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Childhood Reparations

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Abstract

The world is burgeoning with ever-growing disparities, nation-states are becoming increasingly oppressive with centrist politics, conflicts are intensifying, and climate change is causing natural disasters, which are increasingly displacing families and children. That is, 473 million children worldwide are living in conflict zones today. By the end of 2023, 47.2 million children had been displaced due to conflict and violence, while natural disasters had driven 26.4 million internal displacements, of which 8.8 million were children This article then responds to the uneven landscapes and dominant imaginaries confronted by contemporary childhoods. In doing so, it locates how children bear the burden of adult agendas in the waiting room of the past, present and future. This lends to the analyses of the wider politics that frame childhoods. In response, the article calls for a conceptual turn in childhood studies urging a radical politics of hope rather than the oppressive politics of tomorrow. It proposes a (re-)imagining of just futures for children whereby adults move from apathy towards childhood reparations and think about what might have been stolen from children and what we may owe them. The paper concludes that any imagination of reparative futures cannot be crafted without children.

Keywords: childhood reparations; found futures; children's politics and politics of childhood; waithood; social (in-)justices; new social contract; futurist thinking; children's futures foresight; repair work; reparative and just futures

1. Introduction

Our world lies at a disjuncture—of progression and regression, hurriedness–slowness, hope and disillusionment, surveillance and freedom or precarity and possibilities—that interconnects and disconnects childhoods, at once. These are pronounced by nation-states increasingly adopting repressive centrist politics, capitalist economies reframing global coloniality and ongoing conflicts between and within countries intensifying instability, which alongside climate change and man-made disasters have actuated mass migrations. This is evidenced by the 34% increase in children living in conflict zones, across the globe, since 2010, with current estimates noting disruptions to 473 million children's lives (see Save the Children 2020, 2024). The UNICEF (2024) further identifies displacement of 47.2 million children from their homes due to conflicts and violence, while natural disasters have uprooted 8.8 million children internally. More recently, the Russia–Ukraine war, as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2025) notes, has internally displaced 737,000 children, with another 1.7 million identified as refugees, also highlighting the plight of many children separated from a parent. Alongside this, the continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine has exposed 8009 grave violations against 4360 Israeli children, and three times as many violations perpetrated against 4247 Palestinian children in Israel,

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4868 in the occupied West Bank and 3021 in the Gaza Strip (United Nations General Assembly Security Council 2024), with the UNICEF (2025) noting the killing or injury of over 50,000 children in the Gaza Strip.

Moreover, the "global-shock" sustained by the financial crashes, ongoing cost-of-living crises, educational inequalities and issues of social justice continue to disrupt children's lived realities. For instance, the financial panic of 2008 that resulted in the worst global recession since the Great Depression (Warsh 2009), the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025) reports, has driven 4.3 million children living in the UK into poverty due to the subsequent austerity measures, Brexit, the coronavirus pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. Such debilitating conditions that frame children's lifeworlds lend to the analyses of the wider politics that shape childhoods today. Take, for example, the world's military expenditure rising each year—going up by 37 per cent between 2015 and 2024, with funding, in 2024, estimated at US$2718 billion (Liang et al. 2024)—while the UNESCO-UIS (2024) reports 'alarmingly insufficient' investments in education, with an annual funding gap of US$97 billion, which is particularly debilitating for children's futures in low- and lower-middle-income countries. These are but a few instances of the polycrisis (Escobar 2023) that children must navigate duly but often without consent or consultation.

Accordingly, this conceptual paper examines the uneven landscapes—of disparate contexts, conditions and ideologies—which children in contemporary times are confronted by, negotiate, and enact in their everyday lives. Such an examination is underpinned by postcolonial, feminist, critical, indigenous, and posthumanist framings, which offer rich analytical resources for interrogating subjugation, voice, agency, affect and power[1], particularly pertinent to any analyses of childhoods. This is undertaken to locate how children bear the burden of modernist and adultist polities, policies and politics, in the waiting room of the past, present and future whilst simultaneously (re-)worlding 'other' possible realities. Accordingly, the article calls for (re-)turning the adult gaze on childhoods by moving beyond the preoccupation of Childhood Studies, the social sciences and wider fields with children's present, making it devoid of its intricate connections to the past and the future (Bhambra 2022; Spyrou 2020; Qvortrup 2004). Such a turn urges a radical politics of hope and trust, grounded in children's interwoven temporalities and spatialities of today, yesterday and tomorrow, rather than the singular focus on the oppressive politics of tomorrow or adult fears of today (Giroux 1997). In response, the paper proposes a (re-)imagining of just futures for children whereby adults move beyond apathy towards childhood reparations and think about what we may have robbed our children of and what we may owe to them. This is discussed in relation to children's futurity and futures foresight with a particular focus on children's politics, the scope of education and the possibilities of 'found' futures, framed by the entangled dimensions of time, space and matter. The article concludes that any imagination of alternative futures cannot be crafted without children's presence in the present and a continued understanding of their ontology, precarity, priorities and possibilities, across the past and the future.

Interrogating the sites of asymmetries that children are confronted with and the social hierarchies that peripheralise childhoods from public environs to the 'waiting room' of subjecthood (Chakrabarty [2000] 2007) then provides the premise for my proposal of childhood reparations. This dictates an analysis of adult apathy to childhood set in contrast to the apathy assigned to contemporary childhoods, as deliberated next.

