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To cite this article: Sevasti-Melissa Nolas (2021): Childhood publics in search of an audience: reflections on the children's environmental movement, Children's Geographies, DOI: [10.1080/14733285.2021.1906405](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2021.1906405)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2021.1906405>



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Published online: 25 Mar 2021.



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Childhood publics in search of an audience: reflections on the children's environmental movement

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ABSTRACT

The essay reflects on the children's environmental movement from the perspective of cultural theory, as well as the authors' own and others' research on children's encounters, experiences and engagement in public life. The concepts of political knowingness, childhood publics, and listening publics are evoked to think through the surprise that the children's environmental movement generated in the public sphere. The idiom is positioned as an audience 'hearing aid' for turning babbling into political messages. In so doing we find that the messages from the children's environmental movement are not out of place in the current humanities and social sciences literatures on the Anthropocene.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 August 2020
Accepted 15 March 2021


KEYWORDS

Childhood publics; activism;
animals; nature; listening;
political knowingness

When in 2019 school children around the world took to the streets of major cities and rural areas, the general feeling was one of surprise. Surprise that children were protesting for the climate and their futures, that both these topics might be something that would mobilise children and young people, as well as surprise that *children* themselves could mobilise. In the press, these events were largely covered with no historical awareness of the genealogies of activism in childhood (for an exception see Guber 2018). Such activism has tended to coalesce around issues that were salient to children according to the historical conjectures and socio-economic changes they lived through. Working children of the past and of the present are often active participants in labour movements (Liebel and Invernizzi 2019), and when educational reforms reproduce structural inequalities and racisms students will take to the streets and/or occupy their schools (Kruger 2017; Nolas et al. 2016).

Most of the public narrative around children's mobilisation for environmental justice conformed with well-trodden public scripts of activism (e.g. the lone warrior, the personality activist) and considerable attention and column inches were spent on trying to discredit the agency of lead activists (e.g. Greta Thunberg), to establish political naïveté and children's manipulation by their parents or malign political movements. Children's public claim-making, and the political knowingness that underscored it, was perplexing to many onlookers, as was the materialisation of a childhood publics (Nolas 2015).

In this short essay I reflect on these responses of surprise, and the move to discredit, from the perspective of cultural theory, as well as my own and others' research on the politics, practices, and lived experiences of children's political encounters. Many of the examples I write about come from the Connectors Study, a cross-national multimodal ethnography in three cities (Athens, Hyderabad, London)¹ that explored the relationship between childhood and public life with six- to nine-year-olds, which I led between 2014 and 2019.

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Political knowingsness

When I started recruiting children to the Connectors Study in London in autumn 2014, one of the primary school head teachers who agreed to support our recruitment efforts, told me that I could advertise the study in her school but only to Year 2 students (six-and-a-half to seven-and-a-half years old in England). She would not allow me to reach out to parents and children from Year 1 (five-and-a-half to six-and-a-half year olds) because and I quote ‘I don’t think you’ll find very much, they are very little, it’s all about animals at that age, [the study] would be about the parents’ (Head Teacher, December 2014). At the time, the comment struck me enough to record it in my fieldnotes but its implications would not become clear until much later.

The Head’s dismissal of animals as a legitimate political concern was not untypical. My conversations with many of the children on the study left me feeling dismayed at my own abysmal knowledge of the natural world. I became acutely aware of my own initial failure to imagine that the categories of ‘environment’ and ‘politics’ might overlap for children too, as they do for so many adults.

If we think of research practice, and the act of designing a study, as a form of listening, or a disposition towards listening, reflecting on some of these logics of practice is instructive. For example, we asked children to take photographs of ‘the things that matter to you’. The term ‘things’ is a category I like very much for its openness and potential, the referent could be *anything*: we can imagine the category of the ‘thing’ as a container to be filled, in this case, with whatever matters. But the term can also be ambiguous (‘what do you mean by things?’) so in order to give a light steer, we explained to the study children that ‘things’ could be people, places, events, and objects. We made no reference to either animals or nature.

As we got to know the children in the study, and got to know their thing-containers, we found that many of those were filled with pets and landscapes, stories and photographs about animals and nature, real and stuffed, in existence or imagined. The Head’s dismissal and our experiences of ‘surprise’ at just how much of the non-human world filled those thing-containers, lead my colleagues and I to reflect on the ways that we might improve our practices of paying attention to the voices and expression of childhood; and we returned to our data with different eyes and ears.

