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## Think difference differently? Knowing/becoming/doing with picturebooks

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore ways in which arts-based approaches may be deployed to educate ways of knowing/becoming/doing difference differently, particularly when issues of racism and xenophobia come to the front. We present a school research intervention with students and in-service teachers in Santiago, Chile. In this study, we use *The Island*, a picturebook that produces a narrative of exclusion and fear, instead of promoting tolerance and conviviality. From a new materialist approach, we show engagements or makings of children and adults, sketching out how they defy simplistic ways of thinking and feeling about normative difference. We frame this study as a diffractive research-intervention in which the intertwined and productive relation 'books and readers' allow us to problematize rather than simplify what knowing/becoming/doing with arts may do to the production of difference within school contexts.

### KEYWORDS

Arts-based practices; diffractive analysis; new materialisms; contemporary racism; children's literature

## Introduction

We live in a present in which the dynamics of movement of people between territories have been used to exacerbate discourses and practices directed to categorise people as different from others. This is the case of Chile where there has been an increasing number of families and communities who have chosen the country as a place to move to over the last 10 years. Interestingly for us, schools' composition, in terms of nationality, race, and ethnicity has changed: Vizcarra and Martínez (2019) and Mineduc (2017) report that, between 2015 and 2017, the number of foreign students in Chilean schools grew by more than 100%. However, institutionalised racist and xenophobic ways of knowing and feeling 'the other' (Tijoux and Córdova 2015; Riedmann and Stefoni 2015) have emerged. It is in this cultural, social, and political context that arts-based practices and pedagogies become relevant because they provide opportunities to work against racist and xenophobic feelings, discourses, and acts (Foster 2015, 113; Braidotti 2013, 13) at different dimensions and scales.

In educational and pedagogical research, new materialist and posthumanist approaches have informed a growing number of empirical studies that, rather than posing critical questions about how normative discursive regimes and political formations lead schools to fail children, have opened questions about how researchers and teachers might 'augment' the school's capacities to care for and educate children (MacLure 2015). Even though questions

about the potentiality of schools to enact socially-just pedagogies (Goodley 2007) are not new, they are framed from renewed ethical, ontological, and epistemological standpoints (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017, 2018). Barad (2007) refers to this relation as an 'ethic-onto-epistem-ology' (90), in which the intellectual commitment is to challenge permanently those Cartesian dualisms such as mind/body, nature/culture, human/non-human, matter/meaning, fact/story, and theory/practice that limit our ways of knowing and categorising life experiences. We lean towards this posthuman ethic-onto-epistem-ology to explore new perspectives to deal with teaching and researching on issues of racism and xenophobia (Bozalek 2018). We will discuss the uses of these perspectives later in the article.

Traditionally, the use of books to advance more just pedagogies is a topic well researched within reader response studies. Most empirical research studies make a strong argument for how to gain knowledge and experience about different cultures by reading stories in which different ethnic groups are represented. The assumption is that, by reading books in which difference is represented, children and young people can learn to appreciate and respect difference (e.g., Morrell and Morrell 2012; Harper and Brand 2010; Bishop 1990). The representational orientation of this approach is based on a humanist perspective which emphasises a rational subject as unitary and hegemonic, rational, autonomous, and self-determined (Braidotti 2013). These studies rely on the belief that cultures and identities from other geopolitical spaces can be represented, and that, therefore, we can teach and learn about them. Within this framework of essential identities, real 'out-there' to be represented, dichotomous ways of understanding and arranging populations, humans are at the centre of any explanation; the reader is epistemologically separated from the book, and reading is thought to be a transaction in which the reader breathes life into the text according to their prior knowledge, experiences, and literary repertoires (Rosenblatt 1993, 1978; Iser 1972).

Other ways of framing reading may open up more space for socially just pedagogies. In this study, we use posthumanist and new materialist philosophical approaches to enable less anthropocentric conceptualisations of the relations between readers and books. Posthuman approaches to literature and literacy studies (Kuby and Rowsell 2017; Murriss 2016; Murriss and Haynes 2018) take an ethic-onto-epistemology standpoint in which knowing/becoming/doing cannot be separated because 'discourse and matter are mutually implicated in the unfolding emergence of the world' (MacLure 2013, 659–660) particularly in the act of reading as a transformative practice. One of the main themes of new materialist scholarship's ontological orientation is that it conceives matter 'as lively or as exhibiting agency' (Coole and Frost 2010, 7) and not separated from discourse. In light of this, we consider the book as having a thing-power; an idea that resonates with the statement that books have effects on readers not only on cognitive- but also in all sorts of embodied and affective levels (Felski 2008). The thing-power of books may be understood with Jane Bennet's concept of 'vibrant matter' (Bennet 2010), namely, that things vibrate and resonate with other human and non-human entities and have, therefore, agency. Bennet's ideas of human and non-human assemblages in which networks operate co-affecting each other helps us think about books as living entities interconnected with their readers, the mechanics of the publication, the spaces in which books are read, and the range of the book's material features, among others. Our work with picturebooks within the new materialist perspective takes us to a more complex understanding of the reader who cannot be solely defined by his/her rational ability to interpret a text. Hence, reader and book take the relational production and understanding

about difference out of its normative frame, in which attributes of the 'other,' such as a recognition of him/her as homogenous, seem unthinkable.

