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Thinking and Doing with Childism in Children's Literature Studies

Abstract

In this article we share our reflections on how childism has enabled us to navigate theoretical assumptions shaping our field and develop new positions and research practices fostering child-adult interdependencies. Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak has relied on childism as a framework for the introduction of participatory research with young readers as a way for advancing child-adult collaboration. Macarena García-González has deployed childism to think about adultism and its analogies to sexism. Although we offer a critique of childism as an essentializing concept, we also show how for both of us it has served as a gateway towards other approaches, and especially post-anthropocentric understandings both of texts, readers, and the world and of our critical engagements. Finally, we argue that childism may remain a productive starting point for further openings in children's literature and culture studies and childhood studies if it becomes a plural and messy notion that questions the discourse of hope for a better future as defining children's lives.

keywords: children's literature and culture, childist criticism, new materialist feminism, participatory research, posthumanism

In 1984, Jacqueline Rose published *The Case of Peter Pan, Or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, which continues to be conspicuously present in theorizations of children's literature. Rose's main argument was that literature addressed to children is actually about and for adults as its purpose is to build "an image of the child inside the book" in order to "secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within grasp" (1984, p. 2). *The Case of Peter Pan* has been predominantly read as urging children's literature scholars to focus on dismantling ideological constructions of childhood, while it has also been criticized for declaring it to be "impossible" for adults to transpose themselves into children. David Rudd (2010) points out to how, ironically, Rose holds on to a residual notion of the Romantic child by considering that children are such a distinct group from adults that they stand outside society and language. Post-Rose research includes studies by the Reading Group (e.g. Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994; Lesnik-Oberstein and Thomson, 2002), for which discussions about real children amount to new constructions of childhood, and Maria Nikolajeva's theory of aetnormativity (2009, 2010), according to which children's literature centers on adult normativity, thereby reflecting real-life child/adult power imbalances. More recently, Clémentine Beauvais developed the concept of the mighty child (2015); that is, the child that potentially subverts the aetnormative order through possessing the future inaccessible to the adult. Diverse as these approaches are, they rely on the binary between the child and the adult, thereby failing to examine the full spectrum of child-adult relationships in children's literature and in real life, especially in light of the importance of intergenerational bonds as crucial for the survival of contemporary societies (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Jaques, 2021).

While working on this article, we noticed that 1984 also saw the emergence of another important theoretical approach to children's literature: "childist criticism", proposed by Peter Hunt, which gave rise to a theoretical countercurrent where "the adult and the child coexist in an egalitarian way" (Chapleau, 2009, p. 164). Hunt argued that young readers' multiple individual responses to literature should inform adults' critical practice as a way towards a more accurate understanding of "reading as a child" in particular cultural contexts (1984, p. 45). Hunt suggested that if we agree that interpretations of texts often do not conform to authors' intentions, "we might find that the four current kinds of reviewing and evaluation of children's books ('children *might* like...', 'children *should* like..', 'children *do* like...', 'children *will* like...') are all equally suspect" (1984, p. 44) as based solely on our

assumptions about young readers. These assumptions, as Hunt insisted in his *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*, need to be challenged through “rereading of texts from [...] a childist point of view” (1991, p. 143), which means, as he stressed, a realistic appreciation of what an adult critic does when dealing with children’s books and child reader: “it is the *critics* who ultimately make the books” and “create the intellectual climate which produces the text” (1991, p. 143). Children, on the other hand, may have freedom of choice but they can choose only “*from what there is there to be chosen*” (1991, p. 143).

Hunt’s ideas did not prove as influential as Rose’s in the decades to follow but they inspired a number of innovative insights into the concepts of the child and childhood that can be seen as attempts to counteract the adultism prevailing in children’s literature studies. Our article has two aims: firstly, we discuss what childism has meant in our field and exemplify it with our research practice; secondly, we critique childism for how it essentializes the child and adult and argue that it should be expanded to address both human and more-than-human relationalities that produce childhood and adulthood. We conclude with a speculation on how a pluralistic understanding of childism may generate further openings in children’s culture studies.

The Childist Thought in Children’s Literature Scholarship

Before we provide an overview of childist children’s literature studies, we would first like to present Peter Hunt’s recent comments on the childist approach, which he kindly supplied on our request. Hunt’s observations are pertinent as some critics have misinterpreted the idea of childist criticism either as “an attempt by adults to read as children would” (Nodelman, 2008, p. 156) or as “pay[ing] heed to specific attributes of children as readers” (Reynolds, 2011, p. 128). The former is also how it has been understood by John Wall, who thus writes of childist criticism: “On this view, adults can more complexly interpret children’s literature by putting aside their adult biases and reading from children’s own points of view” (2019, p. 6).

