Childhood, Children's Literature, and Postcolonialism

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Faulkner, Joanne. *Young and Free: [Post]colonial Ontologies of Childhood, Memory and History in Australia*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. 230 pp. $53.24 pb. ISBN 9781783483075.

Grzegorczyk, Blanka. *Discourses of Postcolonialism in Contemporary British Children's Literature*. Routledge, 2015. 135 pp. $148.00 hc. ISBN 9781315867076.

Stadler, Sandra. *South African Young Adult Literature in English, 2000–2014*. Universitätsverlag Winter GmbH Heidelberg, 2017. 223 pp. $49.50 hc. ISBN 9783825366414.

Despite more than five decades of dedicated scholarship, the field of postcolonial studies has still to make significant inroads into children's literary and cultural studies. In a similar vein, children's literary and cultural studies have been somewhat reluctant to enter the field of postcolonial studies; when children's literary and cultural studies scholars have made a foray into it, they have tended to rely on a handful of key thinkers. There is a paltry amount of material that brings postcolonialism and children's cultures together, a surprising research lacuna when one considers that the modern concept of childhood has supported—and even made possible—the European colonial enterprise.[1] Part of the problem may lie with the term "postcolonial," which, in addition to being "haunted by the very figure of linear 'development' that it sets out to dismantle" (McClintock 254), is still too often mobilized in an ahistorical and general fashion. Fernando Coronil succinctly summed up the consequences of this preoccupation with the abstract in 1992 when he argued that the "unconstrained flight from fragmentary examples to vast generalizations about the postcolony hinders the understanding of commonalities among postcolonial societies as well as of differences distinguishing them" (96). Many of the negative critiques of postcolonialism have rightly hit their mark, as the very term "postcolonial" *does*—even now, several decades after it came under

intense fire in the academic community—tend to encompass too many disparate contexts and conditions. For this and other reasons it has tended to curry no favour among Indigenous critics. In his famous "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," Thomas King went so far as to argue that the term postcolonial relies on an infantilization of Indigenous peoples. In "the case of pre- and post-pubescence and pre- and post-colonial," he wrote, "the pivot around which we move is puberty and colonialism" (242).

I realize that I am rehashing old and tired debates, but these may in fact be important ones to recall in our current era, when "post-" words continue to proliferate at an alarming rate. "Post" now prefixes words such as "truth," indicating either that we are still in a crisis in the idea of linear, historical progress (McClintock 254) or that something else is going on. While Blanka Grzegorczyk, Sandra Stadler, and Joanne Faulkner—the authors of the three books under review in this essay—reflect neither on the politics of postcolonialism nor on the continued ubiquity of the prefix "post" in contemporary discourse, they respond to a critical urgency to attend to the plethora of children's and young adult texts that engage the kinds of questions pursued in postcolonial studies and/or hail from places in which colonialism and its legacies continue to have deleterious effects on people's ways of life. They accordingly highlight the continued need for a postcolonial studies that remains attentive to the effects and legacies of colonialism and, in many cases, continued colonialism.

Discourses of Postcolonialism in Contemporary British Children's Literature

Grzegorczyk is among two of the authors reviewed here to make substantive use of the term "postcolonial." She devotes a substantial amount of her book to it, noting that her study straddles postcolonial and postmodern theory, two areas that she sees as possessing considerable overlap. Rather than see the postmodern and the postcolonial as discrete categories, Grzegorczyk recognizes that they have much in common and, as with her analyses of selected contemporary British children's and youth texts, she chooses to operate within the gap between them. Grzegorczyk is also the only one among the authors reviewed here to address the history of the brief forays into postcolonial theory that children's literary studies attempted. She finds these to have been occasionally unsatisfactory and takes issue with Melanie Eckford-Prossor's and Perry Nodelman's attempts to compare Orientalism with adult constructions of the child, a move that necessitates sidestepping "the race and class politics that underwrite and naturalize indigenous representations" (21–22). She argues that the interventions of scholars Clare Bradford, Sue Welsh, and Jo-Ann Wallace have been much more productive in terms of bringing together postcolonialism and children's literature, largely because they foreground issues of race and imperialism. Significantly, given her engagement with British children's and youth texts that address these issues, Grzegorczyk cites Wallace's assertion that "an idea

of 'the child' is *a necessary precondition* of imperialism—that is, that the West has to invent for itself 'the child' before it could think a specifically colonialist imperialism" (176).

