

Introduction

Reimagining Childhood Studies: Connectivities...Relationalities...Linkages...

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After three decades, a good deal of childhood studies *in practice* finds itself stuck, in many ways, in a mire of its own articulation. The urge to conceptualize children as “active in the construction and determination of their own social lives” (James and Prout 1991, p. 8) and to grasp childhood as a social fabrication constituted in and informed by history, politics, culture and geography rings no less relevant and necessary now than it did in the 1980s. Yet, the inventions and interventions forged by one generation of scholars rightly bent on disrupting largely unquestioned and uncontested notions of children and childhood have transfigured, subtly though perceptibly, into the givens, the truisms and, sometimes, the platitudes of another. Most insidiously, the generative problematic of the field—i.e., the constructed, agentic, knowing child—regularly enfolds back onto itself, often reappearing as the solution to the problem it poses. No question or inquiry in the arena of childhood studies, it seems, can attract a satisfying response without some recourse to this figure—this skeleton key of sorts—which is increasingly apprehended as sufficiently self-explanatory or, at least, analytically self-contained. It may very well be the case that the “child” of childhood studies—as it has been forged and re-forged collectively over the years—stands as a foremost obstacle to ways forward.

Reimagining Childhood Studies arises from a self-conscious recognition that the production of knowledge in a field—particularly in a “new” field still excited about its possibilities—can, like a boomerang, rebound and ensnare the producers and products of that knowledge in ways unintended and counter-intentional. This effort—represented in this

Introduction and in the collection of essays to follow—joins other voices in the field to offer possibilities to revisit some tensions, distinctions and presumptions of childhood studies scholarship with an ambition to disrupt what we see as a detrimental, self-referential tendency of so much scholarship which call itself “childhood studies”. Admittedly, not every aspect of every essay achieves this goal. The value, we hope, also lies in the cumulative reflexive attempts to engage in a reimagining along these lines and when, put together, these works encourage dialogic engagement both with similar efforts that have come before and into future scholarship.

Childhood studies, as a field of thought, arose at a particular moment in the social sciences, when modernist and what might roughly be called ‘post’ and ‘neo’ framings (post-modernist/post-colonial/ neo-Marxist/etc.) were jostling for dominion in ways of understanding and explaining the social world. As Prout (2005) points out, childhood studies largely oriented itself towards putting forward arguments for children and childhood that spoke to the still dominant modernist frames which sought stability and coherence, often reducing ambiguity and complexity through dualistic categorisation. Yet, because childhood studies jumped into the fray at a time when discursive explanations or the ‘linguistic and cultural turn’ were on the rise across the social sciences, from the outset, the field participated in an extended period of rejection of economism, totalities, and ‘grand theory’. A part of this effort entailed asserting a fundamental difference and rupture from political economy modes of inquiry and explanation (e.g. Butler 1997)—a difference which the bourgeois, Global North “child” subject as the theoretical center of the field made manifest and robust (as Sarada Balagopalan, this volume, discusses).

Entangled in the analytic, moral and political structures of its founding, a good deal of contemporary childhood studies scholarship also remains reactive to the ghostly presence of developmental psychology (see Burman 2017) and tethered to a cultural heritage derived from

the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and its ongoing aftermath (see Cheney, this volume; see Balagopalan, this volume; see Wickenden, this volume). The specter of invoking, wittingly or unwittingly, some version of the psychological child in particular haunts the periphery of investigation as pre-emptive constraint. Child development continues to represent the negation—the foundational distinction—against which and upon which childhood studies builds its epistemology at both the level of the subject and at the level of structure. Considerable attention and effort expended by authors, instructors and editors serve to police and reinscribe the boundaries delimiting the child of psychology and that of childhood studies from each other. With near ritualistic formality at times, article after article and talk after talk painstakingly revisit and rehearse, to greater and lesser extents, origin stories of how the child of childhood studies has been rescued from universalism, cultural monotropism and essentialism by virtue of this “new” perspective.

Hence, it should come as no surprise that, as a field, childhood studies has ventured into an immense historical and collective investment in a particular “problem of the child” which is, in many ways, existentially consequential for the discipline. Childhood scholarship and the production of childhood scholarship have together been complicit in valorizing children’s agency to the point of a fetish, making of it a moral and analytic bulwark against the encroachment, or perceived encroachment, of anything that feels like psychological, biological or, indeed, structural ways of knowing. Wide swaths of thinking and research accordingly exhibit a decided aversion to centering anything that suggests a decentering of the child subject as the consequential actor or force under consideration—as in, for example, most notions related to child development (in its many forms), or the determinative flows of capital and power or non-

human and technological forces as found in other theoretical perspectives. There are certainly notable exceptions (e.g., Stephens 1995; Lee 1992; Prout 2005; Wells 2015 to name but a few). However, the thrust of approach and conception continues to favor singular—if socially, culturally and historically embedded—subjects who display, or must be allowed to display, creativity and active engagement of the world in the here-and-now (see Cook, this volume; Oswell, this volume). Consequently, we contend, something of the vital relationality of the child remains at arm’s length and kept out of reach conceptually, analytically and politically.

