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The Right to Imagine: Reading in Community with People and Stories / Gente y Cuentos

MARCY SCHWARTZ

MARCY SCHWARTZ, associate professor of Latin American literature and culture at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, is the author of *Inventiones urbanas: Ficción y ciudad latinoamericanas* (Corregidor, 2010) and a coeditor, with Mary Beth Tierney-Tello, of *Photography and Writing in Latin America: Double Exposures* (U of New Mexico P, 2006). Her current book project, tentatively entitled "Public Pages: Reading along the Latin American Streetscape," investigates reading programs that interact with urban public space.

IN CÓRDOBA, ARGENTINA, A LIBRARY OF BOOKS ONCE BANNED BY THE MILITARY JUNTA'S CENSORS (1976–83) NOW RESIDES AT A CENTER called the Espacio para la Memoria ("Space for Memory"). The site, where prisoners were once held and tortured, houses workshops inviting schoolchildren to think about this terrifying period in their history. Under the junta, even children's books were banned, and after reading a few of these titles with the children who visit the center, the workshop leaders ask them why they think the books were prohibited. One of the reasons the censors gave for prohibition was that these books offered "unlimited fantasy." To explore this idea, in one workshop the kids sang the song "The Backward Kingdom" ("El reino del revés"), by the well-known Argentine singer María Elena Walsh. After hearing the charming lyrics (birds swim, fish fly, babies have beards, $2 + 2 = 3$, etc.), students brainstormed to generate their own inside-out or upside-down examples. One child mentioned raining up, another suggested that big kids nap while little kids play, and a third proposed cars driving on the sidewalk while kids play in the street. Upset by this disorder, one of the children exclaimed, "No, that's impossible!" until the boy who imagined cars on sidewalks explained, "But we're just imagining!" His classmate responded, "Oh, okay, in that case it's possible."

The experience of the imagination is a human right, and literature invites and enhances this right. This power of the imagination lies at the core of the program People and Stories / Gente y Cuentos. For more than thirty years, People and Stories / Gente y Cuentos has organized groups of adults in community settings, in the United States and in Latin America, to listen to short stories read aloud. The program reaches a new public, one that never had access to these works before and never would have enjoyed and discussed them without it. As the founder, Sarah Hirschman, asserts:

[W]herever they take place, groups have a similar profile. A group of seven to twenty persons gathers in some suitable location, a room in a public library, in a community or senior center, or any other organization that is

willing to welcome the program. Participants are invited in and encouraged to sit informally in a circle around the coordinator who soon distributes copies of the story to be discussed and begins to read the story aloud. (56)

The coordinator's carefully prepared questions animate the discussion.¹ The resulting dialogue oscillates between close examination of the text and a recounting of personal experiences. According to Hirschman, "The conversation will somehow always relate both to our own experience and to the story and yet also take off into all kinds of liberating, playful, and joyful unexpected directions" (57). Participants agree or disagree, argue, defend, and reexamine their ideas. They learn to refine their thoughts and accept those of others as they come to surprising discoveries about the text and about one another. New voices come forward in serious dialogue, "where the literary text becomes the occasion which sparks and sustains an interweaving of private impressions with public debate" (58).

People and Stories / Gente y Cuentos goes beyond introducing literature to a new audience. The program has been difficult to classify; rigorous but accessible, it owes a debt to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The program's originality lies in how it spurs conversation among voices that are rarely heard. Instead of teaching, *People and Stories / Gente y Cuentos* encourages marginalized voices to speak out, welcoming them in expanded cognitive landscapes. Since the program is completely oral, it does not rely on participants' reading skills or educational levels. A story is read aloud, and photocopies of it are distributed to the participants so they can follow along if they wish. Even those who read poorly or feel intimidated by books or have had alienating experiences in school can participate fully and freely in these groups.

