



Véliz, S. and García-González, M. (2022) Becoming abject: testing the limits and borders of reading mediation. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 43(1), pp. 15-29.
(doi: [10.1080/01596306.2020.1786355](https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2020.1786355))

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Deposited on 21 December 2022

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Becoming Abject: Testing the Limits and Borders of Reading Mediation

Authors:

Soledad Véliz

Macarena García-González

Affiliations:

Center for Advanced Studies in Educational Justice, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Macul, Chile.

Center for Advanced Studies in Educational Justice, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Macul, Chile.

Abstract

Reading mediation is a concept used in Latin America and Spain, referring to the nurturing role played by adults in forging relationships between children and books. In this article, we conceptualize reading mediation as a 'technology of affect'. We propose 'mediation-as-usual' as a normative figuration of this technology, that has taken the task, especially in educational settings, of producing categories and identities regarding readers. Within this technology, adults are produced as empathetic, caring, and capable of providing safe spaces for reading. We report on literary encounters at a school in Santiago, Chile, where we introduced a 'challenging' picturebook to mediation-as-usual. We were involved in the emergence of what we term 'abject mediation', a figuration that produces the limits and boundaries of mediation-as-usual, absorbs semiotic materialities that are usually expelled from mediation and, we argue, has transformative potential. However, this is an ephemeral figuration, as once the limits are produced, reterritorialization works to assimilate the border elements, actualizing mediation-as-usual. We discuss how these figurations may help to question normative ways of producing readers.

Keywords:

Posthuman literacies, becoming, children's literature, death, figuration, reading

1. Introduction

Reading mediation is a concept extendedly deployed in Latin America and Spain to talk about the role played by adults in nurturing positive relationships between children and books. In these regions, anyone with enough motivation and resources can become a reading mediator as specialized education is not needed even if highly valued. The reading mediators, *mediadores de la lectura*, work in settings such as community spaces, school libraries, bookshops, and hospitals. In English, reading or literary mediation does not hold a different conceptual status from the labor usually performed by English teachers within English and ESL classes (as described by Blackburn, Clark, & Martino (2016) and Schieble (2012)).

In this article, we use the concepts of figuration (Braidotti, 2002) and technology of affect (Zembylas, 2015). Rosi Braidotti describes figurations as ‘materialistic mappings of situated, embedded, and embodied positions’ (2011, p. 26). The concept is opposed to the idea of a unitary subject, as it is situated and dependent on others. Braidotti’s account of figuration stresses the bonding and relationality of human and non-human forces. Posthumanism and feminist new materialism conceive humans and non-humans in entanglements in which they co-affect each other.

A technology of affect is a theoretical device that allows us to incorporate several features of new materialism and affect studies to social research. According to Zembylas (2015), one of its main features is “the recognition of bodily matters and their interrelations with socio-political economies” (p. 148); therefore, it is a useful concept to foreground how materialities are involved or captured in the production of social phenomena. We propose reading mediation as a technology of affect (Zembylas, 2015), a conceptualization that expands current understandings of the practice of reading mediation including and acknowledging non human forces. We use this concept taking distance from humanist understandings of reading mediation solely focused on human (adult) agency.

In this article, we describe mediation-as-usual as a normative becoming of reading mediation that organizes bodies in literacy encounters. As a normative arrangement of bodies, it seems to position adults as knowers, children as learners, and books as passive, closed entities (García-González & Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2020; Murriss, 2016). At the same time, it takes upon itself the neoliberal task of creating pleasurable bonds between children and books with the long-term aim of producing readers. This task demands emotional management that is achieved through the subjectification of mediators as caring, empathetic, emotionally stable and skillful enough to channel negative and scary feelings. Reading mediators appear to be resistant to negative feelings and able to control the affective engagements of readers (Colomer, 2005). In this article, we stress how the figuration of reading mediation connects with discourses of childhood innocence and developmentalism, which considers the care and protection of children as fundamental elements to define its limits and borders.

In this article, we deploy a post-qualitative approach (St. Pierre, 2014) to ‘data’ produced at one Chilean school . Specifically, we use “thinking with theory”, as proposed by Jackson and Mazzei (2013); thinking with theory conceives research as a process in which theory and data are ‘plugged’ into each other vitalizing the materialities of research in simultaneous and never ending dimensions. The concepts we use here —technology of affect and figurations— take shape and expand in the writing of the article; they are not a product of the analysis of our data.