2. Childhood Apathy or Apathetic Children?

Given the above-noted sociopolitical disjuncture, the disparate conditions children inhabit and the marginalisation of their voice, the precarity and possibility of children's existence seem to displace their futures in the present, delineated by dominant ideologies

and agendas. The social injustices confronted by children today, however, have been carefully curated and dispensed by adults and those in dominant positions since time immemorial. Whether it is the borders carved into their lands, through modes of capital (military, economic or epistemic) or with difference (of colour, sexuality, religion, culture, or any subaltern position), these are all (and have been, historically) drawn to serve adultist, objectivist, dominant knowledges and paternalist priorities.

Conceptualisation of childhood, however, configured and re-configured in modernist logics, has transcended physical, historical, sociopolitical and discursive borderlands, obfuscating 'other' imaginaries. This has been galvanised, on the one hand, by the temporally constituted paradox of the 'becoming' (irrational, incompetent, vulnerable, awaiting acquisition of adult skills) and the 'being' child who is rational, competent, an agentic social actor and a capable decision maker (see Qvortrup 1991; James and Prout 1997; James et al. 1998). While the 'being-becoming' paradox of childhood conceptualisations has garnered conflicting positions, the dichotomy reinforces dominant adult-child hierarchies. This would benefit instead from an observation of its continuum across past, present and future timescapes since neither is competency a characteristic of adults alone nor does the focus on the 'being' child allow for children's futurity or future experiences of becoming (Uprichard 2008). Children's 'becoming', however, continues to frame protectionist policy, research and practice to rationalise their marginalisation from public arenas and dialogue, instead of heralding children's 'being' through notions of children's rights, voice and agency.

Such patriarchal modes of governance invariably infantilise children, particularly those at the 'periphery' (Connell 2007), invisibilising their nuanced and uneven sociopolitical, material and discursive realities (Giroux 2010). This is framed by adultism that denotes a high esteem for adults (Alderson 2020) undergirded by adult's misuse of power (Flasher 1978) or domination over children (Du Bois 1903), which, in turn, propagates 'childism'—a term used for discrimination against children (Young-Bruehl 2012) and, more recently, respect for children (Biswas and Wall 2023). Despite women and children having been excluded from public arenas for similar reasons—too irrational, emotional, ignorant, dependent to be rights holders—with 'sexism', there is a vocabulary for discrimination against women (Alderson 2017, p. 313) as with racism and ableism. It must be acknowledged, however, that despite ongoing developments there is a lack of consensus regarding the language for examining prejudice against children, namely, between the concepts of adultism and childism. As Wall (2025) argues, while children's social marginalisation—whether racial inequality, gender discrimination, disabilities or colonisation—has been studied widely by scholars, there is lack of systematic or theoretical tools that specifically interrogate childism, children's subordinate status or exclusion as children within society. This discrepancy not only operationalises normative assumptions of adultism but also obfuscates the power dynamics that are particular to adult-child relationships.

Southern and critical scholarship, predominantly in childhood studies, childhood geographies and education (amongst others) further relate this unyielding adult-child separation to the colonisation of childhoods and the ongoing legacies of colonialism. According to Liebel (2020) and Cannella and Viruru (2004), this is symptomatic of the colonial order and its 'civilising missions', which reproduced the relationship between colonial rulers and the colonized, thereby asserting a paternalist lens on childhoods as with women and those colonised (see also Alanen 1988). Rollo (2018, pp. 308, 310) exposes the colonisers' self-imposed 'paternal burden' to explicate how the misopedic discourse of racialised childhoods authorised them to view colonised peoples and children as inferior, savage thus a 'site of naturalized discipline, violence, and criminality'. Grounded in hierarchical divisions of adult capacities for reason, speech and claim-making, invariably assigned to claims for equality and inclusion, he argues, garners both antipathy, and fetishisation and

objectification. This necessitates further examination of anti-child ageism within institutions and wider society. Children, particularly in the southern contexts, however, reveal multiple ways of crossing such adult–child-being–becoming borders by dismantling the linearity of time and development, subjecthoods (by age) and agency[2].

On the other hand, the current political climate—favouring normative, heteropatriarchal, extrapolative, proscriptive and neoliberal modes of order and control—continues to persecute difference whilst concertedly invisibilising 'other' childhoods through universalist, capitalist and neoliberalist framings. Take the recent resurgence of momentum to ostracise, penalise or criminalise migrant youth and families, across Europe, leading to the hyper-surveillance of the 'other' (Efstathiadou and Ioakimidis 2025; Thompson 2025; Garrett 2020; Stasiulis 2004). In the case of the UK, the UN Special Rapporteur, reporting in 2018, found 'striking' levels of 'structural socio-economic exclusion of racial and ethnic communities', which Shankley and Rhodes (2020, p. 203) demonstrate is a result of the 'growth in the acceptability of explicit racial, ethnic and religious intolerance'. Furthermore, marginalised or 'delegitimised' communities (whether Black, ethnic minority groups or Romani communities) have continued to encounter various modalities of inequality, discrimination and racialised organisations resulting in reductivism, excessive imprisonment and over-policing (Ray 2019; Cavadino et al. 2019; Prison Reform Trust 2017).

Not surprisingly, then, ethnic minorities appear to be over-represented at several stages of the criminal justice system compared to their white ethnic counterparts. The Lammy Review (HM Government 2017) found that despite making up just 14% of the population, 40% of young people in custody are from the global majorities (elsewhere BAME), with David Lammy signalling to the *Independent*, in 2019, that the treatment of, and outcomes for, these cohorts had become "considerably worse" (Bulman 2019). Shankley and Williams (2020, p. 53) add that the racialisation of particular crimes (say, gangs and terrorism) are conveniently associated with Black and Asian young people more than any other ethnic groups, resulting in higher rates of surveillance, arrests and prosecutions. The Runnymede Trust (2023) reiterates this, reporting police officers operating within the UK are most often based around schools with higher numbers of pupils eligible for free school meals, correlated with higher numbers of Black and minority ethnic students. Qurashi (2018) observes that such forms of surveillance are invariably experienced as oppressive, generate fear amongst those monitored and demonise the 'other'. This 'new politics of containment' (Collins 1998) ensures that explicit and implicit strategies for surveillance remain 'unraced' such that the whiteness of institutional spaces persist unchallenged (Mirza 2006). These examples do not merely illustrate the systemic failures confronted by 'other-ed' children and young people but also the cultural essentialisms that maintain racist rationality and race-evasive policies.

