



Theorizing Resistance and Intimacy in Youth Studies

—Lisa Weems

Resistance

“Resistance” is a key term in the fields of childhood and youth studies. In what follows, I suggest that we rethink the use of this term as it is deployed currently in youth studies scholarship because particular theoretical exclusions, ideological superiority, and moral certainty haunt its definition. As a researcher and an educator committed to social justice, I am not interested in dismissing the concept of resistance altogether. In order to reach a more fruitful discussion of the term, however, it is necessary to address its historical limitations in practice as well as to imagine new possibilities for its treatment in critical discourses. To this end, I propose the analytic of “intimacy” as a way both to augment and to amend our thinking about issues of youth and cultural struggle. I argue that the concept of intimacy calls attention to the *embodied* nature of power, subjectivity, and citizenship. As such, the construct of intimacy allows researchers to attend to the affective, historical, and socio-cultural

dimensions of childhood and youth as ethnographic subjects and symbolic figures. Furthermore, intimacy permits more dynamic images to animate our sensibility of the “tense and tender ties” of cultural politics (Stoler, “Tense” 3).

Many scholars of cultural studies in education credit Paul Willis with coining the term “resistance,” especially in the context of schooling, counterculture, and youth participation in both.¹ Based on an ethnographic investigation of a school in an industrial town in the United Kingdom, Willis argued that working-class males created and sustained a “culture of resistance” with/in schools because of its emphasis on “feminine” ways of being that involved discipline, obedience, and “book knowledge” (12–18). According to Willis, the lads included in the study resisted the authority of their teachers and administrators rather than learn how to master or to conform to this discipline. He concluded that the counterculture of resistance was paradoxical because it actually resulted

in solidifying the lads' future in such working-class jobs as manual labour.

Since Willis's classic study of working-class lad culture, resistance has remained one of the most prominent terms in studies of counterculture, youth, and social change (Dolby, "Popular" 266). In fact, elsewhere I suggest that youth studies scholarship has become something of a cottage industry that has created a certain "brand" of resistance ("Commodification" 73). This form of youth studies scholarship incorporates the Freireian notion of education as empowerment and the practice of freedom. As a result, this literature tends to conceptualize resistance as a form of youth agency, foregrounding individual and collective acts of resistance as liberation from hegemonic norms. In this way, resistance is viewed as part of larger political and moral ideologies that are cognitive, intentional, and even instrumentalized.


Although a useful and popular term that draws our attention to the ways in which youth exercise agency, the term "resistance" also has been somewhat fetishized and (at times) accompanied by thin analyses of specific cases. Unfortunately, much of the scholarship on resistance as it has been deployed in youth studies has continued to frame power (in various forms) as operating on a single axis or in a single dimension (Weems, "M.I.A." 58).² This pattern is particularly troubling since two of Willis's colleagues at

the Contemporary Centre for Cultural Studies (CCCS) noted nearly forty years ago the ways in which such a definition of countercultural resistance conflates resistance with white, masculine counterculture.³ In other words, the field of youth studies perpetuated the association of the term "resistance" with white, working-class, masculine counterculture.


Often, resistance serves as a shorthand that elides nuanced complications of the multi-dimensionality of texts, contexts, affects, and effects. Specifically, much of the contemporary work in youth studies privileges investigations of particular socio-cultural identities, cultures, and subcultures. It is important to note the distinction between identity and subjectivity. Following the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, I emphasize subjectivity as an assemblage of multiple subject positions and desires within and among persons of all ages—positions and desires that are discursive but not necessarily cognitive, intelligible, or coherent. In this way, scholars who use the framework of subjectivity foreground indeterminacy while still interrogating conflicts, tensions, and asymmetrical relations of power. Despite the fact that many scholars of youth studies suggest that they are interested in destabilizing fixed definitions of power and resistance, their lack of attention to issues of desire limits otherwise complex analyses of the interrelationships between macro, mezzo, and micro dynamics of cultural politics and our own investments in them.

