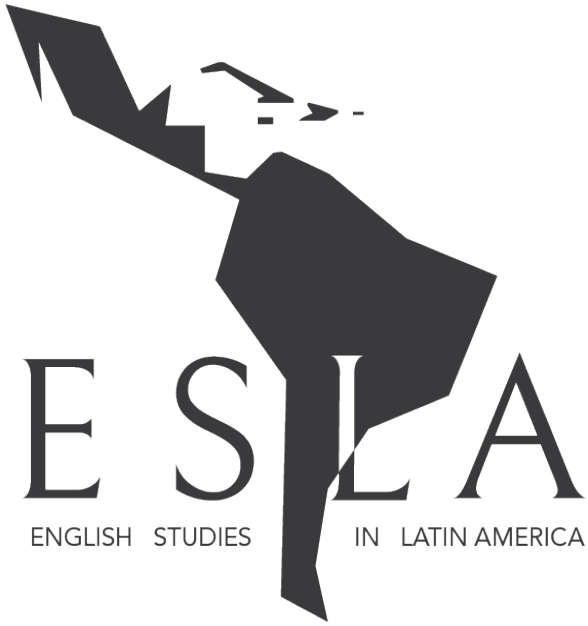

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TRANSFORMING THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT TEXTS FOR YOUNG READERS: AN INTERVIEW WITH EVELYN ARIZPE

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Transforming the Way We Think about Texts for Young Readers: An Interview with Evelyn Arizpe

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Andrea Casals Hill (AC): As we declare on our welcome page, *ESLA* is a journal "that provides a space for writers of academic and creative genres to publish their reflections on cultural productions that connect us to human experiences through the English language. Living, teaching and learning in a primarily Spanish-speaking culture, we, at *ESLA*, believe that it is crucial to open spaces for the many different readings, interpretations and uses of culture in English. As Chinua Achebe reminds us, English allows people to read each other beyond a given country's borders and it has also been forcefully imposed on many. We believe that the spectrum in between these points, the bright and dark sides of globalization and colonization, demands our critical attention from this part of the world". And as we know, you have an interesting multicultural experience that we believe has influenced who you are and your career path. We would like you to give us some insights into your experience.

We know that you are currently involved in projects related to literacy, migration and displacement. How do you think your experience as a Mexican of Spanish, Irish, Scottish and Swiss descent and having an education in bilingual schools in Cuernavaca, contributed to your sensitivity, empathy and the interests you have cultivated as a professional?

Evelyn Arizpe (EA): There is no doubt that growing up bilingual has been a tremendous asset, personally and professionally. My parents' decision to create a bilingual context in Mexico for raising my brother and myself was partly based on their own multicultural experiences and partly influenced by the aspirations of some middle-class groups in the 1960s in that country. These aspirations, which were based on the idea that learning English were key to future success, as it would enable communication, education and work in the United States. Therefore, my parents not only encouraged English as a parallel language to Spanish in the home but also sent us to bilingual schools run by Americans and sourced books published in the United States. The big and colorful picturebooks, together with exciting adventure stories and child-focused non-fiction left little room for books in Spanish except for a few illustrated classics from Spain and some traditional tales; in fact, other than these, in the 1960s and 70s there were few books to be found for children in Spanish. While some of the American publications such as those by Dr Seuss or Richard Scarry are easy to criticize today for their overt Anglocentric, white, middle-class, and heteronormative bias, they represented a world of color and fun and my brother and I loved them. In the early 1970s we moved from Mexico City to Cuernavaca (a smaller city about an hour's drive away), which at the time had only one bilingual primary school (now there are about 50 that advertise themselves as bilingual, with names like "Oxford" or "Stanford"). Because of my level of English, during class the teacher allowed me to read silently from a random collection of books in English at the back of the classroom. At my secondary school, Marymount, I met kindred spirits who also loved reading and the pool of books widened. We shared and read entire series such as Little Women, Anne of Green Gables and the Nancy Drew mysteries, as well as reading Agatha Christie, Jean Plaidy and Judy Blume among others. At the same time, I fell in love with the classics of English literature and one of my teachers nurtured this, encouraging me to think of studying English at university in the U.S.

