Introduction

On July 28, 2015, Peru’s National Independence Day, over a hundred working children and their allies marched through the streets of Lima, demanding that their national government recognize their rights as workers and as political subjects. Their press release, banners, and flyers called for the government to cease trying to abolish child labor and to instead focus on protecting working children from exploitation and providing them with better social services and schools. Children, they argued, should be allowed to work so long as that work is dignified and is not causing them harm. Further, they asked the authorities to respect their political organization, the Movimiento Nacional de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Trabajadores Organizados del Perú (MNNATSOP, the Peruvian National Movement of Organized Working Children and Adolescents), to include them in all policy decisions related to working children, and to “listen and take into account what we propose for our lives and our communities.” This march was not just attended and led by children, but was entirely planned by a committee of ten young activists, ages eleven to fifteen, who had been elected to leadership by their peers in the movement. They were supported in this organizing by four colaboradores (adult supporters), but the young people themselves were the primary decision makers, wrote all of the materials for the event, and did the outreach and publicity.

The march started out fairly subdued, with just a handful of the young activists chanting. Led by eleven-year-old Andrea and fifteen-year-old Patricia, the NATs (niños y adolescentes trabajadores, or working children and adolescents) quickly became more comfortable, getting louder and louder as they yelled, “Alerta! Alerta! Alerta que camina: los NATS organizados de América Latina!” and “Los niños lo dicen y tienen la razón, sí al trabajo digno y no a la explotación.” By the time we had reached the main plazas in the center of the city, they were totally enthusiastic protestors: dancing, laughing, and jumping up and down in
rhythm with the chants. Despite its small size, the march captured the attention of many bystanders, who expressed surprise at seeing children leading a march, as well as curiosity about the movement’s reasons for defending children’s right to work. After moving through the center of Lima, past several plazas full of people, the group stopped in a park and several teenage leaders spoke about why they were there. They expressed their firm belief in their rights to political, economic, and social inclusion, and the need for then president Ollanta Humala to follow through on the commitments he had made to children, including to working children. The crowd of both participants and bystanders cheered loudly after each speech, and the young activists wrapped up the event with an escalating call-and-response series of “Que vivan los NATs!” “Que vivan!”

As the event was winding down, one of the colaboradores asked my partner and me whether we would help out by walking Andrea back to her home in a nearby neighborhood. A diminutive Afro-Peruvian with an infectious smile, Andrea was overflowing with energy and practically bounced through the streets as she led us back toward her house. Although we knew our way around the area fairly well, we let Andrea guide us, following her directions on which route to take to her house. Along the way, she told us proudly that she “knows this area like the palm of my hand.” She pointed out various landmarks, including her favorite place to eat ceviche, greeted a few neighbors as we got closer to her house, and kept up a running commentary about how my partner and I should be careful because we are foreigners and people might try to cheat or steal from us. She warned us not to go down certain streets, to avoid a particular park, and to be alert because her neighborhood is “not safe.” In a crowded area around the Plaza de Armas, she paused to make sure we were all still together, ushering my partner forward when he fell behind a bit. I tried to reassure her and explained that we had lived in Lima for many months, and that we both travel a lot through various neighborhoods of Lima on foot and feel comfortable in these spaces. When we got to her house, she smiled, told us this is where she lives, and then offered to walk us back toward the center of the city so we could catch a bus back to our apartment. I gently reminded her that the whole point of our journey with her was that the colaboradores wanted us to take her home, not the other way around! She reluctantly agreed
to this, but reminded us one last time to be careful and gave me her cell phone number, “in case you get into any trouble.”