Indeed, one would be hard pressed, for instance, to traverse the landscape of childhood studies course modules, textbooks and conference presentations without encountering the sentiment that “children are beings not becomings” (Qvortrup et al. 1994, p 2). Clearly, a significant epistemological intervention into presumptions about reading children as *merely* in the process of undergoing change (i.e., especially learning and development), the notion of “being” in this sense has effortlessly taken its place among the new clichés, often deflecting rather than inviting critical reflection. Evidently preferential to “becoming,” “being” supposes a desirable state or, at least, a favored perspective on childhood as something to be released from the teleology of adult conceptions and institutions that tend to favor single, linear trajectories of learning, development and, perhaps, being (see Uprichard 2008; See also Owell 2013). “Being” seems a reasonable place to repose from the vantage point of those of us who sit atop Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. For others, like some of the queer of color youth Bernardini (this volume) discusses, “being” signifies navigation and struggle *within* multiple structural vulnerabilities, and “becoming”—becoming “sideways” (Stockton, 2009) perhaps—might appear as both desirable and undesirably uncertain. The hesitancy to embrace “becoming” speaks to a generalized reluctance to let go of

the foundational distinction from developmental psychology and individualized, monadic child which carries or holds agency unto itself.

The flight from becoming in this way encodes, paradoxically, a kind of denaturalized child which exists in a here-and-now, often for the sake of claiming academic positional distinction. Consequently, the underlying epistemological and moral privileging of agency, usually particular types of agency (see Sanchez-Eppler, this volume; see Cordero Arce, this volume; see also Oswell 2013; James 2007, Spyrou 2011), cultivates an analytic blind spot—a space of perpetual unsight—which undoes or disables possibilities of seeing differently. Indeed, presuming “being”—and presuming that a particular sort of being is realized through the exercise of a particular sort of agency—arguably discourages inquiry into how multiple and connective scales, relationalities and structural entanglements also make the ‘child’ of childhood studies possible and viable. Discussing existentialist readings of politically committed texts for children, Beauvais (this volume) notes: “[d]oing childhood studies without agency ready at hand” enables “wonder” about “temporal inflections” (page XXX). Kontovourki and Theodorou (this volume), as well, lay bare the obstacle of children’s agency—of a presumed shape and content—rather than seeking to liberate them from non-agency.

Such fetishization does not only result in an intellectual loop, but has serious political consequences. Much like Nancy Fraser’s (2009) depiction of feminism’s ‘uncanny double’, a version of itself that has not just been co-opted by neoliberalism but has a strong affinity with the very constitution of late capitalism, the ‘darling figure’ of childhood studies (see Cook, this volume) bears marked similarity to the idealized subject of neoliberalism. At once innovative and chameleon like, this figure demonstrates a remarkable ability to constantly remake itself anew, well befitting a regime of ‘flexible accumulation’ (Harvey 2007). Because this ontological

production is rendered sacred, it can obscure interrogation of its productivity for capitalism and, indeed, arguments developed in childhood studies about the agentic child may even be used to bolster neoliberal projects, from the ‘Girl Effect’ (Shain 2013) to early childhood interventions aimed at the human capital development of the active child (Newberry 2017).

The point for consideration here is not simply that scholars have produced and entertained “wrong” or “inappropriate” conceptions of children’s agency, or that it has remained entirely unexamined in the field. It is that agency itself—in its centrality, dominance and hegemonic position in childhood studies—may very well stand in the way of reaching for alternative ways of knowing. Efforts to move beyond individual and individuated agency span from Alanen and colleague’s (2000; 2001) insistence on generation as a relationally inflected time-scale of knowledge and measurement to Oswell’s (2013) theorizations of multiple and varied agencies. As well, those in educational studies (see Edwards and D’Arcy 2004), literacy studies (Fisher 2010) and children’s geographies (e.g., Ansell, 2009; Kraftl 2013) strive to problematize and, in some ways, decenter the child by attending to the materialities and geo-scales which surround and construe children and their worlds. Agency here arises as a relational dynamic—not so much a property of an entity, but an element of a complex, an assemblage of sorts which, as Oswell states, “is always in-between and interstitial” where “the capacity to do and to make a difference is necessarily dispersed across an arrangement” (2013, p. 70).

We strive to position *Reimagining Childhood Studies* as an invitation to readers and colleagues to engage in further a dialogue about the nature and boundaries of this shared endeavor. Our concern at this historical juncture centers on how childhood studies, as it is being practiced and deployed across a range of institutional domains, might be becoming ossified despite the rather robust efforts of many scholars to the contrary. To break through a long-

standing epistemological and conceptual impasse in childhood studies requires a commitment to aspire to dislodge some of the foundational notions of the field without completely dismantling the entire enterprise. In what follows, we attempt to perform this difficult trick—not as an exemplar of some ideal new reimagining of the field—but as a contribution to a larger, ongoing conversation regarding our own endeavors to engage with the child, children and childhood beyond received frames. In so doing, we place ourselves alongside, not above or apart from, the contributors to *Reimagining Childhood Studies*, and other colleagues in the field, who welcome the excitement as well as the risks of stepping past boundaries. Most importantly, we place our conceptual move in this volume within an emerging current of scholarship in childhood studies, a current which is not always sufficiently forceful and influential but which is however greatly important and valuable in helping disrupt the orthodoxies of the field we described above. Some of this work is mentioned in this introduction and throughout the various chapters of the book though we acknowledge that the purpose of this volume is not to review this emerging literature but to offer a reflective attempt at reimagining childhood studies alongside other efforts that do so.

