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Towards an Affective Childist Literary Criticism

Macarena García-González

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Centre for Advanced Studies in Educational Justice, Santiago, Chile. Vicuña Mackenna 4860, Macul, Santiago, Chile.

mgarciay@uc.cl

ORCID 0000-0001-8051-9969

Abstract

A long-asked question in children's literature studies is how the child reads the very same book we (adults) have read. In 1984, Peter Hunt argued for a "childist criticism" proposing that young readers' multiple individual responses to literature should inform adults' critical practice. In this article, I propose that affect theory and new materialist epistemologies could reorient our critical practice in and with children's literature. Using the concept of childist criticism (Hunt 1984, 1991) and Maggie MacLure's (2013) notion of the "wonder of data," I follow different encounters between children (and researchers) and the book *La madre y la muerte/La partida* (Laiseca et al., 2016). This book tells a macabre story about a mother that cannot bear to have her child taken away by Death. By following the book's agency (García-González & Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2020) in the research assemblage of different projects, I propose possible affective methodological orientations to post-representational research for children's literature criticism.

Keywords: new materialism, affect theory, literary criticism, childism, death

How the child reads, or rather, how the child reads the very same text(s) we (adults) have read (or are reading) has been a long-standing question in the field of children's literature studies. Although, answers to the subject have been as prolific and polyphonic as they have been problematic, particularly in their engagement with ontologies of childhood(s), there also seems to be a shared understanding that these inquiries lie in terrains of assumption, supposition and, of course, imagination. As children's literature scholars, we are fruitfully haunted by Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984) and its statements about childhood and writings for children. For Rose, the child was a projection of adult fantasies, one that adults (have) create(d), publish(ed), and read (for), while simultaneously setting the borders for what counts as children's literature. Since the publication and dissemination of her text, Rose's notion has been widely discussed and contested. Research by scholars in the field (Gubar, 2009; Smith, 2017) has discussed Rose's assertion and managed to reply that it does not function exactly like that: children have always had agency in the production of literature for them/about them.

In "Thinking and Doing with Childism in Children's Literature Studies," an article co-authored with Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González, 2022), we notice how Rose's text coincided in time with Peter Hunt's call for a "childist criticism" in which young readers' multiple individual responses to literature would inform adults' critical practice as a way towards a more accurate understanding of what "reading as a child" meant in particular cultural contexts (1984, p. 45). While Rose's groundbreaking essay has been widely discussed in the field, Peter Hunt's call for what he termed a "childist criticism" has been rather marginalised and upon consideration, as it has been described as "more a position than a methodology" (Reynolds, 2011, p. 54) or as a position that would reject the literary in favour of the didactic (Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 4). With Deszcz-Tryhubczak, I propose to look at childism's possibilities to account for child agencies in children's literature studies and read Hunt's ideas alongside the developments about childism in childhood studies, a term that calls for (activist) research to challenge structural adultisms and aetonormativity.

In this article, I make an argument for what I term an "affective childist literary criticism." By employing this term, I combine Hunt's proposal with methodological orientations inspired by new materialist and affect theory. I believe that the question about how we read certain texts is better approached as one about how we are affected with those texts and other intensities, among those, that of age, of us being adult critics reading along with (real and imagined) child readers. I also follow John Wall's (2019) call for a childist critical perspective that would challenge adultism in a similar way to how feminism challenges sexism. Keeping the impossibility of such parallel —women and children are excluded in different (and often complementary) ways—, childism aims to challenge epistemological orders as feminism has done. By affective childist literary criticism, I mean to bring in this drive into the epistemological, providing some methodological orientations that may serve as alternatives to the reader-response framework (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995), the most widely used paradigm in our field to account for encounters between children and texts. In order to sketch how this affective childist criticism may work, I recount how my reading of a particular book shifted through a series of encounters with this book and other (child) readers. Such encounters —and I use here the term to underline how children, adults and books co-produce each other when they meet— have been set up, experienced, and analysed in relation to the affective; they ocurred in the frame of three research projects that draw inspiration from feminist new materialism. I will briefly present such projects aiming to give a glimpse of how the position of the researcher as a critic became in and with each of them by bringing in Maggie MacLure's (2013) concept of "wonder of data": an intensity that seems to emanate from data which is “suspended in a threshold between knowing and unknowing”, that it cannot be “wholly contained or recuperated as knowledge, and thus affords an opening onto the new.” (p. 228)