Both lenses on childhoods inevitably reproduce adult apathy—defined by Dahl et al. (2018) as an attitudinal orientation founded on 'a lack of desire or motivation to take an interest'—that propel children's marginalisation from public arenas and dialogue. Markedly, children and young people's exclusion from decision-making processes is evidenced by the lack of representation of their vision, experiences or priorities, with members of parliament consisting of a mere 2.6% of people under 30 years of age, globally, despite 49% of the world's population falling within this age bracket (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2021). Wyness (2019, p. 201) argues that through the protectionist, welfare and needs-driven lenses, 'the "political child" is seen as the "unchild"' as it is unfathomable for adults to envisage children as political. Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019), drawing on the occupation life of Palestinian children who remain subversive, resilient and resistant to their traumatic conditions, reveals a darker tale of 'unchilding' founded on settler-colonial state and its necropolitics authorising 'the use of children as political capital for dispossession in the

colony' (p. 138) and 'eviction of children from childhood' (p. 122) itself, seen as 'disposable' (p. 92), ungrievable, 'uncivilised' (p. 122) and with no-lives (p. 138). Despite this, as with Shalhoub-Kevorkian's (2019) study, children and young people have revealed themselves to be powerful advocates, disruptors and active sociopolitical participants, across time and space[3]. In fact, where children and young people have been brought into public dialogue, they consistently articulate their dissatisfaction with the current political systems, voice concerns about their exclusion from decision-making processes and note the ensuing erosion of trust in democracy alongside emphasising distinct foresight about futures thinking (see UNICEF-Innocenti 2024; Henn et al. 2005; O'Toole et al. 2003). The National Centre of Social Research (NCSR) Report (Lucas et al. 2024), which analyses similarities and differences between and within generations in the UK, reiterates this noting further that almost 70% of Generation Z (those born between 1994 and 2014) prioritised environmental concerns over economic growth, compared to 44% of Baby Boomers (born between 1901 and 1924).

Yet adults, politicians, elite institutions and practitioners often remain apathetic to children's social, environmental, and political protests, priorities or passivity. Wyness (2019) argues that this is a result of children's assigned position in the social order, which is retained to ensure that the social hierarchy and the authority of the erudite adult figure remains undisputed. Zhou's (2024) research with boarding school children in China, however, demonstrates that children's apathy is exacerbated by their inferior position or secondariness (Said 1978) in power relations. Such secondariness may affect children's apathy and alienation from matters that concern them, but it effectually assigns them to the waiting room of the 'not yet' but 'becoming' adult (Chakrabarty [2000] 2007), endorsing the labelling of children as apathetic, disinterested or disengaged. This imaginary waiting room of the past, present and future that children are relegated to has been examined extensively, exposing the nuances of waiting (see Durham 2000; Honwana 2019). Abebe's (2020, p. 588) research with Ethiopian youth acknowledges waiting and waithood to be a 'stultifying process' that induces anxiety and a displaced sense of the future but reveals it is not 'a passive act' since the young people actively anticipate uncertainty and negotiate their futures whilst acknowledging the tensions and possibilities that their past and present realities pose such as regime change or uneven development impacting their education and employment. Similarly, Jeffrey's (2010, p. 79) study with unemployed young people of north India, which offers a gendered analysis, demonstrates why locating the culture of 'masculine waiting' within boredom, 'hanging out', a sense of being left behind or hope for future rewards is unsophisticated. Here, waiting is not only explicitly linked to class–caste politics but also how young people adopt self-conscious strategies, creative ingenuity and opportunism, challenge dominant ideologies espoused by their parents and the state, and initiate protests against corruption, educational mismanagement and harassment by government officials (ibid., p. 35). In both cases, despite the limitations of their contexts and adult imaginings, the disfranchised young people appear to be informed about the precarity and possibility of their futures. Unlike dominant perceptions, they employ unconventional strategies and sites to extend the boundaries of their stultified futures and sociopolitical (dis-)engagement with their 'suspended self' unfolding 'in/through/between discursive spaces' and its possibilities (Campbell 2017, p. 47).

This section has directed attention to adultist reproductions of hostilities and apathy, on the one hand, and children's agency, resilience and empathy, in spite of it, on the other hand. It is imperative then to acknowledge the ensuing tensions between adult apathy to childhood and the allegedly apathetic children and young people, in order to revisit the temporal connections and conditions of hope, fear and futurity that frame their lives. The next section, subsequently, proposes childhood reparations to address the complexities of adult apathy resulting in the marginalisation and perceived inferiority of children's

voice, practices and futures foresight, and to respond to the wider call to turn the gaze on childhoods (Spyrou 2022) towards rethinking possibilities of childhoods, children's ontologies and their sociopolitical positioning in this world.