We refer to ‘abject mediation’ as a figuration, in which the capacities of adults, children, and books within the affective technology of reading mediation shifts dramatically. In the configuration that we put together for this article, we, as researchers, brought into an educational setting an adult mediator and a book that challenged normative accounts of children’s literature. In the relational blend in which we were immersed, the limits of mediation-as-usual were produced, and, we argue, were signaled by discursive, material, physiological, and visceral signs of rejection (Kristeva, 1982). We use Julia Kristeva’s conceptualization of ‘abject’ to speak of ‘abject mediation’ which we propose to be an operation that produces and agitates limits of reading mediation. However, even if mediation-as-usual is challenged, it soon becomes reterritorialized. Nonetheless, the

process of becoming abject may allow teachers and mediators to think and potentially challenge what mediation-as-usual does.

2.1. Teaching to love books in neoliberal times

What does it take to teach children to love books?

Reading is often regarded as a public good and an essential asset involved in the development of almost every aspect of human potential (e.g. OECD, 2000). The alleged benefits of reading are broad: it has been found to be beneficial for a healthy theory of mind (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Lysaker & Tonge, 2013), to reason about the natural world (Waxman, Hermann, Woodring, & Medin, 2014), to resignify traumatic experiences (Cerlalc & Unesco, 2018), and, even, to boost financial success (Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008). Historically, schools have been held responsible for the production of readers under the contemporary guise of literacy: the achievement of ‘understanding, using, evaluating, reflecting on and engaging with texts to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential and to participate in society’ (OECD, 2019, p. 28). A literate person is someone who has cognitive abilities such as decodification, inference, and critical assessment. However, to be a reader is, also, ‘to cultivate not only proficiency but also engagement in reading’ (OECD, 2019, p. 31). This interest in the engagement with texts is an emotional imperative, which, it has been argued, is essential for the construction of a long-lasting relationship with books (Cerrillo, Larrañaga, & Yubero, 2009; Petit, 2007, 2009).

We take reading mediation to be a technology of affect that allows diverse practices to thrive within it. One of the most interesting aspects of reading mediation is that it offers possibilities for children and adults to engage in creative and exciting makings. The field of reception studies has extendedly shown the range of mediating practices with literary texts (e.g. Evans, 2015, 2016; Murriss & Thompson, 2016; Pantaleo, 2005) as studies with posthuman and new materialist theories (e.g. Davies, 2014; Hackett & Somerville, 2017; Knight, 2015). By conceptualizing reading mediation as a technology of affect we do not intend to exclude other, different ways of mediation. We conceive mediation-as-usual as a radicalization or as a normative becoming of the broad and diverse practice of reading mediation. More specifically, we argue that mediation-as-usual is a specific technology of affect in the sense that has made itself suitable to the neoliberal task of producing proficient readers that love books. This is an affective task, and mediation-as-usual is invested in the administration of emotions that readers should feel towards books.

Mediation-as-usual, as a technology of affect, seems to have become essential to the task of producing proficient readers that love books. It captures adult bodies to stand between children and books, as a bridge that not only joins but actively arbitrates the relationship between both parts (Robledo, 2010). The human figuration is essential for mediation-as-usual, as book-loving children would need certain type of adults to guide them (Cerrillo et al., 2009; Colomer, 2005; Petit, 2007). Within mediation-as-usual, the mediator appears to designate an adult figuration that performs a number of acts aimed at the production of proficient and emotionally-attached readers, that is, people who *love* books. For Petit, a mediator could be: ‘(...) a teacher, a librarian, a prefect, a social worker, or a volunteer entertainer’ (Petit, 2007, p. 155). In English-speaking countries, the role of producing readers is taken by teachers, parents, and researchers, among others (for example, through critical literacy Hayik, (2015).