However, as Hunt explains in “Childist Criticism Revisited” (2021):

To dismiss the intended audience of a text as irrelevant seemed to me to be self-evident nonsense: the audience was essential to the critical process. The difficulty was assumed to be that the child’s, or a child’s, or any child’s—theoretical or actual—perception or response or understanding was unknowable. Or, rather, that critics (and other adults involved with

children's texts) could arrogantly make decisions (as they do now) about what the/a/any child would or could like/understand—or, implicitly, what they should like or understand.

What I wanted to do was to hand the power, at least nominally, to the child readers. As anyone who has any contact with actual child readers will know, it is impossible, beyond certain limited denotative responses, to know what they understand from a text: all we know is that it is probably not what a skilled reader would understand. The idea of “childist” criticism was not to speculate on, or assume, what a child reader—however defined, but usually defined by relative inexperience—would understand, but to acknowledge that understanding was different, and individual, and to a large extent, unknowable

Such an approach, of course, makes all adult judgments of children's books – all adult discussion of them, redundant – which rather awkwardly raises the question of why critics should draw a salary. It also directly confronts the elephant in the room of most criticism and theory (at that historical point): we might admit that we cannot know what a child is thinking, but we are much less likely to admit that we don't know what an adult is thinking, either. There might be narrower limits to “misreadings” when dealing with peer groups of readers, but they are there: is there a text in this class? If we object to assuming that children, as a group, take certain shared meaning from texts, why do we not do the same with adults? (Hunt, 2021, unpublished data).

It is owing to the above-mentioned misinterpretations of the goals of childist criticism that it has not been implemented in practice. For Kimberley Reynolds, it has been “more of a position than a methodology” (Reynolds, 2011, p. 54). Moreover, a number of children's literature scholars have relied on Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's (2012) understanding of childism as a prejudice against children without acknowledging its affirmative potential (Joosen, 2013; Nance-Carroll, 2021), which we see as symptomatic of our field's acceptance of the child-adult binary as the default form of intergenerational relations.

Nevertheless, the affirmative understanding of childism as suggested by Hunt gave rise to some important theoretical discussions that challenge adultist criticism. Childist orientation continued with Karen Coats's insistence on developing approaches involving interactions with real children based on love, and not on exploitation, as the core of child-adult relations (2001, p. 143). For Andrew Melrose, a children's book “is as close as we can get to a critical, visual, literary and literal hug and to miss this point is to miss the function of the book and the potential it has in the nurturing process, and in making connections” (2012,

no page). Engaging directly with Hunt's arguments, Sebastien Chapleau addressed the very viability of the concept of children's literature: it should refer only to "the process of production" ("the writing of children's literature"); whereas, "[a] children's book can never be—it can only become" (2009, p. 65). Hence, what may exist is a "child's literature" (2009, p. 65) or children's literatures defined by "the individuality of the child" at a given moment (2009, p. 65). Chapleau saw this possibility as "the here and now at the heart of childist criticism" (2009, p. 65). He also wondered what a childist criticism of childist criticism itself would be (2009, p. 150); that is, how children would understand and comment on such academic concerns. Although he did not propose a methodology allowing for the emergence of children's own critical practice, his question may be seen as an opening towards participatory approaches to studies of children's literature(s). Finally, Chapleau stressed the paradigm-shifting potential of childist criticism: through its destabilizing the institution of children's literature, it could challenge broader social and cultural norms defining childhood and adulthood.

An especially important contribution to the childist thought has been made by Mary Galbraith, who in her "Hear My Cry: A Manifesto for an Emancipatory Childhood Studies Approach to Children's Literature" proposed to see childist children's literature studies as part of a general emancipatory project of childhood studies, centered on "a commitment to understanding the situation of babies and children from a first-person point of view, exploring the contingent forces that block children's full emergence as expressive subjects, and discovering how these forces can be overcome" (2001, p. 188). Galbraith emphasized that this emancipatory model should develop across academic disciplines and society in general as a result of "*finding ways to admit childhood desires, experience, and predicaments into all practices of the human community [...]*" (2001, p. 194 italics in the original text). Hence she advocated a systemic change that could lead to a thorough societal transformation, and in particular to raising individuals aware of the need for "an emancipatory model" in which "adults look for ways to reenter and reevaluate their own childhood experience as part of a personal emancipatory human project as well as a larger project to be with, support, and negotiate conflict with children without oppressing them" (2001, p. 188-189). Childhood studies and children's literature scholarship may support this goal by centering on intergenerational dependencies. For Galbraith, "the central emancipatory question with respect to childhood is not how children can escape from adults, but how children and adults might enact dialogue within a relationship where one partner is intensely vulnerable and

