Fixity and fluidity – circulations, children, and childhood

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Fixity and fluidity – circulations, children, and childhood

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Abstract
Circulation is often essentialized as a prescribed, limited, and closed form of movement, ‘fixed’ in origins and destination, in intent and outcome. However, circulation may also be understood as a form of flexible movement, non-fixity or multiple stabilities (the act of living life in multiple physical and social locations). This special issue of the journal Childhood examines a plurality of circulations as metaphors and catalysts for unsettling children and childhood as fixed ontological categories. On one hand, contributors’ attention to a phenomenology of circulations, children, and childhood identifies ‘fixed’ expected or projected developmental trajectories assumed by such adult actors as state workers, child welfare experts, lawyers, law enforcement and biomedical professionals, or adoption professionals to underpin a ‘normal childhood’ (such as that which might be grounded in a nuclear family, with an assumed fixed and stable locus of belonging). On the other hand, it identifies and literally subjectifies children who deviate from this model or ideal. Using spatial metaphors to deconstruct childhood as a fixed category ultimately yields important models for thinking about how children and childhood literally and figuratively perform as markers for both stasis and fluidity in our daily lives.

Keywords
Adoption, childhood, circulation, migration, phenomenology

Introduction
In her insightful article, “‘My future doesn’t know ME’: Time and subjectivity in poetry by young people,” Rachel Conrad (2012) investigates the problem that ‘common-sense...
views of time’ (2012: 204) present to the study of children and youth. She notes that discourse in childhood studies includes multiple perspectives on time to highlight the ways in which adults call upon childhood to cement fixed notions of temporality – ‘in which the present-time of children’s lives is always down-played in adults’ focus on the remembered pasts and hoped-for futures of childhood’ (2012: 205). She then asks to what extent considering philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s framings of time as ‘the mutual harmonizing and overlapping of past and future through the present (1995 [1962]: 420) is useful for (1) unsettling the ontological categories used to fix the temporal locations of children; and (2) following Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) and Warming (2011), highlighting the ‘fluid and performative . . . nature of children’s perspectives’ in relation to time (2012: 205). Ultimately, she imagines, and employs, a social study of children and youth whose starting point is phenomenological – one that theorizes childhood as a ‘non-determinative sense of becoming’ (2012: 205) rather than a ‘becoming’ with a future (moving towards becoming an adult) orientation.

Just as it is worthwhile for Conrad to de-essentialize notions of time to better understand how notions of childhood are taken up in the very project of those essentializations, so is it worthwhile to rethink spatial metaphors to disabuse the notion that children occupy isolated, separate, and fixed social locations. The special issue at hand demonstrates this through the phenomenological investigation of circulations, children, and childhood. Like time, circulation is often essentialized as a prescribed, limited, and closed form of movement, as in the biological sciences of circulatory systems (Rosen, 2004). Or it is marked temporally as an event or happening in which objects temporarily move, or are moved, until they achieve some natural state of rest (Maudlin, 2012). Circulation, then, is often considered a fixed form of movement, one that defines experience of movement in space and time, in origins and destination, in intent and outcome. However, this special issue of Childhood explores what kinds of theoretical developments ethnographers yield when they set out to document a phenomenology of circulation in relation to children, one where movement is prescribed, yet flexibly perceived and embodied; imposed, yet flexibly enacted. In other words, what kinds of ‘fixed’ and ‘fluid’ relational contexts and trajectories of children’s circulation can be identified that shape both figurations of childhood and the lived experiences of children?

Circulation is primarily understood in this special issue as a flexible form of movement, non-fixity or multiple stabilities. That is, we explore the notion that circulation – the act of living life in multiple physical and social locations – is actually a stable condition. Circulation is also used as a metaphor for understanding children’s experiences of movement and space, both their own circulation and the circulation of ideas, narratives, images, and symbols associated with childhood. On one hand, contributors’ attention to a phenomenology of circulations, children, and childhood identifies ‘fixed’ expected or projected developmental trajectories assumed by such adult actors as state workers, child welfare experts, lawyers, law enforcement and biomedical professionals, or adoption professionals to underpin a ‘normal childhood’ (such as that which might be grounded in a nuclear family, with an assumed fixed and stable locus of belonging). On the other hand, it identifies and literally subjectifies children who deviate from this model or ideal. These diverse articles demonstrate that although the bodies of children and others are set in motion
by many state processes around the world (civil war, poverty, lack of support for women and children, economic and social inequality), these processes also trigger concurrent movements (and inertia) with regard to information, images, ideas, time, power, status, symbols, and/or emotions.

