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CHAPTER TEN

Children's Literature on the Colonia

La Nao de China, the Inquisition, Sor Juana

Emily Hind

Mexican colonial histories for children published after the year 2000 concern this volume in terms of three themes: first, the maritime trade route between Acapulco and the Philippines; second, the Tribunal of the Holy Inquisition; and finally, the biography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. The present analysis pays attention to both the use and suppression of a gothic mood as it affects the three thematic groupings. On an international level, gothic styling has become so familiar that the aesthetic "is probably more popular now than it has ever been" (Heiland 156). This global popularity reflects the power of the gothic to contradict the rational impulse of the Enlightenment, since the shadows, mysteries, and unknowable yet enclosed spaces of the gothic mode provide relief from the demands of a contrasting, rational progress narrative (Anolik 2). In terms of Mexican literary tradition, that eerie tone characterizes Heriberto Frías's turn-of-the-previous-century chapbooks on Mexican history, available in the eighty-five installments of the Biblioteca del Niño Mexicano (1899–1901) and illustrated by José Guadalupe Posada (Alcubierre Moya 121).[1] Frías finds the *colonia* memorable largely for its horrors. About a century later, the post-2000 histories for children show that gothic narrative tactics can be used, on the one hand, in texts that represent the colonia as a period of appalling cruelties that must never be repeated, and, on the other hand, in texts that warn that contemporary realities engage the colonia and thus enclose the past within the present. These two approaches call upon familiar gothic moods by emphasizing

themes of transgression and monstrosity, as well as enclosure and persecution. These topics create fear in the reader, and as Frías knew, suspense keeps an audience engaged with a story.[2] Despite what could be termed a "gothic creep," suggesting that the eerie is continually edging into many colonial histories, the three topics in the more recent histories sometimes attempt to sidestep the spooky with troublingly dry results. For example, work on La Nao de China that would avoid the gothic mode largely eliminates human figures. The Inquisition lessons that would evade the gothic tactic look to numbers to quantify events, and when it comes to Sor Juana, biographies that would refuse the gothic tend to insist on the wholly admirable, and consequently inaccessible, nature of the poet-nun's timeless, undead model. The contradiction that wavers between treating children as "special" readers who would require character-infused, gripping, gothic-tinged narratives, or addressing children as mature readers who can handle a stricter, more factual approach, hints at a larger debate in our time regarding the disputed divisions between childhood and adulthood. It is not clear which group ultimately proves the more "innocent" when it comes to the difficult legacy of Mexican colonial history.

Manila Galleons in Mexican Children's Literature

Recent Mexican narratives for children on the subject of the colonial trade route tend to emphasize maps and objects, rather than characters and adventure; thus, their young readers are imagined to possess a high tolerance for factual information.[3] Even the summaries of these texts can bore, and thus before reviewing the titles, it makes sense to acquaint the reader with a radically different approach to similar topics. The lively British series of history books for children whose titles begin with some variations of the phrase "you wouldn't want to" show that accurate history of maritime activities, to name only one topic covered, can be enthralling. In these English-language books, humorous cartoon figures in the midst of a busy layout convey excitement and humor and create a sense of progressive sequence. The books always begin by giving the reader instructions on taking on a starring role. For example, in *You Wouldn't Want to Sail with Christopher Columbus! Uncharted Waters You'd Rather Not Cross* (2004), the first lines directly address the reader: "The year is A.D. 1492. The place is Palos, a harbor town in southwestern Spain. . . . You're ten years old and it's time for you to find a job to help support your family" (Macdonald 5). The reader's explicit engagement finds further incentive in a

fun, cartoonish aesthetic that can be described as "only flirting" with the gothic. Despite endless grotesque details drawn from eras that predate modern medicine and human-rights law, the histories never tip into the fully creepy, because their details amuse more than they horrify. That is, the British series does not participate in the same gothic tone found in some Mexican texts, mostly thanks to the giggling foreign books' upbeat illustrations. Furthermore, the humorous British books never suggest that beyond the parameters of each book, young readers should want to go back to the past and reside in its settting, or that the present operates as a faithful reflection of this past. In the European histories, the past seems delightfully and thankfully *past*. Not so in the Mexican books.

