into Sonia Manzano’s interventions on Sesame Street.

28 From my first chapter, Island Boy (1969), this textbook makes the claim that Puerto Ricans have a “no future-no past” pessimistic attitude, a failed American dream.
Puerto Rican “Johnny Appleseed,” foresaw the day when her seeds of folktales would create a rebirth of Puerto Rican culture within the U.S. Belpré acknowledged that a new creature was indeed emerging “in this new land,” but she wanted this new creature to share “the collective psychology of the Puerto Rican people” (Belpré 1). For Belpré, Puerto Rican culture was tied to a specific Island national mythology which resists U.S. colonialism and Spanish colonialism, though she often upholds Spain’s 400-year rule of the Island. Through education and literature, this new creature, then, would preferably take the form and share the tendencies of an idyllic past generation. Children’s folklore was “the open door to the Puerto Rican literature of the past and present” (Belpré, “Folklore of the Puerto Rican Child,” 1). A bridge of words and stories designed by Belpré would most assuredly lead children on a one-way trail back to the Island, even if they would find that Paradise had long since been ravaged. Even so, Belpré’s bridge allowed children to cultivate cultural pride – the “casita” she built was meant to provide a shelter from a society viewing these children as subjugated orphans.

Ortíz-Cofer’s project, however, is rooted in reflective nostalgia. While restorative nostalgia seems driven by a search for roots, as Boym points out, reflective nostalgia acknowledges that excavating the past might further reveal the “ruins” of lost cultures and cities, devastated civilizations sometimes built one on top of the other. Ortíz-Cofer conveys all the pangs of “longing” for the homeland even as she fixes her gaze on the “ruins” of Island and U.S. history (Boym 1). Ortíz-Cofer implies that, along with language and culture, she inherited a sense of nostalgia, a la Belpré and Mohr, through oral storytelling:

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See chapter two, “Pura Belpré Lights the Storyteller’s Candle: The Rebirth of Puerto Rican Culture in the U.S.”
When my mother moved to the United States, she took [storytelling] with her. She would get together with the women in her building and they would do the same thing, except that then it became nostalgic: *cuando estaba en casa hacíamos esto y lo otro*. They passed on not only culture but yearning. I grew up with my mother yearning for *la casa, la mamá, la isla*. It’s part of the immigrant experience, this constant feeling of homesickness that you have; it’s something that never quite goes away. That’s why my work probably has an element of *Where is home? I want to go there.* (Hernandez 100)

She complicates the notion of “home” much further than Belpré by making “home” the object of a subjective question. Home is a reflective, creative process rather than a geographical place: “What I am going is examining the past and seeing what I can gather to explain where I came from. It’s not a nostalgic journey; it’s more of an exploration. For me writing is self-discovery” (100). Like Mohr, Ortíz-Cofer highlights cuentos or storytelling (even survival stories) within the family, as opposed to an official, folkloric tradition. Yet, though Mohr portrays the child as an artist refashioning subjugated spaces, Ortíz-Cofer’s child as poet/interpreté underlines the child’s significance for bridging historical narratives, and like Jiménez, for containing, writing, and interpreting history. For Ortíz-Cofer, the children of the renaissance build alternate ways of surviving life “on the move,” in and out of translation. 30 These alternate means of survival (from stealing English to leading the generations) suggest a critique beyond U.S. or Spanish colonialism. She extends into an exploration of the “ruins” (civilizations built-upon civilizations and language upon language) within English literary history.

Belpré’s work in Spanish Harlem suggests a view of children as portals back to the Island of old rather than as bridges. Belpré’s folktales, as some of the first published U.S. Puerto Rican texts, suggest children as providing an entrance into U.S. literary

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discourse. Jiménez’s foresaw the future in the eyes of the Puerto Rican child, yet Belpré and other adults seem to have seen the past. “Children’s” story times and dramas (such as the annual Three Kings Day Festival) were just as much for the adults as for the children. For example, a relatively unknown play, *Remembranzas Tropicales/Tropical Memories*\(^{31}\) (n.d.) by Belpré requires child actors to dress as coffee plants, embodying the Island and transforming the harsh city into an enchanted Isle. *Remembranzas* provides a glimpse into Belpré’s acknowledgement of the Between-child. Though restorative writers like Belpré generally discourage children from embracing betweenness, within *Remembranzas*, Belpré’s develops the theme of a child who enters in and out of time, a child like Jiménez’s little prophet who entered through doors marked “origin” and “terminal.” This version of the child, as the beginning and the end of history, reigns from a position outside of time and so can lead adults into both the past and future. Belpré’s *Remembranzas* and Ortíz-Cofer’s “Fable of Our Times” (which she uses to frame her essay “In Search of My Mentor’s Gardens”) explore the role of Between-children as portals and bridges, respectively, for older generations of cultures and literature. Both the play and the fable also employ allegory as a means of making intensely political statements.

