



Discovering, Exploring, and Colonizing Childhood: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Childhood Studies



The papers included in this section were originally presented at the international conference on Mapping the Landscapes of Childhood, held at the University of Lethbridge in May 2011.



How to Make Good Subjects: Guiding Girls, Creating Citizens, Constructing Consumers —Elizabeth Galway, Louise Barrett, and Jan Newberry

In her 2011 article “On Not Defining Children’s Literature,” Marah Gubar acknowledges that, although the concept of childhood is difficult to define, it does not follow that “we cannot know anything about the lives, practices, and discourse of individual children from different times and places.” In speaking of

children’s literature, Gubar argues that we should abandon the attempt to create a narrow definition and should instead strive “to characterize our subject in ways that acknowledge its messiness and diversity” (212). Such an approach has value not only for those concerned with children’s literature but also for those

working in the broader field of childhood studies. Given that the very notions of childhood and youth are complex and continually shifting, by recognizing their inherent diversity we can both expand and deepen our understanding of these categories.

In May 2011, the international conference on Mapping the Landscapes of Childhood at the University of Lethbridge showcased just how important and useful a multidisciplinary approach to childhood studies can be. The conference arose out of a recognition that many scholars on our campus were exploring issues related to childhood that ranged quite literally from A to Z: from anthropological to zoological approaches, with educational, historical, literary, neuroscientific, psychological, and sociological perspectives in between. The productive conversations engendered by this recognition of common interests inspired us to ask how childhood studies were conceived across Canada more broadly, and so the idea for a conference was born. The response to our call from scholars within Canada and from around the globe was enthusiastic and the conference itself a great success. It was apparent during the conference, in the discussions it stimulated and in the connections made, that our decision to “go broad” had inspired scholars not only to recognize the benefits of a pluralist approach in general, but also to view their own work, located within specific discourses and disciplines, as others might view it, bringing new, previously hidden

insights to bear on their specific areas of interest.

The development of the Institute for Child and Youth Studies at the University of Lethbridge as a direct result of the conference will, we hope, enable our pluralist approach to continue to flourish.

The themes at the heart of this forum represent our interests as scholars of childhood within our own disciplines of English (Galway), psychology (Barrett), and anthropology (Newberry). The obvious thread that links the three papers selected for the forum (by Kristine Moruzi, Kristine Alexander, and Natalie Coulter) is the notion of colonization; that is, all three authors are concerned with the creation of “good subjects,” whether these be citizens of empire, members of a girls’ club, or consumers of popular culture. These are ideas that link to our broader interests in exploring the idea that human identity is not fixed and self-contained but an ongoing process of construction. Ian Hacking has written cogently on the “looping effects” created by the construction of new “human kinds” within psychology, anthropology, and sociology (351). The constructions we develop through academic study and its subsequent filtering through society change how people come to see themselves, altering their ideas and lived experience to produce new kinds of people, which leads to changes in how these new kinds are realized, recognized, and studied in an ongoing cycle. In other words, human identity is a moving target. It seems clear that all of us who engage in the



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academic study of childhood would do well to heed these points: whether we deal with the past or the present, the ways in which we interpret, dissect, and interrogate our subject matter has the potential to create particular “child kinds” that then influence perceptions of children beyond the academy. Specifically, the papers here deal with the manner in which the subjectivity of children is created by and through social practices (such as the Guiding movement, literature, television, advertising, and the “Disneyfication” of culture). Questions common to many scholars in the disciplines of children’s literature studies, anthropology, and psychology pertain to how children come to know themselves, how they are socialized through the adult-produced literature that they read, how knowledge is produced, and what the relations between knowledge and power are.

The three articles presented here were chosen for the ways in which they illuminate the intersection of various disciplines in the field of childhood studies, develop our comprehension of childhood experience, and point to new directions in research and practice. While the authors work within the different fields of children’s literature studies (Moruzi), history (Alexander), and communication studies (Coulter), all three deal explicitly with the issue of colonization in their papers: Moruzi focuses on texts addressed to (potential) British (female) settlers, which sought to persuade them to move to Canada and to colonize it in ways that promoted imperial ties; Alexander explores the ongoing ideological work of the Girl Guides in shaping girls to be appropriate colonial subjects; and Coulter uses colonization as a (potentially problematic)

metaphor for thinking through the place of the child under the system of global consumer capitalism as exemplified by Disney. Each of their papers raises important questions about how categories of youth are constructed to serve particular cultural, political, and commercial needs. Each also sheds light on the role that adults play in shaping how children view themselves and how they are viewed by others, demonstrating that the manner in which childhood (which includes further categorizations such as boyhood and girlhood) is often defined by adults, rather than by children themselves. Most importantly, each reveals the difficulties faced by scholars from all disciplines when it comes to understanding the lived experiences of real children, which are often obscured by potent images of “the child” constructed by adults.

