Literary Circulation Beyond the Market: Public Institutions and Cultural Democracy in Contemporary Latin America—A Roundtable

Daniel Hernández, Marcy Schwartz, Alejandra Soriano, AND **Yosa Vidal**

THE TENSION BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES has long shaped literary production in Latin America. From national prizes to contemporary digital initiatives, the means and modes of literary promotion have played a crucial role in determining not only what we read but how we conceive the very act of reading. In June 2024 I, along with colleagues from IDARTES Bogotá and Librería Garabato, organized a roundtable that brought together key voices exploring this complex relationship between public resources, spaces, audiences, and literary creation. The event, held in parallel with the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) Conference, aimed to examine how public institutions mediate and shape literary practices in the region. We created a space for dialogue that bridged academic research, cultural management, and creative practice.

The testimonies collected here reveal how the interaction between public institutions and literary creation has evolved from a prescriptive, top-down approach into more dynamic and collaborative models. This transformation echoes broader changes in how we understand the role of public cultural institutions in Latin America. Contemporary approaches recognize the multiplicity of reading practices and literary traditions that coexist within our societies, moving away from traditional models of cultural imposition toward more participatory frameworks.

The selection of participants was deliberate, aiming to capture different dimensions of how the public intersects with literature in our region. Marcy Schwartz's contribution illustrates how urban reading programs across Latin America have transformed public spaces into sites of literary encounter. Her research documents initiatives that have made literature accessible in unconventional spaces—from public transportation to neighborhood plazas—challenging traditional notions of where and how literary experiences should take place. These programs, she argues, create new forms of readership that transcend social and spatial boundaries.

From Chile, Yosa Vidal offers us critical reflections on state funding for literary creation that highlight the complex relationship between creative autonomy and public support. The Chilean experience with competitive grants reveals how evaluation mechanisms have evolved to better serve creative communities while maintaining accountability—a balance that speaks to broader questions about the role of public institutions in cultural production.

The Colombian perspective, brought by Alejandra Soriano, articulated through the experience of cultural management in Bogotá, offers insights into how public resources can be channeled to create innovative literary access points. Programs like Libro al Viento exemplify what I call "transmediating practices"—initiatives that not only distribute literature but transform how texts circulate and are consumed in urban spaces. These programs challenge traditional divisions between high and popular culture, creating new modes of literary engagement that respond to local needs and practices.

As an interviewer, I structured our conversations around five key questions that I believed would help us understand the current state and future challenges of public literary initiatives in Latin America. The responses revealed several intersecting concerns that I find particularly relevant for our field.

First, the changing nature of state involvement in literary promotion emerged as a crucial theme. All participants noted a shift from prescriptive approaches to more collaborative models, though each country has followed its own path in this transition. The tension between institutional support and creative autonomy remains a productive one, generating new forms of engagement between public institutions and literary communities.

Second, the conversations highlighted how public literary initiatives must constantly navigate between traditional cultural hierarchies and contemporary reading practices. As someone who has long studied Latin American literature, I found the discussions about how public programs can bridge canonical traditions with emerging forms of literary expression and consumption particularly compelling.

The impact of digital transformation on public literary initiatives became another central theme, especially in light of the pandemic's effects. Our discussions revealed how public institutions across the region have adapted to new circumstances, creating hybrid models that combine physical and virtual access to literature. This adaptation speaks to the resilience and creativity of Latin American cultural institutions.

Perhaps most significantly, our conversations repeatedly returned to the question of how public resources can effectively serve diverse communities while respecting their specific needs and interests. The participants shared valuable insights about successful programs that have managed to create genuine dialogue between public institutions and local communities.

As both a scholar and co-organizer, I was struck by how these conversations revealed the unique character of Latin American approaches to literary promotion. Despite our region's economic challenges, we have developed innovative solutions for making literature accessible to broader audiences. From mobile libraries in Chilean archipelagos to poetry on Bogotá's TransMilenio buses, these initiatives demonstrate a remarkable commitment to democratizing literary access.

This dialogue offers valuable perspectives on the current state of public literary initiatives in Latin America. They provide concrete examples of successful programs while also highlighting ongoing challenges and opportunities. As our region continues to face political and economic

transitions that affect cultural funding, these insights become increasingly valuable for understanding how to sustain and expand literary access.

These conversations confirm my long-held belief that examining the relationship between public resources and literature remains crucial for understanding contemporary Latin American cultural production. The intersection of public institutions, creative practices, and community needs continues to generate new forms of literary engagement that challenge traditional models of cultural promotion. These conversations not only document current practices but also point toward future possibilities for making literature and the making of literature truly accessible to all members of our societies.