Carmencita, the would-be Between-child of Belpré’s *Remembranzas*, acts as an interpreter of dreams and a guide through history for her Abuelo. Belpré sets the play within Abuelo’s fantasy of a “tropical huerto/orchard” which seems like a timeless vacuum. The play begins within Abuelo’s vision his ideal orchard, progresses into his

\(^{31}\) The play is called *Remembranzas Tropicales* in the original Spanish by Belpré. Lori Marie Carlson translated the play into English, but there are a few places where I have decided to translate words differently than Carlson.
dream of the orchard coming to life, and then ends with Carmencita (outside the dream) trying to wake him. Throughout, Carmencita is able to interact with Abuelo, as if she stands outside of time. The tropical garden setting also reinforces the pattern of seed and garden imagery across Belpré, Mohr, and Ortíz-Cofer’s narratives. It is remarkable how these writers, across periods and, to a certain extent, unaware of each other, return to the garden as a symbol of longing, whether like Belpré, longing for the “lost” Paradise and desiring to secure a remnant within exile, like Mohr, demanding one’s rightful position within U.S. discourse, or like Ortíz-Cofer “searching” for her mentors’ gardens (i.e. a literary genealogy).32

Sitting in his huerto, Belpré’s “Abuelo” resembles Jiménez’s sketch of “El Viejo,” an elderly man with no vision of the future or capacity to interpret the harvests of the renaissance. He represents the Island’s past generations, longing for the pleasures of the homeland while in exile: “Tiempo de bonanzas… Época divina…Era de mis frutos…/ Time of abundance…a divine epoch…the age of my glory…” (35). Carlson translates Abuelo’s last line (“Era de mis frutos…”) as “the age of my glory,” but the line possibly contains a play on words. In literal translation, the line is “age of my fruits” which implies a time of abundant fruitfulness and offspring. In other words, the older generation’s past glory (the Golden Age) corresponds to an image of plentiful offspring and even child-bearing, something Belpré further emphasizes when Carmencita immediately interrupts Abuelo’s mourning over his “fruits” by responding, “Somos abuelito../ We are abuelito…”.33 Carmencita’s response can suggest two readings, both

32 Ortíz-Cofer’s “In Search of My Mentor’s Gardens” is clearly in conversation with Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mother’s Garden’s as I show later in the discussion.

33 Carlson’s translation leaves off this pun. I have indicated where I have changed Carlson’s translation.
revealing her intention to console Abuelo: one, Carmencita implies that she and Abuelo represent the fruit or offspring of this Golden Age, or, two, that she and the other child actors on stage represent this offspring. However, considering that children likely played the coffee plants, the fruits (like the seeds and harvests of the renaissance) and the children seem one and the same.

Carmencita may represent the ample “fruit” of the Golden Age, but she is clearly a new creature. In addition to her position outside of time, Carmencita’s youth, as in Jiménez’s child, allows her to gather all the “impossible and possible” qualities of her ancestors. Indeed, youth is clearly a coveted quality underlined by all the authors in this narrative. Carmencita, dressed as a campesina, still wears the traditional dress of her people although her “wisdom” concerning her surroundings surpasses that of her Abuelo (Belpré Remembranzas 35). Within this dreamscape, Carmencita and Abuelo seem forever in transit, walking through the orchard, but never reaching a physical destination. Abuelo tells Carmencita that the “green field” with “rich vines” once “knew a time that was full of delight” (35). His emphasis on the richness and green color of the field suggests the field’s health; yet, Carmencita’s response reveals how the productivity of Abuelo’s orchard exists only within his gaze:

Yes, I know, [Abuelo]. You’ve told me before how the potatoes and juicy, sweet pineapples filled your cart when you traveled to town; how the sugarcane and the coffee allowed you to grow what I see: star apples, lemon trees. I know that your oranges were excellent! But time passes, [Abuelo]. The land has given her fruit…And now it’s tired, no longer fertile. It doesn’t have strength…Like an orchard that begs us to leave it alone! (35)

Instead of a green field, Carmencita sees a field of devastation. Indeed, Carmencita can remarkably nurture Abuelo’s ideals while also directing his gaze away from the restorative nostalgia that has made him and his dreams infertile. Through Carmencita,
Belpré’s depiction of this devastated wasteland condemns colonialism – a rich port (i.e. Puerto Rico) and profitable investment plundered and drained of its resources. Carmencita’s speech causes Abuelo to understand that the past age “will not return.” He tells her, “Your wisdom [Carmencita] makes me realize that we are fortunate still.”

Carmencita and Abuelo have essentially changed roles; she is the wise sage and he is the invalid child. She tells him, “Sit down, Grandpa. Stop thinking so much. Times have to change” (35). She then offers to “sing [Abuelo] a song,” drawing him away from this repressive memory and into an escapist dream.