Escaping Adultism

Forty years ago, Peter Hunt pointed out (and towards) the adultism in the critique of children’s books: “we might find that the four current kinds of reviewing and evaluation of children’s books (‘children *might* like...', ‘children *should* like...', ‘children *do* like...', ‘children *will* like...') are all equally suspect." (1984, p. 44) Even if in the last decade, the children's literature ecosystem has become increasingly aware of power imbalances between adults and children in the creation and assessment of texts for children, Hunt’s assertion appears to be still quite present. We have gone a long way in discussions about power hierarchies yet talking about real children and children’s literature is still a “risky business” as Marah Gubar (2013) observes.

John Wall, professor of philosophy and religion, has defended an understanding of childism “in analogy to terms like feminism and environmentalism” (2009, p. 523) and the “feminist ambition for systemic normative transformation.” (2019, p. 7) Childism would be, thus, a positive term, a term to oppose adultism. The term has had its battles. It had to be distinguished from Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's (2013) childism which is presented as the complete opposite: the prejudice against children. Here I follow Wall’s and Hunt’s use after a conviction that we need an affirmative term to counter our adult-centred epistemological practices. Childism seeks to create a difference-inclusive social imagination in which children take part and in which we, as adult researchers, are forced to question our biases. The question of how exactly this might be carried out is what orients this article.

Conflating the marginalisation of women —that gives rise to feminism— with that of children risks obscuring how gender and age work. There are several distinctions to be made. First, we need to consider the category of the marginalised child with attention to the intersectional positions that produce such a child in the first place: we should ask how the child is classed, gendered, racialised, abled, etc. Second, we need to ponder how ageism or adultism against children functions differently from sexism and racism, to name the two more prevalent exclusionary systems, if only because children have the potential to exit the category by growing up, while members of other oppressed groups do not. This dimension of the power imbalance has been brilliantly addressed by Clémentine Beauvais in the concept of the "mighty child" (2015): while adults have an authority that comes with age and experience, children, Beauvais contends, "are mighty because their specific form of 'power' is dependent on the existence of a future for them in which to act." (2015, p. 82) Age and gender produce exclusions in different ways, while intersectingwith other systems of exclusion; a movement that appears to be relevant here is how feminism (and also childism) have moved from being centered in identities —as a movement for women and by women— to a critical form of inquiry directed towards relationalities and epistemologies. The work of feminist new materialists such as Coole & Frost (2010) Donna Haraway (2016), Karen Barad (2007), Fox and Alldred (2015) and Rosi Braidotti (2013) has made a call for such academic engangement in producing knowledge differently. In a similar vein, the concept of childism is moving away from claims about participation and children's rights and towards demands for reformulating research practices and academic knowledge.

Childist literary criticism is, therefore, inspired by feminism and by feminist literary criticism. Feminist literary criticism has been a contested practice often defined by how it brings feminist theory to understand the circulation and assessment of literary texts: as such, it is not only concerned with what may appear as the most obvious tasks —assessing the value of women writers, questioning the masculine canon, and pursuing to rescue marginalised female authors—, but also with opening questions about what counts as criticism and as literary in the first place. Feminist criticism has been closely associated with the birth and growth of queer studies not only in its attention to the variety of identities, but in *queering* the authorities —of the author and of the critic—over the text (Wiegman, 2014). Feminist criticism is also connected to the rise of terms such as "postcritique," presented by Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski (2017) in a collected book of chapters. Inspired by their work with feminist theory and literary criticism (Anker, 2012; Felski 2015), as well as by Bruno Latour's (2004) take on critique (in his celebrated piece claiming that critique has run out of steam), Anker and Felski invite new (post)critical approaches in which we no longer assume that critique is synonymous with resistance organized by a "hermeneutics of suspicion." (p. 15) Anker and Felski argue that we misunderstand critique if we think of it exclusively as a method, for it is also a mood. They also insist that we must expand the horizon of literary studies and the humanities beyond what is commonly considered as critique to account for a plurality of possible relations with literary texts. Felski (2020) has later developed this post critical approach as related to our multiple affective forms of getting attached to artworks and to how the social meanings of artworks "are not encrypted in their depths —perceptible only to those trained in professional techniques of interpretation." (xiv)

