Postcolonial Approaches to Latin American Children’s Literature

Ann B. González

Children’s Literature and Culture
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*
Postcolonial Approaches to Latin American Children’s Literature

Ann B. González
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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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 Mignolo 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 colonality, 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 major 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, unforgiveable 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 colonially 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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Every effort has been made to obtain copyrights.
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\(^1\) 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,\(^2\) 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, xxii).

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\(^3\) and postcolonial responses to it. All the texts analyzed here have been written in or translated into Spanish\(^4\) for an implied reader who is a juvenile Spanish-speaking *mestizo*,\(^5\) 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). 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) 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). 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, 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” (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). 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”; 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. 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) 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: “a situation in which no matter what a person does, he ‘can’t win’” (Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind, 201).

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 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.

(Post 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. Furthermore, Latin America is unlike the “settler” nations that also formed during this historical period: In those countries, whole
families from the “mother” country settled in the new space (e.g., the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), killing or moving the indigenous populations that historically had inhabited the regions and creating a bipartite division between “us,” the settlers, and “them,” the indigenous groups. In contrast, Spain sent male soldiers, explorers, and administrators who, in addition to killing and moving the native peoples, also mixed with them in large numbers. The result over time produced a hierarchy of increasing powerlessness that may best be seen in terms of a tripartite division. At the top were the Creoles of Spanish descent, who “occupied a position of relative subalternity with respect to peninsular authorities” (Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui, “Coloniality at Large,” 7); in the middle were the new mixtures of white and indigenous people (the mestizos, cholos, ladinos, or what José Martí termed in Nuestra América [1891] “el hombre natural”), who were born in the New World but were neither authentically “pure” Indian nor European; and finally, there were the almost completely powerless indigenous populations.

With the independence movements of the nineteenth century, two conflicting ideological impulses became evident in the region’s literary production, all responding to centuries of colonial domination and the logic of coloniality. The first, given the unchallenged assumption that Europe represented the heart of civilization, modernity, and progress, was the urge to imitate European literary movements and genres (including the newly invented category of children’s literature). The second, an opposing impulse, resulted in a conscious attempt by Latin American mestizos (especially those arguing for independence) to distance themselves from Europe by establishing a Hispano-American continental identity (Rama’s “cosmovision”) with distinct local (national) manifestations (see Camayd-Freixas and González, Primitivism and Identity). Often, these two contradictory impulses merged in interesting and unusual ways, while writers imitated or confirmed, often unconsciously, the underlying assumptions of Eurocentrism and simultaneously argued against them.

The logic of coloniality in Latin America, however, added even more layers to the initial problem. In addition to its conflicted relationship with Europe, the dominant mestizo population alternately romanticized and vilified the original inhabitants of the New World. On the one hand, they selectively appropriated from the indigenous cultures a variety of artifacts and attributes that appealed to them, justifying ownership through their initial blood relation. On the other hand, like the European conquerors, they saw themselves as superior and civilized in contrast to the original inhabitants, whom they deemed barbarians.

The dominant mestizo population projected itself in literary discourse (as well as through other kinds of discourse) as a homogenized majority group (which, in terms of numbers, it was not) who represented the
interests and identity of the New World. Like the classic case of El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1539–1616), who had learned Quechua and Incan culture as a child from his mother’s indigenous family and later Spanish and European culture from formal schooling and his father, a Spanish soldier, the *mestizo* population had grown up between two worlds. Garcilaso’s overall strategy to manage this situation was to assimilate into the dominant, Spanish culture. He valued it as superior to his Incan heritage, and eventually, as a young adult, he moved to Spain. His assimilation, however, was never quite complete, as is indicated by his designation (even today) of “El Inca” to distinguish him from his “genuine” Spanish contemporary, the poet Garcilaso de la Vega (1501–1536). Moreover, he assumes, at least overtly, a humble and inferior position as a *mestizo* raised in a barbaric culture in the New World who was lucky to be saved by Christian Europeans (see *Comentarios Reales de los Incas*, [1609]).