Hirschman is the wife of the development economist Albert O. Hirschman, and the program was inspired by her five-year stay in Co-

lombia, where she became immersed in Latin American literature, and by a course with Freire at Harvard in the 1960s. The goals and achievements of the program include boosting self-confidence; validating life experiences; sparking communication across the social divides of class and race; and, perhaps the core of these literary encounters, enabling the discovery of poetic language. Expanding the horizons of the imagination is what fiction is all about, and on the first page of her introduction Hirschman quotes article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which states, "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits" (Hirschman xvii). *People and Stories / Gente y Cuentos* reaches out to the imprisoned, the chemically addicted, victims of domestic violence, students let down by an educational system that has failed them, and individuals living on the streets. Imagination through literary language is a free and available tool for transcending those difficulties. Language is everyone's heritage, everyone's inheritance (as the program's executive director, Patricia Andres, states in a documentary film about the program [*People*]), and the organization invites its participants to recognize and articulate their imaginative responses through short stories.

Most of my own experiences coordinating the program have been in a medium-security prison in New Jersey with young adult Hispanic inmates, although I have coordinated many groups in English as well and participate in training new coordinators. In 2006 I helped launch the program in Bogotá, Colombia, where I trained more than twenty new coordinators.² The resonances of the stories shared in community groups—whether in public libraries, shelters, soup kitchens, and rehabilitation centers across the United States; in adult education programs in Colombia; or in France's largest prison, just outside Paris—unleash and resensitize the

imagination. While this program may not seem concretely connected to human rights, it addresses the same kinds of concerns as the librarians and social workers whose work helps children in Argentina grasp the loss caused by censorship and appreciate the recovery of the democracy of reading. To imagine is a human right; to imagine is to be free.

Hirschman underscores how the program capitalizes on the stories' poetics to unlock the imagination, "which begins to splinter and recast what it encounters" in group conversations (38). A few examples from *People and Stories / Gente y Cuentos* groups illustrate how the stories generate dialogue. Two stories by the Colombian writer and Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez are favorites in the program. They are included in English programs in translation as well as in Spanish programs because they are so effective in provoking responses that open new imaginative horizons. In "Balthazar's Marvelous Afternoon" ("La prodigiosa tarde de Baltazar"), Balthazar is a humble but talented carpenter who makes beautiful birdcages out of soldered metal and wire. When a young boy in the village asks him to make a cage for his bird, Balthazar works on it night and day for weeks, and the result is astounding. Balthazar and his wife decide on the price he will ask, and when others stop by to admire it and offer to buy it, he refuses their bids and explains that it is for the boy who ordered it. When he takes the creation to the boy's house, the father is furious with Balthazar for going ahead with a project that a child ordered. In spite of the boy's tantrum, the father refuses to give Balthazar a cent. The artisan ends up offering the birdcage to the boy as a gift, stating that he made it especially for him. The rest of the village assumes that Balthazar got a good price out of a stingy man, a conclusion that Balthazar does not correct, and they all celebrate with rounds of drinks at the local bar.

The poetic description of the birdcage evokes conversation:

The cage was on display on the table: with its enormous dome of wire, three stories inside, with passageways and compartments especially for eating and sleeping and swings in the space set aside for the birds' recreation, it seemed like a small-scale model of a gigantic ice factory. (107-08)

Puesta en exhibición sobre la mesa, la enorme cúpula de alambre con tres pisos interiores, con pasadizos y compartimientos especiales para comer y dormir, y trapecios en el espacio reservado al recreo de los pájaros, parecía el modelo reducido de una gigantesca fábrica de hielo. (69)

When the local doctor walks by and sees the birdcage, he is fascinated and immediately wants to buy it for his wife. He calls the birdcage "an adventure of the imagination" ("una aventura de la imaginación").³ In awe, he continues to examine it, and adds, "You wouldn't even need to put birds in it. . . . It would be enough to hang it in the trees so it could sing by itself" ("Ni siquiera será necesario ponerle pájaros . . . [b]astará con colgarla entre los árboles para que cante sola" [108; 69]).⁴ The beauty and skill of this creation prompt discussion about construction projects, building models, and other artistic endeavors. In a recent group at the prison, one of the participants illustrated nearly every story we read. Discussing this story validates talents and interests beyond reading and comprehension, stimulating participants to recognize and embrace their imaginations.

