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A Future “After Childhood”: Engaging the Anthropocene in Early Childhood Education

Book Review of Peter Kraftl’s *After Childhood*, by Paolo Russumanno

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Overview of *After Childhood*

Peter Kraftl’s work *After Childhood: Re-thinking Environment, Materiality, and Media in Children’s Lives* (Routledge, 2020) demands a strenuous exercise in reading, thinking, and imagining new ways of seeing and becoming within the field of childhood studies. Broadly speaking, this is a methodological experiment that mostly uses the theoretical positioning of new materialist and posthumanist thinking to unlock the potential for further interdisciplinary research. In this pursuit, Kraftl relentlessly breaks open scholastic silos, humanist languages, and widely agreed-upon ways of knowing to present a carefully curated hodgepodge of disciplinary endeavours that reimagine the child and the world. At its core, this is the motivation for thinking with *after childhood*.

As a human geographer and childhood studies scholar who embraces the spirit of new materialism, Kraftl has a unique disposition that encourages him to experiment with different methods across multiple disciplines. His entire work is a sensibly frenetic, gradual, and meandering procession in, out, and across a variety of scales. In each chapter, Kraftl pulls the reader into an unravelling exploration of intellectual curiosity, cautiously guiding the reader while simultaneously hurrying them to keep pace. Kraftl acts as a metaphorical tour guide in foreign lands, introducing wide-eyed child scholars to traditionally taboo disciplines and an emerging culture of embraced unknowns and becomings (Haraway, 2008). This tour of the unknown is necessary, not just for Kraftl’s work, but for understanding and embracing the very difficult work of decentering oneself to embrace, welcome, and explore the entanglements, relations, and affects that emerge when we actively and insecurely position ourselves within the *common worlds* to think and become alongside the more-than-human (Kraftl et al., 2020; Nxumalo & Vintimilla, 2020; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Kummen, 2016; Taylor, 2017; Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015; Vintimilla & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020; Vintimilla et al., 2021). At times, this is an uncomfortable, tenuous, and exhausting toil—but in doing so, Kraftl not only shakes directly at the root of childhood expertise but excavates and suspends it within the commons of other, other(ness), and other(ing). At a much higher scale, the ripple effect of this precise work has an unsettling impact on the firm terrain that the humanist ethos is built upon, and the in-between space in which the epoch we call the Anthropocene thrives.

By encouraging readers to reimagine the world, its underpinnings, and constitutions, Kraftl lays bare the possible realities beyond their purview. For Kraftl, critique of the modern man is no longer necessary—the damage is done. Rather, he decenters the human, stripping it of its mastery before entangling it amid the variegated relationships that exist to demonstrate our world’s vulnerability within the Anthropocene, as well as our own vulnerability as a species (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Kummen, 2016). This purposeful act of undoing and becoming is an embrace of chaos, disorder, and “trouble”—the goal is to enmesh ourselves within the unknown, its potential and perpetuity.

Though he acknowledges that it is too late for human and nonhuman actors to emerge from the Anthropocene unscathed, Kraftl hopes that by “cutting” (pp. 39–53) across it, we can find connections and common ground that will guide future generations. Kraftl is clear in this regard; he does not “purport to solve these problems” but rather is attempting to refashion and reimagine ways of thinking that might “broach the complexity and intractability

of those challenges” (p. 158). For Kraftl, *after* is the encompassing of these methods and reimagination process. It is his contribution, not just to the field of childhood studies, but also to the multidisciplinary body of knowledge materializing around issues and solutions of climate change and their impacts on the future of humanity. In this review, I reflect on Kraftl’s critical view of the humanist ethos and how, by welcoming an embrace of the knowledge revealed in trauma, silliness, and interface, we can exercise a method of interdisciplinary work that navigates and broaches the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene

Kraftl describes the Anthropocene as a multiscalar and delinear temporality with “complex, knotty, intractable challenges that affect communities in particular places” (p. 2). To navigate such a tenuous landscape (both physical and intellectual), Kraftl dedicates himself to “loosening control”—ontologically and epistemologically—to embrace states of trouble, play, silliness, and violence (p. 3). It’s here, in the gaps that emerge from relinquishing control, that Kraftl goes *in* and *out* to suspend—even if only briefly—the variegated and overlapping issues that coalesce under the broad ethos of the Anthropocene.