Peter Hunt's 1984 conceptualisation of childism is intricately related to literary criticism: he points to how adultist we are when we argue that children *might* like something (a common formulation by academics, while practitioners would prefer to assert that children *do like* or *will like* a certain text) (p. 44). Hunt's proposal for a childist literary criticism was later developed by Sebastien Chapleau, who argued that "[a] children's book can never be - it can only become." (2009, p. 65) Chapleau saw this becoming as "the here and now at the heart of childist" criticism (2009, p. 65). Chapleau did not propose a methodological approach but did open questions about how to include real children in the critical practice and on what they could make out of this adult endeavour of childism in the first place. With Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak (2022), we proposed to revise how childism has been taken up in children's literature studies, proposing to consider its relationship with recent participatory approaches to children's literature research.

The "affective turn" (Clough, 2008; Thrift, 2004) in humanities and social sciences appears to be particularly productive to rethink literary criticism and questions about how to make sense of what artworks do. Affect theory encompasses different theoretical developments (see Coleman and Ringrose, 2013, Ahern, 2018), that mostly coincide in departing from the understanding of affect by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (D&G). These scholars elaborate on affect upon 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza as an idea that is perceived by the increase or decrease it causes in the body's force, the impact of the modification or variation created as one body acts upon another (1987, p. 257). The body in affect theory is not limited to human bodies or living things, but includes materialities, spaces, forces, feelings, and stories. Moreover, the emphasis is on how bodies *become* rather than what bodies *are.* As Boldt and Leander (2020) highlight in their reading of affect theory for literacy studies: "affect is understood as relations of affecting and being affected, in which the human is no more privileged than any other participant." (p. 4), Affect theory has often been considered to be a subset of posthuman philosophies in which the historical Western focus on the human is replaced by an inquiry into the diverse heterogeneous assemblages or networks in which human, non-human and more-than-human entities or actants are produced. Feminist new materialist approaches draw upon affect theory in their focus on materialities and their argument about how materialities shape everyday life in ways we are not aware of because we have paid too much too attention to linguistic representations (see Barad, 2003, p. 801). Affect theory is often used to do textual analysis that shows the "affect in the works," but here I try to follow, instead, the “affect of the works,” (Bewes, 2018, p. 330) which is what I consider to be a post-representational approach to literary criticism. Tracing the “affect of the works” implies a movement away from an emphasis on discourses, to one on materialities; with Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak we suggest that a focus on matter “provides openings for research in our field, as it forces us to rethink adult-child relationalities—with a blurring of the adult/child binary—and to reimagine critical interpretation with an attention to materialities that exceed the representational paradigm.” (García-González & Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2020, p. 45)

Contemporary understandings of affect are developed by establishing an ontological difference with culturally constructed forms of emotion considering that affect is, first, an intensity. “The notion of emotion as always already mediated is one limit of sociocultural theory for coming to the fullness of social life as, in part, only felt, irrational, and not only culturally determined.” (Ehret & Rowsell, 2021, p. 202) What I term as affective literary criticism is, therefore, concerned with such intensities allowing us to decenter traditional critical repertoires —such as those that Rita Felski (2011) identified as stemming from the “hermeneutics of suspicion” in which the critic seeks out for hidden meanings— to move towards more embodied understandings of what an artwork may do to and with its readers. The embodiment I refer to is not one that is solely related to individual (human) bodies that read, but rather to the question of how reading occurs with other human and non-human materialities. In other words, an affective literary criticism aims to bring us closer to how we feel with certain texts and how we move with them towards other feelings, things, and people.