In contrast to the sequential delivery of disturbing details that make for a rip-roaring good time *and* a history lesson in the British series, *El galeón de Manila: Los objetos que llegaron de Oriente* (2005), by Rosa Dopazo Durán, features statically serene and collage-like drawings of ships, maps, and vague people, along with some final images from the collection in the Franz Mayer museum, where the author works. Two more contemporary-styled illustrations in the text mercifully present a brief appeal to more playful sensibilities. One picture shows human legs sticking out of the ocean surface near a shark fin, and another portrays Posada-like skeletons strewn about on a galleon deck. However, most of the text seems only loosely aimed at a young audience, if younger audiences can be assumed to prefer stories with engaging plots and specific characters. For example, consider the unexciting conclusion that means to relate the trade route to the present time:

> Y más allá de intercambios comerciales y artísticos, esa línea que se tendió de Acapulco a Manila, influyó de manera determinante en nuestra cultura, pues además de los objetos, llegaron también chinos y filipinos que trajeron consigo tradiciones y costumbres, formas de vestir, de hablar y de comer, y que formaron familias que probablemente todavía encuentren en sus recuerdos el eco del mar que atravesó el Galeón de Manila. (47)

The fact that no image of the aforementioned families appears suggests the abstract nature of the human relations portrayed. A stronger sense of humor—but the same generally dry approach—characterizes Claudia Burr and Rebeca Orozco's *Lo que va y lo que viene: La Nao de China* (2006). This book takes inspiration from the writings of Gerónimo Monteiro, an admiral from the mid-eighteenth century. Unfortunately for children in

search of a heroic protagonist, Monteiro does not appear in the text until the notes at the end, which seem focused on informing teachers instead of entertaining youngsters. In a second, perhaps more regrettable move for younger readers, the authors use images taken from the colonial period, and the visuals concentrate not on humans but ships, without developing a sequential sense of action from page to page. Still, an occasional touch of humor manages to interrupt the rather inert transmission of data, as a "you wouldn't want to" moment occurs with the mention of scurvy. The authors confide that dozens of people onboard died after losing their teeth to the disease, since the stricken travelers could not swallow or chew (Burr and Orozco n.p.). Unfortunately for child readers inclined to gaze upon historical horror, the above lines accompany a placid drawing of a ship.

Interest in the trade route between Acapulco and the Philippines is not new, and in a history text for young readers published in 1900, Heriberto Frías takes a different tack when he enthuses, "¡Se llamaba la *nao de China*! ¡Con qué delicia era esperada en México aquella maravillosa *nao*!" (*Los crímenes* 10). In contrast to Frías's merry enthusiasm when it comes to telling children about the trade ship, the title of the relevant chapbook, *Los crímenes y las epopeyas de México colonial*, emphasizes law-breaking and strikes a chord closer to the delicious frisson of the "you wouldn't want to" British series. A gothic aesthetic more plainly characterizes another of Frías's history titles, *El fantasma carnicero humano* (1900). The promise of a scary tale seems likely to hook readers, and Frías doubtless believed that the dreadful tone would convince an otherwise reluctant audience to read about the colonia. The contradictions of this approach bear emphasizing: somehow, a portrayal of the colonia as a disagreeably violent period of history was intended to cast that time as a more attractive subject. The fact that Frías felt he had to overcome audience disinterest in the colonia appears in his lamentation from *Los crímenes y las epopeyas de México colonial*, in which he exclaims that grown men had elected to protect their ignorance of the period: "Fueron pasando los años, los años unos tras otros, sin que ninguno de los hombres . . . quisieran [*sic*] saber los estupendos hechos de la vida de México durante la dominación de los virreyes! [*sic*]" (5–6). Frías implies that his young audience exercises greater intellectual bravery, in a tactic reminiscent of the British books that grant young readers trusted maturity to learn "what you wouldn't want to." In Frías's texts, the dynamic pits children's willing loss of innocence against adults' refusal to read about colonial history. Still, a framework of historic optimism applies, because Frías contends that the past matters because it is *not* the present. His turn-of-the-century Manichaeism simplistically

splits the colonia from Mexican Independence by calling one unhappy and the other righteous. For example, in *El fantasma carnicero humano*, Frías writes,

> ¡Ay amiguitos mexicanos que leéis estas líneas en que se os traza por mano amiga, algo como el cuadro de aquellas tristezas de nuestros antepasados pobres, sabed que en México durante la época que se ha llamado *Colonial* y es aquella en la que gobernaron los *virreyes*, época que duró muy cerca de trescientos años . . . durante esos tres siglos, siempre la vanidad, el orgullo y la crueldad de los ricos españoles, privaron sobre los dolores y trabajos del indio . . . (5)

This hypnotic prose, with long sentences and many ellipses, manages to create tension for the young reader by giving a "friendly" hand to a creepy presentation of Spanish cruelty. The touted optimistic vision of Mexican Independence as a cheery solution to the colonia aligns Frías with the official nationalist efforts that celebrated a progress narrative for Mexican history.

