



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies



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# Hopscotch!

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Latin American Literature in Translation

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Latin American Literature in Translation

*Cartucho*: Nellie Campobello  
on History through the  
Eyes of a Child

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Latin American Literature in Translation

*Cartucho*: Nellie Campobello  
on History through the  
Eyes of a Child

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Campobello combines her own memories of the Mexican Revolution as she saw it, growing up during the 1910s, with stories she heard or collected from her mother and others.

Her aim is to offer “true stories” of Villa, his men, and the fighting in Northern Mexico, to offset the “legends” that merely repeat the victors’ claims and dull the Mexican people’s senses (4). But these are still stories, as Campobello validates tales told by those at the margins of official discourse, including women and even small children.

They puncture pretensions to totality,  
the notion that we already know  
everything we need to know.



Framing the Revolution through the eyes of a child, Campobello restores the notion that there was something at stake in violence that could seem to be no more than a meaningless game. Perhaps, she suggests, at stake was the right to play.



# **FRAGMENTATION AND THE END OF HISTORY**

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“Cartucho didn't say his name. He didn't  
know how to sew or replace buttons.  
One day his shirts were brought to  
our house.” (6)

“Bustillos had been born in San Pablo de Balleza” (9); “They were on the corner of the second street” (20); “Tomás Ornelas was on his way from Juárez to Chihuahua” (46); “Parral was under siege” (61); “Nobody knew how they apprehended him” (62).

The reader and the narrator alike have to make sense of or respond to a situation not of their own making.

The connection between the different episodes is often unclear, and they frequently show signs that they are told out of order.

It is as though the narrative looped round and about, or oscillated back and forth, following a logic dictated by memory, rather than history.



“I’ll never forget as long as I live the fright that evil man gave me” (25); “I’ve never been able to forget the sound of the rifles as they made ready to fire” (62); “The people who saw [Villa’s troops] still remember the way it was” (86).

“I know my uncle was surprised [. . .],  
and that’s why he’ll never forget the  
General’s words, and neither will  
he forget his tears.” (72)

These stories tell of moments of intensity, flashes of affect (fear, surprise, amazement, joy) that shape or distort bodies and persist long beyond their immediate cause and effect.

“It was ten o’clock at night” (51); “It was the fourth of September, but of what year?” (84).

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“Few towns during the revolution saw events as bloody as those that occurred in Hidalgo del Parral [. . .]. In the course of ten years, Parral suffered the violence of being taken no fewer than twelve times by contending revolutionary forces.” (Max Parra)



In life as in memory, what stands out are moments, details, that may be luminous or dark, tragic or even humorous, whose significance is lost in their subsequent transcription into novelistic plots that have beginnings, middles, and ends.

“He died for a kiss the officer gallantly awarded him” (25); “He just had the face of a man lulled by fate” (55); “he was dying for a cause different from the revolution” (18).

“He died for a kiss the officer gallantly awarded him” (25); “He just had the face of a man lulled by fate” (55); “he was dying for a cause different from the revolution” (18).

“He embraced the bullets and held on to them.” (66)

“The people of our land had  
beaten the savages. [. . .]

“The people of our land had  
beaten the savages. [. . .]

“Our street would be joyful once more.” (89)

“Predictably, Villa’s Northern Division was mown down by defensive machine gun and artillery fire. With tragic consequences for the attacking soldiers, the newly emergent, dehumanized discourse of defense through mechanized firepower clashed with the epic personal heroism of attack.” (Lucas Izquierdo)

