

Reconceptualising Voice

An Exploratory Case Study of British Child Migrants (1869–1970)

In my thesis, I have reconceptualised voice as an analytical concept to study marginalised people in history, using the example of British child migrants sent to Canada and Australia between 1869 and 1970. I aim to make a methodological contribution to the study of marginalised figures in history and to expand the historical knowledge about the child migration schemes from a new perspective. The history of childhood and youth as an academic field often deals with how adults saw and treated young people. Where young people themselves have come into focus, agency has been the main analytical category. The agentic individual – rationally and independently directing their path of life – is the opposite of what the child (and, in part, the juvenile) is constructed as in Western society. More recently, scholars have therefore criticised the concept's epistemic value for studying the history of young people. I propose a new concept of voice to fill this gap.

As an analytical concept, voice gained traction in Subaltern Studies with Gayatri Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. Searches for marginalised voices have since been undertaken in various fields of historical research, including childhood history. However, the conceptualisation of voice varies and is rarely clear-cut. Voice is often used as a self-explanatory metaphor for either the authentic self or the democratic empowerment of a liberal subject. I understand voice as a communicative tool of a social being. As a research concept, voice allows for insights into the development of ideas about young people and young people's rights, as well as into how child migrants perceived, navigated and communicated their migration experiences and how they constructed new identities in the process.

I refine the concept of voice in two ways: On the one hand, I differentiate four interconnected transforming processes – raising, recording, archiving and excavating voices – to help understand the different factors affecting each step in the creation of historical records and academic writing, and thus in preserving, amplifying or silencing certain voices. In turn, analysing these processes provides insight into broader social dynamics, such as the construction of childhood and youth as social categories. On the other hand, I attend to the different dimensions and forms of voices: the dimensions of sound, narrative and practice, and the forms of *Mitsprache*¹, speech, singing, writing and bodily performance. Throughout, the analysis of silence plays an important role as a form rather than the absence of voice and as a bearer of information.

¹ I use the German term “Mitsprache” to capture different forms of – often but not only verbal (“Sprache” = “speech”) – participation in a discourse or a decision-making process.

In the chapter *Mitsprache*, I focus on the agentic aspect of voice, which has long been the focus when historians have used the term. I use the example of child migrants' voices in legal and administrative processes to study this aspect. On a historiographic level, I question the dominant, linear narrative about the history of children's rights. On a methodological level, I conceptualise the relationship between agency and voice as research concepts. I demonstrate how ending the search for authenticity and examining voices long rejected as inauthentic or non-agentic enables insight into child migrants' dreams and fears. Examining the role of child migrants' voices in processes of aftercare and institutional oversight helps dissect various levels of silence and explain the discrepancy between assessments of child migrants' wellbeing in contemporary sources and in later recollections.

In the chapter *Letters*, I attend to child migrants' letters as the most common example of written voices. Studying the practices of the production and publication of child migrants' letters reveals multiple levels and forms of silencing as well as selective amplifying of young people's written voices. It also reveals the specifics of epistolary voices, and written voices more generally – arguably the form of voice that is most often studied by historians. Examining the use of child migrants' letters in agencies' advertisement over the course of the twentieth century furthers my thesis – introduced in the previous chapter – that the development of children's rights was actually more complex and contradictory than previously thought. In examining the narrative content and material meaning of child migrants' letters, I study their creation of personal networks and identities. I further discuss the shortcoming of letters as aftercare tool or sources about the problems child migrants encountered.

In the chapter *Speech*, I make a contribution to the emerging field of Voice Studies and establish voice as a triad of narrative, sound and practice. Adding the dimensions of sound and practice enables historians to draw more information from the limited source material at their disposal. The approach allows insight into child migrants' practices and experiences of social stratification, of social belonging and exclusion, and the (per)forming of child migrants' various identities.

In the chapter *Music*, I analyse how studying music can enrich voice as an analytical concept and provide further insight into the history of child migration, drawing on discussions about sound and narrative from the previous chapter. I analyse the various functions of singing, understanding it as both a disciplining tool and an individual expression. Music is one example of how child migration agencies moulded young people's (physical) voices to influence their expressions and their thinking, and to instrumentalised these voices to promote their work publicly. I analyse which established images and preconceptions of childhood, youth and voice agencies could relied on in doing so. Careful analysis of child migrants' singing as an expression provides insight into their emotions, emotional

expressions and emotional formations, into their daily concerns and their various coping mechanisms.

Reflections about the body are enriching for the history of childhood and youth and for considerations about voice. I consider the specifics of the body and bodily practices in relation to voice for the history of child migrants in the chapter *Body*. In the first part of the chapter, I examine ideas about the relationship between body and voice in the nineteenth and twentieth century. In the second part, I discuss bodily performances as voices, attending to patterns of behaviour as well as individual actions. Juxtaposing the practices of escaping and behaving silently, I discuss what I call the “resistance trap”, historians’ one-sided focus on resistance, and add another aspect to the multidimensional and multilevel interpretation of silence running through the thesis. In doing so, I also demonstrate the diversity of child migrants’ subjectivities and coping mechanisms.

My thesis aims at contributing to the history of childhood and youth, the history of British child migration, as well as to methodological debates about marginalised voices in history. British child migrants are the example I use to develop and exemplify a new concept of voice. I hope, however, that it will serve to study all other (marginalised) figures in history.