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Grzegorczyk's analyses of key texts in the following chapters make good on this observation in their attention to the ambivalence and contradictions that permeate writings of childhood and youth in Britain. One notable example is her reading of Gautam Malkani's 2006 *Londonstani*, a novel that has divided many readers as a result of its hard-to-understand colloquialisms, and scatological and otherwise vulgar language—an attempt on the author's part to reflect the actual speaking style of young "rudeboys" living in the Hounslow district of west London. It is written in the first person by Jas, a rudeboy who we are initially led to assume is as brown as the members of the South Asian diaspora with whom he associates. By the end of the novel, however, we know that he is actually white. The story meanders along from one adventure to another, not so much a plot as an autoethnography as Jas approaches rudeboy culture with the attitude of an anthropologist. According to Grzegorczyk, Jas's own peculiar and largely unsuccessful performance of this culture functions to show that while the perceived authenticity of ethnic performance does not necessarily depend on place of origin, contemporary ethnic performances are inextricable from histories of colonialism. Whether he intends to or not, Jas's rudeboy performance recalls colonialist tropes of "passing" and consequently signal his separateness from the group. His borrowing of the conventions of autoethnography actually connects him to histories of passing made possible by colonialism: his narrative recalls such figures as anthropologist Walter Dyk, who tried to pass as an American Indian in order to collect ethnographic data, and the explorer Richard Burton, who donned the guise of an Indian to facilitate empire-building

on behalf of Britain (Grzegorczyk 48). The ending of *Londonstani* invites us not only to reflect on the politics of performativity but also on the consequences of passing, as "Jas's performance of alterity results in a further widening of the gap between the members of the South Asian community and their white neighbours in the London suburbs, illustrated by a racially motivated physical attack on the boy" (Grzegorczyk 48).

Jas's donning of a typically South Asian style of self-fashioning nevertheless draws attention to the importance of ethnic performance for his fellow rudeboys, for whom it enables a powerful—if troubling—form of agency. It is through performance that the rudeboys attempt to wrest control over how they are seen in a place where the colour of their skin means that they are stigmatized (Grzegorczyk 47). Accordingly, it is the key to their agency as a group. A successful rudeboy performance may not necessarily depend on place of origin, but Jas's status as a white Brit means that his experience of London is very different from that of the South Asian diasporic rudeboys: "Jas can neither fully identify with the lived or remembered experience of exploitation and oppression nor fully dissociate himself from the culture, values and practices of the dominant group, represented by his parents" (Grzegorczyk 48). In Grzegorczyk's view, *Londonstani* can be read alongside Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* as examples of novels that explore postcolonialism through encounters that take place in the "former imperial center" (Grzegorczyk 49). Drawing on the work of Iain Chambers, Grzegorczyk argues that novels such as these illustrate beautifully the "violence of alterity" (Chambers 4) as it emerges across routine and seemingly innocuous encounters in the metropole (49).

Grzegorczyk's organization of her vast material is impressive. She ably juxtaposes novels that overlap in terms of the kinds of experiences they engage but which represent disparate settings, as in her analysis of Malkani's and Syal's novels, the former having been published in 2006 and the latter in 1996. Ten years may separate these novels, but in both the exploration of the violence of alterity proceeds by way of teasing out the complexities of authenticity, a theme that entails a problematizing of dominant notions of identity and a focus on the cultural encounter itself. Grzegorczyk explains that the effect of the depictions in these novels of the cultural encounter is "to make the young reader recognize that the construction of the 'other' has been essential to the remolding of the British majority's 'selves' and of their particular sense of history, culture and society" (49). The result of Grzegorczyk's productive juxtapositions is a textured and compelling engagement with some of the most remarkable children's and youth novels to have been published in Britain since 1990.

