



Can the Child Testify?: On Childhood, Testimony, and the Cultural Construction of the Child as Political Subject

—Julia Emberley

In February 2009, the English playwright Caryl Churchill presented her work, *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza*, at the Royal Court in London, England. Her ten-minute play, directed in this performance by Dominic Cooke, was staged free of charge. The play consists of seven events in Jewish history, including, for example, the Holocaust, the establishment of the Israeli state, the first intifada, and the expropriation of water supplies, and concluding with the recent Israeli onslaught in Gaza in January of 2009. Each scene in this production was performed by a different actor. Churchill has made the text of the play and a performance directed by Elliot Smith readily available on the Internet. In Smith's production, the play is performed by one woman, Jennie Stoller. In performing all parts, Stoller is seen and heard speaking in a series of oppositional imperative sentences, as if she is talking to another adult or other adults, telling them what to say or not to say to an absent Jewish female child in

order to explain the meaning of each of the events. Churchill's directorial comments in the text of the play made available on the web through the Royal Court Theatre are as follows:

No children appear in the play. The speakers are adults, the parents and if you like other relations of the children. The lines can be shared out in any way you like among those characters. The characters are different in each small scene as the time and child are different. They may be played by any number of actors.

Here is an excerpt from the play, taken from the part where Jewish settlers are living in the former Palestinian territory. The adult voice exhorts the listener to instruct the child in the following manner:

Don't tell her she can't play with the children

Don't tell her she can have them in the house.
Tell her they have plenty of friends and family
Tell her for miles and miles all round they have
lands of their own
Tell her again this is our promised land.
Don't tell her they said it was a land without people
Don't tell her I wouldn't have come if I'd known.
Tell her maybe we can share.
Don't tell her that.

The text is performed on the basis of this dialogic tension, "tell"/"don't tell." What conditions the rhetorical action of the play is the way the audience is positioned as witness to the crisis of Jewish individuals who, visibly torn by internal and external pressures of censorship, desire to say one thing but are compelled to say another. What becomes apparent in the oscillation between the sayable and the unsayable is that "truth" is overdetermined in the sense that a regime of veridiction exists due not only to historical realities, but also to the fear of violence. The play incited a good deal of controversy (see Henry; Jacobson); charges of anti-Semitism, rebuttals, and defences abounded, including the making of another play, titled *Seven Other Children: A Theatrical Response to "Seven Jewish Children,"* by Richard Stirling. As with Churchill's play, Stirling's response was performed free of charge in London, England during May 2009. Stirling's intent was to demonstrate the

"distorted education of many Palestinians about Israel, Israelis and Jews" (qtd. in Nathan).

Churchill's play "works" on the basis of an absent child, gendered female, about whom the ostensible instructions are directed. (In Stirling's adaptation, the child is male.) This absent child constitutes a subject position that may be filled by the promise of a better future or by the overdeterminations of fear and suffering as they are made to continue into the present and future of Palestinian and Israeli political relations. This rhetorical figure of absence is a powerful subject position, in part because it is the figure of the child, in all its connotations of fragility and vulnerability, that is being recalled here, being female making such vulnerability all the more extreme. But what happens when the figure of the child no longer signifies a conflict between a potential absence of ethical consciousness and the possibility of a dissenting voice? Can "the child" testify in the context of such overdeterminations? I would argue that the figure of the child as testifier is being deployed in contemporary testimonial practices for purposes related to the meaning and even the loss of childhood in a world of genocidal atrocities.

Consider the following words from *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak*, edited by Deborah Ellis:

I just want to go to school. I don't want to blow

anything up. The soldiers don't see me as a child. They see me as an enemy. I don't like them, but I'm not their enemy. I just want to go to school. (46)

These are the words of an eleven-year-old Palestinian girl named Mona, who was living in Palestinian territory between Jerusalem and Ramallah around 2004. Mona's understanding that she is perceived as an enemy, and not a child, indicates the degree to which she sees herself as a child under siege whose childhood has been usurped by a military presence in her everyday life. The condition of military occupation has forced a transformation of her identity from child to enemy, a transformation that she does not welcome. In another testimonial narrative, Mahmoud, Mona's schoolmate, also expresses a desire to maintain, or perhaps protect, his childhood against the insurgency of militarized violence, suffering, and pain when he describes playing war with his friends and the real rules of war:

When I play with my friends, we play Israeli and Palestinians, and we pretend to shoot each other. Everyone wants to be Palestinians, of course, but we trade off, to make it fair. We have toy machine guns and rifles, but we also make our own guns out of sticks and things, so that there are enough guns to go around. We play around the ruins of buildings that have been bombed, jumping out at each other. In our game, the Palestinians always win. I play games where we shoot the Israelis, but the guns aren't real, and no one really gets hurt. I wouldn't want to hurt anybody for real. Also, we Palestinians are forbidden by the Israelis to have guns. They want to keep all the guns for themselves. (Ellis 50)



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Mahmoud insists, with unwitting irony, that his playing at war is done in the fairest way possible. Everyone has to play both parts, and there have to be enough guns to go around. In the real war, however, Palestinians are forbidden to use guns and are thus overrun by Israeli military forces. Even playtime in Palestine, Mahmoud is telling us, is more ethical than the rules of war in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In their testimony, Mahmoud and Mona bear witness to the loss of their childhood and the traumatic shift in the boundary between the child and the adult, fantasy and reality, that they are forced to undergo. They are more than aware of how ideas associated with childhood, such as play, innocence, friendship, and love, are not givens, but are the privileges of others whose lives are not curtailed and limited by military occupation.

