"The Ice is Melting and I Don't Want Santa to Drown!": Reflections on Childhood, Climate Action, and Futurity

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This paper's reading of a specific cultural artifact to emerge from children's climate activism in contemporary Australia enacts an argument that children themselves can be seen to be redefining childhood and futurity through their climate activism and demonstrates how their placards are evidence of this. It argues that we as critical childhood scholars can follow their lead by uncovering the discourses that underpin their activist slogans. In doing so, we can set about contesting the limiting and disempowering discourses of childhood that would dismiss the very idea of children as political participants in the fight to save the planet.

Key words: *climate activism; childhood; futurity*

This paper grew out of my dismay at watching, in 2019 and beyond, the ways in which the urgent, informed, articulate, independent, and politically and socially engaged climate activism of young people in Australia was being at once diminished and belittled, and nodded to and dismissed by adultist responses, which seek to embed differences between the "adult-self" and "child-other" (Biswas & Mattheis, 2022). Specifically, my interest in the ways in which children were presenting themselves as climate activists was piqued when on March 15, 2019, I stood in a playground in Glebe Park in central Canberra. It was the day of the worldwide school strike for climate action, and I had taken my two children, 4 years and 6 months old, to the protest. The playground was at the site of the rally's end, and there were families and children who had attended the rally milling around, playing. It was there, in the playground, that I was struck by a placard that read "The Ice Is Melting And I Don't Want Santa To Drown!" The sign was sitting unattended as its owner, a perhaps 5- or 6-year-old climate activist, played in the playground. I spoke to the parent standing nearby who said their child had chosen the wording for the placard themselves. I was immediately struck by the confluence of these signs of childhood (the playground) and protest (the placard) and wondered at the ways that children's subjectivities were being imagined and enacted within the space of the protest/playground itself. The very location of the placard with all its attendant symbolic weight of political expression within this very strongly demarcated childhood space—and here I reference the historicity of playgrounds emerging as a response to the Victorian delineation of childhood as a separate space to adulthood and thus as a powerful symbol of this (Kincaid, 1994)—this confluence of politics and childhood alerted me to the potential for children's climate activism to blur the boundaries between dominant notions of childhood and adulthood, innocence and agency. The notion that this child, like many children everywhere, was able to position themselves as both playful child and political activist, set me to thinking about the ways in which dominant, limited discourses of childhood might be genuinely disrupted by child activists themselves.

In 2019 it was clear that in Australia, the dominant and pervasive responses from adults and adult institutions to children's participation in the worldwide school strike for climate action sought to rehearse the positioning of child climate activists either as immanent future adult subjects or as agents of hope for the future. I noted, with dismay,

the ways that, in their focus on futurity within a neoliberal conceptualization of time as linear and progressive, both these positionings were engaging in a double manoeuvre of obscuring childhood and activism in the present, reinscribing still dominant modernist (and adultist) positionings of children as other-to adults (Balagopalan, 2021; Millei, 2021; Raby & Sheppard, 2021). But I wanted to consider how activist children were positioning themselves through and within their activism.

Figure 1. Placard.

In this paper, then, I discuss the placard "The Ice is Melting and I Don't Want Santa To Drown!" (Figure 1) and the social and political context in which it sits, to explore how children's climate activism brings forth a challenge to dominant discourses of childhood, time, and climate activism. In particular, I argue that this placard can be read in ways that signal how—through their activism—children are seeing themselves differently, and through reshaping the representational politics of childhood, are breaking through discourses that confine them to be passive recipients of adult decision making to become players in the discursive construction of the climate emergency.

Building on the work of Ketaki Prabha (2020) and Ben Bowman (2019), who each advocate for opening up fresh ways to make sense of children's activism, and within the context of contemporary children's climate activism in Australia, I read the implicit and explicit messages encoded in the placard "The Ice is Melting and I Don't Want Santa To Drown!" to suggest that children themselves are carving out new ways of being and doing in the face of climate catastrophe. Making use of possible understandings of futurity that challenge dominant understandings of linear progressive time, and Holmberg and Alvinius's (2020) understanding of precarity as the basis for childhood subjectivities, I illuminate through this reading the ways that children's climate activism can be understood to unpick and dismantle modernist conceptualizations of childhood subjectivities and enable understandings of children's climate activist subjectivities that are not constrained by such discourses. Ultimately, I suggest that we as critical childhood studies scholars can take the lead from children themselves to incorporate a newly nuanced discourse of childhood into our research and writing about the experience of the child.