Children’s more-than-human worlds

Animals and nature were a big part of many of the children’s lives. Many of the children had a pet. During the fieldwork new pets joined the families and pets who had been part of the family for many years died. Some animals or pets that children encountered also had accidents and recovered and children explained to us how they helped them recover. We heard stories of bears, pigs, tigers, turtles, horses, eagles, baboons, canaries, donkeys, penguins, cats and dogs. Echoing previous research findings on pets in the family (Charles and Davies 2017; Morrow 1998; Tipper 2011), some children told us that if their pets were human, they would be their mum or dad, or a good friend. They told us that their pets made them feel safe. Children cared about protecting their pet’s identities in the pictures they took of them. Children talked of animals as being able to keep them company when they felt lonely or bored. Animals had personalities according to children. Children also told us about the adventures and funny things their pets got up to.

The Connectors Study crossed the boundaries of ethnographic research and public engagement work. Our various research methods (walking, talking, mapping, photographing, playing, cf. Vavantakis and Nolas 2019) constituted both data collection methods understood in the traditional way, as well as boundary objects (Leigh Star and Griesemer 1989), concrete and abstract ‘things’ that can belong to multiple social worlds (Stoytcheva 2013), that served to translate private matters into public issues (Mills 1959). I call this publics creating methodologies.

For example, we developed a visual storying method that translated data, the photographs that children took of the things that mattered to them, into photo-stories, artefacts that could be and

were publicly exhibited² in each of the three study cities (Varvantakis, Nolas, and Aruldoss 2019; Nolas et al. 2017). Many of the children in the study chose to make their photo-stories about their own pet or another animal they had met. Many of the children also spoke about nature and the environment in similar ways, as something that made children feel happy, that they needed to care and to be concerned about.

Meanwhile, the Children's Photography Archive,³ one of the study's unintended outputs, is full of the photographs that children on the study took of animals⁴ and nature⁵ both in children's home cities as well as on their trips elsewhere. The photographs in the Children's Photography Archive suggest that children's concern for the non-human world is very much part of their everyday lives. The non-human world can also overlap with the political. A number of the children across the three cities expressed their care for the world through animals and nature, talking about animal/nature sanctuaries and raising money for environmental causes. Taken together, these photographs, the stories that accompany them, as well as other conversations during fieldwork, communicate something of children's 'political knowingness' on the environment.

Tuning devices and messages that resonate

As those who live and work with young children especially will recognise, such knowingness is very rarely communicated in registers of political expression that we might expect of a public sphere (spoken word, turn taking, argumentation). Political knowingness in childhood is largely idiomatic (Nolas, Aruldoss, and Varvantakis 2019): it commands an attention to the embodied and experiential dimensions of meaning-making, the registers of stories, gestures, gazes, moves, and affects of children's communication. It is a register of knowing that can be easy to miss and dismiss on a one-to-one or small group level 'like the babble of voices to the new arrival in a far-flung airport' (Kushner 2000, 49). When it coalesces into a movement the public response might be one of surprise.

When Friday for Futures hit the media, I was not surprised. I had already lived through my own moment of surprise. Instead, given everything we had heard and seen from children on the study, School Strike for Climate made sense. It made sense because of everything we had heard from children about animals and nature and because we had spent five years thinking of children as a *publics*: a situational configurations of strangers who are brought together through things that matter to them.

Greta Thunberg, Luisa Neubauer and Milou Albrecht, and the young women of colour whose names did not make it into the mainstream media^{6,7} like Xiye Bastida, Jayden Foytlin, Leah Namugerwa, Artemisa Xakriabá, Autumn Peltier, Isra Hirsi and Ridhima Pandey, as well as many other anonymous to the public children and young people internationally, galvanised a movement that was in waiting, ready to take shape (cf. Bayat 2009). What these women were saying in public had found an audience. A very big audience of other children and young people whose idiom had formed a message that resonated.

The kids are alright. But the element of surprise and move to discredit needs further complexification.

Babble interlude

(I)

In May 2017 I was visiting Athens with my family. During this time, Documenta14⁸ was taking place in Athens. Documenta is an exhibition of contemporary art that takes place in Kassel, Germany every five years. In 2017 half of the event, controversially, moved to Athens to focus on 'learning from Athens' in the midst of the so-called 'Greek crisis'.⁹ Documenta14 described itself

as not [being] owned by anyone in particular. It is shared among its visitors and artists, readers and writers, as well as all those whose work made it happen.¹⁰ It is in other words, a publics.

One of the venues for the event was the Athens Conservatory, a large, imposing building of Bauhaus architecture in the city centre. As a school of music, drama and dance, the spaces inside of the building (in the basement at least), built for rehearsals and performances, are large, high ceiling spaces with ample room for experimentation in sound and movement. As we made our way to the basement, my son, four at the time, thought he had won the lottery. Having made it quite clear, in a four-year-old sort of way, that he was not happy about the visit to begin with and wanted to go home, he now raced through the corridors and adjoining rooms, doing exactly what the building was designed for: experimentation with sound.

