

# Games in the Sand: Serious Play with Scrabble: A Chadian Childhood

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## Games in the Sand: Serious Play with *Scrabble: A Chadian Childhood*

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Engaging with Michaël Ferrier's *Scrabble: A Chadian Childhood* (Liverpool University Press, 2022) for a review is a different experience than reading for leisure. The act of reviewing carries a responsibility toward fellow scholars to provide an honest assessment while simultaneously extending a generous engagement to the author. Furthermore, there exists a sense of accountability to the *Journal of Childhood Studies*, and so my reading and response are oriented in particular ways. In this undertaking, several guiding questions, inspired by the journal's commitments and intentions, come to the fore. These include: In what ways is the text rooted in situated contexts that are particular to a specific time and place but that help readers think from where they are now? How does the text grapple with "everyday ethical, political, epistemic, and ontological inheritances that shape worlds" and that take children's insights seriously? What interventions does the text make in dominant discourses of child development that privilege particular Western, middle-class, white ways of knowing and being? How might childhood memoir, as a literary form, have methodological significance for childhood studies? What grounds the theoretical framework of the narrative, even as it remains unremarked upon or perhaps because it goes unstated? This review sets out to think with these concerns—however partially, modestly, and incompletely—offering insights into the book's potential contribution as a resource for childhood studies.

### Structure and overview

*Scrabble: A Chadian Childhood* is a fusion of memoir and cultural commentary, offering insights into the multifaceted nature of childhood. The narrative centers around the author's experiences at the age of 10 in N'Djamena, Chad, at the end of the 1970s, yet weaves in earlier and later recollections and hints at future events, encouraging readers to explore the uncertainty of memory despite (or maybe because of) the author's convictions of truthfulness. Divided into three sections, "Toumai," "The Outdoor School," and "The War," the book's structural fluidity blurs boundaries between segments. This is particularly true of the first two sections, which engage in dialogue about the who, what, when, where, and how of learning and relationships. However, the final section is defined by an interspersion of poetic writing with stark imaginary of war. It is disconcerting (Verran, 2001). I think that is the point.

Throughout, Ferrier probes the concept of childhood: the relationships that distinguish it, the spaces and times it occupies, its relationship with the nonhuman world, its institutionalization and failure to be contained, its go-between traditional cultural values and the influence of Westernization, and its oppositional framing of innocence and war. For me, the book also invites critical examination of memoirs as a means of not only remembering but reconstituting childhood. I was frequently reminded while reading and reviewing that "concepts of childhood provide a useful container for adult desires" (Russell, 2022, p. 4), and neither Ferrier nor I can escape this tension. In my reading and reviewing, I was struck by constant "wants" of the sort where I wished Ferrier addressed this and that more. Still, Ferrier's distinctive blend of memory and metaphor prompted me to reconsider preconceived notions about childhood as I read about its profound connections to the physical, cultural, and emotional landscapes of Chad. While colonial legacy, political mobility, and the inequitable distribution of resources are not explored in any serious manner in the text, they loom large for me as hauntings, urging the reader to acknowledge

their presence. I wanted these ghosts to be addressed explicitly (Tuck, 2018). Yet I am left uncomfortable with my demands for a memoir to meet my expectations of critical scholarly engagement. I am not sure this is fair and, for me, it remains unresolved.

## Figurations of African childhoods

A widely held tenet of childhood studies is the importance of contextualizing childhood experiences within specific sociocultural and historical settings. Childhood memoirs can engage with this condition by immersing readers in the unique ecologies of particular contexts. These narratives often offer vivid depictions of cultural practices, family dynamics, and societal norms, allowing readers to glean invaluable insights into how childhood is intricately woven into diverse and dynamic contexts. By scrutinizing such memoirs, childhood studies scholars may gain a more nuanced understanding of the considerable variation in childhood experiences across different times, places, and spaces. This is especially significant in the case of African childhoods, where accounts are notably scarce in comparison to the abundant narratives and scholarly works stemming from and about the Global North, yet are often taken as universal rather than universalizing.

