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# Introduction: Latin American Children's Literature and Culture

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MACARENA GARCÍA-GONZÁLEZ, FELIPE MUNITA AND  
EVELYN ARIZPE

The development of research in Latin America about children's and young adult literature or LIJ (the commonly used abbreviation for 'literatura infantil y juvenil') has transpired in close relationship to reflections on pedagogical praxis and enquiries around how to foster, encourage, and mediate literary reading practices. This close relationship motivated the call for our 2021 congress, 'Aesthetic and Pedagogic Entanglements', the first IRSCS congress organised in Latin America.<sup>1</sup> The porous connections between the literary and the educational, and the openness with which these terms are approached, seems to be a distinctive feature of research in the field of LIJ in both Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking geographies. Latin America is, of course, a large and diverse region, which means that we must exercise caution in making generalisations from Mexico to Brazil to Chile. However, in light of the response to the call for this special issue and with our experience engaging with scholars and scholarship in the region to back us up, in this introduction we propose that Latin American children's literature scholarship is produced by multiple entanglements of the literary and the educational and that these entanglements are also reflected in the ongoing struggle to legitimise the study of children's literature in academic contexts. Research on children's literature in Spanish-speaking countries is mainly carried out within education faculties, while in the humanities faculties the study of children's and youth texts is not only scarce but also, in many cases, strongly resisted, usually based on some suspicion regarding the aesthetic quality and literary value of these works.

Specifically, Latin American LIJ studies appear to be characterised by the intersections with two other fields of study: literature didactics and the social exercise of reading promotion. Within the realm of the didactics of literature, and under the premise that good children's books teach their readers 'how to read', the tradition of research in these regions tends to show a belief that a

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thorough description and historical placing of works of literature for children allows a deeper understanding of the repertoire of literary teachings they may offer. The other field that converses with LIJ studies, reading promotion, has a long tradition in Spanish-speaking countries. We are talking here about a field defined not so much by empirical research (which is still very scarce), but by a wide set of socio-educational actions and strategies that favour the appropriation of written culture by children and young people in various social spaces. The tradition of reading promotion is especially strong in relation to demands for social justice and inclusion and may be defined, in a broader sense, by a context in which the enormous deficiencies in terms of the provision of basic services and scarcity of resources are recognised. The close relationship of children's literature with this field of social action means that the scholarly works developed in this line adopt a strong political component that, it seems to us, is central to understanding the development of the field of studies of LIJ in Spanish.

This context leads us to consider that it makes special sense to think of the field of LIJ studies in Latin America from the theory of polysystems by Even-Zohar. Zohar's concept of the polysystem allows us to understand the field from the intersections and superimpositions that it establishes with other cultural systems—pedagogical, socio-educational, and psychological—and the strong influence of these fields of research in the delimitation of the literary. These cultural systems mean that the analysis of texts has been carried out in constant dialogue with a reflection on the educational potentialities the book as a cultural object might offer in school contexts. In the praxis and theorisation of literacy promotion, empirical research has been oriented towards examining how the use of children's and young adult literature in diverse social contexts can contribute to citizenship participation and to a sustained grappling with exclusion mechanisms that pervasively haunt and ballast Latin American countries. From this perspective, reflection on books seems to accompany reflections on the mobilisation of reading in contexts marked by the participation of children and young people, markedly those defined by crisis (for example, in favelas, prisons, or migrant shelters).

In tandem with the slow but progressive consolidation of studies about LIJ in Latin America in these two fields, the last few years have witnessed a hatching of critical texts that review works meant for children and young adults from the frameworks of literary studies, aesthetics, and cultural studies. This has resulted, at least in part, in the publication of a significant number of studies on the aesthetic and literary trademarks of children's literature, an intellectual production that has been particularly prolific around picturebooks. In parallel, the attested presence of researchers contributing from cultural studies has summoned and drawn upon fields of knowledge such as history, philosophy, and sociology, emphasising the (re)production of ideologies in works of art and bringing into focus the ways and modes in which children's and young adult literature engages with diverse social phenomena. Scholars are now looking back to the history of this literature, rescuing lesser-known authors, and reviewing the works of some of the more traditionally famous names in each country. Some

of these, which delve into historical revisions where questions around childhood imaginaries and their intersections with discourses on the concepts of nation and future, seem particularly significant in the Latin American context and beyond (e.g. Latinx children's and YA literature studies).

We open the issue with an essay by Valeria Sardi, based on her opening keynote lecture for the IRSCS congress in Santiago, in which she brings feminist, queer, and decolonial theoretical approaches to imagine other ways of reading in the school classroom. Sardi reviews the ways in which the reading of certain canonical texts, such as Jorge Luis Borges's short story 'Emma Zunz', has shifted through the years and how these shifts provide possible openings for embodied and sexualised pedagogies given that, she argues, all readings are gendered and sexualised. Sardi shows how, until the 1980s and 1990s, 'Emma Zunz' was read as a crime narrative; when sexed-and-gendered tensions became apparent in the classrooms, other 'impertinent readings' against the academic interpretative apparatus began to emerge. Sardi's essay proposes opening literature didactics to read against the grain of the colonial, capitalist, white, androcentric, encyclopaedist, and hetero-cisnormative matrix to complicate traditional readings of canonical texts.

