

Preprint version. Please cite:

Barker, Meghanne. 2019. "Dancing Dolls: Animating Childhood in a Contemporary Kazakhstani Institution." *Anthropological Quarterly* 19(2).

## ARTICLE

### **Dancing Dolls: Animating Childhood in a Contemporary Kazakhstani Institution**

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#### **Abstract**

This article shows how marginalized children use performance to animate hyperbolic representations of ideal childhood at a state-run home for children in Kazakhstan. Children growing up in institutional group homes, such as orphanages, are frequently objects of pity and stigmatization. These institutions rely on state and private donations. They compete for continued support with an increasingly diverse field of alternative social welfare programs. Based on observations between 2012 and 2014 at Hope House—a temporary, state-run home (with private sponsors) in Almaty—I examine how teachers socialize children into roles of performing for visiting adults. Their songs and poems solicit affection and ongoing engagement from visiting spectators, who include state inspectors, corporate sponsors, and parents who have promised to return for them. These animations stage ideal versions of childhood: children show their vulnerability, and thus their need for support, but also offer promises of their potential. That is, the children work to show that they require assistance now, but will grow up to be competent adults, despite the perceived threat that early institutionalization presents to their development. As these children take on roles that render them helpless or even object-like, they nonetheless actively participate in inviting and sustaining interaction with and investment from visiting adults. Teachers compel children to recite poems and to dance as puppets come to life, exercising

both care and control. These routines are thus not simply a show for outsiders. Rather, teachers socialize children through repetition and rehearsal. These animations form a crucial modality through which the children develop relationships with adults inside and outside the institutional home. [Keywords: Childhood, animation, performance, postsocialism, Central Asia, institutionalization, marginalization]

## **Introduction**

Teachers arranged the toddlers, clad in green tutus and yellow wigs, on a carpet, which served as their stage in the middle of the playground. With other children and adults arranged around them, the music started. The three- and four-year-old dancers squatted and stood, squatted and stood, as directed by the lyrics of the song. During my second spring of fieldwork at Hope House, a temporary home for children under seven years of age in Almaty, Kazakhstan, the “Dolls” (*Qyyrshaq*, in Kazakh) number was a popular choice for entertaining the home’s frequent visitors, whether they were from government departments overseeing the home, private sponsors, or the children’s own parents. The few children who fit into the green leotards happened to be boys, so they were cast as the dolls and led by a slightly older girl, Dinara.<sup>1</sup> One of the boys spent most of the song trying to shake his curly yellow wig off of his head.

At Hope House, performance served as the primary interactional framework (Goffman 1974) through which children encountered outsiders. Having been placed at the home by their parents—mostly single mothers, who had agreed to resume care by their child’s seventh birthday—the children rarely left the grounds of the home. However, a variety of adults visited Hope House. The home comprised part of a complex field of state and private solutions to the problem of children in need of temporary or permanent care. Children’s performances at Hope

House acted as a site in which child performers and adult spectators all came to share in agency and responsibility. Performances of cuteness—children taking on roles of dancing puppets or dolls—also become sites where children display ability and potential. To achieve cuteness, children convey a vulnerability that draws in viewers to participate in their care—thus distributing sentimental attachment and agency. Children growing up in institutional care, however, should not appear permanently helpless. Showing their potential for future development and autonomy becomes especially important in these performances, as a way to offset stereotyped expectations that they will fail later in life. Children’s performances at Hope House must walk the line between vulnerability and hope, offering evidence that the children need help now, but assuring audiences they will develop along expected trajectories.

In this article, I consider these children’s programs as acts of performance and animation, as they become a primary modality for socialization. I trace child institutionalization in Kazakhstan as part of a wider post-socialist context: while early Soviet utopian visions included institutions for children as ideal sites for achieving social transformation, by late Soviet times, citizens largely stigmatized state institutions and the children growing up in them. State-run orphanages served, in the most optimistic imaginings, as emblems of state socialism’s paternalism. At worst, especially after the end of the Cold War, they were icons of the failings of communism. In post-independence Kazakhstan, such stigma remains. At the same time, an increasingly diverse field of potential sponsors—nonprofit groups and corporate donors—resulted in a proliferation of groups visiting Hope House during my fieldwork to see the children and offer contributions. The result is a complex economy of showing and giving. While the children’s performances act in some ways as a show of gratitude for such patronage, they also

work to prove the fitness of the institution in the face of pervasive concerns about orphanages and similar homes.

This case highlights the role of competing ideologies of childhood in Kazakhstan and how such ideals influence adults' engagement with children at Hope House. Whereas scientists and cultural studies scholars have focused on vulnerability as the key trait that characterizes the aesthetics of cuteness, I argue that we need to attend, as well, to the role of potential in ideal figurations of childhood, as adults expect children to follow ideal trajectories and mark those who fail to do so as dangerous or damaged. Popular sentiment surrounding orphanages, articulated in media and by everyday Kazakhstani citizens, portrays them as creating "bad subjects" (Kulick and Schieffelin 2004), because institutionalized children's potential is allegedly diminished by orphanage conditions. Adults at Hope House use routines of imitation and repetition to make children adept at animating ideal figures of childhood. Such routines might seem, like orphanages themselves, to be outdated remnants of Soviet educational models. They are, nonetheless, intersubjective processes through which children form ties with the teachers who direct them, with their peers as they watch and imitate one another, and with the adult audiences, whose attention they learn to seek and to value.

### **Pedagogical Performance at a Temporary Home**

Hope House was a second home, designed to help children return to their first, family home—as teachers and directors often reminded the children, parents, and other guests (Barker 2017a, 2017b). Parents voluntarily placed them there for at least one year, promising to resume care for them by the time the children were old enough to start school, at age seven. In the traditional, Soviet-era model of "baby houses" (*dom rebēnok*, for children zero to three) and

“children’s homes” (*detdom*, for ages four to 18), children stayed in institutional care until aging out at 18, unless adopted. This system continues in contemporary Kazakhstan. However, the Kazakhstani government created Hope House, along with similar programs, in the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the goal of offering temporary care for children while mostly single mothers worked to improve their financial situations. Bobek, a nongovernment organization (*obshchestvennyy fond*) founded by First Lady of Kazakhstan Sara Nazarbayeva, established the home, along with others in Kazakhstan, though it subsequently came under Almaty Department of Education control. While permanent institutionalization had long been the dominant solution for children classified as “orphans or [those who are] deprived of parental care” (as they were termed in official documents in Kazakhstan), government and nongovernment groups encouraged other options as well, including foster care and family-style orphanages.<sup>2</sup> In the latter homes, children lived in age-staggered groups to simulate sibling relationships. Out of 24,419 children lacking parental care in 2016, 7,236 were living in some kind of institution, while the rest were in foster care or living with a relative. The gradual decline in institutionalization corresponds with an overall slow but steady decline in numbers of children counted by the state as orphans or deprived of parental care in the past several years.<sup>3</sup> A new program creates mothers’ homes for women with young children, each home entirely funded by a different corporation’s social responsibility program. These programs worked in various ways to protect, restore, or simulate that family upbringing in different ways. The underlying assumption of these various alternatives to orphanage care was that families raised children better than institutions could. Nonetheless, these solutions failed to address the broader causes that contributed to children being placed in institutional care, such as the insufficient government support offered to poor, single parents or the lack of space in public preschools, brought about in

part by the closing of many on-site preschool facilities at factories and other workplaces after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Heyneman and DeYoung 2004).