Our initial effort to assert our own (re)thinking about childhood studies starts with a discussion of ontology. In many ways questions of ontology lie at the heart of childhood studies, with its efforts to reclaim the passive, developing child, and yet the fascination and recapitulation of the field's favored agentic child has meant that more pressing questions about ontology have largely been neglected. In response, we gesture here to the productivity of relational theories of ontology, and explore what these can offer to childhood studies, not just as a theoretical enterprise, but one that is fundamentally bound up with the ethics and politics of knowledge production. Which child, children, and childhood do we bring into being through our scholarship

and which do we preclude? Repositioning relationality as the core focus of writing, conception and research prods scholarship to push past conceptualizing children in essentially monadic terms—i.e., as beings which have (i.e. “own” or “possess”) agency—and into realms where children and childhood can only fruitfully be located by way of linkages with other human and non-human aspects of the world. Thinking relationally about the child in this manner thereby invites a relational posture not only toward bodies and persons but also toward objects, technologies, systems, epistemes and historical eras. Such a focus begets and informs attention to blind spots in the field, areas which we do see, or are not even aware of, because the ontological and scalar frames which dominate the field do not allow for their existence. Political economy and its multi-scalar operations, we argue, is one such blind spot. In centering the relational, and foregrounding ethical and political commitments, we then proceed to interrogate the political economy of childhood under contemporary, financialized capitalism, suggesting this can open up lines of inquiry and offer critical ways to address new, and more invasive/pervasive, means of capital accumulation and the concomitant heightening of inequities.

In so doing, our point is not to engage in a zero-sum game of replacing one ontology, scale, or ‘turn’ with another. At root, we make the deceptively simple point that the complexity and dynamism of life itself necessitates making a ‘cut’ around the object of study, and demands of us decisions as to the theoretical and conceptual resources we mobilize: *What kind of child do we choose to bring into light? What kinds of inclusions and what kinds of exclusions result from our choices?* We do not suggest that the issues we raise in this Introduction are the only lines of inquiry in childhood studies. In offering an explicit reimagining of ontology and new imaginings of the contemporary political economy of childhood, we set out to make the case that these have a crucial role to play in advancing the intellectual and political project which is childhood

studies, including in providing the basis for interventions which have preferable material consequences for children and those human and non-human others with whom they live their lives.

REIMAGINING CHILDHOOD STUDIES WITH RELATIONAL ONTOLOGIES

Though not explicitly discussing issues of ontology, a number of the chapters in this volume argue for the need to turn our attention to the relational and interdependent aspects of children's lives as well as the ethics and politics which characterize them. Cordero (this volume) argues for the need to rethink the child legal subject, abandoning the 'petrous ontology' of the independent legal subject and moving towards an interdependently autonomous one who is a full-fledged rights-holder and duty-bearer. Balagopalan (this volume) offers her own critique of the autonomous, independent child-subject of contemporary childhood studies and argues for a non-sovereign kind of relationality based on an ethics of responsibility towards others, while Oswell (this volume) makes the case for an expanded political vision for, and on the basis of, childhood studies, which would also include infancy by accounting for infrastructures and supports, vulnerabilities and solidarities. Together with these contributors we explore what it might mean for childhood studies to rethink its object of inquiry—the child—with relational ontologies.

Of course, the field's concerns with ontology are not new. The 'new paradigm' was in many ways a reaction to the essentialist ontologizing of the child by the developmental and socialization theories which preceded it. In the early 1980s, Chris Jenks expressed his clear dissatisfaction with the ontological assumptions which guided much of the scholarly thinking until then: "It is as if the basic ontological questions, 'What is a child?', "How is the child

possible as such?’ were, so to speak, answered in advance of the theorizing and then dismissed” (1982:10). The ‘new paradigm’ offered a fresh and welcomed answer to the ontological question by positioning the child as socially constructed rather than universal, as a reflexive, social actor rather than a passive presence within overwhelming structural determinations, and as an individual whose very ontological existence needed to be acknowledged as independent and autonomous. The ‘new paradigm’ also offered a set of methodological tools that would help bring forth this new ontological understanding of the child through a commitment to the use of qualitative methodologies which would highlight children’s voices and agency in the local contexts of their everyday lives. But despite these early ontological concerns of the field, its social constructionist orientation and emphasis on epistemology have largely failed to move discussions on ontology beyond the agentic child.

Without downplaying the critical insights of the cultural turn, the call of the ‘ontological turn’ is to embrace a more expansive terrain where human, non-human and technological forces are recognized as entangled in the constitution of the social world, and producing knowledge about its character. What the ontological turn offers is the theoretical possibility of recognizing the materiality of life while understanding that discourse is entangled with, produced by and productive of, this materiality. A concern with the ‘real’—the material presences of life—as these acquire their status within discursive fields of meaning and power, is what is of interest here. It signals, in this way, a move from a concern with categories and essences to emergence stemming from children’s relational encounters with the world. Asking us to rethink our ontological commitments and certainties, this theoretical orientation takes us back to that basic question of the field: “How is the child possible?” The question invites us to reimagine the child,

not by reducing our understanding to essentialist assertions but through a fresh look at matters of ontology which highlight the complexity of the child. Placing childhood and children within this larger relational field of human, non-human, and technological forces we are led to explore their becomings as necessarily and inevitably interdependent “on other bodies and matter (Hultman and Lenz Taguchi 2010:525, 531; see also Balagopalan, this volume and Cordero, this volume)”, as well as social relations which both precede and are transformed through this intra-activity but without resorting to romantic claims about authenticity (Rautio 2014:471-472). These becomings are not without history as Balagopalan (this volume) shows, nor are they free from social, cultural, economic and all other kinds of constraints. But, and this is the important point here, they are nevertheless constitutive of change, however small or slow it may, at times, be.

This kind of relational ontologizing signals a shift from a view of children as individual, bounded entities and independent units of analysis to an understanding of children as ontological becomings: what matters is not what they are but how they affect and are affected in the event assemblages they find themselves in (see Barad 2007; Fox and Alldred 2017; Lee 2001). Relational ontologizing also signals a shift from childhood as an identity category to the practices which enact it as a particular kind of phenomenon: from what childhood is to how childhood is done. These shifts, to the extent that they inspire empirical and theoretical work, are in many ways attempts to decenter children and childhood and to contribute to childhood studies’ overcoming of its child-centeredness and inward-looking gaze (see Spyrou 2017; see also Beauvais, this volume). To decenter children and childhood through relational ontologizing is precisely to identify and examine those entangled relations which materialize, surround, and exceed children as entities and childhood as a phenomenon diversely across time and space.

