


# Childhood Entanglements, Artifacts, and Inheritances

## Children's Cultures After Childhood (Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Macaraene García-González, Eds., 2023)

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Volume 49, Number 2, July 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1112583ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs21774>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Association for Young Children

ISSN

2371-4107 (print)

2371-4115 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Russumanno, P. (2024). Review of [Childhood Entanglements, Artifacts, and Inheritances / Children's Cultures After Childhood (Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Macaraene García-González, Eds., 2023)]. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 49(2), 85–91. <https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs21774>

Article abstract

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## Childhood Entanglements, Artifacts, and Inheritances

A Review of *Children's Cultures After Childhood* (Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Macaraene García-González, Eds., 2023)

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*Children's Cultures After Childhood (2023) is a collaborative, interdisciplinary effort by children's literature, culture, and cognition scholars eager to go beyond the text. Inspired by Peter Kraftl's After Childhood and informed by posthumanist and new materialist theories, this collection of essays begins the difficult work of shifting the discipline toward new ways of seeing and doing.*

**Key words:** *new materialism, posthumanism, children's literature, after childhood*

*Children's Cultures After Childhood* (John Benjamins, 2023) is one piece of a larger scholastic effort that seeks to unbind, and pry open, the critically discursive and analytical methods that have shaped contemporary children's literature, culture, and cognition research. Inspired by a shared interest in relational ontologies, new materialism, and posthumanist thinking, the editors of this project, Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak (University of Wrocław) and Macaraene García-González (Pontifical Catholic University of Chile), have mobilized a diverse cast of "child-ist" (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González, 2023c, p. 1038) literary, media, comparative, and cognitive scholars to *re/imagine, re/think and re/*

*do knowledge* within and across their respective disciplines. Much like Peter Kraftl and his inspiring intellectual labour *After Childhood: Re-thinking Environment, Materiality, and Media in Children's Lives* (2022), the researchers gathered in this book think with contemporary feminist theory to actively decenter the humanist legacy—and its overzealous reliance on developmentalist outcomes and closures—to find new possibilities within the emergent common(ing) worlds. For the scholars who contributed to this project, it's recognized that their theoretical and empirical work has complexity, but a shift "towards understanding these relations as taking place within diverse intra-actions of meaning and matter" (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González, 2023b, p. 8) is important to the current anthropocentric context and insinuating crisis of modernism. This reconceptualization project deliberately undermines and pokes through the "narrow developmentalist logic" (de Rijke et al., p. 153) that shapes the modern child, its literature and culture (*child/text/culture*) while also revealing the entanglements that tie the child intimately to our fragile global landscape.

Every project scholar throughout *Children's Cultures After Childhood* expresses an eagerness for interdisciplinary work and an appreciation for its capacity for producing exhilarating and disruptive intellectual uncertainty. Over 200 pages and 12 chapters, readers follow along as new possibilities, modes of doing, and unknown worlds within the realm of childhood literature and culture are pondered, imagined, and explored. As in Kraftl's volume, this is done in a diffractive way. Traditionally dualistic meanings shaping the modernist world are "moved around," revealing a multiplicity of knowledges and wisdoms entangled within "messy, uneven, and inconsistent" (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, p. 125) relationships of "multi-directional power and affect" (de Rijke et al., p. 158). For scholars, researchers,

and students of children's literature and culture, such diffractive modes of doing, seeing, and knowing place an onus upon the ontological and epistemological foundations of their discipline—and challenge childhood literature and cultural researchers to think about the materiality affects constantly in flux just outside *child/text/culture*. This deliberate act of playful scholarly sabotage is a preliminary yet necessary measure to dislocate and traverse the broader sociocultural subjectivities that have seized, encoded, and formed the modernist/anthropocentric child, its associated literature, and dominant cultural perspectives that shape our understanding of the child and childhood (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González, 2023c, p. 1040).