capable of suffering but developmentally dependent and relatively inarticulate” (2001, p. 190). Searching for such a dialogue may be channeled through children’s literature as it both represents “the existential predicament of childhood in an adult-dominated world” and contains schemata and motifs close to experiences of both children and adults (2001, p. 200). As Galbraith stressed, although her approach “endorses Hunt’s childist project”, it is nevertheless substantially broader as it sees an exploration of the emancipatory elements of children’s literature as a way of mobilizing interdisciplinary reflection on childhood-adulthood connectivities (2001, p. 198).

A number of scholars working with the childist criticism have also explored theoretical and practical possibilities of appreciating children as creators of children’s culture and of including texts produced by them into the remit of children’s literature studies. David Rudd developed the notion of the constructive child to acknowledge the abundant literatures produced by children—a proposition that has opened up a possibility of children’s literature as something else than an element of culture created by adults for young audiences. As Rudd argued, “the fact that children are seen not to have a stake in this [the creation of children’s literature] is [...] a product of the way children’s literature (in its texts and its criticism) has become institutionalised, such that—ironically—only commercially published work is seen to count; or, to put it another way, only adults are seen to ‘authorise’ proper children’s literature” (2005, p. 19). He then suggested that scholars in the field contribute to “this culturally dominant version of events”, thereby implying the necessity to develop childist methodologies informed by what Chapleau referred to as respect for all childhood cultures (2009, pp. 76, 83). Peter E. Cumming also argued for the presence of children’s “voices, worldviews, cultures, and reading and writing practices” in children’s literature studies, which, as he hoped, would potentially both “destabilize” and “enrich adult academic study of children’s literature” (2008, p. 106). However, for Cumming, this transformation is not likely to happen not just because “children remain second-class citizens, members of a sub-species of the human race” (2008, p. 106), but also because of the difficulty of determining what kind of children’s writing is worth studying. Cumming further asked how we should study it: “As a window for adults into the secret corners of children’s lives? As an interrogation of adult-authored literature and adult power? As a fundamental challenge to the traditional production and reception of children’s literature?” (2008, pp. 106-107). Therefore, for Cumming, the childist approach could be about “adult readings informed by children’s readings” that take place in the exploration of children’s writings as “part of a mutual enterprise between child

and adult reader” (2008, p. 108). Such ventures may “empower child writers and readers” without disempowering adults: as Cumming explains, “it is surely not necessary to disempower (but merely to humble) adult readers” (2008, p. 108). Such a perspective is a reasonable addition to the childist criticism and its focus on intergenerational dialogue. Research following this direction can be found in Karen Sánchez-Eppler’s *Dependent States: The Child’s Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (2005), Marah Gubar’s *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children’s Literature* (2009), a special issue of *Bookbird* (Sundmark, 2017), Victoria Ford Smith’s *Between Generations: Collaborative Authorship in the Golden Age of Children’s Literature* (2017) and Rachel Conrad’s *Time for Childhoods: Young Poets and Questions of Agency* (2019).

The adultist character of children’s literature as limited to texts authored by adults was more recently questioned by Lies Wesseling, who considered approaches to researching “‘another children’s literature’, namely literature about, for, and by children” (2019, no page). Advocating the need to rethink “the asymmetry between adult authorship and juvenile readership”, Wesseling argued for paying attention to creative opportunities resulting from the development of the Internet and new media, and in particular to the disappearing distinctions between writers and readers and the increasing number of creative intergenerational collaborations and self-published young authors (no page). This approach dismisses suspicions that often arise in relation to the child’s creative agency in intergenerational collaborations. As Wesseling explained, power is at stake in any joint endeavors, and although children’s creativity is inevitably “mediated by adult editors, translators, publishers, and public relations and marketing professionals, this does not necessarily equal the repression or silencing of children’s voices” (2019, no page). Therefore, as she concluded, we should explore mutual benefits coming from creative child-adult partnerships rather than see them as always unjustly asymmetrical.