Mediation-as-usual performs very precise affective operations to produce positive bonds between children and books. Vick & Martinez (2011) deploy ‘teaching-as-usual’ —first proposed by Davies & Hunt (1994)— as an embodied performativity in which values such

as 'care, commitment, professionalism, being good with kids' (p. 189) are essential for the profession. Certain emotional repertoires, usually those of the so-called positive emotions, are considered to be necessary to be a caring professional (Abramowski, 2010). Besides caring for children, reading mediators are also expected to love books. The transmission of love for books from adults to children is assumed to be contagious (Colomer, 2005), within affective relationships of hospitality (Petit, 1999) and shared enthusiasm (Chambers, 1993).

In the next section, we describe how a research-intervention (ANONYMIZED RESEARCH, 2019) in a school in Chile was involved in the production of normative (as-usual) and abject mediation. We try to shift the focus from figurations of mediation as an exclusively human endeavor towards a more-than-human affair (Burnett & Merchant, 2018; Coban, McAdam, & Arizpe, 2020; Kuby, Thiel, & Spector, 2019). In this article we do not focus on how power restricts through 'mediation-as-usual', but we also follow a more affirmative approach which combines the critical with the creative (as proposed by Braidotti (2002).

2.2. The affect turn and which affect for technologies of affect?

Michalinos Zembylas draws from affect theory (Clough, 2008; Massumi, 1995) to propose the concept of 'technologies of affect' (2015). Affect theory, or the 'affect turn', addresses how different materialities, and not just discourses, touch human and non-human bodies (Clough, 2008). In this article, we follow a theorization of affect as becoming. Following Nietzsche and Spinoza, affect as becoming involves: '(...) intensities that affect it (the body), augmenting or diminishing its power to act: these intensities come from external parts or the individual's own parts' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 283). In other words, we want to actualize the current understanding of mediation as a practice centered around adult agency that stands as a bridge between children and books.

We use Zembylas (2015) 'technologies of affect' as it allows us to gather and connect 'material, affective, and conceptual elements' (p. 151) that work to produce categories and identities, separating, excluding and marginalizing. When applied to mediation, this technology captures bodies and diverse materialities that produce capacities like reading and enjoying literature. To conceptualize the different positions that emerge during encounters with books, we use a set of figurations, which are 'localized, materialistic mappings of situated, embedded, and embodied positions' (Braidotti, 2011, p. 13). The idea of mapping denotes territories, but these do not pre-exist the practice of mapping. For Deleuze & Guattari (1987), territorialization is a process that arranges diverse functions to be purposeful to the territory. The territory, in turn, 'has two effects: a reorganization of functions and a regrouping of forces' (p. 320). We understand that mediation is reterritorialized as mediation-as-usual when it organizes bodies and gets involved in the production of recognizable readers. This reterritorialization produces identities and dominant positions —such as that of the reader—but, more importantly, it captures affects to produce positive emotional connections between children and books. Abject mediation could be understood as a deterritorialization of this highly codified territory, a destabilization, and possible opening up of possibilities for the relations between children, adults and books or other entities. Both figurations are transitory and interchangeable, and both can be present somehow simultaneously. Accordingly, one of the focus of this article is to show how mediation-as-usual can become porous, unstable, and can transgress its boundaries to actualize abject mediation.

2.3. How to abject

We are interested in an elaboration of abjection that is coupled with Bataille's *formless* (Georgelou, 2014). In this sense, abjection is an operation that evokes the limits of

expectations, norms, morals, and regimes by enabling different ways of thinking to emerge. Abjection has a long conceptual genealogy. Kristeva (1982) re-works Bataille's concept of abjection (Bataille, 1985) to describe it as the expulsion of certain unwanted psychic elements to achieve the constitution of an acceptable self (Barret, 2011; Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2008). Applications of the concept to the field of research in education have moved away from these psychoanalytic origins and have turned abjection into an operation deployed to produce recognizable subjects that are allowed to exist within certain social norms (Davies et al., 2006). Butler (1990) understands abjection as a structural notion, one that constitutes boundaries for subjects as a way to leave 'outside' what has been deemed unacceptable. Accordingly, the regulation of the body and its functions prevents turning abject; the emotional control of mediation-as-usual over the display of the mediators in the encounter with books is, therefore, crucial for the constitution of an acceptable reading mediator.

