



**“It’s the kids who made this happen”:  
The Occupy Movement as Youth Movement**  
— Mavis Reimer

Like many scholars of young people’s texts and cultures, I expect, I have watched with great interest the protest movements collectively known as Occupy and media coverage of these movements over the past year. From the beginning, whichever event is cited as the beginning, the activists collectively have been represented and addressed as young people. *Adbusters*, the Vancouver culture-jamming magazine that first posted the call to “#OCCUPYWALLSTREET” on its website in July 2011, implies an audience of young people in its style and content. The playful register of the September–October 2011 issue, with its now-famous centrefold of a ballerina gracefully posed on the rampaging bull used by Wall Street as a metonym for the markets, is one example, as are the pictures of young people used to illustrate the spreads that end the issue: two prepubescent boys with slogans painted on their chests clown for the camera while another boy who has discarded his shirt faces down a line of police


in full riot gear in the piece on “World War IV,” and a swarm of youthful demonstrators fill the background of the page headlined “Dreaming of Democracy.” The mainstream media reports followed the lead of *Adbusters*. Articles about Occupy are almost invariably accompanied either by high-angle shots of a crowd of mostly young protesters in an urban space or by a series of head-and-shoulder shots of individual occupiers. The 31 October 2011 issue of *Maclean’s: Canada’s National Magazine*, for example, uses both of these visual cues: the crowd shot appears on the front cover behind the provocative title, “The Occupy Wall Street Movement Has It All Wrong,” while four youthful activists, posed with their placards in front of them, appear at the head of the article.

As the encampments settled in for long stays in the public spaces they occupied, the appeal of the movement to a wide cross-section of people became increasingly visible. Reporters filed stories about,


for example, the presence in the crowd of financial workers from Wall Street firms, the appearance of television and film stars in the park, the support of Bank of Canada Governor Mark Carney for the message of the protesters, and the pepper-spraying of eighty-four-year-old activist Dorli Raine at Occupy Seattle. Such features gave weight to one of the most popular slogans of the movement—"We are the 99%"—developed from an article by economist Joseph Stiglitz in the May 2011 issue of *Vanity Fair* in which he described the enormous and growing income gap between the "upper 1 percent of Americans" and everyone else. Despite the evidence of the complicated composition of the Occupy crowds, however, media commentators and public intellectuals alike continued to privilege "young people" as the face and the heart of the movement.

In this context, it seemed, *young people* was a floating signifier that indexed a subject position as much as a chronological age. Kalle Lasn, co-editor of *Adbusters*, was quoted as observing that young people are at the forefront of Occupy Wall Street because of "their Internet and social media savvy": "a few smart people on the Internet can call for something and, if it captures the public's imagination, it can get tens of thousands of people out on the streets" (Mickleburgh, "Anti-Wall Street"). Theorists of globalization Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri attribute some of the success of the movement to the fact that "the young people

populating the various encampments" are politically inexperienced and therefore willing to ask the "seemingly naive, basic question: Is democracy not supposed to be the rule of the people over the polis . . . ?" ("The Fight"). "[N]ew to politics," they find that "the form of representation itself is not adequate to their desires" (De Caeter). Italian journalist Emilio Carnevali, speaking of the *indignados* marches that took place in more than 950 cities worldwide on 15 October 2011, sees the composition of the crowds as symptomatic of the times in which we live: "There wasn't a single march that wasn't composed mostly of youth—the ones most hurt by mass unemployment tied to the brutal contraction of production and revenues when the real economy registered the impact of the financial crisis" (31). The importance of the youth presence in and for the protests was such that anthropologist David Graeber, one of the early organizers of Occupy Wall Street, left New York a few days after the occupation of Zuccotti Park began because he believed that his status as a celebrity was a danger to the success of the movement that was "first about participation": "It's the kids who made this happen," he was reported to say (Berrett). Characterized as early adopters of new communication technologies and social actors with fresh visions but thwarted opportunities, young people clearly embody the movement's orientation to the future and its claim on that future.