Certainly, we are not the first research group to propose working with picturebooks as a way to disrupt representationalist accounts that regulate biological, social, and cultural truths about who we are. Karin Murriss and Johanna Haynes have worked with picturebooks in classroom interventions, arguing that these types of books, in which the visual and the verbal interplay, can 'be used as creative opportunities to destabilise discriminatory binaries' (Murriss 2016, 200). We follow this work and expand their conclusions, inquiring into how the agentic matter of the text – and the entangled relationship between book-adult-child – destabilises binaries, such as, for example, the one in which adults have reached cognitive and emotional development whereas children are in the process of development. Having said this, we differ from traditional reader response studies in that we do not take the book as a pedagogical tool with a clear message to be transmitted, but rather as a provocation that operates in the entanglement of discursive and affective realms.

In this article, we present a research study conducted in 2018 in which we used the Spanish translation of the picturebook *The Island* (Greder 2002). We aimed at using particular forms of reading mediation to decentre knowledge and explore the production of us/them binaries. In this article, we report our work with two groups (belonging to two different grades) where we worked with five picturebooks during twelve sessions in one school in Santiago, Chile. We also report a series of workshops for teachers in which we replicated the activity conducted with school children. During this study, we made several decisions that diverged from traditional approaches of working with children's literature to challenge xenophobia and racism and the production of otherness. One of the most important was to work with texts that interpellate emotions in a way in which the pedagogical voice – what Perry Nodelman calls the 'hidden adult' in children's literature (Nodelman 2008) – may not be (that) easily traced. In other words, we selected picturebooks whose pedagogical intentions were less evident, as assessed by the research team. In this sense, we understand these books as a calling out of the emotional and as encouraging readers to engage with them affectively. The books we worked with may be taken as combining this emotional interpellation with a cognitive provocation that is often identified in the so-called postmodern picturebooks (Serafini 2005; Pantaleo 2004, 2010). The new materialist approach drew our attention to the imbrication of affects and materialities. As Julieta, who worked with us in the school intervention mediating the reading of the book with groups of children acknowledged: 'I can see how they are all books ... uh ... books with emotions ... books that provoke. Actually, I want all of these books you are working with'. We think of these picturebooks, and of *The Island* in particular, as productive aesthetic objects since they helped us to challenge: (1) superficial ways of thinking about exclusion and violence, and (2) humanist ways of organising the world (a us/them binary linked to racism and xenophobia). In other words, we sought to explore how micropolitical readings assisted the ethical imperative of thinking difference differently (Lather 2006), where difference is conceived as a multiplicity that is irreducible and resists notions of stable identity.

We argue instead, that a critical and materialist arts-based practice to think difference differently, out of its normative framework, involves the deployment of a set of strategies that relate the discourse and materiality of the text and with the text. We understand materialist arts-based practices as those that afford opportunities to think-through and become-with aesthetic encounters in ways that bypass the limits and possibilities of normative, logocentric, and dominant disciplines and discourses (Manning 2016, 53-55; Truman and Springgay 2015,

161). Our inquiry considered the books' aesthetic agentic forces that could open up unforeseen patterns and spread meaning in different ways. In way this, this study was a practice-based inquiry in which the immanence of the event – the multiple scales of happening in the encounter of books, children, and adults – provided us with challenging and problematic understandings of self and otherness.

## Materials, people, methods

To advance on the idea of picturebooks as provocations to think about difference differently, we explored and mapped the entanglements of mediators (adults), children, and books during and after class group readings sessions, focusing on how meanings of self and otherness were produced and challenged. We distanced ourselves from more traditional perspectives on reading as decoding and responding to a text, that is, from the paradigm of reading as interpretation (Garcia-Gonzalez 2018). Instead, we considered it a process in which knowing/becoming/doing are intertwined, cannot be separated, and are (collectively) embodied (Kuby, Thiel, and Spector 2019).

### *The book: the Island*

As noted above, we selected *The Island*, a picturebook that challenges simple and optimistic narratives about inclusion and tolerance. *The Island* was published in Germany in 2002 and has recently received renewed attention for its relation to migration, xenophobia, and intolerance in the midst of the so-called refugee crisis (Dudek 2011; Lunt 2016). We used the Spanish version (by publisher Barbara Fiore), which has a hardcover, as did the English original, and a large format (20 x 30 cms.) The cover shows a fortress-like building, textured by wide strokes of black charcoal over a white background. Illustrations within the book exploit the white background and focus heavily on characters and objects. Armin Greder, the author, makes use of symbolic art references, where one page evokes the famous painting 'The Scream' by painter Edvard Munch. In an effort to render the story, we share a short review published on the website of a prestigious Spanish reading promotion agency, the Fundación Germán Sánchez Ruiperez<sup>1</sup>:

[*The Island* is] a tale about an everyday story: fear of the stranger, fear of the foreigner. The inhabitants of the Island, blinded by the unjustified panic of a man who has ended up there, return him to the sea to then build a fortress with the aim that no one else finds them. The author of *The Island* engages with a valuable asset of our time, which is not as used as it should be: tolerance. The similarities of this story with reality are not mere coincidences.'

We suggest that the book does not engage itself with the matter of tolerance. This may be a good thing to say considering how this concept 'conceals an asymmetric relation of power between the tolerator and the tolerated, which reveals itself only when the stronger party chooses not to interfere with what is taken as a disapproved behaviour' (Dasli 2018, 11). Or, as Wendy Brown (2006) clearly states: tolerance is the regulation of aversion. *The Island*, instead, engages with xenophobia, the contagious fear of others. At a conference presentation called 'Radical Children's Literature Now!' Mickenberg and Nel (2011) described this book as 'suggesting a darker side of the immigrant experience and inviting a critical perspective on current anti-immigrant sentiments' (450) which was an important

perspective to explore in our research study. In short, the book narrates the perspective of a group of villagers, and through an incisive interplay of the verbal and the visual, it depicts the viciousness of their prejudices, showing no possibility for redemption.

