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# BILINGUAL FOLK STORYTELLING: Pura Belpré and *Perez and Martina*

BY WILLIAM S. WALKER

Ninety years ago, in 1932, when Pura Belpré published her landmark bilingual children's book, *Perez and Martina*, she immortalized a folktale that she had learned from her grandmother as a child in Puerto Rico. As she recalled, it "was a favorite of my grandmother, one she had often told me... I put it down just as [she] had told it." The story of *Perez and Martina* tells of "a beautiful Spanish cockroach, called Martina, and a gallant little mouse called Perez" (Belpré n.d., 1–2). It is a courtship tale, with various suitors attempting, unsuccessfully, to win Martina's hand before the dashing Perez sweeps her off her feet. Like many folktales, its apparent simplicity masks layers of complexity and perceptive insights into the human condition. It is a tale of love and grief, ending not with happily-ever-after wedded bliss but with Perez's tragic death and Martina's song of lamentation.

According to literary scholar and Belpré biographer, Lisa Sánchez González, *Perez and Martina* is "the first known Latino storybook published by a major English/American press [and] the first known integrally bilingual (Spanish/English) children's book in mainstream publishing history" (Sánchez González 2013). Belpré's significance in the field of children's literature is such that, each year, the American Library Association recognizes, with its Pura Belpré Award, "a Latino/Latina writer and illustrator whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth" (ALSC 2022). This award has ensured that her name has not been forgotten, at least by those in the children's literature world.

Nevertheless, few scholars outside the field of Puerto Rican Studies have examined the context in which she created and shared

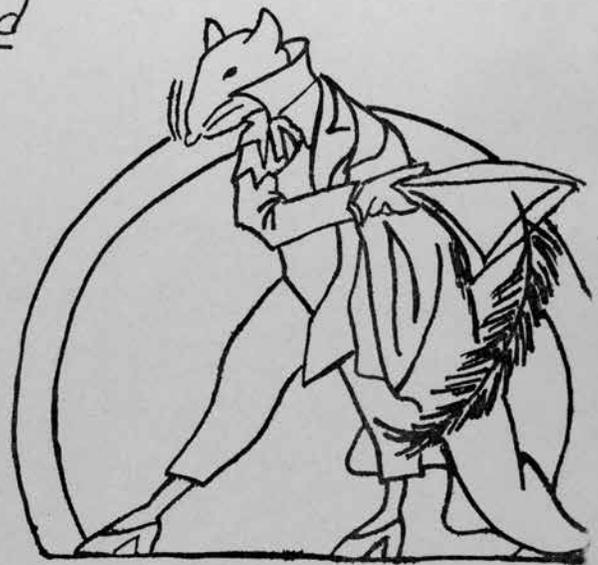
*Perez and Martina*, her lasting contributions to bilingual literature and bilingual education, and her connections to the field of folklore.

The New York Public Library's  
Concourse Neighborhood Action Bookmobile  
and South Bronx Project

presents

Perez and  
Martina

a  
Puppet  
Show



Saturday, May 6, 1972  
Two Shows, 11:15 & 2:15  
161<sup>st</sup> Street at Walton Ave.

Poster for *Perez and Martina* puppet show, New York Public Library, 1972. Pura Belpré Collection, 1897–1985. Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.

## Folklore and Bilingual Education

At the core of Belpré's approach to connecting with children was a firm belief that folklore could serve as a critical element in bilingual education. "Folklore is important literature for the bilingual child," Belpré wrote in an unpublished manuscript. "The variety of themes," she continued, "and the very characteristics displayed in folklore portray much of the history and social patterns from bilingual children's home countries" (Belpré 2013, 217). Belpré recognized that folktales could carry with them layers of familial, social, cultural, and even political history. Moreover, from developmental and psychological perspectives, they held a special resonance for young audiences, especially those from outside the dominant culture. "A child's discovery of a familiar folktale," Belpré wrote, "does wonders to him. Here is something he can identify with and share with his school friends. Here is part of his heritage come alive for him in a form that he can both read and tell" (Belpré 2013, 217). From firsthand experience as a storyteller and children's librarian in the New York Public Library (NYPL) system, Belpré understood the power of folktales to transform children's lives by fostering pride in their heritage and nurturing cultural consciousness.