3. Childhood Reparations

Burgeoning disparities, undergirded by the legacies of historical and contemporary trauma, loss and suffering, continue to fold, unfold, and refold children's lifeworlds. As discussed previously, in the last two decades, contemporary children's lives have been framed by oppressive politics and sustained inequalities—whether the financial crises, rising fascism, ongoing wars and destabilising civil conflicts, enduring racism, impending nuclear threats, climate change disasters or the recent pandemics—all of which have lent not only to children bearing witness to grave loss of family; sociocultural, epistemic and environmental alongside economic capital; and humanity itself, but also urge attention to the intergenerational suffering and what children have inherited from or surrendered to their previous generations. This demands a 'new' social contract between adults and children of today and tomorrow that allows spaces for mourning and renewal, builds intergenerational consciousness and repairs connections of the past, present and future. Repair work or the 'praxis of repair', as Aslam (2022, p. 4) opines, involves healing justice, self-care practices and attending to past and present traumas and stresses by identifying the 'who, what, and how of what has been broken', employing creative, interconnected approaches towards repairing them and "making ready" institutions and people. With this section, then, I argue that children are the past, present and future victims (and/or survivors) of adult ideologies, agendas and propagandas (and oftentimes, apathy, as discussed previously) that invariably disregard their futurity and futures foresight. Ochi (2025, p. 292), analysing the reparations orders of the International Criminal Court, posits that future 'victims can be those born out of sexual and gender-based crimes (SGBC), those who lost those who were supposed to be their important persons, those who suffer harm inherited from their parents, and new members of the affected community'. In confronting these sociopolitical, onto-ethical and epistemic dilemmas, I conceptualise childhood reparations as a means of historical redress to children and intergenerational justice. This enables observing childhood as a site for reparations towards repairing the fractures in adult–child relationships founded on apathy and hierarchical marginalisation, or the human–non-human, temporal–spatial, social–political, ontological–epistemic (dis)connections. Love or rather 'an ethic of love' that 'presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well' (hooks 2000, p. 87) is central to reparations, and repairing the 'wound, injury, and suffering within a frame that takes into consideration histories of violence, oppression, and social injustice' (Zembylas 2017, p. 24).

The project of repair, then, as Bhambra (2022, p. 16) opines, is transformative, reconstructive, and actively acknowledges the connected histories and sociologies alongside the fissures that have engendered the present to address contemporary inequalities towards making 'a world that works for all of us'. Reparation has historically aimed to redress violent perversions of colonial, racial or state oppression whether in exercising its power on the victim, those colonised and marginalised communities and individuals (Henderson and Wakeham 2009), or by chastising 'deviant' states and populations, say, through genocide, ethnocide, or epistemicide (see Heiskanen 2021; de Sousa Santos 2014). That is, at its core, reparation is grounded in justice and equity, given wrongdoers (in this case adults) benefiting from wrongdoing is not only deemed unjust, but reparative justice also entails wrongdoers correcting the wrongdoing to ensure just relations, with the state taking responsibility for an individuals' right to receive an effective remedy—ideas that underpin its rights-based approach in contemporary times (Ochi 2025). It is with

these provocations in mind that I draw on the 'reparative position' to turn the gaze on Childhood Studies and other disciplinary fields seeking to understand children's lives (whether sociology, philosophy, political theory or health) and enhance debates on social justice. Such a position, I argue, would allow adults, practitioners, elite institutions and modalities of governance to think about what may have been stolen from our children, what we may owe them, and what shape may just relations with children and young people (of today and tomorrow) take; to respond productively to the historical and contemporary asymmetries and injustices sustained by children, and for adults to move from apathy, culpability or denial towards encounters of hope, trust and intergenerational solidarity. A reparative framework further enables a critical lens on the 'vested interests' of adults and the salience of the alleged shortcomings of the 'waiting child' (Qvortrup 2004, p. 267).

The language, question and tensions of reparations are increasingly interrogated in postcolonial studies, psychoanalysis and education today. For instance, while Tharoor (2017) makes the case for reparations to nation-states, reflecting on the suffering inflicted on the south by the extractive and exploitative colonial domination, Bhambra (2022) urges an epistemic repair of the social sciences, itself, to collectively address the inequalities (implicit and/or explicit) legitimated by the discipline. Both arguments set the wider frame of reference, in interrogating and contextualising the sociopolitical and epistemic dimensions, for childhood reparations. Klein's psychoanalytical work (Klein [1937] 1984), in contrast, explores it through the suffering of self, caused by our sense of dependence, destruction and identification with the mother thus others, and through love leading to a loss of self through sacrifices made for (m)other and repairing the harm. Building on Klein's work, Tarc (2011) and Zembylas (2017) engage in reparative works to reinvigorate discussions on reparative justice in education, which enables a move beyond apology and acknowledgement of traumatic histories. To elaborate, Tarc (2011, pp. 350–51) centres on the reparative curriculum intending to build students' 'capacity to feel, think, and make reparation for unimaginable lives and worlds radically outside of their own' and embody the survivor's attempt to 'make sense of senseless events in the radical hope of living in the wake of devastation' towards moments of affective and subjective learning and unlearning together. Zembylas (2017) develops the argument further with a focus on love as ethico-political practice (not merely as a sentimental emotion) in education. Elucidating love as an ethical and political practice—through the works of Freire, hooks, Nash and Gandhi amongst others—they argue this positions the concept within the public rather than the private sphere whilst concomitantly shifting the identitarian politics of difference towards new forms of relationality and empathy in encountering otherness. This lends to their theorisation of reparative pedagogies of aimance (or love that affirms a more active affinity between human beings) that may be employed as a powerful force for social change, in problematising essentialisms and fostering practices that refuse to harm others (ibid., 2017).