In what follows, we report and reflect on this research intervention with picturebooks in school classes of seven- to eight- and ten- to eleven- year olds in a school in Santiago de Chile. Apart from *The Island*, we also used the picturebooks *Eloísa y los Bichos*, *El Viaje*, *Ícaro* and *La Madre y la Muerte* – unhappy endings being the common thread among them all. In their endings, a certain ‘narrative closure’ (Carroll 2007) may be achieved – characters would not be troubled again by the same issues that provoked the story – but not everything is presented as solved, and the world depicted may include uncertain and uncomfortable dimensions.

### *The people we worked with*

We worked with two groups: a 2nd grade class with children between ages seven and eight; and a 5th grade class with children between ten and eleven years old at a school run by a non-profit, emblematic society in Santiago, Chile. The Chilean educational system combines private, public, and subsidised school provisions in a highly segregated system (Carrasco, Gutiérrez, and Flores 2017). The private society in charge of the school where we conducted the study is more than 150 years old and focuses on providing (subsidised) education to children in ‘vulnerable’ communities in Santiago. To briefly understand the idea of vulnerability in Chile, since 2007 a ‘vulnerability index’ has been implemented by a governmental agency that is in charge of ‘administering state resources intended to ensure that Chilean children and adolescents in a biopsychosocial vulnerability condition can enter, stay, and succeed in the educational system’ (Junaeb 2018). The school where we conducted the study is ranked as having 52.2% of ‘vulnerability,’ which may be read as a middle-class school population. One of the many critical dimensions on which this index is based on is the explicit relation between children and books in which an interest in reading signals lower vulnerability. Likewise, those children that report having books at home are considered to have some protection from the risk of vulnerability (Matus 2019). Accordingly, reading is highly valued in this school, and it is celebrated through a number of public ceremonies and gestures, such as the celebration for ‘first readers’ in which parents are invited to listen to their first-grade children read aloud. In addition, the school has a well-equipped library that is restocked monthly with new purchases; librarians participate periodically in follow-up and training sessions. Some teachers and parents recognised the school as a ‘very strict’ institution, which was part of the reputation of the managing funding institution.

Going back to our study: our research intervention involved weekly meetings with two school classes, as well as small-group discussions and interviews with children, parents, teachers, and librarians. We worked with groups of 15 to 20 students for eight months; all of them presented informed assent from their caretakers and informed consent themselves. The students who did not present consent or assent did not participate in the intervention.

To better understand and report children’s reading in school classes, we contrast these reports to a similar intervention conducted with similarly sized groups of in-service adult teachers. We are aware of the risk of reading this comparison as essentializing and universalizing children responses, that is, of (re)producing the adult/child binary, but rather, we understand this as a diffractive move aimed to produce ‘data’ to question our onto-epistemological stances when observing and analysing children’s engagements with the book. Preparing and

conducting a similar intervention with adults allowed us renewed access to the ways of becoming/knowing/doing that take place in both groups: adults and children.

The class readings were led by a children's book mediator, whom we will call Karen. The 'reading mediator' is a term extensively used in Spanish-speaking countries to refer to people who work on promoting and reading books to groups of children in libraries and/or participate in projects at schools. The term designates an adult figure in charge of transforming children into readers who is very often a volunteer and not the school teacher herself. The role is strongly shaped by emotional aspects and foregrounds certain basic values such as accompaniment and closeness, the importance of affection and trusting dialogue (Munita 2014). Karen would often stress how she needed to distance herself to perform her (emotional) role from what she perceived as the strict teaching style that the librarian and teachers showed during the reading sessions.

### **The mediators**

Karen led a discussion about the book with half of the group of children, while the other half of the group engaged individually in activities related to the book. This second group received instructions from Julieta. Julieta was a YouTuber, who had studied literature and had recently finished writing her first novel but had no experience and no training in pedagogy. She would invite the students to write, draw, or paint in relation to the book they had just collectively read. The backgrounds of these two mediators – both selected by us with the explicit intention of avoiding putting the school teachers in the position of being assessed by our research – performed very diverse approaches to the books and to children. Karen, who self-identified as a 'reading mediator,' presented all books to the participating children with a remark on who the author was. She told us that it was difficult for her to work with books that she had not chosen. She also contended that some books were not appropriate for the participants' ages; specifically, she did not feel comfortable with the rather gruesome and macabre *La madre y la muerte* (Laiseca, Chimal, and Arispe 2015), and also manifested resistance towards *The Island*. She could only understand the use of these books in the classroom under the idea that these were books that different experts had highlighted as having 'literary quality'. Julieta, the other mediator, expressed doubts about how the children would react to these books and whether the stories were appropriate for children or may lead them into a collective catharsis. This emerged as a concern of most of the adults involved in this research project, including ourselves. Karen later reflected on how she has been surprised by the responses and engagement of the children, who were eager to read and discuss these 'emotionally-charged and sad stories.'