The experience of El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega illustrates the predicament felt by many *mestizos* on the continent. On the one hand, the group has continued to feel, even today, noticeably inferior to whites, Europeans, and the so-called first world. Yet, on the other hand, they see themselves as superior to other groups, specifically the Amerindians or original inhabitants of the Americas as well as other minority groups who later appeared on the scene, such as the Africans who were brought in as slave labor or indentured servants along with successive waves of Chinese immigrants. Thus, as critics like Mignolo argue, the term “Latin America” is inevitably an incomplete construct since, as a product of coloniality, it excludes anything produced prior to Columbus and, for the most part, ignores the ongoing cultural productions of Amerindian groups as well as those of Afro-American or Asian subcultures in the region (see *The Idea of Latin America*). Clearly, the logic of coloniality has survived into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Like abused children who grow up to abuse their own children, the *mestizo* population continues the cycle of coloniality by perpetuating political, economic, and social structures that disadvantage the indigenous cultures and other racial and ethnic minorities in the region. Keyes and McGillicuddy refer to this process as the “politics of assent,” which affirms “ideologies already present in society and internalized, perhaps subconsciously by the author” (*Politics and Ideology*, 10).

**Postcolonial Theory and Children’s Literature**

The logic of coloniality also continues to dominate the field of literary criticism in its selection of canonical writers, its emphasis on “European” universality, and its analysis of the “primitive” in art. Postcolonial critics, therefore, look to the gaps, the absences, the appropriations, and the overt and covert resistances that indicate alternative views
and unorthodox explanations of the world and “where power can be resisted or re-imagined; moments of creativity and criticality” (Rijke, “Creatively Life,” 45). One place, however, that postcolonial critics of Latin America have been hesitant to look, despite their ever-widening sphere of inquiry, is within the discourses of children’s literature.

As the new regional divisions of Spanish America were attempting to establish themselves as separate nations in the twentieth century based on European and US models, regional governmental efforts redoubled to construct an identifiable local culture (literature, music, language, and history) that could serve to unite the (mestizo) populace and be passed on to the next generation of citizens. The production of children’s literature in the area, therefore, was officially promoted by government entities and inextricably bound to these historical and political imperatives. Born soon after the independence movements of the nineteenth century (officially beginning with Martí’s children’s magazine La edad de oro in 1889), Hispanic children’s literature, like the rest of canonical Spanish American literature, has never really been separated from the contemporary political movements that spawned it. The overriding goals that underpinned this post-independence cultural production were to simultaneously and paradoxically establish a Hispano-American continental identity while constructing local national identities that could be distinguished from it. As Kimberley Reynolds explains,

> It is not accidental that at decisive moments in social history children have been at the centre of ideological activity and that writing for children has been put into the service of those who are trying to disseminate new world views, values and social models.

*(Radical Children’s Literature, 2)*

The creation and promotion of children’s literature in Latin America has dramatically increased since the 1980s. Latin American authors have won prestigious international prizes for children’s literature, and national prizes have emerged to foment increased interest in literary creation for children. Mario Rey marks the Feria Internacional del Libro Infantil y Juvenil [International Children’s Book Fair] in 1981 as the watershed moment that sparked an increase in literary production in Mexico, for example. Argentina, on the other hand, showed strong beginnings in the 1960s, only to have the most recent dictatorship (1976–1983) ban a number of books for children. Clearly, the ideological content (see Scerbo, “El campo de la literatura”), however cleverly masked or hidden behind humor and fantasy, was obvious enough to irritate and concern government officials, who accused Elsa Bornemann’s *Un elefante ocupa mucho espacio* (1977) [An Elephant Takes up a Lot of Space] of inciting a strike (see Sturniolo, “Literatura infantil y juvenil latinamericana,” 128).
Critics of children’s literature in general (and even more so critics of Latin American children’s literature) have been slow to turn to post-colonial theory as a useful tool for analysis (Reynolds and Grenby, *Children’s Literature Studies*; Bradford, “Race, Ethnicity and Colonialism,” 43; and Alonso Soroa, “Estado de la cuestión”). Yet, as Clare Bradford explains,

Children’s texts reinvoke and rehearse colonialism in a variety of ways: for instance, through narratives that engage with history in realistic or fantastic modes; through sequences involving encounters between Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters; through representations of characters of mixed ancestry; and through metaphorical and symbolic treatments of colonization.