We regard abjection as the practice of transgressing borders and, at the same time, producing and transforming these borders. The technology of affect that we call mediation-as-usual is not just the description of a normative process but responds to a relational ontology, a technology able to produce and give capacity to diverse entities, human or non-human, involved in reading mediation. In concordance, any book, adult mediator, child reader or such can acquire a capacity to abject and, in consequence, produce the limits of mediation-as-usual. For example, it is common to find books expelled from the technology of affect of reading mediation because they are considered inappropriate for children. We propose abject mediation as an operation whose affective consequences are the disturbances of boundaries that we thought were static and definitory.

3. How to assemble research

Posthuman and new materialist theories recognize the importance of narrative when producing research. Kaiser (2012) refers to the process of producing a narrative to tell the story of research as *reassembling*, in other words, discursively retrofitting a narrative to tell as if it were linear. By doing this, we accept that we are producing a new state of affairs (Bowden, 2011), one that does not have the pretension of communicating actual events. Besides, post-qualitative inquiry understands that it is impossible to have a (well-trained) researcher which is not involved into the very object of research. In this section, we aim to acknowledge how we became involved in mediation-as-usual and abject mediation and how we produce a narrative about it.

We report on a research project undertaken at a school in Santiago, Chile. The project was part of a series of involvements with educational institutions developed under a research line (the ANONYMIZED project). The main project dealt with mapping affective intensities related to reading with unusual, challenging picturebooks (Evans, 2015). This school is part of a non-profit, private, and emblematic society in Chile, dedicated to the provision of education to children from 'contexts of vulnerability'. The society manages 19 schools in the Metropolitan Region of Chile, with more than 20,000 students in total. We chose to work with them because we were involved in a project about reading promotion, and this group has a particular interest in providing the schools with well-equipped libraries as well as constant supervision and training for librarians. Each class has mandatory visits to the library for 45 minutes every week, an unusual event in schools in Chile. We were allowed to work with the children and adults in these library times.

The project involved six sessions with two classes of students: one group aged 7-8 years old and the other aged 10-11 years old. We worked with groups of 15 to 20 students. All participants, including the adults involved, complied with the ethics procedures of research.

Our common interest was to use the books to break taboos and challenge normative ideas about childhood; thus, we decided on five picturebooks which we ranked from less to most 'challenging' (realizing from the very beginning that they would be more challenging for teachers and other adults in the room rather than for the children). The books are *Eloísa y los Bichos* [*Eloísa and the Bugs*] (Jairo Buitrago and Rafael Yockteng, 2011), *El Viaje* [The Journey] (Francesca Sanna, 2016), *La Isla. Una Historia Cotidiana* [The Island: An Everyday Story] (Armin Greder, 2003), *Ícaro* (Federico Delicado, 2014), and *La Madre y la Muerte/La Partida* [The Mother and Death/The Departure] (Alberto Laiseca, Alberto Chimal and Nicolás Arispe, 2015). Most of the books we used have seemingly 'unhappy or ambiguous endings.' We developed a plan for psychological intervention if needed. We discussed with the librarian the possibility that these books made children uncomfortable or upset in ways that needed further monitoring. We discussed the possibility of having a crisis intervention, which are usually designed for extremely traumatic events and community disasters, like school shootings or suicides. As this was not the case, we borrowed the concept of trigger event (from ACT model intervention from Roberts, 1992) to work a plan of safety management which mainly considered derivation to the school psychologist if one or several children showed distress. During the sessions the researchers (one of them a researcher in the subject of forensic psychology) were attentive to signs of distress, discomfort, or the like, in children. We observed no such signs, but we can only assert that no triggering events or precipitating events were produced because of the reading or the related activities.

Our intervention considered weekly meetings with the two classes as well as small-group discussions and interviews with children, parents, teachers, and librarians. The class readings were led by a children's books mediator, who was hired by us for this specific project. She had experience reading to groups of children in community libraries and had just completed a specialization course on children's literature. She was asked to write autobiographical records after the sessions. We reassembled research using drawings from these accounts, from conversations with the librarian and assistant librarian of the school, and fieldnotes and drawings made by us. Children and adults who were part of our observations have all given written consent (assent by the children and consent by the parents in the case of the students). The subject and titles of the books used were explicitly stated in these forms. When we did not have both forms signed, children were allocated in a different activity in a nearby room.

