

# Postcolonial Approaches to Latin American Children's Literature



*Ann B. González*

Children's Literature and Culture



# Postcolonial Approaches to Latin American Children's Literature

In this volume González explores how the effects of a traumatic colonial experience are (re)presented to Latin American children today, almost two centuries after the dismantling of colonialism proper. Central to this study is the argument that the historical constraints of colonialism, neocolonialism, and postcolonialism have generated certain repeating themes and literary strategies in children's literature throughout the Spanish-speaking Americas. From the outset of Spanish domination, fundamental tensions emerged between the colonizers and native groups that still exist to this day. Rather than a felicitous mixing of these two opposing groups, the *mestizo* is caught between contrasting worldviews, contending explanations of reality, and different values, beliefs, and epistemologies (that is, different ways of seeing and knowing). Postcolonial subjects experience these contending cultural beliefs and practices as a double bind, a no-win situation, in which they feel pressured by mutually exclusive expectations and imperatives. Latin American *mestizos*, therefore, are inevitably conflicted. Despite the vastness of the geography in question and the innumerable variations in regional histories, oral traditions, and natural settings, these contradictory demands create a pervasive dynamic that penetrates the very fabric of society, showing up intentionally or not in the stories passed from generation to generation as well as in new stories written or adapted for Spanish-speaking children. The goal of this study, therefore, is to examine a variety of children's texts from the region to determine how national and hemispheric perceptions of reality, identity, and values are passed to the next generation. This book will appeal to scholars in the fields of Latin American literary and cultural studies, children's literature, postcolonial studies, and comparative literature.

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*Ann B. González*

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Ann B. González

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To my mother, who first read to me, and to my children and grandchildren, who have listened to me read to them. And to my sister-in-law, Olga González de León-Páez, who spent long hours helping me understand Costa Rican culture.



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# Preface

Mine has been a long journey. It is important to start with me, the literary critic, because I no longer believe in what I was trained to assume implicitly back in the days of New Criticism: that the text can stand alone outside history or context; that it can be accessed by any educated, sensitive reader; that as a critic, I am outside the work, outside ideology; and that my assumptions are not assumptions but fundamental and essential truths. It is also important to understand that I am white, female, and born into a monolingual, middle-class American family in the South of the United States, where both my parents (this part is slightly unusual) were university academics. It is necessary to be cognizant of these facts because I no longer believe that they are incidental and unrelated to the text but form part of my epistemological location in time and space as I relate to the text. What is unusual about my journey is how far I have traveled: from the heart of modernity, Eurocentrism, and white privilege to what postcolonial theorists like Walter Dignolo call the “border” (*Local Histories/Global Designs*) and Homi Bhabha calls “beyond” (*The Location of Culture*), a locus somewhere on the periphery or the interstices, where alternate realities and ways of knowing are generated and vie for centrality.

The process has involved learning another language (Spanish), which I now speak at the level of a near native; living abroad (I lived and taught in Costa Rica for eight years and in Spain for one); extensive travel; intellectual exchange and reading; and the fundamental suspicion that my academic training never prepared me to understand the “Other,” much less their texts. I remember reading children’s stories to my own children in Costa Rica. Someone gave me a copy of Costa Rica’s most famous book of stories for children, Carmen Lyra’s *Cuentos de mi tía Panchita* (1920), and I was stunned; the stories were so different, so antithetical to anything I had read as a child. I could not make any sense out of Lyra’s tales nor understand why they would be aimed at children, despite my academic formation and all the sensitivity I could muster. That was the beginning of a decades-long attempt to see beyond my training, beyond my ethnocentric and Eurocentric upbringing, beyond my naturalized beliefs—a process that ultimately led to my doubting and resisting many of

the ideological assumptions that I had previously accepted without question, both about texts and about children. It was a process that Mignolo has termed “learning to unlearn” (Tlostanova, *Learning to Unlearn*).

I cannot claim to speak for Latin Americans, and I do not intend to appropriate their texts as an object of study for the US academy. My intention in writing this book is to make explicit what I believe is a dynamic process of reading and relating to texts from a broader perspective, from the “in-between” of cultures (Clifford, *Routes*), and from a postcolonial optic and understanding of history. My selection of children’s texts by writers from Latin America, therefore, is not based on chronology, nationality, genre, or any disciplinary notions regarding literature or definitions of what children’s literature is or is not. Neither am I attempting to be comprehensive or to make universalizing statements about Latin American texts that have been aimed at or marketed for children. Rather, my selection is based on personal preference, familiarity, and intrigue because these texts have caused me problems, because I remember many of them years after reading them for the first time. Most of all, despite great strides in the academic study of literature for children, these texts are still marginalized and undervalued in the United States as well as in Latin American intellectual circles, relegated, as Guatemalan writer and critic Arturo Arias would say, to the periphery of the periphery (*Taking Their Word*). My hope is that this book can help remediate this state of affairs.

