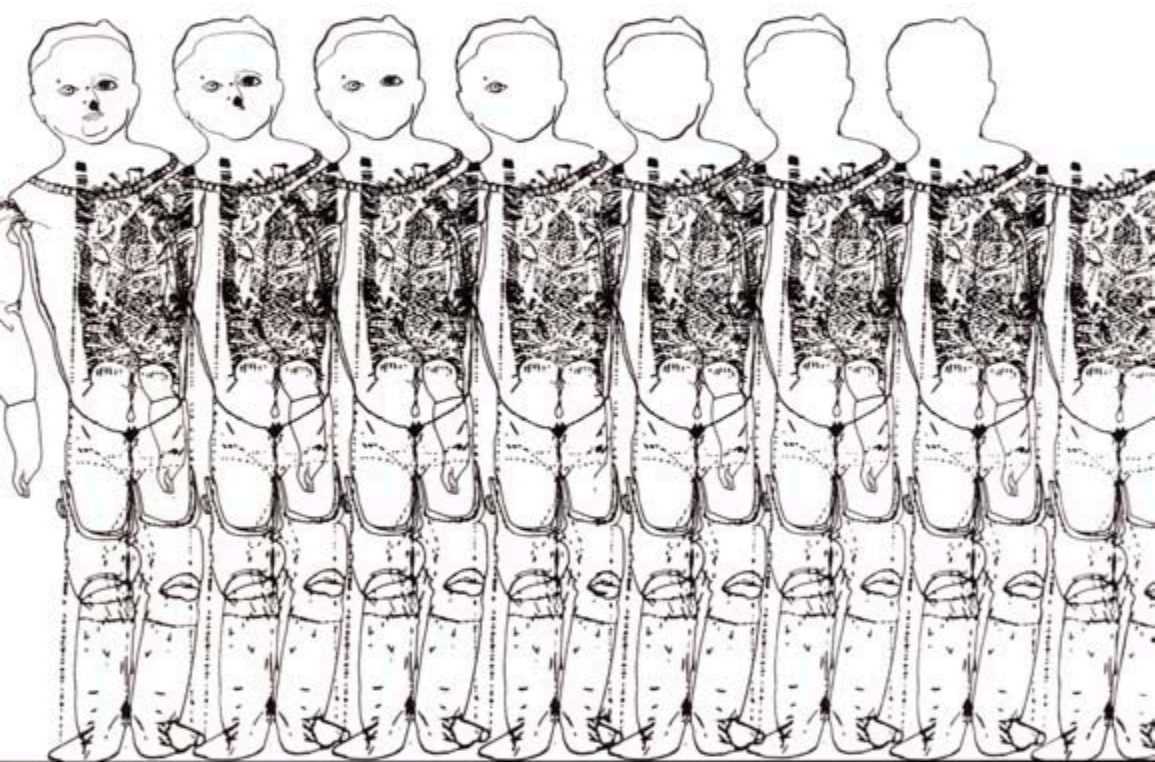


# Figurations



Child, Bodies, Worlds

Claudia Castañeda

## FIGURATIONS

N E X T W A V E

*New Directions in Women's Studies*

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Caren Kaplan, and Robyn Wiegman*

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Child, Bodies, Worlds

*Claudia Castañeda*

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## FIGURATIONS



## Introduction

### Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds

This book begins with an assumption so apparently self-evident that it seems almost impossible to imagine an alternative: that the child is an adult in the making. What is the child but a human in an incomplete form, which must acquire the necessary traits and skills to live as an adult? What else can one hope for a child but that it will grow physically, intellectually, and emotionally in order to function as an adult in the world? What could be more obvious than the fact that the treatment of a child will have a decisive effect on the adult it will become, or that the children of today are the citizens of tomorrow? I argue that embedded within these assumptions is a conceptualization of the child as a potentiality rather than an actuality, a becoming rather than a being: an entity in the making. However else it may be described, and whatever natural or cultural differences might be seen to distinguish one child from another, the category “child” seems to carry with it an unmistakable and incontrovertible fact: a child is by definition not yet that which it alone has the capacity to become. It is in this unique capacity, in this potential, I suggest, that the child’s availability—and so too its value as a cultural resource—lies.

In this book, I consider the child’s appearances across a range of cultural sites to suggest that it is repeatedly figured as an entity in the making. I argue that this insistent figuration, in turn, plays a unique and constitutive role in the (adult) making of worlds, particularly the worlds of human nature and human culture. In so doing, I also suggest that the study of the child is important not only with respect to children and their experience of the world, but also with regard to the making of worlds more generally.