Another favorite is Isabel Allende's "Two Words" ("Dos palabras"), a story that highlights what we call in the program "shadows." Shadows are the ambiguities, the silences, the gaps and distances that produce doubt and uncertainty, increase suspense, and call on the reader's ability to visualize. Hirschman calls shadows the "slippery and evanescent quality of fiction [that] disturbs but at the same time tantalizes our imagination" (43). The big secret in this story are two words Belisa Crepus-

culario pronounces to a colonel, which seem to cast a spell over him. Belisa, a self-taught Cyrano de Bergerac, climbs out of extreme poverty by selling words. She writes letters, baptism and marriage announcements, legal documents, whatever her clients ask her to draft. When the colonel, a violent rural caudillo, decides that he wants to run for president and hopes to earn the public's affection rather than take the position by force, he contracts Belisa to write his campaign speech. The price for the speech includes the bonus of two secret words that Belisa whispers in his ear before she leaves. The speech is as effective as he hoped, and his popularity soars, but since meeting Belisa the colonel is altered, disoriented. When his rough assistant presses him to explain his disturbed state of mind, the colonel blames his condition on Belisa's secret words.

Belisa was born into a family so poor that the parents did not even have names for their children, so she had to choose her own name. This line of the story always evokes reactions from participants, and in one group a member commented that poverty is not only economic, that many suffer from poverty of the imagination due to ignorance. Responding to her choice of a name for herself, participants sometimes find Belisa reminiscent of *belleza*, the Spanish word for beauty. Most have no idea about the meaning of *crepuscular*, the root of her chosen surname, but the poetic sound of the word functions without a definition; participants often mention that the term evokes mystery and suspense. The stark description of the landscape underscores Belisa's desperate origins:

She came into the world and grew up in an inhospitable land where some years the rains became avalanches of water that bore everything away before them and others when not a drop fell from the sky and the sun swelled to fill the horizon and the world became a desert. . . . During one interminable drought . . . [t]he land was eroded, split with deep cracks, strewn with rocks, fossils of trees

and thorny bushes, and skeletons of animals bleached by the sun . . . she was so stubborn that she survived to cross through that hell and at long last reach the first trickles of water, fine almost invisible threads that fed spindly vegetation and farther down widened into small streams and marshes. (11)

Vino al mundo y creció en la región más inhospita, donde algunos años las lluvias se convierten en avalanchas de agua que se llevan todo, y en otros no cae ni una gota del cielo, el sol se agranda hasta ocupar el horizonte entero y el mundo se convierte en un desierto. . . . Durante una interminable sequía . . . [l]a tierra estaba erosionada, partida en profundas grietas, sembrada de piedras, fósiles de árboles y de arbustos espinudos, esqueletos de animales blanqueados por el calor . . . ella era tan tozuda que consiguió atravesar el infierno y arribó por fin a los primeros manantiales, finos hilos de agua, casi invisibles, que alimentaban una vegetación raquítica, y que más adelante se convertían en riachuelos y esteros. (16)

When I asked the group if they had ever known such a geography, one of the prisoners answered, "Yes, my cell."

The story never reveals the two words. The most obvious message, "I love you," is expressed in two words in Spanish. But the participants suggest other options: "Find peace," "I'm American," "Let's arrive" (referring to crossing the border from Mexico into the United States), or even silence. I ask whether words can really exert so much power over people, and the participants confirm that they do, and mention prayer, chanting, Santería rituals, and mantras. One of the participants commented that "words can be buried like swords," evoking Spanish sayings such as *having a dagger instead of a tongue* and *using your words like swords*. I asked if anyone had ever felt language like a sword, and a participant responded, "When I heard the judge pronounce the words of my sentence."