Today, Mexican authors who write for a young audience continue to fight the perception that knowledge of the colonia is unnecessary or unpleasant, and that to know a little about the period is already to know too much. In his history book for young people published in 2004, Alfonso Miranda Márquez explains that readers avoid the subject of the colonia because they associate it with the Conquest: "Frecuentemente, sólo nos quedamos con una terrible imagen violenta, aunque hay mucho más. Cuando analicemos correctamente este periodo, podremos conciliarnos con nuestra propia historia y liberarnos del pesado lastre de la incomprensión" (7). Miranda Márquez seems to blame writers like Frías for perpetuating the negative reputation of the colonia. The point on which Miranda Márquez and Frías coincide relates to the idea that knowledge of the colonia results in freedom. In an approach also critical of the Manichaeism wielded by writers like Frías, Estela Roselló' writes her children's history book, published in 2007, to express misgivings regarding the portrayal of the colonia as three centuries of immobility and obscurantism, succeeded by the heroic years of the Mexican Independence (44). Roselló champions the renewed study of the colonia that would link the present with that foundational time: "Por más lejana y diferente que nos parezca la sociedad virreinal, lo cierto es que muchas de nuestras costumbres, ideas, creencias, formas de relacionarnos, instituciones, expresiones al hablar o manifestaciones artísticas datan, precisamente, de la época colonial" (44). Roselló

follows a trend supported, to varying degrees, by fellow children's history writers when she hints that the colonia related to the future as a reflection of the past. The gothic potential in the suggestion that the present is enclosed in the past, and is thus gloomily foretold, may catch the interest of a younger public eager for a ghost story, and thus Roselló's narrative, perhaps somewhat unintentionally, ends up echoing Frías's technique.

Another relatively recent text that repeats Frías's gothic lure is *El Tombuctú* (2000) by Edna María Orozco. This illustrated story tells of two Spanish boys in the capital of New Spain who imagine their canoe, *El Tombuctú*, to be a vessel worthy of the adventures had by La Nao de China.[4] The eeriness arrives with Melchora, the black slave who can conjure the "soul" that all things have (24). During perilous floods in the capital, the slave magically calls El Tombuctú to her so that she, her "amitos," and her *amitos*' family can escape the rising waters. The slave does not attempt to achieve an overarching solution to stop the bad weather; instead, she seems satisfied with the small group's escape (31). It remains unclear whether Melchora cannot speak to the soul of the rain, or whether she simply refuses to, and here arises the ambiguity of depicting a slave who rescues her "little owners" with comfortingly "white" magic. In spooky conflict that underscores the racism of "white" and "black" magic, Melchora's powers always retain a suspicious connotation of "black" enchantment for the privileged Spanish family, whose members help to perpetuate the "black" legend of New Spain. By no means does Melchora reassure the reader conscious of the horror of slavery when she says "softly" to the boy who asks about the canoe as a means of rescue, "Todo puede pasar, mi querido pichoncito" (11). The possible threat contained in that line probably occurs to at least some young Mexican readers. In harmony with the enigmatic persecutions that underpin the gothic tradition, *El Tombuctú* never deciphers Melchora's underlying intentions and thereby allows the reader to determine the possible level of aggression contained in the slave's actions.

The gothic potential inherent in the idea that the past continues to "live," spectrally, in the present, by way of a ghost story or some other uncanny transgression, works to combat the daunting distance of the colonial topic. The alien nature of the colonia surfaced in emails by the aforementioned child-history authors Claudia Burr and Rosa Dopazo Durán, who generously responded to my query about whether the topic of the commercial trade route between Acapulco and Manila in their works was meant to acknowledge implicitly the recent wave of Asian immigration to Mexico. Dopazo Durán gave a blunt answer, to the effect that the two time periods

have nothing to do with one another: "No tiene nada que ver con la población creciente de orientales [*sic*], sólo que hay fenómenos sociales que se repiten en la historia." For her part, Burr did not answer the specific question, but she did spell out the difficulty of writing about that era: "La Colonia para los niños de hoy tiene poco o nada que ver con su cotidianidad." Nonetheless, Burr and Dopazo Durán showed they believe that knowledge of the colonia matters when it comes to an adequate comprehension of Mexican history. Even though the prospect of learning about La Nao de China might at first seem irrelevant to young, technologically savvy cybernauts, these authors believe in the importance of supplying the information.

Aside from the gothic possibility, a second possible point of interest for children who would study the colonial trade route has to do with a central contradiction in children's literature, as pointed out by Perry Nodelman, who notes that in order to learn about the securities of home, a child must leave. This movement provokes a kind of contamination that spoils adult ideas about children's obedience, immobility, and innocence (81). Thus, one way to interest young readers in the topic of the high-seas trade would be to play up the aspect of human adventure. Because contemporary youths spend increasing amounts of time indoors, they might especially enjoy the possibility of reading about the shipping routes. While it may be understandable that Mexican history writers today do not readily use the gothic aesthetic when talking about the cultural significance of La Nao de China, it does perhaps seem surprising that writers similarly avoid the gothic, even when exploring the matter of the Inquisition for young readers.

