

Editorial: Speculative Worldings of Children, Childhoods, and Pedagogies

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Editorial: Speculative Worldings of Children, Childhoods, and Pedagogies

Emily Ashton, Guest Editor

The cover image for this special issue is a painting titled “Crossing Reality Portal” by Alejandro Darío Pizarro Chellet, a Mexican multidisciplinary artist and permaculture practitioner who works at the intersection of environmentalism, social practice, and public art.¹ The painting was part of a United Nations international exhibition, “The Future We Want,” which aimed to “foster a conversation about the kind of future we want for our world and how we can empower youth to work towards it” (United Nations Geneva & Perception Change, 2020, p. 4).² In his painting, Chellet offers a speculative play on the “Refugees Welcome” logo that widely appears at activist rallies and in international human rights campaigns (See Figure 1).³ While the popular image evokes the fear and urgency of flight, there are no obstacles in view—the tagline “bring your families” conveys an ease that is not emblematic of the refugee experience for most displaced persons.



Figure 1. “Crossing Reality Portal” by Alejandro Darío Pizarro Chellet

Instead, Chellet layers colour, affect, and meaning into his painting, and introduces “two pillars” to “symbolize a political and psychological border” of the refugees’ liminal experience (United Nations Geneva & Perception Change, 2020, p. 34). In the terms of this special issue, I interpret these pillars as a speculative *not this* and *not yet* of refuge: What happens in the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987)? Engaging with “Crossing Reality Portal,” I wonder if it can inspire the kind of speculative care that María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) proposes, a “commitment to seek what other worlds could be in the making through caring while staying with the trouble of our own complicities and implications” (p. 204). This seems all the more relevant today as I watch from afar the situation in Ukraine and wonder about how global empathy is distributed.⁴

Additionally, the defined heteronormative nuclear family of “Refugees Welcome” blurs in ways where child and adult positionalities in the painting are no longer clearly defined. When I first saw the image, I assumed it was a child-figure in the foreground. Given the referent sign, I know that my initial impression is likely mistaken. Yet, the painting gestures toward how we “live simultaneously in multiple worlds,” and suggests that though the ability to move between imaginary and real words is often associated with children, it is not exclusive to them (Pretti et al.,

this issue). Also uncertain is the future evoked in, by, and with this image: Is this the future *we* want? Chellet offers a speculative question as an accompaniment to the painting: What if “this family will be able to cross a portal into a better and more fair reality of the world?” (United Nations Geneva & Perception Change, 2020, p. 34). As a form of what queer feminist poet Adrienne Rich (1993) calls the first “revolutionary question... *what if*” (p. 242, emphasis in original), there is a lot left unsaid, unrepresented, and unknown. There is also a gesture toward a speculative “elsewhere and elsewhere that was, still is, and might yet be” (Haraway, 2016, p. 31). Thinking with the image, I arrive again at what I find so generative about speculative fiction and speculative pedagogies: imaginaries of *not this* (as in refusal), *not yet* (as in what is to come), and *what if* (as in generative possibilities).

I want to linger with the painting a little longer as its title, “Crossing Reality Portal,” presents me with multiple openings into the articles of this special issue. First, portals are unsettled and unsettling. In much speculative fiction, a portal is a secret door that opens into a new world. Examples from my childhood reading are the clothes cupboard in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the rabbit hole in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, and Platform Nine and Three-Quarters in the wizardly world of *Harry Potter*. Portals disrupt linear notions of space, place, and time—sometimes simultaneously, when spaceplacetime is an intra-active phenomenon that materializes another plane of existence (Barad, 2007). Several authors in this issue play speculatively with temporality. For example, Sarah Binnendyk suggests that a “futurity of inclusion” might emerge from reconceptualizing anti-bias education within more-than-human communities. Adrian Downey suggests that Indigenous children’s stories are lively worldings that cannot be contained by the temporal confines of Western linearity, and that, instead, “very old stories yield very old futures—futures toward which we can (re)turn.” Portals enable movement between worlds—they unhinge us from any assurance of a one-world world metaphysics (Law, 2015) and reveal a pluriverse, “a world of many words” (de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018, p. 232).