In a recent session with inmates in New Jersey, we read another story by García

Márquez, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" ("Un señor muy viejo con unas alas enormes"). In a small coastal village, a storm washes up an old man with huge wings. A family takes him in, putting him on display in a chicken coop, where hundreds of visitors come to see him for a small fee, pilgrims from far and wide hoping to have contact with a fallen angel. He is dirty and decrepit, his wings are full of sea flotsam and bare in spots from shedding feathers, and he is unable to communicate in any language the villagers speak. The old man is far from the people's idea of an angel. Even the priest has trouble deciding if the old man is an angel or the devil in disguise. These bold contrasts play with readers' expectations and provide much material for examining both traditional and contemporary ideas and for questioning sacred and secular images. We examined how the story never says what the old man is, and when I asked for opinions on this central question, the inmates were not willing to draw conclusions. I was fascinated at how accepting they were of the ambiguity. Ambiguity is in fact one of the qualities we look for in stories for the program and one of the categories for coordinators to mine for discussion questions. At the end of this discussion on "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," I reread a passage where the word "truth" appears twice (about the Spider Woman who arrives with a traveling circus, drawing the village's attention away from the old man), and asked why the story emphasizes the idea of truth. Are these creatures so outlandish that they put the concept of truth to the test? Is this a true story? The lively conversation considered the category of fiction making. Several said that even if the story is not true, the experience of the imagination that the story provides is.

After five years or so in the chicken coop alongside the family's house, the old man takes flight and sails away:

Elisenda let out a sigh of relief, for herself and for him, when she saw him pass over the last

houses, holding himself up in some way with the risky flapping of a senile vulture. She kept watching him even when she was through cutting the onions and she kept on watching until it was no longer possible for her to see him, because then he was no longer an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea. (332)

Elisenda exhaló un suspiro de descanso, por ella y por él, cuando lo vio pasar por encima de las últimas casas, sustentándose de cualquier modo con un azaroso aleteo de buitre senil. Siguió viéndolo hasta cuando acabó de cortar la cebolla, y siguió viéndolo hasta cuando ya no era posible que lo pudiera ver, porque entonces ya no era un estorbo en su vida, sino un punto imaginario en el horizonte del mar. (20)

I have asked participants how one might keep on seeing something that can no longer be seen, and they often respond that her memories of the old man prolong the image of his flight. This contrast between his familiarity (he has become part of the family) and the shock of his flight after so many years on the ground forms parallel universes: García Márquez pits an ordinary daily task (cutting onions for lunch) against the extraordinary phenomenon of an old man flying. Through *People and Stories / Gente y Cuentos*, stories last beyond the sessions and stay with the participants, having filtered into their imaginative repertoire. Horizons have expanded to include contrasts and contradictions, ambiguities and shadows, a variety of truths held in poetic language that combine familiarity with surprise.

Reading in community through *People and Stories / Gente y Cuentos* defies the restriction of reading to solitary and private spaces by opening literature and dialogue about it to readers in arenas removed from typical literary or academic venues. Programs such as *Community Read*, at Penn State University, and *One Book, One City*, which promote reading in groups, also challenge the singular and cloistered mode of reading by

inviting citizens to participate in public forums such as roundtables and debates.⁵ While these programs approach reading as a common experience, providing events at public libraries and on university campuses, *People and Stories / Gente y Cuentos* takes reading into less literary realms: shelters, prisons, church basements, and rehabilitation centers. "The pleasures of literature arise largely from its capacity to introduce us to things unforeseen . . .," suggest Michael Bérubé, Hester Blum, Christopher Castiglia, and Julia Spicher Kasdorf in their discussion of Community Read (423). In *People and Stories / Gente y Cuentos* sessions, the surprising plot twist, the unusual response in a dialogue, unfamiliar uses of language, and contrasting images all push readers to enter new imaginative zones at the same time that fiction infiltrates unexpected venues. "Encouraging trust in acts of imagination untethered from predictability and precedent, reading literature fosters the imagining of unprecedented *social* arrangements as well, opening limiting social imperatives to the horizon of inventive possibility" (423). Reading, then, and subsequent discussions about the reading serve as catalysts for enriching civil society. *People and Stories / Gente y Cuentos* capitalizes on the imagination through fiction as a strategy for mutual understanding, particularly to "facilitate contacts between groups that feel estranged" from one another, to overcome distrust, and to break down stereotypes. Reading and conversing about short stories in a group is an experience freed from obligatory conclusions; instead of consensus, "[d]ifference is now perceived as strength rather than weakness" (Hirschman 56, 87, 88).

