

February 2019

## Tracing Activist Genealogies in Latina Children's Librarianship

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### Recommended Citation

Terrones, Lettycia (2019) "Tracing Activist Genealogies in Latina Children's Librarianship," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol1/iss2/2>

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## Tracing Activist Genealogies in Latina Children's Librarianship

*We wanted an all-inclusive name that would represent a wide array of cultures within a culture. After many more names were scribbled on a cocktail napkin, after our creativity began to wane, Toni asked, "Oralita, Sandrita, have you ever heard of Pura Belpré? Well mujeres, let me tell you who she was. She was a librarian, the first Latina librarian of the New York Public Library, a puppeteer, she was Borinqueña, a folklorist, a writer, and she believed in library services to Latino children" ... Our hearts paused. We found the path that Pura started on in the 1920s, and we began walking ...*

–Sandra Ríos Balderrama<sup>1</sup> “¡Celebración! The Tenth Anniversary Celebration of the Pura Belpré Award.”

On June 25, 2006, upon the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Pura Belpré Award for outstanding Latino/a children's literature, Sandra Ríos Balderrama told an audience of the American Library Association (ALA) annual conference about the night she and the co-conspirators of the Pura Belpré Award decided upon its name. This story points to the quotidian landscapes and sociocultural circumstances that shape and constitute activist imperatives of Latina children's librarians. This essay examines the activist imperatives of three Latina librarians: Pura Belpré, who revolutionized bilingual children's library service in 1920s Harlem, New York, and Sandra Ríos Balderrama and Oralia Garza de Cortés, who in 1996 established the Belpré Award. The story told above also illustrates how Latina librarians have

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<sup>1</sup> Ríos Balderramas's remarks in honor of the tenth anniversary of the Pura Belpré Award were first presented at the American Library Association annual conference in 2006, and were later published in the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC) journal as well as the 2006 winter newsletter of REFORMA-The National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking. See Ríos Balderrama's essay “¡Celebración! The Tenth Anniversary Celebration of the Pura Belpré Award.”

traced our genealogies in library service, inscribing our presence materially and institutionally in our library work. It also points to the professional structures that operationalize and disseminate the multiple facets of children's library work, including how professional conferences standardize librarian discourse around the evaluation and use of children's literature. Moreover, it reveals how professional structures offer proximity and access to new and existing networks of friends and colleagues, which in turn contribute to professional ideologies around children's literature in libraries.

Like Ríos Balderrama's story, this essay attends to a genealogy of Latina children's librarianship. Specifically, I examine Pura Belpré's imperative to develop and sustain culturally responsive children's library service to Puerto Rican communities, an imperative present from the very beginning of the establishment of United States children's librarianship as an institution. I then examine Ríos Balderrama and Garza de Cortés's practices in children's librarianship to argue how their work was similarly informed by culturally responsive imperatives toward creating material and ideological spaces for Latino/a communities within their library institutions. In connecting Belpré's work to that of Ríos Balderrama and Garza de Cortés, I trace a genealogy of Latina children's librarianship that reveals how activist impulses have centered our work.<sup>2</sup> By describing how these three Latina librarians navigated institutional spaces in their respective time periods and organizations, I consider how we might conceptualize as activism, the quotidian acts of negotiation and resistance that comprise children's library work.

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<sup>2</sup> Ladson-Billings's groundbreaking work on culturally relevant pedagogy informs my use of the term, especially as the pedagogical approaches she outlines directly supports the work of critical library children and youth services. Ladson-Billings describes the political intentionality behind culturally relevant teaching, writing: "Not only must teachers encourage academic success and cultural competence, they must help students recognize, understand, and critique current social inequities," which necessarily requires educators to be responsive to "inequities and their causes" (477).