In contrast, we need to think about how power and desire may be mutually constituted, contributing to how persons of all ages experience, imagine, and represent resistance. For example, Jen Gilbert draws from psychoanalytic theories to understand how youth and adult desires intermingle in sex education. As she suggests,

When it comes to sex education, we don't seem to trust youth to learn from experience. Our anxious dependence on the "facts," on scientific knowledge devoid of any contact with the contexts in which youth make decisions about their sexuality, cannot help youth to remember their sexuality as an affective experience. Yet if we are to imagine a thoughtful sex education for youth, we must, as adults, risk thinking for ourselves, recognizing how our own desires come to structure our attempts at sex education for youth, and then offering youth generous enough prohibitions so that they can make good use of both our and their negations as they work to craft affectively rich stories about their sexualities. (80)



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In other words, scholars of childhood and youth might do well to understand resistance beyond familiar tropes of identity development or youth as a fetishized cultural group. We might also understand resistance as a feature of experience that is bound up in our own fantasies and failures of subject formation, knowledge production, and neat and tidy representations.

Recent work in Latin American studies and transgender studies reorients the focus in theorizing resistance in several meaningful ways. First, issues of intersectionality, affect, and embodiment take centre stage as youth are envisioned and represented as desiring subjects who are complicit in yet who "talk back" to pathologizing scripts, authoritative

structures, and live networks of power and authority. For example, Cindy Cruz's investigation of "resistance in tight spaces" demonstrates the ways in which homeless queer and trans youth of colour navigate police interaction through tactics ranging from kicking and screaming to flirting (553). Similarly, Marcia Ochoa's ethnography *Queen for a Day* provides a textured analysis of how racialized technologies of glamour create a position of "spectacular femininities" that function as both normalizing and unfettering in different contexts (201). Crossing borders between virtual and real, rural and inner city, North and South, gay and straight, gender passing and mis/recognition, Ochoa demonstrates how youth navigate dangerous terrain and multiple axes of domination in everyday life. Furthermore, these investigations frustrate questions of ideological superiority, moral certainty, political solidarity, and native authenticity—all assumptions that haunt theories of resistance.

Scholars of childhood and youth need not abandon the concept of resistance. Rather, I suggest that we challenge the images and assumptions about what resistance looks and feels like. We may need to confront our own suppositions about the how, when, and where of cultural politics. For example, how might our studies change if we presumed that politics are located not only in the public sphere (in schools and in streets, for instance) but also in the private sphere of family and home?

Intimacy


A term that I would like to bring to bear in youth studies is "intimacy," as informed by affect theory⁴ and by scholarship in Indigenous studies, settler colonialisms, and transnational feminism. "Intimacy" as an analytic category lends itself to the study of affects, logics, and structures that includes—but does not stop at—the level of individual (interpersonal) identities. Intimacies can be thought of as spatial relations between bodies, systems, and environments regardless of intention or affective directionality. Intimacy, then, is a politicized construct that frames real and imagined relations between persons as particular subjects and as symbolic figures (representative of a larger social group). For example, social justice education is rife with calls for schools and classrooms to provide a safe space for LGBTQ and other marginalized youth. Yet educational philosophers remind us that learning necessarily involves encounters with risk, fear, and uncertainty. Moreover, formal education has not been a site of safety for several racialized communities and persons with non-normative genders or abilities, especially when schooling is equated with the control of bodies, language, and culture in the name of "civilization." K. Tsianina Lomawaima provides an excellent account of how the history of residential schooling for Native Americans—whether cast as cultural genocide, institutionalized abuse, or forced assimilation—has produced a legacy of shared trauma.

As a term, intimacy characterizes a state of proximity between or among bodies and their environment that involves issues of legal disenfranchisement and displacement as well as of the cultural politics of identification and social location. Intimacy, then, becomes an analytic tool for researchers to use to look at the embodied dimensions of power in time, space, or place (Weems, "From 'Home'" 560).