Framing the analysis

A key starting point for this paper is the work of critical childhood and feminist poststructuralist scholars that highlights the ways in which the discursive construction of the child shapes and is shaped by children's ontologies and material practices (Burman, 2020, 2022; Burman & Millei, 2022; Castaneda, 2002; Robinson, 2008; Baird, 2008). How children *do* their activism in relation to how they imagine themselves, and how that activism is taken up and responded to more broadly within adult institutions, is inextricably linked to how childhood is discursively constituted (Raby & Sheppard, 2021). Consequently, central to children's engagement in the political space of climate activism is the examination and reframing of discourses of childhood themselves (Spyrou, 2020). Critical childhood scholars highlight and critique the dominant discourses that childhood studies hinges on: the oppositional politics of adult-child relations which reinforce adult power and childhood innocence and

vulnerability (Balagopalan, 2018, Hopkins & Sriprakash, 2016); humanist understandings of agency that propose an autonomous state relative to adult competence, to which children have little access (Burman, 2020; Davies, 2004; Spyrou et al., 2018); and notions of child development that naturalize and embed within ontologies of childhood an understanding of linear time (Burman & Stacey, 2010, Millei, 2021). Examinations of such understandings have long been central to research on children's activism (Nissen et al., 2021; Spyrou, 2020). I, too, draw out these ideas through my exploration of the social and cultural context of children's climate activism and seek to unsettle them via my analysis of the placard text. (For a review of childhood studies' engagements with these ideas, see Canosa & Graham, 2020; Spyrou et al., 2018.)

The analysis for this paper draws on critical theoretical approaches from critical childhood studies (Burman, 2016, 2022; Burman & Stacey, 2010; Hopkins & Sriprakash, 2016) deconstruction (Burman, 2020), and Foucauldian analysis (MacNaughton, 2005). These approaches inform a discursive analysis of the cultural artifact that is the protest placard. As these methodological approaches demand, the discourse analysis of the placard is situated within a broader analysis of the ways in which dominant discourses of climate action and childhood, and attendant ideas of agency, power, and—centrally—time, are rehearsed within the public political and social sphere in Australia and elsewhere. The analysis of this particular cultural text of children's climate activism, then, works not to present a series of findings on the situation of children's climate activism in Australia but rather to open up a suite of readings of childhood, futurity, and activism that allow us to interrogate and complicate the ways in which we engage with the discursive constitution of the child activist subject, and attendant discourses of childhood.

The methodological approach of analyzing the text as a sign of climate activism in relation to broader political and cultural discourses of childhood and activism engenders a series of readings and rereadings of the text that move my own thinking forward and challenge more traditional or habitual interpretive lenses we might bring to bear on childhoods and activisms. As such, the paper is structured as an unfolding: I trace a shift in my own interpretation and analysis of how young climate activists constitute their subjectivities and represent childhoods via this close reading of the cultural artifact of the placard. In doing so, I ask the reader to accompany me on my journey in situating the broader contemporary political and discursive positioning of the child activist in Australia in relation to dominant discourses of childhood and activism; to bear witness to my initial interpretations of young climate activists' representations of subjectivity and childhood in relation to a broader suite of activist placards; and then to think through this analysis via the central placard to a potential reframing of discourses of childhood and activism. Thus, before providing my reading of this particular placard, it is necessary to provide a glimpse of the political, social, and discursive context into which children's climate activism is being received.