—Daniel Hernández

DANIEL HERNÁNDEZ: Can you describe your relationship as writers, managers, and researchers to the use of public resources for the promotion of literature?

MARCY SCHWARTZ: I am Professor Emerita of Latin American literature and culture at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. My most recent monograph is *Páginas públicas: Leer en el paisaje callejero de América Latina* (Eduvim, 2025), an updated and translated version of *Public Pages: Reading along the Latin American Streetscape* (University of Texas Press, 2018). I have published extensively on the relationship between urban space and the literary imagination, reading practices and public culture in Latin America, translation, and photography. I have bridged my academic work with Spanish-speaking communities in New Jersey through service-learning initiatives and leading reading workshops at prisons and other venues through the nonprofit People and Stories/Gente y Cuentos. My research, teaching, and public engagement have become more seamless as I have studied and participated in literary reading initiatives in Latin America as well as in the U.S. that move beyond academic institutions and expand into the public sphere.

Public resources for literature and the arts have offered me a fascinating arena for exploring how readers, in particular, make use of opportunities and access materials, spaces, and interactive activities involving books and literature. I've been honored to watch programming in action, out in public space, in dozens of cities and towns across Latin America. While I have definitely engaged in years of field work and participant observation for my research, I have also enjoyed being a reader myself, a beneficiary, of these very programs. Free books on buses and subways have come into my hands through programs such as Libro al Viento in Bogotá, Colombia, billboards filled with poetry or short stories adorn my walks through cities through programs such as the vastly popular creative writing contest Santiago in 100 Words in Chile, and book fairs in parks and plazas have introduced me to emerging writers. Alternative publishers have invited me to make books with them—I especially enjoy bookmaking and decorating with independent *cartonera* presses that bind books in reused cardboard—and I have collected and conducted archival research on newsletters and other local ephemeral print materials, now spilling out of my own folders

and file drawers, that has given me insights into neighborhood initiatives. I feel privileged to be on both sides of public literary interventions: as a researcher and scholar as well as a public reader joining the crowd.

YOSA VIDAL: I am a university professor, writer, and researcher, but it is my creative work—more than any other—that has led me to develop a vision for the use of public resources in the promotion of literature. Among my books are *Érase otra vez* (2011), *El Tarambana* (2013), *Los multipatópodos* (2017), and *Vals Chilote* (2022). On several occasions, I have received literary grants, and my work has been published and distributed by the Chilean state. On the one hand, these public resources have allowed me to dedicate paid hours to writing, which in my case—and for many other authors—has served as a recognition of writing's value as human labor. I may well write at 5 a.m., or after everyone else is asleep and the dishes are done, but it is paid labor, nonetheless. This is important, as it neutralizes the exploitative aspect of writing—an aspect that shouldn't exist and that is particularly present in the case of women.

On the other hand, throughout these processes, I've noticed that the criteria used to allocate resources—at least regarding creative writing grants—have moved away from a normative understanding of literature, which is a significant achievement. The fact that it's our peers who distribute these resources after evaluating the writing samples—submitted anonymously—ensures that the evaluation criteria do not necessarily uphold a fixed idea of what literature is, or seek to protect certain "values," or aim to "rescue" particular authors or figures. I trust the reviewers because they are among the best readers our country has. This rotating community, which changes from year to year, forms a relatively stable and reliable platform for the promotion of writing. Moreover, I believe we have managed to fine-tune the process over time. For instance, grants no longer require the once-nefarious writing "project," which forced writers to become technocrats—skilled in filling out forms and tracking deadlines, as if writing were an activity with specific and non-specific aims, both short- and long-term. Dorothea Lasky addresses this issue in her work *Poetry Is Not a Project*, translated into Spanish by the Argentine poet Cecilia Pavón. When writing projects were mandatory, many outstanding writers were excluded—most of them senior writers unfamiliar with bureaucratic forms, and even less so with the digital world. Now, writers submit a certain number of pages, and that's what reviewers read: the written word, which is in itself sufficient proof of writing. I may disagree with a reviewer's judgment, but they are, after all, professional writers entrusted with the task of reading.

That said, I'll allow myself two critiques. The first concerns the fact that the state is a mammoth—clumsy and slow—still digesting whatever it consumed during the previous administration. As a result, it spends its time putting out fires, pays reviewers poorly and late, and lacks consistency in setting deadlines for applications, among other issues. My second critique relates not only to the role of the state but also to the broader community of creators and promoters of literature in these times, which Inodoro Pereyra would call "so contemporary." It concerns the state of perverse

dependency that we must urgently overcome. We cannot continue to rely solely on grants and their logic. Our responsibility as creators and promoters of literature is to invent new forms of cultural circulation that do not depend on state subsidies.