To frame my analysis, I use Chela Sandoval's theory of oppositional consciousness, which offers a method for mapping the topographies, or the sites, places and acts, that illuminate how and where feminist women of color manifest persistent opposition to dominant social structures. Women of color feminists have enacted oppositional consciousness across time and geographies; however, our specific histories, especially the day-to-day sites of labor where we create resistance, are often unrecorded and under-theorized. Sandoval's theory of oppositional consciousness offers us ways to write our histories to show the generative ways in which women of color at once operate within, exceed, and break away from dominant social structures and the normative ideologies that uphold institutions. By identifying these in-between sites where women of color negotiate their positions within and in resistance to dominant institutions, Sandoval's theory of oppositional consciousness articulates what she calls differential consciousness, "whereby individuals and groups in opposition are able to effectively challenge and transform oppressive aspects of identity and social order" (42). Differential consciousness empowers minoritarian subjects to challenge and *transform* oppressive ideologies in ways that connect seemingly disparate sectors of society.

Sandoval's formulation of differential consciousness generates insight into the work of Belpré, Ríos Balderrama, and Garza de Cortés in their efforts to create and sustain culturally relevant library practices from within and in resistance to the institution of children's librarianship. To show this, I focus my analysis on two historical acts that evidence the transformational work of these three Latina librarians: 1) Belpré's authoring and publication of her first picture book, *Pérez and Martina: A Portorican Folk Tale*, and 2) Ríos Balderrama and Garza de Cortés's establishment of the Pura Belpré Award. I situate my analysis from three

angles in order to map the topographies—sites, places and acts—that influence these two important landmarks in the history of Latina librarianship. The first angle examines the institutional structures of U.S. children’s librarianship that give shape to and inform the professional day-to-day practices of Belpré, Ríos Balderrama, and Garza de Cortés. In this section, I describe how Belpré’s work in the children’s rooms of The New York Public Library (NYPL) led her to write her first work of children’s literature. From here, I segue into a discussion of Ríos Balderrama and Garza de Cortés, whose work as children’s librarians inspired their leadership in establishing the Belpré Award. My analysis juxtaposes the two time periods in which these three librarians worked, in order to contextualize how their efforts created spaces for cultural specificity within the dominant narratives of internationalism and multiculturalism that grounded the organizational culture of children’s library services at their respective times. This comparison allows me to draw connections between the sociocultural life that informed their respective work. I conclude with a reflection on the legacies of these three Latina children’s librarians and consider what the afterlife of their leadership might imply for our contemporary work with children and libraries. From these three vantage points, I aim to bring into relief the expressions of differential consciousness evident in the activist contributions of Pura Belpré, Sandra Ríos Balderrama, and Oralia Garza de Cortés.

*A Book on the Table: Negotiating U.S. Children’s Librarianship*

Belpré started her library career in 1921 as a Spanish-speaking assistant at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library (NYPL). Located in the African American neighborhood of Harlem, New York, the 135th Street Branch Library—later named after the Harlem Renaissance poet, novelist, and children’s book author Countee Cullen—served as

central meeting place and organizing headquarters for Black intellectual and artistic life during the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> In her essay, "The Art of Writing for Children," Belpré describes her early work at the 135th Street Branch, noting how one her duties involved organizing the book collection in the children's room:

My first assignment was to read all the books on the fairy tale shelves. Thus the folklore of the world opened for me. As I shelved books, I searched for the folktales I had heard at home and had told to my cousins and friends. To my amazement, I found not even one. A sudden feeling of loss rose within me. I wished so much to preserve this folklore for the children in this new land. I know that the knowledge of this folklore would develop a sense of pride and identification in him. But how was I to accomplish my wish? (qtd. in Sánchez-González 209).

Belpré's reflection, written years later as part of her memoirs, reveals how the everyday practices involved in her library work directly influenced her philosophy of children's library service and literacy. Julio L. Hernández-Delgado, in his study of Belpré's leadership and legacy, notes how "instead of wallowing in dejection [at the disparity of Puerto Rican representation in literature for children], Pura Belpré made a personal commitment to preserve the rich Puerto Rican folklore for the children of the United States" (428).