Portals then do not only consist of wardrobes, holes, and train platforms; they are not just literary devices in speculative fiction. Stories themselves can be portals. Speculative stories allow us to re-see what is taken for granted, reimagine what is possible, reconnect with multispecies kin, and reenvision worlds that are not so cruel to so many. Given the articles assembled here, and with an appreciative nod to recent speculative-inspired work in childhood studies (e.g., Common Worlds Research Collective, 2020; Nxumalo & ross, 2019; Sheldon, 2016), perhaps academic writing can also open up “otherwise” worlds (Crawley, 2015; Samatar, 2015). Esther do Lago e Pretti, Jieyu Jiang, Ann Nielsen, Janna Goebel, and Iveta Silova (this issue) story how their collective childhood memories fashioned portals through which they could “enter and exit different worlds, as well as a space—and time.” Portals afforded an imaginative, collaborative, and scholarly interval for their common worlding. Moreover, authors in this special issue engage with the speculative in ways that interrupt tropes of human exceptionalism and instead reposition the child as inextricably entangled with a host of human and more-than-human existents. The diverse collection of articles showcases what is possible when the speculative is engaged “as a mode of inquiry” to think-with challenges of contemporary childhoods, including the climate crisis (Kupferman & Gibbons, 2019).

Chellet’s title also indicates a grappling with what constitutes “reality,” while its precursor “crossing” conveys a trembling of solid(ified) meaning. In its verb form, crossing can signify movements of traversing, overlapping, and intersecting, but it can also mean thwarting, obstructing, and resisting. Hard lines between the real and imaginary both intersect and are foiled in several articles in this issue. Engaging with the imaginary in opposition to the real is revealed as a strategy to “maintain the ontological duality [of] Western scientific discourse” (Pretti et al., this issue) that values rationality above all else; instead, we might be open and attuned to the “activation of worlds.” Sometimes cuts do have to be made (Barad, 2007), but when we repeat too many in the same place, worlds and the borders between them get hardened. Janet Seow (this issue) explores these themes as she thinks-with young Binti from Nnedi Okorafor’s novella of the same name. Binti is making her way at the intersection of worlds—her home

on earth with the Himba in Namibia and her life in space at a speculative university called Oomza Uni among alien creatures. Seow shows how Binti thwarts stereotypes of Black childhoods as she manoeuvres back and forth between worlds and between child and adult identifications and response-abilities—the crossings are not easy.

The desire to erect hard borders between real and fantasy reflects a particular way of organizing worlds. A turn to the speculative might help us approach the facts of the (real) world differently. As Ruha Benjamin (2016) prompts, “the facts, alone, will not save us...we are drowning in ‘the facts’ of inequality and injustice” (p. 2). Facts relay a partial view of the world as is; facts cannot imagine the world as it might be. This is another reason why I think the speculative is so important. In its attempt to “reimagine and rework all that is taken for granted about the current structure of the social world—alternatives to capitalism, racism, and patriarchy,” speculative fiction apporions “windows into alternative realities, even if it is just a glimpse, to challenge ever-present narratives of inevitability as they relate to both technology and society” (Benjamin, 2016, p. 19). In this issue, Bretton Varga and Erin Adams focus analytical speculation on how droids—in part their design, performance, programming, genderization, and maintenance—blur boundaries between human and machine that might refocus our attention on interdependence rather than extraction. Shelley O’Brien (this issue) reinterprets the inevitability of e-wastelands as a speculative production of toxic ongoingness wherein children become with others, including contaminated species, technologies, and places. O’Brien tells a story of “collaborative survival” that refuses to disavow the “contaminated diversity” of our futures (Tsing, 2015, p. 32). What follows are some additional highlights of this issue’s speculative contributions, beginning with the Articles from Research.