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Other common cultural assumptions about young people are also obvious in media accounts of the movement. Many commentators, for example, have appeared to take for granted a structural opposition between adults (us) and not-adults (them), as they repeatedly pose a version of the question, “what do they want?” (implicitly “of us?”). In an editorial in the Canadian *National Post* in October 2011, for example, Kelly McParland not only suggested that the movement needs to “get[] some leaders and become[] a real grown-up movement” but also taunted the “confused” protesters with the power of the real, grown-up world to refuse them: “Once they know everything they’re against, who are they going to see to fix it all?” (A2). Describing herself as young and inexperienced, *and* as a writer and a critic, activist Nicole Demby turns aside the imperative issued by “the media and well-meaning liberals . . . to produce a message”: “If Occupy Wall Street has failed to use this platform to limit itself to a discrete set of demands, it is because it refuses to undermine the depth and breadth of what’s wrong. OWS’s message is entangled with its form, its self-sustaining structure in which the group provides for its own physical, social and intellectual needs.” In her image of the “self-sustaining structure” of the camp, Demby not only refuses a definition of Occupy in oppositional terms but also points to the performative practices of the protests.

As Demby’s analysis demonstrates, the activists’ accounts of themselves and their movement have often been characterized by complexity and self-reflexivity. Dan Berrett, reporting on Occupy Wall Street for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in mid-October, notes the collection of twelve hundred books (and growing daily) in “The People’s Library” in Zuccotti Park and quotes the librarian

at the protest site: “I really am amazed for the respect they have for the word. . . . There’s a real reverence for what has been written that has surprised me, since they eschew whatever came before, all the thought that came before.” In another sense, however, the respect for the word among the protesters is unsurprising. The production, circulation, and study of texts—websites, blogs, tweets, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, placards, slogans, images—both started the movement in New York and spread it to a thousand other cities.<sup>1</sup> In *Declaration*, their e-book on the cycle of struggles that took place in 2011, Hardt and Negri offer a larger context for understanding the centrality of texts to the movement. Contemporary society, they explain, increasingly functions “by exploiting the production and expression of knowledge.” This is “a society of cognitive capitalism” in which cognitive labour is the hegemonic form of labour power. Seen from this perspective, the fact that “a large portion of the activists are students, intellectual workers, and those working in urban service jobs—what some call the cognitive precariat”—becomes entirely legible ([48]).<sup>2</sup> As Hardt and Negri predicted in *Empire*, their first book theorizing globalization, “The struggles to contest and subvert Empire, as well as those to construct a real alternative, will . . . take place on the imperial terrain itself” (xv). In a society of cognitive capitalism, then, cognitive labour “permeates and is crystallized in these forms of struggle” (*Declaration* [48]).

The extent to which the struggles of 2011 were permeated by cognitive labour can be seen both in the intense interest of Occupiers in theory and in the intense interest in Occupy shown by a wide range of cultural theorists and public intellectuals. Quotations from philosophers pepper the pages of most *Adbusters* issues and excerpts from important works by contemporary cultural theorists are regularly reprinted there. The #Occupy website maintained by *Adbusters* includes a link to Occupy Theory, a page that “offers theory and strategy as a means of empowering occupiers, whether actual or potential, to envision actions that ultimately transform existing power structures” (“Tidal”). A number of public intellectuals visited Zuccotti Park over the months of its occupation to speak to the protesters, including Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, Cornel West, Frances Fox Piven, Joseph Stiglitz, Naomi Klein, and Jeffrey Sachs. People at the front of the crowd loudly repeated speakers’ words to those assembled behind them in the choral-speaking ritual dubbed “The People’s Mic,” an ingenuous response to the prohibition against the use of loudspeakers and microphones in the park. Occupations in other cities were visited by, among others, scholars David Harvey, Manuel Castells, Angela Davis, and Robert Reich. The scholarly journal *Theory & Event* produced a supplement to its 2011 volume in which it published the observations of nine contemporary theorists; *The Berkeley Journal*

of *Sociology*, a journal run by graduate students, sponsors an online site with a forum “designed to bring together essays, critical commentary, and eventually research of social scientists on the Occupy Movement” (“Understanding”); books, collections of essays, and the announcements of books and collections to come are already beginning to appear.