Barrie Thorne's observation that "both feminist and traditional knowledge remain deeply and unreflectively centered around the experience of adults" (1987: 86) remains a fairly accurate description of the state of social and cultural theory, both feminist and otherwise, today. This is not to say that there is no critical work on children and childhood from feminist and other critical perspectives. Important work has been done on the inequality between children and adults (Jackson 1982; Lorde 1984) and on the consequent misrepresentation and misuse of childhood in both popular and academic knowledges<sup>1</sup> and on alternative theories of childhood (Henriques et al. 1998; James and Prout 1990; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998). These efforts have certainly highlighted the absence of adequate representations and understandings of childhood and children's experience. But rarely has the question of the child translated into wider theoretical debates.<sup>2</sup> Neither have theorists given sustained attention to the value of the child in the making of adult worlds, and so to the way this value often works against the "best interests" of those whom the category purportedly identifies.

The relative absence of attention to childhood at the center of wider issues is important not only because it fails to locate children at the center of social, political, and cultural concerns. It is also significant, I argue, in that its endurance is precisely bound up with the uses of the child's value in and as a particular form. Consequently, it is critically important to understand and respond both to the ways in which the child (as one among a number of categories of [unequal] difference) comes to accrue significant cultural value, as well as the work that it does along the way. Asking how and why the child as a figure has been made a resource for wider cultural projects brings the child into the foreground of analysis regarding its uses and value for adult discourses, and provides the groundwork for imagining an alternative order of things.

This book investigates ways in which the child's potentiality is made and remade in particular sites. While all categories, including that of the adult, can be deconstructed to expose the instability of their contours or borders,<sup>3</sup> what is specific to the category of the child is the identification between the child and mutability itself. It is not simply that "the child" is a sign, category, or representation that can be read in multiple ways. What is distinctive about the child is that it has the capacity for transformation. In fact, such a transformation is a requirement; it is a necessity for the child, so to speak, "by nature." This implies that the child is also never complete in itself. It is precisely this incompleteness and its accompanying instabil-

ity that makes the child so apparently available: it is not yet fully formed, and so open to re-formation. The child is not only in the making, but is also malleable—and so can be made.

While the category “child” bears on actual children and their experiences of the world, this book is not about that relation, at least not directly. I do not seek to offer an account of how these assumptions affect real children, although I am convinced that they do. Instead, this book is about the endurance of a particular configuration of the child as an entity in the making, and its prolific and multiple uses across disparate cultural sites. If the child’s appearance is more than incidental across the strikingly broad range of sites that I consider, from science to the media, the academic world, and word-of-mouth circuits of rumor, what is the significance of this repeated use? If the child appears not only where actual children’s lives and experiences are at stake, but also where they are decidedly not, then how can we account for its pervasive presence across such disparate sites? What is it about contemporary configurations of the child that make it available to such a wide range of constituencies and for such divergent uses? With what qualities or characteristics has the child been endowed to make this availability possible?

### *Figural Bodies*

Figuration is my principle tool for describing the child’s appearances in discourses as well as across them. In contrast to literary uses of figuration that would define it in terms of signification or representation, my use of this term turns on a relation between the semiotic and the material: figuration entails simultaneously semiotic and material practices.<sup>4</sup>

This concept of figuration makes it possible to describe in detail the process by which a concept or entity is given particular form—how it is figured—in ways that speak to the making of worlds. To use figuration as a descriptive tool is to unpack the domains of practice and significance that are built into each figure. A figure, from this point of view, is the simultaneously material and semiotic effect of specific practices. Understood as figures, furthermore, particular categories of existence can also be considered in terms of their uses—what they “body forth” in turn. Figuration is thus understood here to incorporate a double force: constitutive effect and generative circulation.

In this project, figuration provides a way of accounting for the means

through which the child is brought into being as a figure, as well as the bodies and worlds that this figure generates through a plurality of forms. Using this approach, I suggest that each figuration of the child not only condenses particular material-semiotic practices, but also brings a particular version of the world into being. In conceptualizing figuration as a dual process, furthermore, my account of the category “child” also insists that even apparently generalized figurations are particular. They are the effect of a specific configuration of knowledges, practices, and power, such that providing an account of the child’s figuration entails generating accounts of necessarily powerful and yet still contestable worlds.