The moment emphasizes how Belpré distinguishes remembering from dreaming; mainly, memory is unchangeable while dreams are re-creational. Belpré’s stage directions indicate that the child actress playing Carmencita should sing “Los Frutos Vienen a Vida/The Fruit Trees Bud …to represent the dreams of the grandfather..” (36). Belpré leaves out the song’s lyrics, but Carmencita’s song about budding trees seems to both induce Abuelo into sleep while causing his dreams to “flourish.” The “chorus” of coffee plants suddenly springs to life and sing their own song, “El Café Gloria de Borinquen” in honor of Puerto Rico’s most illustrious export. Belpré’s representation of children dressed as coffee plants further marks the distinction between her conception of children as “new” creatures and Ortíz-Cofer’s. Unlike Maria breaking through the concrete, the coffee plants invoke frailty:

I am the most beautiful,

The most tender of plants.

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34 In the original, this “wisdom” is tied to a specific ideal of gender – women’s intuition. Abuelo tells Carmencita that she has “ese razonar que tienes to mujer” or that “wisdom you possess as a woman” (40).
My pure white flowers,
Similar to jasmine;
My leaves are so green, so delicate,
That trees and fruits
Grow all around me,
Worrying that the sun will burn me,
Worrying that the sun will burn me.
...
All plants take care of me.
They take care of me well,
And all of them hope for
My blessing and my health. (36-37)

Abuelo’s dream reveals the older generation’s anxiety about uprooting an even greater natural resource: the Puerto Rican child. Beyond taking the form of a traditional cultural symbol, Belpré’s characterizes these children as a kind of endangered species. The image of the other plants coddling the coffee plants, striving to secure the plant/the child’s “blessing” and “health,” coincides with Belpré and the older generation’s investment in children. Her involvement in children’s folklore seemingly supplants the child’s native soil through stories. Belpré, however, appears to assign adults a greater responsibility for sustaining children than writers like Jiménez, Mohr, and Ortíz-Cofer who present children as self-sustaining through an innate source of art and poetry. And, yet, adults like Abuelo seem crippled by idealism, reassigning children to perhaps “unnatural” positions of authority.
*Remembranzas* reveals the instability within the older generation’s conceptions of children. Children are new creatures, but must take the old form. Children guide adults in and out of time, but they cannot survive on their own. After the dream sequence, Carmencita “sits down by her grandpa.” She literally enters his dream; this is represented by “a soft pink veil with butterflies” enveloping the two figures. The veil contains further detail into Belpré’s glimpse of the Between-child. The pink veil symbolizes the idealism of the past which has entangled Abuelo. However, the butterflies around the veil invoke the hope of a new creation. The Between-child does exist in Belpré’s vision; yet this child has yet to go beyond the veil of the past. We see Carmencita only in a dream and in a vision, weaving in and out of a timeless vacuum. Carmencita tells the audience that “[m]y [Abuelo] is fragile and upset, and he trembles.” She then refers to Abuelo directly, “Won’t you come, [Abuelo]? Won’t you come?” The stage directions indicate that Carmencita “takes her grandpa’s hand and leads him away” (37). Indeed, even as she leads the older generation, the miraculous Carmencita seems incapable of performing one last miracle: showing us what the future looks like. Here, even the present would qualify as the future.

Ortíz-Cofer’s “A Fable of Our Times” also relates the story of a little girl (a Between-child) and a representative of the older generation walking toward the future, yet it is clear that this fable challenges conceptions beyond Puerto Rican identity. “A Fable of Our Times” prefaces Ortíz-Cofer’s “In Search of My Mentors’ Gardens” in which Ortíz-Cofer makes arguments similar to those of Alice Walker’s in *In Search of My Mother’s Gardens* (1983). For example, writers need “models,” something Ortíz-Cofer felt she would never have if she had been looking to English literature for people
that looked or talked like her. Also, that literature is a kind of creative genealogy where writers participate in writing, as Walker writes, “one immense story” (5). Walker and Ortíz-Cofer emphasize writing as entering a conversation with those models and mentors that precede them. I use the term “creative genealogy” to stress that part of what Ortíz-Cofer and Walker highlight, though perhaps even more implicit in Ortíz-Cofer, is that a common race, nationality, history, or even “mother” tongue is not needed in order to enter and engage in a conversation. Whereas Walker reflects on the categorization of literatures as “black” or “white,” Ortíz-Cofer reflects on her belonging to “English.”

