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What Grown-Ups Aren't Thinking About: A Response to Tran Nguyen Templeton

Wendy Luttrell

City University of New York

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What Grown-Ups Aren't Thinking About: A Response to Tran Nguyen Templeton

Wendy Luttrell

Tran Templeton opens her article “Whose Story Is It?: Thinking Through Early Childhood with Young Children’s Photographs” with a compelling adult-child encounter. Tran and 6-year-old Saloma are viewing photographs taken of Saloma by early childhood teachers in the preschool classroom where Tran taught and conducted her research. Saloma offers a piercing analysis of “grown-ups” who neglect to consider children’s own wishes. “Maybe the people [children] don’t want you to take a picture of them when they’re like that,” Saloma cautions. But it isn’t just that adults are taking pictures that may be unwanted; what bothers Saloma is how we as adults position children in diminutive ways. Tran registers the indignation in Saloma’s voice as the 6-year-old states her objection, “Like they [adults] just think, ‘Oh that’s so cute’ (*makes a shutter noise ‘chk!’*) and they [children] don’t even want you to do that. What about that? Grown-ups aren’t thinking about that!”

How better to honor Jonathan Silin’s lifetime of work and introduce readers to critical childhood studies than to highlight Saloma’s insightful critique? This exchange exemplifies the goal of critical childhood studies, a field that aims to privilege and amplify children’s own perspectives and experiences and treat them as competent social actors in their own right, no matter where they ‘fit’ into child development discourses. Tran’s article beautifully embodies this field of research that requires adults to create conditions of hospitality so that children feel welcomed and valued for who they are, not who they are “supposed” to be according to prescribed norms, standards, and performance measures. And vice versa: as Tran so importantly writes, research in this field demands “deep awareness and reflexivity. ... As an inquiry process, I have to ask into what space children might be welcoming me (or alternatively barring me entry from).”

Tran’s and Saloma’s conversation grew out of a sustained classroom and research relationship in a multiage preschool. Tran gave digital cameras to Saloma (at age 4) and 10 other children (including Jaylen, age 3, who we meet later in the article). The cameras were theirs to take home with the wonderfully open-ended invitation to simply “take pictures.” When the children returned them and felt ready to view their photographs, Tran asked each child to guide her through the images in accordance with their own pace and interest. As part of this conversation, Tran also asked each child to select five images to share with their peers at a group meeting. As she writes, “These opportunities engage both the child who took the photographs, and the children who are viewing the images, in shared identity work.”

Tran generously cites my research and practice of *collaborative seeing* as influencing her study. As described in my book, *Children Framing Childhoods: Working-Class Kids’ Visions of Care* (2020), I gave kids cameras at ages 10, 12, 16, and 18 to photograph their family, school, and community worlds. She and I both turned to photography because

the mobility and portability of cameras facilitates a chance to be welcomed into the emotional and geographical spaces of children's lives. We designed our respective projects to follow the kids' leads, highlighting the connections they made between their own and each other's images, which, as Tran points out, provides glimpses of children's shared identity work. I also sought to maximize the kids' opportunities to be in charge of their self representations (including having them curate exhibitions of their work for teachers and for a larger public).

Tran's article highlights key crosscutting themes that connect the pictures taken and discussed by young people in both projects. Whether at ages 3, 4, 10, 12, 16, or 18, the kids used their cameras to make visible their active participation in care networks. Among the multiple identities and shared identity work these two projects evidenced, the kids each chose to represent themselves as a "caring" and "cared for" child. Through pictures of their homes, family members, and cherished possessions, the kids emphasized their sense of self-regard, family ties, and belonging. Sharing their photographs opened up space for the kids to position themselves vis-à-vis their peers in new ways (as Jaylen did) and to skillfully navigate social differences that could bar entry into peer culture. Examining each other's photographs was an opportunity to *meet* each other on new terms, to establish a sense of worthiness, and to achieve dignity in the eyes of their peers.

Most importantly, the kids did this in ways that could easily be misconstrued by adult viewers, as Tran explains in describing her own initial misreading of Jaylen's iPad. Likewise, the kids in my project both took many photographs of TV screens, video games, and computers. In speaking about their images of screens, the kids seemed aware of adult-centered concerns about screen time, and found ways to defend against negative appraisals. Most often, they emphasized how these new media technologies cemented relationships of care and access to peer culture.

No matter how much careful listening, deep awareness, and reflexivity we use as adult researchers, there are limits to what we can come to know about young people. Tran's exemplary research and writing respects these limits, beckoning us to *meet* children *again and again*, on their terms. Learning with and from children (and for that matter, anyone) is an ongoing process; it isn't a one-off occurrence—which brings us back to how Tran opens her article, inviting Saloma to revisit the pictures she took when she was 4 years old as well as those taken by her teachers. I can't help but wonder whether Saloma would have come to her critical perspective about adults and their (mis) and/or unwanted representations of kids had she not been given her own camera and been treated with such generosity and deep regard for her meaning-making. This way of *seeing with regard* for children is a direct challenge to schooling, which is organized around a quite different way of seeing as surveillance, control, measurement, evaluation, and judgment.

I hope the cautionary title and tale of Tran's paper will linger in teachers' minds: Whose story is it? How are we seeing children? Through whose eyes? With what degree of power, privilege, and authority? Toward what purpose? And with what consequences? To paraphrase Saloma, "What about that?" Can we grown-ups think about that?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Wendy Luttrell is a professor of urban education, critical psychology, and sociology. She is the current executive officer of the Urban Education PhD Program at The Graduate Center, CUNY. Her research examines how urban American schooling shapes and reinforces beliefs about gender, race, class, identity, knowledge, and power, with a focus on how systems of inequality get internalized, especially by learners who have been marginalized, excluded, or stigmatized.