

What Does It Mean to Be Puerto Rican in Children's Literature?

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ABSTRACT: Under the large umbrella of Latinx children's literature, the books and studies that specifically portray Puerto Rican characters, settings, and stories are limited, creating a gap in understanding the representations of Puerto Ricans in children's literature. This study explores the voices of Puerto Ricans through a critical content analysis of twenty contemporary realistic picture books published from 2000-2016. The collection shows 1) a magical but limiting representation of the island; 2) a consistent absence of the African or Afro-Puerto Rican identity; 3) a complex use of Spanish in English texts and, 4) a resistance against a colonial discourse and myths that have historically described the broad Latinx population as indifferent with regards to their children's educación.

Key words: Puerto Rican children's literature, Latinx children's literature, postcolonial theory, critical race theory, critical content analysis, contemporary realistic fiction, counter-narrative

Introduction

There are 3.4 million Puerto Ricans on the island and 5.3 million Puerto Ricans living in the United States, U.S. (Census 2015). Puerto Rican families have a strong presence in classrooms across the U.S., especially across the East Coast. Still, misconceptions and narrowed understandings about what it means to be Puerto Rican continuously frame the lives of many children and families. Latinx-Puerto Rican children's literature can become a vehicle into exploring how this heterogeneous community navigates complex and blended geographical, national, and linguistic worlds (and borders).

Literature is never neutral, but ideological, contributing to the creation of meaning "within particular contexts, negotiated among individuals, and implicated in power dynamics" (Ghiso & Campano, 2013, p. 48). Children's literature, besides ideological, has historically been didactical, aiming to teach the reader something about the world from a particular perspective. Therefore, what is included and excluded in a children's book, within its written text and illustrations, matters because it positions characters, settings, and plots in dialogue within narratives that shape how individuals and communities, like Latinxs and Puerto Ricans, are perceived, and how they are respected and valued or silenced and dehumanized.

This study explores the voices of Puerto Ricans through a critical content analysis of twenty Latino children's picture books that portray Puerto Rican characters and stories set on the island and in the U.S. The main questions guiding this study are:

- How are Puerto Rican experiences represented in contemporary realistic fiction for young children?
- How is the Island depicted in the text and illustrations?

The article begins by providing a brief historical overview of Puerto Rico and research on Puerto Rican children's literature. Then, I provide a theoretical framework followed by a description of the methodological approach, which includes the criteria for book selection. Subsequently, I describe four findings and their relationship with patterns previously noted in the field of Latinx children's literature. Finally, I reflect on the teaching implications of this kind of research.

Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican Children's Literature

Puerto Rico is a Caribbean island and one of the five Greater Antilles, located between the Dominican Republic and St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Island. Puerto Rico has gone through two major colonization processes. The Spaniard colonization began in 1493 with the arrival of Christopher Columbus, Spanish colonists, and African slaves. Popularly speaking, it is said that Puerto Ricans, as an ethnic group, emerged from the interactions between Spanish, Africans, and the Indigenous Taínos, who inhabited the Island before the Spanish colonization. In 1898 Spain lost the Spaniard-American war, which resulted in Puerto Rico being annexed to the United States and becoming an unincorporated territory of the United States. Years later, in 1917 Puerto Ricans became American Citizens through the Jones-Shafroth Act. Having a U.S. passport has allowed Puerto Ricans since the 1900s to move between the Island and the United States due to economical and sociopolitical factors with the largest wave of migration in the 1950s (Whalen, 2005). Nowadays, Puerto Rico maintains the colonial status and due to Puerto Rico's economic debt, the island is facing what has been called as possibly the greatest exodus in Puerto Rico's history.

The majority of the Latino children's literature portrays the experiences of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans (Short, Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2014) but the history of Puerto Rican children's literature has little documentation (Gregory 1993; Nieto, 1997; Figueras, 2000; Torres-Rivera, 2014). Sonia Nieto's (1997) survey of Puerto Ricans in children's books examined books published in the U.S. through the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) from 1940-1994. Texts from 1940-1972 were saturated by racism, stereotypes, sexism, negative representations of the Puerto Rican family, ethnocentric colonialism and misconceptions regarding the use of Spanish. Nieto attributes these patterns to a strong presence of non-Puerto Rican authors. Titles from 1973-1983 focused on the process of assimilation and a sense of inferiority. In this regards, Lucille Gregory (1993) argues that in the past, the intended audience had been primarily older readers, in part because of the complexity of the topics presented such as gangs and ghettos. The third subgroup consisted of 45 stories from 1983-1994 for preschoolers to young adolescents, in which an emergence of more accurate and authentic representations began to emerge. This time, Nieto (1997) attributes the decrease of misrepresentations to the authors' and illustrators' real-life experiences and knowledge of Puerto Rican communities. Nieto's article is still frequently cited because it is the survey that analyzed the largest body of Puerto Rican children's literature.