According to Abebe and Ofose-Kusi (2016), representations of African childhoods tend to fall into two distinct and limited categories. The first can be termed “crisis childhoods,” which are most familiar in stories of child soldiers and other traumatic experiences. The second category is “tribal childhoods,” where research tends to “exoticize, particularize and, sometimes, universalize children’s experiences as ‘indigenous’ and unique” (p. 304). While these representations can be strength based (e.g., “African children are so resilient”), they often homogenize what is a very diverse land and peoples. Furthermore, these sorts of representations serve to other not only children but also the places, spaces, and times they inhabit. While Ferrier’s memoir resists falling neatly into either of these portrayals, it cannot escape them completely. Of related salience are potential differences between representations of African childhoods by Africans and narratives of childhood in Africa by expatriates. I mention this because of Ferrier’s subtitle, *A Chadian Childhood*, and the geopolitical belonging it may convey.

Ferrier was born in 1967 in Strasbourg, France. His grandfather was Mauritian born and his grandmother is Indian; this history is recounted in another of his books, *Over Seas of Memory* (Ferrier, 2015). On his Wikipedia page, Ferrier is described as coming from “a French family and also from Mauritian Creole people and Réunion Creole people, with Indian, French, Malagasy and British origins” and having had a “nomadic” childhood. Next year, a biography will be published about his life entitled *Michaël Ferrier, Transnational Novelist: French Without Borders* (Kawakami, 2024). The “nomadic” and “without borders” are phrasings evocative of the sort of privilege of mobility I wish was addressed. This does not discount Ferrier’s contribution, but it is my attempt to front situated differences that matter (Davidson, 2010; Hope, 2002). I am not trying to smooth over the unequal access to whiteness that different expatriates experience but noting that these differences do carry weight and that they should be attended to in memoirs of African childhoods.

The closest Ferrier comes to engaging with the geopolitics of location is when he disavows the word expatriate: “expatriates (that word, I never liked it)” (p. 138). The explanation, however, stops where it starts. Like many literary genres, there tends to be a template for expatriate childhood memoirs. Davidson (2010) captures these tendencies as “spectacular scenery contrasted with the brutality of the politics; the tale of childhood paradise lost, when dark realities start to intrude on Eden” (para. 2). While this may seem too simplistic, and is written with satirist attention, there is meaning that gets strengthened in the repetition of form. In a series of recollections, Ferrier even marks the moment he “had come to the end of [his] childhood,” when civil war is no longer immediately escapable (p. 138). He continues:

War: everything we will never understand. War is the opposite of childhood: it is the moment when we realize that we have absolutely no chance of getting the answers to the questions we ask ourselves. Nothing can be grasped or explained anymore. War leaves the world to its fundamental incomprehensibility. It is like the sun: a huge question with no answer. (p. 138)

I am in no position to argue against the incomprehensibility of war, but what I can do as a childhood studies scholar is inquire as to whether an explanation of the incommensurability of war and childhood discards and disregards a selection of children from childhood. There is something ethically misaligned in the oft-heard “they did not have a childhood” to encapsulate the experiences of children surviving trauma and hardship. The unspoken referent is a particular kind of childhood and a particular “they.” I do not think this is Ferrier’s intent, but many Chadian childhoods were lived in war rather than being isolatable from it. Most of Ferrier’s childhood memories are recounted while war rages all around him. He helps us notice so much about the plants, animals, and geographies of his everyday life. But war is another ghost for most of the book. So, while not discounting the trauma Ferrier and his family experienced when the war reached their literal doorstep, they also got to leave. Most Chadians did not. Many of those people we encountered through Ferrier’s writing also did not. There is sparse attention to the material implications of the war for different groups of children, for example, the former school friends of Ferrier who become victim and another soldier in a scene of recognition of Davidson’s phrase “childhood paradise lost.” The brutal scene of death was a break that signalled to Ferrier that his childhood was over, but I wanted more to be acknowledged.

Ferrier’s memoir does enrich the body of autobiographical work on childhood by providing a multifaceted view of childhood, one that encompasses both African and non-African elements and experiences, I just wished he acknowledged it as such. Figurations of childhood are messy: Sometimes we clean up our analyses (and our recollections) so they seem neutral, but figurations are tied up with the politics of particular times and places. Overall, there is a racial, colonial, classed, and gendered politics of childhood at play in this book that does not generate the page space I think it deserves. Ferrier shows complex relationships between individuals and the more-than-human world in ways that prevent perpetuating a prevailing yet oversimplified perception of childhood as universal. But not all people are fleshed out, particularly the women and those who are employed at his family’s home. They are often objects of his gaze.