Wesseling’s argument draws on Marah Gubar’s kinship model of child-adult relations, an example of the most recent childist thought in children’s literature studies. In this model, “children and adults are fundamentally akin to one another, even if certain differences or deficiencies routinely attend certain parts of the aging process” (2016, p. 299). Contesting the difference and deficit approaches to childhood, Gubar therefore argues that children’s expressions of agency or their experiences might vary “in degree” from those of adults but they should be acknowledged in relation to, rather than as radically separate from, adults’ experiences or agency (2013, p. 454). Thus, in the kinship model, children’s responses

to literature and creative contributions to culture are as important and valuable as those of adults. Gubar stresses that appreciating the kinship model necessitates a “perspectival flip” (2016, p. 300): we are so much in the habit of perceiving children and adults as separate species, with the former being powerless and aspiring for the norm and the latter powerful and constituting the norm, that we may find child-adult connectivities hard to notice and accept. However difficult this perspectival flip may be, it has occurred, as evidenced in the growing scholarly interest in the role of children’s literature and culture in sustaining intergenerational bonds. In *Adulthood in Children’s Literature* (2018), Vanessa Joosen brings insights from age studies and children’s literature research to examine ageist motifs in depictions of old age in selected children’s texts. Importantly, she has recently extended this approach by using Wall’s conceptualization of childism in “Connecting Childhood Studies, Age Studies and Children’s Literature Studies: John Wall’s Concept of Childism and Anne Fine’s *The Granny Project*” (in press). Cross-age interdependencies are also the focus of *Intergenerational Solidarity in Children’s Literature and Film* (2021), edited by Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Zoe Jaques, which argues for the institution of children’s culture as capable of fostering child-adult bonds, generational intelligence, and empathy. This claim also drives *Children’s Literature and Intergenerational Relationships: Encounters of the Playful Kind* (2021) and *Rulers of Literary Playgrounds: Politics of Intergenerational Play in Children’s Literature* (2021), edited by Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Irena Barbara Kalla. All these studies posit children’s literature and culture as a site of a spectrum of intergenerational exchanges both at the level of representation and as a practice catalyzing such experiences in real life through shared creative, receptive, and research processes.

We hope that the above review of childist developments in our field has encouraged readers to reflect on theoretical affinities between childism in children’s literature studies and childhood studies. The most important of these convergences is the commitment to propagate the respect for intergenerational connectivities. Below we discuss one more such affinity—the emergence of participatory approaches in our field as a practical attempt at unsettling the child/adult binary.

Participatory Approaches in Children’s Literature Studies

Wall argues that childism has implications for the humanities in that it should encourage the emergence of inclusive methodologies that would not only guarantee “voice to expressions of

otherness” but also generate and expand possibilities for shared intergenerational understandings (2013, p. 82). As shown above, this transformation has to some extent occurred in our field, as evidenced in the growing interest in children's own writing as a vital and legitimate contribution to children's literature. And yet the fundamental structures of children's literature scholarship have remained adult-centered, with children typically present as subjects of reader-response inquiry rather than as competent actors and holders of knowledge and expertise concerning their lives, including their reading experiences. Inspired directly by Wall's call for a childist revolution in the humanities through the inclusion of children's experiences (2013), Deszcz-Tryhubczak and her colleague, Mateusz Marecki, have argued for the use of participatory research as a way to redress the asymmetrical power relations between children's literature scholars and young readers through intergenerational dialogue and co-production of knowledge about children's books and reading. In the years 2016–2019, in collaboration with primary school students from Wrocław, Poland, and their Polish teacher, they formed an intergenerational research team and developed two participatory projects: “Children's Voices in the Polish Canon Wars” and “Productive Remembering of Polish Childhoods”. Although both projects were initiated by Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Marecki, the young researchers were invited to exercise control over all stages of the research process. The projects resulted among others in the publication of two peer-reviewed polyvocal articles co-written with child researchers, with each section specifying the names of its authors (Chawar et al., 2018, Deszcz-Tryhubczak et al., 2019). To the best of our knowledge, writing and publishing peer-reviewed articles with child readers remains an unprecedented practice in our field.

To achieve these goals, the team needed to resolve a number of ethical issues. These included the unequal distribution of power in the research process; limitations in the representation of children's voices; the development of child-sensitive methods, mutual trust, reciprocal respect, and responsibility; the acknowledgement of intrachildhood diversity; and the situatedness, temporariness, and contingency of knowledge production involving young participants. The intergenerational interactions in both projects were fluid: while the adult researchers were juggling the roles of a fraternal “least-adult” figure or a facilitator (Warming, 2011, p. 39) and a supervising teacher, the child researchers “were switching smoothly between their roles as supervised participants relying on adult assistance and full-fledged primary researchers” (Chawar et al. 2018, p. 119). As Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Marecki found, their participatory collaboration with children required assuming the stance of