Inquisition by the Numbers

Rather than using the gothic aesthetic, children's texts on the Inquisition usually approach the subject through facts, such as the start and end dates of the event. Even in the midst of the fictionalized narrative in Agustín Ramos's *El preso número cuatro* (2000), the page layout includes inserted boxes of factual text. The fates of the four prisoners, perhaps due to discouraging wordiness, turn out to be less interesting than the inserted selections of precise historical data. One of the text boxes explains that the Tribunal of the Holy Inquisition was formed in 1571, and that between 1522 and 1820, the Inquisition executed 296 prisoners (12). The numbers also clarify that "El Tribunal de la Acordada llegó a tener dos mil quinientos

tenientes o comisarios al mando de un capitán, que ejercían el terror, principalmente sobre los pobres. En menos de un siglo, entre 1719 y 1813, la Acordada ejecutó a ochocientos ochenta y ocho prisioneros" (23). The historic sources on the Inquisition may promote this reliance on numbers, although the urge to avoid turning history into a gothic horror show may also influence the paint-by-numbers technique. A second example of the number-intensive data appears in Carmen Saucedo Zarco's history, which includes a news item from the *Gazeta de México* from 1730, which informs readers of the date on which an "auto de fe" was carried out with four prisoners (*La Nueva España* 36). Of course, this parade of dates and sums can support distinct interpretations. In Roselló's history, the numbers seek to minimize the horrors of the Inquisition:

> A diferencia de lo que ocurría en Europa en los siglos XVI y XVII, en la Nueva España, la Inquisición no quemó ni ejecutó a un gran número de personas. Se dice que durante los trescientos años de su existencia, el Santo Oficio no condenó a muerte a más de cincuenta personas; sin embargo, el miedo, la amenaza y la tortura sí fueron mecanismos muy utilizados por el tribunal para lograr que las personas se delataran entre sí o se autoacusaran. (19)

Roselló also uses a comparative perspective to diminish the gruesomeness of the numbers, and she mentions the witches of Salem, New England—where, in four months, more than 150 people accused of witchcraft were tried, and ultimately nineteen of them were hung (18). This mathematical approach to history risks leaving the young reader with the interpretive burden, which hints that if the adult historian does not seem to know what the numbers mean, less expert youngsters might not know what to do with the information, either.

In another example of the numerical approach, Alejandro Rosas uses the children's history *De Tenochtitlán a la Nueva España* (2007) to explain that the first "auto de fe" occurred in 1574, with punishment imposed on eighty-nine people accused of crimes against the faith, of whom five were burned (77). The narrative surrounding the numbers means to compensate for the weak interpretive content of the hard data—and Rosas specifies, for example, that the Monte de Piedad building is the present-day site of some Inquisitorial events; he also notes that the colonial convictions were carried out in today's Alameda (77). This spatial reference brings the past into the present with the effect of issuing a gothic invitation to view the historic center of Mexico City through the gloomy filter of

the Inquisition. Thus, in between the almost unspoken meanings of the numbers and the apparently unspeakable details of the tortures, there remains a more accessible interpretative option of enclosing the present in the past. This example of the "gothic creep" shows that even in the midst of a would-be factual presentation, the effort to bring the colonia into young readers' daily lives does not shy away from harnessing the sensationalism of the gothic mood.

A review of the legal changes that occurred between the times of the early practices of the Inquisition and the later habit of duels concerns Elisa Speckman Guerra's unlikely, yet entertaining illustrated book on the history of Mexican law for young readers, *¿Quién es criminal? Un recorrido por el delito, la ley, la justicia y el castigo en México (desde el virreinato hasta el siglo* XX*)* (2006). That text concludes by recognizing the ongoing evolution of the law: "Este libro—al igual que todos los que describen las ideas y las instituciones de nuestra sociedad—todavía no se ha acabado de escribir" (70). Since this legal evolution has no ending or stable interpretation, it appears to insist on a tradition of error that characterizes the past, and at the same time, through linking the present to the past, the text implies the inevitability of further error. Significantly for this odd journey "back to the future" for young readers, the recent children's histories of the colonia are populated almost entirely by adults. At first glance, this emphasis seems like a fortunate tendency, given that one way to cordon off the colonial past and thus "liberate" the future for young readers might be to focus on adult historical characters. Ultimately, however, it seems that the division between past and present, or adult historic protagonists and present-time child readers, can set up a gothic trap. In the recent colonial histories, the national Mexican project does not seem to create the country in a foundational way, but instead merely recreates it, and this recreation tends to hint that young readers' futures are trapped in history. That is, if the endeavor of founding the nation originally inspired the saying, "Gobernar es poblar," now it would seem that to govern is to resettle. For children, this means that the prospect of growing "up" into Mexican citizens might also connote the notion of growing "down" by extending roots into tradition and historical folly.