Children at Hope House were grouped with same-age peers, with two teachers rotating 12-hour shifts, giving lessons to the children and acting as primary caregivers throughout the day. Helpers, rotating 24-hour shifts every 3 days, performed various tasks during the day and slept nearby the children at night. Parents could visit Hope House during set hours of the day or for special occasions. Children were not allowed to make short trips home. Teachers went by the title *Apai*, a Kazakh title that follows first names and means “aunt” in some regions of Kazakhstan, but is commonly used in Almaty to express respect to senior women, including teachers. At traditional, permanent orphanages I visited in Kazakhstan, children often addressed all of the caregivers and directors (who were almost all women) as “Mom.”<sup>4</sup>

When caregivers become “Mom,” it would seem that the state, in these cases, works to replace kin networks; yet extended kin networks still play an important role in caring for children, as evidenced by the state’s statistics of kin fostering children. During my fieldwork, I met a few grandparents whose eldest grandchild lived with them for the child’s first few years. They explained that this offered a chance for the young parents to enjoy the early years of their marriage and was part of a larger tradition among Kazakh kin networks engaging in temporary or permanent adoptions. Some Kazakh acquaintances expressed surprise and dismay to learn that most of the children in Hope House were Kazakh, interpreting this as a breakdown of kin networks (cf. Dahl 2014).<sup>5</sup> At the same time, a system like Hope House in some ways follows this wider tradition of a temporary relinquishment of care by a parent—the state acting as a substitute for those extended kin networks, but without replacing the mothers or fathers who wish to resume care.

I came to Hope House to study the children's everyday play to see how they became socialized to understand the world around them. On my first visit, the children donned costumes of baby chicks and mother hens and Kazakh warriors, and they danced—just for me. The directors had heard I was interested in puppetry, so they took me into another room, down the hall, where they set up small benches for the toddlers in front of a puppet theatre. Standing behind a curtain, the six-year-old group animated puppets and stuffed animals for the younger children. Then the directors took me to each classroom to show me the children playing. Many of the children, rushed from the music room so that I could observe them, still wore their costumes as they played with blocks, cars, and dolls.

Once I began my long-term fieldwork, teachers stopped dressing the children up or directing them to perform for me. I aimed to arrive during the children's free playtime, to observe and record it—but I found myself incorporated into the children's play and was sometimes asked to mind them while teachers stepped out. Rehearsals and performances for other guests regularly encroached on designated playtime. These guests were often “sponsors” who offered supplementary support to the home—on top of the state financing—usually in the form of donated objects, from clothes and toys to classroom equipment. These private donations helped make Hope House into an attractive site of which the directors (and the Department of Education overseeing them) could be proud, which then increased the influx of visitors, such as business groups and corporate sponsors, who might bring a photographer or camera crew in order to publicize their philanthropic efforts. At first, during these visits, I often remained “backstage” in the classroom, assisting in costume changes or minding the children not selected to perform that day; later, teachers asked me to video record these performances and to make DVDs for their own records and to send home to the parents.

Almost every morning, the children went down to music class in the middle of the morning to rehearse for upcoming shows. These rehearsals were less exciting to observe than their free play or even their classroom lessons because they were so repetitive, but I eventually recorded several of them, as they revealed the processes by which children came to be more or less successful performers. The music teacher usually modeled actions from the front of the room for the children to follow. The children's success often depended upon attunement with the teacher. They developed the ability to imitate their teachers' bodies precisely (Keevallik 2010, Wilf 2012).

Teachers distinguished between good and bad performers, with the better performers in the front. The ones in the back might be told to stay in their classrooms during performances.

Yerlan, for example, joined the group between my first and second years of fieldwork. Six years old when I met him, he had quickly distinguished himself as the child who got placed in the back for the music lessons. I observed and recorded one day as the music teacher stood at the front and modeled a dance for the children, while the stereo played a song about Almaty. The children sang along, and the movements to the dance consisted of little more than a step to the left, then to the right, and some grand gestures with their arms. Yerlan, however, was consistently a full step behind everyone else. He faced the front at first, his gaze gravitating to the ceiling, and he finished the song with his head completely turned around, facing the large window behind him. For the second song, Ainura's solo, he wasn't even allowed to sit on the sidelines with the other children. Instead, he was sent to the front of the room, to sit beside me. He watched the other children through the viewfinder of my video camera.

Ainura was a model pupil and performer. She held a mic in one hand—the other one was bandaged—and followed her music teacher's lead. The teacher stood in front of her, making

broad gestures, as Ainura sang along to the CD, a song with a melancholy tune addressing a mother and father who have been separated from their child. On the sidelines, the other children sang, too, the lyrics addressing a mother and father far away from them. Yerlan watched through the viewfinder of my camera and instructed me to zoom in on different children. Zhamilia and Nazilia knitted their brows as they sang from the sidelines. Ainura's performance showed her competence, while it also conveyed an undiminished continued yearning for parental care.

### **Animating Figures of Childhood**

At Hope House, rehearsal and performance became dominant modes of children's interaction with adults. A number of factors account for this. The emphasis on children's performance extends from Soviet-era pedagogical modes relying on repetition and recital that continued in many children's spaces. Hope House's location in the business capital of Central Asia positioned it to receive visitors and donations more frequently than institutions in more remote areas in Kazakhstan. In addition to these factors, Hope House's emphasis on performance emerged from a need to prove to outsiders that their children were normal, healthy, or able, in the face of widespread stigmatization. Anthropologists of performance have highlighted how particular racialized or ethnically-marked groups are called upon to perform particular forms of authentic identity which often construes particular groups as anachronistic or timeless, thus justifying their continued marginal status (e.g., Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett on Maasai performances for tourists (1994), Lemon on Roma in Moscow (2000), Wirtz on Afro-Cuban performance (2011, 2014)).

Rather than saying that these groups perform a particular identity, it can be helpful to think of the individual performers as "animating" figures (Manning and Gershon 2013). Taking up Goffman's participant framework (1974) moves away from simple speaker-hearer

dichotomies, opening up interactions—including performances—to a wider range of possibilities in terms of the people or entities involved in what’s happening in front of us. A range of roles might be at work in an interaction: teachers plan and direct the children who animate these roles through their performances. Visitors might blame children’s poor performance (or even appearance) on the state bodies meant to oversee the home or on the parents who placed them there, so that responsibility can extend to absent parties, as well. Roles, of course, can be laminated on top of one another, and the boundaries between roles can be slippery or leaky.<sup>6</sup> When the children at Hope House sing and dance, they might be dressed up as chicks or warriors, but at the same time, they also animate the role of the child as a characterological figure (Nozawa 2013), or what Hastings and Manning (2004:304) have termed “figures of identity” as children. As animators of childhood, the children—and the adults who plan these performances—assert their right to be included as ideal figures of childhood, assuring spectators that they are on the correct trajectories expected in terms of their growth and development.<sup>7</sup>

Anthropologists of childhood have noted the ways adults often place children at the periphery of both society and social analysis. Kromidas (2014) argues that the natural and social sciences have placed children outside the porous boundaries of the human, treating them as a particular kind of savage whom society will tame. The marginalization of children—as with other groups—can come out of disregard or devaluing children, but also result from fear, whether this fear is of “evil” children themselves (Moore 2004:739) or of the risks and responsibilities involved in developing a relationship with a young, vulnerable child. Stasch (2009) describes Korowai memories of past practices of infanticide, alongside ongoing descriptions of young children as demonic, to argue that these occur despite—or because of—the emotional investment Korowai adults put into rearing children.

