AGENCY, ACTIVISM, AND CITIZENSHIP IN CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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This book discusses children's and young adult agency and activism across literature and culture, demonstrating how they influence child citizenship. It engages with agentic voices and practices across multiple spheres of young people's lives, as well as the challenges to active citizenship faced by children. The collection establishes both agency and citizenship to be relational. We consider agency as a system of relations between children themselves, between children and adults, children and institutions, children and nation-states, as well as children and the nonhuman. We discuss citizenship as an entanglement, a process of becoming rather than an awarded status experienced passively. Across the essays included in *Child as Citizen*, we review the interconnectedness that emerges from these relationships and attempt to untangle some of the complications. How can we truly position children as cocreators within institutions and systems that do not share our values? How do we balance individual and collective agency? How can citizenship become a vehicle for care-full activism rather than a passive status? To respond, we adopt an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on the sociology of childhood, children's literature studies, youth culture studies, media, technology and cultural studies, and Anthropocene, ecofeminist, and disability studies. Brought together into a single volume, we hope that these essays become a point of reference in establishing how children's and young adult texts bring their readers closer to embodied participation in political processes of positive change toward social justice.

The role of the child in society has been a matter of interest for centuries (James and Prout 1990, Milne 2013, Gubar 2009 and 2016, Cummings 2020) but the historical categorization of the child as innocent and in need of protection,

or evil and in need of discipline (Crawley 2010, Spyrou 2018), is no longer valid. Likewise, the more modern notion of the child as victim and subject to multiple pathologies (Cavazzoni et al. 2022), or its antithesis framing the child as uncaring and detached (Nance Carroll 2021), are inadequate pictures of the childhood realities that we encounter both in life and in literary representation. Together with the contributors to this book, I am thinking of child and young adult agency as multidimensional and based on the possibility to engage in a broad range of entangled civic systems and processes. Spanning the personal, the familial, the social, and the political, these systems and processes are predicated on (but are not restricted to) the right to access knowledge and resources and the right to use that knowledge to participate in dismantling ideological hierarchies of power that no longer serve well. The impetus of this form of agency is resistance, social justice, and activism (recognized as movements rather than moments) that is not "predetermined by inherent biological or physiological factors," such as age, and is not "an essential, transhistorical or transcultural continuity" (Lesnik-Oberstein 2011). Changes that occur on personal, familial, social, and political levels may look and sound different depending on the geopolitical context that children inhabit (Percy-Smith and Thomas 2009). In fact, the intersectional and intergenerational sense of agency at play in children's claims towards more active forms of citizenship is recognized as crucial to understanding their role as citizens (Hardman 2001). At the heart of the changes we see forming around cultural constructions of childhood is a generational gap that fails to acknowledge the power that children have to act upon their own situation and the context around them. For this to shift, it is necessary to destabilize "power relations between adults and children" and, as the essays in this collection demonstrate, this also means "destabilising power relations between misogynistic patriarchal societies and more equitable ones" (McDowell 2002).

Forming communities of their own, often online, young people experiment with different forms of relational and social agency, enacting change through deeper inclusion and more distributed forms of power. The multiplicity of voices that are entering the public sphere (as we learn to harness the positive power of the internet even more than ever before) is enriching. Is it fully representative? No, not yet. Is internet use unproblematic? Certainly not. We have a long way to go. It is, however, more vocal about injustice and well-connected than was historically possible before the digital age. The degree to which young people are challenging the "more traditional, developmental discourse of children's incompetence" (James in Flynn 2016: 266) is perhaps the most fundamental change we have noticed in our research on the role of the child as citizen.

