Beyond Traditional Hierarchies
Creating Space for Children's Literature Collections

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Children's literature collections and their associations with canons and histories pose challenges for contemporary children's literature research, where an emphasis is increasingly placed on diversity and inclusion, as well as on questioning so-called established histories of children's literature. Problems arise when using collections to deconstruct canons or to destabilise established histories: by, for example, shifting the focus to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, we may end up tracing alternative histories and in so doing, potentially – even unintentionally – creating new canons. In this paper, we propose that, in directing the focus away from concepts of linear time, an alternative ›spatial‹ approach to children's literature collections can be facilitated, one that might at once acknowledge and disrupt canons and histories, while also promoting an understanding of the complexities and contradictory natures of collections. Taking a synchronic rather than a diachronic approach, drawing upon theories of space and considering collections in terms of both the physical and the online spaces they occupy, encourages conceptualisations that move beyond traditional histories and hierarchies as well as attempts to delineate, exalt and cohere, and creates opportunities for serendipitous research discoveries.

Introduction

Children's literature collections are inextricably caught up in discourses of canonicity and history. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the limited research that analyses such collections often engages with these discourses, as is evident in the works of numerous critics such as Anne Lundin, Kenneth Kidd and Timothy Young. Many of these scholars have focused on the roles collectors and collections play in the process of canon formation, as detailed in Lundin's *Constructing the Canon of Children's Literature: Beyond Library Walls and Ivory Towers* (2004): what a collector deems collectable often confers value on a text and creates a status for a text within the history of children's literature. However, in her writing on the subject, Lundin also addresses the collaborative processes involved in building and researching collections and argues that collections »are poised to respond to a growing attention to the history of print culture, a new respect for popular culture, and a developing interest in the social history of how culture is produced and received« (1998, p. 309). What is interesting here is Lundin's repeated use of the word ›history‹ and the implication that children's literature collections are inherently bound up in various types of histories: histories of print culture, social histories and histories of children's literature itself. Indeed, much of the scholarship on children's literature collections is underpinned by concepts of history and, by extension, linear time.

As noted by many critics, including Mathew Grenby in his essay »The Origins of Children's Literature« (2009), children's literature history and criticism is obsessed with a search for beginnings or origins. This preoccupation with origins is also found in theoretical discourses of archives, evident in the work of Jacques Derrida, who describes »a compulsive repetitive and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to

return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement« (1996, p. 91). There are distinctive operational practices and standards involved in the acquisition/procurement, organisation and description of the different types of materials for which archival collections and library collections act as repositories; however, the academic study of children's literature collections is directly informed by theories of archives, with the terms ›archive‹ and ›collection‹ very often used interchangeably, arguably as a way of acknowledging that many children's literature library collections encompass materials beyond the books or texts themselves. Texts within children's literature collections often receive attention because of their association with ideas of ›origin‹ or because of their status as first editions. If we were to explore the beginnings of Irish children's literature, for example, we would possibly arrive at texts by James Delap (writing under the pseudonym of ›Philanthropos‹) and Maria Edgeworth held in the Pollard Collection of Children's Books housed in Trinity College Dublin (TCD). Mary »Paul« Pollard identified Delap's *The History of Harry Spencer* (1794) as the first children's text by an Irish person printed in Ireland, and much is made of the fact that an early edition of Maria Edgeworth's *The Parent's Assistant* (1796) – from two years later – is held in the Pollard Collection. However, the problem with this approach, this desire, is that it automatically confers merit on individual texts or persons, usually in terms of originality, and suggests a certain linearity and development from a point of origin. This focus on ›firsts‹ and the significance that is conferred on them continues to encourage traditional readings of collections in linear, historical terms, rather than opening up opportunities for alternative modes of viewing collections.

In his discussion of children's literature collections, Kidd, reflecting on Carolyn Steedman's understanding of ›the archive‹ in *Dust* (2001), emphasises that it is »the fantasy of recovery that drives archives research« – a fantasy that covers up »the irretrievability of the past« (Kidd 2011, p. 15) – while also drawing upon the work of Derrida to forward the argument that the »archive is [also] future-oriented and [not only] past-preoccupied« (ibid., p. 8). Indeed, Steedman also draws upon the work of Gaston Bachelard as well as that of D.W. Winnicott to position the archive as a dream space and as a place of play where, alone in the archive, the historian can dream up a whole world of the past through a simple scrap of paper (Steedman 2002, pp. 80–83). While theories related to origins and linearity can be useful, they can also be (de)limiting, particularly when too great an emphasis is placed on the relationship between an irretrievable past, a fleeting present, and an uncertain future.