“La Vieja” crippled by the past within “A Fable of Our Times” is none other than perhaps the wickedest stepmother of all – “Mother English.” Like Belpré, Ortíz-Cofer reflects on historical traumas through allegory, personifying “English” as a “beautiful and cruel” stepmother embarrassed by her “mongrel” children. However, in the tradition of Nicholasa Mohr, Ortíz-Cofer’s fable condemns a system of U.S. and British literature failing to recognize the rightful place for all of English’s “stepchildren”:

Once upon a time a young girl lived in the house of English. The girl loved English, although English was not her mother tongue; she was her stepmother tongue. Mother English was both beautiful and cruel and she preferred the company of men. (92)

Ortíz-Cofer distinguishes this fabled family line by language as opposed to race, ethnicity, or nationality. As she does in Maria, Ortíz-Cofer challenges the notion of “native English” and the marginality of “non-native English.” In the tradition of Mohr, Ortíz-Cofer highlights the rightful, though subjugated, place of these stepchildren within the house of English. English may wish to subdue or hide her stepchildren, but she can never succeed at denying their lineage.
Ortíz-Cofer likens the study of literature to a “love affair” with English. She portrays English as a beautiful lady who taunts her “lovers.” English “prefer[s] the company of men”; however, it is clear that English’s “love” is dysfunctional, as these male “paramours” (such as Lord Byron and Percy Shelley) end up “used” and imprisoned within a room inside English’s house. English reserves her greatest cruelty for those she views as her subordinate children, mainly women and foreigners:

English’s stepdaughter despaired when she discovered that her stepmother disdained not only women but also the foreign, the dark, the strange. The threat of spoiling her beauty by associating with mongrels send English into a panic, and because her stepdaughter was not acceptable by her standards, being an ugly child acquired through a politically motivated union, she locked her up in a room whose original use she had forgotten. But the girl continued to love English because she had been brought to her house at a tender age and knew nothing and no one as well as she knew English. (93)

Ortíz-Cofer allows readers to see the “ugly” child of a “politically motivated union” as representing English’s “fruits” of conquest, whether U.S., European, Caribbean, etc. The description also underlines the instability, the betweenness, of “English” identity, highlighting the various cultures and nations who could identify as “English” even without their stepmother’s approval. The image of English locking up her lovers and progeny highlights the impossibility of strict categorizations (English Literature, Caribbean Literature, American Literature, Spanish Caribbean, African-American Literature, Children’s Literature, etc.) within this family line.

Ortíz-Cofer’s underlining of the dysfunction and instability within the House of English coincides with my own project in terms of placing Puerto Rican writers within a literary tradition. For example, if we approach Pura Belpré’s work according to race and geography, what would we leave out if we study her as an African-American writer (should we even do so?), although she refused to identify as “African” within “America”? 
Using language as a parameter, could we study Judith Ortíz-Cofer as growing out of Island tradition without leaving out issues of U.S. identity. Juan Flores once argued that Puerto Rico’s *La Charca* (1894) should be taught within a tradition of U.S. literature since it speaks to U.S. colonial identity. How might we do so in a productive way? Could U.S. Puerto Rican children’s writers speak to Euro-American constructions of childhood and children’s literature? Can we see those who write about childhood and children’s literature (regardless of race, nation, or language) as participating in “one immense story”? Taking a cue from artists like Ortíz-Cofer, Belpré, Mohr, and Manzano, I am certainly inviting us to do so.

English “locks up” the little girl in a room “whose original use [English] had forgotten.” Ortíz-Cofer emphasizes English’s forgetfulness as running gag within this fable. English’s forgetfulness reinforces both the impossibility of literary categorizations and the notion of marginality as a breeding ground for creativity. A little girl conspiring with the “lovers of English” (in this case, “the lovers” include Percy Shelley and John Keats) and English’s great devotees (these include Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson) further underlines the presence of children within the creation of an ideal literature. The old and new generations of literature converge around a child who can

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36 Ortíz-Cofer depicts the love of English for women writers in this fable as a dangerous “pact.” English “demanded, a woman had to pay a high price, often surrendering her reputation, her sanity, and sometimes even her life. English was like a poisonous drug that corrupted a woman’s mind and made her ignore her husband and her children, for English took the place of men in women’s hearts.” Ortíz-Cofer’s emphasis on the “unnatural” manifestation of this love emphasize s the difficulties women’s writers have had in gaining equal standing within literature. Women’s writers are represented by a “small secret shelf that contained the works of women who made their pact with English: Woolf, Dickinson, Stein, Plath, Sexton. It was a great discovery because inside one of the books was the key that unlocked the door to the room.” (97)
see the connections among the fragments. Ortíz-Cofer also emphasizes a patriarchy and matriarchy of literature in which minority writers might claim parentage. The little girl’s most gratifying moment occurs when she discovers a shelf filled with the work of women writers. Before, she had “[n]o one of her own kind with whom to share and compare,” however, the “secret shelf” contains “the key that unlocked the door to the room.”