Both the march itself and our interactions with Andrea that day are reflections of the critical approach to childhood that has been developed over the past forty years by the Peruvian movement of working children. In the march, working children engaged in a public politics of protest, arguing for children’s greater inclusion in economic and political life. They demonstrated their ability to organize and engage in collective political action and challenged widespread assumptions about child workers. Against increasingly globalized narratives that imagine the ideal childhood as a time of only play and learning, or as a time without responsibilities, the NATs argued directly for their right to work a limited number of hours in safe, dignified, and protected conditions and explicitly claimed that work and a happy childhood are not necessarily incompatible. They also emphasized their own political and economic capabilities, redefined childhood as a space of meaningful and critical participation, and identified themselves as public subjects and collective actors, directly challenging more widespread discourses that frame children only as objects of socialization and as innocent, passive, and privatized individuals. But Peru’s movement of working children is not just interested in children’s political and economic inclusion; it also seeks to transform intergenerational relationships, making them more egalitarian and increasing children’s power and authority in their everyday interactions with adults. This everyday intergenerational politics was evident in Andrea’s confidence and her totally empowered take-charge attitude. Andrea is not just an eleven-year-old activist with political experience who can lead a march and express her own fully developed arguments about children’s rights; she is also an eleven-year-old who knows her way around her city, trusts herself to effectively navigate its potential dangers, and is not afraid to tell two adults that she is more knowledgeable and skilled at this than they are. The fact that we were foreigners certainly helped mark us as less competent than Peruvian adults, but Andrea claimed significant power and authority in this intergenerational interaction. Andrea entirely rejected the idea that she needed protection, positioning herself instead as a protector; she saw herself as being in charge of and responsible for us, not the other way around. Like many other NATs involved in the movement of working
children, Andrea has learned to value her expertise and to question assumed intergenerational hierarchies that place adults “above” children.

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_The Kids Are in Charge_ explores the specific case of Peru’s movement of working children in order to question, destabilize, and disrupt many commonsense ideas about children and childhood. Both this book and the movement itself directly challenge five widespread assumptions: (1) the binary difference assumption, or the assumption that children and adults are essentially different kinds of humans; (2) the natural assumption, or the assumption that childhood is a natural and universal category, with fixed traits and characteristics; (3) the passivity assumption, or the assumption that children are uncritical sponges who absorb the perspectives of adults; (4) the exclusion assumption, or the assumption that children should be prevented from participation in both work and politics; and (5) the power assumption, or the assumption that adults’ power over children is just, inevitable, and/or necessary, and should not be diminished. These five assumptions are not universal, and they can look and sound somewhat different in different social and cultural contexts, but they are powerful and increasingly pervasive narratives about childhood that circulate globally through popular media, international human rights institutions, children’s organizations, and other transnational programs and interventions that address education, families, communities, and children’s lives. This book draws on the knowledge and experience developed in the critical space of Peru’s movement of working children to reconsider and question each of these assumptions and to offer an alternative approach to childhood and intergenerational relationships.

**The Binary Difference Assumption.** Ideas about childhood are also always ideas about adulthood: the two categories are positioned in opposition to one another. Many of the dominant ideas about modern Western selfhood—that we are rational, free-willed, independent individuals—rely upon a binary logic in which children are _not_ those things. The logic of the binary suggests that children are fundamentally different from adults, and that their needs, desires, and ways of being in the world are essentially distinct from those of older individuals. While I do not dispute that there are differences between a four-year-old and a
fifteen-year-old, and between a fifteen-year-old and a thirty-seven-year-old, there are also many differences among fifteen-year-olds globally, historically, and in any given social context. Some fifteen-year-olds may have more in common with some four-year-olds, and some may have more in common with some thirty-seven-year-olds. Like all binaries, the adult/child binary obscures the similarities between the two social categories and overemphasizes differences. Following upon the theoretical work done by many other scholars of childhood, I encourage readers to not take the meaning attached to differences of age for granted. Instead, we should make these differences the subject of inquiry; we should ask ourselves why we think that children are different from adults in any given situation, and whether, perhaps, they are not actually as different as the binary assumption suggests.