One of the topics to which discussants return in their commentaries is the leaderless character of the movement. Variouslly described as a swarm, a network, sets of horizontal affiliations, an instantiation of the multitude, and a claim of the commons, Occupy is characterized (and often celebrated) as, in the words of political scientist Bernard Harcourt, “an impressive group of well-educated and articulate young women and men expressing themselves in a new political grammar.” It was, however, a very old social problem that posed a recurrent difficulty in the historical and theoretical accounts of Occupy: the relation of the Occupiers to the entrenched homeless populations of the urban centres in which they set up camp. For the public spaces in which the Occupy movements staged their protests were not empty lands, but spaces often already occupied by indigent street people, people the Occupiers sometimes displaced when they pitched their tents.

Many texts produced about and by the Occupiers recognize the constitutive presence of the poor in the encampments. Community social worker and

organizer Moriggan Philips, for example, observed that “[p]lenty of unemployed, underemployed and broke ass people are taking on roles of organizers within Occupies,” that the ranks of the Occupiers include many “who rely on various forms of public assistance, both safety net programs like public housing and social security programs like unemployment,” and that “the camps drew many from those forgotten and neglected corners of our communities: the houseless, those with mental health issues and substance use problems.” Sociologist Chris Herring and anthropologist Zoltán Glück concur with this observation and extend it to point out that “the history of capitalism is also the history of systemic social and economic exclusion” and that “today we are all at risk of becoming part of the *relative surplus population*” (168). Feminist activist Barbara Ehrenreich similarly notes that “[h]omelessness is not a side issue unconnected to plutocracy and greed. It’s where we’re all eventually headed—the 99 percent, or at least the 70 percent, of us, every debt-loaded college grad, out-of-work schoolteacher, and impoverished senior—unless this revolution succeeds” (28). Calling for solidarity with the poor and the houseless, these commentators remark that the protesters borrowed strategies for living in temporary shelters in public spaces from the experienced street population. Ehrenreich, for example, insists that, while the mass demonstrations of the Arab Spring are often cited as precipitating Occupy in North America, the

“tent cities” of the chronically homeless that were built on abandoned industrial sites or other marginal spaces in several Canadian and American cities in the 1980s and 1990s “are the domestic progenitors of the American occupation movement” (27). The Arab Spring demonstrations, too, are tied to the long-term presence of people on the street, coalescing around the self-immolation of a twenty-six-year-old Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in December 2010, after he had been humiliated by municipal officials and had his wares confiscated by them. Reports that Bouazizi had a university degree but could not find work, while now generally conceded to have been erroneous,<sup>3</sup> suggest the extent to which his harassment was understood as emblematic of the situation of the many under contemporary conditions of capitalism.

For other Occupiers and commentators, the association with the poor and the disenfranchised was a claim that was more perplexed; indeed, it was one fraught with anxiety. Activists noted, for example, that the descriptor *Occupy* “has a deeply colonialist implication” and “erases the brutal history of occupation and genocide of Indigenous peoples that settler societies have been built on” (Walia). Several of the Occupy sites declared their solidarity with Indigenous peoples; some chose other names, such as (un)Occupy Albuquerque or the People’s Assembly of Victoria, to avoid the implications of the original label for the movement. But activist and writer

Harsha Walia, writing about “the broad principles of unity” of Occupy Vancouver, which “include[] an acknowledgement of unceded Coast Salish territories,” argues that “intentionality” cannot overwrite history. Even as she outlines what an analysis of poverty from within Occupy might look like, Philips concludes that “Occupy is not a poor people’s movement”: at the centre of the protests, she notes, are those “for whom the promise of security was broken,” not those for whom “a promise of security was never made” nor those for whom “[n]o part of the system has ever worked in their favor.” The 99%, she observes, “includes people earning upwards of \$400,000 a year,” and she wonders whether economic inequality in the United States might be better represented “by looking at the 10% at the top versus the bottom 20%.” Arun Gupta, co-founder of the *Occupied Wall Street Journal*, asking how an economic justice movement could *not* include the chronically poor, quotes National Coalition for the Homeless executive director Neil Donovan worrying that the Occupiers “are adopting the language and lifestyle of the poor to describe their temporary inconveniences.” “[T]ensions are surfacing,” Gupta observes, “over how to build a movement that combines a downwardly mobile middle class with communities that have been mired in poverty for decades.” Sometimes, Herring and Glück contend, “it appears that the general exclusion of the homeless from public life” has taken