My maternal grandparents had made me aware of family history, most of which had to do with immigration to Mexico. My great-great-grandmother, Barbara Peart, wrote a book in 1943 about her experiences as a newly wedded Irish girl who travelled from Dublin to Mexico, passing through Argentina and Texas. Perhaps it was these stories, along with a growing political and

feminist stance that heightened the tensions of living within a minority Spanish/English bilingual bubble. I decided to stay in my own country and study Latin American literature and later travel and study in Europe (rather than the US). It also became very clear to me that I did not want to settle down into the gender role traditionally assigned to women in Mexico. Therefore, after studying at the Departamento de Letras in the Universidad Iberoameriana and working for some years as an English teacher for adults as well as an assistant researcher for a children's dictionary at the Colegio de México, I ended up doing a doctoral project on young adult literature and the act of reading at the Faculty of Education in the University of Cambridge. An increasing self-awareness of my privileged status as a migrant who, unlike others, was accepted because of social background and knowledge of English (and classic children's books) led me to find ways in which I could do something useful, starting with trying to make connections between the Spanish and English-speaking worlds of books and reading. Eventually this led to research on fostering the love of reading, on visual literacy and picturebooks and to the development of projects around intercultural communication and migration.

AC: Along these lines, and considering your background, once at the doctoral program in Cambridge, would you say that your understanding and interpretation of fictional or theoretical texts produced by the English speaking cultures was any different from the analysis provided by Anglo candidates? How do you perceive that your experience and world vision contributed to the discussions?

EA: At the time I came to the UK, there were no specialized masters-level programs on children's literature so I was lucky to be able to attend classes on this topic offered by the literature team at Homerton College, with pioneers of children's literature studies such as Morag Styles, Victor Watson, Eve Bearne and David Whitely. For the most part, however, I just read as much as I could on the subject. I read mainly in English, although a research visit to the International Youth Library in Munich enabled me to consult both primary and secondary literature in other languages. Because I loved children's and young adult books, I wanted to share them with that intended audience, but I was aware of the strong resistance to reading among Mexican adolescents. I was intrigued by how

children and young people made sense of what they did read; how they were expected to make meaning from texts within the school context and how that might compare with reading books written with them in mind, for pleasure. My critical literary training in Mexico had a strong focus on hermeneutics (Paul Ricoeur) and reception theory (Roman Ingarden). In the UK I was excited to discover the links between these theories and practice through scholars I had never heard of and whose work on literature, literacy and education was crucial in understanding young people's reading, such as Shirley Brice Heath, Louise Rosenblatt, Margaret Meek and Aidan Chambers.

My doctoral research took me into secondary schools in Cambridge and also in Cuernavaca; both experiences confronted me with the realities and complexities of how the act of reading itself is perceived in the curriculum and also by those who try but often fail to persuade students to read. In England in the 1990s there were a few YA texts included in the curriculum but there were none at all in the Mexican curriculum. To be fair, this type of books was only just beginning to be published in Mexico but there was little attempt to offer young readers texts that they could connect to through their interests or lived experience. It was revealing to compare two different educational systems and the teaching of literature and most of all, to find out from the students themselves what they thought of reading and how they responded to the YA books I persuaded them to read. One of the main findings was that they enjoyed the books once they got 'into' them because the characters were a similar age, they spoke using similar forms of language and had similar concerns. Another finding was that having the books was not enough, 'reluctant' readers also needed to have gently guided conversations (by a more experienced reader) and opportunities to voice their own opinions and respond using different modes, such as drawing. So it was not so much that my understanding or interpretation of literature was different from my Anglo colleagues but that the field of children's and YA literature scholarship was relatively new and beginning to blossom; most of all, Rosenblatt's (1978) idea that the act of reading was a "transaction" - meaning that we also needed to learn about reading from what children and young people tell us about texts- was also providing me with new ways of thinking about the analysis and interpretation of literature itself.

AC: Similarly, we know that you started the MEd in Children's Literature and Literacies at the School of Education (University of Glasgow), and that you are now the head of an international graduate program (Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters in Children's Literature, Media and Culture); both are programs that receive an important percentage of international students. Would you please share with us how you perceive that these students contribute to the program's discussions and how might they exist in tension with or deconstruct underlying ideas that may be taken for granted by students coming from English backgrounds.