Moreover, intimacy signals an affective dimension to particular relationships and, while it suggests intensity, it does not require cognitive recognition or mutuality in orientation, emotions, and relations of power. In fact, intimacy can be produced through domination and coercion as well as through carefully crafted systems of trust and interdependence. What is important here is the researcher's careful attention to the material conditions that produce intimacy, the constitutive relations of power, and the direct and contingent effects for the bodies and lives involved. As an analytic tool in youth and childhood studies, intimacy may be important precisely because it provokes conversations about the dangerous and ambivalent nature of subjectivity, power, and cultural struggle. Yet there is a discursive silence on issues related to intimacy, affect, and embodiment in the field. Might this be related to a moral panic regarding youth sexuality and anxieties about relations between youth and adults that are not socially sanctioned?⁵

As many of the authors in this forum argue, the field of childhood and youth studies often assumes nostalgic ideas of childhood, positing young people as innocent babes unaffected by psychosocial or cultural factors of conflict, harm, and violence.⁶ Within popular discourses, violence and abuse are viewed as isolated incidents among individual actors and, as such, the solutions for addressing violence treat individuals without intervening in nostalgic discourses about childhood or recognizing the precariousness of relations between children and adults in close proximity.

Historians remind us that children were part of the myth of the benevolent "family" that crystallized in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries as a function of Western nation-building. If we recollect this history, intimacy can be thought of as an artifact of the (heteronormative) discourses of the (bourgeois) family on which Foucault and Butler elaborate. Abuse against children became viewed as a pathological occurrence, a failure in and of the family, the unit that is presumed to model intimacy as a moral or a sacred relationship. Moreover, the twentieth century shifted the constitutive elements of the legal dimension of relations within the family to recognize children's rights against parental abuse and neglect. Violence, rape, torture, and manipulation are all horrific acts and harmful dimensions of human relationships and group dynamics, but often, representations of childhood seek



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A contemporary example of a text that does not shy away or attempt to compartmentalize the affective dimensions of power is Phoebe Gloeckner's memoir *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* and the 2015 film adaptation by Marielle Heller. In this autobiographical story, Gloeckner's fifteen-year-old protagonist, Minnie, becomes sexually involved with her (divorced) mother's boyfriend. Both Gloeckner and Heller, in an interview with NPR's Terry Gross, agree that Minnie becomes sexually active from a desire for intimacy, a desire in which lust, love, sex, and intimacy are conflated. Gross, Gloeckner, and Heller differ, however, in their interpretations of the power dynamics of the relationship and what it "means" to Minnie. Heller begins by stating that she wanted to "honor . . . the purity of Minnie's voice." She goes on to say that she wanted the audience to experience Minnie's first sexual encounters (whether consensual or not) from Minnie's point of view:

So while she's experiencing that conflating of lust and love and that confusion of whether these first sexual experiences are consensual or not, I wanted the audience to experience it the way she's experiencing it. And if she's not feeling like a victim in those moments, we shouldn't be feeling like she's a victim. If she's finding empowerment in moments of it, then we wanted that to be the experience of the film. Although, I do think it's a situation where she's in an abusive situation, and she's being taken advantage of. But what I thought was so beautiful about what Phoebe had written is she kind of explained how you could fall into this type of situation and how that could have been almost any of us. (Heller and Gloeckner)

Here, Heller's comments oscillate between two modes. The first is a kind of nostalgic view of youth (or of any ethnographic subject, for that matter) in which there is a romance of authenticity and a belief in the truth of the native's point of view. In this sense, the director is simply acting as unfiltered documentarian of an unmediated girlhood. The other mode places Heller in an active role as the director working to create empathy (a sense of sanctioned vulnerability) and empowerment for youth and adults alike. In an oddly unreflective and somewhat uncritical moment, Gross then plays the role of the adult protectionist adult (mother? psychologist?) to Minnie as a symbolic figure of some sort of universalized girlhood: "You know, another complicated thing, I think, I think 15-year-olds are children but they want to think of themselves as not being children. They want to think of themselves as adults." Nevertheless, Minnie eventually becomes "empowered" despite being, at age fifteen, "such a hyper-vulnerable age to become sexual" (Heller and Gloeckner).