La Madre y la Muerte/La Partida is a double story published by a Mexican publisher (Fondo de Cultura Económica). The book is composed of two stories: *La Madre y la Muerte* written by the Argentinian author, Alberto Laiseca, and *La Partida*, written by the Mexican author, Alberto Chimal. Both stories are a single picturebook, with two covers, and each story finishes in the middle of the book, with a double-spread that reunites the stories. The tales deal with mothers facing the death of a young child. The black and white illustrations by Nicolas Arispe reference a universe of anthropomorphized creatures in Laiseca's story, and Guadalupe Posada engravings in Chimal's. Only *La Madre y la Muerte* is used in this research.

La Madre y la Muerte tells the story of a mother whose baby has been taken away by Death. As she cannot come to terms with it, she decides to go where Death lives, but, to move forward, she must give away different parts of her body. She finally manages to get to Death, who tells her that she has never seen anyone achieve such a thing so that she will give her back her child. A double-spread shows Death watering a garden, and just after turning the

page, we know that there is no possible happy ending to this story: the returned child is dead (and the body appears to be burning inside a stove).

Even if this book has been published on a children's literature series, the coordinator of this series commented: 'we don't publish *La madre y la muerte/La partida* thinking of a children's audience. A few days ago, one of the book's authors, Alberto Chimal, was asked if this book was for children. He answered something very clever, he said it was a book for readers (...) I turn your question around; what readers is this book for?' We had extensive ethical deliberations about using this book. These deliberations included: two readings with children of 7 to 8 years old, a literary reading and discussion with education scholars, and an extensive literature review from literary and psychological backgrounds on the relations between terror, death, fear, fiction and children. There is a long academic tradition that is interested in how children and young people need and take pleasure in stories that deal with existential issues. Bettelheim (1975), from a psychoanalytic stance, argues about the need of children to read fairy tales, especially because this type of stories take 'existential dilemmas very seriously and addresses itself directly to them' (p. 10). However, this type of stories are not, usually, the ones that adults offer children to read (Rijke, 2004), in part because of concerns about protection. We align with other scholars who propose that stories that thrive on anxieties and fear can be viewed as a space for release and experimentation (McCort, 2016) or as a safe forum to play out certain anxieties. In practical terms, we decided to catalog the book as a 'challenging picturebook' (Evans, 2015), books that 'push the boundaries of what is and what is not deemed acceptable' (p. 28) for children.

Our research intervention was organized under what Elizabeth A. St. Pierre's (2018) refers to as post-qualitative inquiry. St. Pierre argues against the separation of the theoretical and the methodological, pointing out how conventional humanist qualitative methodologies do not align with the ontological proposals of posthumanism. Instead of believing in the good sense in the detection of error, post-qualitative inquiry proposes to put methodology aside and, instead, read widely across philosophy and social theories to reorient thinking. This is what we have done with the 'data' obtained at our fieldwork. Our data is not organized from a politics of evidence, but rather considered to be fluid, open to change (Denzin, 2013). As Jackson and Mazzei (2013) propose, we involved ourselves in 'thinking with theory' putting 'philosophical concepts to work' with questions regarding the naturalization of the adult mediator as a bridge between children and books. We took the 'data chunks' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013, p. 264) of text, audio, drawings and images and, at last, plugged them into different discussions, into solitary ruminations, readings and disagreements.

4.1. How mediation-as-usual is assembled: producing the borders

Mediation-as-usual is a technology of affect that organizes encounters with books, adults, and groups of children. Mediators ensure the production of readers by controlling the non-human entities involved in reading encounters. Mediators use various criteria like aesthetic quality (Robledo, 2017), attention to the reader characteristics (such as their age) (Lazar, 1993), and a great number of considerations about the text characteristics (Lluch, 2010) to select books that are transit reading and educational spaces. Other criteria include different types of childhood figurations and prejudices (Lundin, 2004), ideas on how readers would 'progress' in reading (García-González, 2017), and institutional and contextual conditions like fear of retaliation if selecting taboo themes (Giussani, 2014).

