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Seeking Literary Justice

La Caja Mágica in Boyle Heights

It is two-thirty in the afternoon on Sunday, 22 May 2016. You walk west down First Street, through Boyle Heights, a neighborhood just east of downtown Los Angeles. You can see downtown on the horizon from the crossroads of Boyle Avenue and First Street directly ahead of you. Walking through Mariachi Plaza in the glare of a Sunday afternoon, you hear cheering, then quiet, then laughter, then quiet, then singing. Children's voices come from the kiosk, a raised pavilion that was a gift from the State of Jalisco in 1998 and built in traditional Mexican style from Cantera, using the same stone the pre-Colombian Toltecs used for their pyramids. Approaching the kiosk, you realize it is filled with people, a mix of ages. They are hushed, their attention fixed on a woman reading to them.

This scene describes a children's storytelling hour, the result of a collaboration between six UCLA researchers and Libros Schimbros, an independent bookstore and lending library in Boyle Heights, which took place over four months in 2016. The project explored how small-scale, staged literary interventions like a storytelling hour could have a productive impact on a given community. The initiative came about as a way to promote something we call "literary justice."

Literary justice is premised on the idea of a culture that embraces stories as a part of life as part of a community-building effort. It is achieved when all members of a community have equal access to books and stories, and it stems from numerous studies that demonstrate that a person's access to literature is a strong indicator for a host of quality-of-life measures.¹ A robust public library system is an important tool in the fight for literary justice, but in cities like Los Angeles, busy families often struggle to use a public library system that was not designed to accommodate them. The limited

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availability of books and magazines, limited open times, hard-to-reach-library branches, and even a lack of knowledge of where library branches are located all limit the utility of libraries, as do lack of time and money, illiteracy, and a passion for books that has not yet been sparked in every member of the community.

So instead of focusing on physical libraries—or even physical books—we chose to focus our work with *Libros Schmibros* on stories. By bringing books and stories out of the library and into the neighborhood, we hoped that literacy and community engagement might build on one another in more imaginative ways. We devised a project that had two components—*La Caja Mágica* (the Magic Box) and *La Hora Mágica* (the Magic Hour)—aimed to expand the conventional notion of what a library could be by shifting the focus from books to storytelling. A small gathering telling stories becomes a performance: the sidewalk becomes a space of cultural production, changing the cultural practices of the neighborhood. Essentially, it becomes a library.

In *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Edward Soja introduces the idea of space as subject to forces that allow resources to be distributed unevenly and allow certain services to be granted only to the privileged.² Literary injustice, therefore, describes forms of cultural, geographic, and social segregation that affect a community's access to literary activities. In this sense, literary justice looks to break chains of inaccessibility and to empower community members by creating access funded by new paths of literary distribution.

Literary justice focuses on those places or social strata where access to literature has been diminished by economic or political decisions of the city. If “those who live in the city,” as Mark Purcell suggests, “contribute to the body of urban lived experience and lived space,”³ where does the experience of reading and storytelling fit into urban space? Claiming a space for books in the city is a way for a community to claim the right to be educated.

This in turn, led us to ask the following: Is our city designed for reading? Is public space planned for sharing stories? Is the act of reading aloud perceivable in Los Angeles? Literary justice promotes the importance of reading in the public realm as a means to enhance and empower community participation in public space.

Today's public libraries serve as a basis for disseminating ideas to the community while providing a secure reservoir for books, magazines, or newspapers. However, as

an enclosed, institutional space, it is functionally limited by its location, format, hours, and programs offered. Mobile libraries, on the other hand, represent a practical way to bring the book and the pleasure of literature to different communities. Projects such as the American Bookmobile service in the 1950s symbolized a way of assisting communities outside the boundaries of public library branches.⁴ However, mobile libraries themselves are limited by their small size and lack of vital resources a full-service public library can provide, such as trained children's librarians. How can people access books and storytelling activities in public space? Can creatively implemented literary justice embedded into the cultural practices of an urban space such as Boyle Heights foster spatial justice?

La Caja Mágica is the heart of the project. Inspired by art projects such as *The Dumpling Express* (by the Berlin architecture office, Something Fantastic) and Olafur Eliasson's *Mirror Bikes*, *La Caja Mágica* is a chrome-coated plywood box that unfolds to expose an interior of grass serving as a stool. The box stores grass mats to create seating for an audience. What looks at first like a strange, mirrored, rolling two-foot cube is in fact a storytelling box of tricks, containing books, puppets, and gifts. It is a box, but it is also a seat for a storyteller. It is an object, but also a location.

When children approach it, they see themselves playing in its mirrored surface. This dazzling effect seeks to pay homage to the visual aspects of a neighborhood, blending strangely with its surroundings, appearing imperceptible. Like the gleaming boxes of magicians, it attracts and generates expectation and curiosity among children and adults alike.

Once it is open, the box—lined with artificial turf—provides a place for the storyteller to sit and to store the books that will later be distributed to the audience. The turf and green seating mats transform the gray sidewalk into something almost park-like. The goal of *La Caja Mágica* is to transform a common environment into a micro library—or into a space apt for magical storytelling. The action of transforming the surroundings of the box into a whimsical environment becomes in itself a simulacrum of the cultural imaginary of telling stories in the middle of the forest. It transports these activities from the seclusion of enclosed space to the open communal environment of the public space. It also plays—in a minimalistic way—with the basic conditions needed to transform any space into a library.