With the proposal for an affective childist literary criticism, I aim to contribute to the ongoing discussion on how to overcome adultism in our field. This discussion may be traced back to both Hunt’s (1984) and Rose’s (1984) texts, but also to more recent theoretical and conceptual approaches to the power hierarchy between children's and adults as in Nikolajeva's (2009) concept of "aetonormativity", a neologism that refers to the normativity of the adult, Marah Gubar's (2013) "kinship model" that oppossess to the notion of the child as having a deficit to be compensated, Deszcz-Tryhubczak's work with children in participatory approaches (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2016) and Helma van Lierop-Debrauwer's (2022) proposal to look at children's literature as "joint venture" of adults and children. The power imbalance between children and adults (and child readers and adult authors) has also motivated an interest in young authors and the circulation and appraisal of their works (as in the work of Joosen, 2021; Wesseling, 2019, and Todorova, 2017) and different understandings about how intergenerational relations hide a potential for transformation (as gathered in Deszcz-Tryhubczak & Jacques, 2021; Deszcz-Tryhubczak & Kalla, 2021). More recently, Vanessa Joosen has also taken up John Wall's childism as an analytic framework for textual analysis of ageism in children's texts (Joosen, in print).

I propose some methodological orientations —or rather, some affective methodological orientations— to facilitate children's literature criticism as a "joint venture" (van Lierop-Debrauwer, 2022) between adults and children. Helma van Lierop-Debrauwer notion of a "joint venture" (2022) argues for the researcher's epistemological humility to overcome what Karin Murris calls "onto-epistemic unjustice": "that children are not listened to because of their very being (onto) a child and are therefore unable to make claims to knowledge, because it is assumed that they are (still) developing, (still) innocent, (still) fragile, (still) immature, (still) irrational, and so forth." (Murris, 2020, p. 46) Murris combines ontology with epistemology to argue that children are not heard because they are children, while van Lierop-Debrauer invites us to think about how research could help us develop an epistemological humility. I sketch here some orientations for such endeavour by following a shifting relationship with a work of art published in a children's literature collection. In this article, the method goes about how to become affected by reading with children. In the next few pages, I attempt to describe some of the intensities that came up and after encounters between children, books, and children's literature researchers. I aim at describing events that could help us to open paths that counter adultism without falling into a naive rhetoric about the emancipatory power of children's voices. These paths, I aim to show, are connected to the power of affect.

The Agency of The Book

I encountered *La madre y la muerte/La partida* when revising a great lot of challenging picturebooks at the Internationale Jugendbibliothek in Germany. After reading many of them, I ended up identifying some common strategies for dealing with difficult matters, but when I was confronted with this particular book, I could not identify any. How could someone dare to publish a story like this? Who dared to put it in a children's literature collection?

La madre y la muerte/La partida is a picturebook with two stories —and two front covers— that are brought together by the suggestive illustration of Argentinian illustrator Nicolás Arispe (Figure 1). *La madre y la muerte* by Alberto Laiseca revsions a short story by Hans Christian Andersen in which a mother (illustrated as a fox) has a baby that is taken away by Death after Death puts her off to sleep. When the mother wakes up, she decides to go and chase after Death to get her baby back. On her way, the mother needs to give away parts of her body: eyes, legs, an arm. When she arrives, dismembered, Death is astonished: "I have never seen such abnegation," Death says, and promises to give the child back. After the encounter, one turns the page to a double spread without text in which Death is watering a wild garden. In the next double spread, stands one line of text: "but (the baby) was dead." Death has given a dead child to a mother that has lost her eyes, legs, and an arm in her quest to get her back. The images show an empty cradle and a wood-burning stove with flames (Figure 2). The other short story of that book, *La partida*, by Alberto Chimal, is even more disturbing. It tells the story of a mother whose child is dead in the flesh but still lives. The child is decomposing, and worms come out of his eyes.