The Australian context

The choice of the Australian context for an examination of children's climate activism is not unintentional: For the past decade Australia has been considered worldwide to be a laggard in climate adaptation and mitigation and is considered to have contributed to the railroading of the 2021 Conference of the Parties (COP26) goals in Glasgow (Eckersley, 2021). In 2021, Australia was ranked near to last of 64 countries in terms of policy responses to the climate crisis by the Climate Change Performance Index (Burck et al., 2021). Until recent shifts in climate politics in Australia signalled by the "climate election" of 2022 that saw the election of numerous independent candidates on the basis of climate activist policy platforms (Cave, 2022), political debate on climate change in Australia had for more than a decade been hijacked by right-wing climate deniers. Rather than focusing on how best to respond to global climate change, this debate questioned whether climate change is real (Brett, 2020), and

> what should be a straightforward discussion of scientific fact and possible responses has instead become a mire of misinformation and denial that has paralyzed policy, clogged investment, increased

> power prices and delayed change. (Taylor, 2019, para. 1)

This dominant political narrative has driven climate (in)action in the nation (Crowley, 2021), despite large-scale public support for climate action (Quickie, 2021) and children's activism that is buoyed by global children's activist movements (Cloughton, 2021). Clearly the disparity between national and political narratives on climate change in the past decade and children's activist agendas in the nation is stark.

During this time, Australia's policy response to climate change was intrinsically tied to the positioning of children in and by the nation. Despite the 2021 high court ruling that the Australian government has a responsibility to take climate change seriously to protect the futures of Australian children (Schuijers, 2021), the Australian government, led by then prime minister Scott Morrison, sought to appeal this ruling in order to disentangle political motivation from duty of care for children (Wooton, 2021). The Australian government's dismissal of children's interests in relation to the climate crisis was arguably underpinned by understandings of children that dismiss and discount both their activism and their legitimacy as citizen-participants. I contend that this particular moment and context for climate action in Australia illuminates clearly the need to pay attention to children's activism and to reconceptualize children's place as activists and citizen-subjects.

Adultist responses to children's climate action

Given the inextricable relationship between the discursive construction of childhood and how children take themselves up as activists and are read as activists by and in relation to adult institutions, in the section that follows, I identify and unpack two discourses of childhood that underpin public and political responses to children's activism in Australia. These are the figuration of the child as immanent future subject and the discourse of children as the hope for the future. I argue that via their reliance on modernist conceptualizations of the subject, the child, and ideas of time, these discursive constitutions of childhood work to constrain and delimit the activism of children and, crucially, the ways in which it is interpreted and responded to by adults.

These adult interpretations are framed by what Biswas and Mattheis (2022)—in discussions of the reception of children's activism within adult institutions—define *adultism*: a way of understanding and framing adult interpretations of children's subjectivities and behaviours in opposition to those of adults. Within adultist perspectives, Biswas and Mattheis identify a problematic "need to differentiate the 'adult-self' from the 'child-other' [that] is so pronounced that children are often perceived as a separate species which enables adults to gain power over them and perpetuate injustice" (p. 149). Adultism offers a way of conceptualizing specifically the normalization of relations of adult power and children's incapacity and the attendant disempowerment that accompanies this; here I follow Biswas and Mattheis (2022) to unpack adultist responses to children's climate action in the Australian context that draw on dominant discourses of childhood in order to constrain and delimit the power and credibility of children's climate activism. In doing so I come—alongside other theorists and scholars of childhood, time, and activism (Biswas & Mattheis, 2022; Holmberg & Alvinius, 2020; Millei, 2021; Spyrou 2020)—to the limits of such discourses, which beseech us to turn to children's framing of their subjectivities, activist selves, and conceptualizations of childhood (Bowman, 2020; Prabha, 2020; Skovdal & Benwell, 2021).

The first adultist discourse of childhood that emerges from this context of Australian responses to climate action—that of immanent future subject—emerged strongly in then Australian prime minister Scott Morrison's responses in 2018 and 2019 to the burgeoning youth climate movement. Morrison urged children to "be less active" and decried the politicization of children under the guise of creating unnecessary anxiety, claiming, in response to Greta Thunberg's UN Climate Summit speech, that that "we've got to let kids be kids" (Glenday, 2019). "What we want," he said, "is more learning in schools and less activism in schools" (Australian Associated Press, 2018).