The natural assumption. Critical sociological, historical, and anthropological approaches to the study of childhood consistently argue that childhood is a social construction, that it is not an inevitable biological category, and that its meanings are not universal, fixed, or natural. What it means to be a child, and children’s social roles, responsibilities, and capabilities are flexible and context-dependent. What children are allowed to do, what they learn to do, and therefore what they can do all vary across cultures and time periods. Age is not destiny. However, the natural assumption appears frequently in everyday social life, usually with very specific sets of claims: fifteen-year-olds are self-centered, or twelve-year-olds can’t really think abstractly, and so on. And while there may be some truth to some of these claims, the sociology of childhood, as an approach, encourages us to be skeptical of the tendency to see children’s experiences or children’s capabilities at a given age as inevitable. What it means to be a child is context-dependent and malleable. Against the natural assumption, the movement of working children shows how childhood looks different when kids are treated as capable political actors and are given the opportunity to develop, learn, and participate in a collaborative intergenerational social movement.

The passivity assumption. The first two assumptions undergird a whole set of more specific ideas about childhood, including the assumption that children and adults are very differently situated in relation to the enduring sociological question of agency and social structure. Adults are usually assumed to possess agency, or to have the
capacity to critically interpret the world and to act creatively upon that world, while children are frequently assumed to be passive objects of socialization, fully produced and constrained by their social contexts. This is evident in the recurring claim that children are “sponges” who absorb the ideas of adults around them, while adults are independent, autonomous, critical thinkers whose ideas are their own. Drawing from critical social theory and childhood studies, I take the theoretical position that individuals of all ages are products of social environments and active subjects who interpret, navigate, and act upon those environments. The passivity assumption is particularly relevant for the movement of working children and this book because many people assume that children who are involved in social movements or who engage in political speech are merely pawns of adult activists. Children who are politicized are frequently described as manipulated, with their political education being depicted as brainwashing and their claims dismissed as mimicry.

These narratives assert that children are incapable of critical political analysis, while adults are positioned as agentic critical thinkers. The Kids Are in Charge rejects this depiction of activist children as simply dupes of all-powerful adults, but that does not mean that they are entirely free of adult influence. Instead, like many sociologists, I take the position that everyone’s ideas may be both socially produced and critically considered. Therefore, rather than challenging the passivity assumption by claiming that children are also autonomous, free-willed, and rational individual agents, I highlight how both children and adults in the movement of working children are shaped by the larger social context of childhood and are actively contesting and questioning some elements of that context.

THE EXCLUSION ASSUMPTION(S). Dominant narratives about child labor presume that work is antithetical to a “good” childhood and that work harms children. Working children are regularly depicted as tragic figures, victims who have “lost their childhood” and who need to be saved from the “scourge” of child labor. This book presents a very different view on children’s work, highlighting how children’s work is not always exploitative and is not always a negative feature in children’s lives, although it is sometimes both of these things. Children’s work is not the focus of my analysis, but I introduce readers to children who enjoy their work, who find work to be fulfilling, and who are fighting for
their right to work in dignity. They argue that working can be an asset for children, providing them with valuable knowledge and skills. They directly reject the idea that their total exclusion from work would be in their best interests and instead argue for the value of children's inclusion in economic life.

These children also challenge their ongoing exclusion from political decision making and political authority. Children's exclusion from politics relies heavily upon the first three assumptions, as well as an ideal of childhood innocence that suggests that children should not be concerned with social and political problems. This ideal of innocence ignores the fact that many children are living these problems on a daily basis and do not have the option to ignore them. Children experience racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty, violence, war, and other injustices; they live in political and politicized worlds, and therefore have knowledge to contribute to political discussions. If childhood's meanings are socially constructed, if children's skills and knowledge depend on their social contexts, if both children and adults are agentic and subject to socialization and social constraint, then why are children so frequently excluded from political life? Why don't they get to participate in the many decisions that affect them and their communities? Why do most social movements not include children as meaningful participants? And is children's ongoing exclusion from democracy and political life just? Peru's movement of working children effectively demonstrates that children can, in fact, be critical political actors and activists, if they are given the right opportunities and supports. Against the assumption of exclusion, this book argues for the value of children's meaningful participation on the grounds that it is good for kids, good for society, and far more ethical.

