



Unheard voices in the dissonant diaspora: youth from aggressor states negotiating identity through picturebooks

Voci inascoltate nella diaspora dissonante: la rinegoziazione dell'identità dei giovani provenienti da Stati aggressori attraverso gli albi illustrati

Chang Hasheminezhad-Li  | Università di Padova | chang.li@phd.unipd.it

Abstract (EN)

Situated within lifelong learning, this study investigates how diasporic youth from aggressor states (Russia, Belarus, China) navigate their “stigmatised citizenship.” By employing the Picturebook Elicitation Interview (PEI), this research positions intergenerational picturebooks as a mediating “third object,” facilitating the articulation of a fragile moral agency. The findings reveal four intersecting mechanisms: (1) the hermeneutic gap provides emotional scaffolding; (2) visual metaphors enable the cognitive deconstruction of propaganda; (3) this protective distance paradoxically exposes ethical tensions regarding complicity; and (4) effective engagement strictly relies on concrete ontological anchors, rejecting pure abstraction. Ultimately, this study argues that for stigmatised subjects, the aesthetic distance of the picturebook is not a retreat from reality, but a fundamental prerequisite for moral reconstruction and the assertion of civic agency.

Keywords: intergenerational dialogue, picturebooks, stigmatised citizenship, agency

Abstract (IT)

Collocato nell'ambito del lifelong learning, il presente studio indaga il modo in cui i giovani della diaspora provenienti da Stati aggressori — Russia, Bielorussia, Cina — negoziano la propria “cittadinanza stigmatizzata”. Attraverso l'impiego della Picturebook Elicitation Interview (PEI), la ricerca considera gli albi illustrati intergenerazionali come un “terzo oggetto” mediatore, capace di facilitare l'articolazione di una fragile agency morale. I risultati mettono in luce quattro meccanismi tra loro intersecati: (1) lo scarto ermeneutico offre un'impalcatura emotiva; (2) le metafore visive consentono la decostruzione cognitiva della propaganda; (3) tale distanza protettiva espone paradossalmente tensioni etiche connesse alla complicità; e (4) un coinvolgimento efficace si fonda necessariamente su ancoraggi ontologici concreti, rifiutando la pura astrazione. In ultima analisi, lo studio sostiene che, per i soggetti stigmatizzati, la distanza estetica dell'albo illustrato non costituisce una fuga dalla realtà, ma una condizione fondamentale per la ricostruzione morale e per l'affermazione dell'agency civica.

Parole chiave: dialogo intergenerazionale, albi illustrati, cittadinanza stigmatizzata, agency

1. Introduction: The dissonant diaspora

“It is hard to explain,” Masha, a twenty-year-old student from Belarus, stuttered, gripping her smartphone throughout our interview. She gestured towards the deactivated VPN¹ icon on her screen, a digital lifeline she kept deliberately dormant while living in Germany. “It’s like... even though my body is here in Europe, my nervous system, my brain, stays in Minsk.”

This dislocation encapsulates the precarious condition of young people from aggressor states who now reside within Western democracies. Unlike the paradigmatic figure of the political exile, who is imagined as having left home behind, these young adults carry the authoritarian shadow within their life, affecting both their digital protective infrastructures and their nervous systems.

For them, this internal fracture is further complicated by what Sadeghi (2016) terms “stigmatised citizenship.” Many find themselves caught in a profound double bind. In the host society, they are perceived as potential embodiments of a hostile regime, while they simultaneously fear ongoing digital surveillance by authorities at home. This layered exclusion not only erodes their sense of belonging, but also disrupts the trajectories of lifelong social learning. Recent empirical studies suggest that, for young community, this stigma has high invisible costs. Stigma frequently becomes a barrier to social integration, and these symbolic injuries can be as detrimental to their well-being as material precarity (Sergeeva & Kamalov, 2025).