In an overview of anthropology of childhood, Lancy (2008) outlines three dominant ideologies of childhood across different historical or cultural contexts: children as pure and innocent (“cherubs”); children as commodities (“chattel”); and children as liminal and even dangerous (“changelings”). In an effort to de-naturalize conceptions of childhood presumed by some white, middle-class American researchers, Lancy points out the exceptionalism of the ideology of children as innocents in need of protection. Nonetheless, seemingly disparate ideologies of childhood can exist alongside one another. American popular culture also offers examples of demonic children, such as the 2009 horror film *Orphan*, about a little girl adopted from Eastern Europe who turns out to be a sociopathic killer (dir. Collet-Serra). In the case of Hope House, children get treated at different times as innocent, as object-like, and as dangerous.

Ideal figurations of childhood in contemporary Kazakhstan are in many ways an outgrowth of Soviet images of happy childhood as a sacred space (Kelly 2009). However, certain children end up excluded from the myth of the innocent child, as Bernstein (2011) points out regarding black children in American culture. In the performance of ability and normality at Hope House, the children share certain struggles faced by stigmatized, racialized, gendered, and class groups, in terms of limited rights and expectations of ability. An important difference between childhood and other classifications of people is the temporal dimension of childhood: All children eventually become adults, and might someday have children of their own. Children anchor ideologies of futurity and hope, tied not only to individual children and their families, but bearing implications for the future of the nation, more broadly.

### **Tropes of Showing at a Total Institution**

Before I came to Kazakhstan, seasoned academics of postsocialist Eastern Europe warned me that it would be difficult or impossible to gain access to a state orphanage. In early trips and in an exploratory trip to Romania, representatives from local and international organizations agreed that orphanages were often wary of outside visitors. The bureaucratic process of gaining permission from the Department of Education to conduct my research was slow and required having the right connections to push my petition through. Nonetheless, the directors at Hope House surprised me with their immediate support of my research there. The director insisted more than once that they had nothing to hide. They welcomed guests all the time.

Hope House meets Goffman's (1961) definition of a "total institution," insofar as it offers a single space for all of its residents' activities—work, leisure, and sleep—and thus stands in tension with the outside world. However, Goffman doubts whether orphanages should be included as such a site because he assumes children can know too little of the outside world for such tension to arise. At Hope House, most children arrived too young to have retained detailed memories of their first year or two at home with their families. Caregivers, however, cultivated an ongoing tension by reminding children of their future return to their family homes. In the meantime, the complex field of visitors coming and going created daily reminders of the outside. The Department of Education paid for Hope House's main expenses—providing the building, food, and the staff's salaries—but most of the clothes, toys, and classroom equipment came from private donations, whether from volunteer organizations or corporate sponsors. Besides visits from family members, Hope House hosted visitors from state and private organizations. Teachers described them in various ways, as "sponsors," "volunteers," or "students," but often didn't know which organization or university they came from; the children tended to call them all "guests" (*konaktar*, in Kazakh). Lessons ended abruptly, naps were delayed, and excursions were

canceled in order to accommodate these guests. The home's attitude of welcoming guests fit with wider notions of Kazakh hospitality that adults were keen to impart on the children.<sup>8</sup>

Hope House's enthusiasm for children's performance fit the wider aesthetic landscape of Almaty, which prided itself as a "child-friendly" city.<sup>9</sup> Child-friendly aspects of the cityscape ranged from brightly-painted playground equipment in the yards (*dvor*) of Soviet-era apartment buildings to restaurants offering free art lessons to children on Sunday afternoons (while their parents, presumably, would consume food or drinks). The aesthetics of childhood, while increasingly commercialized by new shopping centers, formed part of the city's public spaces. Children did not only perform at institutions like Hope House but all over Almaty, on outdoor stages for holiday celebrations and in shopping malls for pageant-style child model searches. At children's theaters in the city, "animators" warmed up the children by leading them in games and dancing. They would also call upon the children to perform, asking, "Who can recite a poem for us? Who will sing a song for us?"

When I mentioned the focus on performance to friends from the former Soviet Union who were reared in the US or to parents who had lived in the US and Kazakhstan with their children, they would often remark that the whole thing was simply "very Soviet." Rockhill (2010), in her ethnography of institutionalization of children in the Russian Far East, argues that, well into the 21st century, Russians continued to emphasize the public, collective goals of *vospitanie* (rearing, education, or upbringing) over private, individual notions of the word. On the one hand, this meant that social goals dictated individual goals of children's upbringing, according to Rockhill. Childhood itself was part of public life in Almaty and political imagery in Kazakhstan. These routines of performance fit into larger historical and regional trends in propaganda showing children in intimate relations with paternalistic state leaders, from messages

over nursery doors reading ““Thank You Dear Comrade Stalin for a Happy Childhood!”” in the 1930s (Kelly 2005:207) to billboards of President Nazarbayev surrounded by children that I encountered around Kazakhstan during my fieldwork. Such imagery contrasts starkly with the daily struggles of children and families in both contexts. Rather than a deep chasm between image and reality, however, children came to embody ideologies through routines of pedagogy and performance. Lessons on citizenship at Hope House ensured that, by the time they left to live with parents and begin first grade, children could sing patriotic songs, identify on a map the capital city of Astana, along with several other major cities in Kazakhstan, and name the major natural resources found in different regions.

While there was a certain amount of continuity between traditional Kazakh values of hospitality and Soviet emphasis on the public nature of children’s upbringing, there were also signs that Almaty was changing in ways that had profound effects on parents with young children in the city. Scholars of urban space in Kazakhstan have noted how the built environment fostered particular affective attitudes of citizens towards new, “cosmopolitan” landscapes (Bissenova 2013). Many citizens have experienced these changes as engendering uneasiness (Buchli 2007) or “longing” for a state that citizens see as having abandoned them with dramatic welfare cuts at the end of the 20th century (Laszczkowski 2013). Much of the new urban landscape has emphasized, for locals, the increasing distance between the state and its citizens, and between citizens and state visions of the nation’s global future (Alexander and Buchli 2007, Koch 2014).

The new capital city of Astana has garnered attention for the dramatic changes it has seen since it became the new capital in 1997, but more subtle changes in Almaty seriously affected citizens’ lives, nonetheless. Along with rising costs of daycare and private preschool due to

public preschools' closing, new commercial spaces designed to attract children and their parents offered evidence for the ways the city was becoming an increasingly expensive place for parents to raise a child. It was in this context of greater socioeconomic stratification that Hope House was founded in the 1990s, as a way to prevent the long-term institutionalization of children in traditional orphanages by caring for them temporarily.

