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Side-by-Side: At the Intersections of Latinx Studies and ChYALit

Marilisa Jiménez García

The phrase "side-by-side" normally connotes a sense of camaraderie and companionship. This is implied in illustrator Joe Cepeda's rendering of César Chavez and Dolores Huerta on the cover of the picture book *Side-by-Side/ Lado a Lado* (2010) by Monica Brown, the picture suggesting you can't have one without the other. As much as "side-by-side" connotes friendship, I have found this phrase helpful in my research on Latinx literature for youth: a literary and cultural tradition rich in unlikely pairings created not so much by choice, but by necessity. The picture celebrates the coming together of Chavez and Huerta, yet we see that English and Spanish are also placed side-by-side: two languages with a violent history facing each other, but separated by a division on the page. Chavez and Huerta's hands bridge the divide, yet that division between cultures and languages running side-by-side remains. U.S. children's literature evidences these splits, switches, breaks, and unlikely pairings—these parallel stories and traditions greet us with a history of delight, violence, and contradiction. My research has demanded that I negotiate divisions both in the field of Latinx studies and children's literature in order to exist in academia, and to dwell on the parallels, the intersections and the contradictions. Here, I emphasize a history of children's literature in the academy, and the place of Latinx literature for youth in the larger conversation on what it means to study American childhood and youth. Particularly, I underline how children's literature in the humanities and Latinx Studies converge in ways that render Latinx authors for youth visible in multiple fields.

In June 2016, at the annual Children's Literature Association Conference, President Annette Wannamaker spoke on the "ghosts" of children's literature, in the process quoting Jacques Derrida. "There is no inheritance without a call to responsibility," she said (Wannamaker). Wannamaker focused on uncovering gaps and divisions, both disciplinary and cultural,

in the formation of children's literature as a field of literary study. Among those "ghosts" were the values and decisions of such influential figures in ChLA history as Alethea Helbig and Francelia Butler. Helbig, for example, in "Curriculum Planning in Literature for Children: Ways to Go," wrote that in organizing the children's literature curriculum at Eastern Michigan University it would be best to "concentrate on what would be of basic cultural value, and on important and classic books which [scholars] might use as touchstones or judging other books for children." From this early moment in the development of the field, it is clear that qualities associated with terms such as "classics" and "touchstones" were understood as opposed to, or separate from, ethnic literature, as Helbig also writes that she wanted to avoid topics and themes deemed "ephemeral or faddish" during the 1970s when ChLA was formed, including "ethnic literature." The use of children's literature in the classroom was also seen as separate from the work done by those in the humanities, as Wannamaker emphasized vis-a-vis a 1972 quote from Butler: "Children's literature is almost entirely in the hands of those in education or library science, who emphasize the uses of literature in the classroom, methodology, biographies of current writers, graded reading lists, book reports—good things but not the concern of those in the Humanities." Interestingly, the lack of intersectional work between the founders of children's literature in the humanities and ethnic studies movements has created considerable disparities, which perhaps accounts for the lack of a more diverse group of scholars and scholarship, and perhaps even limiting research engaging the public (Schwebel). The demand by communities of color for ethnic studies, including late 1960s and early 1970s movements for indigenous, African American, Chicanx, and Puerto Rican Studies and their continuing histories and struggles, depends on arguments tied directly to educational equity and classroom outcomes. In particular, the urgency of these arguments derives from the exclusionary practices of the U.S. canon and the shifting demographics of the U.S. classroom into what is today a majority-minority population—a large portion of which are Latinx students (Council on Major City Schools). What was deemed faddish or out of the realm of the humanist has taken center stage through a new majority, and the side-by-side histories of ethnic studies and children's literature have inevitably collided in the twenty-first-century call for diverse and "own voices" in literary studies.[1]

Children's literature has a history of marginalization in the academy. The increasing growth and relevancy of the field in the large scheme of literary and cultural studies—and the renewed call for diversity in literature, publishing, and scholarship—has perhaps placed us in an advantageous position from which we might examine how the field has developed in 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. To render Latinx literature for youth visible in American literature venues, 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 in a comparative view of children's literature and media, since what is often construed as "children's literature" so often concerns Anglo-British and Anglo-American writing.

The field's reliance on Anglo texts to construct field identity and methodology perhaps limits its capacity to develop interdisciplinary relationships and research. 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 and bilingual cultures into one homogenous "ethnic" category. In *Ethnic Literary Traditions in Ethnic Children's Literature*, a study that includes Latinx 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. While there has been an emergence of critical attention regarding these issues, for the most part children's literature journals and programs associated with English departments rarely offer a variety of courses intersecting these fields.