These are some substantive responses to the intrapersonal and inter-political dynamics of reparations (Tarc 2011, p. 350) that encounter past atrocities with affect, imagination, care and solidarity leading to altered thinking between and within the self–other—conceivably, then, the adult and the child—and become particularly pertinent to the violence-stricken, apathetic and individualist world that children and young people are confronted with today. However, such reparative practices, pedagogies and priorities attend neither to the reclaiming of childhoods and children's futures by children themselves nor the matter of 'unchilding', which exposes the 'racialized political work of violence that constructs, directs, governs, and transforms colonized children as dangerous, racialized others', evicting them from childhood itself as illegitimate nonsubjects (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2021, p. 490). Given children's multiple and pluriversal realities (Balagopalan 2002; Escobar 2020), then, an analysis of children's distinct ontologies and epistemologies alongside the ethical and

political dimensions of reparations—thus political-ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad 2017)—across its temporal dimensions become relevant to reparative futures. For example, the historical remembrance of violence by, say, a fifth-generation indigenous child and the ethico-onto-epistemic practices of their community encountering its wounds, suffering, oppression and forgiveness, within a particular and shifting political climate across time, may constitute particular conceptualisations of reparations, reparative practices and reparative futures, quite distinct from any other childhoods (oppressed or not). Additionally, while they attend to the sanctity of the past and present, perhaps, addressing the elision of imaginative possibilities for futures thinking and children's futurity, and moving beyond anthropocentric conceptualisations of reparations, are imperative to ensuring children are not only capable of evaluating their own position in any structural order but also avoid perpetuating the very inequalities they seek to overcome.

The UNESCO's (2021) *Futures of Education Report* does attend to this gap in advocating for a 'new social contract for education that can repair injustices while transforming the future', founded on an ethic of care, reciprocity and solidarity. This appeal for reparations to address past and present injustices, and the very act of raising the matter (and methods) of 'repair' towards reconfiguring possible futures, presents a productive lens on childhoods and education. However, as Sriprakash (2023) notes, such perpetual calls for 'new' social contracts invariably fail to meet expectations as not only do the specificities and nuances remain wanting but also their underpinning ideals, ideologies and practices are unlikely to convey a shared understanding or reach a consensus. This, as Rollo (2021, pp. 316–17) argues, is a result of 'the social contract tradition' shaped by liberal political theory advocating for legitimate knowledge bearers with a capacity to consent and intelligibly articulate one's interest, which at once precludes the 'silent' and preserves 'legacies of exclusion', thus maintaining patterns of domination and legitimatising violence and coercion against women, children and people of colour. The relationship between speech, silence and silencing then is resonant of exclusionary colonial strategies and particularly problematic for any social contract to be drawn with children, presumed to be incapable, awaiting acquisition of adult skills or silent, as with adultism, since such a disqualification is anti-democratic and urges institutional reform.

Notwithstanding, it is Sriprakash's (2023) analysis of the injustices in education—accounting for the perpetuation of systemic inequalities, marketisation, harmful ideologies, and sites for social reproduction, as educational (Ladson-Billings 2006) and moral debts (Vavrus 2017) to future generations—and explorations of 'reparative futures' for just education systems along its material, symbolic, pedagogic, relational and epistemic dimensions that are particularly valuable lines of inquiry in relation to childhood reparations. On the one hand, this positions reparations as 'backwards-looking' and 'future-oriented' (Táíwò 2022, p. 124) through the inter/intra-connections between the genesis of the injustice in the past, its reparatory obligations in the present and its repair in the future. This can enable children and young people to recognise colonial and historical connections and think anew about the structures that disfigure their shared world (Bhambra 2022). On the other hand, it opens up spaces for fostering intergenerational allyship that espouses 'radical solidarity' (Zembylas 2017) with adults moving beyond apathy towards relational perspectives on loss, suffering and justice, and enables children to 'choose to relate to the world as ancestors', themselves (Táíwò 2022, p. 11), a continuity prevalent in indigenous communities (Sinha 2025).

What remains elusive within these discussions is children's futures foresight, particularly in relation to conceptualisations of reparations and reparative futures, and how the adultist gaze on children as past, present and future ancestors alongside the dominant sociopolitical structures that marginalise, silence or disregard children's futurity may be

reframed. Given the 'crisis of imagination' (Giroux 2024, p. 7) that our current, more fascist structures and institutions legitimate, circulate and reproduce, it is imperative that educators and academics, as public intellectuals, raise historical, social and political consciousness that repairs past and future injustices in the present by enabling students and individuals to adopt a critical stance, take control and reshape dominant structures, moving from 'paralyzing indifference' towards acts of resistance and hope. Childhood reparations then would not only 'make ready' citizens and institutions for new solidarities and political imaginations alone (Aslam 2022), rather it would also unequivocally invoke children's (re)worlding of just futures—or a reclaiming of *their* 'worlding of a world' (Spivak 1985, p. 253)—as counter-hegemonic praxis to the dominant, adult-coloniser's imaginaries. This shift, the article contends, is central to any project of repair concerning futures that children may be caretakers of, as any attempt to envision reparative futures would remain incomplete without children's imagination of new social possibilities, of new political imaginaries and thinking anew about the past to serve the future. Reparations to present and future generations of children then urge a rethinking of adults' 'worlding' of childhoods and adultist priorities, policies and praxis, given our 'disfigured' world epitomises precarity, unmet prospects and lost futures for our children.

To extrapolate repair of, and reparations for, the ceaseless loss of children's futures, in the past and present, the subsequent section proceeds to consider the ways in which reparations to childhoods or childhood reparations may be realised and the implications of such an engagement on children, institutions and reparative futures. This is undertaken to disrupt normative regimes and Eurocentric epistemologies of childhood towards reconfiguring reparative possibilities. Such an orientation may rearticulate reparative frameworks with children at the centre, as deliberated next.