A critical gap persists regarding the educational and narrative resources available to this group. While studies on migrant youth often focus on bicultural adaptation, little attention has been given to youths from aggressor states and how they utilise literary practices to process complex culpability. Traditional spaces of civic learning, such as university lecture halls or public debates, often impose binary rhetorics that silence nuance. Consequently, these individuals face a unique educational predicament where generic migration frameworks fail to capture their specific need for reconstructing political identity. This predicament demands a shift from mere socialisation to what Biesta (2021) defines as subjectification, namely the educational imperative for individuals to exist as responsible subjects of action rather than passive objects of a regime. They usually have to engage in a high stakes form of self-directed learning to express their political opinions, yet they lack the safe dialogic environments to do so.

Focusing on youths from aggressor states, this research proposes that children’s literature functions as a vital lifelong and lifewide learning resource. By constructing the necessary pedagogical safety, this medium provides them with an environment for expression and safe dialogue. Moving beyond the assumption that picturebooks are solely for children (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2018), this study positions the picturebook as a third object capable of mediating adult reflection. In line with the perspective of lifelong learning, we treat the reading encounter not merely as a literary activity but as a non-formal learning environment (Nygren et al., 2019) where adults can practise civic voice through the visual and metaphorical potential of picturebooks without immediately incurring the cost of autobiographical exposure. This article investigates how picturebooks assist these young adults in emerging from discursive paralysis to articulate a fragile yet authentic moral subjectivity, transforming the act of reading into a process that strengthens their civic voice and political expression under constraints.

2. Theoretical framework: The third object

Contemporary scholarship reconceptualises the picturebook not merely as a tool for literacy but as a complex multimodal ensemble (Kelly & Kachorsky, 2022) capable of engaging readers across the

¹ A service that encrypts internet traffic and can be used to access blocked online resources.

lifespan. This broader scope is essential when examining intergenerational picturebooks (Farrar, 2020). These texts, often defined as “challenging” (Haaland et al., 2023), transcend the implied child reader to address sophisticated geopolitical themes suitable for emerging adults. Unlike conventional narratives, these works employ asymmetrical relations between word and image, creating a *hermeneutic gap* that requires the reader to actively negotiate meaning. For the young adults in this study, this interpretative void functions as a strategic shelter. As Rottenberg (2022) argues, the text prompts the reader to engage their imagination in dialogue with itself to find meaning, transforming the reading act into a process of identity construction.

Recent research confirms the medium’s capacity to engage with difficult knowledge, ranging from historical trauma to speculative ecological crises (Arizpe et al., 2025; Hasheminezhad-Li, 2025). Scholars contend that the medium’s multimodal constitution affords a crucial aesthetic distance (Hope, 2018), offering a safe space for the reader. Within this mediated space, subjects approach stigmatised memories through oblique confrontation. This process functions as a catalyst for transformative learning (Formenti & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023), where the hermeneutic gap forces adult readers to critically reflect on their assumptive opinions. This perspective aligns with Véliz and García-González (2022), who posit that narratives thriving on anxiety function as a “space for release and experimentation” (p. 5). By serving as a safe forum to examine complex themes, these texts allow for the testing of the limits of speakability.