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<sup>3</sup> See Whitmire's excellent history of African American librarian Regina Anderson Andrews which examines the critical role African American intellectuals and educators played in The New York Public Library, particularly in the neighborhood branches of Upper Manhattan, including 135<sup>th</sup> Street Branch. Nuñez notes, however, that much of Belpré's outreach in "bridge [making] between the NYPL and Puerto Rican and Latino communities" happened in the subsequent years following her transfer 135<sup>th</sup> Street Branch (73).

Indeed, Belpré found a way to actualize her vision and “accomplish her wish,” using the very resources of the institution to resist exclusion. In 1925, after having worked for four years as a Spanish-speaking assistant at the 135th Street Branch Library, Belpré enrolled in the NYPL’s Library School, becoming the first Afro-Boricua librarian of the NYPL, and arguably the first Latina librarian in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Belpré wrote her first picture book, *Pérez and Martina: A Portorican Folk Tale* as part of her course work with Mary Gould Davis, the supervisor of storytelling at the NYPL. Published in 1932 by the Frederick Warne Company (famous for publishing the children’s books of Beatrix Potter), *Pérez and Martina* became the first work of Puerto Rican folklore published in the United States. Fluent in Spanish, English, French, and Portuguese, Belpré loved languages, literacy, and education (Sánchez-González 16). In addition to her formal library science training, she studied Latin American literature, Portuguese, and puppetry at Columbia University (Sánchez-González 35). Guided by the conviction that Puerto Rico’s literary traditions belonged in the collections of the NYPL, Belpré leveraged her position as a children’s librarian to literally write herself and her community’s literary culture into the nation’s primary institution of education, the public library.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jiménez García, Sánchez-González, and Nuñez, in their respective scholarship, discuss Belpré’s Puerto Rican identification. Their scholarship interrogates the politics of race and ethnic construction in *latinidad*. For example, Sánchez-González examines the politics of racial identity as it relates to Belpré’s Puerto Rican identification. Nuñez’s discussion of African American and Puerto Rican populations in Harlem at the turn of the twentieth century adds nuance to Sánchez-González’s analysis, particularly as it centers on the small, yet growing, Puerto Rican immigrant population in 1920s Harlem which included English and Spanish speakers. Nuñez notes Belpré’s Afro-Puerto Rican racial/ethnic identity, as well as her class and gender status as a way to contextualize Belpré’s ability to access and navigate the diverse communities she engaged in her roles at the NYPL. I also borrow the term Afro-Boricua from Jiménez García’s scholarship on Belpré.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Pura Belpré Papers: Finding Aid* for a comprehensive list of Belpré’s published works, including original titles and works of translation.

Belpré's intellectual assets and visionary leadership benefitted the NYPL's strategic vision for children's library service. During this time period, story hour at the NYPL prescribed strict rules, requiring children's librarians to use only stories that came from published books. Children's librarians followed the same ritual to initiate the story hour: they lit the storyteller's candle, set a vase with fresh flowers, and placed the physical book from which they drew the stories they told. Considering there were no published works for children about Puerto Rican life, folklore, and cultural heritage in the collections of NYPL, Belpré secured Davis's permission to use her unpublished stories and Puerto Rican folktales to develop bilingual story hours. She began writing and telling the folktales she had heard as a child in Puerto Rico, using her coursework in storytelling as a launching pad to write stories inspired by Puerto Rico's oral tradition. Belpré innovated children's library programming for New York's Black and Brown children, creating the first ever Spanish-English bilingual story hours, puppet shows, and her published children's books and stories.

Belpré's cultural work challenged the contradictions of liberal narratives that at once declared the public library as an egalitarian site for universal education, capable of educating the "common man," while at the same time maintaining systems of exclusions by not providing equal library service to all, especially those most marginalized by race and class discrimination (Harris 2509). By challenging the NYPL's Anglo-Eurocentric literary culture, materially evident in the lack of Spanish language collections for children, Belpré's literary works and storytelling craft "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" (Jiménez García, "Pura Belpré Lights the Storyteller's Candle" 117).