Building on the work of anthropologists who have upset notions of spatial fixity and fluidity as evidenced through various forms of child circulation such as adoption, informal fostering, migration, and deportation (e.g., Briggs and Marre, 2009; Fonseca, 1986, 2004; Leinaweaver, 2008; Leinaweaver and Seligman, 2007; Stryker, 2011; Yngvesson, 2002, 2005; Yngvesson and Coutin, 2006), the articles here also identify ways in which childhood itself is made central as a metaphorical, narrative or discursive marker for understanding movement and stasis. Authors examine circulations to gain better insight on children and childhood in a variety of field sites – some obvious, and some less so: within flexible care arrangements in a marginal urban mestizo population in Quito, Ecuador; among 1.5 generation Salvadoran migrants who were raised in the United States and then deported to El Salvador; among adopted children treated using early forms of the Evergreen model of attachment therapy at a clinic in Colorado, USA; among transnational adoptees from Asia, Africa, and Latin America raised in Sweden and the United States who return to the sites of their abandonment; along Quechua child migration pathways and among child postcard vendors in Peru; and among inmates at a therapeutic community prison in Britain where the figure of the injured child enters into circulation as a token of shared suffering.

Studying not just child circulation, but the circulation of narratives, subjectivities, and figurations of the child disorders the reification of childhood as an immutable category, while suggesting new insights about children and childhood that allow for more responsiveness to the dynamism of children’s lives; it also utilizes children and childhood studies as a way in for problematizing taken-for-granted assumptions about movement, location, temporality, and agency, phenomena that are central to our understanding of sociality and social life. Using spatial metaphors to deconstruct childhood as a fixed category yields important models as well for thinking about how children and childhood literally and figuratively perform as markers for both fixity and fluidity in our daily lives.

Circulations and childhood as a ‘non-determinative sense of becoming’

All of the articles in this special issue address, in one way or another, both substantive and methodological problems posed by conventional understandings of the child and of childhood as presented from the perspective of an adult for whom ‘a child has emerged from upstream in the past and is changing toward the future downstream’ (Conrad, 2012: 205). This unidirectional sense of becoming fixes the subjectivity of a child to a specific time, and, as we suggested in our opening section, a specific space – the protected space of childhood – with its conventional relational forms: ‘the family,’ ‘the home,’ a bounded local community. This idealized notion of where childhood is located and what child subjectivity consists in has been critiqued in a range of literature (see Stephens, 1995 for an overview; and Leifsen, this issue) but remains a pervasive theme in childhood policy and practice.
Esben Leifsen’s article, ‘Child circulation in and out of the secure zone of childhood,’ a study of flexible care arrangements in Ecuador, poses a challenge to idealized notions of childhood and child subjectivity. Leifsen argues that informal child circulation and care arrangements in Ecuador are aspects of distinct, changeable socialities that are characterized more by relational fluidity and impermanence than by relational fixity, that is, permanent location in a ‘secure zone’ such as a conventional family. As a consequence, he suggests that family needs to be thought of as a less stable social structure and the child as a less localized subject. Leifsen critiques social scientific discourses of rupture as a break from one essential relationship, arguing that the ‘past’ from which some children are understood to be in need of rescue involves a far more complex range of relationships: for example, with extended kin, foster parents, and others, or institutions, from which there may have been a series of separations, and a series of relationships, some abusive, some more temporary, than others. He argues for an approach to the ways that children and youth navigate these relationships that draws on the work of Christiansen et al. (2006) and emphasizes social becoming, rather than social belonging. As Leifsen suggests, ‘a focus on navigating permits us to capture social structure through the essential human struggle of relating and creating meaningful social associations’ (Leifsen, this issue). He develops this argument through an extended analysis of one child’s insistent, self-initiated search for new caretakers.

Likewise, Susan Coutin’s article, ‘Place and presence within Salvadoran deportees’ narratives of removal,’ interrogates notions of childhood as fixed to particular times and locations in her examination of the displaced subjectivities of Salvadoran youth who have been deported back to El Salvador from what they had assumed was a secure location in the United States. Coutin argues that youths’ accounts of removal destabilize common understandings of the fixity and fluidity of persons and places. Rather, places become key components of selves for immigrant youth and their narratives of exile articulate an ongoing psychological connection to places and times before their deportation, in spite of legal prohibitions on physical presence. Drawing on interviews with deported youth as a way of mapping their experience of the transition to illegality and exile, Coutin suggests that ‘removed landscapes … record almost a ghostly presence of youth who are no longer there.’ In this sense, landscapes ‘are revealed to be both fluid and fixed, in that they too move, even as they remain part of youths’ selves’ (Coutin, this issue).