Consuelo Figueras (2000), focusing on stories published on the Island, describes a historical overview that acknowledges 1917 as the year that "books became more accessible to Puerto Rican children" (p. 24). The main goal of promoting reading and americanizing Puerto Rican children through literature encouraged book donations from the United States, the establishment of library services, and reading campaigns. The genre of traditional literature and poetry, particularly legends, riddles and rhymes, allowed writers and educators to share the influence of Spanish, Taíno, and African cultures, distinguished by Puerto Rican oral traditions. The major themes identified at that time were family love, moral and religious values, and ethics. Figueras (2000) also describes the picture books that emerged in the 1990s as characterized by more "realistic short stories set in present-day Puerto Rico" (p. 27).

Most recently, Carmen Milagros Torres-Rivera (2014) argues that Puerto Rican children's literature strongly describes historical or folkloric characters, settings, and experiences. Rich representations and references include 1) the Indigenous Taínos; 2) the coquí, an autochthonous amphibian collectively adopted as a national symbol, and; 3) Juan Bobo, a folkloric character who depicts values associated with rural life during the 1950's (honesty, hard work, respect to adults, and community). Torres' research also notices a very limited number of stories depicting Afro-Puerto Rican characters, which she aims to correct with her own collection of short stories, which include titles like: *Dancing Bomba* (2010), published through Anansesem.

This study seeks to bridge the gaps identified in previous research by contributing patterns and findings across book for young children, particularly stories with contemporary realistic representations that are published more recently. Also, my focus is on books created primarily by authors who self-identify as Puerto Rican or bicultural with Puerto Rican heritage.

Theoretical Framework

This study constitutes a critical content analysis of Puerto Rican children's books guided by the frameworks of postcolonial theory and critical race theory. Critical content analysis

supports the exploration of relationships of power in the social practices presented in the texts in order to challenge condition of inequity (Johnson, Mathis & Short, 2017)

Claire Bradford (2007) argues that “Language is the primary mode through which colonizers and colonized encountered one another, and it is the principal means whereby relations of power are challenged and altered” (p.6). The language of children’s literature presents an opportunity for critically reflecting upon the ideologies embodied in the books, which suggest ways of being and living in the world. Post-colonial theory explores and questions the cultural legacy of colonial processes after colonization. While Puerto Rico maintains a colonial status, Lois Tyson (2011) argues that children’s books [about Puerto Ricans] can be described as postcolonial literature because the vast majority of the authors are members of the Latino community, which shared experiences of colonization similar to formerly colonized population. Sara Mills’ (2004) description regarding the monolithic view of Latinxs and other minorities in the United States as an “undifferentiated mass about whom one could amass ‘knowledge’ or which could be stereotyped” (p. 97) is an example of those shared experiences of colonization. A postcolonial lens can serve as a tool to identify binaries, beliefs of superiority common in colonialist ideology, and non-violent anti-colonialist resistance actions. Philip Nel and Lissa Paul (2011) argue that contemporary production of postcolonial children’s literature includes a large amount of stories told from the perspective of Indigenous authors and illustrators, whose work serves as counter-narratives. García (2011) also argues that Puerto Rican children’s literature should be analyzed from a post-colonial perspective because even though the island currently has a colonial status, the written and illustrated stories constitute a form of *writing back* to the colonizers.

Critical race theory (CRT) places race at the center of analysis, while also exploring the intersectionality between race and racism with class, gender, sexual orientation, nation origin, and language (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT is committed to social justice and to challenge dominant notions of race and racism through counter-narrative, “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). Counter-narratives are an important concept within critical race theory and postcolonial theory because they constitute a way of looking and interpreting the world that challenges and disrupts dominant discourse. Brooks (2017) argues that CRT’s relevance within children’s literature can be noticed in the historical underrepresentation and misrepresentation of books by and about people of color. Most recent CRT-based research in Latinx children’s literature by Braden and Rodriguez (2016) describe a consistent attempt to privilege English and English monolingual readers; a superficial integration of cultural artifacts from a touristic view; traditional depictions of gender roles; and, a tendency to create near-perfect families and story endings.

The Latinx-Puerto Rican authors in this study have constructed a wide range of experiences that can help readers explore the implications of colonial discourse and manifestations of psychological resistance, essential for other means of resistance to take place.

Research Methodology

The goal of this critical content analysis is to identify patterns and themes across a collection of twenty contemporary realistic picture books in relationship to one another, rather than engaging in an in-depth analysis of individual stories. The books were published between 2000-2016 and published in one of the following databases or websites: Worlds of Words,

Anansem-The Caribbean Children’s Literature Ezine or Amazon. The first two resources were selected for their professional outreach and teaching/scholarship orientation. Both databases also explicitly highlight collections of Caribbean and Latinx children’s literature. Amazon was selected in order to identify the titles that are easily accessible to a wider audience. Through this resource self-published books such as *Tulipán*, were found.

The books highlighted representations of Puerto Rican characters, settings, languages, and family and community practices and themes. Explicit references to Puerto Rico were present in the author’s note, copyright page, book’s blurb or review. Books that reflected a broader Latino experience, even when written by authors who self-identified as Puerto Ricans, such as Samuel Caraballo (2012) *My Big Sister* and Judith Cofer (2011) *¡A Bailar! Let’s Dance!* were excluded given the existing broad research around Latinxs children’s literature. Similarly, books that portray the Puerto Rican experience within a global context like Lulu Delacre (2013) *How Far Do you Love Me?* were also omitted because of their overall goal of showing diversity in the world, whereas this study seeks to understand diversity within the Puerto Rican experience across the Latino umbrella. The genre of contemporary realistic fiction was intentionally selected in order to 1) understand the explicit and implicit messages (values and ideologies) imbedded in the written and visual text that target young readers, and 2) move beyond frequent analyses that focus on the genres of traditional and informational literature. The year of publication was noted to create an image of Puerto Rican representations across 2000-2016. The book titles and descriptions are included in Table 1.