### Inspired by the *after*

For Kraftl, a child geographer, *after* galvanizes the capacities of his accustomed scholarly interrogations. *After* dismisses the linearity of Cartesian knowledge and scale, oxidizing and reviving hardened methods by moving them across, and through, different temporalities, chronologies, spaces, and places—all of which are loosely tied together by historical, social, cultural, and political entanglements. It is here, within these loose openings, that the child and childhood exist as something beyond and outside of anthropocentric adolescence (Pryce, p. 77). The subtle yet useful sliding *in and out of focus* that *after* inspires creates the gaps necessary for conceptualizing ethical and epistemological research (Barad, 2007) unbound by humanist logic and favourable to more livable common worlds that could be shared with the more-than-human and nonhuman (Haraway, 2016).

Collaborators in this anthology share aspirations with Kraftl. The intention of this project is not a “quest for novelty or innovation for innovation's sake” but rather “a shared commitment to making the familiar strange in the name of social justice” (Pryce, p. 77). More generally, the assortment of essays throughout this collection demonstrates the onto-epistemological tactics, paths, and orientations that childhood literary and cultural scholars can embrace and explore if they decide to take on the onerous work of pushing their discipline into the uncomfortable yet liberating “trouble” and willingly choose to stay there (Haraway, 2016).

### Posthumanism & new materialism in children's literature and culture

Though the title of this work takes inspiration from Kraftl (2022), it is the work of posthumanist and new materialist thinkers such as, Barad, Haraway, and Deleuze that will motivate childhood literary and cultural scholars to go beyond *child/text/culture*. This entire project is a strenuous but worthwhile effort to both reveal and revel in the worlds that exist *after*. Through shared commitment to a methodical and analytical *re/turning* (de Rijke et al., p. 153) of pages and artefacts linked to childhood literature and cultural studies, project scholars set off on variegated paths, guiding readers on what becomes possible when reading through a posthumanist and new materialist lens.

Chapters are divided into three clusters: (1) New Materialist Readings of Children's Cultural Texts (pp. 20–71), (2) Relational Approaches in Empirical Research on Children's Cultures (pp. 88–137), and (3) After-Children's Culture Studies (pp. 152–185). Each cluster represents and depicts potential meanderings of the posthumanist and new materialist approach that editors Deszcz-Tryhubczak and García-González hope to foster, both within this project and across the discipline(s). Throughout the book, project scholars collectively nudge readers toward a multiplicity of approaches that purposefully “re-turn” (Newfield, p. 186) to modernist, child-centric discourses and artefacts ranging from mermaid folk tales (Cluster 1, p. 21), youth news media (Cluster 2, p. 89) and colonial knowledge (Cluster 3, p. 173) to offer “weird” ways of thinking with them.

Each essay is framed by key posthumanist and new materialist concepts that prop up the more intended childhood literary and cultural potentialities being explored. Concepts such as affect, assemblage, and agency assist childhood literature and cultural scholars as they eagerly venture into the “relational network of human and nonhuman

elements represented by an event [*reading*], object [*book*], phenomenon [*disneyfication*], or any other situation in which the ‘animate and inanimate’ [*the velveteen rabbit*] affect each other and are affected” (Duthoy, p. 104, text in brackets my own). Tenuously and with uncertainty, project scholars and readers alike take curious steps toward the rhizomatic “sproutings and outgrowths” (Lorgen & Sørensen, p. 101) that appear from the “messy, uneven, and inconsistent” (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, p. 125) encounters of intra-acting that happen among human, nonhuman, and more-than-human entities (Subramaniam, p. 140). It is here, in the spontaneity of such encounters—full of loose ends and gaps—that emerging posthumanist and new materialist childhood literary and cultural scholars can engage with the ailing anthropocentric crisis, while also theorizing about *child/text/culture* as it exists in its peripherally constant state of becoming.

This departure from a fixated deconstruction of text toward an acknowledgment and engagement with “bodies, animals, affects, technologies and materialities of different kinds” (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González, 2023b, p. 6) is integral to the project. Though existing outside the text, these agential relations are inherently complicit in the production of texts and simultaneously affected by their reproduction. For childhood literature and cultural scholars, to stay afloat amid the multiplicity of such shifting encounters and correlations, attention and interrogation must necessarily move and constantly decenter “the complex relationalities of human, non-human, and more-than-human entities and agencies” (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González, 2023b, p. 2). These moves establish the intentions of this project, as well as the broader intellectual promises and determinations that academics, researchers, and students of children’s literature and culture can aim towards.