Alanen (2017:149) has recently noted that “to encourage a turn to ontology in this sense means to invite childhood scholars to study and to think ‘deeply’ of their philosophies of science”, and indeed the nature of ‘reality’. A move towards a reflexive and critical consideration of knowledge practices may contribute towards childhood studies’ development as a critical field which is not merely aware of its own limits and biases but is also capable of making political and ethical choices. Anne Marie Mol (see 1999 and 2002) argues for the need to acknowledge ontological multiplicity insisting that it is our practices which enact particular realities (Mol 1999:75). Because our knowledge practices are performative we are, as researchers, *partly* responsible for “the world’s differential becoming” (Barad 2007:91) through the material-semiotic configurations we make possible and bring into being through our ontological assumptions and epistemological choices including particular methods for studying the social (Law 2004; Ruppert, Law and Savage 2013:33; Fox and Alldred 2017).

A turn to ontological enactments therefore reintroduces the childhood researcher into the research assemblage, not simply as a reflexive figure capable of critically assessing her positionality and biases but as an entangled and co-constitutive presence in the assemblage which produces knowledge—her physical presence, her preferred methods of data collection and analysis, her theoretical and philosophical assumptions, and her own emotions and desires, to name just a few—are all entangled in the knowledge practices at work when investigating any particular event assemblage (Haraway 1992; Barad 2007; Hultman and Lenz Taguchi 2010; Fox and Alldred 2017). Such moves in the context of research are constitutive of the knowledge practices at work as Kontovourki and Theodorou (this volume) illustrate through their reflexive account of an interview encounter with immigrant children: their own presence as researchers

co-constituted children's subjectivation and agentive performances in ways that could not be made meaningful outside of the particular research assemblage. Thus, a move to decolonize childhood research, as Cheney (this volume) suggests, through the co-production of knowledge with children constitutes a disruptive intervention which might lead to other, and potentially more ethical, ways of knowing. It reconstitutes the research assemblage in such a way that new affects and effects are possible.

Inevitably, all interventions in research entail a certain kind of ontological politics (see Mol 1999; 2002; Law 2004): if reality is multiple (because entities materialize differently as a result of the multiple event assemblages they become a part of) rather than singular and if it is partially shaped by our knowledge practices (because entities materialize differently, in part, as a result of our theoretical and methodological choices) rather than existing entirely independent of them, then it is also inadvertently political (see Fox and Alldred 2017). To claim that reality may be multiple (because processes of materialization ontologize the world relationally and hence render any claims to essential entities meaningless) is not to resort back to the purely ideational; nor is the claim that our knowledge practices enact certain realities a claim that as researchers we construct reality based on our own wishes. As researchers we partake in processes of materialization: to claim otherwise is to once again pretend that we can keep the 'real' at a distance and simply describe it. As our discussion of political economy further down illustrates, we do take the materiality of life and its outcomes (e.g., multiple forms of exploitation and oppression, including expropriation as we discuss below) as the cornerstones for a critical discussion of knowledge production in childhood studies.

This demands that a critical childhood studies does not simply reflect in a retrospective manner on its ontological enactments but is cognizant and strategic about the way it chooses to exercise its politics in the first place. The ontological, when combined with the political, offers options, Mol (1999:75) tells us, so that the critical question is which, out of the multiple realities, we could enact through our knowledge practices as researchers, do we strive to bring into being (Law 2004:39). Which ontologies of childhood do we hope to enact? What particular effects, for instance, do our methodological and theoretical choices have on the knowledge we produce? And, more importantly, what difference do such realities make in children's lives? As Hekman puts it:

“We can compare those material consequences and make arguments about which ones are more useful. We will not convince everyone with these arguments. We cannot appeal to an objective reality to trump the argument. But we have something to argue *about* (Hekman 2008:112; emphasis in the original).”

If childhood studies is to be ethically committed in relation to its knowledge practices it will have to grapple with the relativist inclinations of its social constructionist thinking and opt for political interventions with preferred material effects on children's lives. Enacting an ontology of the child as a vulnerable victim versus one where the child is a reflexive agent, as in the ongoing debate on child soldiers, can clearly have diverse material consequences on children's present and future. Rosen (2007), for example, has shown how children who participate in the military as soldiers and engage in violence are often denied by humanitarian organizations and international law their agency and considered to be simply victims who are coerced into participating. This is so even when both the historical and anthropological evidence

on children's participation in the military suggests otherwise; that is, that children often participate in the military willingly and do so with a sense of pride. To claim that these children are capable of making their own decisions rather than being coerced by adults is to enact a particular ontology of childhood—the child-as-actor—which considers the child, like the adult, as a being, while to claim that these children are vulnerable is to enact a very different ontology which considers them as fundamentally different from adults, as incapable of making their own rational choices, in short, an ontology of the child as a developmental becoming. Each position entails both a political and an ethical stance which may, in real life, result in diverse material effects on these children's lives, interfering, for instance, to 'save' them in one instance, considering them and treating them as no different from other (adult) soldiers, in another instance. This is an illustration of how childhood studies scholarship may offer more nuanced accounts of children's lives by attending to the multiple ontologies at work, challenging in this way simplistic and uproblematized forms of knowledge which insist on specific and immutable understandings of what a child is (see Spyrou 2018:214). In a similar vein, bringing into focus the *indebted child* (see our discussion further down) in the context of heightening global inequalities and wealth concentration through a systematic account of the relational processes which materialize her, entails a certain kind of ethical and political positioning which informs rather than detracts from the knowledge produced.