Children's literature collections and their associations with canons, histories and linear time pose challenges for contemporary children's literature research, where an emphasis is increasingly placed on diversity and inclusion, as well as on questioning so-called established histories of children's literature. Collections may be used to advance research by deconstructing canons or destabilising established histories, by shifting, for example, the focus to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality. Such approaches are worthwhile and important; however, in the longer term, these processes may trace alternative histories and, in so doing, potentially – and even unintentionally – create new canons.

In directing the focus away from concepts of linear time, an alternative ›spatial‹ approach to children's literature collections can be taken, one that might at once acknowledge and disrupt canons and histories, while also facilitating an understanding of the complexities and contradictory natures of collections (similar to how the work of Franco Moretti has encouraged the use of graphs and maps in an attempt to challenge notions of liter-

ary canons). This synchronic, rather than diachronic, approach draws upon theories of space and considers collections both in terms of the physical and the online spaces they occupy, potentially opening new opportunities for researching children's literature collections and encouraging conceptualisations that move beyond traditional hierarchies as well as attempts to delineate, exalt and cohere.

The National Collection of Children's Books (NCCB) Project

In arguing for a spatial approach to children's literature collections, we draw upon our experience with the National Collection of Children's Books (NCCB) project (2013–2015) in Ireland, and the lessons we learned during and after the project. The NCCB was a two-year interdisciplinary and inter-institutional project, funded by the Irish Research Council, which examined children's books collections in five Dublin libraries: the Church of Ireland College of Education Library; the National Library of Ireland; Dublin City Library and Archive (Pearse Street Library); Cregan Library, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra; and Trinity College Library. In 2016, after the project ended, the Church of Ireland College of Education and St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, were incorporated into Dublin City University (DCU), with their holdings rehoused between DCU's Cregan and O'Reilly libraries. The NCCB project captured the richness of some of the children's literature collections in one city: the Kildare Place Society archives and the Bartlett Puffin collection in Church of Ireland College of Education Library; Trinity College Library's Pollard Collection of Children's Books, with its more than 10 000 items from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century; the impressive children's book collection, containing texts from the eighteenth century, in Dublin City Library and Archive, Pearse Street; and the comprehensive range of texts of Irish interest in the National Library of Ireland and in Cregan Library, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra – the latter holding the Patricia Lynch and Padraic Colum special collections.

In terms of output, the central aim of the project was to create a centralised online catalogue and database of the children's literature collections in one city, Dublin, which would enable researchers, including the public, to search bibliographic information across the five libraries simultaneously. The resulting catalogue includes all children's book titles (currently 256 076), in all languages (currently 95) from the five libraries up to 2014. The NCCB catalogue includes books from named collections as well as children's books found in the host institutions' general catalogues. However, the project also aimed to highlight several texts from these libraries and provide further detailed descriptions of and images from these texts in a database. The focus of this additional database is on literary and educational texts, with particular attention paid to texts of Irish interest or with a connection to Ireland. Currently, the database holds more than 500 English- and Irish-language entries.

While the NCCB project demonstrated the varying ways in which children's literature collections are literary, educational, historical, institutional, cultural, national and international resources, as well as catalysts for contemporary commentary and change, it also attempted to democratise the resources of the five libraries involved by enabling specialists and non-specialists to easily access in one online digital space bibliographic information on disparate and physically separated children's literature collections. Guided by the principles of discontinuity that Michel Foucault discusses in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) and elsewhere, our hope was that the online digital space of the NCCB project / platform would allow for a greater understanding of the fact that collections are

always in a process of becoming, and by complementing and complicating the physical collections, it might transform them into networks of rhizomatic possibilities that have the potential to disrupt the linearities and hierarchies of histories and canonicity, while also facilitating serendipitous research discoveries.