To illustrate the potential trap of growing "backward" into the celebrated and yet notoriously imperfect adult figures of the past, I turn to the free national textbook *Formación cívica y ética* for the second grade, (2010).[5] In this text, required for *all* second-graders in Mexico, an activity titled "Me esfuerzo por ser mejor persona" asks readers to work in groups and research one of four historical personalities: Cuauhtémoc, Sor Juana

Inés de la Cruz, Benito Juárez, or Carmen Serdán (47). The impression of a gothic return grows stronger on the next page, on which the reader finds the second-person instruction to ponder the qualities appreciated in these "héroes y las heroínas de tu país" (48). These exercises do not automatically presume the value of innocence in readers because they require children to locate themselves among the adult heroes of the past, who saw particularly difficult, even bloody, events. The self-improvement exercises that propose a future in history ask second-grade readers to meditate on their personal flaws that do *not* match up with those of the historic characters, with the aim of having children assimilate their behavior into that of the named national heroes.[6] This task suggests a certain defiance of the notion of freely willed personal improvement, given that under the gothic schematic, the effort to know oneself can lead to self-identification as a reincarnated Other, as in the sometimes school-assigned novella *Aura* (1962) by Carlos Fuentes, to name an example drawn from Mexican fiction.

The degree to which Mexican history authors admit that their texts ask children to imagine themselves as part of the community of adults that resides in the historic past understandably presents a tricky operation. It bears emphasizing that under this aesthetic, to aspire to grow "up" into a person like Cuauhtémoc or Sor Juana is really to imagine evolving back through time. The ambivalence that young readers might feel in response to this injunction to seek self-betterment among deceased and evidently imperfect national heroes, perhaps unexpectedly, actually contradicts Heriberto Frías's reassurance that young readers need not return to the horrors of the colonia in life, but only in narrative. In contrast to Frías's optimism, the post-2000 tendency in Mexican histories for children is to recognize with ambivalence that the colonia persists. As an additional contemporary snare, Mexican history, as presented by Mexican writers, is full of mistakes and injustices committed by adults. Thus, the future that returns to the past hints at an odd bargain that would have children build a future in the past—and on a foundation of known mistakes. The loosening of authority in the history books for children accompanies the admission of historical error evident in practices such as slavery and all those related to the Inquisition. This new interpretive flexibility leads to another reason why the histories of the new millennium do not promise an authentic liberation from the past for children: historians can no longer easily affirm the motto of the Iberoamericana University, with its ominous future tense, "La verdad os hará libres." That is, the recent histories of the colonia cannot support the foregone freedoms of univocal truth ("la verdad") or its implied progressive plot. What historians now tend to promote for young

Mexicans involves multiple versions of truth that generally engage one another in unresolved contradictions and nevertheless continue to structure the future.

Another Inquisition history for children appears with Santiago Cortés Hernández's *El hombre que se convirtió en toro y otras historias de la Inquisición* (2006). This sophisticated book makes use of many colorful illustrations to explain itself—mercifully, in light of the density of the texts taken from the Archive of the Inquisition in Mexico City (57). The drawings help the reader visualize a pact with the devil that turns out to be illusory, since the Inquisition determines that the story in question is groundless rumor (39). The story's lack of a univocal truth—or any truth at all—emerges when the character Cortés Hernández casts suspicion on the veracity of the protagonist, that is, the man turned into a bull by diabolic influence: "Muy probablemente era un acusado imaginario que tal vez ni siquiera existió" (39). Instead of dismissing or making fun of colonial history-cum-folktales, Cortés Hernández counsels that narrative is valuable in itself and was useful to the illiterate people who related to these archival stories differently than did the literate Inquisitorial researchers. This literary value connects to the contemporary reader's present: "Tal vez nos sorprenda encontrar que todas las historias, las nuestras y las suyas, las de entonces y las de cualquier época, tienen una misma lógica, unos temas parecidos y una manera semejante de encerrar enseñanzas y entretenimiento" (55). In tune with our media-saturated times that thwart children's innocence, contemporary children's books on the Mexican colonia do not debate the principle of young readers' innocence per se, but rather the degree of influence that the past works on the present.