Rachael Stryker’s article, ‘Movement without movement: ‘RAD kids’ as circulatory problems in United States adoption pipelines,’ focuses on children at risk for disrupting adoptions who undergo certain types of attachment therapy. She documents such children’s complex sense of connection to a ‘past’ that remains a powerful presence in their lives, even as attachment therapists seek to forcibly erase their pre-adoptive histories. Describing children’s memories of and nostalgia for, not only birth and adoptive families, but children and caretakers in institutions, Stryker argues that therapists’ efforts to institutionalize an exclusive (adoptive) family and a single locus of belonging is a dimension of biomedical knowledge regimes that discipline children’s bodies and minds, seeking to return them to what is considered a ‘natural state’ in which they love only one set of parents. The children she studied, by contrast, demonstrated more nuanced understandings of connection, based on a history of relations and of separations that recall Leifsen’s discussion of flexible childcare arrangements in Ecuador and Coutin’s account.
of removed landscapes among Salvadoran deportees. Stryker suggests that children
were treated at the clinic where her research was carried out understood their own circulation
as ‘pendular’ rather than linear, and their selves as ‘pendulating’ between institutions and
families, rather than as fixed in one place or another, a metaphor that might equally be
applied to the subjects of Leifsen’s and Coutin’s research.

Barbara Yngvesson’s study of transnational adoptees who return to the orphanages,
hospitals, courts, or families that were sites of their abandonment engages with related
issues. Focusing on the ‘pull’ experienced by adoptees to a canceled ‘past,’ she juxta-
poses state policies that standardize adoption as a unidirectional process that requires a
clean break from the past so that the adopted can complete a particular trajectory of
‘proper’ development, and more complex renditions by the adopted themselves of their
own circulation as children. For the adoptees in Yngvesson’s study, subjectivity is a cir-
culatory phenomenon: a temporally dynamic and open-ended process of coming into
being in which the child (or mother) left behind and the adopted child take shape vis-
a-vis one another. Yngvesson demonstrates the work of phenomenology for under stand-
ing emerging forms of consciousness that accompany children’s embodiment of their
own circulation, a process in which temporally based selves and families are remade and
remapped.

In an analysis that is evocative of Coutin’s account of the ways removed landscapes
record the ghostly presence of deportees who are no longer there, Lorna Rhodes’ research
among inmates at HMP Grendon, a therapeutic community prison in Britain, focuses on
the way the ghostly presence of past events in the lives of the prisoners ‘leave “a shape
defined by [an] absence” ’ (Rhodes, this issue, citing Gordon, 1997: 6) that can transform
both subjectivity and public space at the prison. Rhodes contrasts a rehabilitative ideal in
which memories of painful childhood experiences are brought into circulation among
prisoners in therapeutic practices known as ‘linking,’ to isolationist and repressive prac-
tices at supermax prisons in the United States. Rhodes argues that because ‘linking’
actively connects the words and behavior of one person to another’s experience, circula-
tion of the figure of the injured child and the image of shared suffering it evokes among
inmates in the community prison is potentially transformative both for individual prison-
ers and for social space at the prison. Like the adoptees in Yngvesson’s research whose
return to sites of their abandonment five, ten, or twenty years previously brings the child
who was left behind into dynamic relationship with the self who was adopted, such
‘returns’ can provide ‘a small window of becoming and opportunity’ (Stern, 2004: 7) in
which both subjective and social space may be reconfigured.