Thinking with relational ontologies in childhood studies also signals a willingness to reflexively experiment and rethink the very concepts and tools we use to understand children and their worlds by allowing our empirical materials and the contingencies of daily life to offer us new possibilities about what things are and what they could be. Producing alterity through

ontology—whether in the face of the post-colonial child (see Balagopalan, this volume), the queer child (see Bernardini, this volume) or the disabled child (see Wickenden, this volume)—can therefore result in knowledge which is not simply different but also carries political and ethical commitments which can make a difference in children’s lives (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Hekman 2008).

SCALE AND SCALE-MAKING IN CHILDHOOD STUDIES

To rethink childhood studies’ object of inquiry—the child—with relational ontologies also invites reflection on a much neglected, mostly taken-for-granted referent and unproblematized dimension of knowledge production in the field, namely, scale-making. Attending to scale-making as a knowledge practice may offer an opportunity to reflect more critically on the processes by which childhood studies scales its empirical field of inquiry and to question the ontological status of the scales it uses to produce knowledge. Far from being the way things are, scales must be created through concerted effort; they must be “proposed, practiced, and evaded, as well as taken for granted“ Tsing (2005:58) reminds us, and can be used to “contextualize experience, imaginatively placing the phenomena of experience in wider (or narrower) relational fields” (Irvine 2016:214) to ultimately create hierarchies of importance and centrality through the sorting, grouping and categorizing of things, people and qualities (Carr and Lempert 2016:3).

Scaling-up or scaling down can provide a different picture of reality though such moves do not in themselves provide necessarily a more real, complex or complete picture (see Strathern 2004). In that sense, all scales offer a particular point of view and therefore profess a political

and ethical stance towards the world; they are, in other words, ideological though they are rarely, if ever, explicitly addressed as such by the implicated actors, researchers included. But the fact that there is nothing inherently more real at one scalar level as compared to another does not prevent the kind of ideological work which enlists specific ontological, epistemological, political and ethical discourses to justify and naturalize particular scale-making projects. Such was indeed the case with the ‘new paradigm’ in childhood studies whose desire to document the competent, agentic child signaled the scale of choice as the local, micro context of children’s everyday activity. This meant, however, that other potential scales of interest, such as the macro political-economic scale (see our extended discussion of political economy in the next section; see also Hart and Boyden, this volume; Ansell 2009) would find limited resonance among the committed followers of the ‘new paradigm’ who saw an ethical and political imperative to make visible what was, until then, ignored in research—namely, children’s status as beings rather than developmental becomings.

Despite their centrality in elaborating a more critical understanding of knowledge production, questions about scale-making have yet to capture childhood studies’ imagination. Ansell’s (2009) attempt to rethink scale for childhood studies by exploring the multiple connections children have with a spatially and temporally diverse world made up of events, policies, or discourses which often lie beyond their immediate environments is a notable exception and an invitation for the field to attend to scale-making more seriously. We take this invitation to reflect on scale-making in childhood studies as a call to ‘play with scale’ (see Sánchez-Eppler, this volume), to experiment with new sets of knowledge practices at different scales and to enact new ontologies which allow for more politically responsible and ethically

sensitive understandings of children and childhood. Far from being an exercise in perspectivism, to ‘play with scale’ is to engage in scale-making and to rethink the ontological, epistemological and ethical assumptions at work (see, for example, Kraftl and Horton, this volume, who argue for a more expansive temporal and spatial scale for the entire field that would help rethink childhood studies’ remit in the Anthropocene; and both Sánchez-Eppler and Balagopalan, this volume, for efforts to trans-navigate scale in ways that challenge a cartographic bifurcation of the world into core-periphery or North-South at the same time as remaining vigilant about the ongoing violence of the colonial project and empire).

In the next section, we invite readers to consider with us what ‘playing with scale’ might mean for the field. In recognizing that the scale and ontology being brought into being in childhood studies is easily taken up by, or even bolsters, the project of neoliberalism, we take our cue here from Fraser (2009) and flag up the importance of disrupting our field’s “uncanny double” by keeping abreast of the changing social, economic, and political circumstances of global capitalism, which until now has been of limited concern in much contemporary childhood studies. By engaging with recent theorizing on financialized capitalism, we participate in a scale-making that neither occupies the macro-global of traditional political economy nor the preferred micro-local scale of childhood studies, but scale-jumps between and across them. Conscious that the scalar and ontological choices we make have import, we do so to illustrate the dynamic entanglements between generational social relations and contemporary patterns of accumulation, as well as to consider what role we allow, produce and desire for childhood studies in such contexts. Indeed, to do otherwise risks adding momentum to childhood studies’ “uncanny double”.

REIMAGINING THROUGH CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL ECONOMY

We are not alone in making demands on the field to think children and childhood through political economy. In her ground breaking essay, Sharon Stephens (1995, 20) argued that children's lives and the child figure are impacted by global forces *and* a crucial site for "exploring capitalist society and its historical dynamic". Similarly, Sue Ruddick (2003, 337) argues that "far from being a byproduct of capitalism in its various phases, youth and childhood can be located at its literal and figurative core". She demonstrates, for example, that the experiment with part-time and part-year jobs for young people in the USA in the 1970s, based on assumptions of the malleable and schooled child, was one of the sites where today's flexible labor practices were tested and entrenched.

