

CODA: Seismic knots of (un)knowing “toddler”(s)

Janice Kroeger
Kent State University, USA

Julia Persky
Texas A&M University, USA

Jayne Osgood
Middlesex University, UK

Global Studies of Childhood

2022, Vol. 12(3) 310–316

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/20436106221117203

journals.sagepub.com/home/gsc

Coming into this themed edition, many of us, perhaps most of us, were (and still are) enraged. Our hackles were raised. From the Latin cauda “tail of an animal,” we speak. Our, *kaud-a- “part; tail,” is cleaved, separate, from the work of the collection, flicking here. *We* were enraged by the ugly parts of the world that had proliferated, effects of late capitalism, even within the certainty of our own settled, privileged, and mostly secure academic lives. We were unsettled by Capitalocene’s effects, which surface everywhere including in the forces of our work, productivity, efficiency, and consumerism. Knitting together, putting on our pussy hats, thinking otherwise about our shared futures with children, we formed our own pack (pact). Teachers can be *witches and ballerinas*, *bitches* of sorts, doing their best work in muddy gardens, and small backrooms, in cluttered classrooms, and noisy playgrounds. We worked from what is in the bag, our pitchforks, turning the soil, airing out our whimsical thinking caps, adding bit of yarn, an irony, or some grammarily glue, because when such tools are used together, all sorts of fundicity and “mischief of one kind or another” can ensue (Sendak, 1963).

Glaring to many of us at the turn of 2019 were such things as, frequent reports of human tragedies, military occupations or the threat of them, increasing severity and frequency of climate related disasters (earthquakes, floods, fires) followed by reports of long months when many regions of the world were without power, water, food, or hope. Many of us raged, as our powerful governments and world leaders were slow to or not willing to act, and instead played golf, ate Big Macs, spent our money, raised our taxes, and talked about birthday cake. We were unhinged further by images that can’t be unremembered, by media reports of mass movement of human bodies across national and international lines, often accompanied by portrayals of children in foil blankets behind fences; images of toddlers floating alongside wailing and grieving fathers; reports of suckling

Corresponding author:

Jayne Osgood, Middlesex University, The Burroughs, London NW4 4BT, UK.

Email: j.osgood@mdx.ac.uk

infants and not-yet-speaking-children being separated from their mothers and becoming untraceable in the chaos and instability shaping numerous geopolitical contexts. Then, we *marched*, gathered, rode buses, sponsored each other. Strangers spoke, walked in unison, millions of people, women. Many of us smoldered, with signs and demonstrations and solidarity. We wrote letters, formed pacts, fundraised, donated. We knitted together the marbled pinkness of our bloody femininity and found the strength and connection of our loose ends to connect with each other and create a tidy-little-tantruming-set-of-knots.

All of this uncertainty, as if not enough, was quickly followed by the great plague of 2020, in which our own isolation and fears for safety of ourselves and young children took hold. As we wrote in the *Editorial* “It became impossible to avoid the intense mixture of unsettling affective forces when confronted with this impossibly huge materialization of public protest throughout the world (accompanied by the Trump baby) because of Capitalist greed, misogyny and racism.” In response to capitalism’s affective forces, we responded by creating a call to recognize the massive power of *global childhood scholarship in step* with our own situated rage. And, a reckoning occurred. Toddlerhood, a special part of childhood, was resituated, reconfigured against a regime of consumerism and globalization. We have created a scholarly collection that *talks back* and reclaims the spaces of toddlerdom. In our collection, toddlers *are not* behaving badly, hopelessly self-absorbed or horrible, but are hopeful, capricious, *heard*, seen, and keenly *felt* by their teachers. Metaphorically, authors in this edition have reclaimed the toddler image (with renewed visions for the experiences of young child), and they have wrestled the fat Trump baby balloon to the ground, popping it into a-thousand-complex-talking-back-bits and pieces.

Communicating across the globe via technologies, Facebook, Zoom, emails, and correspondences, we Editors, created a responsive retort to what the Trump baby-image came to symbolize with a fully multi-dimensional and artfully-reverberating call. The resulting collection has a range of imagery of “toddler,” with data driven portrayals, storied examples, alongside narrative and philosophical pieces exerting their own intra active and affective force(s) with a sizemology of its own. Finding voice in our writing and our alliance(s) across the globe, authors, teachers, and researchers, have noted the injustices perpetuated on young children, and have instead raised the image of the toddler *as* a far superior being than some of our world leaders.

The writing(s) in the collection question the hopes of childhood contexts and reform caring, with generative capacities in human and worldly development(s). In some ways the visionary capacities of researchers’ images and texts are in contrast to what we were seeing, hearing, and feeling from the vantages of our own governments’—ineptitude(s). Even as our world leaders seem to largely ignore (or take metaphorical baby steps) in the struggle(s) we desire for humans to care for each other and our planet, the writers in this collection have taken notice. The magnitude of the collected works center themes of relationality and vulnerability; time and intensities; and respecting toddlers while acknowledging our own created monstrosities.