And so, while all three papers are concerned to some degree with what we might loosely term “childhood culture,” the varying disciplinary perspectives that they provide also make it apparent that childhood cannot be considered separately from adult culture and society. While children and adults might have differing needs, interests, or levels of understanding, these exist in overlapping spheres, not separate ones. As a result, the cultural products produced “for children” often reflect adult concerns about gender, citizenship, nationhood, and the marketplace. As the essays in this forum demonstrate, youth organizations, literature, clothing, games, and

other forms of entertainment from the late nineteenth century to the present, in nations around the globe, have been and remain shaped by adults, and in turn they have the potential to shape how children see and understand themselves.


Some of the fears that children lack the resources to resist adult influence are assuaged by reading Kristine Alexander’s paper, in which the wry and witty observations of girls like Eileen Knapman show that they were able to create a sense of “ironic distance from some of [the] more stringent requirements and ideals” of the Guiding movement. The refusal of Canadian Girl Guides to adopt the English habit of stripping bed linens every day on the grounds that it was “morbid if not hysterical” and the ways that Aboriginal girls were able to use Guiding to their own ends, taking what they wanted from the movement without necessarily embracing its broader goals, can also be seen in this light. Nevertheless, Coulter’s paper offers a compelling argument that the forces that control not just cultural products for young people but also the very construction of youth categories, remain very powerful and difficult to escape. The focus of these papers allows for a consideration both of the manner in which conceptions of childhood are created to serve the needs of adults rather than those of children, not to mention the way in which childhood studies throw into sharp relief the methods and approaches by which we construct our knowledge.

Gender, Geography, and the Construction of Transnational Girlhoods


Kristine Alexander's paper "Can the Girl Guide Speak? The Perils and Pleasures of Looking for Children's Voices in Archival Research" explores the challenges of researching the early history of the Girl Guide movement in England, Canada, and India. Alexander reveals the difficulty in locating the voices of the varied young women who were part of this youth movement, since matters of gender, race, language, and geography have an impact on the availability of archival sources for historians. Kristine Moruzi's "I am content with Canada': Canadian Girls at the Turn of the Twentieth Century" considers texts directed to girls and young women, specifically examining depictions of Canadian girls in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century periodicals and novels. While Alexander seeks to locate the voices of real girls from this period, Moruzi demonstrates the role that adult authors played in constructing and colonizing girlhood. Considering how notions of femininity were influenced by British imperialism and Canadian nationalism, she explores how national ideologies of girlhood were complicated by the fact that colonial readers consumed fiction authored in other parts of the British Empire. In contrast to Moruzi's and Alexander's historical perspectives, Natalie Coulter's article "From Toddlers to Teens: The Colonization of Childhood the Disney Way" examines more recent developments in how young people are

imagined, constructed, and colonized. Using the example of the "tween," her paper deals with the marketing strategies and "branding" initiatives that ostensibly serve the desires and interests of children but can be shown ultimately to serve the needs of global capitalism. Her emphasis on the homogenizing influence of globalization in the construction of a canonical "tween" girl—one who can be marketed in the same way regardless of local, cultural, and societal norms—echoes Alexander's historical exploration of the Girl Guide movement, which also constructed a particular kind of girl "for all nations." Similarly, Moruzi examines efforts to promote an "international sisterhood," but shows how this was complicated by the intertwining of notions of imperial girlhood with an emerging sense of a distinct national identity.

Products for the young—be they toys, reading materials, or activities—are often marketed with a claim that they are "good for children." While this may indeed be the case, the papers in this section reveal that they just as often seek to provide what is "good" for contemporary adult society. As Perry Nodelman has noted, what "adults believe is good for children is essentially what is good for adults, and . . . the literature children need might be better defined as the literature adults want and need children to need" (158). Ideological, political, and economic forces can all play a role in shaping not just what is provided to children but the very image of childhood itself. The



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work of Moruzi, Alexander, and Coulter reveals the difficulty in accessing the responses of real children to these efforts, a difficulty that remains a central problem for those interested in childhood studies.