Physical spaces

Although recent work in information sciences has engaged with concepts of space in relation to libraries and archives (Bouaamri / Barátné Hajdu 2022; Eastwood / McNeil 2017) there is no significant research on the role that space might play in understanding and researching children's literature collections. Much has been written on theories of space and how they might relate to texts, to libraries and to institutions; for the purposes of our analysis, the ideas of ›spatialisation‹ found throughout the writings of Foucault offer a particularly useful entry point for an exploration of children's literature collections within the context of space. In his wide-ranging discussion of heterotopias, Foucault makes direct reference to the library as »constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages,« a project of organising that is a »perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place« (1986, p. 26).

Removed from the everyday space, and housed in the sacred spaces of libraries, children's literature collections suggest a way of preserving and exalting children's texts that the real world cannot. This removal also elevates the cultural status of these texts and bestows a ›value‹ upon them – even if that value is simply that they have been deemed worthy of preservation and exaltation. However, in the process of being classified and catalogued by adult librarians, preserved for future use by scholars and researchers, granted unity or connection by being placed under a named or established collection, individual texts are also turned into »something else« (De Certau 1995, p. 74): Texts are always in context – with the sacred spaces of libraries, with the collection they are part of, with the other types of literature they have been divorced from. Nevertheless, by occupying physical spaces in libraries, children's literature collections suggest a tantalisingly elusive sense of origin, permanence and knowing.

Physical spaces and places also play a role in the creation of what Derrida (above) referred to as archive »fever« or »desire.« As is well established by urban geographers, the situation of a university or institution within a city space, for example, attaches value and importance to its buildings and its contents; by extension, a university library that holds a children's literature collection confers on that collection a certain status and value, and, conversely, the fact that a university or institution houses specific collection bestows a reciprocal value on that university or institution – such is the symbiotic relationship between the Pollard Collection and TCD, or the Bartlett Puffin Collection and DCU, both occupying spaces and places in a UNESCO city of literature.

Housed within the confines of specific libraries, children's literature collections often occupy physical spaces that are closed off from the everyday world, behind the walls of a prestigious university or institution, where only a privileged elite – with access to a reader's card / ticket – is granted relatively easy access. This confining, or limitation of access, perversely confers value on a collection, as well as on the individual texts held within a collection. The resulting value attributed to these texts can in turn contribute to canon formation: Because they are held in important places these texts must, by extension, be important.

Although the creation of children's literature collections and the physical spaces in which collections are housed generate not only perceptions of origin, permanence and value but also coherence, any sense of coherence is merely illusionary. Children's literature collections are comprised of different types of texts, which suggests heterogeneity rather than homogeneity: Collections contain texts from various time periods across several centuries, texts from multiple genres and texts targeting infant readers and young adult readers, as well as everyone in between. Similarly, there is a lack of unity when we consider books as material artefacts occupying physical spaces; texts might be catalogued as part of one collection, but individual books are rarely physically unified in spatial terms, scattered in different physical spaces through library stacks and storage. In this sense, a collection rarely occupies a fixed, singular, physical space within a library. A unified and coherent children's literature collection is a myth: it is an imaginative construction; it is only the cataloguing system that unites the texts within a collection, providing a particular kind of order to abstract, ideational content, creating boundaries that set certain texts apart from other texts and, indeed, certain collections from other collections.

Online spaces

In terms of physical space, libraries and collections are constituted territorial spaces that organise the texts within them and the researchers who navigate them. In this sense, these spaces are representative of what Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari theorise in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) as »striated space«: organised space that coerces the individuals who occupy it to think in particularly fixed, ordered, successive ways. Online digital spaces arguably have a greater inherent potential for the disruption of established hierarchies. However, to organise in any space is not only to classify and to cohere but also to limit and to place boundaries, so the challenge is always to find ways or mechanisms to allow for interplay between organisation and disruption. An online digital space like the NCCB platform places traditionally isolated collections side-by-side with other collections, acknowledges that children's literature collections occupy sacred spaces – in this instance the sacred spaces of Dublin universities and institutional libraries – and have consequential value. However, the NCCB platform also simultaneously disrupts traditional unities and hierarchies, opens up access to and knowledge of collections, positions collections in relation to other collections and in the process promotes ›deterritorialization‹. Drawing upon the work of Kenneth Kidd, Lucy Pearson and Sarah Pyke, NCCB is, as explored below, a research resource that facilitates »a kind of constructed serendipity« (Kidd et al. 2016, p. 166).