Kraftl frames the entirety of his work within a divergent parallel. In the very first pages, he demonstrates how the same encompassing force of climate change can inflict diverse casualties across physical landscapes and cultural identities. Such dynamism shares a genotype lineage with that of neoliberalism and colonialism—existing both in-here and out-there (Peck & Tickell, 2002), making it difficult to capture and hold. All we can do, as Kraftl demonstrates tirelessly throughout, is to stop, slow, speed up, rewind, and fast forward accordingly. His industrious efforts to capture and scrutinize the legacies of the Anthropocene are illustrated throughout each chapter. Through discussion about such things as plastic (p. 73), bones (p. 115), tire fires (p. 83) websites (p. 96) and their larger ties to consumerism (p. 113) race/gender (p. 27), colonialism and global trade (p. 35), Kraftl *cuts* through the Anthropocene to reveal entanglements between climate change and children. He achieves this by drawing attention to these anthropocentrically etched phenomena while also artfully sliding the child in and out of the frame, masterfully demonstrating the reciprocal impacts of these multiple, seemingly unrelated objects (human and nonhuman), before skilfully sliding the child out again.

This practice of decentering and recentering, or “pulling in and pulling out” of focus, emphasizes the way “childhoods cut across and are cut across by” the realities of the Anthropocene (p. 45). It positions children as unassuming victims caught in the crossfire of the Anthropocene (and to a greater degree the humanist project) as well as the most vulnerable (before, during, and after childhood) to impacts of “pollution, malnutrition, and lack of access to sustainable energy sources” (p. 138). Much more than that, and integral to this work, is this idea that a rethinking of our understanding, perception, and categorization of children and their agency in relation to the Anthropocene can also be the solution (p. 3). For Kraftl, undermining centuries of human mastery requires discarding and reinventing symbols, ideas, and languages—new concepts that do not lend themselves to the hegemony of humanist forces but rather to collaborative exploration and imagination (Ødegaard, 2021).

After, before, and around human

Arguably, if language has the power to build and shape realities, it is impossible to imagine a future detached from the humanist/Anthropocene, if those same linguistic tools were redeployed in a *new* world-building process. By uttering the language of the humanist project, we inevitably recreate a world based on these traditionalist notions of reality. Keen to not recreate the past, Kraftl takes on the arduous task of crafting new linguistic mechanisms to forge new concepts and ways of understanding that could potentially help scholars break through the firmament

of the Anthropocene and into the world *after*.

As alluded to earlier, Kraftl's reimagining of *after* is a proposed method for the contemporary childhood scholar. Kraftl rethinks *after* as something that can be much more than a historiographical or linear categorization. Instead, he puts the term through a rigorous reclamation process equipped to work through "a series of tensions, decentering and recentering the human subject; scaling up and scaling down; speeding up and slowing down" (p. 43). Having reproduced the term in this way, Kraftl argues that *after childhood* affords childhood scholars the capability to look beyond notions of agency and the permanence that holds normalized child constructs.

Kraftl's use of *after* also creates room for ancillary mediums that would allow childhood scholars to move uninhibited across various contextual planes—both physical and intellectual. Terms such as *nexus*, *cuts*, *resource-power*, *circulation*, *interfaces*, *visibility*, *energetic phenomena*, *synthesis*, and *stickiness* are developed by Kraftl to further catapult our thinking "beyond the scale" (p. 44). Most valuable to this hard work is a reframing of the terms *generations* and *intergenerational relations*. For Kraftl, these terms are the proverbial hammer and nail in his *after* toolbox. However, to meet the demands of his labour within the Anthropocene, he believes they are of better use as *infra-generational relations*.

Infra implies "more-than-generational and more-than-human processes, energies, materialities, technologies, media, affects, and more that constitute the temporalities in which childhoods are enveloped, and of which they are productive" (p. 44). For Kraftl, these infra-generational sensibilities (p. 113) are the technologies that will help navigate temporalities and geographies within the *after*—and further help to define *after childhood* as something that is always present, even in adulthood and in death (p. 115). This purposeful and intentional reconceptualization stems from Kraftl's belief that "conventional social-scientific conceptual and analytical tools" of critique are no longer sufficient to address the Anthropocene (p. 133). Perhaps more importantly, this determined and conscious act of reimagining language and shedding academic distinction creates space for an interdisciplinary approach so that Kraftl that can better manage the variegated impact and hegemony of the Anthropocene.

