



Decolonising Reading Lists in the Age of AI: an Essay at the crossroads of Decoloniality, Childist Criticism and Chat GPT

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Abstract

Focusing on children's literature courses in higher education as a lens, this article critically interrogates the notion of "decolonizing" reading lists while examining the expanding influence of artificial intelligence (AI) on the production of knowledge. It draws on decolonial frameworks and integrates feminist and "childish" analytical perspectives, scrutinizing superficial applications of decoloniality as a form of "decolonial washing." By employing ChatGPT-3 as a case study, this research illuminates both the risks and opportunities of operationalizing decolonial discourses in academic contexts. The findings indicate that AI frequently reinforces colonial epistemologies, yet "childish" criticism may cultivate imaginative avenues for rethinking entrenched scholarly practices. Ultimately, the study advocates for more radical, generative forms of decolonial engagement that challenge conventional academic norms and envisage alternative pathways for knowledge creation.

Keywords: childhood, reading lists, childism, ChatGPT, diversity.

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Descolonizar listas de lectura en la era de la IA: un ensayo en la encrucijada de la decolonialidad, la crítica niñista y el chat GPT

Resumen

Este artículo examina críticamente la idea de descolonizar las listas de lectura en la educación superior, particularmente en el contexto de un curso de literatura infantil, indagando sobre la creciente influencia de la inteligencia artificial (IA) en la producción de conocimiento. Por medio del uso de marcos decoloniales y de la integración de perspectivas feministas e niñistas, este ensayo interroga las aplicaciones superficiales de la decolonialidad como una forma de lavado decolonial. A través de una comparación de las respuestas de ChatGPT-3 como estudio de caso, bosqueja algunos desafíos que se vislumbran cuando los discursos decoloniales son útiles a enfoques académicos. Este ensayo sugiere que la IA perpetúa las estructuras coloniales del conocimiento y propone ampliar la investigación con críticas niñistas para imaginar otros caminos. El artículo concluye abogando por la búsqueda de prácticas decoloniales más radicales e imaginativas.

Palabras clave: infancia, listas de lectura, niñismo, chat GPT, diversidad.

Descolonizar as listas de leitura na era da IA: um ensaio na encruzilhada da decolonialidade, da crítica criancista e do Chat GPT

Resumo

Este artigo examina criticamente a ideia de descolonizar as listas de leitura na educação superior, particularmente no contexto de um curso de literatura infantil, indagando a crescente influência da inteligência artificial (IA) na produção de conhecimento. Por meio do uso de referenciais decoloniais e da integração de perspectivas feministas e infantis, o ensaio questiona as aplicações superficiais da decolonialidade como uma forma de “lavagem decolonial”. A partir de uma comparação com as respostas do ChatGPT-3 como estudo de caso, são delineados alguns desafios que surgem quando os discursos decoloniais são úteis às abordagens acadêmicas. Este ensaio argumenta que a IA perpetua as estruturas coloniais do conhecimento e propõe expandir a pesquisa com críticas infantis para imaginar caminhos alternativos. O artigo conclui defendendo a busca por práticas decoloniais mais radicais e imaginativas.

Palavras-chave: infância, listas de leitura, infância, ChatGPT, diversidade

Introduction: Decoloniality in Times of Crisis

Our research cultures are in a reflective state, confronting the limits of our ways of knowing as we intertwine global, systemic, economic, and ecological crises. A critical framework that gains traction in this self-reflective mood and that allows us to grapple with the posed questions is decoloniality. Acknowledging that both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment were “dark” political and epistemic projects founded on the exploitation and subordination of the colonial Other, decoloniality provides a lens through which to address the problematic epistemes of whiteness, Eurocentrism and imperialism across the humanities and social sciences (Mafie’o et al.). Decolonial thinking appears as one possible route to propose new creative and epistemic practices.

In this essay, I sketch some critical reflections on the call for decoloniality, by inquiring into what is at stake when we set ourselves to decolonise reading lists in higher education or to decolonise the curriculum more broadly. I make this inquiry reflecting on the increasing influence of artificial intelligence (AI) in knowledge production. This essay reflects on what is at stake when we speak of decolonisation from Western educational institutions that have played a key role in the (post)colonial order. To sketch some critical reflections on the call for decoloniality, I situate it alongside the emancipatory paradigms of feminism and childism, and open some questions about these intersections. I bring here Chat GPT-3 as a device to think about how knowledge is produced today.