Relationality and vulnerability

Through the collection, bag ladies speak, telling prick(ly) tales on world leaders. The authors have rendered the toddler as a figure of potential, with clownish antics and deep explorations into the contents of canvas bags. Speaking back, researcher’s skills have been expanded here, with new kinds of childhood studies techniques. Merging such things as poetry, extemporaneous thought, images, analysis, and philosophical musings, within post-human and feminist post-colonial theories, authors have exposed their relational intimacies and writing vulnerabilities. They’ve helped us to question many conventions and metaphors of guiding young children. By exposing the tropes of progress in academic subject areas (upstaging language benchmarks and mean length

utterances) authors have urged us to replace adultified control (a fascism of sorts) with what is often *overlooked* in toddler capacity and expressiveness. In this way, vulnerability in care and writing is productive, reestablishing sovereignty to childhood and an integrity to their aged-human peers. Authors implore us to move away from knowing “things” about toddlers (and interrupting them *or* answering for them *or* exerting force on their bodily autonomy), and rather, move our own adult bodies, and thinking capacities, into a space of relating differently (with uncertainty) in adult-child relations as their teachers, researchers, and policy makers.

Time and intensities

Within this collection of works, toddler’s time (or) the timing of toddlers is reconsidered, often rendered slowly. As examples, authors question the moronic hectic schedules and guided routines of early childhood centers. Developmental pacing, clock work/working by the clock, is replaced with rights-based, process-oriented approaches with young children. The gentle subtlety of young child’s non-verbal gesture and silence denotes competence for toddlers. In most cases, a reassertion of power as toddlers negotiate their serious understandings using symbols and gesture with adults. Toddlers *speak* in their own time, often with the body, rather than the voice, long after their adults (including researchers) might have moved on. Authors caution us that having something intense to say might be missed if adult time overshadows toddlers’. Working within *dialogs* of the body, gesture, toddlers’ physical exertion and teacher’s utterance, toddlers defy their adults. The intensities and affects of tantrums, hakas, and dramatic plays (like crying or running away), are questioned in this collection alongside the historical images of women’s rage. Feminist ideologies are often used in this collection to render time and emotional affects historically, revealing the intensities of rage and frustrations as *felt across epochs*. Anger and its affects in *Angry Arthur* (like Max making mischief of one kind or another, Sendak, 1963), cracks the earth wide open, like an egg, and produces a myopic destruction, which the authors argue, we cannot ignore.

Respect for toddlers, and other monstrosities

Several works within our collection created new spaces to theorize the monstrosity of the Trump baby and Capitalocene’s effects in relation to the rights of children and the larger concerns of humanity. Rather than return to a normalizing base-line, the materialization of childhood was portrayed through consumer products, film, and classroom tools. Authors argued and denounced the caricature of the Trump baby not just as an effigy for our excisement of anger, but as an alter ego for the power of the mob to diminish childhood even while they demanded better from public figures. Counter values of empathy, solidarity, justice, respect, joy, and hope were argued for, and imagined within the positive affect in preschools and nurseries. Toddler power was expertly rendered, as teacher/researcher(s) reinterrogated the often monopolizing performance of adults as they over power and exert force in the majority of classroom talk. Authors question the materiality of possessiveness, adult-child touch, role play, and pretending, further demonstrating the power of bodily communication in everyday classroom moments. Collectively, authors emphasized that toddlers are capable and demanding and pushed childhood studies to change our ever imposing adult positions of authority over toddlers. Finally, cinematic images of giant babies were analyzed for their perceptual force in our world, giving a philosophical analysis of what Big babies in film actually do. Big babies threaten us, pass gas, laugh at our fears, crash through walls, show us our human errors of gluttony, excess, poverty, and consumerism. Big babies appear grotesque and monstrous to show the fullness of human capacity and the fuller tragedies exerted on toddlers and other humans via homelessness, hunger, displacement, neglect.

In an unfinalized fashion, the collection has helped us to create questions about the time we are living in, the time children experience, the world our children are inheriting, the world they experience, the worlds they and we make together. Revealing details of the subsurfaces of anthropomorphic and anthropocentric toddlerdom, there has been some reclaiming, a dismantling of sorts, which has allowed for a really interesting, difficult, obstinate, and noninnocent child/hood to emerge. The collection allows us to *offer up* multiple readings on the teacher and child, the toddler in culture as both superhero, citizen, muse, and countermanding force. Throughout the collection scholars have constructed the visible cognition of young children alongside the animated affects in movie, illustration, symbolic representation, and film. Instances of language, play, talk, material literacies and their affects, stand alongside silent gesture(s), intimacies, emotional intensities, and absorptions. Indeed, the collection has become more than we had hoped for and maybe all that we need. This process of elevating toddlerdom has involved critical engagement with early childhood practice, research practices, and scholarship. With this in mind we close with some final thoughts, albeit a specific version of toddlers/toddlerdom. We acknowledge that toddlers/toddlerdom is experienced/produced differently in different places, and the collective work undertaken pursues the figuration of “toddler” that is more than a bounded human subject, or one in a specific geopolitical location.