Belpré's expressions of differential consciousness took on life in the material and ideological spaces of the NYPL. She inhabited and put to use institutional resources to create physical spaces and a material culture from which, as she later wrote, Puerto Rican children could "develop a sense of pride and identification" (qtd. in Sánchez-González 209). In her day-to-day practices as a children's librarian, Belpré drew from the institution's resources—the NYPL's library school curriculum, the children's literature collections throughout the various Harlem branches where she worked, and the professional responsibilities of conducting story hours and outreach required in everyday children's library work. From these inside resources, Belpré innovated library service for those who fell outside the dominant purview of the NYPL. Belpré literally and figuratively put a book on the table for Puerto Rican children.

Decades later, the imperative to put books on the table for Latino children would continue to occupy the daily work of Latina children's librarians. Starting in the 1970s, as their numbers began to increase, Latino/a librarians exercised their own forms of differential consciousness. Like Belpré, they also navigated institutional resources to put books by and about Latino/as into their children's literature collections and implement bilingual story hours and outreach programs. Indeed, activist imperatives in support of culturally relevant library service characterizes the history of Latino/a librarianship in the United States.<sup>6</sup> REFORMA— The

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<sup>6</sup> Haro, Güereña, Güereña and Erazo, and Villa-Nicholas's respective studies of Latino/a contributions to U.S. librarianship survey the wide range of Latino/a librarian activism across geographies and diverse library settings. In describing the origins of REFORMA, former ALA Executive Director Elizabeth Martinez, locates the convergence of rising political consciousness and civil rights action among Latinx people in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During this time, Chicano youth across the Southwest walked out of high schools in a series of protests against racist treatment in schools; in 1970, Chicano activist organized the Chicano Moratorium in East Los Angeles to protest the war in Vietnam, connecting their protest against the military industrial complex and imperialism to their calls for a right to equitable access to public education. Martinez recalls: "I was part of the library contingent marching in the 1970 [Chicano Moratorium] in protest of the disproportionate number of Mexican Americans dying in the Vietnam War; some 30,000 other Chicanos were marching too" (40). Martinez, at the time a children's librarian in the

National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-speaking— in particular, championed library services for Latino/a children as part of their core mission from the very start. One of the earliest REFORMA chapter newsletters from spring 1979, for example, reports on the El Paso chapter's "opposition to [the] closing of the Boy's and Girl's section of section of the Main Library" (REFORMA, El Paso Amoxcalli Newsletter n.p.). In their petition to the El Paso Public Library Board, REFORMA chapter members protested the closing of the children's reading room, noting the "very large percentage [estimated 60 to 70%]" of Mexican American children who actively used the children's room (n.p.).

This central commitment to securing and cultivating library spaces and services for Latino/a children is further confirmed in Robert P. Haro's 1981 comprehensive study on Latino/a library and information service. Recognized as being the "first book to focus on Hispanics in the United States within the context of librarianship," Haro's study articulated the ideological underpinnings entailed in securing materially tangible spaces and resources for Latino/a children in libraries (ix). Haro's powerful advocacy for bilingual/bicultural competency among librarians working with Latinos, moreover, connected these dispositions with the library's pedagogical responsibility to support childhood literacy and "intellectual access" (Haro 106). The social justice implications evident in Haro's and REFORMA's early advocacy for Latino/a children in libraries contextualize Sandra Ríos Balderrama's and Oralia Garza de Cortés's contributions

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East Los Angeles Branch of the Los Angeles Country Public Library system, spearheaded a federal grant specifically targeting library services and programming for black and brown communities in Los Angeles. The goal of this service was to address the disparity of culturally relevant collections, programming and library services.

toward creating culturally relevant library services and spaces for Latino/a children. Indeed, as Ríos Balderrama recalls, one of the motivations behind committing to the work of creating a unique prize for Latino/a children's literature—what would later become the Pura Belpré Award—was to respond to “the library's accountability to Latino patrons and to make the library accessible to a broader public” (“Birth of the Award” xiii).

