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Caitríona Ní Laoire, Fina Carpena-Méndez, Naomi Tyrrell and Allen White
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What is This?
Introduction: Childhood and migration – mobilities, homes and belongings

Caitríona Ní Laoire
University College Cork

Fina Carpena-Méndez
Oregon State University

Naomi Tyrrell
University of Plymouth

Allen White
University College Cork

Abstract
This article introduces a special issue on childhood and migration. It argues that understandings of the ways in which children form belongings and attachments are enhanced by conducting research with children who migrate or who live mobile and transnational lives. The articles in this collection highlight the mobile and translocal nature of children’s lives, from different perspectives and in different global and migration contexts. Taken together, they make a number of key contributions to an emerging literature on the lives of migrant, mobile and diasporic children and young people. They emphasize the situated and contextualized nature of migrant children’s negotiations of home and belonging. In particular, the collection explores children’s and young people’s constructions of home and belonging, often negotiated in contradictory or challenging circumstances and frequently destabilizing powerful assumptions about the nature of migration, mobility and childhood, such as ideals of childhood based on notions of residential fixity.

Keywords
belonging, childhood, home, migration, mobility, youth
Recent developments in the social studies of childhood have pointed to the multidimensional nature of children’s lives as well as the socially constructed nature of childhood itself. Underlying these developments is the recognition that childhood is a concept which lies at the intersection of multiple frames of reference and languages. This polyvocality is reflected in the multidisciplinary nature of the field of childhood studies, where different theoretical and disciplinary frameworks and languages overlap and coexist. As a result, the heterogeneous nature of children’s lives is illuminated, and recent developments in global childhood studies have succeeded in emphasizing the diversity of children’s experiences and of representations of childhood. The articles in this special issue of Childhood continue in this tradition by focusing on a relatively invisible dimension of childhood, in this case, that of migrancy. Despite the proliferation of research which seeks to destabilize assumptions of homogeneous childhoods (e.g. Christensen and James, 2000; James and Prout, 1990; James et al., 1998; Stephens, 1995), surprisingly little attention has been paid to childhoods that are characterized by migrancy and mobility. This gap exists in both childhood studies and migration studies (see Dobson, 2009; White et al., forthcoming), and in this collection, we seek to draw on the multiple disciplinary perspectives of both fields in order to illuminate different aspects of children’s migrations and mobile lives.

It is now increasingly accepted that children are not passive recipients of culture, socialization and identity but that they are subjective beings and are actively involved in shaping their own sociocultural worlds. This has contributed to a body of research which explores, from different perspectives, how children and young people form and negotiate their identities and belongings. For example, work in the area of children and ethnicity has highlighted children’s active involvement in processes of othering and racialization and discussed the ways in which children can construct or perform identities often in opposition to an ‘other’ (Ackroyd and Pilkington, 1999; Castro, 2004; Connolly, 1998; Devine and Kelly, 2006; Devine et al., 2008; Scourfield et al., 2005). This research shows that, in the global North, migrant or ethnic minority children often become constructed as the ‘other’ in these kinds of processes. The tendency in this kind of research can be to take for granted the stability of the constructs ‘us’ and ‘them’, thus reinforcing an ethnic majority–minority framework. This is closely related to broader social anxieties surrounding the place of migrant or ethnic minority children, particularly in societies of the global North, as well as related assumptions of cultural essentialism which construct children of migrants as trapped between two cultures (Mannitz, 2005).

Intersecting with culturally essentialist assumptions surrounding children’s ethnicity are particular essentialized ways of conceptualizing childhood itself. Dominant western ideologies of childhood involve polarized constructions of the child: on the one hand, the child is constructed as uncivilized, disorderly and dangerous, and on the other, it is assumed that childhood is a state of innocence, purity and stability (Jenks, 1996). Holloway and Valentine (2000) argue that both of these constructs contribute to the assumption that the natural and best place for children is the ‘home’. In other words, it is assumed in western societies that children have a natural need for stability and security which can be provided by the domestic and familial environment. This has resulted in much research and policy towards children being underlaid by assumptions that associate ideal modern childhoods with residential fixity and domestication. This is reflected...
in moral panics around the presence of mobile, nomadic or homeless children, such as the presence of street children (Beazley, 2000), Traveller children (Helleiner, 1998; Vanderbeck, 2005), trafficked children (Huijsmans, 2008), displaced children and migrant children.