### **Making Children (Who) Perform**

In some ways, the institution's focus on children's performance fit right into the post-Soviet landscape of childhood in Almaty. Yet, as I spent time in other preschools in the city, I found that the frequency with which the children at Hope House performed made for a qualitatively different daily routine and influenced the children's relationships with adults in significant ways that I outline below. On one hand, it made sense that orphanages, holdovers from socialism, would be ideal sites for the preservation of Soviet pedagogical practices. On the other hand, Hope House's dependence on an increasingly diverse field of patrons created a uniquely post-Soviet situation of having to perform for more and more visitors. Moreover, this dependence on, and scrutiny from, spectators from public and private entities distinguished performance at Hope House and similar children's homes.

Tropes of performance infused Hope House's preschool classrooms as well. Every few months, teachers and directors would plan and carry out "open lessons," a common practice in Soviet and contemporary schools in Kazakhstan, though it seems less preparation goes into open lessons at schools than at Hope House. On open lesson days at Hope House, the teachers and directors would spend the morning visiting three different classrooms, where the selected teacher in each room would provide a sample lesson. A few months into my fieldwork, Aigul' Apai, a

teacher in my group, got the idea to model her upcoming lesson after a children's game show that the class sometimes watched on television. She prepared questions for the children in a range of categories, arranged the questions and categories on a board (cf. *Jeopardy*), and had me videotape different teachers around school asking the questions so that she could play them back during the lesson. Aigul' Apai rehearsed the lesson with the children several times, using many of the same questions she planned to ask during the lesson.

After watching three open lessons from different teachers, the teachers gathered and offered critiques of each. I witnessed some harsh feedback sessions, with the strongest rebukes coming from directors. They sometimes criticized teachers for not having the appropriate energy level for their age group, for not making full use of the potential materials or technologies, or for having chosen the wrong profession. I never saw any such reproach directed at Aigul' Apai, who was held up by directors and fellow teachers alike as exemplary of what a "creative" teacher should be. This was despite the fact that many of her lessons included tasks that hardly offered children the chance to express themselves creatively in the ways Western pedagogues might expect—with "open-ended" toys or activities. For the game show lesson, the children practiced sitting with hands neatly folded on the table in front of them and answering questions that had definitive right and wrong answers. For her open lesson in art, she assigned pictorial genres, such as portraits (*portret*) and landscapes (*peisazh*), and children used watercolors to recreate pictures they had painstakingly practiced beforehand.

With open lessons, as with the children's songs and dances, the teachers designed and directed these performances and the children executed them. This raises a question regarding the extent to which we can consider such lessons and performances "creative," when the children have very little input into what they say or do. Such activities are, in many ways, a far cry from

the kind of child-centered classrooms proliferating through the globalization of early childhood education (Ahn 2015), or even the creative styles that Chinese art students attempt to cultivate (Chumley 2016). Yet, as Wilf (2012) has argued, repetition and copying are sometimes necessary steps to achieving creativity. These lessons, like the performances, not only showcase abilities or ideas but also shape the social relations within which they unfold. As Nauruzbayeva (2011) has noted, Kazakhstani artists' choices regarding styles and subject matter are inextricable from political and economic questions, as paintings of prominent leaders align artists with the political elite. At Hope House, endeavors that take on a theatrical character might lack the spontaneity of the children's free play, but they are creative in the sense of being productive, acting as a key node for social relations between children and a range of adults.

These routines that socialized children as performers (Ochs 1990) also cultivated child-teacher relationships. Adults working with the children at Hope House exercised care, as well as control. Engaging the children in actions of imitation and repetition, they still created intersubjective encounters that relied on joint attention (Kockelman 2006). In teaching children spoken lines, the teacher or speech therapist adjusted pace, volume, and content, not moving on until the child had gotten it right. Teachers sometimes complained when performances for outsiders disrupted the children's eating or sleep schedules. Other times, however, they planned programs even when they expected no visitors, and the teachers donned costumes and performed alongside the children. If I missed a performance they had found to be particularly enjoyable, they would remark what a shame it was that I had missed it. Performance at Hope House—and, I would argue, performance in many contexts in Kazakhstan—became not only a way for children to display ability, but also acted as a modality for children's interactions with adults, whether

adults held the role of initiating the children's performances, viewing them, or some combination of the two.

### **From Bad Performers to Bad Subjects**

As children came to spend more time at Hope House, they became more competent, disciplined performers. But some were better than others. In their daily lessons, Ainura and Yerlan often sat together at the front, albeit for different reasons. Ainura was to act as leader for the other children, raising her hand to answer questions and passing out workbooks. Yerlan was at the front so that teachers could keep an eye on him. They sometimes held his hand while addressing the group, offering extra affection and attention to him, while also working to control his wandering eyes and hands. Yerlan had come to live at Hope House with his brother before his second birthday. He was new to this group, though, another group having been recently dissolved. The teachers had all found Yerlan and his brother too much to handle together, so they had been separated. Teachers cited Yerlan's inability to focus as an outcome of his fraught relationship with his mother.

Rather than accepting this explanation of Yerlan's behavior as resulting from an inner psychological issue, however, I want to use the example of Yerlan to think about the relationship between children's institutionalization and expectations of such children to perform for adults. Marginalized identities can form through classroom dynamics and harden over time (Bucholtz et al. 2012, Wortham 2005). In the case of Yerlan, however, teachers seemed aware of his likely marginalization and were working to keep him from it. Teachers worried about Yerlan throughout the year. His inability to perform effectively in the classroom, during music classes,

or on stage, indexed (or pointed to, cf. Ochs 1992) deeper emotional issues and put him at risk of becoming a “bad subject” in the future.

Kulick and Schieffelin (2004) have argued that in studies of language socialization, we should look not only at the development and reproduction of normativity, but that we must also consider the possibilities of the emergence of “bad subjects” (Althusser 1971:169) as those who have defied expectations and norms or failed to learn them. Instead of treating such subjects as anomalies whose deviant behavior must be explained by psychology, rather than anthropology, Kulick and Schieffelin advocate exploring the “dual indexicality” of socializing utterances. The expression of a norm simultaneously manifests the inverse (Kulick and Schieffelin 2004, Kulick 2003). By constantly insisting that they had “nothing to hide,” by emphasizing in speeches that the children would be going home eventually, and by stressing to outsiders the fitness of the children who lived there, representatives of Hope House showed off their facilities and children, while simultaneously acknowledging that family upbringing was preferable to institutionalization.

In speeches at Hope House, directors and visitors alike invoked discourses of “hope” as existing on individual, family, and national levels. Adults lauded children as the future of Kazakhstan; but many local and international representatives of groups working on children’s rights found orphanages to be undesirable “scraps” of their socialist past (Laszczkowski 2015). Adults in Kazakhstan concerned with issues of children’s welfare—especially international organizations working in the region—characterized orphanages in Kazakhstan as outdated remnants of their Soviet past.<sup>10</sup> Some international organizations worked to improve conditions within them; for example, the SPOON Foundation works to improve the nutritional content of diets in orphanages in Kazakhstan and other parts of the world. Others, such as a representative

from UNICEF whom I met in 2010, held that improving the system would only help to sustain it. They believed, instead, that the state should be doing more to close orphanages and to promote domestic adoption and foster care—practices which were slowly gaining popularity. These tensions reveal that discourses of children *as* the future often fail to specify *which* futures certain adults envision, and whether or not all children will be able to experience Kazakhstan’s future in the same way.