Interdisciplinary work

When thinking about issues of climate change, Kraftl notes that in most instances, there is a "rush" to solve the issue with "smarter, bigger, and better human interventions (p. 44). Though this endeavour is notable and commendable, Kraftl believes there are gaps in it to be filled by a diverse field of childhood studies in the *after*. As a geographer and childhood studies scholar, Kraftl approaches the contentious nature of the Anthropocene by considering the possibilities existing in scale and intermingling of disciplines. To further his point, Kraftl argues that "childhood studies are well positioned to scale down and cultivate 'arts of noticing': the small and seemingly insignificant events taking place on the common grounds of minor players" (p. 44). This art—one of noticing and not noticing—demands of scholars a *diffracted* way of seeing and doing (Juelskjaer & Schwennesen, 2012). It requires a dogged persistence that moves the gaze away from the child towards spaces, places, and objects that intuitively surround, play, tussle with, and pull our very idea of "child."

More specifically, Kraftl, borrowing directly from Affrica Taylor and her criticisms of the humanist "man-to-the-rescue" script that seeks to save the world within the Anthropocene, is encouraging childhood scholars to look at "the *how* of children's world-making with more-than-human others" and ways it can "contribute to the collective task of refiguring our place in an anthropogenically-damaged world without recourse to the conceits of the Anthropos" (Taylor, 2019, as cited in Kraftl, 2020, p. 44, emphasis in original). Here, with Taylor's help, Kraftl slowly guides childhood scholars away from the expectations of their traditional disciplines into a space that is both unknown and becoming.

Throughout the book, Kraftl repeatedly stands up to his own convictions by working to “engage meaningfully and consistently with feminist, queer and critical race theorisations of difference and matter that sit alongside and in tension with certain forms of ‘post-’ child thinking (including deployments of actor network theory (ANT) and new materialist theory” (p. 5). Determined to push his work and the childhood scholar further, he also wades into the somewhat uncharted territories of “speculative-realists” and “object-oriented ontologies.” As mentioned already, this act of loosening control is done to provoke the scholar towards new insights that would otherwise be unconsciously or obliviously overlooked (p. 5).

Kraftl’s willingness to embrace a variety of theoretical positionings is paired with an admiration for interdisciplinary collaborations that range from “artists, architects, engineers and environmental nano-scientists” (p. 5). In each chapter, with acknowledgment of these various methods and their findings (considered summarily as *stickiness*, *toxicity*, and *pull focus*) Kraftl makes connections between the Anthropocene and childhood. In each chapter, he demonstrates this “methodology” time and again, outlining the possibilities for childhood scholars. For Kraftl, the synchronized act of pulling children in and out of frame alongside the application of “discordant disciplinary traditions” (p. 45) must be harmonious and intuitive. Actively moving “in and out of focus in different ways” and utilizing “different modes of (re)presentation” makes this process as “important as ‘high’ theory to stretching ways of thinking and doing, after childhood” (p. 45).

By *refocusing* throughout the book, Kraftl continually reaffirms how *after* is now temporal, contextual, physical, and metaphorical; it is applicable in archeology, psychology, and geography—a multifaceted concept that serves as a theory of childhood but also a method of understanding and rethinking it within and beyond the Anthropocene. By making *after* an interdisciplinary concept, Kraftl (with the help of Donna Haraway) can take experimental steps into the *trouble* that arise from his process of *decategorization* of theory, concept, and language. It is also here, in the *trouble*, that we see Kraftl’s laborious efforts of rethinking in acts of “decentring *and* recentring, speeding up *and* slowing down, scaling up *and* scaling down” (p. 44, emphasis in original).

Amid the trouble(s)

With frustrated compassion, Kraftl drags the childhood scholar into trouble (Haraway, 2008) and uncertainty across each chapter. Using his reconceptualizations of *after childhood* and *infra-generations* (among other reimagined concepts), he emphasizes childhood’s *anterior* (what comes after) and what it means for “contemporary phenomenological horizons” (p. 115). This march into the trouble of the anterior is drenched with anticipation of the unexpected, the alternative, and reorientation of “ethical dispositions to childhood, generation and the earth, and to intractable challenges—like climate change—that past-present-future-infra generations face” (p. 34). His immersion into trouble(s) emphasizes a need to be immanent amid the chaos (MacLure, 2015) and embrace a knowing that does not categorize, or assume determinations, but rather tumbles, shifts, and rolls alongside the varied assemblages that both inform and are informed by entanglements (MacLure, 2015). To not get lost amid the trouble, Kraftl leans heavily into scale, both spatially and temporally.