We involved ourselves in practices of mediation-as-usual as soon as we were confronted with the task of choosing the picturebooks for the research project. Through a selection of books, certain figurations of childhood are reified and assembled, aided by concerns about

literary quality and developmental psychology. For example, one of the school librarians stated: 'Small children don't understand death. When they see things that they don't understand, these [books] will only shock them, disturb them.' What children can and cannot understand about death, in this example, is organized through a developmental logic, according to which there are progressive, linear stages to reach an 'adult' understanding of death. Developmental issues are common concerns for mediators, and these were intensified by the subject of the books. However, these concerns are not exclusive of reading mediation.

Mindy Blaise (2013) makes a connection between psychological and developmental understandings and the hegemony of childhood innocence. In Blaise's claim, relationships between children and adults regarding, for example, sexual education are produced as a binary in which some try to protect children from sexualization while others seek to empower them (Faulkner, 2010). Something similar can be said of the struggles that teachers and mediators have when considering sharing potentially disturbing stories with children: a polarization of practices in which children, either must be protected by adults or, alternatively, harmed by them.

Mediation-as-usual produced the limits imposed on books almost immediately with *La Madre y la Muerte/La Partida*. We, researchers, proposed the book to be read by both age-groups (7 to 8 and 10 to 11); however, during preparatory meetings with the reading mediator she confessed how uncomfortable she was with the idea: 'This is an unkind view of death. It's not that I don't want to talk to the children about death; rather, it is at what age do I talk to them about death?' She also expressed: 'With books that I know that it's normal for kids to get sad, I read them. But with this one, which is so cruel, it is not necessary to talk about death. I consider it irresponsible. In no way do I see it for 2nd grade [kids]. Those in 5th grade might enjoy the images, maybe a younger child would too. It is sullyng the subject ... addressing it ahead of time.' The school librarian agreed: 'I found *La Madre y la Muerte* too... brusque...very intense... (...). I felt that the children were shocked.' We present these accounts as part of our thinking process to elaborate how mediation-as-usual produce mediators as bridges, one of their primary duties to stand between children and books. In this case, if the book is allowed to get attached to a child's body, it will produce traumatic effects. Mediation-as-usual assembles and organizes itself around an adult figure invested in protecting children from potential encounters with books that may provoke harm. Concerns are coupled with considerations about children's innocence and maturation, placing mediators as either protectors or harmers. The coupling of *La Madre y la Muerte/La Partida* with children produces a limit for mediation-as-usual and threatens to expel it from the technology.

Mediation-as-usual assembles an ideal adult mediator who is caring, empathetic, and loves books (Cerrillo, 2009; Petit, 1999 among others). The reading mediator must permeate the space, to produce the circulation of emotions in an emotionally safe environment. According to Munita (2014), pleasure for books is not natural but is 'built' by mediators in their interactions with children. The ability to deal with emotions is professionalized as socioemotional learning, which is deeply connected with group reading and sharing (Colomer, 2005) but also with the capacity of mediators to be hospitable (Petit, 2009). Empathy, affection, closeness, and the importance of trusted dialogue are extensively named as central abilities for mediators to master (Munita, 2017; Robledo, 2017; Sainz, 2005 among others). For example, the reading mediator stated after reading *La Madre y la Muerte/La Partida*: '(...) I think that the subject of the affective aspect of reading became evident again here, by giving hugs and thanks for the lived moment.'

We explored the question of how we may produce safe spaces for children's reading and sharing. The idea of 'safe spaces' is often, but not always, assembled with that of children's innocence and with practices of protection as ideal figurations for mediators. As a mediator stated, the fear of harming children by reading a book that would not be age-appropriate fueled most of the rejection towards *La Madre y la Muerte*. A safe space for reading seems to be dependent on individual books, and in this case, this materiality threatened with not just harming the children but also with defying the figuration of the mediator as a caring, empathic subjectivity. The destabilizing potential of specific materialities (like this book), exposed the limits of mediation-as-usual.

As a technology of affect, the stability of mediation-as-usual depends on figurations of innocent childhood, developmental foundations, the affective investment in protecting children by adult mediators, and the figuration of a caring adult within 'safe spaces.' We do not claim that introducing a challenging picturebook is the only way of destabilizing mediation-as-usual, instead, that its limits are produced when labeling a book as outside of mediation or difficult to mediate.

In the following section, we show how abject mediation is reassembled. We stress that this is not a figuration that emerges in opposition to mediation-as-usual. Both figurations co-exist, but one may be intensified, or shifts that are constant become perceptible for humans.