Aaaaaaaa. Hlllllooooo. Ooooooo. He shouted into the various rooms waiting for the echo to return his voice to him. Ooooooo. Hlllllooooo. Aaaaaaaa. His echo responded.

Until he was told/we were told by one, and then two of the event volunteers, to be quiet. He was disturbing the other visitors, as well as the open rehearsal that was going on and which, as far as I could see, was encouraging audience participation. Just not an audience of a shouty and excited four-year-old.

(II)

The BBC holds a large sound archive with recordings from the 1920s until the present day. In April 2018 the archive was made open to the public for personal, educational and research use.

Amongst the 16,000 recordings are 145 entries of baby sounds (foetal heartbeat, breastfeeding, laughing, playing, waking up, crying, singing, screaming, talking nonsense, saying mummy, saying daddy, muttering, blowing raspberries, having a temper tantrum, drinking coughing); and 194 entries of children sounds (children shouting, clowns and children saying 'hello', children in playgrounds, bells ringing, playing in the streets, playing indoors, toy sounds, singing, general atmosphere of children running around, shouting and general chatter, hysterical children in class, noisy children, cheering, booing & hissing, chattering, fidgeting, 40 children on wet gravel, 2000 children outside).

Many of these recordings date back to the 1960s and 1970s, some are from the 1980s.

(III)

In September 2019 Japan Airlines announced a new booking tool that would show which seats families with infants and toddlers up to two years old had reserved so that other passengers could select their seats accordingly.

The Guardian, the UK's left of centre, liberal broadsheet, headline read 'Babies on a plane: Japan Airlines unveils tool to tackle horror of screaming infants'.¹¹

(IV)

Anon child/anytime

Why do you say 'uh huh'? You're not really listening to me, are you?

Childhood publics in search of an audience

The Connectors Study did not set off to research any specific child political expression or political concern, our attention was not honed towards issues of environmentalism. We started from a much more speculative position of looking at the relationship between childhood and public life always broadly defined. Children's politics of care and concern for the environment found us in the process

of the research, as I described in the first part of this essay. It was the potential for an auditory mishap, as is represented by the primary school Head Teacher I write about in this essay, that prompted me to broaden my range and to listen out for everyday cultural responses to the sounds of childhood.

The vignettes in the previous section prompt us to consider how infant and child sounds are encountered in everyday life, propagated through artistic spaces, national broadcasters, and digital/printed presses, without the mediation of researchers and their tuning devices.

The sounds associated with everyday childhoods are the shouting, the chatter, the crying, the singing, the screaming, the nonsense, the booing. It is sound reverberating off walls and piercing eardrums. The audience listens in 'horror' at the continuous onslaught of the babble of voices from the disruptors of some largely imagined, in most cases, peace, and seeks out the quiet by booking an airplane seat as far away as possible from the din.

Research with younger children in schools and communities corroborates this response to such sonic experiences. Children in classrooms and communities report experiences of being quietened and stilled (Kirby 2020) and 'scolded' (Aruldoss, Nolas, and Varvantakis 2021) respectively, their teachers and other members of their communities requesting their bodily conformity (Kirby 2020), their 'good' and quiet behaviour.

Kate Lacey (2013) argues that for too long listening has been neglected as an activity in the public sphere. Democratic societies place utmost importance on the 'freedom of speech' without much consideration for the necessity of an audience. In parallel, and within childhood studies and children's social policy and practice, the focus, for a long time, has been on children's voice: enabling it, promoting it, supporting it. Turning voice into speech (Oswell 2009).

The focus on the child's voice is a focus on individual subjectivity. Instead, to listen is an intersubjective act, it is an engagement in dialogue, it is a practice of creating worlds (Kanngieser 2012), and of allowing oneself to be recruited into those worlds and of being altered by them (Varvantakis and Nolas 2019). In other words: listening creates audiences and affect, it moves us, and it matters (Kershaw 1999). Such a stance returns us to what Lacey (2013) identifies as the forgotten definition of the audience: 'which etymologically clearly privileges the listening *relation* in the process of communication' (13, emphasis added). Listening as such shifts our attention away from the individual speaker and into 'the intersubjectivity of the public, plural world' (Lacey 2013, 13) rendering important 'listening publics'.

