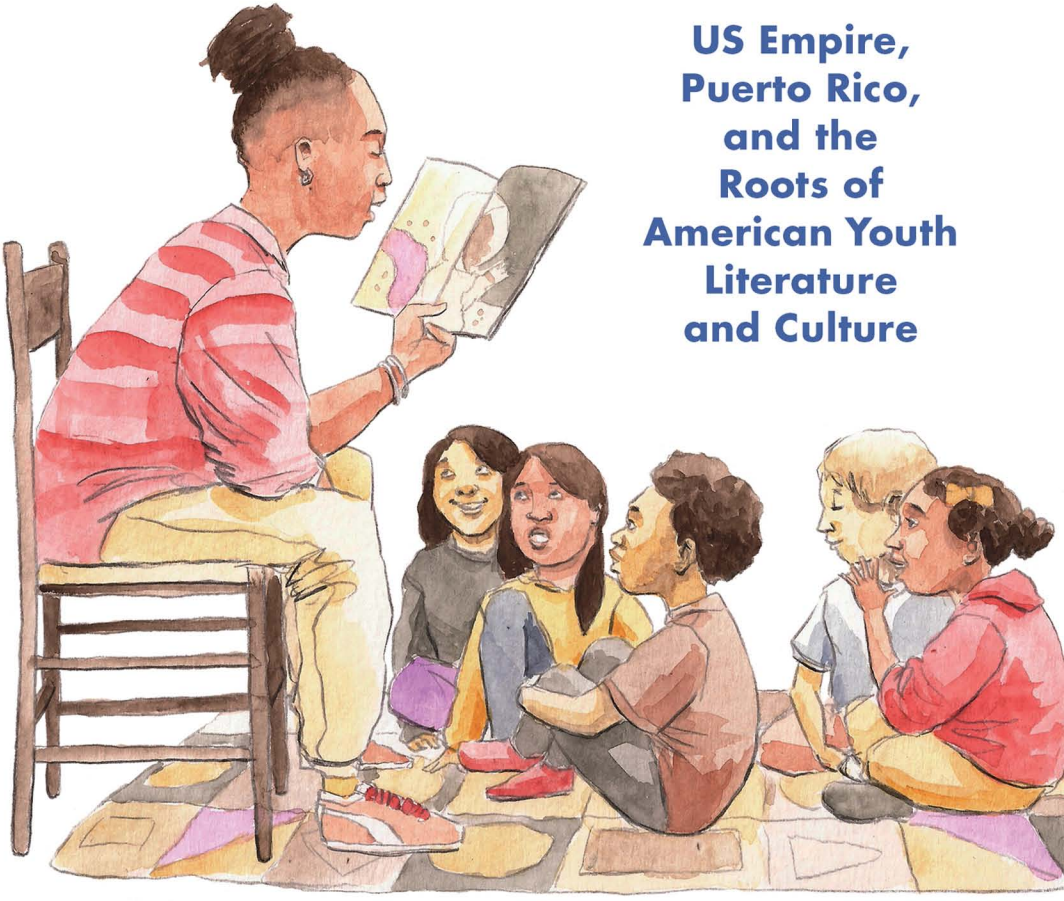
SIDE BY SIDE

US Empire, Puerto Rico, and the Roots of American Youth Literature and Culture



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Foreword by Sonia Nieto

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THE LETTER OF THE DAY IS Ñ

Sesame Street, a Girl Named Maria, and Performing Multilingualism in Children's Television