To return to the question of my relationship with public resources, I must say that the most fruitful, by far, has been my use of public libraries—those last bastions of an economic alternative to capitalism. I would argue that libraries are not only an alternative to capitalism but a direct challenge to its premises, since the reader's desire for what's on the shelves is not possessive. Instead, it is a desire to enter the world of reading alongside others, in a conversation that begins in the library. My research has often led me to spend time in small community libraries. For instance, to write my latest novel, *Vals Chilote*, I spent entire afternoons in libraries in Castro, Ancud, Queilén, and Chonchi. These are beautiful wooden buildings where people of all ages lounge about (there's heating!). There, you can explore local archives, get to know the librarians—always eager to recommend a book—chat with children and adolescents who pass the time in the afternoons while waiting for their parents to return from work, and, of course, write. Moreover, if I'm generally captivated by the smell of libraries, then the libraries in Chiloé—with their mix of paper and chimney wood—leave me just two blocks away from utopia.

ALEJANDRA SORIANO: First, to briefly return to the point raised by Yosa about state funding for writers: I fully agree that sustainability should not rely solely on public resources. Incentives should also help circulate and distribute the projects resulting from these grant portfolios, and support strategies for marketing and engaging audiences.

Now, I started my professional career at the Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia, and this first experience shaped key aspects of my future trajectory. From the beginning, I understood that cultural management in the public sector involves different considerations and commitments than in the private or any other sector. Working in the public sector means thinking in terms of the collective; the decisions you make from there affect or benefit more than one person and are also subject to public scrutiny, which imposes a responsibility that goes beyond personal judgement. In my experience, the management of public resources has always been accompanied by a constant dialogue with others and by the administrative rigor required by the sector, with procedures, checks and paperwork that ensure that our actions meet the needs of the community, whether at national, municipal, local or even *barrial* (neighborhood) level.

As far as the promotion of literature is concerned, I have worked at the Secretaría de Cultura, Recreación y Deporte de Bogotá (Bogotá Secretariat of Culture, Recreation and Sports) and currently at the Gerencia de Literatura del Instituto Distrital de las Artes de Bogotá (Literature Management of the Bogotá District Institute of the Arts), among other experiences in cultural management. These experiences have allowed me to explore different ways of promoting literature with public resources. The projects that emerge in this context must respond to public issues such as lack of access to reading materials, inclusion and diversity in literary collections, interculturality and the limited time available for leisure reading after work.

In this regard, I would like to share a concrete experience that illustrates this view. I particularly remember a visit to the public library in Carmen del Darién, a municipality in the Chocó region on Colombia's Pacific coast, where I went to observe how the public reading policy, implemented at the national level, was reaching the area. My interest was to learn what was happening far from the geographical and administrative center of the country. I found that the library itself was located far from the town center and far from social life. I was told that the decision to put it there was based on the principle that reading "requires silence." The librarian, for his part, realized that the location did not encourage visits or recognition of the library as a meeting place. He then decided to create outreach reading programs, which he implemented in the fishing port, hairdressers' shops, community centers, and the municipal school, a strategy that allowed him to cultivate book clubs and projects for the creation of oral narratives and collective memory. Witnessing this experience firsthand made me realize that public management is not just about technical or legal documents, but that its impact depends on how well it adapts to people's needs and contexts.

All these factors make the promotion of literature a matter of common interest. In short, my relationship with public resources has been about ensuring that they are truly accessible and tangible for everyone. Today, as the Literature Manager at the Instituto Distrital de las Artes, an entity that promotes access to the enjoyment and practice of the arts in Bogotá, I think that public policy is renewed through ongoing dialogue with the various actors who implement it. "What do you need?" "What would you do differently?" "How could we do it better?" These are the kinds of questions I often raise in our dialogue spaces, because I believe that no project can truly be different without the contribution of other visions and the inclusion of different ways of doing. In this spirit, we are currently developing joint projects at the Instituto in collaboration with the publishing sector, booksellers, creators, and other participants in the city's book and reading value chain.

DANIEL HERNÁNDEZ: What do you think about the state's role in the selection and dissemination of literary works and its influence on a society's tastes and reading practices?