At the same time, scholars in Latinx studies rarely consider the position of literature for youth and writers for young audiences in the study of historically oppressed peoples. That is, in ethnic and postcolonial studies, literature for youth remains, for the most part, marginalized. Indeed, as a practice, I began using the term "literature for youth" as opposed to "children's literature" in order to represent to a broader range of scholars the literary and cultural merits of these works as Latinx literature. Since Latin American and Caribbean writers also face marginalization in academic literary studies, Ann González

in *Resistance and Survival: Children's Narratives from Central America and the Caribbean,* writes that Latin American and Caribbean children's literature represents the "periphery of the periphery of the periphery" (2). González 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)

González offers an argument for centralizing Latin American and Latinx narratives as a means of comparing fundamental themes in children's literature scholarship, such as what is meant by subversive literature and the means by which young people might be encouraged to subvert systems (Mickenberg; Mickenberg and Nel). Scholarship in Latinx literature for youth, much like scholarship in African American and Indigenous literature, has its roots in education and library science scholarship, especially the work of organizations such as the Council on Interracial Children's Books in the 1970s and scholars such as Sonia Nieto and Oralia Garza Cortes, extending from the work of Rudine Sims Bishop and Violet Harris. Regardless of a scholar's interests as a humanist, in order to conduct thorough and ethical research, scholarship in Latinx literature for youth necessitates active engagement in interdisciplinary and comparative approaches.

In my work, I have sought to emphasize Latinx literature in a way that both engages with literary theory and critical education policy for Latinx education. A huge contradiction exists when those of us in Latinx studies as a whole do not critically consider the role of literature for youth in Latinx literature and culture, yet we lament the lack of equity on the children's bookshelf. Many Latinx writers have and continue to write for young people, from José Martí establishing the concept of las Américas/the Americas; to Ernesto Gálarza, and Pura Belpré bringing to life the struggles and values of the early Mexican American and Puerto Rican migrations; to novelist Nicholasa Mohr creating one of the first Latinx youth protagonists; to Gary Soto and Francisco Jiménez offering alternative perspectives of what it means to grow up as an American; to today's renaissance of Latinx literature for youth, including the

work of Sonia Manzano, Daniel José Older, Sofia Quintero, Meg Medina, Lila Quintero Weaver, and Matt de la Peña. In fact, I would argue that Latinx literature for youth functions as a counter-canon to both U.S. and Latin American tropes and norms. Today's Latinx authors for youth challenge the kind of internal and external racism, sexism, and classism that has rendered Latinxs invisible in U.S. and Latin American literature and society. Latinx authors centralize AfroLatinxs and indigenous narratives such as in Older's *Shadowshaper* (2015) and Sofia Quintero's *Show and Prove* (2015). They take on colorism and gender, as in de la Peña's *Mexican White Boy* (2008) and Meg Medina's *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* (2013). Others revisit moments in U.S. history in which Latinxs are often forgotten, such as in Weaver's graphic novel *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White* on the Selma riots. Latinx literature for youth, like perhaps no other Latinx-led space at the moment, publicly amplifies voices of people who have been left of out both U.S. and Latinx canons, and collectively questions and engages with key stereotypes of U.S. literature and culture.

The intersections of children's literature studies and Latinx studies challenge our understanding of factors that shape scholarly and literary canons in multiple locations, including areas of race, gender, nationality, and ethnicity. As in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDx talk "The Danger of the Single Story" (2012), there is also a danger in a single story told in scholarship. As a field, are we engaging in scholarship that values diverse communities and stories? What story does our scholarship tell about the communities and knowledges we value? Or is our scholarship centralizing only certain kinds of knowledge? I have argued in my research that you cannot know the story of American children's and youth literature and culture without knowing the story of the Puerto Rican community in the United States; the same applies in reverse. The cultural and literary work of the Puerto Rican Diaspora community intersects with key literary and cultural movements in the formation of ideas about race, U.S. literature, transnationalism, and childhood, such as the development of library services and publishing for children in the United States, the Harlem Renaissance, the rise of ethnic youth protagonists and young adult novels, and the emergence of people of color on children's television. I have found the work of Caroline Levander, Karen Sanchez-Eppler, and Carol Singley helpful for how they think through the ways in which childhood codes nationhood, and how the child's subjectivity mirrors authors' understanding of dependency and kinship to the nation. The U.S.-Puerto Rico colonial relationship 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. Literature representing this relationship has historically fallen outside the

parameters of English departments, Spanish, Latin American, and children's literature scholarship in the humanities. The literary history of the Boricua diaspora requires several layers of textual and historical recovery, hence the work of scholars such as Vanessa Peréz-Rosario, Urayoan Noél, Lisa Sánchez Gonzalez, and projects such as Nicolás Kanellos' Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Heritage section at Arté Público Press. The ambiguity of a nationless state, and its literature, creates possibilities for studying the intersections of American and Latin American traditions, and the role of literature in fostering national associations and citizenship. The racial ambiguity associated with Puerto Rican mestizaje, reflected in its literature for youth, helps us further explore the ways in which childhood is imagined and performed in the United States specifically as white (Bernstein).