Instead of labeling children and young people as snowflakes (Fox 2017), authors in this book recognize them as active citizens. Instead of describing children and young people as a narcissistic, selfish, disrespectful cohort of human students, we acknowledge their interest in the local, the sustainable, the folk, and the digital as a different mode of being in the world that goes beyond a simple, or for that matter defeatist, reaction to the biggest problems in the global political situation. Having said that, we are not advocating here for the glorification of a whole generation; in fact, many of these essays emphasize the importance and influence of collaboration and learning across generations. As Meg Rosoff reminds us in her essay on the value of books in today's climate, being oblivious is dangerous and the antidote to that is being aware and agentic. A hopeful position is one that "assumes competency, that promotes an ethic of care and cooperation, and that recognizes young people as co-producers and coperformers [*sic*] rather than passive recipients" (Flynn 2016: 263). This volume therefore explores young people's engagement in solution-building toward climate change, unsustainable housing markets, rising levels of debt and subsequent financial hardship, modern-day slavery, the constant threat of far-right politics and the long shadow cast by dictatorships that cling to power, causing so much harm to communities along the way. The onus to provide solutions is not placed fully on young people, of course, but the passionate desire to contribute is definitely a trait that emerges in the studies on young people included in this volume.

In view of this, or perhaps as a result of it, the "care-full" (Motta & Bennett 2018) activist approach coupled with the decolonization project spreading across children's literature and its associated academic circles is commendable and is placed at the forefront of the methodologies underlying the research and writing of this book. Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak describes how research in children's literature and childhood studies is meaningful and can have social and political impact. It can also generate the multiplier effect discussed by Farriba Schulz when discussing the impact of academic research on cultural and political changes instituted in society, but not unless there is commitment across the whole community of stakeholders. Decentering the white, male, ageist, Western gaze is important, as is uncovering the injustices and suffering on which much of today's prosperity is built. No longer content to accept the status quo or even the fait accompli sense of business as usual (is that interchangeable with a sense of despair?) that young people are often presented with, they seek to understand the processes behind the products, the systems beneath the societal norms they are told they "should" endorse,

and the injustices inherent in our institutions perpetrating systemic abuse of person, policy, and politics (op de Beeck 2020). As both Rosoff and Schulz point out, there is a sense of anger growing toward political complacency around social inequity and injustice, and rightly so. And, out of this anger, new forms of activism emerge. As Naomi Hamer and Ann Marie Murnaghan claim, young people are becoming more aware that it is not enough to be a passive citizen—we all need to be actively engaged in society for real change to be affected. Our engagement needs to be cooperative, intergenerational, embodied, and spanning multiple social and cultural platforms. It is only through a remembered interwoven culture of care and community that we can move through, and beyond, the numerous global crises currently knocking at our door (Soep 2014; Jenkins et al. 2016; Scolari et al. 2018). This is what lies at the heart of child citizenship in a post-9/11, (post) "ecostable," (post)pandemic, and mass-displaced world.

Child as Citizen addresses the culture of care and community directly through "the right to culture" (Harde and Kokkola 2018; Moylan 2020; Castro and Clark 2021; Reynolds 2022). Expanding on UNESCO's definition of the right to cultural life, we use the word "culture" to refer to the right to live by your chosen identity, alongside your inherited one. This could include (but is not restricted to) revisions to your ethnic, racial, and religious customs, assigned gender and imposed sexuality, body apology/autonomy, the practices associated with your socioeconomic class and the (non)geographical place you call home. Again, none of these are new concerns. Historical, comparative studies of children and young adult literature demonstrate how young people are framed in society and the roles they are asked to take on (Gubar 2010; Joy 2019; Slavtcheva-Petkova 2023). What is new, however, is the way in which we are connecting these epistemic frameworks and roles to daily life and coupling this work to the drive for a more simple, scaled-down, and sustainable way of life, as well as a more representative and empowering literary and cultural landscape. Children and young adult involvement in the public sphere demonstrates a desire for "a richer sense of self" (see Hamer and Murnaghan in part IV) and a richer "emotional geography" (see Murphy in part IV). Our work explores how this desire traverses the literary, cultural, and media landscape, gaining traction as it grows.

