



Reviews



Case Studies of the Child's Perspective

—Lois Burke

Moruzi, Kristine, Nell Musgrove, and Carla Pascoe Leahy, editors. *Children's Voices from the Past: New Historical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Palgrave, 2019. 342 pp. \$119.99 hc. ISBN 9783030118952. Palgrave Studies in the History of Childhood.

The edited collection *Children's Voices from the Past* addresses a key methodological problem for researchers working on the history of childhood: how do we access children's perspectives, and not just adult definitions of those perspectives? As the editors delicately put it: "This volume is united by a belief in the importance of seeking children's voices while underwritten by an appreciation of the challenges of doing so" (11). The book sets up the importance of the child's "voice"—which the editors define as what children said and thought about a particular thing—over "agency," which in sociological terms describes breaking away from a system and therefore cannot always be used to describe

childhood experiences accurately. The use of the word “perspectives” in the title is a careful choice on the part of the editors. Through insisting on framing the collection by using “perspective” and “voice” over “agency,” the introductory matter and essays offer a new angle on the saturated “agency” debate in childhood studies, which some scholars find “inadequate” to explain the complexity of their research findings (Vallgård, Alexander, and Olsen).

The introduction addresses scholarly ideas put forward during the twentieth century by historians, childhood psychologists, and sociologists, all of which have shaped current understandings of the child’s perspective. This chapter draws attention to the importance of prioritizing non-Western perspectives in the search for the child’s voice. Indeed, a significant merit of this edited collection is that the majority of chapters examine Indigenous and non-Western childhood, as well as the perspectives of children who experienced care systems. The essays cover a range of child-made evidence; sources consulted include institutional records, interviews, artworks, diaries, letters, memoirs, and objects.

The essays in the first section look at youthful writings, ordered broadly by chronological date of the creations. The first chapter, by Shih-Wen Sue Chen and Kristine Moruzi, discusses *Girl’s Own Paper* and *Boy’s Own Paper*, two children’s magazines which ran from the later nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Although they emerged at the same time and often were both read by the same children, the two magazines are seldom examined together. By looking at the correspondence pages in these magazines, the authors find common ground between boys and girls who ask about health, hobbies, education, and employment. This chapter makes a strong case for the importance of the periodical press as a source of children’s correspondence, especially in documenting the desires and fears of late Victorian adolescents.

The second chapter, by Anna Gilderdale, focuses on correspondence pages in New Zealand publications and children’s pen names in them. Patriotic names like “Colonial Girl” and “New Zealand’s Own” appear alongside Indigenous te reo Māori phrases like “Whetu” and “Tui.” These pseudonyms functioned to unite social connections within the magazine—they even facilitated marriages among contributors later in life. Gilderdale briefly draws a parallel between late nineteenth-century correspondence pages and young peoples’ use of

internet platforms today. The connections between children's historical writing cultures and current social and digital media practices are potentially rich and merit increased scholarly attention.

The next chapter, from Kelly Duke Bryant, looks at student voices in Senegalese children's letters at the turn of the twentieth century. Strict letter-writing conventions which students learned allowed them to write to schools in the capital to ask for admission or scholarships. Their requests were coloured with promises to become model French citizens in colonial Senegal. Although these letters were ephemeral and fragmentary, they offer insight into children's attempts to position themselves strategically during a period in which most of Senegal was controlled by the French.

The culminating chapter of this section, by Susan Eckelmann Berghel, focuses on mid-twentieth-century childhood and race relations in America. The author examines some of the letters written by children to the American president in response to the Birmingham church bombing of September 1963, which killed four children. In these letters, the children described their hurt, anger, and concerns at a lack of political progress. They proposed specific solutions to the political issue, yet some white children also wrote in support of racial segregation. Eckelmann Berghel draws attention to the "non-child-centered sources . . ." (110) that these young people relied upon, such as political speeches and newspaper reports, and how these might have shaped the child's perspective.

Part 2 of the collection, "Images of the Self," groups papers that are concerned with children's self-concept and images of the child's self in multimedia. Chapter 6, Mary Tomsic's "Children's Art: Histories and Cultural Meanings of Creative Expression by Displaced Children," focuses on artwork created by children displaced by war and conflict across various contexts. Tomsic particularly examines drawings created by children held in Australian immigration detention centres. The perspectives of displaced children have only recently come to the attention of historical researchers, yet the author warns that children's artworks "cannot provide transparent, direct access to children's voices" (138). She stresses that looking at children's artworks collectively can offer some access to children's understandings of the world they live in.