Over her career, she became adept at cross-cultural, or intercultural, communication; at the same time, she was a strong advocate for her own community, both of Puerto Ricans and Hispanic/Latinx people more broadly. "Bilingualism has existed in America since the first immigrants arrived at her shores," she wrote. "This nation has been confronted with a Babel of languages preserved by the elders but quickly lost by their children in the process of assimilation that followed" (Belpré 2013, 214). For Belpré, the "Babel of languages" was something to celebrate, not lament. What was lamentable was the loss of language, which so often occurred among the second and third generations of migrants. This was a loss that she fought especially hard to counteract among Puerto Ricans and other

Spanish-speaking New Yorkers. Sharing folktales, Belpré maintained, was a key way to address cultural and linguistic homogenization and to combat assimilationism.

## Harlem and the New York Public Library's 135th Street Branch

*Perez and Martina* resulted from more than a decade of Belpré honing her craft as a storyteller and children's librarian. Immersed in the pluralistic environment of the NYPL, she found encouragement and support to bring the folktales of her childhood to life in story hour programs. She began this work at the 135th Street Branch Library in the heart of Harlem. In the summer of 1920, Belpré arrived in New York City from San Juan to attend her sister Elisa's wedding and, along with several of her siblings, decided to stay. By May 1921, she had found a position at the NYPL's 135th Street Branch.<sup>1</sup> This placement was fortuitous, because it situated her in the center of the burgeoning Black cultural renaissance at one of its crucial hubs.

The 135th Street Branch offered a nurturing environment that was ripe for creativity and cross-cultural exchange. The head of the branch, a white woman named Ernestine Rose, was an innovative leader who was unafraid of taking risks, providing cultural resources and offering programs that were relevant to, and empowering for, the library's surrounding population. Rose hired Black librarians, including the writer Nella Larsen, author of *Passing*, and she supported numerous literary, cultural, and artistic events. In the 1920s, prominent intellectuals and activists, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Carter Woodson, spoke there. In addition, the library hosted two major exhibitions of work by Black artists and fostered the development of a Black theater company.<sup>2</sup> Rose was also interested in serving Harlem's growing Spanish-speaking population and looked to Belpré to begin this work. Able to speak and read Spanish, English, and French, Belpré was an ideal candidate to bring linguistic diversity to the library's staff. Moreover, raised in several towns and cities across Puerto

Rico, Belpré understood intimately the island's racially, ethnically, and culturally mixed heritage, celebrating its blended Indigenous, African, and European roots. Through her ancestry and upbringing, she embodied the intersections of languages and cultures.

Little is known about the backgrounds of her parents, but in an oral history interview, Belpré said that her father's parents were migrants to Puerto Rico from Martinique.<sup>3</sup> In the 1925 New York State Census and the 1930 US Census, she is identified as "Colored" and "Negro," respectively.<sup>4</sup> Belpré had strong connections to Black culture, not only through living and working in Harlem, but also through her family and marriage, in 1943, to the famous composer and concert violinist Clarence Cameron White, who was African American. Although often invisibilized, Puerto Ricans of African descent were an important part of the city's growing Spanish-speaking population. Most famously, the great patron of the 135th Street Branch's archive of Black history and culture—Arturo Alfonso Schomburg—was Afro-Puerto Rican (Norat 2020). The presence of Afro-Latinx cultural figures in the historical record provides an important reminder that Blackness and Puerto Rican or Latinx identity are not mutually exclusive.

## Telling *Perez and Martina* and Other Stories

Belpré's storytelling repertoire was eclectic and pluralistic. At the 135th Street Branch in February and March 1923, for example, she read or told "Russian picture tales," as well as "Mighty Mikko," a Finnish folktale, and "King Arthur," the English legend. In April and May, she translated children's stories not only from Spanish, but French as well, and sang French songs. She also presented "Smolichcheck," a Czech fairy tale; "The Jackal and the Lion," an African folktale; "The Enchanted Castle in the Sea," a Spanish fairy tale; and "The Red Shoes" and "The Nightingale," stories by the Danish author Hans Christian Andersen. Belpré was not content to share only the tales of others, however, and soon turned to the story she had learned from her grandmother.<sup>5</sup>



Pura Belpré speaking with a group of children, Casita Maria, c. 1930s. Pura Belpré Collection, 1897–1985. Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.