### **Ways to analyse**

The mediators followed our guidelines for the designed in-classroom activities and, as part of their responsibilities, they were instructed to report what they observed and experienced in each session. This report had to be delivered as one or two written pages. The guidelines provided for each session included opening questions and/or instructions to guide the discussion group and for the group working in individual engagement. Some of these recommendations were: a) to be aware of and ethically encourage the transgression of age-appropriateness (the same activity was used with the 2nd and 5th graders with picturebooks

that could be defined as a *crossover*) (Beckett 2012); b) to refrain from considering certain interpretations or engagements with the text as wrong; and c) to focus on emotions, intensities, and feelings in the children's engagement with the text. These instructions were intended to allow children to flow with the text instead of taking them 'back to the text' as teachers and reading mediators often do.

In our research study, books were thought of as instruments that produce an 'output'; multiple and unexpected forms of readers' affective engagements. These engagements were registered through voice and video-recordings, and in our own field notes. In each session, we would wander around different groups of children, taking notes and paying particular attention to those materialities involved in the interactions between readers and books. We followed what Bronwyn Davies calls 'emergent listening' (2014); which is that mode of listening to what involves 'working against oneself' (21) to perform a radical break from who you are and your ways of making sense of difference. The listening-as-usual, to which this emergent listening is opposed, presumes that the researcher already knows what anyone might say or mean. In such a way, the researcher becomes actively engaged in the production of the readers' subjectivities through already known categories (Davies 2016). To enact emergent listening, we used a range of 'listening' devices such as fieldnotes, sketches, audio recording of meetings with the mediators, drawings, and we encouraged that children intervened on low quality prints of some picturebook drawings. Here, the reflexive conversation among the researchers was vital. Dialogues to understand breaks and complexities were critical to questioning our own ways of listening enabling us to go back to the field with politically refreshed orientations.

Our attention to materialities included but was not reduced to: tones of voice, spatialities, thingness, and the multiple and changing forms of affinities and tensions between students or between teachers and students and others. What we term here as spatialities appeared to be important: how did they sit during and after the reading, with whom, and where? On 'thingness,' we considered the attention to pencils, traces, colours, and pencil cases. The list of materialities that could be considered to be important were potentially endless, especially as the enactment of emergent listening implies not to focus on what you expect. Our interest in reporting all these dimensions to what was happening during the sessions had to do with the idea of tracing processes rather than describing them. In other words, 'Rather than describing what is, or what the meaning of an event holds, through diffraction we explore the dynamic unfolding and processes of change' (Gullion 2018, 123). The production of data itself followed this diffractive orientation in such a way that our focus was not on the books themselves, the mediators, or the children. We, as diffractive modes of inquiry suggest, did not differentiate or give different statuses to humans, materials, nor affects. We report the production of the phenomena produced as a result of the *happenings* among these humans, materials, and affects, not in opposition but in relation. As Karen Barad (2007) notes on the contribution of diffractive modes of inquiry:

an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework [...] provides an understanding of the role of the human *and* nonhuman, material *and* discursive, natural *and* cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices, thereby moving such considerations beyond well-worn debates that pit constructivism against realism, agency against structure, and idealism against materialism (26)

We read children and adults' engagements with the book using diffraction as method. Haraway (1992) offered a definition of diffraction as 'a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of differences appear' (300). In other words, we explored and considered the patterns of vibration that the encounter with books provoked as a way of producing difference and reading different material along each other without trying to compare them, but rather to produce new meanings in the encounter (Bozalek and Zembylas 2018).

Therefore, our guiding questions enabling us to follow the traces of these *happenings* were: what relations (humans, materials, and affects) are assembled?, what do these relations reveal and produce? How far (politically and ethically) can we go with what we learn from these relations? With these questions in mind, in what follows we present part of our analyses.

## Pieces of analyses

### *MOMENT 1: contrasting adults' 'expected answers' with what children actually wanted to talk about*

In the first reading activity of the book, we gathered all the participating children together. The two group classes appeared to be caught by the expressiveness and darkness of *The Island's* visual and verbal narrative. Children became more excited as the story progressed without leading up to some point of redemption. Both groups of children were remarkably silent and attentive to the development of the story, which was projected on a screen. During the reading with the fifth grade, a boy could not help shouting when the last double-spread showed how evil prevailed: 'finally, a story that doesn't end well!'

After the read aloud, we divided the group into two. One half sat in a circle for a verbal discussion (the discussion group), while the other half moved to an adjacent room and sat around working tables where they were asked to intervene on a double-spread from the book with a specific question related to the story (the making group), in this case: who is the newcomer? (Figure 1). With this model, we generated two different approaches to mediation: a more language-driven collective exercise of meaning-making and a more material-driven and slightly more individual exercise of meaning-making. In both cases, as is perhaps obvious, collectiveness was important, but the positioning of the adult in charge and the spatiality of the groups were very different.

What first appeared to be surprising and remarkable in regard to the children's 'responses' was that the condition of the foreigner did not appear to be important to either of the discussion groups or to the making group, even though there was at least one 'migrant student' in each group.<sup>2</sup> Very few children – only three of the 30 students – mentioned the character's condition of being 'foreigner.' The story of what had happened in the book was elaborated among other explanations and intensities that we map and present below.