**The Power Assumption.** As a social group, children consistently have less power than adults. Differences between children and adults are not merely differences of age and generation, but also differences of access to power and resources. Age categories are laden with power and inequality, creating dynamics and structures of marginalization and oppression that scholars have named ageism or adultism. This inequality is often invisible and normalized; it is taken for granted in most intergenerational contexts that adults should be the ones who are “in charge.” Even spaces that challenge children's political exclusion and argue for
children’s right to participation frequently still leave adult power and authority unquestioned. In contrast, the movement of working children seeks to significantly increase children’s power across multiple contexts, including families, schools, municipal governments, the Peruvian national government, and international human rights organizations and institutions. In addition to arguing for children’s dignity, power, and full citizenship rights, they directly challenge adult domination and power within the movement itself by theorizing and enacting horizontal intergenerational relationships—relationships rooted in a belief in children’s fundamental equality with adults and in practices of non-hierarchical collaboration between children and adults. These relationships of collaboration are an example of prefigurative politics, with the movement “prefiguring” the social relations it would like to see in the wider society. These two political approaches—prefiguring horizontal relationships that challenge age-based hierarchies and advocating for increases to children’s power in other institutions—complement one another and make up the movement’s two-pronged political strategy. This challenge to the assumption of adult authority is one of the most profound and unique contributions of the Peruvian movement of working children.

In challenging these five commonsense ideas about childhood, I am not trying to say that they are entirely false or definitively prove them wrong. Many other scholars have done excellent work that presents the philosophical and ethical arguments against some of these assumptions and have provided systematic data and evidence regarding the cultural and social influences upon children’s developmental trajectories and capabilities. I name these five assumptions here so that they are made visible, and I ask readers to treat them with some suspicion rather than taking them for granted as truths about children and childhoods. Questioning commonsense assumptions is precisely the purpose of critical scholarship. The Kids Are in Charge therefore adds to the critical scholarship on childhood by ethnographically exploring an emergent version of childhood otherwise—a version of childhood where children demand their collective rights, expect adults to treat them as capable and knowledgeable subjects, and seek to act as equal partners with adults in the collaborative pursuit of their political visions.

Childhood studies scholars have consistently argued for treating childhood as a social construction whose meanings are produced
through discourse, practices, and institutions, and are actively negotiated by children. Much of this work has focused on illuminating the dominant or hegemonic models of childhood. In contrast, this book focuses on an alternative vision and emphasizes that childhood, as a social construction, is open to change. This notion of the potential for intentional transformations of childhood is often implicit within childhood studies rather than directly addressed. The movement of working children reminds us of one of the key features of a socially constructed category: such categories can be reconstructed and remade, and these remakings may emerge from large-scale structural changes (such as digital cultures or new economic imperatives), but they may also be the result of social movement activity and political struggle. Childhood and its meanings can be actively contested, debated, and challenged by children themselves.

When I speak in public about this work and my interest in intergenerational equality and horizontalism, some adults are quick to express their discomfort with the idea of having children take on a greater role in decision making of all kinds. In some of these interactions, I encounter a stubborn refusal to consider alternative ways of thinking about childhood. But many other adults, and certainly most children and youth who I talk with about this work, are excited about the prospect of at least discussing the (il)legitimacy of the profoundly unequal power relations between children and adults. This is a discussion that provokes, and a discussion that I mean to provoke. In arguing for reimagining childhood as a space of greater political and social power, neither I nor the movement of working children is suggesting that adults do not have responsibilities for caring for children or protecting them from harm. Children’s particular dependencies and vulnerabilities are real and need consideration in any redefinition of adult-child relationships. And, as the example of the criminalization of children of color in the United States makes very clear, sometimes being treated like adults is not in children’s best interests. However, these complexities should not prevent us from questioning children’s marginalization from political life.