In 1986, when Ríos Balderrama and Garza de Cortés first met, they, like other Latino/a librarians, were actively compiling resources to support collection development and programming in Spanish and bilingual formats for children. The material culture of Latino/a librarians during this time—from REFORMA newsletters, to practitioner articles such as Cuesta and Tarin's 1978 article, “Guidelines for Library Service to the Spanish-speaking,” to edited monographs, such as Allen's *Library Services for Hispanic Children: A Guide for Public and School*—document how Latino/a librarians curated bibliographies of children's literature, as well as print and non-material resources to support Spanish-language and bilingual children's library services. These efforts also produced lists of publishers and book distributors, guidelines for outreach and programming, information about international children's literature conferences in Mexico, and community events to mark the United Nations International Year of the Child (REFORMA, El Paso Amoxcalli Newsletter n.p.) As Ríos Balderrama recalls, she and Garza de Cortés were already in the practice of researching and curating “their own tools for service ... [and had] compiled their own collections of *rimas y canciones*” (“Birth of the Award” xiii). They learned the bilingual and Spanish children's songs of composer José-Luis Orozco and memorized Latin American and Caribbean folktales to use in their story hours and school visits. While cross-disciplinary collaborations were active during this time, such as the Council on

Interracial Books for Children, whose journal, *The Bulletin*, curated culturally responsive books for young readers, efforts to get Latino/a “books on the table” largely remained invisible to the mainstream library professional community.

Ríos Balderrama and Garza de Cortés's commitment to establishing the Pura Belpré Award challenged the systemic erasure of the library and informational needs of Latino/as. Their leadership in establishing the Pura Belpré Award clearly shows how they leveraged strategic affiliations within the institutional structures of American public libraries, specifically the organizational structure of the ALA, while simultaneously drawing from the strong culture of advocacy for culturally responsive library service modeled by REFORMA. Ríos Balderrama and Garza de Cortés documented their intentional partnerships with the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC), a division of ALA. They noted how this collaboration helped them achieve their primary goals for the Award, which was to gain “access and visibility” to books for Latino/a children created by Latino/a authors and illustrators (Ríos Balderrama and Garza de Cortés “Partnership” xiv). They envisioned the Pura Belpré Award would bring recognition to and open publishing doors for Latino/a authors and illustrators of children's books. Moreover, the Award would increase the material availability and dissemination of books by and about Latino/as, making them tangible to the collection development and programming processes of working children's librarians. Ríos Balderrama and Garza de Cortés wanted Latino/a authors and illustrators and their children's books to reap the same “recognition and visibility that the Caldecott Medal, Newbery Medal, and Coretta Scott King Award enjoyed” (Ríos Balderrama and Garza de Cortés “Partnership” xv).

To this end, Ríos Balderrama and Garza de Cortés began using their leadership positions within REFORMA and ALSC to systematically carve out a space for Latino/a children's literature in the institution of American children's librarianship. Capitalizing on their leadership assets, they understood how Garza de Cortés's recent election to the ALSC Board of Directors would lend proximity to policy-making in ALSC, while Ríos Balderrama's noted managerial and negotiation skills "in relationship and coalition building" would help bridge agreements between REFORMA and ALSC in support of the Award. Ríos Balderrama and Garza de Cortés moved from "conversation to planning," to *actualizing* their vision for the Award (Ríos Balderrama "¡Celebración!" 37). In 1990, Ríos Balderrama, while working as a children's librarian in the South Berkeley branch of the Berkeley Public Library in California, arranged a meeting with her director of children's services, Linda Perkins. At the meeting, Ríos Balderrama shared her vision for an "award that [would promote and affirm] the diversity of Latino culture in children's literature" (Ríos Balderrama "¡Celebración!" 37). Perkins, who was about to start her term as ALSC president-elect, supported the idea, agreeing that a partnership between REFORMA and ALSC to co-sponsor such an award would be mutually beneficial. ALSC could offer institutional access and expertise in legislating ALA's organizational policy, while REFORMA could connect "to the Latino community and the expertise in [evaluating] cultural content" (Ríos Balderrama and Garza de Cortés "Partnership" xiv). In 1996, the ALSC Awards Committee approved the proposal to establish the Pura Belpré Award, affirming Ríos Balderrama and Cortés's efforts to put books on the table for Latino/a children (ALSC, "Latino").