### *MOMENT 2: steering the wheel away from family affections and back to the book*

Literature has shown how literary mediation that is focused on group discussions about picturebooks produces conglomerated, collective appreciations (Harris and McKenzie 2005; Pantaleo 2007). With the second-grade class, the discussion revolved around how the man in



**Figure 1.** Drawing recreation of the making group with the mediator at the centre and the researchers taking notes.

the story was unjustifiably attacked by a group that ended up killing him. The sessions were held a few weeks after Easter in a school with a Catholic orientation, which may play a part in how this relationship was made and some explicit references to Jesus Christ that arose. It is also true that the discussions took place at the very same moment in which a new immigration law was being discussed in the media, but, not even the older children appeared interested in exploring how this story could be an allegory of xenophobia in relation to migration and to rising racism and xenophobia in Chilean society. For the 5th grade class (ten to eleven years old), the explanation that had greater resonance was that this man has been abandoned by his mother and thrown into the sea. They even claimed that the fisherman, a character that had defended the foreigner and claimed that the group of villagers would have to take responsibility for him, could have been his father. Speculating about the possibility of having the fisherman as the father of the newcomer, a story closer to a soap opera plot than to a possibility in a picturebook, may also be taken as a way of ‘hacking’ the entire conversation about the text, that is, of boycotting adult expectations of how the conversation about the book should be driven.

What appears to be more important in the multiple and different ways children related to the text was its relation to narratives of everyday aggression and exclusion. At the very beginning of the 5th grade group discussion, the same boy who had celebrated the ending said: ‘This man has been rejected by society. If it were me, only one of you, only Andrés, would have helped me if I was a shipwreck survivor’. He was interrupted with laughter three times while putting these words together. When he finally completed the idea, another child replied to him: ‘This is what happens to you in school’. This narration of group exclusion and personal experiences was soon interrupted by the adult mediator who drove the children’s attention back to the book: ‘There was only one person that helped the man: who was he?’ This took the conversation away from everyday aggression and exclusions to start a speculation about the figure of the fisherman – the character that attempted to help and defend the newcomer –, which this group of children liked to think as the father of the man that arrived. The coming

back to the book that was sought by the mediator appeared to distance the students from further exploring the interlacing of embodied, domestic aggressions at school.

### ***MOMENT 3: being involved in and by the story through makings***

The second group of 15 students were taken to an adjacent room after the reading aloud activity and sat down at work tables. As soon as they arrived there, groups of friends met, and we – the adults in the room: the librarian, the mediator of the research project, and us, the researchers – tried to reorganise the initial affective group configurations, introducing the rationality of ‘getting similarly sized groups’ and asking some of them to sit apart from their friends.

The groups were asked to intervene on a double-spread photocopy of the picturebook in which the visual and the verbal appear to be in contradiction (Nikolajeva and Scott 2006). ‘So they took him in’, was read while we saw the villagers with pitchforks, rakes, and brooms pointing to the naked and slim figure of the newcomer. Both 2nd and 5th graders noted the contradiction, claiming that the man had not been welcomed. ‘They have been very cruel!’ a 5th grade student commented emphatically. Julieta asked them to focus on writing words that would describe the man and to be sure to write them over the copied image of the double spread. Only one child in the two groups wrote ‘foreigner’ as a word to describe the man. Most, especially the older children, made seemingly elaborated assumptions about who this man is. Some listed physical descriptions: thin, bald, naked, and white, and then continued adding meanings that appeared to integrate assumptions about his personality (kind-hearted, curious, respectful, he feels like rubbish). Most of these ‘personality traits’ could be read as embedded in a desire to empathise with him: such as solitary, respect, and silence. Others brought assumptions of who this man is and why he has been discriminated against: shy, thin, naked. We found many marks that signalled the man as ‘poor’: is being ‘poor’ a mark for his need of care or as a reason to be marginalized?

### ***MOMENT 4: stroking the paper: words are thrown, words stab***

The instruction given to the ‘making’ group was to write words that would describe the man. The students engaged in this activity while also eventually talking to their peers at the table, to the literary mediator, Julieta, to the teachers, and/or to the two researchers in the room. Therefore, one possible layer of meaning-making may be explored through the words they wrote down on the sheets we had distributed.

When referring to the naked man and to the islanders, children wrote things such as:

- (he) is naked, (he) is bald, he has no hair, big nose, (he) is serious, big ears, (he) does not have clothes.
- Racist- do not take him in- treat him like an animal, solitary- he has no job – he has no name – he tries everything
- Poor, respectful, silent, naked, thin, rude, bald, weird, kind, curious
- They are cruel. They bully him. They fear him because they do not know who he is. They are too naive.
- Someone. Why doesn’t he have clothes? How did he get there? His skin is like plastic. Indifference.

- Big-head, naked, bald, Pía, psychologist?, thin, barefoot, fool, big nose, heartless, boring, flaute.<sup>3</sup>

Verbal language gives us access to one layer of meaning, but we can also look at how these words are materially displayed on the page and to other features that appear relevant when the focus is set on the materiality of language. We have words that appear to be ‘thrown’ as if stabbing (naked, rude, weird, and curious; see Figure 2). We may compare words that are thrown (naked, respectful, bald, naked, curious, poor) with those that are written horizontally (silent, skinny, kind; see Figure 3. Why was ‘naked’ first written horizontally and then erased to be thrown? Could this ‘curious’ be better translated as weird, or rather, queer, odd? Or words