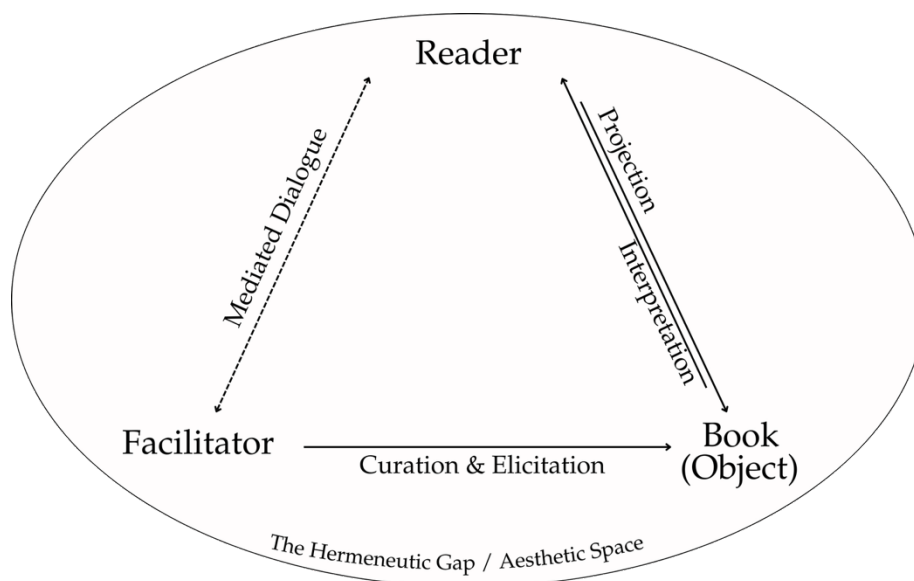


Figure 1. The triadic relationship of the picturebook as a dialogic environment

This study conceptualises the picturebook as a third object within the research encounter. The text here serves as an intermediary that establishes a triangular relationship between the facilitator, the reader, and the object itself. This triadic interaction, central to children’s literature and the pedagogy of reading (Campagnaro, 2021), alters the dynamic of the exchange by directing the gaze away from the participant and onto the image, thereby reducing the intensity of direct interpersonal confrontation. For youth navigating authoritarian surveillance, this triangulation is a vital mechanism of mediated disclosure. As demonstrated in some empirical studies, the visual nature of these narratives creates a context of ambiguity (Arizpe et al., 2014), allowing participants to project their own stories onto the narrative progression and transform internal anxiety into shared dialogue. Therefore, this triadic relationship can be summarised as a dialogic environment, as illustrated in Figure 1. This reading environment shapes the narrative selection for this study.

The picturebooks were chosen not for their safety, but for their “abject” potential to disturb (Véliz & García-González, 2022, p. 10). The logic is dialectical: because of the safety of the *medium* as third object, the riskiness of the content and its emotional weight can be permitted to show. By engaging with stories that have challenging topics, such as trauma, loss, and grief, participants are not asked to perform their pressure directly but are invited to interpret it as a form of art. It is within this projection, safe inside the hermeneutic gap, that a fragile but authentic moral subjectivity can be articulated.

3. Methodology: Picturebook Elicitation Interview

By adopting a qualitative multimodal inquiry framework, this study investigates how young adults from authoritarian backgrounds negotiate political identity through literary mediation. Purposeful sampling recruited a cohort of six participants holding citizenship from Russia, Belarus, or China who are currently residing in Europe. All participants are students or early-career professionals aged between nineteen and twenty-three. Their defining characteristic is a status of emerging adulthood marked by liminality, described by the participants themselves as a “dissonant diaspora.” This term reflects their precarious position as they are neither political refugees completely severed from their homeland nor ordinary second-generation immigrants fully integrated into the West. As Hao (China) notes, he perceives his existence as split between being a data point in a Western classroom and a witness to political movements at home. The cognitive split highlights the critical need for narrative resources to bridge these fragmented identities.

Given the politically sensitive nature of the inquiry and the vulnerability of the target demographic, this study adopts a micro-pedagogical approach centred on an idiographic focus. This design allows for a phenomenological thick description of a hidden curriculum of survival that would otherwise remain invisible in broader quantitative surveys. The Russian cohort (Katya, Alina) navigates the direct stigma of aggressor citizenship and complex external scrutiny. The Belarusian cohort (Julia, Masha) addresses a marginalised demographic bearing the guilt of the co-aggressor state while facing the political aphasia following the suppressed 2020 protests. Finally, the Chinese cohort (Hao, Lin) manages the dual dilemma of the Western ideological gaze and digital surveillance, with experiences shaped by events such as the White Paper Protests². These participants represent information-rich cases (Patton, 2002) selected precisely because their lived experience sits at the extreme intersection of complicity and resistance.