I am not alone in this process nor by any means the first. Increasingly, the writers of texts for Spanish-speaking children have consciously attempted to promote the recognition of non-Western cultures and values and Amerindian perspectives in contemporary texts for children, but these writers are also mired in the same uneven power matrix that derives from modern/colonial thinking and, like me, have been slow to embrace postcolonial explanations and decolonial options. Consciously or unconsciously, however, they have lived under what I have termed, in the body of this study, the postcolonial double bind (a tension that I am aware of only theoretically and to some extent experientially as a female) that is the resulting stress between what one absorbs as a child in the affective sphere and what one learns later in a rational and formal context from the dominant culture (Parikh, *Transience*, 53). This lived experience on the periphery, negotiating between two worlds and two sets of expectations, between what one has been taught by hegemony versus what one “knows” from local history, culture, family, and community, permeates these children’s texts and makes them fundamentally different from texts produced by the center. Hispano-American narratives for children have had to respond, knowingly or not, to the confusing logic of coloniality, which paradoxically asks children to desire all things Western while at the same time keeping those desired objects always just out of reach.

One story in particular from a 1996 Mexican collection of children's literature, *Lo mejor de la literatura para niños* (Gamboa Castro and Audirac Soberón, 293–294), which I remember reading with horror some years ago, exemplifies this paradox. To put the tale in context, we should remember that Mexico is home to the pre-Columbian Aztec and Mayan civilizations and is now populated in its majority by *mestizos*, the result of miscegenation of indigenous and European/Caucasian racial and ethnic groups. The tale in question describes a so-called Amerindian myth of creation. Manitú, the Creator, attempts to make human beings by forming them from mud and cooking them like dough. After several unsuccessful attempts, resulting in blacks, whites, and “yellow” Mongolians, the Creator finally declares success—the red man, his “preferred” race. Nevertheless, the anonymous transcriber of this would-be authentic narrative undermines the fundamental values attached to indigenous identity by adding: “A nosotros, la verdad, nos parecen mucho más hermosos los hombres blancos” (Gamboa Castro and Audirac Soberón, *Lo mejor de la literatura para niños*, 294) [Nevertheless, we think that white people are the prettiest (translation mine)]. The double bind produced by this overtly racist message, unforgivable at this late date in the century, is clear to the child reader who is most probably not white. While the indigenous race may be preferred by the gods of local folklore, the white race is clearly preferred by Western civilization. The *mestizo* child, who is caught in the middle and cannot fully live up to the expectations of either group, thus begins life with a deficit.

This coexistence of two psychological vectors (that is, who one is versus who one should be) generates what Arias calls a “split personality,” where identity is inevitably divided between “a Westernized image and its ‘Indian’ shadow” (*Taking Their Word*, 64). As the industry of children's literature grows in the region and indigenous narrative production and works from the oral tradition are increasingly appropriated by children's literature and mediated by a Westernized “lettered” consciousness, rather than the production of a homogenized continental, national, or regional identity, which was certainly the overriding aim behind the production of early nationalist children's literature in Latin America, the result has been the reinforcement of this double bind: the paradox resulting from conflicting constructions of reality and opposing approaches to history, the indigenous desire to remember confronted by the neocolonial imperative to forget.

Hispano-America has been preoccupied ever since the independence movements in the nineteenth century with establishing a sense of continental American identity, particularly in the minds of children, the future citizens of the new republics (cf. José Martí's *La edad de oro* [1889] and Angel Rama's notion of a “cosmovision”). National ministries of education have played significant roles throughout the twentieth century in selecting and promoting particular authors and works for children

that have emphasized and articulated national values and priorities, and attempted to homogenize as much as possible what is fundamentally a heterogeneous population. While looking to inculcate an overarching Latin American identity on the one hand, each individual country has also been faced with the project of distinguishing itself from its neighbors, a paradoxical task that has produced a range of confusions and contradictions, some conscious, some not, in the creation of literature for children.

While children everywhere are to some degree plagued by the mixed messages and conflicting impulses they receive from adults, this situation seems exacerbated in Latin America as a result of the logic of coloniality that has systematically devalued native cultures (Fanon) and local epistemologies (Mignolo), and reinforced the negative images of self that have accrued due to years of colonial domination by Spain; a century of cultural imperialism by the United States; and, ultimately, the economic oppression and homogenization of today's global market. My goals, therefore, in writing this book are to explore the various and variegated responses that Hispano-American writers have taken in their texts for children as they attempt both to make sense out of these contradictions, paradoxes, and ambiguities, and, at the same time, to entertain and teach the next generation.

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"The Postcolonial Double Bind: César Vallejo's 'Paco Yunque.'" *Misfit Children: An Inquiry into Childhood Belongings*, edited by Markus P.J. Bohlmann. Lexington Books, 2016, pp. 159–174.