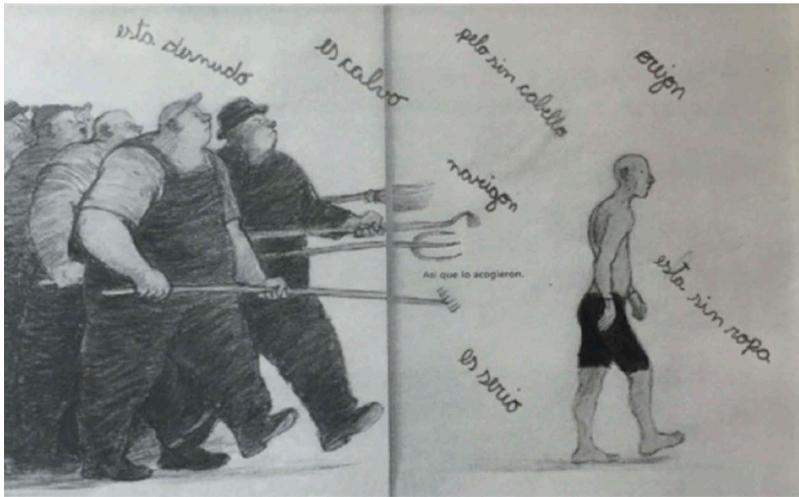


Figure 2. Words that are thrown to the man: big eared, without clothes, serious, bald, naked.

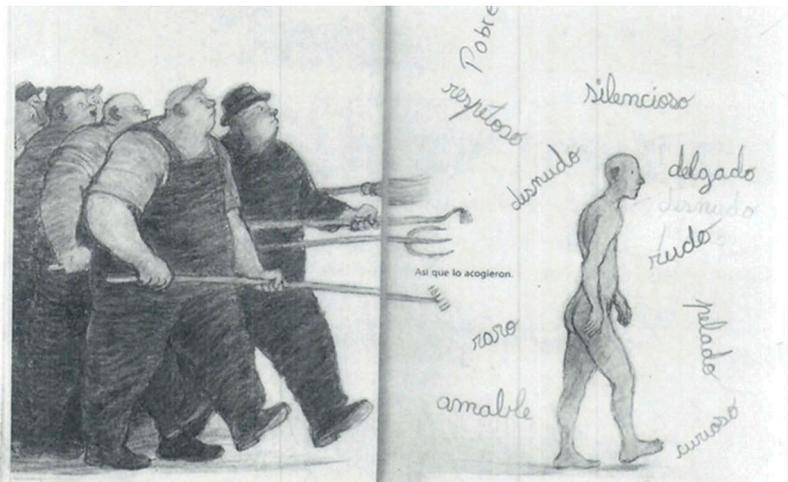
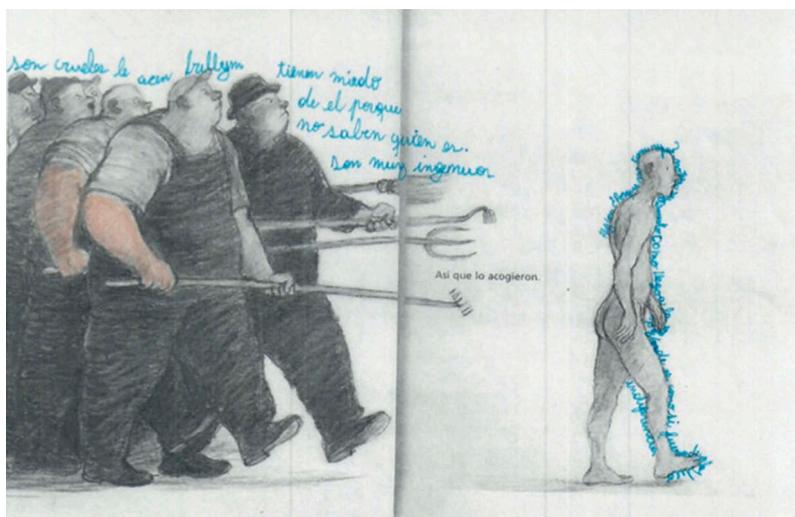


Figure 3. Words that are written horizontally to describe the man: silent, skinny, kind.



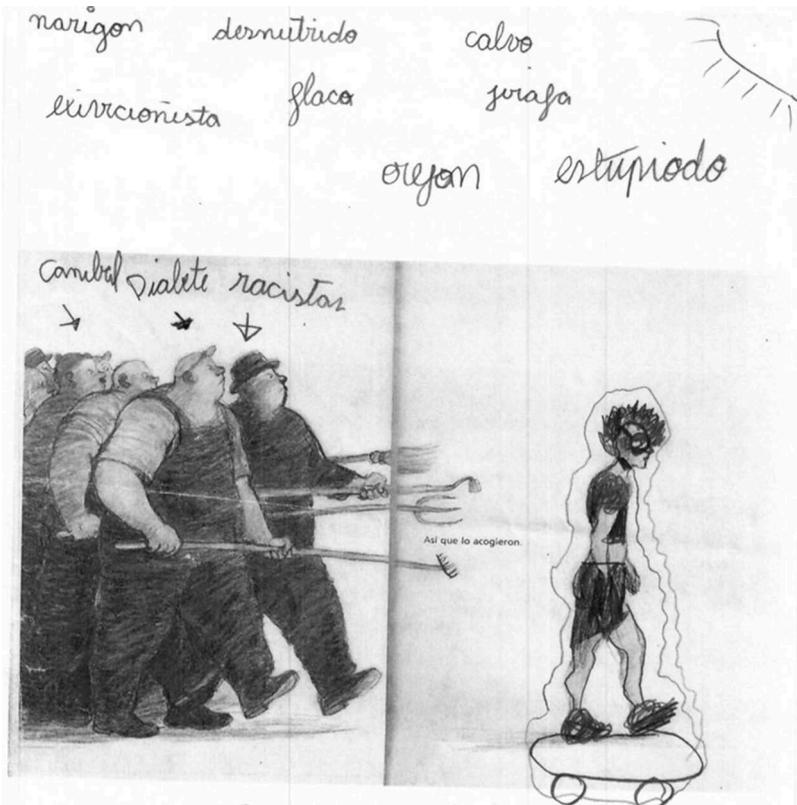
**Figure 4.** Words that are written as caressing the body: lonely, kind, loving.

were written as caressing as if feeling again and repairing by touching the body. How different is it to write on his back to embrace him from his front, to keep him from walking away? What can we say about this light blue, glitter pen? (Figure 4).