Gloecker protests Gross's use of the term "empowered," suggesting instead a much more ambivalent emotional response: "Some of the reviews, yeah, they do use the word empowered, and yeah, Minnie has agency. *But I can tell you that Minnie was overwhelmed with sex.* And I don't think if you had told her you're empowered and you have agency—it would not have computed" (Heller and Gloeckner; emphasis added). What this conversation reveals is the way in

which Gloeckner, Heller, and Gross actively move in and out of talking about Minnie as the protagonist of a novel (fiction), Minnie as the subject of a memoir (an autobiographical account), and Minnie as a barometer for thinking about girls' ability to make (rational) adult decisions about sex, sexuality, and intimacy (affect). Moreover, each of the participants slips between talking about Minnie's experiences and her own experiences with sexuality in her teens. Most curious (and exciting) to me is Gloeckner's alternating use of verb tense: "Minnie has agency. But I can tell you that Minnie was overwhelmed with sex." Gloeckner's narrative places Minnie in the present and in the past; she is a character who relies on her (adult) narrator in the future to sort memories into meaning. Although Gross attempts to pin down a clear and linear sense of what constitutes proper sexual development for "real girls," both Gloeckner and Heller remind the interviewer that Minnie is a character in a text. As such, the *figure of Minnie* can and will proliferate in multiple interpretations. Nevertheless, Gloeckner, as the autobiographical subject and the adult narrator of *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, acknowledges complicity in a relationship of asymmetrical relations of power. The adult narrator offers a generous message to young Minnie: "I'm sure it was confusing" (Heller and Gloeckner). We might create what Ann Cvetkovich calls "an archive of feelings" on girlhood, sexuality, and intimacy in a heteronormative context through a study of the interview (besides the novel and the film).

In *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, biological kin serves as the unit of analysis. There are, however, entire worlds of kinship communities that intersect, overlap, or depart completely from that of a heteronormative, homonormative, and/or blood kin scenario.⁷ What happens when we complicate the scene further by displacing kinship altogether to talk about other forms of intimacy, association, and sociality?

Following scholarship in the study of empire and colonialisms,⁸ I propose a radical reconceptualization of intimacy: on the one hand, to incorporate analyses of the spatial and embodied points of contact, connection, and collision among bodies rather than the individual as a site of analysis, and on the other hand, to disrupt boundaries between public and private, oppression and resistance. Lisa Lowe offers a concise framework for understanding intimacy alongside the emergence of modern liberal humanism and the racialized and sexualized colonial ordering that accompanied it (193). Her framework deploys intimacy in three ways. First, she defines intimacy as “spatial proximity or adjacent connections with the ‘intimacies of four continents’” in which bodies from Asia and Africa were forcibly transported to the Americas and that gave rise to the bourgeois republican states in Europe and North America (193). The second meaning of intimacy, for Lowe, involves the domestic and sexual labour that accompanied the “colonial management of sexuality, affect, marriage and family” (195). This

includes rape, sexual assault, domestic servitude, and affective relationships between plantation owners, their wives, and their children and the enslaved African children, youth, and adults. The colonial management of sexuality, marriage, and family also includes the ways in which biological families and marriages among enslaved African Americans were prohibited or broken purposely as an attempt to regulate the biopolitics of a “consensual” intimate or familial economy. This latter point leads to Lowe’s third and final meaning of intimacies as “the volatile contacts of colonized peoples” (203). She argues that systems of classification and obsessive demarcations between various racial, ethnic, and immigrant groups constituted a form of “volatile contacts” that might have been unspoken but that were produced and sustained through slave ship logs, legal documents, and business contracts. According to Lowe, this colonial hyper-vigilance is a result of fear and anxiety: “The repeated injunctions that different groups must be divided and boundaries kept distinct indicate that colonial administrators imagined as dangerous the sexual, laboring, and intellectual contacts among slaves and indentured nonwhite peoples” (203). Thus, narratives of intimacy (even if imaginary) can be located in such unusual spaces as archives that document the prohibition of contact, connection, and coupling.