"Two Children's Writers from Latin American: The Right to Play." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 40 (2016), 163–178.

"Changmarín: Race, Identity, and Children's Literature in Panama." *The Latin Americanist*. 58.1 (2014), 67–75. <http://eOffprint.aptaracorp.com/cgi-bin/offal?aid=15248nr6276DTwC3010rX>.

"The *Popol Vuh* for Children: Explicit and Implicit Ideological Agendas." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. 39.3 (2014), 216–233.

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# Introduction

## The Problem of the Postcolonial Double Bind

The purpose of this study is to analyze, from a postcolonial perspective, a variety of contemporary texts written, adapted, or marketed expressly for Spanish-speaking children to explore how the effects of a traumatic colonial experience (and I maintain that there is no other kind) are (re)presented and redescribed<sup>1</sup> to Latin American children today, almost two centuries after the dismantling of colonialism proper. My goal is to understand what these texts say, intentionally or unintentionally,<sup>2</sup> about Spanish American colonial and postcolonial experiences and how they communicate national and hemispheric perceptions of reality, identity, and values to the next generation. Like children's literary critic Mike Cadden, I am convinced that "no literary genre has ever taught us more about a culture and its values than the literature published for a society's children" (*Telling Children's Stories*, xxi).

This study is not meant to be a history of Spanish American children's literature nor an exhaustive study of texts aimed at children or adapted for children from the region. Rather, it explores a range of strategies for postcolonial resistance, negotiation, and accommodation as these play out in a selection of children's literature from the region. The texts represent important canonical works. Some have been adapted for children, as in the indigenous myth and history *Popol Vuh*, the colonial drama *El Güegüense*, and a contemporary prose poem by Octavio Paz. Others have been written expressly for children by well-known writers, either professional children's writers (Carlos Rubio, Lara Rios, Jerry Tello, Carlos Francisco Chang Marín, Rafael Pombo, and María Elena Walsh) or, in some cases, professional writers for adults who have written occasionally for children (Horacio Quiroga, Claribel Alegría, Isabel Allende, Mario Benedetti, César Vallejo, Augusto Roa Bastos, and Emilio Carballido). The selected works particularly illustrate the issues of transculturation<sup>3</sup> and postcolonial responses to it. All the texts analyzed here have been written in or translated into Spanish<sup>4</sup> for an implied reader who is a juvenile Spanish-speaking *mestizo*,<sup>5</sup> a member of the dominant culture that traces its roots back to the biological miscegenation and cultural merger of Spanish colonizers and indigenous inhabitants. Emphasis here is placed on racial hybridity—variously termed

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*mestizaje*, *ladinidad*, and *choledad*—throughout the region since this is the group that has been targeted for the production of the majority of children's literature in Spanish. Recently, increasing numbers of texts for indigenous children in the region have been published in various native languages, especially as the values of bilingual and multicultural education have become more politically acceptable. However, except for some bilingual editions that include Spanish as one of the two languages, these works lie outside the scope of this study.

### Theoretical Frame: Postcolonial Theory

The analyses of the texts for children included in this study are based on the general tenets of postcolonial theory, an attempt to understand the world and provide alternative explanations of experience from the perspective of colonized peoples, in as much as it is theoretically possible to do so, rather than from the viewpoint of the colonizers. For my purposes here, I agree with Bill Ashcroft that the much contested prefix “post” in postcolonial does not mean “after” colonialism “since it is colonialism’s interlocutor and antagonist from the moment of colonization”; it is rather “a way of talking about the political and discursive strategies of colonized societies” (*Modernity’s First Born*, 9).<sup>6</sup> The beginnings of the field may be traced back to the works of Martinique’s Franz Fanon, whose groundbreaking *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) explores the adverse psychological effects of colonial repression on black people, and his classic on decolonization *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), which analyzes the revolutionary experience of the French colony of Algeria. The majority of contributions to the field, however, emerged during the 1980s from the Indian subcontinent’s experience with the British Empire in the nineteenth century (see Huggan, *The Oxford Handbook*; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*; and Marzec, *Postcolonial Literary Studies* for overviews). A rather later discussion of postcolonial theory has emerged from Latin American theorists (see Fiddian, *Postcolonial Perspectives*, and Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui, *Coloniality at Large*, for overviews)<sup>7</sup> who look back at their much earlier colonial experience with the Spanish Empire from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, followed by what has been termed “neocolonialism” or internal colonialism after independence, combined with the cultural and economic imperialism of the United States from the nineteenth century to today. As Walter Mignolo quips, “South American countries gained independence from the former empires, in order to remain dependent on new imperialism” (Tlostanova and Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn*, 5).