Displaying *La Caja Mágica* (the Magic Box), a chrome-coated plywood box that unfolds to expose an interior of grass serving as a stool. The box stores grass mats to create seating for an audience.

In 2006, the Mexican artist Pablo Helguera organized an art project called *The School of Pan-American Unrest*. The project revived dying native languages and reenacted traditions in a traveling schoolhouse that made connections between the different regions of the Americas—from the northern regions of Alaska to the southern provinces of Chile—through a combination of performances, workshops, and screenings. Helguera’s breakdown of the traditional institution of the school provided inspiration for the reconceptualization of the pedagogical dynamics between storytelling and the places stories are told, be they schools or libraries.

Following Helguera’s lead, on a sunny Sunday afternoon in May of 2016, our six-person team and Libros Schmibros took over the kiosk at Mariachi Plaza. We opened *La Caja Mágica* and *La Hora Mágica* (the magic hour) began. David Kipen of Libros Schmibros introduced the event, and children’s librarians read stories aloud in Spanish and in English to a group of twenty children, who listened and danced. Two storytellers from the Los Angeles Public Library system engaged the children and their adult family members through skillful storytelling: book selection, page

turning, and animated voices transformed words on a page into reality.

As the event drew to a close, we asked the children how often they would like to attend storytelling afternoons like *La Hora Mágica*, and we asked their parents where such events should be held. Most said three or more times a month, at Mariachi Plaza. Afterward, children and parents signed up for new or renewed accounts and checked out books at Libros Schmibros, which is located right next to the kiosk.

The whole project became an act of gift-giving to the community of Boyle Heights; by giving and sharing books and stories with the people, it functioned as an exemplary action to be imitated between parents and children. It also symbolized an act of literary justice that pursued the transformation of the cultural practices of the neighborhood by bringing fun and enjoyment to public space while promoting the act of reading and literacy.

At first, it was *La Caja Mágica* that commanded the attention of the audience, with its bizarre shiny presence; but as *La Hora Mágica* continued, both children and adults shifted their attention to the stories and activities performed by the

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storytellers. *La Caja Mágica* created an intimate literary space in a public area. *La Hora Mágica* is about stories, but it is also about the physicality of books and how they are treated when they are theatrically pulled from *La Caja Mágica*. The box, difficult to size because of its reflective sheen, seemed simultaneously tiny and huge as some twenty to thirty books emerged, one pulled from Libros Schimbros's collection for each child present.

La Hora Mágica was advertised through posters in nearby locations, such as storefront windows and utility poles, and outreach to a few schools, bringing a dozen children there for the beginning of the event. Within the first ten minutes, another nine children and their parents joined, some running late and others passing by and wanting to join. The crowns, books, and puppets that emerged from *La Caja Mágica* attracted the attention of the public, but these alone could not hold focus without the dances and stories, read from books in English as well as Spanish.

Spectacle and performance were key components of this literary intervention. The action and impact that *La Caja Mágica* and *La Hora Mágica* had over the community provided an outlet for the social dynamics of the neighborhood, which all too often remain latent, with child-friendly spaces rare and working parents often keeping children at home. The event, not only a symbolic transformation of public space into library, also brought a moment of unity, peace, and enjoyment to participants. The project proposed, on one hand, a change in the spatial practices of the neighborhood by making accessible the art of storytelling; on the other hand, the whole experience allowed a reconfiguration of the reading and storytelling expectations of people.

Bringing the experience of reading books to people in urban spaces opens the possibility to reclaim the spaces for literacy as an act of social and spatial justice. Traditionally, kiosks in plazas like the one in Boyle Heights are used by

bands and other groups as entertainment space. *La Caja Mágica* and *La Hora Mágica* broadened the kind of entertainment that could use the kiosk, while instilling a culture of literacy. Inspired in principles coined by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, reading culture (or storytelling culture) is a series of social practices and tactics that permit competence in reading skills; these social rights of community to reading habits enable people to use books as tools for its intellectual and personal development.⁵ However, these practices are neither centered nor anchored in the mere materiality of the book as an object, nor in the number of books that a person possesses or reads, but in the way the communicated word between two or more people impacts and transforms someone's thoughts and life. Access to the benefits that the act of reading and storytelling bring to people is the basis of the "Literary Justice." **B**

Notes

- ¹ On the importance of libraries to communities, see M.D.R. Evans, Jonathan Kelley, Joanna Sikora, and Donald J. Treiman, "Family Scholarly Culture and Educational Success: Books and Schooling in 27 Nations," *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 28.2 (June 2010): 171–97, which demonstrated that having more books in the home provided an advantage to children equivalent to having parents with a university education.
- ² Edward W. Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
- ³ Mark Purcell, "Excavating Lefebvre: The Right to the City and Its Urban Politics of the Inhabitant," *GeoJournal* 58.2 (2002): 99–108.
- ⁴ Dorothy Strousse, "The Administrator Looks at Bookmobile Service," *ALA Bulletin* 52.1 (1958): 16–22.
- ⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).



Storytelling time for attendees of *La Hora Mágica* (the Magic Hour), Boyle Heights.