Fieldwork was conducted between March 2025 and January 2026 during the P.A.G.E.S. (Picture books As Gateways to European Society) project. Funded by the Arqus European University Alliance³, this transnational network effectively overcame the geographic dispersion of the cohort. To mitigate transnational repression, all identities have been anonymised.

The semi-structured Picturebook Elicitation Interview (PEI) serves as the core methodological instrument, a technique that utilises the picturebook to safely elicit readers’ political expressions and lived experiences. To facilitate this, the criteria used to select the primary texts focus on their interpretative openness, narrative uncertainty, and distinct potential to act as projection screens for identity construction. Consequently, the final selection of the corpus emphasises three picturebooks with three distinct approaches to representing conflict. *The Enemy* (Cali & Bloch, 2013) situates two solitary soldiers in opposing trenches where they rely on a military manual that demonises the invisible adversary. This specular narrative structure critiques state

² This refers to the mass demonstrations across China in 2022 against the Zero-COVID policy.

³ A strategic partnership comprising nine universities across Europe, including the University of Padova.

propaganda through minimalist aesthetics. In a shift towards allegory, *How War Changed Rondo* (Romanyshyn & Lesiv, 2021) depicts a fragile town invaded by War personified as destructive darkness. It moves beyond simple conflict to provide direct visual references to collective trauma. Finally, *War* (Letria & Letria, 2021) abandons character-driven plots to depict war as a silent disease and conceptualises conflict abstractly.

Distinct from traditional interrogative formats, this methodological approach through PEI positions these picturebooks as a third object between the researcher and the participant. This configuration strategically redirects the conversational focus from a direct scrutiny of personal experience towards a communal exploration of literary metaphors through reading and discussion around this reading. By doing so, it constructs a safe hermeneutic space which allows for the articulation of complex moral reasoning that traditional interviews might suppress. The physical setting of each encounter was determined entirely by the participants. This allowed them to select a space where they felt secure and unobserved. Furthermore, the study adheres to rigorous ethical standards by explicitly emphasising the right to withdraw not merely as a procedural formality but as a means to restore agency to subjects navigating high-pressure political discourse. The investigation path has been organised in six sessions. Each session lasted approximately 60 to 70 minutes and followed a carefully designed three-phase protocol (Fig. 2). The session began with an attunement phase consisting of introductions and warm-up dialogue to establish rapport. This was followed by the mediated reading phase lasting approximately 20 to 25 minutes where participants engaged with the selected texts. Crucially, the participants exercised agency by determining the reading order themselves. Finally, the session transitioned into the dialogic inquiry phase for about 20 minutes. Here, the discussion moved from the immediate visual elements of the texts to a deeper reflection on the plot and its resonance with their personal experiences. This structure allowed the interview to naturally evolve from an aesthetic appreciation of the *third object* into a profound personal disclosure.