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root in the Occupy Movement as part of a “political calculus of whether the homeless ‘deserve’ to be a part of the movement” (165).<sup>4</sup> As early as the end of October 2011, Adam Nagourney reported in *The New York Times* that there was a common sentiment among Occupiers that the homeless are “more of a detriment to the movement than an asset” and observed that the “rising number of homeless” at the camps “has made it easier for Occupy’s opponents to belittle the movement as vagrant and lawless and has raised the pressure on municipal authorities to crack down.” As Nagourney predicted, the widespread eviction of the Occupiers and the demolition of encampments by police in many cities during November and December were legitimized by charges that the camps were lawless, violent, hazardous, and unsanitary,<sup>5</sup> charges with which occupants of the earlier tent cities would have been familiar. If it sometimes seemed that, having taken up the metaphorical condition of poverty and homelessness, the Occupiers had forgotten the literal grounds of the figure, it also became apparent that authorities could readily reverse that transaction and insist that the protesters bear the meanings they had invoked.

In *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time*, Martin Jay considers the theoretical passages of Sigmund Freud’s notion of the *unheimlich*, usually translated as “the uncanny” in English but more literally meaning “the unhomely.” As Jay points out, the literal meaning of the term can be stretched to include exiles, the stateless, or the homeless, although metaphorically the *unheimlich* functions primarily to unsettle “phantasmatic notions of home” (161) and to deny “the plenitudinous presence of full emancipation” (160). Jay quotes Anthony Vidler’s warning

of the dangers of trivializing political or social action by conflating “reflection on the ‘transcendental’ or psychological unhomely” with “the intolerable state of real homelessness,” but it is Jay’s subsequent suggestion, that what he calls “the unheimlich manoeuvre” itself works “tirelessly” “to undermine the hard and fast distinction between the metaphoric and the real, the symbolic and the literal, the animate and the inanimate” (163), that is potentially of most use for thinking through the relation of the Occupy movement to homelessness. At the site of discourses of the unhomely, it becomes difficult to pin down what “mere homelessness” might be—spiritual or economic lack? physical or emotional hunger? cognitive or organic disease? bodily or political displacement?—since one condition so quickly becomes or inhabits another.

It has long been my contention—a conclusion built on the work of many scholars of critical childhood studies—that the cultural work of holding in place the boundaries of home has been assigned to children, at least in those cultures that are derived from Western European social models. Over the past decade, I have puzzled over the implications of the extraordinary interest in the representations of homeless child subjects in contemporary texts about, as well as those directed to, young people. From textbooks on the urban homeless and global refugees designed for primary- and secondary-school classrooms, to young adult fiction featuring runaways, throwaways, and

travellers as central characters, to an international collection of neo-realist films about the young living on the streets of “world cities,” young people inside texts and young readers outside texts have repeatedly been confronted with the imperative to “go homeless.”<sup>6</sup> Some of these texts are fictitious and some factual; some work within the generic conventions of documentary realism and some are allusive, allegorical fables; some dwell on the pain of dislocations and some celebrate the possibilities of wandering. While the texts reach different conclusions about the meanings and values of homelessness, however, all of them can be read within the semantic field of globalization and the theoretical (and metaphorical) vocabularies of subject formation entailed by globalization: flows; nomadology; exilic energies; deterritorialization; liquid modernity; immaterial labour; circulation, mobility, diversity, and mixture. The Occupy movement explicitly situates itself as a protest against the neo-liberal projects of global capitalism. If we understand the Occupy movement as a youth movement, is it possible to think of the Occupations as young people’s responses to—and perhaps refusals of—the contemporary cultural imperative to “go homeless”?

