Children's geographies I: Decoloniality

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Abstract
This review departs from the perception that children's geographies are theoretically 'stuck', by showing how the field's growing decolonial scholarship pushes its boundaries. Decoloniality involves delinking from Western constructs and developing pluralistic theoretical frameworks firmly grounded in the realities of marginalised childhoods. Organised around the themes of decolonial theory, praxis, and conceptualisations of childhood, the review focuses on embracing historical geographies of non-Western childhoods, developing relational and place-based methodologies, centring on childhoods on the margins of global knowledge production, addressing the interlinked marginalisation of children through colonial violence and adult dominance, and challenging the Anglo-centric modes of academic publishing.

I. Introduction

2023 marked the twentieth anniversary of the inaugural edition of the journal *Children's Geographies*, a sign that the eponymic field has left its teenage years. Nevertheless, as Khan (2021) recently highlighted, scholars continue expressing concerns about children's geographies struggling to reach maturity and being conceptually 'in-making' and 'stuck', sentiments shared with its sibling area of childhood studies (Alanen, 2019). Those depictions have been resurfacing somewhat periodically (Horton et al., 2008), and they are surely contestable, given the undeniable impact children's geographies have had both on the wider discipline of geography and the interdisciplinary realm of childhood studies (Kraftl and Horton, 2019).

An angle through which children's geographies can be deemed as 'stuck', however, is the field's strong association with the Anglo-centric academic milieu. Children's geographies took off in the 1990s from a close engagement of UK and US feminist and post-structuralist geographers with the nascent field of the New Social Studies of Childhood, a paradigm itself rooted in the UK and Northern European sociology and anthropology, centred on the rejection of biological models of child development psychology, and instead viewing childhood as socially constructed and children as capable social actors (Aitken, 2019; Holloway, 2014; Matthews, 2003). Although over the subsequent years the focus of children's geographers encompassed childhoods in the Global South, and the sub-discipline played a

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crucial role in examining terms such as 'global' or 'multiple' childhood (Ansell, 2016; Wells, 2016), the Eurocentric nature of its theoretical framework persists. Akin to decolonial scholars' observations from childhood studies, the questions that children's geographies ask remain being shaped by 'universal certitudes' (Balagopalan, 2019: p. 24) of Euro-American childhoods regardless of where the re-search is conducted; and the plurality of geographical scholarship is empirical rather than epistemological (Mignolo, 2007), with themes and methods following those of Western theories (De Castro, 2020).

One way to transcend the 'stuck' label of children's geographies is through a sustained and explicit engagement with decoloniality, some-thing in which the field arguably lags behind other branches of human geography and broader studies of childhood (Aufseeser, 2023). Embracing de-coloniality does not simply entail generating (or simply mechanistically referencing) more schol-arship about children's spaces and places in the Majority World. As Ansell's (2019) overview illustrates, geographical research on childhood in the Global South is already present in the theories developed in the Global North, but it is rare for children's geographers to bring up and mobilise Southern theories (Punch, 2020). As Ansell (2019: p. 66) asserts, geographers working with 'children in the [S]outh have promoted alternative theoretical lenses' to dominant conceptual frameworks originated in the Global North, and some of the current decolonial scholarship in children's geographies has a lineage distinctly traceable to earlier work of Western geographers researching childhood in, and developing theo-risation from, the Global South (e.g. Ansell and Van Blerk, 2004; Burman, 1995; Beazley, 2003; Katz, 1991, 2004; Nieuwenhuys, 2007; Punch, 2002; Ruddick, 2003; Robson, 2004). However, decoloniality rests on *delinking* (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018) from Western constructs and ideas, many of which perpetuate oppressive structures. It involves critically examining seemingly 'self-evident concepts' and their 'lo-calised conditions of emergence' (De Castro, 2020: p. 357) and developing pluralistic theo-retical frameworks grounded in investigations at sites that have been actively marginalised in the Western trajectories of children's geographies and which remain on the margins nowadays. As Abebe et al. (2022) put it, decoloniality is chiefly about 'why and how the terms of engagement in knowledge production must change' (p. 268). Decoloniality can also help address complexities of childhoods whose geographies do not neatly align with the Global South/North dichotomy, such as regions in Eastern Asia and post-communist Europe (Hsieh, 2016; Lee, 2016; Millei et al., 2018; Świętek et al., 2019; Silova, 2021). The historical relationships with colo-nialism and Western modernity in these parts of the world are intricate and multifaceted (Bonnett, 2021; Balogun, 2022), yet epistemologies of childhood in these areas tend to be positioned in the same dominant Western narratives of mo-dernity and transition.

