

# Intergenerational Present: Unexpected Proximity in the Adultist Temporality

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## **Abstract**

This work fits the scope of the journal because it addresses the topic of adultism, as the special issue calls for, from an unexplored perspective. Temporality is, probable, one of the most naturalized dimensions of our daily life and it is questioned here from an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach. This conceptual exercise, rendered with some poetics, leads us to the edge of the thinkable in terms of intergenerational relationships: If time is not linear maybe you can make friend of a child.

## **Introducing the Intergenerational Point of View**

*The unexpected is what makes life possible.*

—Úrsula K. Le Guin

*Sitting in the neighborhood park, a woman and a little girl chat while sipping a cold drink from the bottle they just bought at the corner kiosk. They are sheltered from the sun under the shade of a tree, but the heat still hits their skin; they sweat on the sarong they are sitting on. The chatter seems to go in slow motion. They laugh for a while, they grow silent; they slowly leave to protect themselves from the heat of the burning summer.*

*A few meters away, a lady with white hair and calm movements sits on a wooden bench. She leans her walking stick to one side and adjusts her blouse, wrinkled in the hustle and bustle of bending down to the seat. She is also sweaty*

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*and looks fatigued, but her gaze remains cheerful, fixed on an adolescent who walks towards her with her arms outstretched wider and wider to give her a hug.*

Is it possible that these encounters are not familial? Can we imagine a situation in which the woman is not the little girl's mother, aunt, or older sister? Is there any chance that the adolescent is not the granddaughter of the lady with the walking stick? Can they all be friends, companions, confidants?

The forms of proximity between generations have strict scripts imposed on them that limit the ways in which persons can be with one other and push them towards the repetition of a system that prefers them to be isolated, conforming to one another. When it comes to age groups, there are certain classifications that are put into play in a hierarchical way, and so an abysmal distance is created between childhood, adulthood, and old age. It is difficult for us to think of relationships between these groups beyond kinship, not because they do not exist, but because they are silenced by the needs of familiarist capitalism (Federici, 2015; Owen, 2020).

As age studies have pointed out (Debert, 1998; Duarte Quapper, 2016), it is Western society that created discrete separations between age groups and a violent hierarchy of adulthood, as an ideal stereotype of human beings, as opposed to the subsumed childhood-youth—known as adultism or adult-centrism-, as well as the undervalued old age—which is known as ageism. This system of age oppressions, in intersection with patriarchy, colonialism and ableism, not only produce watertight (white and bourgeois) imaginaries of what each moment of the life cycle should be, but also mark what is desirable, expected, and undesirable in relations between generations, reducing the possibilities of intergenerational connection to family and educational frameworks.

In this context, this article proposes to analyze the rules that govern the intergenerational links between adulthood and childhood/adolescence in order to account for the artificial barriers produced at the service of capital accumulation and sustained by temporal mechanisms. As various authors from the field of social sciences (Fabian, 1983; Harvey, 1992; Foucault, 2001) and queer theory (Halberstam, 2005; Love, 2007; Edelman, 2014; Owen, 2020) have pointed out, the notion of Western time is one of the fundamental bases of the regimes of inequality and practices of oppression, in this case we bring this understanding to the analysis of adultism and the way in which it organizes relations between age groups.

Based on the proposal for the democratization of the present made by the anthropologist Fabian in his book *Time and the Other*, this text explores the possibility of forging bonds between age groups beyond the scripts of adultism. In a review of experiences in which children and adults produce the world together at school (*Filosofar con chicxs*, 2018) and become companions (Magistris & Morales; 2021; Shabel, 2022a; Shabel & Montenegro, 2023) and friends (Shabel, 2022b) in social organizations, we investigate on unexpected modes of intergenerational proximity, seeking to expand our political imagination to all sides of the life cycle.