Grzegorczyk's tendency to move through the novels quickly, however, produces dissatisfying analyses. There simply is not enough time to do justice to five novels in one chapter. Although what Grzegorczyk has to say about these novels is on point and productive in terms

of sparking a conversation about how contemporary British children's literature mobilizes discourses of postcolonialism, one gets the impression that she has been far too ambitious. For instance, she develops her analysis of Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy*, Beverley Naidoo's *The Other Side of Truth*, and its sequel, *Web of Lies*, in just under five pages. The book as a whole discusses nineteen authors. To be fair, it does proclaim to offer "a critical survey of contemporary British writing for children and young adults via the lens of postcolonial studies," and it does so as a corrective to the relative absence of attention to the intersection at which children's literature and postcolonial studies meet (1). Indeed, if nothing else the book is a successful survey, deftly bringing together texts that deserve much more attention than they are receiving, both in terms of scholarship and children's literature courses, which too often bear the signs of an overly rigid adherence to prevailing definitions of what counts as children's literature. This brings me to another valuable aspect of Grzegorczyk's study when viewed as a survey rather than as a deep critical engagement with key texts, namely: its willingness to include among its objects of analysis texts that tend to be marketed to adults more than young people. In keeping with her focus on liminality, Grzegorczyk sets her sights on what happens *in between* categories. She accordingly identifies a preoccupation with the space in between texts that appeal to more than one type of readership. Examples of in-between spaces include that which lies between colonial and postcolonial conceptions of childhood, between the private and the public, and between "us" and "them." As her analysis of *Londonstani* shows, Grzegorczyk also attends to the novel performances that emerge from within these interstices. This preoccupation leads to layered readings and a refusal to reproduce unproductive divisions between "the West" and "the Rest." Significantly, Grzegorczyk asserts early in the book that she does not characterize any of the texts as attempts to pander to Western tastes for the exotic (38). Rather, she recognizes the messiness of cultural encounter and resulting identity formations in her analyses of selected children's novels, but not without sacrificing due diligence to the difference between those that merely celebrate cultural assimilation and those that clear a space for deep learning. Notwithstanding its cursory analyses, then, *Discourses of Postcolonialism in Contemporary British Children's Literature* should provide both a model of how one might approach British children's novels that engage histories and legacies of colonialism and a resource for those eager to teach a course in the area.

South African Young Adult Literature in English, 2000–2014

Stadler's survey of South African young adult literature also redresses a glaring gap in the field of children's literature, in this case the rich body of texts produced in South Africa. Outside of the important work of

scholars such as Elwyn Jenkins, Judith Inggs, and a few others, little work has been done on post-apartheid South African young adult novels. Despite South Africa's status as the most prolific publisher of children's and youth texts on the African continent (Stadler 17), children's literature programs, academic associations, and journals are sorely lacking in that country. Of the little scholarship that has been done on South African children's literature, some has been grossly inadequate in teasing out the complexities of representation that emerge. For example, Stadler has nothing good to say about Donnarae MacCann and Yulisa Amadu Maddy's 2001 monograph *Apartheid and Racism in South African Children's Literature 1985–1995*, and argues that their analyses of selected texts amount to "misreadings" (19). Like Grzegorczyk, who cares little for easy dismissals of texts on the grounds that they pander to Western tastes for the exotic, Stadler rejects easy dismissals of South African children's and young adult novels as "racist." She subsequently makes the case for more comparative readings of contemporary South African young adult novels, as the intersection at which, say, Anglophone texts meet Afrikaans texts, or Afrikaans texts meet isiZulu texts, or at which South African texts meet European ones, is complicated: South Africa has eleven official languages and, while few titles in Indigenous African languages are published, one must keep in mind that "South African children's literature" necessarily includes texts written in languages other than English and Afrikaans. Unfortunately, "no comprehensive analysis of contemporary children's and youth literature [is] available in print for any of the other indigenous languages" (19).