La madre y la muerte/La partida was published in Mexico in what may be described as one of the most prestigious picturebook collections in Latin America: A la Orilla del Viento from Fondo de Cultura Económica. Nevertheless, the publisher coordinator has said that they did not publish this book thinking of a child audience. One of the authors, Alberto Chimal, describes it as “a book for readers” (Córdova). The implicit transgression of publishing this in a collection for children was probably one of the reasons that captivated me the most. Laiseca revises one of Andersen’s fairy tales, one of those stories that are often censored, by parents, teachers, and other caretakers. I may then suggest that having this story published in a children’s literature collection invites —in both children and adults— a childist reading: how would a child read this? What would they enjoy and what does age do with the range of possible responses and attachments? How would I have read it as a child? Where does the book take us? How is that the adult in me impedes me a childist reading?

La madre y la muerte presents a compelling example of how books do things with us and as such offer a privileged opportunity to think about how an affective childist literary criticism could work.

Moment 1. Embodying The Book.

In 2018, I conducted with Soledad Véliz a research project that inquired into how books about difficult subjects are read in schools. We used five challenging picturebooks that were read aloud to two school classes (8-9 years-old and 10-11 years-old) in 10 different sessions[1]. We organised the books from the least to the most challenging, placing *La madre y la muerte* as the last book to be read. To read the books and guide the conversation, we hired two literary mediators. We invited them to be part of the research project —as participants, they would be observed too— and set up ourselves to take up the role of observers. One of the mediators read aloud each book, while the other walked around showing the pictures. After this shared reading, the group was divided in two: one half had a verbal discussion about the book, while the second half was taken to an adjacent room in the school library where they were given a simple instruction asking them to write or draw something (loosely) connected to the book. With this set up, we were aiming to give account of how reading is an embodied practice and how we cannot solely give account of shared meanings by conducting verbal conversations about books. We referred to the second group as the one oriented by "makings" (see García-González, Véliz and Matus, 2020).

La madre y la muerte soon produced difficulties the other books had not. The reading mediator argued that it was not appropriate for children and asked us to replace it, at least for the group of younger children. We proposed to her another, "softer," story. The book was already doing things with us.

Inspired by feminist new materialist approaches to research, we had designed data production in multiple formats and layers that allowed us to pay more attention to the affective: drawing and texts written by children, fieldnotes and sketches that purposedly recorded our feelings and emotions, event descriptions prepared by the mediators inmediately after the interventions, and recordings of the conversations. We produced data without intention of coding it later, but rather of producing that wonder Maggie MacLure speaks of. When "reading" the data, we noticed that children had referred to all sorts of wounds —

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[1] This project as the following two presented in this article were overseen and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile.

physical wounds— after listening to this story. The book brought up all sorts of emotional repertoires about death and sacrifice, repertoires that were not only discursive but also material, emotional, affective.

When analysing the data, I went back to the audio recordings to see what I may have missed by reading the transcriptions. Then I noticed how a girl spoke with silences. It was surprising to note how the group did not jump to fill in those silences: “I had like… like… fear… but also emotion… Emotion because the mom fought against all… against wind and tide to save her child… and sadness… because… ohhhh…., I mean, fear… and something here.” Listening to the recording I was very surprised that none had interrupted her. She seemed to be struggling, but the rest of the children took the time to listen with respect.

After the session with the 10-11 year-olds, we had a very short break to prepare the room for the younger group. While we were rushing preparations, I asked the cultural mediator if she would dare to read the book to the 7-8 years-old. She immediately agreed. Later she would tell us that the reactions of the first group had surprised her, that she had realised that children liked to talk about death and that they did it “naturally”: “none questioned that in real life, death came to pick you up, none questioned how it was visually represented, or if she was good or bad, as I would have imagined,” she wrote later in her report.