The earliest record of Belpré telling a version of *Perez and Martina* comes from a December 1922 Christmas program at the 135th Street Branch:

About twenty-five children watched Miss Belpré light the Christmas candles and set them in the window. She told them how the children of Spain celebrate Christmas, and how instead of our St. Nicholas they expect a visit from the Three Kings. She finished with *Perez the Mouse*. Miss Greene was asked to tell the Nutcracker again after which the reading room gift books were presented, and the children browsed a while before we all parted with *Merry Christmas* echoing on the stairs.<sup>6</sup>

Only a year and a half into her library career, Belpré was already demonstrating an

extraordinary ability as a facilitator of cross-cultural exchange, deftly inserting the Hispanic cultural tradition of Three Kings Day into one of the library's Christmas programs while also sharing an authentic piece of her own folk culture. The next documented telling occurred a year later in December 1923, for a group of 44 girls from PS 119, a public primary school about two blocks from the library. Again, it was recorded as "Perez the Mouse."<sup>7</sup> Then, in May 1924, Belpré told it to another school group, girls and boys, from PS 89. This time, it was recorded as "Martina and Perez the Mouse."<sup>8</sup> That same month, she was invited to tell the story at the NYPL's storytelling symposium, which was led by her mentor, the librarian and storyteller Mary Gould Davis.<sup>9</sup> Each time she told the tale, it was well received, and she received

encouragement to continue sharing it. Davis also advised her to write down *Perez and Martina*, as part of coursework that she undertook at the New York Public Library School, a major training center for librarians in this period.

### Community Work in the "Barrio Latino"

Opportunities to facilitate bilingual exchanges were limited at the 135th Street Branch, however, because its primary audience consisted of non-Spanish speaking patrons. In the 1920s and 1930s, the center of New York City's Puerto Rican and Hispanic/Latinx community was elsewhere. In these years, a significant Puerto Rican population was settling in Southwest Harlem between Fifth Avenue and Manhattan Avenue

from 110th Street to 125th Street, and it was there that Belpré's storytelling and bilingual educational work would come into full flower. In 1927, she was transferred to the 115th Street Branch Library,<sup>10</sup> which was the center of the "Barrio Latino" (not to be confused with "El Barrio," the section of East Harlem that would become the heart of Puerto Rican and Hispanic/Latinx New York by the 1940s). She was also living in the neighborhood, on West 117th Street, two blocks from the library (Iglesias 1984, 98, 143, 146–7, 155).

Shortly after her transfer, Belpré became an assistant in the children's room. "The first group," she wrote, "that began to visit the children's room were grandmothers, in search of 'Cartillas', the Spanish ABC, to teach their grandchildren Spanish, afraid that they would forget it" (Belpré n.d., 3). It was with this audience of caregivers and children that Belpré's work would have its greatest impact. Belpré and her colleagues, especially Maria Cimino, held bilingual story hours, both at the branch and elsewhere in the neighborhood, connecting with community institutions, including La Milagrosa Catholic Church, the Spanish Evangelical Church, the YMCA, the Museum of the City of New York, and Casita Maria, a community center serving the Hispanic/Latinx population. "Our knowledge of Spanish and French," Belpré wrote, "gave us an opportunity to use the foreign picture books in our bilingual work with the little children" (Belpré n.d., 3). Belpré and her colleagues also developed a reading club for teenagers that utilized the branch's Spanish book collection. Perhaps most significantly, Belpré and her colleagues organized a vibrant Three Kings Day celebration. The first of these events occurred in January 1928, with several more occurring in the years prior to the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> They included music, dancing, storytelling, and puppetry, and were very popular with community audiences. The Three Kings Day celebrations highlighted Belpré's success at showcasing Hispanic/Latinx culture while building a library-based approach to bilingual education, which was deeply embedded in the surrounding community. *Perez*

and *Martina* continued to play an important role in this work. With the added element of puppetry, which Belpré began experimenting with in the mid-1930s, dramatized versions of the story were often the centerpiece of the library's children's programming and outreach.

### **Perez and Martina's Lasting Influence**

In the early 1930s, Belpré connected with an editor, Arthur Treble, and publisher, Frederick Warne and Company, to bring *Perez and Martina* to a wider audience beyond Harlem and New York City. Frederick Warne and Company was a major publisher of literature for children, including the work of Beatrix Potter and Kate Greenaway (Sánchez González 2013, 37).<sup>12</sup> It is not clear how the manuscript came to the publisher's attention, but it was likely through the NYPL's substantial networks in the children's literature world, especially the contacts of the legendary head of the library's Office of Children's Services, Anne Carroll Moore. Appearing in 1932, with beautiful illustrations by artist Carlos Sanchez M., *Perez and Martina* was not a best seller, but it was successful enough to launch Belpré's literary career. Over the coming decades, she would publish several more books featuring Latin American folktales, including *The Tiger and the Rabbit and Other Tales* (1944) and *Juan Bobo and the Queen's Necklace* (1962). She would also continue her work as a storyteller and bilingual educator, both in the NYPL system and nationally, until her death in 1982.