The first task of postcolonial studies as a field has been to unmask and deconstruct the naturalized and implicit assumptions that derive from centuries of colonial thinking and logic. The first and hardest

assumption to dismantle is the entrenched belief that civilization, modernity, and progress are the patrimony of Europe (Eurocentrism).<sup>8</sup> This overriding truism incorporates at least three corollaries: (1) ontological: The belief in the biological and racial superiority of white Europeans over native inhabitants; (2) epistemological: The belief that knowledge and truth exist only in their European (Christian) manifestations; and (3) ethical: The belief that it is the moral obligation of Europe to share its superior culture with the rest of the world (the so-called “civilizing mission”). These assumptions, in turn, justify and glorify colonization while hiding the dark side of military domination, economic exploitation, physical and cultural violence, slavery, and genocide,<sup>9</sup> without which the colonial powers would not have been able to sustain themselves in the first place (Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* and *The Idea of Latin America*).

Postcolonial theories further argue that “coloniality”<sup>10</sup> (that is, the underlying logic that supports colonialism and sustains Eurocentrism) lives on after colonialism proper has been dismantled and manifests itself in “social hierarchies; economic, racial, and sexual inequality; economic and cultural dependency” (Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui, *Coloniality at Large*, 9).<sup>11</sup> In other words, coloniality is constitutive of modernity (Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, and Tlostanova and Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn*); that is, the celebration of modernity in the center could not exist without the injustices of coloniality in the periphery.

It is important to analyze how the logic of coloniality works in order to understand the multitude of responses that colonial peoples have employed to negotiate between opposing cultures; “ethos”;<sup>12</sup> belief systems; languages; epistemologies; economic, social, and political structures; and asymmetric power relations. The center imposes “modernity” on the periphery (that is, another language; another religion; another technology; another political, legal, economic, and social structure; and another way of thinking about time, space, nature, and what is real) by either physical force (military intervention and coercion), persuasion (education, indoctrination, and brainwashing), or some combination thereof. The center’s imposition is based on the unquestioned ideological assumption that what is imposed is superior to what was there before (if anything was). Often, what was there before is not even visible to the dominant power or is consciously set aside and excluded.<sup>13</sup> By virtue of the assumed ontological superiority of the imperial force, all local customs; language; identity; epistemology; and social, political, and legal structures are ignored or actively denigrated, belittled, invalidated, prohibited, and destroyed. Subjugated peoples, by the very fact of their subjugation, are deemed deficient or underdeveloped.

Colonized peoples come to believe over time that they are lacking, lesser than, and inferior to the dominant culture. Furthermore, they are

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convinced by the dominant colonial power that they should aspire to all that modernity has to offer. Yet, at the same time, they are thwarted at every turn by the overt or covert racism that underpins modernity and European colonial expansion (Quijano, “Coloniality of Power”), what Erik Camayd-Freixas and José Eduardo González term “unreachable modernity” (*Primitivism and Identity*, xi). The colonial subject is always already “Other” (subaltern)<sup>14</sup> and cannot ever attain the status of equal, no matter how well he or she imitates or tries to assimilate into the dominant group. There is no way, at least on the surface, for colonial subjects to succeed within the parameters of Eurocentrism and the logic of coloniality. The rules of play are set against them, yet colonial peoples are inextricably bound to the game. They are caught in what Gregory Bateson described in the 1970s as a double bind:<sup>15</sup> “a situation in which no matter what a person does, he ‘can’t win’” (Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 201).<sup>16</sup>

Mired in the logic of coloniality, the periphery searches for ways to resist, survive, and endure, often through a multitude of resilient and creative forms of defiance and selective appropriations. Some of these resistance strategies have been noted by anthropologists (syncretism and assimilation), and others have been noted by postcolonial theorists (hybridity<sup>17</sup> and reinscription of the past). In this book, I look closely at a variety of these survival strategies as they play out specifically in children’s literature, one of the few places that the colonial subject is permitted a limited degree of agency to influence the next generation. According to Marian Therese Keyes and Aine McGillicuddy,

One of the distinct qualities of children’s literature is that it is a genre that is both heavily monitored and tightly controlled for didactic purposes, yet also enjoys a greater freedom than literature for adults to be rebellious, illogical and irreverent.

(*Politics and Ideology*, 11)

#### Postcolonial Theory and Latin America

Latin America holds a unique position within postcolonial theory. First, its history is different from that of the African continent and the Indian subcontinent, which were colonized in the nineteenth century mainly by France and England, and to which the field of postcolonial studies initially referred. These colonies were established in response to the impulses of the Industrial Revolution and the need for land and resources. Latin America’s “discovery,” conquest, and colonization, on the contrary, was a sixteenth-century phenomenon, an outgrowth of the Renaissance, science, exploration, modernity, and the expansion of the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Latin America is unlike the “settler” nations that also formed during this historical period: In those countries, whole