



Reviews



Suspicion and Collaboration: Modes of Scholarly Reading

— Mavis Reimer

Robinson, Shirleene, and Simon Sleight, editors.
Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World. Palgrave, 2016. 329 pp. \$109.99 hc. ISBN 9781137402400. Palgrave Studies in the History of Childhood.

Wojcik, Pamela Robertson. *Fantasies of Neglect: Imagining the Urban Child in American Film and Fiction*. Rutgers UP, 2016. 222 pp. \$27.95 pb. ISBN 9780813564470. The Rutgers Series in Childhood Studies.

Scholarly book reviews typically focus on the content of the material presented in the volumes under review, weighing the significance of the arguments to the disciplinary discussions in which they are intervening. Perhaps because scholarly writing is governed by

conventions well known to other scholars, the style of presentation is rarely considered. If such considerations are advanced, reviewers might speak to the organization of essays or chapters, to editing standards or choices, or to the fit with the series in which the volumes appear. In

the case of the two books I am reviewing here, however, the modes of their presentation—one a monograph, the other a collection of essays—were central to my experience of reading them and, so, to my eventual evaluation of the significance of their contributions to the current field of scholarship on young people’s cultures.

Both books are good examples of their type. In *Fantasies of Neglect: Imagining the Urban Child in American Film and Fiction*, American scholar Pamela Robertson Wojcik argues that the mobile urban child has been understood in terms of neglect in American film and fiction at least since the Depression era. Neglect has taken two forms, both of them “fantasies” in Wojcik’s terms—the fantasy that an urban child is a figure of social or psychological neglect and the child’s fantasy of mastery, which requires that it be “left alone” (29)—and Wojcik documents in detailed readings the ways in which these two images of neglect are conjoined and counterpoised in various groups of texts (some directed to children, some to adults, and some to mixed audiences) to register changing cultural attitudes to children’s mobility and autonomy. In *Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World*, Shirleene Robinson and Simon Sleight bring together a collection of essays on the constructions and the experiences of childhood and youth across two centuries (the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries) in formal and informal sites of the British empire. Contributing scholars come from Australia, Britain, the United States, Canada, and

South Africa, and from the disciplines of political history, art history, archaeology, cultural studies, the history of education, feminist studies, social history, the history of childhood, and literary studies. While the essays are as diverse in subject and style as these lists suggest, recurrent themes are mobility (both the circulation of ideas and the movements of groups and individuals) and the agency of young people within cultural systems. In a number of ways, then, the two volumes can be seen to be related projects despite addressing different historical and geographical contexts.

As reading experiences, however, they are quite dissimilar. Wojcik’s single-authored study is a coherent and sustained argument demonstrating that, despite the dramatic restrictions of children’s actual mobility in the city over the twentieth century, the fantasy of urban children’s mobility endures in American culture, as that is expressed and produced through American filmic and fictional texts. The overall argument of Robinson and Sleight’s multi-authored volume is that children were central “to the operation of the British world system” (16). The fifteen studies that point to this broad conclusion consider young people as they appear in diverse sources: laws, essays, novels, interviews, court records, museum exhibits, mothering manuals, sociological theory, archaeological studies, online memorial sites, media discourses, family portraits and letters, and documents from Guiding organizations and child-rescue campaigns. The actual and textual children and youth described in



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the studies variously instantiate, endorse, enjoy, accept, shape, use, suffer, endure, challenge, subvert, and resist the roles in the imperial system they are offered or have thrust upon them, with their different responses inflected by differences in age, gender, race, sexuality, social position, class status, national citizenship, and geographical location, among other variables. In short, this collection of essays can be said to make an implicit argument about the incommensurability of different instances of childhood in addition to its explicit argument about the centrality of the category of childhood to the British imperial project. Wojcik also acknowledges that urban mobility signifies differently for boys and girls, white children and black children, and middle-class children and poor children—indeed, *Fantasies of Neglect* includes separate chapters on Depression-era texts focusing on boys and on girls and on mid-century texts focusing on white middle-class kids and on black urban boys—but the chronological organization of her argument and her recurrence to the binary heuristic of neglect work to smooth these differences into a single historical narrative. Her conclusion ultimately privileges the contemporary middle-class view of the need to circumscribe children’s mobility as the normative view of American childhood—“Now we imagine our kids as less innocent but keep them more protected, more contained,” she claims (193)—and subordinates other (previous) narratives in which children are knowing, streetwise, and mobile to the status of resources for alternative ways of imagining and empowering “our children.”

