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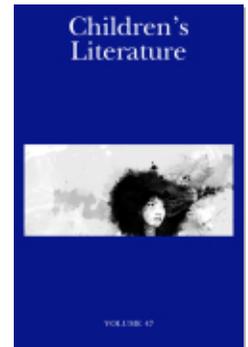
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Articles

The Lens of Latinx Literature

Marilisa Jiménez García

Youth literature and culture serves as a dynamic space for Latinx artistry and innovation, and narrates some of most influential debates on Latinx life in the US, including those centered on citizenship, race, and gender. In our contemporary Latinx literary world, literature for youth, and also literature revolving around the processes of adolescence, has taken center stage. In November 2018, we celebrated the triumph of Elizabeth Acevedo as the National Book Award winner for Young People’s Literature for *The Poet X* (2018). Later, in February 2019, Latinxs would add the first Latina Newbery Medal winner (Meg Medina) and first Latina Printz Award winner (Acevedo) to a list of milestones in literary culture. On the evening of the National Book Awards, Latinx Studies scholar Vanessa K. Valdés, the author of *Diasporic Blackness: The Life and Times of Arturo Alfonso Schomburg* (2018), underlined a strong connection among issues of race, youth literature, and visibility in the literary canon, writing on Twitter, “#Afrolatinidad all up in the National Book Awards!!! Thank you, [Elizabeth Acevedo], for writing US into the canon!” Similarly, Charlie Vásquez, director of the Bronx Writers Center, recently credited youth literature as an important part of the “#BoricuaLit Renaissance [that] is Happening Now,” marking young adult novels as part of a larger Latinx creative resurgence. Yet literature for youth has long-been a fixture of Latinx culture, from José Martí’s *La edad de oro* (1899) to AfroBoricuas Pura Belpré and Arturo Schomburg’s storytelling and archiving in the New York Public Library to Ernesto Galarza’s “mini-libros” during the early Chicano movement. Literature for young people has functioned as a key platform, historically, for Latinx communities (Jiménez García, “Pura Belpré”).¹

When I proposed a guaranteed Modern Language Association panel on Latinx literature at the 2016 Children’s Literature Association in

Columbus, Ohio, my objective was to subvert the conversation on diversity. Over the past few years, the Children’s Literature Association has engaged in a meaningful discussion on how to improve as a more inclusive scholarly community in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and disability. Yet, often in discussions of inclusivity and social justice, we overlook that engaging with the intellectual histories and scholarship from marginal communities is one of the most basic ways to exercise equity. We forget that although Indigenous and people of color writers and scholars have been marginalized in literary and cultural history by conquest and colonization, the contributions of these communities are not marginal. As Toni Morrison once said in a speech titled “A Humanist View”:

The function, the very serious function of racism, is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language, so you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly, so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Someone says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary. There will always be one more thing.

Racism is also a stealth operative—its greatest trick is to deny its own existence through presenting itself as neutral while situating the epistemologies of Indigenous and people of color, for example, as working out of “identity.” Epistemologies matter. Whom we cite matters. Yet, more than just adding in a citation, whom we decide to engage with and build with intellectually—and in the material spaces that make up our field—matters. I wanted to see a panel at the Modern Language Association dedicated entirely to Latinx literature for young people because I thought it was time that the lens of Latinx literature was presented as a framework for examining how children’s and young adult literature behaves as an aesthetic and political medium.

In my call for papers, I presented research questions similar to those that follow as a means of grounding the conversation. I wanted to go beyond a discovery process of “Latinxs have written books for children” or “there are Latinx characters in children’s literature.” In my time as a researcher and professor of both Latinx Studies and youth literature, these are questions that have guided my planning of syllabi and research projects, questions that I continue to pursue:

1) In addition to critical race theory (CRT) and postcolonial theory, what critical theories and scholarship in Latin American Studies, Latinx Studies, American Studies, and Children's Literature and Childhood Studies provide a lens for Latinx literature for youth? In turn, what perspectives do epistemologies grounded in the Latinx experience lend the fields of youth literature as a whole?

2) What is the historical role of children's and young adult literature in Latinx communities? How can we (re)consider, for example, the work of forerunners such as Pura Belpré and Ernesto Galarza?

3) How do Latinx writers challenge and provide alternative narratives to mainstream US society, including issues such as race, class, and gender (i.e., masculinity, femininity, machismo)?

4) How do Latinx writers interrogate, revise, and/or disrupt Latin American and Caribbean traditions of the homeland, such as political parties, government, race relations, class and gender/sexuality? How are Latin American and Caribbean lands, cultures, languages, and societies depicted by Latinxs writing for youth?

5) How do newer voices in Latinx literature for youth (e.g., Elizabeth Acevedo, Judith Ortíz Cofer, Meg Medina, Isabel Quintero, Marjorie Agosín) differ/overlap with earlier generations of authors (Belpré, Nicholasa Mohr, Sandra Cisneros)?