### **MOMENT 5: narrated exclusions**

At one table, there were three 'non-friends' who had been asked to sit together. At this table, one of the students wrote that the fat men were bullying the newcomer. The one next to her, a student who had initially refused to sit there, replied that this story was not about bullying. She was very clear about this. But the first girl insisted, they have bullied him. This led them to explain to me that last year a girl had to leave the school because 'none of them wanted to play with her'. This was explained by the one who did not want to sit at the table while her classmate wrote: 'they are scared of him because they do not know him. They are too naïve.' The third girl at that table explained that the girl who had to leave had another 'mentality.' We asked her what she meant by this, and she said that there was something different, that she wanted to play 'in a childish way.' The two girls at the table agreed that she now goes to another school, as if indicating that their story does not have such a terrible ending. At the same time, all three of them wrote words caressing the body of the newcomer who had been killed by the locals.

At another table sat a group of what would later be identified by the teacher as 'the problematic girls.' At this table, the group agreed that the naked body should be covered. 'He is exposing himself,' one said, as they covered his bottom and part of his chest. Soon they started transforming him into a punk-skater, and one of them drew something like an 'aura' around him (Figure 5). At the same time, they 'threw' words at him: 'big-nose', 'big ears', 'stupid', 'boring.' In one of these sketches, we found a word that may be considered the most offensive of all; 'flaite,' a Chilean pejorative for a 'low-class person with extravagant behaviour that is related to the criminal world' (Academia



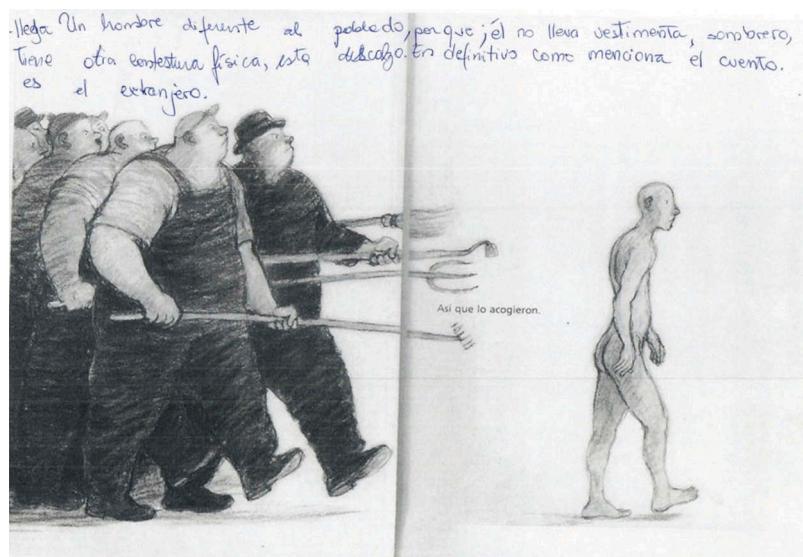
**Figure 5.** The previously naked man is transformed into a punk-like skater with an 'aura'.

Chilena de la Lengua 2010). They appeared to be keen to map the exclusion and discrimination at the same time that they demonstrated resistance to it through the imagination of a punk subjectivity. The newcomer appeared to be protected and attacked, re-enacting the violence of the story, as if the narrator's lack of interest for the feelings of the man who is expelled could now be rearranged in their answers.

A girl identified as the most problematic in the entire class (as indicated later by one of the teachers) also sat at this table. She did not want to participate in the activity and when asked to do so, she said that this man: 'is nothing to her.' Once the activity was over and all the students were leaving the school library, this girl came to tell us that she and her friend (who was drawing the punk-skater) had failed the previous year, and were repeating this year. None of the children appeared to identify the man as a foreigner, but they did connect the story to aggressions and everyday exclusions.

### ***MOMENT 6: following the line and turning their backs on the image***

Some weeks later, we suggested that five different groups of teachers – about 20 participants each – perform the same task. After reading the book aloud, and before engaging the group in any sort of verbal discussion, we asked them to answer the question: who is the man that arrives? They had to write down their answers over the



**Figure 6.** An in-service teacher describes the man in a seemingly impartial way: a different man arrives to the village (...). As the story mentions, he is a foreigner.

same double-spread we had used with children. Again, we indicated that there were no right or wrong answers, and that they could use words, phrases, or other means. It is interesting to note that most of them addressed the task in a way that differs from that predominant within the groups of children. Most of the in-service teachers indicated that the man's ontological definition was that of being a newcomer. The idea of identity, as fixed and essential, becomes very clear in their markings. In some cases, they provided a rather impartial description of what has been seen as in [Figure 6](#).

'A different man arrives to the village; he does not wear clothes [or] a hat. He has other physical features; he is barefoot. Definitely, and as mentioned in the story, he is the foreigner.' In some other cases, they were critical of the villagers, but nevertheless framed their actions as provoked by the newcomer: 'The man who arrives is a foreigner, a person that looked for a place to live, but since he was different (unknown), he provoked fear and dread among the inhabitants of the island.' Most of the adults' answers had a different ontology as the starting point: the man is different yet the villagers should have reacted differently to this difference. In the children's answers, this category is not so clear, and the shifting and relational production of difference appears to be acknowledged and produced in their makings.