Allyson Stevenson's article "Karen B., and Indigenous Girlhood on the Prairies: Disrupting the Images of Indigenous Children in Adoption Advertising in North America" also offers a compelling reading of the child in visual media in the 1960s and 1970s, a period which witnessed drives to encourage transracial adoption of First Nations and Métis children in Canada. Stevenson includes before and after photos taken of Indigenous children, which were supposed to demonstrate that they had become "civilized" through adoption and promote a notion "of the vulnerable child in need of rescue . . ." (179). The chapter includes letters written by a young Indigenous girl, Karen B., who was taken into care during this period. These letters demonstrate the price that Indigenous Canadian families and communities have paid as a result of child welfare and adoption schemes.

Kate Douglas's contribution, "'Share the Shame': Curating the Child's Voice in *Mortified Nation!*," examines how childhood is curated by parents, museums, and other institutions, as well as by children themselves. Douglas offers the example of the *Mortified Nation!* project, in which adults share their embarrassing personal artifacts of youth, such as journals, poems and, other creations, and in doing so, "bring the child voice and adult reader into dialogue . . ." (205). This essay raises interesting questions about the shifting ontological and narrative positions of the child self, and how the various phases of these positions are manifest in the curation of the child's perspective. These questions speak to current and future practices of documenting children's lives and perspectives and are particularly germane to those heritage institutions that hold materials relating to the child subject.

Part 3 is entitled "Remembered Voices" and unites contributors who utilize oral history interviews in their work. "Oral Histories and Enlightened Witnessing" by Deidre Michell begins by examining the experience of Brian, who was sexually abused as a child in the Australian care system. Brian's campaigning for the child's perspective to be recognized above the perspectives of struggling parents in cases such as these offers a glimpse into the motivations for the work conducted by Deidre Michell and Nell Musgrove in *The Slow Evolution of Foster Care in Australia: Just Like a Family?* The project involved conducting interviews with former foster care children; three examples of these interviews are included in the chapter. Mitchell returns several times to the work of twentieth-century Swiss psychologist Alice Miller, whose

work focused on children's trauma, in order to promote the practice of empathic oral history interviewers acting as "enlightened witnesses" to the child's perspective.

Sarah Kenny's chapter focuses on more than twenty youth oral history records concerning life and youth culture in postwar Britain. The interviewees are working-class and lower middle-class people who grew up in Sheffield, an industrial northern English city, between the 1960s and 1980s. Kenny's research conclusions suggest that there was a fluidity between mainstream and alternative cultures for young people who attended nightclubs and other venues.

Although oral history interviewing offers an excellent alternative to traditional archiving in terms of historical data collection, the interviewees recall childhood, rather than experience it. This section of the collection raises intriguing questions about whether the emotional and empathetic power of oral history can still offer insights into the child's perspective, rather than the adult's retrospective understanding of it. Some further probing of the gulf between adult memory and childhood perspective, as we see in Douglas's chapter, would have made for an interesting addendum to this section. Still, the focus on the experiences of those children who were doubly marginalized—either by being working class or in the care system as well as being a child—renders these contributions especially important.

The final section, part 4, entitled "Speaking Back to Institutions," examines children's voices in institutional archives and offers new understandings of these children as something other than deviant and criminal. Greg T. Smith's fascinating contribution, "Muffled Voices: Recovering Children's Voices from England's Social Margins," explores the history of the Philanthropic Society for the Relief of Criminal Children from the later eighteenth century. Smith particularly pays attention to the society's internal records and unedited letters written by boys who were sent away to British colonies and wrote back to the society's chaplain to give thanks.

Melissa A. Brzycki's chapter, "Revolutionary Successors: Deviant Children and Youth in the PRC, 1959-1964" concludes the collection. Brzycki situates her study in the context of the early People's Republic of China, when the state established many institutions meant to structure children's time both inside and outside of school. The author's main concern is the ways in which children circumvented the expectations placed upon them during this period.

In 1960s China, children were hoped to be “revolutionaries” for the republic’s new way of life, yet “[m]isbehaving and criminal children made evident the failures of the revolution” (302). Like Smith’s chapter before it, Brzycki’s essay mainly concerns boys, whose misbehaviours were described in reports in new work-study schools.

The distinctive set of case studies included in this collection provide fresh insights into child-made evidence and the perspectives that children have to offer on social, cultural and political topics. Many of the articles justly draw attention to the lack of historiographical work on childhood perspectives across time and space. Yet the collection as a whole, with its diverse geographical, temporal, and social focus, demonstrates that this rich area of research is only just beginning to be mapped. This collection paves the way for further work researching children’s perspectives in their myriad forms and identifying effective strategies for gathering data and conducting archival research in the history of childhood and youth. Going ahead, this strategic work may well be the greatest challenge for historians of childhood—alongside the conciliation of childhood agency.

Works Cited

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