Kristen E. Cheney’s *Pillars of the Nation: Child Citizens and Ugandan National Development* raises the bar in the field of childhood studies and adds a welcome injection of studies of children and youth into the broader fields of anthropology and ethnography.

There are three aspects of the book I wish to highlight in this review. The first centers on the push by the government of Uganda (GoU) to use children as their focus in an attempt to create a singular national identity of a “Ugandan.” Cheney’s brief but concise history of Uganda shows that mobilization of ethnicity for domination, power-grabbing and retaliation runs deep throughout the country’s past, in no small part encouraged by the former colonial power. With the rise of the current government (the National Resistance Movement or NRM) that gained power in a military take-over in 1986, there was an attempt to shift away from strong ethnic identification, and, hopefully, with that, ethnicized violence, terror and war. Cheney shows us how for the new NRM government children
were an especially important tool as they lacked the social and political memory of racial and ethnic separation and violence; hence they could be a force for helping steer their country away from such conflicts in the future. Here children are viewed as apolitical and an empty space waiting to be filled by the state. Yet Cheney shows that even the youngest children in her book are aware of multiple levels of power and exclusion at play around them. She highlights how the children themselves struggle with what they want their future to be in terms of their own active citizenship, their dreams for what Uganda could be (so often shaped by international child rights discourse that is amplified by the rhetoric—if not the actions—of the GoU), and the locations they find themselves in, which so often hinder their dreams. The candor and sophistication with which the children speak through their life histories powerfully illuminates the complexity of what it means to be a rights-bearing “Ugandan” child.

The second aspect of the book I wish to discuss is education. As Cheney points out, education rightly falls on the heels of national identity as it is in the schools that children are most inculcated with nationalist rhetoric and ideologies. Cheney’s important contribution here is to show how within the ever selective teachings of Ugandan peoples, history, national symbols, boundaries and definitions of citizenship, children are much more than simple repositories for information. Rather, the children sift through the teachings to reject some of it, modify interpretations, and create their own understandings of themselves as individuals and social beings. Showing even more complexity in her attempts to understand what is happening with Ugandan children in their educational settings, she pays exquisitely close attention not only to the children who are in school, but to those who dropped out as parents died, funding dried up, and whose schooling days came to an end. Her insights from watching a few such children, who stand both literally and figuratively at the threshold of the schools—but never crossing back into their former classrooms—tells us as much about education and the right to education among Ugandan children as does her analysis of what the children are taught and their own processing of that information.

By all national and UNICEF statistical figures and human index accounts Uganda’s children are beset and beleaguered. Among Cheney’s most important contributions is her careful yet rigorous investigation of how these children actually internalize and or reject these characterizations and tallying of their lives. Again and again Cheney draws on the children’s stories to illus-
trate the multi-faceted ways in which children use their own agency and personal resources to at least attempt to maneuver through difficult conditions and situations. Yet Cheney also shows how some obstacles prove too overwhelming. Some children drop out of school, fall severely ill, or cut back on their dreams, while others curtail movement due to increased war, and still others lose their siblings, parents and friends. And this too, she shows us, is what it means to have a Ugandan childhood.

As someone who has worked for a number of years in Uganda studying the effects of war on civilian populations in the northern districts, I believe it is important to note that while Cheney’s fieldwork for the book was concluded in 2001, the messages she puts forward are perhaps even more salient now, as the war has intensified and spread. To date, no peace agreement has been reached, ethnicization of national politics grows stronger, and the most recent presidential elections showed strong regional divides within the nation. Her final sentences of the book strike a particularly strong cord and are worth repeating here. “In any case, difficult circumstances have led to the failure of the axioms of childhood protection, both local and international. By default, the responsibility falls to this generation of young Ugandans to slow the cycle of violence and lighten the burden of poverty, lest they perish under its weight” (270).