In our research, it became clear that we were the ones in need of hearing aids (but also seeing and feeling aids) to help us make sense of the din. The 'idiom' was one such a device that we came up with (Nolas, Aruldoss, and Varvantakis 2019) to turn the babble of sound into messages that mattered, to become a receptive audience and listening publics for the children in the study. This device offered us a different positioning: we listened in 'joy' as children played with their voice, laughed and giggled, sang, talked to themselves and us from morning till night, enraptured in plots, characters and narrative arcs, the sounds of smaller bodies and their minds discovering, making sense of and re-arranging the world.

We have examples of such listening publics when researchers, scholar-activists, and others, typically cultural actors (youth workers, museum workers, after-school clubs) create 'contact zones' for dialogue, for speaking and listening amongst children and young people from different communities (Askins and Pain 2011), for children and young people to address structures of oppression (Torre et al. 2012), and/or for children to be recognised as a publics in their own right with common cares and concerns (Nolas et al. 2017). Such spaces often provide short-lived, though no less meaningful, experiences of listening publics.

Becoming a 'listening publics' might involve staying with the 'surprise', what Donna Haraway might call 'staying with the trouble' (2016), and allowing ourselves to be carried off in the delight and the din of the babble of voices. This can, at times, be overwhelming and so it might be helpful to reframe listening as a relative, and not absolute activity. In everyday life, we both listen and not

listen: we tune in, we tune out; we are attentive, we are inattentive; we are present, we are absent (Nolas and Varvantakis 2021).

Public reactions to the children's environmental movement, as well as some of the vignettes in this essay, remind us that our practices of listening, both in person and when mediated, are rooted in the conditions of the present moment and continued figurations of children as both innocent and experienced, in need of protection and disciplining. These ideologies of childhood frame how we listen. The disruption to such representations might not be to call for more participation on the child's part: what the children's environmental movement tells us is that children can and are already participating in shaping their cultures and societies, with or without the support of significant others.

What we learn from the children's environmental movement, and from paying attention to children's everyday practices of care and concern, would not be out of place in the current humanities and social sciences literatures on the Anthropocene. Both the Connectors Study children and those children and young people who marched the streets on Fridays, demonstrate an understanding of the 'more-than-human' worlds (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) we live in, presenting us with an understanding of nature as already political.

In so doing, they challenge and extend received notions of 'protection', so often applied to but also missed in childhood. The ask is this: to include protection at the interstices of the human/non-human worlds for now and for the future. And in this sense, their message about environment justice could not be clearer.

Notes

1. The European Research Council funded Connectors Study (ERC-StG-335514) (2014–2019) started at the University Sussex (2014–2017) and continued at Goldsmiths, University of London (2018–2019). The study explored the relationship between childhood and public life in three cities: Athens, Greece; Hyderabad, India; London, United Kingdom. The purpose of the study was to create rich ethnographic and multimodal material on children's everyday lives, in diverse settings and during an historical period of rapid socio-economic change, in order to re-theorise children's participation and the emergence of an orientation towards social action in childhood. <https://childhoodpublics.org/projects/connectors/>.
2. <https://childhoodpublics.org/events/in-common-childrens-photo-stories-of-public-life/>.
3. The Children's Photography Archive (CPA beta) is the first archive in the world of its kind, featuring the photographs of child photographers. The archive was emerged from the Connectors Study (see above) with the beta version holding a collection of children's photography from the study. At the time of writing, and funded by the European Research Council (ERC-PoC-874454) (2020–2021), we are in the process of establishing CPA 2.0 as an open archive that can receive photographic submissions from children photographers, and projects working with children and photography (see also Nolas and Varvantakis 2019; Varvantakis and Nolas 2020) <https://childhoodpublics.org/projects/childphotoarchive/>.
4. https://cpa.childhoodpublics.org/child_theme/animals/.
5. https://cpa.childhoodpublics.org/child_theme/nature/.
6. <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/19/797298179/you-need-to-act-now-meet-4-girls-working-to-save-the-warming-world?t=1593770048002>.
7. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/climate/five-women-colour-fighting-climate-change-worldwide>.
8. <https://www.documenta14.de/en/>.
9. Further information on the background and controversy see Rikou and Yalouri (2017).
10. <https://www.documenta14.de/en/news/25596/closing>.
11. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/27/babies-on-a-plane-japan-airlines-unveils-tool-to-tackle-horror-of-screaming-infants>.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Morten Skovdal for the invitation to be part of Special Collection of Viewpoints and to the anonymous reviewer for their generous and constructive review of the essay. I would like to thank my colleagues on the Connectors Study - Christos Varvantakis, Vinnarasan Aruldoss, Claire Prater and Robyn Long, for being such an awesome group of people to think and do research with.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The Connectors Study was funded by FP7 Ideas: European Research Council [grant number ERC-StG-335514] (2014–2019) to the author.

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