To understand the child in terms of figuration locates the child in a wide nexus of linked transformative trajectories that point to the uses of its mutability. Among the most significant of these trajectories is the distinctively human and embodied transformation that goes by the name “development.” Through its bodily interactions with the world, including its entry into language, the child is seen to develop into an adult. Contemporary notions of child development rest on the dual assumption that the child has the potential for transformative and progressive change, and that its expression takes a particular bodily form. So, for example, the child is seen to change physiologically over the course of its development, becoming increasingly adept at using its body to negotiate the world. Biology (such as hormones or changes in the brain’s structure), social relationships (such as the mother-child bond or friendships), and training (including parenting and schooling) may all play a role in establishing and ensuring these changes. Through this process, the child’s ever-changing body is slowly transformed into the comparatively stable, physically mature, and culturally inscribed adult form.

The condition of childhood therefore finds its value in potentiality. At the same time, the form that the child’s potentiality takes is consistently framed as a normative one, in relation to which failure is always possible. Just as the child’s potential for physical growth must be ensured by specific means, so too the child’s socialization and enculturation must be secured. The vast range of psychological theories, government policies, and social welfare programs directed at procuring the child’s proper development indicate the pervasiveness of this teleological model of the child across biological, social, and cultural domains. Should a given child either fail to possess or to realize its potential (as in the notion of “stunted growth”), he or she remains a flawed child and an incomplete adult.

And yet within this economy of mutability, childhood can also be a highly valued feature of adulthood. For example, the turn back to one's childhood to repair the adult or to reclaim "the child within" (as in many psychotherapeutic techniques) has become a familiar response to adult problems both within psychotherapeutic regimes and in wider popular discourse.<sup>5</sup> Once the adult's temporal distance from childhood has been secured, the adult draws on the past as a resource for the present. The adult returns to childhood to reappropriate the child he or she once was in order to establish a more stable adult self. Here, the child is primarily valuable insofar as the condition of childhood can be revisited in order to be left behind once again.

### *Local and Global Worlds*

A key argument of this book is that the child accrues power and value across its multiple figurations, and that only by addressing this multiplicity can its cultural force be adequately addressed.<sup>6</sup> A principal challenge for this study is to convey a sense of the power generated in and through the child and its uses, without reproducing the problematically universalizing or global claims that are so frequently made through this very category. Invocations of the child, including the overly generalized description I have offered so far, are historically and culturally specific. While it is possible to make such generalizations in order to suggest the overall argument of this project, the book is framed in terms of the specificity of the child's appearances in time and place. It locates purportedly general claims concerning the child in particular discursive, cultural, and geopolitical contexts. While changing definitions of the child in time and place have been well documented in historical, social, and cultural studies of childhood,<sup>7</sup> my simultaneously located and cumulative approach provides an alternative means of describing and accounting for the particular cultural force of the child (and by extension that of many other such categories). As such, this book is perhaps as much about a theoretical-methodological approach to culture (including forms of nature) as it is about appearances of the child in culture.

To describe figuration in terms of its relation to the material-semiotic nature of worlds is also to locate practices and their associated power not only in specific discursive domains, but also in time and place. There are good reasons for insisting on local differences, as well as claiming global



ones, but such differences do not necessarily have to work in terms of an either/or relation. The articulation of global locations is important for my investigations of the child because the child is so often figured in universal or global terms (“we are the world, we are the children”). Throughout this book, I account for the ways in which local figurations of the child are also always imbricated in global processes. Rather than relying on formulations of globalization as a strictly late-capitalist phenomenon, I draw on post-colonial criticisms that suggest that the binding of the national within transnational circuits of exchange has occurred across a historical trajectory that began long before the contemporary period of globalization (see Abu-Lughod 1989; Hall 1991). The corresponding alternative global order of things is characterized by nondependent relations or “disjunctures” between economic, cultural, and political realms (Appadurai 1990). Anti-universalist notions of the global emerging out of these criticisms attend to shifting organizations of time and space, or what I refer to throughout the book as “circuits of exchange” that work not just across or alongside nation-state boundaries, but instead of them.