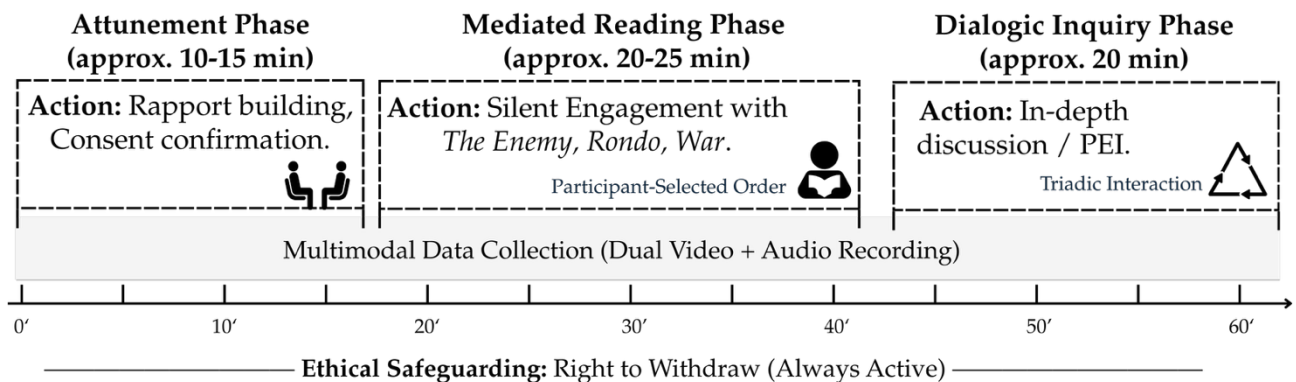


Figure 2. The Three-Phase Structure of the Semi-Structured Interview

To capture the full nuance of these interactions, both audio and video recordings were used.

Transcripts and video annotations underwent inductive thematic analysis. Initial open coding prioritised In Vivo codes (Saldaña, 2021), capturing behaviours, attitudes, gestures, tone of voice, ways of holding the book, pointing at pictures, flipping back and forth between certain double-page spreads. This technique uses the readers' exact vernacular to capture the specific mechanisms of speakability rather than imposing external thematic categories too early in the analytical process. These codes were subsequently clustered into higher-order themes aligned with the study's theoretical lens of the *third object* and aesthetic distance. Finally, theoretical integration involved testing these themes against within-case and cross-case contrasts to specify the boundary conditions for adult mediation.

4. Results: Four dimensions of mediated expression

The analysis of the Picturebook Elicitation Interviews (PEI) validates the theoretical premise that the picturebook functions not merely as an elicitation tool, but as an active third object that reconfigures the boundaries of expression. The data suggests that for these young adults, the visual narrative creates a necessary buffer against the paralysis of their political identity. By intertwining the raw empirical findings with theoretical reflection, this section categorises the results into four distinct dimensions: (1) the function of the text as emotional scaffolding; (2) the construction of meaning through visual metaphors and civic literacies; (3) the emergence of ethical tensions; and (4) the boundary conditions of aesthetic mediation.

4.1 Emotional scaffolding: The picturebook as a safe shield

Prior to engaging with the visual texts, the discourse revealed a profound ontological crisis. The interview setting itself initially elicited a distinct defensive posture, with the somatic landscape characterised by crossed arms, averted gazes, and hesitant speech. This tension stems from what Sadeghi (2016) terms “stigmatised citizenship”, where the participants’ national identity has mutated from a neutral geographical marker into a morally charged symbol. Confronted with the binary of good victims versus bad aggressors, participants described a paralysing cognitive dissonance where they viewed themselves as simultaneously the villain and the potential ally. This dissonance was vividly illustrated by Alina (Russia). She described a paralysing moment at a university rally shortly after the Ukraine War. At a rally, she realised her presence was framed conditionally: “I stood there, thinking: ‘Okay, so in his words, I am now both the villain and the ally.’” For her, this public moment crystallised the internal fracture that necessitates the emotional scaffolding provided by the picturebooks. Katya (Russia) illustrated how this geopolitical stigma invades the boundary between intimate affect and public performance. Her demeanour fractured as she compared her homeland to a “toxic ex”, lamenting her inability to exist simply as a student without the burden of representation:

In Europe, I have turned into someone who is seen as having “a story.” Everyone wants to hear my spicy ideas on Putin, or Prigozhin ... Sometimes I just think: “I study film. Can’t we just talk about movies?”