EA: The IMCLMC program[1] grew out of Glasgow's School of Education MEd in Children's Literature and Literacies[2] which is nearing its 10th year but it could not have happened without the now clearly established global network of children's literature scholars and the institutions that are involved in it, from universities (Aarhus University, the University of Tilburg, the Autonomous University of Barcelona and the University of Wroclaw) to cultural organizations that are able to offer placements or internships. The program is founded on the principle of collaboration and the mobility of both students and staff. The MEd has always received students from a wide range of countries and IMCLMC widened this range even further, aided by the scholarships that are part of the program. I know that other tutors, like myself, feel privileged to be sharing study spaces with students who bring a wealth of knowledge and experience not only from their cultural contexts but from their professional backgrounds as well (journalism, graphic design, psychology, publishing, illustration, media and others). Of course, there are tensions, as you note, because of these different backgrounds, approaches and understandings. Some of these become manifest in the 'blind-spots' or assumptions made about other cultures, especially when it comes to particular ethnicities or minorities; however, theses blind-spots are precisely what trigger a greater awareness of language and representation in books as well as of the way we speak about certain things, they therefore open spaces for important dialogue and discussion. The close analysis of books often reveals hidden prejudice and racism, some forms of which, unfortunately, some students have directly experienced, at times without even realizing it. Debates around authenticity and who has the right to write (or

1 https://www.gla.ac.uk/postgraduate/erasmusmundus/clmc/theprogrammeandhowtoapply/
2 https://www.gla.ac.uk/postgraduate/taught/childrensliteratureandliteracies/

illustrate) about 'others' can move from the personal to the analytical and vice-versa, they can be challenging and difficult but also illuminating and providing a way forward. Students coming from English backgrounds tend to realize how they took for granted certain stereotypes learned from books read in childhood as well as how little they know about literature from other countries. At the same time, discussions around education, innocence, empathy, consumerism and the environment, among other topics, help all students confront their assumptions about childhoods, children's literature and its role in children's lives in different contexts.

AC: You are an expert in picturebooks and visual literacies. Still focused on multiculturalism and intercultural communication, in what ways do you think visual literacy can contribute to mutual understanding among different cultures?

EA: Visual literacy includes the skills of looking and thinking beyond the immediate images we confront every day. Developing visual literacy is therefore essential in today's world where children and young people are being bombarded by images – and this seems to be heightened during the current Covid-19 crisis, with memes, videos, news images, and all the other types of images that the news and social media bring us. If we do not look carefully and thoughtfully at images, we can fall for images which are stereotypes and especially stereotypes of particular cultures or groups. Images have long been used to fan hatred and prejudice, but they can also be used to support understanding, curiosity and develop a sense of the aesthetic. Morag Styles and I found this when we did the research that resulted in our book *Children Reading Pictures* (2003/2016) where we talked to children ranging from 4-11 years old about picturebooks by Anthony Browne and Satoshi Kitamura. Among other interesting lines of enquiry, we realised the importance of considering the ways in which children's cultural contexts influenced the ways they made sense of both text and image, for example, most children felt sorry for the animals locked in cages in Browne's book *Zoo*, but from the perspective of a child whose religion did not allow pets, keeping animals in captivity was actually a good thing. We realised the potential that picturebooks had (and this has now been evidenced in a range of studies on reader response to picturebooks) for opening dialogue and sharing different points of view because these discussions can be held through the symbolic world of the

picturebook, at a distance which allows those involved to feel safe to offer their opinions or share their beliefs. (In fact, Morag and I are now working on a 3rd edition of the book for 2021, together with museum educator Kate Noble, and one chapters that will be substantially expanded will be the one on diversity, inclusion and multicultural picturebooks.)

All these experiences have led me to advocate for reading picturebooks with young children and especially multicultural picturebooks which represent cultures that they are less familiar with. I will refer to our "Visual Journeys" project later but I want to mention three doctoral students working with multicultural books I have worked with. One is Emma McGilp (2017) who brought picturebooks in different languages into the classroom and worked with young children in ways that encouraged thinking about words and pictures, about translation and understanding of settings from different countries. Among other activities, she invited parents who read and spoke languages other than English into the classroom to read the books with the children. Overall, the children began to lose their fear when coming across languages that were different to their own. The study showed the potential of images and of thinking and talking about images to consider the way other people live and open intercultural lines of communication. Another student is Herdiana Hakim who is working on multiculturalism in Indonesian children's books, using words and pictures, as well as arts-based activities to examine discourses of tolerance and pluralism (see also Hakim 2020). This year, I hosted a visiting doctoral student from Norway, Sissil Heggernes, who is working on a thesis on intercultural learning in English language teaching through picturebooks. She has published part of this study (2019) which shows how using picturebooks for mediated dialogues can serve to foster students' intercultural learning. These cutting-edge empirical studies confirm how developing visual literacy along with picturebooks can be used to open channels of communication across diverse languages and cultures and help to encourage inclusion.