4. 'Found' Futures

The present calls for a decisive rupture from adult apathy and the 'general amnesia' about situating children within contexts of profound suffering and grievous conditions, the enduring fate of the waiting child, and children and young people's 'lost futures'[4]. This not only demands a radical reconfiguration of the ontological and epistemological positioning of children in the public sphere but also a recognition of justice as a lived, not deferred, condition. To do so, I offer 'found futures' as a source of repairing the past, present and the future, and as a means to reveal how such a critical, childhood-oriented reimagining of just futures may contextualise and connect the material, symbolic, discursive, relational and epistemic dimensions of reparations. While it is important to acknowledge the breadth of potential discussions on found futures that remain outside the remit of this article, here, it centres on reparative justice for children through two key arguments: futurist thinking and pluriversal politics, as entangled with space, time and matter, respectively. This concluding section then invites a (re)imagining of just futures for children that open up discursive, material and temporal spaces for reparative imaginaries. My proposition of 'found' futures is underpinned by the erstwhile discussion on the ethic of love and Giroux's (1997, 2024) analyses of cultural politics, radical democracy and hope. Here, hope, as with love, is not sentimental or fantastical; rather, it is envisaged as 'educated', and educational, thus becomes a 'precondition for imagining a future that does not replicate the nightmares of the present, for not making the present the future (ibid., 2024, p. 16). It draws also on the tenets of found art and poetry—where the artwork or poem can be created by the reordering, reframing or erasure of existing images and texts through combining fragments, collaging or rearranging these, or drawing on language from non-poetic contexts to transform its meaning poetically (Stepakoff 2021). Found poetry understands knowledge as embodied, thus emphasising lived experiences, contexts, juxtapositions and reinterpretations (Wiggins

2011). It is these critical features—of curating, (re)discovering and reimagining of existing histories, spatialities, discourses or sociocultural and political artefacts—that I employ in the forthcoming discussions to contour the intellectual–political debates regarding futures thinking, particularly in relation to reparative futures, a rewilding of childhoods and pluriversal realities, which may not merely enhance children's futures foresight but also galvanise transformative praxis.

4.1. Futurist Thinking and Reparative Temporality

Futures studies, which came to the fore after the second World War, while not a novel intellectual undertaking, initially operated within technocratic and predictive paradigms that reproduced dominant logics of progress and development, before arriving at its humanist focus on foresight (Vidergor 2023). Currently, a critical lens on future studies offers a pertinent tool for interrogating the epistemic and ontological conditions under which futures are imagined, revealing how futurity, and childhoods, are entangled with historical power and dominant ideology, thus emphasising 'the critique of official futures, radical transformation of the existing order' (Son 2015, p. 133). Futures thinking, as articulated within futures studies, does not preclude engagement with the past or present; on the contrary, it enacts a recursive praxis of (un)learning and relearning for redressing past and present injustices towards reimagining and materialising alternative, socially just futurities (Dator 2019). Such convergence foregrounds that futures thinking is not neutral, rendering some futures plausible and others unthinkable, which demands scrutiny of the politics of power-knowledge, temporality, justice and subjectivity. This begs the question of what futures are imagined, by whom, for whom and under what conditions; what futures are privileged or preferred and whose futures matter? In this sense, futures studies, reframed through a critical lens, becomes a site for decolonial, reparative, and emancipatory imaginaries. A decolonial perspective reframes futures as plural, contested and situated, elevating subjugated knowledges and alternative temporalities (cyclical, relational, intergenerational) that broaden how futurity can be known, lived and claimed (Spyrou 2022; Escobar 2018).

This has transformative significance for childhoods, as well. Given futures studies is often presented as a forward-looking enterprise, childhoods occupy a pivotal position within such discussions since conceptualisations of childhood are invariably a signifier of futurity (children are our future, future-makers, change agents), yet children's *lived* presents are frequently characterised by waiting. Here, temporality is key again since children are often constructed as having a 'not-yet' status that can justify postponing children's voices, rights or politics while intensifying precarities in the present. Childhoods and future studies, then, are structured by normative temporal regimes, arrangements and infrastructures that delimit whose futures become possible, liveable or invisibilised. As Barad (2017, p. 57) posits,

> In these troubling times, the urgency to trouble time, to shake it to its core, and to produce collective imaginaries that undo pervasive conceptions of temporality that take progress as inevitable and the past as something that has passed and is no longer with us is something so tangible, so visceral, that it can be felt in our individual and collective bodies.

Found futures shifts the sites of power in reframing the ontological, epistemological and political inquiry to explore which temporalities are curated, examined and reimagined and by whom, and specifically, how the past is constructed, in the present, or how futurity may be co-produced with children over time. Addressing these questions makes clear that found futures are not simply anticipatory or pervasive; they are co-generatively assembled. Further, 'troubling times' in this way, *with* the tangible and visceral nature of temporality,

allows a move away from neutrality to reflexivity wherein values, assumptions, privilege and power relations embedded in futures thinking are made explicit and interrogated.

Observing childhoods through a lens of found futures that foregrounds the plurality of temporality, and that maps contestable and foreseeable futures in this way, can prompt reparative imaginaries that refuse the foreclosure of *timeless* possibility. Rather than treating childhoods or justice, symbolically, as a distant promise, children can be recognised as present subjects of rights, care and politics whilst concomitantly disrupting narratives that defer the responsibility of our past. There are rich studies that are already invested in childhood reparations or repairing the past and future with children, implicitly and explicitly. For instance, in Spyrou et al.'s (2022) study, young climate activists reimagined 'not just any future' but reassembled notions of sustainable and just futures, curating ways of making it 'less anthropocentric', 'less selfish and competitive and more empathetic and collaborative', respectful of other human beings and generations 'including future ones', and one 'without wars, exploitation, discrimination and social inequalities…'. The study reveals children and young people's construction of their sociopolitical subjectivities, which is explicitly intertwined intergenerationally, communally, with human–non-human entities, and the past, present and the future. Another such example is Hickey-Moody and Wilcox's (2019) study, undertaken post 26/11, where cross-cultural and inter-faith children reimagined 'togetherness' by reassembling notions of community, belonging and identity (sexual, gender, religious) and employed Instagram and art workshops to curate more-than-human assemblages of feeling, expressing and understanding the key concepts and celebrating difference. The pedagogical nature of materiality, spatiality and temporality, here, privileges the '*being with*' rather the '*knowing* in research' to 'make new ways for people to come together and share their knowledges, experiences, and differences' which has significant implications for remaking meaning thus reparative futures.