If the identity crisis is managed through performance, the anxiety regarding digital survival is more visceral. The introduction of *The Enemy* acted as a catalyst; when participants reached the scene of the soldier in the trench, the “hole” on the page was instantaneously decoded as a metaphor for their primary survival literacy: the VPN. This tool acquires a status exceeding its technical function, thus becoming the digital trench where the self is hidden. Hao (China) reinforced this by describing mobile applications as a “Panopticon in the pocket.” Masha (Belarus) validated this connection. As detailed before, she conceptualised this digital tool as a “trench” for her nervous system, anchoring the abstract fear of surveillance in a tangible technological object. This demonstrates how digital literacy functions as a prerequisite for psychological safety. However, the picturebook reconfigures this communicative space. By establishing a triangular relationship between the reader, the researcher, and the visual narrative, the medium enabled a shift from high-risk autobiographical confession to low-risk literary interpretation. Masha (Belarus) provided the clearest evidence of this triangulation. Her engagement with *How War Changed Rondo* was recursive; she mentioned the visual symbol of the frightened flowers repeatedly, using this visual metaphor of the illustration as a persistent anchor to stabilise her trembling narrative:

Picturebooks really help ... because we can start with “this character did this” or “this city looks like that”, I think it is much easier than “tell me about you.” ... Personally, I think, saying “this flower is scared” is easier than saying “I am scared.”

This mechanism parallels Lysaker’s (2018) concept of reading as re-contextualisation. For Lin (China), who habitually avoids political topics, the unreality of the visual narrative became a prerequisite for speech. She described the picturebook as a “gentle door” that softened the topic, allowing her to enter the discourse like a tourist rather than a representative of a regime:

[The picturebook] softens the topic. If a stranger comes up to me and asks, “What do you think of censorship or Taiwan?” I would most likely just say, “Sorry, I don’t know much about it” and end the conversation. But when we are gathered around a book talking about a character, I am willing to say more. It feels like these words are not entirely about me, but about them in the story.

This research posits a functional equivalence between the hermeneutic gap of the picturebook and the encrypted tunnel of the VPN. Just as the proxy server masks the user’s digital footprint to bypass censorship, the fictionality of the narrative and the peculiar visual-literary mechanisms of picturebooks offers a cognitive tunnel that shields the participant’s high-stakes biographical self. This literary form of “anonymous login” constitutes the prerequisite condition for them to articulate political agency.

4.2 Cognitive deconstruction: Visual metaphors as civic literacy

Alongside functioning as an emotional shield, picturebooks provided specific visual and graphical metaphors that participants employed to deconstruct authoritarian narratives. The illustration of the manual held by the soldier in *The Enemy* served as a critical instrument for this cognitive dismantling. Hao (China) connected the fictional manual to the propaganda narratives he encountered during the White Paper Protests, utilising the book’s logic to strip the state’s ideological machinery of its sacred aura:

My experience at the time [the White Paper Protests] was exactly like *The Enemy*. ... I think the propaganda was just like my manual. ... Since someone can write this manual, someone else can write another one. Those manuals are not absolute truth. They are just a few sheets of paper.

This cognitive dismantling exemplifies a critical pedagogy of resistance (Giroux, 2022), where the reader reclaims agency by exposing the manufactured nature of authoritarian truth. By reducing the formidable ideological machinery to “a few sheets of paper”, Hao completed a cognitive act of disempowerment. This suggests that the technical empowerment of this generation is a capability birthed by everyday life needs. As observed in Alina’s (Russia) case, her mastery of VPNs was rooted in the entertainment consumption needs of global youth culture, particularly the desire to download pirated resources, rather than in explicit activism. This affirms Pearson’s (2024) argument that in environments shaped by digital authoritarianism, infrastructural competencies constitute a self-directed informal civic curriculum. Similarly, Katya (Russia) performed a cognitive act of rewriting, noting that the manual as a human product means historical scripts are reversible:

From *The Enemy*, there is this moment when the soldier realises the enemy’s manual is basically the same as his, just with different names. ... It means the script can be rewritten. Manuals are human products, not gravity. If humans wrote “Enemy” on the cover, humans could also cross it out and write “Neighbour.”

However, this internal rebellion does not always manifest as public speech. For Lin (China), agency is exercised through strategic disengagement. She described her refusal to participate in political debates not as ignorance, but as a “rational sorting” mechanism to preserve her mental well-being and safety.