(*Unsettling Narratives*, 3)

The one aspect of postcolonial theory that initially attracted mainstream children’s literary critics, however, was the superficial similarity between children and postcolonial subjects. Among other things, they emphasized the child’s lack of agency, power, and legal status, and the fact that children cannot speak but are spoken for by adults (Nodelman, “The Other”). Following this analogy, children, like their indigenous counterparts, need to be civilized, taught, molded, and disciplined by adults who stand in for their colonial masters. Such comparisons, however, are overly simplistic at best since childhood is a temporary condition, and colonial status is not. Furthermore, the entire issue is more nuanced since some children are more “powerless” than others. That is, the children of dominant groups will grow up to become part of the dominant elites, whereas children from indigenous or colonial groups will continue to maintain their subaltern status, even as adults. Furthermore, children of dominant groups may, in some cases, wield more power than adults from subaltern groups. We will see such an example in the analysis of César Vallejo’s Peruvian classic for children *Paco Yunque* (1951).

The complexity of the relationship between children and adults is particularly evident in juvenile literature in Spanish from Latin America. Overtly, the national goals of the various Ministries of Education throughout the region have been to teach *mestizo* children the values and beliefs of the dominant class (the Spanish “criollo” oligarchy), urging them to become patriotic, loyal, and obedient citizens. Covertly, however, this body of texts displays a wide range of postcolonial resistance and appropriation strategies. The central goal of this study, therefore, is to look closely at examples of children’s literature that have been produced or adapted for *mestizo* juvenile audiences in Spanish America to understand both how the logic of colonality works and how strategies of resistance, appropriation, and transformation have been passed on from one generation to the next.
Overview of this Study

Postcolonial theories argue that the logic of colonality puts colonial subjects in a double bind, a situation in which they are forced to negotiate between opposing belief systems, behaviors, and cultural requirements. In Latin America, mestizo children are not only caught in this primary double bind created by the unquestioned belief in European/U.S. superiority but, in turn, create a parallel double bind for indigenous children, who they believe are “beneath” them. Part I of this book, composed of two chapters, describes in some detail this tripartite division in the asymmetric power matrix that has been constructed in Latin America. The first chapter analyzes the case of Vallejo’s Paco Yunque and demonstrates how the indigenous colonial subject, in this case, a little boy of indigenous descent, is caught within the double bind, victimized, defeated, and immobilized, unable to respond in any constructive or creative way to the injustice of the system. The second chapter, however, reviews the power of indigenous mythology to endure colonial epistemic violence and appropriation by analyzing the history of how the Popol Vuh has been translated and adapted for Spanish-speaking children over the last fifty years. This chapter demonstrates the multitude of responses to colonality available to the colonial subject, responses that range from initial acceptance and acquiescence in the face of Eurocentric dominance to more recent attempts to understand, redescribe, and reinscribe the ethos of the Mayan pre-Columbian worldview. As Clémentine Beauvais explains, “it is by turning anguish into meaning-making and value-building in one’s own life that a sociopolitical programme of change can be designed. This is the defining element of the hope of the adult of politically transformative children’s literature” (“Little Tweaks and Fundamental Changes,” 25).

Part II of this study is composed of five chapters that look more closely at specific resistance strategies evident in selected works for children from the region. Chapter 3 shows how the logic of colonality can be met by overt rebellion under the guise of play. The right to play, and, by extension, the right to other personal and civic liberties, is defended in the works of two contemporary writers: Costa Rica’s Rubio and Paraguay’s Roa Bastos. More often, however, resistance to colonial domination is covert. Chapter 4 analyzes the appropriation and recent adaptation for children of an anonymous colonial drama from Central America, El Güegüense, in which the hero epitomizes the trickster figure so admired in Central American children’s literature as well as other colonial literatures (González, Resistance and Survival). This unorthodox antihero manages to get his own way, along with the last laugh, without directly affronting or confronting the dominant group. Chapter 5 discusses how strategic alliances can empower subaltern groups and looks closely at the famous collection of stories for children written by Uruguayan Quiroga, who, among
other things, disrupts the notions we have about nature and our relationship to it. Chapter 6 introduces the strategy of reinscription, that is, rewriting history or retelling the story (see Delgado, *Critical Race Theory*), as an active form of resistance to the logic of coloniality by analyzing the work of Panamanian writer Chang Marín. By inserting the forgotten or omitted parts of official history into children’s discourse and deconstructing official culture, this well-known Central American children’s author succeeds in rewriting the past and liberating children from the restrictive and racist assumptions that accompany the logic of coloniality.