Together, these statements reinforce the positioning of the child within the space of childhood, represented in part by the idea of school which, Sarada Balagopalan (2008) reminds us, signifies a "normal" childhood with its attendant emphasis on innocence, nurture, and a clear separation of the roles of adult and child (p. 270). According to Alexander and colleagues' (2021) analysis, such understandings, which exclude children from participation until they reach adulthood, shaped much of the public discourse around children's climate action in these 2019 youth climate strikes in Australia. These discourses seek to position children as innocent and in need of protection from what Kerry Robinson (2008) calls dangerous "adult knowledges," and the child, as subject-in-the-making, is juxtaposed with an idealized, rational adult, here imbued with knowledge, power, and agency (Hopkins & Sriprakash, 2016; Raby & Sheppard, 2021). In this context, the notion of childhood innocence, as Alexander et al. argue,

> is framed as intending to protect children, but has a dual effect of diminishing their opinions and political actions and of limiting their opportunities so as to protect that "innocence" from climate concerns. (p. 3)

Importantly, these discourses frame children's value to society in relation to their futurity, discounting their present subjectivity, voice, and potential for agency. This conceptualization of children's subjective positioning within society disempowers children by repudiating their competence and their conceptualizations of themselves as knowledgeable agents and by removing their right to political (and even societal) engagement (Raby & Sheppard, 2021; Spyrou et al., 2021).

This positioning of the child figure as an innocent becoming in relation to the modernist adult subject is simultaneously long critiqued (see, e.g., James & Prout, 2015) and amazingly tenacious within contemporary political and social discourses (Burman, 2022). Naturalized through the pervasiveness of developmental understandings of the child as in the process of a linear trajectory of growth from dependent child to autonomous, complete, rational adult, the child subject as developing body is made use of as a powerful mirror to and object for shoring up the modernist project of progress and is rehearsed and reproduced powerfully across myriad situations (Burman, 2020; Hopkins & Sriprakash, 2016).

Here, through a focus on how *futurity* is used within and in relation to children's climate activism, I point to the ways that the modernist child-adult subjectivities and relations are inextricably linked to the acceptance of a neoliberal understanding of *time* as linear and progressive: this long contested and simultaneously seemingly intractable developmental construction of the child as a body on a trajectory from dependent child to autonomous adult naturalizes and renders immutable the understanding of time as linear and progress linked (Burman, 2020; Millei, 2021). Here, then, I signpost the need to rethink child-future relations, to unpick and dismantle this dominant temporality in order to make space for novel ways of thinking about childhood and the child subject, as I attempt later in this piece.

A second site of Australian adultist responses to children's climate activism to emerge in the 2019 school strikes can be found in responses that draw on the politics of hope (e.g., we're building a better world where our children are our future leaders) and its attendant futurity. Problematically, the (often well-intentioned) adult acknowledgment of the need to engage with children's activism because of an abstracted right to participate and be heard (a manoeuvre that Tanu Biswas (2020) calls ethical nodding) positions children as *future* citizens and change makers. This focus on futurity allows adults to ignore the structural and discursive disempowerment of children in the political sphere and to defer action and engagement (Holmberg & Alvinius, 2020; Spyrou et al., 2021). Rousell and Cutter-MacKenzie-Knowles (2020) suggest that

> while children … are being positioned as future leaders whom the public expects to overcome the legacies of environmental inaction … they currently have limited opportunities to cultivate, voice and express their understandings, concerns and imaginings within their local environments and communities. (p. 192)

By focusing on futurity rather than children's need for agency now, adultist responses permit and praise activism while maintaining the status quo in terms of adult power and children's powerlessness. In public commentary Ben Bowman points to the impact of this deferral, saying, "It's an open wound for young climate activists who hear adults applaud them for having a voice, but continue to act as if the catastrophe scientists warn is already here will never come" (Bowman, 2020, para. 6). The problematic nature of this temporal dislocation of action and agency under the guise of support was called out by Greta Thunberg in her 2019 UN Climate Summit speech in which she addressed adults and adult institutions, saying, "You come to us for hope—how dare you!" (in United Nations, 2019, n.p.). Thunberg's reproach highlights the ways in which this discourse divests adults of responsibility in the present and (endlessly) postpones both climate action and the children's subjecthood toward a future adult subject.