A historical example for understanding intimacy as a complicated dynamic of embodiment and power among

youth involves the history of wet nurses and domestics in the antebellum American South. The case of Black wet nurses exemplifies how young enslaved African American women (many in their teens) were forced to be in continuous relations of close proximity, sexual subjugation, and what historian Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers terms “maternal violence.” Jones-Rogers characterizes maternal violence as the intimate labour to which enslaved African American women (many of them young) were subjected as they cared, both physically and emotionally, for slave-masters’ children. This example of racialized and embodied intimacy, like that of residential schooling, reminds us that the lines between children, youth, and adults are tied up in national and historical contexts of subjectivity and citizenship.

As a transdisciplinary scholar of girlhood, I am involved in producing an archive consisting of historical and cultural documents that reveal the “intimacies of four continents” through the intellectual, physical, and symbolic crossings of settler colonialism, slavery, and globalization, as well as the cultural documents that reveal contemporary young women’s involvement in projects of decolonization. Borrowing from Lowe’s framework, I suggest that the theoretical lens of intimacy facilitates a way to map the bodies and places that populate narratives of girlhood and de/colonization. Moreover, given my interest in embodied and affective relations of power, my analysis of archival material

explores the unspoken intimacies of points of contact, connection, and collision often made visible through visual representations.

For example, feminist historians have adopted definitions of citizenship and activism from (Western) political theorizing. As mentioned earlier, some of these definitions include assumptions about a split between public and private spheres and a separation between the political and the cultural realms of society and the kinds of activities that constitute social activism. Young women have been positioned largely around and within discourses of sexuality and motherhood, albeit in multiple ways according to their place and status in real and imagined contexts. As many contemporary girlhood scholars have argued,⁹ young white women are characterized typically as innocent, benevolent progenitors of a long-standing legacy of republican motherhood, charged with the “white women’s burden” to educate and to sanitize the unruly practices of “deviant daughters” (Odem 4) or “Third World female victims” (Sensoy and Marshall 1). In contrast, young women of colour (both in the United States and in the Global South) have not been afforded this status. Politicians and scholars across the ideological spectrum often cast racialized girls as either young child brides at the hands of abusive Brown men or hypersexualized Jezebels clamouring to be “video hoes,” meaning that young women of colour are not characterized as being in possession of their bodies. Unlike Minnie,

the fifteen year-old “child” with whom book readers and film viewers are asked to empathize, the bodies and identities of young women of colour are denied a sense of pedagogical vulnerability, danger, or agency. These double representations of girlhood illustrate how authoritative experts (such as Terry Gross as a prominent speaker on National Public Radio) mediate the “proper tempering of desires” (Stoler, “Tense” 44) in the service of larger public, national, and imperial intimacies.

Despite their relative absence in official archives of political activism, young women of colour take up, deploy, and subvert dominant discourses of subjectivity, culture, belonging, and citizenship. My interest is to investigate “citizenship from below” (rather than the citizenship of political actors at the top) by foregrounding the ways in which young women of colour play a key role in anti-racist, de/colonial, and transnational activism (Weems, “Refuting”). Young women of colour challenge contemporary efforts of neo-colonialism related to land use, militarization, the corporatization of higher education, loss of Indigenous language and knowledge, and gendered violence (“Project”). Furthermore, political work often involves intimate labour in that it focuses on collective and intergenerational notions of subjectivity and culture. Tribal elders and scholars of Native/First Nations studies recognize (and highly recommend) community-based practices of memory work, creative scholarship, and artistic production as legitimate forms of political