Postcolonial theory also posits the possibility of combining opposing belief systems to create new, hybrid products (Sayegh, “Cultural Hybridity”) that are neither completely one nor the other (as is arguably the case with the *mestizo* population itself). Nelson Arturo González Ortega suggests, for example, that magical realism, a powerful literary current and a signature of the “Boom” in Latin American narrative, is such a case of hybridity, borrowing Amerindian epistemology, or what has been termed magical thinking (Camayd-Freixas and González, *Primitivism and Identity*, 110–134), and interweaving it with European literary form. Chapter 7, therefore, looks at the various possibilities and examples of transculturation in Latin American children’s literature and the resulting tensions formed between tradition and modernity (see García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*). Both Argentinian writer Walsh and US Latino/Chicano writer Tello show the learning process of the colonial child at work. In both cases, children struggle with learning the Western conventions for storytelling and fight to make the story their own. Two other writers, Costa Rican Ríos and Chilean Allende, in their contemporary novels for adolescents, attempt to transcend the conflicts between cultures in order to bring together what are usually mutually exclusive views. That is, rather than a hybrid mixing or merging of two cultures to produce something new, this postcolonial approach places elements from both cultures side by side as equally valid by acknowledging the power of modern Western science while at the same time arguing for the acceptance of indigenous approaches to medicine. Far from lumping non-Western approaches to the problem of disease within the category of primitive superstition, each of these authors indicates that Amerindian approaches represent alternative forms of knowledge that are valid in their own right and that may be useful if employed along with modern medicine for more complete and holistic patient care. The chapter ends with an analysis of Allende’s first published story for children, “La gorda de porcelana” [The Chubby (female) Statue], which shows successful hybridity in action. The main character, Don Cornelio, transforms from a stodgy example of life in the Western metropolis into a man who has been touched by magic and who now understands different ways of seeing and knowing.

The final part of the book, composed of two chapters, looks at unresolved issues, including Latin American writers for children who appear
themselves to be caught in the postcolonial double bind, conflicted and unable to settle on the best advice to give children or the safest approach to take. Chapter 8 tackles the ever-present dilemma of representing and relating to the Other, both the racialized Other and the female Other. This issue is handled metaphorically in stories by two prominent Latin American writers: Mexico’s Carballido and Paraguay’s Roa Bastos. Both writers use dangerous but loveable animals to stand in metaphorically for the indigenous subaltern. The chapter ends with an analysis of the problem of female representation in the various versions for children of Paz’s story from Mexico “Mi vida con la ola” [My Life with the Wave]. Chapter 9 analyzes the work of Salvadoran poet and novelist Alegría, who cannot seem to decide whether it is better for children to forget their painful colonial history and move forward or try to understand the past by being exposed in literature as well as in life to the violent injustices of the world.

Finally, the conclusion of this study explores the possibility of escape from or transcendence over the postcolonial double bind, first by learning the fine art of irony and the ability to understand a double message, to read the reverse of what is written, and to hear the opposite of what is said. Sometimes, this duality takes the form of parody; sometimes, characters become something Other, like the ciguapas of Dominican legend; sometimes they take another form (nahualism); or attempt to delink from the system altogether and live a secret life. Ultimately, one of the most powerful responses to social injustice is presence itself. Despite all that dominance does to erase the colonized group, the Other simply will not go away or completely disappear. Its very existence deconstructs the dominant ideology that minimizes it. The postcolonial subject, therefore, must finally understand that identity itself is based on a definition of what it is not and that without the Other, the Self is meaningless. This final chapter discusses the possibilities of moving beyond the parameters of colonial thinking, as Mignolo urges, to situate oneself on the epistemological border or in Homi Bhabha’s third space or, as Martí exhorted in Nuestra América over a century ago, to change the “spirit” of the debate, not just the forms. Such a challenge underpins my thinking in this analysis of Spanish American children’s literature and inevitably points to the complexity of the postcolonial experience that affects generation after generation in this enormous region of contrasts and convergences.

Notes

1 I use the term “redescription” in Rorty’s sense: “The ironist’s preferred form of argument is dialectical in the sense that she takes the unit of persuasion to be a vocabulary rather than a proposition. Her method is redescription rather than inference” (Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, 78).