## Cluster one

Contributing scholars in Cluster One provide “examples of how new materialist philosophies, and particularly the after-childhood approach, can be applied in textual analysis” (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González, 2023b, p. 12). This process of unravelling, or rather, the acknowledgement and attempt to open space for disentangling, revolves specifically around analyses of Westernized dualities that define nature/culture (Wesseling, p. 21), real/artificial (Kharbanda, p. 35), human/nonhuman (Ghosh, p. 52), and childhood/adulthood (Pryce, p. 71). In each essay, there is a *re/turn, re/analysis and re/thinking* of traditional texts and stories, whose intrinsic ties to deep socially, culturally, and historically humanistic lineage are vigilantly revealed. Throughout this process, there is a clear blurring of those Cartesian worldviews traditionally shaping the words and worlds within and beyond the texts under scrutiny. In doing so, project scholars in Cluster One simultaneously unsettle the taken-for-granted assumptions that soak through the pages of child-centric texts while also prodding at their emanating cultural permeance and broader affect.

More specifically, the *child/text/culture* inquiries in this cluster consider the “complex biosociocultural entanglements” (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González, 2023b, p. 1) of traditional folklore (e.g., mermaid tales reimaged in a contemporary novel and stop-motion animation of Sergei Prokofiev’s 1936 *Peter & the Wolf*), character authenticity and affect (*The Velveteen Rabbit* and *The Indian in the Cupboard*), and diffractive perspectives on discursive legacies of modernist children’s literature (J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*). Through application of a posthumanist and new materialist lens, each of the project scholars and their distinctive work reimagine the possibilities of textual analysis by consciously decentering the human agent that typically dominates children’s literature and cultural studies. By committing and moving toward this subtle act of focusing “in and out” (Ghosh, p. 56), project scholars ask what other ways of seeing exist, and perhaps more pertinently, what is possible when we engage in this process of decentering.

This transitory move into the messiness—its entanglements, and the assemblages that pull, push, and react

(Kharbanda, p. 38)—is an important shift toward opening space in the production of new knowledges capable of amplifying the more-than-human and nonhuman. It also creates opportunities, albeit loosely, to trace the very real and influential relations and engagements that shape and affect the act of worlding (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González, 2023c, p. 1038). The Derridean concept of haunting and the broader “spectral turn”—as discussed by Stella Miriam Pryce in Chapter 5—best captures the intentions of Cluster One essays. Considered “a means of thinking ‘beyond’ or ‘after’ linear conceptions of generations, age, categorization and even temporality” (Pryce, p. 74)—*haunting*—like Kraftl’s *after*, becomes a process of decentering that digs at the broader assemblages tied to humanist *child/text/culture*. As a result of this commitment to shifting and moving—back and forth across the many realities bound up, within, and beyond child, pages, and artefact—Cluster One scholars create opportunities to see the corollaries of children’s literature and culture, allowing for engagement with the more-than-human and nonhuman, as well as their relations and encounters with materiality.

## Cluster two

In Cluster 2: “Relational Approaches in Empirical Research on Children’s Cultures,” project scholars explore the promise of *becomings* that emerge when peering beyond *child/text/culture*. As mentioned, such pursuit requires a “shift away from the child as the sole agential body,” in favour of “materiality of child bodies and the bodies of other nonhuman entities as relational assemblages” (Ghosh, p. 56). For new materialist scholars, “assemblages are not simply human artefacts” but rather configurations of “both more-than-human material stuff and more-than-human processes” (Kharbanda, p. 49)—fluid assortments constantly in flux as “different intra-actions’ produce ‘different phenomena’” (Duthoy, p. 105). It is here, in the belief that agency can emanate from “multiple sources or many loci” (Kharbanda, p. 38), that childhood literary and cultural scholars can reorient how they perceive, for example, exchanges between a children’s television series like *Supernytt* and its audiences (Lorgen & Sørensen, p. 89) or a child’s particular perception, engagement, and destruction of more-than-human entities (e.g., weeds on playground) (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, p. 129). Used as a tool to describe the “relational network of human and nonhuman elements” (Duthoy, p. 104), relational assemblages make visible the production of effects—and alteration—of events that actants, both animate and inanimate, create when they “do things” (Duthoy, p. 104).