MARCY SCHWARTZ: The state intervening in the selection and dissemination of literary materials is a double-edged sword, with an array of objectives that range from aesthetic to didactic, social, and ideological. I am not in favor of the state (or the municipality, in the context of much of my research on urban reading programs in Latin America) functioning as tastemakers, even though I recognize that this is often what happens indirectly as programs emerge and develop. Whose voices are limited, silenced, or censored? What kinds of works are prioritized, and which are avoided or sidelined? How can public programs question and expand the canon? I hope to see that power, and those funds, put to the best use for impacting the wider community, for opening doors to new readers and welcoming unlikely participants, for fostering dialogue and imagination rather than shutting out new voices and audiences. We

cannot overestimate the power and scope of state, municipal, and regional institutions and policies, and must work to shape their initiatives to benefit the broadest audiences and to break through historic barriers. Working together or in parallel with grassroots initiatives is another strategy for reaching wider audiences.

One example of misplaced intervention, in my experience, is the development of and reliance on prescriptive lists of "recommended" books by organizations such as Fundalectura, the Colombian branch of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), that privilege certain writers, genres, periods of literature over others via criteria that are often classist and exclusionary. These lists help guide—or misguide—pedagogical planning in schools and libraries. I participated in workshops, led training sessions for reading promoters, and met with leaders of the organization on several occasions. While I admired the outreach and local interventions on the neighborhood level sponsored by the organization, I found the group's approach limiting and judgmental due to its top-down orientation. There are many wonderful programs and initiatives that the organization sponsors but its emphasis on controlling or judging what young people read is problematic.

On the other hand, the nonprofit organization People and Stories/Gente y Cuentos (peopleandstories.org), based in the U.S. but with programs in Colombia, Ecuador, and Puerto Rico, leads reading programs for adults in public venues such as prisons, libraries, drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers, soup kitchens and adult education centers. It has developed a list of hundreds of short stories through a very different approach. These selected stories meet criteria related to successful and effective use in the reading groups, such as their efficacy in prompting vibrant discussion through their poetic language, open-ended or ambiguous conclusions that call for nuance, and stories that portray multicultural social and interpersonal contexts. This organization does not serve the same purpose as Fundalectura (for example, it does not provide materials or consultation directly for educational institutions, even though some of the reading groups are held in school settings), nor does it intervene directly at the state level. Both Fundalectura and People and Stories/Gente y Cuentos develop a literary corpus, but the motivation, goals and objectives of the latter organization are more humanistic and flexible.

In the U.S., I believe that public libraries, institutions that energetically support freedom from censorship (at the family, school, state, federal levels) and protest book banning, help keep patrons' reading imagination alive. They offer a noble model of leadership in promoting quality and thoughtful materials and making a variety of reading materials available to the public. The American Library Association, a huge umbrella organization for public libraries in the U.S., designates a week every year in October called Banned Books Week, to call attention to and protest censorship, with exhibits of banned books displayed in prominent places in libraries. Particularly for young readers, public libraries make books and other materials free and accessible, and they strongly defend freedom of information. Libraries' commitment to offering safe spaces outside the home and school settings to explore interests opens the world to many people of all ages and backgrounds: youth, young adults, adults, and senior citizens.

YOSA VIDAL: It is important to think of writing practices and habits in conjunction with practices of reading, as one does not exist without the other. There are no formulas, but I believe that in Latin America, it is essential for the state to provide resources through public grants, organized by peer reviewers who change each year, so that writing can remain independent of market interests. Literature cannot always be turned into a commodity, and many books remain outside the commercial circuit because they are written to be read, not sold. In this context, it is vital that the state ensure this kind of writing still reaches the readers.

Now, every country in Latin America presents a particular relationship between the state and literature. In some cases, state intervention is strong, as in Chile or Argentina, while in others, such as Bolivia, the relationship is almost nonexistent. In Bolivia, I've observed—through conversations with fellow writers—that the relationship with the state is borderline negative. Writers perceive the state not only as absent but as an active obstacle to literary creation, the publishing industry, and the promotion of writing. Literature, in this context, unfolds against the tide of the state.

However, this situation does not only provoke complaints. It also breathes life into public spaces through readings at book fairs and bars, workshops, graffiti, cartoons, songs, and blogs. I don't want to romanticize precarity (that's a deadly trap), but I've witnessed how writers and readers have lost their fear of a castrating, *machista* society—precisely because they are not subordinated to the power of the state. The Orureña poet Hilda Mundy, at the dawn of the twentieth century, was told that in order to speak about her country, she would need to become "earnest and reflexive"—a notion she refused. This gesture marks the beginning of a tradition of dispossession and abandonment, one that sees silences, not explanations; celebrations, not offices, as the spaces where reading and writing can truly flourish. Argentina, on the other hand, watches in horror as the state shrinks and disappears—the state being the very platform that once made the country so rich in terms of book production. Something similar is happening under the Trump administration. His self-styled "anarcho-capitalist" government is waging an economic "battle," which has led to reductions in state departments, slashing the budget for public education in half, and a long, frightening etcetera of other measures. This is merely the prelude to another "battle"—the moral one—which seeks to destroy everything that threatens so-called "Western" values. For current Argentine president Javier Milei, public education is nothing more than a tool for Marxist indoctrination, and policies that promote books and reading are forms of "brainwashing." He has been particularly zealous in attacking his declared enemies. While writers won't stop writing, and readers won't stop reading, Milei's government has intensified a malaise that has been brewing for decades. We still don't know how the absence of the state—which, paradoxically, smothers its citizens—will influence new aesthetics and reading habits.