### **Between the Orphanage and the Family Home**

Hope House presented a compromise between family life and institutional life for children, emphasizing the superiority of family homes by building up children’s anticipation of their return to their mothers. At the same time, Hope House offered an institutional solution. It was, after all, a state-funded group home with children sleeping in bunk beds in same-age cohort groups. On a structural level, it looked much like traditional orphanages. Such orphanages served to epitomize the tropes of socialist coldness and social and material lack that dominated Western depictions of socialism through the 1990s. Cold War stereotypes typified Eastern Bloc landscapes as “gray,” this seemingly dull qualifier actually loaded with multiple meanings (Fehérváry 2013). Lemon’s discussion of Cold War tropes of contact and gaps highlights how senses and sentiment get collapsed or conflated in meta-descriptions of places and people, so that discourses of material lack in the Soviet Union come to stand in for emotional coldness or distance to outsiders (2011, 2013, 2017). Moreover, insiders take up outside characterizations, despite other descriptions of Russians as exhibiting extreme depth of soul or emotion (Pesmen 2000, Oushakine 2009).

Throughout the 1990s, postsocialist orphanages gained widespread media attention in the West. Mass media reportage of abuse and neglect in orphanages and in homes for children with disabilities offered images of “waiting children” (Cartwright 2005) to viewers, these children ostensibly yearning for Western parents to swoop in and save them through transnational adoption. Adoptions from Kazakhstan to the United States peaked in 2004.<sup>11</sup> Before I visited Kazakhstan for the first time in 2010, I met adoptive parents in the United States who appraised Kazakhstani institutions quite positively, which contrasted with predominant depictions of Romanian and Russian orphanages. This motivated me to choose Kazakhstan as a field site. While organizations pushed for the Kazakhstani government to increase domestic adoptions, local skepticism surrounding adoption came not only from stigmatization of the children available for adoption, but also from stories of adoptions gone wrong in international cases. During my long-term fieldwork, Kazakhstan maintained a ban on international adoptions to the United States specifically, following a series of scandals surrounding the adoptive parents’ treatment of adoptees (Lillis 2013) and alleged failure to comply with follow-up reporting procedures.<sup>12</sup>

People I met in Kazakhstan during my fieldwork did not expect children growing up in orphanages or other homes for children to succeed, for various reasons. In addition to television and newspaper reports on such institutions that appeared in the 1990s in the United States, researchers of child development also turned their attention to such sites to study the effects of institutional conditions on children’s mental, physical, social, and emotional development (e.g., Nelson et al. 2014, Rutter et al. 2007, The St. Petersburg-USA Research Team 2009). While this research works to improve the lives of the children they study, it also reinforces stigma attached to institutionalization by stressing the impaired abilities of children relative to never-

institutionalized peers. These studies and reports initiated by American and British psychologists have often been carried out in collaboration with local researchers and have prompted changes in local policy. Classifying them strictly as “Western” views of the region risks overlooking the ways such reports and studies affect local perceptions and reactions to institutionalization.

In many regions, stigma accompanies a child’s designation as “orphan” (Freidus 2010, Hunleth 2013), their images bound up in local and international discourses regarding kinship ties, need, and aid (Dahl 2014). In Kazakhstan, it was less the designation of “orphan” (*syrota* in Russian, *zhetim* in Kazakh) that anchored discourse surrounding institutionalization and child welfare, as much as *detdomovets*—from the common local term for orphanages, *detdom* (from *detskii dom*, “children’s home”). This marginalization contrasts with early Soviet plans for children’s homes: Bolshevik leaders viewed children’s homes as having positive transformative potential for all children, not only orphans. Children’s homes, or even “children’s villages,” would save the new generation from the backwardness of family upbringing to create new Soviet citizens (Mally 1990, Kirschenbaum 2001). As war and famine created an overabundance of children in dire need of care from the state, however, children’s homes became desperately overcrowded. The state not only reversed their plan to “save” children from their “backwards” parents; they also began to implore families to take in others’ children to help with this crisis of children in need of care (Ball 1994, Stronski 2010). Children growing up in overcrowded orphanages during this time would later remember enduring hunger that made them feel more animal than human (Green 2006). While conditions in Soviet institutions improved after the end of World War II, children living within them became increasingly stigmatized. People assumed that parents had abandoned them because of some deficiency the child exhibited or because the parents themselves suffered from some marginalized position (Kelly 2007). The stigma

connected to people who placed their children in such institutions became the stigma of children residing in them, even if common causes for placing a child in a home included poverty or social condemnation of single mothers.

Negative stereotyping of *detdomovci* continued during post-socialist times. Within Kazakhstan, people, including those who worked in children's homes, spoke of growing up in an institution as disadvantageous to children. Part of the problem, they claimed, came from the children's limited experience in the outside world, but another contributing factor was that children had to contend with outsiders' prejudices against them. In cases where orphanage children went to school with non-institutionalized children, parents worried about the children stealing from or negatively influencing their own children. Another common stereotype—held even by some adults who worked with *detdomovci*—was not that these children were dangerous, but rather that they were too sheltered. Having been brought up in a system cut off from the outside world, they argued, the children didn't know how to do anything for themselves when they got out. Such children were only capable of institutional life. *Detdomovci* would, according to this stereotype of them, ultimately end up back in institutions of other sorts—whether in the military, prison, or mental hospitals.

These stereotypes of post-institutional children failing to integrate into life outside of the institution often work under the assumption that their upbringing was the sole difference between them and their never-institutionalized peers. However, as Rockhill (2010) points out, children “graduate” from children's homes or similar institutions into the adult world at a time when others their age are still relying on their families for support. In Kazakhstan, young adults who have just finished high school will often continue to live with their parents or receive financial assistance from them if they go to another city to study. Children graduating out of a children's

home technically have a right to some kind of housing, but the bureaucratic process is complicated, and they often struggle to navigate it. Descriptions of orphanage graduates as less capable than their non-institutionalized peers, then, might be misleading or overstated, as institutionalized children are not entering the world on a level playing field.

### **Sponsoring Spectators**

As local and international NGOs advocated domestic adoption and foster care, Hope House and other group care facilities risked losing state and private support in favor of other care options. Evidence of children's thriving in these homes, publicized through performance, acted to reassure sponsors that Hope House was indeed a worthy endeavor. The material landscape of Hope House differed strikingly from dominant portrayals of socialist-era orphanages as dilapidated or sterile environments (Fujimura et al. 2005, Rockhill 2010). This emerged most clearly in the costumes and play clothes donned by the children when they had guests. The clothes, donated from sponsors who had visited in the past, were all brightly colored, boasting cheerfulness and newness. Guests ranged from students at a local pedagogical university putting on a skit for the children, and then offering goodie bags of coloring books and fruit, to representatives of multinational corporations, donating expensive audiovisual equipment. The relative material wealth of Hope House likewise meant that the directors and teachers were eager to show off their facilities and the children who lived there. The director boasted to me that their classrooms were nicer than most public preschools in the city.

The majority of children's contact with the "outside" world at Hope House consisted of interactions with state or private donors, whether through representatives' visits—where children invariably performed—or through children's far less frequent visits to parks, theaters, or

shopping malls. In aligning themselves with the politically powerful, artists risk accusations of inauthenticity, or of having been “bought” (Dubuisson 2013, Rogers 2006). Sponsorship creates certain responsibilities for these donors, creating a relationship that gives rise to risk on both sides. On the one hand, children often seem to represent an uncontroversial group for donations, as discourses surrounding childhood seek to de-politicize it through descriptions of children as innocent and of childhood as a universal human right (James and James 2004). However, children’s homes—traditional or new—were not the only possible ways to invest in childhood, for private sponsors or for the state. By the end of my fieldwork, teachers at Hope House worried about the future of the home, and of their jobs, as state representatives were telling them that there should be no children’s homes in Kazakhstan. The children at Hope House bore some responsibility for engaging sponsors and the state to convince them to continue to invest in the future of Hope House.