Stadler's own expertise lies in Anglophone texts, although she does include some texts that have been translated into English from Afrikaans. She accordingly limits her scope to texts written in English and, in the interest of avoiding "superficiality and inaccuracy," to social-realist teen novels published between 2000 and 2014 (20). The exclusion of fantasy, science fiction, and non-fiction from her sample may on the surface seem arbitrary, but when one considers that some of the most compelling works for children and young adults in the post-apartheid era have tended toward the social-realist mode, then Stadler's narrow generic focus makes sense. Anchoring what might otherwise end up being a rather clunky survey, Stadler narrows the field further in each chapter by focusing her analyses of selected texts on specific topics. Because apartheid restructured space in South Africa so radically, and because space has undergone even more radical revision since the ending of official apartheid in 1994, Stadler focuses her first chapter on the topic of space. Chapter 2 addresses gender, an equally important topic more than twenty years after the end of official apartheid. Here Stadler moves through texts that engage hegemonic masculinity, sexual orientation, HIV/AIDS, and rape, showing that far from telling a "single story," children's and young adult texts in South Africa engage with the experiences of

many different types of young people (Adichie qtd. 21).[2] In the third and final chapter, Stadler turns to socio-economics, another pressing issue in South Africa today. Here she analyzes texts that foreground the effects of neoliberalism and globalization on young people in South Africa, including social segregation and inequality.

Stadler's anchoring of textual analyses in specific topics is a good strategy in a study, which, despite its careful narrowing of the field, still appears to have bitten off more than it can chew. Stadler discusses more than fifty books in her attempt to provide a sense of what kind of work for children and young adults South Africa is producing, and in what ways this work engages issues pertaining to space, gender, and socio-economics. Necessarily, she moves through her material as quickly as Grzegorczyk. What redeems this rapid-fire treatment of contemporary South African young adult texts is both its attentiveness to theory and its insistence on relating texts back to context. Not only does Stadler ably summarize difficult theoretical concepts and bring them into productive conversation with her chosen texts, but she also discerns important connections between theories which she then brings to bear on her subject. Testifying to her attentiveness to politics, she goes even further to acknowledge that theories produced outside of South Africa do not necessarily apply to South African texts. When Stadler does bring an outside theorist into her analysis, it is with a hyperawareness of the theory's rootedness in contexts alien to South Africa. The resulting readings are therefore creative and compelling.

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An example of Stadler's productive approach to texts appears in the final sub-chapter of chapter 2, which focuses on gender, where Stadler briefly analyzes Kagiso Lesego Molope's 2012 novel *This Book Betrays My Brother*. The novel is about a young girl named Nedi who witnesses her brother rape his girlfriend. Having been warned by her family not to say anything to anyone, and because she is afraid of her brother, Nedi is forced to keep knowledge of the event tucked up inside where it festers like an open wound. Stadler's analysis of the novel

highlights its engagement with trauma and its remarkable inclusion of the rapist's voice. "In contrast to other novels that thematize rape," she argues, this one "gives insight into the male's perception of the situation in hindsight" (121). That the novel does so without sacrificing rigorous critique of sexual violence signals its willingness to come at its subject matter from more than one angle. One of the things that gets missed in the kinds of analyses one finds in MacCann and Maddy's book is precisely this attention to the messiness of social relations, which, in countries such as South Africa, are inextricable from histories of colonization and subsequent struggles for decolonization. Basi's rape of his girlfriend does not occur in isolation but within a larger context in which sexual violence has become normalized. Stadler wraps up her analysis of this novel by stating that it constitutes "a critique of contemporary social realities but also of politics in South Africa" and accordingly makes an important first step "toward the deconstruction of established codes of conduct, silence, and male privilege" (122).

Stadler's effort to tease out *what* these texts do as opposed to simply *how* they engage the three main topics highlights the importance of her intervention. While part of me would like to see more detailed analyses of texts, her book does begin to remedy the relative lack of attention paid to South African children's and young adult texts. This book should be a welcome resource for instructors looking for materials to put on general children's survey courses or on more narrowly focused courses in the area. It should also be required reading for anyone conducting research into South African children's literature. Its status as a revised dissertation should not be off-putting, as Stadler employs a graceful and confident prose throughout. Far from being a "dry read," *South African Young Adult Literature in English* offers a pleasant and engaging survey of some fascinating texts. Those new to South African children's literature will likely finish the book wondering how it is that they have so far managed to overlook such an enticing body of work.