The first report on children's geographies reviews recent geographical scholarship on childhood through the lens of decolonial debates in childhood studies and elsewhere, organised around three questions: What decolonial theory can be envisaged for children's geographies? What practices and methods align with it? And what images of the child emerge?

II. What theory?

Balagopalan (2019) asserts that a major feature of (post-)colonial conceptions of childhood is that whereas contemporary Western childhoods are seen as emerging out of complex *histories*, children's lives elsewhere are interpreted through notions of lo-calised *cultures*. This implies that *all* children and childhoods are situated along a developmental and progressive timeline, yet that timeline and the notion of progress and development are defined by the historical trajectories of Western childhoods (De Castro, 2020). In the framework of decolonial lit-erature, this is referred to as the 'denial of coevalness' (Mignolo, 2007): non-Western childhoods are not seen as evolving in a timeframe of its own, as all historical transformations globally are referenced to Western experience. Childhoods outside the West are attributed to localised cultural divergences and

measured against their (expected) alignment with the universalised narratives of (Western) childhoods.

Addressing these issues in children's geographies necessitates adopting historical perspectives on space, place, and mobility that would fully capture the historical and spatial development of oppression and marginalisation of children, addressing how local aspects of such marginalisation are linked to broader oppressive systems. While a considerable body of historical geographical research on childhood within Western contexts exists (recently Cope, 2023; Von Benzon, 2022), it is the less common research that delves into the historical geographies of childhood outside it that offers a valuable lens through which to address what Balagopalan refers to as 'conceptual silences […] through which we view childhoods in the [M]ajority world' (Balagopalan, 2019: p. 37). Koomson et al. (2023), for example, call for a greater recognition of historical process that laid foundations of contemporary children's mobility, illustrated through how a mode of children's movement between fishing communities in Ghana that traditionally served the purpose of work socialisation have been reframed as criminal acts of child trafficking within the framework of the United Nations Palermo Protocols. Elsewhere, Vergara del Solar et al. (2023) reveal how the relationships of Chilean children with public spaces have been shaped by historical efforts by the state and society to remove children from the streets, and how these efforts have been portrayed by the government as achievements that would enable children from Chile to enjoy a 'civilised childhood', akin to 'European countries'. Further, there is recent geographical research on childhood in India, focused on the intersections of class, caste, nation, and religion, which traces the establishment of the contemporary patterns of formal education within colonial and post-colonial histories, highlighting the caste- and religion-influenced violence experienced by children nowadays but with links to the colonial and post-colonial histories (Amatullah, 2022; Kannan, 2022). Lastly, contemporary geographical scholarship situated in the Global North also offers decolonial historical perspectives by investigating the historical trajectories of colonial violence against Indigenous children, which continue to shape contemporary injustices (Murnaghan and McCreary, 2016). It also examines ongoing colonial violence, including its physical and institutional aspects (De Leeuw, 2016), as well as cultural and symbolic mobilisations (Balogun and Ohia-Nowak, 2023).

In addition to incorporating decolonial histories into children's geographies, there is an impetus for the field to more deeply immerse itself in the decolonial critique of 'global childhoods'. This entails a shift in focus from centralised perspectives to embracing the 'alternatives, pluralities, and multiplicities with which childhoods need to be viewed "from below," that is, from the margins and peripheries of global knowledge production' (Abebe et al., 2022: p. 261). This principle calls for elevating these peripheries to the central stage of geographical scholarship and involves a diligent exploration of place-based pluralities, while simultaneously retaining a focus on the overarching processes that shape children's experiences across diverse locations. As highlighted by Abebe and Ofusu-Kusi (2016), this shift goes beyond merely diversifying our understanding of southern childhoods. Instead, it challenges us to identify and analyse the major processes that exert a significant influence on childhood experiences on a global scale (Katz, 2004). These processes may include themes traditionally at the heart of post-colonial scholarship, such as post-colonial state formation, modernisation, developmentalism, neoliberalism, or technologisation. However, it is equally important to extend attention to notions that may not have traditionally occupied a central role in post-colonial discourse but are pivotal to the study of childhood, such as child participation (Cuevas-Parra, 2022) and schooling (Maithreyi and Kannan, 2022). By encompassing these dimensions, geography can expand the conceptual boundaries, moving beyond the confines of its Western knowledge trajectories. Examples of such work in the recent literature include tracing how children's emotional geographies of migration outside the Western settings reshape our understandings of concepts ranging from family and care to moral economies and human trafficking (Beazley et al., 2018; Blazek and Esson, 2019; Francisco-Menchavez, 2018); or how accounts of children and COVID-19 in the Majority world shed light on

themes such as children's marginalisation and governance, intersectional inequities, and right to play and education (Kusumaningrum et al., 2022; Sullu, 2023; Tebet et al., 2022).