The U.S. flag and the Puerto Rican flag fly side-by-side. It is an unlikely pairing—a marriage of convenience that produced countless U.S. citizen children which writers such as Nicholasa Mohr characterize as wards of the state and, or as Judith Ortíz-Cofer writes, unwanted "stepchildren." Mohr and Ortíz-Cofer challenge Singley's notion that the desire for recognition in American kinships is about "fresh starts" and not so much about the European tradition of bloodline. We might see this further in Ortíz-Cofer's notion of the "stepchild," a child who is a blood descendent of one parent, but related by marriage to the other. In "A Fable of Our Times" (2000), Ortíz-Cofer depicts a little girl, a stepchild of the personified "English," staking her claim on English's house and possessions:

> 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. (92)

The stepchild fights for recognition within the House of English, even after her cruel Stepmother English locks her away in a room. Ultimately, her senile stepmother realizes that she needs her stepchild to interpret the changing rhythms and sounds of the language English once thought she owned. In Mohr's *Nilda*, we find a child character that Mohr often portrays as a kind of ward of the state. In *Nilda* (1973), the American school system and the Catholic Church are depicted as agents of the state who take on the task of "raising" Latinx children as "good Americans." For example, 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. Mrs. Langhorn makes it clear that Puerto Rican parents are unfit to raise "good Americans." Mohr, through Mrs. Langhorn, highlights the impossibility of the American dream particularly since Mrs. Langhorn's idealist speeches make it clear that she offers no place for children who look and speak like Nilda. Both Mohr and Ortiz-Cofer also help us think through the whole concept of "Adopting

America." Is it a personified "America" that takes in the wayward or is it the wayward who must take on the business of claiming their right to America? Mohr's Nilda literally plants her feet into the earth in upstate New York, taking her place in America. Ortiz-Cofer's "Maria" from *Call Me Maria* (2006) claims in her poem "Confessions of a Non-Native Speaker" that she takes words and phrases from unsuspecting native speakers. Both Mohr and Ortiz-Cofer depict children as assertive, vengeful creatures who take, even steal, valuable things back from the colonizer, things like land, identity, and even language. Children routing the colonizer provide a different perspective from the one often advanced by children's studies scholars, who have theorized children and even child characters as "colonized" by and in literature (Rose; Nodelman). Children in Puerto Rican literature and Puerto Rican literature for youth are often portrayed as taking active vengeance, an esteemed response. The stepchild in Ortíz-Cofer's fable ultimately takes English captive.

Portions of the argument I make here were parts of my dissertation at the University of Florida in 2012, presentations at research meetings at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, and job talks at universities. My work in this area preceded the rise of the We Need Diverse Books movement, and the 2014 Children's Literature Association centered on diversity, though not the generations of calls from scholars, many of which have been from women scholars of color in the fields of education and library science. I have had an easier time rendering this scholarship visible in Latinx and other ethnic studies' circles as opposed to rendering it visible within children's literature in the humanities. Indeed, there was a time when I stopped attending the Children's Literature Association meetings simply because I felt that my work was not benefiting from conversations where scholarship seemed completely centered on nineteenth-century white, Anglo narratives, with some exceptions, including the work of Michelle Martin, Ann González, Clare Bradford, and Katharine Capshaw Smith. Capshaw Smith, in particular, has argued in the past for the importance of employing ethnic studies methodology: "I want to look at the question of race through U.S. children's literature scholarship from an ethnic studies perspective and look back at ethnic studies and the academy from the perspective of children's literature" (240). Her 2014 call for more conversation between ethnic studies and children's literature offered a powerful critique of the institutional structures that have kept interactions from happening, yet I would still say that the foundations of children's literature scholarship still need unsettling. I say this because I think it is important to recognize that people of color have been thinking about and creating children's literature since the forming of children's literature as an industry in the United States. Yet our scholarship seems to often forget and exclude these voices, along with scholars of color who have done the work

to elevate the voices of people of color at the intersections of ethnic studies and literature for youth, particularly those in education and library science. Even in our way of organizing ChLA meeting spaces, we still have a tendency to relegate "ethnic" conversations to issues of internationalism and diversity rather than issues affecting the totality of the field (Dahlen).

Latinx literature for youth offers a space in which the history of children's literature, its scholarship, and the cultural and literary work of marginalized populations ultimately collide. The lens of Latinx literature is one that magnifies issues of transnationalism, language, race, ethnicity, gender, and class for how they shape ideals about U.S. literary, historical, and scholarly canons. Ultimately, I would say that Latinx literature for youth asks us to question the organization of the children's literature world. They ask us to look at the breaks and switches, the spaces between cultures, the shelf of children's books that we divide by race, nation, and language. They ask us to see that side-by-side doesn't always mean that we are together in this. They provide us with the unsettling reality that we may actually be farther apart than we think.

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Note

[1] "Own voices" is a movement in publishing to include authors from diverse and communities of color, as opposed to publishing stories "about" those communities written by white authors. Similar to We Need Diverse Books, the movement gained popularity out of a social media hashtag #ownvoices.

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