2 According to Marian Keyes and Aine McGillicuddy, “ideological content can be transmitted in various ways in children’s literature, at times not even deliberately on the part of the author” (Politics and Ideology, 10).
A term coined by Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortíz to describe the merging of cultures (see Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar, 1947). Mary Louise Pratt refers to the space where transculturation occurs as the “contact zone” in which “disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination” (Imperial Eyes, 4). Bill Ashcroft, working from Althusser, refers to the same process as “interpolation,” “in which the colonized culture interpolates the dominant discourse in order to transform it in ways that release the representation of local realities” (“Modernity’s First Born,” 18; see also Ashcroft et al., Post-Colonial Studies, 213–214). Angel Rama later applies the term to Latin American narrative in Transculturación narrativa en América Latina (1987) (see Camayd-Freixas and González, Primitivism and Identity, 89–107).

Translations into Spanish are from indigenous languages only. Classic European or North American texts for children that have been translated into Spanish are not considered here.

This term is used broadly to describe the population that resulted from European and indigenous racial mixing. Originally pejorative, it has transitioned in Latin American discourse to “a positive ‘national’ cultural sign … of shared if disputed indigeneity” (Ashcroft et al., Post-Colonial Studies, 122).

Other critics agree:

Postcolonial literary studies consider how texts inscribe the shifting relations of power and knowledge evident in colonial and postcolonial societies, and in their discussions of traditional narratives, postcolonial literary studies resist universalizing interpretations, preferring to focus on the local and the particular.

(Bradford, Unsettling Narratives, 8)

Good overviews of postcolonial studies may be found in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, The Post-Colonial Studies Reader; Ashcroft et al., Post-Colonial Studies; and Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui, Coloniality at Large.

According to Bill Ashcroft, however, basing his argument on O’Gorman and Rama, “postcolonial analyses have been a feature of Latin American intellectual life at least since the 1950’s” (“Modernity’s First Born,” 10). The introduction to Coloniality at Large: Latin American and the Post-colonial Debate goes even further by indicating the long trajectory of critiques against colonialism by Latin American “letrados” and scholars, who have been largely ignored by the contemporary field of postcolonial studies (Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui, Coloniality at Large, 1–20).

“Es decir, la creencia de que Europa y las sociedades occidentales derivadas del modelo europeo (i.e., Estados Unidos y Canadá) son el ‘centro’ epistemológico y cultural del mundo entero y, correlativamente, las naciones que no son europeas, son su ‘periferia’” (González-Ortega, Relatos mágicos en cuestión, 14) [that is to say, the belief that Europe and Western societies derived from the European model (i.e. the United States and Canada) are the epistemological and cultural ‘center’ of the entire world and, in correlation, non-European nations are its ‘periphery’] (my translation). See also Ashcroft et al., Post-Colonial Studies, 84–85.

Ashcroft lists a host of colonial strategies, constructions, and impositions: “The dislocating power of colonial language, the mapping of the world, the naming and regulation of distant lands, the emptying of space and the suppression of place, the surveillance of the colonized, the discourse of history, systematic education, the erection of the imperialism’s entire spatial and temporal binarism with its invention of race, cannibalism and primitivism, and its distinction between the spirituality and transcendence of Europe and
the materiality and primitivism of the periphery, all these represent modes of imperial control, which in turn generate strategies of resistance and transformation …” (Ashcroft, “Modernity’s First Born,” 20).

10 “The concept of coloniality, a term coined by Quijano, facilitates an understanding of how race and labor were articulated in the colonial period … and of its perpetuation in modern times” (Moraña, Dussel and Jáuregui, Coloniality at Large, 9):

Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations.

(Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 243)

11 “It survives in culture, labor, intersubjective relations, knowledge production, books, cultural patterns, and other aspects of modern existence” (Tlostanova and Mignolo, Learning to Unlearn, 7–8). See also Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 243.

12 Pulin Garg argues that Indian youth are “caught between an agrarian, traditional ethos and the industrial, Western ethos,” causing the fragmentation of Indian identity (Garg and Parikh, Crossroads of Culture, 14).