*Internationalism and Multiculturalism in U.S. Children's Librarianship*

The institution of children's librarianship in the United States is historically linked to discourses about the egalitarian promise of educational access. In turn, the ideology of universal educational access is fundamental to notions of American democracy. In the early years of the twentieth-century, white women librarians in the ALA, such as Anne Carroll Moore, Caroline Hewins, Alice Jordan, and Frances Jenkins Olcott, began championing the public library as a site for the public good, where exposing children to enriching reading experiences would lead to "the socialization of children" (Walter, *Children & Libraries: Getting it Right* 4). Along with developing a library school curriculum that addressed library services for children, they began advocating for formal recognition of children's library services as a specialized field. Moore, among other women librarians, organized the Club of Children's Librarians at the 1900 ALA Conference in Montreal, which was officially recognized by ALA as the Section for Library Work for Children just a year later (Walter, "ALSC" 333). The seeds leading to the institutionalizing of children's library services as a specialized field, which this women-led advocacy planted, eventually resulted in the Association for Library Services to Children, a division of ALA, in 1976 (Walter, "ALSC" 333).

Anne Carroll Moore's leadership as Superintendent of Children's Work at NYPL from 1906-1941 was foundational to children's library services and set the tone and networking model for how children's librarians should pursue mutually beneficial professional relationships in their day-to-day work. Indeed, Moore deserves special recognition "for her role in defining and institutionalizing public library services for children" (Walter & Gross 877). Moore's leadership led to the codification of standards and practices which reflected the ideological values underpinning library services for children—from the architectural design of children's reading

rooms, to “taste-making” in children’s literature through prizing, book reviewing, and collection development, to establishing story hours and community outreach as bedrock library services for children (Kidd 171-173; Walter, *Children & Libraries: Getting it Right* 4-6). Moore’s protégés in the NYPL, who in turn developed practices and philosophies of community engagement, included Pura Belpré. Historian Lisa Sánchez González describes how under the supervision of Moore, children’s librarians at the NYPL adopted internationalist ideologies which posited local neighborhood library branches as community hubs, connecting and supporting exchange in a multi-ethnic, multi-national, racially diverse, and economically stratified city. Sánchez-González describes how Moore “hired [children’s librarians and library assistants] for their creative energy and knowledge of various languages, literatures, and oral traditions [in order] to serve the needs of children in their own neighborhood’s ethnic enclaves” (31-32).

Surely, this internationalist ideology influenced Ernestine Rose’s hiring of Belpré in 1921. As Sarah A. Anderson notes, Rose’s strategic hiring of Black and Brown women from Harlem, including the Harlem Renaissance novelist Nella Larsen, “helped further the connections Rose wished to make in the community” (394). Rose’s approach to negotiating her role as a White woman and library manager in a majority Black public library was not only informed by the internationalist ideology of the library as multicultural/inter-racial community hub, but also by an awareness of the critical role that African American and Puerto Rican community leaders played in legitimizing the public library as a space for Black and Brown patrons. Betty L. Jenkins describes how Rose leveraged Harlem’s African American leaders in order to enhance library services at the 135th Street Branch, writing: “Throughout the twenty-two years [Rose] worked in Harlem, a knowledgeable and committed group of civic

leaders, librarians, and scholars guided Rose with ideas and resources" (221). However, it is important to note how ideological beliefs about assimilation to dominant "American" values (i.e. White, Anglo-European values) guided Rose's community engagement and outreach. Not surprisingly, Rose received push back from Harlem's Black leadership, including W.E.B. DuBois.<sup>7</sup>