Hardt and Negri’s characterization of the movement as “sedentary” suggests that this might be the case. In *Declaration*, they note that, unlike the “alterglobalization movements” of the 1990s from which Occupy clearly borrowed some of its purposes



and tactics, the Occupy movements do not migrate “from one summit meeting to the next, illuminating the injustices and antidemocratic nature of a series of key institutions of the global power system,” but rather they “stay put and, in fact, refuse to move” ([4]). At the same time, the struggle for “the commons” that also characterizes the Occupy movements does not return young people to the enclosures of home and school long thought to be proper to them; they are, rather, to modify Nicole Demby’s terms, learning how to stay in place outside.

Hardt and Negri propose that there are four “dominant forms of subjectivity produced in the context of the current social and political crisis” ([5]) that “constitute the social terrain on which—and against which—movements of resistance and rebellion must act” ([6]). They label these the indebted, the mediatized, the securitized, and the represented. The “indebted,” they suggest, are disciplined by debt, which “impos[es] austerity on you,” “reduce[s] you to strategies of survival,” and “even dictates your work rhythms and choices” ([7]). The “mediatized” is the figure for participants in the constant “voluntary communication and expression” involved in “blogging and web browsing and social media practices” ([11]), with the result that they are “paradoxically neither active nor passive but rather constantly absorbed in attention” ([12]). The “securitized” is the figure for the double role of “watcher and watched” ([18]) in the

“total surveillance” regime that is sustained by the manufacture of fear ([15]). The “represented” is the figure that “gathers together” the other three figures and “epitomizes the end result of their subordination and corruption” ([19]) in their removal from the scene of political power. While the initial descriptions of the four figures of subjectivity in *Declaration* are despairingly negative, it is within these figurations that Hardt and Negri also find the conditions of possibility of the coming revolution. The homeless, I propose, may be another such subjective figure, a figure for the cultural imperatives to move on that constitutes and organizes the social terrain on which, through which, and against which movements of resistance and rebellion, particularly those of youth under the current phase of capitalism, must act.

The articles in the current issue of *Jeunesse* all work with questions of the political and cultural uses to which the figures of *young people* or *the child* have been put. The essay by Graeme Wend-Walker takes up the figure of “the represented,” here specifically adult representations of children’s interests. Through a close reading of Russell Hoban’s 1975 novel *Turtle Diary*, Wend-Walker unpacks the way in which Hoban anticipates the argument of Jacqueline Rose that such representations are really about adults keeping their world together and “getting the children to help them do it” (27). In the conclusion to his essay, Wend-Walker explores the possibility that provisionality and play may

offer ways of moving beyond the “intellectual cul-de-sacs” (16) that Rose’s work has made obvious to critics of children’s literature. Liliijana Burcar begins her essay with an explicit statement of her theoretical assumption that literary texts are metonymic of their socio-political contexts and goes on to show, through a reading of Gary Paulsen’s 2007 novel *Lawn Boy*, “how mainstream contemporary children’s literature is implicated in sustaining unequal socio-economic relations of power and being-in-the-world” (42). By learning to manage a group of undocumented Mexican labourers—who are part of the mobile, flexible, and precarious labour force that subtends global capitalism—the young American boy at the heart of Paulsen’s story succeeds, at the level of the narrative, in becoming a thriving entrepreneur; at the level of its discourse, Burcar argues, the novel desensitizes young readers to calls for social justice.

Peter Arnds, in “Innocence Abducted,” discusses the appearances of the Pied Piper legend in European literature about children since the nineteenth century. Often set within the context of war and its aftermath, these texts are meditations on the disappearance of children from the community and complex expressions of adult regret and desire, with the homeless vagabond Piper the focus for this ambivalence. Working in particular with novels by Wilhelm Raabe, Günter Grass, and Michel Tournier, which take up the heritage of the Second World War, Arnds concludes that children and youth are “figures of the burden of history” (81). It is

the socio-political uses of pseudo-history with which Susanne Gannon, Marnina Gonick, and Jo Lampert are concerned in their essay, ““Old-Fashioned and Forward-Looking.”” Looking at both the American and the Australian versions of *The Daring Book for Girls*, the design of which references the aesthetic of Victorian and Edwardian girls’ books, Gannon, Gonick, and Lampert consider the way in which nostalgia for the past can be directed toward securing socially preferred gendered identities in the present. The girl subjects produced in and by these books, they conclude, are invited to identify as privileged subjects who understand themselves as individuals who are personally responsible for developing and marketing their knowledge and skills.