Downey provides a close reading of children’s books by two Mi’kmaq authors, Allan Syliboy and Rebecca Thomas, in order to grapple with the potential incommensurabilities and alliances of posthumanism, speculative fiction, and Indigenous cosmologies. In “(Re)envisioning Childhoods with Mi’kmaq Literatures,” Downey extends speculative temporalities to include “very old futures (re)emergent from very old stories” in ways where past-present-future are not linear formations but recursive relations. Within these stories are pedagogical possibilities “built on reciprocity and mutual accountability,” which impart lessons of sustainability and consent that might help us to face up to the problems of the Anthropocene. Downey further sets out how the parameters of speculative fiction and posthumanism might bend to engage with “Mi’kmaq mythopoetic tradition,” particularly how temporality is fluid, Land is teacher, and literacy is about reading the cosmos and not just the written word. Downey plays at the edges in his analyses—he wonders about the possibilities of “stretching science to include Indigenous knowledges, stretching fiction to include the ontologically real mythopoetic, stretching speculation to include the recursive return of a future that has already been.” Downey sees potential for radical, reciprocal, “very old futures” that are always already entangled within the “animacy of the world” all around us.

O’Brien is moved by vital materialist perspectives to “dismantle, rather than reiterate, binaries such as culture and nature, and think-with the possibilities for multispecies kin in ruined landscapes.” In the first section of “Speculating the Symbio: Possibilities for Multispecies and Multi-Entity World Making in Childhood,” O’Brien disassembles individualistic figurations of the child defined by positivistic child development knowledge and established in opposition to powerful, all-knowing adults. This deconstructive work makes way for a reconstructive method (Taylor, 2013) in the form of speculative fiction. In the latter part of the article, O’Brien offers us “The Symbio,” a speculative story of “bird-child-microbe-dog-e-waste relations as a playful and generative means of imagining robust survival for children on a contaminated planet.” Set on an e-wasteland of human-caused contamination in a near-future Toronto, a genderless child-figure, dogs, and microbes “intra-act as multispecies holobionts” to create community through coconstructing a livable nest of toxic garbage for their bird kin. Amid the slime are pedagogical possibilities for disrupting romanticized nature discourses of rewilding, reimagining play with contaminated mates and materials and repositioning the child as not a solitary subject but “right in the thick of

things, where they most certainly already are.” The Symbio is a speculative envisioning of a contaminated, lively common world.

Writing in a collective “we,” Pretti, Jiang, Nielsen, Goebel, and Silova share their experimentation with collective biography. Instead of a straightforward methodological practice, “Memories of a Girl Between Worlds: Speculative Common Worldings” spins a diffractive tale of speculative fabulation that shows worlds in the making. The authors combine place, play, animals, mermaids, breath, and temporal dislocations to challenge what counts as real/fantasy and adult/child. They (re)claim their lived experiences of dreams and dreaming as both “portals to other worlds” *and* the “the real life-worlds that [they] inherited, shared, and cohabited with human and more-than-human others.” Within these worlds are stories, games, feelings, transformations, desires and so much more—and neither the waking world nor the dream assert possession. In moving across space and time, body and memory, girl and group, these authors see pedagogical pedagogies for multispecies and intragenerational play that is radically open and receptive to the “visible and invisible worlds” that surround us as participants in a pluriverse.

In “Nnedi Okorafor’s *Binti*: African Science Fiction and the Reimagined Black Girl,” Seow offers a reading of *Binti* with clear intent: to disturb and counteract deficit constructions of Black childhoods. With young Binti as her companion, Seow demonstrates how Africanfuturism can reclaim in the here and now a “reimagined future for the Black child (and the Black female in particular) beyond adult confines and beyond the stereotypes of an underachieving, hypersexualized, and unintelligent other.” Indigenous African ways of knowing take flight in the novella’s outerspace setting, and they are also shown to be inseparable from land in ways the combine science with magic and the past with the future. For example, the red clay (*otjize*) that covers Binti’s skin and the mathematical codes plaited in her hair demonstrate how “African science and technoculture are interlaced with traditional practices and beliefs” that are embodied and relational. With *Binti*, Seow defamiliarizes sentimental ideas of diverse childhoods and works toward refiguring Black childhoods as place-based ecologies that are both grounded and out of this world.