Wojcik’s recourse to “we” as she closes her book is a clear interpellation of a sympathetic reader. I found myself resisting that call, not only in the last pages of her study, but throughout

my reading of what is an accomplished and generally persuasive argument. In trying to account for my disagreeableness, I began to think about the reader implied by a scholarly monograph. Generally, a monograph is presented and presents itself as an authoritative and comprehensive mapping of important terrain. (Indeed, Wojcik's introduction is titled "Mapping the Urban Child." The back cover material identifies her current academic position, lists her prior book publications, and indicates that the book in hand "considers," "investigates," and "explains" the trope identified in the title.) Not only the scope of the material taken up but also the length at which it is considered appears to make a claim to completeness. (Wojcik discusses more than seventy-five texts in her study, from Charles Dickens's 1838 novel *Oliver Twist* to a *Sesame Street* episode of 2015.) To these characteristics is added the scholarly habit of introducing a book-length study by situating the argument in relation to other important, adjacent studies, a move that is widely recognized as responsible scholarship but that also seeks to borrow the credibility of the earlier studies, whether the argument in question refutes, challenges, complicates, repairs, confirms, or extends the previous work. (Wojcik's introduction locates her work with reference to critics and theorists of children's literature, including Jacqueline Rose, Kathryn Bond Stockton, Marah Gubar, Eric Tribunella, and Perry Nodelman; film critics and theorists, including Siegfried Kracauer, Vicky Lebeau, Miriam

Hansen, and Ian Wojcik-Andrews; urban and cultural geographers, such as Jane Jacobs, Henri Lefebvre, and Gill Valentine; and cultural theorists, such as Michel de Certeau.) Assertions of authority, comprehensiveness, completeness, and importance invite testing by critical readers. Reviewing my reading notes for *Fantasies of Neglect*, I realized that "testing" was an apt description of my reading: as well as highlighting passages I found particularly forceful or insightful, I had repeatedly noted questions raised for me as I worked through the argument, questions about gaps, contradictions, and shifts in terms. For example, against Wojcik's early observation that contemporary children are disappearing from "public view" and "public space," and her slide from those terms to "urban streets" in the next sentence (4), I have pencilled the question, "is 'public space' the same thing as 'urban space'?" Against her elaboration of the two fantasies of neglect through a discussion of Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan narratives, I have queried the sufficiency of her explanation that "it is worth looking" to nineteenth-century British texts for the paradigms through which to read twentieth-century American texts (16). Indeed, her implicit recognition here that ideas and images of childhood circulate internationally sent me back to consider the extent to which her framework and analysis relies on the work of theorists and critics who are not American and do not work in American contexts: from the earlier list of scholars she cites in her introduction,

this would include Rose, Nodelman, Kracauer, Lebeau, Lefebvre, Valentine, and de Certeau. Seeing this, I wondered what else the national scope she has imposed on her project obscures and I began to doubt that such a narrow scope logically allows her the breadth of her conclusion, in which she has dropped all mention of the specifically American limits of her study to appeal to all of “us” who are concerned “over war, terrorism, global warming, and more” (192). Problematizing and decoding texts, including texts of scholarship, is a learned and valued reading strategy for most postmodern scholars, many of whom would see themselves as members of what Paul Ricœur famously called “the school of suspicion” (32).

Curiously, however, I did not respond in the same way to Robinson and Sleight’s collection of scholarly essays. There is no doubt that there are unacknowledged limitations to their presentation of their subject. For one, the list of contributors is silently but significantly skewed in favour of Australian and British scholars, reflecting the affiliation of the editors with the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies at King’s College London. There are no essays by scholars from the Caribbean, New Zealand, or West Africa. Perhaps more problematically, two of three essays that appear under the heading of Indigenous Experiences have been written by white scholars—or, in any case, by scholars who do not identify as Indigenous—with no discussion in the essays about the theoretical and political difficulties of unmarked settler

scholars representing the experiences of Indigenous peoples and no indication in the Acknowledgements that the editors sought to commission work by Indigenous scholars in their “worldwide search in order to extend the scope of the book” (viii). The opening premise of the volume, that age was “a fundamental factor in British world discussion” because “constituent parts of Britain’s empire were often figured as precocious children” (7), suggests an attenuated understanding of the complex and perplexed passages of figurative language in culture. There are much more sophisticated readings of cultural uses of figuration in, for example, chapter 1, which considers the invocations of Queen Victoria in child-rescue literature, chapter 2, which looks at the depiction of the *ayah* in family portraits, and chapter 13, which looks at the “disorderly” Australian girl’s use of popular performances as a resource for her self-construction. But, as this example suggests, despite problems in the assumptions of the volume, I found myself fully engaged as a reader, actively making my own connections across essays, arguments, and references.