My aim with this essay is to explore some possible openings for our research, from the positionality of a children’s literature and culture scholar. In this article, I do not follow a traditional academic article, but rather share a way of wondering about these urgent issues.

My departing point may well be the reading of “Decolonisation is Not a Metaphor”, an essay by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang where a powerful argument against the momentum for decolonisation as an epistemological framework is made:

At a conference on educational research, it is not uncommon to hear speakers refer, almost casually, to the need to ‘decolonize our schools,’ or use ‘decolonizing methods,’ or ‘decolonize student thinking.’ Yet, we have observed a startling number of these discussions make no mention of Indigenous peoples, our/their struggles for the recognition of our/their sovereignty, or the contributions of Indigenous intellectuals and activists to theories and frameworks of decolonization (2).

Tuck and Yang underscore that decolonisation “is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools” (10). They consider that this way of speaking of decoloniality as a metaphor is part of what they call “moves to innocence” (10), namely, the various strategies and rationalizations through which individuals, mainly white settlers, attempt to alleviate their sense of guilt or complicity in the ongoing processes of colonisation without making substantive changes to the colonial structures. These moves serve to absolve people of responsibility and maintain their comfort while failing to address the fundamental issues such as land repatriation and the restoration of Indigenous sovereignty. Examples of these moves include adopting superficial multiculturalism, tokenistic inclusivity or claiming Indigenous identity without genuine connection or consequence. Though these moves are often well-intentioned, Tuck and Yang argue that they ultimately reinforce the settler colonial framework by diverting attention away from the political and material actions required for true decolonisation. They

call for a radical rethinking that does not allow for easy resolutions or self-exoneration, insisting that decolonisation must involve the unsettling and significant transformation of existing power dynamics and land ownership. Moreover, they note how scholars may use decoloniality to “gain professional kudos or a boost in their reputations for being so sensitive or self-aware”. This article establishes a departure point because here I push the question of how we resist to be complicit to these movements to innocence.

Decoloniality and Feminist Epistemologies

Tuck and Yang’s critique of the academic cultures aiming to decolonise felt near the knuckle for me, as I read them while I was engaged in conversations about how to decolonise reading lists for a children’s and YA literature class for a university course. I wondered if our teachings and our lists of mandatory and recommended readings would not be a form of performative allyship, empty gestures of support to people from marginalised positions that do not contribute to real change.

I felt complicit, an agentic force in those moves to innocence that today take form in our celebration of new epistemologies that we do not fully support because we end up framing them in traditional Western discourses. I also wondered how to relate our efforts to decolonise alongside other emancipatory paradigms such as that of feminist epistemologies which were also becoming a new lens through which we were questioning our canon. Feminism, much like decoloniality, seeks to dismantle structures of power and knowledge that perpetuate exclusion and marginalisation. We should address both, I thought, but then how to move beyond tokenistic gestures when we weave feminist, decolonial, and other critical frameworks into our academic practices? Where do our desires to be critical become something more than intellectual gestures?

I also read Tuck and Yang’s critique, without feeling convinced, formulating arguments with it as I read. I resisted it in the same way as when we, “outsiders”, read universalist explanations by North American authors. As a Latin American scholar, I am very aware that decoloniality emerged as a critical framework distinct from postcolonial theory, the latter being more concerned with the legacy of the British Empire. Decolonial thinkers like Sylvia Wynter, Aníbal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, and María Lugones have put an emphasis on the lingering structures of colonialism in their epistemological approaches. This perspective is less focused on cultural reproduction and more on the entwined structures of colonialism and capitalism that result in exploitation and how they are immersed in our ways of knowing. Wynter’s critique of “Man” as a colonial construct is particularly denunciatory in terms of how we organise and produce knowledge today (257-337): Wynter highlights the colonial underpinnings of the category of the human, which, she argues, was designed to exclude non-European people and produced European epistemologies that were later disseminated around the world. Latin-American decolonial thinkers have long called for a critique of what constitutes knowledge. And, I whispered to myself, metaphors are ways of knowing.