### **Relationalities of learning**

As a childhood studies scholar, I was drawn to Ferrier’s understanding of learning and the importance he puts on noticing. Learning is made possible by the presence of plants and animals, and he makes sense of them through experience and the Indigenous knowledges shared with him. Chad’s diverse flora and fauna, alongside generations of traditional wisdom shared by the house caretaker, Saleh, played a fundamental role in shaping Ferrier’s childhood. This interconnectedness between nature, culture, and learning underscores how knowledge is acquired and passed down. I was constantly amazed at Ferrier’s ability to re-remember details. The pages are full of descriptive sights, sounds, smells, and tastes. This is because for him learning is “sensation ... childhood helps us to see the appearance of the world in full light” (p. 15). One of the ways this sensing is possible, Ferrier explains, is its “vertical break.... It is life at ground level: I share it with the animals” (p. 15). Children are literally closer to the ground, where so much of life happens. Ferrier shares the importance of developing a habit of “always seeing the world on many levels,” and this childhood lesson is one Ferrier says he never forgot.

Humans are not the only teachers in the memoir, or even the main teachers in Ferrier’s childhood. He writes, “Before humans, teachers, educators, professors, even before parents or family, it was animals that educated me” (p. 34). There were vivid descriptions of the “tree of creatures” (p. 33) that brought together flora, fauna, and local

Indigenous knowledges into a world-upon-itself in the knotted trunk and sprawling roots of an old tree. Ferrier referred to this tree-ecology as “my first guide and a powerful tutor” (p. 34). To know the world, for Ferrier, was to practice an “incandescence of sensation,” to attune to “the shape, the colors, the smells, the texture, the dimensions, the landscape, the distances...” (p. 16). He adds that, “even if you do this, it is still more beautiful, more terrifying, and more varied than you think” (p. 16). There are lessons here for understanding learning as knotted within multispecies ecologies and ecosystems. Rooney and Blaise (2023) suggest that “noticing ... can challenge ideas of what it means to learn. We come to understand that imaginings and moments of joy and astonishment are also forms of knowledge, where the knowing comes from moving with the intricate, and sometimes messy, workings of hidden microworlds” (p. 60). While Ferrier’s memoir does not actively destabilize human exceptionalism and is engrossed in the discovery of a true self in a coming-of-age tale (which may also be a limit of genre), more-than-humans are nevertheless important participants in the learning journey. The animals and plants comprise Ferrier’s “outdoor school, that of bends and corners, twigs and scrublands, bifurcations” (p. 50) that are key figures. Ferrier contrasts the outdoor school with the “official space, that of knowledge certified by institutions and accredited by the masters, and then an unofficial space, immense and heterogeneous, composed of a multitude of clandestine forms of knowledge” (p. 56). His affinity seems to be with the first, and his deep descriptions of its teachings leave no doubt in a reader’s mind about its power. Throughout the book there is an ongoing disruption of the institutionalization of learning in place of a deep respect for Ferrier’s Indigenous and multispecies teachers and the world they share.

The evocation of “the outdoor school” is multilayered. It refers to learning that happens outdoors—beyond the formal walls of a school—like in the above quotation. It is also a stage of lifespan development as taught to Ferrier by Saleh. It follows the first stage of life known as the “mother’s school,” where home is the main site of learning. The outdoor school life stage encompasses ages 7–14, but Saleh insists that everything “is always school, because everything is school. Going to have fun is going to school. Going to get water is like going to school. Everything is about teaching and learning” (p. 46). In my interpretation, this is a gesture toward lifelong learning that cannot be contained by neoliberal globalization. The lifespan development taught to Ferrier by Saleh is something more like a geographies of lifespan development that is ontologically and epistemology different than the sort of age and stages that we are used to in child development theory, where progression is tied to the type of reasoning going on inside a child’s head. Each “degree” of life that Saleh describes is intimately entangled in space and place and marked by growing response-abilities to care for others, human and more-than-human (e.g., “the animal kingdom, the plant kingdom, the mineral kingdom” [p. 47]). One of my takeaways from the descriptions of learning, and what Ferrier affirms throughout the book, is the importance of noticing the world of which we are already a part and to do so with joy and a nonextractive ethos. I find this moving and relevant for work with children.