Table 1: Book Descriptions

Book/Author	Book Description
<i>Estrellita se despide de su isla/Estrellita says good-bye to her island</i> (Bilingual), by Samuel Caraballo	Estrellita is moving to New York City with her father. She describes the Puerto Rican landscapes and traditions that she will miss.
<i>Mis abuelos y yo/My grandparents and I</i> (Bilingual), by Samuel Caraballo	A young boy describes how much he enjoys spending time with his grandparents.
<i>Estrellita en la ciudad grande / Estrellita in the big city</i> (Bilingual), by Samuel Caraballo	Estrellita now lives in New York City with her father. Over a phone conversation, she tells her Grandma Panchita about her new life.
<i>The poet upstairs</i> , by Judith Cofer Ortiz	Juliana misses school for being sick. She spends the day with her mysterious neighbor who is passionate about poetry.
<i>La parranda de Mimi/Mimi's parranda</i> (Bilingual), by Lydia M. Gil	Mimí is sad because she won’t be able to go to Puerto Rico over the winter. Her classmates organize a parranda for her.
<i>Tulipán: The Puerto Rican giraffe</i> , by Aida Haiman	Tulipán thinks and questions what it means to be Puerto Rican.
<i>Miracle on 133rd Street</i> , by Sonia Manzano	José and Papá find the perfect oven for their Christmas roast and enjoy a community celebration.
<i>No dogs allowed!</i> , by Sonia Manzano	Everyone goes to the lake and finds creative ways to watch for El Exigente, who is not allowed in the area.

<i>Elena's big move</i> , by Sarah M. Olivieri	Elena and her family are moving to Indiana. She creates photo albums to remember Puerto Rico and to learn about her new school and community.
<i>Sofi and the magic, musical mural/Sofi y el mágico mural musical (Bilingual)</i> , by Raquel M. Ortiz	Sofi learns about Puerto Rican bomba, plena, and vegigantes through the colorful community mural called: "El pueblo cantor".
<i>Play ball!</i> , by Jorge Posada w/Robert Burleigh	Jorge is coached to be a left-handed to enhance his opportunities as a Baseball player.
<i>Baseball on Mars/Béisbol en Marte (Bilingual)</i> , by Rafael Rivera & Tim Hoppey	Roberto and Papá spend time together copiloting a rocket ship and playing 'catch' all afternoon on Mars.
<i>Green Christmas</i> , by Carmen Rivera-Lassén	Abuela Cheli comes to the city to spend El día de los Reyes Magos with her three grandchildren.
<i>A doll for Navidades</i> , by Esmeralda Santiago	Esmeralda and her siblings are getting ready for the Three Kings' Day. This year, Esmeralda received a gift that makes her rethink the meaning of this special tradition.
<i>Grandma's records</i> , by Eric Velasquez	Eric and his Grandma listen to Caribbean rhythms and enjoy their first Salsa concert.
<i>Grandma's gift</i> , by Eric Velasquez	Eric and his Grandma spend time together making pasteles and visiting the Marqueta, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
<i>Looking for Bongo</i> , by Eric Velasquez	A young boy looks everywhere and asks everyone for his stuffed animal, Bongo.
<i>The coquí and the iguana</i> , by Alidis Vicente	Sebastian and his cousin visit La Parquera and learn stories about the iguanas and the coquis.
<i>Sergio and the hurricane</i> , by Alexandra Wallner	Sergio learns what to do before, during, and after a hurricane.
<i>The day the animals came: A story of Saint Francis Day</i> , by Frances W. Weller	Ria develops a sense of belonging to her new community after attending the special Feast of Saint Francis celebration at the cathedral.

The themes emerged from multiple transactions with the texts and the theory. An initial reading was completed to get a general sense of the broad themes in the story, as well as initial personal responses to the text and the illustrations. Then, I read deeply about postcolonial and critical race theory in order to cultivate the ability of thinking *with* theory by reading the data while thinking about theory (Johnson, Mathis & Short, 2017, p. 9). I also identified related research studies that could inform my research process. Some of the studies consisted of content analysis, while the others were described as critical content analysis. Whereas content analysis might employ a critical lens to analyze its findings, critical content analysis frames every aspect of the research (including the research questions) through a critical theory. Subsequently, I engaged in an in-depth theoretical and contextual reading considering the following questions proposed by Botelho and Rudman (2009):

- Focalization: Whose story is told? From whose point of view?
- Social processes of characters: Who has power? Who has agency?
- Closure: How is the story resolved? What are the assumptions in the story closure?

I created a spreadsheet that included book title, setting, author/illustrator, connection between the author/illustrator to Puerto Rico, summary, and codes that depicted the representations of the characters, landscapes, languages and ideologies. A recursive and flexible process between the data and the theory supported the emergence of the patterns that are been discussed in this article.