The complex relationship of figurations of the child (abandoned, vulnerable, impov-
erished, abused) to the continual process of ‘coming into being’ not only of the child, but
of the adult that child becomes, is also taken up in the contributions of Michael Hill and
Aviva Sinervo. Hill’s use of life history methodology to explore various ways in which
fluidity and fixity shaped the circulation of Gina Maldonado, a transnational indigenous
intellectual from Cusco, Peru, points to the ongoing significance of stereotypes such as
‘the migrant child’ in Maldonado’s Quechua village, or ‘the indigenous intellectual’ in
her cosmopolitan professional environment. Even as Maldonado’s mobility complicated
her relationship to these figurations and the racial and class hierarchies that shaped them,
they continued to circulate emotionally in ways that produced what Stryker (this issue)
describes as a ‘pendulating self.’ Likewise, Sinervo’s article, ‘No somos los pobrecitos,’ explores the ways stereotypes of childhood poverty among child postcard vendors in Peru are deployed in their everyday practices, even as the children’s situations can be considered transitional: they are marketing themselves in a way that in itself is not ‘fixed’ but fluid, yet what sells is a more conventional representation of being stuck in poverty or in a romanticized version of ‘the indigenous child.’ Sinervo provides a compelling account of how children participate in the work of categorization, even as they must take into account the powerful emotional currency of conceptions of poverty and childhood, and the ways in which such ideas circulate.

The child as a ‘true thing’: Unsettling fixed notions of childhood

While a central aim of this special issue of *Childhood* is to use the metaphor of circulation as a way in for illuminating childhood as a form of ‘non-determinative becoming,’ a necessary accompanying goal is to highlight tensions between a child-centered perspective on becoming and the approach of powerful state agents (social workers, therapists, police, child welfare officials) who are authorized to intervene in the lives of children, particularly children who are understood to be displaced, lost, living on the margins, or in some other way ‘at risk.’

These tensions are notable in each of the contributions, but manifest in different ways. For example, Michael Hill’s interviews with Ecuadorian transnational intellectual Gina Maldonado reveal the state’s role (primarily via cosmopolitan public schooling) in attempting to fix – both in the sense of cementing and repairing – an inherently ‘disordered’ indigenous childhood, an attempt at disciplining Maldonado’s very self that, ironically, her own circulation to the ‘more cosmopolitan’ United States aided her in making sense of. In Esben Leifsen’s research on ‘lost’ children and the child welfare field in Ecuador, the tension involves different understandings of the child’s best interest as dictated by child professionals working with ‘lost’ or ‘abandoned’ children, on the one hand, and the children they are seeking to ‘protect’ or ‘rescue,’ on the other. For professionals, protection involves securing the birthmother–child bond, or when family reunification is not possible, arranging for a child’s legal adoption. Leifsen describes this set of policies and practices as a ‘relational fixity’ rationale, by contrast to the relational fluidity that characterized the informal (typically self-initiated) circulation of children in the marginal urban Quito neighborhood where his research was carried out.

A relational fixity rationale also underpins the practices of attachment therapists detailed in Rachael Stryker’s adoption research in Evergreen, Colorado. Focusing on what was understood by therapists to be ‘reactive attachment disorder’ among children whose adoptions were disrupting, therapists sought to instill ‘child love’ for the adoptive parents in the children through a range of coercive strategies that included forced forgetting of the children’s birth parents or orphanage connections, and defining as ‘circulatory problems’ those children who could not reconcile themselves with the mandate that they had only one family (and one proper child ‘self’). Similarly, Barbara Yngvesson’s research underscores the tensions between an approach to family-making in adoption that involves a ‘clean break’ with the past (advocated by mainstream adoption professionals) and the more temporally dynamic engagement with their pre-adoptive histories.
that underpins the understanding of ‘circulation’ by adoptees who participated in her research.

An undercurrent in all of the contributions is the implicit and sometimes explicit ways in which normative configurations of (ideal and non-ideal) childhoods animate the actions and understandings of all participants, both children and adults – whether these adults be child welfare workers, attachment therapists, adoption professionals, immigration officials, adoptive parents, or the ethnographer him- or herself. With reference to these configurations, historian Carolyn Steedman (1995: 5) underscores the importance of making ‘an analytic separation between real children, living in the time and space of particular societies’ on one hand, and ‘the ideational and figurative force’ of the child as ‘a figure that resists the processes of both history and symbolism – a child: a true thing,’ on the other.

Aviva Sinervo’s contribution engages explicitly with this dynamic in her examination of the circulation of images of childhood poverty that must be confronted and mediated by child vendors in Cusco, Peru. Although the focus of Sinervo’s analysis is on the children, her study is particularly insightful in its complex engagement with the struggles not only of child vendors, but of tourists and aid workers, with the issue of child vulnerability and how it is to be understood in the context of stereotyped concepts of ‘pobrecito.’