## Geographies of childhood

From a childhood studies perspective, I found *Scrabble* to be most generative when thought through the lens of the geographies of children and childhood. I have made gestures to mobilities, space, and place in earlier sections to show how they influenced my overall reading and reviewing. More specifically, from childhood studies scholars, I have tried to think *Scrabble* alongside insights such as “we can never think of place without weather” (Rooney & Blaise, 2023) and that place constitutes an intersection of nature/urban/childhood (Duhn et al., 2017) rather than *only* ontologically separate childhood spaces of home, school, and city. I write *only* because these sites do have importance, but they are embedded into a larger exploration of space that is not so easy to delineate.

Ferrier stories his childhood in terms of increasingly independent mobilities: He details transitions from home to the hut in his walled-in yard, to the neighbouring hospital and morgue, to the faraway school, to the magic of the

markets (p. 85). The exploration of space is joyous and formative:

I devour the space, I breathe it in deeply. I walk. I venture farther and farther, I go up to the northern part of the city or to the west, I wave through alleys, come out upon the wonder of the river with its sparkling eddies and its golden sulfur bubbles, its banks laden with acacias and mimosas from which the children dive in, laughing.... I open doors, I push gates, I enter gardens. I climb steep slopes. The smallest footpath, the smallest ravine, seem to me to stand out of the splendor of the terrain, an opening into which I must venture. (pp. 75–76)

Succinctly stated, “children go everywhere” (p. 81). Ferrier even plots out his childhood in places, shared with the reader in a bulleted list: “the bed, the bedroom, the house, the terrace, the yard, the river, the neighbourhood, the city, the world, the universe” (p. 74). While we might be tempted to think these sites in expanding, progressive circles, Ferrier interrupts this linearity and states that, instead of “from point to point ... a lace pattern of places ... I like to represent life as a spiral, which with each step takes me towards new places, new discoveries. A vortex” (p. 74). As I attempted to evoke earlier, child development is rendered in spatial imagery in *Scrabble*, and I think this framing could be valuable for disrupting normative ways of knowing childhood that continue to be powerful and harmful in child-related disciplines.

In the early pages, Ferrier shares, “I had a childhood of sand and dust ... between the savannah and the steppe” which is closely followed by the observation “Chad, for me, is first and foremost the wind” (p. 11). Sand, wind, and dust make people and make place in inseparable ways: “All bodies are weather bodies” (Rooney & Blaise, 2023, p. 38). Sand sticks to bodies and moves with bodies. Wind may be harder to hold in my hand, but it moves us too and moves sand. Sand and wind also reach across space in ways not contained by borders; for example, sand from the Sahara often reaches the Caribbean, Cuba, and the Gulf Coast of the United States more than 5,000 miles away. *Scrabble*, the book’s title and main metaphor, is revisited multiple times in the text. The jury for the 2020 Prix Jacques Lacarrière award, which Ferrier’s memoir won, described the metaphor this way:

Like a game of Scrabble, the game starts with empty squares offering all the possibilities then becomes complicated and tightens to lead to an inevitable outcome. The landscapes of Chad—its light, its ochre dust, the wind—and the characters are entirely carried by the sensitivity and poetry of a writing of sensation brought to incandescence. (Le JSL, 2020, para. 4, my translation)

Sand and wind, far more than Scrabble, stay open to possibility. Sand and wind can carry Arabic, French, Hausa, and Musey, the languages of Chad, in ways that a game whose point system is based on the letter’s frequency in standard English just cannot. Sand and wind is the material sort of metaphor that I desire for thinking childhood. In this way, it is the second part of the jury’s words that holds an impact for me: the nod to how the landscapes of Chad, including the attributes of light, the ochre-coloured dust, and the warm wind, can be conjured but not closed down in a piece of writing. I read into Ferrier a suggestion that the depiction of weather elements is not just straightforward but can be undertaken with a heightened sense of sensitivity and poetic language that leaves space for unknowingness. In other words, Ferrier’s writing conveys a deep and vivid sensory experience of the Chad landscapes and the people, plants, animals, and weather within it, creating a strong and affective depiction that evades the “inevitable outcome” of a word game. Ferrier’s writing is as much about place and space as childhood, and perhaps another takeaway is that those should not be teased apart but thought, and remembered, together.

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