Themes in Puerto Rican Picture Books

This study describes the following four findings: 1) a magical but limiting representation of the island; 2) a consistent absence of the African or Afro-Puerto Rican identity; 3) a complex use of Spanish in English texts and, 4) a resistance against a colonial discourse and myths that have historically described the broad Latino population as indifferent with regards to their children's educación.

The dominant picture: “One city, one country”

So green...

Puerto Rico is well known for its green landscapes, tropical beaches, and consistent warm temperatures. This image of paradisiac Puerto Rico dominates the narrative in fifteen of the twenty books analyzed. From mangrove trees growing in the bioluminescent waters of La Parguera on the south shore of the island to the Río Camuy Caves and the Yunque National Forest. These green descriptions of the island, although accurate, are incomplete, and contribute to narrow understandings of Puerto Rico and its inhabitants. For example, the books lead readers to assume that the majority of Puerto Ricans on the island are living in rural areas. This unrealistic narrative fails to represent the experiences of the 93.6% of Puerto Ricans living in urban communities (Census, 2010), which diminishes and silences the stories of these individuals, children, and families.

Sometimes the rural narrative is the result of a comparison between two places: Puerto Rico and New York City. In *Estrellita en la gran ciudad/Estrellita in the Big City* (Caraballo, 2008), an illustration on the left, shows grandmother Panchita seated in an open space, the terrace, in front of the ocean. The open sky and the horizon create a sense of space, peace, and freedom. The contrasting illustration on the right depicts Estrellita sitting on her new bed looking at buildings and cars through a small window. Even though the room seems spacious, the absence of nature creates a sense of confinement. The pattern in the written text and illustrations compare a busy, noisy, modern New York City to a quiet, peaceful, coastal Puerto Rico.

A similar comparison between Puerto Rico and the Bronx can be observed in *Tulipán: the Puerto Rican giraffe* (Haiman, 2013):

“It was fun being of two places: one cold, one hot, one city, one country [...] she had lived hearing and visiting the sunny, enchanted island washed by the seas [...] She loved the Big Apple, too”.

While Tulipán's initial comparison seems to simplify the experiences of both places, the story continues by introducing the reader to modern Puerto Rican architecture like “el choliseo”, Coliseo de Puerto Rico José Miguel Agrelot “Don Cholito”, and the University of Puerto Rico. Balanced portrayals of the island are limited. A second attempt to create more balanced representations of the island can be found in *Elena's Big Move* (Olivieri, 2009) where Puerto Rico and Indiana are compared through similarities and differences. When Elena shares her

photo album of Puerto Rico with her new classmates, she points “at the rainforest, the caves, and the beach”. Her new teacher “suggests that the class help Elena collect pictures of Indiana to make a [new] album”. The students’ ideas included: Marengo Cave Park, Bluesprings Caverns and Hoosier National Park. Elena’s and her classmates’ contributions focus on landscapes of both places as contexts that hold family stories. Along with exploring points of connections between two places, this book is one of the few within the collection that also describes elements of urban Puerto Rico such as: high buildings and hotels by the beach and the airport. *Elena’s Big Move* describes an island that shares connections with other cities around the world.

Consistent green and rural representations of Puerto Rico create a single story (Adichie, 2009) that situates the island back in the 1950s when agriculture was the primary economical factor, landscape extensions were greater, and contemporary urban cities and towns were minimal. This dominant rural narrative supports ideological values such as honesty and preference for a simple, never changing life (Yenika-Agbaw, 2003; Bradford; 1995, 2001). These views position Puerto Rico as naïve and fearful of the constant ongoing changes of society, portraying them as insufficient, and dependent from larger cities and countries. Furthermore, the single story suggests that progress and technology have not influenced Puerto Rico’s sociocultural, economical, and political contexts; an island trapped in time and space with little resources and knowledge to face challenges of the global world; an undeveloped place to be (re)discovered.

The dominant rural representation of Puerto Rico created by stressing the island’s landscapes is problematic. First, it defines Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans by virtue of differences from the U.S. (Bradford, 2007). In other words, defining Puerto Rico as the opposite from U.S. This presents a conflict for countless children and families whose bicultural identities recognize connections across places, while also acknowledging the unique characteristics of each context. Positioning Puerto Rico as an exotic remote island also creates a barrier that prevents readers from understanding the colonial relationship between both countries over time.

So magical, but...

Authors writing from their childhood memories sometimes created the manifestations of Puerto Rico as a magical place. For example, Esmeralda Santiago describes *A Doll for Navidades* (2005) as “based on what happened on my seventh Día de los Reyes Magos” (Authors Note). Meanwhile, Alidis Vicente explains in her website that *The Coquí and the Iguana* (2011) was inspired by her many summer trips to Puerto Rico. For these authors, Puerto Rico “continues to be home, a romantic place that is fondly remembered for its past glories and rich cultural practices” (Yenika-Agbaw, 2003, p. 242), including its beautiful landscapes and tropical nature. In *A Doll for Navidades* (Santiago, 2005), however, Esmeralda questions her socio-economical context saying: “The Three Kings are Magic. Why can’t they make enough baby dolls for everyone?” Esmeralda’s concern puts into perspective the idea of Puerto Rico as a magical place with economical hardships and lack of opportunities.