Using the concepts mentioned above, such as *after* and *infragenerational*, Kraftl hovers along scale, parachuting into and out of the “inherent tensions and troubles” found along the way (p. 41). Kraftl makes the researcher as elusive and malleable as the Anthropocene, and in doing so, grants childhood scholars the ability to go beyond child, agency, and local. With permission to ride the scale, childhood scholars are now flung into the messiness and unfamiliarity of those childhood experiences, “divorced from the broader regimes of power and generational inequality upon which their lives, agency and emergent subjecthood depend” (p. 42). For Kraftl, and hopefully for contemporary childhood scholars, amid the trouble and among the stuck is a good place to be.

Trauma, silliness, and interface

Throughout the book, Kraftl offers contexts steeped in trauma, silliness, and/or the interface between the two. It's amid these "three strands" that the trouble and tensions of the "major conceptual, methodological, and empirical contributions of this book" are tied (p. 205). Trauma is perhaps most evident throughout the book and can be identified in each chapter. Whether it's a lost doll inside a derelict apartment somewhere in Luz Sao Paolo (p. 56), a car tire in Aleppo (p. 83), biological remnants of the Roman Empire (p. 125), or a brick in Birmingham (p. 157), Kraftl weaves together webs of trauma across histories and geographies that underline the dualistically harmful impact felt by children and environments in the Anthropocene.

Despite a potentially overwhelming sense of despair, Kraftl finds hope in the promise of childhood and its intuitive "silliness" (p. 206). He frames silliness as an act of play and imagination, a state of becoming that embraces spontaneity and "modes of being, interacting, researching, writing, and experimenting" (pp. 206–207) that have the potential to create ways of seeing not possible without intuition. As scholars operating within this concept of *after*, silliness is the willingness to look beyond preferred methodology to seek "ways of knowing" and "*other* stories about childhoods" (p. 207) not conceivable within traditional silos. By being silly, childhood scholars (or any scholar within the *after*) can remain unperturbed by scrutiny or failure, preferring instead to pursue the potential rewards of possibility.

Finally, interface is the agglomeration of both these things, and much more. The interface is the very relations between humans and materials, as well as the conditions, traces, and legacies that shape these connections (p. 208). For Kraftl, the interface is where the links and commonalities are identified and explored—it's in the interface between trauma and silliness that Kraftl encourages us to think and do *after* childhood, which, as discussed throughout, means children are both "out of the picture" (p. 207) and central to it.

Thinking after after-childhood

Kraftl's *After Childhood: Re-thinking Environment, Materiality and Media in Children's Lives* is a strenuous and vigorous exercise in pushing conceptual and theoretical boundaries beyond current comprehension. Kraftl takes care to intricately fashion new concepts and means of thinking that help guide childhood scholars beyond the realm of agency and into an expansiveness of space, time, scale, and place—to dig deep into pressing issues of the Anthropocene and its impacts on childhood. While, broadly, this is a demonstration of potential methodology, it is also a glaring testament to the impacts of climate change on generations past, present, and future. Throughout the book, the pressure of the Anthropocene and its impacts on childhood are immense. However, to instill calm, Kraftl methodically discusses his designs for a new language that, when articulated with intention, can begin the process of deconstructing and producing new worlds in the *after*. He also carefully, and daringly, maps out interdisciplinary possibilities by allowing his expert gaze to drift beyond his own proficiencies into places unknown. It's here, in these places unknown, that we find the potentials and rewards of staying with trouble. For Kraftl, it's in here, amid the trouble, that new knowledge can be wrought and crafted. Finally, we come to understand all these movements, orientations, and decentering as traumas, silliness, and interfaces—the loose and haphazard results of what happens when we loosen control. In doing so, this book achieves the difficult task of connecting the most pressing issues facing our society to a common goal that can be applied in various ways by different scholars toward variegated solutions.

Kraftl's work is a culmination and expression of all the work that has come before it: feminist, queer, critical race, actor network, and new materialist theories. More importantly, it is a work that must still come to fruition, serving as an invitation to aspiring scholars to grow from. Personally, as a human geographer who has only recently

entered the field of childhood studies, the timing of this text is fortuitous. Kraftl has provided a road map equipped with concepts and directions that can be applied to my own field of research. His extraordinary efforts to push theoretical positioning forward has afforded me the luxury of building research that could potentially be innovative enough to transcend traditional applications of study, research, and ways of knowing. More importantly, Kraftl's assembled arsenal, when taken up by a multiplicity of scholars and disciplines, will inevitably begin the long infra-generational process of dissolving the insidious nature of Anthropocene and reimagining human and nonhuman within the *after*.

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