Finally, it is vital to maintain attention to how the marginalisation of children in the Majority world is compounded by the very fact that they are children. Decolonial perspectives illuminate the complex layers of children's marginalisation that intertwine colonial violence (Joronen, 2016) with the over-arching and near-universal regimes of adult superiority and dominance (cf. Wall, 2022). While it is important to acknowledge the challenging circumstances faced by many children in the Global South, the disproportionate emphasis by Western scholars on children's poverty and adverse conditions reproduces the desire to underscore the contrast between the prevailing global ideal of childhood, rooted in the Global North, and its apparent absence in the Global South (Twum-Danso Imoh, 2016). This dynamic carries significant cultural and political implications, as the re-colonisation of societies in the Global South often unfolds through the lens of childhood politics, characterised by a discourse that infantilises children rather than empowering them, a discourse in which Global North actors often presume to know what is in the best interest of children *and* their communities (Cheney, 2019). This does not imply disregarding or overlooking the marginalisation and oppression experienced by children. Instead, it means that focusing primarily on deficits reinforces the perception of children as needing protection and the Global South as requiring 'development'. Consequently, both are perceived as inherently less capable than their adult counterparts in the Global North and reinforce the primacy of Western theories. In contrast to this, recent geographical literature from the Global South provides portrayals of children as exposed to age-based marginalisation in addition to other patterns experienced by their adult counterparts, yet unpicking the formation of their agency as non-exclusive from vulnerability and itself transformative of children's environments in ways unrecognised in Western contexts. Rahman et al., (2018) reveal how maintaining and balancing relations with adults is pivotal for the survival of children connected to streets in Bangladesh, but that the violence endured from adults in turn forces children to instigate violence themselves. Elsewhere, the work of Marshall (2016) and Marshall and Sousa (2017) on children's experiences of trauma and violence in Palestine emphasises how Palestinian children construct their everyday cultural frameworks, drawing from sources that include Islamic ethics, Palestinian nationalism, and Arabic soap operas, yet those scripts inevitably face constraints imposed by children's age, geopolitical location, and intersecting categories of gender, race, and religion.

III. What method and practice?

Decolonial theory and practice are inherently interconnected. While the concept of relational ontologies has recently emerged as central in both the broader field of childhood studies and children's geographies (Spyrou, 2019; Warming, 2022) and among their decolonial advocates (Abebe and Biswas, 2021; Abebe et al., 2022; Nxumalo, 2016), of similar importance is the notion of relational epistemology. Relational epistemology encompasses a mode of analysis centred both on localised human and non-human relationships and on an experiential dialogue involving scholars, practitioners, and activists working in diverse geopolitical contexts. On the second point, children's geographies have witnessed limited instances of direct comparisons between the Global North and South (Punch, 2020), yet where such comparisons have occurred, there is evidence of their conceptual impact transcending the Global South/North divide, as in cases of children's independent mobility (Huijsmans, 2016). This dialogue needs to extend beyond mere comparative work, however, as focusing solely on comparison risks reinforcing binary distinctions between the Global South and North, potentially leading to over-simplified conceptualisations of both (Twum-Danso Imoh et al., 2019).

Recent geographical research has brought forth compelling examples of scholarship that transcends geographical boundaries and contextual variations while challenging Western-based understandings of childhood. Postar and Behzadi (2022), for instance, explore children's work in extractive industries in

Tajikistan and Tanzania, locations profoundly influenced by neocolonial and neoliberal forces, albeit in different ways. Despite parallels in their empirical findings regarding children's struggles and exploitation, the conceptual frameworks surroundings these findings follow quite disparate narratives of colonial, communist, and capitalist histories of resource exploitation, ultimately connected through the channels of contemporary global capitalism. Addressing the history of resource extraction in Tajikistan, they argue that while its Soviet period era in particular is nominally seen as 'decolonial in theory', it generated exploitative relations between the central ethnically nationalist Soviet state and Central Asian populations, very much mirroring the geometry of exploitation witnessed in Tanzania during the colonial rule.