Thirty percent of the books in the collection are set on the Island. Only *A Doll for Navidades* sends an explicit message around the household’ economical situation. The rest of the stories, while making no direct reference, suggest fishing, agriculture, coaching, and sales as the

kinds of jobs available on the island. *Play Ball!* (Posada & Burleigh, 2010) describes a father coaching his son to be a left-handed batter in order for him to be more successful in the U.S. American Professional Baseball League. This story provides a transition into the rest of the texts set between the Island and the U.S. or entirely in the U.S., where conversations about economics were always on the table. For example, in *Estrellita se despide de su isla/Estrellita says good-bye to her island* (Caraballo, 2002) Estrellita and her father moved to New York to seek new job opportunities, while Grandma Panchita stays in Puerto Rico fishing and selling fritters to pay her bills. Elena (Olivieri, 2009) moves with her family to Indiana because of her father's new job. The majority of the books set in the U.S. make explicit references to the characters' professional life and their related challenges, often portraying the parents' struggle in juggling family and work. In *Grandma's Records* (Velasquez, 2001) and *Grandma's Gift* (Velasquez, 2010) Eric spends summer and winter breaks with his Grandma because both of his parents work. Tulipàn explains that when she and her mother have no money they go to the bodega to "get some rice and beans, fiao" (to pay later). In *Where the Animals Came* (Weller, 2003) Ria came to New York City with her parents, who "were always working" hoping for a better life, while she spent long hours with her neighbor.

The books set on the island portray Puerto Ricans as not worrying or aware of their economical context, which can be interpreted as ignorance or conformism. Meanwhile, the U.S. is positioned as a place that provides opportunities for those who are aware of their economical context, work hard, and are willing to make sacrifices. Chappell and Faltis, (2007) who examined the portrayal of culture and identity in Latinx children's books, found that sometimes Mexico was described as "a magical place, but one with no opportunities. The only chance for success in life is to stay in America" (p. 259). In looking at Caribbean picture books Malcolm and Lowery (2011) also found that the U.S. was depicted as a land of opportunities, while the Caribbean was portrayed as a less desirable option. This ideology that positions the U.S. as superior was also present in this collection of Puerto Rican stories. From a post-colonial perspective, the limited range of jobs and the absence of conversations around these themes position Puerto Rico as economically dependent, incapable of offering its inhabitants the quality of life they are looking for, and uninterested in changing their ways of doing and thinking (Mills, 2004).

Eric Velasquez and Afro-Puerto Rican stories

Afro-Puerto Rican characters and stories are underrepresented within the umbrella of Puerto Rican children's literature (Torres-Rivera, 2014). This lack of representation of Afro-Puerto Ricans, but also Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latino stories is also a concern within the larger Latino umbrella of children's literature. This absence suggests a form of racialization as readers begin to form specific ideologies around race also based on the absence of Afro-Puerto Rican narratives (Martinez-Roldán & García, 2016).

Previous research in Puerto Rican children's literature found that the African context was introduced primarily in books deemed as traditional or informational literature with educational purposes. Figueras (2000) describes that children's books between the 1950-1980 infused "the three elements of Puerto Rican culture-Taíno, Spanish, and African" (p. 26), a restatement of collective thought regarding the emergence of Puerto Ricans. Years later, African and Afro-Puerto Rican stories published in the 1990s prioritized slavery stories. These important narratives, when only situated in the past, contribute to a false notion of the end of racism on the

Island while they also create no point of connection to the future, making it hard for readers to examine the implications and place of the stories in their own lives.

In this collection of books the Afro-Puerto Rican experience is primarily addressed in the illustrations with the inclusion of characters that reflect different shades of black, suggesting that people on the island are representative of a range of skin colors. While illustrations are important in picture books, the way these Afro-Puerto Ricans have been depicted suggests a strategic marketing technique, rather than a true intent to create a space for the Afro-Puerto Rican voices to be heard and understood.

On the other hand, this collection of books also includes the work of three artists who purposefully create the stories of Afro-Puerto Ricans. Eric Velasquez narrates stories inspired by his own experiences as son of two Afro-Puerto Rican parents in the United States. Raquel Ortiz's and Maria Dominguez's story draws from their work with public art, particularly community murals. Velasquez's references to Afro-Puerto Rican cultural details and practices are core to the development of his stories, providing depth and breadth. In *Grandma's Records* (2001) the main characters, Eric and Grandma, explore the African drum rhythms of bomba and the African and Spanish sounds of plena, Puerto Rico folk music, through Rafael Cortijo y su Combo. *Grandma's Gift* (2010) depicts Eric and Grandma listening to Afro-Puerto Rican composer, Rafael Hernandez's famous Christmas carol called Aguinaldo Puertorriqueño. They also learn about the life of Juan de Pareja, a slave born artist, assistant to Spanish painter Diego Velasquez. In 2015 Raquel Ortiz and Maria Dominguez published the story *Sofi and the Magic, Musical Mural/Sofi y el mágico mural musical*. This story introduces Sofi to folk music bomba y plena and to the vejigante, which history has Spanish, African, and Taíno roots. Velasquez's latest Puerto Rican story, *Looking for Bongo* (2016), explores, primarily through its illustrations, African artifacts on the walls, a passion for African rhythms through the congas and bongos, and cultural identity and self-image through the boy's Afro hair.

