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Rachel Conrad, Time for childhoods: Young Poets and Questions of Agency

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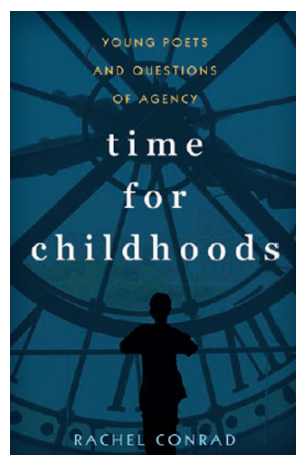
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Review/Recension

RACHEL CONRAD
TIME FOR CHILDHOODS
Young Poets and Questions
of Agency

Amherst: University of Massachusetts
Press, 2020 (209 pp.)



It was at the time I was reading the closing pages of Rachel Conrad's book *Time for Childhoods: Young Poets and Questions of Agency* (2020) that a video of the young poet Amanda Gorman went viral. Performing her poem "The Hill We Climb" at the inauguration of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, the 22-year-old mesmerized viewers all over the world with her passion, persona, and powerful message. It struck me how Gorman embodied many of the central points in *Time for Childhoods*: Conrad encourages us to engage seriously with poems written by young people, to admit poetry written by young poets into literary canons, to provide access for young poets to be published and heard, and to acknowledge their agency. Conrad turns our attention to the literary merit of poetry written by young people, presenting a collection of youth-written poems for the reader to explore under her expert guidance and compelling commentary.

The book's premise is that poetry written by children is not typically regarded as literature in its own right: the poems are viewed as homework practice rather than art, or the outputs of adult teaching rather than childhood creativity. Conrad argues that cultural biases mean young people are considered intellectually and artistically immature and that the works of young poets are too often ignored or dismissed as juvenilia. She contests this idea throughout, engaging in close readings of youth-written poems from adult-facilitated projects to demonstrate their literary value.

Time for Childhoods consists of five chapters and a concluding section. In the first chapter, Conrad outlines her theoretical framework

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and discusses key concepts in her study – concepts she has developed and expanded on in previous writing, such as temporal agency, dynamic temporality, and temporal standpoints. Through various examples, she discusses how the term temporal agency targets young people’s ideas, practices, and imaginings of time and engages with the use of time and temporal practices to contemplate or accomplish one’s own goals. As a way of challenging the taken-for-granted cultural representation of time as irreversible, steady, and linearly progressive, Conrad uses the term dynamic temporality as a way of remaking time or temporal sequence, for example, in transposing the future into the present in order to act on it. Finally, Conrad uses the term temporal standpoints to explore children’s understandings of their temporal agency – their agency in relation to time as children – and childhood as a social, yet temporary, position. Consequently, Conrad argues, “theorization of youth agency can benefit from exploring and advocating for the importance of young people’s perspectives on temporality, or time for childhoods” (43).

Conrad navigates the terrain of previous research in areas like the sociology of childhood, critical developmental psychology, and young people’s poetic writing, consistently referring to one of the key concerns in childhood studies: the agency of young people. Conrad presents three methodological approaches that frame the book. The first one emphasizes the intention of reading youth-written poetry with the same in-depth engagement used for poetry written by adult poets. The second approach involves reading youth-written poetry from projects initiated by adults to consider the decisions that adult mentors, teachers, editors, and publishers make in presenting works by young poets. Finally, Conrad pays special attention to how young poets represent time and temporality as key contributors to their sense of agency.

Conrad presents four different projects dealing with youth-written poetry in the United States during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, and the inspirations driving them. Across the various chapters, she examines the young poets’ temporal structure of action, use of common temporal markers, charting of temporal metaphors and trajectories, shifting or playing with verb tense, and reference to age or life phases. I have to admit, I could not have imagined that focusing on time and temporality would be such an interesting approach to these young poets’ writings. Yet, through substantial analyses of the poems, Conrad convincingly argues for their intrigue and significance when it comes to young people’s lived experiences in and over time.

One chapter focuses on Gwendolyn Brooks and her engagement with and promotion of young poets through both her authorship and her sponsorship of contests and workshops. In her analysis of the poems that ensued, Conrad discusses how the young poets deal with questions of entrapment by time, age, and racial injustice. The poems are both dramatically straightforward, as in Aurelia Davidson's poem "Trapped" ("I am trapped / Because I am Black," 51), and quietly contemplative, as in Ebony Tillman's untitled poem: "'Cause the world I wanted / is dead in my hands" (55).

Issues connected to racial injustice and oppression become one of the prominent themes among the young poets presented in this book. In the chapter on *The Voice of Children* workshop co-facilitated by June Jordan and Terri Bush, Conrad shows how the young poets craft the present around racial oppression and violence as it relates to both past and future. I was truly amazed as I read the powerful words of these young poets: for example, Michael Goode's "war war / why do god's children fight among each other / like animals" (128), or the raw imagery in Christopher Meyer's poem: "I watch the ships come / bringing shiploads of people in / doomed to spend their lives / in chains / the whip flickering about" (131).

Another chapter focuses on the literary magazine *Rattle* and their series of annual anthologies of youth-written poetry, particularly *Rattle Young Poets Anthology* launched by the magazine in 2014. By applying recent scholarship on children's rights, Conrad highlights the significance of such a context for young people's participation in literary production. One chapter considers the anthology *Salting the Ocean: 100 Poems by Young Poets* (2000) edited by Naomi Shihab Nye, who has devoted much of her professional drive to young poets through her work as a poet in schools and written or edited poetry volumes for a young audience. These chapters emphasize the importance of providing young people with possibilities to be heard as well as recognizing and respecting the authority, agency, and artistry of young poets, also in classrooms and other educational contexts. Here, Conrad also discusses the contentious issue in identifying and pointing out writers' ages, a noteworthy topic to reflect on.

There are times when Conrad's core arguments are overly recapped, meaning the book occasionally strays into feeling repetitive. Conrad also dedicates a significant amount of space to describing the adult facilitators who work with these young poets. While this is understandable and valuable in terms of context and approach, it nevertheless tends to shift the focus away from the young poets and their work.

Ultimately, though, reading Conrad's book has been a stimulating experience. It is well-written, inspirational, and theoretically as well as methodologically sound. One of its absolute strengths is the large amount of youth-written poetry, combined with Conrad's knowledgeable gaze and unrelenting close attention usually only reserved for poems written by adults.

Time for Childhoods argues for literary criticism that engages seriously with poems written by young poets. Hopefully, this book will reach a wide audience within this field, since it offers several striking points for consideration, while underlining the value of those committed people who facilitate workshops and publishing forums for young poets. I would hope the book reaches this audience as well, in recognition of all the work that is done. Finally, considering the number of young people they encounter every day, I hope this book will find a readership among teachers and educators, as it has the potential to provide them with insights and inspiration on how best to support and encourage young people in expressing their thoughts and experiences.

Conrad makes the literary case for poetry written by young people loud and clear. After all, they might go viral one day, too.

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