A childist affective literary criticism may be directed, precisely, to bring more texture to those assumptions and to bring ourselves to enjoy how reading together moves us to do differently. If we attend to the multiple relationalities that the book provoked, we may well argue that it was not about talking naturally about death, but rather about different embodiments of pain and care. Children talked about it, but they also performed it in different ways when talking about physical wounds, writing about pain and showing a desire —a need we could even say— of relating with the book and with the activity somehow differently: for example, by the end of each session children would come to see the book closely and touch its textured covers.

By the end of our 6-week intervention, we brought black-and-white copies of the front covers of the five books we have read and asked them to organise them from the one they liked the most to the one the least. A striking majority —over 80% in both groups— selected *La madre y la muerte* as their preferred book; many of them also showed preference by colouring the copy we had distributed. We were very surprised: we expected a more even distribution of preferences. An affective childist orientation to our literary criticism should take us to look more closely to how this book had moved us. I insist in the need to find data that opens wonder, as, for instance the recording of one of the 7-year-olds that said that the book had brought her "happiness":

> Mediator: What brought you happiness?
>
> Girl: Because it was a kind of sad story, so then I, the other day I went to see my granny Ana and it reminded me a lot… because she died of a disease.
>
> Mediator: Where did you go to see her?
>
> Girl: To the cemetery. When I was little, she used to mash bananas with oranges, she would feed it to my mouth every day.
>
> Mediator: And what brought you happiness?
>
> Girl: When they gave back the child, I felt curious when they handed in the body to the person.
>
> Mediator: And that brought you happiness and you remembered? Because you remembered your grandmother?
>
> Girl: Because it turns out she died of a really serious disease…She had a lot of shivers with a lot of hypothermia and all of that, and it made me remember.

Mediator: And that memory brought you happiness…what was it that brought you happiness about the story?

Girl: When she had to take her arms and her body out.

Mediator: Why did it bring you happiness?

Girl: Because when she died, the body was already dead, so the story is dead, but not…

Teacher: Time is up already.

Girl: I feel a lot of happiness, I remembered when she was giving me everything in the mouth, she would sit me down in the chair.

(The teacher addresses the mediator, naming her out loud)

Mediator: But what brought you happiness was remembering your grandmother…"

The mediator is interrupted by the schoolteacher, who warns that time has run out, and the children must leave. They cannot advance any further in their dialogue, one in which agreeing on meaning does not seem possible. The mediator reassures the girl that *La madre y la muerte* had brought her happiness because it reminded her of her grandmother. Yet the girl, in her discourse, appeared to be weaving a meaning of hapiness that is alien to the mediator repertoire, to adult repertoires, perhaps, on what counts as appropriate happiness. I would further argue that the girl's affective intervention provides a glimpse at sensorial and corporeal discourses—seldom unaffected by censorship— that grapple in a culture in which mind is strongly opposed to body.

There, in her discourse, now gleams (MacLure, 2013) something I had not foreseen, but that was also present in the recurrence of wounds and conversations (fueled by fascination?) around maimed bodies. The mediator, however, would write down in her logbook that the girl's opinion had attracted her attention: "[She] told that not long ago she had visited her grandmother in the cemetery, and that the story reminded her of how much she loved her grandmother, how her grandmother used to feed her, and *that* memory made her happy [emphasis added by me].”

Time and time again, when talking about readings of *La madre y la muerte,* adults, literature critics and experts associate the book with death and the importance of overcoming its taboos, despite the fact that the book appears to do much more than just that in child-book encounters. *La madre y la muerte* sparks conversations on missing parts, warmth, touch, bodies that have escaped the world of the living, on death before dying, and life after it.

Moment 2. Transactions with the book.

In 2019, with Soledad Véliz and Jacinta Jímenez, we put together a small collection of picturebooks for two after-school spaces created by an NGO in informal settlements, *campamentos*, in the outskirts of Santiago. *La madre y la muerte/La partida* was one of the books we took with us there. With these books and in collaboration with the neighbours that cared for the children, we organised an educational program. The program consisted, mainly, in reading-alouds and activities with the different books. The caretakers worked with groups that ranged from infants to adolescents; most of them confessed they only read what was mandatory for the school (or not even that). Some of the adult caretakers would also confess that they did not like to read. One of them told us that she thought it was very stupid that schools required children to read a book every month.