These stories depicting Afro-Puerto Rican characters contribute to the development of racial literacy, which has been described as tools, beliefs and abilities to support children in encountering, identifying, recasting, resolving and overcoming everyday racism (Twine, 2004; Coleman & Stevenson, 2014). The goals of racial literacy include the deconstruction of racial information and knowledge, the building of healthy, flexible construction of racial identity, the willful, choosing racial styles and self-expression, and the assertive countering of racial stereotypes. Racial literacy can support Black students in understanding themselves and developing ways of being Black and Latinx that help them being successful in and outside of the academic context (Martinez-Roldán & García, 2016). This literature, as a cultural artifact, can impart knowledge, skills, and dispositions so students can empower themselves intellectually, emotionally, socially and politically. These books in the context of Puerto Rican schools and communities on the Island can support educators in engaging children in conversations about race and racism, which are often silent or deem unnecessary under the collective conceptualization that all Boricuas emerged from the interactions between Spanish, Africans, and Taínos.

Spanish in Puerto Rican Children's Books

Puerto Ricans learned Spanish as a result of the Spaniard colonization process. When the Island was annexed to United States, efforts to establish English as the official language were unsuccessful. In 1902 the Official Language Act was passed making English and Spanish both

official languages. In 1991, the government passed a law making Spanish the official language. In 1993 English and Spanish were both recognized as co-official languages. Recently, in September 2015, Spanish became the official language, again. The most recent Census (2010) data shows that 94.9% of Puerto Ricans (living on the Island) spoke a language other than English at home. Also 30% can speak English “very well”. In the U.S. 82% Puerto Ricans ages 5 and older speak English proficiently. The other 18% reported speaking English “less than very well” (PewResearch Center, 2011). Given these complex linguistic contexts, how are languages presented in the stories?

The use of Spanish in English and bilingual texts echo prior research in Latinx children’s literature, while also contributing new ideas for further consideration. Braden and Rodriguez (2016), who analyzed Latinx children’s book published in 2013, found that the majority of the bilingual books privileged English through the layout and positionality of the written text. After considering their same analytical criteria, the five dual language books in this collection challenge their finding through the use of strategies that elevate the status of Spanish within the stories. Samuel Caraballo wrote three of the bilingual books published by Piñata Books. Caraballos’ books consistently employ strategies to privilege Spanish, such as placing the Spanish title above the English text on the book cover or consistently positioning the Spanish text at the upper part of the left page. The English text is either underneath the Spanish text or parallel on the right page. The selection of size and color also signals Spanish as the preferred language or as equally important to English. The other two bilingual books, also published by Piñata Books employed a variety of strategies that tended to emphasize English.

Throughout the years, scholars examining the use of Spanish in Latino English text have described the integration of Spanish words process as superficial, seldom adding depth or breath to complex understanding regarding cultural practices and values. (Barrera & Quiroa, 2003; Torres, 2007; Garcia, 2011; Martinez-Roldan, 2013; Braden & Rodriguez, 2016). The English texts analyzed in this study continue to strategically cushion Spanish words to add cultural flavor to their narratives. Torres (2007) describes cushioning Spanish words when the meaning of the Spanish word is transparent in the English text usually through immediate translation. The stories integrate Spanish words that readers can easily understand through contextual cues, and which usually refer to culturally recognizable items, such as food (chicharrones, pasteles, arroz con leche), places (La Parguera, Casa Cuba, El Morro), kinship terms (Mami & Papi, madrina, prima, Tía), character names (Tita, Carmen, Marta, José), and concepts related to Christmas (Navidades, el día de los reyes magos, aguinaldos, parranda, güiro, cuatro, palitos). This practice prioritizes a monolingual English reader and fails to challenge children, especially bilingual speakers with authentic language interactions (Barrera & Quiroa, 2003; García, 2011).

This collection of books presents two significant exceptions that challenge the safe integration of Spanish words into English texts: the work by Eric Velasquez and Ada Haiman. Velasquez, who introduces readers to Afro-Puerto Rican characters and stories, plays with Spanish in order to shape the bilingual interactions between Eric and his Grandma. Sometimes Grandma speaks Spanish and relies on Eric for translation of texts such as his translation of a teacher’s note. Other times, she engages in Spanish with vendors at La Marqueta:

“*Estoy buscando calabaza, yautía, plátanos verdes, guineos verdes y papas,*” Grandma said to the first vendor. (I’m looking for pumpkins, taro root, green plantains, green bananas, and potatoes.) “*Pues aquí tenemos los mejores.*” (Well, here are the best.)

Velasquez describes an emergent bilingual Spanish dominant Grandma who learns from her grandson, while the child, bilingual, although showing preference for English, practices Spanish

by being immersed in social interactions that value code-switching. While the use of italics for Spanish has been criticized as positioning Spanish as foreign, I argue that authors like Velasquez are playing with languages in order to create authentic conversations while still keeping in mind the English monolingual reader that the publishing market envisions. His italic word choice is context based and deepens the meanings of the story. For example, the child utters “*la masa, la carne y la salsa*” to describe culinary practices that are thoroughly explained in the story. The overuse of literal translation after Spanish has also been questioned as not representative of the natural way bilingual speakers (Barrera & Quiroa, 2003). I argue that Velasquez use of multiple strategies and punctual use of translation is important in order to understand how Eric navigates his bilingual bicultural worlds.