This distinction requires a recalibration of how we interpret silence. It suggests that disengagement is not always a deficit of political consciousness, but a valid adaptive strategy. Just as digital evasion is a literacy of access, strategic silence is a literacy of self-preservation. Both demonstrate that for this group, civic agency is negotiated not through vocal heroism, but through the quiet, calculated management of survival. Such strategies resonate with the UNESCO (2021) call for a new social contract in education, which urges us to validate the informal, often invisible learning that occurs in the fissures of a damaged world.

4.3 Ethical tensions: The burden of complicity and guilt

While the picturebook functions as a shield, it simultaneously acts as a scalpel that cuts through internal defenses, revealing deep ethical tensions. The protective distance of the metaphor facilitates a visceral confrontation with collective guilt and the ambiguity of the “grey zone.” The readers are not victims of direct aggression, yet they suffer from the erosion of the moral self. The interaction is not frictionless; Hao described the conversation as an exhausting physical feat, akin to “running a marathon while sitting down.”

Alina (Russia) articulated this complex sense of complicity with painful clarity when engaging with the imagery of destruction in *How War Changed Rondo*. Her rational knowledge of her own innocence clashed with the emotional weight of her national heritage, leading to a realisation that her cultural identity had been weaponised against her will:

I left Russia when I was thirteen, I didn't vote for anyone, I didn't pay taxes there as an adult. But emotionally, when I see black smoke drawn in that book, I think “that's my language coming with the bombs.”

This finding engages directly with the framework proposed by Véliz and García-González (2022), who argue that literary mediation should function as an ethics of care situated beyond paternalistic humanitarian logics. This study extends their premise by operationalising the picturebook as a third object and as the essential infrastructure that sustains this non-paternalistic space. For this group, the “care” provided by the picturebook does not manifest as relief for a victim, but as a safe container in which the perpetrator-by-association can process moral injury. Focusing on the subjectivity of youth from aggressor states carries an inherent ethical tension. It is imperative to clarify that analysing the survival strategies of these young people does not equate their suffering with that of the direct victims of aggression. Instead, this study highlights a different, often overlooked dimension of authoritarian violence: the erosion of the moral self within the aggressor society.

This tension permeates the construction of social identity, creating a fractured existence. Katya (Russia) described how geopolitical stigma invades the boundary between her intimate affect and public performance. She lamented that her identity as a queer woman is constantly overshadowed by the “enemy” label attached to her passport, forcing her into an exhausting performance of moral management:

I'm Russian *and* queer *and* feminist. None of these identities asked for a war. Now when people see “Russian queer”, some think “brave dissident”, others think “enemy citizen.” It's exhausting brand management.

Crucially, this ethical tension is historical as well as immediate. Masha (Belarus) viewed the destruction, such as the intrusion of a huge black machine into the image, as a reminder of the suppressed 2020 protests in her homeland. Her engagement with the text was marked by a profound sense of helplessness and a belief that the current violence in Ukraine is partly a consequence of her own nation's inability to democratise. This creates a specific form of survivor's guilt where the safety of exile is experienced as a failure to protect the neighbour:

When I see Ukrainian stories now, part of me thinks, "We failed early, and now they pay also for our failure." It's irrational maybe, but this guilt is there. ... I feel more ... spectator's guilt.

This acknowledgement of guilt within the safety of the interview confirms that the picturebook functions as an ethical probe. By allowing the "abject" potential of the narrative to surface (the smoke, the destruction, the failure), participants engage in a rigorous moral accounting that would be impossible in a direct political interrogation.