### Adulthood from the Root: Time and Capital

*In the park the woman twists her curls into a bun and lies down. She dozes, perhaps tired from work and the unrelenting heat. The girl stands beside her, playing with two dolls, a bucket and several stones she collected. Her gestures hint at her energy, on vacation from kindergarten. She speaks in a quiet voice, so as not to wake her companion.*

*The adolescent enters the scene, looking for the food truck where she might buy some water. She answers messages on her phone and sends an audio message: "I'll be there in an hour." She appears concerned, but the tension eases on the way back to the white-haired lady, who is looking through some papers in her wallet, the kind that arrive by letter and have instructions and deadlines. The adolescent sits on the bench, and they share the cool drink and talk about a film whose name they can't remember. They laugh at their forgetfulness, until an alarm goes off on the lady's mobile and she explains that it's time to go home.*

The way we organize time in our lives is in some ways out of our control; we maneuver freedom as best we can between calendars, agendas, and the absurd idea that our birth anniversaries are suggestive of who we are. Yet, ages function in this system to indicate what we should be: how much we should weigh and measure, how much education we should have attained and how we should spend our leisure time, what is forbidden and what is permitted, what is desired and what is disposable. These mandates are based on a notion of linear and predictable temporality that organizes the life cycle in successive, differentiated, and predetermined stages, and on which are also founded the concepts of development, evolution, progress and chrononormativity, all rooted in the principle of accumulation that governs capital and which Marx described in a book that is still contemporary.

It was a disciple of Marx, David Harvey (1992), who explained that the capitalist mode of production needed to transform the temporal experience to order the world under its service. This took place between the 16th and 18th centuries, splitting time from space and forging a narrative of universal and objective time, intelligible in its past and predictable in its future. By doing this, history can only be read in one direction, always looking for the new technology or decision that can increase productivity and solve an impending profit crisis. According to Harvey, capital develops and accumulates, or it dies; thus, everyone had to take on the commitment as their own in order for the system to work. This is something that Elias (1997) also analyzed in terms of the civilizational process as the introjection of this temporal model of calculation and production into the rhythms of each subject's everyday life.

Foucault studied this process of creation of productive bodies, disciplined in such a way that maximum profit could be extracted from them in each movement, in each serial exercise that "served to economize the time of life, to accumulate it in a useful form and to exercise power over men through the mediation of time

arranged in this way” (2001, p. 166). The development of productive forces and the accumulation of wealth are once again at the center of a temporal composition around which everything else is compulsively organized. In these new disciplinary societies, time molds bodies at the service of the capital and hierarchies over which they expand. This means that those who do not comply with such temporal patterns are severely punished: they are deemed slow, retarded, and lazy.

This same temporal scheme can be studied in the West’s relationship with the other peoples of the world, whom it placed in a past time of underdevelopment in comparison to the productive Europe, as the ultimate state of developed humanity. As Fabian (1983) explains in his anthropological critique, this colonial operation made of the Others a temporal alterity, an allochronic existence form whom co-evalness is denied. With this, the cultural other became an ancestor and primitive version of the western humanity, which had to recognize the benefits of modernity, subsume itself to it and try to resemble it on a linear path towards progress. The parallel that can be drawn between this temporal hierarchy and the adultist one is evident, so much so that the conquered communities were represented as if in an infantilized stage of human development (Szulc et al., 2023).

This is something that Benjamin also criticized (in Löwy, 2003) when he proposed pulling a handbrake on the train of history, warning against the homologation of the category of time with that of progress, which reduces the relations between past, present and future to a single scheme of hierarchical continuity, in which only what already exists is reproduced and accumulated. This “homogeneous and empty time” (p. 92) has reduced human history to a civilizational teleology in which all violence is justified in order to end the barbarism of difference and, as Le Guin (2022) put it, has destroyed the versatility of narrative genres by making all stories a copy of the path of the hero - always male and individual - who dominates what he touches because he measures time in efforts and successes.

Another of the elements geared to this temporal machinery of domination is chrononormativity. It refers to the naturalization of certain schemes of rhythms of doing, as well as the obliteration of the artificiality of this chronological operative, which generates an essentialization of the passage of time under the imperative of the capitalist reproduction (Freeman, 2010). This naturalization of time produces bodies that desire certain things and are excited by others, each at a specific moment in the life cycle. As various queer writers have pointed out (Halberstam, 2005; flores, 2021), these implicit, but highly effective norms, organize the experience of life into successive, hierarchical stages that designate specific characteristics to each age, ensuring that each decision leads to the accumulation of what is considered valuable in this system: goods, knowledge, offspring. They also drive the age mandates that regulate our experience of life: giving up pacifiers and diapers before a certain age, starting to write and learning addition or subtraction in a certain grade, then finishing secondary school or college, getting married, having children and getting a job to keep capital moving.