My fieldwork left many questions unanswered regarding who these sponsors were, what motivated them to visit Hope House, and what impressions the children made upon them. I lacked permission to engage with visiting outsiders and worried that pressing for these interactions might threaten the permission that had already been difficult for me to obtain. However, my own lack of knowledge about these sponsors is a reflection of the children’s and teachers’ own vague understandings of them. When I would ask teachers who these visitors were, they often didn’t know. Even when the visitors themselves consisted of young people who had come to perform *for* the children, teachers simply supposed that they were students of some sort. Important guests often arrived late, keeping the costumed children and nervous teachers waiting in the classroom to be called into the music room, and left soon after having passed out their gifts and having their photographs taken with the children.

## **Animating Ideal Childhood: Vulnerability and Potential**

Ideologies of childhood in Kazakhstan—as expressed through these performances and in other aspects of public life in Almaty—celebrated a combination of vulnerability and ability, the proportions of which shifted as children got older. Writing on cuteness—from both scientific and cultural studies perspectives—has stressed how people project helplessness, vulnerability, and passivity onto objects, animals, and humans whom they perceive as “cute.”<sup>13</sup> Kazakhstani children’s culture still features many of the popular figures of Soviet visual culture, including Buratino, a Soviet adaptation of Pinocchio (Tolstoy and Collodi 1943[1936]), and Cheburashka (Uspenskii and Solin 1998 [1965]), a popular late Soviet puppet animation. Both characters occupy a tenuous position between animate and inanimate. At Hope House, children often dressed up as cute objects that had come to life, such as in the dancing dolls. The toddlers imitated an object animated by the song, but the dance required them to move stiffly, as if they were wind-up toys that lacked a full range of movement.

Cute faces, moreover, offer a certain semiotic blankness, which invites the viewer to project emotions onto the face (Silvio 2010). Hello Kitty’s missing mouth is a commonly-cited example of this, with Sanrio’s “Frequently Asked Questions” page explaining that the absence of mouth is part of the character’s “openness of heart.”<sup>14</sup> If the cute face invites projection, it becomes doubly passive—construed as weak by the viewer and as agentless even in inviting such projections.<sup>15</sup> The dancing dolls at the beginning of this article offer an example of the ways men and women in suits, representing larger business groups, would come to make speeches about hope and childhood, to clap and smile at the performances, and to have their pictures taken with the children. Then they would leave. At a young age, children became used to being picked

up by strangers for such photo ops. The children's cuteness—their vulnerability and malleability—in part indexed a lack of agency in the sense of having little flexibility or accountability (Enfield and Kockelman 2016), but it also served as a resource in securing sponsors' continued engagement.

As cute and helpless as the children may have been, performances also highlighted their abilities. Teachers and directors worked to show that the children were happy and healthy, in need of sponsors' support but also assuring them that the institution was functioning and that the children were growing and learning. People describe cute objects as “childlike,” highlighting iconic similarities between stuffed animals and toddlers, but one important difference between cute objects and cute children is that children are supposed to grow up. Adults expect children to develop, to get larger, and to become less dependent on adult care for survival. I refer to this aspect of ideal childhood as a display of “potential” because what children work to show is not always an index of current ability or normality, but rather a promise of future ability. This places them on the road of expected human development, in contrast to studies or stereotypes that predict less desirable outcomes.

### **Audience Feedback (and its Lack)**

A rare instance in which I was made privy to the negative evaluation of a visiting outsider occurred at a different children's home, a more traditional orphanage. Two groups were visiting that day—a group of Korean youths and a group of local volunteers. First, the Korean group performed a dance routine to English-language Christian rock. Next, the children at the orphanage, dressed in costumes, sang and danced for their visitors. After the kids performed, we went inside for lunch. We were given a tour of the children's rooms, and they held up their

favorite toys for us to see. In the cafeteria, I sat with the local volunteers at one table; the children sat a smaller table next to us. One volunteer, a young man keen on practicing his English with me, pointed to the children and said, “You know, these kids here, they’re wolves.” When I protested, he insisted that although the children might seem nice now, they would become fiercely competitive when playing games and would show that they only cared about winning.

It was a rare and extreme assertion, yet it marked a convergence between the children’s performance and stereotypes that children of such backgrounds could not be trusted, that they were not what they seemed, and that they had something to hide. We can find ample evidence of fascination and fear regarding the dangers of improper socialization, through stories of “feral” children and violent institutional conditions in Russian and English-language film and television. Many of these Russian-language television news programs about children with “Mowgli Syndrome” (*syndrom maugli*) link children’s neglect—being left to socialize more with dogs, birds, or sheep—to broader social problems, such as alcoholism or abandonment by parents in search of employment elsewhere. Such cases, along with descriptions of orphanage graduates as incapable of living independently as adults, serve as extreme cautionary tales, the ultimate bad subjects of stunted development that pedagogues at Hope House and other institutions needed to prove their children would not become. Performance was a useful way to show that children were capable. Nonetheless, such showings of normality, ability, or potential were not immune from raising doubts in suspicious audience members.

The interactional frame of the performance both ensures greater consistency of the children’s behavior and opens them to scrutiny from visitors (Bauman and Briggs 1990). Interactional norms of visitors playing the role of spectators, moreover, meant that while the

children's performances invited visitors' evaluation and approval, audience reactions mainly appeared in the form of polite clapping. Who these sponsors were, exactly, or what they thought of the children, mostly remained unknown to teachers and children alike. Teachers cited mounting pressure to show the Department of Education that they merited continued funding. As much as they distinguished their home, Hope House often found themselves grouped with orphanages as another version of an outdated system. Earning their approval required a delicate balancing act. Hope House needed to show sponsors that the children needed their support and at the same time offer evidence of children's increasing abilities, as a promise that these cute residents would not always rely on institutional systems of support.

### **Creativity and Kindness on Display**

Every year in the spring, the Palace of Schoolchildren hosts the *Meirim festival' detskogo tvorchestva* (a combination of Kazakh *meirim*, meaning “kindness” or “pity” and Russian, *festival' detskogo tvorchestva* or “Festival of Children's Creativity”). The program showcases children's performance, featuring song, dance, poetry recital, and musical ensembles. It consists of two stages: First, a daylong program allows each group of children to take the stage from ten to 30 minutes. This initial program takes place at the Palace of Schoolchildren—the Pioneer Palace of Soviet days. A panel of judges—national artists of some sort—selects the best acts to participate in the second stage: a special concert at the National Opera Theatre with professional performers. The entire festival is comprised of children from the various special institutions around the city. In 2014, the school for the blind's band played a few numbers, and then one of the teenage boys offered a poetry reading. A group of children from the school for

the deaf danced. A high school-age girl from one of the boarding schools sang an American pop song.