Alexander’s article echoes Margaret Steffler’s observation that the “failure to include the child’s voice in academic research” is “not simply a matter of neglect; accessing the direct voice is difficult” (119–20). Alexander demonstrates that the voices of the girls who participated in this organization in the early years of the twentieth century are not easy to locate in the historical documents from the period, and she explores the specific factors that have contributed to the loss of some evidence. Beyond this, her paper also demonstrates just how easily the image of “the child” can be shaped by adults rather than by the self-expression of children. As Coulter points out in her article, adult-created images of childhood and of other categories of youth can then be sold back to children themselves, who “perform” the childhood with which they have been presented.

Such activities are not new. Decades ago, Jacqueline Rose raised these issues for scholars of children’s literature to contemplate, demanding that they consider the basic question of the extent to which adults manipulate children through cultural products. Children’s literature, as Rose pointed out, might be intended for young readers, but it often serves the needs of adults. Moruzi’s analysis supports Rose’s well-known assertion that if “children’s fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp” (2), by revealing that constructions of girlhood served several functions

that extended well beyond boosting sales of periodicals to young readers. In magazines such as *Girl's Realm* and *Girl's Own Paper*, authors writing for a young female readership actively constructed very specific images of British and Canadian girlhood, designed to foster a sense of connection and loyalty to Britain while simultaneously figuring the Canadian girl in such a way as to encourage emigration from Britain. Moruzi argues that children's literature, particularly the girls' periodical press, was a vital source for the support and promotion of girls' emigration to places like Australia and Canada.

At first glance, then, there would seem to be quite a difference between Alexander's archival research seeking to understand the experiences of girls in India who participated in the Girl Guide movement of the 1930s and Moruzi's analysis of images of Canada in a selection of late-nineteenth-century children's publications. But the two papers demonstrate fascinating linkages between themes of imperialism, emerging national identities, changing roles for women, traditional notions of femininity, and shifting attitudes toward the British Empire and emerging nationalism in places like Canada and India. Essentially, both the Girl Guide movement and texts like *Girl's Realm* were interested in constructing an image of ideal imperial girlhood and selling it to girls and young women. While Coulter argues that the creation of categories of youth for the primary purpose

of creating marketing niches is an accomplishment of twentieth-century capitalism, Alexander's and Moruzi's work shows that this is a process that has roots at least as far back as the nineteenth century; the prominence of this issue in papers from three quite distinct disciplinary perspectives sheds light on its pervasiveness—and reveals the benefits of approaching childhood studies from multiple angles.

Moruzi argues that the constructions of the category of girlhood in late-nineteenth-century juvenile literature reflect the tensions between the ideal of feminine domesticity and the new realities of women's lives, highlighting how these constructions shift over time in accordance with the dominant ideology of a particular moment. Such tensions are also noted by Alexander, who writes of the often contradictory program in the Guide movement of domesticity, citizenship training, internationalism, and support for a racially stratified British Empire. Alexander highlights the difficulty of gauging the responses of diverse groups of girls to these sometimes competing images of ideal girlhood. Her account of archival research reveals the value of a multidisciplinary approach that draws on such resources as visual culture, diaries, and children's literature to help uncover the lost voices of these young women. Furthermore, both Moruzi's and Alexander's considerations of how archival material can be used to locate girls' voices goes some way to answering Coulter's question regarding how we are to locate the

voices of contemporary children in order to discover how they respond to the capitalist construction of a Disneyfied childhood.

The Emergent Social: Following Traces of Interdependence

Such considerations bring to the fore Bruno Latour's point (taking on John Dewey's earlier ideas) that objectivity "can refer to the presence of objects which have been rendered 'able'...to object" ("When" 115). This has great resonance when applied to studies of childhood and youth, where children are not simply the willingly passive subjects of psychological experiments that Latour considers, but rather those who have adult views imposed on them.¹ That is, children are encouraged to embrace particular interests actively, but lack the voice that would allow them to object to the ways in which their wants and needs are being presented to them. It also raises the possibility that, in many cases, children do not yet possess the experience required to recognize the underlying agenda shaping the construction of particular kinds of self.

The particular difficulty of finding a way for the object to object to the ways in which it is studied, constructed, and presented raises more general questions about the role of our knowledge practices in the production of young people, and of "the social" more generally, questions with which the articles by Moruzi, Alexander, and Coulter all engage. Recent

work in the social sciences directs our attention to how categories such as girl, tween, and even capitalism are made through the work of analysts themselves. In Latour's actor network theory, for example, discussed in *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*, the ethnographer is encouraged to follow behind scientists to look over their shoulder as they make connections to produce a network of ideas and people. This process of making connections is what Latour calls the social, in contrast to the psychological, the biological, and so forth, and can be a rich way to consider the effect of the categorizations identified in the articles in this section. As already noted, these categories may tell us more about the adult than about the child. Taking seriously the emergent social does not reject the relation between apparent categories but rather embraces it as central to the *making* of the social. It also potentially provides a way to generate the kind of objectivity that encourages and permits objection on the part of the object of study.