At the heart of their, and others' (e.g. see also Hart and Boyden, this volume), arguments are not only the conviction that political economic understandings are crucial for understanding childhood, but that without attending to children and childhood understandings of global capitalism are impoverished. As Anna Tsing (2009) demonstrates, the figures we use to think through social processes allow us to do different sorts of conceptual work and are productive of different conclusions. With Stephens and Ruddick, we suggest that thinking through the figure of the child, and the real beings we call children, has much to add to understandings of the variations, expansions, and dynamism of capital. In building on this work, what we are proposing is a sustained engagement with recent developments and debates in the social sciences and cognate disciplines which highlight the specificities of this conjuncture and seek innovative ways

to move beyond the false divisions between political economy and the cultural turn of the late 20th century. More specifically, what is distinctive about our approach is the centring of attention on changing patterns of *capital accumulation* and the relational ontologies this brings into being. Our reimagining involves placing regimes of accumulation at the heart of our studies of the child/children/childhood and by corollary moving the child/children/childhood from the margins of scholarship on financialized capitalism. We add to our ongoing preoccupation with ontological concerns about what makes the child as such possible, the question: ‘How are the child, children, childhood constituted by, and involved in the constitution of, financialized capitalism?’ This is not to simply mobilize the child as an object for our own enlightenment. Attending to child figure and the way she is generated by the social relations of financialized capitalism offers insights into child subjectivities and the changing institution of childhood, as well as offering richer conceptualisations of contemporary processes of accumulation.

We situate these arguments within a widening consensus in the wake of the 2008/2009 financial crisis and widening politics of austerity that social theory must re-engage with political economy. The proliferation of interest in the finance sector can be understood as part of the effort to account for the seismic transformations of social life since the post-Bretton Woods period when the gold standard was abandoned. Referred to alternatively as the financialization of daily life (Martin 2002), debt society (Lazzarato 2011), and financialized capitalism (Fraser 2016), this is a periodizing concept which draws attention to the increased portion of global economic activity which is located in the finance sector, as opposed to, *inter alia*, land, industrial production, and the service sector. From student loans for education, to payday or credit card loans to cover the costs of social reproduction in contexts of massive state retrenchment, or

repayment obligations incurred through World Bank micro-financing projects, debt is now omnipresent. Individual, municipal, and sovereign debt lies at the heart of financialized capitalism, with securitisation, the bundling and slicing of debts for trade on the market, becoming the dominant form of accumulation since the 1970s (Adkins 2017). Financialized capitalism simultaneously refers to ‘the way financial measurements, ideas, processes, techniques, metaphors, narratives, values and tropes migrate beyond the financial sector and transform other areas of society’ (Haiven 2014, 1). Here, the language of the market, technologies and practices of securitization, as well as the shifting of relations of exploitation to those between distant financiers and (often impoverished) debtors instantiate new types of subjects ensnared by possible futures created through debt (Adkins 2017). We ‘invest’ in our relationships sometimes in the hope of long term ‘returns’ or ‘owe debts’ to people in our social networks, with middle class childhoods increasingly tied to and enacted in such terms. Schools and early childhood programmes are treated as sites for ‘investing in children’, or more precisely their ‘human capital’, with the World Bank even offering an ‘early childhood calculator’ for quantifying profits from investment programs (Penn 2011).

What is notable about much of the recent political economic theorising is that this is not a return to either a benign market logic inhabited by rationally choosing actors, nor is it a reinvocation of deterministic base-superstructure models. Instead, this work attempts to work with the lessons from the cultural turn with its emphasis on intersectional subjectivities, socio-cultural vernaculars, and struggles for hegemony. As such, this scholarship is productive for childhood studies both for its insistent historicity and the wider conceptual apparatus that it introduces. Notwithstanding the inevitable debates occurring within this vast body of work, here

we tease out some key themes and trajectories in a culturally-inflected political economy, focusing on those which have particular purchase for reimagining childhood studies.

Efforts have come from several directions to de-naturalize ‘the economy’. Critiques take issue with the depiction of the economy as a simple moniker for market-based activity in more (neo)liberal accounts, or the site of commodity production in more orthodox Marxist accounts. This new work does not separate ‘economic’ practices from other life world activities, reduce the economy to a certain set of motivators for social action (e.g. calculability, gain), or pre-determine actors (e.g. wage earners) and mechanisms. In their effort to ‘rethink the economy’, for instance, Narotzky and Besnier (2014, s5) propose a definition that includes “all the processes that are involved, in one fashion or the other, in ‘making a living,’” as well as a concern with making lives *worth* living across generations. They draw attention to the effort, value(s), and power differentials involved in such activity. This understanding, and here they acknowledge their ‘debt’ to feminist scholarship on care and reproductive labor, highlights the importance of the reproduction of life itself for people, but also for capital, therefore marking this as a site of conflicting value(s).

Such an opening of ‘the economy’ is also evident in works on the financialization of everyday life. Haiven (2014, 4), for example, draws attention to the way that subjectivities, social relations, creative agency, and social practices are produced, enacted, and “conscripted into an increasingly sophisticated order of capitalist accumulation”. In a particularly relevant example, he traces the lucrative Pokemon phenomenon, arguing that its success is – in part – due to its resonance with financialization. It involves a repertoire of “zealous” (113) accumulation and speculative trading, “merg[ed] with a militaristic theme” (115), at the same time valorizing

creative expression and individual preferences as long as they don't interfere with the market. Haiven's broader point is that financialized capitalism is not just 'out there', imposed on people. Working with notions of economic performativity (e.g. see Callon 2010), where expectations and predictions shape rather than map finance, he argues that financialization is a 'bottom up' process made in everyday life. Here a tight web of matter (e.g. Pokeman cards), possible subjectivities (e.g. self-accruing personhood), relations of competition and appropriation embedded in the casino economy, and long-standing efforts to expand markets to the playful and creative consumer child, combine to materialize the Pokeman phenomenon and its child subject. At the same time, Haiven insists that we need to account for domination and stratification. This requires simultaneously holding on to understandings that financialization is used by capital as a 'fix' for its crises of overproduction, where debt, for example, facilitates continuing consumption by the increasingly impoverished working class despite wage stagnation and serves as a mechanism for generating profit through debt servicing and ever-new financial products.