Once outside the room, the little girl finds her stepmother “playing solitaire” with no memory of the child she once imprisoned. After a lifetime of locking her family members in rooms, English is “lonely” and pitiful. Yet, English’s efforts to control discourse have failed. The little girl notices that English’s house is “full of people who acted as if they belonged in the house of English, speaking to one another in interesting new words she had not heard while locked up with English’s old lovers.” These people, English tells the little girl, are “[s]tepchildren with their children, poor relatives, and other people they’ve brought here without my consent. They are loud, they talk fast, and I don’t understand them.” I read this group’s activities in the house of English as reinforcing the notion of “stealing language” in Ortíz-Cofer’s work. They represent a host of Between-children (of vary nations and races) who have taken the ultimate revenge. Not only have they broken into and plundered English’s home, but they have taken the old woman/the language hostage, leaving her paralyzed in her own house. The little girl, once reviled by English, becomes the old woman’s confidant as both realize that the house’s rules and confinements have kept them from engaging in a new and expanding discourse. English’s effort to control the family line has left her without the ability to interpret the
present discourse. She is seemingly mute and fearful as a result of her impossible ideals of pure literary lineage.

The little girl’s reaction to the overrun house marks a difference between Ortíz-Cofer’s conception of children and Belpré’s. Belpré Carmencita saw a ravaged garden while Abuelo only saw the past promises. Ortíz-Cofer’s little girl does more than just point out the errors of the past and present. Instead of English’s ravaged house, the little girl sees an opportunity for “fun” (i.e. the possibility of making new connections) (93). Ortíz-Cofer narrates that the elderly English has grown less “imperious” with age. Her old ways have left her defeated and immobile; otherwise she would never invite her stepdaughter to “play a friendly game.” The little girl represents English’s only hope for engaging in the present discourse. Ortíz-Cofer implies that English needs these people, these Between-children, if it is going to regain its productivity. After all, remembering Maria’s poem, these people have taken possession of all the choicest words. The little girl takes mother English’s hand and offers to introduce English to her “new family” and to “translate” for her. She brings a solution to the house of English (of course, only after English breathes a “sigh of resignation”), leading English into a realm of more productive exchange.

Within this vision, Ortíz-Cofer gives us a glimpse of the future of English with only one word. It is not a frightful fall, or a disappearing behind a veil, but a “party” —a gathering of English and her stepchildren. What might such a gathering look like? Perhaps, it looks like Sesame Street’s Salsa-bet, Belpré’s folklore, Maria’s poems or Nilda’s collages. The gathering of English and her stepchildren also implies that the study of English should include a study of the new kinds of Englishes posited by
minority, ethnic, or postcolonial communities (even given the status of English as a
global language of trade). These new Englishes may include the written and oral poetry
of Spanglish and other “-gles” (Yiddish-English, Russian-English, Italian-English,
etc.) incorporating code-switching. Studying English might encompass a comparative,
multilingual project inclusive of all of English’s affairs (i.e. Shakespeare and Ortiz-Cofer
under the same roof). As in Call Me Maria, Ortiz-Cofer’s “Fable of Our Times”
represents language and words as capital, even more specifically as loot, taken through
conquest by the colonizer and re-captured by the colonized through violent force.

Living in the Fire and/or the Sacrifices of the Between

Vamos Borinqueños vámonos ya

Que nos espera ansiosa

Ansiosa la libertad

(Let us leave, Borinqueños, let us leave now

For liberty awaits us, anxiously).– La Borinqueña

In the U.S. Puerto Rican narrative, since interpretation/translation links to poetry, a
child translating for an adult is deemed a creative act. This child has room to arrange
the conversation as he/she sees fit. Ortiz-Cofer and Belpré (like Jiménez and Piñeiro)
underscore the Between-child’s role within cultural and linguistic exchanges that have
great political implications. Belpré’s Remembranzas exemplifies how children interpret
within colonial spaces for other members of their subjugated class, while Ortiz-Cofer’s
“A Fable of Our Times” illustrates children as interpreters for the colonizer. Indeed, the
little girl’s final line (“I'll help translate”), as she takes English’s hand, reinforces the
necessity of these children for those in power. Again, the multilingual child’s capacity to
speak for the monolingual adult (either colonized or colonizer) marks him/her as a
desirable object in matters of love and war. Within these narratives, children represent
the first line of defense and communication for both colonizer and colonized. Such an
image is plagued with contradictions: while adults during migration and colonialism wish
to protect and guide children (e.g. Belpré’s trees coddling the little coffee plants), it is
really children who end up protecting and guiding them. While adults praise and elevate
the raw creativity and linguistic giftedness of the child, it is only so adults can utilize
these talents to enter discourse. If a child is a cultural and linguistic bridge, then this
means that adults literally step over children.