In “D032 N07 C0MpU73: Exploring (Post)Human Bodies and Worlds with/in Droidial(ity) and Narrative Contexts,” Varga and Adams consider how speculative literacies might create spaces for nonhuman and human relational becomings. They contest the assumption that children are passive recipients of children’s literature and describe how children are attuned to the affective capacities of nonhumans in ways that might provoke anxiety and fear in those who desire the boundary maintenance of hierarchical dualisms (e.g., natural/artificial, child/adult, human/nonhuman). They draw on research wherein children show a receptivity to “alternative possible presents” and exercise care and concern for how droids ought to be treated. Varga and Adams then offer an innovative and interruptive reading of three picturebooks that have robots as central figures. They do so by writing in and out of the publishers’ official synopses. They “plug in” posthuman concepts to short-circuit simplistic interpretations and enact how “posthumanism can be a way to decenter the human and the child in children’s literature.” They propose a framework of droidiality to redirect our attention “beyond human bodies” while simultaneously confronting the ethical instabilities shadowing the constitution of the non/human. They conclude with provocations for students to create posthuman writings that explore and experiment with the relational interdependence of children, droids, and worlds.

A contribution to the Ideas in Practice section comes from Binnendyk and her article “Reconceptualizing Inclusion Through Anti-Bias Curriculum.” Binnendyk pulls from her multiple roles as a mother, educator, childcare director, and graduate student to recenter relations with more-than-human existents (e.g., bees and dragons) in early years settings. She proposes the provocative figuration of a “futurity of inclusion” as an invitation to collectively cultivate learning spaces “for living well together.” Binnendyk’s reflective wonderings are an example of how we can begin

to unsettle the humancentrism of our early years' practices and "welcome the voices and stories...of nonhuman subjects" into community.

As expressed in the Call for Papers for this special issue, we were seeking speculative works/worldings that could "expand our own visions of what is *possible*" in childhood studies (Benjamin, 2018, para. 20, emphasis in original). Authors in this issue accepted this challenge in different ways: They played with form and format through font, size, colour, and emphasis; they played with ideas in ways not delimited by conventional scholarly analysis—some wrote stories; they played with child-figures in ways that did not reproduce imaginaries of childhood innocence or heroic narratives of redemption but got at how child-figures intra-act relationally with/in their worlds. Fikile Nxumalo and kihana miraya ross (2019) see speculative fiction as creating "openings for imagining what kinds of early childhood pedagogy might be possible within an ethics of radical relationality" (p. 509). Taken together, I think these authors and articles have extended these openings and enacted a speculative ethics of possibility.

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- 1 I extend deep gratitude to Alejandro Chellet for allowing the use of his image. To learn more about his work, please visit his website <http://www.alejandrochellet.info/> and social media @alejandro.chellet and @alex.chellet.studio.
 - 2 The catalogue for the exhibition can be viewed here: https://annewoelk.files.wordpress.com/2021/01/the_future_we_want_small.pdf
 - 3 Photo credit Creative Commons license: Leif Bryne, "Refugees welcome Bring your families (Wien)," available at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/49376052@N00/28668171035>
 - 4 See, for example, Moustafa Bayoumi's (2022) opinion piece "They Are 'Civilised' and 'Look Like Us': The Racist Coverage of Ukraine"; Wajahat Ali's (2022) article in *The Daily Beast*; and Stephanie Hegarty's (2022) report "Ukraine Conflict: Nigeria Condemns Treatment of Africans."

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