The goal of the festival is not simply to showcase the children's talents, but to judge them, complete with a jury. Only the "best" would get to perform alongside professional artists at the opera theatre a few weeks later. At the same time, a certain ambivalence surrounds how the children should be celebrated for abilities while taking into account (presumed) disabilities. Journalists reporting on the 2015 festival write: "Looking at these kids, you forget that the majority of them have developmental issues. They simply want to prove to themselves and others that they too can do what their peers can do" (Umarekova and Kudykbaev 2015). By "peers," we must assume that the authors are referring to the never-institutionalized children (who likewise serve as the control measure for psychologists' evaluations of institutional impairment). According to these journalists, the goal of this performance was for the children to showcase abilities that we presume their "peers" already have.

Though the journalist argues that the audience forgets the children's developmental issues when viewing their performances, Bakhyt Ospanov, president of the sponsoring fund,<sup>16</sup> is quoted in the same article as admitting that the children's issues in fact make it difficult to judge them: "Some of the children don't see, others don't hear...there are children with impaired memory, and there are simply orphans from children's homes...Bringing them together and evaluating them according to a single criterion of creativity is difficult" (Umarekova and Kudykbaev 2015).

The article underscores ambivalence surrounding institutionalization, ability, and performance in Kazakhstan. Institutionalization can create order among bodies. With comparison—through ranking—it helps to establish and maintain organization (Foucault

1995:146). Psychologists and other scientists have indeed published countless comparisons of institutionalized and non-institutionalized children, using standard systems of measurement, including physical growth and IQ. Here, the judges faced a very different task of trying to rank the children according to their creative abilities and then compare them to one another. There is no child who is truly normal, in the sense of the never-institutionalized control group used by psychologists. The children's presumed goal, according to the writer of the article, is to "pass" as normal, to perform normality (Butler 1993, Larsen 1929). The sponsor focuses on the task of judging the children in relation to one another. This internal comparability proves complicated, as each child who performs has been placed in an institution of some sort because of some difficulty, whether physiological, developmental, or relational. The uncertainty surrounding the evaluation of these children relates to overarching ambivalences toward children's institutionalization in Kazakhstan that have yet to be resolved. In the meantime, the institutions celebrate children's abilities.

We might wonder what room there is for the children's creativity or agency in such programs, when they seem to be mere animators of others' creative visions. Even as the children's animations of childhood render them characterological figures of childhood through their distillation of aesthetic and sentimental properties of childhood, they are also indexes of the adults' responsibility. Agency emerges over time and is often distributed among multiple parties (Hill and Irvine 1993, see also Laidlaw 2010). Questions of responsibility are doubtless crucial to understanding the children's performances, but "responsibility" has a dual indexicality of its own. If we ask who is responsible for the children's presence onstage—or for their residence at Hope House in the first place—we might answer that the parents who chose to place them are responsible, for they were the ones who made this choice. By placing them at Hope House,

however, they are calling upon the state—and upon individuals representing the state, from the Department of Education overseeing the budget to the cooks who prepare their food—to take on some of this responsibility. This is a future-oriented responsibility. These actors might not see themselves as the cause of the children’s plight. Nonetheless, they take on a duty to the children, assuming at once agency and responsibility for the children’s wellbeing.

In my second year with Hope House, the music teacher prepared the children for the festival intensely, rehearsing a series of acts, totaling about 20 minutes: A four-year-old in a white suit sang a patriotic number (off-key) while his peers, in sailor outfits, marched behind him holding Kazakhstani flags, followed by several dance numbers and a girl reciting a poem about her grandmother. Yerlan participated in none of these acts. However, in order to fill time between these numbers for costume changes, Hope House needed an emcee (*tamada*). For whatever reason, they chose Yerlan.

I had seen the children preparing for the show, but I hadn’t known about Yerlan’s role until he walked out onto the middle of the stage of the capacious Palace of Schoolchildren in a tiny tuxedo. Yerlan’s physical features met many of the “baby schema” that adults are predisposed to find cute, according to ethologist Konrad Lorenz (1970): he had a huge head, with a large forehead, wide-set, grey eyes that had a kind of twinkle in them, and a small mouth. He readily smiled, and although he was small for his age, he had a sort of low, raspy voice. As he took the stage, he held the mic in his hand and spoke into it, dead serious, reciting formal Kazakh poetry about the fatherland. He had to exit and enter repeatedly between the numbers. With each entrance, he became more confident, making sure to stand in the spot marked off on the carpet they had laid in the middle of the stage to help orient the children, holding the mic with one hand and gesturing with the other, with as much confidence as Ainura had shown in the music room.

Of all of Hope House's acts, the jury favored the numbers in which the children animated inanimate objects, as dolls and puppets: For the concert at the opera theatre, one group performed a dance from *Buratino* (the Soviet adaptation of Pinocchio), while the younger children danced behind them—at the same time—in their doll costumes. In addition, Yerlan was invited to assist in hosting the show. For this second performance, instead of walking onstage alone in his tux, the hostess for the night accompanied him, a middle-aged Kazakh woman in a long evening dress. He only came out to chat with her for one interlude while stagehands set up chairs for a musical ensemble. Whereas he had looked fearless hosting by himself at the Children's Palace, he looked shy that evening in the opera house, perhaps because of the full audience, the darker lighting, or the fact that it was past his bedtime. The hostess kneeled down to him, putting the microphone up to his mouth and coaxing him to speak his lines. When he finished, a stagehand presented him with a stuffed lamb and led him offstage by the hand.

This second performance allowed a vulnerable side of Yerlan to leak through. Whereas his seriousness in his earlier performance had rendered him an effective animator of words beyond his years, the opera theatre performance was in its own way more effective, as evidenced by the hostess's smiles, the audience's gentle laughter at Yerlan's shyness, and their enthusiastic applause when he delivered his lines and exited the stage. By combining bashful smiles with ultimately competent delivery, Yerlan embodied the role of the good child, in his willingness to reveal both defenselessness and potential. It was an effect similar to that produced by the children wearing tutus and dancing as dolls—showing a readiness to be animated by adults, an ability to imitate, but with a measure of spontaneity (shaking their heads, pulling at their tutus) that indexed a youthful spirit and an emergent self, underneath the curly wigs.

Yerlan had good days and bad ones that spring. After his mother took his brother home early, leaving Yerlan at Hope House by himself, he would frequently announce his dislike for whomever happened to be around him. He would then add that he didn't like his brother or his mother, either. His successful performance didn't solve these problems, but the teachers and assistants remarked how well he had performed. He did go home with his mother eventually; the last I heard, he was doing well, though the teacher reporting this referred to him, fondly, as the "most hooligan" boy she had ever known. Perhaps the significance of Yerlan's surprising performance was less that it marked a turnaround for Yerlan—from problem child to darling—but instead offered evidence that Yerlan, despite his troubles, found a way (or a variety of ways) to make adults see him.

## **Conclusion**

The pervasive performances of children for adults at Hope House shape children's understandings of outsiders and of the world beyond the gates of their institutional home. Theatrical tropes practiced in performance bled into the children's free play, as the children would playfully sing and dance for one another on the playground. Teachers or their assistants sometimes arranged spontaneous performances by playing music on their cell phones, calling for one child to dance and for the others to watch. The children in my group primarily spoke Kazakh, but one thing they all knew in Russian was, "*Smotrite! Smotrite!*" This means, "Look! Look!" They called out to me on the playground to watch them, especially when I had brought my camera.