This adultist focus on the future (child) subject is inextricably implicated in the politics of hope, a politics called out by Thunberg as a deferral. She argues, "Adults keep saying, 'we owe it to the young people to give them hope. But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic" (in United Nations, 2019, n.p.). While Thunberg calls for action and in doing so pleads for an urgent revision of adult-child power relations, Zsuzsa Millei (2021) critiques the ways in which adultist investments in narratives of hope reinscribe the modernist project:

> Hope accompanying possible alternative futures is associated with human empowerment and redemption, with solving problems by intervening, adapting and being resilient, which are all based on a belief in progress and human mastery and remain an "unchecked privilege of the moderns." Hope engendering alternative possibilities is thus a flight from staying with the trouble of the reality of extinction. (p. 69)

Such an investment remakes "modern futurity," problematically again "bestowing an epic agential power in 'man'" (Clarebrook, 2015, as cited in Millei, 2021, p. 69), which reinscribes the status quo, business as usual, that children's climate activism is seeking to challenge. Crucially, such an investment in linear time, progress, and mastery as part of the modernist project are shored up by understandings of the child as a future citizen subject.

Such adultist responses are not confined to the Australian setting. Ketaki Prabha (2020), writing of youth activism in India, argues that these adultist discourses around children's participation shape and constrain the possibilities for children's taking up of activist subjectivities. She interrogates the ways in which the aforementioned adultist stance works to "acknowledg[e] children's voices only insofar as it allows us to mould them," which, she argues, "obscures our imagination of children as political actors in their own right" (para. 3). Based on human rights discourses that permit children the right to participation in matters affecting their lives while maintaining their status as vulnerable and in need of protection, this participatory stance fails to unsettle or unseat the modernist child subjectivities underpinning these discourses and entrenches binaries between adult/child subjectivities. Additionally, Raby and Sheppard (2021) point to the ways in which the UNCRC focuses on children's "evolving capacities" in attributing rights to participate: they critique the ways that the focus on competence, signalled by "adult-like traits such as maturity, articulateness, rationality and working within established institutional systems" (p. 387) reinscribes rather than counters the fiction of the rational, autonomous adult subject. Spyros Spyrou (2020) illuminates the potential for participation to be read as patronizing rather than empowering: "The current understanding of children's participation with well-intentioned adults seeking to open up spaces for children to participate may be reaching its limits" (p. 6). Given the pervasive effects of climate change in all domains of human life, what constitutes children's own sphere in which they have the right to participate is exponentially growing, yet

adult invitations for participation are clearly not.

In her critique, Prabha (2020) draws attention to the ways in which adult understandings of the possibilities for children's participatory political engagement limit children's climate activism. She calls for adults to "overcome our protectionist impulses to make space for political expression that takes on less familiar forms, not always legible to an adult vocabulary of the same" (2020, n.p.). Similarly, Bowman (2019) argues that methodological framings of research into children's activism take on an adultist assumption about how political and social engagement occur. He advocates too (alongside others such as Nolas, 2021) for a shift in the ways that we research and discuss children's activism, which open up spaces for different structural and discursive understandings of children's political engagement.

In light of these discursive positionings of children and climate activist ontologies, which so limit and constrain the possibilities for children's activism to be read and acted upon as a call for action now, for the future, and in response to Prabha's (2020) call for making space for that which is not legible within an adult vocabulary, I sought to look at children's self-representation and negotiations of these discourses as portrayed through cultural artifacts of Australian children's climate activism. Preceding my critical discourse analysis of the text of the placard, I looked briefly to multiple other cultural artifacts that represented children's climate activism, to engage with children's voices and understandings as a means of working through my own adultist lenses on children's climate action. In engaging with these slogans here briefly, I set out to demonstrate the shift in my own thinking in relation to children's self-representation via climate action.

Children's self-representation through cultural artifacts: A stitch in time

A suite of children's placards and slogans drawn from rallies and protests around Australia signal the responsibility of adults in taking action on behalf of children for children's future. The slogan "Our future, in your hands," written on the hands of young people, alongside the sign "Give us our future" point to the responsibilization of adults to protect, save, and act on behalf of children. Indeed the large-scale 2019 study "Protest for a Future" stated that "the entire framing of this movement is about young people demanding that adults take responsibility for safeguarding their future" (Wahlstrom et al., 2019, p. 10).