4.4 Which limits? The boundaries of narrative mediation

These dialogues, with picture books as the third object, reveal quite interesting potential, such as emotional changes mentioned earlier. However, some limitations emerged during the process, and the data revealed key constraints of the mediation mechanism. While *The Enemy* and *How War Changed Rondo* elicited rich responses due to their concrete imagery, such as guilt, unease, or emotional release, Letria's *War* generally lacked engagement. Readers evaluated the abstraction of the text as insufficient for their lived reality. For instance, unlike other texts providing clear metaphors, such as trenches, flowers, manuals or light bulbs, the viral, faceless depiction of conflict in *War* failed to provide a foothold for projection. Julia (Belarus) bluntly expressed this alienation, revealing the tipping point where the hermeneutic gap becomes too wide to bridge:

I actually don't like this one [*War*]. It is too, how to say, too conceptual? ... It makes me feel like that is "some kind of war." ... If I can't look through a specific character, I don't know what to say.

This rejection indicates that for this group, the safety of the hermeneutic gap relies heavily on concrete material anchors and effective, appealing concrete visual metaphors. Without specific visual elements to inhabit, the interpretative gap leads to disengagement rather than articulation. This points towards the new materialist framework proposed by García-González and Deszcz-Tryhubczak (2020), which conceptualises reading through "ontological entanglements." The materiality of the text must resonate with the physical reality of the reader to activate agency.

Furthermore, Alina's reaction to *How War Changed Rondo* demonstrated that there is a saturation point for trauma processing. When asked to identify specific pages that triggered her guilt, she waved vaguely at the "dark-coloured pages in the middle" and declined to look at them directly, indicating a limit to her capacity to process the trauma (Świetlicki, 2018). Katya (Russia) also expressed resistance to the very format of the picturebook, questioning the ethics of aestheticising violence. Her anger reveals the core paradox of this pedagogical method, acknowledging that the medium is both a necessary crutch and a source of frustration:

Sometimes I am angry that we need cute drawings to make people care about things that are already objectively horrific. But then I remember I also need those drawings. Without them, I shut down faster.

Effective mediation, therefore, requires embodied symbols, concrete illustration rather than philosophical abstractions. As noted by Zembylas (2012), generalised approaches risk overlooking

specific political affects. For stigmatised youth who are navigating high-pressure political environments, concreteness is not merely an aesthetic preference, but a necessary condition for existential grounding.

5. Conclusion: Reclaiming civic agency

The research validates the theoretical utility of the picturebook as a third object within the context of adult reading. Emphasizing the intertwining of visual narratives and the concreteness of visual metaphors during the interaction with the text, this study demonstrates that it is possible to shift from a high-risk (and often avoidable) autobiographical confession to low-risk literary interpretation that also says something autobiographical about themselves. This mediated disclosure proves essential for young adults from authoritarian backgrounds as it creates a literary communicative reading environment where the paralysis of identity can be temporarily suspended to allow for the rehearsal of a fragile civic voice through words and images.

The findings reveal a multifaceted dynamic that operates across four distinct dimensions. First, the picturebook functions as emotional scaffolding that provides a safe shield against the paralysis of identity. Second, beyond this protection, the medium offers specific material metaphors which enable cognitive deconstruction, allowing participants to dismantle state propaganda and articulate a hidden curriculum of survival. However, this process is not frictionless. The safety of the medium simultaneously acts as a scalpel that exposes deep ethical tensions, forcing a confrontation with the burden of complicity and guilt. Finally, the study identifies critical limits to this mediation. Readers explicitly rejected abstract narratives in favour of concrete images, demonstrating that for this group, the safety and freedom of expression rely heavily on clear visual elements rather than abstract philosophical concepts.

Ultimately, it is imperative to clarify that focusing on the subjectivity of youth from aggressor states does not equate their suffering with that of direct victims, nor does it seek to beautify political aggression. Instead, this inquiry highlights the overlooked erosion of the moral self within the aggressor society. By positioning children's literature as a vital resource for navigating ethical dilemmas and for identity reconstruction, this study challenges the binary rhetoric that silences nuance. It concludes that even in the shadow of authoritarianism, the act of reading can offer a space for civic debate and dialogue, enabling readers to reflect and maintain connections with democratic values through aesthetic distance and proximity.

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Corresponding author: Chang Hasheminezhad-Li | chang.li@phd.unipd.it

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