To trace these relational assemblages and engage in research that is enduringly becoming, childhood literary and cultural scholars must lay flat the multiplicity of vantage points and possibilities that arise from assemblages (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González, 2023b, p. 11). In doing so, project scholars clarify and select from a myriad of relational pathways—relationships, entanglements, and possibilities—typically undiscovered and ignored (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, p. 129). Kraftl’s method of moving *in and out of focus* makes this seemingly overwhelming task tenable (Kharbanda, p. 38). Through the application of *after*, utterances (Lorgen & Sørensen, p. 89), swirls (Duthoy, p. 107), and encounters (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, p. 123) that unfold are now noticed when laid horizontally, providing new materialist scholars—or in this case specifically childhood literature and cultural scholars—the ability to constantly re-turn, re-interrogate, and re-engage with *child/text/culture* in new and meaningful ways.

In Cluster Two, the pathways chosen for exploration are related to a youth news program (Ch. 6); age and power in a Dutch children’s book (Ch. 7); common worlds tied among a weed-child-book (Ch. 8); and the emotions and collective memories embodied within, and carried by, fabrics found in a tactile picture book (Ch. 9). In each instance, readers are given insight into the different actants (both animate and inanimate) entangled within these assemblages, encounters, and possibilities, and alongside project scholars, work through and consider broadly the varied assemblage paths that could potentially stem from and descend through *child/text/culture*.

In each chapter, project scholars present their chosen assemblages by moving *in and out of focus*, offering

perspectives of the multiple enactments that unfold when actants “do something” (Lorgen & Sørensen, p. 98). For example, in Chapter 9, project scholars Mukand and Riaz Niveditha Subramaniam guide readers through a material assemblage of artefact, experience, memory, and affect (Subramaniam, p. 137). More specifically, this chapter explores the “ability of artefacts to embody individual emotions and collective experiences” as “translated through the material poetics of the picture book” (p. 137). In this essay, the relational assemblage is traced across, and through, the ideation of a book, the process of book making, the textures of the book itself, and the memories and affects a specific textual artefact has on an individual, their histories, realities, and worlds through intra-actions (pp. 137–148).

This process only becomes possible *after* the field of children’s literature and culture is reoriented and viewed through a posthumanist and new materialist lens. For childhood literary and cultural scholars, the ideas of assemblages and actants are integral to moving, exploring, and tracing knowledges beyond the text. There isn’t one assemblage but a multiplicity: interacting, mutating, and reopening through encounters and engagements—including those of the researchers themselves. In the case of children’s literature and culture, this means that various agents—human, nonhuman, and more-than-human, that engage, encounter, and experience *child/text/culture*—do so in relation to the world(s) around them. Much like Kraftl, this adherence to subtle shifts and moves reveals and opens up unlimited pathways emanating from children’s literature and cultural studies to give scholars new ways to ponder and explore.

### Cluster three

Each chapter in Cluster Three “provide[s] insights into how new materialist approaches shift our understanding of the world and research, and especially of the theoretical and empirical reach of children’s literature and culture studies” (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González, 2023b, p. 12). Consistent with the rest of the text, there is an intentional effort to first decenter and reframe the focus of analysis. In this instance, scholars reimagine reading practices and learning as part of an embedded assemblage interwoven with meanings of “neoliberal, capitalist and colonial forces” that shape, mould, and standardize human encounters with reading and learning (Véliz, p. 172). By laying flat the reading assemblage and focusing *in and out* across assemblages of relationalities, the developmentalist logic that seeps through and saturates contemporary ideations of reading and learning becomes visible for interrogation and nudging. It is here, within the spaces that emerge *after* shifting focus, that embedded assumptions debasing books, literacy, and knowledge to forms of currency (de Rijke et al., p. 153)—both within and outside the text (Véliz, p. 172)—that project scholars begin to reimagine reading practices as acts of joy (de Rijke et al., p. 156), inclusion (Véliz, p. 176), and poetry (Newfield, p. 186). Through “scrabbles” (de Rijke et al., p. 186) “weird readings” (Véliz, p. 171), or “multimodalities” (Newfield, p. 188), project scholars push standardized norms of reading and learning toward provocative “messy entanglements” (de Rijke et al., p. 167) in hopes of sparking and reinvigorating the “petrified” (Newfield, p. 198) modernist reading and learning practices that have become customary.