Ada Haiman self-published *Tulipán: the Puerto Rican Giraffe* in 2013. In her journey of self-cultural identification, Tulipán lists Spanish words that reflect the influences of English and multiple Spanish dialects: el rufo, la marketa, chévere, guagua, pegao, revolú, cuchifritos, bodega, la isla, la iupi, cocotazo, sancocho, pon, chiringa, coquí y niuyorrican. Her vocabulary acknowledges the dynamic nature of languages and their ongoing transformations to adapt to the sociocultural circumstances and changes. It also recognizes Spanglish and additional words from conversational Spanish as legitimate varieties of Spanish, rather than silencing them for not been considered correct, formal or standard Spanish.

With regards to the authors’ decision making processes regarding the use of Spanish, Bradford’s (2007) insights around the power relationships between Indigenous authors and the publishing industry seem relevant, as she argues that the “publishing houses are dominated by Eurocentric cultures that maintain their purchase on political power and cultural productions” (p. 20). This tension shapes how individual authors and illustrators navigate the publishing world and their social responsibility in order to get their work published.

Puerto Rican Families Engaged in educación

The books analyzed contribute counter-narratives that write back to assumptions that position Latinx parents as not valuing education (Valencia & Black, 2002) and as not been sufficiently involve in their children’s learning.

Research on Latinx communities show that many Latinx families share a holistic approach to their child’s learning that has been called educación (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1995). Educación supports children in becoming a better person, rather than solely focusing on school success. It acknowledges the importance of becoming bilingual and bicultural in order to access more opportunities (Quiocho & Daoud, 2010). This perspective has three important derivatives. First, morals, values, and dispositions are as valuable as “good grades”. In fact, morals constitute the foundation for learning. Second, life learning goes beyond the school context, takes multiple shapes, and involves many people who are deemed as knowledgeable. Third, parent’s perceptions about what constitute family engagement will vary accordingly.

While, the school context does not constitute a dominant image in this collection, the narratives encourage children to being present, engaged, and responsible at school. In the stories, children in Puerto Rico attend school to learn about hurricanes, which is very important in order to understand the Island’s history with this atmospheric phenomenon, as well as the expectations before, during, and after a hurricane. The school is also a place that supports children in exploring and sharing their cultural identities by welcoming families and family stories into the curriculum

and encouraging connections to the larger community. These range from assigning field trips to art museums to families and classmates organizing a *parranda* for Mimí.

Beyond school, children learn *with and from* parents, grandparents, relatives, neighbors, and cultural artifacts about family togetherness, and the importance of cultural identity. Velasquez's character, Grandma, shares cultural pride with her grandson as she explains: "if you want it to taste traditional, you must make it traditionally", as they engage in the arduous task of making *pasteles*. In their interactions her grandson also learns about the song "En mi Viejo San Juan" written by Noel Estrada, which has represented the Puerto Rican diaspora since 1943 because of its lyrics describing the nostalgia of Puerto Ricans who move abroad while their hearts remain on the Island.

Similarly, in *Miracle on 133th Street* (Manzano, 2015) the family must adapt their traditions in order to roast their pig for Christmas. This is the only book in the collection that depicts the emotional struggles faced by many Puerto Ricans who leave the island. In this excerpt the mother reacts: "We never should have left Puerto Rico. There we could have roasted it outside." followed by the narrator explaining "every Christmas she got homesick for Puerto Rico". In the process of finding a bigger oven to roast the pig, the family discovers that their neighbors (representing many different family dynamics, structures, and cultures) need to create a sense of community as much as they do. Cultural identity and biculturalism are developed through family togetherness, which for some families implies maintaining direct contact with the Island. Elena (Olivieri, 2009) engages in these back and forth practices through a photo album that she creates with her family before moving to Indiana. This artifact allows her to revisit family stories and create new ones. Sofi (Ortiz, 2015) experienced a similar reflective process as she interacts with a community mural called: "El pueblo cantor", which creates a space for her to live the richness and interconnection between communities.

Within these books family engagement ranges from completing homework, and making explicit connections between home and school's preferred literacies to being present in the lives of children, engaging children in cultural practices, and welcoming bilingual/bicultural identities.

Discussion

In examining the portrayal of Puerto Rican characters and experiences in children's literature through a critical content analysis utilizing postcolonial and critical race theory, I found that the collection contributes counter-narratives that resist dominant discourses. These discourses were present within the historical context of Puerto Rican children's literature and more specifically within deficit views of Latinx families that still shape school curriculum. The history of Puerto Rican children's literature is full of books written and illustrated by non-Puerto Rican authors who created problematic representations of this community, in particular, of Puerto Rican families and the use of Spanish (Nieto, 1997). Writing back to dominant discourses presents a difficult task which should not be reduced to taking sides, but to creating representations of ways of living, thinking, and being that build on the communities' strengths and resistance over time. The ways in which these books show resistance differ, and at times, struggles with this goal.