The figure of the child as a site through which to mediate across national boundaries is not a new phenomenon in English literature. The rise of boys' adventure narratives during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries laid the groundwork for representational mechanisms that could cross the divide between the empire and the colonies. The child as a figure of transcultural mobility entered literary modes of territorialization in such notable works as Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and Ernest Thompson Seton's *Two Little Savages*. Along with J.M. Barrie's play *Peter Pan: or, The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*, boys' adventure stories, in conjunction with the rise of youth movements such

as the Boy Scouts, introduced the child into the imperial imaginary as a figure of transcultural mobility, whose agential powers included always being prepared to "go native" when and if need be.¹

In the disciplinary formation of English Literature, the figure of the child occupied a central position as an object of study in the context of genre studies such as children's literature. While J. K. Rowling's successful Harry Potter series injected new material into the somewhat staid and predictable course curriculum during the 1990s, other literary texts were making use of the figure of the child, turning it to other purposes not necessarily aimed at children's reading pleasure. I have in mind Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, in which Satrapi deploys the figure of the child in a comic-book format in order to create a narrative perspective of her childhood experience of the Iranian Revolution in the late 1970s (see Emberley, "This Is Not a Game"). For Satrapi, the figure of the child makes it possible to redraw the boundaries between reality and fantasy and to highlight the ironic tensions between cultural and political representations.

In both the Harry Potter books and Satrapi's graphic novel, it is the trope of the knowing child that comes to the fore. This is the child of experience, whose innocence has been tampered with and destroyed by the forces of evil, as in the case of Harry Potter, or at the hands of autocratic political forces, such as Islamic



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religious fundamentalism in Iran during the 1978 and 1979 revolution and counter-revolution. An anticipatory moment in the genealogy of the knowing child can be found in the Romantic literary tradition, where William Blake, for instance, in his poetic sequence, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, shifted the focus from the idealized figure of the innocent child of English bourgeois Christian construction to the newly visible industrial class of child labourers. Blake's uncanny use of the figure of the knowing child is being reconfigured today by a complex set of hegemonic interests including identity formations, institutional pedagogical practices, and transnational economic and political pressures.

This genealogy of the figure of the child provides some historical contextualization through which to trace the significance of industrialization and imperialism in the making of this figure, and to situate the current hegemonic fluctuations permeating the representations of children today, including the specificities involved in the mobilization of childhood as a highly contested political terrain. Nowhere, I think, is the mobilization of the child as a political subject more troubling than in the field of testimonial studies.

Ellis's book, for example, was also met with controversy. In discussing this book, and the controversy surrounding it, I argue that the testimony of children who experience the trauma of military violence is important to the contemporary politicization of the child and to the meaning and memorialization of childhood (Emberley, "A Child"). The politicization of the child and childhood is occurring in a wide range of public institutions, including human-rights organizations such as Amnesty International, with its current emphasis on child soldiers; and Canada's Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which will be involved in

collecting testimony from indigenous people on their childhood memories of the abuses and deaths that occurred in the residential school system (Emberley, *Defamiliarizing*; “Indigenous”). The institutional and discursive politicization of the child and childhood is an important topic for cultural studies. The figure of the child and the meaning of childhood are products of representational technologies and techniques to the extent that even nations, continents, and other politically circumscribed spaces have “childhoods.” As both concepts and metaphors, “the child” circulates through the national imaginary and “childhoods” become the domain of state regulation and control, but none of this would be possible without the production of the figure of the child and the ways in which value and meaning are ascribed to childhood and childhood experience. In addition, the making of

the child as a political subject not only serves to fill an apparent gap of lost innocence, but also has the uncanny effect of blocking from sight the actual loss of children’s lives due to war, disease, and oppressive labour and domestic practices, and the exploitative reproductive and sexual violence in the trafficking of children globally. Given the historical, cultural, political, and representational overdeterminations that exist in the rhetorical and cultural construction of the child and childhood, I wonder, can “the child” bear witness to exploitation, abuse, and death due to violent and traumatic events? Furthermore, what happens when the child is launched as the figure of truth, authenticity, and power in contemporary political struggles? These are the questions that inform my research into the making of children as political actors in a transnational frame.

Notes

¹ This moment in the genealogy of the figure of the child does not exclude attention to the domestic sphere and girls’ fiction as a site of imperial/colonial negotiation of so-called civilization, propriety,

and racial regulation through the mother’s body (on this point, see Emberley, *Defamiliarizing*, specifically chapter one).

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