A wooden casita, built over an abandoned lot in East Harlem, foregrounds an icon of American children's lore: Big Bird. After greeting *Sesame Street*'s child viewers by saying "Hola," Big Bird explains that a "casita is a special kind of house just like they have in Puerto Rico."[1] The casitas, rural island dwellings sandwiched by modern skyscrapers, exemplify a pattern in the art of the Puerto Rican diaspora: the building of a structure, whether imaginative, physical, or, in this chapter, linguistic, over a US given. Big Bird among the casitas also demonstrates how the diaspora's approach, and imposition, toward US culture imprints the dominant culture—an American icon speaking Spanish. "Hola" is a familiar word in the *Sesame Street* universe, particularly since the 1971 introduction of Sonia "Maria" Manzano, the Puerto Rican actress and writer for the Children's Television Workshop,[2] the production company that makes *Sesame Street*. Manzano, recently retired in 2014, began writing literature for young people in 2003 with her first picture book, *A Box Full of Kittens*, followed by *No Dogs Allowed!* (2007). Both celebrated the simple joys of young Latinxs growing up in New York. However, her turn to young adult audiences in *The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano* (2013) and *Becoming Maria* (2014) employs the kind of critical, creative lens she employed for years rendering Latinx lives and histories visible on *Sesame Street*. Manzano's revolutionary role of over forty years as performer and writer on *Sesame Street* as "Maria" gave a face and voice to a diaspora community that is significantly underrepresented in the children's literary world. Even with the work of Pura Belpré and Nicholasa Mohr, Puerto Ricans and Latinxs overall remain among the least represented groups in all youth literature and media.[3] As one of the "friendly neighbors" on one of the nation's most beloved television shows for young people, the celebrated presence and role of Maria/Manzano on *Sesame Street* forces a consideration of why children's

television, as opposed to children's literature, offered such a prominent cultural address for this community.

What has been possible for Latinxs in children's television apart from children's literature? An irony exists when the erasure of people of color protagonists persists on the page, yet for fifty years *Sesame Street* has presented people of color as ordinary, friendly neighbors. Even in Latinx Studies, Sonia Manzano's performance and writing on *Sesame Street* is seldom discussed when considering Latinx representation and audience reception in media, as opposed to those happening in adult media around figures such as Jennifer Lopez, Rosario Dawson, and Selena Quintanilla (Baez 2019). Manzano belongs in conversations about how Latinxs as subjects and agents resist the rigid stereotypes of Latinas, ultimately owning and authoring representations in prominent venues. Youth media, television, film, and music, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, should form part of our understanding of writing for young people and Latinx media more broadly. Angie Thomas, author of the breakout young adult novel *The Hate You Give* (2016), often credits Tupac Shakur and other rap artists as her writing role models when she was a young person struggling to find herself in the literary world. "Publishing did something pretty terrible. They made the assumption that black kids don't read" (*Telegraph*).[4] Thomas's references to television such as *It's a Different World* and artists like Shakur underline how literacy and reading function outside the dictates of literature, the canon, and school curriculum. Moreover, the notion in the 1970s and 1980s, when television was still blamed for "rotting minds," that the medium could transform and supplement learning, especially early literacy skills, was controversial and revolutionary.[5] From the late 1970s through the 1990s, while publishing dismissed generations of youth of color, television provided teachers and models of color such as Levar Burton in *Reading Rainbow* and Sonia Manzano in *Sesame Street* bridging the gap between audiences and books, echoing the kind of critical literacy practices modeled by Belpré and Schomburg decades before.

Manzano's performance and writing from the 1970s to the 2000s invites an examination of where generations of readers would turn when publishing remained silent, and what those audiences would learn about how multiple languages and cultures shape their worlds. The medium of television affords a playing with language which at times, registers as shallow ("Hola Means Hello"), but also revolutionary for its dedication to yielding to multilingual discourses. For example, although Nicholasa Mohr, the preeminent children's author of the Nuyorican era, injects Spanish words and phrases, she limits code-switching given her relationship to her audience: "[Poets] can read their work aloud and have close contact with their public. When I do use words

in Spanish, I follow them up with English in a way that is clear" (Rodriquez, 93). Here, Mohr implies that speaking and performance transcend certain limits existing on the written page.

In this chapter, I focus on how the character of Maria functions in relationship to *Sesame Street*'s language pedagogy. During Manzano's tenure, 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. However, as a character based in US and Puerto Rican cultures, Maria's role of teaching language through performance connects to Puerto Rican literacy traditions. Specifically, 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. Like the aesthetic of the casitas, *Sesame Street* presents Spanish as difficult to ignore since it has augmented the structure of official English. Bilingual characters like Maria and Luis collide with a variety of characters and cultures. On the show, Maria embodies bilingualism as a communicative gift which can benefit everyone on the *Street*. She is particularly intriguing in that, unlike Belpré and Mohr's creations, Maria is a combination of television producers' imaginings and Manzano's performative and literal authorship. While children's literature, as Clare Bradford writes, reflects the language-related power struggles of colonial societies,[6] such as naming and ordering territories, there is a lack of language experimentation and interaction in many books for youth (Bradford, 20–43). Despite growing interest in international and more diverse authors and stories in recent scholarship, outside of discussions on translation, children's literature scholars say little about the use and exchange of foreign languages, and even less about Spanish as a non-foreign part of US youth literature.[7] Yet, what happens when languages collide and break unspoken rules, such as when *Sesame Street* enables exchanges such as untranslated dialogue and segments completely in Spanish?