Queer theory thus suggests that the stages of progress also produce heterosexuality to guarantee their own reproduction; those who do not identify or behave according to the parameters of the sex-gender normality of each age are accused of having poor development: an atrophied, immature, stunted, queer one. Muñoz (2020) speaks of heterolinerity to refer to a social present where only heterosexuality and reproduction are envisioned as possible horizons of human development, which, we know, has especially violent effects on infants who are hyper-monitored so that they are not detoured from a normalized growth in an alternative queer temporality (Stockton, 2009).

In this context, we arrive at a notion of individual development—physical and psychological—based on the modern matrix of progress, for which the passage of time is understood as advancement, refinement and augmentation, a repetition of selfhood increased in a single sense (Rabello de Castro, 2020). This is a conceptualization coming from biology that permeated both psychology and medicine (and all human sciences) and left subjects at the mercy of experimental measurements, quantifications, as well as social chrono-expectations. Cognition and ability adopted a Western-centered, white, male, and adult model, against which everything else was devalued and subsumed, considered late, slow, or retarded.

From this conception, life is understood as a linear process with a prefixed rhythm, where one stage of the life cycle follows the next, with watertight scripts of the correct practices for each generation and a deep yearning for the accumulation of wealth, titles, and prestige at any cost. From this conception, childhood and youth have been conceptualized as a not-yet developed stage of humanity, a period of preparation for adulthood, as the definitive state of the human because it produces more capital.

In this straight timeline in which lives and bodies are made to fit, childhood and youth have been conceptualized as an incomplete, incapable, irrational period of life, closer to nature than to culture because it is still too raw to participate in the world and is therefore confined to the private world (Zelizer, 2004). Here we find one of the roots of the historical subsumption of this age group, which was denied any kind of agency and subjectivity and removed from the processes of participation in public life, silencing their voices and ignoring their needs (Niñez Plural, 2019; Liebel, 2020). This is where childhood is transformed into a minority age that must respond to adult control – to guarantee the reproduction of the existing in the new generations- and adultism is established as the norm between the ages. How do we twist this relational linearity? What unexpected forms of proximity emerge in the interruption of cumulative time?

### **Accumulative Time in Intergenerational Analysis: Those Who Own the Present Own the Ages**

*The girl climbs a tree, goes up one branch and then another, then sits up above and with a deep joy, looks down on everyone. But then she falls. She cries. The woman jumps up and comes to her aid. People talking in the vicinity look annoyed; they turn away so as not to hear the crying. The white-haired woman does not manage to see the scene because she is already at the other end of the square, moving at her own rhythm and withstanding the grunts of passersby she hears, impatient with her slowness. She arrives ploddingly at the traffic lights on the avenue, the only crossroad that gives her enough time to pass without running and, thus, to avoid the shouts of drivers and cyclists for her to hurry.*

We cannot deny the effects that the passing of time has on our bodies, the marks it leaves and the marks that the experience of having a body and being alive in this world have not yet made. Precisely, what it is about is to return to these effects from a materialism of the flesh that abandons the pre-established for each moment of life and allows us to access what each one of us wants and needs beyond the chrono-mandates. Although it is evident that the process of growing up gives us and takes away possibilities of doing, there is nothing in it that obliges us to generate isolated age groupings, much less hierarchical ones.

In fact, it was not until the expansion of capitalism in its imperialist form that the degradation of childhood was installed as a model for connecting generations. Although it was Ariès (1987) who gave an account of the creation of childhood in Western society, it is Federici who provides us with valuable connections to understand how in the interplay between capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism, the process by which certain bodies have been privatized and their knowledge subsumed to the category of ignorance and blasphemy. In the author's thorough analysis of sources published under the title *Caliban and the Witch* (2015), she exposes the European imperative of separation and hierarchization of adults over children, exported from Europe to the colonies in pursuit of the civilizing process: "The Jesuits' greatest victory, however, was persuading the Naskapi to beat their children, believing that the "savages" excessive fondness for their offspring was the major obstacle to their Christianization" (p. 200).