I tried to find some paradoxical relief in what they called the “ethics of incommensurability”. If the damage cannot be measured, reconciliation is impossible. Understanding this could lead us to ways of knowing that depart from our failure: our failure to repair even as we try to do so. We stitch together parts that will inevitably show their fissures. Should we start by acknowledging our failed subjectivities when we use discourses about recognition?

A Micro-Practice of Broader Movements?

If we emphasise decolonising education, specifically decolonising reading lists (see, for example, Bird and Pitman, Kelly, Ahmed, Adewumi et al.), we tend to understand decolonising as a micro practice of a broader programme: decolonising the curriculum. Similarly, decolonising the curriculum is regarded as a micro practice of the wider project of unsettling the colonial legacies in society. The colonial making of our societies is not only related to the haunting presence of a past that appears in our representational regimes—which can be tackled by removing monuments, renaming or erasing holidays, changing the repertoires of heroes whose names are given to streets, squares, buildings and other institutions—but to an array of material makings that permeate our desires too.

One of the most potent recent calls for decolonising education in higher education has come from the Rhodes Must Fall movement, which managed to push through some structural change by first focusing on the removal of celebratory images of Cecil John Rhodes, perhaps the most salient figure of British Imperialism in South Africa and closely connected to the design of apartheid. Rhodes Must Fall was followed by the #feesmustfall movement, a broader protest aimed at guaranteeing access to higher education and decolonising the curriculum, including, or even starting with, the reading lists (Knudsen and Andersen). Universities, particularly in former colonial powers like the UK, have been called to challenge imperialist values through their curricula, admission processes, and institutional hierarchies. While Rhodes statues and images have been removed in South Africa, his statue at Oriel College, Oxford, remains. The British university has argued logistical reasons for not dismantling it and agreed to a series of measures to “mitigate the enduring presence of Rhodes’s legacy within the college” (Oriel College).

For Lesley Le Grange and other authors, the university curriculum represents a critical opportunity to enact change in higher education. Yet, they note how many universities are only in it as a form of “decolonial washing” (27), giving the impression that their curricula are decolonised while failing to make any substantial changes. This happens when complicated conversations are avoided and when decolonisation is reduced to surface-level changes, as noted in studies on reading lists and curriculum diversification efforts (Bird and Pitman 904). Decolonial washing and decolonial metaphors pose a threat to our political movements for more just educational futures.

AI and Decolonisation

So how can we learn to decolonise the curriculum and the reading lists? How can we learn to decolonise the deeply ingrained habits of modernity and humanism? I brought this question to the generative intelligence of Chat GPT. Our knowledge production is increasingly shaped by artificial intelligences that perpetuate and intensify existing mainstream ways of thinking and create a regime of truth, which could be seen in some ways as a kind of new common sense. The “mainstream” in the previous sentence may well be substituted by the word oppressive. As Tacheva and Ramasubramanian argue, ChatGPT extends algorithmic oppression and data colonialism, extracting knowledge and labour while obscuring the harm inflicted on underrepresented communities. How, then, would these intelligences provide some guidelines with regard to decolonising?

In May 2023, I entered a simple prompt, “How to decolonise a reading list?”, into Chat GPT-3. The chat had been opened up to all users a few months previously and we, in academia, were grappling

with the question of integrating it into our teaching and research while keeping a critical eye on it. I was interested in how the chat might form part of an assemblage that would help my thought process. I was of the opinion that decolonising thinking was related to imagining and inventing other paths to knowledge and I wondered whether the chat could bring some new insights or if I could find a way to resist the chat's moves to innocence. This is the answer that ChatGPT-3 gave to me:

Decolonizing a reading list involves recognizing the dominance of Western or Eurocentric perspectives in the current canon of literature and actively seeking out and incorporating works by marginalized and non-Western authors. Here are some steps you can take to decolonize a reading list:

1. Identify the gaps: Start by analysing the current reading list and recognizing the gaps in representation. Determine which voices are missing and what perspectives are underrepresented.
2. Incorporate marginalized voices: Look for literature by authors from diverse backgrounds, particularly those who have been historically underrepresented in the literary canon. This could include works by authors who are Black, Indigenous, or people of colour, as well as those from non-Western countries.
3. Consider translations: Look for works that have been translated into English from other languages. This can help broaden the range of voices and perspectives in the reading list.
4. Seek out non-traditional sources: Look for literature from non-traditional sources, such as zines, blogs, and self-published works. These can offer alternative perspectives and voices that may not be represented in traditional publishing.
5. Balance the syllabus: Ensure that the reading list is balanced in terms of representation, with works from a variety of cultures, regions, and perspectives. Avoid tokenism by including only one work by an author or culture, and instead aim for a diverse range of voices.
6. Engage in critical discussion: Encourage critical discussion of the literature and the ways in which it challenges or reinforces dominant narratives. This can help to deepen understanding and appreciation of diverse perspectives.

By incorporating these steps, you can help to decolonize a reading list and create a more inclusive and diverse literary canon.

I was surprised by how these recommendations chimed with our discussions when preparing reading lists for children's literature courses. In those early days of ChatGPT, I was expecting it to be less akin to the conclusions we had reached when thinking about mandatory and recommended readings. I could, however, easily find cracks in its discourse. Chat GPT related the concept of voice to notions of "incorporating" and "balancing". It did not point out or suggest that this call for diversification could obscure how the coloniality of power works. The chat also called for considering translations in English instead of opening questions about what gets translated and how texts written in different languages produce

different worldviews. What I was not expecting to see written by Chat GPT was the invitation to look for non-traditional sources such as “zines, blogs and self-published works”. Chat GPT-3 did not have access to academic sources at that time and the discussion on bibliodiversity was not that advanced in English. Some months before I had been tracking the use of the term bibliodiversity, as developed by Paulo Slachevsky, in scholarship published in English for a book chapter on cultural diversity in which I made an argument about the potential of the Latin American’s *cartoneras*.

The *cartoneras* are independent publishers which produce hand-made books with covers made from recycled cardboard (*cartón* in Spanish). The movement began as a response to the inaccessibility of traditional publishing and as a way to make literature affordable and accessible to a broader audience, highlighting the crisis that leads waste scavengers, or *cartoneros*, to collect and sell recyclable materials, including cardboard. *Cartoneras* promote a DIY ethic, social justice, and sustainability, while often publishing marginalized voices, experimental literature, poetry and children’s written texts. Over time, the movement has spread across Latin America and beyond, becoming a symbol of resistance and creativity in the face of adversity. The *cartoneras* are often compared to zines and other forms of activist publishing.

What counts as publishing and how publications circulate and are accessed by readers has long been discussed in Latin America (Véliz; Hernández Zamora). I decided to use the equivalent prompt in Spanish (“¿cómo decolonizar una lista de lecturas?”) to consult Chat GPT, wondering whether my mother tongue—also a colonial language, but one that has moved away from the most powerful geopolitics with the centuries—was more sensitive to the epistemological exclusions.

Decolonizar una lista de lectura implica desafiar y cuestionar los sesgos y las perspectivas eurocéntricas y colonialistas que pueden estar presentes en la selección de los textos. Aquí hay algunos pasos que puedes seguir para decolonizar tu lista de lectura:

1. Diversificar tus fuentes: Busca autores y autoras de diferentes países y culturas. Incluye voces indígenas, negras, asiáticas y otras minorías étnicas y culturales. También puedes buscar autores y autoras que escriban en diferentes idiomas.
2. Cuestionar tus prejuicios: Reflexiona sobre tus propios prejuicios y supuestos culturales y cómo pueden influir en la selección de tus lecturas. Cuestiona tus propias ideas sobre lo que es “valioso” o “importante” en la literatura.
3. Leer críticamente: Examina la forma en que los autores y autoras abordan temas como la raza, el género, la sexualidad y la colonialidad. Considera la forma en que se presentan diferentes perspectivas y cómo se aborda el poder y las relaciones de poder.
4. Buscar recomendaciones: Busca recomendaciones de otros lectores y críticos que estén comprometidos con la decolonización de la literatura. Hay muchas organizaciones y grupos que se dedican a esto y que pueden ofrecer sugerencias valiosas.

5. Ser consciente de los propios privilegios: Reconoce tus propios privilegios y cómo pueden influir en tus elecciones de lectura. Trata de incluir textos que desafíen tus propias perspectivas y que te permitan aprender de las experiencias de otros.