Belpré's philosophy of library service, and indeed that of Harlem's Black majority, resisted the erasures of racial and ethnic assimilation. The Harlem Renaissance's Black art, literary and intellectual life points to the anti-assimilationist cultural and political orientations of Harlem's Black majority. Of Rose, Jenkins remarks: "Soon after she arrived at the 135th Street Branch Rose noted, with some concern, the increasing self-segregation of Harlem's institutions. Its churches, theatres, newspapers, and social service organizations were increasingly black sponsored, staffed, and managed" (219). Rose's concern against Black "self-segregation" reveals a lack of understanding about the culturally specific modes of Black and Brown cultural flourishing, particularly considering the intellectual and creative milieu of the Harlem Renaissance. Jiménez García situates Belpré's contributions to this cultural flourishing as distinctly anti-assimilationist and filled with an activist imperative that enabled her to participate "within U.S. literary traditions [including the public library as institution] while also using them as a means of subversion" ("Pura Belpré Lights" 113). Belpré activist imperative included a distinct professional mission to instill cultural pride in Puerto Rican children.

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<sup>7</sup> Whitmire's chapter (chapter title) (book name) covers in detail DuBois's involvement with the NYPL, especially in his role as an NAACP advocate for children's librarian Regina Anderson Andrews.

Yet despite efforts to disrupt assimilationist values, the long-lasting effects of internationalist ideology continued to ground U.S. public libraries through the course of the twentieth century. By the 1980s, the ideology of cultural assimilation entered the popular discourse under the language of multiculturalism. In children's librarianship, the term *multicultural literature* "became commonly used to refer to diversity in literature for youth" (Dresang "Opening Doors" 18). Children's librarianship borrowed frameworks from multicultural educational theory to develop practices in evaluating and integrating ethnic children's literature into their professional practice.<sup>8</sup>

Many of these practices, however, remained tied to the discourse of assimilation, where attending to multicultural literature for children in library service was less about disrupting and destroying systemic racism and more about the celebratory and nostalgic sentiments which framed the contributions of ethnic minorities as being part of the larger American fabric. Katharine Capshaw illustrates how liberal ideologies of multiculturalism played out in the debates around ethnic children's literature in the disciplinary fields of literary studies, librarianship, and education. She notes how challenges to the assimilationist ideologies underlying multiculturalism also problematized the commodification of authentic ethnic stories for children. Capshaw describes how the convergence of political pressure, initiated by Civil Rights activism, directly influenced the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which was a key component of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty"

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<sup>8</sup> Dresang cites Banks's 1975's study "Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies," and his framework for integrating ethnic content in the curriculum as signaling the first phase of multicultural education. She notes how Banks influenced Library and Information Science curriculum, which often used his formulations to create courses in multicultural youth literature toward cultivating librarian cultural competence. Similarly, in addition to Banks, Smolen et al. cite Donna E. Norton's "five-phase model for studying multicultural literature," in their study on integrating children's literature centered on race and ethnic representation into primary and middle-grade curriculum. (17).

campaign. Children's book publishers capitalized on this legislation and began opening new profit markets by "issuing books for schools that served low-income children" (Capshaw 240). In fact, the rhetoric of educational equity supported capitalist accumulation in the form of new marketing of ethnic children's books.

As a counterpoint, Capshaw notes how radical works for children emerged, particularly those created by African American authors, poets, and illustrators such as Tom Feelings, June Jordan, and John Steptoe. They in turn, were, supported by antiracist coalitions such as the Council on Interracial Books for Children, whose constituents comprised educators and literary critics of Indigenous and racialized backgrounds.<sup>9</sup> However, as Capshaw notes:

Aesthetic readings of books trump political or material readings during this period; we get intensified interest in the triumphalism of 'voice' divested, often, of political implications. With the commodification of ethnic texts, we find a deepened interest in what is authentic about writing, a turn to the sociological with the expectation of usefulness for the white reader within an institution (242).

Capshaw's analysis is particularly important in the context of the history of children's librarianship as an institution. It allows us to see how the historical threads of internationalism carry over and share similar assimilationist missions of 1980 and 1990s multiculturalism.

### *Legacies and Impermanence*

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<sup>9</sup> Capshaw calls for critical studies on race and ethnicity in children's literature, including interrogations on the commodification of racial and ethnic difference and assimilationist narratives of colorblindness. While these areas lie outside of the scope of my essay, I want to acknowledge the urgent need for this research and want to stress the importance generating this scholarship by indigenous and intellectuals of color.