Ortíz-Cofer and Mohr highlight how migration and colonialism disturbs the
traditional adult-child power relationship. Both depict a very different picture from the
idealized symbiotic circle of parent and child gracing the cover of Un Siglo. Within the
translation relationship, child-adult interactions appear more as a tug-of-war rather than
a circle of peace. The tug-of-war is perhaps never more apparent than when children
must translate legal matters for adults. As Mohr illustrates in works like Nilda and El
Bronx Remembered, and Ortíz-Cofer in The Line of the Sun, the U.S. colonial system
undermines the parental/authoritative role of migrant adults. However, I note that writers
like Belpré, Mohr, and Judith Ortíz-Cofer do not depict precocity in children as
something that somehow “spoils” a child’s sense of wonder and creativity. Mohr and
Ortíz-Cofer show how children bear the brunt of migration, enduring the humiliation
aimed at their monolingual loved ones. They emphasize the hypocrisy of an adult’s or
the state’s use of children as negotiators within state institutions. Unlike Anglo writers
emphasizing childhood, such as Charles Dickens whose precocious child character

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sketches appear strange and almost monstrous, within Mohr and Ortíz-Cofer, it is adults who end up looking cartoonish and deranged.\(^{37}\)

For example, both Mohr and Ortíz-Cofer emphasize the awkward situations and even foolish behavior of adults that arise when family members and white authority figures rely on migrant children as interpreters of state matters. Ortíz-Cofer’s “Marisol” from *In the Line of the Sun* narrates her experience as interpreter between her mother and the Red Cross officer investigating a fire that destroyed Marisol and her family’s (the whole tenement of El Building, a mostly Puerto Rican residence) home:

> Once again I found myself in the role of interpreter for the world of my mother who, after all these years, still believed it operated like an extended family: in the times of need and tragedy people naturally came to your rescue. She never quite understood why I had to make ten phone calls before we got an appointment with the man from the navy office.

> I learned something in those days: though I would always carry my Island heritage on my back like a snail, I belonged to the world of phones, offices, concrete buildings, and the English language. I felt truly victorious when I understood the hidden motives in my conversations with adults, when they suddenly saw that I understood. Their acknowledgment of my insight was usually accompanied by either irritation at my presumptuousness or a new tone of respect in their voices. (Ortíz-Cofer *In the Line of the Sun* 273)

Ortíz-Cofer, through Marisol, dispels any conception of children as ingénues, easily fooled and inept when it comes to adult devices. Children belong in places of influence. Marisol knows exactly what the Red Cross worker, Mrs. Pink, means when she tells Marisol that the fire destroyed “[o]ne big eyesore in one fell swoop” (275). Marisol tells the reader that she “felt like laughing hysterically at this foolish woman” when Mrs. Pink asks if she has “packing to do,” even as Mrs. Pink stands surrounded by the rubble of families who have lost all their possessions. Mohr’s Nilda must also decipher the

\(^{37}\) The Artful Dodger from *Oliver Twist*; Jo to a certain extent in *Bleak House.*
“hidden motives” of adults who continually ask her to play the interpreter. Mohr generally focuses on Nilda’s desire for a U.S. identity, so it is interesting that when Nilda does participate in an activity which would highlight her “betweenness”; such as translation, Mohr depicts it as a moment of confusion. Discerning adult motives can also uncover cruel realities.

To illustrate, Nilda intervenes between her Aunt Delia and a white police officer who has caught Aunt Delia selling illegal numbers. Yet, applying Ortíz-Cofer’s view of child interpretés, the white police officer’s insistence that Nilda explain the law to Aunt Delia in Spanish (a kind of contraband) also represents an illicit activity: “Take your aunt home. And tell her she’s not supposed to be doing something illegal. That she might get into trouble. And that she should keep out of mischief.” Eleven-year-old Nilda must perform her aunt and the officer’s role. The officer aims his comments at Nilda while looking at her aunt, “Mother, go home. Shame, shame, you don’t do that. Now that is against the law.” Mohr emphasizes Aunt Delia as “cupping her hand to her ear” – a gesture that depicts Aunt Delia as both linguistically and physically impaired without her niece’s aid (Mohr 243). When Aunt Delia erupts against both Jacinto (the lottery organizer whom the officer ignores), Nilda again plays the adult by putting her finger to her lips, shushing her aunt. Perhaps, Nilda is just “embarrassed” by her aunt’s antics. Or perhaps she wants to avoid the officer’s comprehension of Aunt Delia tirade against the U.S. justice system: “You don’t know how to enforce the law, only how to take away my rights. I know my rights; I am a citizen!” 38(243).