Not only is it important to describe the distinct global processes that are implicated in colonial and postcolonial histories, but it is also necessary to consider the potentially multiple kinds of transnational processes that can be at work in one location. With these understandings of the global in mind, I employ the more specific term “local-global” to situate in time and space each of the child-figures I discuss in this book. Itself a rather indeterminate locution, the term local-global works well for thinking about the mix of imagined and concrete materialities through which the child is figured as an adult in the making, and how that figure circulates through transnational spaces. In other words, I use the term local-global to identify transnational circuits of exchange with specific trajectories and histories. From this starting point, the discursive locations of the child-figures I have chosen to address are themselves situated in specific local-globals, whether they make apparently universal claims to the child, or whether they concern the child in more circumscribed transnational domains. As such, I do not see the child-figures I consider in this book as representative of the child or childhood. Instead, they comprise an indicative and limited set of figurations in which the child embodies or is identified with local-global concerns.

The local-global also makes visible the continuities that can be identified across different figurations of the child. Just as the local-global provides

specific mappings of transnational circuits of exchange, so too the circuits of exchange I consider have their own collective location. One way of describing this location is to suggest that the book turns on two pivot points. The first is the United States, which is a geographic point of intersection for all of the transnational circuits I consider. This positioning of the book around the United States is partly an effect of my own location in the Euro-American academic world. It also speaks to the United States's distinctly hegemonic economic, cultural, and military global reach. However, I have deliberately avoided centering the project in the United States in order to make evident other global figurations of the child. The global reach of the United States is not everywhere and always the most significant aspect of a given event, experience, or—most pertinently for this book—figuration of the child. Consequently, the United States links the different figurations of the child I discuss in the book, but it is positioned relative to other national or transnational locations depending on the specific figuration at issue.

The English language is the book's second main pivot point. Generated through various kinds of transnational networks located primarily between Europe and the Americas, the predominantly English language resources I have used bear the mark of this linguistic mapping. The specificity of this location can be exemplified by the fact that English uses (apparently) gender-neutral nouns, as compared to other (Indo-European) languages, such as Italian (*il bambino, la bambina*), Spanish (*el niño, la niña*), or Hindi (*बच्चा, बच्ची*).<sup>8</sup> But like the United States, the space mapped by the English language is a variously centered location. The use of English is differentially located across class, race, and gender hierarchies as well as political and economic ones both nationally and transnationally. So, for example, English is not the principal language spoken in some Latino communities in the United States. It remains hegemonic in a bureaucratic and institutional sense, but not with regard to everyday communication in such locations. Furthermore, in some parts of these communities, men may know more English than women, or children may know more English than their adult counterparts owing to their differential involvement (through school or employment) in the wider English-dominant culture. My claims concerning the child are consequently specific and limited in ways that parallel the "centrality" of the United States or the English language in these examples: they are significant precisely insofar as they are located in local-global time-spaces.

My interest in the child, configured as it is through the concept of figuration, emerges in part out of my engagement with feminist, postcolonial, and science and technology studies. In these (already interdisciplinary and sometimes even anti-disciplinary) fields, scholars theorize the relationship between power, materiality, and inequality as a key feature of the world's making. Together, these three areas of study provide indispensable tools for thinking about how hierarchies are constituted, how they are materialized and lived as the real, and how these hierarchies are (or might be) contested. Indeed, this study would not be thinkable without the work of theorists who have articulated the simultaneous power and contingency of the institutions, facts, technologies, and meanings that make up our bodies and worlds.<sup>9</sup> The present study of the child as a material-semiotic entity both draws on theoretical resources from relevant interdisciplinary work, and brings the child into the center of discussions concerning the making of "facts" about human nature and culture. To address the question of the child in this way, I juxtapose scientific figurations of the child against equally distinct figurations in other cultural domains. This selective juxtaposition emphasizes the power of scientific discourses in everyday understandings and uses of the child, while insisting on the cultural specificity of those scientific claims. At the same time, it insists on the importance of claims to the child's nature in cultural domains other than strictly scientific ones. By placing science alongside other cultural discourses that make claims to the truth of the child's nature in a local-global frame, this book further questions the technocentrism and Eurocentrism that continue to obtain in different ways across this interdisciplinary conjuncture.