In addition to challenging these five commonsense ideas about childhood, Peru’s movement of working children also challenges the dominant approaches of many programs and organizations for children. It offers readers a vibrant and viable alternative model for how to increase
children’s democratic participation, inclusion, and collective power, whether that be in the context of educational institutions, after-school programming, children’s organizations, social movements, or the ever-expanding landscape of spaces designed to involve children in formal politics. Since the drafting and ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, children’s participation has come to be seen as a kind of policy common sense in many parts of the world. Article 12 of the convention requires that signatory states “assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” Governments, NGOs, and schools loudly and frequently proclaim the value of “including children’s voices” in decision making. However, the vast literature on children’s participation has identified notable limits to this particular formulation of children’s democratic power, including the ease with which children’s voices can be dismissed. Many participatory programs for children tend to be “tokenistic, unrepresentative in membership, adult-led in process, and ineffective in acting upon what children want.” These programs also often function primarily as educational opportunities that aim to prepare children as future citizens and treat them as citizens-in-training, rather than fostering children’s meaningful political power in the present. In contrast to these more widely practiced approaches to “children’s participation,” “student voice,” or “youth engagement,” the movement of working children has developed theories and practices that are rooted in building collective power, rather than the framework of individual rights. The Kids Are in Charge therefore provides concrete ideas for improving programs aimed at children’s political inclusion and participation.

While it is undeniable that childhood in Peru is distinct from that found in other national contexts, the alternative vision of childhood developed in this movement is still highly relevant to conversations about childhood elsewhere, including the United States. Whether it be in the various discussions of “helicopter parenting,” parents being punished for letting their children walk alone around their neighborhood, or frequent adult reminiscences about their own childhood independence and freedom, there is a clear sense that many contemporary US childhoods are heavily supervised, organized, and managed by adults. But
US childhoods are also diverse and uneven, with poor and working-class children and children in immigrant families taking on substantial responsibilities and acting with far more independence and autonomy than their more socially and economically privileged peers.\textsuperscript{22} And while white children continue to be primarily imagined and treated as innocents by both media and public discourse, children of color are regularly criminalized, judged, and treated as adults by police and the criminal (in)justice system.\textsuperscript{23} With only a little bit of probing, the image of childhood as a time of safe, protected, and responsibility-free play is revealed as a racialized and class-specific myth. But it is a powerful myth, and one that continues to play a role in how individual adults and social institutions treat children. The United States is also the only United Nations member state to not have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, reinforcing a continuing approach to treating children as objects of protection, intervention, or punishment rather than as subjects of rights. By offering a striking contrast to these dominant narratives of childhood, the Peruvian movement of working children raises the possibilities for thinking about childhood differently.

But elements of the movement’s vision of childhood are also not entirely unfamiliar: many parents, teachers, and children’s advocates aspire to enact more egalitarian and horizontal forms of relating with children. “Democratic parenting” websites and manuals offer advice to parents on giving children choices and decision-making power in their family relationships. The Sudbury schools and other radical schools run by direct democracy sometimes describe children and adults as equals, and give students control over their own learning.\textsuperscript{24} In the realm of politics, articles and blog posts offer tips for how to talk to kids about social and political issues, including racism, war, and other injustices. High school and middle school–based youth activist organizations, kid-friendly spaces within larger social movement events, youth participatory action research projects, and a small handful of political groups for younger children, like the widely celebrated Radical Monarchs, also aim to engage kids as citizens-in-the-present rather than citizens-in-the-making.\textsuperscript{25} These all suggest some popular interest in expanding children’s democratic power and political engagement, and an openness to reconsidering intergenerational hierarchies. The movement I analyze in this book offers insights for adults who are already reimagining child-
hood through these kinds of spaces and practices, but it also enters into new territory: a model for horizontal intergenerational activism that is explicitly committed to expanding children’s power in economic, social, and political life.