Douglas Holmes and George Marcus's methodology of para-ethnography, directed toward understanding the marginal ways of knowing in technocratic regimes, puts the focus on the "culture work" performed by the expert, the scholar, or the child worker as they create categories in their work. This allows us to appreciate the interdependence of child and adult in networks of care, association, and analysis. That is to say, it

provides the means by which we can see that adults and children are mutually constitutive nodes in such networks; we are made as adults as we make the child.

Coulter's reference to the idea of assemblage as heterogeneous and unstable connections across difference (and *because* of difference) is in line with the analysis of the mutual constitution of adult and child described here. Assemblage is proposed as an analytical alternative to "structure," that modernist trope of building rigid, reinforced categories of difference into which people are slotted. The salient point here is that assemblages are global forms, and as such, are as evident in Moruzi's and Alexander's pieces as in Coulter's. Assemblage and actor network theory do not presuppose the category of nation, empire, or colony, but rather they look toward these categories as effects—effects of connections that in fact may be driven by other ends, like surplus value appropriation, print capitalism, and archival practices. That these effects are social is not in question. Rather, what are called into question are the social practices and processes that produce these effects, and these effects are the emergent social as much as any self-evident, age-delimited category.

To illustrate, a comparison of Moruzi's and Alexander's pieces suggests not only the identification of girls as a category of analysis and intervention but also the absence of other possible categories of experience. The Aboriginal Girl Guide from Alexander's

piece highlights the absence of the First Nations girl as anything other than the "other" in the print capitalism of the Canadian and British magazines described by Moruzi. Following the approach described here, this missing category provides an entry point into the process by which the social is made through our scholarly practices. The absent First Nations girl illustrates how a consideration of a network of associations and ideas can also reveal those actors missing from our networks. Reading against the grain, as Alexander proposes, suggests the need to look for silenced voices. An approach to the emergent social poses questions about whether a category such as Aboriginal girl exists or needs to exist. Perhaps this is a positive freedom: the freedom from being understood as part of a category.

The emphasis here on how we do our work reflects the methodological thread in all three papers. Alexander is clear that part of her analysis derives from the way in which record keeping and archive construction shape our understanding of past lives. The approach described above thus constitutes a meta-commentary on the social that is evident in such traces. Similarly, Moruzi's use of literary sources to understand how empire was imagined is a method that has important implications for whether we can "know" the non-literate and those who cannot or will not have access to print media. Perhaps Coulter's analysis is the clearest example of how the social is produced through the work of the expert or analyst.

The invention of the “tween” by the marketing industry is not a reflection of social categories on the ground, but rather the expansion of a network or constellation of actors and actants: the corporate advertising expert and the young people who do not yet know they are tweens. As Latour notes, “no actant is so weak that it cannot enlist another. Then the two join together and become one for a third actant, which they can therefore move more easily. An eddy is formed, and it grows by becoming many others” (*Pasteurization* 159). The tween could be seen as such an eddy, producing more connections and more relations in a branching network of associations that can now include the pretween.

Beyond what may appear to be a recondite argument about epistemology, the point of considering the imminent social produced through networks of expertise is to keep in sight the interdependence of categories of experience and study. There is no Promethean child, only the child or the young people at the centre of networks of intervention, application, and analysis. This acknowledgement keeps us from divorcing what we study from how we study it, but it also foregrounds the interdependence of adult imaginings with the existential reality of young people. We take action not on young

people or even for young people; rather, we take action on ourselves as we are made through the positing of young people as a category.

In sum, these articles do not simply demonstrate the ways in which many researchers take an interdisciplinary approach to their own work. Rather, taken together, they illustrate how an awareness of work in multiple disciplines can help us move from looking through a keyhole to stepping through a door into a new world of meaning. There is a new and productive dialogue taking place between quite different disciplines. The papers in this forum demonstrate that considering a subject from multiple disciplinary perspectives reveals both crucial connections and elisions, thereby leading to a more complete understanding of each individual topic of research. One of the major aims here, then, is to demonstrate the tensions and the productive connections that exist within the broader field of childhood studies and to show how people working from different disciplinary perspectives can speak to one another in dynamic and fruitful ways. These intersections can inform the work of scholars, practitioners, and policy makers working in a broad spectrum of areas within childhood studies.

Note

¹ For a discussion of the links between Latour's and Dewey's positions with respect to the status of psychology as a discipline, see Brinkman.

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