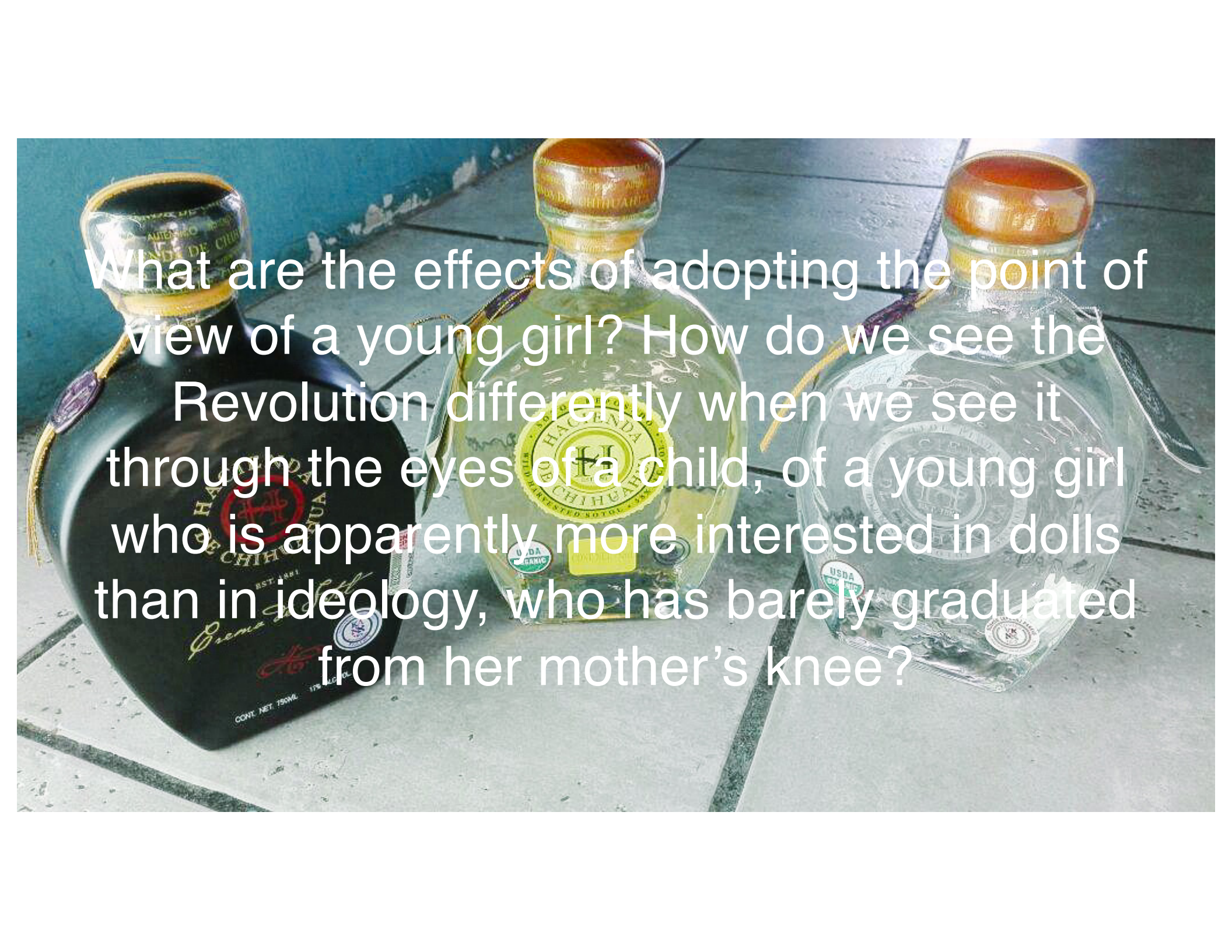
Campobello's prose both mimics that fragmentation and at the same time rescues something of what she saw as the heroic bravery, and disdainfulness towards death, evidenced by Villa's forces.

Campobello rewrites history, to recreate and pay homage to those whom the Revolution vanquished, who then had the subsequent indignity of being portrayed as no more than bloodthirsty bandits by the Revolution's own chroniclers.



She goes against history to suggest other ways of thinking about or recollecting the past, faithful more to memory and affect than to a narrative logic of cause and effect.

What are the effects of adopting the point of view of a young girl? How do we see the Revolution differently when we see it through the eyes of a child, of a young girl who is apparently more interested in dolls than in ideology, who has barely graduated from her mother's knee?

Three bottles of Hacienda Chihuahua tequila are arranged on a wooden surface. The bottle on the left is dark with a black label, the middle one is clear with a yellow label, and the one on the right is clear with a white label. All bottles have wooden stoppers and are tied with purple ribbons. The text is overlaid on the image in white.