A decolonial relational epistemology does not necessarily hinge solely on comparative analysis across different sites of exploitation. Hanna's (2023) work addresses the importance of mobility across places and shows how the child migrant accounts of identities traverse different sites and intersect with the racialisation occurring within the classroom, involving the celebration and endorsement of White identities among migrant children while erasing Blackness. In the work of Marrun and Rodrigues-Campo (2023), the relational impact of exposure to everyday racism, violence, patriarchy, and gentrification is not delineated across different sites but unfolds in time, illuminating the resistance strategies which racialised and marginalised children and their communities adopt and evolve over a longer period of time. And finally, as pointed out by Aufseeser (2023), decoloniality and its relational epistemologies may incorporate mobile practices of researchers as they navigate between various sites of children's oppression and exploitation, such as in her work in Peru and the USA. Crucially, aside from travelling ideas and experiences, Aufseeser argues that a decolonial approach implies commitment 'to move beyond critique into scholar-activism' (p. 654), underpinned by experiences and knowledges from different locations.

Another central aspect of decolonial practices in children's geographies is the emphasis on place. Scholarship informed by place-based pedagogies is 'interested in possibilities for unsettling the dominance of EuroWestern knowledges' (Nxumalo and Cedillo, 2017: p. 99) by highlighting specific Indigenous knowledge systems and their relationships with place. Place-based pedagogies revolve around narratives and representations deeply rooted in a particular location, intertwined with the presence of children within it, underscoring the potential for anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive transformation that these narratives and relationalities can bring about (Nagasawa and Swadener, 2017). In geography, Wintoneak and Jobb (2022) illustrate how their collaborative walking methodologies in Canada and Australia, centred on themes of climate and waste, necessitate a reflection on the enduring impact of settler colonialism and the fact that these walks occur on lands taken from Indigenous peoples. The act of walking in a given land becomes inherently linked to the practices of storytelling, sharing, and learning about 'multiple pasts, presents, and futures […] in which extractivist logics and pollution [of settler colonialism] have left a permanent trace' (p. 12). Another important element of place-focused decolonial methodologies is the power of ethnography and creative methods. Roussell (2023) exemplifies the potential of theatre-making in conjunction with ethnographic engagement to access children's animistic comprehension of multispecies relationships, all while challenging Western developmental models of childhood. Elsewhere, Van Blerk et al. (2023) elucidate the importance of longitudinal participant-led ethnographic work with children living on the streets, as opposed to the more limited 'snapshots' or 'drive-by ethnography' (Brocklehurst and Peters, 2017) often conducted by Western researchers in the Global South. And finally, there is a growing body of work contemplating the possibilities of integrating online and digital methods into place-focused research involving children in the Global South, better responding to the daily realities of children from Indigenous and other marginalised communities (Andal, 2023a; Kidman, 2016; Sciascia, 2016).

The final aspect of decolonial practice I wish to highlight is the matter of authorship, accessibility, and the legitimacy of knowledge. As Aufseeser

(2023) points out, decoloniality compels us to probe the origins of specific forms of knowledge, their impacts, and the processes through which they become recognised. These questions are inseparable from the unequal political and cultural economies of academic knowledge production, which rest not only on the utter hegemony of the English language, particular academic writing style, and literature canon but also on accessibility of literature sources and opportunities to exchange and promote knowledge with others. This by definition marginalises or completely excludes authors from the Global South and elsewhere who may be otherwise best positioned to produce place-grounded and ethically competent knowledge about childhoods from contexts marginalised within dominant geographical narratives. However, due to barriers such as challenges in engaging with paywalls or the lack of linguistic capital demanded by the publishing culture of Western academia, their perspectives remain overlooked (Abebe et al., 2022; De Castro, 2020), and the geographical scholarship about childhood in the Global South rests on the Anglophone literature produced by researchers in sufficiently privileged financial, cultural, and linguistic positions. Engagement with non-Western and non-Anglophone scholarships has been pursued through intentional dialogues and translations in some areas of geography (Ferretti, 2021), but it remains scarce in children's geographies.