En resumen, decolonizar una lista de lectura implica buscar una variedad de perspectivas y voces, cuestionar nuestros propios prejuicios y leer críticamente, buscar recomendaciones de fuentes comprometidas con la decolonización de la literatura y ser consciente de nuestros propios privilegios.

The first steps—Chat GPT wants to turn everything into steps and bullet points—include something that the English version did not: a call to question your privileges. The original Spanish text also refers to authors using a form of inclusive language, “*autores y autoras*”, avoiding the use of the more normative form of the masculine plural. More meaningfully, it invites us to question our ideas of what is “valuable” or “important” in literature.

The Spanish version is much more aware of how different exclusions work. Are the debates on decolonisation and decolonising reading practices richer in Spanish? What authors and texts inform GPT? We may have a hint in the use of the term “coloniality”, coined by Aníbal Quijano. In Quijano’s analysis, coloniality is not simply the historical phenomenon of European colonization but an enduring structure that shapes modernity. He argues that colonialism imposed a particular global order that outlasted formal colonization. This order is characterized by racial hierarchies, the dominance of Western knowledge, and the naturalisation of economic exploitation.

Which other authors are here erased, or excluded, when Chat GPT speaks? Are some more at risk of being erased than others? Are the sharp ends of their theories softened? Chat GPT’s Spanish-language proposal for decolonising reading lists, as in its English version, ends up compiling a list of steps. Are these steps a form of decolonial washing? Why do we always come back to diversity as being about different voices speaking? Can generative intelligences think about their own privilege? Will they be able to learn to feel? Will the AI chat be able to speculate and provide us with ideas of how to decolonise a reading list or will the algorithm keep returning us back to the standard?

And, then, one more question: was Chat GPT responding to us on how to decolonise reading lists in higher education or have I got them thinking about mandatory readings in schools?

Tracing our Complicities

Some years ago, I was invited to contribute a chapter on cultural diversity and social justice to *A Companion for Children’s Literature*, published by Blackwell, from Taylor and Francis. I can see now that it was the first of similar invitations, which I subsequently began to decline. Sometimes I am honest enough to say that I do not believe you can craft a good companion that is not Eurocentric. On other occasions, I say I have no time, which is also true. The acceleration of time may be the most successful form for coloniality to expand. I did write the text for the Blackwell companion. I tried hard to write a text that would fit yet would somehow not be complicit. How do you write for a book in which texts are meant to be based on neutral and universal premises?

I opened the text with a reference to Boaventura de Sousa Santos' notion of "epistemology of the South" as a reflection of our epistemic injustices and our ideas on the autonomy of the individual. I regret having done so. You are probably aware of the accusations that have fallen on de Sousa Santos (if not, please do read the article by Viaene et al. on this). We have been told we can separate the author from the work, which I very much doubt we can. But also, I had already felt the crack in Sousa Santos' concept of the epistemologies of the South. It was a useful concept to speak about those other ways of knowing, to give a hint of indigenous epistemologies and about less Westernised modes of thinking. But it promised a South for a North: it reinforced a simplistic binary between the 'North' and the 'South,' inadvertently creating a mirror image of the global hierarchy he aims to deconstruct. De Sousa Santos needed to essentialise the 'South,' representing it as a homogeneous space of resistance, free from its own internal colonialism, hierarchies, and power imbalances. This oversimplification not only overlooks the diversity and complexity of knowledge production but risks perpetuating some kind of 'South romanticism'. Instead of dismantling the structures that enable coloniality, this concept may subtly reinforce them by framing knowledge production in terms of territorial and geopolitical oppositions. It fails to fully acknowledge that coloniality operates through more diffuse and interconnected networks of power that cannot be neatly mapped onto a North-South divide.