Regan Postma-Montaño's article has echoes with the pathway in LIJ scholarship that has been interested in the rescue of traditional tales. In this case, however, she provides an example of how a re-writing and re-reading of a traditional tale can become significant to the current generation of Afro-Costa Rican readers, not only introducing them to their cultural wealth but also supporting their struggle against suppression and oppression. Postma-Montaño draws on critical race work to argue that the language of *Los cuentos de Anansi* by Quince Duncan, together with the illustrations by Ruth Angulo Cruz, provide an anti-racist 'counter-frame' to colonialism and racism that can help affirm Afro-Latine children's roots as part of the national imaginary. This recognition and valuing of the Afro-Latine cultural heritage also appears to be a trend, not only in the writing and illustrating, but also in the reviewing of children's books published in Latin America. It is equally interesting to observe how the oral tradition is revisited in the article by Marina di Marco, which analyses a recently created lullaby ('Rayito de sol', by the Argentinian singer-songwriter Magdalena Fleitas) and considers it as part of the children's literary system. With an approach anchored in children's literature studies that dialogues with contributions from semiotics, reception theories, and musicology, Di Marco probes the enunciation in the lullaby, focusing on the creation of emotional atmospheres in which the intersubjective encounter between the baby and the adult happens through the act of singing.

The apparatus of enunciation is also of interest, albeit from different theoretical positions, to Mariela Romero, who writes about translations carried out by two important authors of Argentine children's literature in the last decades of the twentieth century: María Elena Walsh and Elsa Bornemann. She analyses the paratexts of two translations of these authors, observing how the original editions of these texts complicated what was considered 'for children',

thus collaborating in the progressive development of a new vision of children's literature in Argentina and in the Latin American context. This article provides interesting findings in a line of research that remains underexplored in the Spanish-speaking context: translation studies in the field of children's and youth literature.

The article by Natalia Rodríguez and Rocío Malacarne takes another important author of children's and youth literature from Argentina as the focus of analysis: María Teresa Andruetto (Hans Christian Andersen Award 2012). They focus on two reissues – in 2012 and 2019 – of 'adult' poetry by Andruetto, published by independent publishers, in picturebook and playbook formats. The article questions how the text is redefined with these adaptations and provides insights on these processes at the level of the verbal text and of the book materiality, processes that allow us to move towards a conceptualisation of a porous literature that blurs the borders between children and adults. It also shines a light on a type of production that is increasingly common in the Spanish language (reissues of adult literature within the framework of collections of the children's literary system).

The above-mentioned entanglement between the literary, the educational, and the political is particularly evident in the article by Christian Anwandter, which tackles the relationship between three big words – childhood, culture, and revolution – in the educational agenda of Salvador Allende's socialist government (1970–1973). From a perspective of cultural history, Anwandter analyses the role of literature within this political project that sought to form new citizens for a new society. In doing so, he draws attention to the dialectic in the broader Chilean context (both the political right and left) between the idea of 'purity' and 'contamination' with respect to children and young people, which places them in the ambivalent position of being both vulnerable to manipulation and strong enough to be agents of change. This ambivalence, it can be argued, still underpins much of the way education and childhood culture is understood across Latin American, and traces of it can still be found in the curriculum and the literature written with young readers in mind but also in some of the scholarly approaches to LIJ.

We hope this special issue will facilitate the access of international scholars to the wide-ranging and rich research done in the region. Most of the research on Latin American LIJ is published in Spanish, but we do find young scholars publishing in both languages, opening new conversations in the field. We also hope that such new conversations and this special issue will encourage a new generation of writing about LIJ in Latin America that looks to build on traditional approaches, but moves away from the dialectic of purity and contamination highlighted by Anwandter, through a dialogue with current critical preoccupations and through engaging with developing critical theories produced both in, and about, the region (decolonial and anticolonial studies, subaltern studies, Caribbean studies, and Indigenous epistemologies, among others). The overview of current Latin American LIJ studies also shows that, without neglecting historical production, there is a need to approach

contemporary authors more critically, to seek out current writing and publishing trends that may be going under the radar of what is perceived as established practice (such as the writing of young people themselves, fan fiction, or cartonera and zine publishing), and to question national and ethnic imaginaries.

#### NOTE

1. A full report on the congress can be read at <http://irscl.com/santiago.html>

**Macarena García-González** is currently a Marie Curie Fellow at the University of Glasgow. She holds a doctorate in Cultural Studies and Social Anthropology from University of Zurich. She has authored *Enseñando a Sentir. Repertorios Éticos en la Ficción Infantil* and *Origin Narratives. The Stories We Tell Children about International Adoption and Immigration*.

**Felipe Munita** is Doctor of Literature and Language Didactics and Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities and Doctor en Didáctica de la Lengua y la Literatura of Universidad Austral de Chile. He has authored *Hacer de la lectura una experiencia* and *Yo, mediador(a): mediación y formación de lectores*.

Professor **Evelyn Arizpe** holds the Chair of Children's Literature at the University of Glasgow and is the current Past President of IRSCL. She is Programme Lead for the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degree programme, Children's Literature, Media and Culture.

**Ja'nos Kovacs Navarro** holds a bachelor's degree in English Literature and Linguistics (PUC), a graduate diploma in Archival Sciences (UCh) and is currently finishing a masters in Cultural Heritage (ANID scholarship N° 22230024). His research lies at the intersection of heritage studies, childhood, and children's literature. The guest editors thank him for translating the articles in this special issue.