4.2. The production of abject mediation

The day before the reading of *La Madre y la Muerte*, we had agreed with the mediator to read it only to the older students (10-11 year old's). The mediation-as-usual technology had prevented us from proposing to read *La Partida*, as we all agreed that this was a more brutal story. So even if we wanted to disentangle ourselves from the assemblage of children's innocence, the bodies of research of which we were a part of became captured by this affective technology.

On the day we read *La Madre y la Muerte*, there were several adults present in the school library: five professionals from the school and two researchers —the authors of this article— and the reading mediator. First came a class of 10 to 11 years old. While the mediator read out loud the book —and the double spreads were projected on a screen— one of the researchers wrote: 'The library assistant had an anguished look and muttered: 'how sad.' Two children next to me whispered something about death and started making faces of disgust while the mediator narrates how the mother rips off her limbs.' The mediator recorded in her diary: 'And when the story ended, they remained silent for a few seconds, as if overwhelmed. It was even difficult for me to interrupt that moment and move on with the next activity.' However, the reading and discussion progressed, the children and adults conversing over the story.

After the class left the library, one of the researchers asked the mediator if she dared to read the book to the younger students who were on their way to the space (she believed that after experiencing how it had gone with the older children she would have lost some fears). The mediator agreed. The 7 to 8 years old children arrived at the library. One of the researchers registered in her diary that, before the reading started, she felt 'a cold sweat' running down her spine and the 'sweat collected in her palms,' which may indicate an autonomic response to stress. Later, the mediator wrote in her diary: 'As I read, the children were asking questions [but not expecting an answer], and I listened to their nervous comments of disgust, or astonishment when the mother mutilated herself. After the reading,

some children clapped and asked for the story to be read again. This, I interpret, is that there are children eager to listen to these types of stories, that do not have a happy ending, and that deal with complex issues, in a complex way as well.' Later, one of the researchers stated in a meeting, some days after the session, that this experience 'allowed me to get rid of prejudices.'

In the last session of the group readings, we brought all of the books that had been read and asked them to choose the book that they liked the most to recommend to their peers. According to our results, 80% of the 5th grade children and 84% of the 2nd grade children chose *La Madre y la Muerte* as their preferred book. The fact that this was the last book to be read probably influenced the results; however, the idea that the children liked this book had a considerable effect on the school librarian. She stated:

But, I was also impressed to see that the book that according to MY assessment had been 'shocking'...due to the subject (...). However, (...) most went with *La Madre y la Muerte* (...) when talking with the children as to why they liked it, I think what made the biggest impression was the mother's sacrifice...I mean, they didn't even talk about death. (...) they saw... another idea that the book points out, which is the sacrifice of the mother. According to the professional, this book may be acceptable because it glorifies the sacrifice of the mother instead of talking about death itself.

For the reading mediator, it was the 'natural' way in which the older children talked about the subject that made her change her mind about reading the book to the younger ones: 'It was the naturalness that I saw in older children when addressing the theme of the book, the pleasure that it gave them to talk about death and this specific story, that I considered. So, we had to take advantage to try and see what the reaction of the little ones would be and not miss the opportunity to offer them a quality work.' This idea of the 'quality' of the literary text and pleasure as the affective binding, reterritorializes any harm she could have identified in the book as worth the risk.

Mediation as a technology of affect denotes changes in the capacities of humans and non-human entities, and we refer to these changes as becoming abject mediation. Mediation as abjection is, to us, this operation of pushing the limits, of plugging back in what has been ejected, because the limits can only be produced by 'touching them' (Manchev, 2009 in Georgelou, 2014). The exercise of touching the limits is useful to demonstrate that these limits alter and adapt, as at the moment of being produced, they are changed by the same operation. As indicators of the abject practice, we reported bodily changes, physiological indicators of stress, and discursive accounts of the fears and anxieties associated with the emergence of abject mediation. The change of capacities is signaled by these registers. Abject mediation gestures towards non-innocent relationships of care with children by recognizing that children connect with books in unpredictable ways. In the same way, abjection points towards a disturbed, unsure adult who does not control the outcomes of the reading and, therefore, cannot solely be a 'bridge' between children and books. In abject mediation, adults are readers just as children are.