In the chapter for the companion, I did not delve into the proposal for decolonising but reviewed different approaches to cultural diversity in our research field and the important work that has been done on critiquing representation of ethnicities. I also traced different initiatives that foster transnational dialogues by bringing together international collections or fostering translations. I concluded the chapter with a subsection titled "New Territories to Imagine", wondering what new decolonial relations between children's literature and social justice could be created. I suggested looking into speculative fiction and its subversion to Western mimesis, and into the movements for bibliodiversity in Latin America. In the section on bibliodiversity, I pointed to how the *cartoneras* publishers have mobilised political, artistic, and literary agencies to produce alternative formats and reading cultures. Both speculative fiction and *cartoneras* challenge temporalities. Another exciting research development that challenges the coloniality of power is that of the critical approaches to archives as we grow aware of how all archives are colonial assemblages (Luker).

Childhood and Decoloniality

In this article I contemplate "how to decolonise a reading list" as a question that encompasses both the syllabus for higher education courses, as well as the lists of compulsory literary readings for schools and, even, the lists of recommended readings proposed by public libraries and other cultural institutions. I resist narrowing the question in an aim to underscore how it is related to a way of knowing the world. Nevertheless, decolonial efforts have different effects when related to other agentic concepts such as that of childhood. I asked GPT-3 "How to decolonise a reading list for children". The recommendation was very similar to one listed above, but included a next step: "Age-appropriate discussions of colonialism: For older children, it might be useful to include texts that directly address colonialism, slavery, and their lasting effects on society. Such texts should offer pathways for understanding rather than reinforce trauma".

ChatGPT likes steps to follow, progressions, telos. They adhere to the notion of linear development, breaking complex processes into sequential, digestible phases. The belief in 'age appropriateness', as

a universal category, is found on developmental psychology models that categorize children into fixed stages of readiness and comprehension, a knowledge that has been widely criticised by decolonial and anti-colonial approaches to childhood studies (De Castro 2). This notion of age-appropriateness, however, operates here as linked to this telos of development as well as to the notion of perceived risks. The idea that certain topics are inherently traumatic or unsuitable for children is often based on Western, middle-class notions of childhood innocence that do not hold in other contexts.

Furthermore, the concept of ‘age-appropriateness’ functions to limit the range of knowledge children are exposed to, potentially reinforcing a paternalistic view of childhood that denies children agency over their own learning. This protective mechanism presumes a universal child subject who must be shielded from the complexities of the world until they reach an arbitrary level of maturity. We may need to get rid of such telos, of the very key notion of progress, to find a way to know differently.

Childist Reimaginings

What radical reimagining may be possible if we combine critical approaches to the constructions of childhood with decolonisation? Colonial powers often positioned themselves as guardians of ‘innocent’ children—both their own and those in colonized territories. Colonisers portrayed the colonised peoples as being childlike, in need of civilizational guidance. This infantilisation parallels the ways in which children were viewed: as passive, impressionable, and in need of external control. Such ideas upheld colonial logics of paternalism and superiority, with the empire cast as a benevolent parent.

The path I propose is to link our critical attention to childhood to our concerns around coloniality. This leads me to delve into the affordances of childism, a term that has been gaining some track in research cultures to refer to ways of resisting discrimination against children and young people. I use the term childism here with positive formulation defended by John Wall and other colleagues (Biswas et al.; Wall). This formulation needs to be distinguished from Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s elaboration of ‘childism’ at the complete opposite: the prejudice against children. Wall has defended the positive formulation which he relates to other forms of activism, such as feminism, anti-racism, and environmentalism, rather than with the forms of discrimination they tackle: sexism, racism, extractivism and ageism, to name but a few (263). Of these forms of activism against discrimination, Wall unsurprisingly stresses the comparison with feminism in an attempt to highlight how childism is linked to a promise of transformation. This comes in the tradition of comparisons between the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies with that of gender studies, a comparison often made to signal a failure of childhood studies to mainstream the generational order as gender studies have achieved with the gender order (Punch; Wall). For example, we are now required by funding bodies to describe how the proposed projects deal with gender, while nothing similar is required for age or generational relations.

Wall stresses the relationship between childism and feminist scholarship, proposing it is also an affirmative and activist perspective related to the “ambition for systemic normative transformation” (263). He calls for a scholarship that not only seeks to understand and describe children’s experiences but also criticises and transforms the adultism of scholarly theories, practices, and social structures. He admires how gender studies took off from early women’s studies to eventually encompass a broad project of social transformation and he sketches what such a change would look like for scholarship focused on childhood: he proposes to move the poststructuralist critique that considers childhood a socially

constructed category towards what he calls a “childist reconstructionism”, in which scholarship would not focus on understanding children’s lives, or on deconstructing hegemonic discourses that marginalize them, but on “reconstructing interdependent social relations as more radically and imaginatively difference-responsive” (267). Research, thus, would be oriented towards the creation of a “difference-inclusive social imaginations” (267).