The matter of children's innocence is worth reviewing, since it underpins one current of thinking regarding the reasons for writing books for children, rather than simply asking children to read books also written for adults. In *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Neil Postman argues that the "Western" concept of childhood developed as a consequence of the spread of the printing press and the subsequent division between those who could read and those who could not; this new rift between children and adults based on literacy skills created the notion of childhood, which in Postman's analysis peaked in the century lasting from 1850 to 1950 (18, 67). With the arrival of television in the mid-twentieth century, the adult secrets kept in books were no longer so removed from children's reach, and the nonliterate group became less "childish" as a result (80). The difference that Mexico presents with this version of "Western" history turns on an alternate reading scene. At the very time that Frías was optimistically

writing for children, literacy rates rose slowly in Mexico: between 1895 and 1910, they grew from 14.4 percent to 19.7 percent (Gonzales, citing Vaughan 526). Thomas Greer clarifies that not until 1960 did the Mexican national literacy rate hit 62.2 percent; working backward, one may see that in 1950, the percentage stood at 55.9 percent, in 1940 at 44.8 percent, and in 1930 at 33.4 percent (467). This different pattern of literacy rates may explain why relatively little research on children in general has been carried out in Mexico. Barbara Potthast and Sandra Carreras's edited volume on children in Latin America recognizes this lacuna. Potthast and Carreras regret that despite academic interest in topics related to homeless children, delinquents, and child labor, broad studies of infancy and youth in Latin America remain in short supply (7). The lack of generalized interest in children suggests that perhaps Mexican literature for young readers never widely imagined the audience as innocent, or especially distinct from adult audiences, and therefore Frías's delighted exploration of the ghastly side of colonial history may have postulated itself as an appeal to young, but not necessarily immature, readers. Now, more than a century later, the "innocence divide" might even be understood to favor adults over children. While historians still wrestle with ways in which to present unpleasant facts to young readers, some adults in the media, both foreign and Mexican, appear to conform to the "see-no-colonia adults" of Frías's abovementioned complaint when the grown-ups argue that "today" is the least moral time of all, and that a vaguely defined "yesterday" used to safeguard proper morality, a notion that no child reader of colonial history could support.

Given the factual forthrightness evident in Mexican colonial histories for young audiences, Nodelman's observations on double meanings or shadow narratives in English-language children's literature require retooling for the Mexican context (77). While it would not be accurate to claim that no shadow narrative exists in books for young students of Mexican history, it does seem that few double histories on the colonia (that is, texts with denser information available to those able to catch the implications available "between the lines") have been published, even for young readers. Perhaps because the twentieth-century Mexican government never saw fit to glorify the colonia, the period does not inspire the multiple versions of history that narrate periods such as that of Mexican Independence and the Mexican Revolution, which consequently might better lend themselves to shadow narratives. Not only do children know as much as adults when it comes to the colonial topic then, it seems possible that the children may know even more than adults will admit to understanding about that time.

Ghostly Sor Juana: Transcending Linear Time

In one exception to the rule of imagining the past as a place of error, the image of Sor Juana in recent children's literature conjures a more positive figure. However, because the poet-nun appears as utterly nonnormative, her imagined model quashes any realistic hope of children becoming (like) her. Oddly, since Sor Juana never dies in a definitive way in the recent histories of the colonia for children, she belongs to a strange temporality of inimitable, transcendent exception. Therefore, her image promises one way out of the gothic trap (the problem of living in the past by virtue of existing in a doomed present), but this solution, due to Sor Juana's peerless nature, does not apply to the young reader in a shared escape. As Blanca Martínez-Fernández writes in spectral terms for her biography of the nun for children, supposedly narrated by Sor Juana herself: "Mi vida fue muy interesante y bonita" (41). Of course, the statement, "My life *was* . . ." denies the normative finality of death. The same strange, but nice, time appears in the surprisingly lengthy text by Irene Livas, awkwardly illustrated by amateur painters ages nine through fourteen. To begin at the ending, the biography placed at the conclusion of the fictional plot reads, "Érase una vez una niña muy inteligente y con mucha voluntad . . . ," and the same page gives the year 1651 as that of Sor Juana's birth (Livas). The "Once upon a time" that begins precisely in 1651 captures this aspect of strangely suspended time that facilitates Livas's fictional text, which consists of letters that a young narrator writes to Sor Juana. The letters always begin in intimate style, "Querida Juana Inés," and the reader never sees Sor Juana's reply. Given Sor Juana's fantastic achievements as a woman, intellectual, and artist in the colonia, her biography for children might be expected to engage one of two traditional genres: the fairy tale or the fable. In fact, neither genre completely informs the biographies. Due to the suspended time that denies Sor Juana a mortal end, her biography does not participate fully in the tradition of a fairy tale, since that genre concludes with the famous "happy ending." On the contrary, the Sor Juana of contemporary children's literature "lives on" without ever really dying.

