

Review

Side by Side: US Empire, Puerto Rico, and the Roots of American Youth Literature and Culture.

Marilisa Jiménez García.

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Marilisa Jiménez García's *Side by Side: US Empire, Puerto Rico, and the Roots of American Youth Literature and Culture* examines the power structures that have defined the field of children's literature since its inception. The Introduction asserts that "the field has functioned and organized itself in a sort of hyper-canonical and hyper-hegemonic way", centring "Victorian and American traditions about what it means to be young person [sic], and so whiteness and anti-Blackness, in many ways, serve as organizing factors of what is known as Children's Literature Studies" (7). *Side by Side* analyses dominant narratives about Puerto Rico vis-à-vis Black Puerto Rican community-based aesthetics and pedagogies that have thrived in spite of institutional uninterest, resistance, and banning. It does so by way of "peel[ing] back the neutrality, and benign celebration, in what scholars have often considered the tradition of Puerto Rican children's literature, specifically its relationship to Puerto Rican and US governments" (5). Given the school closures, budget cuts to the University of Puerto Rico, and the people's actions, atop everything else that's happening, this study is as timely as it is urgent.

Jiménez García establishes that picture books and illustrated primers were political tools employed to imagine the new colony and represent it not only to people in the US but

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also to a Puerto Rican audience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Centering an Afro-diasporic and Indigenous lens, Jiménez García then focuses on a series of key figures: Rafael and Celestina Cordero, two free Black siblings in Puerto Rico; renowned Black Puerto Rican intellectual Arturo Schomburg and the youth texts he has inspired; Pura Belpré, the first Black Puerto Rican librarian in New York City and her storytelling; and “autora-cátedras” (10) – Puerto Rican women writers and educators who employ Indigenous and Afro-Boricua strategies in their work to undermine the patriarchal literary tradition in Puerto Rico. Among the autora-cátedras are Ángeles Pastor, Isabel Freire de Matos, and Flor Piñeiro de Rivera.

Side by Side also provides insight into how Nicholasa Mohr, a Puerto Rican writer in the US, places New York as the dreamscape of the Nuyorican child instead of relying on an imagined Puerto Rican past. Mohr’s work “stand out[sic] for how she reinvents the present without necessarily seeking to transcend the cityscapes and streets which, for Nuyorican writers, represented new pathways for the imagination” (109). In Jiménez García’s view, the emphasis on immigration and multiculturalism has diminished Mohr’s recognition as a force in US fiction. Indeed, she critiques the emphasis on the celebration of stories about immigration and US multiculturalism that overshadows authors, such as Mohr, who hold the US accountable for its imperialism and colonialism.

Jiménez García then turns her attention to how children’s television programming can function as a tool for early childhood literacy. She specifically discusses *Sesame Street* as a TV show that filled the literary representational gap for Latinx youth during the second half of the twentieth century. Focusing on Maria, a character played by Sonia Manzano who employs English and Spanish to negotiate relations between multiple characters, Jiménez García examines how the show “emphasized language practices as a kind of performance, though problematically at times, such as through skits employing miming, music, theatre, and spoken word as a means of depicting language practices” (148). In leading the script writing for Maria, Jiménez García argues that “Manzano continues a trend of Puerto Ricans occupying spaces outside traditional literature as a means of critiquing literature, and encouraging self-education and critical literacy” (148). The analysis of *Sesame Street*’s pedagogy provides a context to examine how language and culture are presented as “moldable, performable aspects of everyday life” (171) in Latinx youth media, and it will be interesting to see how films and TV shows for young people portray the daily practices of Latinx communities who speak Haitian Creole or French, for example.

Finally, Jiménez García brings *Side by Side* full circle by returning to contemporary Puerto Rico to contemplate ideas relating to “restoring power” and “restoring communication” with regards to youth literature and culture (196). She focuses on the politics of Lin Manuel-Miranda and his famous musical *Hamilton* (2015), Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez’s graphic novel *La Borinqueña* (2016), and the political use of youth literature in the 2019 #RickyRenuncia Protests, reading Puerto Rico-based youth literature authors such

as Laura Rexach Olivencia and Ada Haiman as part of an Afro-Boricua and Indigenous aesthetic tradition. The archipelago-wide public pedagogy activities and educational initiatives that occurred in the aftermath of Hurricane María, during and after the 2019 #RickyRenuncia Protests, after the 2020 earthquakes, and that continue in our current moment, give testament to how these traditions go beyond institutions and give way to further research that builds upon Jiménez García's work.

Side by Side's strength lies in its diasporic Puerto Rican focus. For a book about Indigenous and Black Boricua thought and aesthetics that includes contemporary Puerto Rico, it could have also featured Puerto Rico-based Black Puerto Ricans who are current autora-cátedras, such as Mayra Santos Febres and Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, for example, or autora-cátedras who work with various organisations. There are also instances where additional contextualisation and clarification would have benefited readers. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Jiménez García has made an important and necessary contribution that sits at the intersection of Youth Literature and Latinx Studies. *Side by Side* is a great source for scholars doing comparative work between the lands, waters, and peoples that make up the US settler-colony and empire, and for those studying power dynamics in multiple contexts.