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Campobello displaces her memories to a still younger version of herself, or to an idealized construction of a self for whom the events of the Revolution would be among her very first lasting psychic impressions, a sort of screen memory for which everything that came before was just a blank.

Rather than adopting the stance of an “adult who remembered her childhood impressions and judged the characters and events of her past from a position of maturity[,] Campobello’s language [is] that of a child who has remained faithful to her memory, who pores over her memory as though she were poring over the present” (Jorge Aguilar Mora).

“It did not destroy, or falsify, the way in which the dead were taken up as a child’s toys. On the contrary, it gave it a vital, internal, and more profound legitimacy.”  
(Jorge Aguilar Mora)

Only a child could see things as they really were, stripped of the moralizing or politicizing judgements that accompanied and over-wrote the events themselves.

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Only a child could see (or see through) the games that the adults are playing.





# **PLAY AND THE REVOLUTION AS GAME**

The language of play and games is  
everywhere in *Cartucho*.

Playing at war shades seamlessly  
into war itself.

The bullets fly, but the children are still children, sometimes overlooked in the heat of the moment, sometimes catching the grown-ups' attention and allowing them to indulge their own childish fantasies, a little free play in the midst of such violence.

Before long, it is clear that it is not just the children who are playing games.

“When he wanted to have fun, he practiced target shooting at the hats of men who walked by on the street. He never killed anybody. He was just playing, and no one got angry with him.” (7)

“With the revolutionary cry and the tricolor flag, [. . .] firing shots through all the cracks where there were rural police. They seemed to be playing on horseback, riding across the plazas, up to the hills, shouting and laughing. Those who witnessed the uprising say it didn’t look like one.” (81)

The Revolution opens as play,  
accompanied by laughter, an exercise in  
freedom, in finding and aiming at the cracks  
or fissures in the edifice of the state.



“We girls were eager to see the men fall.  
[. . .] my sister and I climbed up to peer out  
of a window, our eyes wide in anticipation.  
Looking around, we didn’t see a single  
body, which we really regretted.” (28)

““Hey, what’s that pretty thing you’re carrying?’ From up the street we had been able to see that there was something pretty and red in the basin.” (35)

“They were all rolled together, as if they had no end. ‘Guts! How nice! Whose are they?’ we said, our curiosity showing in our eyes.” (35)

“Since he lay there for three nights, I became accustomed to seeing the scrawl of his body [. . .] sleeping there, next to me. That dead man seemed mine. [. . .] I liked to look at him because I thought he was very afraid. [. . .] I went to sleep dreaming they would shoot someone else and hoping it would be next to my house.” (37)

Matter-of-factly, Campobello itemizes and examines the elements that compose the events and situations around her, to evaluate their uses, marvel at their splendors, and consider the rules that govern their often surprising disposition.

“In Huizinga’s framework, unlike modern wars—which are inhuman and cause massive devastation—primitive war is a part of civilization and can be considered in terms of its cultural function. This can explain the fact that the Revolution in Campobello’s texts is presented as a war that is profoundly human.”

(Kristin Vanden Berghe)

“An alternative imaginary of the Revolution,  
represented as a failed attempt to  
change for the better the rules of the  
social and political game in Mexico.”  
(Kristin Vanden Berghe)

Campobello restores the idea that something was truly at stake in a conflict that can otherwise appear so chaotic and disorderly.



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At its best, it was fought for the right to play, to laugh, to feel, to be free from constraint.

“I’m telling what impressed me most, no longer recalling any of the strange words or names I didn’t understand.” (42)

“A man who’s going to die has  
a right to speak!”

“A man who’s going to die has  
a right to speak!”

“Everyone turned their backs on the  
grey form left lying there, pressing into  
the ground the words they  
never let him say.” (52)

Campobello's narrator constantly returns to such "grey form[s]," not so much to give them voice as to register at least that the men they once were had lived, had struggled, and had died, had persisted in their being until they could do so no more.



# MUSIC

Fósforo,  
“Cochabamba”



# PRODUCTION

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# HISPANIC STUDIES





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*¡Don't leave it to mañana!*