Found futures then would ensure that futurity is not a privilege but a shared reparative commitment between adults and children, human–non-human, whereby discursive and material transformations not only relate to pedagogical practice, participatory foresights and intergenerational equity but also policy reforms that centre on children's knowledge, voice and agency in reimagining temporality. Such a politics of hope rather than fear of the past or tomorrow, or disempowering structures, in dark times, emphasises the link between the 'issue of authority to the rhetoric of freedom and democracy' (Giroux 1997, p. 95), often invisibilised within dominant, adultist discourse. In contrast, 'found futures' co-constructed with children offer a critical approach to both childhoods and futures thinking in challenging the linearity of time and children's development; engaging with temporal dimensions and situated formations advances transforming the present and repairing futures towards lived justice as a condition of any alternative or imagined future. However, such repair work cannot be accomplished without shifts in childhoods thinking and practice, as elucidated next.

4.2. Possibility of Pluriversal Politics and Childhoods

Giroux (1997, p. 95) declared, 'We live in a time when democracy is in retreat ', an assertion that does not only resonate with the world some 30 years on but also presents significant implications for children's lives, education and futurity. With respect to children and young people, such retreat from conventional politics is grounded in their distrust of politicians and political systems that have continually excluded them and their priorities, as evidenced previously. Faced with such democratic deficit and a civilizational crisis that Escobar (2018) contemplates in examining the separations of a one-world ontology (mind–body, human–non-human, subject–object, west–rest), found futures has the potential to attend to some of the struggles its pluriversal conjecture is constituted of—say, heteropatri-

archy, capitalism, coloniality, modernity and racism. This wanting repair work, as Escobar (2018) proposes, may be redressed by 'radical relationality'[5] or the ontology of relatedness rather than dualisms, which recognises radical interdependence as the premise of all reality, where everything is mutually constituted, and for something to exist, everything else must. In acknowledging children's multiple realities and the impending need for righting adults' wrongs (de Castro 2022), found futures facilitate the discovery and rearrangements of diverse, shifting and reparative futures, which, in turn, make more effective sites of political intervention available, rendering a 'world of many worlds' possible (Escobar 2020, p. x). Found futures, therefore children's futurity, then, is situated and spatialised, thus liminal—folding and unfolding within and across homes, neighbourhoods, institutions, borders, platforms (physical, digital) and ecologies of 'being', 'knowing' and doing'.

This calls for a rewilding[6] of childhoods in reassembling, repairing and reviving conceptualisations, ecologies and spaces inhabited by children. While this approach to childhoods thinking is drawn from environmental and conservation studies, crucially, it recognises children as both future citizens or change-makers and present subjects whose materialities and spatialities warrant immediate reparative work. Such an exploration is intended to foreground the possibilities of futures thinking with a particular focus on (re-)turning the gaze on children's political positioning, participation, and their political lives. Oswell (2018, p. 200) adds, however, children have never been 'afforded the luxury of a pure space' to defend their interests, particularly spaces for contestation and assembly. On the one hand, scholars argue this is a result of politics occurring in the public realm, which 'innocent' children are deemed not to belong to (Wells 2014), while, on the other hand, it is framed by children being seen as apprentice citizens rather than fully constituted social participants due to their lacking ontology, which is a precondition for political participation (Cockburn 1998; Wyness 2019). Despite the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) binding nation-states under international law to listen to children's views in matters that concern them (Article 12), ensure they are able to express these freely (Articles 13, 14) and to reserve their right to assemble or join organisations (Article 15), such dominant ideologies continue to frame institutional and policy thinking resulting in the neglect of children's voices, politics and priorities for their futures.

In contrast, children, as Spyrou et al.'s (2022, p. 742) study evidences, 'seek to intervene in the trajectory of history, to empower themselves to act on the future through their emerging sense of collective hope and activism which can propel them out of the anxiety and despair they often experience'. Children and young people's political activism may be invisibilised or disregarded by adults, but it remains as vibrant today, given that they are better educated than ever before (Wells 2014), and the past decade has witnessed more protests than at any other time since the 1960s (Shenker 2019). Moreover, an examination of young people's politics evidences their distinct ways and places of connecting, globally, over political issues significant to them that move beyond the performative politics of adults. For instance, young people might refrain from adult spaces of politics (such as the parliament or the voting booths) or reject formal and 'educational' approaches to politics (Collin 2015), but they are actively speaking out about corruption, climate change, gender, racism, socioeconomic inequalities, and rights and liberties (Lucas et al. 2024; UNICEF-Innocenti 2024; OECD 2022). Instead, young people's politics remain outside the traditional sphere, espousing digital solidarity, non-violent demonstrations and engagement with single-issue campaigns, voluntary sectors or religious centres (UNICEF-Innocenti 2024), also evidenced by the ongoing global protests against the war on Palestine (Al Jazeera 2024; Betts 2025). Such political praxis, at once, disrupts the established order and recentres conceptualisations of what it means to be political.