“methodological immaturity” (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008, p. 499), which entailed flexibility and openness to children’s appropriation of adult researchers’ tools. As they explain: “It is this relationality and interdependence, combined with unpredictability, that children’s literature scholars may find especially difficult not only to accept but also to recognize as potentially a productive aspect of the research process” (Chawar et al. 2018, p. 116). Finally, the degree of participation and decision-making achieved in both projects varied at different stages of the collaborations. Sometimes the adults were responsible for decision making, initiation, and direction, while there were also occasions when the young researchers took over method selection, goal-setting and planning. Although both projects were substantially framed by the school setting, all the participants strove to keep inevitable power inequalities to a minimum by stressing child–adult interdependencies. These efforts were appreciated by the child researchers, which is reflected in their comments in both articles.

Both projects have set a precedent for a childist transformation in children’s literature studies: they shifted scholarly attention to young readers as subjects producing knowledge that may not only guide adult researchers in their explorations of children’s books but is also valuable in its own right. As Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Marecki conclude, without reconceiving children’s literature scholarship as promoting intergenerational dialogue, we risk missing productive opportunities to work with children and books for the benefit of all generations as children’s literature itself “represents, embodies and enables a cultural, socioeconomic and political network of bonds, interactions, allegiances and commitments among children and adults” (Chawar et al. 2018, p. 112). However, as they also realize, “[d]espite best efforts, participatory research with children may be questioned as not valid and rigorous enough, according to academic (read adult) conventions” (Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Marecki 2021, p. 222). Summarizing their experience gained in both projects, they propose that although there are no universal solutions to the ethical and methodological challenges of participatory research with children, the key to the potential of this approach to destabilize adultist assumptions in academia lies in accepting the “messiness” of participatory research as a work-in-progress rather than as a final outcome or product.

While the above-described participatory research exemplifies childist inspirations that children’s literature scholarship has found in childhood studies, we believe that our field also has a lot to offer to the latter. As we argue below, being focused on diverse textual forms and their circulation and reception, children’s literature studies allows for a fluid understanding of

multiple temporalities, spacialities, and intergenerational connections that produce and shape childhood-adulthood connectivities.

Childism and Feminist Materialisms

As Wall explains, childism appears in childhood studies “in analogy to concepts such as feminism, womanism, postgenderism, postcolonialism, decolonialism, environmentalism and transhumanism” (2019, p. 1). He associates it with these “isms” as related to various forms of activism rather than with forms of discrimination they battle; that is, sexism, racism, extractivism and ageism, to name some. Wall unsurprisingly stresses the comparison with feminism to show how childism is a positive term linked to agency and transformation. The interdisciplinary field of childhood studies has often been compared to that of gender studies in that the concepts of age and generation also follow Butler’s poststructuralism. Just as gender, age and generation are socially produced. Such a comparison is often made to signal a failure of childhood studies to mainstream the generational order the way gender studies has done with gender (Punch, 2016; Wall, 2019). This failure is reflected for example in how funding bodies require taking into account gender relations in research projects, while nothing similar is required for age or generational relations (Punch, 2020). Wall stresses the relation between childism, gender studies, and feminist scholarship, proposing the former as an activist approach to research related to the “feminist ambition for systemic normative transformation” (2019, p. 7). He admires how gender studies took off from early women studies to a broad project of social transformation and sketches what such a change would look like for scholarship focused on childhood: he proposes to move the poststructuralist critique that considers childhood a socially constructed category towards what he calls a “childist reconstructionism”, in which scholarship would focus not on understanding (children’s) lives, or on deconstructing hegemonic discourses that marginalize them, but on “reconstructing interdependent social relations as more radically and imaginatively difference-responsive” (2019, p. 11). Research would thus be oriented towards the creation of a difference-inclusive social imagination in which children take part.

Childism’s emphasis on bringing activism into academia shares paths with developments of gender studies yet it would benefit from relating more deeply to contemporary feminist scholarship, in which the call for transformation is grounded in newly developed conceptualizations of the ethical, epistemological, and ontological dimensions of

research (Barad, 2007, p. 90). Barad and other feminist scholars call for an attention to biosocial materialities in order to move research away from the binary of reality/language towards complex understandings of human and more-than-human entanglements. New materialist philosophers pledge for a knowledge production in which ethics, ontology, and epistemology are recognized as inseparable. This approach to research has deeply influenced childhood studies in its movement away from an understanding of childhood as a social construction towards conceptualizing it as a biosocial category in which age and generation are produced rather than reflected (Lenz Taguchi, 2011; Osgood, 2014; Kraftl and Horton, 2018; Spyrou, 2019; Diaz-Diaz and Semeneć, 2020; Malone, Tesar and Arndt, 2020; Murriss, 2020). If research produces childhood, it is responsible for how the child and childhood are disclosed through methodological practices (Spyrou 2018). New materialist focus on relationalities enables moving away from the figurations of children as either beings or becomings, which has been pivotal to debates in childhood studies for decades. The child—just as the adult—emerges instead from human and more-than-human networks in which adult normativities are dispersed.