The approach in children's literature to Sor Juana's undead life does not represent a fable, either, since the moral lesson that would need to emerge is not clear. The new biographies for children suggest that one would have to *be* Sor Juana in order to match her accomplishments, and that goal is impossible given that learning to read at age three, absorbing Latin and mathematics almost by osmosis, and performing both as a beautiful social star at court and a brilliant intellectual dedicated to the convent, are events

that simply happen to someone as much as someone can make them happen. Although a child might strive to imitate Sor Juana by becoming a writer, that possibility is not emphasized because the children's histories do not tend to classify Sor Juana primarily as a poet. In an attempt to straddle the line between the roles, Roselló includes Sor Juana in the category of "Religion in New Spain" and imagines the "poetisa" to lead a tranquil life in the convent, surrounded by silence and the company of her books (*La Nueva España* 15). Other biographies conceive of Sor Juana's life as more sociable. In the chapter on education in *La Nueva España: Siglos XVII y XVIII* (2009), Carmen Saucedo Zarco presents the poet's life as more agitated, and in a second text, *Sor Juana y don Carlos: Una amistad entre genios* (2007), indicated as meant for lower reading levels, the historian offers noninnocent details. In the latter illustrated text, Saucedo Zarco reveals that upon entering the convent Sor Juana received a slave as a dowry from her mother (23). Saucedo Zarco also explains that Sor Juana's father never recognized her, and thus she did not use the paternal last name until joining the convent (14). This contemporary effort to demystify the poet for children, however, does not quite achieve its goal because there is no way to combat positively the transcendence of Sor Juana's image in Mexico. That is probably why she figures in so many history books for children not so much as a writer, but mostly as an unrivaled celebrity.

In sum, recent biographies of Sor Juana for young readers defy the genre of fables because the texts do not hint that the future can be improved by behaving like nun, nor that the young Juana learned a moral lesson. The presentation also avoids the fairy-tale model, which insists that wishes can come true, because obviously they did not for the nun. In point of fact regarding the unpleasantness, Livas's book has an imaginary pen pal grasp the threat of Inquisitorial violence:

> Querida Sor Juana:
>
> Se me hace tarde para la escuela. Te escribo a toda prisa, aunque sea un recadito, porque es urgente que sepas algo: tu confesor es de la Inquisición.
>
> Ay, Juana Inés, me apena decírtelo, pero el padre Antonio, tu consejero querido es tu enemigo. Sí, ese hombre que hace tantos años te dijo que entraras al convento para que tuvieras tiempo de escribir a gusto, ahora anda diciendo que hacer obras de teatro es pecado. (approx. 103)

This missive is the third letter of the book that treats the Inquisition. Although the narrative voice first learns of the institution through the in-

visible letters from Sor Juana, by this third letter the young student is competent enough to warn the nun about her confessor's political loyalties. However, no lesson can come of these warnings, since Sor Juana's story is already determined. The lack of a moral point to the biography indicates the difficulty of deciding which "facts" in the poet's life matter. One seeming point of agreement is the importance of Sor Juana's birth year, and the date appears in a startling number of texts. Cortés Hernández ends his book about the Inquisition with a colonial chronology that announces 1651 as Sor Juana's birth date (59). A chronology in the fourth-grade free textbook *Historia* (2010) places the iconic black-and-white Sor Juana in a nun's habit next to the year 1651. Despite the nearly universal emphasis on the date, not all scholars agree on exactly which year is correct. The book from the same governmental series for sixth-grade students of *Español* (2010) gives the poet's birth year as 1648.

Martínez-Fernández's lively biography anchors the events of Sor Juana's life at every turn in specific, although perhaps incorrect, dates, continuing with this historical tic until the end of the book, listing "important facts for school" that span a period from 1890 to 1980, or from the passageway of the train through Sor Juana's family property in Nepantla and the destruction of part of the house where Sor Juana lived, to the institution of the Mexican National Day of the Book (43). None of these bookish events may strike some readers as worthy of memorization, or even mention, and thus the chronology may seem to aid mainly the school that would ignore the more fundamental, though perhaps more abstract, information that would connect the poet's political time with that of the children. This disengagement with the heart or "artery" of the history by way of distracting the reader with "capillary" details, which by their very nature lead to nowhere especially central, allows studious children a release from the potential of the gothic trap, because young readers are not likely to understand why the rambling story matters to their futures. In the unlikely case that the nun's long-ago birth year does mean something to young readers in the twenty-first century, it might make sense to include the poet-nun's year of death as well. That date does not appear as often, likely due to the fact that a death date would threaten Sor Juana's magically continued life in suspended time. Interestingly, although Sor Juana never really seems to die, her image seems self-contained, outside the consumer culture that the children readers inhabit. The poet's exceptionality when it comes to now-strange practices, such as always wearing the same outfit in canonical images, leads me to the contentious dividing line between adult and young readers as regards the select population in Mexico today that can afford to

buy history books. Specifically, this line of separation has to do with consumption power.