This fact shows the violence it took to produce the Western age classification and to convince other peoples that childhood was not to be treated as an equal, but as a lower stage, like women in their relationship with men. Federici explains that the conquerors first got men to beat children in public if they did not comply with their orders and, later, did the same to women, as relational models inaugurated in this colonial process. This laid the foundations for the development of capital, which requires inequality and obedience, differentiated and confrontational population groups in juxtaposed binary systems, placed at the service of productivity. Another of the archives the author cites in the book is that of a Naskapi native

from the sub-Arctic north of America speaking to a Jesuit as follows: “You French people love only your children; but we love all the children of our tribe” (p. 199), something the Jesuit mocks him as a fool or a madman. What this exchange shows us is that for Catholic Europe there was only one correct way of organizing social relations, based on marriage and the patrimony of the head of the family, in which the children were included as property.

It is this familiarist model that became compulsory for the whole world, narrowing our horizon of possibilities for interacting between the youngest and the oldest, and producing violence on all bodies. Treating children—and elder—as human beings on an equal footing with adults became a sign of a primitive people that had to be abandoned to make room for the age subordination imposed by civilization. This is how relations between generations became pre-established and severely policed, with specific ways for age groups to talk to each other and standardized styles of proximity (Shabel & Montenegro, 2023). It is our aim to denaturalize this adultist bonding norm in order to account for its artificiality and to bring attention to those intergenerational ties that grow in the shadow of the canon.

This deep critique must, then, expose the temporal mechanisms that have separated age classes, valorizing some more than others on the scale of the human. We use the category of non-coevalness that Fabian applied to ethnic groups to a discussion of intergenerational relations. In this framework of categories that Western society spread with blood and fire through conquest and colonization, the I/we from which time is measured is conceived as the present, always adult, while the children are understood as of the future and the old of the past, unfinished, and deteriorated versions of the productive present. Because “the other is a temporal other, and in a dynamic of indefinite accumulation, the other is the one who loses time” (Dahbar, 2021, p. 64), his or her value is less and his or her group is minorized.

We live with people of the most varied ages, but the effects of the narrative are so profound that we talk about generational alterities as if they still—for children—or no longer—for the old—existed. If, as Fabian (1983) explains, Europe appropriated the present and located non-European others in the past, it also made the present an adult monopoly, relegating childhood to an earlier stage of adulthood, while locating it in the future, an allochronic otherness that must eventually become adult sameness (Stockton, 2009; Owen, 2020) and in the meantime obey it.

In queer theory, the denial of the present for childhood was pointed out by Edelman. In his book *No Future* (2014) he examines temporality and indicates that the figure of the Child, with capital C, condenses the ideology of heterosexual production and reproduction as a promise of increased sameness, as the “telos of social order” (p. 30) and, therefore, a regulatory ideal of adulthood and old age, which must guarantee the straight path towards the prefixed future of those who

have not yet incorporated the social rules. In other words, childhood has become in modern society a hologram of what will be, without any present consistency other than an empty shell in which to deposit the narrative of progress and heterosexual accumulation, something that is also expressed by Berlant (1997) in locating the Child as the ultimate neoliberal citizen.

And this is of no advantage to flesh-and-blood children, upon whom several mandates are unloaded together with a strict curricularization of their practices (Gaitán & Mongui, 2021). These mechanisms seek to guarantee a straight development from childhood to adulthood, without deviations, delays, or suspensions. In this reproductive futurism, as the author calls it, the Child is always the representation of an alien promise and is therefore worth what it will be, completely negating what it in fact is. Another queer author puts it in similar terms:

If childhood is understood as something entirely separate from adulthood, if the idea of the child describes someone who is naive, unknowing, innocent, who is without agency or desire, then it is this construction that renders the relation between adult and child impossible-impossible because the child is so significantly emptied of anything we might recognize as being ontologically meaningful. (Owen, 2020, p. 2)