AC: We also know that you have been involved in literacy projects related to migration and displacement. What is the contribution of books on migration and displacement written for young audiences?

EA: As I mentioned above, literature often provides a safe space for approaching complex and challenging topics in ways that are aesthetically engaging and insightful. The best literature allows the reader to make up their own minds about situations, inviting a questioning attitude and presenting possible alternatives without pushing for a specific one. As I see it, books on migration and displacement can mainly contribute in two ways: they allow readers who have not had those experiences to imagine what it might be like to go through them and at the same time they can show those who have that they are not alone in having them (Arizpe 2019). In the first case, reading can lead to a better understanding -or at least an awareness- of the issues that cause migration and those that are often faced during the journeys and upon arrival. This can also encourage empathy and perhaps solidarity, or at least provide them with a narrative that may raise questions about what they may have been hearing in their homes or seeing on the news about immigrants (this also goes back to the importance of visual literacy). In the second case, reading may act as a way of symbolically reconstructing their experiences and readers may find hope when characters come through challenging situations. When we worked on the Visual Journeys project, we used books with themes revolving around journeys, migration and conflict, such as Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006) with both children who had experienced displacement and children who had not (Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán 2014). We found that most of the former were able and keen to share parts of their stories and that the latter were interested in hearing them; many had not realized what some of their peers had lived through. The arts-based activities that followed the reading helped in the sharing and creating of new, more hopeful narratives. The project confirmed that picturebooks, and especially wordless picturebooks, are ideal for using in these contexts because, through the special relationship that exists between the words and the images, challenging topics can be approached in ways that can offer gentle introduction to them but also contain powerful emotions and reactions (Arizpe et al 2014). While there is now a plethora of children's books on the topic of migration, it must be noted that there are many which fall short of representing what could be considered an 'authentic' experience, either during the refugee journeys or after, in the resettlement and inclusion; however, other books are carefully crafted in ways that do not either glorify, contribute to

stereotypes or present false hope. As with other challenging and complex topics, there is a place for children and young adult books on migration, but any selection needs to be carried out with a critical eye. In addition, it is best when a more experienced adult reader such as the teacher shares the reading and is able to guide the conversation and create response activities so that the books provide support for all children, no matter what their knowledge and experience about migration might be.

Building on our research with refugee and "new arrival" children and on a research grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), in 2017 we created a network that includes researchers from different countries working with educators, mediators and others who use literature and the arts to support migrant children and young people in non-formal contexts such as refuges or even in the street. We started with Egypt and Mexico but have now included Chile, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador and The Lebanon; these partners include universities, NGOs, libraries and regional sections of IBBY (International Board on Books for Children and Young People) as well as some government sectors. The aim is to share experiences but also to provide a 'toolkit' for working with picturebooks and the arts as well include suggestions for the selection of books and other resources (www.childslitspaces.com). At the moment we are working on extending the possibility of sharing resources and activities which have emerged during the covid-19 pandemic, trying to learn how to best use books, reading and other arts activities and to reach not only displaced children but also those with little access to the internet. Watch this space…!

AC: And last but not least, you have recently been elected president of the International Research Society for Children's Literature (IRSCL). In that role, what is the particular contribution you wish to influence the organization with?

EA: I was elected president in the summer of 2019 and I hope to see my contribution support three main strands: 1) helping to create more intercultural bridges between the English and Spanish speaking worlds of children's literature; 2) supporting more interaction and exchange between children's literature scholars and the 'mediators' who work with books and children; 3) making sure there are more robust structures in place to ensure equity and inclusion. Of course, at the moment I am having to deal with the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on the plans we had as a Board and also on the forthcoming Congress in Chile in 2021 – but I will come back to this later.