Performance played a key role in children's socialization at Hope House, following routines of repetition, imitation, and memorization in order to fulfill roles of ideal childhood in

lessons, songs, and dances. While Kazakhstanis generally valued children's performances, the frequent influx of visitors, resulting from Hope House's reliance on material support from a range of actors, increased the frequency and intensity of children's performances. Meanwhile, persistent stigmatization of institutionalized children raised the stakes of performance for homes such as Hope House. As children worked to show they possessed the desired characteristics of cuteness and growth, they animated ideal figures of childhood while cultivating sentimental attachments to adults. Because locals and international communities have often cast children growing up in orphanages as "bad subjects" who risk becoming incompetent, or even dangerous, adults, teachers work to assure outsiders that the children are developing along ideal trajectories. In the process, children learn not only to recite poetry, to sing, or to dance, but moreover to value being seen by adults. Children's performances act as sites where children distribute—through their poems and dances—agency, responsibility, and sentiments, which have implications for adults' future engagement with them.

Understanding the complex participant framework of child performance highlights the ways socialization processes can include a kind of learning to allow oneself to act as an animated object. This moves us away from stark contrasts between passive or resistant subjects, while it also highlights the complex field of actors involved in children's welfare in a contemporary institution. In post-Soviet Kazakhstan, ideology and reality regarding childhood and child welfare intersect at institutions such as Hope House, as government and non-government bodies examine a range of programs designed to care for children and make decisions about where to invest. At the home, children's performing bodies act as sites of shifting, competing, or laminated tropes of children—as innocent and object-like, as mischievous but harmless, or as cute, yet dangerous.

**Acknowledgments:**

Thanks to Jeffrey Albanese, Tiffany Ball, Krisztina Fehérváry, Paul Kockelman, Alaina Lemon, Michael Lempert, Jane Lynch, Paul Manning, John Mathias, Perry Sherouse, and Chip Zuckerman, along with participants in the University of Michigan Ethnography Lab and at the Academia Sinica Labor of Animation Conference (especially my discussant, Natasha Heller), and to three anonymous reviewers for this journal, each of whom offered generous feedback on various iterations of this article. I am grateful for research support from the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program, the Fulbright-IIE program, the University of Michigan Rackham Graduate School, Department of Anthropology, and Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies. Many thanks to Elmira Shardarbekova for her assistance in transcription. Finally, I am indebted to all of the adults and children at Hope House for allowing me to conduct this study.

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**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>Though directors only asked that I omit children's surnames, to protect their anonymity, I use pseudonyms for all children and personnel throughout. For this study, I received University of Michigan IRB approval, consent from the children's legal guardian (the institutional director), and permission from the Almaty Department of Education. I gained oral assent from the children and respected their occasional calls for me to leave them alone or not film them. If directors seemed little concerned about the children's privacy regarding my own study, it seems to me this was because the children were already in the public eye to a greater extent than children growing

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up in family homes, their images frequently featured in news stories and in promotional materials for donors.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase, *deti-sirot I deti, ostavshiesia bez bpopecheniia roditelei*, is used in the popular press (e.g.

[https://bnews.kz/ru/news/v\\_kazahstane\\_kolichestvo\\_detei\\_sirot\\_v\\_detskih\\_domah\\_sokrashchaetsya](https://bnews.kz/ru/news/v_kazahstane_kolichestvo_detei_sirot_v_detskih_domah_sokrashchaetsya) accessed on January 31, 2019), as well as by governmental organizations, such as the Committee for the Protection of Children's Rights in Kazakhstan (e.g. <https://www.balakk.kz/ru/node/32339> last accessed on October 19, 2017).

<sup>3</sup>These figures come from the Committee for the Protection of Children's Rights in Kazakhstan, *ibid*. While international adoption had been sharply curtailed during my fieldwork, and adoptions to the US had been explicitly banned in Kazakhstan, local citizens remained skeptical of adoption locally. According to organizations working with children in Kazakhstan, couples who did adopt domestically usually preferred to adopt infants and often worked to keep adoptions a secret.

<sup>4</sup>At Hope House, all teachers and directors were women. The only male employees were security guards, drivers, and occasional repairmen.

<sup>5</sup>All groups spoke Kazakh, with the exception of one Russian-language group. Most groups included a mix of children who were ethnically Kazakh, Russian, and other ethnicities.

<sup>6</sup>Bateson's (1955) seminal work on play frames points to similarities between children's play and adult art and the ways lines in both get blurred between fantasy and real, while Irvine (1996, 2011) has highlighted the messiness in trying to distinguish participant roles, as qualities of the animator can leak into the message being conveyed, and vice versa.

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<sup>7</sup>In their everyday free play, the children in turn used objects and role playing to animate worlds outside the home, at once transgressing and highlighting tensions between borders of inside and outside (Barker 2017a, 2017b). In the work of García-Sánchez (2014), immigrant children’s play both exposes and helps them make sense of boundaries of groupness and belonging with peers.

<sup>8</sup>Hospitality has played an important economic role in maintaining social networks for Kazakh families during difficult times (Werner 1997, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> The Child Friendly City Initiative is an international program UNICEF introduced in Kazakhstan in 2008, with Almaty among the first cities to participate. More information is available at <https://www.unicef.org/kazakhstan/en/child-friendly-city> (last accessed February 2, 2019).

<sup>10</sup>One American director of an international development organization, who had been working in the region for several years when we met in 2010, described Kazakhstan’s persistent reliance on children’s homes and similar institutions as evidence that it was the “most Soviet” post-Soviet country, arguing that the government preferred the oversight and control that centralized institutions offered to alternative solutions such as foster care.

<sup>11</sup>Information accessed from [https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/Intercountry-Adoption/adopt\\_ref/adoption-statistics.html](https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/Intercountry-Adoption/adopt_ref/adoption-statistics.html) on April 13, 2018.

<sup>12</sup>See Stryker (2010) on extreme methods undertaken by adoptive parents of post-institutionalized children in the United States.

<sup>13</sup>Psychologists, ethologists, and other scientists have developed and conducted experiments surrounding the characteristics that define what makes infant faces attractive and how people recognize such traits in other faces, human and nonhuman (Lorenz 1970). In cultural studies,

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scholars have noted the role of “cute” attributes in media, in consumer culture, and in ideals of femininity, especially in Japan (Kinsella 1995, Merish 1996, Ngai 2005).

<sup>14</sup>Q: “Why doesn't Hello Kitty have a mouth?”

A: “Hello Kitty speaks from her heart. She’s Sanrio's ambassador to the world and isn't bound to any particular language.” Accessed from <https://www.sanrio.com/pages/faqs> on November 22, 2017.

<sup>15</sup>This “exaggerated passivity” (Ngai 2005:834) needn’t stand in categorical opposition to activity, as scholarship on objects and animated figures often emphasizes the ability of a puppet or avatar to move in and out of roles of activity and passivity (Manning 2013, Shershow 1995).

<sup>16</sup>The M. T. Ospanov Social Fund (*Obshchestvennii fond im. M. T. Ospanova*), a foundation named for a founder of the Kazakhstani Parliament and other aspects of the transition to democracy in Kazakhstan, engages in a range of projects designed to honor Ospanov’s legacy by developing Kazakhstan socially and economically, including economic seminars for small and medium-sized businesses.

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