The appreciation of such porosities between categories sheds new light on the question of how to distinguish nature from culture, which new materialism considers as the continuum of “naturecultures” (Haraway 2003). Scholars working with this perspective in childhood studies critique developmentalism as discourses and practices emerging from the relating (biological) ages to developmental milestones and possible delays (Osgood and Robinson, 2019). Developmental psychology has been the hegemonic paradigm in which the category of the child produces essentialist (and universalist) assumptions. New materialism proposes instead to look at how the child and the adult are produced in relations. Some authors call for decentering childhood (Spyrou, 2017) and moving away from “child-focused concerns toward more diverse issues in which children and childhood are implicated but are clearly more wide-ranging and expansive” (2017, p. 434). In this way they “dispense with the very idea that the child—as an individuated human subject—should be the primary object of analysis for childhood studies” (Kraftl & Horton 2018, p. 107).

In children’s literature studies, feminist (literary) criticism has been seen as parallel to childism as both deal with exclusion and marginalization (Hunt 1991, p. 191-192). Lissa Paul argues that a good reason for “appropriating feminist theory to children’s literature” is that “both women’s literature and children’s literature are devalued and regarded as marginal and peripheral by the literary and educational communities”(1987, p. 187). She celebrates how

feminist critics have been challenging women's marginalization in literary history by giving definition and value to the literature written by women, which took forms and explored genres outside mainstream literary cultures. In his argument for a childist critique, Sebastian Chapleau (2007) quotes Lissa Paul, as well as Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own* (1929), to argue about the need to value texts written by children as works of literature produced from marginalized positions in a similar vein to that of women's writing. Interesting as this parallelism is, it conflates the marginalization of women and that of children and risks obscuring differences between how gender and age work. Firstly, we need to consider the category of the marginalized "child" with attention to the intersectional positions that produce such a child in the first place: for instance, we should ask how it is classed, gendered, racialized, abled... Secondly, we need to ponder how ageism directed against children functions differently from sexism and racism, if only because children may potentially exit the category by growing up, while members of other oppressed groups do not. Thirdly, we need to look at how the category of the marginalized child entails a potential reverse: the child will grow up and may have an ageist attitude to new generations of children. Clémentine Beauvais (2015) speaks of the "mighty child" to stress how the future potential of the child may defy adults' hopes for preserving the current status quo. Tanu Biswas (2021) stresses how Beauvais's notion of "temporal otherness" (2018) reveals an asymmetry between children and adults in which the former have a future (and, therefore, Time, which in modern history has been inseparably coupled with Money), while the latter (only) have a past that they can access. How to read, thus, the power asymmetries in these shifting relationships? How to integrate these readings into a childist literary criticism?

Feminist literary critique is often identified with a quest to rescue and value texts written by women and to critically analyze representations of women, but, as Rita Felski argues, it should not be something that interests just some of us in the field but rather all of us as it alters our vision of literature as literature (2020, p. 20). Rather than revolving around the slippery category of the "woman", feminist literary critique has begun to explore a set of new questions about the relations between the social, the political, the biological, and the aesthetic. How far may this analogy between feminist and childist scholarship take us in children's literature studies, as well as in childhood studies and knowledge production at large?

Childisms should, as feminisms, seek to decenter notions of objectivity, agency and voice. As Chapleau argues, childism is one more of those counter-hegemonic struggles—

such as postcolonialism, gay and lesbian movements or Marxist movements—wishing to transform the world by making “it an equitable place for everyone” (2009, p. 186). But how does this struggle work when connected to the figure of the child, which is produced in such a close relation to the promises of a better future and world transformation? As we argue elsewhere from our position as children’s literature scholars, “this claim for a promising future, this desire of the pedagogical project invested in young people, makes children’s literature a site of slow violence in which several exclusions keep taking place” (García-González and Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2021, no page). Furthermore, how is it possible to compare the “feminine” of feminist approaches and its multiple renderings in social movements to the “child” of childist approaches if such a category has been created by adults and only by academics, while most children worldwide remain unaware of it? Who is to judge whether our perspective is childist or not? How would various forms of child-led research be of help here?