These insights are important for childhood studies, not least because they indicate that in order to be attentive to the political economy we do not need to focus on particular groups (e.g. *working* children). Such sectors are surely important, but they need not exhaust our focus. Further, these insights suggest that just because social and legal decrees mean that many children are precluded from wage work, trading on the market, and holding debt or income in their own right, this does not mean that their lives are irrelevant for political economic consideration. No singular site or scale is the site of the political economy; financialized capitalism is just as 'real' in the operations of the market as in the play of children. What appears to be a bigger picture (e.g. 'global capitalism') is really another depiction of reality which is rendered possible through

scalar aggregation. For instance, the impoverishment experienced by children at a local site is aggregated by a statistical service to create a numerical reality which is, however, neither bigger nor more complex than the experiences of impoverishment collected by the ethnographer in her encounters with poor children. Beyond recognition that the multi-scalar levels in which financialized capitalism effects and is produced, we suggest that childhood occupies a central place in political economy. ‘The economy’, in this broad understanding, is animated by temporalities of nostalgia and dreams, often heavily inflected with generational anxieties (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). This reconfiguring of intimate relationships via speculative temporalities, and the existential concerns this produces, borrows from and materializes the trope of child as the embodiment of such futures (as Clementine Beauvais explores, this volume). Still here, we recognize the classed nature of such imaginaries and their productivities. While privileged children are “niche-marketed to secure success in the insecure future”, working class children become the seemingly disposable “waste” or detritus of financialised futures, to mobilize Cindi Katz’s (2008, 10) powerful metaphors. Often deeply tied to systemic racism and anti-migrant sentiment, as in the ‘school to prison’ or ‘school to deportation to export processing zone’ pipeline, this is a harsh reminder that debt-spurred dreams cannot evade the structural conditionalities of children’s lives.

A second, and connected, emerging conceptualization lies in the insistence on the centrality of the historical and spatial dynamism of capitalism, rather than a reliance on pre-determined models. Local cultures of kinship, varying cultures of production and divisions of labour, colonial histories and the neo-colonial contemporary combine in what has been called ‘vernacular capitalism’ (Birla 2009). Rather than aberrations from a ‘true’ capitalism, such

vernaculars highlight emerging and contradictory forms of capital, as well as how these become stitched together, albeit in often fragile forms. For childhood studies, this implies starting our investigations with people's life projects, their efforts to make lives worth living, tracing outward lines of value, economic and moral, as well as accumulation, rather than imposing abstract logics of global scale. Cindi Katz's (2004) seminal study linking children's lives in Howa, Sudan, and New York City is a remarkable example of such efforts to examine the impact of global economic restructuring across spatial-temporal scales. Financialized capital has wrought marked changes on relations between states and increasingly transnational governance structures, markets, and families, in the process creating new conditions of childhood. Reminiscent of Haiven's *Pokemon children of financialized capitalism*, children in Howa engaged in play emboldened by the introduction of consumerism and monetization, "domesticat[ing] capitalism as they outfitted themselves as new subjects of its terms" (102). In New York, global restructuring shifted the costs of social reproduction away from the state, making impoverished children's futures "moot" and rendering them sources of accumulation through rentierism. Katz depicts diverse childhoods, without losing site of their interstices, using attention to scale and political economy as a way to make these relations visible.

In an era of financialized capitalism, a focus on debt and reproductive labour is one fruitful avenue for childhood studies to continue such explorations (see Rosen and Newberry 2018), although by no means the only. Mass indebtedness has become increasingly necessary for assuring everyday existence as well as making lives worth living into the future. As Sylvia Federici (2014) points out, this changes the temporality of accumulation linked to reproductive labor. While feeding, clothing, cleaning, caring for, and socializing others is directly tied to

accumulation in that, among the working classes, these activities are involved in reproducing workers for capital, in both daily and longer term temporalities, debt has meant that “many reproductive activities have now become immediate sites of capital accumulation” (Federici 2014, 233). Here Federici is referring to both the provision of social reproduction by private companies (in some cases because of state retrenchment), which is paid for through debt, and accumulation through debt servicing and the explosion of securities trading.

For childhood studies, this prompts questions that we have largely neglected through our scalar and ontological choices, such as: What are the different ways that we can understand debt through the child figure? What childhoods are engendered in the changing relations between matter, discourse, value(s) and process of accumulation in varying contexts? By asking such questions prompted by new scholarship on financialized capitalism we make possible, indeed enact, very different types of children to the always-already active and innovative child-as-agent. For instance, we might explore *the child born of debt*, considering how her life is made and sustained through familial debt as well as how she serves, in the anticipatory imaginaries that make indebtedness possible, as a symbol of hope for brighter futures. We could study the *indebted child*, considering the ways that children in different contexts take up debts in the form of student loans, debts owed and paid to families through migratory remittances (Heidbrink 2014), or as a shared member of an indebted household with the anticipation that debt will be a constant companion into the future (Horton 2015). As Adkins (2017) points out, a key feature of contemporary debt is that it is no longer premised on a temporality of repayment at a final point in the not too distant future, but ongoing debt servicing into unpredictable futures. We might consider the *child as debt*, exploring the ways that ‘investing in children’, a sustained effort on

the part of both children and adults, is premised on borrowing from the future adult the child will become. Here, the temporality of accumulation is perhaps slowed down, until ‘quality enhanced’ labour power of working class children and adults (Rikowski 2003) enters the wage nexus. Alternatively, this can bring into focus relational questions of gender and generation where the idealized *subject of investment* (the child) is linked to the idealized feminized *subject of debt*. Financial institutions are increasingly seeking to apprehend women’s strategies for survival in precarious economic conditions, such as their (real and imagined) steadfastness and reliability in relation to obligations to children and their social networks, as systems for self-management and policing of others, all to ensure debt servicing obligations are met (Federici 2014). Such explorations, prompted by relational ontologizing, have often been downplayed, despite their enormous significance, or even depicted as intrinsic antagonisms between women and children, undercutting the possibility of intergenerational solidarities (Rosen and Newberry 2018).