This is of particular significance to childhood discourses that oscillate between protection and participation or children's futurity and lost futures (whether children as our future, loss of innocence, hurried childhoods or waithood). Building on these arguments, I locate found futures within children's present practices, sites, issues and materialities that may materialise reparative action as a means for older generations to relinquish power, co-create knowledges with children, and learn about and unlearn their privilege to acknowledge other (children's) 'ways of knowing, doing and being'. That is, matter (in its broadest sense—whether policy, campaigns, educational resources, children's parks or toys) matters. Barad (2003, p. 829) adds,

> 'Knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible. . . Practices of knowing and being are not isolatable. . .We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because "we" are of the world.'

Materiality and spatiality of children's lives then anchors children's futurity. Children's bodies (and their precarity), structures (say, social, political or physical) and ecologies (systems, environmental climate) mediate the possibilities of found futures, particularly in relation to repair work. More importantly, as noted within posthumanist or new materialist framings, children's participation with matter is not passive but an active act of world-making (Hickey-Moody and Wilcox 2019; Murris 2016). This reframes found futures as material-discursive assemblages, thus highlighting the significance of material and spatial dimensions in bringing about discursive or reparative change. Futures foresight and children's futurity then must be explicitly place-based and attentive to how spatial configurations reproduce or interrupt inequality.

For childhood studies and wider disciplines concerned with children's lives or social justice, this means reading the 'waiting child' not as an individual condition but as a spatial–material arrangement, across time (say inaccessible care infrastructures, border–bordering regimes and the surveillance of racialised or migrant children's lives), which delays or denies children's futures. Escobar (2020, p. xvii) posits,

> 'we are summoned by place into entanglements with each other and with nonhumans, whether in conflict or cooperation or both, as all of us, willy-nilly, live in coexistence with multiple others through intricate relations that define our very way of being'.

This suggests that found futures grounded in pluriversal politics is entangled with its diverse forms emerging from the Global South and North, exposing a spectrum from modernist liberal to radically relational possibilities that significantly weaken the seemingly rigid boundaries built in adult imaginaries. Reframed through time, space and matter, found futures becomes a critical, emancipatory and reparative praxis that urge research, scholarship and policy alike, the task to curate, reassemble and reimagine socially just futures *with* children. Such a project of repair is urgent but fraught with the complex workings of heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism and multiple conditions of crisis which have rendered collective and relational ways of being invisible. To dismantle it, adults, institutions and researchers must first understand these oppressive systems to comprehend the breadth of subjugated subjectivities and the depth of repair and adopt acts of resistance. Only by interrogating such exclusionary aberrations can adults address ontological dualisms and turn the gaze on adultism to relinquish some power to children as the future bearers.

5. Conclusions

This conceptual paper has articulated the ever-growing disparities confronted by children today, driven by adult ideologies, agendas and priorities. In response, it proposes childhood reparations to the field as a means of addressing adultism and foregrounding

the intricate connections between the past, present and the future towards repositioning children's sociopolitical status. Reparations, and childhoods, as I have argued, traverse between past, present and future, keeping both the foundations of the past (injustices) and its repair located in the present, which opens up the possibilities for multiple political futures. By observing childhood reparations as a political-ethico-onto-epistemological tool, and considering children's futures across time, space and matter, with this emergent yet prolific proposition, the paper seeks to extend dialogue on childhoods and social justice, particularly in the fields of critical childhood studies, sociology, education, philosophy, political theory and human geography. It thus offers found futures as an analytical resource for attending to the reparative work regarding children's futurity by probing futures thinking; the temporal, material, discursive and spatial dimensions of reparations; and the possibilities of the pluriversal politics that both shape and can be shaped by children's futures foresight. Realisation of any such project of repair related to childhoods or childhood reparations, however, demands a (re-)turning of the adult gaze on childhoods—a shift that explicitly recognises radical relationality; prioritises intergenerational consciousness and allyship, not adult apathy; and addresses the elision of children's (re-)imagination of just futures intertwined with the past and the present. This certainly calls for some self-inquiry as a 'species' but concomitantly signals the urgent need for reparative, responsive and relational research *with* children.

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Notes

1 For a more detailed analysis of the noted concepts, please refer to (Said 1978; Spivak 1985; Giroux 1997; Smith 1999; Barad 2007).
2 See, for instance, elucidations by (de Castro 2012; Balagopalan 2019; Sinha 2025; Abebe 2019), respectively.
3 For detailed temporal analysis of children's political lives and the politics of childhood, see also (Sinha et al. 2026).
4 The phrase is directly drawn from Abebe's (2020) study with educated youth in rural Ethiopia who are faced with universal ideas of development leading to state-driven land-grabbing schemes, dispossession, and high unemployment rates, and thus precarious futures. The notion of found futures, elaborated here, is employed to mirror it, locating ways to attend to the precarity and possibilities of children and young people's lives in waiting. More widely, it also relates to implicit or explicit concerns about lost childhoods, whether hurried childhoods (Elkind 1982), death of childhood (Postman 1994) and the 'loss of innocence' (Buckingham 2003).
5 Escobar acknowledges that relationality is not a new concept—it has been explored by several southern, indigenous, critical, feminist and posthumanist scholars (see, for instance Abebe's (2020) work on relationality of agency; discussions on relational ways on being and doing in Smith's (1999) study with Māori peoples; Liamputtong's (2007) health work, particularly with women, reciprocity and a relation ethic of care or (Barad 2007), respectively)—but urges thinking about it in new ways, for thinking anew about the old with the reemegence of inter-intrarelatedness as the fundamental of life (Escobar 2022).
6 For further analysis of the term, please see (Jepson and Blythe 2020; Hawkins et al. 2024).

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