When I began to investigate these artifacts, I understood that children's mobilization of adult responsibility for safeguarding their future was working to shine a light on the structural and political marginalization of children, yet I was perplexed by the use of notions of vulnerability, future citizenship, and the need for adult protection that were being drawn upon by children themselves in the climate movement. The call for adults to save children's futures seemed to play into those very notions of immanence and futurity that we in critical childhood studies, human rights advocates, and others have for so long repudiated (Spyrou et al., 2021). I grew concerned that children's climate activism was directed towards arguing for their future, instead of their present, as though their present was not of concern, was invisible, disappearing from view. As Holmberg and Alvinius (2020) suggest, "using the abstract concept of future generations … dehumanize[s] and partly distance[s] itself from today's children as subjects in relation to the climate crisis" (p. 5). I worried that the future focus of climate discourses around children would decenter the child's present, enacting an erasure of the childhood of children in order to focus on their impending adulthood. I worried that this focus would reinforce children's obscurity in policy, planning, and action and so reinforce their relocation to the edges of political consciousness, to the "garden" of childhood.

At the same time, though, I noted that child activists were also demanding that their voices be heard, and that their concerns be taken seriously; slogans such as "the oceans are rising and so are we" and the placard held by 13-year-old Australian climate activist Izzy Raj-Steppings during the raging bushfires of summer 2019 which reads

"look what you left us, watch us fight, watch us win" foreground children's conceptualizations of themselves as activist subjects, perhaps—using this war metaphor—as combatants, in the fight for climate justice. Here I found myself reading children's activism as drawing on discourses of action, dissent, and political engagement as they see themselves—and demand to be seen—as political agents, as active participants.

However, I found in these initial readings of these artifacts a reproduction of the adultist readings of children's activism that I critique—which focus either on futurity or on present—a reinscription of the being/becoming divide that has so plagued childhood studies and stitched up understandings of child subjectivities (Burman, 2022; Spyrou, 2020). The bottleneck in my thinking here, I saw, was around understandings of time, the disjuncture between futurity and present activism. I felt that in reading these slogans in relation to traditional notions of linear time, I was, as Prabha (2020) warned, narrowing the field of interpretation.

I turned, then, to Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw's exhortation to "multiply our understandings of time" (as cited by Spyrou in Millei, 2021, p. 62) when thinking with and about childhood and, as Spyros Spyrou puts it, to "think beyond linear time" (interviewed by Millei, 2021, p. 62). I sought to complicate understandings of futurity and the present as expressed through these slogans.

Returning, then, to the slogan "our future, in your hands," I wondered if this imagining of the future in the present could represent a compression of time or indeed a circular notion of time, described by Kverndokk and Eriksen (2021) as a loop: the future being literally brought into the present to be placed in the hands of adults. This notion aligns with Kverndokk and Eriksen's (2021) figuration of child climate activists as "symbolic time travelers, travelling back from the future" (p. 3). Analyzing Greta Thunberg's addresses, they argue that "she places herself in the future, looking back at the present" (2021, p. 4). Rethinking notions of futurity in this way allows us, then, to move away from these adultist conceptualizations of child activist subjectivities and to read climate activism as a push back against both neoliberal, linear progressive time and, consequently, the modernist child (and adult) subject that accompanies it.

The ice is melting and I don't want Santa to drown

With these thoughts in mind, I turn now to an examination of what is signified by the placard "The Ice Is Melting and I Don't Want Santa To Drown!" In so doing I move toward a conceptual framing of the ways in which children's climate activism can be read in relation to notions of precarity (Holmberg & Alvinius, 2020) and ambivalence to consider alternative ways of conceptualizing childhoods. In the critical analysis that follows, I argue that within this cultural artifact of children's climate activism can be seen a repudiation and in fact dissolution of both linear progressive time and consequently of the modernist adult-child binary that underpins adultist responses, and its accompanying binaries of (adult) logic, rationality, and power and (child) fantasy, illogic, and dependency.