In the last decade of her life, Belpré received many honors and tributes, which acknowledged her pathbreaking role in the fields of bilingual literature and bilingual education. In February 1974, the interim principal of PS 5 in New York City offered words that reflected the feelings of many toward her:

As president of the Hispanic Educators Association, I am representing those dedicated Bilingual/Bicultural professionals who insist that Pura Belpré White is the Brothers Grimm, Hans

Christian Andersen, Mother Goose, and Walt Disney all rolled up in one.

Pura Belpré has . . . given a great deal to our Community and it is only proper that we honor her tonight. Although her books are read throughout the world, [their] greatest impact must be on the Puerto Rican New Yorkers, for they offer a bridge between their parents['] childhood[s] in Puerto Rico and their own in New York. These works are an [extension] of Puerto Rican Culture and Literature, whose roots can be traced to our diverse ancestry and whose humor, wit and moral values are timeless and universal. (Graciano 1974)

The work of bridging generational and cultural divides continues to be a core challenge for bilingual educators. Over her long career, Belpré demonstrated convincingly that folklore can be an essential tool in accomplishing this objective. Much more than window dressing for statist multicultural initiatives, folklore programming creates inclusive and welcoming spaces that encourage meaningful exchanges both within and between cultural groups. ▼

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The date of Belpré's arrival in New York is listed in the ship manifest for the *S.S. Philadelphia*, arrival date in New York of July 26, 1920, and port of departure from San Juan, Puerto Rico (Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Foundation Passenger Search; also confirmed on Ancestry.com). Belpré and her siblings are all clearly listed in ship manifests from 1919 and 1920. Elisa and her husband Remigio Maduro filed for a marriage license on July 29, 1920, and their wedding date was recorded as August 4, 1920: New York (Extracted Marriage Index, 1866–1937, Ancestry.com). See, also, Hernández-Delgado (1992, 427). In her application to the NYPL's Library School, Belpré wrote "March 27, 1921" in response to the question, "If born abroad, when did you come to this country?" Perhaps she returned to Puerto Rico for the holidays and then came back to New York in March 1921 on a ship that did not have a manifest, such as a freighter—or the manifest has been lost. I have not been able to locate a ship manifest or any other document showing a March 1921 arrival. In her

- application to the Library School, Belpré also wrote that she began working at the 135th Street Branch on May 1, 1921 (Student record for Pura Belpré, NYPL Library School Records, Box 34, Columbia University Libraries).
- 2 On the 135th Street Branch, see Anderson (2003), and Hutchinson (2006, 132–145). See also, *New York Times* (1921, 1925).
  - 3 See Sánchez González (2013, 24–30); “The Reminiscences of Pura Belpré White,” Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1976, Interview by Lillian Lopez #1, February 14, 1976, pp. 2–3 in transcript, and Interview #2, April 4, 1976, p. 61 in transcript, Series V, Box 3, Folder 13, Lillian Lopez Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños Archives.
  - 4 New York State Census, 1925; US Federal Census, 1930; Ancestry.com.
  - 5 February and March 1923 Circulation Department, School Reports, Box 4, Folder 9 (Circulation, Monthly Reports 1919–1927); Informal Reports for April and May 1923, Box 5, Folder 1 (Children’s Room Reports, 1922–1929); April 1923 Circulation Department, School Report, Box 4, Folder 9 (Circulation, Monthly Reports 1919–1927), 135th Street Branch Records, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
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  - 9 Informal Report for May 1924, Box 5, Folder 1 (Children’s Room Reports, 1922–1929), 135th Street Branch Records, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
  - 10 The date of Belpré’s transfer to the 115th Street Branch is listed in the Committee on Circulation minutes, 1927, Record Group 5, New York Public Library Archives, p. 379.

- 11 “Fiesta de Reyes,” *Grafico*, January 15, 1928. *New York Public Library Staff News*, December 31, 1936, vol. 26, no. 53, p. 153; handwritten invitation to Three Kings Day celebration for January 6, 1937, Box 32, Folder “115th Street 1935-1954,” Lydenberg, Hopper and Beals General Correspondence, The New York Public Library Archives, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.
- 12 See also, “Frederick Warne” <https://www.penguin.com/publishers/frederickwarne/>

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## For Further Reading

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