**Mobilities, homes and belongings**

Holloway and Valentine’s (2000) notion of ‘home’ refers to a privatized domestic space, but the notion of ‘children’s place is in the home’ can also be extended to more abstract notions of ‘home’. The concept of ‘home’ has a long association with the ways in which different types of spaces become sites of security, and provide a sense of belonging, which can relate to sites of attachment as diverse as the nation or the locality (Morley and Robins, 1993; Rutherford, 1990). Home can be mobilized as a site of nostalgia and romanticism, articulating with postmodern tendencies to locate childhood itself as a source of nostalgia (Jenks, 1996). This can contribute to the production of ethnocentric and essentialized constructs which position children in particular ways, such as the notion of idyllic (English) country childhoods (Bushin, 2005; Jones, 1997). These notions of ‘home’ have been deconstructed by postcolonial and feminist perspectives which acknowledge the exclusive nature of such constructs. In this way, home can be reconceptualized in terms of movement (Ahmed et al., 2003; Nash, 2009; Ni Laoire, 2008), and as routed through complex webs of connections and attachments (Gilroy, 1997). This decouples the concept of ‘home’ from a distinct physical location and instead positions it as a mobile concept in relation to multiple social fields of attachment and belonging. Related to this, poststructuralist developments in social sciences challenge cultural essentialism by questioning the stability and fixity of accepted social and cultural categories (such as childhood, youth, identity, ethnicity, nationality and race), and provide a framework for reconceptualizing the ways in which these are articulated in children’s and young people’s lives.

Recent research emphasizes the importance of the different sites of belonging connected with various spheres of life that children encounter in everyday life (Olwig, 2003). It is recognized that children perform multiple and intersecting identities, which are variously gendered, racialized, localized and commodified, and that these are contingent on context (Connolly, 1998; Skelton and Valentine, 1998; Valentine et al., 2009). This occurs in the context of rapid cultural globalization in which children are involved as both consumers and (re)producers of deterritorialized frames of reference. However, it must also be recognized that children’s everyday lives are lived in and through concrete territorialized local contexts. So their negotiations of identity and belonging involve intersecting relations and identifications on different scales. Conceptualizing children’s belongings in this way destabilizes ideas of childhood as a site of stability and fixity. Instead, children’s migrancy and mobility and the ‘transcultural’, or culturally ‘blended’ (Hoerder et al., 2005), nature of their lives is foregrounded.

The powerful ideologies that place idealized childhoods in fixed and bounded spaces are challenged by the complex realities of the lives of many, or most, of the world’s children. Research conducted in the global South reveals the ways in which the everyday lives and biographies of many children are marked by mobility, independence and
instability (e.g. Beazley, 2000; Carpena-Méndez, 2006; Punch, 2007; van Blerk, 2005). This body of research questions simplistic notions which assume child mobility is always associated with deviance and danger. A number of articles in this collection explore the highly mobile nature of the lives of children living in global South contexts and the complex ways in which their lives, social relations and attachments are shaped by this. Dominant western notions of the fixed and stable nature of childhood and youth are also contested by the realities of the lives of children and young people who migrate across national borders and who live transnational lives. Powerful ideas about childhood, identity and culture can work in ways that tend to deny children’s migrancy, both by privileging stasis and by fixing cultural boundaries. However, by recognizing their migrancy, attention is drawn to the ways in which children’s social relations, belongings and relationships to place are fluid, contextual and mobile. The articles in this special issue reflect an emerging body of literature which is beginning to explore the ways in which children and youth who migrate, and/or who live transnational lives, develop identities and belongings. This literature foregrounds the fluid and dynamic nature of their processes of identity formation (e.g. Bushin et al., 2007; Christopoulou and de Leeuw, 2005; Easthope, 2009; Harinen et al., 2005; Mannitz, 2005; Olwig, 2003; Sirriyeh, 2008; Sporton et al., 2006; Valentine et al., 2009).

We argue that understandings of the ways in which children form belongings and attachments are enhanced by conducting research with children who migrate or who live mobile and transnational lives. As Sporton et al. (2006) argue, young migrants’ identities are shaped literally ‘on the move’ as they live mobile lives. Olwig (2003) suggests that institutionalized group boundaries, or geographical sites of origin or destination, may not provide migrant children’s primary sites of belonging. She draws attention to the ways in which their sites of belonging are connected to the various spheres of life they encounter in everyday life. This challenges notions of migrant children as having to choose between two cultures or ‘identities’. Others have found that hybridity or hybridization (Christopoulou and de Leeuw, 2005), transculturalism (Hoerder et al., 2005) or transnationalism (Levitt and Waters, 2006; Mannitz, 2005) provide more useful frameworks within which to understand migrant and/or diasporic children and youth’s belongings. These frameworks, while providing different lenses, are united by a concern to capture the fluid and dynamic nature of migrant children’s and young people’s meaningful connections and identifications. It is useful in this context to draw on Ahmed et al.’s (2003) conceptualization of home as formed in relation to movement, in other words, that home is both re-made and re-membered through migration (see also Easthope, 2009; Ni Laoire, 2008). In this way, Ahmed et al. (2003) confront the dominant tendencies to associate home with stasis and fixity, and mobility with detachment. Drawing on these developments, we begin to view migrant children’s constructions of home in terms of a fluid, evolving process (see also Sirriyeh, 2008).