An insistence on the vernacular also gestures to diversity, and its stratifications, as central to global capitalist projects – not mere happenstance (Tsing 2009). Here we turn to Nancy Fraser’s (2016) work on the interstices of racism and capitalism. While concurring with Marx’s analysis of exploitation as the private appropriation of the surplus value produced by ostensibly free workers, she makes the case that at least as central to accumulation is ‘expropriation’. Rather than working through wage labour, expropriation involves ‘confiscation’ of land, labour, and human beings including organs and reproductive capacities, and ‘conscription into capitalist circuits of value’ either directly, such as through slavery, or indirectly, such as through debt or unwaged reproductive labour. Other contemporary examples include: home and land foreclosures or appropriation, residential and school segregation, and lack or underfunding of

public services. Expropriation is key to accumulation for obvious reasons: it provides resources and labour that capitalists do not (fully) pay for. This is not, however, simply an economic distinction but a political one made through concerted effort: between the free worker and the dependent subject, who are often institutionally and legally defined by their relationally-produced differences. In contrast to ‘free’ workers, the expropriated are unfree, non-waged, and dependent subjects, including colonized subjects and those who do not have independent legal status, such as children (see also Arce, this volume). Fraser roughly traces the shifting relationship between exploitation and expropriation, arguing that in the current era of financialized capitalism we are increasingly seeing a hybrid figure: “The expropriable-and-exploitable citizen-worker, formally free but acutely vulnerable” (Fraser 2016, 176). Introducing such concepts into childhood studies can help to materialize deeply historicized assemblages of social class, the legal and political status of childhood, and new regimes of accumulation.

The complexity of these interconnections is certainly relevant for childhood studies, as the queer youth of colour who act as Bernardini’s interlocutors (this volume) demonstrate with their refusal to be pinned down as expropriable-victim-subjects whilst deeply aware of the structural vulnerabilities which shape their lives. They make short work of childhood studies’ ‘go to’ concept of agency as self-possession, which offers little by way of understanding the relational fields in which financialized capitalism and contemporary subjects emerge. The political economic processes which make the expropriable-and-exploitable subject are further helpful, we suggest, for interrogating the reproduction and dynamism of adult-child generational distinctions, rather than simply mapping their contours (Mizen 2002). The concept of expropriation allows us to materialize ontologies of childhood which are fundamentally linked to

capital accumulation, and therefore engage in knowledge practices which can elaborate their rupture.

CONCLUSION

In this introductory chapter, we offer our own attempt at reimagining childhood studies alongside the contributors to this volume. In the process of reflecting on and writing this piece we asked ourselves: *How can childhood studies move beyond its current, limited and limiting preoccupation with the independent, monadic and agentic child on which its own very identity as a project seems to rest? What would childhood studies look like if the 'child' was located somewhere other than at the center? How can scholarship and practice take seriously the political presence of living, biographical children while also implementing a wide scalar and temporal view (extending to past and future) of the worlds in which they exist and from which they arise?* Admittedly, such questions may never be answerable in any simple manner, but we felt they must be posed if only to beget initially unsure, hesitant responses.

We have suggested that thinking about childhood through relational ontologies may help the field to rethink its very object of inquiry—the child/childhood—in ways that counteract its own inward tendencies and release the hold of its fixation with the agentic child. A move to decenter children and childhood through a relational perspective, we argued, can also offer childhood studies an opportunity to expand its scope of inquiry and to rethink the ethics and politics of its knowledge practices. Our scales of choice, for instance, and the work they do through our knowledge practices illustrate how the field can experiment with new ways of knowing that tackle some of its blind spots. Our discussion of childhood under financialized

capitalism (as one instance of such a blind spot) illustrates not only the centrality of childhood in political economy but also the need to disrupt the field's 'uncanny double' by turning our attention to the way our field might contribute to, or at least serve to unwittingly justify, wider developments of global capitalism and their impact on children's lives. Without losing sight of the local, a rescaling of the field's empirical project in this sense can bring forth worlds and relations that are both different and consequential. Our interventions in children's worlds through the knowledge we produce, however limited can, we suggested, be mindful and reflexive about the material consequences they have on children's lives.

As a dynamic scholarly field and practice, childhood studies has much to offer to the human sciences and beyond. Overcoming the desire to 'own the child' need not weaken the field's intellectual and political project. On the contrary, we feel that such a move might re-energize it through cross-fertilization. Being open and receptive to dialogue with what lies beyond—to borrow and integrate but to also offer and contribute—is not only a sign of intellectual maturity for a field but also a bold affirmation for its *raison d'être*. The project of reimagining childhood studies no doubt looms larger than this attempt in *Reimagining Childhood Studies* wherein the contributions, individually and collectively, strive to reach beyond extant boundaries of thought and conception to venture elsewhere. In the end, we feel each of us faces the challenge—in our own ways, our own spheres, our own work—to move past the 'child' without recklessly leaving childhood behind. Recognizing the limits of any attempt at reimagining a field, and the sense of humility that comes with attempting to do so, we nevertheless feel that at this particular moment in childhood studies' trajectory such attempts

may provide impetus for new explorations, and not just any explorations, but ones that matter for the historical times in which we live.