Approaching the spatial complexity of children's literature collections conceptually in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of »deterritorialization« encourages a breaking down of traditional borders, whether the primacy of the physical space, designations, records, branches or categories. According to Keith Woodword and John Paul Jones, »deterritorialization and the heterogenesis it produces are processes that bring forth socio-spatial complexity that was disguised by the functional and categorical divisions of institutionalization« (2005, p. 240). An online digital space facilitates collections occupying spaces that are potentially, to use Deleuzoguattarian terminology, smoother than they are »striated«: spaces of becoming, spaces that researchers traverse, spaces characterised by greater possibilities for heterogeneity and continuously shifting identities.

Within this context, it is important to acknowledge the individual identities of children's literature collections and the differing ideals, aims, policies and systems of organisation of the various institutions that house collections. For example, the NCCB platform accommodates a range of children's literature collections, from special collections in university libraries to general collections in public institutions. Placing catalogues for special collections alongside general catalogues from public institutions allows researchers not only to identify what can be found within collections but also to note what collectors and institutions have occluded or, perhaps, excluded.

This move beyond the primacy of the singular, physically isolated collection opens up new opportunities for research and understanding; the very process of placing individual collections in one online digital space acknowledges the institutional identity of each collection while simultaneously disrupting apparent unities within individual collections. The myriad search functions and tags on the NCCB platform allow readers to place collections alongside each other, to see, for example, how a single text (or author) is represented across various collections in Dublin, whether it is included or excluded, the edition held and so on. This search function might prompt a move beyond textual analysis and encourage researchers to consider a text within the broader context in which it is found. In turn, a collection might be placed within the context of other collections from other institutions, and these institutions within the context of histories within the city space. Within such discussions, it is important to note that each institution involved in the NCCB project carries the weight of its own history and politics within an Irish context, from St Patrick's College, Drumcondra (a traditionally nationalist and Catholic teacher-training college, now part of DCU) to TCD (a university associated with Protestant Imperialism), and that these histories play a role in shaping our understandings of items and collections. We might ask, for example, why is it that Trinity College Library holds very few children's texts by the Irish Catholic author Padraic Colum, while DCU Library has an entire collection dedicated to his work. Whether Colum's work does or does not occupy an institutional space might be read in terms of the religious and political histories and traditions of those institutions.

In one sense, when access to a children's literature collection is made available online, even if that access is limited to bibliographic records, the physical spaces that a collection traditionally occupies, closed off behind the walls of university libraries or institutions, is no longer as sacred as it once was – if everyone can access knowledge of a collection then the sacredness of that collection is challenged. However, in the absence of the digitisation of the texts themselves, access is, while maybe not illusionary, limited: online digital platforms often simply provide more information on what the public does not have access to, with barriers to accessing physical texts remaining intact. Furthermore, digitisation will not give access to the physical texts themselves; it will only give an illusion of access, in the sense that through digitisation the materiality of a text is removed, a materiality that plays a particular role in a researcher's understanding and knowing of a text. The »desire« of the archive is about connecting with points of origin, and only the physical book allows direct and unmediated access to this point. From a phenomenological perspective, the loss of the physical connection – through touch or smell, not having to wear gloves, or not reading it in a sacred space or reading room – removes this kind of connection and therefore affects discernments of value. To reappropriate Michel de Certau's argument in relation to archives, the issue of employing online digital spaces to open up children's literature collections and texts is »not only one of bringing these ›immense dormant sources of documentation‹ to life, of lending

voice to silence, or of lending currency to possibility. It means changing something which had its own definite status and role into *something else* which functions differently« (1995, p. 74). Therefore, not only is it a question of what kind of online space we might create for a greater understanding of collections, but also of how might our concepts of the collections – and the texts within these collections – shift and change when viewed and understood through online spaces.

What is certain, however, is that when used to complement and complicate physical collections, online digital collections have the potential not only to bring knowledge of and access to collections to a wider audience but also to move towards – to draw upon the organic metaphors of Deleuze and Guattari as elucidated by Stuart Moulthrop:

> a chaotically distributed network (the rhizome) rather than a regular hierarchy of trunk and branches. [...] [T]hese metaphors attempt to displace a language founded on logocentric, hierarchically grounded truth and replace it with an unfounded play of anarchistic, contingent paralogies (1994, p. 301).