Mediation-as-usual, when assembled with certain materialities, like this picturebook, reveals its limits as porous and unstable. Abjection is a mode of attention toward materialities, emotions, bodies, or others that are rejected from the technology of mediation-as-usual. The book is presented as difficult to mediate and, therefore, the bridge between children and book is interrupted. The book cannot be seen as connected to children's bodies. When we

forcefully plugged this book back into the technology of reading, mediation-as-usual was disturbed and rearranged.

We wanted to produce an unstable practice of mediation-as-usual that challenged the way that normative production of readers is enacted; nonetheless, the reterritorialization was almost immediate; the book was re-incorporated as non-harming and non-threatening anymore because it had already been 'tested' on children. Children did not just 'survive' the interaction but also chose it as their favorite reading. The children reterritorialized the book as the affirmation of a mother's sacrifice, in what we see now as a move towards maternalism, the most revered role for a woman is that of a mother and a caretaker of young children (Ailwood, 2008). The book becomes part of mediation-as-usual, as the mother's sacrifice function as a semiotic bridge, one which the adult mediator can grasp.

5. Conclusions

Mediation as a technology of affect is dedicated to the production of nurturing relationships between children and books. We proposed mediation-as-usual as a radicalization of this technology, a normative arrangement of bodies to produce love for books, and, consequently, readers. As such, mediation-as-usual puts special care into managing and controlling the emotional flows that permeate the safe space of reading, because the aim of the technology is, through love and pleasure, produce subjectivities that will engage in life-long reading. The figure of the bridge that reading mediators are called to embody, stand between children and books, with the adult mediating the access to the former. We described how mediation-as-usual works to produce adult figurations that protect children through diverse mechanisms, one of them being the control of literary materialities, like a challenging picturebook. Therefore, mediation-as-usual is a technology that appears to be based on an asymmetric relationship between children and adults in which the latter is responsible for selecting age-appropriate books and protecting the former from potentially harmful literary experiences. Moreover, mediation-as-usual produces an ideal reading mediator who is caring, emotionally stable, and able to produce a safe space for children to bond with books. Mediation-as-usual is a figuration we use to convey the complex ways in which discourse, practices, bodies, and affects coalesce together to produce something that seems natural.

We tested the limits of the normalized and naturalized ways of producing readers by plugging back in a rejected picturebook into the configuration of mediation-as-usual. With this exercise, we were involved in becoming mediators-as-usual and abject mediators. However, we do not want to create a new binary (mediation-as-usual as opposed to abject mediation) but to exceed these positions by showing how mediation-as-usual is always present, even in seemingly disruptive practices. For example, we were unable not to take into account notions of age-appropriateness when choosing between *La Madre y la Muerte* and *La Partida*.

We are aware of our involvement in the outcomes of this research. By contributing to the emergence of abject mediation, we wanted to show the potentialities that this exercise of touching the limits offers. Abject mediation, in this particular configuration, involved adults that did not necessarily love the book, actually, some of them openly rejected it. Also, in this configuration, children do not emerge as innocent, but they might worryingly emerge as sexist and even cruel towards women. By engaging in this exercise of touching the limits, is it possible that the entities involved in mediation shift, and alternative relations emerge? For example, the mediator may emerge as a reader and the book as a mediator.

Mediation-as-usual became deterritorialized by proximity with a book 'that pushed the limits of what we understand as children's literature,' and it almost immediately became reterritorialized, resignified, and its potential recaptured by the technology of affect of mediation-as-usual. Nonetheless, mediation-as-usual also changes by this exercise; it does not return to a previous state but 'establishes a new virtual reality, a new field of potential' (Kaiser, 2012, p. 1049). We are always open to being re-inscribed as abject.

The process of abject mediation may allow teachers and mediators to think and potentially challenge what mediation-as-usual does typically. We present this experience to question the concept of the reading mediator as a stable, rigid, univocal identity and to report about the array of subject positions enacted through the faces, bodies, materialities, and discourses of children, adults, and books involved. We look to further develop abject mediation as part of an ethics of care in non-innocent relations (Hohti & Tammi, 2019), and explore novel ways of conceptualizing reading mediation.

Funding details.

This study has been supported by ANID PIA 160007, ANID FONDECYT 11800700, and SOC 180023.

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