_The Kids Are in Charge_ presents the movement of working children as a model for including children in social movements, increasing their political power, and creating more egalitarian intergenerational relationships, but it also illuminates the very real difficulty of this work. I don’t romanticize the movement or gloss over the challenges of trying to disrupt age-based hierarchies and adultism. Peru’s movement of working children has a forty-year history of reimagining childhood and practicing horizontal intergenerational collaboration, but still struggles to make its vision real in both the daily life of the movement and the larger society. The movement is not a utopian space free from the constraints of the larger social context. We live in age-stratified societies in which adults have far greater power, privilege, and resources than young people. This power differential is particularly heightened when we are talking about children, and not just youth (teens or young adults). The reverberations and consequences of the five assumptions above continue to appear within the movement, and children and adults do not easily shake off their habits of hierarchical intergenerational interaction. Further, there are some serious theoretical and conceptual complications that emerge in the process of trying to envision intergenerational equality. Therefore, the challenges involved in transforming childhood and adult–child relationships are also central to my analysis.

To be clear, in presenting the movement’s struggles to achieve its political visions, I am not suggesting that it has “failed” or that it is “not successful.” Instead, I treat the movement’s struggles as an opportunity to explore the messy and always unfinished nature of transforming social relations. My discussion of the difficulties is not so much a criticism of the movement as an acknowledgment of how much this endeavor is _always_ an incomplete process. There are no easy answers to these challenges, and so my task here is not to try to “solve” them, but to draw them out so they might be more deeply understood and discussed. The movement is not perfect, but we should not expect perfection of it, or of ourselves. By showing how the pursuit of intergenerational equality is always partial and in process, I invite all of us into this political proj-
ect, no matter how distant the ideal may seem from our own current practices. Instead of saying, “Look at this flawless model; you should be just like them,” I ask adults, including those who are already doing this work in this specific movement or in other intergenerational spaces, to continually reflect on how, where, and when we are engaging with children in ways that amplify their collective and individual power, and how, where, and when we are engaging with children in ways that diminish that power.

My approach to thinking through adult-child relationships relies heavily on the work of US feminists of color and transnational feminists who have written extensively about creating meaningful political coalitions across lines of difference and inequality, most notably gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation. This body of work highlights the complexity of solidarity and alliance in the context of inequality, emphasizes the importance of leadership by those most marginalized in the wider society, and argues for the need for ongoing reflection about internal power dynamics in social movement contexts. The scholarship on horizontalism and participatory democracy similarly underscores how the pursuit of more egalitarian relationships and democratic interaction is shaped by larger social and cultural expectations and is therefore always unfinished. Sociologists of social movements have also written extensively about the intersecting differences of gender, race, class, and sexuality among activists, and a growing number of authors have begun to write about adult-youth dynamics in social movements. All of this theoretical and empirical work emphasizes the value of collaboration across difference and the need to take seriously the fact that inequality is never entirely erased, but must be regularly confronted.

_The Kids Are in Charge_ adds to these conversations by focusing intensively on the dynamics of age, which have generally been under-studied by scholars of social movements. But age also always intersects with other lines of difference, including gender, class, racial and ethnic identity, ability, and sexuality. Therefore, while my argument foregrounds age as the primary object of analysis and study, I address other identity categories, most especially gender, class, and racial/ethnic identity, when they emerged in my fieldwork in ways that interacted with the movement’s age dynamics. In devoting primary analytic attention to age, I am not suggesting that age is more important than these other lines of
power in children’s lives, or that it is fully separable from these other dynamics, which of course transform children’s experiences and how age categories operate in their lives. Instead, I choose to focus on age because age dynamics remain under-theorized and because age is the most central category in the discourses, identity frameworks, and politics of this particular social movement.