6) Is there a pan-Latinx tradition for youth?

The title of the panel, "The Rise of Latino/a Literature for Youth," came from a literary salon I attended in 2015 at the New York Public Library that was dedicated to Latinx young adult literature. During this forum, Daniel José Older, Adam Silvera, Sonia Manzano, Torrey Maldonado, and Crystal Vasquez spoke about how youth literature and culture helps authors articulate the Latino/a experience—experiences that often involve multiracial, multilingual, and multitextual realities. Literary salons usually feature a select audience of publishers, academics, booksellers, and the foremost authors as a means of accessing the current moment in literary movements. Topics are usually selected through high library circulation numbers—meaning that the NYPL, an influencer in publishing, saw Latinx lit as a viable market. *Publishers Weekly*, which rarely dedicates column space to the topic of Latinx readership, listed the event as a front-page story.

On January 6, 2018, Three Kings Day, I introduced the MLA panel, "The Rise of Latinx Literature for Youth," with scholars Sonia Alejandra

Rodríguez, Cristina Rhodes, and Ashley Hope Pérez, all of whom presented excellent papers representative of the various areas of their training. The audience of faculty and graduate students included those in AfroLatinx Studies, comics, Chicana feminisms, and queer theory, and they remarked on the excitement of hearing the papers in the venue of the MLA. Afterward, Julie Pfeiffer, editor of the *Children's Literature* annual, approached me about curating a peer-reviewed forum in the journal based on the topic of the panel. With more time, I would have opened it up to a larger pool of writers and scholars; however, I am pleased that those who were able to participate in the forum provided such critical perspectives on the field beyond the panel. For example, Sonia Alejandra Rodríguez offers an in-depth analysis of three modern Latinx narratives, which challenges our understanding of adolescent protagonists developing as artists, while Angel Daniel Matos contextualizes an important conversation about gender and sexuality in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012), one of the most talked about young adult novels in our recent history. As with the panel, I hope this forum creates a dialogue that will increase Latinx Studies scholarship in youth literature both in *Children's Literature* and beyond.

Although the panel did not focus on the commodification of Latinx, I want to conclude by reflecting on the concept of what gets seen and marketed as Latinx and then go further into what I mean by the lens of Latinx literature. In a consumerist society, issues of commodification take precedence. Indeed, our current conversations about diversity on our bookshelves and in our classrooms have more to do with commodification than we may like to admit. I am not talking about the way in which childhoods and childhood experiences have become a market, but rather about how youth and creators of color are esteemed and valued in terms of access to cultural and market capital. This is a system that makes diversity a viable market while still excluding creators and scholars of color. The representation of people of color on the children's bookshelf, both in terms of quality and circulation, has always been a central concern to communities of color. On one hand, as Sarah Park Dahlen refers to it, the "autonomy" of such representation coincides with authors of color creating content. On the other hand, community authorship may not safeguard against issues such as sexism and racism. Additionally, youth literature and culture, as a market, relates to commodification, belonging, and citizenship in a consumer society—especially in the case of Latinxs (Dávila; Báez). As Latinx Studies scholar Arlene Dávila has analyzed in *Latino Spin: Public*

Image and the Whitewashing of Race (2008) and *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (2012), dominant US society views Latinxs as consumers and Latinx bodies as commodities, which may heighten the visibility of Latinxs but still ignores their political struggles and lack of political representation. This is something to think about as Latinx content continues to get more visibility on the children's bookshelf, and specifically which voices have been coded as Latinx. "Own voices" authorship in Latinx communities, I suggest, connects with how Latinx audiences have been categorized as readers and consumers, an area that requires more research. Media studies scholar Jillian Báez writes about the tendency toward extremes in her study of Latinx media, *In Search of Belonging* (2018), asking scholars to

avoid[] a populist approach or celebratory stance toward audiences and instead complicate[] the passive-versus-active debate. Latina audiences are viewed as neither passive dupes nor all-powerful agents, but instead as subjects who engage with media in sometimes troublesome ways that can be consumerist, assimilationist, heterosexist, racist, or classist, all in the struggle for recognition, and hence citizenship. (5)

The struggle for visibility in youth literature, and the right to tell our stories, connects with complicated notions of belonging, disenfranchisement, and citizenship. The Latinx experience also teaches us that citizenship is something one can experience even symbolically, as our Dreamers will tell you. The balance between consumerist notions of what it means to be seen and valued in the US and in youth literature presents particular challenges for decolonizing work, understanding that decolonization is more than just a metaphor (Tuck and Yang 2).