Young and Free: [Post]colonial Ontologies of Childhood, Memory and History in Australia

Joanne Faulkner's *Young and Free* is the most theoretically sophisticated of the three books under review here. Where Grzegorczyk's and Stadler's books provide surveys of children's and young adult literatures that engage discourses of postcolonialism and conditions of postcoloniality respectively, Faulkner's makes a theoretical intervention toward decolonizing concepts of childhood, memory, and history in Australia. Although she theorizes such concepts through readings of cultural texts, these are not necessarily produced for or marketed to children. As a result, she focuses less on moving through many texts to show how they engage postcolonialism and more on using selected texts to test and exemplify her theory. Another difference with the other two books reviewed here is that the texts

she chooses are generically diverse. For example, in chapter 3, Faulkner explores how the figure of the child comes to embody the fundamental groundlessness of colonial sovereignty through David Malouf's 1993 novel *Remembering Babylon*, J. M. Coetzee's 1986 novel *Foe*, Jennifer Kent's 2014 horror film, *The Babadook*, and Ivan Sen's 2013 crime film, *Mystery Road*. None of these are children's texts: Faulkner's aim is to explore adult ambivalence toward childhood as opposed to the ways in which literature designed for and marketed to children engages postcolonialism.

Of course, ambivalence toward childhood often does manifest itself in children's texts. In Australia, ambivalent representations of children have functioned in children's literature to signal the unhomeliness of the settler. Depictions of young children "'at home' in the bush"—a staple in early Australian children's literature—celebrate a "settler nativity" (Faulkner 35–36) that can come only come about as a result of Aboriginal knowledge of the land. Faulkner goes on to cite Ethel C. Pedley's 1899 *Dot and the Kangaroo* as exemplary of the "settler-child-gone-native" trope, another staple of early children's literature, only in this case the child is implausibly found and raised by a kangaroo rather than Aboriginal people, a manoeuvre that effectively erases Aboriginality while also recalling reports about feral children raised by wolves. This displacement of Aboriginality onto the animal other, in this case the kangaroo, transforms what would otherwise be a story about colonialism into a story about humanity. In the conclusion to her brief discussion of this text, Faulkner remarks that it "is a piece of whiteness invested in the bush through which the settler becomes Indigenous in white Australian imagination" (36). The child proves a convenient figure for appropriative "Indigenization" for the settler-colonial subject, as the child is already associated with the "primitive" and the "natural."

The aim of Faulkner's project, then, is not to explore how children's texts exhibit the signs of adult ambivalence in their often didactic yet occasionally transformative engagements with questions of the postcolonial, but rather, how settler-colonial ambivalence toward Indigenous people erupts—sometimes in strange and startling ways—in all kinds of Australian texts irrespective of their targeted audience. Accordingly, the primary focus of her book is childhood and its entanglement in memory and history in Australia. The texts she selects as a means of exploring the modern concept of childhood as it functions in Australia to repress feelings of homelessness on the part of settler-colonial subjects are often those, which on the surface appear to have nothing to do with postcolonialism. And this is precisely her point. The settler-colonial subject's heavy reliance on displacing childhood onto Indigenous people has a way of seeping into settler-colonial cultural productions. In this way ambivalent depictions of childhood underscore the settler-colonial subject's fragile claim to Australia.

The Babadook is instructive in this context. Kent's film is about a single mother named Amelia (played by Essie Davis) raising her six-year-old son Samuel (Noah Wiseman) in the Adelaide suburbs. We gradually discover that Amelia lost her husband in a tragic car accident the same day Samuel was born, a detail that helps explain her ambivalence toward her son. This ambivalence manifests most violently in the form of "Mister Babadook," both the title of a children's book Amelia "discovers"[3] and a monster that manages to get under Amelia's skin. Ambivalence toward the child lies at the centre of this film, making it an ideal text for Faulkner's study.