ALEJANDRA SORIANO: Over time, although it remains relevant, the role of the state in this area has evolved. At present, efforts are being made to make decisions in a more horizontal way, incorporating multiple points of view and diverse experiences. Examples of this are the collection of literature written by women promoted by the

Ministerio de las Culturas, las Artes y los Saberes (Ministry of Culture), and the bilingual editions in indigenous languages of the Libro al Viento books. I believe that the future will involve greater plurality, with the state acting as a facilitator of the collective will and popular desire. For example, this year, during the Festivales al Parque, the most important public-access music festivals in the country, we met readers who, when they encountered the Libro al Viento titles, asked us about titles in poetry, science fiction, personal growth, and *literatura fantástica* (here, literature from the horror and fantasy traditions). So, together with the editor of the collection, we brought these concerns to the editorial committee working group, where we discussed and selected titles in these genres that could potentially become part of the collection. At the same time, it is important to maintain the role of curators, editors, and facilitators, who can interpret popular taste and, equally, rely on expert judgement to balance both perspectives. I remember someone saying to me: "I'd like to read something that speaks to being"—a concern that other readers have shared with me in different ways. In conversation with the editorial committee, it was suggested that this question could bring to the collection titles in philosophy that allow for complex reflection, and that could resonate with someone wishing to make their reading practice a form of personal growth. In this way, a simple question from a citizen gives clues to an editor or curator as to what path to take to connect with readers, and invites us to think about how to facilitate access to content that not only needs to be published but also requires mediation strategies in order to be truly accessible.

DANIEL HERNÁNDEZ: How do you perceive the tension between the forms of reading that emerge from popular taste and the use of state funds to promote a given literary tradition? What are the possibilities of dialogue and synergy between public policies and the preferences of the different audiences who are targeted by these policies?

MARCY SCHWARTZ: The tensions between public policies and the public's preferences are always a fascinating arena. I believe the most effective and impactful public programming expands readership by intervening in less conventional spaces and making reading material attractive as well as accessible. Who determines the policies that fund, staff, and disseminate these programs? And what are the strategies that orient them? Based on my research, a focus on enjoyment, pleasure, the imagination, humor, connection, and personal and collective well-being yield the most far-reaching results. Prescription accomplishes much less than invitation. I appreciate the plural reference to audiences and want to call attention to the wide variety of reading communities that public programming identifies and attempts to reach. Readership splinters into so many groups, but I prefer to see this as richness and diversity rather than a limitation. We must consider the factors of generational divides, social class and educational backgrounds, neighborhood identities, border areas and regional identities, race and ethnicity, migration status, gender, and ableness. The attempt to address too many different reading communities is often a pitfall, and a more pragmatic approach that targets specific communities and their needs rather than trying to cover everything paradoxically leads to more wide-ranging and lasting results.

I am generally wary of state-led reading campaigns that have ideological agendas, even though I recognize that these initiatives often do intend to expand the accessibility of books and reading materials. Venezuela has had a number of initiatives that have made literature more accessible, publishing and distributing inexpensive books, particularly in rural areas. Rural reading programs in Peru, especially those through the Network of Peruvian Rural Libraries, have long been models that avoid political rhetoric and maintain their focus on access, creativity, local folklore, multilingual works as well as other national, regional and world literature. Most of my research and field work has focused on municipal reading initiatives. I have highlighted the outstanding work with neighborhood libraries, local histories, and local memory studies that preserve or restore monuments or commemorate victims of state and political violence. Some relevant examples of programming and initiatives that tap into local memory politics have come from post-dictatorship Argentina. Neighborhoods in Buenos Aires have repurposed former detention and torture centers, painted murals to memorialize victims, and established lending libraries with reading workshops for the public in the centers. In Córdoba, Argentina, a former police station and detention and torture center has been repurposed as a memory center called the Archivo Provincial de la Memoria (Provincial Memory Archive) with a library of previously censored children's books. In Bogotá, the Libro al Viento books prioritize local literary production and memory, in volumes of bilingual indigenous poetry and others that focus on the challenging peace process after decades of political violence. The program publishes at least one dedicated title every year in its Capital Collection that relates specifically to Bogotá. These targeted local reading initiatives are more convincing, community-based, and less top-down than the ones at the national level.