The Forum in this issue, edited by Elizabeth Galway, Louise Barrett, and Jan Newberry, considers the productive tensions and connections that studying children and youth through the multidisciplinary lenses of Childhood Studies can illuminate. As the editors observe in their introductory essay, approaches to the study of children and youth range “quite literally from A to Z: from anthropological to zoological approaches, with educational, historical, literary, neuroscientific, psychological, and sociological perspectives in between” (108). In the three essays gathered here, the writers consider girlhood as a specific subset of childhood from their particular disciplinary perspectives. Kristine Moruzi works as a literary critic

with historical girls' books and periodicals; Kristine Alexander works as a historian with the archives of the Girl Guide movement; and Natalie Coulter works as a communication studies scholar to read the media marketplace. Each of the authors finds the structures and imperatives of colonization informing the construction of childhood within their fields of study.

As always, we end the issue with a series of review essays. Grit Alter's review of a recent critical German study of ideas of multiculturalism in Canadian children's books points to the ways in which texts for young people circulate across national boundaries and become resources in contexts quite different from the ones in which they were produced; Katherine Whitehurst reviews two recent novels and a volume of essays that, in their different ways and for different audiences, continue to recycle and disperse traditional cultural narratives; and Suzanne Pouliot outlines the

ways in which three recent collections of critical and theoretical essays demonstrate the values of reading children's literature in the context of its social reception, as an opportunity for aesthetic engagement, and as the object of specialist analysis. Taken together, she concludes, these studies make it clear that there have been profound shifts in critical views from the time when literature for young people was generally thought of as innocent.

Her observation might be extended to a summary of this issue of *Jeunesse* as a whole. While texts for and about children and young people might be understood to mobilize ideas of innocence, the work of those texts typically is no longer seen as innocent, but rather as deeply implicated in the production and distribution of social and political values, and sometimes also as sites at which the implications of the processes of production and distribution are made visible and are challenged.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Determining the size of the Occupy protests was an important strand of media coverage. In a *Guardian* article of mid-November aimed at finding accurate statistics, Simon Rogers concluded that “‘951 cities in 82 countries’ has become the standard definition of the scale of the Occupy protests around the world this weekend,” while a Reuters article on the same weekend described Occupy Wall Street as “the movement that has sparked solidarity protests in more than 1,400 cities” (Nichols).

<sup>2</sup> No page numbers are used in the e-book; the numbers in square bracket indicate my count of pages, beginning from the first page of the introduction. The lack of pagination may be part of the “revolution” its publication represents. According to the blogger unemployednegativity, “It is easy to imagine Hardt and Negri’s *Declaration* as something like a revolution in terms of at least the form and content of its publication. In terms of form, it is a self-published text, appearing first on Kindle, then on *Jacobin*, all of which should be followed by a pamphlet (and no doubt multiple pirated versions on scribd and other sites)” (“Revolution in Theory”).

<sup>3</sup> The Wikipedia page for Mohamed Bouazizi provides links to erroneous reports that he had graduated from university.

<sup>4</sup> In their first publication of this article, in *Occupy #2: An OWS-Inspired Gazette*, Herring and Glück describe the exclusion of the homeless from the Occupy movement as, apparently, “a way of establishing legitimate occupation against mere homelessness” (22–23). The changes in the subsequent reprinting of the piece suggest the perplexities and anxieties of this subject for Occupiers.

<sup>5</sup> See Rod Mickleburgh’s “Vancouver Seeks Injunction to End Protest,” in which he reports that such claims are being made about Occupy Vancouver.

<sup>6</sup> In “On Location: The Home and the Street in Recent Films about Street Children,” I suggest that the street child is the emergent normative subject of global capitalism.

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