Children, Colonial History, and the New Consumers

Children's books published in Mexico after the year 2000 give surprisingly candid coverage of many colonial topics. Even so, the texts tend to omit reference to some historic phenomena, such as abandoned children and drug use. These omissions probably fail to signal a principal intention of protecting young readers' innocence, given the visibility of these themes in Mexico today. From the street level, children in Mexico can easily observe homeless peers and the use of drugs. Thus, Mexican literature for children may not operate so much according to a dynamic of knowing and not knowing, as a principle of obstructed participation. The saying "El que calla otorga" suggests that by avoiding meaningful explorations of certain topics in histories of the colonia, such as drugs and sex, the historians end up giving tacit approbation for these phenomena. A cynical view could conclude that children must engage with the censored material, if Mexican society is to continue functioning as it has been. The most gothic aspect of the past enclosed in the present, then, may have to do with the material excised from the histories. The explicit lessons for children in the negative thematic of the colonia deal with forms of violence such as racism, slavery, corruption, and torture, while the topic of Sor Juana allows the additional admission of colonial sexism. These themes recognize the continued relevance of violence and discrimination, and they deliver an implicit reproach to children who would become involved in these practices, since the activities are not viewed positively in the texts. But sex, drugs, and to some extent poverty go untreated in the histories and thus could be erroneously imagined by young readers to represent temptingly new forms of rebellion.

Nevertheless, for the most part, rather than segregation according to literacy levels, or levels of knowing and not-knowing, the dividing line today between children and adults may be centered on the economic. Young people with access to television and Internet today may not so much lack information as they do a means of supporting themselves. Thus, even as childhood disappears, the notion of dependence remains. Mexicans call the young people who today neither study nor work the "ni-ni" generation. Scholars of comparable youthful experience in the United States write about "Guyland" (Kimmel) and "men turning into boys" (Cross) and find

the perceived modern (male) immaturity disturbing. Today, across the globe, kids—perhaps especially boys—cannot win, because they are neither innocent children nor satisfactory adults, but something hybrid. Given the probably unprecedented sophistication of contemporary youth when it comes to accessing information, perhaps the disappointment that these still unfamiliar generations present to older adults today has less to do with what kids do or do not know and more to do with what they can or cannot consume, a reality that in one way or another affects how many and what kinds of history books they can read. In a last example of these texts for children, I want to mention the project financed by the General Consulate of the United States, written by Arturo Curiel Ballestero, *Del cacao al dólar* (2007). The book begins with an image by illustrator Felipe Dávalos of a cacao plant with its roots in a credit card. Regardless of the agenda that the book's U.S. backers may have had for the image, it speaks to me of hopeful environmental possibilities. The inability of young people today to consume at the level that adults might wish suggests a path toward sustainability, from a valuable, living plant to even more purely abstract, "electronic" form of currency. In this image the gothic threat of reliving the past seems, at least potentially, to find a solution. If young readers today cannot buy or travel (e.g., colonize) their way out of their predicaments, they will need to try and think their way out and avoid mistakes already delineated in the history books. Good luck to them!

Notes

1. In spite of Frías's early example, as recently as the 1980s, relatively few Mexican books for children existed. One article reports that from 2000 to 2007, an employee at the Guadalajara bookstore Gandhi saw the children's area expand, as well as noticing that the demand for Mexican children's books rose by some 50 percent (Félix 12). By 2007, according to the same article, the children's area of the Fondo de Cultura Económica bookstore in Guadalajara had expanded from 9 to 200 meters.

2. Heiland observes that the gothic "at its core" is about transgression, of all sorts, and that gothic novels aim "above all" to create fear (3, 5).

3. Histories of the colonia for young people that mention the trade route include those by Rosas (69), Roselló (24–25), and Saucedo Zarco (*La Nueva España* 52, 70, 71).

4. The volumes in the series by Fondo de Cultura Económica are two books in one, with with the second book printed upside-down from the first. For example, on the other side of *El Tombuctú* one finds *El preso número cuatro*.

5. *Formación cívica y ética*, for the fourth grade, also reviews Sor Juana's biography and mentions her literary contribution (60).

6. The cues that propose change for second-graders are: "Decido en qué quiero mejorar," "Reflexiono sobre qué quiero lograr," "Para lograr mi propósito voy a realizar las siguientes acciones," and "El tiempo en que voy a alcanzar las metas mencionadas es . . ." (48).

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