Each of the five chapters that make up this book takes as its object a particular figuration of the child in a specific local-global circuit of exchange. But as I have already suggested, this is not a project about the child's appearance in five discrete cultural domains. Neither is it an exhaustive account of the child's discursive construction across such domains. The task in each chapter is to describe in some detail the constellation of practices, materialities, and knowledges through which a particular figuration occurs, and in turn, to identify the significance of that figuration for the making of wider cultural claims. The relationship between the project's broad aims and the specific instances of the child's figuration discussed in each chapter is not straightforwardly additive, but has a more cumulative form. In particular, the book tracks the uses of the child-figure

in relation to three crucial elements: the child's status as a natural human body; the processual character of that embodiment; and its imaginative potency. In seeking to explore these dimensions of the child's figuration, I have not looked at the cultural sites where the child's significance might be most readily assumed, such as in education, legislation, or pediatric medicine. Instead, my focus on figuration has led me to less predictable sites, where the child's appearance might not be expected, or where its uses exceed its more conventional representations.

The first two chapters address the child's figuration in scientific domains. Chapter 1 examines the figuration of the child in nineteenth-century science and its practices of collection on a global scale, together with the writing and publication of texts based on the resulting data. I consider figurations of the child in English-language scientific texts situated in a local-global circuit of exchange that extends through Britain, northern Europe, the United States, and the colonized world. Watching the child's often apparently marginal appearances in scientific discourse, I ask how figurations of the child are used to establish hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality as "facts" of the natural human body.

Chapter 2 moves from the nineteenth century to the late-twentieth century, in which scientific disciplines are more clearly separated from one another in theory and practice. Whereas figurations of the child in nineteenth-century discourse draw on "global" evidence collected by "gentleman scientists" who traversed the boundaries of biology, anthropology, and other such emergent disciplines, later twentieth-century scientific discourse draws a different map of knowledge making and practice. This is due in part to the division of scientific knowledge into ever more specialized subdisciplines in the later period. In this chapter, I focus on figurations of the child in developmental cognitive neuroscience, centered in the United States, and linked to Britain and a wider English-language transnational scientific culture. In this scientific local-global, key features of the child's figuration are the developing brain and its associated behaviors as these are materialized through the bodies of laboratory animals as well as actual children's bodies. I ask how the child—specifically the child's brain—is used to figure emergent "facts" about the nature of human cognition and its cultural variation.

Moving away from strictly scientific discourses, chapters 3 and 4 consider figurations of the child in other cultural discursive locations. Chapter 3 is concerned with the child's figuration in the domain of transnational

adoption. While transnational adoption is practiced in a number of European countries (including the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Germany) as well as the United States, national histories of adoption are critical to the more recent emergence of transnational adoption. Furthermore, while international human rights legislation on transnational adoption exists, national legislation has had much greater jurisdiction over the practice of transnational adoption until very recently, owing in part to the weakness of international human rights law more generally. This chapter considers the United States as a local-global nation into which children are adopted transnationally, primarily from Latin America and Asia. Race—the child’s race as compared to that of the adoptive parents—has been a central issue in U.S. intranational adoption, and emerges as well in the context of U.S. transnational adoption. In this chapter, I ask how refigurations of the child as an adoptee negotiate issues of racial identity raised in the context of transnational adoption.

Another aspect of transnational adoption is that competing and often contradictory figurations of the adoptee may exist simultaneously in different locations. Building on this suggestion, chapter 4 considers the circulation of child-organ stealing rumors in Guatemala, and the reporting on these rumors both within Guatemala and in the international English-language press. More specifically, I examine the ways in which U.S. and Guatemalan media reports figure the child in the production of stories about child-organ stealing. A key issue in the chapter is how the figure of the child becomes central within competing claims to the truth or falsehood of the rumor. This, in turn, suggests that some figurations of the child become hegemonic within a particular discursive domain, whereas others do not.

The final chapter of the book brings my discussion of the child into the more explicitly academic field of post-structuralist and feminist theory. The purpose of this chapter is to show how the local-global circuits in which this book travels are implicated in the making of the child. I track figurations of the child in the work of Michel Foucault, François Lyotard, Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, and others. Having identified problematic uses of the child in these oppositional theories of the subject, I go on to discuss how such appropriations might be rethought.

Jacqueline Rose has previously noted the importance of a knowing ignorance with regard to the child because “if we do not know what a child is, then it becomes impossible to invest in their sweet self-evidence” (1992:

xvii). This book constitutes an attempt to enact the responsibility that “we” adults bear in relation to our child counterparts insofar as we have, can, and indeed must make claims about the child. While currently available ways of making these claims fall into and between the natural and the cultural in what seems a relentlessly hierarchical form, I wish to suggest that worlds could be made otherwise, precisely through some form of unknowing. My hope is that this book works toward that necessarily unattainable end.