Our proposed activities were aimed at finding amusement and connection to life experiences in reading and included the creation of alternative endings, playdough modelling, epistolary writing and different (playful) questions that were (often loosely) related to the books. After reading *La madre y la muerte*, we invited them to think about our desire to negotiate with death, our fantasy about it not being definitive: each child was invited to write down who they would take back from death and what they would offer instead. This question was also meant to provoke an awareness about the mother's absurd sacrifice, a narrative that, in our opinion, was one of the problems posed with the book.

The activity motivated, as expected, a lot of conversations about what the mother in the book did and about mothers' love for their children. Many children praised the mother for her sacrifice, but this was also a contested narrative, and different sorts of things were exchanged with Death. The wonder of data was found in some of those exchanges. For example, one of the girls wrote down that she would exchange her dog —that had died some months ago— for her brother, a child who usually also attended the group sessions, a child known by the rest of the participants. This answer surprised the caretakers who asked her if she was sure of it. The adults in the room appeared to be shocked, but later, recalling this episode with us, one of them had a good laugh: "What else could I say? She was just so serious about it!" I realised, then, when we shared a laugh, that *La madre y la muerte* had moved us into more ironic and irreverent ways than what I had expected. We could share guilty feelings with amusement. The book could not be reduced to the trope of the sacrificial mother, as I feared, as a traditional critical approach would lead us to argue. The book was assembled with various other forces, among those, forces that resisted book culture and its didactic promises.

Moment 3 Resisting a book

A year later, we included *La madre y la muerte* in yet another research project. With Soledad Véliz and Ignacia Saona, we created the collaborative platform for children's culture #EstoTbn, a hashtag meaning esto también, "also this," in a gesture towards the cumulative ethos of social media sharing. For this research project, we worked with children and school librarians from different cities and villages in Chile inquiring into how certain books and other cultural materials for children get recommended. This project started during the first Covid wave with the aim of challenging the mainstream channels of circulation in the context of cultural recommendations during the first lockdown. The exploration then moved to question how certain forms of what we may term children's culture —fiction and artworks for/about/by children— get to circulate while others get marginalised.

La madre y la muerte was one of the artworks we proposed to the children. We, the research team formed by Soledad, Ignacia and me, sent this book, among others, to the school libraries and also shared a video-recorded reading-aloud that teachers could show to the children, who were not attending the schools at the time. The data production was mainly structured around our invitation to children to send us their opinions about what cultural materials they would recommend, to whom, and why. Some children replied with written comments, while others wanted to be interviewed about their preferences or replied by sending audio messages by chat. We asked them if they would recommend this book to others. Many said they would not, that it was too sad. Another agreed on recommending it and wrote: "it is one of the saddest books that I have ever read, but I still like it." One of the children sent us an audio recording in which he spoke clearly and slowly, as if carefully choosing the words: "It can be defined in one word: disturbing. Not recommended if you are someone that gets scared easily, but it's ok. Simply disturbing, very disturbing. And I don't really know if it was made for children, but ok. Disturbing. That word defines it: disturbing." I listened to this comment thinking that I could have certainly described the book as disturbing, perhaps it was one of the reasons why I liked it in the first place, why the three of us liked it, as if looking for arts that take us out of our comfort zones, but we were not expecting a child to describe it like this. Moreover, this child, as if reading our desire, makes a conscious decision when highlighting that he has chosen one word to describe it. The child questions that adults have published this book for children yet writes as a child for the adult researchers and does what we appear to be asking him to do: to find accurate definitions of his interpretations.

Some of the children found the book sad —perhaps it was more sad than absurd in Covid times—, but this child appeared to be set in resisting that sadness with some sort of disturbing agency, something that resonated quite deeply with my own interpretative subject, that had wondered whether this book would be as disturbing to children as it was to us, the adults reading a children's book.