Sesame Street and Maria represent a paradox similar to how Jillian Baez describes the iconic *West Side Story* film and play, a cultural landmark that served as a filter for producers when creating *Sesame Street*'s Puerto Rican heroine. Baez writes about the ironies of problematic though useful portrayals: "On the one hand, *West Side Story* filled a gap in entertainment media, where Puerto Ricans were seldom represented. On the other hand, it served as a template through which non-Puerto Ricans made sense of Puerto Ricans, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, when few cinematic representation of Puerto Ricans were in circulation" (1). *Sesame Street* circulates stories about Latinxs and language in a way unprecedented in print mediums, touting both the power of broadcast

media and its ability to intervene in communities disenfranchised by schooling situations. My analysis probes questions of access regarding racial justice and historically disadvantaged children, among them African American and Puerto Rican preschoolers, the two "at-risk" groups targeted by *Sesame Street*'s early research and self-esteem curriculum. Maria's creation marks television producers' desire to reach a Puerto Rican community perceived as violent and impoverished, a group of preschoolers that producers may have felt had more access to television than literature. Yet, this is not a study in linguistics, nor is it a comprehensive study on Sonia Manzano's role in television history, although my analysis touches on these subjects.

Maria, a representation of Puerto Rican migrants in New York City—and, specifically, Sonia Manzano's performance, embodiment, and later writing of the Latinx content on the show—serves as an illustration in both sections of this chapter since she embodies the show's language ideology. First, I analyze the show's approach to presenting bilingual discourse as a give-and-take negotiation of power. What children's programs like *Sesame Street* compel us to see is that languages do not always run parallel, as bilingual books often suggest. "A bilingual," Ana Celia Zentella writes, "is not two monolinguals stuck at the neck" (56). I highlight the historical and social issues underlying Maria's creation as drawing on popular portrayals such as *West Side Story* while still opposing stereotypes of migrants. Maria's character and performance illustrates the show's approach to pacifying relations between rival languages, English and Spanish. Second, I examine the role of performance in *Sesame Street*'s language instruction. Language and performance on *Sesame Street* are interrelated to the point that the show presents performance as language, and language as a performance. Maria, particularly in her performances as a mime, illustrates the show's representation of language as a process of mimicking sounds and/or gestures, like miming, singing, or dancing. In the show's pluralistic vision, *Sesame Street* portrays racial, cultural, and language difference to preschool children as something akin to the theatrical concept of people and languages as existing as an ensemble. For over fifty years, this concept of ensemble has enabled *Sesame Street* to "do things with words"[8] that had not been possible in youth literature.

RUMBLE: LANGUAGE AS DUEL, BILINGUAL CHILDREN'S CULTURE, AND A GIRL NAMED MARIA

Throughout this book, I have asked us to consider how side-by-side relationships of close proximity often reflect deep colonial anxieties and colonial

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Marilisa's research on Latinx literature have appeared in *Latino Studies*, *CENTRO: A Journal of Puerto Rican Studies*, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, and *Children's Literature*. Her dissertation on Puerto Rican children's literature won the 2012 Puerto Rican Studies Association. She is also a Cultivating New Voices Among Scholars of Color Fellowship recipient from the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE).

Marilisa seeks to create pathways in her research between the multiple fields of Latinx Studies, Puerto Rican Studies, children's and young adult literature, comparative literature, and education. Her work with Teaching for Change seeks to bring together research and practical tools for classroom teachers advocating for social and racial justice in the classroom. She has worked as a classroom volunteer in Miami and New York City public schools and with the Children's Defense Fund Freedom School's book selection committee.