Feminist new materialisms provide concepts that may help us navigate the complex ground in which the struggle for childism emerges. In new materialist philosophies, identity categories are never stable, and so the child and the adult are temporary and relational figurations produced within biosociocultural entanglements. A (childist) feminist materialist approach to children’s literature may have less to do with the child as a human body of a certain age and more with exploring the assemblages in which such a figure is produced. What matters is the entanglements—or “intra-actions”, to use the materialist term coined by Karen Barad (2007, p. 33)—of children and texts in various spaces and times. In the following section, we describe two research projects in which we rely on feminist new materialism to produce complex accounts of children’s cultures. In a similar vein to Wall’s “reconstructionism”, we seek to recognize and produce interdependent and affirmative relations with children; however, our feminist materialist approach enables us to draw away from human-centered understandings of agencies and to look at how the child is produced in relation to several other materialities. In these entanglements, we focus on how the desire for a better (more equitable) future produces childhoods.

New Materialist Childist Research in Children’s Literature Studies

Deszcz-Tryhubczak attempted to embrace a relational perspective in “Shaping a Preferable Future: Children Reading, Thinking and Talking about Alternatives Communities and Times”

(ChildAct), her other participatory project co-conducted in 2018 with a group of primary school students (age 10-11) from Cambridgeshire, UK. Although Deszcz-Tryhubczak selected the children's book for the project and invited the young researchers to read and work on it with her, she did not plan how exactly the project would develop but waited for the children's decisions. As she recalls, "The moment I gave away the copies of *Un Lun Dun* to the participants, I realised that anything could happen. I no longer controlled the project as it was the children, their parents (through allowing and encouraging their offspring to participate) and teachers [...] (through taking care of the logistics) that also controlled the flow of the research. [...] I had to face the challenge of radical unpredictability, messiness and the sheer complexity of the newly emergent relationality and interdependence" (Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2019, p. 191). Importantly, the process began to be shaped not only by the human participants, but also by "the nonhuman agent, *Un Lun Dun* [by China Miéville] itself, and its performative and creative agency" (2019, p. 191). The novel both prompted the initial idea for the project—as it preoccupied Deszcz-Tryhubczak a long time before the project started—and intra-acted with the participants: on one hand, the book inspired ideas and actions; on the other, the participants' entanglement with it activated and spread its "epistemic work" (2019, p. 191). For Deszcz-Tryhubczak, *Un Lun Dun* was reading the participants' hopes and worries while they were reading and discussing it (Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2019). The children's team decided to examine the novel by making a film adaptation of the story, which they intended to use to encourage a reflection on whether older and younger citizens' voices count in government green policies.

The unpredictable development of the project made Deszcz-Tryhubczak recognize the importance of "response-able" (Barad, 2007, p. 393; Haraway, 2008, p. 88) research. She reacted to the children's suggestions, letting herself be affected by them in various situations, including their decision that she should play one of the character's in the film, which in a way stretched her beyond herself as an adult researcher and reader: she needed to respond to the children's request in a caring and productive way, thinking about how her involvement in the film would influence the research process, how her impersonation of the character would correspond to the rest of the adaptation, and how she would overcome her own awkwardness when performing. The collaboration on the film meant that all the participants "were in a constant and mutual state of responsibility for what happened" (Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2019, p. 195). Simultaneously, the research process was marked by all-pervasive joy, laughter, enthusiastic anticipation, stress, tiredness, impatience, and even frustration. Hence, it moved

away from observing and representing the workings of literature from a distance towards engaging with them via intergenerational collectivities and affirmative creativity.

The adaptation itself can be seen as “a multimodal material-discursive knowledge-production constituted by and constituting encounters of human bodies with one another and with the non-human world” (Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2019, p. 196). The latter included not only the book but also the weather, the space of the school yard, the school library bookshelves, the filming equipment, a toy car, costumes and face paints, the instruments stored in one of the classrooms, and some sunflower seeds... In this way ChildAct destabilized not only adult-centric critical practices but also anthropocentric ones as it foregrounded the fundamental relationality of all matter, or as Karen Barad puts it in new materialist terms, a dynamism of forces (2007, p. 141) in which matter, things, and bodies are constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing, and working inseparably through their relationship to other similarly contingent bodies, things, and ideas, including children, adults, and books. As we argue elsewhere (García-González & Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2020), new materialist thinking may provide important openings for children’s literature studies, enabling us to develop fresh insights into entanglements of adults and children, both real and imaginary. It may also help us to understand how writing, reading, drawing, film-making and other forms of doing *with* books may be understood as processes of “becoming-with”. Maybe we can account for what a children’s book does by exploring the porousness between texts and readers of all ages, including the multiplicity of relationalities with textures, spaces, feelings, and other materialities? (García-González & Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2020, p. 52)