Critical approaches to childhood, such as childism, challenge the adult-centric perspectives that have historically shaped how children are perceived and treated. Decolonising this construct requires dismantling the colonial frameworks that define childhood in narrow, Western terms. We would move beyond the idea of childhood as a period of innocence, dependence, and future citizenship, and instead consider how children themselves experience, shape, and resist colonial structures. Integrating childism with decolonisation also disrupts the traditional hierarchies of knowledge production. Children are often marginalized within scholarly and societal discourse, their voices relegated to the background. A childist decolonial approach could position children as legitimate creators of knowledge, challenging the colonial hierarchy that privileges adult, Eurocentric, and formal knowledge systems. This might involve rethinking how we design education, engage in research, and interpret children’s stories, perspectives, and cultural practices.

Colonialism often infantilizes not only colonized peoples but also the concept of childhood itself, enforcing passive roles onto children. By intertwining childism and decolonial thought, we can imagine new forms of play, agency, and empowerment for intergenerational relationships. Play, especially when unstructured, has the potential to be a space of resistance against colonial norms, allowing children to create, challenge, and redefine their worlds outside of adult-imposed frameworks. A decolonial reimagining would take children’s play seriously as a mode of agency and world-building, recognizing the political and social insights it can offer. In the same line, a childist decolonial approach brings our attention to the colonial-capitalist obsession with time, progress, and productivity. Children’s temporalities—how they experience time differently from adults—might be seen as offering alternative rhythms and ways of being that disrupt capitalist modes of production. This aligns with decolonial calls to reject the linear, progress-oriented models of time that underpin capitalist exploitation. A radical reimagining might emphasize slowness, imagination, and relational time as forms of resistance to colonial and capitalist structures.

In sum, by critically interrogating childhood through a decolonial lens, we open up possibilities for imagining childhood not as a fixed, passive category, but as an active space of resistance, knowledge production, and political agency. This reimagining could disrupt entrenched colonial and capitalist structures, paving the way for more just, inclusive futures for both children and societies at large.

We have reviewed the children’s literature field tradition in childist approaches, starting from the work of Peter Hunt (*Criticism, Theory*, ‘Childist criticism’) who called for scholars that would read alongside children to inform their views on books. With Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak, we argue for a new materialist reading of childism in which we propose that childism can be a movement that brings researchers and data to explore the intra-actions of the social, the political, the biological and the aesthetical with regard to ageism and other exclusions. How would a decolonial approach to children’s reading lists work with and learn from a childist approach? We may first need to rethink what approaches do for us. Are critical approaches ready to be forms of worldmaking? We may have to be prepared to play around

with traditions and the canon when we are open to other forms of making what counts as literary. Being childist requires us to remain attentive to our desires for idealised childhoods and how we project them into the future. As Lee Edelman has shown, the child is an icon of futurity, whose present needs are supplanted by the perceived future needs of the child as citizen-to-be.

As we consider alternative paths towards a new way of knowing, we may need to start finding time to get lost, to escape from the normative telos of progress. We may need to explore other notions of what counts as a text, other ideas about relationships between poetry and jokes and memes, between wordless picturebooks and art shows, and between urban music and YA fiction. We may need to look into audio-books and podcasts, but also into the songs we sing when children hurt themselves. We may need to sing more. I asked ChatGPT about whether we “can sing our way to decolonising reading lists”. I was expecting the GPT to be wary or confused, but they appeared to be quite supportive of the idea: “Singing, often associated with oral traditions, storytelling, and communal knowledge-sharing, contrasts with the traditional, written-dominant academic canon that reading lists represent. Decolonising reading lists involves questioning whose voices are privileged, what kinds of knowledge are valued, and how that knowledge is disseminated”. They did, however, seem to consider singing a metaphor. ChatGPT provided a list of the benefits of singing for decolonisation, but they refer to it as “singing”. They use quotation marks.

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