

The Ethnopoetics of Space and Transformation: Young people's engagement, activism and aesthetics

by Stuart C Aitken, Ashgate, Farnham, UK and Burlington VT, USA,
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Stuart Aitken is interested in the politics and poetics of young people's participation in transformative events and the more mundane practices "through which young people take responsibility to create a politics of hope" (p. ix). To this end, he attempts to do two things with this book. First, he draws on a wide range of spatial theorists to consider how spaces become transformative "to the degree that they are open to the political" (p. x). Second, he utilizes *ethnopoetics* (which is the subject of Chapter 2) to describe transformative events and spaces lyrically in an attempt to represent something of "the importance of affect as a political push in the world" (p. x). He manipulates research data to rearrange and re-visualize young people's words, gestures, and imagery to create poetic stanzas which succinctly render "the emotions that exceed the text" (p. x). Theoretically and methodologically, he is concerned with the aesthetics of young people's political agency.

The key themes and concerns of the book are set out in the first chapter, and illustrated through revisiting fieldwork examining the lives of children living in a homeless shelter in San Diego. This chapter also positions the work in relation to some of the key theoretical concepts that Aitken engages with. In particular, he reworks Grosz's concept of 'geo-power', using it to consider the ways in which otherwise marginalised young people push back against the structural limitations on their lives to create hope. It becomes here that part of his interest in the poetics of children's politics is to try and share the power and importance of the politics of hopeful surprises enacted when children push back against the world. The punchline to the chapter achieves this quite powerfully.

Empirically, the book covers a lot of ground and a diverse range of different geographical contexts, modes of politics, and subjectivities. Chapter 2 examines the

mobilities of people with cerebral palsy in California, in conjunction with a discussion of Ranciere's approach to aesthetics, to consider how events which disrupt social norms and regimes of the 'sensible' create a potential opening for politics. Chapter 3 draws on Grosz's re-reading of Darwin to rethink the ecology of Fanjingshan National Nature Reserve in China and the lives of the marginalised children that live there. Through a deep mapping of young people's emotional attachment to local ecologies, this chapter attempts to represent their engagement with contested processes of development in the area. Chapter 4 contrasts young people's school protests in the USA and Chile to consider how children attempt to control space and their future. A key argument here is that young people's political identities always exceed the spaces that define them. Aitken clearly believes that the power to surprise and unsettle the status quo is one of the most important aspects of young people's politics. Chapter 6 examines the politics of Latino/a children's work translating for their families, and the State of California's attempt to restrict this. This chapter powerfully explores the children's capacity to be citizens, the politics of their competency (relative to adults), and what it means to be heard. Aitken offers a nuanced argument here; but I wanted more of the empirical material – to let the children speak for themselves. Finally, Chapter 7 gives voice to the political concerns of young people belonging to the *Izbrisani* (or, the Erased) in Slovenia – those people who were left stateless following the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia in 1991. The case study is fascinating; and the chapter engages with Agamben's understanding of bare life to good effect – considering the aesthetics and ethics of making bare life public and visible.

The poetic stanzas that Aitken presents throughout the book can be powerful and affecting. In that respect, they do their work. However, I found myself constantly questioning two things as I read the book. First, would the unadulterated voices of his participants been any less powerful? And, second, what is the ethics of rearranging participants' words in these

ways to maximise their affective power for the author's ends? In his conclusion, Aitken argues that his method is about more than the careful selection and arrangement of words in provocative ways. For him, ethnopoetry helps draw attention to the ways in which the aesthetics of young people's politics has "the capacity to disrupt the sensible" (p. 169). For all the book's moving stories of young people's political agency, I remain unconvinced that ethnopoetry helps reveal new insights into this.

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