Why does this volume of essays solicit the scholarly reader as collaborator rather than as detective? Part of the answer is simply that the polyphonic form of the collection does not readily support the establishment of a single, authorized point of view available to critique. Like most essay collections, *Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World* is organized by a shared question, but includes responses that, as I have already



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said, arise from multiple locations, assume different perspectives and disciplinary procedures, build various theoretical frames, and define corpora of documents that only incidentally overlap those of other investigators. This puts the reader into the position of being one among many questioners. Like numerous essay collections, this volume was, from its beginning, itself a collaboration, originating in a symposium hosted by the editors that sought to bring together scholarship on the history of childhood and on “the British world,” a formulation that has gained currency since the 1990s (see Eureka Henrich) as a “fluid,” “adaptable,” and “nodal” descriptor of the British imperial system (2). Moreover, as a collection of essays in a relatively new area of research, the volume presents itself as the beginning rather than the culmination of an investigation: Robinson and Sleight end their introduction by expressing the modest hope that research at the juncture they have defined will continue to grow, “perhaps influenced by the approaches elaborated here” (18). The unfinished nature of the project offers the scholarly reader an opening to shape its future directions, while the extensive endnotes for each chapter provide access to relevant scholarship for readers new to specific areas of investigation. The cumulative bibliography at the end of the volume runs to thirty pages.

Collaboration as a mode has long been the norm in clinical and laboratory research, but increasingly is practised and valued in humanities and social science research, too. My own work as a humanities researcher has been split between collaborative and independent projects for decades. At this point, even my independent projects are direct outgrowths of collaborative work. I have come to understand in concrete ways how little of one’s contributions as a scholar are truly original, despite the

fetishistic status of that term in scholarship and the ways in which conventions of presentation privilege newness. To take Wojcik's book as an example, the back cover blurbs position this study as groundbreaking and original—"No film scholar . . . has engaged as deeply with the history of childhood as Wojcik has here"; "This charming and original work is unafraid to be polemical and provocative"—while Wojcik's Acknowledgments make evident the fact that her study is built on the interventions of many other scholars over a period of years: these include participants at the five conferences at which she presented aspects of her argument, editors of the journal and essay collection in which she first published versions of two chapters, and colleagues who read and commented on her manuscript. Nevertheless, monographs continue to be regarded as the best evidence of an individual's scholarly mastery in many fields in the humanities and social sciences. This might be changing. Colleagues at my own university tell me that editing a volume of essays and publishing it with a university or academic press increasingly is regarded as meritorious work in annual reviews and that the value of publishing a chapter in an essay collection is now not seen as significantly different from publishing an article in a scholarly journal. The Children's Literature Association and the International Research Society in Children's Literature both have developed specific awards for collections of essays since the turn of the century, in addition to their long-standing awards for monographs,

because of the amount of important scholarship in the area that now appears in edited volumes. To date, Robinson and Sleight's collection has been reviewed more often than Wojcik's monograph.

Indeed, it is possible that, in the contemporary scene of academic publishing, the mode of a piece of research is less relevant than its discoverability and accessibility. Not surprisingly, discoverability and accessibility overwhelmingly, although not exclusively, have to do with the digital availability of research, as researchers—particularly but not exclusively student researchers—more and more expect to be able to access all of the relevant previous work in an area without leaving their desks. In 2012, Kent Anderson wrote a blog posting for *The Scholarly Kitchen* outlining the failure of chapters published in essay collections to generate citations and "the impact, buzz, reputation, or knowledge transfer" for which authors generally hope, especially in comparison to journal articles. While one commentator on Anderson's post opined that the issue was prestige, since "one tries to cite the most prestigious sources" (Wojcik), many others observed that the issues of availability Anderson outlined were rapidly becoming irrelevant as publishers moved to treat book chapters like journal articles, assigning them DOIs and making them available as separate pieces of scholarship through online aggregators or for online purchase. In 2018, monographs, too, are usually obtainable as e-books and often sliced into chapters for discoverability, although the style of argumentation and

documentation typical of many monographs mitigates against the effective disaggregation of chapters from the book as a whole. Both *Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World* and *Fantasies of Neglect* can be found in such digital part publications through readily available databases.

As the ecology of scholarly publication continues to change, the modes of scholarly writing and the value

attached to different forms of publication undoubtedly will also shift. For reasons ranging from the pragmatic to the technological and philosophical, it seems likely that forms of multiple authorship will proliferate. There will be a concomitant need for scholars to pay attention to the kind of scholarly work promoted, permitted, and inhibited and the modes of reading offered, encouraged, and discouraged by these shifting forms.

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