Migrant childhoods

Our collection of articles is situated in the context of the conceptual developments in relation to children and migration outlined in the preceding section. The collection, which arises from a conference on Children and Migration held in Cork in 2008,
highlights the experiences of children whose lives are marked in different ways by mobility, disruption or multilocality. All of the articles highlight the mobile and translocal nature of children’s lives, but from different perspectives and in different global and migration contexts, and all use children- or youth-centred methods that foreground the position of children in research.

Taken together, the articles make a number of key contributions to the emerging literature on the lives of migrant, mobile and diasporic children and young people. First, they point to the importance of acknowledging children’s and young people’s own perspectives in research on their lives. Children’s perspectives can oppose those of adults and contribute alternative perspectives in understanding formations of home and belonging in contexts of mobility. For example, Madeleine Hatfield’s (née Dobson) article on children’s experiences of return migration in highly skilled households reveals the mobile, transient and small-scale nature of the practices of homemaking in which these children are involved, which contrast with the more permanent and fixed approaches taken by their parents. Similarly, Tom Luster et al.’s article brings out the subtle and not-so-subtle differences between young Sudanese migrants and their foster parents with regard to their beliefs about the factors that contribute to successful adaptation of the young migrants.

Second, this collection of articles also emphasizes the situated and contextualized nature of migrant children’s negotiations of home and belonging. In other words, while home is not simply viewed as a private domestic space, or a national space, neither is it simply an abstract and deterritorialized space of interaction. In a number of the articles, ‘home’ emerges as a concrete site of social relations and practices, involving familial and other social relations, daily practices and materiality, often conducted and experienced across territorial boundaries (see articles by den Besten, Hatfield, Mand and Sirriyeh in this issue). Irina Schmitt, in her article on young people’s competences in creating belonging in Germany and Canada, presents belonging as a situated achievement drawing on contextualized competences, while Olga den Besten’s article on immigrant children’s local belongings in Paris and Berlin reveals the specificity and diversity of their experiences, which are shaped by differential access to resources as well as different migration histories.

In particular, many of the articles in the collection explore the children’s and young people’s constructions of home and belonging, often negotiated in contradictory or challenging circumstances and frequently destabilizing powerful assumptions about the nature of migration, mobility and childhood, such as ideals of childhood based on notions of residential fixity. This theme is picked up in particular in Christian Ungruhe’s article on youth migration in Ghana. Here im/mobility is shown to be central to young people’s identity formations and achievements of ‘success’ in terms which are meaningful to them. In a transnational diasporic context, Kanwal Mand’s article highlights the role of transnational mobility in the formation of belongings among British-born Bangladeshi children. In her article on kinship and belonging among Maasai adoptees in Kenya, Caroline Archambault argues that parents’ and children’s processes of kinship-making through adoption act as a form of resistance to western sedentarizing discourses of residential fixity.

In particular, the articles question the binaries of home/not-at-home and rootedness/rootlessness which tend to dominate accounts of migration and belonging. Ala Sirriyeh successfully dismantles such binaries in her article on young refugee women in the UK.
She explores the ways in which the young women create and manage im/mobilities in their lives in order to negotiate homely spaces, thus destabilizing assumptions about home, safety and asylum. Both Kanwal Mand and Madeleine Hatfield find that practices of homemaking among migrant/diasporic children are closely interrelated with both materiality and relationality, and that home for these children cannot be characterized simply in terms of rootedness. Madeleine Hatfield’s research also overturns the oversimplified notion of an out–return divide in migration by revealing the ways in which children in particular carry elements of ‘home’ across this divide. The complex nature of the processes by which attachments are formed among mobile/migrant children is also highlighted by the bicultural approaches to adaptation taken by young Sudanese migrants in the US (Luster et al., this issue) and the multilocal childhoods experienced by adopted Maasai adoptees (Archambault, this issue).

The articles also point to the intersectional nature of children’s identities, showing that they are also gendered, classed and racialized in ways which intersect with or supersede any ethnic/national or migrant identities. In other words, home is not only or necessarily associated with a place moved to or from, but involves a negotiation of multiple and complex attachments and detachments at different scales. Irina Schmitt’s article unpicks the ways in which notions of ethno-national belonging or difference intersect with questions of gender, sexuality, locality and fashion in young people’s formations of belonging, while in Christian Ungruhe’s article, the close interconnections between mobility, gender and ideas of tradition and modernity in the young people’s identity constructions are apparent.

By bringing together perspectives from the global South and North, and from different disciplines, we acknowledge the diversity of contexts in, and through which, children experience migration and mobility. All too often research tends to isolate different aspects of migration experiences and to build academic boundaries around them. This can result in the development of divergent languages and concepts relating to migration and childhood. Rather than seeking to overcome this diversity, it may be more appropriate to encourage dialogue within it. It is in this spirit therefore that this collection seeks to contribute to the emerging interdisciplinary dialogue in and between the fields of childhood studies and migration studies, by incorporating theoretically informed discussions on mobilities, homes and belongings.

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Note

1. Née Bushin.

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