Like Lorna Rhodes’ analysis of the place of the abused child in the reordering of social space at a community prison in Britain, where the spatialization of the abused child as ‘the self within’ (Steedman, 1995: 12) contributes to a larger project of ‘remedial sociality’ and therapeutic community at the facility (Rhodes, this issue), Sinervo examines how figurations of the ‘pobrecito’ are central to the complex networks of social relations in which child street vendors are caught up in Cusco, networks that are contingent on child vendors’ strategic performance of themselves as ‘poor.’ Finally, Susan Coutin’s research on Salvadoran deportees examines the deployment of conventional stereotypes by deported youth that emphasize ‘the normalcy of their daily lives’ prior to deportation in order to develop an “alternative evidentiary grid” that justifies their belonging in the United States, even as their experiences of what was normal were shaped by growing up in heavily policed, racially segregated communities, where a ‘normal childhood’ placed them at risk of being removed. The distance between an idealized childhood and the experiences of deported youth is further underscored in a neoliberal model of immigration in which immigrant ‘entrepreneurs’ send back remittances, but in which deported youth are perceived as ‘friction’ or ‘failure’ in the proper circulation of resources between El Salvador and the United States (Coutin, this issue).

Child agency as circulatory

As discussed above, one challenge of this collective project has been to recognize the force of modern understandings of childhood as a very component of the child self. To subvert this modernist tendency, the authors in this special issue have taken as their point of departure locations where children are seen ‘as both social being and social becoming’ (Christiansen et al., 2006: 11). Thus, a final theme in the issue is the use of circulation as a spatial metaphor to identify ways that children implicate themselves in their own becoming. Implicit in that tension is an understanding of child agency as inseparable from a concept of the child as continuously involved in making relations in ways that are simultaneously fixed and fluid. That is, these relations are shaped by figurations of the...
child that are part of legal, cultural, and moral knowledge regimes that each child must navigate to make his or her way in the world and they are perceived and performed in ways that are contingent on the different circumstances of each child. We posit that if children’s non-determinative becoming is circulatory, then perhaps child agency must be considered circulatory as well.

This is perhaps best articulated by Leifsen, who suggests that we view children’s agency ‘as an interrelation between proper action and the conditions of possibility in the contexts where children navigate’ (Leifsen, this issue). Elsewhere in the publication, articles further reflect the notion that children’s agency might be considered outside dichotomies of vulnerable vs. agentive children and youth. Leifsen, Stryker, and Yngvesson ask to what extent the perspectives of ‘lost children,’ pathologized adoptees, and adult adoptees complicate the figurations of children and childhood that child workers, biomedical professionals, and adoption workers reify. Rhodes and Coutin each highlight childhood as a category that simultaneously disorders and reorders space to develop analyses of alternative logics of belonging. And both Sinervo and Hill document some subversive use of the circulation of figurations of children: Sinervo documents poor children’s use and resistance of the stereotype of the vulnerable child to sell postcards, and in Hill’s article, his interlocutor Gina, in recounting her early childhood, discusses ‘performing’ indigeneity and cosmopolitan-ness during childhood and adolescence to advance her professional and personal aspirations. In both of these examples, child actors are producing the very stereotypes they are attempting to transcend. In all of the articles, authors understand agency as something that is less a static condition of having and/or expressing power; rather, it is explored as a fundamental, yet shifting dimension of what sociality is understood to consist in.

Conclusion

One of the key goals of childhood studies since its emergence in the 1980s has been to engage and unsettle the essentializing notions that underwrite childhood as a common-sense idea (James and Prout, 1997). Some of the earliest engagements in childhood studies in this regard address the western assumptions that frame childhood as a ‘fixed’ ontological category. These assumptions have been addressed along various registers, primarily as critiques of modernist (biological, psychological, developmental) categorizations of what constitutes and instantiates a child (James, 2007; LeVine, 2007; Montgomery, 2009) as well as the subsequently necessary assertion that children are, in fact, social subjects, capable of thought, action, and impact (see Montgomery, 2009 for an overview of this literature). The present special issue should be considered in complement with those works that are attempting to add to this project, specifically by questioning the ontological categories used by childhood studies scholars (Conrad, 2012; Prout, 2005; Ryan, 2012) as well as unmooring children from the fixed temporal and spatial location of childhood as an experience marked particularly by ‘the self in progress.’ Utilizing circulation as a metaphor to better understand children and childhood challenges the notion of the child as a ‘self in progress’; but it also reminds us that childhood studies is still very much a discipline in progress.
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