Discussion

I have briefly presented three encounters between *La Madre y la muerte* and (young) readers sketching out how new relations with and towards the book emerged. These encounters occurred in the frame of three different research projects that inquired into children's reading practices and engagement. The three projects shared an interest in how we use books, what books do to us, how they affect us, and how we are not only affected by what we could put in words, but also by all sorts of entangled affective and material levels that are not even bound to single bodies or objects. Those entanglements are intra-actions (Barad, 2007, p. 185), as the entities do not preexist the exchange. The three projects follow, therefore, a line of inquiry about the agentic power of children's literature recognised as an affective force that acts with and within human and more-than-human bodies. In the projects I refer to, we did not focus on discourses about the books, on what they would represent, nor on the responses to them, but rather set our attention on the different semiotic-material entanglements that came into play when those books encountered readers. Here I have paid attention to some of the intra-actions with *La madre y la muerte*, because this book seemed to be particularly well suited to produce the epistemological humility needed to move towards a childist perspective. My argument for an affective childist literary criticism is one of embracing that multiplicity of possible emboddied readings —of children, of adults, and as part of human and more-than-human entanglements— that retains that modern desire of interpreting a text. New materialist and affective approaches to research, I claim, may help us to open up our difference-inclusive imagination to nurture the (adultist) tradition of literary criticism.

As Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Marecki (2021) and Biswas (2020) argue, if we are to challenge adultism, we need new methodological practices. Childism, as a difference-inclusive social imagination, provides an orientation towards more inclusive approaches, but holds a threat in its abstraction, in the essentializing that appears to be at the core of all terms that propose the emancipation of a determined social group. I believe that if we pull childism away from its ontological claims about the child and produce it as rather a movement, as a force, it should bring new insights to our adultist biases, opening space for other ways of knowing. Childism shall not be used to claim an acknowledgment of children's perspectives or to seek for children's emancipation from an adult-centred world, but rather as a force that requires from us, adults, a constant critical revision. Childism is not to become any sort of new identity politics, but rather a perspective to inquire and examine our hopes and pretensions when we do research about, for or with children. When coupled with affect theory and new materialist approaches, childism helps us to open space for the new, for that "wonder of data" that fosters a capacity "to enter into relation with researchers as in an *event.*" (MacLure, 2013, p. 231) We may need such wonder to overcome what Rita Felski describes as the detective orientation of literary criticism, concerned with unveiling the true meanings of texts. An affective childist literary criticism may provide us with methodological orientations to open up new readings that account for how we are affected by other readers and by situated encounters with books.

I have tried to sketch out some of the movements and openings that an affective childist literary criticism provided me in relation to *La madre y la muerte*. Needless to say, these movements and openings were made possible by the materialist involvement in fieldwork, an openness to the different intra-actions between children, caretakers, physical (and virtual) spaces, books, affective contexts, and researchers. Considering these relations to be intra-actions and not just responses —as in the reader-response theory developed by Louise Rosenblatt (1994)— allows us to move our attention from the reader as the one that brings life into the text, towards the set of relations in which that text is distinctively (re)produced in a specific time and space. This may be close to Rosenblatt argument about books as “inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols,” (1995, p. 24) but I propose here to consider that books and reader’s agentic matter intra-act. An affective childist literary criticism, therefore, would be put to work to map or trace some of those intra-actions with children’s literature while acknowledging that, as Peter Hunt adverts, we do not know what a child is thinking when reading, but that we also do not know what an adult is thinking. An affective childist literary criticism may, instead, open up possible routes to map what books do with us and to us. And a possible start point, as I have planned to sketch here, may be found in those books that puzzle us, haunt us and trigger feelings; texts that reveal their agency to us and that invite us to for new interpretations of texts and their world making.

Figure 1. *La madre y la muerte/La partida* by Alberto Laiseca, Nicolás Arispe and Alberto Chimal (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2015).

Figure 2. “But (the baby) was dead”, the disheartening ending of *La madre y la muerte* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2015).

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