YOSA VIDAL: This is a rich and complex question with several dimensions. On the one hand, we must ask ourselves: what literary traditions does the state promote?

Let's think concretely. I had to read *Palomita blanca* in school. It's a book by Enrique Lafourcade, mandatory in today's curriculum, and it has sold more copies than any other book in Chile. The same goes for *Donde estás, Constanza* by José Luis Rosasco. These two books have been unavoidable for every Chilean student for the past forty years, yet they are absolutely dispensable. On the other hand, we did not read *Décimas* by Violeta Parra, *La amortajada* by María Luisa Bombal, or the short stories of Marta Brunet. Let's not even mention Mapuche poetry. From Gabriela Mistral, we were forced to memorize "Piececitos de niño azulosos de frío"—a saccharine selection from the work of a towering poet, focused solely on maternity. Any Latin American comic books? *El Eternauta*? Something by Rius? Nothing. The tradition the state promotes to this day, either lazily or willfully, is mostly composed of foundational novels—"foundations" welded by force. It is a macho bildungsroman written by white middle- and upper-middle-class men, which enforces a very clear vision of family, class, and gender roles. This is the literature the state considers pedagogically essential, as it teaches what's right and what's wrong, what's normal, monstrous, or deviant. To this tradition, we must add the Spanish classics, which are taught out of context and turned into a senseless snooze-fest for any child or adolescent.

Now, what reading practices emerge from popular taste? The autobiography of the Chilean geisha, *Me llamo Anita Alvarado*? *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle? These books may well be bestsellers, but they have reached that position through marketing strategies. They don't necessarily reflect a system of preferences.

For there to be synergy between the reading public and the state, public policy must incorporate the complexity and diversity of the reading population, in terms of class, gender, and race. "Popular" taste is as diverse and complex as Chile's multicultural and plurilingual society. If there is to be a dialogue between the state and the public, we must place on the same shelf the book on the Chilean geisha (which, by the way, is quite good) alongside *Piñen* by Daniela Catrileo. We must also consciously reform school reading lists. It's time to remove José Luis Rosasco once and for all and let María Luisa Bombal in.

ALEJANDRA SORIANO: This tension reflects, in essence, the distance between "high" and popular culture, with the former understood as a paradigm in which a select few determine what others should read, based on the assumption that popular taste lacks the necessary capacity to choose. However, this tension is increasingly less tenable. Today, there are more mechanisms for understanding what the citizenry wants to read, and what individual citizens want to read. So I think it is necessary to build bridges and communicating vessels between public policies—their strategies and projects—and the people, who are not only their ultimate beneficiaries but also the driving force through which these policies are embodied and acquire meaning. In this regard, we find that surveys, media trend analyses, and reports from bookstores and publishers offer clues to guide decision making, taking into account the cultural and consumption practices of the citizenry; on the other hand, conversations in settings of civic participation in public spaces, such as festivals, fairs, and outdoor events allow us to listen and align our work with what people want to read, with their concerns and interests. It is a way of softening the institutionalism that sometimes seems inaccessible in people's daily lives.

DANIEL HERNÁNDEZ: How do you think public initiatives to promote reading can challenge the perception of books and reading as difficult to access in Latin America?

MARCY SCHWARTZ: Public initiatives definitely help break down the barriers to books and reading, particularly by exploiting unconventional spaces beyond schools, libraries, universities, and bookstores. Along with lowering or eliminating costs, public initiatives are able to truly reach out and occupy spaces that people frequent for other daily tasks, making books and reading visible in municipal offices, parks, on public transportation, and in neighborhood plazas. Taking books to the streets, meeting people where they already are, and creating reading experiences in unexpected times and places expands audiences. These strategies also shift attitudes away from elite, private, limited circulation toward expansive, broad, inclusive audiences. Many programs capture new readers who might have had negative experiences with language arts in school, or feel intimidated by imposing institutional settings.

Accessibility requires meeting readers where they are, bringing reading materials to them, offering literary selections that draw them in formats that are inviting.

In the short story reading and discussion sessions sponsored by People and Stories/Gente y Cuentos, the organization mentioned earlier, the participants embrace collective reading and discussion in part because it does not feel like school. Sitting in a circle, reading aloud, and sharing their own life experiences in relation to the stories creates a group dynamic, builds trust, fosters self-confidence, and minimizes social hierarchies, as all participants are on an equal footing.