In terms of the first strand, as I mentioned at the start of this interview, for many years I have been aware of the parallel worlds of research done in English and Spanish. As is the case with other research in languages, the relationship between these worlds is unbalanced in the sense that Spanish-speakers, if their language skills allow it, are aware of research in English, but a relatively small group of people in the Anglophone children's literature research and teaching world are aware of what is happening in Spanish, not only in terms of publications but also research projects or higher education courses in the field. In addition, there seems to be little communication and exchange between the many Latinx scholars in the US and scholars in Spain. The internet has helped to bring these worlds closer together and the relationship has been improving through conferences and international projects, however, there is still a lot of work to be done. When I was elected to the Board in 2015, one of my remits was to help to grow the Spanish-speaking membership. IRSCL membership tends to grow in the geographical contexts where the Bi-annual Congress will be, or has been, held. For the Congress in Chile (in whatever form it may have to take) we will obviously be expecting greater numbers of members from both Spain and Latin America as well as our usual strong group of members from the USA. The 2021 Congress will be a space where the research in Spanish and Portuguese can be highlighted, different groups can come together and hopefully this will help support the growth of the multilingual scholarship, encouraging students and early career scholars to get to know each other's work - without neglecting scholars from other parts of the world, of course!

In terms of the second strand, due to an increasing demand for universities to show the impact of research, along with the response to the growing critical situations worldwide that affect children and young people, from forced displacement to wider climate change, it seems natural to try to consider how children's literature scholarship can contribute to helping or supporting educational and other initiatives. My impression is that more scholars are becoming involved in working in different spaces (community, school, government initiatives) alongside children and young people as well as authors, editors, teachers, cultural workers and other professionals involved in education, culture, media and social wellbeing. This implies more interdisciplinary approaches that bring

together the humanities, social sciences, education and the arts, including childhood studies and the involvement of children and young people themselves in research. Many teachers are now scholars in their own right and are interested in research, while scholars who have been interested mainly in the text are now also looking at the contexts in which these texts are being read, who they are being read with, who decides what is read, published, promoted, etc. The theme of the next Congress 'Aesthetic and Pedagogic Entanglements' reflects this move and considers literature and the act of reading from perspectives that move away from the traditional split between the pedagogical and aesthetic aspects of children's literature:

> Thinking about possible synergies between the pedagogical and the aesthetic in children's literature brings back questions on reception and (affective) engagement. It also provides us with insights into the entanglements of the publishing industry, the readers/viewers/consumers/users, the authors/artists, the practices of reading/sharing/discussing/reversioning and the new technologies … (https://www.irscl2021.com/call-for-papers/)

My contribution will be to help cast the network of children's literature scholars and practitioners more widely across the globe and finding ways of communicating and sharing that are more equitable and inclusive for all groups. This is linked to the third strand which has involved creating an Equity and Diversity Committee for the first time in the history of IRSCL, the aims of which include creating an environment where all members, especially underrepresented groups, feel a sense of belonging, acceptance and safety and also where the existence of diverse ways of knowing, being and presenting research is acknowledged (these aims will shortly be published on the IRSCL website). This is work in progress, but this is obviously a very important step for the organization.

Since the invitation to respond to this interview, the world had changed and now I have a more pressing objective which is to keep IRSCL functioning as best it can during the covid-19 health crisis. One part of this involves general management and practicalities which is not of much interest here, but the other part is about responding in terms of what it means for members coming together for seminars, meetings and the Congress in 2021. Going back to the three

strands, it is very encouraging to see that, even as anxieties, fears and depression increase, there has been a global explosion of solidarity and support, impossible to keep up with, in the form of readings, storytelling, bilingual reading, reviews and recommendations of global texts and a range of arts-based practices around books and especially children's literature. It is inspiring to see so many creative ideas around the use of indoor space, home videos of and with children sharing books, artwork, games, performance, dressing up, music and online book groups around children's literature, most of which is about entertaining and not just about support for 'homeschooling'. Research is already being developed that will look at these practices which tend to involve both literature and literacy and I hope to encourage this through IRSCL and also IMCLMC. This work will help us to reflect and perhaps transform the way we think about texts and other cultural productions in ways that will allow us to reach further, share in more depth and support more scholars, more practitioners and also more children and young people across the globe.

Thank you so much!

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