In exploring age as an axis of identity and inequality, this book emphasizes childhood and adulthood far more than other age-based social categories, such as youth and adolescence. Even though movement frameworks discuss working children and adolescents (*niños, niñas y adolescentes trabajadores*, or NATs) as a combined social group, the movement’s political discourse centers primarily around *infancia* and *niñez* far more than *adolescencia*. Further, even many older adolescents in the movement regularly refer to themselves as *niños* or *niños trabajadores*. Therefore, I refer to the young people in this movement as either “NATs” or “kids.” I use the term “children” when discussing the abstracted social group, but primarily use “kids” when I’m discussing actual living, breathing young people. Although some find the term “kid” to be demeaning or diminishing, I appreciate its informality and the fact that it is language often used by young people themselves. Of course, the specific young people in this movement are Spanish-speaking and so don’t use either of these English terms. However, my perspective is that “kids” better captures the more casual spirit of their self-understanding than “children.” Finally, it is worth noting that the term “youth” (juventud), both in Latin America in general and in the specific context of the movement of working children, generally refers to young people who are older than those found in this space. The NATs are never described by either themselves or adults as *jóvenes*. While youth is frequently linked to political change and social movements, childhood has a very different symbolic and material relationship to the political, requiring its own consideration apart from the discussions of youth activism. It is also a far more salient concept for this specific intergenerational movement.

In the chapters that follow, I pose a number of questions: How are childhood and adulthood being conceptualized in this unique social and political space? What does intergenerational equality mean to this movement? How are children’s political power and equal citizenship made possible and impossible? *Can* children and adults interact in a horizon-
tal fashion in political space? What do these interactions look and feel like? When and under what conditions do these collaborative political partnerships flourish and when do they falter? What are the discourses, practices, and institutionalized organizational structures that facilitate and/or produce barriers to more egalitarian intergenerational partnerships in the context of social movements? How do children and adults in this movement challenge age-based hierarchy, and how do they replicate it? In addressing these questions, I attempt to go beyond simplistic binaries of children as either active or passive, liberated or oppressed, and independent or manipulated. I explore the subtle and not-so-subtle dynamics of what I call age-based power, or the construction, distribution, and deployment of differential authority, influence, status, or value on the basis of chronological age. I treat power as pervasive, relational, and dynamic, and see its presence not only in practices of authority and control, but also in discourse and the processes of subjectification and subject making (how people's identities are produced and regulated). The power relations that exist between children and adults are constituted via material conditions, institutional structures, organizational and individual practices, habituated social interactions, and discourses about what it means to be a child or an adult. Focusing on this unique social movement context, I offer a textured understanding of how age-based power and hierarchies operate and, more importantly, how they can be undermined through horizontal intergenerational activism.

Chapter Outline

*The Kids Are in Charge* traces how adults and children in the movement of working children conceptualize children's place in public life, how they envision horizontal and egalitarian relationships between kids and adults, how they put these ideas into practice in the movement, and how they advocate for them in the wider society. Chapter 1 introduces the movement of working children and the Peruvian context and discusses my research methods and practices. In chapter 2, I look at the range of conceptualizations of childhood that circulate in and around the Peruvian movement of working children. I outline several of the more pervasive and dominant paradigms of childhood in contemporary Peru and then consider how the movement of working children responds to
and directly challenges these paradigms, radically redefining childhood as a space of social, political, and economic subjectivity and engagement. Chapter 3 maps the movement’s multiple interpretations of, and arguments for, horizontalism and intergenerational equality, expanding further on the movement’s theoretical contributions and imaginative challenges to hegemonic understandings of childhood and adulthood. In chapter 4, I shift attention from discourse to practice and look at how the movement creates a collaborative intergenerational political community by focusing on the relationships between the NATs and their adult *colaboradores*. I highlight the tension between horizontalism and teaching that is embedded in the role of the *colaborador* and explore different ways *colaboradores* seek to manage or minimize this tension. In chapter 5, I take a more critical stance and look directly at issues of power, outlining multiple modalities of age-based power in order to consider how adult authority is reinforced or disrupted in the movement. I also look at the key role of adolescents in the movement and the ways that their power and presence complicate the child/adult binary. Chapter 6 takes a wider view in order to address the diffuse impacts of the movement on Peruvian childhood and on working children’s lives outside the movement context. Each chapter ends with a three-part conclusion that highlights how the movement of working children undermines widespread assumptions about childhood, explores some of the difficulties of this work and what those difficulties tell us about how age-based power operates, and identifies ways the movement can serve as a model for intergenerational politics and the inclusion of children as full participants in their communities.