These intentions are best encapsulated in Chapter 11 through the concept of weird readings. Described as anything existing outside the standardized reading assemblage, these “foreign affects” persistently irrupt but are never acknowledged or considered (Véliz, p. 172). Committing to weird reading, whether this means the orientation of text on the page from left to right (p. 181) or “affirmative experimentation with poetry” (p. 186), makes possible the activation of an “ongoing process of intra-action and creative becoming” (p. 181). Engaging with and aspiring to exist within a constant state of becoming keeps open the interpretations, possibilities, and weird realities that are ignored when one is focused on developmentalist outcomes. Through emerging frameworks of multiliteracy and multimodality, different modes of meaning are represented and communicated to create space for the weird.

Perhaps, rather than just linguistic, the act of reading becomes visual, sonic, gestural, or spatial and its expression formulated by drawing, painting, or sculpture (Newfield, 2023, p. 189). More generally, project scholars suggest that there needs to be a conscious effort to *re-turn* to reading “over and over again—iteratively intra-acting, re-diffracting, diffracting” (p. 190)—to constantly reimagine and reinvigorate “new life” into a fixed state. For this to work, there must be willingness to commit to small acts of resistance, and a conscious and intentional intra-acting with place, time, language, history, pedagogies, practices, and traditions (p. 194). Simply put, childhood literary and cultural scholars need to get weird.

### **After reading *Children’s Cultures After Childhood***

By creating space to think with posthumanist and new materialist ideas, the scholars who contributed to this book have created opportunities where insights once hidden and invisible are given room to breathe. During this exploratory shift in thinking, those customary modernist practices, perspectives, and norms that, over centuries, have stagnated into the commonplace, are reinvigorated and revitalized into a state of unknown becoming—traditional entanglements shed in favour of possibility. This is the most inspiring feature of this intellectually strenuous and collaborative effort: the unwavering willingness of each contributing scholar to relinquish control of their expertise by seeking to look beyond the text.

As an urban geographer who only recently ventured into the field of curriculum studies, existing in a place of unknowing and uncertainty has been a familiar feeling for me. However, it is in work like *After Childhood* and *Children’s Cultures After Childhood* that this discomfort and trouble become reframed as a generative space for scholars, academics, and researchers, to enthusiastically and modestly acknowledge the possibilities of interdisciplinary research. In both volumes, readers are encouraged to slow down and think deeply about the myriad interconnections and affects that underlie our dominant modes of knowing. By the end of each book, readers (if willing to do the work) are equipped with the capacity to peel back the veneer of humanist logic, revealing the chaotic, entangled, and beautiful mess of unimagined futures, pasts, and presents. Whether these are found beyond the book or, in Kraftl’s case, behind a brick, it is here that interdisciplinary work can help researchers once siloed to find, trace, and tie together current realities and future possibilities.

Arguably, this is why *after* is such a useful way of thinking about our work. In a world hemorrhaging vitality, the very act of unsettling and contesting our preconceived notions gives space to a potential revival—or at the very least, a salvation project—that considers the human, nonhuman, and more-than-human knowledges that are inherently embedded into the very makeup of our material world. It allows for a collaborative intellectual endeavour that values and props up views or ideas which in the past would have seemed diametrically opposed, unrelated, or ignored. For childhood literary and cultural scholars, *after* ties their discipline to the real-world materiality that *child/text/culture* is very much implicated in producing and reproducing—and creates opportunities and space for new materialist childhood scholars to think about, and contribute to, the current imperative facing all life on earth during the Anthropocene.

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