In a historically and persistently White institution such as United States children's librarianship, the turn to ethnic children's literature finds a ready home in its apparatuses of professional practice—particularly, its canonizing system of prizing. Marilisa Jiménez García develops Capshaw's critique about the commodification of United States children's literature in her analysis of the Pura Belpré Award. She writes: "The Belpré Medal's creation also represents an attempt by the children's librarians and the book industry to codify, indeed name-brand, Latino/a culture, something that is near impossible for a group of distinctive nations and languages" ("The Pura Belpré Medal" 113). Jiménez García challenges us to consider the complexity of the stakes involved in Latino/a children's literature prizing. The Pura Belpré Award marks the interstices of divergent interests, containing agendas across spectrums of affinity and rejection. Jiménez García reminds us that while the Award has "affirmed the existence of a market for Latino/a children's literature," it also reproduces the tokenizing "ethnographic" effects wrought by the dominant gaze of the White reader ("The Pura Belpré Medal" 112). To this end, any anxiety we might have about whether the White, middle class child will "get" the cultural specificities of Chicano/a/x borderlands in, for instance, Cathy Camper and Raul Gonzalez's *Lowriders to the Center of the Earth* (2017 winner of the Pura Belpré Award for Illustration), can help us interrogate and reckon with the white supremacy underlying the uneven privileging of White readership.

Indeed, cultivating and sustaining our critical lens is imperative to minoritarian scholarship about children's literature. Our critiques must also model generosity and kinship-making. Not only must we be vigilant to critique how our efforts recreate the homogenizing norms and assimilatory narratives of children's librarianship, we must also

problematize our participation within, outside, and through the institution. For example, we might examine what it means for librarians of Indigenous and racialized ancestry to serve on the selection committee of the Pura Belpré Award. What types of institutional resources and professional proximities are made possible by our participation in these sites of power? We might ask how the bibliography of Pura Belpré Award winners and honor recipients could inform syllabi curation for specialized courses in Latino/a children's literature. Or we might continue to write passionately about the affective qualities, the aesthetic and political power, found when Black, Brown, Indigenous children see themselves in the prominent Brown faces of Rudine Sims Bishop's mirror.<sup>10</sup> We might also interrogate the strategies of minoritarian survival at play when a Chicana librarian reads Xelena González and Adriana M. Garcia's picturebook *All Around Us* (2018 Pura Belpré Honor Award for Illustration) to a group of eager children at storytime.

In other words, how can we exercise and express forms of differential consciousness to work from within while working also from without and through the interstice of the Pura Belpré Award? Considering how the Pura Belpré Award deploys from sites of institutional power—from REFORMA and ALSC, to the U.S. markets of the publishing industry—how can we move like Pura Belpré and Sandra Ríos Balderrama and Oralia Garza de Cortés, who skillfully operated within their respective institutional sites of children's librarianship to make and create new sites that exceed “the demands of dominant ideology” (Sandoval 43). What these

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<sup>10</sup> See Rudine Sims Bishop's seminal theory of “mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors” and the politics of racial and ethnic representation in children's literature. See also Michelle H. Martin's theorizing on the political aesthetics in picture book illustrations featuring prominent closeups of Black and Brown faces.

critical moves will look like will depend on those who choose to make them. The landscapes are ours to shape. Reflecting on the future of the Pura Belpré Award, Sandra Ríos Balderrama charts out some possibilities:

I'm so proud of the Pura Belpre Award! –its legacy and traditions. Going forward I would love to see more Afro-Latinx, LGBTQ+, science fiction, futuristic (and more!) content and illustration included in the publication queue, for review by the selection committee, and seriously considered as Honors and Winners. It's a big task to define the depth and breadth of the Latina/o/x experience but we must stretch and cannot remain static! For the Belpré Award to remain relevant, as with any program of inclusion, we must incorporate the ongoing evolution of how we Latinx identify ourselves and how we see the world. This is sacred work!

--Sandra Ríos Balderrama<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>. Balderrama, Sandra Ríos. Personal interview. 26 Oct. 2018.

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