A number of small-scale, local but very impactful initiatives in Latin America rely on neighborhood solidarity to expand reading experiences. The program Salas de Lectura (Reading Rooms) in Mexico supports people sharing collections of books and hosts activities around reading from the facilitators' homes, gardens, garages, even using the trunks of their cars. The neighborhood community center La Grieta in La Plata, Argentina held very successful *muestras ambulantes* (mobile exhibits) that showcased books and reading in local businesses, parks, plazas, and restaurants. These are replicable models that cost very little and once again break down the institutional and social class exclusivity often associated with literary reading.

YOSA VIDAL: First, we must acknowledge that books are indeed difficult to purchase in Latin America. Their high cost is due to low wages, paper shortages, and the bankruptcy of many local publishers. Taxes also contribute significantly. Unlike in Argentina, where books are tax-exempt, Chile imposes a 19% tax—the second highest in the world—the same rate as for a pack of cigarettes. In Chile, books are treated as luxury commodities. More precisely, we might say that in Latin America, books are hard to buy but not necessarily hard to access. We still lack sufficient public libraries in working-class neighborhoods and small communities—places where citizens feel safe and are encouraged to discover the pleasures of reading. But there are also numerous library systems and reading initiatives that are widely used. Some emblematic examples include the Bibliometro in Santiago and Valparaíso: a network of small library branches installed in metro and train stations that greatly facilitates book circulation. Another notable case is the Libro al Viento program in Colombia, which has correctly understood that the solution is not to have people buy more books, but to transform the channels through which literature circulates. They print thousands of copies every year and give them away to communities, ensuring that the books don't simply pile up on the shelves but are read, shared, and passed along—that they run, indeed, fly from reader to reader. These initiatives aim to reach large audiences, but there are also smaller, more isolated communities of readers. The most beautiful example I know is the library network on Isla Grande de Chiloé, which I mentioned earlier. These libraries act as literary arteries, and we must also highlight the *Bibliolancha*—a project started over thirty years ago by Teolinda Higueras, a librarian from Quinchao. She uses *lanchas* [motorboats] to bring books from her library to the small islands of the archipelago and to the remotest regions, overcoming isolation with literature. We Latin Americans may struggle to buy books, but we have no trouble reading.

ALEJANDRA SORIANO: Projects that facilitate free and public access to reading materials are essential for the enjoyment of reading, writing and orality in various formats. However, these programs should not be limited to the distribution of materials; they must also promote access to training programs, reading mediation, oral expression skills, and the development of creativity. These elements are crucial to create a link between people and the practices that enable access to written culture. Many times, access does not depend solely on material goods, but rather on the cultural and social capital that makes for a more enriching experience, one that allows enjoyment, interpretation and effective access to reading. In the Colombian case, we find several barriers that hinder access to books and reading, for example, the centralization of access to reading materials due to the territorial concentration of bookstores, low reading rates in remote and rural areas, and the lack of free time to read outside educational settings, among others. However, the Colombian government has implemented one of the most ambitious public policies in the region in terms of the development of library infrastructure and services, through the Ley de bibliotecas públicas 1379 de 2010 (Public Libraries Law 1379) and the plans for reading, writing, and orality such as the PPLEO-Decreto 034 de 2023 (the reading public policy of Bogotá). These policies have expanded the presence of libraries across the country and brought library services to places that would not otherwise have access to quality reading materials.

DANIEL HERNÁNDEZ: What future challenges do you anticipate in relation to the emergence of digital media and virtuality as a mechanism to promote reading?

MARCY SCHWARTZ: My research over the past twenty years confirms a preference in Latin America for physical books over electronic formats for reading, particularly given that the programs I have studied make printed books available free or at very low cost. Of course this is a continually evolving scenario, with ever increasing digital access and expanded formats for reading across the region. More recent *planes de lectura* (reading plans) in Latin America reveal an emphasis on bibliodiversity and encourage a broader ecosystem of books and access to reading. Reading promotion action plans and broad-based surveys of readers in recent years in an array of Latin American cities and countries have been paying more attention to digital access and the diversity of platforms of which readers avail themselves. Programs' overviews and goals for their local or national reading ecosystems emphasize the promotion of digital reading, but generally as a complement to print materials.