The ice is melting and I don't want Santa to drown. The shock value of the placard is surely in its bringing together of two quite different ways of knowing—climate science and childhood fantasy—to argue for immediate interventions to prevent catastrophe. The text of the placard places the urgent climate crisis revealed by climate science (*the ice is melting)* alongside the magical thinking of childhood (*Santa*). By holding both of these ideas together as equal, the text unsettles traditional binaries between adulthood and childhood that put against one another adult knowledge, competence, and institutional power in the present, and children's innocence, "irrationality," disempowerment, and futurity. It dislocates dominant and pervasive privileging of adult knowledge and that adult, rational subjectivity over children's ways of thinking, being, and knowing.

Crucially, the child activist is centrally positioned here: Through the use of "I," this child's voice is not diminished

or hushed in relation to adult discourses of science, nor covered over in childhood's symbolic loss. Here the child stands between science and fantasy, to be at the centre. This entanglement of science and magic, of rationality and fantasy seen through the eyes of a knowing child subject, represents, I think, an important space through which children's activist ontologies can emerge. Childhood, here, cannot be separated from the reality of the climate crisis, and children themselves are able to draw on scientific paradigms to call for immediate action, not by leaving the space of childhood to enter adult political dialogue (as Morrison's paradigm would have it) but by drawing the science into and alongside the space of the playground.

The conceptualization of time is central to this unpicking of the modernist logic of adult-child relations and the subsequent separation of children from logic and rationality here: The present tense of this text (*The ice IS melting*) works against the obscuring of childhood by ideas of children as future citizens and draws attention to the ways that climate action is working on childhood now. It works against abstraction of the child subject being impacted by climate change through discourses of futurity (Holmberg & Alvinius, 2020) and in doing so it opens a space for consideration of the relationship between climate and child rather than climate and future adult.

This text also points to children's vulnerability to temporality in itself: Holmberg and Alvinius (2020) argue that

> children are forced to think about their future and evaluate their actions in the present time in terms of their future implications in a way that seems unprecedented. In a way, the *present* is stolen from the climate precariat [children]—children cannot allow themselves to live in the present and carelessly consume or act without repercussion. (p. 7, emphasis in original)

This argument stages children as in-between: They can no longer exist only in the present or in relation to a future citizen subject. However, this very focus on temporality—on climate change in the present—is what allows children's double bind in time to be seen, and, as Holmberg and Alvinius (2020) suggest, it is what allows the social, cultural, and discursive impact of climate change on children to be foregrounded and attended to.

Thus the acknowledgement of the impact of climate change on children in the present works again—as I articulated above—to muddy the distinction between future and present: Futurity is again compressed with the present. Holmberg and Alvinius (2020) suggest that the future impinges on the child's present, that they are unable to live in the present without reference to the future: "The temporality of the present and the future is interwoven, which means it cannot be captured by a linear conceptualization of time" (p. 7). Therefore, in bringing climate destruction into the present tense of the text (*The ice IS melting*), this phrase works against modernist conceptualizations of the future in relation to what Chandler (2019) calls "an optimistic telos of universal knowledge and progress" (as cited in Millei, 2021, p. 69). Rather, the attendant destruction embedded within the image of polar ice cap disintegration perhaps calls on apocalyptic narratives of the future: the understanding articulated by Hanne Warming (2021) that "increasingly the future appears as a discursive/material matter of a threat and a failed promise" (interviewed by Millei, 2021, p. 61). The destabilization of the notion of the future-as-promise embedded in this statement asks us to consider the future not in terms of progress but in terms of failure. Important to note here is the repudiation of the future-as-failure through the refusal of *I don't want*, which, put together with the reality of the present-day ice melt, perhaps allows us to consider "staying with the trouble of the reality of extinction" (Millei, 2021, p. 69), forging futurity as a kind of space of ambivalence rather than a space of progress, hope, and success. This delinking of (future) time and progress works against the "modernist imaginary" and, with it, unsettles the fiction of the agentic, powerful adult subject and its other: the dependent, vulnerable child (Millei, 2021).