This ontological void, from which old age also suffers in our adultist societies, is reproduced in other temporal figures that in daily use, fragmenting the present and producing unease between generations. Immaturity, on the one hand, produces the effect of a fractured time, moving people from the present to the past, transforming the childish things into an insult of devaluation and a label of backwardness and delay (Halberstam, 2005; Love, 2007). An immature person is behind the Western age norm and, in its deviation, brings older people closer to younger ones, which is unacceptable for the strict adultism that governs human bonds. Immature adults should be condemned and fixed, and not permitted near children. Precocity, on the other hand, names overtaking as a rapidity that also deforms the life-cycle norm and produces social panic, especially when we speak of children doing things that are supposed to be for adults. Topics such as death and sexuality or actions such as work and politics are off-limits to children who are seen as not yet having the capacity to deal with the reality in which they participate. Thus, the notions of “children without childhood” and “lost childhoods” (Liebel, 2020) are based on those chrononormative (white and bourgeois) ideals of what this stage of life should be—erotic, apolitical, unproductive, joyful, naïve—criminalizing other ways of living it under the accusation of anticipation.

What these historical processes and everyday social mechanisms show us is that the present is in constant dispute; those who manage to position themselves as the true protagonists of time, place themselves above others who, in turn, must submit to them because their time has either passed or not yet arrived. To get out of this logic of competition and oppression, a good strategy is the democratization



of the present for all ages, something that Fabian proposes ethnically, which he names as “The radical coevalness of humanity” (p. 11) and describes as a “shared intersubjective time” (p. 200) to which we must appeal and place in conversation with difference, but on an equal footing. This means recognizing a multiplicity of pasts (no longer a *universal* history of civilizational evolution from Mesopotamia to the Second *World War*) that give rise to a plural present, tensioned by groups that imagine divergent futures, none more advanced or progressive than another.

For the age study that brings us together in this publication, we assume that all generations make the present, therefore, they are all making history and composing the future. Many studies on childhood have been pointing towards this same conclusion, especially those dedicated to the study of children’s political participation (Niñez Plural, 2019; Liebel, 2020; Rabello de Castro, 2020). What we bring with this temporal analysis is a contribution to an argument that, even in adultist contexts such as the Western one, children dispute meaning, twist norms and invent practices that forge the everyday realities of their communities, producing unexpected outcomes for all generations.

This does not mean inventing a beautiful phrase to romanticize the scene. As Fabian says in his study on otherness, assuming a coevalness with others—ethnic or age—is conflictive and requires a laborious exercise both for those who hold the monopoly of the present, and for those who have been excluded and now claim a place on it. Far from seeking homogeneity, the democratization of time is a search for proximity through difference, putting creativity and patience at the service of the project, exploring the arts of translation that forces us into an imperfect conversation with this age other. As Pescetti (2022) says, childhood is a time traveler, a newly arrived foreigner of the present with whom we must learn to bond to make the world a kind place for all generations.

### **Discussion: Interrupting Adulthood with Unexpected Proximity in Latin America**

*More than three years ago, in another square, we all met to support the abortion law.<sup>1</sup> And when it was passed, the celebration was immense, with tears and hugs stretching for many blocks. We invaded the city with our bodies intertwined and there was the girl, the woman, the adolescent, and the white-haired lady. There were high school girls who were discovering for the first time the experience of doing politics on the street and those activists who criticized the idea of a revolution without gender equality in the 1970s. It was a timeless embrace of struggle and it was beautiful.*

Fabian (1983) and feminist and queer theories (Butler, 2006; flores, 2021) share an understanding that power operates by hindering the dialogue between different human groups, generating enmities, competitions and subsumptions be-

tween them. This means that meeting, listening and accompanying each other is a form of resistance, which also tends to work well, especially when we go beyond the scripts that the system has prescribed for such dialogues: “The hope of queer politics is that bringing us closer to others, from whom we have been barred, might also bring us to different ways of living with others” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 254). In Latin America, there have been attempts at unexpected intergenerational proximity, both from practices in schools and social organizations and from theoretical production in the academy, which dismantle adultism from doing with others in a plural present. We emphasize the category of the unexpected, as the participants in the local experiences quoted here mention the fact that the proximities resulting from the practices were not planned, but were merely a question to be addressed.