THE URGENT NEED FOR CARE-FULL ACTIVISM: AN AUTHOR, ACTIVIST, AND ACADEMIC'S PERSPECTIVE

In line with its objective of representing agency, activism, and citizenship from multiple perspectives, part I of this volume features essays by a renowned children's author, an activist, and an academic. It begins with a manifesto on the value of books, penned by none other than Meg Rosoff. Rosoff laments the current state of affairs: "Children in the twenty-first century are being groomed by education [and governments] to conform to a standard capitalist model that favors self-interest, consumption and economic growth over the creation of a better world." Childhood reading is in sharp decline. Where, if anywhere, do books enter the conversation in a world where barely anyone reads anymore? And what role do we need them to play? Ranging from a broad overview of her own experience with reading and writing children's books, to the motivation behind some of the most needfully troubling stories she has written, Rosoff delivers a scathing yet deeply moving account of why children need books, now more than ever. Children's role in society is dependent on their knowledge of what matters and why. But not only, Rosoff reminds us: their society and ours depend on what they choose to do with that knowledge. Failing to equip young people with a meaningful education will have a detrimental effect on us all. We used to say children are the future. Rosoff reminds us that there is a strong case to make for acting as though children are the present because the future itself is at stake here. The second chapter of part I offers Nicola Parker's practitioner's perspective of developing Amnesty International's work on children's literature and human rights. For over two decades, Amnesty International has used story, poetry, illustration, and nonfiction to support children and young people in developing knowledge, building empathy, and gaining the confidence to stand up for themselves and others. Parker guides us through "a three-stage evolution: firstly, using stories to explore human rights; secondly, supporting young people's freedom of expression through a poetry and spoken word education resource; and thirdly, upholding children's participation rights in a book creation process." The essay raises key questions about the nature and extent of child participation in democratic processes and how these may be affected by geopolitical context. It offers important insights into "a dynamic use of literature, where adults' challenge is not to be didactic but to embrace freedom of expression, to listen to and trust the children." The sense of urgency at the heart of this work is also present in Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak's essay on academic activism. In spite

of institutional structures that become more and more commodified and service based, Deszcz-Tryhubczak reminds us that academia can still be engaged in "implicit or small activism." Here, small does not mean insignificant. Deszcz-Tryhubczak outlines the multiplier effect that university classrooms can have. Adopting a feminist ethics of care framework, she advocates for "care-full activist onto-epistemological commitments in our scholarship and other professional activities," which allow us to resist oppression and participate in the younger generation's rebellion against systemic silencing and injustice.

LITERARY AGENCY AND A RECASTING OF EQUITABLE CHILD CITIZENSHIP

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 demonstrate how relational social agency is narrativized across different literary genres and forms, as well as periods, for children and young adults. Juxtaposed to one another, the three essays highlight difference as an onto-epistemic opportunity for increased equity that helps us to imagine and execute the right to citizenship beyond traditional notions of conformativity (see Christensen) and productivity (see Leach-Leung, Coste). In chapter 4, Nina Christensen explores how agency works in relational systems of influence. Analyzing elements of a picture book, a project in which authors and children coproduce stories for children, and an autobiographical account of children and adult relationships in the nineteenth century, Christensen demonstrates how children are capable of acting with others. She observes that while able to harness a more powerful form of action through connection, they remain true to their own identities, even though these may still be developing. Each of the analyses presented in the essay allows the reader to think through the ways in which children are allowed to act and what resources they draw on in order to affect the change that they feel is necessary, both in themselves and in the context or people around them. Change often requires destabilizing current worldviews in a movement toward more inclusive, stable, and just ones. In her essay on disability, Elizabeth Leach-Leung extends this argument to the types of agency afforded to children with disabilities in cultures that promote citizenship measured by old forms of material and economic productivity. Through her analysis of eugenic legacies in children's literature, she reminds us of the systemic changes needed for children's books to become more diverse and demonstrates how to read for eugenic legacies and resistance in children's and young adult literature featuring disabled