38 It is unclear if Aunt Delia is saying this in “broken” English or Spanish. Mohr writes the lines in English. However, since Nilda is translating for her aunt in this moment once might presume that Delia is speaking Spanish
Adults like Mami, Aunt Delia, and the officer so depend on Nilda’s successful performances as an adult that it’s even more unsettling when such adults force her to play the “child.” For example, Mrs. Heinz (the social worker that Nilda imagines stabbing with a nail file) demonstrates just how commonplace it was for Diaspora parents to depend on their children as interpreters. In social services office, Mrs. Heinz assumes that Nilda will speak for her mother, ignoring Mami: “Before her mother could answer, the social worker turned to Nilda and said, ‘My name is Miss Heinz. Does your mother understand or speak English?’” Mami quickly interjects by telling Mrs. Heinz that she can speak English, even if it is “not so good.” Mami’s ability to speak English causes Mrs. Heinz to immediately question Nilda’s presence in the office. Mrs. Heinz demotes Nilda, outside of the adult role of interpreter, to the “appropriate” role of child, asking, “Why isn’t she in school?” (65) Nilda watches as her mother “turn[s] red” from embarrassment. Beyond language interpretation, Nilda serves a protective role for Mami during her visits to state offices. She is Mami’s advocate of sorts since Mami “never liked to go to these places alone; she always brought Nilda with her. Ever since Nilda could remember she had always tagged along with her mother.” Mami lies to Mrs. Heinz, making up an illness (“She wasn’t feeling well”) as an excuse for Nilda’s attendance. Perhaps, Mami realizes that if she admits her dependence on a child advocate to another adult she will lose any semblance of equality that she has with Mr. Heinz. Nilda’s “confusion” and “surprise” at her mother’s willingness to lie and downplay her daughter’s role suggests Nilda’s sense of betrayal (66). As Mrs. Heinz continually demeans Mami and Nilda by suggesting that Mami keeps a dirty, scandalous household (“I see that your boys have a different last name”), part of the horror for the reader
comes from realizing Mami’s failure to provide the kind of protection she expects from her daughter. Also, as readers, we must watch as a child capable of negotiating within complicated “adult” situations is made to play the fool and (perhaps worst of all) keep silent. Nilda only speaks when Mrs. Heinz demands that Nilda answer questions about hygiene. Even at this moment, Nilda defers to her mother’s authority. Mami, incapable of facing Nilda, says “Nilda, answer the lady.” After Nilda explodes in a rage (“I take a bath when I need it!”), both Mrs. Heinz and Mami reprimand her. Mrs. Heinz issues perhaps the worst insult of all: “Young lady, you are no help to your mother” (69). On the other hand, Mami represents the greatest betrayal. Leaving the office, Nilda questions her mother about the meeting, “I don’t have an upset stomach. Why did you let her talk like that to me? Why didn’t you stop her?” Mami’s response underlines the brutality of a life lived in colonization, migration, and poverty: “I had to say what I did, that’s all. I have to do what I do. How do you think we’re gonna eat? We have no money Nilda. If I make that woman angry, God knows what she’ll put on the application. We have to have that money to live” (70). Translation: In order to survive, sometimes we have to sell out our children. Maybe as a result of witnessing others demean her mother, or maybe as a result of Nilda’s experience as an advocate/interpreter for adults, Nilda has trouble accepting her mother’s reasoning as authoritative. Nilda shouts, “I don’t care. I don’t care at all!” Mami slaps Nilda with a warning that she will “slap [her] again, only harder, if [she doesn’t] shut up” (71).

Whether Nilda is speaking for or silenced by an adult, she is never rewarded within this adult-run, child-employed system. In a world where children negotiate for adults, adults stand to gain in terms of progressing toward state benefits. For Antonia I.
Castañeda, children interpreting for adults such as Nilda represent an ethical predicament, a moral consequence of conquest. The child translator, she points out, “is a historical as much as a contemporary issue and experience” and by “no means solely or even principally an immigrant experience, or at least not historically.” Castañeda persuades scholars to notice these child interpretés, these Between-children, intervening during critical moments of North American history: “Irrespective of which colonial power arrived on the shores of what Europeans named the North American continent, they had to communicate with people living here. Europeans did not initially speak indigenous languages; somebody had to translate, and that somebody was often a child” (132). She asks us to consider, “What cultural and linguistic rites are these in which a mother’s life balances on a child’s tongue? What cultural issues are at state for child translators? How do they interpret for themselves the cultures they must translate for others? What are the politics they confront each time they translate cultures?...Who are these children who speak in tongues and live in fire?” (128). Writers like Belpré, Mohr, and Ortiz-Cofer give us a window into the lives of children “in the fire” like Maria, Carmencita, Nilda, and Marisol. In the case of Mohr and Ortíz-Cofer, perhaps, this lack of systemic rewards compels their invitation for children to refashion the spaces they inhabit, Mohr through art and Ortíz-Cofer through poetry.

39 Antonia I. Castañeda’s essay is helpful in that it presents many questions about children as translators and opens up the debate about children as translators. However, I would say we need more scholars working in this area of translation in order to think through the questions of trauma, history, childhood, and translation asked by Castañeda.