Adults engaged much less in alternative materialities of writing. The two groups of in-service teachers used structured phrases or lists of characteristics. We could say that they were better at following instructions, yet, when the instruction was to write over the images on the double spread (on the photocopied version), many turned the page and wrote on the reverse. They continued to do this even after we insisted they write over the images. This was read by ourselves as a response to the deeply-ingrained habit of separating the visual and the verbal, and to an idea of the artwork being something concluded and valuable in itself. Asking them to write over the image could have been

taken as an invitation to become implicated in the story, a story in which the crowd of villagers acts, dispersing agency and ethical accountability. In *The Island*, the man is killed because a crowd pushes him into the sea. We do not have an evil adversary, just an evil world where no one is to blame.

Only four of over forty in-service teachers addressed the task by organising the words in a way other than sentences or lists. This meant either placing words over the illustration or using arrows or other sorts of signs that established a relation between the picture and their own writings.

This mind-verbal-language-coded approach was very telling and is exemplified by the reaction of a teacher who was ashamed of not being able to fulfil the task. She said she had not done it correctly, but she appeared confident enough of her effort since she was willing to show it to her fellow teachers at the same table. 'I could not find another way,' she said showing how she had attached – with arrows – some words to the villagers and others to the man. On the villagers' side, we read 'with power,' 'different,' 'collective,' and 'with history,' while the naked man had different arrows emerging from his head: the longest one took us to 'alone' (or by himself), 'individual,' 'different,' 'without anything,' and 'without a voice' that led us to a small 'without a story'.

This answer appears to reproduce that idea that a socially-just agenda must be founded in the recognition of difference; the effort to 'give a voice' to social actors would be transformative. In her rendering, the newcomer should have been given a 'voice' to be able to construct his own story, following a humanist paradigm in which, in order to have power in a relationship, you have to be able to tell your story. What would be this man's tell-able story? How is an us/them binary produced in this well-intentioned approach to understanding power?

The structured and verbal responses of the adults recall Evelyn Arizpe's (2013) reflections on how verbal story-making competence is what most researchers value, neglecting opportunities to explore visual literacies (173). This emphasis on the verbal appears to be part of a broader and more extensive operation in which it comes to be accepted that only through verbalization can we access the mechanisms of the mind, a mind thought to be rational and reflexive, while its dual opponent, the body, would be irrational, emotional, and impulsive (or, at best, intuitive).

## Discussion and conclusions

To the surprise of the school librarian and the teachers, we refused to offer pedagogical closure for this intervention at the school. This responded not only to the desires of the research-intervention, which aimed for openings following a new materialist arts-based approach, but also to a deep belief in the unfairness of organising a conclusion driven by us, adults, who read the book and the activity differently. Similarly, we did not engage in a discussion with the in-service teachers, but decided, instead, to show them those markings made by children. This motivated a discussion about how they were more deeply affected by the book (especially in examples such as [Figure 7](#), in which it is difficult to follow a verbal-visual argumentation and even to read the words placed there). How, then, can we explain how this activity has activated a reading that not only engages strongly with the material-semiotic art of the picturebook, but also with desires, orientations, and intensities which may interfere with the production of us/them national narratives?



they were thrown at him, by drawing clothes as a way of limiting the exposure of his naked body, or by writing along the border of the drawn body, like a caress, a thick veil of words over the skin. We experience these as vibrations seeking and testing meanings for the story of a man that was produced as threatening. Tolerance, as a positive acceptance of difference, does not necessarily mean involvement with the other. We may argue that the students we worked with got involved in the effort to get to know the foreigner and, in this involvement, they brought up their own experiences of exclusion – both as being excluded and as excluding others. Even though the activity tried to highlight ways of ‘knowing’ by asking ‘who is the newcomer?’, children responded in multiple, affected, and vibrating ways, which were not based on getting to know the newcomer but rather the relations that resulted in him being seen as different and excluded. Adults, instead, appeared to quickly subsume to the logics of immigration and to a collective anxiety towards immigrants that appears to be taken for granted.

What we have learned from this research intervention exercise is that tracing the multiple and always evolving processes of going back and forth when reading is a productive force in seeing possibilities for change. To work against racism and xenophobia, we need to advance our current ways of understanding the phenomena itself. Diffraction, as a political way to produce data and explain something out of this production seems relevant to us in such a way that something new might happen.

## Notes

1. ‘Un cuento que relata una historia cotidiana: el miedo al extraño, el temor al extranjero. Los habitantes de la Isla, presas de un pánico injustificado al hombre que allí ha ido a parar, terminan por devolverlo al mar, para construir luego una fortaleza con el objetivo de que nadie más los encuentre. El autor de *La Isla* se compromete con un bienpreciado de nuestro tiempo, no tan utilizado como sería necesario: la tolerancia. Las semejanzas de este cuento con la realidad no son mera coincidencia’.
2. This condition of the students was noted by the librarian, who identified foreign students because of their accent in Spanish. She would highlight that at least in two of them no longer had a ‘sonsonete,’ which would literally mean a ‘monotonous rhythm’.
3. a Chilean Spanish slang used to define urban youth of low-socioeconomic background who are linked to vulgar habits and crime (definition from Wikipedia).

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