The global COVID-19 pandemic transformed how we interacted in public space. Plazas, cultural centers, parks, and other commonly accessed spaces and institutions became dangerous sites of contagion. Authorities in some cities declared walking in one's own neighborhood off-limits for months at a time unless one had a dog to walk or a medical necessity. Other than essential medical and food services, most public institutions such as schools, universities, libraries, and municipal offices shut down physically and pivoted to remote services.

The distribution and circulation of printed books, and collective programming that brings readers together around them, was interrupted for an extended period. Due to stay-at-home mandates, reading practices during the pandemic were limited to individual, private, at-home experiences, but technology and the Internet filled the cultural breach to some extent, with literary readings and book presentations accessible on online platforms. Reading programs that relied on distributing print books, such as Libro al Viento in Bogotá, Colombia, invested in putting more and more content online. The number of downloads soared. The public health crisis prompted immediate action across Latin America, and globally, to expand Internet access, prompting governments to designate it as an essential service. Online reading and literary experiences do not replicate the collective experiences of reading in public space, and as programming out in public and in person gradually returned, organizers jubilated. It remains to be seen how increased digital access is impacting the consumption of print media. But the accessibility, interpersonal connection, media awareness, and expanded use of the Internet during and since the pandemic has contributed to the democratization of media.

YOSA VIDAL: Ah! These are ongoing challenges—not future ones—since we already have an enormous community engaged in new forms of reading and new literary media. Truth be told, I see these challenges as opportunities: opportunities to democratize information, expand access to resources, and disseminate works. I'm not fond of the meme that contrasts rows of newspaper readers with crowds of people staring at their phones. It reflects a rather myopic understanding of media, in my opinion—many people are, after all, reading the news on their phones. There's been an incredible renaissance of reading clubs, a practice that emerged during the pandemic and is clearly here to stay. (These clubs, by the way, are mostly composed of women. Why?) Some meet in person, others virtually, but they are advertised and organized through social media—and I see nothing but exquisite possibilities in this. The greatest challenge, I believe, is making sure kids don't get run over while crossing the street, hunched over their phones. That's the real danger.

ALEJANDRA SORIANO: This question has been under discussion for years; we have moved from skepticism to resignation, passing through phases of paranoia and terror in response to the rise of digital media, which at first seemed to threaten the analog supports for reading. However, rather than challenges, I see opportunities. Digital media can be used to close gaps between the countryside and the city, between borders, languages, and worldviews. For me, the attitude toward these developments should be one of openness, without losing our critical and reflective capacity, but allowing for the innovation and experimentation that these tools offer. I am thinking, for instance, of research that can be carried out on creative processes in dialogue with the developments emerging from large language models in artificial intelligence. What happens, in this scenario, with copyright? What are the ethical and commercial stances of the book value chain regarding these tools? How are creative writing programs positioning themselves in relation to these developments? Here, I find a

dynamic space for discussion and collaboration, not only in academic but also in legislative, creative, and productive terms, which can allow us to innovate and propose other possible horizons for creation.

MARCY SCHWARTZ: To wrap up this roundtable, a short story from the creative writing contest Santiago in 100 Words offers a fitting example of the power of reading in the public sphere. The program invites stories written by ordinary citizens and posts the winning stories on billboards in public transportation stations; an annual anthology of the one hundred best stories is distributed for free. Submitted to the program's 2015 annual contest, the tale "Reflection" presents a scene of reading on the subway as a gateway to an interpersonal encounter. Two flirtatious, imaginative passengers catch each other's gaze in the train car window and then retreat into their books:

> "Reflejo," por Maximiliano Bolados Arratia
>
> Te miro por el espejo que forma el vidrio al pasar por el túnel, distraída lees un libro, de vez en cuando subes tu mirada y miras mis ojos calcados en el vidrio. Me asusto, me escondo y me tapo con mi libro; tú te cansas y vuelves a lo mismo. Así, el metro es un campo de batalla, el libro una trinchera y tu mirada un disparo que a ratos anuncia la bajada.
>
> (*Santiago en 100 Palabras,* vol. 9, 88)

> "Reflection," by Maximiliano Bolados Arratia
>
> I look at you in the mirror created by the glass while passing through the tunnel, you're reading a book, distracted, once in a while you look up and meet my eyes traced in the glass. I get scared, I hide behind the book; you get tired and go back to yours. So, the subway is a battlefield, the book is a trench and your gaze is a shot that at times announces a stop.

Meeting a stranger is risky and prompts fear, yet this is what "public" means: sharing space with strangers. The activity of reading provides a refuge, a trench in the battlefield of urban movement through public space. Although they hide behind their books, reading offers these strangers a point of connection, a built-in conversation, a glimpse of solidarity, a safe form of flirting, and a common shared experience of everyday life. A