How we approach children's literature collections in the future is inextricably linked to what Stacy Allison-Cassin described as the need to move towards a »new conception of ›library,‹ one that has nothing to do with branches, or genres of libraries, or physical spaces at all. It is everything and nothing« (2012, p. 301). Allison-Cassin argues that in the digital age, a »radical rethinking of traditional conceptions of the bibliographic universe, work, text, and information is required if we are to truly have a new vision of ›the library,‹ one that truly approaches and approximates a ›universe of knowledge«« (ibid., p. 295), and she proposes that, although traditionally we »seek to create a bibliographic universe where messages are received with perfect clarity, with the minimal amount of ›noise«« (ibid., p. 303), perhaps we should be creating systems that facilitate the deliberate creation of ›noise‹. Within the context of children's literature collections, it is possible to read the NCCB platform, in some sense, as an example of the kind of »multi-dimensional space« (ibid.) that Allison-Cassin argues is the future of the library, accommodating as it does a central catalogue of multiple collections as well as a discrete database that moves beyond the limitations of the traditional bibliographic information of catalogues, providing researchers with advanced information on and images from specific texts through its database. It is a system that allows for a certain amount of disorder, that creates constellations and that can open up catalogues (and research) »to the possibility of serendipity« (ibid, p. 304).

The simultaneous examination of collections in terms of physical and online spaces creates opportunities to identify the strengths and weaknesses of both spaces. The incomplete nature of either one space allows for a liminal space, in a Bakhtinian sense (1981, 1984, 1986), or a ›border zone‹ where things happen. This is not necessarily a desire for infinite pluralities but for a system of organisation that allows for gaps, for flexibility and for evolution. If, as Allison-Cassin argues, a radical rethinking of the library is necessary, it seems important and timely to begin to conceptualise what future online spaces for children's literature collections might look like and how they might function, especially in terms of supporting advanced research, and to develop a symbiotic relationship between physical and online children's literature collections that might result in greater and more diverse understandings of texts and contexts.

Conclusion

Shifting the focus away from canons and histories and analysing children's literature collections through the lens of space enables researchers to move beyond ideas of origins and linearity and offers opportunities to understand the potential as well as the limitations of collections that inhabit physical spaces and online spaces. Whereas the value associated with children's literature collections was once directly informed by the relationships of these collections to library or institutional buildings occupying a physical space in a city, conferring value is now much more complex. The provision of online digital spaces for physical collections is central to the strategic planning and development of libraries and is often aligned with not only ideas of value but also ideals of democratisation. Before the NCCB project began, the extent and scope of the holdings of the various collections were largely unknown because not all catalogues in the participating libraries were open-access and available online. As a result, material lay undiscovered and under-researched. The project provided a new digital infrastructure, with enriched data and metadata about the collections, that helped open new areas of research. The ability to view and access this information about children's literature collections, and specific items within these collections, has also attracted researchers to Dublin to conduct physical research in its libraries and institutional buildings.

The greater deterritorialised space of online platforms provides access to texts and resources and facilitates a move towards what Julianne Buchsbaum terms »connection development« (2009, p. 4): making children's literature collections more accessible, enabling more individuals from different backgrounds to access them, question inclusions, highlight omissions, problematise selections — thus challenging the status quo of the apparent unity of the physical collection. An online digital space can allow for a certain degree of disruption and for the creation of ›noise‹ by presenting multiple collections simultaneously and allowing for the contestation of authority – particularly in relation to ideas of canons, value, and firsts – and for the exploration of inclusion and diversity without the recreation of hierarchies. Furthermore, an online digital space encourages researchers to move beyond traditional desires for coherence and instead to consider effacement as central to their understandings of children's literature collections. It has the potential to grant researchers an immediate understanding of the development of children's literature in spatial terms rather than according to traditional linear histories, and to open up a series of research possibilities: the migration of authors, the movement of texts across borders, the role of publishers in the creation of specific editions, or how a text might travel between locations or even readers. Linear histories may very well continue to dominate the academic study of children's literature, but spatialisation offers a welcome respite from such approaches, allowing researchers to destabilise fixed notions and disrupt ideas of firsts and origins, to capture a broader picture of continuity and discontinuity in children's literature across collections, libraries, cities and nations.

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