In terms of markets, belonging, and visibility, the Pura Belpré Medal served to ensure Latinx books circulated more widely, and stayed in print, yet the medal committees rarely embrace Indigenous and African heritage in what it rewards as Latinx (Jiménez García, "Pura Belpré" 114–15). Anti-blackness is very much a reality in Latinx communities. AfroBoricua illustrator Eric Velasquez has stated, "AfroLatinxs are some of the most erased in all of children's literature." This makes Elizabeth Acevedo's recent National Book Award win all the more significant: a brilliant AfroLatina composing stories centering AfroLatinx lives on a (trans)national stage. Acevedo's winning of the 2019 Belpré Medal, another first for an AfroLatinx, also highlights the importance of visibility for AfroLatinxs in our top prize for Latinx children's and young

adult literature. Velasquez's recent pictorial work in *Schomburg: The Man Who Built a Library* (2018), written by Carole Boston Weatherford, places into the hands of young readers the legacy of Arturo Schomburg, a man who helped shape epistemologies of library services and research on Africana, and who worked alongside Pura Belpré during the formative years of library and archive services and storytelling for young people of color. Yet, because of what so often gets memorialized as Latinx, Schomburg's position as a member of both black and Latinx communities get erased.

The term Latinx,² like Latina/o and Latin@, which scholars have revised for further gender inclusivity, helps with bringing together the various nationalities represented in the US. As a field, Latinx Studies acknowledges the tension and complications present even in its act of naming—from the more nationalist discourses of Chicano and Boricua (Puerto Rican) Studies in the late 1960s to the more transnational position of Latinx Studies today. However, Afro and Indigenous Latinx ways of knowing and being, along with the various racial, gender, and class struggles of these communities in the U.S., Latin America, Central America, and the Caribbean, are often ignored for the sake of the so-called mainstream. We see a single story about Latinxs as light-skinned Spanish speakers, and it is important as scholars that we don't homogenize and also tell a single story in our research. Scholars in children's literature seeking to conduct research on works with Latinx content should also research the various histories of migration, colonialism, and US intervention and land seizure that make Latinxs part of the US population. Similarly, bridging together fields, and accomplishing "crossover" scholarship, as Michelle Martin has called it (97), means respecting histories of scholarship by scholars of color. Writing about Latinx content without engaging the liberatory epistemologies in which ethnic studies was born and has continued to grow—by student demand—presents a hollow analysis to readers and scholars. Also, if you are Latinx, you can be Asian, Arabic, Jewish, Black, Indigenous—this diversity has become even more important as our stories come to voice in the twenty-first century. Moreover, we have departed from what ethnic studies epistemologies were meant to accomplish when we feel comfortable naming a children's literature prize after an AfroLatina, yet AfroLatinxs, and other members of our diverse Latinx community, continue to struggle for visibility in children's literature texts and scholarship.

So what does Latinx literature teach us? What tools does it give us for reading the world and other texts? Well, for one, by studying within a category that reaches into and challenges so many “progressive” histories that have become somewhat monolithic in twentieth and twenty-first-century US literary study (the Harlem Renaissance, the civil rights movement, ethnic studies movements, intersectionality, and literature), Latinx literature teaches one how to see the ways in which people get left out of the academic snapshot. Latinx literature offers youth literature scholars a rigorous training in comparative methodologies and a need to see various histories and stories running “side-by-side” (Jiménez García, “Side-by-Side” 113). It affords us space to linger on the silences between the histories of Latin America, Central America, the Caribbean, and the US, and to witness the dysfunctional partnerships that have come as a result of our communities surviving in close proximity to what José Martí called “our formidable neighbor” to the north: the United States (128). Latinx literature offers us an opportunity to reconceptualize texts—that is, it forces us to contemplate how Latinxs have published their own newspapers, made their own curricula, offered up corridos, salsa, and reggaeton, and have performed cuentos during the moments where the literary establishment, in Spain and the US, didn’t care to publish our voices. This is the same spirit of cuentos emerging in places like Puerto Rico, after Hurricane Maria, where storytellers such as Tere Marichal (author of *Maria Chucena techaba su choza*, 2018) gather on the beach to tell stories, and educators such as Mercedes Martínez, of the Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico, teach in classrooms without books and without electricity. Latinx literature helps us think about what makes up a canon in US literature when authors and artists decide to write back in the colonizer’s language (be it Spanish or English) and yet, at times, willingly decide to deny monolinguals a translation or a glossary. Latinx literature is a liminal space daring us to transcend disciplines and borders, asking us to go beyond our neat definitions. Latinx literature, thankfully, just never will behave. And that it is why we need it more than ever.

Notes

¹See Jiménez García, “Pura Belpre.”

²Some scholars may still use Latina/o and Latin@ in different contexts; however, Latinx was adopted in around 2015 as a means of challenging the gender normative aspects of Spanish. It should not be assumed that all scholars adhere to this term. Please see Scharrón-del Río and Aja.

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