Intergenerational connectivities and other human-non-human entanglements also constitute the core of the collaborative platform for children’s culture #EstoTbn, the hashtag meaning “esto también”, “also this”, formed in 2020 by Macarena García-González and her colleagues Soledad Véliz and Ignacia Saona to challenge adultist (and humanist) mainstream channels of literature recommendation for young readers. #EstoTbn enquires into how children and adults get affected by cultural productions and forms of recommending literary and cultural texts. The platform does so by hosting a research project with children and school librarians from Chile, who have all been invited to share, produce, and critique recommendations of children’s literature and culture in whatever format they find suitable.

The project started during the first COVID-19 wave, when recommendations of children’s literature and culture proliferated in the web and related to concerns about how to deal with children during the lockdown and growing fears about how children would cope

with the harsh reality of the pandemic. The project later moved towards exploring how certain fictional and non-fictional works for/about/by children circulate while others are marginalized and how these processes depend on themes, genres, styles, and diverse arrangements of intergenerational collaborations that produce fictional and artistic works. With an explicit aim to bring other media and arts to the ecosystem of reading promotion and literary education, the project generates recommendations of books, literary fragments, videos, music, and artworks that are shared with the child and adult participants.

In #EstoTbn, the child and the adult do not hold a fixed identity and are not attached to any defining dimension such as maturity or cognitive abilities. The project strives to consider them as “relational ontologies” (Spyrou, 2018, p. 25): the child and the adult do not exist prior to their encounter. While drawing away from the category of the child, #EstoTbn nevertheless responds to a childist desire to open spaces for children’s “voices”. Yet voice is always “voice”, inevitably failing at representing subjects. Following Lisa Mazzei’s (2013, 2016) critique of qualitative research that aims to represent excluded subjects by conveying their words and believing they speak for a unitary “I”, #EstoTbn acknowledges how the voices produced by research methods are entangled with promises (and failures). Children send audios and write recommendations, realizing that these will be read by adults first, while the adult participants seek to become vigilant of how their adultism also persists when promises about children’s participation are made.

Finally, in #EstoTbn, a childist (literary) criticism appears as a device for opening a multiplicity of children’s positions in relation to books and other cultural texts; agency does not reside in individual subjects or/any individual children but becomes networked, assembled, and distributed with the participants and multiple relations with books, films, zoom meetings, emails, school libraries, social media hashtags, and human subjects. In these entanglements, the researchers try to identify the forces of adultist ways of knowing and to examine closely what hopes are put forward by ideas of children’s voices. When the messiness of the relationalities and agencies is acknowledged, we may be able to move more clearly away from a childism that relies on an adult promise of children’s emancipation towards one in which the complexity of multiple childhoods and child positionings comes to the fore.

Conclusion

If we look at how childism also emerges in relation to other concepts, we may be more prepared to use it to address cultural production for/by children and to see how the for/by does not imply a dichotomy but porousness. An emphasis on relationalities that draws away from the child as a fixed category and from pretensions of rendering children's voices opens new ways of counteracting processes of exclusion through our research methods. Yet our engagement with feminist new materialisms has also made us aware of the benefits of repositioning child-adult connectivities into posthuman contexts, as created and shaped by many other human and more-than-human relationalities, or simply by the all-pervasive messiness of the world, which includes readers, texts, scholars, and the materialities of research itself. Taking into consideration the sheer multiplicity of these entanglements, we need various kinds of childisms and their becomings rather than a fixed anthropocentric notion of childism. Such an approach in turn necessitates methods geared not so much towards producing new knowledge but immersing oneself into events and processes emerging in messy posthuman entanglements and registering them in their singularity and fluidity without attempting to tidy them up. This is not an easy thing to do specially in the context of increasingly output-driven and feasibility-focused research-funding contexts. Open-ended methods face much more resistance now, but a lot may be gained by considering tensions in and ethical commitments to a knowledge production that is able to take risks and acknowledge the unpredictable. As our projects show, it is difficult and in fact futile to design complex methodological approaches. We should rather be ready to respond in situ to diverse events and connectivities through which our lives unfold to be able to have a better grasp on what childhoods are created through our own research practices.

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