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Pura Belpré's Puppetry at the NYPL Children's Rooms: 1921-1982

by Lisa Sánchez González

This presentation discusses Belpré's work in the children's rooms of the New York Public Library, including how and why she eventually created a mobile puppetry theatre. In her essay "Bilingual Storytelling"—which was recently republished in a recovery project based on her archival papers—Belpré offers some information about her



Pura Belpré. From the Pura Belpré Collection at the Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Hunter College, CUNY.

introduction to puppetry at the 115th Street branch of the NYPL and her study of puppetry at Columbia University. She mentions that she started her first puppet theatre in the 1930s

at the Aguilar branch in an effort to recruit boys to participate in the children's reading room activities. Belpré's obvious talent and success as a puppeteer merits more research, and this presentation offers some paths of investigation.



Christmas Story hour, Plywood's Salute to the Hispanic Population. From the Pura Belpré collection at the Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Hunter College, CUNY.

An extraordinary public intellectual of the Puerto Rican diaspora, Pura Belpré was born in Cidra, Puerto Rico in 1899 and died in New York City in 1982 after a prolific career as a children's author, librarian, advocate, and puppeteer. Among other firsts, Belpré wrote the first mainstream Latino storybook in US publishing history: *Perez and Martina* (House of Warne, 1932). The American Library Association has named a major children's literature medal in her honor (it now includes Young Adult fiction). In many ways, Belpré is the Zora Neale Hurston of Afro-Caribbean American literary history—with a flamboyant, polyglot twist.



Pura Belpré and her puppets Martina [left] and Perez [right]. From the Pura Belpré collection at the Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Hunter College, CUNY.

Belpré's extraordinary career at the New York Public Library began in 1921 during the founding decades of their system-wide children's services. What most people don't know about this period in library history is that those involved in creating the first children's rooms had a radical view of their charge. Serving a multicultural and multilingual population in New York City's ethnic enclaves, these pioneer librarians considered it their duty to make the children's rooms equally multicultural and multilingual. They also felt that the best way for children to understand and appreciate the cultures of others meant helping them understand and appreciate their own. And this is why Anne Carroll Moore, the Superintendent of Work with Children at the time, based the hiring criteria for assistant librarians in the children's rooms on their creative energy and knowledge of these diverse communities' languages, literature, and oral storytelling traditions, rather than formal degrees in librarianship. These women, Belpré among them,

carefully chose and then became loving curators of the book collections they displayed in their reading rooms.



Story Hour at Casita Maria P.R. Community Center. From the Pura Belpré collection at the Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Hunter College, CUNY.

Historically, of course, this groundbreaking work occurs in the wake of the massive migration of people from all over the world to New York City at the turn of the twentieth century, so there were dozens of different ethnic and language groups among the city's children. Dovetailing with these librarians' conscientious work with immigrant children were milestones in African American librarianship—we recall that the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, whose foundational collection was created by Puerto Rican bibliophile Arturo Alfonso Schomburg—was also established in the 1920s at the 135th Street branch. This branch is in Harlem, of course, which was evolving at the time into the Black cultural and intellectual mecca we associate with the

Harlem Renaissance. To serve the surrounding community better, Ernestine Rose, who was the head librarian at that branch, integrated her staff, hiring important figures in African American and Afro-Caribbean library history, including Catherine Allen Lattimer, Nella Larson Imes, and Pura Belpré.

In her essay “Bilingual Storytelling,” which was recently republished in a recovery project based on her archival papers, Belpré explains how and why she eventually took up puppetry. This was during her time in the children’s room at the Aguilar branch in East Harlem, where she was transferred to serve the growing Puerto Rican community there in the 1940s. She writes:

Aguilar had a feeling for clubs. The Little Women’s Club was an institution sanctioned by the girls’ austere parents for them to attend. I felt that the boys needed some creative activity too. I suggested puppetry. The boys liked the idea but refused to do hand puppets. This, they thought, was “girls’ stuff.” They wanted marionettes. So I went to Columbia University and took a complete course on the subject. The boys were eager to start working on the theater. The parents couldn’t believe their sons were busy Saturday afternoons making puppets, sewing costumes, and dramatizing a story, but they were also proud parents as they came to the performances.

Puppetry became an important activity in the Children’s Room. The entire staff was involved in it. The first puppet show was *St. George and the Dragon*, given for Christmas. (Sánchez González, 224)

Community outreach was a passion for Belpré and she was extremely talented at it, as were so many of her colleagues who served in the children’s rooms of the period. Decades later, Belpré designed a mobile puppet theatre. Her puppet theater was an initiative launched during the 1970s by the South Bronx Library Project. As Julio Hernández-Delgado discovered while interviewing one of her close colleagues during this period, Mary K. Conwell, the theater was “lightweight and easily transportable,” and Belpré “instructed library staff in the arts of designing costumes, creating theatrical props, selecting appropriate storylines, preparing scripts, and acting with puppets.” He adds that the “puppets became an immediate hit with library employees and South Bronx residents. These shows were exquisitely performed” (Hernández-Delgado, 434-35).

In her papers, Belpré recounts the sheer joy that the puppetry gave to the children. Her most popular performance was, of course, *Perez and Martina*. Her story hours and puppetry made her a legendary and beloved figure in New York City. Belpré's trailblazing success as a puppeteer merits more specialized research.

Works Cited

- Hernández-Delgado, Julio. "Pura Teresa Belpré, Storyteller and Pioneer Puerto Rican Librarian." *Library Quarterly* 62.4 (1992).
- Sánchez González, Lisa. *The Stories I Read to the Children: The Life and Writing of Pura Belpré, the Legendary Storyteller, Children's Author, and New York Public Librarian*. New York: Hunter College, CUNY, 2013.