In order to create counter-narratives, this collection includes work primarily done by Puerto Rican or Latinx-Puerto Ricans who many times contributed representations inspired by their childhood experiences on the Island and in the U.S. Self-identifying as Puerto Rican or as having Puerto Rican heritage does not guarantee a counter-narrative (Bradford, 2007). While their work

aims to show the beauty and uniqueness of the Island, by highlighting cultural differences as a strategy for creating a unique cultural identity, these images of nature within the collection have created a dominant narrative that sustains colonial discourse around patriarchal relationships, rather than challenging them. The rural narrative positions the Island as a magical place with no opportunities for families' social and economical sustainability; families who must move to the U.S. in order to find jobs (or better jobs). Adichie (2009) reminds us that the problem with single stories is that they are incomplete. Puerto Rico has beautiful landscapes, but the vast majority of the Puerto Ricans interact and move between rural and urban settings daily or develop routines that allow them to concentrate in urban communities while visiting the beach or el campo occasionally. Also, many Puerto Rican families are moving to the U.S. (and other countries) due to different circumstances, but that is not the only story that should describe the rich cultural practices and experiences of Puerto Ricans families.

Within this collection a couple of individual authors create counter-narratives around the Afro-Puerto Rican identity and the use of Spanish in English and bilingual texts. Velasquez's (2001, 2010, 2016) and Ortiz's (2015) texts resist discourses around race that overlook the African and Afro-Puerto Rican identity by reducing it to one of the elements within the Puerto Rican mixture of Spanish, African, and Taíno. Their books contribute to racial literacy and can support readers in finding positive representations of Afro-Puerto Rican families who have built strong support systems within their households and communities, and children who are successful at school, while also becoming independent, caring, respectful, conscious, family oriented human beings (Reese et al. 1995).

Velasquez's work also contributes to counter-narratives that search to depict authentic linguistic interactions that honor bilingual readers' linguistic repertoire and translanguaging strategies (Garcia & Li Wei, 2015), while also challenging English monolingual readers. Velasquez's characters represent different levels of bilingualism, and learn from and with each other by engaging with multiple family and community literacies. Haiman (2013) challenges dominant discourse that privilege some varieties of languages over others by including words of conversational Puerto Rican Spanish, such as *fiao* and *revolú*, as well as English words that have been transformed and now used in the Spanish language like *rufo* for roof. She also plays with conventional Spanish grammar in "*la iupi*" (Universidad de Puerto Rico) to reflect dynamic uses of oral language. Haiman (2013) resists dominant discourses that define children's literature as instructional materials employing narrowed conventions of language, rather than authentic cultural artifacts to read the word and the world.

This collection of books challenges assumptions around Latinx families by repositioning families as hardworking, caring, and supportive of their children's educación. These stories also consistently describe happy families and happier endings. Braden and Rodriguez (2016) argue that a dominant image of perfect families and happy endings prevents children from making connections to their own lives and exploring the daily challenges present in their households, schools, and communities. Given the historical misrepresentations created around Puerto Ricans and Latinxs in children's literature I wonder, whether these near perfect narratives create spaces for young children to reflect upon a different experience. Or are they the result of what Bradford (2007) describes as the power of dominant discourses around childhood that authors and publishers have internalized? This dominant view positions children as naïve, fragile, and characterized by an inability to understand complex social issues. The answer does not have to be an either/or, but an opportunity to further reflect upon the potential use of these stories in the classroom. I argue that this collection of books creates a resistance against colonial discourses and myths that have

influenced the ways Latinx and Puerto Rican families are perceived in society. This collection presents an opportunity for Puerto Rican children's literature to redefine itself as resistant and liberatory literature that tells stories about the richness within the heterogeneous Puerto Rican communities so that the question of what it means to be Puerto Rican can be addressed through narratives that reflect upon the struggles, along with the strengths, the resilience, and the magic.

Final Reflections

This critical content analysis of picture books about Puerto Rican characters and experiences offers several implications for teaching. Children are never too young to be influenced by the ideologies, values, and perspectives shaping children's literature. For this reason, it is important that educators create experiences that allow children to respond aesthetically to the books and then move from initial personal responses to critically thinking about the place of those narratives in their lives and within the larger society (Johnson, Mathis & Short, 2017). Texts are never neutral and educators can encourage readers to reinterpret, rewrite, and revise as they develop new awareness and deeper understandings (Vasquez, 2012).

This collection of books shows that individual books might be authentic, but within a collection, these individual books can construct a repetitive narrative that creates a problematic single story suggesting deficit views of individuals and communities. In this sense, adopting a critical stance towards children's literature supports children in questioning the truth in books, even in the happy ending type, to "reimagine experiences as way to change social practices" (Harste, 2014, p. 97-98) toward a just world. Furthermore, creating a counter-narrative should be approached as a collaborative endeavor that starts with the efforts of authors and illustrators creating texts that resist dominant discourses, and continues in the classrooms and homes of committed educators and families who explore the interconnectedness of stories from a critical stance to understand and resist the ways in which stories have historically privileged only some characters, plots, and settings.

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