characters. She identifies its impact on disabled citizenship alongside the promotion of agency in disabled and able-bodied children in these narratives. Angled differently through a discussion of ageism, Jill Coste discusses agency and citizenship in the same terms. Her essay is a moving plea to continue believing in the power of children's literature to elevate its readers and empower them to act against systemic injustice. By looking at multiethnic writers who began their work as teens and whose novels address social concerns that push back on hegemonic norms, Coste demonstrates how "these young writers challenge aetonormativity and prove their might by prioritizing and amplifying the conversations that can help change our world for the better." Systemic injustice is a key focus both in the writing of these teenagers, as well as in Coste's own work, as she foregrounds the emotional needs of teenagers who are dissatisfied with the civic cultural practices they find themselves forced into and are seeking to change them. All three essays highlight a desire to build childhood ecologies founded on care, curiosity, connection, and courage despite oppressive structures pushing us in the opposite direction. They highlight the fact that children do not simply have or possess citizenship but rather that citizenship is an entangled relationship based on interconnectedness and cooperation across all spheres of life—intellectual and embodied experiences across cultural, social, and political contexts. Therefore, as elaborated in the next section on childhood ecologies, agency is framed here as a "working with" rather than a "working on" issues, or even people, so that within collective systems, everyone maintains the right to meaningful participation without compromising their identity. This, we argue, also requires acknowledgment of historical and systemic trauma and a consideration of how corporeal aspects of children's everyday geographies affect agency.

CHILDHOOD ECOLOGIES AND THE AGENCY TO ACT AND HEAL

In chapter 7, Daniela Brockdorff and Katrin Dautel focus on young adult literature that demonstrates children and young adults working through trauma while harnessing individual and relational agency to mitigate their disturbing situations. Like Leach-Leung and Coste, they emphasize the fact that young people resist victimization and almost always perform better under duress than we may expect. Trauma, "narrated in its raw form through stories of abuse and neglect, challenges agentic paradigms of the child as powerful," but this research shows that even young people subject to abuse

are resourceful. Often, they are able to "expand" the space around them by using the imagination to interact with objects and creatures in their environment. Introducing Lambros Malafouris's notion of "creative thinging" as a making of "new things that scaffold the ecology of our minds, shape the boundaries of our thinking and form new ways to engage and make sense of the world" (2014: 140), Brockdorff and Dautel demonstrate how storytelling is a way of exploring human-nonhuman relationality and the ways in which this can be a tool to promote agency (Raithelhuber 2016; Spyrou, Rosen, and Cook 2018). Taking this discussion further, Irena Barbara Kalla links the discourse on trauma, environment, and relational agency to literature on the Holocaust, showing that failure to recognize the interconnectedness of all things leads to tragedy. Kalla finds a useful set of analytic tools within ecocriticism and encourages us to think more deeply about postcatastrophic literature and its revelations on the role children may take when society is in crisis. Building on Parker's essay, she notes that the suppression of young people, leading to a lack of agency and therefore citizenship, is "intertwined with other exigencies of the twenty-first century, such as poverty, hunger, migration, and human rights issues." Thus, exploring child agency and citizenship as an "ecology" can be a powerful method to describe the relationships of young people with literature, culture, society, and nature. In chapter 9, Anne Klomberg develops this discussion further by exploring corporeal citizenship as an ethics of care that encompasses all life on earth. As Coste does in part II, Klomberg delves more deeply into the ecofeminist ethics of care principle to show how teenage activism is embodied rather than abstract. She argues that "adolescent bodies are always, already, somewhat out of place as a result of aetonormativity," emphasizing their "outsiderhood." Like Leach-Leung and Brockdorff and Dautel, among other authors in this collection, Klomberg insists that this does not necessarily mean that young people are disempowered. Embodied activism allows us to appreciate that adolescents' materiality can become a source of power, enabling them to challenge aetonormativity, and reject the hopeless world image that adult characters envision. Literature provides examples of ways in which this can foster more meaningful experiences of citizenship. Through all these chapters, we understand why citizenship cannot merely be awarded but must emerge from a cultural ecology that fosters the "richer sense of self" that Hamer and Murnaghan describe, as well as the richer "emotional geography" outlined by Murphy. Additionally, as discussed by Rosoff and Parker, the function of books in children's lives and how they do, or may, leverage their readers into higher positions of civic power, generating real (legal and long-lasting?) change, is an area that deserves sustained attention.