According to Daniel Moyano, an Argentine writer whose stories we include in the program's bibliography, reading stories "is our most familiar, generous, intense, and violent way of stepping out of our routine and our boring reality. The short story is a violent, fast, and beautiful medium for taking

you outside that reality, for connecting you to another reality that we only glimpse, that we long for . . ." ("es la manera más familiar, generosa, intensa y violenta que uno tiene de salirse de la rutina y de la aburrida realidad. El cuento es ese medio violento y rápido y hermoso de sacarte de esta realidad, para conectarte con esa otra que vislumbramos, que deseamos . . .") [my trans.; 6]). How telling for Moyano to notice the "violent" nature of stories. Born in Córdoba, the city with the library of banned books, Moyano himself was a victim of human rights violations. Arrested and then exiled just after the military dictatorship took power in 1976, he lived in Spain until his death in 1992. In Spanish, *violento* suggests abrupt, sharp transitions, jarring stimuli, gripping and shocking input that produces an *intensé* reaction. How can reading a story be both "violent" and "generous"? This is a kind of question we ask participants in *People and Stories / Gente y Cuentos* sessions. Between violence and generosity is an inviting space for eliciting strong responses from unassuming but emboldened new readers, a space where reading together enhances our collective lives.⁶

NOTES

This essay is based on a presentation delivered at the MLA convention in Philadelphia in December 2009, on a panel entitled "The Humanities and Human Rights." My thanks go to the panel organizer and chair, Steven Mailoux, and to my fellow presenters, Diana Sorensen and Bruce Robbins, for a lively exchange.

1. Hirschman outlines the important role of the coordinator, "who will actually run the groups, read the stories, and help propel the discussion." She admits her unease with the name *coordinator*, stating that "it is a poor term for the key role that this particular actor performs but we use it for lack of a better one" (53). I prefer the term *facilitator*, and *facilitador* has been adopted as the term for the coordinator for the program in Spanish in Colombia. The forthcoming translation into Spanish of Hirschman's book maintains *coordinator* ("coordinador").

2. The launching of the Colombia program cannot be divorced from the context of the country's continuing struggle against political violence. In recent years, particularly under the leadership of two mayors, Antanas Mockus (1995–98 and 2001–04) and Enrique Peñalosa (1998–2001), Bogotá embraced a number of efforts to encourage active civic culture and promote public space, such as the expansion of the city's public libraries. My first trip to that city to train coordinators, in 2006, was funded by grants from Rutgers University and a local literacy agency, Fundalectura. The second training workshop, held two years later, was funded by a competitive municipal grant to support literary programming in Bogotá during the year that the city was named World Capital of the Book by UNESCO, in 2007–08. Thirty-five programs were initiated during the granting period in prisons, churches, libraries, schools, adult education centers, and drug rehabilitation programs. Some of the trained coordinators were involved in programs that worked with ex-combatants and victims of political violence.

3. The published English translation of the story, by J. S. Bernstein reads, "This is a flight of the imagination" (108).

4. In another story by García Márquez, "The Most Beautiful Drowned Man in the World" ("El ahogado más hermoso del mundo"), there is also a character who stretches and tests the community's imagination: "Not only was he the tallest, strongest, most virile, and best built man they had ever seen, but even though they were looking at him there was no room for him in their imagination" ("No sólo era el más alto, el más fuerte, el más viril y el mejor armado que habían visto jamás, sino que todavía cuando lo estaban viendo no les cabía en la imaginación" [666; 50]).

5. Many cities in the United States as well as abroad have adopted the One Book, One City program. One Book, One Philadelphia, for example, states that its goal is "to promote reading, literacy and libraries, and to encourage the entire greater Philadelphia area to come together through reading and discussing a single book" (*One Book*). Community Read, sponsored by the Center for American Literary Studies at Penn State, began in 2007 as an attempt to narrow the divide between town and gown by inviting the nonacademic community to participate in public activities organized around reading a particular book (Bérubé, Blum, Castiglia, and Kasdorf).

6. For more information on People and Stories / Gente y Cuentos programs, see www.peopleandstories.org.

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