40 Castañeda lists Malintzin Tenepal, or La Malinche” a 15-year old “who became translator, lover, and tactical advisor to Hernan Cortes.” (132). This argument could perhaps be extended to historical figures like Sacagawea who was about 13-14 when she helped translate for Lewis and Clark.
Ortíz-Cofer’s emphasis on the Between-child (a child who thrives on hybridity) offers child readers options for constructing their own bridges outside the subjugated spaces and beyond geographical, linguistic, and political constraints. Moreover, Ortíz-Cofer’s writing suggests a shift away from discussions about the “morality” of children acting like adults which depends on a sentimentalized notion of children as socially inept. Instead, she asks us to recognize these children as a present reality which may foster productive exchanges across cultures and languages. Sesame Street’s Manzano pictures the movement of these children between cultures and languages as “walking a tightrope.”\footnote{From “Oral History with Sonia Manzano” (Emmy Legends online archive). This image of the bridge and specifically the tightrope may also joins with Carolyn Steedman’s Strange Dislocations and her work on “the child as acrobat” and “actor.”} Manzano’s metaphor is perhaps more appropriate, considering that it captures the graceful, poetic agility of the child interpreter along with the element of danger (death-defying leap) and sacrifice associated with these child “performers.” Indeed, these little poetic thieves persuade us to further consider the different ways children are asked to literally act out national anxieties whether on stage like Belpré’s little coffee plants or on the national stage like Marisol or Nilda.

The Between-child is the dream child of the Puerto Rican imagination, and perhaps even of global imagination. He/she illustrates the importance of language as a tool for creating identity and implementing conquest. Language is such a vital part of Puerto Rican identity that this dream child lives in constant translation and exchange. Yet, instead of total confusion, the Between-child’s acts of translation create a bridge of poetry. The trail is long and narrow; only a skilled performer may make the journey across—unless, you take the hand of a Between-child and watch them lie down in the
gaps so you can cross over. As opposed to the Displaced or Diaspora child characters, this characters helps us consider the possibilities of writing theory and creative works without allegiance to either nationalist or assimilationist views. What would such a literature look like? Or perhaps, what kind of creative works (literatures and new mediums) does character gesture toward that would otherwise remain ignored? What conversations might we have?

In terms of a comparative conversation between the Island and the Mainland, the narratives I have presented in this chapter ask us to reconsider the Island as a real, flawed location within Puerto Rican letters. Thus far, the authors reviewed in this study have portrayed the Island as a point of origin, a point of no return, and a limiting fantasy which, though powerful, must be forsaken for U.S. survival. Discussions of authentic Puerto Ricaness seem limited to a writer’s acts of denial – either of the Island or of the U.S. Few writers/theorists even look beyond the New York metropole for U.S. Puerto Rican experiences; something Ortíz-Cofer highlights when she says “the Diaspora continues. It did not get stuck in New York” (Ocasio “Puerto Rican” 98). Labels (“U.S.” or “Island” Puerto Rican) seem organized around whether (or what degree) an author viewed himself/herself as working in exile. Ortíz-Cofer’s revision of the Between-child persuades us to look past views which paralyze discussions about authentic Puerto literature and culture. 11 years after the U.S. conquest of Puerto Rico, authentic Puerto Ricanness could, quite problematically, imply embracing one colonial power (Spain or the U.S.) over another. Uniting with a national literature seems the solution for securing

a place on the bookshelf. It also seems that while national sovereignty is a desirable condition, national orphanhood, as Mohr’s children’s narratives suggest, is not. Of course, both sovereignty and orphanhood imply a form of independence and separation. Reconstructing the Island as an impossible, mythological paradise (a trend in children’s literature and media) highlights the denial of a very real, very economically and politically divided territory whose children’s writers, for over a century, have struggled to gain support and acknowledgement from the U.S. publishing industry. Perhaps, it is only in recent years, that writers like Ortíz-Cofer have been able to move beyond stereotypes of Island and U.S. identity.

Yet all the major writers, from the Island to the Mainland, associated with the project of children’s literature and culture have, at some point, fixed their gaze on the Between-child. This child character showcases children as the crux of the Diaspora. They possess the heart of a poet which is also the heart of a thief. They keep the secrets of the kingdom. They gather the best lines from among the generations. Ortíz-Cofer shows us that the Between-child’s kingdom is a kingdom of poetry made up of words which she has rightfully stolen. These words form a bridge over the ruins of the past and the uncertainty of the future. This child leads us to a place where we take things by force. The way into this place is on the backs of these children. The brilliance

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43 I am referring not only to Belpre and Mohr’s earlier attempts to merge with Island traditions and U.S. traditions, respectively, but also to theorists such as Sanchez-Gonzalez who argue that in order for U.S. Puerto Rican literature to gain a proper place within U.S. literature, it needs to disassociate with Island narratives. That is, Island and Mainland authors should not be included in the same tradition.

44 Consuelo Figueras whose work I mention in the first chapter. The Pura Belpré Medal has never been awarded to a strictly “Island” author, including Ortiz-Cofer who won a Medal in 1995. The Medal specifies that children’s books in English and Spanish are eligible, but in the 13 years since the foundation of the medal, no book written fully in Spanish has won the award. Only one Island author, Georgina Lázaro, a poet, has been among the “honors” awarded. No Island author has won a medal.
of these little luminaries may turn to darkness when we consider the cost, but perhaps that price is worth our redemption. A space for dialogue; a place in history.
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