SYSTEMIC AGENCY AND SITES OF RECOGNITION AND ENGAGEMENT

In this section, Schulz, Murphy, Hamer and Murnaghan, and Kulkarni and Owens explore how children's and young adult literature is produced and received within sites of "agentic relation and recognition"—the places and spaces where children encounter power and may choose to adopt it. As discussed throughout this volume, the encounter with power can come in the form of adult and/or systemic intervention attempting to raise them up or, equally, oppress them. This section of the book considers four of the most significant cultural and educational sites through which literature is positioned to help young people negotiate their relationship with power—schools, archives, museums, and online platforms. In chapter 10, Schulz focuses on the role teachers play in establishing the literary classroom as a space in which to rethink the children's relationship to/with/in nature and, through that, to consider the implications of childhood ideologies to understand what is oppressed or leveraged in the process of representation. Schulz draws on ecocriticism to ask what agency means at the interstice of nature and culture and how the agentic child is framed through that perspective. The social/pedagogical angle of this chapter is important as it outlines the "multiplier" effect that so many activists name as a crucial aspect of their work. As Deszcz-Tryhubczak also points out, pushing back and reworking old systems requires high levels of momentum to sustain and, in turn, this requires more people (and diverse demographics) to get on board with the work. In chapter 11, Murphy frames "emotional geography" (mapped throughout the objects and memorabilia in the archive) as a way of discovering lost children's voices while better understanding the role of children in society historically. Working through archives with an open mind allows us to study children's experiences based on their own account, alongside that of those observing them. Importantly, as Christensen observes in her essay too, it invites us to replace the predominantly white, male accounts of children's restricted social roles with more relational and interconnected relationships. Likewise, in chapter 12, Hamer and Murnaghan explore museums as a site for adventure, agency, and independence that can, and often do, function as liberatory sites for imagined futures. Studying child-adult relationships through museums efficiently exposes a tension between adults and children. The children form their own real and imagined relationships to the objects and collections on display, but they are also very tightly controlled and monitored when spending time in these spaces. This seems to be an anomaly that is dismissed by cultural phenomena like *Night at the Museum* but reemerges

whenever past histories are challenged and called out as being inadequately framed. Like Brockdorff and Dautel, Hamer and Murnaghan study the relation of reality and fantasy as ways of expanding space to amplify children's voices. Standing more firmly in their own worldviews and becoming active agents of change is a topic picked up by Kulkarni and Owens, who expand the discussion to include digital practices as they play out in the world of TikTok. As Coste and Klomberg also observe in their essays, Kulkarni and Owens note that nurturing subcultures as a way of democratizing critique leads to the onto-epistemic redefining of (in)justice and generates positive change from the inside out.

CONCLUSION

Generating positive change from the inside out is a powerful tool against oppression and this collection explores both the nature of that change as well as its literary, social, and political manifestations. The fight for justice and healthier, more inclusive, societies is both personal and collective. As authors, academics, teachers, and curators study and create the changing conditions of child agency, activism, and citizenship, it is important to adopt the curiosity and spirit of collaboration that we see emerging in young people. Their desire to tell their own story, to claim their own identities and have them represented in books, films, and digital and social media worlds is, or must be, at the heart of efforts to democratize children's literature, media, and culture. While acknowledging the absence of children's voices represented directly in this volume, we hope that our scholarship still provides a step in that direction as it outlines the complex, care-full changes that are already taking place, and those that still need to happen.

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