On the one hand, we bring those experiences that aim to generate non-adultist links from the classroom, as the action and reflection group *Filosofar con chicos* (Philosophizing with children) has been doing. This group uses the notions of the unknown and chaos to circumvent the adultist school order and create new logics. In inventing the rules of a game, one can make desirable that which was unthinkable a moment ago: “It is chaos understood as a condition of possibility of creation (...) Chaos as a moment that gives rise to something new.” (*Filosofar con chicos*, 2018, p. 25) From that disorder emerges the possibility of a horizontal practice between generations. In their publication, this group brings in the category of affective comfort as another fundamental ingredient for making the classroom a space of enjoyment in the encounter between children and adults, giving an age dimension to the thousands of reflections that have been written about pedagogical bonds, something that we have named elsewhere as betraying school time (Shabel and Montenegro, 2023).

On the other hand, the region also has a long history of social organizations in which political struggle takes place within an intergenerational alliance. In these contexts, we have been reflecting on the links between children and adults from the category of political companions in community (Magistris and Morales, 2021) and feminist (Shabel, 2022a; Shabel and Montenegro, 2023) activist experiences. In the Spanish-speaking south, the word *compañera* (companion) is used to describe a shared point of view in a commitment to a more equal world, a shared proximity to the political arena and the collective struggle: “A *compañera* is someone who dreams of something similar to what one dreams of” (Magistris and Morales, 2021, p. 74). For this reason, it is also a term that has been used exclusively by the adult world –with its monopoly on politics. We apply its English translation, “companion” here to designate what happens when adults and children take to the streets together to demand their rights, in defiance of generational norms and the norms that make the politics of the present.

Within the regional feminist movement, intergenerational encounters have become increasingly common, which has widened the possibility of forging companionship between age groups through public demonstrations that generated an

atmosphere were of joy and pleasure: “it is this amount of people occupying the streets and taking over the city that makes a feminist community, it is there where it becomes embodied, where it was possible for the younger ones to be the protagonists alongside the adults” (Shabel & Montenegro, 2023, p. 218). The models of struggle proposed by feminism connects with the process of age democratization that politics needs and opens the possibility of weaving intergenerational friendships (Shabel, 2022b) and meeting with other age groups for the simple pleasure of spending time together.

While not perfect or definitive, these experiences attempt to bring together generations and “break free from the intergenerational bonding model that assumes the conflict and anxiety of influence” governed by adultist mandates. (Halberstam, 2005, p. 180) Having friends and companions—political and pedagogical—of all ages broadens a horizon of possibilities in a world that otherwise looks to replicate itself until reaching a point of destruction. It does so by building bridges between those who hold a different relationship with that world because they have lived in it for more or less time. A gesture of xeno-chronic contact (in Greek, foreigner and time) that proposes the idea of an intergenerational present as a time of radical coevalness, is an opportunity for all ages to make decisions about their present.

This article seeks to add conceptual density to our reflections on childhoods through the study of time as a mechanism for producing distance between ages, and to have a more precise understanding of the functioning of adultism. Likewise, we reiterate Dahbar’s question: “what kind of communities, and under what assumptions of proximities and distances, can be formed in these strange temporalities?” (2021, p. 219), opening a call to create temporal frameworks where it is possible to build democratic encounters between ages, making room for difference and change without violence.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> The Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy Law was passed in Argentina in December 2020 after years of a campaigning and demonstrations for the decriminalization of abortion in parks all over the country. Those in support of the law wore green scarves. The legislative debate that resulted in the passing of the law took place in the National Congress and lasted more than twelve hours. The park in front of the Congress and its surroundings were full of supporters who organized music shows, speeches and collective meals. The massive feminist movement waited for results into the night. In the early hours of the next morning, Congressional votes were counted and the law was approved; the thousands of people gathered outside hugged, shouted and cried with happiness; plazas and parks all over the country became a meeting point for feminist celebration.

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