IV. What child?

What 'decolonial child' may theories and practices outlined above produce? Balagopalan (2021) emphasises the concept of non-sovereign relationalities in children's lives, the sort of interconnectedness in which care is central and evident but where it needs to be traced beyond a sense of children's autonomous selves, consequently foreground children's incremental 'contributions towards reimagining a more *collective* and socially and ecologically just world' (p. 329, italics added). It is this notion to deem children's transformational powers primarily within the picture of collective societal progress that markedly differentiates decolonial understandings of childhood from their Western counterparts. It is also

one area where the current geographical literature can provide perhaps the widest range of empirical and conceptual examples, involving the contexts of schooling and learning (Jirata, 2022; Nxumalo and Cedillo, 2017), street livelihoods (Aufseeser, 2020; Beazley, 2016; Van Blerk et al., 2017), orphanage and care institutions (Miller and Beazley, 2022; Uptin and Hartung, 2023), domestic work (Blagbrough, 2023; Olayiwola, 2021), unaccompanied migration journeys (Adefehinti and Arts, 2019), peace-making (Woon, 2017), and family economies (Khan, 2022; Phiri, 2016). The range of examples listed here illustrates the children's capacities to change their lives and worlds while highlighting the utmost relevance of collective presence and relationality for such transformations.

Another important implication of decolonial theory and practice is about the patterns of children's marginalisations that encompass race and Indigeneity. Colonial oppression rests on the logic of racial hierarchies (Aufseeser, 2023), themselves incorporating corporeality, language, history, religion, and land. Yet, an analysis of racial violence needs to begin with the experience of those who are violated, with their resistance and, crucial for geographers, the practices of remaking place in and through which such violence unfolds (McKittrick, 2011). As De Leeuw and Greenwood (2016) point out, the contemporary racial marginalisation of Indigenous children goes hand in hand with health and poverty discrimination, social isolation, educational disadvantage, and political persecution. However, as other geographers have shown, children racialised as non-White and Indigenous are active agents of resistance and reworking of place relationalities in contexts as wide as school and education (Hanna, 2023; Maithreyi et al., 2022), care relations and migration journeys (Rajan, 2022; Torres et al., 2022), urban planning and policies (Diaz-Diaz, 2022; Andal, 2023b), and land extractivism (Nxumalo, 2017). It is also possible for individuals and groups to assume the positionalities of both the colonised subjects and colonisers (Pulido, 2018), as examples from children's geographies show, ranging from Cheung Judge's (2023) account of disadvantaged Black UK youth participating in volunteering schemes in sub-Saharan Africa to the systemic exclusion of

Roma representations in school texts in Poland (Świętek et al., 2019).

V. Conclusions

Espousing decolonial perspectives has been a rather protracted process for children's geographies. This review discussed how some of the recent geographical scholarship on childhood has done so, and by addressing the questions of theory, praxis, and conceptualisation of childhood, it highlighted eight ways through which decoloniality may advance the conceptual boundaries and political relevance of children's geographies: (1) by embracing historical geographies of non-Western childhoods and their entanglements with structural marginalisation; (2) by centring childhoods on the margins of global knowledge production and on the processes that impact them; (3) by addressing the interlinked marginalisation of children through colonial violence and adult dominance, and how this is mobilised in Western narratives of childhood in the Majority World; (4) by adopting relational and comparative epistemologies and practices; (5) by developing place-focused methodologies; (6) by disrupting the Anglo-centric and commercialised modes of academic publishing, knowledge production, and circulation; (7) by recognising children's capacity to act through their non-sovereign relationalities; and (8) by acknowledging children as place-makers subject to racial violence and marginalisation, sometimes in complex and contradictory positions.

For children's geographies to embrace decoloniality should be unsettling. As Nxumalo (2019) writes, '[d]ecolonization requires and is led by Indigenous peoples, knowledges and ontologies' (p. 133). Especially for a field as deeply rooted in Western and Anglophone histories as children's geographies, this is a challenging task. Decoloniality does not imply refraining from engaging with Western scholarship, nor does it involve adding more empirical examples from the Global South to illustrate theories developed from the contexts of Western childhoods, institutions, and academia. Instead, and given the current uneven patterns of knowledge production in children's geographies, decoloniality should require a deliberate pause and disruption of (some of) the established theories and practices that children's geographer have relied upon. That is a major challenge, no doubt. Self-disruption may be seen even as risky for a field that has long sought recognition within the broader discipline of geography and which may have been deemed as peripheral by some.

Nevertheless, what might appear as a short-term self-disruption could ultimately represent a crucial step toward fortifying the identity and purpose of children's geographies. Decoloniality will push the boundaries of the field's epistemology and enhance its political relevance, making it a necessity for fostering more just, inclusive, equitable, and ultimately robust foundations for the future of children's geographies.

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