participation and activism. Thus, citizenship from below emphasizes collective and intergenerational (but not necessarily biological) notions of kin, culturally safe education, community-based cultural practices, and organized demonstrations against multiple forms of violence. For example, several community-based organizations have emerged since 2010 to raise awareness about state-sanctioned racialized, gendered, and sexual violence against women of colour of all ages. One collaboration is the group Walking with Our Sisters, founded in 2012 by an intergenerational group of First Nations and Metis women to raise awareness of the violence against Indigenous women and the alarming silence among politicians, policy-makers, and the media.

The art installation consists of over eighteen hundred vamps (the top part of a traditional moccasin) beaded by hand by more than thirteen hundred artists from across North America. Many of the vamps are beaded together in community. As a culturally specific form of affiliation, Walking with Our Sisters integrates two aims of learning traditional arts and raising political awareness. Literally, the vamps are created in intergenerational circles of First Nations, Metis, and Indigenous women and men. Similarly, natives and non-natives work together to prepare, transport, and install the exhibit to ensure it retains a spiritual and culturally appropriate form of display. Since 2012, the Walking with Our Sisters exhibit has travelled across provincial and tribal borders

due to the collective power of crowdsourced funding. As they write, “There is power in numbers, and there is power in art” (“Project”).

In this article, I have attempted to curate an archive in the making on childhood and youth that pulls together an assortment of images and narratives regarding what it means to be a fetishized object and an embodied subject of power. I include representations of girlhood that foreground intersectional social identities and that move beyond notions of resistance and intimacy as the property of the individual (autonomous) human subject. These representations illustrate two key points. First, resistance is a potentially useful concept, but it needs to be reimaged and nuanced in relation to an understanding of the dangerous, productive, and seductive nature of power. Resistance not only

is about fighting an outside oppressive force but also includes dealing with the affective dimensions of difference, conflict, and the struggle of everyday life. Second, intimacy may be a helpful tool to analyze textual and visual representations of childhood and youth as ethnographic subjects, literary characters, and historical figures. I invite scholars of childhood and youth to envision intimacies as the spatial connections between and among youth and adults (both real and imagined) produced through various events, documents, images, and narratives in specific times and places. Interrogating these representations with an eye toward embodiment (both theirs and ours) complicates notions of power and agency beyond the binaries of oppression/resistance or fear/confidence that structure nostalgia and protectionism.

Notes

¹ This genealogy of resistance can be found in highly visible accounts of youth studies such as Henry A. Giroux’s *Theory and Resistance in Education*, Nadine Dolby’s *Constructing Race*, and Greg Dimitradis and Cameron McCarthy’s *Reading and Teaching the Postcolonial*.

² For compelling arguments for and analyses of intersectional dimensions of childhood and youth, see Mayo; McCready; Tuck and Yang.

³ Angela McRobbie and Stuart Hall were two of the most vocal critics of the extent to which the work produced by the CCCS centred (and somewhat glamorized) working-class white males without attention to how race and gender shapes the nature and substance of resistance as a cultural practice.

⁴ My thinking most resonates with that of Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, and Ann Cvetkovich.

⁵ For a good discussion of moral panic regarding youth and sexuality, see Silin.

⁶ Elizabeth Marshall provides a concise yet astute treatment of how nostalgia figures into theorizations of youth and childhood in her entry in *Keywords in Youth Studies*.

⁷ For an insightful account of how diasporic queer Filipinos make kinship, see Manalansan.

⁸ Ann Laura Stoler, Ara Wilson, and Lisa Lowe are central authors in this field.

⁹ For a critical review of how “the girl” and girlhood have been constructed in popular and academic discourses regarding race, sexuality, citizenship, and the public sphere, see Brown; Cox; Jiwani, Berman, and Cameron; Taft; Weems, “Refuting.”

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