Finally, figuring the future in terms of failure—or in terms of the loss of imagined progress-oriented futures—speaks to Holmberg and Alvinius's (2020) use of the notion of precarity as "the experience of living with an unpredictable

future" (p. 7). This understanding of precarity is used by Holmberg and Alvinius to suggest that children's activism and agency can be understood in relation to and in resistance to their very vulnerability. Thus the centering of the child *now*—and foregrounding of their vulnerability to an apocalyptic future—that is enacted through this placard spurs action in the present and calls attention to children's vulnerability to climate change in the present and in the future, and asks for their climate action to be attended to.

Children's very real vulnerability to climate change is embedded in the placard's call to action, and environmental destabilization of the realities of childhood is central to the activist impulse of the text. In a literal sense, if we consider the causal link between melting ice and the possibility of Santa drowning, we can read in the text itself a literal commentary on the impact of climate change on children and lived childhoods, evoking the very real effects of climate change on children's life chances, well-being, and health. In the summer of 2019, bush fires raged across Australia; in the summer that this placard was used, children in Canberra spent the bulk of the summer indoors due to the smoke particles hanging in the bowl-shaped Canberran geography. That summer, in our bush capital, air quality was poorer than in the worst polluted cities in the world. Galleries and museums shut; air purifiers sold out; schools kept children inside. The childhood ideal of a summer of play-based, outdoor, roaming, carefree time was very much under threat.

But rather than see the symbolic drowning of Santa as a loss of an idealized symbolic childhood that climate childhoods can no longer embody (à la Postman, 1994), I read this as a radical disassemblage of traditional dominant discourses of childhood, as a breaking down of fixed, dichotomous discourses of childhood that render children speechless and silenced, vulnerable and nonagentic. Rather, the threat of Santa's drowning alongside this call for action rehearses an understanding of childhood as precarious in the face of climate change, as conceptualized by Holmberg and Alvinius (2020), in which the vulnerability of childhood to climate change is the very premise on which activism and resistance take place.

Importantly, to read this placard as a triumph of discursive and political disruption is to read it as a fiction: Clearly, the clause *I don't want* at once speaks to the agency of the child to protest and to the limits of that agency. Science tells us that the ice is melting. We are reminded that the child's agency to enact change beyond protest is still structurally and discursively hampered via adult power over political and social action. This refusal (*I don't want*) against the inevitability of climate change highlights for me the contingency of children's—or indeed all subjects'—agency on the discursive construction of the self (Davies, 2004). Bronwyn Davies (2004) suggests that agency is necessarily read, not as "freedom from the discursive constitution of the self … [not as] autonomy in the sense of being an individual standing outside social structure and process" (p. 4), as modernism would have it, but as always implicated in and constrained by discourse. Here we can read the child subject, not as torn between positionings of abjection and autonomous agency, but as taking up childhood subjectivity in relation to a complex suite of competing discourses and social structures (Davies, 2004). This foregrounding of contingency of children's—and adults'—agency is perhaps what permits children to simultaneously draw on discourses of savoir and futurity and discourses of action, dissent, and political engagement.

Finally, then, *I don't want* points to this dissolution of childhood, not as a triumph, but as an ambivalent site of change. The mourning of childhoods in the present and the future is wrought here and the destabilization of childhood is resisted, even while it engenders a reworking of traditional discourses. This ambivalence, however, rather than being a site of stasis, becomes a site through which new ways of being and doing, of imagining childhood in relation to climate action and activist subjectivities, can be enacted.

In this reading of the placard in the context of wider children's activism I suggest that the environmental destabilization of childhood and children's futures is here being mirrored in children's (self)representations.

Arguably, the space of uncertainty or precarity that children inhabit in a changing climate can be seen to allow for the holding of multiple narratives of self and childhood that enable old discursive regimes to be challenged. In this uncertain space children are carving out new ways of being and doing in the face of catastrophic environmental destabilization. Discursive shifts do not themselves stir politicians to act with urgency to avoid irreversible environmental catastrophe. But discursive shifts can allow for new ways of thinking and fresh insights into a problem that has clearly not been addressed by adults responsible for saving the planet. If, as I have argued here, child activists are disrupting conventional notions of childhood and time, we as critical childhood studies scholars could do well to take the lead from children themselves to incorporate a newly nuanced ontology of childhood into our research and writing about the experience of the child.

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