Rather, “toddler,” as explored throughout this Issue, can be understood as a becoming, a phenomenon that is materially-discursively produced and does important work to both sediment, aerate, and disrupt ways of knowing. This collective work has elevated “toddler” in magnitude through a careful exploration of what toddler is and what toddler does. The field of childhood studies has long recognized the validity of “toddler,” our work contributes to that legacy. Our deep commitment to “toddler” is felt in the ways in which we care about/for/with; the ways in which we (as a broad, global childhood community) *love* “toddler” in all its generative complexity. Here we have created some words about “toddler” capacities, while we recognize this poetic rendering is shaped by our situated knowledges and partial perspectives that inevitably generate a particular version of toddlers/toddlerdom, we feel certain it will resonate beyond our immediate context and reverberate, agitate, and provoke elsewhere.

Toddlers, Becoming

Big head, soft hair
 Round, rosy-cheeked
 Cherubic faces
 Sweet baby smell,
 Fading
 Bubble baths and
 Footed pajamas
 First haircuts
 Birthday smash cakes and
 Blowing out candles
 Small hands,
 Into everything
 Pointing
 Reaching
 Chubby arms and legs
 Wrangled and wrestled into clothes and baby shoes with bells
 Bounce, wobble, bobble, tumble
 Jump and dance.
 Rolling, crawling, climbing

Rambunctious escape artists
 Boundless energy
 Falling down
 Scraped knees and hands
 Band-aids
 Kisses on boo-boos
 Getting up again
 Drooling, hungry
 Tiny spoons and
 Sippy cups
 Teething, gnawing, small teeth chew
 On sticky fingers and gooey toes,
 Gummy animal crackers and
 Teething toys and pacifiers
 Eyes wide with wonder
 And love for
 The world
 Aware and active
 Playful and curious
 Watchful
 Inquisitive and questioning
 Exploring
 Uncontained
 Undaunted by boundaries
 Camping out in blanket forts
 Playhouses and cardboard boxes that
 Soar to outer space
 Wishing on stars and the
 Man in the moon
 Chasing butterflies and wooly worms,
 Lounging lizards and lightning bugs,
 Stuffing rocks, feathers, frogs and
 Snakes that slither
 Into pockets (surprise)
 Blowing dandelion puffs and
 Picking fistfuls of wilted bouquets
 Riding tricycles, pulling wagons,
 Pushing trucks and
 things that roll.
 Making snow angels and
 Sledding
 Splashing gleefully in puddles
 Swooshing down slides, and screeching In delight
 On swings that fly
 (Look Mom! No Hands!)
 Sandboxes for digging with pails and shovels
 To build sandcastles
 Lego bricks to snap together and take apart
 (and step on!)
 Wooden blocks to stack up high
 And knock down again
 Sidewalk chalk to make dazzling doodles

Bubbles to blow and play-doh to squish
 Kites to fly, and boats to float
 Or sink
 Engaged and insightful
 Imaginative and mischievous
 Adventures with roaring monsters and
 Fire-breathing dragons
 Superheroes in capes and wand-wielding wizards
 Princesses, ballerinas, astronauts and
 Pirates hunting buried treasure
 Players of music
 Beaters of drums made of bowls and spoons
 Finger paint art on walls (and dogs)
 Makers of mudpies, macaroni art, messes
 And magic
 Belly laughs and giggles with abandon
 Playing peek-a-boo,
 Singing happy-silly songs
 Crying and cranky without apology
 Enraged and frustrated from
 Lack of sleep
 Stomping feet, demanding
 Disruptive protest
 Purposeful resistance
 Chatty, babbling
 Silence
 Gestures
 Imitators
 Learners and inventors of languages
 Meaning-making
 Communicating
 Finding joy in everything
 Separate from us (but better) in
 Their willingness to try
 Accepting
 Leaning into our bodies
 Vulnerable
 Willing to be accepted and loved
 “as is” unapologetically
 Relational
 Stubbornly independent and
 Determined
 Competent and capable with
 Endless capacity and
 Potential
 Agentic and active in
 Shaping their worlds
 Participatory
 Citizens
 Not bound by time
 In-the-moment
 Present

Hopeful
Wholly human
Developing
Emerging
Becoming
Being

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Reference

Sendak M (1963) *Where the Wild Things Are*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Author biographies

Dr Janice Kroeger is Professor at Kent State University, USA. Her research concerns power and equity in early childhood contexts and seeks to highlight the connections and important possibilities that emerge when teaching, research and activism are brought together in the pursuit of social justice.

Dr Julia Persky is Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University- Commerce. Previously, she worked as an elementary school teacher in Texas public schools. Her research interests include qualitative research methodologies, diversity and equity in education, education for social justice, early childhood education, and curriculum theory.

Dr Jayne Osgood is Professor of Childhood Studies at the Centre for Education Research & Scholarship, Middlesex University. Her work addresses issues of social justice through critical engagement with policy, curricular frameworks, and pedagogical approaches in Early Childhood Education & Care. She is committed to extending understandings of the workforce, families, gender and sexualities, 'child', and 'childhood' in early years contexts through creative, affective methodologies.