13 An opposing movement to restore and celebrate aboriginal and indigenous beliefs and culture in a multitude of areas that arose in the twentieth century is called primitivism, “a philosophy of history which theorizes that humanity’s golden age was in the beginnings; that history is not marked by progress but by a tendency toward decline” (Camayd-Freixas and González, Primitivism and Identity, viii). The very name of the field, however, still indicates an implicit assumption that history is linear and that cultures develop or (d) evolve, either for better or for worse, from primitive to modern. Postcolonial theory attempts to break out of this vertical hierarchy and argue for the plurality of epistemologies as equally valid responses to the world.

14 See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Also, the entire field of subaltern studies that looks at the asymmetric power relations generated by colonial subjugation; see, for example, Beverley, Subalternity and Representation, and Rodríguez, The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader.

15 Pulin Garg claims that the double bind is a result of a culture of transience, which “evolves in a society when its individuals are exposed persistently to two distinct ethos about the nature of collectivity and nature of man’s relationship with his collectivity” (Parikh, Transience and Transitions, 52).

16 Bateson specifies five requirements for the double bind:

1. Two or more persons… 2. Repeated experience… 3. A primary negative injunction… 4. A secondary injunction conflicting with the first at a more abstract level, and like the first enforced by punishment or signals which threaten survival… 5. A tertiary negative injunction prohibiting the victim from escaping from the field.

(Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind, 206–207)

17 This term, originally from biology, was introduced into postcolonial theory by Homi Bhabha to describe a process of transculturation in which the merger of two cultures produces something new or in which the dominant culture is markedly transformed by the colonial culture. It has long been
used by Latin American intellectuals, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians to describe not only the cultural mixtures between European and indigenous groups but also the racial mixture (*mestizaje*). For more discussion of this term, see Ashcroft, et al., *Post-Colonial Studies*, 108–111, and Rudd, *The Routledge Companion to Children’s Literature*, 148.

18 See Ashcroft, “Modernity’s First Born” for a defense of applying postcolonial theory to the case of Latin America; see also Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui, *Coloniality at Large*.

19 “those where colonization took the form of invasion by a European power, where colonizers (settlers) exercised racial domination over the autochthonous inhabitants of the lands they invaded, and where indigenous peoples continue to seek recognition, compensation, and self-determination” (Bradford, *Unsettling Narratives*, 4).

20 This middle category of *mestizos*, however, is not homogeneous, though it has often been projected as such in an effort to strengthen unity in the process of nation building. Rather, it has been subdivided into a multitude of groups based on racial coloring: Groups that were darker but not Indian (*cholos*) versus those that were lighter (*ladinos*). Generally, these divisions are accompanied by assumptions about intelligence, capability, beauty, character, and aptitude.

21 Most histories of children’s literature, while acknowledging an oral tradition and didactic pieces aimed at children during the Middle Ages, point to France’s Charles Perrault and his 1697 collection of fairy tales as the beginnings of what we think of today as children’s literature. As the concept of childhood changed during the eighteenth century, a new audience for literature was created, leading to what has been termed the “Golden Age of Children’s Literature” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (See Nikolajeva, et al., *Aspects and Issues in the History of Children’s Literature*, for a fuller discussion of the history of European children’s literature.)

22 According to Bill Ashcroft,

‘the unconscious desire for the persistence of colonial relations’ and the conscious desire for separation and independence, are two positions that can exist side by side in any colonized space, but in the settler colony may so overlap that they can become subject positions adopted by the same subject.

(Ashcroft, “Modernity’s First Born,” 11)

23 The debate was epitomized in Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s mid-nineteenth novel *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie* (1845), but the fundamental binarism was created with the advent of colonialism itself.

24 I have always suspected, however, that at times he spoke tongue-in-cheek and that some of his self-deprecation was in reality a rhetorical ploy aimed at the stereotypes of his Spanish readers.

25 “In order to overcome the hegemony of the *alphabet-oriented notions of text and discourse* Mignolo proposed the term *cultural semiosis* as the overarching concept that, in addition to materials of the lettered tradition, could include cultural artifacts such as quipus, maps, myths, calendars, oral narratives, and discourses produced in indigenous languages, thus allowing for a wider exploration of dominated cultures” (Moraña, Dussel and Jáuregui, *Coloniality at Large*, 3).

26 See Bradford’s discussion and critique of Perry Nodelman’s article in *Unsettling Narratives*. 
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