Yet as with some of the other texts Faulkner takes up, this one appears to have nothing to do with postcolonialism. Mother and son are white, and so is everyone else in the film, from the old lady next door (Barbara West) to the grim social workers (Craig Behenna and Cathy Adamek) who threaten to take Samuel from his mother. In Faulkner's view, the conspicuous absence of Indigenous peoples invites a postcolonial reading: the film can be read as a symptom of white settler refusals to face Indigenous peoples. By the racist logic that permeates the settler-colonial project in Australia, for settlers to face Indigenous peoples would be to face the groundlessness of their own sovereignty, which is in turn founded on the repudiation of those aspects of childhood that are most associated with the "primitive." In Enlightenment terms, primitive childhood embodies "an immaturity associated with reliance on external agencies of knowledge and action" (Faulkner 1). Not surprisingly given the dark, menacing, and often-invisible spectre of the babadook, Faulkner sees this creature as a thinly veiled metaphor for the Indigenous presence, which watches "from a hidden vantage that unsettles the certainty and authority of [Amelia and Samuel's] experience" (73). Thus, while the film purports to be about "negotiating grief and banishing monsters," its production and resonance can be interpreted to have broader implications: "*The Babadook* may be read within a tradition of Australian cinema that obliquely addresses the colonial legacy and fear of a return of a repressed truth to claim our children and home" (73). When read through a postcolonial lens, Amelia's assertive banishment of the monster takes on a disturbing cast: her screaming command for the babadook to quit the house is "a curious assertion of settler sovereignty" and appears to be even more so in light of the film's *mise-en-scene*, which gradually makes the house appear more and more like the Australian bush in which the settler child is often shown to have become lost (72–73). Faulkner's analysis shows that *The Babadook* is one among many examples of how white settler productions in Australia often unwittingly exhibit feelings of not belonging to a land to which settlers can make only a precarious claim.

Young and Free is not what one might call a contribution to children's literary studies, and so it is arguably a poor fit in this review. Yet it provides an important resource for children's literary and

cultural studies scholars in its sustained account of how the modern concept of childhood colludes with colonialism to displace Indigenous peoples and how this displacement in turn continues to support white settler identity. Taking seriously some of the warnings made in the 1990s concerning applications of the term "postcolonial," scholars should, however, keep in mind that Faulkner's focus is Australia and that many of her observations therefore may not apply very well to other contexts. That said, her book provides one model for thinking through how the figure of the child functions in settler colonies.

Conclusion

All three of these books provide rich resources for anyone looking to familiarize themselves better with the diverse and frequently disparate ways in which conceptions of childhood have served colonial projects and identity formations. Additionally, they demonstrate the continuing importance of postcolonial questions by showing how they are engaged and play out in some of the most fascinating texts for adults and children in three key contexts: Britain, South Africa, and Australia. I began with Grzegorczyk's book, as it exemplifies the kinds of engagements that occur in the metropole several decades after the majority of Britain's colonies became independent and Britain, as a result of its large-scale colonialist-imperialist project, found itself to be a much more hybrid and culturally rich place. Stadler's book on South African young adult novels nicely supplements this study by exploring the kinds of stories produced in the first fourteen years of the twenty-first century when the promises of the official end of an era of apartheid have yet to materialize. And finally, Faulkner's book provides some valuable theoretical tools to further analyze the texts that Grzegorczyk and Stadler examine. How do contemporary British children's texts bear traces of the modern concept of childhood inherited from the Enlightenment? How do South African texts conceive of childhood when the markers of adulthood have become virtually impossible to achieve in a country where so many young people cannot find employment? How do writers and other cultural producers reclaim the figure of the child when it is used so flagrantly as a means of signifying settler feelings of homelessness? These and many other questions come to mind when considering this trio of newly published monographs on childhood, children's literature, and postcolonialism. Even at the cost of approximately $50 each, all three are worth adding to one's bookshelf. They will be especially useful for scholars working across young people's texts and cultures and postcolonial cultural studies.

Notes

[1] See Jo-Ann Wallace's essay "'The Child' in Post-Colonial Theory," included in the volume *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*.

[2] Stadler cites Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009 TED talk, entitled "The Danger of a Single Story," which addresses the ways in which Africa has been reduced to a single story.

[3] Faulkner's view is that we are invited to see Amelia as the author of the book, an assumption that seems plausible after it is revealed that Amelia made a living writing—among other things—children's books prior to her husband's tragic death.

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